PAST MASTERS 200

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F. Scott Fitzgerald
Beatrice Grimshaw
Sapper
Robert E. Howard

and more

PAST MASTERS 200

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

28 Jan 2025

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1: Adventure of the Cleopatra Necklace

George Barton

1866-1940

In: *The Strange Adventures of Bromley Barnes*, 1918

Bromley Barnes, US Treasury detective, was part of the tsunami of detective fiction which came in the wake of Sherlock Holmes. There were numerous stories, mostly in Blue Book Magazine*, in 1910-11.*

IT DOESN'T pay to advertise— always. At least that was the conclusion of the trustees of the great Cosmopolitan Museum after the antiquarians of the country were thrown into a state of hysteria over the strange disappearance of the Cleopatra necklace. The sensational business started with a newspaper paragraph in the *Clarion,* reading something like this:

"The trustees of the Cosmopolitan Museum have added to the collection of curios in Egyptian Hall a rare old necklace which they say belonged, beyond the shadow of a doubt, to the famous sorceress of the Nile. As a relic of the civilization which existed three thousand years before Christ, the collar is naturally priceless. Its intrinsic value is placed at $30,000."

The announcement brought a crush of visitors to Egyptian Hall. The curator, Dr. Randall-Brown, had provided a strong plate glass case for the precious relic, and had given it the place of honor in the very center of the marble-tiled hall. The collar of the late— very late— Queen of Egypt reposed on a velvet-covered stand which displayed its rare qualities to excellent advantage. The setting was of some curious metal that was neither gold or silver, but the necklace itself was a collection of amethysts, pearls and diamonds.

Egyptian Hall was one of a number of large rooms in the Cosmopolitan Museum, which was part of the educational system of the famous University where some eighteen hundred young men, from all parts of the world, were preparing themselves for their attack on the world. The Cosmopolitan Museum, it might be added, was regarded as burglar-proof, as well as fire-proof. One watchman was employed during the day and another by night. George Young, the day watchman, also acted as a sort of guide, and when the trouble came he admitted that he had not remained in Egyptian Hall continuously; that, at one time, he had been out of the room for fifteen minutes.

It was Dr. Randall-Brown, the curator, who first made the astonishing discovery. He had brought a connoisseur from Harvard to look at the treasure.

"You will notice," said the curator, gloating over the prize as only an antiquarian can, "that there are three pearls, three amethysts and three diamonds in succession, and after that they come in twos and then in ones."

But even as he spoke, he realized that this orderly arrangement no longer existed. One of the amethysts had been misplaced. Filled with the gloomiest forebodings, he examined the outside of the case. Casually, all seemed well, but the use of a magnifying glass proved that the twelve screws which fastened the case to the flat table, on which it reposed, had been disturbed.

"Close the doors," cried the curator, nervously, "and we'll look into this business."

The case was opened and the astounding discovery was made that some one had taken the stones from the priceless Cleopatra necklace and had substituted paste diamonds and imitation gems in their place.

The news, which leaked out in spite of the caution of the trustees, made a tremendous sensation. The telegraph and the cable were called into requisition to beseech the police everywhere, and the learned men of the world, to join in the search for the missing treasure. Dealers in precious stones and pawnbrokers were given the description of the gems taken from the necklace, with instructions to arrest the first person who offered such stones for sale. Their curious size and shape, it was added, would make their identification comparatively easy.

The local police made a determined effort to locate the stolen property and to unravel the mystery of the robbery. Every one connected with the museum, in any capacity whatever, was subjected to a rigid inquiry but without result. The curator and the trustees wrung their hands in despair. They were estimable gentlemen, but their brows were so high and their intellects so keen that they were absolutely helpless in solving every-day problems of life. The University was becoming the laughing stock of the world. It was inconceivable, said outsiders, that such a crime could be committed without the police speedily detecting the criminal.

It was at this stage of the game that Barnes, going into the *Clarion* office, met his friend Curley, of that paper, and was given this command: "Solve the museum mystery." He had been given many difficult orders in the past, but this seemed the most impossible of all. Perhaps they were trying to have some fun with him at the office. "If so," he said to himself, "I'll put the laugh on the other side."

That afternoon he called up Dr. Randall-Brown and told him that he had been commissioned to solve the mystery. The learned curator smiled through his perplexity and said fervently:

"Do so, and you'll win my everlasting gratitude."

"But," insisted Barnes, "I must have your authority to cross-examine the employees and to conduct the investigation in any way I see fit."

"You have all that," replied the doctor. "I'll see that no obstacles are placed in your way."

The first thing that Barnes considered was the substitution of the fake necklace for the real one in the day time. He interrogated George Young, the day watchman, at some length, and that officer persisted in his statement that his longest length of absence from Egyptian Hall was for fifteen minutes.

"Didn't you go out for luncheon?"

"No, sir; I carried it with me as usual and ate it at that little desk over in the corner of the room, where I had a full view of the case containing the relic."

"Have you had many visitors?"

"Yes, sir; especially since the necklace came."

"How many at one time?"

"The number varied. Sometimes the room was crowded, and again there would be only two or three."

The detective reflected that it might have been possible for a trained gang of thieves to do the job in fifteen minutes. One man might have stood guard at the door while a half-dozen confederates unscrewed the case and made the substitution. But, of course, they would be subjected to interruption. Altogether, Barnes felt rather skeptical about his theory.

His next move was to put Adam Markley, the night watchman, through the third degree. The results were far from satisfactory. Adam Markley had been with the museum for fifteen years, and his reputation for integrity was very high. Indeed, he almost took a childish interest in the rare objects that were in his charge. He was an illiterate man, but what he lacked in education he supplied with enthusiasm and devotion to duty.

Dr. Randall-Brown shook his head smilingly when Barnes spoke of the night watchman.

"It's all right to put him on the griddle," he said, "but you might as well suspect me as old Adam Markley."

"I do suspect you," began the detective.

The venerable Egyptologist gave a start of surprise. He spoke sharply:

"Well of all the cheeky—"

Barnes lifted an interrupting hand.

"I suspect you and every one connected with this place," he finished. "You know," he added, "I am working on the French principle that you're all guilty until you prove your innocence."

"Ah," was the relieved reply, "that's different, but I'm sure you're wasting your time on the night watchman."

Adam Markley told his story in a straightforward way, and although he was called upon to repeat it, he never once deviated from any of the essential details. He was cherubic in appearance, and in spite of his years, his cheeks were round and rosy, and his blue eyes looked out at his inquisitor with child-like innocence and freshness. He constantly ran his hand through his brown hair, and his manner seemed to say, "Why don't you look for the thief instead of bothering with me?"

Barnes, not content with examining the employees, made an exhaustive investigation into their antecedents. He paid particular attention to the two watchmen. Young, he found, was a married man with a large family living in a modest house in the suburbs. Markley resided in bachelor apartments in the city, living comfortably but inexpensively. Those who knew him were loud in his praise. Some of his older friends recalled him as a child. He had a brother, and the two of them, with long brown curls and rosy cheeks, went about hand in hand like two babes in the wood. The brother, who, unfortunately, had left the straight and narrow path, was now living in the West.

Adam Markley, in the course of his examination, let fall one remark which Barnes thought might develop into a clew. He said that Professor von Hermann had paid five or six visits to the museum and had stood before the case containing the necklace like a man fascinated. Professor von Hermann was one of the world's greatest archaeologists, and there is no doubt that he keenly felt the disappointment which comes to such a man when a rival— even though that rival be an institution— secures the prize he covets. Barnes, in the course of his investigation, learned that the professor, on one occasion, had told a friend that the only thing he needed to complete his own collection was just such a necklace as the trustees of the Cosmopolitan Museum had fondly believed to be safe in Egyptian Hall. Barnes called at the professor's home with the idea of gaining some impressions of the venerable connoisseur, but that gentleman bluntly informed him through a servant that he "had no time to give to gossiping detectives."

Barnes relished this greatly, and made a mental resolution to remember the eccentricity— or worse— of the savant at the proper time and place. In the meantime he called upon the curator of the museum for the purpose of asking some further questions.

"Well, my man," cried Dr. Randall-Brown, with wet-blanket cordiality, "I suppose you've come to tell me you're stumped."

"Nothing of the kind," protested the detective.

"You haven't found the thief?"

"No," admitted Barnes, "not yet, but I've got a bully good theory."

"What is it?"

"I'm not ready to give it out. What I want to know from you is whether you haven't forgotten to tell me something."

"Sir!" exclaimed the doctor, with a rising and highly indignant inflection, "I've told you all I know."

"You were in your office in this building the day before the theft was discovered?"

"I was."

"Did anything unusual occur?"

"No, sir."

"You stepped out of your office for a few minutes?"

"Yes, I was in and out several times."

"And once, when you returned, you found a young man fumbling in the drawer of your desk?"

The curator's face lengthened.

"You're right, Barnes, I forgot all about that. It seemed such a trifling matter."

"It's the trifles that count, doctor. Who was the young man?"

"I never learned. He ran out as I came in. I imagine it was one of the students from the University."

"Wasn't he dark-complexioned?"

"Now that you mention it, I believe that he was."

"Haven't they some Egyptian students in the University?"

"By Jove, they have five or six. My boy, I believe you're on the right track!"

Barnes sighed.

"I doubt it, but I've got to clean all of these things up, you know."

"Shall I send for the Egyptian students?"

"No— at least not at present. By the way, do you know Professor von Hermann?"

"Yes."

"Has he ever said anything about the necklace?"

"Yes, he told me that his collection was incomplete without it and that our collection was incomplete without his Egyptian antiquities. He wondered if the trustees would consider a suggestion to sell him the necklace. I told him the proposition was preposterous."

"He thought the collection should be merged?"

"Exactly, only his plan would be to have the tail wag the dog."

Six days had now gone and Barnes apparently was no nearer the truth than he had been in the beginning. Every day regularly he reported at the *Clarion* office and found against his name on the assignment book in the *Clarion* office

the command, "Solve the museum mystery." The city editor, in his dry mirthless way, did his best to tease the emergency man.

"If you want to give up the assignment, Barnes," he said, "I'll let you report the meetings of the Universal Peace Union."

"No," said the baited one, clicking his teeth with determination, "I'll finish this job first if you don't mind."

That night he enlisted the aid of his friend and fellow worker, Clancy.

"You needn't tell me what you want," said the loyal Con, "I'll go with you anywhere without asking questions."

At midnight the two of them were prowling about the dark stone walls of the Cosmopolitan Museum. The place was on the outskirts of the city, and at that hour was lonely and deserted. A dim light shone from one of the small windows near the entrance. It was too high for either of them to look inside.

"I'd give a dollar for a soap box or something to stand on," grunted Barnes.

Clancy never hesitated for an instant.

"Let's play horsey," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I'll get down on my hands and knees," quoth the faithful one, "and you can stand on my back and peep inside."

It was no sooner said than done. The improvised stand proved to be just the right height. By clutching the window sill with his finger tips Barnes was able to draw himself up and peer into the little room that led to the museum.

There sat old Markley tilted back in a chair with his feet on the window ledge reading a book. A half smile wreathed his cherubic face, and he had the appearance of a man who, as one of our Presidents once remarked, was "at peace with the world and the rest of mankind."

There was certainly nothing to excite suspicion in appearance or the action of the venerable person, and yet the mere sight of him seemed to throw Barnes into a state of intense excitement.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he whispered hoarsely to his friend, as he jumped from Clancy's willing back.

"Got what?"

"Never mind," was the impatient retort, as he grabbed his associate by the coat sleeve; "come with me."

"What are you going to do now?" ventured Clancy.

"Commit burglary, I hope," ejaculated Barnes fervently.

Clancy looked at Barnes with real concern. He wondered whether he could, by any possibility, be taking leave of his senses. In spite of this momentary doubt he followed his friend with the blind devotion which was his most becoming trait. Soon after leaving the museum they were able to get a cab and

in a little while the vehicle, pursuant to Barnes's directions, drew up in front of Adam Markley's lodgings.

"This is the part of the job that I dislike, but desperate cases require desperate methods."

"How in the world can you get in?"

"This is one feature of the case where credit belongs to the police department. They secured skeleton keys in order to search old Markley's rooms."

"Then what's the use of your doing it over again?"

"Oh, they might have forgotten something," was the laughing rejoinder.

The two men entered the house noiselessly, crept silently up the stairs and soon found themselves in the modest habitation of the old watchman. It consisted of a bedroom and a sitting room. Barnes paid no attention to the sleeping chamber, but proceeded at once to the living apartment. This was plainly but comfortably furnished. A roll-top desk stood in one corner and a big Morris chair in the other. The left wall contained some family photographs, and Barnes gazed long and earnestly at one of these representing two young men. The other wall held a large engraving of General Grant on horseback. Presently Barnes went to the desk. It was locked. Without any evidence of compunction he pulled out a sharp instrument and began to twist the lock.

"You're going pretty far," said Clancy gravely.

"Yes," retorted the irrepressible one, "and the farther I go the more I learn."

The lock yielded and the top rolled up. Barnes grabbed a handful of papers and went through them like a conjurer doing a trick. Finally he reached a little yellow slip. He read what was written on the sheet and gave a gurgle of delight. He hastily slipped all the papers back in place and pulled the desk down in a way that automatically locked it, and cried out cheerfully:

"We're through, Clancy, old boy; nothing to do until to-morrow."

After breakfast next day Barnes called Dayton, Ohio, on the long distance telephone. It took him some time to get the person he wanted, but by noon his face was wreathed in smiles.

"It's all right," he exclaimed gaily to Clancy; "I want you to meet me at Markley's room the day after to-morrow at eight o'clock in the morning."

"Why?"

"Oh, we're going to have a little surprise party."

At the hour appointed Barnes and Clancy were at the modest quarters of the old watchman. So was Dr. Randall-Brown. The curator was annoyed.

"I don't like this," he exclaimed testily; "I don't relish the idea of breaking into a man's rooms without absolute proof."

Barnes smiled.

"If we had absolute proof, we wouldn't have to do it."

"Well, what do you expect to prove by coming here?"

"That depends entirely on the result of my experiment. We'll know all about it in a few minutes."

As he spoke, heavy footsteps were heard on the stairway, and in a few minutes Markley entered the room. He seemed dazed at the unexpected sight of strangers in his apartments.

"What's— what's the meaning of this?" he stammered.

"You know," said Barnes, sharply.

"I don't," he retorted with a trace of defiance.

Barnes advanced until he stood directly in front of the old man. He pointed an accusing finger at him. He spoke sternly.

"I charge you with the theft of the Cleopatra necklace from the Cosmopolitan Museum!"

The color slowly receded from the cheeks of the man's cherubic face. He sank weakly into the easy chair. It was some moments before he spoke, and then it was in a hushed and trembling voice.

"Where's— where's your proof?"

"In the necklace itself— we've found its hiding place."

The man's glance went waveringly about the room, and then it halted and rested on the engraving of General Grant. Barnes had been watching him like a hawk, and upon that significant halt he rushed over to the picture.

"Yes," he said, as if answering a question, "it does hang a bit crooked," and, as he straightened the frame, there was a crashing sound from behind the engraving and a small woolen bag fell to the floor.

Barnes picked it up quickly, and opening the top emptied the contents on the table. There before the astonished gaze of the onlookers, were the pearls, amethysts and diamonds that had composed the Cleopatra necklace.

Markley lay back in his chair, too stupefied to speak. Dr. Randall-Brown broke forth in a cry of anguish.

"This is horrible! No one living could have convinced me that Adam Markley was a thief!"

"He isn't," said Barnes, coolly.

The curator pointed a despairing finger at the gems and then at the cowering man in the chair.

"There," he cried angrily, "how do you explain this evidence away?"

Barnes paused for a moment as though listening, and then said:

"If I'm not mistaken, the explanation will be here in a moment."

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the door opened, and in walked a rosy-cheeked, brown-haired, cherubic-faced person. The detective gave a wave of his hand in the direction of the newcomer.

"Gentlemen," he said, with something like dramatic effect, "let me present to you Mr. Adam Markley."

Every one shouted with surprise.

"But who," exclaimed Dr. Randall-Brown, pointing to the creature in the arm chair, "is this man?"

"That," said Barnes, "is Jim Markley, thief and general all round confidence man. He had been living in Dayton, O., but when he read of your $30,000 necklace he couldn't resist the temptation to come here and get it. How he got it is a long story that will have to be told in the court, but in the meantime it is sufficient for you to know that he first had his twin brother lured away from here and then, clothing himself in his gray uniform, personated him at the museum and easily got away with the gems during the night."

While he talked the two brothers were staring at each other. Adam's eyes were humid with unshed tears, but the face of the black sheep now betrayed only cynical indifference. The resemblance between the two was remarkable. They were as much alike as two peas in a pod. After the necessary formalities had ended, they separated, one to take his place in a felon's dock, the other to resume his position as a faithful and trusted employee.

That night Clancy ventured to question Bromley Barnes.

"I thought at first," he said, "that the culprit was either the student who was found going through Dr. Randall-Brown's desk, or Professor von Hermann, the Egyptologist."

Barnes shook his head.

"The boy was hunting for a set of questions to be used in the coming examination, while the sight of the necklace simply caused Professor von Hermann to give his rare collection to the Cosmopolitan Museum."

"You got your clew the night you peeped in at Markley, didn't you?" persisted Clancy.

"I did," was the reply, "and the clew was in the book he was reading. I knew that Adam Markley could scarcely write his own name and that he could read only with great difficulty. Therefore, when I discovered that watchman reading the second volume of Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* with ease, I knew he wasn't Adam Markley. The rest was easy. The finding of the telegram that lured Adam to Dayton, and then getting into communication with him over the long distance telephone was simply a matter of course."

"What's the moral as far as Jim Markley is concerned?"

"I don't know," grinned Barnes, "unless it's the old one 'where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise.'"

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2: The Satyr

Barry Pain

1864-1928

In: *The New Gulliver*, 1913

MYRA LAROSE was a good governess, capable, and highly certificated.

At Salston Hill School they rewarded her services with forty pounds per annum, and board and lodging during term-time. She had often been fortunate enough to secure private pupils for the holidays, and she knew a stationer who bought hand-painted Christmas cards. At the end of four years' work she had thirty-five pounds saved and in the Post Office. And then Aunt Jane, the last of her relatives, died, and left her a fine two hundred and fifty. This meant another ten pounds per annum.

Things were not so bad, but they did not, of course, justify the very mad idea that came into her pretty head— a head that, so far, had proved itself sane and practical.

The girls of the school considered that Miss Larose was strict but just, and that she had nice eyes. The principal, Mrs Dewlop, when prostrate from the horrible Davenant scandal, had declared that she would never think highly of any human being again; but she did think highly of Myra, even to the extent of considering the possibility of an increase of salary. Myra's fellow-teachers thought her sensible, and chaffed her mildly at times about her economies and her accumulation of wealth. No one would have supposed her capable of anything wild and extravagant.

Possibly a book that she had been reading put the idea into her head. Then there was the accident that nearly all her clothes were new simultaneously. Her eyes fell on the advertisement which showed her the advantages of hiring a petrol landaulet by the day in London. Thoughts of the theatre swam into her head. She loved the theatre, and had not been in one for years. She might lunch at the Ritz. She might deny herself nothing— for one day. Grey routine and miserable economies suddenly found her insurgent. Yes, she would have one great day— one day during which she would live at the rate of two thousand a year.

So, on one splendid morning, at the station of her northern suburb, she had occasion to be severe with the booking-clerk. ("I said *first* return— not third. You should pay more attention.") She bought a sixpenny periodical to read on the way up, and when she reached King's Cross she deliberately left the valuable magazine in the carriage behind her. That struck the high, reckless note. How often had she nursed a halfpenny paper through the whole of a traffic-distracted day that she might read the feuilleton at night!

"Taxi, miss?" suggested the porter when he had ascertained that she had no luggage.

"I think not," said Myra. "I believe my car's waiting for me." She felt that she had said it perfectly— without obvious pleasure, and without that air of intense languor that is always accepted on the stage as indicative of aristocracy, and never seen elsewhere.

She could tell the porter how to recognise the car— information supplied to her by the company from whom she had hired it— and the porter brought it up for her. Her first thought was that it looked splendid. Her second thought was that beyond a doubt she had recognised the face of the liveried driver.

She gave the porter a shilling, and sent him away. (Her usual tips for porters had varied from nothing to twopence, with a preference for the former.) Then she turned to the driver, a young man, with a handsome, clean-shaven face and dark, rebellious eyes.

"I know you," she said. "You are Mr Davenant."

"Quite true, Miss Larose. But that need make no difference. You have bought my services for the day, you know. You will find me just as attentive and respectful as any other servant. Where to, miss?"

"No, no. I want to talk to you. I must. Oh, it's too awful that you should have come down to this. Mrs Dewlop must have been vindictive indeed."

"She was certainly angry." He smiled reminiscently— he had a charming smile. "She had every right to be."

"Look here," she said impulsively, "what is to prevent you from lunching with me?"

"Your plans for the day— this car— and, for the matter of that, my clothes."

"I have no appointments, and no fixed plans. I was going to amuse myself just anyhow. I shall like this far better. Oh, can't you arrange it for me?"

"I should like it, too, and I can arrange it all very easily if you don't mind waiting half an hour."

"Of course I'll wait— wait here, if you like."

"You would find the National Gallery more interesting, and I can take you there in a few minutes."

"Yes, that's better. Thanks awfully. This is splendid."

At the National Gallery she looked at certain pictures with appreciative intelligence. Then she sat down and half-closed her eyes, and saw a picture from the gallery of her memory.

It was the big classroom at Salston Hill School. At one end of the room Myra Larose took the elementary class in drawing. At the other end, much older girls took the lesson in advanced drawing from a master who was, as the

prospectus stated, an exhibitor at the Royal Academy. His name was Hilary Davenant, and in the bills he was charged extra. The older girls were ten in number, and were provided with easels, charcoal, and stumps. They formed the circumference of a circle of which the centre was a life-size cast with a blackboard adjacent.

Myra watched as she saw Davenant going from one drawing-board to another, and noted the waning of patience and the growth of irritation. He went to the blackboard and addressed the entire class on the anatomy of the hand, illustrating his remarks by rapid drawings on the blackboard. They were admirable drawings in their way— swift, right, certain, slick. And suddenly he flung the chalk to the floor and spake with his tongue. He also used gesture— a foreign and reprehensible practice.

"You poor, silly idiots! Not one of you will ever do it, except perhaps Miss Stenson. And if you did, it wouldn't be the real thing." He checked himself, and went on in a nice, suave schoolmaster's voice. "I was joking, of course. As I said, this cast presents considerable difficulties to some of you. But you must face your difficulties and overcome them. You must not let yourselves be discouraged." And so on.

Dora Stenson, aged sixteen, blushed and put her hand over her eyes. The other pupils smiled in a weak, wan way. They had been told that it was a joke, and they believed everything they were told, and did their best. At the other end of the room Myra Larose developed a good deal of interest in Hilary Davenant.

An incident which occurred two days later formed another picture in the memory-gallery. Myra, with other assistants, had been summoned with every circumstance of solemnity to the principal's private study.

"I have to inform you, ladies," said Mrs Dewlop, "that owing to circumstances which have come to my knowledge, I have been compelled to dismiss Mr H. Davenant at a moment's notice." She readjusted her pince-nez, and her refined face squirmed. "Mr Davenant is not a man: he is a satyr. I have sufficiently indicated the nature of his offence, which he admitted; and I do not care to dwell upon the subject further. This has been a great shock to me. One can only hope in time to live it down. That," she added tragically, "is all."

It had happened six months before, and at the time had filled Myra with curiosity and also with a touch of horror. Was it wise of her to make appointments with a man who had been so described? Had not her feeling of compassion for an old colleague— one, moreover, whom she had found sympathetic— carried her too far? This was not at all the kind of thing she had come out to do. But— well, she had done it. And if the satyr added punctuality to his other vices, he would be waiting outside for her.

He was there. He had changed his car as well as his clothes. He did not look poor. He looked as if he owned that car and a good deal of the rest of the earth.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I thought this open car might be useful. If you would be kind enough to take the seat beside me we could talk as we go. I thought, as it was such a ripping morning, you might like to drive into the country somewhere for lunch. But that must be just as you like, of course."

"It is exactly what I like. Let's see. We've got lots of time before lunch. You shall choose where we go."

"If you don't mind lunching a little late, we might do Brighton."

"Yes, we lunch at Brighton," she said decisively. The spirit of adventure was hot within her. She had meant the day to be rather exciting. It was more than fulfilling expectations.

As they crawled through the traffic she asked him how he had persuaded his firm to let her have the open car instead of the other. She was told that it was the policy of his people to oblige a customer in every possible way, and that they had made no trouble. Then she spoke of things she had seen at the National Gallery, and found him just as enthusiastic about art as she had done once in the old days at the school, when chance gave them a few minutes' talk together. But it was not till they sat at lunch in a good little hotel overlooking the sea that they became confidential.

"I gather," he said, "that you knew that Mrs Dewlop sacked me."

"She told all of us."

"Did she say why?"

"Not exactly. She said that you were a satyr. I— I didn't believe that."

"Well, I'll tell you exactly what I did. I kissed Dora Stenson."

This was a blow. "I don't think I want to hear about it," said Myra coldly.

"It's all very well," said Davenant mournfully, "but I'd had very little experience as a teacher. What do you do yourself when a girl begins to cry?"

"If she's quite a child, I try to comfort her. If it's one of the older girls, I tell her that I dislike hysteria, and that she had better go away until she has recovered. But it rarely happens with the older girls. What made Dora Stenson cry?"

"All my own fault— the whole thing. You know the beauties I had to teach. Dora was the only one that had any gift. As for the rest, you might as well have tried to teach blind pigs to draw. What was the consequence? I gave Dora most of the teaching, and I was harder on her than I was on the others. I judged her by a different standard, and I drove her as hard as I could. Well, one day, at the end of the hour, she brought me up some bad work. She'd taken no trouble. It was rotten. All the same, if any of the others had shown me anything nearly as

good, I should have been more than satisfied. As it was Dora, I lost my wool and told her what I thought. Classes were dismissed. You went out. I was left alone in the room. Back came Dora to pick up some truck she'd left behind, and she was crying— crying like anything. Well, I couldn't stand it. I'd never meant to be a brute, and there was that girl— very pretty she is, too— crying like anything. I began to talk to her, and, before I knew where I was, I had kissed her. I'm making a clean breast of the whole thing— I kissed her two or three times."

Miss Myra Larose, who had not wanted to hear about it, had listened with breathless interest, and now put in a shrewd question.

"And did Dora kiss you?"

"As I was saying, where I was wrong was in— "

"All right, I know. If she had not kissed you, you would have said so. But, seeing that she did kiss you, why on earth did she complain to Mrs Dewlop?"

"She never did. She wrote a letter to a girl friend of hers, and left it lying about. Mrs Dewlop read it. Now, what do you think?"

Myra considered a moment. "I think," she said deliberately, "that Dora was a braggart, and that Mrs Dewlop was a sneak, and— er— not very wise, and that you— — "

"Do you also think me a satyr?"

"Of course not. You were all wrong, but you were just a baby."

He gave a sigh of relief.

"It makes me angry," said Myra impulsively. "What right had that woman to ruin you, and turn you into a cab-driver?"

"I must explain further. It is true that she refused me any kind of a character, and that my teaching career was closed. But I am not exactly a cab-driver. When I was turned out I had to give up the idea of making a living by art. I could no longer teach, and modern pictures sell seldom and badly. But I had another string to my bow. I understand motors, and I had had plenty of driving experience. An uncle of mine is in the motor business to some considerable extent. Amongst other things, he is a director and principal share-holder in the company from which you hired your car. He has often asked me to join him, and now I did so. He is a thorough sort of man, and he insisted that I should go through every side. I've washed cars; for three months I was an ordinary mechanic; I've been in the office; the last few weeks I've been driving these privately let cars, and picking up some interesting information as to the amount of tips that the drivers get. Next week I shall be a manager. Well, now, I saw your order when it came in. I remembered you very well— very well, indeed. I determined to drive you myself— to be your good servant, if that was all that was possible, but to be as much more as you would let me be."

As the car purred smoothly through the dusk in the direction of the northern suburb where Myra had her inexpensive lodging, Davenant said: "Then you will give notice that you leave at the end of next term, darling?"

And she said: "Yes, dearest."

3: The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896-1940

Collier's May 27 1922

A fantasy, filmed in 2008 with Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett

AS LONG AGO as 1860 it was the proper thing to be born at home. At present, so I am told, the high gods of medicine have decreed that the first cries of the young shall be uttered upon the anaesthetic air of a hospital, preferably a fashionable one. So young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were fifty years ahead of style when they decided, one day in the summer of 1860, that their first baby should be born in a hospital. Whether this anachronism had any bearing upon the astonishing history I am about to set down will never be known.

I shall tell you what occurred, and let you judge for yourself.

The Roger Buttons held an enviable position, both social and financial, in ante-bellum Baltimore. They were related to the This Family and the That Family, which, as every Southerner knew, entitled them to membership in that enormous peerage which largely populated the Confederacy. This was their first experience with the charming old custom of having babies— Mr. Button was naturally nervous. He hoped it would be a boy so that he could be sent to Yale College in Connecticut, at which institution Mr. Button himself had been known for four years by the somewhat obvious nickname of "Cuff."

On the September morning consecrated to the enormous event he arose nervously at six o'clock dressed himself, adjusted an impeccable stock, and hurried forth through the streets of Baltimore to the hospital, to determine whether the darkness of the night had borne in new life upon its bosom.

When he was approximately a hundred yards from the Maryland Private Hospital for Ladies and Gentlemen he saw Doctor Keene, the family physician, descending the front steps, rubbing his hands together with a washing movement— as all doctors are required to do by the unwritten ethics of their profession.

Mr. Roger Button, the president of Roger Button & Co., Wholesale Hardware, began to run toward Doctor Keene with much less dignity than was expected from a Southern gentleman of that picturesque period. "Doctor Keene!" he called. "Oh, Doctor Keene!"

The doctor heard him, faced around, and stood waiting, a curious expression settling on his harsh, medicinal face as Mr. Button drew near.

"What happened?" demanded Mr. Button, as he came up in a gasping rush. "What was it? How is she? A boy? Who is it? What—"

"Talk sense!" said Doctor Keene sharply, He appeared somewhat irritated.

"Is the child born?" begged Mr. Button.

Doctor Keene frowned. "Why, yes, I suppose so— after a fashion." Again he threw a curious glance at Mr. Button.

"Is my wife all right?"

"Yes."

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Here now!" cried Doctor Keene in a perfect passion of irritation, "I'll ask you to go and see for yourself. Outrageous!" He snapped the last word out in almost one syllable, then he turned away muttering: "Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me— ruin anybody."

"What's the matter?" demanded Mr. Button appalled. "Triplets?"

"No, not triplets!" answered the doctor cuttingly. "What's more, you can go and see for yourself. And get another doctor. I brought you into the world, young man, and I've been physician to your family for forty years, but I'm through with you! I don't want to see you or any of your relatives ever again! Good-bye!"

Then he turned sharply, and without another word climbed into his phaeton, which was waiting at the curbstone, and drove severely away.

Mr. Button stood there upon the sidewalk, stupefied and trembling from head to foot. What horrible mishap had occurred? He had suddenly lost all desire to go into the Maryland Private Hospital for Ladies and Gentlemen— it was with the greatest difficulty that, a moment later, he forced himself to mount the steps and enter the front door.

A nurse was sitting behind a desk in the opaque gloom of the hall. Swallowing his shame, Mr. Button approached her.

"Good-morning," she remarked, looking up at him pleasantly.

"Good-morning. I— I am Mr. Button."

At this a look of utter terror spread itself over girl's face. She rose to her feet and seemed about to fly from the hall, restraining herself only with the most apparent difficulty.

"I want to see my child," said Mr. Button.

The nurse gave a little scream. "Oh— of course!" she cried hysterically. "Upstairs. Right upstairs. Go— up!"

She pointed the direction, and Mr. Button, bathed in cool perspiration, turned falteringly, and began to mount to the second floor. In the upper hall he addressed another nurse who approached him, basin in hand. "I'm Mr. Button," he managed to articulate. "I want to see my—"

Clank! The basin clattered to the floor and rolled in the direction of the stairs. Clank! Clank! It began a methodical descent as if sharing in the general terror which this gentleman provoked.

"I want to see my child!" Mr. Button almost shrieked. He was on the verge of collapse.

Clank! The basin reached the first floor. The nurse regained control of herself, and threw Mr. Button a look of hearty contempt.

"All right, Mr. Button," she agreed in a hushed voice. "Very well! But if you knew what a state it's put us all in this morning! It's perfectly outrageous! The hospital will never have a ghost of a reputation after—"

"Hurry!" he cried hoarsely. "I can't stand this!"

"Come this way, then, Mr. Button."

He dragged himself after her. At the end of a long hall they reached a room from which proceeded a variety of howls— indeed, a room which, in later parlance, would have been known as the "crying-room." They entered.

"Well," gasped Mr. Button, "which is mine?"

"There!" said the nurse.

Mr. Button's eyes followed her pointing finger, and this is what he saw. Wrapped in a voluminous white blanket, and partly crammed into one of the cribs, there sat an old man apparently about seventy years of age. His sparse hair was almost white, and from his chin dripped a long smoke-coloured beard, which waved absurdly back and forth, fanned by the breeze coming in at the window. He looked up at Mr. Button with dim, faded eyes in which lurked a puzzled question.

"Am I mad?" thundered Mr. Button, his terror resolving into rage. "Is this some ghastly hospital joke?

"It doesn't seem like a joke to us," replied the nurse severely. "And I don't know whether you're mad or not— but that is most certainly your child."

The cool perspiration redoubled on Mr. Button's forehead. He closed his eyes, and then, opening them, looked again. There was no mistake— he was gazing at a man of threescore and ten— a baby of three-score and ten, a baby whose feet hung over the sides of the crib in which it was reposing.

The old man looked placidly from one to the other for a moment, and then suddenly spoke in a cracked and ancient voice. "Are you my father?" he demanded.

Mr. Button and the nurse started violently.

"Because if you are," went on the old man querulously, "I wish you'd get me out of this place— or, at least, get them to put a comfortable rocker in here."

"Where in God's name did you come from? Who are you?" burst out Mr. Button frantically.

"I can't tell you exactly who I am," replied the querulous whine, "because I've only been born a few hours— but my last name is certainly Button."

"You lie! You're an impostor!"

The old man turned wearily to the nurse. "Nice way to welcome a new-born child," he complained in a weak voice. "Tell him he's wrong, why don't you?"

"You're wrong. Mr. Button," said the nurse severely. "This is your child, and you'll have to make the best of it. We're going to ask you to take him home with you as soon as possible-some time to-day."

"Home?" repeated Mr. Button incredulously.

"Yes, we can't have him here. We really can't, you know?"

"I'm right glad of it," whined the old man. "This is a fine place to keep a youngster of quiet tastes. With all this yelling and howling, I haven't been able to get a wink of sleep. I asked for something to eat"— here his voice rose to a shrill note of protest— "and they brought me a bottle of milk!"

Mr. Button, sank down upon a chair near his son and concealed his face in his hands. "My heavens!" he murmured, in an ecstasy of horror. "What will people say? What must I do?"

"You'll have to take him home," insisted the nurse— "immediately!"

A grotesque picture formed itself with dreadful clarity before the eyes of the tortured man— a picture of himself walking through the crowded streets of the city with this appalling apparition stalking by his side.

"I can't. I can't," he moaned.

People would stop to speak to him, and what was he going to say? He would have to introduce this— this septuagenarian: "This is my son, born early this morning." And then the old man would gather his blanket around him and they would plod on, past the bustling stores, the slave market— for a dark instant Mr. Button wished passionately that his son was black— past the luxurious houses of the residential district, past the home for the aged....

"Come! Pull yourself together," commanded the nurse.

"See here," the old man announced suddenly, "if you think I'm going to walk home in this blanket, you're entirely mistaken."

"Babies always have blankets."

With a malicious crackle the old man held up a small white swaddling garment. "Look!" he quavered. "This is what they had ready for me."

"Babies always wear those," said the nurse primly.

"Well," said the old man, "this baby's not going to wear anything in about two minutes. This blanket itches. They might at least have given me a sheet."

"Keep it on! Keep it on!" said Mr. Button hurriedly. He turned to the nurse. "What'll I do?"

"Go down town and buy your son some clothes."

Mr. Button's son's voice followed him down into the hall: "And a cane, father. I want to have a cane."

Mr. Button banged the outer door savagely....

ii

"GOOD-MORNING," Mr. Button said nervously, to the clerk in the Chesapeake Dry Goods Company. "I want to buy some clothes for my child."

"How old is your child, sir?"

"About six hours," answered Mr. Button, without due consideration.

"Babies' supply department in the rear."

"Why, I don't think— I'm not sure that's what I want. It's— he's an unusually large-size child. Exceptionally— ah— large."

"They have the largest child's sizes."

"Where is the boys' department?" inquired Mr. Button, shifting his ground desperately. He felt that the clerk must surely scent his shameful secret.

"Right here."

"Well—" He hesitated. The notion of dressing his son in men's clothes was repugnant to him. If, say, he could only find a very large boy's suit, he might cut off that long and awful beard, dye the white hair brown, and thus manage to conceal the worst, and to retain something of his own self-respect— not to mention his position in Baltimore society.

But a frantic inspection of the boys' department revealed no suits to fit the new-born Button. He blamed the store, of course— in such cases it is the thing to blame the store.

"How old did you say that boy of yours was?" demanded the clerk curiously.

"He's— sixteen."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I thought you said six hours. You'll find the youths' department in the next aisle."

Mr. Button turned miserably away. Then he stopped, brightened, and pointed his finger toward a dressed dummy in the window display. "There!" he exclaimed. "I'll take that suit, out there on the dummy."

The clerk stared. "Why," he protested, "that's not a child's suit. At least it is, but it's for fancy dress. You could wear it yourself!"

"Wrap it up," insisted his customer nervously. "That's what I want."

The astonished clerk obeyed.

Back at the hospital Mr. Button entered the nursery and almost threw the package at his son. "Here's your clothes," he snapped out.

The old man untied the package and viewed the contents with a quizzical eye.

"They look sort of funny to me," he complained, "I don't want to be made a monkey of— "

"You've made a monkey of me!" retorted Mr. Button fiercely. "Never you mind how funny you look. Put them on— or I'll— or I'll spankyou." He swallowed uneasily at the penultimate word, feeling nevertheless that it was the proper thing to say.

"All right, father"— this with a grotesque simulation of filial respect— "you've lived longer; you know best. Just as you say."

As before, the sound of the word "father" caused Mr. Button to start violently.

"And hurry."

"I'm hurrying, father."

When his son was dressed Mr. Button regarded him with depression. The costume consisted of dotted socks, pink pants, and a belted blouse with a wide white collar. Over the latter waved the long whitish beard, drooping almost to the waist. The effect was not good.

"Wait!"

Mr. Button seized a hospital shears and with three quick snaps amputated a large section of the beard. But even with this improvement the ensemble fell far short of perfection. The remaining brush of scraggly hair, the watery eyes, the ancient teeth, seemed oddly out of tone with the gaiety of the costume. Mr. Button, however, was obdurate— he held out his hand. "Come along!" he said sternly.

His son took the hand trustingly. "What are you going to call me, dad?" he quavered as they walked from the nursery— "just 'baby' for a while? till you think of a better name?"

Mr. Button grunted. "I don't know," he answered harshly. "I think we'll call you Methuselah."

iii

EVEN AFTER the new addition to the Button family had had his hair cut short and then dyed to a sparse unnatural black, had had his face shaved so close that it glistened, and had been attired in small-boy clothes made to order by a flabbergasted tailor, it was impossible for Button to ignore the fact that his son was a poor excuse for a first family baby. Despite his aged stoop,

Benjamin Button— for it was by this name they called him instead of by the appropriate but invidious Methuselah— was five feet eight inches tall. His clothes did not conceal this, nor did the clipping and dyeing of his eyebrows disguise the fact that the eyes under— were faded and watery and tired. In fact, the baby-nurse who had been engaged in advance left the house after one look, in a state of considerable indignation.

But Mr. Button persisted in his unwavering purpose. Benjamin was a baby, and a baby he should remain. At first he declared that if Benjamin didn't like warm milk he could go without food altogether, but he was finally prevailed upon to allow his son bread and butter, and even oatmeal by way of a compromise. One day he brought home a rattle and, giving it to Benjamin, insisted in no uncertain terms that he should "play with it," whereupon the old man took it with— a weary expression and could be heard jingling it obediently at intervals throughout the day.

There can be no doubt, though, that the rattle bored him, and that he found other and more soothing amusements when he was left alone. For instance, Mr. Button discovered one day that during the preceding week he had smoked more cigars than ever before— a phenomenon, which was explained a few days later when, entering the nursery unexpectedly, he found the room full of faint blue haze and Benjamin, with a guilty expression on his face, trying to conceal the butt of a dark Havana. This, of course, called for a severe spanking, but Mr. Button found that he could not bring himself to administer it. He merely warned his son that he would "stunt his growth."

Nevertheless he persisted in his attitude. He brought home lead soldiers, he brought toy trains, he brought large pleasant animals made of cotton, and, to perfect the illusion which he was creating— for himself at least— he passionately demanded of the clerk in the toy-store whether "the paint would come oft the pink duck if the baby put it in his mouth." But, despite all his father's efforts, Benjamin refused to be interested. He would steal down the back stairs and return to the nursery with a volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica, over which he would pore through an afternoon, while his cotton cows and his Noah's ark were left neglected on the floor. Against such a stubbornness Mr. Button's efforts were of little avail.

The sensation created in Baltimore was, at first, prodigious. What the mishap would have cost the Buttons and their kinsfolk socially cannot be determined, for the outbreak of the Civil War drew the city's attention to other things. A few people who were unfailingly polite racked their brains for compliments to give to the parents— and finally hit upon the ingenious device of declaring that the baby resembled his grandfather, a fact which, due to the standard state of decay common to all men of seventy, could not be denied.

Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were not pleased, and Benjamin's grandfather was furiously insulted.

Benjamin, once he left the hospital, took life as he found it. Several small boys were brought to see him, and he spent a stiff-jointed afternoon trying to work up an interest in tops and marbles— he even managed, quite accidentally, to break a kitchen window with a stone from a sling shot, a feat which secretly delighted his father.

Thereafter Benjamin contrived to break something every day, but he did these things only because they were expected of him, and because he was by nature obliging.

When his grandfather's initial antagonism wore off, Benjamin and that gentleman took enormous pleasure in one another's company. They would sit for hours, these two, so far apart in age and experience, and, like old cronies, discuss with tireless monotony the slow events of the day. Benjamin felt more at ease in his grandfather's presence than in his parents'— they seemed always somewhat in awe of him and, despite the dictatorial authority they exercised over him, frequently addressed him as "Mr."

He was as puzzled as any one else at the apparently advanced age of his mind and body at birth. He read up on it in the medical journal, but found that no such case had been previously recorded. At his father's urging he made an honest attempt to play with other boys, and frequently he joined in the milder games— football shook him up too much, and he feared that in case of a fracture his ancient bones would refuse to knit.

When he was five he was sent to kindergarten, where he initiated into the art of pasting green paper on orange paper, of weaving coloured maps and manufacturing eternal cardboard necklaces. He was inclined to drowse off to sleep in the middle of these tasks, a habit which both irritated and frightened his young teacher. To his relief she complained to his parents, and he was removed from the school. The Roger Buttons told their friends that they felt he was too young.

By the time he was twelve years old his parents had grown used to him. Indeed, so strong is the force of custom that they no longer felt that he was different from any other child— except when some curious anomaly reminded them of the fact. But one day a few weeks after his twelfth birthday, while looking in the mirror, Benjamin made, or thought he made, an astonishing discovery. Did his eyes deceive him, or had his hair turned in the dozen years of his life from white to iron-gray under its concealing dye? Was the network of wrinkles on his face becoming less pronounced? Was his skin healthier and firmer, with even a touch of ruddy winter colour? He could not tell. He knew

that he no longer stooped, and that his physical condition had improved since the early days of his life.

"Can it be—?" he thought to himself, or, rather, scarcely dared to think.

He went to his father. "I am grown," he announced determinedly. "I want to put on long trousers."

His father hesitated. "Well," he said finally, "I don't know. Fourteen is the age for putting on long trousers— and you are only twelve."

"But you'll have to admit," protested Benjamin, "that I'm big for my age."

His father looked at him with illusory speculation. "Oh, I'm not so sure of that," he said. "I was as big as you when I was twelve."

This was not true— it was all part of Roger Button's silent agreement with himself to believe in his son's normality.

Finally a compromise was reached. Benjamin was to continue to dye his hair. He was to make a better attempt to play with boys of his own age. He was not to wear his spectacles or carry a cane in the street. In return for these concessions he was allowed his first suit of long trousers....

iv

OF THE LIFE of Benjamin Button between his twelfth and twenty-first year I intend to say little. Suffice to record that they were years of normal ungrowth. When Benjamin was eighteen he was erect as a man of fifty; he had more hair and it was of a dark gray; his step was firm, his voice had lost its cracked quaver and descended to a healthy baritone. So his father sent him up to Connecticut to take examinations for entrance to Yale College. Benjamin passed his examination and became a member of the freshman class.

On the third day following his matriculation he received a notification from Mr. Hart, the college registrar, to call at his office and arrange his schedule. Benjamin, glancing in the mirror, decided that his hair needed a new application of its brown dye, but an anxious inspection of his bureau drawer disclosed that the dye bottle was not there. Then he remembered— he had emptied it the day before and thrown it away.

He was in a dilemma. He was due at the registrar's in five minutes. There seemed to be no help for it— he must go as he was. He did.

"Good-morning," said the registrar politely. "You've come to inquire about your son."

"Why, as a matter of fact, my name's Button—" began Benjamin, but Mr. Hart cut him off.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Button. I'm expecting your son here any minute."

"That's me!" burst out Benjamin. "I'm a freshman."

"What!"

"I'm a freshman."

"Surely you're joking."

"Not at all."

The registrar frowned and glanced at a card before him. "Why, I have Mr. Benjamin Button's age down here as eighteen."

"That's my age," asserted Benjamin, flushing slightly.

The registrar eyed him wearily. "Now surely, Mr. Button, you don't expect me to believe that."

Benjamin smiled wearily. "I am eighteen," he repeated.

The registrar pointed sternly to the door. "Get out," he said. "Get out of college and get out of town. You are a dangerous lunatic."

"I am eighteen."

Mr. Hart opened the door. "The idea!" he shouted. "A man of your age trying to enter here as a freshman. Eighteen years old, are you? Well, I'll give you eighteen minutes to get out of town."

Benjamin Button walked with dignity from the room, and half a dozen undergraduates, who were waiting in the hall, followed him curiously with their eyes. When he had gone a little way he turned around, faced the infuriated registrar, who was still standing in the door-way, and repeated in a firm voice: "I am eighteen years old."

To a chorus of titters which went up from the group of undergraduates, Benjamin walked away.

But he was not fated to escape so easily. On his melancholy walk to the railroad station he found that he was being followed by a group, then by a swarm, and finally by a dense mass of undergraduates. The word had gone around that a lunatic had passed the entrance examinations for Yale and attempted to palm himself off as a youth of eighteen. A fever of excitement permeated the college. Men ran hatless out of classes, the football team abandoned its practice and joined the mob, professors' wives with bonnets awry and bustles out of position, ran shouting after the procession, from which proceeded a continual succession of remarks aimed at the tender sensibilities of Benjamin Button.

"He must be the wandering Jew!"

"He ought to go to prep school at his age!"

"Look at the infant prodigy!"

"He thought this was the old men's home."

"Go up to Harvard!"

Benjamin increased his gait, and soon he was running. He would show them! He would go to Harvard, and then they would regret these ill-considered taunts!

Safely on board the train for Baltimore, he put his head from the window. "You'll regret this!" he shouted.

"Ha-ha!" the undergraduates laughed. "Ha-ha-ha!" It was the biggest mistake that Yale College had ever made....

v

IN 1880 BENJAMIN Button was twenty years old, and he signalised his birthday by going to work for his father in Roger Button & Co., Wholesale Hardware. It was in that same year that he began "going out socially"— that is, his father insisted on taking him to several fashionable dances. Roger Button was now fifty, and he and his son were more and more companionable— in fact, since Benjamin had ceased to dye his hair (which was still grayish) they appeared about the same age, and could have passed for brothers.

One night in August they got into the phaeton attired in their full-dress suits and drove out to a dance at the Shevlins' country house, situated just outside of Baltimore. It was a gorgeous evening. A full moon drenched the road to the lustreless colour of platinum, and late-blooming harvest flowers breathed into the motionless air aromas that were like low, half-heard laughter. The open country, carpeted for rods around with bright wheat, was translucent as in the day. It was almost impossible not to be affected by the sheer beauty of the sky— almost.

"There's a great future in the dry-goods business," Roger Button was saying. He was not a spiritual man— his aesthetic sense was rudimentary.

"Old fellows like me can't learn new tricks," he observed profoundly. "It's you youngsters with energy and vitality that have the great future before you."

Far up the road the lights of the Shevlins' country house drifted into view, and presently there was a sighing sound that crept persistently toward them— it might have been the fine plaint of violins or the rustle of the silver wheat under the moon.

They pulled up behind a handsome brougham whose passengers were disembarking at the door. A lady got out, then an elderly gentleman, then another young lady, beautiful as sin. Benjamin started; an almost chemical change seemed to dissolve and recompose the very elements of his body. A rigour passed over him, blood rose into his cheeks, his forehead, and there was a steady thumping in his ears. It was first love.

The girl was slender and frail, with hair that was ashen under the moon and honey-coloured under the sputtering gas-lamps of the porch. Over her shoulders was thrown a Spanish mantilla of softest yellow, butterflied in black; her feet were glittering buttons at the hem of her bustled dress.

Roger Button leaned over to his son. "That," he said, "is young Hildegarde Moncrief, the daughter of General Moncrief."

Benjamin nodded coldly. "Pretty little thing," he said indifferently. But when the negro boy had led the buggy away, he added: "Dad, you might introduce me to her."

They approached a group, of which Miss Moncrief was the centre. Reared in the old tradition, she curtsied low before Benjamin. Yes, he might have a dance. He thanked her and walked away— staggered away.

The interval until the time for his turn should arrive dragged itself out interminably. He stood close to the wall, silent, inscrutable, watching with murderous eyes the young bloods of Baltimore as they eddied around Hildegarde Moncrief, passionate admiration in their faces. How obnoxious they seemed to Benjamin; how intolerably rosy! Their curling brown whiskers aroused in him a feeling equivalent to indigestion.

But when his own time came, and he drifted with her out upon the changing floor to the music of the latest waltz from Paris, his jealousies and anxieties melted from him like a mantle of snow. Blind with enchantment, he felt that life was just beginning.

"You and your brother got here just as we did, didn't you?" asked Hildegarde, looking up at him with eyes that were like bright blue enamel.

Benjamin hesitated. If she took him for his father's brother, would it be best to enlighten her? He remembered his experience at Yale, so he decided against it. It would be rude to contradict a lady; it would be criminal to mar this exquisite occasion with the grotesque story of his origin. Later, perhaps. So he nodded, smiled, listened, was happy.

"I like men of your age," Hildegarde told him. "Young boys are so idiotic. They tell me how much champagne they drink at college, and how much money they lose playing cards. Men of your age know how to appreciate women."

Benjamin felt himself on the verge of a proposal— with an effort he choked back the impulse. "You're just the romantic age," she continued— "fifty. Twenty-five is too worldly-wise; thirty is apt to be pale from overwork; forty is the age of long stories that take a whole cigar to tell; sixty is— oh, sixty is too near seventy; but fifty is the mellow age. I love fifty."

Fifty seemed to Benjamin a glorious age. He longed passionately to be fifty.

"I've always said," went on Hildegarde, "that I'd rather marry a man of fifty and be taken care of than many a man of thirty and take care of him."

For Benjamin the rest of the evening was bathed in a honey-coloured mist. Hildegarde gave him two more dances, and they discovered that they were marvellously in accord on all the questions of the day. She was to go driving with him on the following Sunday, and then they would discuss all these questions further.

Going home in the phaeton just before the crack of dawn, when the first bees were humming and the fading moon glimmered in the cool dew, Benjamin knew vaguely that his father was discussing wholesale hardware.

".... And what do you think should merit our biggest attention after hammers and nails?" the elder Button was saying.

"Love," replied Benjamin absent-mindedly.

"Lugs?" exclaimed Roger Button, "Why, I've just covered the question of lugs."

Benjamin regarded him with dazed eyes just as the eastern sky was suddenly cracked with light, and an oriole yawned piercingly in the quickening trees...

vi

WHEN, six months later, the engagement of Miss Hildegarde Moncrief to Mr. Benjamin Button was made known (I say "made known," for General Moncrief declared he would rather fall upon his sword than announce it), the excitement in Baltimore society reached a feverish pitch. The almost forgotten story of Benjamin's birth was remembered and sent out upon the winds of scandal in picaresque and incredible forms. It was said that Benjamin was really the father of Roger Button, that he was his brother who had been in prison for forty years, that he was John Wilkes Booth in disguise— and, finally, that he had two small conical horns sprouting from his head.

The Sunday supplements of the New York papers played up the case with fascinating sketches which showed the head of Benjamin Button attached to a fish, to a snake, and, finally, to a body of solid brass. He became known, journalistically, as the Mystery Man of Maryland. But the true story, as is usually the case, had a very small circulation.

However, every one agreed with General Moncrief that it was "criminal" for a lovely girl who could have married any beau in Baltimore to throw herself into the arms of a man who was assuredly fifty. In vain Mr. Roger Button published his son's birth certificate in large type in the Baltimore Blaze. No one believed it. You had only to look at Benjamin and see.

On the part of the two people most concerned there was no wavering. So many of the stories about her fiancé were false that Hildegarde refused stubbornly to believe even the true one. In vain General Moncrief pointed out to her the high mortality among men of fifty— or, at least, among men who looked fifty; in vain he told her of the instability of the wholesale hardware business. Hildegarde had chosen to marry for mellowness, and marry she did....

vii

IN ONE particular, at least, the friends of Hildegarde Moncrief were mistaken. The wholesale hardware business prospered amazingly. In the fifteen years between Benjamin Button's marriage in 1880 and his father's retirement in 1895, the family fortune was doubled— and this was due largely to the younger member of the firm.

Needless to say, Baltimore eventually received the couple to its bosom. Even old General Moncrief became reconciled to his son-in-law when Benjamin gave him the money to bring out his History of the Civil War in twenty volumes, which had been refused by nine prominent publishers.

In Benjamin himself fifteen years had wrought many changes. It seemed to him that the blood flowed with new vigour through his veins. It began to be a pleasure to rise in the morning, to walk with an active step along the busy, sunny street, to work untiringly with his shipments of hammers and his cargoes of nails. It was in 1890 that he executed his famous business coup: he brought up the suggestion that all nails used in nailing up the boxes in which nails are shipped are the property of the shippee, a proposal which became a statute, was approved by Chief Justice Fossile, and saved Roger Button and Company, Wholesale Hardware, more than six hundred nails every year.

In addition, Benjamin discovered that he was becoming more and more attracted by the gay side of life. It was typical of his growing enthusiasm for pleasure that he was the first man in the city of Baltimore to own and run an automobile. Meeting him on the street, his contemporaries would stare enviously at the picture he made of health and vitality.

"He seems to grow younger every year," they would remark. And if old Roger Button, now sixty-five years old, had failed at first to give a proper welcome to his son he atoned at last by bestowing on him what amounted to adulation.

And here we come to an unpleasant subject which it will be well to pass over as quickly as possible. There was only one thing that worried Benjamin Button; his wife had ceased to attract him.

At that time Hildegarde was a woman of thirty-five, with a son, Roscoe, fourteen years old. In the early days of their marriage Benjamin had worshipped her. But, as the years passed, her honey-coloured hair became an unexciting brown, the blue enamel of her eyes assumed the aspect of cheap crockery— moreover, and, most of all, she had become too settled in her ways, too placid, too content, too anaemic in her excitements, and too sober in her taste. As a bride it been she who had "dragged" Benjamin to dances and dinners— now conditions were reversed. She went out socially with him, but without enthusiasm, devoured already by that eternal inertia which comes to live with each of us one day and stays with us to the end.

Benjamin's discontent waxed stronger. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 his home had for him so little charm that he decided to join the army. With his business influence he obtained a commission as captain, and proved so adaptable to the work that he was made a major, and finally a lieutenant-colonel just in time to participate in the celebrated charge up San Juan Hill. He was slightly wounded, and received a medal.

Benjamin had become so attached to the activity and excitement of array life that he regretted to give it up, but his business required attention, so he resigned his commission and came home. He was met at the station by a brass band and escorted to his house.

viii

HILDEGARDE, waving a large silk flag, greeted him on the porch, and even as he kissed her he felt with a sinking of the heart that these three years had taken their toll. She was a woman of forty now, with a faint skirmish line of gray hairs in her head. The sight depressed him.

Up in his room he saw his reflection in the familiar mirror— he went closer and examined his own face with anxiety, comparing it after a moment with a photograph of himself in uniform taken just before the war.

"Good Lord!" he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it— he looked now like a man of thirty. Instead of being delighted, he was uneasy— he was growing younger. He had hitherto hoped that once he reached a bodily age equivalent to his age in years, the grotesque phenomenon which had marked his birth would cease to function. He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible.

When he came downstairs Hildegarde was waiting for him. She appeared annoyed, and he wondered if she had at last discovered that there was something amiss. It was with an effort to relieve the tension between them that he broached the matter at dinner in what he considered a delicate way.

"Well," he remarked lightly, "everybody says I look younger than ever."

Hildegarde regarded him with scorn. She sniffed. "Do you think it's anything to boast about?"

"I'm not boasting," he asserted uncomfortably. She sniffed again. "The idea," she said, and after a moment: "I should think you'd have enough pride to stop it."

"How can I?" he demanded.

"I'm not going to argue with you," she retorted. "But there's a right way of doing things and a wrong way. If you've made up your mind to be different from everybody else, I don't suppose I can stop you, but I really don't think it's very considerate."

"But, Hildegarde, I can't help it."

"You can too. You're simply stubborn. You think you don't want to be like any one else. You always have been that way, and you always will be. But just think how it would be if every one else looked at things as you do— what would the world be like?"

As this was an inane and unanswerable argument Benjamin made no reply, and from that time on a chasm began to widen between them. He wondered what possible fascination she had ever exercised over him.

To add to the breach, he found, as the new century gathered headway, that his thirst for gaiety grew stronger. Never a party of any kind in the city of Baltimore but he was there, dancing with the prettiest of the young married women, chatting with the most popular of the debutantes, and finding their company charming, while his wife, a dowager of evil omen, sat among the chaperons, now in haughty disapproval, and now following him with solemn, puzzled, and reproachful eyes.

"Look!" people would remark. "What a pity! A young fellow that age tied to a woman of forty-five. He must be twenty years younger than his wife." They had forgotten— as people inevitably forget— that back in 1880 their mammas and papas had also remarked about this same ill-matched pair.

Benjamin's growing unhappiness at home was compensated for by his many new interests. He took up golf and made a great success of it. He went in for dancing: in 1906 he was an expert at "The Boston," and in 1908 he was considered proficient at the "Maxine," while in 1909 his "Castle Walk" was the envy of every young man in town.

His social activities, of course, interfered to some extent with his business, but then he had worked hard at wholesale hardware for twenty-five years and felt that he could soon hand it on to his son, Roscoe, who had recently graduated from Harvard.

He and his son were, in fact, often mistaken for each other. This pleased Benjamin— he soon forgot the insidious fear which had come over him on his return from the Spanish-American War, and grew to take a naïve pleasure in his appearance. There was only one fly in the delicious ointment— he hated to appear in public with his wife. Hildegarde was almost fifty, and the sight of her made him feel absurd....

ix

ONE SEPTEMBER day in 1910— a few years after Roger Button & Co., Wholesale Hardware, had been handed over to young Roscoe Button— a man, apparently about twenty years old, entered himself as a freshman at Harvard University in Cambridge. He did not make the mistake of announcing that he would never see fifty again, nor did he mention the fact that his son had been graduated from the same institution ten years before.

He was admitted, and almost immediately attained a prominent position in the class, partly because he seemed a little older than the other freshmen, whose average age was about eighteen.

But his success was largely due to the fact that in the football game with Yale he played so brilliantly, with so much dash and with such a cold, remorseless anger that he scored seven touchdowns and fourteen field goals for Harvard, and caused one entire eleven of Yale men to be carried singly from the field, unconscious. He was the most celebrated man in college.

Strange to say, in his third or junior year he was scarcely able to "make" the team. The coaches said that he had lost weight, and it seemed to the more observant among them that he was not quite as tall as before. He made no touchdowns— indeed, he was retained on the team chiefly in hope that his enormous reputation would bring terror and disorganisation to the Yale team.

In his senior year he did not make the team at all. He had grown so slight and frail that one day he was taken by some sophomores for a freshman, an incident which humiliated him terribly. He became known as something of a prodigy— a senior who was surely no more than sixteen— and he was often shocked at the worldliness of some of his classmates. His studies seemed harder to him— he felt that they were too advanced. He had heard his classmates speak of St. Midas's, the famous preparatory school, at which so many of them had prepared for college, and he determined after his graduation to enter himself at St. Midas's, where the sheltered life among boys his own size would be more congenial to him.

Upon his graduation in 1914 he went home to Baltimore with his Harvard diploma in his pocket. Hildegarde was now residing in Italy, so Benjamin went

to live with his son, Roscoe. But though he was welcomed in a general way there was obviously no heartiness in Roscoe's feeling toward him— there was even perceptible a tendency on his son's part to think that Benjamin, as he moped about the house in adolescent mooniness, was somewhat in the way. Roscoe was married now and prominent in Baltimore life, and he wanted no scandal to creep out in connection with his family.

Benjamin, no longer persona grata with the débutantes and younger college set, found himself left much done, except for the companionship of three or four fifteen-year-old boys in the neighbourhood. His idea of going to St. Midas's school recurred to him.

"Say," he said to Roscoe one day, "I've told you over and over that I want to go to prep. school."

"Well, go, then," replied Roscoe shortly. The matter was distasteful to him, and he wished to avoid a discussion.

"I can't go alone," said Benjamin helplessly. "You'll have to enter me and take me up there."

"I haven't got time," declared Roscoe abruptly. His eyes narrowed and he looked uneasily at his father. "As a matter of fact," he added, "you'd better not go on with this business much longer. You better pull up short. You better— you better"— he paused and his face crimsoned as he sought for words— "you better turn right around and start back the other way. This has gone too far to be a joke. It isn't funny any longer. You— you behave yourself!"

Benjamin looked at him, on the verge of tears.

"And another thing," continued Roscoe, "when visitors are in the house I want you to call me 'Uncle'— not 'Roscoe,' but 'Uncle,' do you understand? It looks absurd for a boy of fifteen to call me by my first name. Perhaps you'd better call me 'Uncle' all the time, so you'll get used to it."

With a harsh look at his father, Roscoe turned away....

x

AT THE TERMINATION of this interview, Benjamin wandered dismally upstairs and stared at himself in the mirror. He had not shaved for three months, but he could find nothing on his face but a faint white down with which it seemed unnecessary to meddle. When he had first come home from Harvard, Roscoe had approached him with the proposition that he should wear eye-glasses and imitation whiskers glued to his cheeks, and it had seemed for a moment that the farce of his early years was to be repeated. But whiskers had itched and made him ashamed. He wept and Roscoe had reluctantly relented.

Benjamin opened a book of boys' stories, The Boy Scouts in Bimini Bay, and began to read. But he found himself thinking persistently about the war. America had joined the Allied cause during the preceding month, and Benjamin wanted to enlist, but, alas, sixteen was the minimum age, and he did not look that old. His true age, which was fifty-seven, would have disqualified him, anyway.

There was a knock at his door, and the butler appeared with a letter bearing a large official legend in the corner and addressed to Mr. Benjamin Button. Benjamin tore it open eagerly, and read the enclosure with delight. It informed him that many reserve officers who had served in the Spanish-American War were being called back into service with a higher rank, and it enclosed his commission as brigadier-general in the United States army with orders to report immediately.

Benjamin jumped to his feet fairly quivering with enthusiasm. This was what he had wanted. He seized his cap, and ten minutes later he had entered a large tailoring establishment on Charles Street, and asked in his uncertain treble to be measured for a uniform.

"Want to play soldier, sonny?" demanded a clerk casually.

Benjamin flushed. "Say! Never mind what I want!" he retorted angrily. "My name's Button and I live on Mt. Vernon Place, so you know I'm good for it."

"Well," admitted the clerk hesitantly, "if you're not, I guess your daddy is, all right."

Benjamin was measured, and a week later his uniform was completed. He had difficulty in obtaining the proper general's insignia because the dealer kept insisting to Benjamin that a nice V.W.C.A. badge would look just as well and be much more fun to play with.

Saying nothing to Roscoe, he left the house one night and proceeded by train to Camp Mosby, in South Carolina, where he was to command an infantry brigade. On a sultry April day he approached the entrance to the camp, paid off the taxicab which had brought him from the station, and turned to the sentry on guard.

"Get some one to handle my luggage!" he said briskly.

The sentry eyed him reproachfully. "Say," he remarked, "where you goin' with the general's duds, sonny?"

Benjamin, veteran of the Spanish-American War, whirled upon him with fire in his eye, but with, alas, a changing treble voice.

"Come to attention!" he tried to thunder; he paused for breath— then suddenly he saw the sentry snap his heels together and bring his rifle to the present. Benjamin concealed a smile of gratification, but when he glanced

around his smile faded. It was not he who had inspired obedience, but an imposing artillery colonel who was approaching on horseback.

"Colonel!" called Benjamin shrilly.

The colonel came up, drew rein, and looked coolly down at him with a twinkle in his eyes. "Whose little boy are you?" he demanded kindly.

"I'll soon darn well show you whose little boy I am!" retorted Benjamin in a ferocious voice. "Get down off that horse!"

The colonel roared with laughter.

"You want him, eh, general?"

"Here!" cried Benjamin desperately. "Read this." And he thrust his commission toward the colonel.

The colonel read it, his eyes popping from their sockets.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded, slipping the document into his own pocket.

"I got it from the Government, as you'll soon find out!"

"You come along with me," said the colonel with a peculiar look. "We'll go up to headquarters and talk this over. Come along."

The colonel turned and began walking his horse in the direction of headquarters. There was nothing for Benjamin to do but follow with as much dignity as possible— meanwhile promising himself a stern revenge.

But this revenge did not materialise. Two days later, however, his son Roscoe materialised from Baltimore, hot and cross from a hasty trip, and escorted the weeping general, sans uniform, back to his home.

xi

IN 1920 Roscoe Button's first child was born. During the attendant festivities, however, no one thought it "the thing" to mention, that the little grubby boy, apparently about ten years of age who played around the house with lead soldiers and a miniature circus, was the new baby's own grandfather.

No one disliked the little boy whose fresh, cheerful face was crossed with just a hint of sadness, but to Roscoe Button his presence was a source of torment. In the idiom of his generation Roscoe did not consider the matter "efficient." It seemed to him that his father, in refusing to look sixty, had not behaved like a "red-blooded he-man"— this was Roscoe's favourite expression— but in a curious and perverse manner. Indeed, to think about the matter for as much as a half an hour drove him to the edge of insanity. Roscoe believed that "live wires" should keep young, but carrying it out on such a scale was— was— was inefficient. And there Roscoe rested.

Five years later Roscoe's little boy had grown old enough to play childish games with little Benjamin under the supervision of the same nurse. Roscoe took them both to kindergarten on the same day, and Benjamin found that playing with little strips of coloured paper, making mats and chains and curious and beautiful designs, was the most fascinating game in the world. Once he was bad and had to stand in the corner— then he cried— but for the most part there were gay hours in the cheerful room, with the sunlight coming in the windows and Miss Bailey's kind hand resting for a moment now and then in his tousled hair.

Roscoe's son moved up into the first grade after a year, but Benjamin stayed on in the kindergarten. He was very happy. Sometimes when other tots talked about what they would do when they grew up a shadow would cross his little face as if in a dim, childish way he realised that those were things in which he was never to share.

The days flowed on in monotonous content. He went back a third year to the kindergarten, but he was too little now to understand what the bright shining strips of paper were for. He cried because the other boys were bigger than he, and he was afraid of them. The teacher talked to him, but though he tried to understand he could not understand at all.

He was taken from the kindergarten. His nurse, Nana, in her starched gingham dress, became the centre of his tiny world. On bright days they walked in the park; Nana would point at a great gray monster and say "elephant," and Benjamin would say it after her, and when he was being undressed for bed that night he would say it over and over aloud to her: "Elyphant, elyphant, elyphant." Sometimes Nana let him jump on the bed, which was fun, because if you sat down exactly right it would bounce you up on your feet again, and if you said "Ah" for a long time while you jumped you got a very pleasing broken vocal effect.

He loved to take a big cane from the hat-rack and go around hitting chairs and tables with it and saying: "Fight, fight, fight." When there were people there the old ladies would cluck at him, which interested him, and the young ladies would try to kiss him, which he submitted to with mild boredom. And when the long day was done at five o'clock he would go upstairs with Nana and be fed on oatmeal and nice soft mushy foods with a spoon.

There were no troublesome memories in his childish sleep; no token came to him of his brave days at college, of the glittering years when he flustered the hearts of many girls. There were only the white, safe walls of his crib and Nana and a man who came to see him sometimes, and a great big orange ball that Nana pointed at just before his twilight bed hour and called "sun." When the

sun went his eyes were sleepy— there were no dreams, no dreams to haunt him.

The past— the wild charge at the head of his men up San Juan Hill; the first years of his marriage when he worked late into the summer dusk down in the busy city for young Hildegarde whom he loved; the days before that when he sat smoking far into the night in the gloomy old Button house on Monroe Street with his grandfather— all these had faded like unsubstantial dreams from his mind as though they had never been. He did not remember.

He did not remember clearly whether the milk was warm or cool at his last feeding or how the days passed— there was only his crib and Nana's familiar presence. And then he remembered nothing. When he was hungry he cried— that was all. Through the noons and nights he breathed and over him there were soft mumblings and murmurings that he scarcely heard, and faintly differentiated smells, and light and darkness.

Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind.

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4: The Bottomless Well

G. K. Chesterton

1874-1936

Harper's Magazine, March 1921

Every detective story buff has heard of the Father Brown stories; but G. K. Chesterton had a short-lived series featuring another detective, Horne Fisher.

IN AN OASIS, or green island, in the red and yellow seas of sand that stretch beyond Europe toward the sunrise, there can be found a rather fantastic contrast, which is none the less typical of such a place, since international treaties have made it an outpost of the British occupation. The site is famous among archaeologists for something that is hardly a monument, but merely a hole in the ground. But it is a round shaft, like that of a well, and probably a part of some great irrigation works of remote and disputed date, perhaps more ancient than anything in that ancient land. There is a green fringe of palm and prickly pear round the black mouth of the well; but nothing of the upper masonry remains except two bulky and battered stones standing like the pillars of a gateway of nowhere, in which some of the more transcendental archaeologists, in certain moods at moonrise or sunset, think they can trace the faint lines of figures or features of more than Babylonian monstrosity; while the more rationalistic archaeologists, in the more rational hours of daylight, see nothing but two shapeless rocks. It may have been noticed, however, that all Englishmen are not archaeologists. Many of those assembled in such a place for official and military purposes have hobbies other than archaeology. And it is a solemn fact that the English in this Eastern exile have contrived to make a small golf links out of the green scrub and sand; with a comfortable clubhouse at one end of it and this primeval monument at the other. They did not actually use this archaic abyss as a bunker, because it was by tradition unfathomable, and even for practical purposes unfathomed. Any sporting projectile sent into it might be counted most literally as a lost ball. But they often sauntered round it in their interludes of talking and smoking cigarettes, and one of them had just come down from the clubhouse to find another gazing somewhat moodily into the well.

Both the Englishmen wore light clothes and white pith helmets and puggrees, but there, for the most part, their resemblance ended. And they both almost simultaneously said the same word, but they said it on two totally different notes of the voice.

"Have you heard the news?" asked the man from the club. "Splendid."

"Splendid," replied the man by the well. But the first man pronounced the word as a young man might say it about a woman, and the second as an old

man might say it about the weather, not without sincerity, but certainly without fervor.

And in this the tone of the two men was sufficiently typical of them. The first, who was a certain Captain Boyle, was of a bold and boyish type, dark, and with a sort of native heat in his face that did not belong to the atmosphere of the East, but rather to the ardors and ambitions of the West. The other was an older man and certainly an older resident, a civilian official— Horne Fisher; and his drooping eyelids and drooping light mustache expressed all the paradox of the Englishman in the East. He was much too hot to be anything but cool.

Neither of them thought it necessary to mention what it was that was splendid. That would indeed have been superfluous conversation about something that everybody knew. The striking victory over a menacing combination of Turks and Arabs in the north, won by troops under the command of Lord Hastings, the veteran of so many striking victories, was already spread by the newspapers all over the Empire, let alone to this small garrison so near to the battlefield.

"Now, no other nation in the world could have done a thing like that," cried Captain Boyle, emphatically.

Horne Fisher was still looking silently into the well; a moment later he answered: "We certainly have the art of unmaking mistakes. That's where the poor old Prussians went wrong. They could only make mistakes and stick to them. There is really a certain talent in unmaking a mistake."

"What do you mean," asked Boyle, "what mistakes?"

"Well, everybody knows it looked like biting off more than he could chew," replied Horne Fisher. It was a peculiarity of Mr. Fisher that he always said that everybody knew things which about one person in two million was ever allowed to hear of. "And it was certainly jolly lucky that Travers turned up so well in the nick of time. Odd how often the right thing's been done for us by the second in command, even when a great man was first in command. Like Colborne at Waterloo."

"It ought to add a whole province to the Empire," observed the other.

"Well, I suppose the Zimmernes would have insisted on it as far as the canal," observed Fisher, thoughtfully, "though everybody knows adding provinces doesn't always pay much nowadays."

Captain Boyle frowned in a slightly puzzled fashion. Being cloudily conscious of never having heard of the Zimmernes in his life, he could only remark, stolidly:

"Well, one can't be a Little Englander."

Horne Fisher smiled, and he had a pleasant smile.

"Every man out here is a Little Englander," he said. "He wishes he were back in Little England."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I'm afraid," said the younger man, rather suspiciously. "One would think you didn't really admire Hastings or— or— anything."

"I admire him no end," replied Fisher. "He's by far the best man for this post; he understands the Moslems and can do anything with them. That's why I'm all against pushing Travers against him, merely because of this last affair."

"I really don't understand what you're driving at," said the other, frankly.

"Perhaps it isn't worth understanding," answered Fisher, lightly, "and, anyhow, we needn't talk politics. Do you know the Arab legend about that well?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about Arab legends," said Boyle, rather stiffly.

"That's rather a mistake," replied Fisher, "especially from your point of view. Lord Hastings himself is an Arab legend. That is perhaps the very greatest thing he really is. If his reputation went it would weaken us all over Asia and Africa. Well, the story about that hole in the ground, that goes down nobody knows where, has always fascinated me, rather. It's Mohammedan in form now, but I shouldn't wonder if the tale is a long way older than Mohammed. It's all about somebody they call the Sultan Aladdin, not our friend of the lamp, of course, but rather like him in having to do with genii or giants or something of that sort. They say he commanded the giants to build him a sort of pagoda, rising higher and higher above all the stars. The Utmost for the Highest, as the people said when they built the Tower of Babel. But the builders of the Tower of Babel were quite modest and domestic people, like mice, compared with old Aladdin. They only wanted a tower that would reach heaven— a mere trifle. He wanted a tower that would pass heaven and rise above it, and go on rising for ever and ever. And Allah cast him down to earth with a thunderbolt, which sank into the earth, boring a hole deeper and deeper, till it made a well that was without a bottom as the tower was to have been without a top. And down that inverted tower of darkness the soul of the proud Sultan is falling forever and ever."

"What a queer chap you are," said Boyle. "You talk as if a fellow could believe those fables."

"Perhaps I believe the moral and not the fable," answered Fisher. "But here comes Lady Hastings. You know her, I think."

The clubhouse on the golf links was used, of course, for many other purposes besides that of golf. It was the only social center of the garrison beside the strictly military headquarters; it had a billiard room and a bar, and

even an excellent reference library for those officers who were so perverse as to take their profession seriously. Among these was the great general himself, whose head of silver and face of bronze, like that of a brazen eagle, were often to be found bent over the charts and folios of the library. The great Lord Hastings believed in science and study, as in other severe ideals of life, and had given much paternal advice on the point to young Boyle, whose appearances in that place of research were rather more intermittent. It was from one of these snatches of study that the young man had just come out through the glass doors of the library on to the golf links. But, above all, the club was so appointed as to serve the social conveniences of ladies at least as much as gentlemen, and Lady Hastings was able to play the queen in such a society almost as much as in her own ballroom. She was eminently calculated and, as some said, eminently inclined to play such a part. She was much younger than her husband, an attractive and sometimes dangerously attractive lady; and Mr. Horne Fisher looked after her a little sardonically as she swept away with the young soldier. Then his rather dreary eye strayed to the green and prickly growths round the well, growths of that curious cactus formation in which one thick leaf grows directly out of the other without stalk or twig. It gave his fanciful mind a sinister feeling of a blind growth without shape or purpose. A flower or shrub in the West grows to the blossom which is its crown, and is content. But this was as if hands could grow out of hands or legs grow out of legs in a nightmare. "Always adding a province to the Empire," he said, with a smile, and then added, more sadly, "but I doubt if I was right, after all!"

A strong but genial voice broke in on his meditations and he looked up and smiled, seeing the face of an old friend. The voice was, indeed, rather more genial than the face, which was at the first glance decidedly grim. It was a typically legal face, with angular jaws and heavy, grizzled eyebrows; and it belonged to an eminently legal character, though he was now attached in a semimilitary capacity to the police of that wild district. Cuthbert Grayne was perhaps more of a criminologist than either a lawyer or a policeman, but in his more barbarous surroundings he had proved successful in turning himself into a practical combination of all three. The discovery of a whole series of strange Oriental crimes stood to his credit. But as few people were acquainted with, or attracted to, such a hobby or branch of knowledge, his intellectual life was somewhat solitary. Among the few exceptions was Horne Fisher, who had a curious capacity for talking to almost anybody about almost anything.

"Studying botany, or is it archaeology?" inquired Grayne. "I shall never come to the end of your interests, Fisher. I should say that what you don't know isn't worth knowing."

"You are wrong," replied Fisher, with a very unusual abruptness, and even bitterness. "It's what I do know that isn't worth knowing. All the seamy side of things, all the secret reasons and rotten motives and bribery and blackmail they call politics. I needn't be so proud of having been down all these sewers that I should brag about it to the little boys in the street."

"What do you mean? What's the matter with you?" asked his friend. "I never knew you taken like this before."

"I'm ashamed of myself," replied Fisher. "I've just been throwing cold water on the enthusiasms of a boy."

"Even that explanation is hardly exhaustive," observed the criminal expert.

"Damned newspaper nonsense the enthusiasms were, of course," continued Fisher, "but I ought to know that at that age illusions can be ideals. And they're better than the reality, anyhow. But there is one very ugly responsibility about jolting a young man out of the rut of the most rotten ideal."

"And what may that be?" inquired his friend.

"It's very apt to set him off with the same energy in a much worse direction," answered Fisher; "a pretty endless sort of direction, a bottomless pit as deep as the bottomless well."

Fisher did not see his friend until a fortnight later, when he found himself in the garden at the back of the clubhouse on the opposite side from the links, a garden heavily colored and scented with sweet semitropical plants in the glow of a desert sunset. Two other men were with him, the third being the now celebrated second in command, familiar to everybody as Tom Travers, a lean, dark man, who looked older than his years, with a furrow in his brow and something morose about the very shape of his black mustache. They had just been served with black coffee by the Arab now officiating as the temporary servant of the club, though he was a figure already familiar, and even famous, as the old servant of the general. He went by the name of Said, and was notable among other Semites for that unnatural length of his yellow face and height of his narrow forehead which is sometimes seen among them, and gave an irrational impression of something sinister, in spite of his agreeable smile.

"I never feel as if I could quite trust that fellow," said Grayne, when the man had gone away. "It's very unjust, I take it, for he was certainly devoted to Hastings, and saved his life, they say. But Arabs are often like that, loyal to one man. I can't help feeling he might cut anybody else's throat, and even do it treacherously."

"Well," said Travers, with a rather sour smile, "so long as he leaves Hastings alone the world won't mind much."

There was a rather embarrassing silence, full of memories of the great battle, and then Horne Fisher said, quietly:

"The newspapers aren't the world, Tom. Don't you worry about them. Everybody in your world knows the truth well enough."

"I think we'd better not talk about the general just now," remarked Grayne, "for he's just coming out of the club."

"He's not coming here," said Fisher. "He's only seeing his wife to the car."

As he spoke, indeed, the lady came out on the steps of the club, followed by her husband, who then went swiftly in front of her to open the garden gate. As he did so she turned back and spoke for a moment to a solitary man still sitting in a cane chair in the shadow of the doorway, the only man left in the deserted club save for the three that lingered in the garden. Fisher peered for a moment into the shadow, and saw that it was Captain Boyle.

The next moment, rather to their surprise, the general reappeared and, remounting the steps, spoke a word or two to Boyle in his turn. Then he signaled to Said, who hurried up with two cups of coffee, and the two men re-entered the club, each carrying his cup in his hand. The next moment a gleam of white light in the growing darkness showed that the electric lamps had been turned on in the library beyond.

"Coffee and scientific researches," said Travers, grimly. "All the luxuries of learning and theoretical research. Well, I must be going, for I have my work to do as well." And he got up rather stiffly, saluted his companions, and strode away into the dusk.

"I only hope Boyle is sticking to scientific researches," said Horne Fisher. "I'm not very comfortable about him myself. But let's talk about something else."

They talked about something else longer than they probably imagined, until the tropical night had come and a splendid moon painted the whole scene with silver; but before it was bright enough to see by Fisher had already noted that the lights in the library had been abruptly extinguished. He waited for the two men to come out by the garden entrance, but nobody came.

"They must have gone for a stroll on the links," he said.

"Very possibly," replied Grayne. "It's going to be a beautiful night."

A moment or two after he had spoken they heard a voice hailing them out of the shadow of the clubhouse, and were astonished to perceive Travers hurrying toward them, calling out as he came:

"I shall want your help, you fellows," he cried. "There's something pretty bad out on the links."

They found themselves plunging through the club smoking room and the library beyond, in complete darkness, mental as well as material. But Horne

Fisher, in spite of his affectation of indifference, was a person of a curious and almost transcendental sensibility to atmospheres, and he already felt the presence of something more than an accident. He collided with a piece of furniture in the library, and almost shuddered with the shock, for the thing moved as he could never have fancied a piece of furniture moving. It seemed to move like a living thing, yielding and yet striking back. The next moment Grayne had turned on the lights, and he saw he had only stumbled against one of the revolving bookstands that had swung round and struck him; but his involuntary recoil had revealed to him his own subconscious sense of something mysterious and monstrous. There were several of these revolving bookcases standing here and there about the library; on one of them stood the two cups of coffee, and on another a large open book. It was Budge's book on Egyptian hieroglyphics, with colored plates of strange birds and gods, and even as he rushed past, he was conscious of something odd about the fact that this, and not any work of military science, should be open in that place at that moment. He was even conscious of the gap in the well-lined bookshelf from which it had been taken, and it seemed almost to gape at him in an ugly fashion, like a gap in the teeth of some sinister face.

A run brought them in a few minutes to the other side of the ground in front of the bottomless well, and a few yards from it, in a moonlight almost as broad as daylight, they saw what they had come to see.

The great Lord Hastings lay prone on his face, in a posture in which there was a touch of something strange and stiff, with one elbow erect above his body, the arm being doubled, and his big, bony hand clutching the rank and ragged grass. A few feet away was Boyle, almost as motionless, but supported on his hands and knees, and staring at the body. It might have been no more than shock and accident; but there was something ungainly and unnatural about the quadrupedal posture and the gaping face. It was as if his reason had fled from him. Behind, there was nothing but the clear blue southern sky, and the beginning of the desert, except for the two great broken stones in front of the well. And it was in such a light and atmosphere that men could fancy they traced in them enormous and evil faces, looking down.

Horne Fisher stooped and touched the strong hand that was still clutching the grass, and it was as cold as a stone. He knelt by the body and was busy for a moment applying other tests; then he rose again, and said, with a sort of confident despair:

"Lord Hastings is dead."

There was a stony silence, and then Travers remarked, gruffly: "This is your department, Grayne; I will leave you to question Captain Boyle. I can make no sense of what he says."

Boyle had pulled himself together and risen to his feet, but his face still wore an awful expression, making it like a new mask or the face of another man.

"I was looking at the well," he said, "and when I turned he had fallen down."

Grayne's face was very dark. "As you say, this is my affair," he said. "I must first ask you to help me carry him to the library and let me examine things thoroughly."

When they had deposited the body in the library, Grayne turned to Fisher and said, in a voice that had recovered its fullness and confidence, "I am going to lock myself in and make a thorough examination first. I look to you to keep in touch with the others and make a preliminary examination of Boyle. I will talk to him later. And just telephone to headquarters for a policeman, and let him come here at once and stand by till I want him."

Without more words the great criminal investigator went into the lighted library, shutting the door behind him, and Fisher, without replying, turned and began to talk quietly to Travers. "It is curious," he said, "that the thing should happen just in front of that place."

"It would certainly be very curious," replied Travers, "if the place played any part in it."

"I think," replied Fisher, "that the part it didn't play is more curious still."

And with these apparently meaningless words he turned to the shaken Boyle and, taking his arm, began to walk him up and down in the moonlight, talking in low tones.

Dawn had begun to break abrupt and white when Cuthbert Grayne turned out the lights in the library and came out on to the links. Fisher was lounging about alone, in his listless fashion; but the police messenger for whom he had sent was standing at attention in the background.

"I sent Boyle off with Travers," observed Fisher, carelessly; "he'll look after him, and he'd better have some sleep, anyhow."

"Did you get anything out of him?" asked Grayne. "Did he tell you what he and Hastings were doing?"

"Yes," answered Fisher, "he gave me a pretty clear account, after all. He said that after Lady Hastings went off in the car the general asked him to take coffee with him in the library and look up a point about local antiquities. He himself was beginning to look for Budge's book in one of the revolving bookstands when the general found it in one of the bookshelves on the wall. After looking at some of the plates they went out, it would seem, rather abruptly, on to the links, and walked toward the old well; and while Boyle was looking into it he heard a thud behind him, and turned round to find the

general lying as we found him. He himself dropped on his knees to examine the body, and then was paralyzed with a sort of terror and could not come nearer to it or touch it. But I think very little of that; people caught in a real shock of surprise are sometimes found in the queerest postures."

Grayne wore a grim smile of attention, and said, after a short silence:

"Well, he hasn't told you many lies. It's really a creditably clear and consistent account of what happened, with everything of importance left out."

"Have you discovered anything in there?" asked Fisher.

"I have discovered everything," answered Grayne.

Fisher maintained a somewhat gloomy silence, as the other resumed his explanation in quiet and assured tones.

"You were quite right, Fisher, when you said that young fellow was in danger of going down dark ways toward the pit. Whether or no, as you fancied, the jolt you gave to his view of the general had anything to do with it, he has not been treating the general well for some time. It's an unpleasant business, and I don't want to dwell on it; but it's pretty plain that his wife was not treating him well, either. I don't know how far it went, but it went as far as concealment, anyhow; for when Lady Hastings spoke to Boyle it was to tell him she had hidden a note in the Budge book in the library. The general overheard, or came somehow to know, and he went straight to the book and found it. He confronted Boyle with it, and they had a scene, of course. And Boyle was confronted with something else; he was confronted with an awful alternative, in which the life of one old man meant ruin and his death meant triumph and even happiness."

"Well," observed Fisher, at last, "I don't blame him for not telling you the woman's part of the story. But how do you know about the letter?"

"I found it on the general's body," answered Grayne, "but I found worse things than that. The body had stiffened in the way rather peculiar to poisons of a certain Asiatic sort. Then I examined the coffee cups, and I knew enough chemistry to find poison in the dregs of one of them. Now, the General went straight to the bookcase, leaving his cup of coffee on the bookstand in the middle of the room. While his back was turned, and Boyle was pretending to examine the bookstand, he was left alone with the coffee cup. The poison takes about ten minutes to act, and ten minutes' walk would bring them to the bottomless well."

"Yes," remarked Fisher, "and what about the bottomless well?"

"What has the bottomless well got to do with it?" asked his friend.

"It has nothing to do with it," replied Fisher. "That is what I find utterly confounding and incredible."

"And why should that particular hole in the ground have anything to do with it?"

"It is a particular hole in your case," said Fisher. "But I won't insist on that just now. By the way, there is another thing I ought to tell you. I said I sent Boyle away in charge of Travers. It would be just as true to say I sent Travers in charge of Boyle."

"You don't mean to say you suspect Tom Travers?" cried the other.

"He was a deal bitterer against the general than Boyle ever was," observed Horne Fisher, with a curious indifference.

"Man, you're not saying what you mean," cried Grayne. "I tell you I found the poison in one of the coffee cups."

"There was always Said, of course," added Fisher, "either for hatred or hire. We agreed he was capable of almost anything."

"And we agreed he was incapable of hurting his master," retorted Grayne.

"Well, well," said Fisher, amiably, "I dare say you are right; but I should just like to have a look at the library and the coffee cups."

He passed inside, while Grayne turned to the policeman in attendance and handed him a scribbled note, to be telegraphed from headquarters. The man saluted and hurried off; and Grayne, following his friend into the library, found him beside the bookstand in the middle of the room, on which were the empty cups.

"This is where Boyle looked for Budge, or pretended to look for him, according to your account," he said.

As Fisher spoke he bent down in a half-crouching attitude, to look at the volumes in the low, revolving shelf, for the whole bookstand was not much higher than an ordinary table. The next moment he sprang up as if he had been stung.

"Oh, my God!" he cried.

Very few people, if any, had ever seen Mr. Horne Fisher behave as he behaved just then. He flashed a glance at the door, saw that the open window was nearer, went out of it with a flying leap, as if over a hurdle, and went racing across the turf, in the track of the disappearing policeman. Grayne, who stood staring after him, soon saw his tall, loose figure, returning, restored to all its normal limpness and air of leisure. He was fanning himself slowly with a piece of paper, the telegram he had so violently intercepted.

"Lucky I stopped that," he observed. "We must keep this affair as quiet as death. Hastings must die of apoplexy or heart disease."

"What on earth is the trouble?" demanded the other investigator.

"The trouble is," said Fisher, "that in a few days we should have had a very agreeable alternative— of hanging an innocent man or knocking the British Empire to hell."

"Do you mean to say," asked Grayne, "that this infernal crime is not to be punished?"

Fisher looked at him steadily.

"It is already punished," he said.

After a moment's pause he went on. "You reconstructed the crime with admirable skill, old chap, and nearly all you said was true. Two men with two coffee cups did go into the library and did put their cups on the bookstand and did go together to the well, and one of them was a murderer and had put poison in the other's cup. But it was not done while Boyle was looking at the revolving bookcase. He did look at it, though, searching for the Budge book with the note in it, but I fancy that Hastings had already moved it to the shelves on the wall. It was part of that grim game that he should find it first.

"Now, how does a man search a revolving bookcase? He does not generally hop all round it in a squatting attitude, like a frog. He simply gives it a touch and makes it revolve."

He was frowning at the floor as he spoke, and there was a light under his heavy lids that was not often seen there. The mysticism that was buried deep under all the cynicism of his experience was awake and moving in the depths. His voice took unexpected turns and inflections, almost as if two men were speaking.

"That was what Boyle did; he barely touched the thing, and it went round as easily as the world goes round. Yes, very much as the world goes round, for the hand that turned it was not his. God, who turns the wheel of all the stars, touched that wheel and brought it full circle, that His dreadful justice might return."

"I am beginning," said Grayne, slowly, "to have some hazy and horrible idea of what you mean."

"It is very simple," said Fisher, "when Boyle straightened himself from his stooping posture, something had happened which he had not noticed, which his enemy had not noticed, which nobody had noticed. The two coffee cups had exactly changed places."

The rocky face of Grayne seemed to have sustained a shock in silence; not a line of it altered, but his voice when it came was unexpectedly weakened.

"I see what you mean," he said, "and, as you say, the less said about it the better. It was not the lover who tried to get rid of the husband, but— the other thing. And a tale like that about a man like that would ruin us here. Had you any guess of this at the start?"

"The bottomless well, as I told you," answered Fisher, quietly; "that was what stumped me from the start. Not because it had anything to do with it, because it had nothing to do with it."

He paused a moment, as if choosing an approach, and then went on: "When a man knows his enemy will be dead in ten minutes, and takes him to the edge of an unfathomable pit, he means to throw his body into it. What else should he do? A born fool would have the sense to do it, and Boyle is not a born fool. Well, why did not Boyle do it? The more I thought of it the more I suspected there was some mistake in the murder, so to speak. Somebody had taken somebody there to throw him in, and yet he was not thrown in. I had already an ugly, unformed idea of some substitution or reversal of parts; then I stooped to turn the bookstand myself, by accident, and I instantly knew everything, for I saw the two cups revolve once more, like moons in the sky."

After a pause, Cuthbert Grayne said, "And what are we to say to the newspapers?"

"My friend, Harold March, is coming along from Cairo to-day," said Fisher. "He is a very brilliant and successful journalist. But for all that he's a thoroughly honorable man, so you must not tell him the truth."

HALF AN HOUR later Fisher was again walking to and fro in front of the clubhouse, with Captain Boyle, the latter by this time with a very buffeted and bewildered air; perhaps a sadder and a wiser man.

"What about me, then?" he was saying. "Am I cleared? Am I not going to be cleared?"

"I believe and hope," answered Fisher, "that you are not going to be suspected. But you are certainly not going to be cleared. There must be no suspicion against him, and therefore no suspicion against you. Any suspicion against him, let alone such a story against him, would knock us endways from Malta to Mandalay. He was a hero as well as a holy terror among the Moslems. Indeed, you might almost call him a Moslem hero in the English service. Of course he got on with them partly because of his own little dose of Eastern blood; he got it from his mother, the dancer from Damascus; everybody knows that."

"Oh," repeated Boyle, mechanically, staring at him with round eyes, "everybody knows that."

"I dare say there was a touch of it in his jealousy and ferocious vengeance," went on Fisher. "But, for all that, the crime would ruin us among the Arabs, all the more because it was something like a crime against hospitality. It's been hateful for you and it's pretty horrid for me. But there are some things that damned well can't be done, and while I'm alive that's one of them."

"What do you mean?" asked Boyle, glancing at him curiously. "Why should you, of all people, be so passionate about it?"

Horne Fisher looked at the young man with a baffling expression.

"I suppose," he said, "it's because I'm a Little Englander."

"I can never make out what you mean by that sort of thing," answered Boyle, doubtfully.

"Do you think England is so little as all that?" said Fisher, with a warmth in his cold voice, "that it can't hold a man across a few thousand miles. You lectured me with a lot of ideal patriotism, my young friend; but it's practical patriotism now for you and me, and with no lies to help it. You talked as if everything always went right with us all over the world, in a triumphant crescendo culminating in Hastings. I tell you everything has gone wrong with us here, except Hastings. He was the one name we had left to conjure with, and that mustn't go as well, no, by God! It's bad enough that a gang of infernal Jews should plant us here, where there's no earthly English interest to serve, and all hell beating up against us, simply because Nosey Zimmern has lent money to half the Cabinet. It's bad enough that an old pawnbroker from Bagdad should make us fight his battles; we can't fight with our right hand cut off. Our one score was Hastings and his victory, which was really somebody else's victory. Tom Travers has to suffer, and so have you."

Then, after a moment's silence, he pointed toward the bottomless well and said, in a quieter tone:

"I told you that I didn't believe in the philosophy of the Tower of Aladdin. I don't believe in the Empire growing until it reaches the sky; I don't believe in the Union Jack going up and up eternally like the Tower. But if you think I am going to let the Union Jack go down and down eternally, like the bottomless well, down into the blackness of the bottomless pit, down in defeat and derision, amid the jeers of the very Jews who have sucked us dry— no I won't, and that's flat; not if the Chancellor were blackmailed by twenty millionaires with their gutter rags, not if the Prime Minister married twenty Yankee Jewesses, not if Woodville and Carstairs had shares in twenty swindling mines. If the thing is really tottering, God help it, it mustn't be we who tip it over."

Boyle was regarding him with a bewilderment that was almost fear, and had even a touch of distaste.

"Somehow," he said, "there seems to be something rather horrid about the things you know."

"There is," replied Horne Fisher. "I am not at all pleased with my small stock of knowledge and reflection. But as it is partly responsible for your not being hanged, I don't know that you need complain of it."

And, as if a little ashamed of his first boast, he turned and strolled away toward the bottomless well.

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5: The Vanishing Trick

Max Afford

Malcolm R. Afford, 1906-1954
Detective Fiction, Dec 1948
In: *Sand on the Gumshoe*, 1989

'NO GHOST,' said Sally Rutland firmly. 'But we've got a kinda haunted room!'

She pronounced it 'hanted' since Sally Rutland hailed from Dallas, Texas.

Mr Jeffrey Blackburn, seated in the deep leather chair in the panelled room at Kettering Old House, looked across at Elizabeth and lowered his right eyelid an imperceptible fraction. The movement said plainly, 'Darling, I told you so!'

Mrs Blackburn, swathed in satin, her corn-yellow hair shining under the massive electric chandelier, caught the expression.

'But, darling! If you've got a haunted room, then you must have a ghost!'

'Not here!'

'Then what happened in this room?'

Sally Rutland said calmly, 'People just vanish into thin air!'

'Oh-oh,' chuckled Mr Blackburn inwardly. His eyes slid around, taking in the expressions of the assembled guests.

There were six other people in the great reception room at Kettering. Almost opposite Blackburn, the thriller writer Evan Lambert hunched his thin body forward in an attitude curiously suggestive of a question mark.

On the square, ruddy face of the man next to him there was absolutely no expression at all. John Wilkins, of the Wilkins Trust and Finance Company, sat motionless, a statue to Mammon in well-cut tweeds, a business colossus whose self control was as rigid as the wall behind him.

Then there was Miss Rountree, an obscure relative of Jim Rutland's—middle-aged, greying and somehow pathetic, like the bedraggled artificial roses she wore at her flat bosom. Her sagging face was ringed in circles—round eyes behind rounded spectacles, the little mouth pursed into an O of wondering anticipation. With all the ardour of the very lonely, Miss Rountree grasped at the promise of a new sensation, as in the past she had grasped at Yogism, Mental Healing, Physical Perfection in Diet and Inner Truths through Controlled Breathing.

Jeffery's eyes came around to their hosts.

Strangers often wondered what Sally van Peters, daughter of the Dalls oil magnate, had ever seen in lanky, balding Jim Rutland, with his serious expression and quiet, almost stolid personality. Never were appearances more deceptive! For their intimates knew, by bitter experience, that one of the strongest bonds between these two was their wicked sense of humour. Jeffery

mentally winced when he recalled the squeaking cushion, the leaking wineglass and trick cigarettes without which no Rutland party was complete.

'Well,' said Sally Rutland. 'Don't just sit there like dummies! Let's see some reactions.' She gave a quick, mischievous glance at her husband, standing tall by the heavy marble mantel. 'They reckon it's just another of our crazy gags, honey—'

Lambert's mouth twisted.

'At least it shows a little more originality than the electric matchbox—'

From the fireplace, Jim Rutland spoke.

'No fooling, Evan. What Sally says is quite true.' Was it Jeffery's imagination or had the deep tone the faintest undercurrent of mockery? 'She found an old book in the library with the craziest story about this room. Believe it or not, Satan himself is supposed to have come down here, breathed on a man— and he vanished! Just like that!' A snap of his fingers emphasised the problem.

'Now, really, Rutland—' It was Wilkins. In contrast to Lambert's frank ridicule, the financier's tone was sceptical but polite. 'He's not one of us,' thought Jeffery. 'He's an outsider. It isn't like the Rutland 's to mix close friends and casual acquaintances like this.' Then he became aware that Miss Rountree was speaking to him from across the room.

'And just what is your opinion of this, Mr Blackburn?' she asked archly. 'You've been so quiet in your little corner I thought you were asleep.'

'Oh, no,' said Jeffery firmly. 'Definitely not! But before I commit myself, I'd like to hear something more about the story.'

Rutland said levelly, 'I'll give it you boiled down small. Back in the year seventeen hundred and something, there was a local parson— chap named the Reverend Gideon Perman. He was accused of witchcraft, brought along here and shoved into this room. The door was locked and barred. When they opened it, two hours later, Gideon had vanished—'

'Well?'

Rutland shrugged. 'That's all.'

'Stop me if you've heard this one,' crowed Elizabeth. 'But there was a secret passage—'

Sally Rutland shook her head, 'You get the gong darling.'

'No secret passage?'

'Not even a chink. Because Benson— that's the pale looking guy who just served the cocktails— Benson said the room was searched high and low for some outlet. That wasn't the original vanishing trick, of course. I'm talking now about the last one.'

Jeffery said quickly, 'The last one?'

Sally nodded. 'It happened about three years ago.'

Evan Lambert sat up, a movement like the opening of a jack-knife. 'As recent as that?'

'The Lattimers owned the place then,' Rutland told him. 'They were the people we bought it from. Benson says one of their servants was sent down to clean out the room. The door slammed shut on the poor devil. When they opened it again— hey presto! No servant!'

'Fantastic!' Wilkins spoke so softly Jeffery had the impression he was talking to himself. Then he looked up at his host. 'But surely the police were informed?'

'You bet.' It was Sally who replied. 'Benson says the police brought a couple of architect guys from London. They tapped and measured for weeks and all they got was housemaid's knee.'

An uncertain little silence fell, to be broken by Elizabeth. 'Aren't you relying quite a lot on what Benson says? How do we know that your butler, having found the old book with the legend, isn't having us all on toast?'

Jim Rutland stared at them. 'I never thought of that.'

But his wife waved the suggestion aside. 'Nonsense,' she said crisply, 'you've only got to look at Benson to see he's got less sense of humour than Jimmy has hair.' She paused, then added, 'Anyway, why should he make up such a crazy story?'

The sudden appearance of the man himself precluded further discussion. He stood just inside the entrance, pale, poised, punctilious, announcing that dinner was served.

'What those men really need,' said Sally Rutland, 'is a lesson.'

'But darling—' began Elizabeth, but her companion cut her short.

'You and I, Beth, we're going to give it to them.' Sally lowered her voice and glanced towards the dining room, still alive with the murmur of masculine voices and the clink of glasses. 'You see, I've got the most gorgeous idea for a laugh.'

The two women were in the reception room following dinner. Miss Rountree had sought her upstairs bedroom for a book. At her exit, Sally had motioned her friend to draw her chair closer to the fire. Elizabeth, watching the flames colour and darken Sally's thin, eager face, had fallen into the comfortable silence born of a good dinner, a cosy fireside and a deep chair. Now she gave a deep sigh of resignation.

'Overproduction of thyroid,' she murmured.

'Eh?'

'All Americans have it,' said Mrs Blackburn sleepily. 'That's why they can't keep still. Look at Mrs Roosevelt.'

Sally tossed her half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace. 'It makes me boil,' she said. 'Here we buy one of the oldest houses in England, with a dandy legend, and instead of treating it with the respect it deserves, what do those men do? Laugh at it!'

'Have another cigarette,' advised Elizabeth soothingly.

'We *have* got a genuine mystery room where people just disappear! What's more, I'm going to prove it. And you, Elizabeth, you're going to help me!'

'How?' asked Mrs Blackburn cautiously.

'Just suppose Jeffery, Evan and Mr Wilkins went down to investigate that room—?'

'Yes?'

'And found the body of the servant who was supposed to have disappeared three years ago!' As Elizabeth suddenly sat up, Sally hurried on. 'And don't tell me that there'll be no body to find. You leave that to me.'

'My dear—'

'I'll borrow an old pair of overalls and a cap from Jim's cupboard. All I have to do is to rig myself out in these things and stand against the wall. Of course, admitted Sally, I can't hope to fool them for long, but the sight of their faces when they throw open that door and find me should be well worth the trouble of the gag.'

She paused, watching Elizabeth 's patently dismayed face.

'Well?'

'You can,' said Mrs Blackburn, 'include me out.'

' Elizabeth, for Pete's sake.'

'No, darling, for mine. If Jeffery ever knew I'd had a hand in a thing like this, he'd have me certified.'

'Jeffery won't know,' Sally persisted. 'All you have to do is to bolt that door on the outside.'

Afterwards, reviewing the whole sinister business with Jeffery, Elizabeth could never actually explain how Sally talked her into this initial gambit. She could only confess that, despite her rooted disapproval of such an infantile scheme, ten minutes later found the two of them burdened with clothing and creeping down a winding stone staircase that threw back the sullen echoes of their footsteps.

'There it is,' announced Sally.

The steps flattened, widened abruptly into a passage which rose into a groined roof over their heads. This passage ended in a blank wall and in the centre, a stone door stood slightly ajar, an extremely massive portal, at least two feet thick, such rugged depth corresponding to the width of the wall in which it was slung. Heavy iron hinges laced one side, two sets of bolts, thicker

than Elizabeth 's wrist, were welded to the other. There was rust and dust and cobwebs.

Mrs Blackburn gave a little, unaccountable shiver and stopped in her tracks.

'Over to you, darling,' she announced.

'Nonsense,' said Sally briskly. 'There's nothing to be afraid of.'

'I'm not—' began Elizabeth, then she stopped. Not afraid, just— well— apprehensive. She wished it was Jeffery who walked by her side instead of this keen-faced young woman who had almost been expelled from Bryn Mawr for trying to land her plane on the lacrosse field. This business of people vanishing into thin air! Up stairs with the men it had seemed too ludicrous for a second thought. But down here in this world of stone and stillness -

Heavy as the door seemed, it swung back easily when Sally dragged at it. As Elizabeth took an unwilling step into the blackness, her companion's torch cut a swathe of light across the small room. And it was surprisingly tiny compared with the dimensions of the upper apartments; certainly no more than twelve feet square.

Sally flashed the torch around.

'You see? Nothing to raise even a solitary goosepimple— just a bare room. Now then -,' she thrust out the torch and grabbed at the bundled clothing. 'Hold the light while I slip into these things.'

In turn, Mrs Blackburn played the silver finger of light over the rough unbroken walls and up to the ceiling that seemed to press down on her neat head. Then she pronounced her judgment. 'I wouldn't stay alone in this place for a cartload of silver foxes.' She turned to where Sally was struggling with the stained overalls. 'Listen, darling. Be sensible. Call the whole thing off.'

'Get thee behind me, Satan!'

'Sally!' Elizabeth 's voice was shrill. 'Don't say that, not down here!'

'Peanuts,' snapped Mrs Rutland inelegantly. She fumbled here and there, then pulled the cap over her dark curls. 'There, I'm ready. Now— bring those doubting Thomases down here fast as you can. And be sure to bolt that door on the outside.'

'Sally—' it was a final appeal.

'Outside, Infirm of Purpose! And bolt that door!'

For just a second. Elizabeth hesitated. Then she passed out into the dimly lit passage and strained at the door. It seemed to swing shut with almost sinister haste and she reached up and shot the bolts with none-too-steady fingers.

She was half way down the passage when she heard the first cry.

It was so faint, so muffled and so indistinct that Elizabeth wondered, at first, if it was merely her imagination stimulated by the hushed and sinister surroundings. Yet that curious echo had been so urgent and so arresting that, despite her eagerness to leave this place, she hesitated with one small foot on the lowest stair. In that moment, it came again and this time there was no mistaking the quality of terror which seeped through even walls of stone.

' Elizabeth— help! Come back!'

Some actions are purely automatic, made without conscious thought. Elizabeth only knew that she was back at that massive door, pounding on it, crying out, 'Sally— Sally, what is it?' Then as no answer came, she wrenched at the rusting bolts, tearing a nail. The door, seeming a dozen times as heavy in her panic, almost resisted her efforts to drag it open. It gave suddenly and swung wide with a sour grating of hinges. Elizabeth stood trembling in the entrance.

'Sally,' she called unsteadily.

The small black pit ahead threw back the echoes of her voice. Mrs Blackburn's uncertain fingers found the sliding catch on the torch and a spear of light shot forward, wavered, explored the full circle, while the girl stared, amazed and incredulous.

The room was empty!

'Oh, no,' whispered Elizabeth Blackburn. Then she swallowed, for there was an odd, sick feeling in her stomach. Nerving herself, she moved forward into the room and its cold dankness rose up around her, so that she swallowed again and put out one hand to the thick wall for support. Standing thus, she played the torch around again, grimly, doggedly, choking down the panic within her, covering every inch of those solid, unbroken walls enclosing that unbelievable, incredibly empty space.

'There's no one here,' she said huskily.

And then, right at her very side, something chuckled.

There was no amusement in it, nor was it a loud sound. It was, however, more than enough for Elizabeth. She swung around, played the light on the blank wall at her side, then with a little choking gasp, she bolted,— bolted frankly and unashamedly, taking the steps three at a time, running with outstretched hands through the long hall, across the armoury, past the stained glass windows with their heavy curtains, through the living quarters and into the sanctuary of the reception room, with its cheerful fire, its deep chairs and the comforting, though undeniably startled, faces of the assembled menfolk.

ii

'DARLING,' said Mr Blackburn.

'Another little sip of brandy,' advised Jim Rutland.

'Slip this cushion behind the lady's head,' suggested the financier Wilkins.

Mrs Blackburn, recumbent, panting, choked with brandy, glared up at the good Samaritans and strove to get her breath. Then she sat up and began to pat her hair into place.

'Listen to me, all of you—'

Jeffery placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. 'Take it easy sweetheart.'

'But Sally—'

'More brandy?' said Jim Rutland. Anyone with a hide less thick would have recoiled from Elizabeth 's look. But Rutland merely replaced the decanter on the table.

'Now, what's all this about Sally?'

Elizabeth said breathlessly, 'I've told you. She had me lock her in that horrible little room downstairs— it was to be a joke on you men. Then I heard that cry. I rushed back, opened the door— and she'd vanished!' She paused, looking from face to face. 'Well! Say something!'

'She was obviously hiding behind the door,' explained Mr Blackburn and calmly lit a cigarette.

'The door opens outward,' replied his wife shortly. 'Besides, while I stood looking into that room— a room bare as the palm of my hand, mark you— something chuckled!'

Jim Rutland grinned. 'You bet it did!'

Elizabeth wheeled on him, but Evan Lambert cut in quickly. 'Tell me, Elizabeth— was there any special reason why you should accompany Sally down to that room?'

'Yes, I had to shoot the bolts on the door.'

'But,' persisted Lambert, 'if the object was to scare us, why bolt the door at all? That wasn't necessary.'

Jeffery nodded. 'Good point Lambert.' He turned to his wife. 'Is your face red?'

'Should it be?' asked Elizabeth acidly.

'Magenta,' Jeffery assured her. 'Don't you see, darling? Sally's real intention was not to scare us, but you! She concocted the other story just to get you down there.' He blew a smoke ring. 'No wonder she chuckled!'

'But -,' then Mrs Blackburn stopped. Her pretty face was such a study in conflicting emotions that Wilkins, watching her, spoke for the second time,

spoke carefully, precisely, with a cold authority that stripped the discussion of all nonsense, reducing it to blueprint saneness.

'All this doesn't explain one very essential point.' His eyes, piercing blue, close set, moved from one face to another. 'Where, when Mrs Blackburn returned, was the lady hidden?'

Jeffery said 'It's possible, of course, that my wife had such a shock she didn't trouble to look very closely.'

'Perhaps,' Wilkins smiled. 'Yet Mrs Blackburn strikes me as being an extremely thorough young woman. Out of fairness to her, I suggest we four men should go down and search the room for ourselves.'

He paused. Elizabeth beamed on him. Jim Rutland shrugged. 'We're merely playing into Sally's hands by keeping the joke going like this,' he pointed out.

But Evan Lambert made the decision for them all. 'Does that matter?' he asked. 'You were going to show us this room, anyway.'

Five minutes later, the little party met at the head of the stone steps. Rutland had a lighted candle, Elizabeth clung to her torch. They started downward. Where the stairs began to widen into the passage, Jeffery stopped and gestured to a slit-like aperture in the wall.

'What's this?'

Rutland explained it was a passage leading out to the summer-house in the garden. As they walked forward, his eye lighted on the stone door, still ajar. He turned to Elizabeth.

'Didn't you bolt that door after you?'

The girl shook her head. 'My one thought was to get back to sanity.'

'Then,' announced Rutland, 'we're wasting our time searching for Sally in that room. The moment your back was turned, she was out of that room and into the summerhouse passage. I'll wager we'll find her back in the library, helpless with mirth over all this fuss.'

'Let's see inside the room,' said Jeffery.

But even as their host had warned, they might have saved themselves the trouble. In the flickering light, the room looked just as bare and just as sinister. Lambert, his professional imagination piqued, moved around giving perfunctory taps on the walls, but their solidness precluded any suggestion of secret passages. Jeffery, who had taken the torch, was poking the light into shadowed corners, achieving nothing more than the startled rout of generations of spiders. Wilkins stood watching the other men, his face frowning and mouth petulant, as though, in his opinion at least, this absurd business had gone on long enough.

Mrs Blackburn suddenly gave an exclamation of disgust and irritation.

'Oh, for heaven's sake! Come on— let's get out of this.'

She made a movement towards the door and as if by mutual consent, all activity within that room stopped. They filed through, one after the other. Without a world, Rutland pushed home the stone door and thrust the bolts into place.

They began to walk towards the steps when:

'Where's Wilkins?'

It was Jeffery, bringing up the rear of the party, who spoke. The others— Elizabeth, Lambert, Rutland— halted and looked around in surprise.

The stifled scream and the muffled pounding came almost simultaneously. 'Oh, my stars,' cried Rutland. 'I've locked the poor blighter inside!' And in a body, they leapt for the door.

To Elizabeth, tired, slightly hazy from the brandy, shaken by her previous experience, what happened next was vague but terrifying like a nightmare which keeps recurring even after dawn. She remembered the bolts yielding under Rutland 's scrabbling fingers, the door being heaved back violently, Lambert shouting out Wilkin's name. Jeffery taking a half-step forward, flashing his torch into the darkness— and then, clearly, more vividly than anything, the grotesque thunder-struck, stupefied expressions on the faces of the three men.

And standing there in that silent corridor, Mrs Blackburn knew it had happened again; that something had occurred that was against all natural, accepted laws; that within half an hour, a woman and a man, solid, matter-of-fact figures of flesh, bone and blood, had stepped into the haunted room at Kettering Old House and had disappeared— vanished— almost in the twinkling of an eye.

'Now are you satisfied?' asked Elizabeth.

'No,' replied Mr Blackburn, 'far from satisfied.'

'I should say not,' grunted his host. Jim Rutland's face was pale; on his upper lip were tiny beads of perspiration and Jeffery realised that of them all, this man seemed the most scared. Suddenly, as though conscious of Blackburn's eyes on him, Rutland turned toward the fireplace and made a little helpless gesture. 'What happens now? What should we do?'

'We must,' said Florence Rountree firmly, 'remain very calm.' A thin wisp of grey hair streaked across her forehead and she pushed it back, only to have it fall again. 'We must remain perfectly tranquil in mind. Thoughts are things— tangible things.' And she fixed her pale eyes on Elizabeth as if daring her to debate the point.

Half an hour had passed since the disappearance of John Wilkins and the return of the slightly dazed party to the reception room. But not before both Jeffery and Lambert had insisted on a thorough examination of that

exasperating chamber. Each man, with the help of Rutland, had taken a section of the wall and sounded it with the thoroughness bred of savage bewilderment. This was no haphazard examination as before; now no single foot of wall escaped their scrutiny.

With absolutely no result!

Elizabeth rose abruptly. 'I'm going to 'phone the police.'

But Jeffery put out a restraining hand.

'What are you going to tell them?' he asked.

'That two people in this house walked into a certain room and faded like a dream?'

'At least they'd do something.'

'Something is right.' It was Evan Lambert. 'They'd probably cart us all off to the asylum!'

'That,' said Elizabeth firmly, 'would be a rest-cure compared to what's been happening here.' Evading Jeffery's hand, she crossed to the hall and they heard the flicking of the pages of a telephone book. Then came the whirr of a number being dialled.

Florence Rountree broke the silence. 'All this,' she announced, 'would be quite unnecessary if you'd only listen to me.'

'I know,' snapped Rutland, 'those people didn't really disappear. We just imagined it!'

Miss Rountree's small mouth set. 'There is no occasion to be rude, James—'

From where the lady sat, she could not perceive the mocking curve of Lambert's mouth as he said 'You mean. Miss Rountree, that our minds, conditioned by the legend of the room, were already expecting it to be empty?'

She beamed on him, nodding triumphantly. 'Exactly, Mr Lambert. You saw not with the eye, but with the brain.'

'Oh, fiddle-faddle,' snapped Rutland.

'James!' squeaked Miss Rountree.

There was tension in the air and nerves were stretched to breakingpoint. All the material for a first-class row was mounting. Then Lambert, with an almost sadistic satisfaction, chuckled in his corner.

'Then, madam, according to your reasoning, Mrs Rutland and Wilkins are still down in that room, playing handy-pandies! Just wait until the local police hear that!'

'The local police,' said Mrs Blackburn from the doorway, 'aren't going to hear anything, at least not on this phone!' She held up the hand-instrument

and the useless flex coiled limply across the floor. 'It's been cut through with a pair of scissors, I'd say.'

'Now that,' said Mr Blackburn softly 'is most interesting.' He turned to Rutland. 'How far away is the police station?'

'Matter of five miles,' the other answered. 'We're pretty isolated down here.'

'That,' returned Jeffery, 'seems to have been the idea! Whoever is responsible for those vanishing tricks doesn't want a police investigation. So I suggest you hop in your car and bring over the local sergeant.'

'But— can he do any good?'

Jeffery regarded him thoughtfully. 'I may be quite wrong, Jim. But I have an idea that once the police are brought into this, the whole mystery will collapse like a house of cards.' Suddenly his manner became brisk. 'Now, jump to it, old man. Meanwhile, I've another little job on my hands.'

Rutland, halfway out of the room, paused and looked back. 'What's that?' he asked.

Mr Blackburn said complacently, 'Me— I'm a detective, so now I'm going to start to detect.'

Jeffery Blackburn held the flame of the candle to the cigarette between his lips, then bending, placed the light on the rough floor and surveyed his surroundings. He blew a thin fan of smoke that hung on the motionless air, then began to unfold and undulate slowly, reaching out grey tentacles to the grey walls that hemmed him in.

Two people had entered this room, and approximately fifteen seconds later, had vanished from it. There was, of course, the legend, but that sinister story made no mention of an amputated telephone wire. To prevent news of these fantastic happenings reaching outside of Kettering, someone had cut all communication. Obviously because a police investigation must reveal the means by which these disappearances had been contrived.

How the devil did one get out of a locked room? Not by any secret passage through the walls, of that he was convinced. By the door? But that massive, two foot thickness of stone had been shut and bolted on the outside.

Jeffery tossed his cigarette aside and crossed to the entrance. The heavy door hung half-open. He raised both hands in an effort to push it wider, but to his surprise the massive portal moved so easily that he suspected oil on the hinges. But the dry grinding in his ears dismissed such a suggestion.

Mr Blackburn frowned.

Something was wrong. Somewhere, at the back of his mind, two small details clashed and contradicted. Standing there in the entrance, one hand on

the rough stonework of the door, Jeffery sent his mind racing back over the details of Wilkins's disappearance.

They had walked out of that room. With a thrust of his arm, Rutland had pushed the door shut and slid the bolts. But— and here Jeffery's eyes narrowed suddenly— when Wilkins's muffled cry had sent them racing back, it had taken the combined efforts of the three men to open this same door. This curious, grey, enigmatic door, which was light and easy to move at one time— and fifteen seconds later, so much heavier -

'Give!' said Mr Blackburn and tapped the door encouragingly. Next moment, his fingers snapped back as though the surface had become white-hot. Wonderingly, almost incredulously, he tapped again and this time there was no mistaking that hollow resonance.

The door was nothing more than a hollow shell!

'Oh, my aunt,' whispered Jeffery. He stared unbelievingly. But surely there was some mistake? They had sounded the four walls— Lambert, Rutland and himself. He even recalled Rutland thumping and bumping on the solid stonework surrounding the doorway. Then, surely, if the door had given up its secret so easily to Jeffery, Rutland must have known, too?

And if he did?

Mr Blackburn chuckled softly. One part of the tangle was already coming free in his mind, so that he could follow the loosening end to a logical conclusion. In time, he would deal with the second snarl. But first things first. Jeffery switched on his torch and moving closer to the door began running tentative fingers over the surface.

Ten minutes later, he walked into the reception room. Elizabeth, dozing in front of the dying fire, blinked at his dusty but patently triumphant expression.

'Hello,' she said vaguely, 'I must have fallen asleep.'

'We've all been asleep,' returned Jeffery. He sat down and lit a cigarette with cobwebby fingers. 'Tell me, Beth. When you ran to that door after Sally's scream, was it difficult to open?'

Mrs Blackburn frowned. 'Yes—' then quickly, 'yes, it was, Jeff! Somehow, it seemed much heavier.'

'Naturally,' agreed Jeffery, 'You see, Sally was *inside* that door.' He hesitated a moment, savouring the expression on his wife's face. 'I've solved the secret of the vanishing trick, darling. That door is literally a hollow cupboard— the inside opens like a panel. Sally and Wilkins waited until we had left the room, raised the alarm then stepped inside that door and closed the panel behind them. Just like that!'

Incredulity raised Elizabeth 's voice a tone. 'Then how did they get out again?'

'In both cases, the door was left unbolted after the discovery. They stepped out, pushed open the door and just walked out of the room.'

'Oh, no,' said Mrs Blackburn.

'Why not?'

'But you men sounded every inch of that room for cavities.'

'Except the door,' her husband pointed out. 'One doesn't expect cavities in doors. That was where Rutland was so clever.'

'Jim?'

'He knew the panel was concealed in that door. That was why, when we sounded those walls, he chose the one with the door— to stop us discovering the trick for ourselves.'

'But why?'

Jeffery crossed to the ashtray on the mantel and crushed out his cigarette. Then he turned. 'Let's start at the beginning. The Rutlands knew of this trick door and saw an excellent opportunity for one of their crazy jokes. That's why we were asked down here. I have some small reputation as a solver of riddles— Lambert has a big name as a detective novelist. Can't you,' asked Mr Blackburn, 'see the Rutlands gloating over this opportunity— presenting us both with a first-class mystery, then chuckling up their sleeves at our attempts to solve it?'

But his wife shook a stubborn head. 'I still can't believe it.'

Jeffery said austerely, 'The type of mind that would sit me down on a squeaking cushion is capable of anything.'

'John Wilkins hasn't that type of mind.'

'Know anything more about him?'

'Only,' returned Elizabeth, 'what Sally told me. He's the merest acquaintance— a comparative stranger. Jim met him casually in the city and he came down a few days ago with his chauffeur— a tough looking gent named Tucker.' And here Mrs Blackburn ran off at a tangent. 'Besides, who cut the telephone wire?'

'Why not,' suggested Mr Blackburn, 'think something out for yourself?'

Elizabeth said sweetly, 'Meaning you haven't the faintest idea, darling?'

'Frankly, no! But I know this much. As I said, the Rutlands planned this as the joke of the season. But someone,' continued Jeffery, 'took it right smack out of their hands, someone who wanted Wilkins out of the way— and who cut the telephone wire to stop police interference.'

'But why John Wilkins?'

'Wilkins is a financier, darling. Financiers deal in large sums of money. And money, as the copybooks used to tell us, is the root of all evil. Everyone wants money. Even Miss Rountree, living in her cloud, cuckoo-land of metaphysics,

couldn't exist without—', and suddenly Jeffery stopped, his mouth open on the word, staring at his wife as though she was some complete and surprising stranger.

'Darling,' cried Mrs Blackburn in sudden alarm.

Then Jeffery grinned. A wide grin in which enlightenment, relief and admiration were somehow blended. He walked across and bending, kissed Elizabeth on the tip of her pretty nose. It was a charming scene of domestic felicity, only slightly marred by the expression of complete bewilderment on Mrs Blackburn's face. Then a voice spoke harshly from the entrance.

' Blackburn!'

They turned. Evan Lambert stood there, his thin figure hunched and suggestive of a spring tightly coiled. He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. They saw him swallow before he spoke again.

'Can I use your car?'

'Of course! But—?'

'I've got to get Doctor Preston,' Lambert cut in, 'and I'll bring back the police myself. There's been some more monkey business— some of the servants are carrying him inside—'

Elizabeth said sharply, 'Who?'

' Rutland! They found him unconscious in the grounds near the garage, bleeding from a nasty wound.' The novelist took a step forward into the room.

'You see, Blackburn, somebody round here coshed him over the head with the proverbial blunt instrument. Don't ask me who— because Rutland just isn't talking!'

iii

ELEVEN-THIRTY p.m. at Kettering Old House.

Benson eased the traymobile, with its silver and snowy napery through the entrance to the reception room and brought it to rest opposite Mr and Mrs Blackburn.

He spoke apologetically. 'I trust tea and toast is sufficient, madam?' He whisked the lid from a salver. 'With the exception of William Darby, the servants are all in bed.'

'So they should be,' replied Jeffery. 'Er— this William Darby— he was the man who struggled with Mr Rutland's attacker?'

The butler nodded. From beneath the traymobile, he brought up a black leather bag. 'This, sir, was found on the ground near Mr Rutland. It's the property of Mr Wilkins, sir.'

As Jeffery took the bag and turned it over in his hands, Benson added, 'The master, sir— is he all right?'

'He will be,' Jeffery assured him. 'Miss Rountree is with him now. There's nothing much we can do except wait for Mr Lambert to return with the doctor.'

Sensing dismissal, Benson started for the door. But Jeffery's voice halted him. 'Oh, Benson—'

'Yes sir?'

'What's this story you told about a servant who was supposed to have disappeared from that room downstairs when the last people owned this place?'

On features less wooden, the expression that crossed Benson's face might have been termed pained surprise. His pale eyes blinked.

'Some mistake, sir, surely? Nothing like that happened while I was in service with the Lattimer family.' He inclined his head as Jeffery dismissed him.

Blackburn turned to his wife. 'Just as I said— a pack of naughty fibs on Sally's part. And stop wolfing that toast. You'll put on pounds overnight!'

Mrs Blackburn's glance was withering. She reached for another buttered finger. 'What actually happened out there in the garden?'

'As far as we can make out, Rutland was walking toward the garage,' Jeffery explained. 'The Dark Invader leapt out of the shadows. William Darby, in the garage, came out just in time to see his employer tapped smartly on the head and the unknown disappearing into the darkness, leaving behind that bag.'

Elizabeth picked it up, and weighed it in her hand. 'It's locked,' she announced.

'Brilliant,' observed Mr Blackburn. 'For that you may have the last piece of toast.'

'It's burnt.'

'Don't cavil. Now, how the devil does one open a locked bag?'

'I can lend you a bobby-pin—'

'Darling,' said Mr Blackburn with restraint, 'outside of a B-class quickie, have you ever seen a man open a lock with a bobby-pin? No— hand me that butterknife!'

'Jeff— now be careful!'

'Leave it to me.' He inserted the thin blade between the metal clasps and strained. Two things happened almost simultaneously. The blade broke and Mrs Blackburn gave a cry of alarm.

'Clumsy ass!'

'The hell with it,' snarled Mr Blackburn, sucking an outraged finger. 'I'm wounded, and it's hurting like mad!'

'Oh, don't be a great boob,' snapped Elizabeth. 'Anyhow, according to Miss Rountree, there's just no such thing as physical pain!'

'Quite right, Mrs Blackburn!'

They wheeled. Florence Rountree stood in the entrance. That unruly wisp of grey hair snaked across a face correspondingly pale. Her thin fingers plucked and worried the artificial bouquet at her waist. She came forward, surveying the traymobile. Jeffery said hospitably.

'Have the last piece of toast, Miss Rountree?'

'No, thank you.'

'How wise,' murmured Jeffery. 'It's frightfully burnt underneath.'

Miss Rountree said coldly, 'I may be rather old-fashioned in such matters. But you both appear singularly unperturbed about the happenings here.'

Jeffery shrugged. 'Even a detective must keep body and soul together! Thank you, Beth. I'll have another cup of tea.'

'As a detective, Mr Blackburn, you seem to have made surprisingly little progress.' Acidity edged her words. 'Mr Wilkins— vanished! My poor nephew— brutally attacked! And Sally— where is she?'

Mr Blackburn smiled. 'Suppose *you* answer that one?'

'I?'

Jeffery sipped his tea. 'She was to have taken the short cut to the summer house and then come up to your room. That was why you pretended to go upstairs after dinner for that book. But you went to your room, to wait for Sally and join in the grand laugh against my wife. But Sally didn't turn up. How worried you must have been! And how frantic you are right now!'

Miss Rountree sat down very suddenly. Her face seemed to shrivel and contract. She took off her glasses and dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. But no tears came; only short, dry sobs so embarrassing to hear that Elizabeth turned her face away.

'I didn't want to do it.' Miss Rountree whispered. 'Sally said it would be all right. That it was only a party game— a joke.' The husky mutter ended abruptly in a quick, choked-off gasp. Elizabeth, looking up, saw she was staring at the french windows— windows which framed the figure of John Wilkins. A different Wilkins, no longer pink, immaculate and imperturbable, but flushed, and with the appearance of a man who had dressed in a great hurry.

'Hello,' he said and they noticed that he was breathless. 'I suppose you've wondered what on earth happened to me?'

'Mr Wilkins,' gasped Florence Rountree. 'What are you doing here?'

'I can tell you that,' replied Jeffery and he held up the black bag. 'Mr Wilkins has come back for this.'

Then things happened very quickly. Wilkins gave a little snort of anger and strode forward, snatching at the bag with greedy hands. At the same moment, Jeffery's fingers tightened like iron on the handle. For some seconds, this frenzied tug-of-war continued, both men swaying and straining. There came the sudden sound of ripping material and the antagonists staggered back each holding part of the dismembered bag— a bag that vomited forth packets of crisp new banknotes. Some of these packets burst the rubber bands which held them and notes fluttered wildly to the floor so that Elizabeth stood soles-deep in a fortune. Then, like a quick-motion film suddenly jammed in the projector, the tableau froze. The two men stared down at the littered floor and while Wilkin's face was angry and dismayed, Mr Blackburn's countenance was deeply reproachful.

He looked up at Wilkins and shook his head. 'Your shareholders are going to be very, very annoyed about this,' he announced. 'This is their money, you know.' And as the absconding financier stared at him, stonyfaced, Jeffery went on. 'You were staying with Jim and Sally Rutland, so you overheard them planning the disappearing trick on us. That's how you learned about the panel in the door. And you saw a heaven-sent opportunity to disappear yourself— and let the Rutland 's face up to the police investigation that must follow.

'I rather suspect that the shifty-eyed chauffeur you employ is in this thing with you. Tonight he was waiting in the summerhouse for you, but Sally, taking the passage to the summerhouse following her vanishing trick, surprised him there. No doubt he trussed her up to prevent her talking too much.'

Wilkins had recovered some of that hard poise. Now he thrust his hands in his pockets and managed a twisted smile. 'Interesting. Blackburn,' he murmured, 'but go on.'

'Thank you,' said Mr Blackburn, 'I intend to. When Sally disappeared, Rutland didn't turn a hair. But when you presumably vanished, he was worried, for here was something he hadn't planned. And when he found you'd cut the telephone wire, he was dead scared. He knew then it was a ease for the police. But you had other ideas. Unfortunately for you, in the scuffle with Rutland, you dropped this bag and a servant brought it in here. And naturally, you weren't going to leave without this money!'

Wilkins said smoothly. 'Circumstances alter cases, Blackburn!' One hand shot from his pocket and it held a small black automatic. 'I regret this touch of melodrama, but it's essential that I'm out of this country by the morning.' Keeping that automatic ominously steady, he began to retreat toward the french windows. 'And I don't intend letting anyone stop me!'

Elizabeth turned her head slowly. Miss Rountree sat like someone paralysed, jaw dropping and codfish eyes wide and staring. Jeffery's face was dark and set. He made a half-movement and the automatic swung up level with his chest. Oh, my God, thought Elizabeth— he's going to charge! She gave an almost audible sigh of relief when Jeffery stiffened and was immobile. A coal fell in the fireplace and her spine prickled with the shock. Wilkins was almost to the french window and reaching out one stiff hand to push it wider.

And there was Evan Lambert. Evan Lambert and two stocky figures in blue uniforms who leapt forward almost simultaneously. There was a sharp crack and the acrid tang of gunpowder before Wilkins disappeared in a tangle of waving arms.

Midnight was chiming when Lambert returned. 'Seems I came back just in time,' he observed, then paused as the hum of a retreating car was heard. 'There go the Terrible Twins, alias Wilkins and Tucker.'

'And good riddance, too,' said Elizabeth shakily. 'Now, what about Sally?'

'She's in her room,' Lambert replied. 'They found her tied up in the summer-house. Poor kid— she's had the scare of her life—'

Mr Blackburn nodded with some satisfaction. 'The trouble with practical jokes,' he announced, 'is that they have the damndest way of kicking back!' He took his wife's hand. 'Come on, darling, let's go up and comfort Jim Rutland. Doctor Preston tells me he's going to have a very sore head tomorrow.'

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6: A Question of Identity

Sapper

H. C. McNeile, 1888-1937

Hutchinson's Magazine, July 1925

THE reputation of Mason, Cartwright and Mason is too well known to need emphasizing. To do so would be rather like alluding to the solvency of the Bank of England. Mention them as your solicitors, and no further reference for a business deal is necessary. And yet it is nevertheless a fact that John Mason, senior member of the firm, did, on one occasion, wittingly and with full knowledge thereof, compound a felony. And it is a further fact that his doing so has never caused him one sleepless night, nor is it ever likely to. Neither Peter Mason, his son, nor Edward Cartwright, his partner for thirty years, knows anything about it: it is his own private secret and it will go with him to the grave. And this was the way of it...

It was in the year 1835 that William, tenth Earl of Olford, being dissatisfied with his lawyer, transferred his affairs to John Mason's father. It was doubtless an honour and a compliment, but it was not altogether an unmixed blessing. Like all the Olfords the tenth Earl had the devil of a temper, and since— again like all the Olfords— his ideas on expenditure with regard to income were a little optimistic, John Mason's father had sometimes been heard to express a profound wish that the honour had been bestowed elsewhere.

He died in 1850, did the tenth Earl, twelve years before John Mason was born, so that his first acquaintance with the family was Richard, the eleventh holder of the title. And he was twenty-five when his father, who was getting on in years, took him down to Olford Towers to introduce him to the Earl.

"My young hopeful, Lord Olford," said the old lawyer. "We've got to have a Mason in the firm, and another few years will see me through."

The Earl shook hands with a grip that made John Mason wince, though he was a rowing man of no mean repute.

"Glad to meet you, my boy. And I hope you'll look after our affairs as well as your father has done. But you'll find it difficult."

"I'll do my best, my lord," John answered, and then the other two plunged into business.

It was always the same, as he found out afterwards— the place. With Richard, Olford Towers was an obsession. It was his religion, almost his very soul. And for an hour that morning John Mason sat and listened while the other two went into facts and figures. Once or twice the imperious will of the

Earl flashed out when his father raised objections, only to be succeeded immediately by a charming smile and, "You're right, old friend, as usual."

And then, just as they had finished, the door opened and a boy of ten came into the room. No need to ask who he was: the likeness, even at that age, to his father was amazing: The same keen eyes and firm chin, the same look of inflexible pride. It was the little Viscount Carslake, the future twelfth Earl and his father's only child.

At the moment, however, any thought of the future was relegated to the background by the very obvious present. A cut under one eye, some bleeding knuckles, and a large tear in his shirt proclaimed the fact that there had been trouble.

"What have you been up to, young fellow?" said his father quietly.

"I found Joe Mercer hitting his puppy," answered the boy, "and I told him to stop. And he wouldn't."

"So you fought him, did you?"

"Well, of course I did, father," said the boy simply.

"Did you beat him?"

The boy nodded.

"He said he'd had enough, and promised he wouldn't hit the puppy again."

"Good boy," said the Earl, "now go and tidy yourself up before your mother sees you."

The door closed behind the child, and the Earl turned with twinkling eyes to the other two.

"Young Mercer is twelve and big for his age. *'Nil timent'*— eh, what! '*Nil timent*!'"

"They fear nothing": the motto of the Olfords. And that was the other half of their religion. Never mentioned, naturally, merely accepted as a matter of course. "*Nil timent*." Once in years to come, when John Mason had relieved his father, he happened to go one day to the portrait gallery. They were all there— all the men of the line of Olford staring down from the walls; all, that is, save one. And where his portrait should have been there was a gap. Without thinking he asked the obvious question.

"It is put away somewhere," said the Earl. "A pity, because it is the most valuable of all as a painting. But we have indisputable proof that he was guilty of cowardice at the time of the Civil War."

And that was enough: the blank space marked the unforgivable sin. Libertines, gamblers, drunkards— all were represented; but for a coward there could only be the oblivion of an attic.

It was during the Boer War that Richard died, and Viscount Carslake became the twelfth Earl. He was in South Africa at the time— a subaltern in

the early twenties. And as John Mason wired him the news he breathed a silent prayer that he would pull through all right. For five hundred years the title had descended from father to son, and now there was a chance of the line being broken. Broken badly, too, for the new Earl's nearest male relatives were second cousins.

There were two brothers— Spencer by name— and John Mason had hardly been aware of their existence till they turned up at the funeral. The elder, Harold, was a very decent fellow: to the younger, Stephen, he took an instant dislike. He was a shifty-eyed, ferret-nosed young man, with an unhealthy looking skin, and he habitually spoke with a slight snuffle. However, even if the worst happened in Africa, Stephen would come into the picture, and Harold, though not a true Olford, would make a very fair substitute. And John Mason was a very exacting judge. More and more as the years passed had he become wrapped up in the family. In fact, he was more like an elder brother to the youngster at the front than a legal adviser. And he wanted an elder brother pretty badly at times. He was a wild boy, bubbling over with life and spirits— a true Olford, and there had been one or two awkward scrapes. One at Eton touching a little matter of gambling; and another at Sandhurst concerning breaking bounds and an unlawful supper party at one of the local hotels.

It was touch and go in the latter case as to whether he wasn't expelled, and his father was furious.

"An Olford," he roared, "sneaking out like a damned footman to drink bad port with fifth-rate chorus girls. By Gad! sir, I never thought I'd say it, but I'm glad your mother is dead."

It blew over and they patched it up, but things were never quite the same again. Their wills were both too imperious, and the atmosphere at Olford Towers stifled the boy. Not that he didn't love the place, but it was only natural that he couldn't feel for it at his age in the way his father did. He wanted freedom and big spaces. Olford Towers could come later. He wanted life with a capital L, not the comparative stagnation of a great country seat.

And so when he returned to England, the war over, John Mason was not altogether surprised at his decision. He heard it while they were sitting over the port at the end of dinner. A day of business lay behind them, and once or twice from little remarks he had guessed that something of the sort was coming.

"You know I've sent in my papers, John: no peace soldiering for me."

John Mason sipped his wine.

"What do you propose to do?"

"Get out of England," cried the other. "Man! there are a million places in this world that I want to see, a million things to do. Life's all too short as it is, so

why waste another moment. But I'm not going as the Earl of Olford in a de luxe suite on a P. & O. I don't mind sticking to Hector, since it's my name, but from to-morrow onwards yours truly becomes Hector Latham."

"And all this?" asked John Mason, with a little wave of his hand round the room.

"Can wait. I'll come back to it in time, John; never fear about that. But first I've got to live. Lord! old man, yarning with some of those irregulars out there, I've just marvelled at the life most of us live."

"And supposing you don't come back?" said John Mason quietly, then what about all this?"

"It will go presumably to that fellow you told me about— Harold Spencer," answered the other. "I've never seen him, but you say he's a decent fellow. I know what you're driving at, John. You want me to marry, and have an heir. But if I do that how the devil can I go off and do what I want to do? I'll marry when I come back, old man; there will be plenty of time then. And you can look after the place for me. I won't have it let, I love the old pile too much for that. And if I want any money I'll cable you from time to time. But I'll not want much."

And so a few days later, Hector, twelfth Earl of Olford disappeared, and in the log of a wind-jammer bound from South Shields to Sydney, the fact that one Hector Latham had booked a passage by nominally signing on as second steward, was duly entered.

From then on for ten years John Mason heard from him periodically. From South America, China, New Zealand, there came short messages. Sometimes, not often, there was a request for money to be cabled; generally it was just a notification that he was still alive. And it was in June, 1912, that he received a cable which brought a smile of satisfaction to his face.

"Wire hundred pounds. Leaving for home, Bellonia*."*

And it had been handed in at Auckland.

The hundred pounds were duly dispatched; preparations were at once started at Olford Towers to welcome the returning owner. The end of July, reflected John Mason, should see him in England again; and on the second of that month the *Bellonia* was reported lost with all hands on board.

At first he could hardly grasp it; he just sat in his chair staring dazedly at the paper in his hands. Then feverishly he rang up Lloyd's. Yes, he was told, as far as they could make out it was only too true. The whole thing at the moment was wrapped in mystery, and they really knew no more than he did. She had apparently encountered the most fearful weather, and had got into difficulties. Her S.O.S. had been picked up by three other boats, but when they reached

the place indicated there was no sign of her. Moreover the last S.O.S. had broken off abruptly in the middle of the message.

He got hold of a passenger list, hoping against hope that Hector might have changed his mind at the last moment and not travelled in the *Bellonia*. But a glance at the names confirmed his worst fears. Evidently, since he was coming home, he had decided to travel under his real name, for the Earl of Olford was, at the top of the column.

So he hadn't come back as he said he would. Fate had decided otherwise. The unbroken line had got to be severed. Of course there were legal formalities as to presumption of death; months dragged by before they were concluded. But in no one's mind was there the slightest doubt as to what had happened. Not a word came to break the silence; it was just one of those mysteries of the sea, which, in this world, will never be explained.

And so in due course, Harold Spencer became the thirteenth Earl, with a singularly charming young wife as his Countess. They had been married about a year, and a son had just appeared on the scene, when the war in France broke out. And the first batch of Kitchener's Army included Harold; it did not include his brother Stephen. That ferret-faced gentleman preferred to fight from an office stool, and succeeded in wangling it successfully. He even gave a watery snuffle when Harold was ripped to pieces by a machine gun at Loos; and felt aggrieved when a dry-eyed woman holding a baby boy of a year in her arms called him a coward to his face.

The fourteenth Earl of Olford— that baby boy; and Stephen, the shifty-eyed, found strange thoughts coming into his tortuous mind. Just supposing the child died, and children do die, he would be the Earl. Measles or something like that.

It would be very nice to be the Earl of Olford very nice indeed. Sometimes, as he polished his chair, he almost forgot the dangers he incurred from Zeppelin raids, in the wonderful train of thought that the idea conjured up. Stephen, Earl of Olford—

But the baby didn't die; it grew into a sturdy, straight-backed little boy. And John Mason, rising sixty himself now, watched the child with discerning eyes, even as in days gone by he had watched Hector. He felt if anything a keener sense of responsibility towards the house of Olford than ever before; it was his job to see that the spirit of those keen-faced men was carried on, just as if the line had not been broken.

And the mother helped him wonderfully. She too, seemed to realise the bigness of the issue, and the place her sonnie had to fill in the world.

He was eight years old when she took him to see the gap on the wall in the picture gallery. And he listened to her with wide-open eyes as she told him why there was no picture.

"But what did he do, mummie?" asked the boy eagerly.

"I don't know quite what he did, darling," she answered. "Perhaps Uncle John can tell you next time he comes down. Anyway, he was a coward, and that's a terrible thing."

"Daddy wasn't a coward," said the child proudly. And with a little cry she caught him up and kissed him.

"Of course he wasn't, my pet," she whispered, "and you've got to be like daddy— never afraid of anything."

"Uncle Stephen is afraid," announced the boy gravely. "He was afraid of Rollo when he barked at him the other day. I don't like Uncle Stephen, mummie, he looks at me so funnily sometimes."

"Don't think about him, darling," said his mother.

"Do you like Uncle Stephen, mummie?" he pursued.

"Not very much, old man, but we won't talk about him."

"He didn't fight, did he, mummie, in daddy's war?"

"No, darling, he didn't fight in daddy's war. He was afraid."

"So he was a coward like that gentleman whose picture is hidden?"

Involuntarily she smiled; but much as she disliked Stephen, the conversation was becoming dangerous with an outspoken young man of eight. So she frowned reprovingly.

"Yes, but you must never tell him so, old chap, because that's rude. And you mustn't be rude to people older than yourself."

They went off to play a game, but those few words lingered in her mind— " He looks at me so funnily sometimes."

It was true; she had noticed it herself. It was very rarely that he came near them; even Stephen's rhinoceros-like hide was not impervious to the icy contempt she felt for him. But on the last occasion it had seemed to her that his face had worn a peculiar gloating look: as if he was in possession of some secret which boded ill for her— and her Robin.

She realised, of course, as well as he did, that he would become Earl if anything happened to Robin; but, unpleasant specimen though he was, she did him sufficient credit to believe that he would never attempt to harm the boy. In the first place, he was far too much afraid for his own skin. Still, she felt vaguely worried, and one day she went so far as to mention the matter to John Mason.

"Perhaps it's foolish of me, Uncle John, and yet there are times when I can't help being uneasy. All his life Stephen has been a wrong 'un; Harold always

used to admit it openly, and wonder where the kink in him came from. And when I realise that it's only Robin's life that stands between him and all this— "

"But, Marcia, my dear, what could he do?" said John Mason reassuringly. "This is a civilised country, and nothing short of killing the child would be of any use to him."

"Oh! I know! I know! Put it down to the illogical woman's brain if you like. But what I feel is that the wish is there, and if the opportunity came who knows what would happen? I don't say that it's likely to, but it might. After all, children have been kidnapped before now."

She paused and stared over the great park, and John Mason saw a strange look come into her eyes— the look which, in days gone by, he had seen so often in the faces of men and women who had lost their all in France— the look of a great pride.

"I've got proud of this place," she went on slowly. "Heaven knows how proud. It's not for myself; it's for Robin. I know we're not the direct line, but that can't be helped. And I've tried to make him worthy of the name; I've put my whole soul, my whole life into it. Harold was worthy; those fierce men upstairs would all say that. And Robin's going to be; he is now. But Stephen! Why, the hidden picture in the attic would cry aloud if he came here. It's all that, as well as the fact that he's my baby."

They were strolling through the Copthorne Spinney, their feet making no sound on the soft turf, when suddenly John Mason clutched her arm and dragged her behind a clump of undergrowth.

"Look!" he muttered. "Don't move; don't let them see you."

And had the woman not been engrossed in the scene in front of her, she would have noticed that every vestige of colour had left his face.

In a little clearing in front of them stood a tall, sunburnt, black- bearded man, holding a struggling small boy in each hand, whilst facing him was Robin.

"Not two to one," he said in a deep, pleasant voice. "That's not fair. Now, who are you, young fellow?" he asked Robin.

"I'm Lord Olford," said Robin, "and I'll thrash them both if you'll let them go."

The big man stared at the child curiously; then he laughed.

"Of course, you'll thrash them both," he agreed. "But one at a time. Take this one first."

He propelled a wriggling victim forward, and Robin set on him furiously.

"Well done," said the man gravely, as after about a minute the boy turned and ran away. "Now the other."

Once again Robin fought like a young tiger cat, but this time it was a longer affair. Robin was getting tired, and the other boy was bigger. And it was only

John Mason's restraining hand that prevented the devoted mother from hurling herself into the fray.

"Now then— stop it, both of you," remarked the big man at length. "Shake hands; that's quite enough."

The two children shook hands sheepishly, and the man solemnly helped Robin on with his coat.

"You cut off out of it," he said to the other boy, who did so with alacrity. "Well, young fellow; so you're Lord Olford, are you? What's your other name?"

"Robin. They were teasing me about it; calling me a bird," he announced. "That's why I fought.

"Quite right," agreed the man. "*Nil timent*; has anyone ever told you what that means?"

"Of course," answered the boy proudly. "' They fear nothing.' That's our motto. And my mummie always says I must never be afraid. None of the Olfords ever are. My daddy wasn't afraid, and he was Lord Olford before me. He was killed in the war."

"Was he?" said the man quietly.

"But my Uncle Stephen was a coward. He didn't go to daddy's war. He was like the man in the picture at home who isn't allowed to be there because he was a coward, too. I asked Mummie what he did, but she didn't know."

"I'll tell you what he did, young fellow," said the man. "There was a king in England called Charles the First. And the king was hidden from a man called Cromwell. And the man in the picture knew where the king was because the king trusted him. And then, to save his own life, he went and told Cromwell, so that the king was very nearly caught. So that's why we put his picture in the attic, Robin."

He broke off as a tall and graceful woman came out into the clearing. Robin, with a cry of "Mummie", had run to her, and over the child's head their eyes met.

"Who are you?" said the woman slowly. "You seem to know a lot of the Olford history."

"It is a fairly well-known one, madam," he returned gravely. "May I congratulate you on the present holder of the title?"

She frowned a little; the appearance of this stranger was not altogether prepossessing.

"Uncle John," she said, turning round— but John Mason seemed to have disappeared.

"I suppose you know you're trespassing?" she went on abruptly.

The black-bearded man smiled.

"Please forgive me," he said. "At any rate I got Robin a fair fight."

"The road is through there," she remarked, haughtily, and still with the same faint smile 'the stranger turned and left her. Again she looked round for John Mason, but there was no sign of him, and at length she led Robin back to the house.

"He suddenly came, Mummie; off the road— just as we were fighting. Wasn't he a nice man?"

"I don't want you to go so far away, darling, when you're by yourself. There are all sorts of tramps and nasty people about."

She hardly heard his indignant defence of his new friend: all sorts of vague fears were darting through her mind. Ingratiating strangers who enticed children away; gipsies. Coming to think of it, he had looked like a gipsy. And was it mere coincidence that Stephen was now paying one of his rare visits to Olford Towers? A tutor: she'd have to get a tutor. Robin was getting too old to be left any longer to his own devices.

And even as she hurried Robin back to have arnica applied to his bruises, John Mason and Hector, Earl of Olford, met face to face.

"It can't be, but it is," said John Mason, and his voice was shaking.

"Aye! old John, it is— right enough," answered the other, quietly. "I told you I'd come back, didn't I? I wonder you recognised me, for I'm altered more than you."

"I think it was seeing you with Robin, Hector. The first time I saw you, you'd just licked Joe Mercer. D'you remember?"

"I remember," said the other. "The beginning of one's life— and now the end."

"What do you mean, Hector— the end? You're only forty-eight."

"Is that all? I suppose it is. For all that, John— it's the end. I've got about six months at the most to go."

John Mason laughed incredulously, and then grew silent. For there was that in the eyes of the man to whom he spoke which forbade disbelief.

"Tell me," he said at length. "I know nothing."

"There's not much to tell, John," said the other. "You thought, of course, that I went down when the *Bellonia* sank. Well, as you can see for yourself, I didn't. She struck something during that appalling storm— possibly a derelict— and sank in two minutes. And I found myself with three of the deck hands clinging to some superstructure that had been carried away. Mercifully the water was warm, because we were adrift for three days. Gradually the sea went down; the pitiless sun came out, and we began to wish that we'd died quickly like the others. And then, one of the other three went mad, and dived overboard. It lightened the load a bit, but beyond that it didn't help, because anyway, we had no water. I think we were all just about following his example,

when we sighted land. It was an island, John, with a few peaceful natives on it. I think they'd only seen a white man once before; later on we managed to talk to them a bit. And the island was miles out of the beaten track."

He leaned back suddenly against the tree and seemed to fall asleep, and John Mason stared at him in amazement.

"What's the matter, Hector?" he cried.

With an effort the other opened his eyes.

"That's what the others died of," he said heavily. "It's a sort of sleeping sickness, I suppose. The natives die of it too, but they're more or less immune. Water or something on the island. John, I must sleep."

He sat down on the ground and rolled on his side. And for over an hour did John Mason sit beside him waiting. It needed no expert now to see that he spoke the truth; the grey tinge of his face told its own tale. He woke as suddenly as he had fallen asleep.

"How long was I asleep, John?" he demanded.

"Over an hour," said John Mason. "You'll come straight up with me to a specialist, of course."

The Earl of Olford smiled faintly.

"I don't think so, old man," he answered. "I'll die in peace, thanks. It saps one's vitality; one doesn't want to do anything— except sleep. It'll be two hours soon, John, and a shorter time between the bouts. And at last one will never wake up. I've watched the others. And when the first boat in ten years did come, I almost decided to let her go without me. But there was one thing stronger than this cursed germ: my will to see the place again. To die here, John; and to see my successor. For I can't do the other thing I told you I would— marry. It's too late for that. But I wouldn't want a better kid anyway than Robin— so what does it matter? It's not for long, and they needn't turn out. I'll leave you to explain it to Robin's mother."

His eyes closed again, but he pulled himself together with an effort.

"An element of humour in being ordered off my own ground, John," he laughed. "But a fine woman. Let's go to the house. I want to see it, John; I want to see it. It bored me in the old days, but now it's my life, or what's left of it. And we'll get someone down to put my face on canvas. Shave off this beard, buy some decent clothes, and die like an Olford. Come on, old friend, I want to set foot in my home again. Great Scott! Who's this?"

For the shifty-eyed, ferret-nosed youngster with the unhealthy skin had developed true to type, and the Earl of Olford watched Stephen Spencer taking his morning walk much as a man watches a noisome insect. Stephen Spencer glanced curiously at the big black-bearded man in such deep conversation with

John Mason, and for a moment paused as if to speak. Then he seemed to think better of it, and with a little nod to the lawyer he shuffled on and disappeared.

"Who the devil is that?" repeated Hector.

"He's Robin's uncle, and your heir should anything happen to Robin," said John Mason. "What's the matter, Hector? What are you looking like that for?"

"You say that he would be the heir if anything happened to Robin," said the other slowly.

"Certainly," answered John Mason. "He's Robin's next of kin in the male line."

"Then what was he doing talking to the most villainous-looking ruffian a mile or so down the road there? I passed him this morning— though he didn't see me. He was so engrossed in his conversation."

"Are you sure, Hector?" cried the other.

"Of course, I'm sure," snapped Lord Olford. "You can't mistake a man with a face like that. John, little sportsmen who climb trees and run wild— can easily break their necks. In a big place like this who is to tell? A broken neck can always be made to look accidental."

"My God!" muttered John Mason, and his face was white. "But we've got no proof, Hector."

"And a damned lot of good proof would be— once it's happened. Don't be a fool, John; don't be a fool."

For a while they fell silent, pacing up and down over the soft turf.

"Granted you're right, Hector," said the lawyer at last, "or even supposing you're wrong, it doesn't alter things. In fact— now that you've come back it makes them easier. Any designs that Stephen may have on Robin are useless now. He gains nothing from the death of the boy. You've got to do it; you've got to see a specialist. Don't you see that you must marry. Marry and have a son. When Marcia knows you're back— that it's you— she won't mind. She feels in a sense just a steward for the Olfords."

Lord Olford nodded gravely.

"We could not ask for a better. She must continue."

"But how can she, Hector?" cried John Mason irritably. "Don't you see—"

"I see nothing, John, except one thing. And that is that for me to have a child would be a crime, suffering as I am from this disease. And in any event I might not succeed before I died— or it might be a girl. And what then? We have only postponed things. Robin would still be threatened by the same danger."

"You mustn't assume on that," said the lawyer. "Just because you saw him talking to a tramp—"

"I'm not risking it," remarked the Earl calmly.

"You'll have to," answered John Mason. "You can't shut the boy up."

And the other's deep-set eyes gleamed strangely.

"True, John; you can't shut the boy up. But there are other ways of killing a cat than drowning it."

He smiled grimly, as if amused by some sudden thought, and John Mason stared at him gravely. Only too well did he know the futility of argument once the other had made up his mind, but he made one final attempt.

"What is the use of all this discussion?" he cried. "Come back to the house now with me, and make yourself known. And if you want to, you can put the fear of God into Master Stephen."

And then he shrugged his shoulders despairingly; the other wasn't even listening.

"It's a difficult proposition, John; very difficult," he remarked slowly. "Even with a reptile of that type one would like to have some proof. And I, as you say, have none."

"And what if you could get proof, Hector? What would you do then?"

"The removal of Stephen would assist matters," answered the Earl calmly. "I feel certain no one would miss him."

"But good heavens, man," spluttered John Mason, "you're n England. And I'm not anxious to see the Earl of Olford ending his days on the gallows."

"You won't, John; I can promise you that. We've died most ways, but never by hanging, so far. And I don't propose to start. No, John, there shall be no disgrace— if by any chance I find that what I suspect is the truth. Only I mustn't be recognised; that's vital. I'm a wanderer, John; a tramp— and tramps may do what the Earls of Olford may not."

"But, Hector," protested the other feebly, only to be silenced with an impervious wave of the hand.

"Your word, John— your word of honour— that you will not divulge to a living soul that you have met me this morning, until you hear further from me."

And John Mason gave his word.

"Good. Come back here at three, and wait for me. I'm going to find that man. So long, old friend."

And at three o'clock the lawyer returned, his mind made up. All through lunch his determination had strengthened to insist upon being released from his promise. If Hector was dying, then it was his right to die at Olford Towers.

"Now it's my life or what's left of it."

He had heard the note of yearning in the wanderer's voice as he spoke. Besides, it was absurd; it was illegal; it was out of the question. John Mason slashed viciously at a nettle with his stick. Fanciful, too; just because Stephen

had spoken to some tramps He'd watched him snuffling over his food at lunch; there was no nerve in that quarter for conspiracy. The thing was ridiculous...

And yet— was it? What had Marcia said to him only that morning? Was it so ridiculous after all?

"All his life Stephen has been a wrong 'un."

Her words came back to him as he sat with his back up against a tree waiting for Hector. Supposing— just supposing— And at that moment he heard the sound of two shots fired not far away.

At first he took no notice— a keeper after rabbits or something. And then a hoarse shout brought him scrambling to his feet.

"Help Murder!"

With pounding heart he ran in the direction of the cry, forcing his way through the undergrowth. And it was Jenkins, the keeper— white in the face and shaking— who saw him and shouted again.

"Mr. Mason, sir; come here, for goodness sake!"

"What is it?" gasped the lawyer. "What's happened?"

"It's up there, sir— behind them bushes," stammered the keeper. "And I seed the whole thing as clear as I sees you now. Mr. Spencer was a-standing there talking to a man— talking very earnest like. And I wondered to myself what he could be saying to a dirty-looking tramp like that, when suddenly the bushes parted behind them, and a great, big, black-bearded man stepped out. And then I give you my word, sir, it all 'appened so quick that I'm all mazed still. This black-bearded man, he 'it the tramp on the point of the jaw, and the tramp 'e fell like a log. Then he drew a pistol and shot Mr. Spencer through the 'eart."

"I heard two shots, Jenkins," said John Mason quietly.

"I'm coming to that, sir," cried the man. " 'E shot Mr. Spencer through the 'eart and then 'e walked back a few paces and stared for a moment or two at the house, over yonder. And then he blew his brains out."

THERE was only one possible verdict, of course. It was true that the tramp's evidence was unsatisfactory, but he was a man of low brain, and the exact topic of the conversation he had been having with Mr. Stephen Spencer was really immaterial. In fact, what little interest there was in the case centred round one point. And it was to John Mason that the coroner addressed himself in his endeavour to elucidate it.

"Owing to the manner in which this man killed himself he is, as you know, Mr. Mason, unrecognizable. Now, from what Lady Olford has told me you saw him on the very morning of the tragedy."

"That is so," assented John Mason.

"Then can you throw any light on to the question of his identity?"

And John Mason's reply came without hesitation: "I never saw the man before in my life."

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7: An Adventure of St. Valentine's Night

Melville Davisson Post

1869-1930

Pearson's Magazine (US) Feb 1908

Melville Davisson Post had several serial characters, the best remembered being Uncle Abner, with stories set in pre-Civil War West Virginia. Another series featuring Randolph Mason, a sharp lawyer, is set in modern times (i.e, 1900s.)

ON THE NIGHT of the fourteenth of February, I came to New York from Philadelphia. The fast train from the South was late and did not arrive until nine o'clock. It was very cold, the windows of the cars were incrusted with ice, there were miniature snow drifts across the vestibules, and the steam pipes smoked. I was exceedingly hungry. The dining-car had been cut off at Philadelphia and my hope of dinner was beytmd me, in New York. When the boat which carried us across from Jersey City to the Twenty-third Street ferry touched the dock, I jumped off and ran into the checking room to give directions about the transfer of my luggage. I was delayed by the oriental leisure of the man in charge. When I got out, finally, into the street not a" cat was to be seen. The wind was driving past every moment with increasing fury, the frozen snow flakes cut one's face. I started to cross the street to a waiting street-car. I had hardly stepped out from the ferry house when a hansom pulled up and I hailed it.

As I put my foot on the cab step, I heard behind me a little smothered cry of disappointment. I took my foot down from the step and turned around. A little way behind me, under the eaves of the building, stood a woman wearing a long fur coat to her feet, and carrying in her hand a traveling bag. Her face above the fur collar of her coat was wrapped in a black veil. I went at once to her.

"Madam," I said, "did you call this cab? "

"No," she replied, in a voice low, musical, but greatly troubled; "I did not call it, but I hoped to get it."

Then she added with a flutter in her voice,

"I am alone. I cannot possibly walk in this storm, and I must get quickly to the Dresden."

"Madam," I said, "this hansom is at your service; pray take it."

"But you? " she answered.

"I shall get up-town some way," I said; "the elevated station is only a few blocks away."

I helped her into the hansom, then another tremendous gust came roaring down by the ferry house. I banged the doors and ducked my head to escape

the fierce onslaught of the wind. When the gust passed I looked up to find the cab standing beside me. A little hand threw open the hansom door, the soft, musical voice said,

"I cannot leave you here in this terrible storm, get in."

I got in, howled to the driver to get over town to the Dresden and sat down by the unknown. As the hansom wheeled into the street, the woman leaned over me and looked back. I looked over her shoulder. Another boat had arrived and the passengers were coming out. I saw in the heavy snow, a man running toward us, waving a hand; then we were out of sight bowling over the Belgian blocks.

The woman tucked the fur coat around her feet, pulled the long sleeves over her hands and nestled up against her corner of the hansom.

"Pardon me," she said, "I thought I had stupidly left my bag on the curb, but here it is at my feet."

I smiled at the pretty lie.

"Madam," I said, "I am sure it is at your feet. There must be some trace of feeling even in alligator leather."

I think she was undecided whether to chill me with irony or laugh. The laugh prevailed, then came the irony.

"How stupid of me," she said; "perhaps you do not wish to go to the Dresden. We are approaching the elevated station, I notice."

Her tone was in that admirable middle pitch which reveals nothing.

I wished to answer that the Dresden seemed just then to be a fairy Mecca, and that if I were put out, I should probably trot after the cab like a faithful puppy; but were there not faint breaths of frost in the little voice? I might be put out after all, and I wished greatly to remain. At any rate, I must take no risks until the elevated station was behind us, so I laid before her the details of my discomfort.

"I shall be glad of the Dresden," I said. "I am cold, I am starving. My fingers are quite numb, and I could gladly eat the straps on the hansom."

She laughed.

"Have you gone so long, then, without dinner? "

"Long? " I echoed. "Why, madam, it has been eight mortal hours! Men have become cannibals in less time than that."

We were well past the elevated station now.

She shrugged her dainty shoulders.

"Observe," she said, "how I shudder."

We were getting on famously.

"And with reason," I answered; "was not the taste of the bear for the tee-tree known even to the ancients."

"One of the Gospels, I think," she said, "tells us how bad such food is for the digestion."

Then, fearing that she had been led too far into pleasantry, she turned it, after the manner of a woman.

"Let us hope," she added, "that you will find something more substantial than the Baptist's meager fare at the Dresden. I would suggest a loin of beef, washed down with Burgundy, a dish of salad, a pot of coffee."

Then her voice slipped up into that dangerous, indeterminate note.

"We are crossing Broadway," she said; " perhaps you would get down here? "

"What!" I cried, "and leave the loin of beef a the Burgundy, the dish of salad? The suggestion is inhuman."

"Very well," she said, and there was no mistaking the indifference in the tone. In fact, it was rather too indifferent. I fancied it masking some aroused emotion.

We bowled along and turned into the Dresden. The porter helped us down from the hansom and into the hotel. Here I saw my companion clearly for the first time— and yet that statement is wholly inaccurate. I saw clearly only a splendid sealskin coat with a sable collar, a fashionable hat, two well-gloved hands and a thick, impenetrable veil. This chance acquaintanceship was about to end. I could not follow her, spying, to the clerk's desk, and yet I must act within the next thirty seconds before the house porter reached her bag if I wished ever to go a step further. He was passing the elevator now. I set my feet into the Rubicon.

"Madam," I said, "this is St. Valentine's night, sacred to the unknown. Its privileges have been respected since Claudius. I beg you to share my loin of beef."

The woman started perceptibly, glanced up and down the corridor and then hurried to the elevator. For a moment I was at a loss to account for this instant flight. Then I observed that a second hansom had arrived and a man was coming in with the porter through the door. The obsequious flunkey was in the midst of a reply.

"Just arrived, sir, in the first hansom, sir."

I glanced at the elevator, the door clicked; the escape was by a hair's thickness. I turned to follow the man. He was advancing to the clerk's desk, his back toward me. I observed that he was rather tall and wore a dark ulster with a strap across the back. The incident required no reflection. Here was the hurrying stranger of the ferry-shed, certainly one of several kinds of dragons to be found at the heels of escaping beauties. I should presently see to which type of dangerous beast he belonged. I strolled over to the big leather settle

opposite the clerk's desk, planted myself in it and lighted a cigarette. The new-comer Wrote his name in the register, took off his coat, and turned. I saw then that he was not an irate father, obviously. He was either the brother, or alas, the husband of this charming unknown. He was a tall young man, evidently from the South or West. His eyes were gray, he wore gold-rimmed spectacles, his nose was aquiline, his mouth and chin firm and well cut. He was evidently a person of determination and courage.

"Aha!" I said behind my cigarette; "there is here certainly snuffings of battle, but not afar off. However, before the shouting of the captains begin to arise, it might simplify matters if I knew whether the Nemesis is brother or husband."

I should arrive at the solution from his bearing; Monsieur Le Coque or Dupin would read it, instantly, like a weather report. I looked up at the man's face.

He was smiling! Then the beast was not an avenging husband. Such a one does not smile when he pursues the faithless. I had all the reeking dramas as authorities for that. He might chuckle in his throat, or draw his lips into a sinister, foreboding curl; but he did not fall into facial sunshine. This man was grinning like a Cheshire cat; and, by the Lord Harry, he was off to the bar below for grog! He must be the brother then— and yet, no. He was too big-limbed for a brother, the types of the two were distant as the poles— nor would a brother be so bedecked with grins. He would have nothing to conceal, he would buzz like a hornet around the truant, stow her safely under his wing and then take his Scotch with his eye on her. This dragon was evidently less the brother than the husband; but was he not, indeed, the husband? Did Pinero draw always faithfully from life? A greater than he had written of those who smile and smile.

Look at it now; the first domestic wrenchings were old enough to be calloused to the fingers, the home was shattered beyond all hope of patching, the woman had gone out over bridges that straightway fell in behind her; the man followed like an Indian— not to win her back to his hearth but for some object more sinister. He had found her at the Twenty-third Street ferry and lost her, but here she was, run fast into a pocket, and so he smiled and took a glass of grog. There was time a-plenty for the blow. I thought the husband theory had rather the better of the argument.

Meanwhile, I was ravenously hungry. I threw away the cigarette, went into the dining-room and ordered a somewhat elaborate dinner. Events were marching over me, the good St. Valentine slept. I must dine alone, while the unhappy truant trembled and went hungry, and, while, perhaps, tragedy knotted the tie strings of her mask.

I was leaning over a cup of bouillon when a low, merry voice said,

"You are not very thoughtful of a guest."

I sprang up to confront a dainty figure in a gray traveling dress, two merry dark eyes, a trace of smiling scarlet above a defiant chin, and a mass of brown hair wound in loose coils.

"I beg you, madam," I said, "to lay this discourtesy to my meager knowledge of fairies. I thought you vanished."

"What!" she quoted, "and lose the loin of beef, the Burgundy, the salad?"

My tone was reproduced adorably. Then she sat down opposite me at the table, as bewitching a madcap as ever danced out of the kingdom of Queen Mab.

So, then, I had been mistaken. She had not seen the Nemesis after all. Or better, perhaps, the person who had arrived was not he, or there was no Nemesis except in my disordered fancy. I looked over the room for the man. If he were spying, he would be in some corner of the cafe with his eye on us, and so he was. I found him presently, a little behind a palm in a nook by the door, and such eyes! They burned like dull green lamps. The smile was faded out to its last vestige, the face was sallow, its tense lines could not be read incorrectly. Some huge, skulking emotion sat watching with this man. The woman had not seen him— that was the whole solution in a word.

I could not eat much for all my boastings of hunger— no one could under those ugly eyes. They seemed now to glitter when the leaves of the palm threw little shadows on spectacle glass. That glass added a certain terror, the eyes became like one moving behind a screen, and there was something sinister in the smiles and laughter of this charming woman under an espionage she did not dream of. I held my place as carelessly as I could, under this menace like a cocked pistol. I fished a little for a clue.

" Madam," I said, tipping a little of my wine into the plate, " the king, your father, doubtless sends an invisible escort with you. I pour out a libation to it."

She put aside the bait.

"I am an orphan," she said, "not even a brother on the throne."

That lopped off one limb of the problem, if it were the truth.

"But, madam," I began.

She held up her ungloved hand, as bare of rings as my own good nose. That dismissed the husband— if the ring were not in her pocket.

"I beg your pardon," I continued. "How could one hope that you had escaped bondage for so long? The men of your land must resemble that foolish people railed at by the Prophet."

She lifted her little chin with a quaint challenge.

"Am I so old, then? " she said.

"Yes, Mademoiselle Inconnue," I answered, "quite eighty years old, I think. The letters to you have been published thirty years."

"Excellent, Monsieur Merimee," she said. "We are now supplied with names, we shall get on better."

I could have taken this promise with a greater joy had it not been for the sentinel behind the palm. I have rarely seen a more bewitching woman than this Mademoiselle Inconnue. She was evidently of Latin stock. French, I thought. The outlines of her face were Continental, the vivacity of it Parisian. Her words had now and then a noticeable accent. She was perhaps born in the Faubourg St. Germain, and expatriated in her short skirts. I thought of her as descended from those women of the Empire who, Halevy says, Logan their memoirs with so subtle and piquant a listing of their charms that no man, after the first page, ever laid down the volume until he had the last word.

If it had been any other than St. Valentine's night, I should have set a doubt against this sudden geniality of my companion. She had not been so sunny in the hansom, but here she laughed like a brook. We might have been runaway lovers with no horses galloping behind us. I would have given kingdoms for a red-hot spit in those eyes under the palm; but there sat the man watching like the Devil's imp. Who was he? I laid another ambush for her with a piece of fiction.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "in the corner yonder by that palm Madame Bernhardt recited for the disabled sailors; the spot is marked with a mosaic star."

She followed my eye boldly to the spot, held a level glance on the very glasses of the dragon without the flicker of an eyelid.

"How lugubrious!" she said. "There is such a star in the railroad station in Washington marking the place where a President was shot."

Then she shrugged her shoulders and looked me squarely in the face.

"Why should they mark with the sign of tragedy the spot where Madame Bernhardt recited— that place there by the palm?"

I tried to evade the directness of the query.

"Lay it," I said, "to the unimaginative nature of our people. A Latin would have marked one place with a mosaic of laurel, and the other with a black cross. Let us suggest it to the Players."

She looked at the palm again with a slow, heavy-lidded glance and then back to me.

"No," she said, "now that I think it over, perhaps the mark of tragedy is fittest there." And then, "Does not Bernhardt indeed represent the embodiment of tragedy?"

I had new lights on the problem. The woman was perfectly aware that a sentinel watched. She knew when he entered with the porter. She knew that he sat behind that palm when she came in to dinner, and yet she came, and played with me a comedy of sweethearts crowded with suggestive incident, and overplayed it. No woman would so goad a man who had any rights over her. Her subtle knowledge of the savage always somewhere in him would warn her against bearing on the sore spot too hard. If nothing else, she would fear the danger of a scene in a public dining-room. But she defied the man. Obviously then, he was one who watched without any authority to control her. To what class did such persons belong? Plainly, to the sleuths of the law. The man in the spectacles was a paid spy. He could report what he saw, but he could not interrupt it. The explanation had arrived.

I had barely settled the matter to my satisfaction, when the man arose and came through the dining-room past our table to the door. He doubtless saw that the woman had discovered him and so deemed it wise to leave the cafe* like an ordinary guest. I observed again that his face was strong, determined and very pale. Such a type of person did not become a detective in New York; but all manner of men came from the great West, and why not a spy with an open, honorable face? The next moment my last theory went to pieces.

The young woman looked up from her coffee, smiled and spoke to him in as pleasant a voice as I have ever heard.

"Good-evening, Henry," she said.

The man bowed courteously and passed on through the door, a show of color mounting slowly to his cheeks.

I withdrew then from the field of Le Coque and Dupin. The mystery was beyond me. One did not speak thus cordially to a hired trailer, and where in Christendom was there a spy who blushed? The man went out into the lobby of the hotel, got a cigar somewhere and sat down in a leather chair by the wall where he could have a view of the dining-room. Still he watched, and my Lady Unknown knew that he watched. She returned to me with a play of still more bewitching coquetry. It was exquisitely done for an audience that could not hear the lines. There was now an air of deep, trusting confidence, now a gush of banter, now a moment of affection, restraining with difficulty a caress. I have not seen the thing done better behind any footlights in the world.

When the dinner was ended, I went with her to the elevator, wondering if she would play it out with her fingers to kiss at the parting. But she only smiled alluringly and I stepped into the steel cage with her. Even the Hebrew Scriptures scorned the weakling who turned back.

"The parlors are on the next floor," she said.

Then the door clicked and the elevator began to rise. Instantly she changed as under some hideous sorcery. Her hands trembled, her face grew as white as a grave-cloth. When she spoke her voice clicked like a steel rail under an express.

"Get out here," she said, when the car touched at the next landing, "and manage to leave the hotel unobserved. You have done me a great favor. I thank you."

I got out. The car vanished. I started to go down the steps, when I saw over the rail the mysterious stranger coming up. I turned back and stepped quickly behind the elevator shaft. The man came slowly up the stairway and went into the public drawing-room. I got into the next car that came down. As it descended, I looked back through the wire net over the roof of the car. The man was coming out of the drawing-room door into the hall. His face was purple.

IT WAS LATE when I got downtown the next morning. Pietro let me in and I went at once to my table in the front office. I was scarcely seated when I became aware of some one talking in the adjoining room. There was a familiar tone in the low voice that took my attention from the pile of letters before me. The door was not quite closed. I arose softly and looked through the crack. Randolph Mason sat in his chair, his fingers plucking impatiently at the heavy mahogany arms, his head held a little to one side, his eyes wandering aimlessly over the room. Opposite him, with her two elbows on the table, her face pressed together in her hands, and a long seal coat falling to the floor over the back of her chair, sat the woman with whom I had dined the night before at the Dresden. I could not see her face, but her voice was tense, vibrant, low, packed with emotion. If I had not been consumed with a special interest, I still had not been able to put away this espionage. The soft, quivering, overcharged tones held me like the droning of some incantation. I caught the words pouring hot as from a crucible.

"After that he was always at the door when I came out, heaping on me things that I did not want— flowers, bon-bons, the like. I was hideously poor. I mended with my own fingers the stockings in which I danced every Wednesday night at the Theatre Frangais in the great ballet of the Fata Morgana. I nfceded warm clothes, good food, a fire. They said I had limbs like a fairy. I had, they were starved thin. An exquisite pallor, I had that too, but it came from sour bread, chocolate made with water and sweetened with sugar picked off with my nails from the bon-bons. I did not love the man, nor any man. I was a child. In the place of a mother, I had the warnings of an instinct. I feared the touch of a man's fingers as the beast of the field does; but the old concierge who had

kept life in me with hot soup every night after the ballet, took the thing in hand. She discovered, I know not how, that the young man's father was a rich American. So she bundled me off to Passe and handed me over to him, but under a ceremony of marriage set out fully on the records of Passe. She was the only friend I ever had, this old, crooked, evil-featured Madame Duroque. She could more easily have sold me to him at the door of her lodge for a hundred louis. After this, I was, at least, not hungry. My husband was little more than a boy. We lived over the Seine by the Luxembourg. I did not dance any more at the Theatre Frangais, but I went every Monday morning to see Madame Duroque to tell her everything and to divide with her my handful of francs. My husband studied art under the usual masters, but it was every morning thrown away. He was indolent, utterly worthless, wholly given over to a life of pleasure.

"One noon in May, his father arrived, handed me twenty-five napoleons and told me to go down into the street. I went with the money in my hand to Madame Duroque. She put her shawl over her head and hurried out. I did not see her again for five days. Then she came with the great American and took me to the Hotel Continental and to my husband. Madame Duroque kissed me at the door, put my certificate of marriage and the wedding ring in a silk bag and fastened it around my neck with a little gold chain. Then she took me to one side, and bade me remain with my husband and demand a hundred thousand francs before I would set foot out of Paris, after which she went back ta her lodge.

"The father prepared then to return with us to America. I refused to go, and my husband, who was now aroused, refused also to go unless I accompanied him. I got finally the one hundred thousand francs and we arrived in New York. My father-in-law, who owned railroads in a Western state, took us there and installed my husband as the clerk of a court in a little town built along the side of a mountain above the fork of a river where three railroads joined. He was trying to make a man out of my husband, he said. At his urging, I invested the money which I had received in the bonds of a railroad which he was building through the county.

"We lived there five years in the smoke, the mud, the unutterable dreariness of this frontier village. One day my husband fell and broke his wrist. He went to a hospital in a neighboring town to have the bone set, and died under the influence of ether on the operating table. I found in his pocket this letter, which he had written to me before the operation."

She took one of her hands down from her face, unhooked, the bosom of her dress, took out a letter and read it. It was a meager note, a sort of memorandum to her, in the event of any serious consequence attending the

operation. It told her briefly that the money which she had invested was lost, that his father had wrecked the railroad, reorganized it and absorbed its assets; but that there were twenty-five thousand dollars in a tin box in the bottom of his trunk in her room. She should say nothing to any one and keep that money for her own. It was all the provision he could make for her.

She laid the paper before Randolph Mason, then she took a newspaper clipping out of her purse and held it in her hand.

"I found the money packed in big bills in the tin box. In a few days I knew where my husband had got this money."

Then she read the clipping. It was an ordinary newspaper notice, reciting the death of the clerk of the court, and the fact that a sum of twenty-five thousand dollars which had been paid into his hands could not be discovered anywhere on deposit in any of the banks. This money he had received under the following conditions: The main line of the railroad belonging to the clerk's father had condemned and taken the bottom lands of the town for a freight yard, and, the land owners refusing to take the money allowed in the condemnation proceedings and the circuit court not being in session, the railroad had paid it into the hands of the clerk of this court.

The woman crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it on the floor, set her elbow on the table, pressed her open hand once more against her face and hurried on with her story.

"My husband's office accounts were gone over and this money could not be found. He was presumed to have spent it. I said nothing. It was merely my one hundred thousand francs with its interest returned to me, and from the very one who, in his own fashion, had taken it. I was glad, glad of this settlement by the good God, glad to the very bottom of my heart. I made ready to return to Paris, to Madame Duroque, to life. Then I learned another thing."

She moved uneasily in her chair, her voice sank lower, her fingers tapped nervously on her face.

"There was one honorable man in this hideous village. From the very day on which we arrived he did incredible things to make life possible for us. He got a house, servants, everything that loving patience could secure for our comfort. I came to regard him as an elder brother. My husband would have been a common drunkard but for him, and I should have been stark mad from dreariness. Well, he came to me and said that he was the surety on my husband's bond as clerk of the court, that if the money could not be found the railroad would force him to pay it. He was not rich, it would take all he had. He did not believe that my husband had used the money; it ought to be on deposit in some bank, or locked up in a box in some trust vault. I set my teeth down on

my tongue and made a pretense of helping in the search. Months passed. I remained in the village, unable to decide between this man's ruin and Madame Duroque."

For the first time in the torrent of words, the woman hesitated, her voice became almost inaudible.

"I learned also in this time a thing that I had not suspected— that the man loved me. Oh, I don't mean love as I have seen it all my life long, the passion of the hunter, a hunger to be fed. I mean something like a religion that carries your burdens for you and is glad of it, that thinks of itself last. A thing like the feeling of that old concierge. *Mon Dieu*! I was mad then! On the heels of it I learned that Madame Duroque was ill in a house of public charity in Paris. Then I took the money and ran away to New York. This man discovered that I had gone and followed me. I arrived last night. He came, too, just behind me to the Dresden. Oh, I was mad, wholly, utterly, hideously mad! Now that I had decided against him, I wanted to hurt him, I wanted to do him all the injury I could. I wanted him to believe me low, vile, common, vulgar. Fate helped me. I came to the hotel in a hansom with a man I did not know. I dined with him!"

Her voice went up strong again, almost defiant.

"There was no wrong in it, no actual wrong in it. I made the man get out at the first landing and return in the next car to the hotel office; but, don't you see, I made him think I was bad."

She brought her two hands down clenched on the table.

"I wanted him to see with his own eyes that I was bad!"

The words clanged like a bell.

I became aware then of some one breathing heavily behind me. I turned, expecting to see Pietro. Instead, at my back, looking over my shoulder, was the man who had sat watching at the Dresden. His face looked as though it were coated with chalk, his eyes stared over my shoulder into the next room. I saw, too, that the door of the house stood half open. He had come in unnoticed by Pietro.

The woman got her voice painfully in hand again.

"Here," she said, "here is the money." And she took up her traveling bag from the floor and threw it down on the table among the books.

"Send it back to him. You are a lawyer, you can do that somehow. I have kept only a thousand dollars for Madame Duroque. Let him arrest me for stealing that, if he likes. I should be glad of a cell."

The woman's face was set now in a distressing tension.

"Madame," said Randolph Mason, "you might have spared yourself this nonsense. You are guilty of no crime in taking this money; neither was your husband guilty of any crime in keeping it, nor yet is the bondsman of your

husband liable for this money. This money was paid to your husband as clerk of the circuit court of his county, during the vacation of that court. It was not, then, money paid into court, to the clerk, as contemplated by the statute of the state in which he lived. It, therefore, did not come into his possession by virtue of his office, and his bondsmen are not liable for its misappropriation. Such bonds require only that the clerk shall account for and pay over, as required by law, all money which may come to his hands by virtue of his said office. It is no crime for you to keep the money since it was neither stolen nor embezzled, but merely entrusted to your husband under an incorrect idea of the law. The loss, madam, will fall on the railroad which paid this money into court— that is, your father-in-law, the one who should properly lose it."

I looked to see the woman grow suddenly radiant; but, instead, she buried her face in her hands and began to cry. The tears trickled through her fingers. She rocked, sobbing, in her chair. I caught the handle to the folding-doors between the two rooms and flung them open. The woman sprang up, stammering incoherently. The man took her in his arms.

Randolph Mason spoke then in his cold, even voice, but there was almost a smile on his lips.

"Parks," he said, "go out and engage a stateroom on the *Kaiser Wilhelm* for Cherbourg."

For the legal principle involved in this story see the case of State to Use of Blake v. Enslow et al. 41 W. Va.; 744.

8: The Strange Affair of the Florentine Chest

Percy J. Brebner

1864-1922

First appeared in the magazine series "Christopher Quarles, Investigator, which ran in The Weekly Tale-Teller *commencing November 1912; later collected in* Christopher Quarles: College Professor and Master Detective*, 1914.*

ONLY THE other day, in a turning off Finsbury Pavement, there was demolished one of those anachronisms which used to be met with more frequently in London, an old house sandwiched in between immense blocks of buildings, a relic of the past holding its own against the commercial necessities and rush of modern civilization. It was connected with a very strange case Quarles and I had to deal with not long after the Seligmann affair.

The house looked absurdly small in the midst of its surroundings, but had once been a desirable residence, probably standing in its own gardens. Now it was almost flush with the street, dingy to look at, yet substantial. The door, set back in a porch, had two windows on either side of it, and there were four windows in the story above it. A brass plate on the door had engraved upon it "Mr. Portman," and it would appear that the bare fact of such a gentleman's existence was considered sufficient information to give to the world, since there was nothing to show what was his calling in life, nor what hours he was prepared to transact business.

As a matter of fact, he not only did his business in the old house, but lived there.

The room on the right of the hall was the living room. On the left was a small apartment, with windows of frosted glass, which was occupied during certain hours of the day by his only clerk, a cadaverous and unintellectual looking youth, whose chief work in life seemed to be the cutting of his initials into various parts of the cheap furniture which the room contained. Behind this office, but not connected with it, was Mr. Portman's business room, to which no one penetrated unless conducted thither by the cadaverous youth. Behind the living room, down a passage, was the kitchen, where Mrs. Eccles, the housekeeper, passed her days. A girl occasionally came in to help her, otherwise she was solely responsible for her master's comfort.

One November afternoon Mr. Portman returned to his house shortly after four o'clock. He stood in the doorway of the small room for a few moments, giving instructions to his clerk, and then went to his own room, closing the door after him. A little later Mrs. Eccles took him some tea on a tray, which she did every afternoon when he was at home. He talked to her for some minutes about a friend who was coming to dinner with him on the following evening,

giving her such particular orders that he evidently wished to entertain this friend particularly well. Soon after five Mrs. Eccles returned to fetch the tray. The door was locked then, and Mr. Portman called out to her that he was busy, but was going out shortly, when she could have the tray.

It was nearly six when she went to the room again. Mr. Portman had gone out, but evidently did not expect to be long, as he had left the gas burning, only turning it low. She had not heard him go, but the clerk said Mr. Portman had come out of his room at a quarter to six, had paused in the passage outside to say, "I shall not be long, but you needn't wait, good night," and had then gone out, closing the front door quietly behind him.

He did not return that night. For five days Mrs. Eccles waited, and then, growing alarmed, gave information to the police.

These were the bare facts of the case when it came into my hands, but I was told that my investigations might possibly throw some light on two or three cases which had puzzled the authorities in recent years.

Mr. Portman was a money-lender, and had so long called himself Portman for business purposes that possibly he had almost forgotten his real name himself. Since for years he had transacted his business unmolested, it was probable that the evil reports which had been circulated concerning him from time to time were grossly exaggerated; but the fact remained that the police authorities had taken considerable trouble to collect items concerning Portman's career, and had kept an eye upon him. Complaints about him had reached them, but those who borrow money are easily critical of those who lend, and there had never been sufficient warrant for taking any action. If, as happened at intervals, Portman had to appear in the witness-box, he came through the ordeal fairly well. He might show that he was bent on getting his pound of flesh, but he was always careful to have the law on his side. He was legally honest— that was his attitude; he could not afford to be generous when a large percentage of his clients would certainly cheat him if they had the chance.

Portman's business room at the back of the house was large, but dark and depressing, its two windows, which were heavily barred, looking on to the blank wall of a warehouse. A large desk and a safe gave it a business aspect, but the room was crowded with costly furniture which fancy might suppose had once belonged to some unfortunate debtor who had been unable to satisfy Mr. Portman's demands. Some good pictures hung upon the walls, and in a recess opposite the door stood an old chest heavily clamped with iron. The key, which might have hung at the waist of a medieval jailer, so huge was it, was in the lock, which was evidently out of order. When I turned the key the lid would not open. Looking through the drawers in the desk, I found several

letters which showed that Mr. Portman's business was often with well-known people— men one would not expect to find associated with him in any way— and the sums involved were often so large that only a rich man could deal with them.

Mrs. Eccles answered my questions without any hesitation. Whatever the world might think of Mr. Portman, she appeared to have a genuine affection for him. She had noticed no change in him recently; he had appeared to her to be in his usual health and spirits.

"When you went for the tray and found the door locked, did you think he had anyone with him?" I asked.

"I didn't hear anyone, but I can't say I listened. It was not the first time I had found the door locked and been told to go back presently for the tray."

"A friend was to dine with him on the following night. Did the friend come?"

"No."

"What was his name?"

"Mr. Portman did not mention it."

"Did you prepare the dinner?"

"No."

"Why not?" I asked. "You did not communicate with the police until five days later, so you must have been expecting your master to return."

"It's difficult to say exactly what I expected," Mrs. Eccles answered, "but I never thought about preparing the dinner. When he didn't return I began to think something was wrong, because I've never known him to be away even for a night without letting me know."

"Why didn't you give information sooner?"

"Sooner? Why, I keep on asking myself whether I've done right in giving it at all. The master might walk in at any moment, and I don't know what he'd say if he did."

The clerk seemed to think that Mr. Portman had been worried recently. He had had several pieces of business which the youth said had not progressed too smoothly. He knew practically nothing about these various items of business, but he gave me the names of half a dozen people who had called upon Mr. Portman during the past week or two.

"He was close, you know," the youth went on; "didn't give much away about his doings."

"Then why do you think he has been worried recently?" I asked.

"He's been snappy with me," was the answer; "but by the way he spoke the other night when he went out I thought everything must have come right."

A further investigation of Mr. Portman's room resulted in a curious find. Under a bookcase, which was raised a few inches from the floor, I discovered a key— the key of the safe. How it had come there, whether it was a duplicate or the one Mr. Portman carried, it was impossible to decide.

Apparently the safe had not been opened, for a drawer therein contained a large sum in gold and notes, and there was not the slightest indication that any of the papers had been touched. It was quite evident, however, that a number of people would profit by Portman's death, especially if he should die suddenly and leave no one to carry on his business; and this was precisely what had happened. Not a relative or friend had come forward to lay claim to anything, and many of his debtors were likely to go free. Among these was Lord Stanford, one of the names the clerk had given me as recent visitors, and I went to see him, only to find that he had left England the day after Portman's disappearance. He had gone to Africa, and that was all I could discover.

Another man who had called upon Portman recently, and whom I went to see, was a Mr. Isaacson. From him I obtained an interesting piece of information. He had seen Portman in Finsbury Pavement on the evening of his disappearance. He must have met him some ten minutes after he had left his house.

"I stopped to speak to him, but he was in a hurry, and did not stop," said Isaacson.

"I suppose you were not due to dine with him on the following evening?" I said.

"Dine with him? No, I have never had that honor. I do not think you quite appreciate Mr. Portman's position. I lend money in a small way, there are many like me, and if, as occasionally happens, business comes to us which is too large for us to deal with, we go to Mr. Portman. The business is carried through in our names, but Mr. Portman is the real creditor."

In his own way Mr. Portman was a man of importance, and a man of mystery. There was nothing to suggest he was dead, and it was quite possible that some crooked business had kept him from home unexpectedly.

I chanced to go and see Christopher Quarles one evening when I got to this point in my investigations, and he at once began to ask questions about the Finsbury affair. I had not intended to enlist his help. I was quite satisfied with the progress I had made, but he was so keen about the mystery that I told the whole story to him and Zena.

"You seem very interested," I said, when I had finished.

"I am. Mr. Portman has been talked about before now, and I remember I once had a theory about him."

"Does the present affair help to confirm that theory?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It might be interesting to know why Lord Stanford has gone abroad," he said.

"That is exactly the line I am following," I returned.

"I should like to know something about the man who was coming to dinner and did not come," said Zena. "It is curious that he should have heard so quickly of Mr. Portman's death, and more curious still that he should make no inquiries."

"Lord Stanford may be able to tell us something about him," I said.

"Zena makes a point, Wigan," said Quarles. "It is rather a complicated puzzle. Of course, Portman may not be dead, but if he is alive why should he run the risk of a police search among his papers? He would know that such an investigation would be likely to do him harm. He would hardly run such a risk. Since Mr. Isaacson saw him in Finsbury Pavement he has vanished completely. He left the gas burning in his room, therefore he did not expect to be out long. He was hurrying, according to Mr. Isaacson, presumably to keep an appointment. Now, if he is dead, it looks like a premeditated thing, because there is no body. It is easy enough to murder; it is the most difficult thing in the world to hide the victim successfully. If a sudden crime is committed, and the murderer has his wits about him, the body will probably be found under circumstances likely to throw suspicion on anyone but the right man; but a premeditated crime usually means the disappearance of the body if in any way it can be managed. So we get a kind of theory which may carry us a long way, and the further we go we shall be the more convinced, I fancy, that many other theories are just as likely to be right."

"Portman may not be dead," I said.

"For the reasons I have given I think we may presume that he is," Quarles answered. "The difficulty of the case arises from the fact that so many people stand to profit by his death."

"Stanford, for instance," said I.

"And Isaacson, perhaps," he returned, "and a score of others. As far as Stanford is concerned, he is a young man with expectations, but with little money at present. He is probably in the hands of other money-lenders besides Portman; he is a fool no doubt, but one would not expect him to be a murderer."

"Given certain conditions, you cannot tell what a man will do."

"True, Wigan, but I do not find the required conditions. Don't let me influence you. Something may be learned from Stanford, but that would not be my line of attack."

"What would yours be?"

"I should like to talk to Mrs. Eccles and the clerk."

When Quarles solved a case his explanation was usually so clear that one could only marvel that the salient points had not been apparent to everybody from the first; when he was considering the difficulties it seemed impossible that the mystery could ever be solved. As I listened to him I felt that his help was necessary in this affair.

"Why not come with me to Finsbury?" I said.

"I will to-morrow," he answered. "By the way, Wigan, wasn't it foggy on the night of Portman's disappearance?"

"It was, dear," said Zena. "Don't you remember, I went to see some people at Highgate that day and was late for dinner?"

Quarles nodded and changed the conversation; he had done with the affair until to-morrow.

When I met him next morning, wrapped in a heavy cloak, for it was cold, I could not help thinking that he looked the very last man in the world to solve an intricate mystery. He was the kind of old gentleman who would annoy everybody by asking foolish questions and telling stories which had grown hoary with age.

"I'm a simple old fool, Wigan, that's my character," he said, guessing my thoughts; "and, if you can look annoyed with me and show irritability, so much the better. Where does Isaacson live? I should like to see him first."

I found it quite easy to be irritable. When we called on Isaacson, Quarles asked him the most ridiculous questions which certainly had nothing whatever to do with Portman, but in a vague way concerned the theory and honesty of money-lending.

"Was Mr. Portman a Jew?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes."

"I seem to remember seeing him without glasses," said Quarles. "I thought Jews always wore glasses."

"We are usually short-sighted," said Isaacson, touching his spectacles, "I am myself. Mr. Portman worked in glasses always, but if you met him in the street you would probably see him without them."

"Ah, you are remembering that he did not wear them the night you met him in Finsbury Pavement," said Quarles, "that is probably why he did not see you."

"He happened to be wearing them that night," Isaacson returned. "I believe he did see me, but was in too much of a hurry to stop."

"Rude, very rude," remarked Quarles.

"Small men have to put up with many things from big ones," said Isaacson humbly.

The professor treated him to a short dissertation on the equality of man, and then we left.

"Honest, I think, so far as he goes," said Quarles, "but he is desperately afraid of being drawn too deeply into this affair. He couldn't afford to be questioned too closely about his business, Wigan."

It had been thought advisable to keep the clerk at his post for the present, and he was quite ignorant of the fact that he was watched both during his business and leisure hours. His own importance rather impressed him at this time, and Quarles soon succeeded in making him talkative, but, as far as I could see, very little of what he said was worth particular note.

"I think Mr. Portman would have been wise if he had confided more in you," said Quarles, after talking to him for some time.

"I think so, too," the youth answered.

"He never did, I suppose?"

"No— no, I cannot say he ever did."

"When he came in that afternoon he stood in the doorway there and talked to you?"

"He was telling me about some papers he would want in the morning. Very snappy he was, I can tell you."

"The weather, possibly. It was foggy and unpleasant."

"He was usually unpleasant, no matter what the weather was. He paid me fairly well, or I shouldn't have stayed with him as I have done."

"Yet, when he went out later that evening, he stopped in the doorway to say good night."

"He did, and you might have knocked me down with a feather," said the youth. "I don't remember his ever doing such a thing before. I'd put some letters which had come during the afternoon on his table, and the news in them must have been good. He'd had some worrying business on hand, I know."

"That would certainly account for his cordiality," said Quarles. "Really, I sympathize with you. Practically, I suppose, you have little to do but answer the door when the bell rings."

"If the office bell rings I pull this catch," the youth said, "and the client walks in. The front door has a spring on it and closes itself. Sometimes a fool will ring the office bell when it's Mrs. Eccles he wants, and that's annoying."

"Very," laughed the professor. "Did any clients call that day?"

"No. A chap wanting to sell some patent office files came and wasted my time for a quarter of an hour; swore that the governor had seen him two or three months ago and told him to call. A rotten patent it was, too."

"He showed them to you?"

"Had a bag full of them. Wanted me to buy the beastly things. I had to be rude to him to get rid of him."

"Did you go to the door with him?"

"Not much!" the youth answered. "I just pulled this catch and told him he would find the door open, and the sooner he got out of it the better. He would have liked to borrow a bob or two, I fancy, but I wasn't parting."

"Did you tell Mr. Portman he had called?"

"I never worried him with callers of that sort."

Then Quarles became impressive.

"I suppose you have no idea where Mr. Portman is? To your knowledge nothing has happened which would account for his absence?"

"Nothing. If you want my opinion— I should say he's dead, had an accident, most likely, and no papers on him to say who he was."

"One more question," said Quarles, "in strict confidence, mind. Is Mrs. Eccles honest?"

"As daylight," was the prompt reply. "Would she have put the police on this business if she hadn't been?"

"I never thought of that," said Quarles humbly. "Your brain is young and mine is old."

"Makes a difference, no doubt," said the youth.

"And my memory is like a sieve," the professor went on. "I've already forgotten whether this file seller was a clean-shaven chap or wore a beard."

"Don't worry about that," said the youth, "because I didn't describe him. He was an old chap with a gray beard, and had lost most of his teeth, I should think, by the way he talked."

"Poor fellow. Poor fellow! I expect I should have been fool enough to give him a bob."

"I expect you would," laughed the youth, in his superior wisdom.

With Mrs. Eccles Quarles's method was still foolish. For some time he did not mention Mr. Portman, and so silly was he that I should not have been surprised had the woman been less respectful in her manner. But he set her talking as he had set the clerk talking, and she was presently explaining that the guest her master was expecting to dine with him must have been of considerable importance, because the preparations were elaborate.

"He's never given such a dinner before," said Mrs. Eccles, "and I suggested that with such preparation he might have asked other guests."

"And the wine?" asked Quarles.

"He said he would look after that himself."

"Very natural," answered the professor. "You've been with Mr. Portman many years, haven't you?"

"Fourteen or more."

"So long! I wonder if you remember a young friend of mine who used to come here, I think. Ten or eleven years ago it must be. He squinted and had red hair."

"I do remember him," said Mrs. Eccles. "He came here to dine once, I recollect. I believe Mr. Portman said he was going abroad. I know he dined here, and I do not think I saw him again."

Quarles nodded.

"I believe he did leave the country; some said in disgrace. I wonder who it was that was going to dine with Mr. Portman that night."

"The master didn't say. All he said was an old friend."

"A young man might be called an old friend," said Quarles.

"Oh, he couldn't be young," said Mrs. Eccles, "because the master said he had known him when he was a young man."

"That is interesting," said Quarles. "Shall we go and look at Mr. Portman's room, Wigan?"

When we closed the door Quarles stood in the center of the room and looked slowly round it.

"Was that screen standing there when you first entered the room, Wigan?"

"Yes."

"Where did you find the safe key?"

"Under that bookshelf."

He went to the safe and walked slowly from it to the door, flicking his hand as he went. Then he looked out of the windows.

"No exit or entrance that way," he said. "There is only the door. Is that the chest that won't open?"

He turned the key and tried the lid. He could not lift it. He locked the chest, then unlocked it again, and hammered upon the lid with his fist.

"The bolts sound as if they worked properly," he said. "I think it's only that the lid has caught somehow."

We tackled it together, and, after several efforts, we succeeded in raising the lid. The chest was empty. Quarles examined it very closely without and within. We could not move it, it was too heavy, but the professor produced a magnifying glass and studied the marks on the wood. He measured the length and depth of the chest, and shut it and opened it several times.

"Opens quite easily now, Wigan," he remarked.

Very carefully he had put two newspapers into it, and some odd bits of paper, which he took from his pocket.

"You see how I have placed them, Wigan, which way up the newspapers are, and the scraps of writing on this piece of paper? We'll set a trap," and he

closed the chest and locked it. "This is an old house, and there may be a way into this room which we know nothing about. We shall see."

We left the room, but Quarles told me not to lock the door. He beckoned me to follow him to the kitchen.

"Mrs. Eccles, how long has your master had that oaken chest in his room?" he asked the housekeeper.

"It's been there all my time, sir."

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if it is connected with your master's disappearance."

Mrs. Eccles's mouth slowly opened in astonishment.

"We shall be back in two hours, and then— then we shall know."

We left her and went to the office. The youth was cutting an initial on the corner of the table.

"Busy, I see," said Quarles. "I fancy Mr. Portman's disappearance has something to do with that old chest in his room."

"How can that be?"

"I don't know yet. We are going to make an important inquiry and shall be back in a couple of hours. We'll be careful to ring the office bell, not the house one."

As we turned to the front door Quarles caught my arm. He opened the door, letting it go so that it would close itself. For a few moments we remained motionless, then, creeping toward the office door, watched until the clerk's back was turned, and went quickly to Portman's room.

"It is very easy, Wigan," whispered the professor; "if for us, then also for others. You see why I did not want you to lock the door of this room? Now we are in, we will lock it on the inside, and that screen will hide us."

"There is no question that Mr. Portman left the house," I said.

"Oh, no. Isaacson was quite definite, but I am trying to fit facts to my theory. I said we should be back in two hours, so we have about two hours to wait."

There was plenty of room behind the screen, but those two hours went slowly. I could not decide what theory the professor had got in his mind, but concluded that he was not so satisfied with the honesty of Mrs. Eccles and the cadaverous youth as I was. He had looked at his watch when we went behind the screen, and he allowed a full two hours to elapse before he would leave our hiding-place.

He walked straight to the chest and opened it. It was empty. All the papers had gone.

"Well, Wigan?"

I stared into the chest and did not answer.

"It looks like another way into this room, doesn't it"— and then he started—"or out of it. I hadn't thought of that. Wait."

He took an old envelope from his pocket, dropped it into the chest, and locked it. He waited a moment, then opened the chest again. The envelope had gone.

"I confess, Wigan, that this is a surprise," said Quarles. "I must go home and think. I believe— yes, I believe we have the clew. You must search Portman's papers for some reference to a business acquaintance, probably a foreigner. Perhaps Portman knows Italy— Florence. It might very likely be Florence. I fancy this chest had its home there. If you find any reference to a friend who is a Florentine, and can lay hands on him, you might question him closely about his movements on the day of Portman's disappearance."

"The first thing is to get this chest moved," I said.

"Let that wait for forty-eight hours," said Quarles. "We may have a more complete story by then. Give me until to-morrow night, then come and see me."

When I went to Chelsea the following night I was taken at once to the empty room. Zena was there. Quarles was standing by his table, on which was a rough plan, evidently a production of his own, and quite unintelligible without an explanation.

"Of course you have not discovered anything yet, Wigan?"

"There has not been time," I answered.

"No, quite so," he said, motioning me to a seat. "But we have a fairly clear story, I think. Zena said, you remember, that she would like to know something about the man who was coming to dine with Portman that night. It was an important point, particularly so since the guest did not put in an appearance. You saw the importance of it, Wigan, because you asked Isaacson whether he was the expected guest. Now, Isaacson had seen Portman after he had left his house that night, but had not spoken to him. This fact suggested a question to my mind: was Isaacson telling the truth? There were two possibilities. Isaacson might have seen him, gone with him, and be responsible for his disappearance; or he might have been mistaken. The man he saw might not have been Portman. The second possibility was the one which appealed to me. The fact remained, however, that Isaacson knew him well, therefore the man he took to be Portman must have wished to be taken for Portman, I argued. This would account for his hurrying on without speaking, since a closer investigation might have betrayed him. I looked for some fact to support this theory. I found it in Isaacson's statement that Portman wore glasses in the street on this occasion, which was unusual, so unusual, mark you, that Isaacson noticed it. Now, if my theory were right, it seemed possible that after Mr. Portman entered his room

that afternoon he never left it. That he was there when Mrs. Eccles took in the tea-tray there could be no doubt; but that it was Mr. Portman who answered through the locked door was another matter.

"Such a fantastic theory required strong support," the professor went on. "The clerk helped me. When he came into the house that afternoon and gave his clerk instructions about certain papers Mr. Portman was snappy, his usual self, in fact, and, incidentally, he proved that he had no intention of being away from the office on the following day; when he left the house he was quite different, genially wishing the clerk good night. Wigan, a man slightly overplaying his part would be likely to do that, especially as he wanted the clerk to be in a position to say that his master had gone out at a certain hour. He was bound to draw the clerk's attention to himself, so he did it with a cordial good night. Knowing that Mr. Portman wore glasses, he would also wear them, even in the street."

"But the clerk would have seen it was not Mr. Portman," I objected.

"That was a difficulty," said Quarles. "It was a foggy afternoon, we know, and would be dark in the passage, but hardly dark enough to deceive the clerk. Another difficulty was how a stranger could get into the house without being seen. Both difficulties vanished when the clerk told us of the man who called selling patent files. He had a bag, Wigan, containing more than samples of files, I warrant— means of disguise as well. We know how easy it is to let the front door slam and remain in the house. I think the file seller practiced the same trick we did. Even to going to Portman's room and hiding behind the screen. You see, the office windows are frosted, so the clerk cannot see whether anyone leaving the office passes into the street or not. If there is something fantastic in this theory, let me pursue it to the end. If I am right, one thing is certain: this file seller knew Portman well. He must have come prepared to make himself up like him. He was able to answer Mrs. Eccles when she knocked at the door and deceive her. Granted that he knew Mr. Portman well, we may assume that he was in some way associated with him in business. Only one man left that room, therefore, as things stand, we may assume that these two men were enemies who had once been friends. Here let me be imaginative for a moment. Mr. Portman was expecting a friend to dine with him on the following night, an important person, since the feast to be prepared was, according to Mrs. Eccles, somewhat elaborate. The sumptuousness of a feast may mean great friendship, but it may be used to hide intense enmity. You read such things in the history of the Medici of Florence. I believe, Wigan, that the feast was prepared for this same file seller, that the wine, which Mr. Portman was looking after himself, remember, would have proved

unwholesome for the guest, who, distrusting Portman, came a day earlier and removed his enemy."

"A little imaginative," I said.

"Imagination bridges the intervals between facts," Quarles answered. "We get again to a fact— the iron-bound chest. It links the two men together. I have no doubt the file seller knew of its peculiar mechanism as well as Portman did. You could not open it, and, since the key was in the lock, no mystery about it, you naturally did not think it of much importance. When together we succeeded in opening it I found on the floor of it a tiny stain. I thought it was a blood stain, but I was not sure. At any rate, the measurements of the chest were such that a body might be pressed in it. Frankly, I admit I expected to see Portman's body when we raised the lid. For the sake of some documents— it is impossible to say what they were— I believed this file seller had murdered Portman, taken his key, opened the safe, taken the papers he wanted, thrust the body into the chest, and had then departed in the character of his victim, flinging the safe key under the bookcase as he went. As there was no body I wondered whether Mrs. Eccles or the clerk, or both, were accomplices of the murderer; whether that chest might not conceal a secret entrance to the room. The idea did not fit my theory very well, but I laid a trap, and you know the result, Wigan. The action of shutting that chest opens the bottom of it, so that whatever is placed in it falls out as soon as the lid is closed and locked. I believe the body of Portman was in it and had got caught somehow— that was why you could not open it, why we could not open it until we had hammered it about, and by constant working upon the lid had released the body. I feel certain that chest had its home in Florence; that is why I suggest an Italian may be the criminal. He may have been long resident in England, of course; certainly he is a man who speaks English perfectly, or the clerk would have described him as a foreigner."

"But the body— where is it?" I asked.

"I've been to the British Museum to-day," said Quarles, taking up the rough sketch from his desk. "This is a copy of an old map of the Finsbury district, and here I find was one of the old plague pits. I believe Portman's house stands on this plot."

It was a very rough sketch, but, as I compared the place the professor had indicated with the old landmarks and their modern equivalents which he had marked, there could be little doubt that Quarles was right.

"I do not suppose that Portman's is the first body that has passed through that chest and slid down into some hole which was once a part of this pit," he went on. "I asked Mrs. Eccles about a squinting youth. He was a young fool with expectations, just such another as Lord Stanford. He was robbed right and

left, and it is quite certain Portman, among others, made money out of him. He disappeared suddenly. It is possible Lord Stanford might have disappeared in a similar way had not his friends got him out of the country. Portman didn't have that chest fixed to the floor of his room for nothing. You may find the solution to more than one mystery, Wigan, when you move that chest."

Portman's body and the remains of at least three other bodies were found in the deep hole under the old house in Finsbury. How the hole had come there, or how Portman had discovered it, it was impossible to guess, but there could be little doubt that he had only been treated as he had treated others. And some six months afterward a man named Postini was knifed in Milan, and the inquiry into his murder brought to light the fact that he had been closely connected with Portman. They had worked together in London, in Paris, and in Rome. At the time of Portman's death they had quarreled, and at that time Postini was in London. Among Portman's papers I found none relating to Postini; no doubt the Italian had taken them, for Portman's letter, asking him to dine and to become true friends again, was found among the Italian's papers.

There can be little doubt, I think, that Quarles was right. Portman intended to rid himself of the Italian after giving him a sumptuous feast, but Postini, wholly distrusting his former comrade, had come a day before his time, and been the murderer instead of the victim.

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9: Running Wolf

Algernon Blackwood

1869-1951

The Century Magazine, Aug 1920

THE MAN who enjoys an adventure outside the general experience of the race, and imparts it to others, must not be surprised if he is taken for either a liar or a fool, as Malcolm Hyde, hotel clerk on a holiday, discovered in due course. Nor is "enjoy" the right word to use in describing his emotions; the word he chose was probably "survive."

When he first set eyes on Medicine Lake he was struck by its still, sparkling beauty, lying there in the vast Canadian backwoods; next, by its extreme loneliness; and, lastly— a good deal later, this— by its combination of beauty, loneliness, and singular atmosphere, due to the fact that it was the scene of his adventure.

"It's fairly stiff with big fish," said Morton of the Montreal Sporting Club. "Spend your holiday there— up Mattawa way, some fifteen miles west of Stony Creek. You'll have it all to yourself except for an old Indian who's got a shack there. Camp on the east side— if you'll take a tip from me." He then talked for half an hour about the wonderful sport; yet he was not otherwise very communicative, and did not suffer questions gladly, Hyde noticed. Nor had he stayed there very long himself. If it was such a paradise as Morton, its discoverer and the most experienced rod in the province, claimed, why had he himself spent only three days there?

"Ran short of grub," was the explanation offered; but to another friend he had mentioned briefly, "flies," and to a third, so Hyde learned later, he gave the excuse that his half-breed "took sick," necessitating a quick return to civilization.

Hyde, however, cared little for the explanations; his interest in these came later. "Stiff with fish" was the phrase he liked. He took the Canadian Pacific train to Mattawa, laid in his outfit at Stony Creek, and set off thence for the fifteen-mile canoe-trip without a care in the world.

Travelling light, the portages did not trouble him; the water was swift and easy, the rapids negotiable; everything came his way, as the saying is. Occasionally he saw big fish making for the deeper pools, and was sorely tempted to stop; but he resisted. He pushed on between the immense world of forests that stretched for hundreds of miles, known to deer, bear, moose, and wolf, but strange to any echo of human tread, a deserted and primeval wilderness. The autumn day was calm, the water sang and sparkled, the blue sky hung cloudless over all, ablaze with light. Toward evening he passed an old beaver-dam, rounded a little point, and had his first sight of Medicine Lake. He

lifted his dripping paddle; the canoe shot with silent glide into calm water. He gave an exclamation of delight, for the loveliness caught his breath away.

Though primarily a sportsman, he was not insensible to beauty. The lake formed a crescent, perhaps four miles long, its width between a mile and half a mile. The slanting gold of sunset flooded it. No wind stirred its crystal surface. Here it had lain since the redskin's god first made it; here it would lie until he dried it up again. Towering spruce and hemlock trooped to its very edge, majestic cedars leaned down as if to drink, crimson sumacs shone in fiery patches, and maples gleamed orange and red beyond belief. The air was like wine, with the silence of a dream.

It was here the red men formerly "made medicine," with all the wild ritual and tribal ceremony of an ancient day. But it was of Morton, rather than of Indians, that Hyde thought. If this lonely, hidden paradise was really stiff with big fish, he owed a lot to Morton for the information. Peace invaded him, but the excitement of the hunter lay below.

He looked about him with quick, practised eye for a camping-place before the sun sank below the forests and the half-lights came. The Indian's shack, lying in full sunshine on the eastern shore, he found at once; but the trees lay too thick about it for comfort, nor did he wish to be so close to its inhabitant. Upon the opposite side, however, an ideal clearing offered. This lay already in shadow, the huge forest darkening it toward evening; but the open space attracted. He paddled over quickly and examined it. The ground was hard and dry, he found, and a little brook ran tinkling down one side of it into the lake. This outfall, too, would be a good fishing spot. Also it was sheltered. A few low willows marked the mouth.

An experienced camper soon makes up his mind. It was a perfect site, and some charred logs, with traces of former fires, proved that he was not the first to think so. Hyde was delighted. Then, suddenly, disappointment came to tinge his pleasure. His kit was landed, and preparations for putting up the tent were begun, when he recalled a detail that excitement had so far kept in the background of his mind— Morton's advice. But not Morton's only, for the storekeeper at Stony Creek had reinforced it. The big fellow with straggling moustache and stooping shoulders, dressed in shirt and trousers, had handed him out a final sentence with the bacon, flour, condensed milk, and sugar. He had repeated Morton's half-forgotten words:

"Put yer tent on the east shore. I should," he had said at parting.

He remembered Morton, too, apparently. "A shortish fellow, brown as an Indian and fairly smelling of the woods. Travelling with Jake, the half-breed." That assuredly was Morton. "Didn't stay long, now, did he?" he added in a reflective tone.

"Going Windy Lake way, are yer? Or Ten Mile Water, maybe?" he had first inquired of Hyde.

"Medicine Lake."

"Is that so?" the man said, as though he doubted it for some obscure reason. He pulled at his ragged moustache a moment. "Is that so, now?" he repeated. And the final words followed him downstream after a considerable pause— the advice about the best shore on which to put his tent.

All this now suddenly flashed back upon Hyde's mind with a tinge of disappointment and annoyance, for when two experienced men agreed, their opinion was not to be lightly disregarded. He wished he had asked the storekeeper for more details. He looked about him, he reflected, he hesitated. His ideal camping-ground lay certainly on the forbidden shore. What in the world, he pondered, could be the objection to it?

But the light was fading; he must decide quickly one way or the other. After staring at his unpacked dunnage and the tent, already half erected, he made up his mind with a muttered expression that consigned both Morton and the storekeeper to less pleasant places. "They must have *some* reason," he growled to himself; "fellows like that usually know what they're talking about. I guess I'd better shift over to the other side— for tonight, at any rate."

He glanced across the water before actually reloading. No smoke rose from the Indian's shack. He had seen no sign of a canoe. The man, he decided, was away. Reluctantly, then, he left the good camping-ground and paddled across the lake, and half an hour later his tent was up, firewood collected, and two small trout were already caught for supper. But the bigger fish, he knew, lay waiting for him on the other side by the little outfall, and he fell asleep at length on his bed of balsam boughs, annoyed and disappointed, yet wondering how a mere sentence could have persuaded him so easily against his own better judgement. He slept like the dead; the sun was well up before he stirred.

But his morning mood was a very different one. The brilliant light, the peace, the intoxicating air, all this was too exhilarating for the mind to harbour foolish fancies, and he marvelled that he could have been so weak the night before. No hesitation lay in him anywhere. He struck camp immediately after breakfast, paddled back across the strip of shining water, and quickly settled in upon the forbidden shore, as he now called it, with a contemptuous grin. And the more he saw of the spot, the better he liked it. There was plenty of wood, running water to drink, an open space about the tent, and there were no flies. The fishing, moreover, was magnificent. Morton's description was fully justified, and "stiff with big fish" for once was not an exaggeration.

The useless hours of the early afternoon he passed dozing in the sun, or wandering through the underbrush beyond the camp. He found no sign of anything unusual. He bathed in a cool, deep pool; he revelled in the lonely little paradise. Lonely it certainly was, but the loneliness was part of its charm; the stillness, the peace, the isolation of this beautiful backwoods lake delighted him. The silence was divine. He was entirely satisfied.

After a brew of tea, he strolled toward evening along the shore, looking for the first sign of a rising fish. A faint ripple on the water, with the lengthening shadows, made good conditions. *Plop* followed *plop*, as the big fellows rose, snatched at their food, and vanished into the depths. He hurried back. Ten minutes later he had taken his rods and was gliding cautiously in the canoe through the quiet water.

So good was the sport, indeed, and so quickly did the big trout pile up in the bottom of the canoe that, despite the growing lateness, he found it hard to tear himself away. "One more," he said, "and then I really will go." He landed that "one more," and was in act of taking it off the hook, when the deep silence of the evening was curiously disturbed. He became abruptly aware that someone watched him. A pair of eyes, it seemed, were fixed upon him from some point in the surrounding shadows.

Thus, at least, he interpreted the odd disturbance in his happy mood; for thus he felt it. The feeling stole over him without the slightest warning. He was not alone. The slippery big trout dropped from his fingers. He sat motionless, and stared about him.

Nothing stirred; the ripple on the lake had died away; there was no wind; the forest lay a single purple mass of shadow; the yellow sky, fast fading, threw reflections that troubled the eye and made distances uncertain. But there was no sound, no movement; he saw no figure anywhere. Yet he knew that someone watched him, and a wave of quite unreasoning terror gripped him. The nose of the canoe was against the bank. In a moment, and instinctively, he shoved it off and paddled into deeper water. The watcher, it came to him also instinctively, was quite close to him upon that bank. But where? And who? Was it the Indian?

Here, in deeper water, and some twenty yards from the shore, he paused and strained both sight and hearing to find some possible clue. He felt half ashamed, now that the first strange feeling passed a little. But the certainty remained. Absurd as it was, he felt positive that someone watched him with concentrated and intent regard. Every fibre in his being told him so; and though he could discover no figure, no new outline on the shore, he could even have sworn in which clump of willow bushes the hidden person crouched and stared. His attention seemed drawn to that particular clump.

The water dripped slowly from his paddle, now lying across the thwarts. There was no other sound. The canvas of his tent gleamed dimly. A star or two were out. He waited. Nothing happened.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the feeling passed, and he knew that the person who had been watching him intently had gone. It was as if a current had been turned off; the normal world flowed back; the landscape emptied as if someone had left a room. The disagreeable feeling left him at the same time, so that he instantly turned the canoe in to the shore again, landed, and, paddle in hand, went over to examine the clump of willows he had singled out as the place of concealment. There was no one there, of course, nor any trace of recent human occupancy. No leaves, no branches stirred, nor was a single twig displaced; his keen and practised sight detected no sign of tracks upon the ground. Yet, for all that, he felt positive that a little time ago someone had crouched among these very leaves and watched him. He remained absolutely convinced of it. The watcher, whether Indian, hunter, stray lumberman, or wandering half-breed, had now withdrawn, a search was useless, and dusk was falling. He returned to his little camp, more disturbed perhaps than he cared to acknowledge. He cooked his supper, hung up his catch on a string, so that no prowling animal could get at it during the night, and prepared to make himself comfortable until bedtime. Unconsciously, he built a bigger fire than usual, and found himself peering over his pipe into the deep shadows beyond the firelight, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He remained generally on the alert in a way that was new to him.

A man under such conditions and in such a place need not know discomfort until the sense of loneliness strikes him as too vivid a reality. Loneliness in a backwoods camp brings charm, pleasure, and a happy sense of calm until, and unless, it comes too near. It should remain an ingredient only among other conditions; it should not be directly, vividly noticed. Once it has crept within short range, however, it may easily cross the narrow line between comfort and discomfort, and darkness is an undesirable time for the transition. A curious dread may easily follow— the dread lest the loneliness suddenly be disturbed, and the solitary human feel himself open to attack.

For Hyde, now, this transition had been already accomplished; the too intimate sense of his loneliness had shifted abruptly into the worse condition of no longer being quite alone. It was an awkward moment, and the hotel clerk realized his position exactly. He did not quite like it. He sat there, with his back to the blazing logs, a very visible object in the light, while all about him the darkness of the forest lay like an impenetrable wall. He could not see a foot beyond the small circle of his camp-fire; the silence about him was like the

silence of the dead. No leaf rustled, no wave lapped; he himself sat motionless as a log.

Then again he became suddenly aware that the person who watched him had returned, and that same intent and concentrated gaze as before was fixed upon him where he lay. There was no warning; he heard no stealthy tread or snapping of dry twigs, yet the owner of those steady eyes was very close to him, probably not a dozen feet away. This sense of proximity was overwhelming.

It is unquestionable that a shiver ran down his spine. This time, moreover, he felt positive that the man crouched just beyond the firelight, the distance he himself could see being nicely calculated, and straight in front of him. For some minutes he sat without stirring a single muscle, yet with each muscle ready and alert, straining his eyes in vain to pierce the darkness, but only succeeding in dazzling his sight with the reflected light. Then, as he shifted his position slowly, cautiously, to obtain another angle of vision, his heart gave two big thumps against his ribs and the hair seemed to rise on his scalp with the sense of cold that shot horribly up his spine. In the darkness facing him he saw two small and greenish circles that were certainly a pair of eyes, yet not the eyes of Indian, hunter, or of any human being. It was a pair of animal eyes that stared so fixedly at him out of the night. And this certainly had an immediate and natural effect upon him.

For, at the menace of those eyes, the fears of millions of long dead hunters since the dawn of time woke in him. Hotel clerk though he was, heredity surged through him in an automatic wave of instinct. His hand groped for a weapon. His fingers fell on the iron head of his small camp axe, and at once he was himself again. Confidence returned; the vague, superstitious dread was gone. This was a bear or wolf that smelt his catch and came to steal it. With beings of that sort he knew instinctively how to deal, yet admitting, by this very instinct, that his original dread had been of quite another kind.

"I'll damned quick find out what it is," he exclaimed aloud, and snatching a burning brand from the fire, he hurled it with good aim straight at the eyes of the beast before him.

The bit of pitch-pine fell in a shower of sparks that lit the dry grass this side of the animal, flared up a moment, then died quickly down again. But in that instant of bright illumination he saw clearly what his unwelcome visitor was. A big timber wolf sat on its hindquarters, staring steadily at him through the firelight. He saw its legs and shoulders, he saw its hair, he saw also the big hemlock trunks lit up behind it, and the willow scrub on each side. It formed a vivid, clear-cut picture shown in clear detail by the momentary blaze. To his amazement, however, the wolf did not turn and bolt away from the burning

log, but withdrew a few yards only, and sat there again on its haunches, staring, staring as before. Heavens, how it stared! He "shoo-ed" it, but without effect; it did not budge. He did not waste another good log on it, for his fear was dissipated now; a timber wolf was a timber wolf, and it might sit there as long as it pleased, provided it did not try to steal his catch. No alarm was in him any more. He knew that wolves were harmless in the summer and autumn, and even when "packed" in the winter, they would attack a man only when suffering desperate hunger. So he lay and watched the beast, threw bits of stick in its direction, even talked to it, wondering only that it never moved. "You can stay there forever, if you like," he remarked to it aloud, "for you cannot get at my fish, and the rest of the grub I shall take into the tent with me!"

The creature blinked its bright green eyes, but made no move.

Why, then, if his fear was gone, did he think of certain things as he rolled himself in the Hudson Bay blankets before going to sleep? The immobility of the animal was strange, its refusal to turn and bolt was still stranger. Never before had he known a wild creature that was not afraid of fire. Why did it sit and watch him, as with purpose in its dreadful eyes? How had he felt its presence earlier and instantly? A timber wolf, especially a solitary timber wolf, was a timid thing, yet this one feared neither man nor fire. Now, as he lay there wrapped in his blankets inside the cosy tent, it sat outside beneath the stars, beside the fading embers, the wind chilly in its fur, the ground cooling beneath its planted paws, watching him, steadily watching him, perhaps until the dawn.

It was unusual, it was strange. Having neither imagination nor tradition, he called upon no store of racial visions. Matter of fact, a hotel clerk on a fishing holiday, he lay there in his blankets, merely wondering and puzzled. A timber wolf was a timber wolf and nothing more. Yet this timber wolf— the idea haunted him— was different. In a word, the deeper part of his original uneasiness remained. He tossed about, he shivered sometimes in his broken sleep; he did not go out to see, but he woke early and unrefreshed.

Again, with the sunshine and the morning wind, however, the incident of the night before was forgotten, almost unreal. His hunting zeal was uppermost. The tea and fish were delicious, his pipe had never tasted so good, the glory of this lonely lake amid primeval forests went to his head a little; he was a hunter before the Lord, and nothing else. He tried the edge of the lake, and in the excitement of playing a big fish, knew suddenly that *it*, the wolf, was there. He paused with the rod, exactly as if struck. He looked about him, he looked in a definite direction. The brilliant sunshine made every smallest detail clear and sharp— boulders of granite, burned stems, crimson sumac, pebbles

along the shore in neat, separate detail— without revealing where the watcher hid. Then, his sight wandering farther inshore among the tangled undergrowth, he suddenly picked up the familiar, half-expected outline. The wolf was lying behind a granite boulder, so that only the head, the muzzle, and the eyes were visible. It merged in its background. Had he not known it was a wolf, he could never have separated it from the landscape. The eyes shone in the sunlight.

There it lay. He looked straight at it. Their eyes, in fact, actually met full and square. "Great Scott!" he exclaimed aloud, "why, it's like looking at a human being!" From that moment, unwittingly, he established a singular personal relation with the beast. And what followed confirmed this undesirable impression, for the animal rose instantly and came down in leisurely fashion to the shore, where it stood looking back at him. It stood and stared into his eyes like some great wild dog, so that he was aware of a new and almost incredible sensation— that it courted recognition.

"Well! well!" he exclaimed again, relieving his feelings by addressing it aloud, "if this doesn't beat everything I ever saw! What d'you want, anyway?"

He examined it now more carefully. He had never seen a wolf so big before; it was a tremendous beast, a nasty customer to tackle, he reflected, if it ever came to that. It stood there absolutely fearless and full of confidence. In the clear sunlight he took in every detail of it— a huge, shaggy, lean-flanked timber wolf, its wicked eyes staring straight into his own, almost with a kind of purpose in them. He saw its great jaws, its teeth, and its tongue, hung out, dropping saliva a little. And yet the idea of its savagery, its fierceness, was very little in him.

He was amazed and puzzled beyond belief. He wished the Indian would come back. He did not understand this strange behaviour in an animal. Its eyes, the odd expression in them, gave him a queer, unusual, difficult feeling. Had his nerves gone wrong, he almost wondered.

The beast stood on the shore and looked at him. He wished for the first time that he had brought a rifle. With a resounding smack he brought his paddle down flat upon the water, using all his strength, till the echoes rang as from a pistol-shot that was audible from one end of the lake to the other. The wolf never stirred. He shouted, but the beast remained unmoved. He blinked his eyes, speaking as to a dog, a domestic animal, a creature accustomed to human ways. It blinked its eyes in return.

At length, increasing his distance from the shore, he continued fishing, and the excitement of the marvellous sport held his attention— his surface attention, at any rate. At times he almost forgot the attendant beast; yet whenever he looked up, he saw it there. And worse; when he slowly paddled home again, he observed it trotting along the shore as though to keep him

company. Crossing a little bay, he spurted, hoping to reach the other point before his undesired and undesirable attendant. Instantly the brute broke into that rapid, tireless lope that, except on ice, can run down anything on four legs in the woods. When he reached the distant point, the wolf was waiting for him. He raised his paddle from the water, pausing a moment for reflection; for this very close attention— there were dusk and night yet to come— he certainly did not relish. His camp was near; he had to land; he felt uncomfortable even in the sunshine of broad day, when, to his keen relief, about half a mile from the tent, he saw the creature suddenly stop and sit down in the open. He waited a moment, then paddled on. It did not follow. There was no attempt to move; it merely sat and watched him. After a few hundred yards, he looked back. It was still sitting where he left it. And the absurd, yet significant, feeling came to him that the beast divined his thought, his anxiety, his dread, and was now showing him, as well as it could, that it entertained no hostile feeling and did not meditate attack.

He turned the canoe toward the shore; he landed; he cooked his supper in the dusk; the animal made no sign. Not far away it certainly lay and watched, but it did not advance. And to Hyde, observant now in a new way, came one sharp, vivid reminder of the strange atmosphere into which his commonplace personality had strayed: he suddenly recalled that his relations with the beast, already established, had progressed distinctly a stage further. This startled him, yet without the accompanying alarm he must certainly have felt twenty-four hours before. He had an understanding with the wolf. He was aware of friendly thoughts toward it. He even went so far as to set out a few big fish on the spot where he had first seen it sitting the previous night. "If he comes," he thought, "he is welcome to them. I've got plenty, anyway." He thought of it now as "he."

Yet the wolf made no appearance until he was in the act of entering his tent a good deal later. It was close on ten o'clock, whereas nine was his hour, and late at that, for turning in. He had, therefore, unconsciously been waiting for him. Then, as he was closing the flap, he saw the eyes close to where he had placed the fish. He waited, hiding himself, and expecting to hear sounds of munching jaws; but all was silence. Only the eyes glowed steadily out of the background of pitch darkness. He closed the flap. He had no slightest fear. In ten minutes he was sound asleep.

He could not have slept very long, for when he woke up he could see the shine of a faint red light through the canvas, and the fire had not died down completely. He rose and cautiously peeped out. The air was very cold; he saw his breath. But he also saw the wolf, for it had come in, and was sitting by the dying embers, not two yards away from where he crouched behind the flap.

And this time, at these very close quarters, there was something in the attitude of the big wild thing that caught his attention with a vivid thrill of startled surprise and a sudden shock of cold that held him spellbound. He stared, unable to believe his eyes; for the wolf's attitude conveyed to him something familiar that at first he was unable to explain. Its pose reached him in the terms of another thing with which he was entirely at home. What was it? Did his senses betray him? Was he still asleep and dreaming?

Then, suddenly, with a start of uncanny recognition, he knew. Its attitude was that of a dog. Having found the clue, his mind then made an awful leap. For it was, after all, no dog its appearance aped, but something nearer to himself, and more familiar still. Good heavens! It sat there with the pose, the attitude, the gesture in repose of something almost human. And then, with a second shock of biting wonder, it came to him like a revelation. The wolf sat beside that camp-fire as a man might sit.

Before he could weigh his extraordinary discovery, before he could examine it in detail or with care, the animal, sitting in this ghastly fashion, seemed to feel his eyes fixed on it. It slowly turned and looked him in the face, and for the first time Hyde felt a full-blooded, superstitious fear flood through his entire being. He seemed transfixed with that nameless terror that is said to attack human beings who suddenly face the dead, finding themselves bereft of speech and movement. This moment of paralysis certainly occurred. Its passing, however, was as singular as its advent. For almost at once he was aware of something beyond and above this mockery of human attitude and pose, something that ran along unaccustomed nerves and reached his feeling, even perhaps his heart. The revulsion was extraordinary, its result still more extraordinary and unexpected. Yet the fact remains. He was aware of another thing that had the effect of stilling his terror as soon as it was born. He was aware of appeal, silent, half expressed, yet vastly pathetic. He saw in the savage eyes a beseeching, even a yearning, expression that changed his mood as by magic from dread to natural sympathy. The great grey brute, symbol of cruel ferocity, sat there beside his dying fire and appealed for help.

This gulf betwixt animal and human seemed in that instant bridged. It was, of course, incredible. Hyde, sleep still possibly clinging to his inner being with the shades and half shapes of dream yet about his soul, acknowledged, how he knew not, the amazing fact. He found himself nodding to the brute in half consent, and instantly, without more ado, the lean grey shape rose like a wraith and trotted off swiftly, but with stealthy tread, into the background of the night.

When Hyde woke in the morning his first impression was that he must have dreamed the entire incident. His practical nature asserted itself. There was a

bite in the fresh autumn air; the bright sun allowed no half lights anywhere; he felt brisk in mind and body. Reviewing what had happened, he came to the conclusion that it was utterly vain to speculate; no possible explanation of the animal's behaviour occurred to him; he was dealing with something entirely outside his experience. His fear, however, had completely left him. The odd sense of friendliness remained. The beast had a definite purpose, and he himself was included in that purpose. His sympathy held good.

But with the sympathy there was also an intense curiosity. "If it shows itself again," he told himself, "I'll go up close and find out what it wants." The fish laid out the night before had not been touched.

It must have been a full hour after breakfast when he next saw the brute; it was standing on the edge of the clearing, looking at him in the way now become familiar. Hyde immediately picked up his axe and advanced toward it boldly, keeping his eyes fixed straight upon its own. There was nervousness in him, but kept well under; nothing betrayed it; step by step he drew nearer until some ten yards separated them. The wolf had not stirred a muscle as yet. Its jaws hung open, its eyes observed him intently; it allowed him to approach without a sign of what its mood might be. Then, with these ten yards between them, it turned abruptly and moved slowly off, looking back first over one shoulder and then over the other, exactly as a dog might do, to see if he was following.

A singular journey it was they then made together, animal and man. The trees surrounded them at once, for they left the lake behind them, entering the tangled bush beyond. The beast, Hyde noticed, obviously picked the easiest track for him to follow; for obstacles that meant nothing to the four-legged expert, yet were difficult for a man, were carefully avoided with an almost uncanny skill, while yet the general direction was accurately kept. Occasionally there were windfalls to be surmounted; but though the wolf bounded over these with ease, it was always waiting for the man on the other side after he had laboriously climbed over. Deeper and deeper into the heart of the lonely forest they penetrated in this singular fashion, cutting across the arc of the lake's crescent, it seemed to Hyde; for after two miles or so, he recognized the big rocky bluff that overhung the water at its northern end. This outstanding bluff he had seen from his camp, one side of it falling sheer into the water; it was probably the spot, he imagined, where the Indians held their medicine-making ceremonies, for it stood out in isolated fashion, and its top formed a private plateau not easy of access. And it was here, close to a big spruce at the foot of the bluff upon the forest side, that the wolf stopped suddenly and for the first time since its appearance gave audible expression to its feelings. It sat down on its haunches, lifted its muzzle with open jaws, and

gave vent to a subdued and long-drawn howl that was more like the wail of a dog than the fierce barking cry associated with a wolf.

By this time Hyde had lost not only fear, but caution too; nor, oddly enough, did this warning howl revive a sign of unwelcome emotion in him. In that curious sound he detected the same message that the eyes conveyed—appeal for help. He paused, nevertheless, a little startled, and while the wolf sat waiting for him, he looked about him quickly. There was young timber here; it had once been a small clearing, evidently. Axe and fire had done their work, but there was evidence to an experienced eye that it was Indians and not white men who had once been busy here. Some part of the medicine ritual, doubtless, took place in the little clearing, thought the man, as he advanced again towards his patient leader. The end of their queer journey, he felt, was close at hand.

He had not taken two steps before the animal got up and moved very slowly in the direction of some low bushes that formed a clump just beyond. It entered these, first looking back to make sure that its companion watched. The bushes hid it; a moment later it emerged again. Twice it performed this pantomime, each time, as it reappeared, standing still and staring at the man with as distinct an expression of appeal in the eyes as an animal may compass, probably. Its excitement, meanwhile, certainly increased, and this excitement was, with equal certainty, communicated to the man. Hyde made up his mind quickly. Gripping his axe tightly, and ready to use it at the first hint of malice, he moved slowly nearer to the bushes, wondering with something of a tremor what would happen.

If he expected to be startled, his expectation was at once fulfilled; but it was the behaviour of the beast that made him jump. It positively frisked about him like a happy dog. It frisked for joy. Its excitement was intense, yet from its open mouth no sound was audible. With a sudden leap, then, it bounded past him into the clump of bushes, against whose very edge he stood, and began scraping vigorously at the ground. Hyde stood and stared, amazement and interest now banishing all his nervousness, even when the beast, in its violent scraping, actually touched his body with its own. He had, perhaps, the feeling that he was in a dream, one of those fantastic dreams in which things may happen without involving an adequate surprise; for otherwise the manner of scraping and scratching at the ground must have seemed an impossible phenomenon. No wolf, no dog certainly, used its paws in the way those paws were working. Hyde had the odd, distressing sensation that it was hands, not paws, he watched. And yet, somehow, the natural, adequate surprise he should have felt was absent. The strange action seemed not entirely unnatural.

In his heart some deep hidden spring of sympathy and pity stirred instead. He was aware of pathos.

The wolf stopped in its task and looked up into his face. Hyde acted without hesitation then. Afterwards he was wholly at a loss to explain his own conduct. It seemed he knew what to do, divined what was asked, expected of him. Between his mind and the dumb desire yearning through the savage animal there was intelligent and intelligible communication. He cut a stake and sharpened it, for the stones would blunt his axe-edge. He entered the clump of bushes to complete the digging his four-legged companion had begun. And while he worked, though he did not forget the close proximity of the wolf, he paid no attention to it; often his back was turned as he stooped over the laborious clearing away of the hard earth; no uneasiness or sense of danger was in him any more. The wolf sat outside the clump and watched the operations. Its concentrated attention, its patience, its intense eagerness, the gentleness and docility of the grey, fierce, and probably hungry brute, its obvious pleasure and satisfaction, too, at having won the human to its mysterious purpose— these were colours in the strange picture that Hyde thought of later when dealing with the human herd in his hotel again. At the moment he was aware chiefly of pathos and affection. The whole business was, of course, not to be believed, but that discovery came later, too, when telling it to others.

The digging continued for fully half an hour before his labour was rewarded by the discovery of a small whitish object. He picked it up and examined it— the finger-bone of a man. Other discoveries then followed quickly and in quantity. The cache was laid bare. He collected nearly the complete skeleton. The skull, however, he found last, and might not have found at all but for the guidance of his strangely alert companion. It lay some few yards away from the central hole now dug, and the wolf stood nuzzling the ground with its nose before Hyde understood that he was meant to dig exactly in that spot for it. Between the beast's very paws his stake struck hard upon it. He scraped the earth from the bone and examined it carefully. It was perfect, save for the fact that some wild animal had gnawed it, the teeth-marks being still plainly visible. Close beside it lay the rusty iron head of a tomahawk. This and the smallness of the bones confirmed him in his judgement that it was the skeleton not of a white man, but of an Indian.

During the excitement of the discovery of the bones one by one, and finally of the skull, but, more especially, during the period of intense interest while Hyde was examining them, he had paid little, if any, attention to the wolf. He was aware that it sat and watched him, never moving its keen eyes for a single moment from the actual operations, but of sign or movement it made none at

all. He knew that it was pleased and satisfied, he knew also that he had now fulfilled its purpose in a great measure. The further intuition that now came to him, derived, he felt positive, from his companion's dumb desire, was perhaps the cream of the entire experience to him. Gathering the bones together in his coat, he carried them, together with the tomahawk, to the foot of the big spruce where the animal had first stopped. His leg actually touched the creature's muzzle as he passed. It turned its head to watch, but did not follow, nor did it move a muscle while he prepared the platform of boughs upon which he then laid the poor worn bones of an Indian who had been killed, doubtless, in sudden attack or ambush, and to whose remains had been denied the last grace of proper tribal burial. He wrapped the bones in bark; he laid the tomahawk beside the skull; he lit the circular fire round the pyre, and the blue smoke rose upward into the clear bright sunshine of the Canadian autumn morning till it was lost among the mighty trees far overhead.

In the moment before actually lighting the little fire he had turned to note what his companion did. It sat five yards away, he saw, gazing intently, and one of its front paws was raised a little from the ground. It made no sign of any kind. He finished the work, becoming so absorbed in it that he had eyes for nothing but the tending and guarding of his careful ceremonial fire. It was only when the platform of boughs collapsed, laying their charred burden gently on the fragrant earth among the soft wood ashes, that he turned again, as though to show the wolf what he had done, and seek, perhaps, some look of satisfaction in its curiously expressive eyes. But the place he searched was empty. The wolf had gone.

He did not see it again; it gave no sign of its presence anywhere; he was not watched. He fished as before, wandered through the bush about his camp, sat smoking round his fire after dark, and slept peacefully in his cosy little tent. He was not disturbed. No howl was ever audible in the distant forest, no twig snapped beneath a stealthy tread, he saw no eyes. The wolf that behaved like a man had gone forever.

It was the day before he left that Hyde, noticing smoke rising from the shack across the lake, paddled over to exchange a word or two with the Indian, who had evidently now returned. The Redskin came down to meet him as he landed, but it was soon plain that he spoke very little English. He emitted the familiar grunts at first; then bit by bit Hyde stirred his limited vocabulary into action. The net result, however, was slight enough, though it was certainly direct:

"You camp there?" the man asked, pointing to the other side.

"Yes."

"Wolf come?"

"Yes."

"You see wolf?"

"Yes."

The Indian stared at him fixedly a moment, a keen, wondering look upon his coppery, creased face.

"You 'fraid wolf?" he asked after a moment's pause.

"No," replied Hyde, truthfully. He knew it was useless to ask questions of his own, though he was eager for information. The other would have told him nothing. It was sheer luck that the man had touched on the subject at all, and Hyde realized that his own best rôle was merely to answer, but to ask no questions. Then, suddenly, the Indian became comparatively voluble. There was awe in his voice and manner.

"Him no wolf. Him big medicine wolf. Him spirit wolf."

Whereupon he drank the tea the other had brewed for him, closed his lips tightly, and said no more. His outline was discernible on the shore, rigid and motionless, an hour later, when Hyde's canoe turned the corner of the lake three miles away, and landed to make the portages up the first rapid of his homeward stream.

It was Morton who, after some persuasion, supplied further details of what he called the legend. Some hundred years before, the tribe that lived in the territory beyond the lake began their annual medicine-making ceremonies on the big rocky bluff at the northern end; but no medicine could be made. The spirits, declared the chief medicine man, would not answer. They were offended. An investigation followed. It was discovered that a young brave had recently killed a wolf, a thing strictly forbidden, since the wolf was the totem animal of the tribe. To make matters worse, the name of the guilty man was Running Wolf. The offence being unpardonable, the man was cursed and driven from the tribe:

"Go out. Wander alone among the woods, and if we see you we slay you. Your bones shall be scattered in the forest, and your spirit shall not enter the Happy Hunting Grounds till one of another race shall find and bury them."

"Which meant," explained Morton laconically, his only comment on the story, "probably forever."

10: Over The Edge Of The World

Flora Annie Steel

1847-1929

The English Illustrated Magazine, Jan 1894

"SOME OF YOU must remember Graham."

"Stout man with a pretty daughter?"

"Possibly. But when I last saw him he was slim, and the daughter a bald baby. That was just after he died of cholera."

We in the smoking room sat up with glances wavering between the speaker's face and the whisky bottle, but there was nothing unusual in the appearance of either one or the other. There was a pause.

"I dare say it seems strange to talk of meeting a man after his death," began the speaker again. Someone murmured a polite hope that it had not been an unpleasantly warm expedition, whereat the gray man with the brown face got up quietly and lit another cigar.

"It was a bad year," he went on, between the puff's. "They were dying like sheep in the Salpur district."

Windows set wide open to the summer air, let in the noisy vitality of London streets, yet memory grasped many of us with her resistless hand, leading us back to silent, solitary days when the punkah throbbed intermittently in darkened rooms, and we sat wondering — more with a vague curiosity than fear — what havoc the cholera fiend was wreaking outside in the blaze of yellow sunlight. Now, when a man has once so waited and wondered, the interest abides in him always, so that the very name of cholera awakens a desire to hear and know more. We sat up and listened, but nothing came.

"A case of suspended animation, I suppose," remarked a young doctor. "It is not uncommon. I remember one—"

"So do I," interrupted the gray man imperturbably, "but this was different; Graham really died. I am sure of it."

Again we waited, expecting more, but the gray man was silent. Then we turned and looked to the Major. In cases of this kind he was our referee. He lifted his coat-tails and stood judicially in front of the fire.

"I think," he said, "that when a man offers a statement of that sort for the acceptance of this smoking room, he is bound to explain it."

"I can't," replied the gray man; "but as we don't dine for half an hour, I will tell you the story, such as it is. Perhaps some of you may understand it, I don't. I never shall till we see things face to face."

The tone of his voice gave me personally quite an unpleasant shiver down my back, and I felt impelled towards a sherry and bitters, though I had read all

the month's magazines, and in consequence was well posted up in the latest ghost developments.

"WHEN I first knew Graham," began the gray man, "he was a *griff* [*newcomer*] at Allahabad, as good-looking, cheeky, high-spirited a young competition wallah as ever passed an examination only fit for bookworms. How the Government of India can expect—"

"Point, sir, point," murmured the Major.

"I beg your pardon; well, how he managed to have kept up such an absorbing interest in the formation of his white ties, or such a keen appetite for all things digestible or indigestible in the whole solar system was even then a mystery to me. For, although I was but a few years older, I already wore spectacles and felt myself circumscribed by the Penal Code. Graham, on the other hand, was absolutely untrammelled, except, perhaps, by good nature, and he was coming near the inevitable smash when typhoid fever stepped in between him and the dog's. To be brief, he fell out of the hands of a bad woman into the hands of a good one, who nursed him as she had nursed many another homeless boy through the valley of the shadow.

I am not going to say anything about this particular woman, because many of us have met her like when we were sick and sorry, and can supply her portrait from memory. Let us call her the *mem sahib*. Some of us, at any rate, have known her under that name. After he recovered he used to spend his leave with them, and more than once she came to look after him when he was ill; for there never was a more reckless chap as far as he himself was concerned. He was forever coming to grief at polo, or half killing himself with malaria. One sees a lot of sham sentiment of the motherly sort in India, but now and again one comes across a real case of adoption. This was Graham's luck, and as the years went by the tie of confidence between him and the *mem sahib* grew closer than that of most mothers and sons. I was stationed with him several times in outlying districts, and have often watched his face brighten when a letter from her came to cheer the long monotonous days. Then he married;— a charming wife to whom he was absolutely devoted, and we drifted apart, as men do after marriage even when it brings the most charming and tolerant of wives. Shortly after the *mem sahib's* husband left India for good, and she, if I may say so, left it for bad. At any rate she left many people in a sorry plight, for she was one of those women who have the knack of helping others.

I remember attempting to express my own sense of forlornness to her one day when Graham was by. She gave a half-jesting reply that old-fashioned Gamps were no longer necessary, since a sick man could go to the station

hospital and get nursed by the most scientific of sisters. Whereupon Graham, in the same half-jesting way, declared he would never part with *his* Gamp, and that she was welcome to every "piller" he possessed if she would only continue to come and nurse him. "Over the edge of the world?" she asked, still with a half smile. Adding, in a lower tone, "I would if I could, you know that well."

"Then I'll chance it," he replied. The look between them was good to see. After that the conversation drifted away into the borderland of the unknown—it had a trick of doing that when the *mem sahib* was among friends; and I remember her saying that life limited us more than death might do. She was full of fanciful theories and dreams. That was the last time I saw her; she died before I went home on furlough. I think the wrench was too hard for her soft heart.

To return to my story. Graham's wife had a baby, so it happened that we chummed together again during one hot weather when our respective wives were in the hills. Cholera raged in the district, and as it was Graham's first independent charge, he felt the responsibility a good deal. Nothing would serve him but to inspect the worst villages, and as my work lay that way, I went with him into camp, in the vain hope of making him take reasonable care of himself. But when the idea of duty seized him there never was any sparing of himself, and I was scarcely surprised on returning to my resthouse one evening, to find him down with the disease in its worst form. Of course I sent to headquarters for medical assistance at once; but we were twenty miles off, and the chance of its coming in time was very small.

Graham's bearer was in too great a funk to be useful, but a new *khansâman*, who had been put on when Graham's wife went to the hills taking the regular cook with her, did very well. It's a digression, but I've always thought that filching away of the best servants by our wives is simply brutal; perhaps they think it is the only way of impressing the horrors of absence on our minds. Well, Elahi Baksh showed such a knowledge of what ought to be done that I complemented him on his unusual skill. The man's impassive face never relaxed.

"I am of a family of *hakims, sahib*," he replied gravely. "My grandfather could have saved my master; now he is in the hands of God, who kept me from the wisdom of my fathers."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"The old man died," he replied; "my father was away and I was a child. How could I learn the elixir— but I have seen and tasted it."

He said no more, but obeyed my orders with a sort of mechanical, hopeless alacrity. The first hours passed quickly in restless busyness. I remember the room in which Graham lay jutted out into the little oasis of green garden, and

as it had windows all round I could see, through the chicks, right away on all sides to the dusty, level, whitey-brown plain, which looked so much lighter and more distant than the sky; that was purple-black with heavy rain clouds, save in the west where the horizon showed a sudden dull red. Graham recognised his danger calmly, as I knew he would, and gave me clear instructions how, if need be, the worst was to be broken to his wife. He laid great stress on her unfitness for travel, and even if he rallied she was not to be allowed to come and nurse him, or run any risk of any kind; adding, with one of his kindly looks, that he needed no better nursing than he had. Yet, though he never mentioned her name, I felt certain from his expression he was thinking of the *mem sahib* far away on the other side of the world. He made a good fight for life, waking up, as it were, every now and again from the dream of pain and death, to something of his imperious ways. Then he would wander again, and so drift into unconsciousness. It was in one of these throbs of life that a smile came suddenly to his face.

"I forgot," he murmured; "give me the forms, dear old boy."

"What forms?" I asked.

He signed feebly to the writing-case on a table hard by. In opening it my hands fell on a bundle of telegraph forms such as every Indian official carries about with him. His eager, wistful eyes gave assent, and I brought the papers to him.

"Pencil," he whispered, "quick, or it will be too late!"

Ere I could return with the latter, the cruel pain had seized him once more; but his mind was set and fixed. His cramped blue fingers forced themselves to write. The effort was pitiable to see, and I was glad when the resolve in his face melted away into the blank of unconsciousness. A glance at the paper as I hurriedly put it aside showed me that the effort had been in vain. Beyond one illegible scrawl nothing was to be seen. After that he never rallied, and before the doctor came, his holsters crammed with remedies, poor Graham was gone. It is curious how trifles strike one more strongly than the important factors in these tragedies of life. I remember thinking the scatter-brained Irish doctor was more sorry at losing the chance of trying some new nostrum than at the actual death of my poor friend. He waxed eloquent in regret at the delay; asserting that one little half hour might have saved a life; producing as proof a small bottle containing some infallible remedy which, he said, he had lately received from a native *hakim*. As the man was an inveterate *gobemouche*, forever thinking geese were swans, I paid little attention to him, and left him to Elahi Baksh while I went to make necessary arrangements. If Graham's last wishes were to be obeyed I had to make sure that the bad news, travelling proverbially fast, should not reach his wife through some side channel. The

only way to prevent this was to wire precautions to her immediate neighbours. I therefore wrote out a few telegrams, and after bidding a *sowar* prepare his horse to ride with them across country to the nearest railway station, I told the bearer to hand over the papers and needful rupees as soon as the man was ready to start. I am particular in these details, for on this point much of the mystery of my story depends. What I want you to understand is that I left the telegrams on the table whilst I busied myself in other things. There was much to be done. I had to ride twenty miles to headquarters that night, and be back by dawn if poor Graham was to find decent Christian burial.

The doctor, too, was anxious to be off, knowing that he might be required else where at any moment. Just as we were starting a thought struck me, and I went once more into the room where the dead man lay. The chicks had been tied up, and the four faintly glimmering squares of the windows only served to show the dark beyond. Night had fallen, and the heavy clouds seemed to smother all breath of life in the world. The only thing really visible was the hard, rigid square of the sheeted bed. A curious feeling that I was deserting a comrade came over me as I turned to seek for the telegraph form on which poor Graham had scrawled his last wish. It might, I thought, have a melancholy interest for his wife, and I wished to secure it from chance of loss. To my surprise it was nowhere to be seen, and after diligent search I was forced to accept Elahi Baksh's explanation, that in all probability it had gone with the other forms for despatch.

"The bearer is a fool," he said, "fear hath made his brain dissolve. Nevertheless the *sahib* need not be alarmed, I will watch, and no harm shall come to my master in your honour's absence."

Somehow I felt inclined to trust the man, and it was a relief as I rode away to see his still, impassible figure crouched beside the oil *chiragh* in the verandah. The night was dark as death itself, and I remember wondering how the feeble flicker of the oil lamp which scarcely showed the darkness around it could shine so far into the night. I must have been a good half mile away when I turned to look for it the last time, and there it was like a star. The rain came down in torrents; altogether a night to be remembered, with its ghastly rousing of carpenters and grave-diggers, and dreary, dreary preparations. Through it all the flicker of that oil lamp seemed to light up one corner in my tired brain— that which held the memory of the dead man lying all alone.

It cleared towards dawn, and half an hour after I had, in the darkness, charged and temporarily scattered a dismal little procession carrying the roughly made coffin on a string bed, I drew bridle in front of the resthouse once more, and dismissed the wearied beast to find its own stable. The

glimmering dawn whitened the bare outlines of the bungalow, and showed me Elahi Baksh still crouched beside the oil lamp.

I thought he was asleep, but at the first touch on his shoulder he stood up alert.

"Hâzar! mem sahib!" Then with a swift glance salaamed low, adding in apologetic tones:— "I did not know it was your honour. I thought it was the *mem sahib* once more."

A strangely dazed look in his eyes made me think he had been eating opium, and I reproached him angrily with having neglected his promise.

"Before heaven, my great lord!" he answered gently, "I have not slept all night, I have watched. If your honour doubts his slave's word let him ask the *mem sahib*."

Involuntarily I asked, "What *mem sahib?"*

The dazed look came stronger. "How should a poor man know? I mean the *mem* who came after your honour left."

"Came! after I left! Why!— where is she now?"

"With the *sahib*," he replied; "or stay! she is coming out."

He pointed to the door, and as I live something— the wind of dawn perhaps— swayed the chick, turning it to one side as if an invisible presence were passing through it. For a moment I hesitated; then reason rose in wrath against my fear, and I entered the room. All seemed the same as when I had left it, and the low bed with its white covering still gleamed the only distinct object amid the pale shadows of dawn. Suddenly I felt a rush of blood to my heart, and heard a cry. I must have uttered it, but I was unconscious of every sense and function save sight, as I strained my eyes with an awful eagerness to the outline of the sheet. Surely— surely— something moved! Rising and falling— rising and falling. A great horror seized me, and I could have fled from the fear of life as I had never fled from the dread of death. Slowly I forced myself to approach the bed, and turn back the sheet from the still face. My friend was dead I told myself; what could disturb his rest? It was a trick of fancy? a wavering shadow? Yet my hand shook, my feet failed me. A moment after, the knowledge that what I feared was true removed my terror. I found myself looking down on Graham's sleeping face with perfect calm; for it needed but a glance to show me that this was sleep, not death. Life, with all its possibilities, lay in the even, regular breathing, the quiet, painless face.

Then came the thought urgently persistent. Whose hand had guided him back? Whose care had come to his aid when friends forsook him? In my heart I knew, but I set the knowledge aside impatiently. Elahi Baksh still stood outside with folded arms. Him I would confront and question; there could be no

mystery— nothing beyond explanation. So I went to him, and asked him when this thing happened.

"What thing, my lord?" he answered.

"Don't look like a boiled owl," I cried; "you know quite well the *sahib* is alive— the danger is past— he will recover."

"God be praised!" was the reply. "Shall I make tea for the *mem*, she must be tired."

"There is no *mem sahib!"* I cried angrily; "you have been asleep and dreaming."

"Before heaven I have not slept! How could I? The *mem* came so often crying, *'Elahi Baksh! Elahi Baksh*!' "

Then I spoke quietly to him, for I saw he believed what he was saying, and told him he was mistaken; but he shook his head.

"She came just after you left, *sahib*," he insisted. "I was sitting by the light, and when I looked up she stood there where you stand, and her voice was so kind and soft as she said, *'Elahi Baksh, your master is not dead: his soul is dreaming by the gate of life. I have come to let him in, for the gate of death is ajar for me. Bring fire to warm the empty house.'* So I brought fire. Sometimes when I looked up she was there, and sometimes she was not there. She came and went calling, *'Elahi Baksh! Elahi Baksh!'* And everything she bid me do, or bring, I did. She must have come a long way to nurse the *sahib*, she looked so pale and tired. God grant her and her children long lives."

"And when did you see her last?" I asked.

He put his hand to his head in confused thought.

"The night was so long, *sahib*, and she came so often calling *'Elahi Baksh! Elahi Baksh!'* At the false dawn, *sahib*, she touched me on the shoulder. I must have been drowsy. She was so white, and her hand cold as ice. The jackals were slinking away. I saw two by the pillar yonder. *'The door is open,'* she said, *'bring food to welcome the master home.'* So I brought it."

"And when you went into the room, was the *sahib* alive?" Again he passed his hand over his forehead and hesitated.

"I was not in the room, my lord. There was no light— nothing but the *mem sahib* standing where you stand, and calling to me *'Elahi Baksh! Elahi Baksh.'* Her voice was so soft, like the voice of someone far off— very far off."

I walked up and down the verandah several times before I asked him if he had ever seen this *mem sahib* or anyone like her.

He shook his head. "I have seen few *mem sahibs*. I do not know the face of my mistress, doubtless it was she."

Well, Graham recovered, but returning health brought him no memory of anything between the time of his trying to write the telegram and his

awakening next morning; nor did I think it wise to tell him Elahi Baksh's strange story. I hinted at it to the doctor, but he was in a furious rage at the loss of his bottle of elixir, which he had left behind in Graham's room by mistake, and which was not to be found next day. He declared that Elahi Baksh had tried its efficacy on his master, and finding it succeed had stolen the remainder, enough to have made him— the doctor— famous for life. " 'Twas an old beast of a *fakir* gave it to me, what the divvle was in it I don't know; but Graham was as dead as a doornail, and now he's as fit as a fiddle. And the elixir's gone. What do ye say to that? except that I was a fool not to try it myself." It seemed reasonable; more reasonable than Elahi Baksh's story, till time brought a curious confirmation of the latter.

Coming home three weeks after I found Graham at his writing table. He lifted a pained set face as I entered, and pushing the letter, over which he had been leaning, towards me said,

"There is bad news. The *mem sahib* is dead." I glanced at the letter scarce seeing the words.

"It would not have been so hard," he said, after a while, "if there had been any message, any thought, but there was none— none."

"Perhaps there was a message," I began.

"No; read it. There was no time. It was so sudden at the last."

She had been found late one morning dead at her writing table, her head resting on her clasped hands, beneath which lay a telegraph form on which was traced an illegible scrawl. Whether, feeling ill in the night she had risen, intending to telegraph for her husband who was away at the time, or whether she had fallen asleep for ever as she sat writing late into the night, as was her wont, no one could say. Nor could anyone decipher the secret of the telegram. It was an Indian form, but as others of the same sort were found in her desk even this clue was lost.

I put my hand on Graham's shoulder, feeling as it lay there the long-drawn breath of a strong man's grief. "Graham," I said, "there was more than a thought— more than a message. She kept her promise and came to you when you sent for her."

Then I told him Elahi Baksh's story. And he was comforted.

There was a pause. Then the young doctor spoke. "A clear case, as I said, of suspended animation. It is not in the least uncommon."

"But how about the telegram," asked the gray man; and the various replies lasted till the dinner-bell rang.

11: Balloons and Sausages

Ernest O'Ferrall

1881-1925

The Lone Hand March 1913

THOMSON leant on the bar and stared offensively at the glum little man who had been introduced to him some time in the remote past. He could not recall the glum one's name, and didn't want to. He remembered that he had not liked him when someone or other told each of them who the other was, ere drifting away to catch a train. But they had gone on buying each other drinks in a solemn, automatic way, and talking gravely in between.

The glum stranger did not seem to mind being stared at. As a matter of fact, he was not aware of Thomson's close inspection until the latter blurted indignantly, "You don' look any better for yer drinks!"

"Beg pardon," murmured the glum one respectfully, and fingered the abundant dry moustache that sprayed out from his patient, sheep-like face.

"Don' look any better for yer drinks— *you* don't!"

"Put it all inside," mumbled the other, wearily, "Every drop— inside!"

"I don' like dry whiskers," persisted Thomson. "Make me thirsty."

"Well, what 'bout 'nother, eh?"

"Why don't yer get 'em off?"

The stranger sighed. "Orright. That seems perfectly fair an' reason'ble— perfectly fair."

"I'm glad you 'gree with me, anyhow !"

"Oh, I 'gree with you, cert'nly. I see your point view perfectly

"Why don' you do like me, then? What's use goin' round like that?"

A look of mild astonishment stole into the blue eyes of the whiskered one.

"Do I?" he inquired.

"Cert'nly you do!" replied Thomson in a very severe manner.

There was a reflective interval.

Then— "I'm 'stremely sorry. I hope you 'cept my 'pologies?"

Thomson gravely considered. The thread of the subject seemed to have been lost somewhere. "It's no use," he announced bitterly at last, "No use talkin'!"

Next thing he knew they had left the bar, and were walking along the street side by side. At intervals they helped each other to dodge a new and dangerous variety of tram that ran from side to side, and could only be evaded by standing perfectly still. Loud voices yelled angrily whenever they allowed themselves to be frightened by one of these things. The dry whiskers of the unknown were still troubling Thomson, and he promised himself that he would renew the subject at the first opportunity.

They had been walking quite a long time when Thomson suddenly discovered that Dry Whiskers was missing. He carefully turned himself round and went back until he saw his companion leaning his feverish forehead against the window of a pork butcher's.

"Are yer hungry?" asked Thomson.

Whiskers looked at him dreamily.

"Oh, so hungry!"

"Would you like a sossige?"

"But I can't drink a sossige!" he miserably expostulated.

Thomson waved his hand impatiently. "I'll get yer some," he said.

Whiskers leant limply against the window, and was half asleep when he felt a large, clammy parcel thrust into his arms. They went on together without a word, and Whiskers dropped the parcel fifteen times. Then Thomson got mad and said that wasn't the proper way to carry sausages at all. Without further delay he burst the string, ripped off the decent paper covering, and draped the cables of meat over his friend's arm. They resumed their journey to nowhere, and Thomson was somewhat annoyed to find that people were stopping and staring at them.

That was bad enough; but they had also, in some mysterious manner, acquired a retinue of abject dogs, which got mixed up with the traffic and occasioned a lot of rage and confusion. Occasionally, when halted by a temporary traffic block, the eager retinue caught up to them, and, before they knew where they were, they were wading knee-deep in curs. Sometimes they nearly pulled the swaying Whiskers off his feet in their frantic efforts to tear off one of the frayed sausages that dangled behind him. He never connected their presence with the salvages, for the simple reason that he had forgotten he had ever been burdened with them.

"Look at dogs!" he whined at last. "Too many dogs!"

"Never mind 'em," gruffly advised Thomson. "They'll go 'way by um bye."

"But why do they foller me! I don't want 'em!"

Thomson fixed him with his eye.

"They want yer sossiges, yer fool! Didn't yer know that?"

Whiskers was amazed to find his arms full of meat.

"*I* don' want 'em!" he sighed, and threw the whole mass to the ravenous pack. Instantly there was a mad chorus of yelps and snarls and a hideous fighting tangle. Thomson rushed blindly into the uproar, and kicked out with both feet until he had driven the famished brutes off their meal. He picked up the armful of dusty, tooth-marked remnants, and solemnly delivered them into the arms of the patient Whiskers.

"Waste!" he said, sternly. "Never throw good food ter dogs!"

"Orright! Won' do it again!"

The objectless march was resumed, and the procession of kicked dogs trotted along in the rear, hopefully licking their chops. When Thomson and his friend paused to let a lorry pass up a lane, they caught up once more and swirled tempestuously round the legs of the sausage-bearer till he cried out in anguish, "Too many dogs! Sick of them! GERROUT!" There was a certain amount of kicking and yelping, and, the lorry passing, the procession again straightened out.

Half a block more, and they arrived at the open gate of a church-hall, at the door of which was a placard: "Your Digestion (Illustrated). Lecture This Afternoon at three o'clock. Admission Free."

Thomson shoved his hat to the back of his head and stared at it. "Let's go in an' get away from dogs," he mumbled. They wandered in unchallenged, and stumbled amongst cane chairs and muttering lecture fiends until they found two unoccupied seats next to the matting-covered aisle. In front of them was a platform, a large white picture sheet, across which colored diagrams were flitting, and a mournful, bald lecturer encumbered with a long pointer. The pair listened attentively, and presently discovered that he was talking about stomachs and vegetables. The pictures were slides of stomachs he had been acquainted with— good, upright stomachs that had been nourished on vegetables, and bad stomachs that had been ruined by meat. Now and then the audience applauded when the portrait of a specially interesting stomach was shown.

"All disgustin' lies!" said Thomson, passionately.

The audience "Sh-h-d" warningly.

Whiskers, patiently clasping his armful of sausages, looked round to see what was hissing at him, and emitted a "GERROUT!"

That instant he was tugged out of his seat. The biggest and hungriest cur had stolen in after him and fastened to the last and second-last sausages. There was a brief, dreadful struggle on the matting, which was terminated by Thomson kicking the hairy brigand in the ribs and shooting him half-way up the aisle.

As they resumed their seats, an elderly usher scuffled down and expostulated in a whisper with Thomson for bringing dogs in.

"I tell you, I didn't bring dogs in!"

"But he followed you in, sir! I saw him myself!"

"He wasn't my dog at all! Wouldn't own such a stinkin' brute!"

The sleepy voice of Whiskers floated out of the gloom. "He wanted a sossige! Give him a sossige for me an' I'll give it back to yer later on."

The attendant couldn't see the sausages, and took it for a deliberate insult. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves interrupting a lecture this way!"

The irritated audience united in a loud "Sh-h-h!"

All argument was suspended, and the usher retreated reluctantly mumbling threats. Then there was peace in the hall until the lecturer's lantern man threw on the screen the portrait of a meat-eater's stomach. The lecturer started to make nasty remarks about it.

Thomson shifted in his seat, and roared: "SHAME!"

The angry audience rose in a body, hissing and hooting, and demanded the interrupter's instant ejection.

The noise roused Whiskers, who had fallen asleep. Thomson's absurd interjection must have been ringing in his head, or perhaps Thomson told him to do it. At any rate, he also rose in his place and defiantly yelled: "SHAME! SHAME!!"

The turmoil increased, and, at the lecturer's request, the lights were turned up.

Whiskers was revealed standing with his arms full of sausages. "SHAME!" he howled, utterly regardless of the threats of the audience.

The lecturer came down from the platform and cautiously approached the objector. His expression was a curious mixture of fury and curiosity. Thomson, sitting gravely alongside, looked as shocked and puzzled as the oldest and most furious lecture fiend present.

"To what do you object, sir?" shrieked the lecturer from the aisle. Then, as Whiskers continued to call out: "Stop calling out 'Shame,' and tell me what statement of mine you disagree with?"

Whiskers started on hearing the high, clear voice so close to him. He opened his mouth to say something, faltered, and suddenly compromised with a plaintive, "I gotter lotter sossiges here!"

The lecturer peered at the ragged, dusty bundle he bore, and recoiled in haste. "So I see! But what do you object to in my lecture. Tell me at once, sir!"

Whiskers toyed nervously with a frayed sausage. "I— I dunno!" he sighed.

Public opinion or something wafted them out to the calm, sunlit footpath with an extraordinary amount of noise and confusion. When they had collected themselves somewhat and dusted their clothes, Thomson remarked explosively to the closed door: "Well, who wants ter stay in yer rotten show!" The door made no reply, and they sadly and silently resumed their march. And behind them, hopeful as ever, trotted the dogs.

It was about five miles or five hours further on, and, after a particularly trying passage with the hungry, hairy retinue that Whiskers cried out in anguish:

"Too many dogs— too many sossiges! Won't carry 'em any more!"

With that he flung his burden on the footpath like a sulky child, and watched Thomson beating off the pack with his feet.

Thomson eventually emerged like a diver from the flowing river of dog with the dusty cables in his arms.

"Mustn't throw rubbish on footpath," he quoted; "Lor' Mayor won't stand it. *I'll* carry sossiges." They advanced half a block. Then Thomson remembered that he had conferred the sausages on Whiskers, and insisted on him resuming the encumbrances. Whiskers was too broken up to protest. But Thomson, in giving them back, promised that he would find some way of getting rid of them if he was so ungrateful as to desire it. Whiskers, by way of reply, merely groaned.

Far down the street, a grave Italian gentleman stood on the kerb holding the threads of a cloud of beautiful red and blue balloons that rolled and tugged in the strong wind. Thomson's eye lighted up, and he urged the rebellious sausage-bearer to hurry. They approached the balloon merchant at top speed, the faithful pack of hounds panting behind them.

"How much fer b'lloons?" gurgled Thomson.

"Fourpen' each," grunted the merchant. "Red or blue?"

Thomson waved his hand regally.

"How much fer the lot?"

"One poun' for lotta!" cried the balloonist, thrusting the thread into Thomson's outstretched hand.

"Right y'are. Pay yer next time."

And he moved off.

The whole street was shocked by the shout of rage emitted by the swindled Italian. He waded after them through dogs, alternately praying and cursing in his native tongue. But Thomson only waved his disengaged hand, and urged him not to worry.

The astonishing procession made its disgraceful way to the top of the street, Thomson all the way explaining that the Lord Mayor would not have rubbish thrown on the footpath, and that he had invented a way of getting rid of it. And when they arrived at the crest of the hill, he showed what it was by rapidly hitching the balloon threads to the cables of meat and casting the mixture loose upon the wind, to the accompaniment of wild shrieks by the defrauded Roman and a deafening chorus of barks by the leaping dogs.

The balloons dragged their comet's-tail of sausages through the air about ten feet from the ground; and beneath it the Roman and the dogs gave an insane jumping performance. Sometimes the running balloonist tripped and fell, and was momentarily obscured by dogs; but he rose again every time, and

resumed his leaping and running. Thomson and Whiskers stood side by side silently watching the receding riot.

Down at the end of the street, an important foundation stoning was taking place. There was the usual respectful frock-coated crowd, a ragged mixture of scaffolding and flags, and a Lancer orderly waiting beside a large motor. A bare-headed, frock-coated gentleman was going through talking motions on a platform, which was further burdened with a crowd of silent, social heavyweights of both sexes.

The storm of dogs, balloons, sausages and Italian profanity whirled madly downhill towards the dignified function, and was right on the heels of the attentive crowd before the armed orderly noticed it. He had been waiting for years for a chance to defend the peace and dignity of his Excellency, and when at last it came, he wasn't ready. The startled people melted like snow before the onset of a frantic horseman, who stood in his stirrups and lunged at the air. He punctured six balloons before the flying absurdity floated out of reach, and, under the influence of some air current, spun high into the air above the platform.

His Excellency had paused in confusion at the sudden panic and disorder amongst his audience, and was about to condude his speech when the heat from the donkey engine chimney ignited the hovering rubber gasbags. There was a brilliant flash, and a stream of dusty, ragged meat, fell from the innocent sky into one of the most illustrious belltoppers in Australia and knocked the glittering crown out of it, to the eternal confusion of its owner and the shame and indignation of the assembled loyalists,

Away up at the top of the hill, a blinking Thomson, utterly unconscious of the devastation he had wrought further down, was proudly pointing out to a little, dry-whiskered man that his splendid device had rid them for ever of the sausages, the dogs and the Italian.

"An', mind yer," concluded, "I didn't throw any rubbish on th' footpath! I just tied it to th' b'lloons, an' *phoof*! off it went!"

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12: The Funeral March

Stacy Aumonier

1877-1928

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SHE WAS a woman with a genius for apparent helplessness. She drifted around the verandah of the Hotel Reina Christa like an autumn leaf, and like an autumn leaf she was for ever changing her hue. She was always wearing different-coloured cloaks and shawls, which other people had to fetch for her. Not only men, but women. She was so helpless, you see. To me she was like a white flower, which one is only conscious of at night. One associated her with the night— the dead white face with the little flick of carmine on the lips, the blue-black hair, and those large, dark appealing eyes. She was always appealing, appealing for sympathy and understanding— and anything else. She seemed to give out nothing of herself. She was nebulous. But in my whole life? have never met anyone such a complete mistress of the verb *schwärmen*. It is a pity there is no real translation for this word, for she embodied it in her every phrase and movement. The women, who were for the most part middle-aged English and American women, staying there for health or pleasure, entirely succumbed to her. They found her most fascinating. She certainly could be amusing at times, and she had travelled a lot, and seen sides of life that appeared entirely romantic and remote to most of them. Moreover, she was Russian, which means so much when you are susceptible to mystic influences.

The men, I noticed, were a little afraid of her, but as they were men whose activities centred principally around golf and bridge it is not surprising. They did not like being asked about their souls, and when their physical beauty was praised openly before a crowd of people they felt self-conscious. But some of them seemed t? like to sit and talk with her— alone. There was one young sub— just out of the shell, with some of the yolk still on his hair— who became apparently wildly infatuated. He devoted not only his evenings, but many of the precious hours when he might have been playing golf to her. The frenzy lasted for ten days, and suddenly the pale youth disappeared. Poor Madame Vieninoff wandered the grounds disconsolately.

"Oh, my poor dear Geoffrey," she said to everyone. "What has happened to him? He was so sweet!—so sweet!"

She was discovered the same evening probing under the lilies on the pond beyond the pergola with a walking-stick. I think it was a disappointment to her not to discover that pale face floating amongst them. She was *so* helpless.

It must have been an even greater disappointment when it transpired that the young man had just remembered that he 'vas down to play in a golf tournament in a town fifteen miles away, and he had not had time to let her

know. She soon, however, recovered from this. To that frumpy old Mrs. Wyatt she would exclaim: "Oh, my darling, how *beautiful* you look to-night! You must always wear cerise and black. What exquisite pearls! They are like your eyes, floating in the ether."

To little Mrs. Champneys she would say:

"Oh, my darling, come and talk to me. I am *so* lonely. You are *so sympathique*."

And she would tell Mrs. Champneys all about her dear beloved husband, who she said had been a great musician, and had died many years ago. She would sap this poor little woman's nervous vitality with her moving stories of love, and death, and passion, with her tales of suffering, interlarded with little flicks of cynical humour. She could blow hot and cold too. She was heard one evening screaming at her maid in French, on account of some trivial ill-adjustment of her frock. She sulked for an afternoon because a pretty woman named Viola Winch had occupied the whole of old Colonel Gouchard's time during *déjeuner*.

But for the most part she had it all her own way. There was little opposition. She was never so happy as when surrounded by some dozen of the hotel habitués listening to her stories, or absorbing her charm.

It was during one of these occasions that I noticed strange little occurrence. The evening train used to come in while the guests were at dinner, consequently the new arrivals usually dined alone, and either did or did not join the others afterwards.

I was seated in a chair on the verandah facing the dining-room obliquely. Madame Vieninoff was the centre of an admiring group as usual. I had never heard her so entertaining. The French door to the dining-room was open, and I observed an elderly distinguished-looking man with white hair and a pointed beard— one of the late-comers— dining alone. He was obviously tired from a long journey and in need of his dinner, which he enjoyed with the quiet satisfaction of a gourmet. He was nearing the end, and had raised a glass of wine to his lips, when? suddenly observed him stop, as though listening. He put the glass down, and frowned perplexedly, as though trying to associate what he was listening to with some past experience.

Then he finished his wine and pondered. After a few more minutes he stood up and came to the open door, where I was sitting, and looked out on to the verandah at the group of people. I saw his eye alight on Madame Vieninoff, and a curious cynical smile twisted his lips. He returned to finish his dinner. I could not see in the dim light whether she had observed him, but I noticed as he went back she was laughing rather hysterically at some reminiscence that she had herself been recounting. Then she became curiously subdued.

When the elderly gentleman came out to partake of his coffee and cognac, Madame Vieninoff had retired. She said the night was oppressive, and was affecting her nerves. I thought to myself: "Ho, ho!" which is another way of saying that we all love a mystery.

I made a point of engaging the newcomer in conversation, although, of course, it was impossible at the moment to talk about Madame Vieninoff. We talked about hotels, and the country, and sport, and other safe subjects which hotel guests interminably discuss. He was a quiet, cultivated Frenchman, prepared to be friendly, but not too communicative— not a man to be rushed or cross-examined. We retired early.

The next two days wrought an extraordinary change in Madame Vieninoff. There was no disguising it. She still drifted about the verandah, but it was in a furtive uncertain manner. She appeared petulant and no one could get a smile out of her. She was obviously, moreover, in dread of finding herself in the presence of this new arrival. She kept her room for hours, and sent her maid for time-tables, or to make enquiries at the bureau about the departure of trains to here, there, and everywhere, which was surprising, as she had told everyone that she meant to winter at the Reina Christa. The poor woman was in great distress, and it became apparent to my friend, whose name I discovered to be Louis Denoyel. Everyone observed that Madame Vieninoff was not herself, but I doubt whether anyone else, except myself, associated her agitation with the arrival of Monsieur Denoyel. On the third afternoon she carne on to the verandah, where I was drinking coffee with Denoyel. She glanced at us and darted away.

Denoyel frowned, and the cynical smile left his face. He stroked his beard, shrugged his shoulders, and muttered:

"Perhaps it's too bad! After all, she's a woman!"

He looked up at me quizzically, and I said:

"All of which I find intriguing."

He thought for a long while. Then he took out a visiting-card, wrote something on it, and rang the bell for the waiter. When the waiter came he said:

"Bring me an envelope, please, and I would like you to take this message to Madame Vieninoff."

The waiter was away for nearly five minutes, and I sat there anxiously hoping that my friend would show me what was written on the card. He was amused at my curiosity, and in a sudden whim he handed it across to me without a word. On it was written in French:

"Do not be alarmed. I am leaving to-morrow morning. —L. D."

When the waiter had taken the message, I said:

"Well, sir, you cannot leave it at that."

He lightly beat a tattoo on the table with his left hand, and then he said:

"No, I suppose, having gone so far, I must tell you the whole thing. But wait till this evening, and we will go out for a stroll along the bay."

The night was warm and fine, and seated on the carcass of a fallen pine tree at the edge of the dunes, just above the bay, Monsieur Denoyel told me this story:

"IT'S A STRANGE story," he said, "because it is a series of contradictions. But all true stories manage somehow or other to contradict themselves; life is like that, I suppose.

"In the days when the ill-fated Romanoffs flourished and Imperial Russia was a force to be reckoned with, Serge Vieninoff was a musician of some repute in Petersburg. He was inclined to be lazy and had accomplished nothing very distinguished, but people were beginning to talk of his future. He had a considerable private fortune, and kept up a certain amount of style in the most fashionable quarter of the city. He was popular, amiable, and cultured. And then one day he met and fell in love with Wanda Karrienski. She was the daughter of a small innkeeper, and was at that time serving as a manicurist in one of the big stores. That is our friend across the way."

And Monsieur Denoyel nodded in the direction of the Reina Christa, whose lights were reflected upon the still surface of the bay.

"She was of the clinging, helpless, passionate kind, exuding an atmosphere of ingenuousness; but, as you yourself may easily divine, not quite so ingenuous, indeed, not quite so helpless as she appears. She made every kind of apparent protest against marrying the aristocratic Serge. She was of a different class, unworthy, too unsophisticated, and all that kind of thing. Oh, she did the thing well. It was just the kind of attitude which infatuated the musician. He would have none of it, and he married her.

"Now you can imagine, coming from the hard conditions in which she had been brought up, and the struggle and indignity of her calling— for you must realize that a female manicurist in Petersburg in those days did not hold the same kind of position as a manicurist holds in London or New York. Her work was mostly connected with young officers. Suddenly finding herself the mistress of a large and fashionable household, and the legitimate wife of a distinguished and wealthy man— well, what could you expect?

"It was the kind of thing she had dreamed of, and read about in cheap novels, but never considered realizable. And suddenly the dream came true. She adapted herself to these conditions like a duck to water. As you may observe, she is still by no means unlovely, and in those days she was an

extremely pretty woman. Moreover, she had a certain native wit, and that most invaluable asset to any woman— the genius of knowing exactly how to dress. In spite of her lowly birth, Vieninoff's friends quickly absorbed her. She became popular and sought after. Her life became one round of dissipation, balls, theatres, dinners, sleigh rides, receptions, and all the gay things which a woman of her nature craves for. Vieninoff couldn't live up to it. He was a dreamer, absorbed in his work; and for the most part he let her go her own way, although devoted to her.

"There were two years of this, and then suddenly— biff! War, revolution, fall of the monarchy, counterrevolution, defeat, ruin! The whole edifice fell to the ground, and among the débris wandered the disconsolate figures of Vieninoff and his wife. He was ruined. The house and furniture were seized by the Bolshevik government, his property was confiscated. Scraping together whatever they could out of the shambles, they managed eventually to reach Paris with a few thousand francs between them and actual starvation.

"They rented two rooms in a meagre little street just off the Rue des Ecoles. It was a wretched place, insufferably hot in the summer, perishingly cold in the winter. But Mr. Vieninoff was a man of spirit. He got together the few treasures they had saved out of the wreck, and spent a portion of his small capital in hiring an upright piano. 'I will teach,' he said. 'I will write and make money. I will rise like a Phoenix. Courage, my little cabbage!'

"To Wanda it was— just hell! For a time she appeared dazed by the whole thing. She had been genuinely frightened, and experienced a certain sense of relief in escaping with her life. But when she began to settle down and realize the situation, the reaction was violent. She found herself cooped up in these two wretched rooms with a man who did nothing but tinkle on a piano, or scribble on sheets of paper. She wandered the streets and found a city larger and gayer than Petersburg. She saw magnificent shops, motorcars, restaurants, theatres, cabarets, and dancing-halls. She saw gay parties of people on their way to these places, and the sight made her eat her heart out. She did not believe in her husband or his ridiculous music. She felt she had been deceived and wronged. She turned against him, and vent all her pent-up spleen upon the unfortunate musician. 'I married an old fool,' she would tell him. 'Oh, my God! all my brilliance thrown away on a nincompoop who thinks he's a genius! Oh, fool that I am.'

"Vieninoff struggled on. He managed to get a few pupils, sons and daughters of tradespeople, who paid badly and were very stupid. They came and went, came and went. He just managed to pay the rent, and buy the barest necessities of life for them both. When not teaching he spent his whole time trying to compose, and for this reason he was happier than his wife. She

did nothing but sit about, nag her husband, and urge him t? get work that brought in more money.

"He was always optimistic. He believed that better times would come, that he would be appreciated, but nothing happened. The years went by, and their position became only worse. And then Mr. Vieninoff began to cough. And he coughed, and coughed, and something told him that the end was not far off, and the knowledge brought with it an element of relief. For as he coughed so did Wanda become more intolerant and abusive. It was bad enough to have a poor husband, but a sick one was even worse.

"She began to prepare for her husband's death. When he died she would sell that wretched piano, and the few sticks of furniture, burn his musical manuscripts, and try to get back to her beloved Russia. Or perhaps she would marry again, a rich man this time and a brilliant one. Perhaps she would stop in Paris. There were many rich men in Paris— Americans, English, Italian. What did it matter? She had not yet lost her looks. She became quite eager for her husband's death. She even did not hesitate to discuss it with him, to jibe at him, and asked him what provision he had made when he deserted her!"

Monsieur Denoyel threw the stump of his cigar far away across the sand with an angry gesture. It whipped the night air like a firefly, and settled behind some scrub. Then leaning forward on his stick he continued:

"Vieninoff had been very good to his wife. In the early days he had loved her passionately. When eyerything went wrong he had stuck to her. In their material distress he had thought more of her than of himself. When they were practically starving it was never she who went without. But lying on his bed towards the end of his days he suddenly realized with vivid intensity the kind of woman she was. A slow anger and resentment began to burn within him. In fair weather she had been all smiles and charm, in foul she proved herself utterly callous and heartless. He felt a desire to punish her in some way. But what could he do? It was perhaps bad enough to leave her nearly penniless. That alone would have been intolerable if she had loved him and been good to him. But he knew that when he died she would not be penniless for long. She was not that kind of woman. She would dance upon his grave. She would forget him, or cherish his memory as an ugly nightmare. Lying there in the darkness he went over and over again the tragic horror of the situation. It stirred him at strange angles. It even aroused the musician in him. Sombre musical phrases pounded through his brain. *He would write his own funeral march!* Moreover, it should be played at his own funeral at all costs. It seemed the only thing left to him— a dignified gesture with which to leave the world. The thought almost made him chuckle with anticipation and glee.

"When she asked him the next day what he was doing, he replied: 'I'm writing my masterpiece.' She sneered at him and went out. Mr. Vieninoff was very busy for weeks after that. He never left his room. And then one day he pulled himself together, and putting on an old hat on which the dust was very thick, he crawled out and visited a notary in an adjoining street. 'I want to make my will,' he said. He gave a careful detailed list of all his belongings, and explained that on his death these were to be immediately sold and the money set aside to defray the expenses of a band employed to accompany him to the graye. And the band was to play his own funeral march.

" 'Yes,' said the notary. 'And what about your wife?'

" 'I leave her the residue of the estate,' he said, with a low chuckle.

" 'And what does that amount to?'

"Mr. Vieninoff shrugged his shoulders.

" 'Oh,' he replied, 'there are my manuscripts.'

"The notary probably thought he was a lunatic. But there it is. The law's the law. The will was duly drawn up and signed. Haying accomplished this feat Mr. Vieninoff's grip on life appeared to cease. He died quietly one evening a few weeks later. He was quite alone when the end came, his wife being out at a cabaret with a woman friend."

Monsieur Denoyel lighted another cigar. The windows of some of the upper rooms at the Reina Christa were beginning to add their reflections to the pattern on the bay, suggesting that the early people were already retiring. The deep melodious cry of a brown owl reached us from a long way off across the dunes. My informant coughed, and appeared a little uncertain how to complete the picture he was conjuring up. At last he said:

"Paris is essentially a city of the unexpected. One should never be surprised at anything one sees or hears there. But Mr. Vieninoff's funeral was surely one of the most surprising spectacles that ever appeared in that surprising city. Madame Vieninoff had heard nothing about the will, and, as you may imagine, when the notary appeared and read the terms of it to her she was furious. Vieninoff had left her nothing but the premeditated bonfire of his manuscripts. Madame Myrthil, the landlady of the establishment, declared that in a moment of hysterical rage Madame Vieninoff had actually struck her dead husband with a roll of music. But let us prefer to believe that this was an exaggeration. In any case, she found herself in a helpless position. Monsieur Pitau, the notary, was a dry old stick, but he was very efficient, and he performed his duties with meticulous care. His trouble was being so pressed for time. It appeared that Mr. Vieninoff had bought the piano on the hire-purchase system, and it was now his property. This, of course, made a considerable difference, and when everything was sold he found that the

estate realized several thousand francs. And this money he had to spend on a band!

"A band! Monsieur Pitau knew nothing about bands. How to hire a band? So the day before the funeral he went to a friend who conducted an orchestra in a café in the Bouleyard Poissinnière. This gentleman was a violinist conducting an orchestra of four. But that wasn't sufficient. Monsieur Pitau wanted a *band*, a large band to play a funeral march in the streets. He was prepared to spend several thousand francs. The violinist said, 'Good,' leave it to him. The next morning there assembled in a little yard off the Rue des Ecoles the strangest band you can possibly imagine. There were the four musicians from the café wearing a curious green semi-military fustian which was their accustomed uniform. There were seyen or eight students from the Conservatoire with piccolos, clarionets, flutes, and saxophones. There were two drummers from an infantry regiment, and several other odd people who had surely newer had a musical instrument in their hands before. The parts were handed round, and of course there was no time for a rehearsal.

"When the hearse arrived, the conductor drew his strange company up into some kind of order. The perfectly plain corn was covered with a black pall on which reposed one wreath of immortelles. There were no mourners, although Madame Vieninoff followed the band, as though wildly hoping that even yet something might be extracted from this exhibition of lunacy.

"The cavalcade started, and the band struck up. Now the conductor, who played the violin, was some kind of a musician, and he made a serious attempt to interpret the themes of the dead composer. But the same cannot be said of the others. They began solemnly marching down the Boulevard St. Michel. A crowd quickly began to collect. And everyone was saying: 'Whose funeral is this? What is this band? What are they playing?' No one could give an answer. By the time they had crossed the river and reached the Grands Boulevards thousands were following, and the band had got quite out of hand. They had entirely lost all sense of a composition. There never was heard such a raging cacophony, such a screaming riot of discord. Long before they reached Montmartre the students were ragging the whole thing. The saxophone was wailing little bits of jazz, the flute interlarding passages from vulgar popular songs. The people were roaring with laughter, refusing to believe that it was a real funeral at all. It was only the conductor and the two military drummers who lent to the performance any sense of rhythm at all. So great was the congestion that before Montmartre Cemetery was reached a large body of police was telephoned for to keep the people in order. There was very nearly a riot. And in any case, it led to an inquiry, which cost the country thousands of

francs. And thus it was that poor Mr. Vieninoff went to his last resting-place, and Madame Vieninoff received her punishment."

Monsieur Denoyel stood up.

"Let us stroll back," he said, "and I will tell you perhaps the strangest part of the story on the way. The affair, as you may imagine, got into the newspapers. It made what the papers calla 'story,' a good 'story' too. It occupied a prominent place on the front page of not only all the French newspapers, but of the English and American. There was something which captured the imagination in an unknown composer writing his own funeral march, and going to his grave to the strains of it.

"While the public interest was still hot on it, an astute publisher had the wit to publish the composition with the 'story' printed on the cover. And then, of course, the most surprising thing of all happened. Someone quite by chance showed a copy to Monsieur Taillandier, the conductor of the Philharmonic orchestra. That gentleman glanced through it idly, and then his interest became aroused. He took it home and studied it. And suddenly he exclaimed to his wife: 'But this is a most interesting and original composition!'

"You have already no doubt anticipated what was to follow. Monsieur Taillandier sought information about this composer and his work, and he was referred to Monsieur Pitau, who passed him on to the widow. One afternoon, he called on Madame Vieninoff. He found her surveying an enormous mass of music manuscripts piled up on the stove. There were tears of anger in her eye, and a box of matches in her hand.

" 'What are you doing, madame?' he inquired.

" 'I'm trying to destroy the relics of a wasted life,' she blazed at him. 'And the filthy stuff won't burn. It's too thick.'

"Monsieur Taillandier snatched a bundle from the heated stove. The edges of the music were charred. It was his turn to be angry.

" 'Imbecile!' he screamed at her.

"She did not, of course, know who he was, and she became even angrier. They had a bad quarter of an hour, till at last he was able to persuade her that the music might not only be good, but it might have some commercial value. This altered the whole case. She allowed him to come later with a secretary and sort the music out. A musical agent was called in to deal with it. Monsieur Taillandier proved himself a sound judge, but he never for a moment anticipated the surprising results of his discovery. A lot of the work was immature, particularly that done during his days of prosperity in Petersburg. But all his later work was surprisingly brilliant. He had written innumerable concertos, symphonies, and sonatas, to say nothing of songs and piano solos. All these were published and performed, and a Vieninoff composition became

quite a vogue. But the most profitable discovery for Madame Vieninoff was that of two light operas. One, called 'Licette'— which he must have written when he was starving— you have probably heard, or heard of. It has been running simultaneously in Boston, Paris, and Vienna for nearly a year. The other is shortly to be produced."

"You mean to say," I ventured, "that Madame Vieninoff is a comparatively rich woman, all through her husband's despised compositions?"

Monsieur Denoyel shrugged his shoulders. "She winters here at the Reina Christa. She has her own maid. I have met her during the season at Cannes, and Pau, and Seville. She has not yet found it necessary to— marry her rich man."

We were approaching the wrought-iron entrance gate to the hotel.

"There is one mystery I cannot yet understand, monsieur," I said. "How is it that you know all the details of this affair?"

He pressed my arm confidentially.

"I was the doctor, monsieur, who attended Vieninoff till the last. He told me all on his death-bed. I had the honour of being the only person to send him a final tribute— a wreath of *immortelles*. I am the only one who knows the whole truth. It is perhaps for this reason that Madame Vieninoff is— well, shall I say a little shy in my presence?"

We walked up the drive, and lo! there on the verandah in her favourite seat was Madame Vieninoff, surrounded by her satellites. I was conscious of a sudden wave of anger, the kind of anger which youth invariably feels in the face of injustice. She had not seen us, and I turned to my friend and whispered:

"You could make it very— unpleasant for her."

He smiled, and patted my shoulder.

"She is a woman," he said, as though this laconic phrase were sufficient to dismiss any form of passionate judgment. Then he held out his hand, and added: "Good night. Do not let her disturb your dreams;" and he gave me a formal little bow and passed through the door and out of my life.

Disturb my dreams! No, she shouldn't disturb my dreams, but she was seriously disturbing my waking hours. Almost involuntarily I ambled in the direction of the verandah. I sat on a wooden bench below it, and I heard her talking, and these were the words which reached me:

"Ah, my poor dear Serge, there was a genius if ever there was one. Listen, darling, he would never have had the courage to persist had I not so often told him success would one day come to him. We were living in quite humble circumstances in those days, a small flat with only one servant. Poor Serge used to despair, but when things were at their blackest, I would take him by the hand and whisper: 'Courage, my dear one, one little step down the fickle

road of destiny, and you will be there,' and I would lead him to the piano-stool. I was always at his elbow. I was the rock upon which he leant. During those long months when I nursed him night and day, he clung to me for support and inspiration. He died in my arms. 'Ah, my wife,' he whispered— and these were his last words— 'my wife, my love— my inspiration.' Isn't it wonderful, darling, to have loved like that?"

A woman! Oh, my dear Monsieur Denoyel!

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13: Skulls in the Stars

Robert E. Howard

1906-1936

Weird Tales Jan 1929

He told how murderers walk the earth
Beneath the curse of Cain,
With crimson clouds before their eyes
And flames about their brain:
For blood has left upon their souls
Its everlasting stain.
—Hood

THERE ARE TWO ROADS to Torkertown. One, the shorter and more direct route, leads across a barren upland moor, and the other, which is much longer, winds its tortuous way in and out among the hummocks and quagmires of the swamps, skirting the low hills to the east. It was a dangerous and tedious trail; so Solomon Kane halted in amazement when a breathless youth from the village he had just left, overtook him and implored him for God's sake to take the swamp road.

"The swamp road!" Kane stared at the boy.

He was a tall, gaunt man, was Solomon Kane, his darkly pallid face and deep brooding eyes made more somber by the drab Puritanical garb he affected.

"Yes, sir, 'tis far safer," the youngster answered his surprized exclamation.

"Then the moor road must be haunted by Satan himself, for your townsmen warned me against traversing the other."

"Because of the quagmires, sir, that you might not see in the dark. You had better return to the village and continue your journey in the morning, sir."

"Taking the swamp road?"

"Yes, sir."

Kane shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"The moon rises almost as soon as twilight dies. By its light I can reach Torkertown in a few hours, across the moor."

"Sir, you had better not. No one ever goes that way. There are no houses at all upon the moor, while in the swamp there is the house of old Ezra who lives there all alone since his maniac cousin, Gideon, wandered off and died in the swamp and was never found— and old Ezra though a miser would not refuse you lodging should you decide to stop until morning. Since you must go, you had better go the swamp road."

Kane eyed the boy piercingly. The lad squirmed and shuffled his feet.

"Since this moor road is so dour to wayfarers," said the Puritan, "why did not the villagers tell me the whole tale, instead of vague mouthings?"

"Men like not to talk of it, sir. We hoped that you would take the swamp road after the men advised you to, but when we watched and saw that you turned not at the forks, they sent me to run after you and beg you to reconsider."

"Name of the Devil!" exclaimed Kane sharply, the unaccustomed oath showing his irritation; "the swamp road and the moor road— what is it that threatens me and why should I go miles out of my way and risk the bogs and mires?"

"Sir," said the boy, dropping his voice and drawing closer, "we be simple villagers who like not to talk of such things lest foul fortune befall us, but the moor road is a way accurst and hath not been traversed by any of the countryside for a year or more. It is death to walk those moors by night, as hath been found by some score of unfortunates. Some foul horror haunts the way and claims men for his victims."

"So? And what is this thing like?"

"No man knows. None has ever seen it and lived, but late-farers have heard terrible laughter far out on the fen and men have heard the horrid shrieks of its victims. Sir, in God's name return to the village, there pass the night, and tomorrow take the swamp trail to Torkertown."

Far back in Kane's gloomy eyes a scintillant light had begun to glimmer, like a witch's torch glinting under fathoms of cold gray ice. His blood quickened. Adventure! The lure of life-risk and battle! The thrill of breathtaking, touch-and-go drama! Not that Kane recognized his sensations as such. He sincerely considered that he voiced his real feelings when he said:

"These things be deeds of some power of evil. The lords of darkness have laid a curse upon the country. A strong man is needed to combat Satan and his might. Therefore I go, who have defied him many a time."

"Sir," the boy began, then closed his mouth as he saw the futility of argument. He only added, "The corpses of the victims are bruised and torn, sir."

He stood there at the crossroads, sighing regretfully as he watched the tall, rangy figure swinging up the road that led toward the moors.

THE SUN was setting as Kane came over the brow of the low hill which debouched into the upland fen. Huge and blood-red it sank down behind the sullen horizon of the moors, seeming to touch the rank grass with fire; so for a moment the watcher seemed to be gazing out across a sea of blood. Then the

dark shadows came gliding from the east, the western blaze faded, and Solomon Kane struck out boldly in the gathering darkness.

The road was dim from disuse but was clearly defined. Kane went swiftly but warily, sword and pistols at hand. Stars blinked out and night winds whispered among the grass like weeping specters. The moon began to rise, lean and haggard, like a skull among the stars.

Then suddenly Kane stopped short. From somewhere in front of him sounded a strange and eery echo— or something like an echo. Again, this time louder. Kane started forward again. Were his senses deceiving him? No!

Far out, there pealed a whisper of frightful laughter. And again, closer this time. No human being ever laughed like that—there was no mirth in it, only hatred and horror and soul-destroying terror. Kane halted. He was not afraid, but for the second he was almost unnerved. Then, stabbing through that awesome laughter, came the sound of a scream that was undoubtedly human. Kane started forward, increasing his gait. He cursed the illusive lights and flickering shadows which veiled the moor in the rising moon and made accurate sight impossible. The laughter continued, growing louder, as did the screams. Then sounded faintly the drum of frantic human feet. Kane broke into a run.

Some human was being hunted to his death out there on the fen, and by what manner of horror God alone knew. The sound of the flying feet halted abruptly and the screaming rose unbearably, mingled with other sounds unnamable and hideous. Evidently the man had been overtaken, and Kane, his flesh crawling, visualized some ghastly fiend of the darkness crouching on the back of its victim— crouching and tearing.

Then the noise of a terrible and short struggle came clearly through the abysmal silence of the fen and the footfalls began again, but stumbling and uneven. The screaming continued, but with a gasping gurgle. The sweat stood cold on Kane's forehead and body. This was heaping horror on horror in an intolerable manner.

God, for a moment's clear light! The frightful drama was being enacted within a very short distance of him, to judge by the ease with which the sounds reached him. But this hellish half-light veiled all in shifting shadows, so that the moors appeared a haze of blurred illusions, and stunted trees and bushes seemed like giants.

Kane shouted, striving to increase the speed of his advance. The shrieks of the unknown broke into a hideous shrill squealing; again there was the sound of a struggle, and then from the shadows of the tall grass a thing came reeling—a thing that had once been a man— a gore-covered, frightful thing that fell at Kane's feet and writhed and groveled and raised its terrible face to

the rising moon, and gibbered and yammered, and fell down again and died in its own blood.

The moon was up now and the light was better. Kane bent above the body, which lay stark in its unnamable mutilation, and he shuddered— a rare thing for him, who had seen the deeds of the Spanish Inquisition and the witch-finders.

Some wayfarer, he supposed. Then like a hand of ice on his spine he was aware that he was not alone. He looked up, his cold eyes piercing the shadows whence the dead man had staggered. He saw nothing, but he knew— he felt— that other eyes gave back his stare, terrible eyes not of this earth. He straightened and drew a pistol, waiting. The moonlight spread like a lake of pale blood over the moor, and trees and grasses took on their proper sizes.

The shadows melted, and Kane *saw*! At first he thought it only a shadow of mist, a wisp of moor fog that swayed in the tall grass before him. He gazed. More illusion, he thought. Then the thing began to take on shape, vague and indistinct. Two hideous eyes flamed at him— eyes which held all the stark horror which has been the heritage of man since the fearful dawn ages— eyes frightful and insane, with an insanity transcending earthly insanity. The form of the thing was misty and vague, a brain-shattering travesty on the human form, like, yet horridly unlike. The grass and bushes beyond showed clearly through it.

Kane felt the blood pound in his temples, yet he was as cold as ice. How such an unstable being as that which wavered before him could harm a man in a physical way was more than he could understand, yet the red horror at his feet gave mute testimony that the fiend could act with terrible material effect.

Of one thing Kane was sure: there would be no hunting of him across the dreary moors, no screaming and fleeing to be dragged down again and again. If he must die he would die in his tracks, his wounds in front.

Now a vague and grisly mouth gaped wide and the demoniac laughter again shrieked out, soul-shaking in its nearness. And in the midst of that threat of doom, Kane deliberately leveled his long pistol and fired. A maniacal yell of rage and mockery answered the report, and the thing came at him like a flying sheet of smoke, long shadowy arms stretched to drag him down.

Kane, moving with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf, fired the second pistol with as little effect, snatched his long rapier from its sheath and thrust into the center of the misty attacker. The blade sang as it passed clear through, encountering no solid resistance, and Kane felt icy fingers grip his limbs, bestial talons tear his garments and the skin beneath.

He dropped the useless sword and sought to grapple with his foe. It was like fighting a floating mist, a flying shadow armed with daggerlike claws. His

savage blows met empty air, his leanly mighty arms, in whose grasp strong men had died, swept nothingness and clutched emptiness. Naught was solid or real save the flaying, apelike fingers with their crooked talons, and the crazy eyes which burned into the shuddering depths of his soul.

Kane realized that he was in a desperate plight indeed. Already his garments hung in tatters and he bled from a score of deep wounds. But he never flinched, and the thought of flight never entered his mind. He had never fled from a single foe, and had the thought occurred to him he would have flushed with shame.

He saw no help for it now, but that his form should lie there beside the fragments of the other victim, but the thought held no terrors for him. His only wish was to give as good an account of himself as possible before the end came, and if he could, to inflict some damage on his unearthly foe.

There above the dead man's torn body, man fought with demon under the pale light of the rising moon, with all the advantages with the demon, save one. And that one was enough to overcome all the others. For if abstract hate may bring into material substance a ghostly thing, may not courage, equally abstract, form a concrete weapon to combat that ghost?

Kane fought with his arms and his feet and his hands, and he was aware at last that the ghost began to give back before him, that the fearful laughter changed to screams of baffled fury. For man's only weapon is courage that flinches not from the gates of Hell itself, and against such not even the legions of Hell can stand.

Of this Kane knew nothing; he only knew that the talons which tore and rended him seemed to grow weaker and wavering, that a wild light grew and grew in the horrible eyes. And reeling and gasping, he rushed in, grappled the thing at last and threw it, and as they tumbled about on the moor and it writhed and lapped his limbs like a serpent of smoke, his flesh crawled and his hair stood on end, for he began to understand its gibbering.

He did not hear and comprehend as a man hears and comprehends the speech of a man, but the frightful secrets it imparted in whisperings and yammerings and screaming silences sank fingers of ice and flame into his soul, and he *knew*.

ii

THE HUT of old Ezra the miser stood by the road in the midst of the swamp, half screened by the sullen trees which grew about it. The walls were rotting, the roof crumbling, and great, pallid and green fungus-monsters clung to it and writhed about the doors and windows, as if seeking to peer within. The trees

leaned above it and their gray branches intertwined so that it crouched in the semi-darkness like a monstrous dwarf over whose shoulder ogres leer.

The road which wound down into the swamp, among rotting stumps and rank hummocks and scummy, snake-haunted pools and bogs, crawled past the hut. Many people passed that way these days, but few saw old Ezra, save a glimpse of a yellow face, peering through the fungus-screened windows, itself like an ugly fungus.

Old Ezra the miser partook much of the quality of the swamp, for he was gnarled and bent and sullen; his fingers were like clutching parasitic plants and his locks hung like drab moss above eyes trained to the murk of the swamplands. His eyes were like a dead man's, yet hinted of depths abysmal and loathsome as the dead lakes of the swamplands.

These eyes gleamed now at the man who stood in front of his hut. This man was tall and gaunt and dark, his face was haggard and claw-marked, and he was bandaged of arm and leg. Somewhat behind this man stood a number of villagers.

"You are Ezra of the swamp road?"

"Aye, and what want ye of me?"

"Where is your cousin Gideon, the maniac youth who abode with you?"

"Gideon?"

"Aye."

"He wandered away into the swamp and never came back. No doubt he lost his way and was set upon by wolves or died in a quagmire or was struck by an adder."

"How long ago?"

"Over a year."

"Aye. Hark ye, Ezra the miser. Soon after your cousin's disappearance, a countryman, coming home across the moors, was set upon by some unknown fiend and torn to pieces, and thereafter it became death to cross those moors. First men of the countryside, then strangers who wandered over the fen, fell to the clutches of the thing. Many men have died, since the first one.

"Last night I crossed the moors, and heard the flight and pursuing of another victim, a stranger who knew not the evil of the moors. Ezra the miser, it was a fearful thing, for the wretch twice broke from the fiend, terribly wounded, and each time the demon caught and dragged him down again. And at last he fell dead at my very feet, done to death in a manner that would freeze the statue of a saint."

The villagers moved restlessly and murmured fearfully to each other, and old Ezra's eyes shifted furtively. Yet the somber expression of Solomon Kane never altered, and his condor-like stare seemed to transfix the miser.

"Aye, aye!" muttered old Ezra hurriedly; "a bad thing, a bad thing! Yet why do you tell this thing to me?"

"Aye, a sad thing. Harken further, Ezra. The fiend came out of the shadows and I fought with it, over the body of its victim. Aye, how I overcame it, I know not, for the battle was hard and long, but the powers of good and light were on my side, which are mightier than the powers of Hell.

"At the last I was stronger, and it broke from me and fled, and I followed to no avail. Yet before it fled it whispered to me a monstrous truth."

Old Ezra started, stared wildly, seemed to shrink into himself.

"Nay, why tell me this?" he muttered.

"I returned to the village and told my tale," said Kane, "for I knew that now I had the power to rid the moors of its curse forever. Ezra, come with us!"

"Where?" gasped the miser.

"*To the rotting oak on the moors.*"

Ezra reeled as though struck; he screamed incoherently and turned to flee.

On the instant, at Kane's sharp order, two brawny villagers sprang forward and seized the miser. They twisted the dagger from his withered hand, and pinioned his arms, shuddering as their fingers encountered his clammy flesh.

Kane motioned them to follow, and turning strode up the trail, followed by the villagers, who found their strength taxed to the utmost in their task of bearing their prisoner along. Through the swamp they went and out, taking a little-used trail which led up over the low hills and out on the moors.

THE SUN was sliding down the horizon and old Ezra stared at it with bulging eyes— stared as if he could not gaze enough. Far out on the moors reared up the great oak tree, like a gibbet, now only a decaying shell. There Solomon Kane halted.

Old Ezra writhed in his captor's grasp and made inarticulate noises.

"Over a year ago," said Solomon Kane, "you, fearing that your insane cousin Gideon would tell men of your cruelties to him, brought him away from the swamp by the very trail by which we came, and murdered him here in the night."

Ezra cringed and snarled.

"You can not prove this lie!"

Kane spoke a few words to an agile villager. The youth clambered up the rotting bole of the tree and from a crevice, high up, dragged something that fell with a clatter at the feet of the miser. Ezra went limp with a terrible shriek.

The object was a man's skeleton, the skull cleft.

"You— how knew you this? You are Satan!" gibbered old Ezra.

Kane folded his arms.

"The thing I fought last night told me this thing as we reeled in battle, and I followed it to this tree. *For the fiend is Gideon's ghost.*"

Ezra shrieked again and fought savagely.

"You knew," said Kane somberly, "you knew what thing did these deeds. You feared the ghost of the maniac, and that is why you chose to leave his body on the fen instead of concealing it in the swamp. For you knew the ghost would haunt the place of his death. He was insane in life, and in death he did not know where to find his slayer; else he had come to you in your hut. He hates no man but you, but his mazed spirit can not tell one man from another, and he slays all, lest he let his killer escape. Yet he will know you and rest in peace forever after. Hate hath made of his ghost a solid thing that can rend and slay, and though he feared you terribly in life, in death he fears you not."

Kane halted. He glanced at the sun.

"All this I had from Gideon's ghost, in his yammerings and his whisperings and his shrieking silences. Naught but your death will lay that ghost."

Ezra listened in breathless silence and Kane pronounced the words of his doom.

"A hard thing it is," said Kane somberly, "to sentence a man to death in cold blood and in such a manner as I have in mind, but you must die that others may live— and God knoweth you deserve death.

"You shall not die by noose, bullet or sword, but at the talons of him you slew— for naught else will satiate him."

At these words Ezra's brain shattered, his knees gave way and he fell groveling and screaming for death, begging them to burn him at the stake, to flay him alive. Kane's face was set like death, and the villagers, the fear rousing their cruelty, bound the screeching wretch to the oak tree, and one of them bade him make his peace with God. But Ezra made no answer, shrieking in a high shrill voice with unbearable monotony. Then the villager would have struck the miser across the face, but Kane stayed him.

"Let him make his peace with Satan, whom he is more like to meet," said the Puritan grimly. "The sun is about to set. Loose his cords so that he may work loose by dark, since it is better to meet death free and unshackled than bound like a sacrifice."

As they turned to leave him, old Ezra yammered and gibbered unhuman sounds and then fell silent, staring at the sun with terrible intensity.

They walked away across the fen, and Kane flung a last look at the grotesque form bound to the tree, seeming in the uncertain light like a great fungus growing to the bole. And suddenly the miser screamed hideously:

"Death! Death! There are skulls in the stars!"

"Life was good to him, though he was gnarled and churlish and evil," Kane sighed. "Mayhap God has a place for such souls where fire and sacrifice may cleanse them of their dross as fire cleans the forest of fungous things. Yet my heart is heavy within me."

"Nay, sir," one of the villagers spoke, "you have done but the will of God, and good alone shall come of this night's deed."

"Nay," answered Kane heavily, "I know not— I know not."

THE SUN had gone down and night spread with amazing swiftness, as if great shadows came rushing down from unknown voids to cloak the world with hurrying darkness. Through the thick night came a weird echo, and the men halted and looked back the way they had come.

Nothing could be seen. The moor was an ocean of shadows and the tall grass about them bent in long waves before the faint wind, breaking the deathly stillness with breathless murmurings.

Then far away the red disk of the moon rose over the fen, and for an instant a grim silhouette was etched blackly against it. A shape came flying across the face of the moon— a bent, grotesque thing whose feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth; and close behind came a thing like a flying shadow— a nameless, shapeless horror.

A moment the racing twain stood out boldly against the moon; then they merged into one unnamable, formless mass, and vanished in the shadows.

Far across the fen sounded a single shriek of terrible laughter.

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14: Trust

Jack London

John Griffith Chaney, 1876-1916

The Century Magazine January 1908

ALL LINES had been cast off, and the *Seattle No.* 4 was pulling slowly out from the shore. Her decks were piled high with freight and baggage, and swarmed with a heterogeneous company of Indians, dogs, and dog-mushers, prospectors, traders, and homeward-bound gold-seekers. A goodly portion of Dawson was lined up on the bank, saying good-bye. As the gang-plank came in and the steamer nosed into the stream, the clamour of farewell became deafening. Also, in that eleventh moment, everybody began to remember final farewell messages and to shout them back and forth across the widening stretch of water. Louis Bondell, curling his yellow moustache with one hand and languidly waving the other hand to his friends on shore, suddenly remembered something and sprang to the rail.

"Oh, Fred!" he bawled. "Oh, Fred!"

The "Fred" desired thrust a strapping pair of shoulders through the forefront of the crowd on the bank and tried to catch Louis Bondell's message. The latter grew red in the face with vain vociferation. Still the water widened between steamboat and shore.

"Hey, you, Captain Scott!" he yelled at the pilot-house. "Stop the boat!"

The gongs clanged, and the big stern wheel reversed, then stopped. All hands on steamboat and on bank took advantage of this respite to exchange final, new, and imperative farewells. More futile than ever was Louis Bondell's effort to make himself heard. The *Seattle No.* 4 lost way and drifted down-stream, and Captain Scott had to go ahead and reverse a second time. His head disappeared inside the pilot-house, coming into view a moment later behind a big megaphone.

Now Captain Scott had a remarkable voice, and the "Shut up!" he launched at the crowd on deck and on shore could have been heard at the top of Moosehide Mountain and as far as Klondike City. This official remonstrance from the pilot-house spread a film of silence over the tumult.

"Now, what do you want to say?" Captain Scott demanded.

"Tell Fred Churchill— he's on the bank there— tell him to go to Macdonald. It's in his safe— a small gripsack of mine. Tell him to get it and bring it out when he comes."

In the silence Captain Scott bellowed the message ashore through the megaphone:—

"You, Fred Churchill, go to Macdonald— in his safe— small gripsack— belongs to Louis Bondell— important! Bring it out when you come! Got it!"

Churchill waved his hand in token that he had got it. In truth, had Macdonald, half a mile away, opened his window, he'd have got it, too. The tumult of farewell rose again, the gongs clanged, and the *Seattle No.* 4 went ahead, swung out into the stream, turned on her heel, and headed down the Yukon, Bondell and Churchill waving farewell and mutual affection to the last.

That was in midsummer. In the fall of the year, the *W. H. Willis* started up the Yukon with two hundred homeward-bound pilgrims on board. Among them was Churchill. In his state-room, in the middle of a clothes-bag, was Louis Bondell's grip. It was a small, stout leather affair, and its weight of forty pounds always made Churchill nervous when he wandered too far from it. The man in the adjoining state-room had a treasure of gold-dust hidden similarly in a clothes-bag, and the pair of them ultimately arranged to stand watch and watch. While one went down to eat, the other kept an eye on the two state-room doors. When Churchill wanted to take a hand at whist, the other man mounted guard, and when the other man wanted to relax his soul, Churchill read four-months' old newspapers on a camp stool between the two doors.

There were signs of an early winter, and the question that was discussed from dawn till dark, and far into the dark, was whether they would get out before the freeze-up or be compelled to abandon the steamboat and tramp out over the ice. There were irritating delays. Twice the engines broke down and had to be tinkered up, and each time there were snow flurries to warn them of the imminence of winter. Nine times the *W. H. Willis* essayed to ascend the Five–Finger Rapids with her impaired machinery, and when she succeeded, she was four days behind her very liberal schedule. The question that then arose was whether or not the steamboat *Flora* would wait for her above the Box Canon. The stretch of water between the head of the Box Canon and the foot of the White Horse Rapids was unnavigable for steamboats, and passengers were transhipped at that point, walking around the rapids from one steamboat to the other. There were no telephones in the country, hence no way of informing the waiting *Flora* that the *Willis* was four days late, but coming.

When the *W. H. Willis* pulled into White Horse, it was learned that the *Flora* had waited three days over the limit, and had departed only a few hours before. Also, it was learned that she would tie up at Tagish Post till nine o'clock, Sunday morning. It was then four o'clock, Saturday afternoon. The pilgrims called a meeting. On board was a large Peterborough canoe, consigned to the police post at the head of Lake Bennett. They agreed to be responsible for it and to deliver it. Next, they called for volunteers. Two men were needed to make a race for the *Flora*. A score of men volunteered on the instant. Among them was Churchill, such being his nature that he volunteered

before he thought of Bondell's gripsack. When this thought came to him, he began to hope that he would not be selected; but a man who had made a name as captain of a college football eleven, as a president of an athletic club, as a dog-musher and a stampeder in the Yukon, and, moreover, who possessed such shoulders as he, had no right to avoid the honour. It was thrust upon him and upon a gigantic German, Nick Antonsen.

While a crowd of the pilgrims, the canoe on their shoulders, started on a trot over the portage, Churchill ran to his state-room. He turned the contents of the clothes-bag on the floor and caught up the grip, with the intention of entrusting it to the man next door. Then the thought smote him that it was not his grip, and that he had no right to let it out of his possession. So he dashed ashore with it and ran up the portage changing it often from one hand to the other, and wondering if it really did not weigh more than forty pounds.

It was half-past four in the afternoon when the two men started. The current of the Thirty Mile River was so strong that rarely could they use the paddles. It was out on one bank with a tow-line over the shoulders, stumbling over the rocks, forcing a way through the underbrush, slipping at times and falling into the water, wading often up to the knees and waist; and then, when an insurmountable bluff was encountered, it was into the canoe, out paddles, and a wild and losing dash across the current to the other bank, in paddles, over the side, and out tow-line again. It was exhausting work. Antonsen toiled like the giant he was, uncomplaining, persistent, but driven to his utmost by the powerful body and indomitable brain of Churchill. They never paused for rest. It was go, go, and keep on going. A crisp wind blew down the river, freezing their hands and making it imperative, from time to time, to beat the blood back into the numbed fingers.

As night came on, they were compelled to trust to luck. They fell repeatedly on the untravelled banks and tore their clothing to sheds in the underbrush they could not see. Both men were badly scratched and bleeding. A dozen times, in their wild dashes from bank to bank, they struck snags and were capsized. The first time this happened, Churchill dived and groped in three feet of water for the gripsack. He lost half an hour in recovering it, and after that it was carried securely lashed to the canoe. As long as the canoe floated it was safe. Antonsen jeered at the grip, and toward morning began to curse it; but Churchill vouchsafed no explanations.

Their delays and mischances were endless. On one swift bend, around which poured a healthy young rapid, they lost two hours, making a score of attempts and capsizing twice. At this point, on both banks, were precipitous bluffs, rising out of deep water, and along which they could neither tow nor pole, while they could not gain with the paddles against the current. At each

attempt they strained to the utmost with the paddles, and each time, with heads nigh to bursting from the effort, they were played out and swept back. They succeeded finally by an accident. In the swiftest current, near the end of another failure, a freak of the current sheered the canoe out of Churchill's control and flung it against the bluff. Churchill made a blind leap at the bluff and landed in a crevice. Holding on with one hand, he held the swamped canoe with the other till Antonsen dragged himself out of the water. Then they pulled the canoe out and rested. A fresh start at this crucial point took them by. They landed on the bank above and plunged immediately ashore and into the brush with the tow-line.

Daylight found them far below Tagish Post. At nine o'clock Sunday morning they could hear the *Flora* whistling her departure. And when, at ten o'clock, they dragged themselves in to the Post, they could barely see the *Flora's* smoke far to the southward. It was a pair of worn-out tatterdemalions that Captain Jones of the Mounted Police welcomed and fed, and he afterward averred that they possessed two of the most tremendous appetites he had ever observed. They lay down and slept in their wet rags by the stove. At the end of two hours Churchill got up, carried Bondell's grip, which he had used for a pillow, down to the canoe, kicked Antonsen awake, and started in pursuit of the *Flora*.

"There's no telling what might happen— machinery break down, or something," was his reply to Captain Jones's expostulations. "I'm going to catch that steamer and send her back for the boys."

Tagish Lake was white with a fall gale that blew in their teeth. Big, swinging seas rushed upon the canoe, compelling one man to bale and leaving one man to paddle. Headway could not be made. They ran along the shallow shore and went overboard, one man ahead on the tow-line, the other shoving on the canoe. They fought the gale up to their waists in the icy water, often up to their necks, often over their heads and buried by the big, crested waves. There was no rest, never a moment's pause from the cheerless, heart-breaking battle. That night, at the head of Tagish Lake, in the thick of a driving snow-squall, they overhauled the *Flora*. Antonsen fell on board, lay where he had fallen, and snored. Churchill looked like a wild man. His clothes barely clung to him. His face was iced up and swollen from the protracted effort of twenty-four hours, while his hands were so swollen that he could not close the fingers. As for his feet, it was an agony to stand upon them.

The captain of the *Flora* was loth to go back to White Horse. Churchill was persistent and imperative; the captain was stubborn. He pointed out finally that nothing was to be gained by going back, because the only ocean steamer at Dyea, the *Athenian*, was to sail on Tuesday morning, and that he could not

make the back trip to White Horse and bring up the stranded pilgrims in time to make the connection.

"What time does the *Athenian* sail?" Churchill demanded.

"Seven o'clock, Tuesday morning."

"All right," Churchill said, at the same time kicking a tattoo on the ribs of the snoring Antonsen. "You go back to White Home. We'll go ahead and hold the *Athenian*."

Antonsen, stupid with sleep, not yet clothed in his waking mind, was bundled into the canoe, and did not realize what had happened till he was drenched with the icy spray of a big sea, and heard Churchill snarling at him through the darkness:—

"Paddle, can't you! Do you want to be swamped?"

Daylight found them at Caribou Crossing, the wind dying down, and Antonsen too far gone to dip a paddle. Churchill grounded the canoe on a quiet beach, where they slept. He took the precaution of twisting his arm under the weight of his head. Every few minutes the pain of the pent circulation aroused him, whereupon he would look at his watch and twist the other arm under his head. At the end of two hours he fought with Antonsen to rouse him. Then they started. Lake Bennett, thirty miles in length, was like a millpond; but, half way across, a gale from the south smote them and turned the water white. Hour after hour they repeated the struggle on Tagish, over the side, pulling and shoving on the canoe, up to their waists and necks, and over their heads, in the icy water; toward the last the good-natured giant played completely out. Churchill drove him mercilessly; but when he pitched forward and bade fair to drown in three feet of water, the other dragged him into the canoe. After that, Churchill fought on alone, arriving at the police post at the head of Bennett in the early afternoon. He tried to help Antonsen out of the canoe, but failed. He listened to the exhausted man's heavy breathing, and envied him when he thought of what he himself had yet to undergo. Antonsen could lie there and sleep; but he, behind time, must go on over mighty Chilcoot and down to the sea. The real struggle lay before him, and he almost regretted the strength that resided in his frame because of the torment it could inflict upon that frame.

Churchill pulled the canoe up on the beach, seized Bondell's grip, and started on a limping dog-trot for the police post.

"There's a canoe down there, consigned to you from Dawson," he hurled at the officer who answered his knock. "And there's a man in it pretty near dead. Nothing serious; only played out. Take care of him. I've got to rush. Good-bye. Want to catch the *Athenian*."

A mile portage connected Lake Bennett and Lake Linderman, and his last words he flung back after him as he resumed the trot. It was a very painful trot, but he clenched his teeth and kept on, forgetting his pain most of the time in the fervent heat with which he regarded the gripsack. It was a severe handicap. He swung it from one hand to the other, and back again. He tucked it under his arm. He threw one hand over the opposite shoulder, and the bag bumped and pounded on his back as he ran along. He could scarcely hold it in his bruised and swollen fingers, and several times he dropped it. Once, in changing from one hand to the other, it escaped his clutch and fell in front of him, tripped him up, and threw him violently to the ground.

At the far end of the portage he bought an old set of pack-straps for a dollar, and in them he swung the grip. Also, he chartered a launch to run him the six miles to the upper end of Lake Linderman, where he arrived at four in the afternoon. The *Athenian* was to sail from Dyea next morning at seven. Dyea was twenty-eight miles away, and between towered Chilcoot. He sat down to adjust his foot-gear for the long climb, and woke up. He had dozed the instant he sat down, though he had not slept thirty seconds. He was afraid his next doze might be longer, so he finished fixing his foot-gear standing up. Even then he was overpowered for a fleeting moment. He experienced the flash of unconsciousness; becoming aware of it, in mid-air, as his relaxed body was sinking to the ground and as he caught himself together, he stiffened his muscles with a spasmodic wrench, and escaped the fall. The sudden jerk back to consciousness left him sick and trembling. He beat his head with the heel of his hand, knocking wakefulness into the numbed brain.

Jack Burns's pack-train was starting back light for Crater Lake, and Churchill was invited to a mule. Burns wanted to put the gripsack on another animal, but Churchill held on to it, carrying it on his saddle-pommel. But he dozed, and the grip persisted in dropping off the pommel, one side or the other, each time wakening him with a sickening start. Then, in the early darkness, Churchill's mule brushed him against a projecting branch that laid his cheek open. To cap it, the mule blundered off the trail and fell, throwing rider and gripsack out upon the rocks. After that, Churchill walked, or stumbled rather, over the apology for a trail, leading the mule. Stray and awful odours, drifting from each side of the trail, told of the horses that had died in the rush for gold. But he did not mind. He was too sleepy. By the time Long Lake was reached, however, he had recovered from his sleepiness; and at Deep Lake he resigned the gripsack to Burns. But thereafter, by the light of the dim stars, he kept his eyes on Burns. There were not going to be any accidents with that bag.

At Crater Lake, the pack-train went into camp, and Churchill, slinging the grip on his back, started the steep climb for the summit. For the first time, on

that precipitous wall, he realized how tired he was. He crept and crawled like a crab, burdened by the weight of his limbs. A distinct and painful effort of will was required each time he lifted a foot. An hallucination came to him that he was shod with lead, like a deep-sea diver, and it was all he could do to resist the desire to reach down and feel the lead. As for Bondell's gripsack, it was inconceivable that forty pounds could weigh so much. It pressed him down like a mountain, and he looked back with unbelief to the year before, when he had climbed that same pass with a hundred and fifty pounds on his back. If those loads had weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, then Bondell's grip weighed five hundred.

The first rise of the divide from Crater Lake was across a small glacier. Here was a well-defined trail. But above the glacier, which was also above timber-line, was naught but a chaos of naked rock and enormous boulders. There was no way of seeing the trail in the darkness, and he blundered on, paying thrice the ordinary exertion for all that he accomplished. He won the summit in the thick of howling wind and driving snow, providentially stumbling upon a small, deserted tent, into which he crawled. There he found and bolted some ancient fried potatoes and half a dozen raw eggs.

When the snow ceased and the wind eased down, he began the almost impossible descent. There was no trail, and he stumbled and blundered, often finding himself, at the last moment, on the edge of rocky walls and steep slopes the depth of which he had no way of judging. Part way down, the stars clouded over again, and in the consequent obscurity he slipped and rolled and slid for a hundred feet, landing bruised and bleeding on the bottom of a large shallow hole. From all about him arose the stench of dead horses. The hole was handy to the trail, and the packers had made a practice of tumbling into it their broken and dying animals. The stench overpowered him, making him deadly sick, and as in a nightmare he scrambled out. Half-way up, he recollected Bondell's gripsack. It had fallen into the hole with him; the pack-strap had evidently broken, and he had forgotten it. Back he went into the pestilential charnel-pit, where he crawled around on hands and knees and groped for half an hour. Altogether he encountered and counted seventeen dead horses (and one horse still alive that he shot with his revolver) before he found Bondell's grip. Looking back upon a life that had not been without valour and achievement, he unhesitatingly declared to himself that this return after the grip was the most heroic act he had ever performed. So heroic was it that he was twice on the verge of fainting before he crawled out of the hole.

By the time he had descended to the Scales, the steep pitch of Chilcoot was past, and the way became easier. Not that it was an easy way, however, in the best of places; but it became a really possible trail, along which he could have

made good time if he had not been worn out, if he had had light with which to pick his steps, and if it had not been for Bondell's gripsack. To him, in his exhausted condition, it was the last straw. Having barely strength to carry himself along, the additional weight of the grip was sufficient to throw him nearly every time he tripped or stumbled. And when he escaped tripping, branches reached out in the darkness, hooked the grip between his shoulders, and held him back.

His mind was made up that if he missed the *Athenian* it would be the fault of the gripsack. In fact, only two things remained in his consciousness—Bondell's grip and the steamer. He knew only those two things, and they became identified, in a way, with some stern mission upon which he had journeyed and toiled for centuries. He walked and struggled on as in a dream. As part of the dream was his arrival at Sheep Camp. He stumbled into a saloon, slid his shoulders out of the straps, and started to deposit the grip at his feet. But it slipped from his fingers and struck the floor with a heavy thud that was not unnoticed by two men who were just leaving. Churchill drank a glass of whisky, told the barkeeper to call him in ten minutes, and sat down, his feet on the grip, his head on his knees.

So badly did his misused body stiffen, that when he was called it required another ten minutes and a second glass of whisky to unbend his joints and limber up the muscles.

"Hey not that way!" the barkeeper shouted, and then went after him and started him through the darkness toward Canyon City. Some little husk of inner consciousness told Churchill that the direction was right, and, still as in a dream, he took the canon trail. He did not know what warned him, but after what seemed several centuries of travelling, he sensed danger and drew his revolver. Still in the dream, he saw two men step out and heard them halt him. His revolver went off four times, and he saw the flashes and heard the explosions of their revolvers. Also, he was aware that he had been hit in the thigh. He saw one man go down, and, as the other came for him, he smashed him a straight blow with the heavy revolver full in the face. Then he turned and ran. He came from the dream shortly afterward, to find himself plunging down the trail at a limping lope. His first thought was for the gripsack. It was still on his back. He was convinced that what had happened was a dream till he felt for his revolver and found it gone. Next he became aware of a sharp stinging of his thigh, and after investigating, he found his hand warm with blood. It was a superficial wound, but it was incontestable. He became wider awake, and kept up the lumbering run to Canyon City.

He found a man, with a team of horses and a wagon, who got out of bed and harnessed up for twenty dollars. Churchill crawled in on the wagon-bed

and slept, the gripsack still on his back. It was a rough ride, over water-washed boulders down the Dyea Valley; but he roused only when the wagon hit the highest places. Any altitude of his body above the wagon-bed of less than a foot did not faze him. The last mile was smooth going, and he slept soundly.

He came to in the grey dawn, the driver shaking him savagely and howling into his ear that the *Athenian* was gone. Churchill looked blankly at the deserted harbour.

"There's a smoke over at Skaguay," the man said.

Churchill's eyes were too swollen to see that far, but he said: "It's she. Get me a boat."

The driver was obliging and found a skiff, and a man to row it for ten dollars, payment in advance. Churchill paid, and was helped into the skiff. It was beyond him to get in by himself. It was six miles to Skaguay, and he had a blissful thought of sleeping those six miles. But the man did not know how to row, and Churchill took the oars and toiled for a few more centuries. He never knew six longer and more excruciating miles. A snappy little breeze blew up the inlet and held him back. He had a gone feeling at the pit of the stomach, and suffered from faintness and numbness. At his command, the man took the baler and threw salt water into his face.

The *Athenian's* anchor was up-and-down when they came alongside, and Churchill was at the end of his last remnant of strength.

"Stop her! Stop her!" he shouted hoarsely.

"Important message! Stop her!"

Then he dropped his chin on his chest and slept. When half a dozen men started to carry him up the gang-plank, he awoke, reached for the grip, and clung to it like a drowning man.

On deck he became a centre of horror and curiosity. The clothing in which he had left White Horse was represented by a few rags, and he was as frayed as his clothing. He had travelled for fifty-five hours at the top notch of endurance. He had slept six hours in that time, and he was twenty pounds lighter than when he started. Face and hands and body were scratched and bruised, and he could scarcely see. He tried to stand up, but failed, sprawling out on the deck, hanging on to the gripsack, and delivering his message.

"Now, put me to bed," he finished; "I'll eat when I wake up."

They did him honour, carrying him down in his rags and dirt and depositing him and Bondell's grip in the bridal chamber, which was the biggest and most luxurious state-room in the ship. Twice he slept the clock around, and he had bathed and shaved and eaten and was leaning over the rail smoking a cigar when the two hundred pilgrims from White Horse came alongside.

By the time the *Athenian* arrived in Seattle, Churchill had fully recuperated, and he went ashore with Bondell's grip in his hand. He felt proud of that grip. To him it stood for achievement and integrity and trust. "I've delivered the goods," was the way he expressed these various high terms to himself. It was early in the evening, and he went straight to Bondell's home. Louis Bondell was glad to see him, shaking hands with both hands at the same time and dragging him into the house.

"Oh, thanks, old man; it was good of you to bring it out," Bondell said when he received the gripsack.

He tossed it carelessly upon a couch, and Churchill noted with an appreciative eye the rebound of its weight from the springs. Bondell was volleying him with questions.

"How did you make out? How're the boys? What became of Bill Smithers? Is Del Bishop still with Pierce? Did he sell my dogs? How did Sulphur Bottom show up? You're looking fine. What steamer did you come out on?"

To all of which Churchill gave answer, till half an hour had gone by and the first lull in the conversation had arrived.

"Hadn't you better take a look at it?" he suggested, nodding his head at the gripsack.

"Oh, it's all right," Bondell answered. "Did Mitchell's dump turn out as much as he expected?"

"I think you'd better look at it," Churchill insisted. "When I deliver a thing, I want to be satisfied that it's all right. There's always the chance that somebody might have got into it when I was asleep, or something."

"It's nothing important, old man," Bondell answered, with a laugh.

"Nothing important," Churchill echoed in a faint, small voice. Then he spoke with decision: "Louis, what's in that bag? I want to know."

Louis looked at him curiously, then left the room and returned with a bunch of keys. He inserted his hand and drew out a heavy Colt's revolver. Next came out a few boxes of ammunition for the revolver and several boxes of Winchester cartridges.

Churchill took the gripsack and looked into it. Then he turned it upside down and shook it gently.

"The gun's all rusted," Bondell said. "Must have been out in the rain."

"Yes," Churchill answered. "Too bad it got wet. I guess I was a bit careless."

He got up and went outside. Ten minutes later Louis Bondell went out and found him on the steps, sitting down, elbows on knees and chin on hands, gazing steadfastly out into the darkness.

15: Buttercups And Daisies

E. Phillips Oppenheim

1866-1946

As "Behind Barred Doors" in *Collier's Magazine*, 2 Mar 1935

Miss Mott was one of many series characters created by the immensely prolific E. Phillips Oppenheim.

SUPERINTENDENT-DETECTIVE WRAGGE bowed formally to Miss Mott upon his entrance into her private office, laid his hat upon the floor and seated himself in the clients' chair.

"Don't be silly, uncle," the young lady laughed, holding out both her hands. "Come and give me your avuncular salute at once."

He shook his head deliberately.

"This," he warned her, "is a professional visit. I have not come here to consult Miss Mott about any courtship troubles, nor have I an interesting case to lay before her, but it is nevertheless a strictly professional visit."

Miss Mott raised her eyebrows.

"Have I done anything wrong?" she asked anxiously.

Her uncle smiled in his own somewhat peculiar fashion. The smile broke away over the lines of his creased face and seemed to leave him afterwards looking sterner than ever.

"Not consciously, my dear," he assured her; "not consciously, of course. I can't think why the devil these people won't leave you alone."

A light flashed into her very beautiful eyes. Miss Mott was quite interested in these people.

"Do explain," she begged.

Superintendent Wragge, with an apologetic glance at his niece, produced a packet of Gold Flake and lit a cigarette. He drew his chair a little nearer to the table.

"I think I remember telling you the last time we dined together," he began, "of a very interesting secret pamphlet circulating in the Yard, dealing with the manner in which watched and suspected criminals, when they are hard pressed, communicate with one another. The Agony Column of The Times for many years was freely used."

"I have often wondered," Miss Mott murmured, "whether those amazing messages one reads ever mean anything."

"They probably mean something," her uncle observed dryly, "but the sense lies underneath the words. Our code experts have often intercepted messages of great importance concealed in the most harmless sentences. No one suspects the owners of the newspapers of complicity. You understand that, of

course? It would be absolutely impossible for any editor to discriminate between the real thing and the faked."

"Naturally," she agreed.

Superintendent Wragge dived into his pocket, produced two copies of Home Talks and spread one of them out in front of him. A little cry of delight escaped his niece's lips.

"Don't tell me that they've been making use of my paper!" she exclaimed.

"That's just what they have been doing. Here is apparently a perfectly harmless *nom de plume* and your reply to the question, whatever it was. Let me read it to you:

JENKS IN LONDON. I think the young lady of whom you write must be very unreasonable. I should tell her plainly that you do not think it fair of her to keep you in such suspense and would insist upon a definite decision.

"Whatever can there be in that?" Miss Mott asked curiously. "They can't build up a code on my reply because they don't see it until it appears."

"The whole of the message," her uncle confided, "is contained in the pseudonym— 'Jenks in London.' It means— never mind what it means. That is a different story. We shall come to the reply presently. Now, tell me, do you keep the letters of your correspondents?"

"For one month," she told him.

"Then you have 'Jenks in London's' letter?"

"Of course."

"Can I see it?"

Miss Mott became very professional.

"These letters are all supposed to be entirely confidential," she warned her uncle.

For the first time in his life Superintendent Wragge was almost angry with his niece. There were no visible signs of it, but she knew.

"Must I remind you," he asked dryly, "that it is not your uncle, but Superintendent-Detective Wragge, of Scotland Yard who asks this favour?"

Miss Mott rang the bell under her foot without further protest. At her request, the lanky, bespectacled young secretary brought in a file from which her employer drew out a letter. She handed it across to her uncle. He studied it with some care and laid it down by his side.

"The usual sort of piffle," he remarked. "But the handwriting must go to our expert. Now, if you will turn to this second number of your magazine, which I have here, you will notice in the first column of 'Answers to Correspondents' a pseudonym, 'Buttercups and Daisies.'"

Miss Mott did not trouble to look at the magazine.

"I remember it perfectly," she declared. "I remember thinking what an odd choice."

"You may be interested to know," her uncle confided, "that 'Buttercups and Daisies' is the reply to 'Jenks in London,' and a very interesting reply, too. I see you advised the young lady to forgive her erring lover. Very nice and human of you, my dear. Now I shall have to trouble you for the letter from 'Buttercups and Daisies.'"

The file was reopened. Miss Mott found the letter and passed it silently across. After a brief examination her uncle placed it with the other in his pocket.

"A very clever stunt this," he meditated. "Much better than any Agony Column. The young man in our Code Department who tumbled to it deserves a medal."

"May I know what 'Jenks in London' said and 'Buttercups and Daisies' replied?" she begged.

Superintendent Wragge stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I can't say that the message is as clear as daylight to us even now," he admitted, "but it contains an address we were very interested to get hold of. And furthermore," he added, with a covert glance across the table, "we are practically certain that the communication is between one branch of a certain company of gangsters and another."

Miss Mott's was almost a painful silence. A flood of reminiscences brought the colour streaming into her cheeks. Superintendent Wragge looked tactfully away. He tapped another cigarette on the arm of his chair and lit it.

"You've heard nothing more, I suppose, of our friends who were flooded out?" he enquired.

"Nothing."

"No more mysterious visits from Violet Joe?"

She shook her head.

"That long devil with the scar hasn't tried to get at you again?"

"I haven't seen or heard a word from any of them," she declared.

"Meredith— that's the arch-blackguard's name, I'm sure of that," Superintendent Wragge continued thoughtfully. "Two of the gang got away by the river, but I have an idea that Meredith's still in London."

"You haven't anything against 'Violet Joe,' have you?" she asked timidly.

"If I had I should forget it," her uncle assured her. "Meredith's the man I want. He's dangerous. So long as he's at large you should be extra careful, Lucie. Watch your step all the time. Don't accept any invitations unless you know the people well."

She shook her head.

"I never go out anywhere," she confided. "I keep William here till I leave myself at night and he sees me into a taxi."

Her uncle nodded approvingly.

"Good girl. What about a little dinner with me to-night, then? I'll fetch you and take you home. Are you doing anything?"

"Nothing at all. Except"— she went on, holding up an envelope— "these came along this morning. I haven't made up my mind what to do about it."

Superintendent Wragge drew out the cardboard slips and studied them. He turned over the envelope and noticed the address in clerkly handwriting.

"Two stalls for The Humming Bird?" he remarked. "Someone's being kind to you. I saw in the paper yesterday that every seat was booked for months."

Miss Mott nodded.

"I believe it's awfully good," she confided. "How would you like to go there first with me and have a little supper afterwards instead of dining?"

"By all means," Superintendent Wragge accepted enthusiastically. "An excellent idea. I haven't been to a theatre for months."

He glanced at the tickets again before he passed them back.

"You say you don't know who sent them to you?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't an idea," she admitted. "The box-office, I suppose."

Superintendent Wragge picked up his hat and smoothed it. Those keen, narrow eyes of his had almost disappeared under their heavy lids and amongst the puckered-up creases of his fleshy face— a sign that he was thinking deeply.

"What's troubling you, uncle?" Miss Mott enquired.

"It seems to me a little queer," he meditated, "for the theatre to be sending away complimentary seats when it's so heavily booked up, and especially for Friday night. They aren't marked 'Complimentary,' either. You're quite sure you can't think of anyone who might have sent them?"

"I can't think of a soul," she admitted. "My editor gets complimentary seats now and then, but if he offers them to me he always wants to come with me. Still, as long as they're here there's no reason why we shouldn't use them, is there?"

Superintendent Wragge selected one of the tickets and returned the other to his niece.

"Not the slightest reason in the world," he agreed. "If you don't mind," he added, "I think it would be better if you went on first and I'll join you later. We're sometimes rather busy at the Yard Friday nights and I should hate to have you miss any of the show. I'll come as soon as I can get away."

"Just as you like," Miss Mott assented. "I shall be there when the curtain goes up on the first act, I can promise you that! Don't miss more of it than you can help."

Superintendent-Detective Wragge, looking slightly distrait, took affectionate leave of his niece and departed for Scotland Yard. His conscience was troubling him badly as it had done once or twice before. Nothing in the world could have prevented his occupying one of those stalls at the Universal Theatre that night. He knew very well, however, that if he did his duty as a blood relation, he ought to take particular care to see that the adjoining one was vacant.

Miss Mott found her seats excellently placed and thoroughly enjoyed the first act of The Humming-Bird. She was just looking round the crowded, house at the fall of the curtain when a girl, seated, immediately in front, turned round and smiled at her.

"Do you mind if I speak to you for a moment, Miss Mott?" she asked.

"Why, of course not," was the courteous reply.

"Do I— ought I to know you?"

"We are complete strangers," the young woman, admitted. "But I feel that I know you very well because I read all your articles in Home Talks. I hope you won't think it a great liberty, but I sent you the tickets for to-night. It was the only way I could imagine of getting to know you."

Miss Mott laughed pleasantly.

"A very delightful way for me. I've been longing to see this show. You're not, by any chance, one of my correspondents, are you?"

In the subdued light the girl seemed to flush.

"I'm afraid I have been guilty of bothering you with my poor little affairs," she confessed. "You answered me in this week's number. I called myself 'Buttercups and Daisies.'"

Miss Mott was well trained for her profession and she heard the announcement with only the faintest flicker of polite interest in her face. For once, then, her uncle must have made a mistake.

"I remember thinking your pseudonym a trifle unusual," she remarked. "I hope what I said was of service to you."

"I should think so," was the enthusiastic reply. "You have so much common sense and yet you look scarcely any older than I," the girl added, with a sigh.

Miss Mott smiled tolerantly.

"Everybody looks the same age in this light. Some of you girls—"

"May I introduce my fiancé?" the girl begged. "Major Lingard—Miss Mott."

A dark, clean-shaven young man, turned out with punctilious care and wearing a rimless eyeglass, rose in his place and bowed.

"Glad to meet so distinguished a young lady," he said pleasantly. "I know what Miss Carruthers wants me to ask you before the curtain goes up. We should be so glad if you would come on to a new supper club with us after the show—you and your escort, if you have one coming," he added, looking at the vacant place. "Otherwise, we will look after you."

"Do please come," the girl urged. "My real name is Betty Carruthers. I should like to talk to you so much and I am sure you would meet some interesting people."

Miss Mott hesitated. The invitation sounded attractive enough to her, but someone had suddenly turned on the lights in an adjacent box and Miss Betty Carruthers's appearance seemed no longer that of the somewhat silly young ingénue. There were one or two lines in her face and little ones—almost crow's feet—about her eyes. Her hair, too, was obviously tinted and her eyes themselves were strange, not at all the eyes of a young girl. Miss Mott's instincts of caution were awakened.

"You are very kind," she said doubtfully. "I am expecting my uncle every moment."

"But you must bring him along," the girl insisted. "It's the quaintest place, only been opened for a week or two. It's run by one of Dick's—that's Major Lingard's—ex-brother officers, and there are always lots of nice young men there."

"I'm sure it would be very delightful," Miss Mott conceded. "May I just see what my uncle says when he arrives?"

"Why, of course," the girl assented. "We shall be going anyway. We dance there every night. It would be so nice to have a good long talk with you..."

The curtain rose and Miss Mott gave herself up to the enjoyment of the show. Immediately on its descent, Superintendent Wragge made his appearance and edged his way to the vacant seat.

"Oh, I'm so sorry you've missed two acts of this," his niece lamented. "It's been perfectly wonderful. The best show I've seen for ages. I want to tell you something," she went on in a slightly lower tone.

The girl in front, with her escort, had strolled over to one of the boxes to talk with some friends. Miss Mott directed her uncle's attention to them.

"Are they friends of yours?" she asked.

"Never seen either of them before in my life to my knowledge," he replied.

"Well," she confided, "the girl's name—she isn't nearly so young as she looks—is Miss Betty Carruthers, and I'm afraid your Code Department were wrong for once, for it was she who wrote to me under the pseudonym of 'Buttercups and Daisies.'"

There was a moment's silence. Superintendent Wragge had made no remark, but Miss Mott knew that he was interested from the swift intake of his breath and from the way he leaned forward, with his hands upon his knees, looking at the girl and her escort.

"She has just introduced herself to me," Miss Mott continued. "It was she who sent us the tickets. She thought it would be a good way to get to know me. That is her fiancé she is with— a Major Lingard. They want us both to go on to a little dance club to-night, which has just been started by some friends of theirs. They asked me to bring my escort, whoever he was."

"Did they know my name and who I was?" Superintendent Wragge asked quickly.

There was an expression of gentle deprecation in Miss Mott's upraised eyebrows.

"Do I run an Intelligence Office for nothing? I simply said that you were my uncle. The girl smiled at me in a most peculiar way. She may be everything that she ought to be, but I don't fancy that in her world girls go about with their real uncles. Here they are coming back."

Superintendent Wragge picked up his programme. It was hard to see that his lips were moving.

"Harness is my name," he whispered. "Mr. Charles Harness— solicitor."

The two glanced expectantly at Miss Mott as they took their places. She introduced her uncle, who beamed upon them with unusual affability.

"I hear you have been kind enough to ask my niece and me to a new supper club to-night," he said. "We shall be delighted to come, of course."

"Capital!" Major Lingard exclaimed. "I hope you'll like the place. Miss Carruthers and I are rather keen on it: run by an old friend of mine The food and drink's all right, anyway, and the music isn't bad."

"If you'll give me the exact address," Superintendent Wragge suggested, "we'll follow you on directly the show is over."

"Oh, please let us take you," the girl intervened. "Father's lent us the family coach— as I call our old limousine— for the evening, and there's room for everybody."

Superintendent Wragge accepted without hesitation.

"At my time of life," he confessed, "I hate struggling about looking for taxis. Besides, it's a wet night."

"We'll all get out together as soon as the curtain's down," Miss Carruthers declared. "Dick's ordered a table, but it's always just as well to be on time. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to a talk with your clever niece."

The curtain rose and Mr. Wragge gave himself up to a whole-hearted enjoyment of the performance. At the end of the act tears of laughter stood in his eyes.

"Best thing I've seen this season," he announced with enthusiasm. "No, I'm not going out to get a whisky and soda. I've been working hard at the office to-night and I had to scamp my dinner, so I'm determined not to spoil my supper. I'll talk to Harry Philpott for a moment."

Superintendent Wragge, the laughter still lingering at the corners of his lips, moved a few places down the row and talked to an elderly gentleman who had also been a late arrival. Miss Carruthers and her fiancé whispered softly together for a few moments. Then the former turned round in her place.

"I can't help feeling that I've met your uncle before," she remarked. "What did you say his name was?"

"Harness," Miss Mott repeated. "Mr. Charles Harness. He is a solicitor in Bucklersbury."

"Very striking face," Major Lingard observed. "He might be a statesman or a great physician or something of that sort. Does he dance at all?"

"Loves it," Miss Mott assured him.

Superintendent Wragge made his way back to his seat as the curtain went up and apparently enjoyed the last act as much as the preceding one. Afterwards, in high good-humour, they all four made their way out together, and stood under the rain-dripping portico while their car was being called.

"I hope this little place will amuse you," Major Lingard said, as they took their places in the limousine after the briefest of delays. "There are not a great many people go there yet, but that's only because it isn't sufficiently known, and Captain Allen— that's the proprietor— doesn't want to spoil it by letting everyone in."

"It really is the quaintest place," Miss Carruthers declared...

It certainly was quaint. The approach up the narrow mews was quaint. The blue lamp hanging over the entrance was quaint. The two front doors, both of unusual thickness, were surprising, and the descent of four or five narrow steps after the first of these was unexpected. A young man in resplendent livery relieved them of their coats and hats. A tired-looking young clerk held open a book whilst Major Lingard wrote down their names. Then, with a flourish, the second door was opened.

"Come this way," the latter invited, taking Miss Mott by the arm.

They stepped forward and passed into what seemed to be nothing more or less than a civilised and over-decorated cellar. The colour-washed walls were hung with sepia drawings of mad design and flaming colours. The furniture was of almost Saxon simplicity and seemed as if it had been knocked together by

some village carpenter. On the other hand, the few tables that were laid were glittering with plate and glass and almost overladen with flowers. The floor was of glass, illuminated from below, and a small coloured orchestra at the farther end of the room was making strange sounds of musical import. There were several waiters standing about of a more robust type than is usual in a night restaurant, and the only other guests were a party of four, two young men of the gigolo variety, with flamboyantly attired companions. Major Lingard led the way to a round table set in a corner of the room. It was profusely adorned with masses of yellow roses and two jugs of amber-looking liquid stood in ice pails by its side.

"Would you mind sitting down and looking through the menu for a minute whilst we go off and speak with our friend who runs the place," he begged. "You'll find that champagne cup excellent, or you may like to dance. We shan't be five minutes."

Superintendent Wragge checked his niece, who was on the point of sitting down in the chair which his host had indicated.

"Major Lingard," he said, "I am going to ask you two favours, which I hope you will not take amiss: one is to let me be the giver of the party to-night—I am the eldest present and I think it is my privilege; the other is to allow us to have a table at the other side of the room: that is a stupid fad of mine, I know, but I will explain the origin of it later on."

There was a vague look of anxiety on the young man's face. He seemed ill at ease and his forehead was wrinkled in deprecating fashion.

"But, my dear sir," he protested, "Miss Carruthers is so anxious to entertain Miss Mott. You see we have ordered special flowers in the hope of your coming, and specially prepared champagne cup, and the table is surely the best in the room."

"I am an ill-mannered pig," the other acknowledged, "but I am an elderly man and I have my whims. There is nothing in wine or food possible here which it will not be my pleasure to offer you."

Major Lingard gave brief directions to a waiter, but he found it difficult to conceal his annoyance. His manner, too, had become nervous, almost uneasy. He was obviously reluctant to leave his guests. The girl, however, remained unmoved. She turned towards Miss Mott.

"Would you like to come with us to meet Captain Allen?" she asked. "Perhaps you could persuade him to join us and dance." He is wonderful when he starts, but he's not keen unless be finds someone really attractive."

"I'll stay with my uncle, if you don't mind," Miss Mott decided, wholly unconscious of the magnitude of her resolution. "He is rather an important person in my young life."

The girl did not press her invitation but the smile lingered a little sourly upon her lips. As soon as she and her companion had left the room, which they did by a door at the farther end, they exchanged a swift glance of apprehension. Miss Betty Carruthers was no longer in the least like an ingénue and there was a very unpleasant expression on the young man's smooth face.

"What do you make of it," she asked anxiously.

"It looks rotten," he admitted.

"And yet," the girl pointed out, "how could they guess anything? They've never seen either of us before, and they couldn't have known of this place because we never even said where we were going. You weren't at Amberley Square, were you?"

"Not I," he assured her. "I was doing business in Amsterdam."

"Then how could they have even the slightest suspicion about us?" she demanded. "There isn't a loose end anywhere."

"I can't see one," Major Lingard admitted. "But will you tell me why the mischief he shied at the table? There aren't half a dozen people in the world who know the secret of that. And why on earth did he want to be host if it wasn't to get out of drinking the champagne cup?"

"All the same, just remember this," the girl reflected. "The old man couldn't possibly have known that we were going to be at the theatre or that we were going to ask him here. He hasn't been out of our sight ever since he took his place in the theatre, so he couldn't have communicated with anyone. It can't be anything but his manner."

They passed down the little passage and entered a small room, luxuriously furnished, something between an office and a masculine sitting-room. A tall, lean man, with a thin scar on one side of his face, was lounging in an easy chair with his hands in his pockets. He looked swiftly across at them as they entered.

"Well?" he demanded.

"They're here," Lingard announced.

"I know they're here," was the irritated reply. "What did you leave them for?"

"Dick's all fussed up," the girl declared. "Old man Wragge's calling himself Mr. Charles Harness, by the by. Wouldn't sit at the guests' table and he won't have anything to do with the champagne cup."

"Did you make a clean get-away from the theatre?"

"Absolutely. Tom was there wearing uniform exactly like the commissionaire's. We didn't see one of the real men on duty, and the plates of the car have been altered again."

The man in the chair meditated for a moment.

"Your invitation for supper was given inside the theatre?"

"Yes, and we didn't even mention where the place was we were taking them to."

"Did either of them get away by themselves afterwards?"

"Not for a single second," the girl declared.

"Then go back again to your job and don't be silly," the tall man enjoined brusquely. "The others'll be coming in directly. I don't want the show-down before one o'clock."

Meanwhile, Miss Mott and her uncle danced away gaily to some really excellent music. The place, except for its two heavy front doors, seemed to differ very little from other night clubs of its order. One or two guests had come in and taken their places at different tables. No one, however, seemed to want to sit at the corner table with the yellow roses...

The ventilation was none of the best and in due course Superintendent Wragge felt the need of a rest and some refreshment. They sat down, and he ordered a bottle of whisky to be opened at the table, and some champagne. The latter arrived in an ice pail and the cork of the whisky was drawn by the maître d'hôtel. The superintendent was having his first drink when Major Lingard and his fiancée returned, with profuse apologies for their brief absence. Any passing cloud which may have been on their faces had vanished. The champagne was opened and poured out for everyone, without reference to the cup. Some caviare and other choice sandwiches were ordered. Major Lingard danced with Miss Mott and Superintendent Wragge danced with and paid many compliments to Miss Carruthers. The somewhat forbidding atmosphere of the room was forgotten. Everyone seemed to be having a good time and the band played at their bidding. Half an hour passed— an hour. At last Miss Mott, at a glance from her uncle who was paying the bill, rose to her feet.

"It's been so delightful," she murmured. "We've enjoyed it ever so much. Haven't we, uncle?"

Producing a fine cambric handkerchief, Superintendent Wragge wiped the perspiration from his forehead with one hand, whilst he handed out liberal tips with the other.

"Delightful," he echoed. "I like your orchestra, too, major. My niece and I will join with pleasure, if you care to put us up."

Major Lingard was watching the second of the front doors which led into the room as it slowly swung to, and they heard the little click of the spring. The change in their host and hostess which ensued seemed to Superintendent Wragge and Miss Mott amazing. The woman who had posed in the uncertain lights as a good-tempered, good-humoured ingénue, suddenly revealed herself as a vicious and evil-looking woman. Major Lingard, with a twist of the mouth,

the departure of his eyeglass and a relaxation of all the muscles of his face, was no longer in the least like an English officer. They threw disguise to the winds. Lingard leaned back in his chair, with his hands in his pockets. Through the door near the orchestra, the tall, thin man with the scar on his cheek had issued and was making leisurely progress down the room.

"We don't as a rule welcome gentlemen of your profession as members, Superintendent Wragge," Lingard said, with a sneer in his tone, "but we are going to make you a life member and keep you here for the rest of your life too. That may not be a very long time, though," he added meaningly. "It will be only a few seconds if you can't keep that right hand of yours still."

"You needn't be afraid," Superintendent Wragge assured him calmly. "I don't carry firearms when I am out for a pleasant evening."

The tall man with the scar on his face had come to a standstill before their table. He bowed low to Miss Mott, who looked at him in horror. The illuminations of the place had become faulty and his gaunt face was more saturnine than ever. He turned to Superintendent Wragge.

"I know that it is your custom to go unarmed, superintendent," he remarked, "but I thought that, perhaps, the memory of a certain night in Amberley Square might have changed your ideas on that subject. Has Miss Mott brought her popgun?"

Miss Mott was incapable of any reply. She was looking despairingly at the little circle of male guests who had left their lady companions and were closing in around the table. She had always had the most unbounded confidence in her uncle, but she reflected with sinking heart that he had come out without the slightest idea of this invitation, and that since receiving it he had not left her side for a moment. It was impossible for him to have communicated with anybody. They were cut off from the world completely and utterly. In that windowless cellar even the roar of the distant traffic was inaudible. Yet the smile upon Superintendent Wragge's lips seemed natural enough, and even at that moment he lit a cigarette.

"You're Meredith, aren't you?" he asked the tall man abruptly.

"That is my name," the other acknowledged.

"I thought I couldn't have forgotten you," Superintendent Wragge meditated. "Quite an honour, I'm sure, this. Are you shooting any better these days? You missed me from a dozen paces last time we met."

Meredith grinned. The detective's attitude appealed to his dramatic instincts.

"You must remember, superintendent," he apologised, "that I was in a hurry. I have you now here all to myself, with plenty of friends around and the club all nicely closed up for the night. I shall make better practice this time."

"I don't seem to remember my host of the evening," Superintendent Wragge went on. "A junior member of the gang promoted, I presume, owing to recent misfortune. He makes up quite well. I almost mistook him for the real thing."

"Don't, uncle!" Miss Mott interrupted, with a sudden touch of hysteria.

He patted her hand. Meredith laughed outright.

"I like to hear your uncle talk," he said. "And for once we have plenty of time. Major Lingard is one of my chief lieutenants at the present moment. He has taken the place of that impossible young man whom we have had to discard altogether. Yes," Meredith went on, scrutinising the end of the cigarette which he had just lit. "We had to get rid of Violet Joe. It was painful, but he was too sentimental."

Miss Mott swayed in her chair. Her uncle passed his arm around her.

"Don't you worry, dear," he begged. "From the little I've seen of Violet Joe I'd back him against our friend here any day. My niece is feeling the strain, Meredith, so let's get down to business. What are you going to do with me? I'm after the remainder of your gang, you know, and I shall get you all some day."

Meredith stared at the speaker incredulously.

"Aren't you inclined to be something of an optimist?" he asked. "For instance, may I enquire how you expect to get out of here alive?"

"Well, I may not," Superintendent Wragge admitted, drawing the whisky bottle closer to him. "I've paid the bill, but I'm going to cadge some more whisky if I may," he added, helping himself. "I may not get out of here alive, as you suggest, Meredith, but there's one thing very certain—"

"I like to hear about certainties," the latter interrupted with an ugly smile.

"One thing very certain," Superintendent Wragge repeated impressively, "and that is, that if you kill me, before six weeks have passed you'll be taking that fifty-yard walk at a few minutes before eight in the morning, with a chaplain reading the prayers, a warder to hold you up, a bell tolling in your ears, and that bare, ugly room yawning before you. Murderers don't escape nowadays, you know, Meredith, and there are special reasons why you won't."

There was something terrifying in his prisoner's deliberate speech and absolute composure, and Meredith shivered for a moment, half in fear, half in anger. He looked around at the others who were waiting for his orders and he waved his hand towards the corner table. Four of them stole round to the back of Superintendent Wragge. Meredith turned towards him.

"Wragge," he said, "you're a rotten detective, but with the help of this very intelligent young lady, your niece, you've come pretty close to us once or twice. After to-night you aren't going to trouble me any more. As for your

niece, you needn't worry about her: she and I have a little bargain to carry out, and this time there isn't going to be any mistake about it!"

He leaned towards Miss Mott with that queer, satanic smile at the corners of his lips, and Miss Mott, although she held herself bravely, felt her eyes dilate with horror. Her uncle held his head a little on one side— listening— and as he listened, he smiled.

"The trouble with you, Meredith," he deplored, "is that you always refuse to give your enemies credit for even the rudiments of common sense. You bait your trap cleverly enough, but you expect us to walk into it a trifle too ingenuously. For instance, you imagined that a harmless paper like Home Talks would escape the notice of the Scotland Yard Code Department. Not at all! 'Jenks in London' told us its message. 'Buttercups and Daisies' confirmed our suspicions."

Both Meredith and Lingard were speechless. They appeared to be stiffening in preparation for some form of action, but they still listened breathlessly.

"And another detail," Superintendent Wragge went on, "—details are so important, you know, Meredith. When you send theatre tickets from a popular theatre for the use of a young lady, and you would like her to believe that they had come from the box-office, go to the expense of having a rubber stamp made. 'Complimentary'— in purple ink across the face of the slip of white paper— would be so much more convincing. That's one o'clock striking, I think. You'd better scuttle off to your hole, wherever it is. Do you hear—"

The superintendent broke off abruptly in his speech. Everyone for a moment seemed to be holding his breath. There was a violent banging at the outside door, a confusion of voices, some raised to the pitch of shouting.

"Open the door there!"

"You can't close a night club before one o'clock!"

"We're members!"

"Open the door and look sharp about it!"

"The Prince of Wales is here and Lord God Beelzebub!"

Doggerel followed, everyone singing, or rather yelling, in a different key:

"We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
Till daylight doth appear!"
"Hip, hip, hip, hurrah! Open the door, you fellows!"

Then silence. The sudden wave of apprehension which had drained the colour from Lingard's cheeks and brought a flash of dismay into even Meredith's eyes passed. The latter even smiled.

"Drunken roysterers!" he muttered. "Sit tight everyone. They'll be off directly."

"I wonder," Superintendent Wragge speculated.

There was a storm of blows upon the door. Then silence again. A couple of the pseudo-guests stood over Wragge, watching in case he should open his mouth. A waiter crossed the floor on tiptoe. A woman who wanted a drink held up an empty bottle. The place became a study in still life.

"They'll be gone directly," Meredith repeated in a whisper.

A further brief period of silence. Then, with appalling suddenness a cataclysmic roar which set the whole place shaking, and beneath the thunder of which were lost all such trivial sounds as the shrieks of terrified women, the tumult of flying feet, the falling of crumbling masonry. The stout entrance door and part of the wall fell crashing into the room and there followed, for a brief and indeterminate span of time, a flying panorama utterly grotesque and unreal.

A single file of black-uniformed police streamed through the room, like gnomes in some fantastic, futurist drama. They were running at the double, their strangely-shaped peaked caps bent towards the ground, flashing by the amazed group of satyr-faced men and terrified women. Unearthly puppets they seemed against the strange background of the weirdly emblazoned walls, hastening towards that farther entrance through which Lingard and Meredith had already disappeared. The three members of the coloured orchestra filled the air with a hideous clamour, yelling like human beasts gone crazy. There was a single shot fired by one of the pseudo-guests at a distant table, a shot which buried itself harmlessly in the wall and brought a stream of crumbling plaster on to the table before which Superintendent Wragge was seated. The rearmost of those black, stooping forms, without faltering in his stride, threw out his arm— there was a stab of flame— and a man sank in a huddled heap upon the floor. Superintendent Wragge passed his arm round Miss Mott's waist and led her towards the open space where the door had been, and through which the night wind was now sweeping.

"They won't have me in the fighting squadron," he remarked. "We'll leave them to it. I ordered the car for one o'clock."

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16: An Out-Islander Comes In

Stella Benson

Mrs. John O. Anderson, 1892-1933
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"YOU'LL SOON get used to it all, girlie," said Willie. "Everything takes a bit of getting used to— that's what I always say." His large perspiring cheeks quivered as the Buick in which he sat quivered splashily through the storm along the main street of Coffee Town. Rose looked at the street full of strangenesses— at the rich shoes, the rich jumpers, the rich white plus fours, the rich silken calves, of the tourists seeking shelter from the storm in the doors of shops full of Hyper-Best dresses.

"One can't get used to people who are all the same person," said Rose. "All these people are the same one, dressed up in different funny ways. One can't get used to a *one*…"

"Folks all look like a buncha freaks when you're new to 'em," said Willie, who always confidently mistranslated, in a tone ten times magnified, like a faulty loud speaker, everything that his bride said.

Still, the honour of having married an American had to be paid for somehow. Rose, a sensible though untutored girl, had realized this from the first. It was most rare for any inhabitant of Liver Island to marry any one except another inhabitant of Liver Island. Sometimes a young man crossed over from one of the Kidney Islands and chose a Liver Island bride. Apart from this, the only other island inhabited by white people within a day's sailing of Liver Island was Tripe Key, on which only seven people lived, of whom Rose's cousin had married the only man under fifty. But Rose had fallen right off her planet; she had married an American. Willie, from New York, had been looking for a site for a turtle-shell depot, and had found Rose. Rose had never worn silk stockings or tasted ice-cream, or used face powder or a lipstick. Her Sunday hat was six years old; it was made of wired imitation lace and lay like a plate on the peak of her mountain of bronze hair. "Better wear nothing on ya head than that fool-thing," said Willie. "Foller the crowd, that's what I always say— it's only crazy folks that try to be different. I'll buy you a hat in Coffee Town like my sister wears, with a fake diamond swaller in the front." So Rose had given her dear romantic Sunday hat to a younger sister, and hidden her hair in a tortured tam-o'-shanter bought at the incredible city of Coffee Town. "One-horse burg, this; give me N'York, that's what I always say to these foreigners," said Willie— which showed what America must be, since Coffee Town, on Bacon Island, was the great renowned capital of the Marmalado Islands.

Rose looked about Coffee Town through the stripes of the rain. In the hotel lobby, while Willie was in the bar, seeing a man he knew, Rose sat and looked

about, feeling as though she were in a trance. On Liver Island, although almost all the white people had the same surname— Leggatt— the other differences between one person and another were marked and known by every one. One knew that Abraham Leggatt's John hated cats, was colour-blind, and dreamt often of his late mother; one knew that Mary Leggatt's, Mary's Mollie always lost her temper when she was hungry, and had a mole on her left shoulder-blade. And if a stranger should come and say, "How like Miss Mary Leggatt is to— er— Miss Mary Leggatt— I mean the other one, *not* the one who lives on Bay Street…" any inhabitant of Liver Island would have looked at him in astonishment as though at an imbecile. Nobody on Liver Island *could* be like any one else, except in name. Nobody, for instance, shared common catchwords. Liver Islanders didn't talk enough for that. They said *Ah* with an upward inflexion when they meant *yes,* and a downward *Ah* when they meant *no.* Between *Ah* and *Ah* they only stated facts about birth, death, marriage, religion, food, turtles, and sponges. But here in Coffee Town, every one seemed to have a different name and yet to be the same person. The tourists stood about the lobby uttering elaborate forms of words in imitation of one another, and yet expressing no facts. "I said, see here, son, I'm a man who… What I always say is… That's what I always say… It's a long time between drinks, as the Governor of North Carolina… You ladies are all alike… it's the *principle* of the thing I care about… I always say…"

Here was Willie coming towards her, his large opaque brown eyes rolling through horn'rimmed glasses, his beaked nose sniffing this way and that. Rose waved her umbrella at him with rather an out-island expansiveness. Willie looked politely but stonily at her and turned his little fat eagle's nose towards another woman. Good gracious— it was not Willie, after all— he wore Willie's clothes and Willie's nose but he was not Willie. *Here* was Willie, coming now— oh no, that one was wearing white plus fours and a flame-coloured pullover; Willie couldn't have changed his clothes in the bar. Ah— here was the real authentic Willie— how absurd not to have been sure of one's own husband— though only a two days' husband to be sure. Willie had seemed to be the most *different* person in the world on Liver Island, but here in Coffee Town, every one seemed to be different in the same way.

"Well, girlie, bin kinda lonesome? I couldn't come sooner; there was a guy there who had a very stimulating line of high-grade information about a new material for toilet goods called rubberine something or other; never pass up a chance to get education, that's what I always say. I didn't take but two highballs, but I've got plenty of the best on my hip. Be prepared for a rainy day, that's what I always say."

"Well, you couldn't have a rainier day than this," said Rose happily, seizing his arm affectionately and leading him to the window.

"Smart baby," laughed Willie. "Knows what she wants and wants it right now. But we haven't got time now, not even for a quick one, cutie, we gotta beat it. The ship can't come into harbour— it's too rough; we gotta get to the tender at South Bay by four."

The wind whined through the flapping chinks of the car's hood as they drove between agitated shockheaded palm groves. From under the wheels came the sharp sound of cloven pools of water.

"Too bad— this gale," said Willie. "I guess we gotta bum trip ahead of us, girlie. But what can't be cured must be endured— that's what I always say."

A perfect suburb of cars had sprung up beside the short pier at South Bay. Scores of stoutish men in grey overcoats and grey hats and expensive sporting shoes— as though all dressed by one divine impulse— stood on the pier watching the sailors' efforts to control the violent movements of several lifeboats. Scores of slim women in biscuit-coloured coats, and brown hats nailed to the skull with diamond ornaments, and thick legs encased in silk, and wine-coloured lips below chalk noses, crouched in the pier shelter. Luggage, in dwindling mountains on the pier, was being tumbled precariously into the leaping boats. "The tender can't come right up to the pier in this sea," said Willie. "Aw hell, this is going to be one bum party." He then mingled with a crowd of other perfect imitations of himself on the pier, and said with them, "You c'n take it from me… it's the *principle* of the thing… these fellers oughta… don't know their own business, that's what I always say…"

Three hours passed, while restive boats full of luggage and passengers bounded with difficulty back and forth. A good many of the waiting male passengers got drunk. The women and children did not, because they had to keep sober enough to be protected from the dangers of the embarkation by their reeling husbands and fathers. A great deal of sobriety was needed for this, as Rose found when it was her turn to leap into the pitching boat from the pier-head. "Weddle I say *jum*" said Willie— was it Willie?— holding her awkwardly and painfully by the upper arm. "Don' *jum* till I say *jum,* f'godsek…" Another Willie, on the bucking edge of the boat below, held out his arms. The boat rose violently to meet her, all askew. "Jum… jump… jum…" Rose jumped; she was torn from one Willie, was in the arms of another, was passed to a third. She was sitting in the boat. Great slaty waves shut out the shore; the sky reeled; a distant lighthouse whisked a feather of light across the dingy distance till a near wave leapt up and obliterated it.

Rose, an out-islander, was well accustomed to small boats, and to getting wet at the whim of waves. It was the tender that alarmed her, and the distant

liner frightened her still more. She had never been in a steamer before— or indeed in anything inexplicably propelled, until yesterday when the Buick carried her across Coffee Town. She watched for the tender intermittently from view-points on the tottering peaks of waves. It was nearly dark. The tender looked like a gold-toothed snarl, the far liner like a sneer of lights. She sat feeling sick with fright, wedged tightly in a row of elaborately undaunted women; the bones she sat on seemed to be shifted by some insane pull of gravity inside her wedged flesh, as the boat pitched this way and that. Opposite to her was Willie, and there, two women down on her left, was another unmistakable Willie. In the whirl and the dusk she could, uneasily, see other Willies grouped in the stern. As the boat twitched itself skilfully parallel with the ribs of the tender, Rose realized that the larger vessel was lined with Willies. She felt altogether alone in the midst of this superfluity, and began to cry unobtrusively. Several Willies helped her from the lifeboat. She had quite given up trying to distinguish the right one. They were all kind. Two of them sat down beside her on a bench on the tender. "Feeling kinda lonesome, girlie?" said one, and the other said, "I gotta toothful of the best on my hip. Always hope for the best and be prepared for the worst— that's what I always say."

"Why did he say *I*— not *we?*" wondered Rose vaguely.

The tender rose and fell with energy but with more dignity than the little boat. The wind whined between canvas screens. There was a stir among the passengers. "Where is she? there… Gee… she's gone… no— *there*…" Every one but Rose and one of her immediate Willies moved to the tender's side. The other Willie came back and said, "Lifeboat's engine stalled— she's being blown out to sea. Fourteen passengers on board of her— but don't get rattled, little lady— they'll be all right." Rose, chilled and exhausted, was not at all rattled about the endangered boat; among so many Willies it seemed that some could be spared.

Hurrying clouds tore themselves to shreds on the horn of a crescent moon. The sea tossed and jostled Rose and a tender-full of Willies. Rose was now, as far as appearances went, the only woman on board. The other women had all shrunk into cracks and crannies of the vessel. Around Rose lay, sat, stood, waved and reeled Willies in all attitudes, at all stages of synthetic sobriety. A line of them leaned against the rail, watching the search for the stray lifeboat, commenting one to another, "Why don't they… if I was them… know their own business… I said to the captain, say, listen, cap, why don't you… he had to admit afterwards, say, listen, he said, that sure was some good advice you handed… that's what I always say… I just said, say, listen…"

The thick clumsy blade of the tender's search-light lashed out through the dark, pricking a rock, a flare of spray, a distant palm tree, a searching lifeboat, with light like a quick short dream.

"Found— found— found," said all the Willies suddenly. "Gee— found 'em at last… I knoo they would… if they done that right at the start… I said, say, listen, cap… isn't that fine… I guess the other boat's picked 'em up… I guess Ed's glad he had a droppa the best on the hip… Be prepared for the worst, that's what I always say…"

Rose, though cramped and cold, was half asleep on her bench. No less than six faithful Willies now guarded her rest, each with a wad of gum inside his large soft cheek, each watching Rose kindly through horn-rimmed glasses. When the tender, drunkenly approaching her mothership, ran impetuously into her on an irresistible wave, breaking off large portions of her superstructure, quite a dozen Willies snatched Rose from under a shower of splintered wood. The force of the gangway, craning wildly from the pitching liner to the rolling tender, was broken by the intervening figures of thirty Willies, who threw themselves between it and Rose.

In the liner at last, the passages echoed with the voices of a chorus of Willies asking where was the state-room of Mrs. Willie Gold. Rose felt swallowed up, irrevocably digested, by this monster full of Willies. She rushed into a cabin and sat weeping on the bed. The cabin, arranged by a cabin steward who was himself a flawless Willie, looked, though she was too ignorant to know it, like a cabin steward's ideal cabin— unsleepable-in apple-pie beds— undrinkable-out of upside-down water glasses— unwashable-in disappearing basin— unsittable-on folded campstool— unhangable-in pegless wardrobe— all bleakly neat, and designed to make the passenger feel nothing but an uncouth intrusion. But Rose disarranged the bed by crying into the pillow. The Willies squeezed in embarrassment and suspended chivalry at the door.

"She's kinda lonesome, I guess… tired… no wonder… you ladies aren't used to… Wait, sister, I guess I still gotta toothful of the best…"

Rose looked at them wildly, pressing in, pressing out, peering shortsightedly over one another's shoulders, all anxious, kind, stoutish, smooth, all spectacled, all with grey overcoats on. And one of them said, "Why, say, listen, girlie, I bin looking everywhere for you…"

"Aw hell, Rosie, what's eating you?" added Willie, unclasping his bride's arms from the neck of the wrong Willie. "She's an out-island girl… she don't know much about the ways of civilized folks yet… everything takes a bit of getting used to, that's what I always say…"

17: The Biting of the Biter

Barry Pain

1864-1928

The Windsor Magazine Nov 1901

TO HAVE A PROPER APPRECIATION of what is fair and friendly, to be ready to make a concession here in order to receive one there, to give on one occasion and take on another, is an excellent thing. This friendly feeling is particularly needful if you happen to be a picture-dealer; you will work harmoniously with other picture-dealers, and incidentally you will find it profitable.

For instance, it may happen that in an auction sale there is one picture which six dealers are anxious to buy. Is that any reason for jealousy and naughty tempers and wicked words, and high prices? It need not be. Possibly one of the six will be able to find reasons which will prevent the other five from bidding. Or, possibly, something of this kind may happen: The much-desired and valuable picture comes up. An air of apathy seems to settle on the little group of dealers. Bidding is slow and soon ceases. The picture is knocked down to one of the dealers for a fifth of its value. And, after the sale, that little group of dealers adjourn to a neighbouring house of entertainment, where they can have a room to themselves, and a cup of tea if they require it. There they hold a private auction among themselves, and this time the picture fetches its real value. The highest bidder takes the picture, and the very considerable difference between the two prices is divided among the other five. Thus the money is kept in the family, so to speak, and is not frittered away upon the original owner of that picture.

Again, it may happen that a dealer wishes to pay much more than he need for something. This is less astonishing than it sounds. If you pay a sensationally high price for a mezzotint at Christie's, and secure your prize after what looks like a very keen struggle, you add to the prestige of the plate; and possibly you have four or five proofs from the same plate already waiting in your portfolio which you will be glad to dispose of to collectors at collectors' prices, seeing that you bought them privately for very little. How can the collector object to a long price when he can read for himself in the papers what you had to pay for the same thing at Christie's.

Yes, in spite of trade rivalries, a dealer should be on friendly terms with other dealers. If Mr. Samuel Levison and Mr. Algernon Franks had not been picture-dealers, they would have quarrelled, for each had taken an advantage of the other that the other considered to be unfair; as it was, they went into partnership. In business they were strictly honest— by which I mean that they did nothing illegal and nothing generous.

There was, for instance, one picture which went through their hands three times. It was a pastoral landscape, and had many merits; but it had no history, and unhappy is the picture that has no history. "I know it to be a Watteau," said Mr. Levison firmly, "and a remarkably fine Watteau, too. No expert who has seen it has had any doubt about it. By the custom of the trade, I am prevented from giving a guarantee, as the picture has no definite history. But the painting is its own guarantee. Nobody who knows the work of Watteau could possibly doubt it." Mr. Levison sold the picture. On the death of the purchaser, a few months afterwards, his collection was dispersed, and the firm bought the picture back again for a song. Mr. Franks knew of a client who wanted an example of Pater. Mr. Franks said he had always considered the picture to be an undoubted Pater, and therefore he had no compunctions at selling it as such— without any formal warranty, as the poor thing had no history. Soon afterwards that client's creditors were rude enough to sell him up; the reputed Pater did not fetch much, and Messrs. Levison and Franks bought it once more. Several points might be urged in excuse for their subsequent sale of it as a Fragonard. Experts may change their minds. Also, they did not actually guarantee it to be a Fragonard. They were strictly honest, with a slight tendency, if they swerved at all, not to swerve on the quixotic side.

One fine morning Levison walked into his partner's room. Mr. Levison was a portly gentleman, with grey hair and whiskers. It was said that as a young man he had been handsome. Franks had never been handsome; he was small and bald, and looked rather like some obscene bird. He might have been a vulture in a previous incarnation.

"I shall be going away after lunch today," said Mr. Levison.

"That is all right. What is, it?"

"I had a letter from a friend of mine who is an auctioneer, in a small way of business, at Salden, in Surrey. He is selling the furniture of a little house there— belonged to an old lady who has just died— and he wanted a word of advice from me."

"Advice about what?"

"Well, there are two small pictures, but I can see from what he says they are nothing. I would not go down if he were not a friend. And there is a Turkey carpet—"

"Yes. What about the pictures? What does he think?"

"What do you suppose? Of course, he thinks they are good; he does not know anything."

"All right. If you buy a picture, that is on the firm's account."

"Of course. You need not remind me of that. When have you found me trying to deal for myself?"

"Never. But perhaps I have had my doubts."

"And perhaps I have had mine. Come, Franks, we don't want to begin to quarrel. If this should be a Romney—"

"Romney? Why didn't you say that before?"

"Romney, or Sir Joshua, or something or other. I don't remember what the idiot said. I told you he doesn't know anything. Why be so quarrelsome?"

"Me? I was not quarrelsome. I like to look after myself a little, that's all. I'm quite friendly. I tell you what— I'll go down to Salden with you this afternoon, if you like."

"No, that's not necessary. It's chiefly the Turkey carpet, and seeing an old friend. If I do anything about the pictures, I shall tell you; the things are on view tomorrow, and you could go down then."

By three o'clock Levison was at the house at Salden where the sale was to take place. His friend Powlet, the auctioneer, was to meet him there.

"Well, my friend," said Levison, "what is it all about?"

"Well, you got my letter and the catalogue?"

"Oh, yes. Valuable oil painting— portrait of a lady— believed to be by Romney. I have heard that kind of thing before. If there had been any chance that was a Romney, you would have come to me before— and perhaps to twenty other dealers as well."

"I'll tell you the truth. I didn't believe it to be a Romney. The old lady hadn't much money, and she didn't go in for pictures. She never spoke of it as a Romney, so far as I can find out— or as anything else. Her nephews, whom I'm selling for, don't believe it, either. In fact, one of them said to me that if I could get a fiver for it, he shouldn't grumble. But when I came to get it down yesterday, I changed my mind; I said to myself that there was quality there. I don't care what it is— whether I understand it or whether I don't— if a thing is really good, I'm on to it. I was mad then that I had not had an expert down before. I did suggest it, but the nephews were against it. When I looked at that picture, I couldn't help feeling—"

"Well, come to business. Let me put my eye on it."

"Right. Jim, just fetch down the smaller of those two pictures, will you?"

The man in a green apron, who was arranging the lots, brought the picture and set it up on a sideboard facing the window.

"Ah!" said Mr. Levison.

"What do you make of it?" asked the auctioneer eagerly.

Mr. Levison did not answer that question. "There was another picture, as well."

"Yes. Bring down the other one, Jim. What do you think about it, Levison? Could it be a Romney?"

Mr. Levison appeared to be lost in thought. Powlet felt annoyed. "Do come on," he said.

"I was trying to think where I saw the original of that."

"What? It's only a copy?"

"It's not badly painted, but there's nothing masterly about it. Look at those dirty shadows and the clumsy way the drapery's handled. I've seen the original somewhere, and I shall remember it yet. If you want my opinion, it's a copy of an Opie, and as it's a pretty subject it might fetch a tenner, or a little more if anybody wanted it. Let's look at the other."

He examined the other with cordial approval. "That's better," he said. "I can't say what it is— nobody very first class. But the man who painted it knew what he was doing; there's nothing weak about it."

"Are you going to bid for either of them?"

"I'm afraid not. They aren't quite up to our class. I might, perhaps, have bought the landscape, if I had seen my way to a customer for it; but the people who buy pictures don't want a painting— they want names. Here, let's wash the dust out of our throats."

"I was just going to suggest it," said Powlet. "The station refreshment-room's the nearest thing."

A few yards away from the house Levison stopped. "I must run back," he said. "I've left my gloves. You go on. I shall be there in a minute."

He went straight back to the room where the pictures were, and was pleased to find that Jim was not there. He went straight to the "copy of an Opie" and examined it with extreme care for some few minutes. "Not a doubt about it," he said to himself; "not a shadow of a doubt. Another of the Lady Hamiltons."

Then he drew his gloves from his coat-tail pocket, and rejoined Powlet in the station refreshment-room. Powlet grumbled a little. "You've been long enough."

"Well, I couldn't find the blessed things. Don't you grumble. If anyone's going to do that, it ought to be me. You write me long yarns about a fine Romney, and when I come down to look at the thing— well, never mind. Mine's Scotch. What's yours?"

Powlet began to talk about the old lady. She had lived in that house for forty-nine years. It was a pity, he thought, that she could not complete her fifty. He supposed it was not to be. Now and again her nephews came to see her. But for that she lived pretty well alone. At the age of sixty she wanted to go as a missionary; her nephews didn't care— it was the parson dissuaded her.

Well connected, so everybody said, but eccentric. Sometimes Levison appeared to listen; more often he seemed abstracted. He had a good deal to think about, and Powlet accused him of not being cheerful company. He had quite determined by this time to buy the picture by himself for himself, to sell it again as soon as he had got the history of it— which he thought would not be very much trouble— and to do all this without the knowledge of his partner Franks.

Levison's conscience did not disturb him. Knowledge has a money value in business. The bibliophile who discovers a treasure in the "twopenny box" does not tell the vendor; he pays his twopence and takes his treasure home. Mr. Levison had discovered one of the many Lady Hamiltons that Romney painted; he was not bound to tell Powlet that; and as he did not tell Powlet that, he had to tell him something else. With regard to his treatment of his partner, he felt that his moral position was impregnable. He had discovered the picture, and it was fair that he should have the entire profits from the discovery; besides, he was absolutely sure that with a similar opportunity Franks would have taken the same advantage of it. If he ever did swerve from the paths of the strictest honesty, it was never on the quixotic side; but if any purist had told him that he was a liar and a swindler, he would have been genuinely surprised.

"Well," said Mr. Franks rather sharply, next morning, "do we buy the Romney?"

"What Romney? Oh, yes— that thing down at Salden. Absolutely N. G. What did I tell you? You can go and buy it yourself, if you like— on your own account."

It was a mistake, and his partner was down on him in a flash. "Will you put that in writing?"

Levison made another mistake. He did not put it in writing. If he had done so, Franks would have been reassured, and would never have thought about the picture again. "Don't be a fool!" he said. "I'm not going to draw up documents about that blessed fire-screen. Oh! go and look at it yourself. It's on view today." The last sentences were good, and nearly took in Mr. Franks. But the first sentences had already aroused his suspicions.

"I have bought fire-screens before now and made money. It was a big picture?"

"Thirty twenty-five. Portrait of a woman. Head and shoulders. Rather a pretty subject; looks like a copy of a fairly decent thing. No great catch, though, even if you take it at that."

"You seem anxious to run it down. Why do you not say it is rot, and leave it, as you generally do?"

"So I did, until you began asking questions." This was one more mistake. He should not have taken the trouble to defend himself, and would not have done if the picture had really been rubbish.

"Very well, I say no more," said Franks, and walked out of the room. When he was alone he sat for some minutes in a brown study. The more he thought, the more he became convinced that he was being done. Mr. Algernon Franks did not like to be done. He had almost made up his mind to run down to Salden, when, as he went out to the outer office, he encountered Mr. Jewit coming out of his partner's room.

So far as he knew, there was no reason connected with the firm why his partner should consent to see Mr. Jewit. Mr. Jewit was quite impecunious, quite straight, and hopelessly alcoholic. Suddenly an idea occurred to Mr. Franks, and he gave up all notion of going down to Salden. He could manage it with much less trouble to himself.

On the following evening, after Levison had left, Franks sent for a clerk who frequently attended sales for them. "Look here, Peters," he said. "I want you to run down to Salden tomorrow. There's a small sale there. You know Mr. Jewit by sight? That's all right. You're to keep an eye on him, but don't get talking with him. If he bids for any picture, follow him and beat him."

"Up to?"

"No limit. Beat Jewit. If he's not there, do nothing, and come home as soon as you can."

"Very well, sir."

Jewit was at the sale, and he followed his instructions precisely. He was to buy the Romney. It was probable, he was told, that he would get it for a few pounds. But if by any chance some idea of its value had leaked out, and there were severe competition, he was to stop at £2,500.

No picture-dealers had thought the sale worth their attention. One or two furniture-dealers who had come down had taken rather a fancy to the Romney. "It's a pretty thing, whatever it may be," said one of them. "I'd risk giving twenty pounds for it, as a spec." It was the general opinion that he ought to get it for less.

Mr. Jewit, who was cold sober for the occasion, opened the ball with a modest bid of one pound. The furniture-dealer went to thirty shillings, and was ironically requested by his companions to be careful. He and Mr. Jewit took it up to twenty pounds, and there the dealer came out, and the clerk that Franks had instructed came in. Presently the two men were raising one another by hundreds; the auctioneer was avoiding anything like a look of surprise, and the room was watching the duel with eager interest. At two thousand, Jewit, in accordance with his instructions, went straight to two thousand five hundred.

He stood there, looking determined and truculent, as if he were ready to go on betting all day on that scale.

"Six," said the clerk. "Two thousand six hundred," said the auctioneer. "Good evening," said Jewit. It was all over. Jewit walked out, and the men who questioned him did not get much information for their trouble. In the street Jewit hesitated for a minute; he was very thirsty. Then he decided to put business before pleasure, and made his way to the telegraph-office.

The clerk arrived at the same office a minute or so later, just in time to hear Jewit say to the girl behind the counter, "It's Levison, care of Gasless, London. Ain't my writing plain enough?"

"And this," the clerk observed to himself, "is pretty hot." Then he sent off his own wire to Franks, also care of Gasless, London. After all, it was none of his business. So far as he could see, the firm had been bidding against itself. There might be a reason for that, or it might be a blunder; anyhow, it was not his blunder. He was quite sure that he had carried out the orders that Mr. Franks had given him exactly.

In Mr. Franks's room the two partners sat and talked. They had just returned from a big sale, where they had done pretty well. Mr. Levison was in a good temper, and drank his whisky-and-soda with the beautiful feeling that he had earned it. Even Franks was distinctly less acrimonious than usual. There was a tap at the door, and a boy brought in the two telegrams. "Here is a funny thing," said Franks. "Two private telegrams, one for each of us, and both come at the same moment."

"Don't see much 'funny' in that," said Levison, as he tore open the envelope. He read the telegram and began to swear. He seldom swore, and possessed no fluency. He merely repeated the same word over and over again.

Franks looked up from his own telegram which he had been reading with a smile of perfect content. "Was there anything the matter, Levison?" he said.

"Oh, no!" said Levison, with savage sarcasm. "If a man curses, that is because everything is all right. Got any more fool questions to ask?"

"Dear me!" said Franks. "And that is the man who only the other day accused me of being quarrelsome! What a queer thing! Well, my friend, perhaps I may ask you what it is that is troubling you?"

"And perhaps you may do nothing of the kind. When those telegrams were brought in, you observed that they were private telegrams. Kindly remember that."

"But I was wrong. This telegram here was addressed to me personally, but it is on the firm's business all the same. I have bought a picture."

"What is it?"

"Well, I don't know exactly what it is. I have never seen it. I hope it will be all right. I've paid getting on for three thousand for it."

"Have you gone stark, staring mad, Franks?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Because you can't do that, and you know you can't do it. You can't buy like that without consulting me. I'll repudiate the thing altogether. No, you must be mad! Three thousand, or something near it, for a picture you've never seen, when you don't even know what it is. You ought to be locked up."

"A man who is a good judge thought very well of it," said Franks, as if in feeble self-defence. "And I had hoped to get it much cheaper. It may come all right one day. It may turn out very good. I should have consulted you, perhaps."

Mr. Levison was beside himself with rage. "You know very well what the terms of our partnership are; and you'll have to abide by them. I'll have nothing whatever to do with the transaction. You've bought this picture at an absurd price without consulting me— you may pay for it yourself."

"I have been a little irregular; but still, partners should stick together. One day you may make a mistake yourself."

"It's not a bit of use your whining. My mind's made up."

"That may mean a heavy loss for me," said Franks gloomily. "But if you will not share it with me, neither shall you share the profit, if there ever is any. No. You throw me over? Very well— then I will have that in writing." He scribbled a few lines on a sheet of paper and handed it to Levison.

Levison read it, gave a contemptuous snort, signed it, and tossed it back to Franks.

"And let that be a lesson to you not to try monkeying about with me."

Suddenly Franks's eyes blazed. He rose and struck the table with his fist. "No," he said. "It is you who will have the lesson. Here is another coincidence about those telegrams. Both came from Salden— yours told you that Jewit had been outbid— mine told me that I had bought the picture for the firm at £2,600. Now I keep it for myself."

"What are you jabbering about? I know nothing about Jewit, and my telegram's not from Salden."

"Very well. Show me the top of the telegram. If it is not from Salden, I will pay you a hundred pounds and apologise."

Levison swore. It was not a very effective retort. He also tore up the telegram.

"You give yourself away, you see. When you went to Salden, you left a catalogue on your desk. I looked at that. I read 'believed to be by Romney.' I did not like your manner. I felt almost certain, when I saw Jewit coming out of

your room— that drunken beggar whom you employed when you were on your own— a man that you said you'd never have in the office again— you meant to get that Romney for yourself. I sent Peters to buy for the firm, to beat Jewit, and not to bid at all unless Jewit did. You tried to do me; now you have done yourself, you swine!"

Levison was equally angry. "Be careful what you are saying. Repeat that and I'll half kill you. You've made a fool of yourself. It is true I sent Jewit to buy, but not for myself; it was for the firm, and intended as a surprise for you. And the picture could have been bought for a tenner if you hadn't interfered."

"Look out of the window," said Franks. "On that roof you see a common black cat."

"What about it?"

"Well, you may go and tell that story to that cat. To me it is no good."

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18: The Mendax Gold Saver

Erle Cox

1873-1950

Australasian (Melbourne), 14 Aug 1920

Erle Cox wrote a handful of comic stories about Major Mendax, a mad scientist of epic proportions

THE TROUBLE commenced with Merton. He invented a new process for treating low-grade gold-bearing soil. It was more simple than the cyanide process, and, according to Merton, would give payable results if applied to crushed bricks. His enthusiasm and Rashleigh's carefully reasoned arguments induced me to invest rather more than I should have in purchasing an interest in a syndicate to exploit Merton's invention.

It was this business that brought Merton and Rashleigh to my house one afternoon to settle some final details; and I think it must have been some devil of unreason with a warped sense of humour that urged Mendax to choose the time for one of his rare visits.

The inventor and the promoter were deep in their discussion, to which I was listening with all the intelligence I could muster when Major Mendax arrived. He came through the open French window, unheralded, and so left no opportunity for evading the infliction.

That he was intruding on a private conference must have been apparent even to Mendax, and an ordinary man would have apologised and retired, but Mendax had a code of social decency that was, praise be, peculiarly his own; he included the three of us in a general bob of his head, and strolling to the table at which we sat, he leisurely lowered his long, thin, body into the only vacant chair.

I had no course but to introduce him to my friends, who, in spite of their politeness, could hardly disguise their surprise at his inopportune appearance. If he noticed his rather frigid reception, Mendax chose to ignore it completely.

"Having a confab? Don't mind me. I'll just sit here and have a smoke until you have finished."

The position was awkward, but I turned to the others. "Major Mendax Is not interested in business matters," I said. "He will not mind in least if you go on talking!"

"Not in the least," echoed Mendax, pulling his pipe from his pocket, and settling himself back in his chair. The others looked rather upset, but, in response to a covert glance from me, commenced rather haltingly to take up their debate at the point where it had stopped so abruptly.

I had more than one reason for discomfort at the moment. First there was Mendax a intention of smoking. It was purely characteristic of him that lie affected a tobacco that belonged to the dark, ages, known as "Navy Twist," of appalling strength and odour. Rashleigh and Merton were both drawing at "Perfectos" that probably cost a florin apiece. My second cause for uneasiness Was that while he hacked up his abomination with a blunt penknife Mendax's eyes were riveted on the blueprints of the gold-saving plant that were spread on the table. I knew he could no more resist the lure of the blue prints than, a cat could resist cream. Presently he struck a match (on the leg of my table), and sent a cloud of poisonous gas into the atmosphere that blotted out the aroma of the "Perfectos" in one horrible spasm; and at the same moment his long, bony arm reached out and gathered in the blue prints.

Merton and Rashleigh paused in their talk, and the latter flung his half smoked cigar into the fireplace in disgust. I think it was only the imploring look in my eyes, and their recognition of my embarrassing position as host, that prevented an outbreak from both, but they resumed their talk with evident difficulty.

Meanwhile the culprit himself was obviously unconscious of having in any way offended. Jn justice I will say this much for him, that I do not think that the word of the business talk reached his understanding. We might have been a thousand miles away for all the interest he took. He just humped his ungainly body into a heap and pored over the prints, bearing a remarkable likeness to the well-known sketch by Furniss entiled, "Since when I have used no other."

For quite half an hour he sat sending out clouds of abomination. We took no further notice of him beyond opening another window and holding our handkerchiefs to our noses. Politeness had to make that much concession to Navy Twist.

Suddenly Mendax looked up, and his voice jarred into our talk. Circular saws might have been sharpened on His voice. "Who is Gordon Essex Merton?" he asked, tapping the blueprints with his knotty forefinger.

"I am," answered the owner of the name.

"Are you the same man who wrote an article on 'Static Electricity' in the March number of *The Engineer*?" went on Mendax, with evident interest.

"Yes," replied Merton, so briefly that it evident that his politeness was fast reaching its limit of perfect elasticity. Mendax ignored the very patent snub.

"Urr— You're doubtless then an interested amateur," he said smoothly (for him).

Merton stiffened in his chair, and Rashleigh ever a mail of action, watched him carefully through half-closed eyes.

"I am," spoke up the outraged inventor with crushing dignity, "the managing director and superintendent of the Vulcan Power Company, the latest concern of it kind in the Southern Hemisphere. I' hold three scientific degrees, and I am a Fellow of the Royal Society."

Vendax's lopsided smile showed one yellow canine tooth: "Urr. That may account for it. However, I merely asked because it so happens that I wrote a criticism on your article in the following month's issue of the same journal."

Merton grabbed the edge of the table in front of him, and with chin out-thrust he glared at Mendax with murder in his eye.

"Did you sign it. "M.X.?" he spat out.

Mendax nodded. "That was my *nom de plume*."

Merton breathed hard for a moment, then: "Let me tell you, sir, you're a damned insulting ill-bred scribbler of egotistical hogwash."

I knew Mendax too well not to know that he was enjoying himself thoroughly. He looked at me maliciously.

"Really, I can't help observing that your good friend's manners are almost as elementary as his knowledge of static electricity."

"And your methods and manners, sir, stink almost as vilely as your pipe," thundered Merton.

Rashleigh flung himself on Merton and pinned his arms, while I pushed Mendax back into his chair before he had time to uncoil himself properly. Merton's blind reference to his pipe was about the only tender spot on which he could have flicked Mendax.

It took ten minutes wrangle before the meeting regained some semblance of order, but the two men eventually subsided into a sort of armed peace that it would have taken very little to terminate. Mendax had gone as near to an apology as I had ever heard from him, which made me suspect that he had something to gain thereby. When the atmosphere became a little less electrical (the storm, had not, unfortunately, affected the thickness of it) Mendax said, "Sorry I hurt your feelings, but it was your signature on these blue prints that attracted my notice. If you hadn't been so thin-skinned--"

"Thin-skinned be hanged! A man would have wanted a chilled steel hide to put up with your—"

Here Rashleigh cut in. "What were you going to say, Major Mendax?"

"Merely," replied Mendax, "that these drawings strike me as being very remarkable. A gold-saving device, I take it?"

"My invention, sir," said Merton truculently, "and my plans, sir. The patents be long to a syndicate of which we three are members. They are remarkable," he went on with a bellicose air. "It's the most effective system that was ever invented," and his tone carried a challenge to Mendax to deny it.

"Urr— My dear sir, I find them very remarkable because the inventor has circled round and round and trampled over and over a very startling theory without having sufficient intelligence to discern it." He spoke as a much-tried head master would to a rather thick-headed boy. It took five minutes to induce Merton to take off his hat and resume his seat, and another five for their gross personalities to cease. Thank goodness, daring the interlude Mendax pocketed his pipe.

It was Rashleigh who poured oil on the troubled waters. Mendax's statement had roused his business instincts. "Do you mean to infer," he said, "that the system is capable of improvement?"

Merton had subsided into sulky silence, but he eyed his tormentor malevolently.

"Nothing of the kind," grated Mendax. "I do say, However, that the drawings contain the germ of an idea that is worth millions—"

"Fiddlesticks and flapdoodle!" This from Merton.

He might have said more, but Rashleigh quietened him with a gesture. He was a bloodhound on the trail how. I had heard Rashleigh say that he would sell churches to the Devil had there been any financial benefit accruing.

"Here," he said, "could you prove what you say?"

"Never say anything I can't prove," snapped Mendax.

"Well," went on Rashleigh, "here's a proposal. We want some more money in the syndicate." (That was true.) "Come in with us, and we will make you an offer for your work as well."

Mendax scowled at the blue prints, and then said, "I've made it a rule never to make commercial profit from my work. I like to keep my hands clean."

Rashleigh flushed.

"But in this case I will make an exception. My sole reason for doing so is to bring home to your interesting friend," here he looked at Merton, "what an absolutely futile mind he has."

Now Rashleigh knew as much of science as Mendax did of high finance, but he was a faultless judge of character, and had summed Mendax up to a nicety. "Would you be game to back your opinion to the extent of £500," he asked with a nicely toned hint of doubt in his voice,

For answer Mendax drew a cheque-book from his pocket, and spread it before him. "To whom shall I make it payable?" he asked, grabbing a pen; and when Rashleigh had told him he filled in the form with his awful scrawl, and then ripped it put and tossed it across the table.

"Hold on," said Rashleigh, "how long will you want to experiment?

"A week or ten days," grated Mendax. "I want these plans too," he said, gathering up the blue prints. Rashleigh nodded. Merton had reached a stage at

which cold rage had left him speechless. When Rashleigh passed over a stamped and signed receipt. Mendax promptly tore it in pieces and dropped it on the floor. Then he relit his pipe and put on his hat and, wonder of wonders, he shook hands with me, a courtesy I had never before known him offer anyone.

"Thanks, old man," he said, "for a very pleasant afternoon," and with scarcely a glance at the other two, he departed, leaving behind an evil odour of Navy Twist.

"A very pleasant afternoon," repeated Merton, softly. "May the good Lord spare me from being round when lie's having an unpleasant one," he added, piously.

Rashleigh turned to me. "By Jove, that is the Grand Master of the Order of Horrible Hogs. Is his cheque O.K.?"

"Good for another two noughts after it," I answered,

Merton glared at the ceiling, "Is that the Mendax who wrote the treatise on the ultra violet rays?" And when I answered in the affirmative, he said, "To think that such a beast could have written such a book."

EXACTLY one week afterwards Mendax rang me up and asked me— no, I had better be precise— ordered me to be at the Port Melbourne town pier at half-past two, and bring those two friends of mine as well. In answer to a question, I admitted that I was capable of managing a boat. He said he had secured a suitable one, which would be in readiness for us. He also mentioned that he did not care much whether the commercial animal turned up, but at all costs I was to have Merton at our meeting.

We arrived slightly before the appointed time, though I had had some difficulty in persuading Merton to make one of the party. I was obliged to admit that our outing included a boating expedition of some sort, the reason for which I could offer no explanation. Merton, whom I could hardly blame, contended that he didn't relish the prospect of the society of Mendax in a rowing boat even for a short period; indeed he claimed that he would feel cramped if he were on the *Aquitania* with him. Rashleigh shied at first until I pointed out that it would not be safe to allow Merton and Mendax to come into such close proximity without some controlling influence. I explained, to Rashleigh that he would, soon get used to Mendax's peculiar manner, and would not notice it. Rashleigh said that, while I might be right, he had never heard of anyone getting used to the toothache.

Exactly on time Mendax's big touring car stopped at the foot of the pier. As usual, he drove himself, because he could never get a man who would stay in his service longer than 24 hours. In the back of his car were a suitcase and a

wooden box about the size of a kerosene case. He lifted out the suitcase himself and consigned the other to my care. It nearly broke both my back and Rashleigh's by the time we had carried it to the waiting boat. Mendax remarked that it contained storage batteries; had he said a battery of artillery I would have credited it.

I will pass over our embarkation. Mendax did nothing but stand on the jetty and criticise. Merton, with wrath in his heart and vitriol on his lips, answered him nobly, so nobly indeed that Rashleigh confided to me that he left nothing for anyone else to say. When we pushed off Mendax and Merton were in the stern, I was rowing with my legs straddling the heavy case, and Rashleigh was in the bows. The boat was down by the stern a good deal, which did not add to my comfort.

We rowed to a spot about midway between the railway and the town piers, at the former of which lay the long black hull of R.M.S. *Malabar*, and there at the order of Mendax I ceased rowing and let her drift.

Then Mendax commenced his explanation to his audience of three, who heard his amazing address with very mixed feelings. To begin with, he stated that sea water contained on an average .06 of a grain of gold to the ton in solution, and that Merton's gold-saving scheme had given the idea by which it would be practicable to deposit this gold in a pure state on copper, in fact; roughly speaking, he had evolved an apparatus that would attract gold as a magnet attracts steel.

"If," he went on, "by using the apparatus I have brought with me I can procure, say, six or eight ounces of gold in the afternoon, then perhaps you will agree that I am not the fool of the party."

"If—" said Merton with undisguised contempt.

"We'll give it a flyer, anyway," said Rashleigh. "we owe it to the syndicate not to turn down a possible chance," but his words did not sound enthusiastic.

Mendax got to work. From the suitcase he produced what appeared to be a copper frame, from the edge of which, and from some bars which crossed it, depended some dozen pieces of copper tubing, about the length and thickness of candles, to all of which were run wires that were connected with two thick insulated wires, that were in their turn hitched up to a black box in the suitcase, and afterwards to the box containing the storage batteries.

After much adjustment the copper frame was securely lashed to a strong hemp-line, and under Mendax's directions Rashleigh and I lowered it overside to a depth of about thirty feet. After that we drifted, while Mendax and Merton wrangled over the storage battery, and performed rites from which we two ignorant ones were excluded by common consent. One point I gathered

from the riot in the stern was that the current Mendax was using would be effective over a radius of about two thousand feet.

Presently I noticed that we were drifting rather quickly, and were making straight for the *Malabar*, and just about the same time Rashleigh drew my attention to the behaviour of the line. Instead of dead weight of copper at the end of it, it might as well have had a lively and sizable fish on it, from the way it ran taut from the cleat to which it was fastened to an angle of 45 degrees with the surface.

I was directing Mendax's attention to the phenomenon, when the pull on the line swung the bow of the boat round, and before we could get the oars out our craft rammed R.M.S. *Malabar* amidships, with a jolt that sent Rashleigh sprawling, and bumped Mendax and Merton together in a manner which gave me intense satisfaction.

I expected to bear some remarks on our performance from the mail steamer, but, strange to say, the incident passed unnoticed, and in the few minutes that ensued we became aware that something was causing unusual excitement on board; sufficient, indeed, to cause even Mendax to notice it, even during the trouble we had to pull clear of the steamer's towering flank.

Eventually Rashleigh took one oar and I the other, and it was like pulling a barge to get the boat back to our first position between the two piers, for she had gone down by the head as much as she had been down at the stern before.

That the experiment was not going according to timetable I could judge from the scowl on the unlovely face of Mendax, and when Rashleigh suggested that the line had fouled something he agreed to an investigation.

An investigation was not such a simple matter after all. I found that I could not haul in unaided, and it took all the united strength of me and Rashleigh, and a large amount of advice from Mendax, before we drew the "fixin's" to the surface, and then we almost dropped it in our excitement when we saw what we had hauled up.

However, with a final heave, we landed the whole concern in the suitcase in the bottom of the boat. Then we sat back, and for a while the four of us stared into the suitcase and then at each other without being able to find words to fit the situation. It was an unforgettable sight. The whole frame with its pendant tubes was one mass of gold, not a mere coating, but an almost solid mass. It was gold that seemed to live, for it twisted and wreathed in festoons round the bars with that peculiar bristling appearance that iron filings have when magnetised.

Mendax was the first to speak.

"Switch off that current," he snapped to Merton, and in a moment the whole brilliant, glittering, mass subsided, leaving the copper bare and free from its glorious mass of wealth.

Then our tongues were loosened. Merton so far forgot himself as to pat Mendax on the back. and Mendax had so far forgotten himself as not to resent the familiarity. While we gabbled and shook hands joyfully, Mendax sat frowning at the mass of gold before him, occasionally running his fingers through it thoughtfully. Then he stooped suddenly, and before we could interfere he took the suitcase in his octopus-like arms, and, with a heave of his shoulders, he cascaded the whole glorious mass overboard. That he didn't upset the boat was a miracle.

To our howl of indignant protest he only grunted that we could easily get more when we wanted it, but that at present it behoved us to get back to the shore, and to lose no time in the going. No other explanation would he give, and there was nothing for it but to obey his orders and pull back to the pier.

He piled us into his car with the suitcase and the box of storage batteries, and drove in grim silence, with a twisted grin on his face, while we three excitedly spent large fortunes and indulged in mutual congratulations.

It was when we had pulled up at the Flinders street station, where we had asked him to drop us, that he spoke for the first time on the subject of his invention.

"If you men will take my advice, the lees you have to say about today's work the less you will have to regret. You may get congratulations, but unless I'm mistaken you are more likely to get five years quod apiece, me included."

The car slipped a way and left us mystified and upset.

I KNEW next morning what he meant when I opened my paper at breakfast. I read that a case containing 5,000 ounces of specie had been dropped between the pier and the boat while the *Malabar* was being loaded. Between the time it had been dropped and the time the divers had gone to retrieve it the case had been broken open, and its entire contents had been stolen. The police were trying to obtain a clue that would lead to the capture of four men in a rowing boat whose actions at this time were extremely suspicious.

I went to the telephone.

"Urr," grated Mendax in answer, "So you know now do you? I knew at once that it was all alluvial gold, and that we had tapped the wrong line. I suppose that case was smashed in the fall and the magnet did the rest. Anyway I've proved what an ass Merton is."

He rang off and that was the end. He point blank refused to let us into the secret of his invention, and said we'd value money more if we worked for it honestly, for his part he had enough for his requirements. Rashleigh stormed and raged and pleaded, and even threatened him with an action to force him to hand over his invention to the syndicate. Mendax only laughed uproariously and derisively, and asked Rashleigh how he would explain the incident of the *Malabar* gold when he was putting his case before the Court. Finally he relinquished all claim to the £500 he had paid into the syndicate, saying that it was worth that amount to settle with Merton.

Rashleigh summed up the situation.

"I said he was the Grand Master of the Order of Horrible Ham, and I withdraw the statement and apologise; the hogs have done nothing that I know of to warrant such an insult."

Merton is dead, and Rashleigh is, I believe, a munitions millionaire in the United States, and I am not very particular about the feelings of Mendax. Therefore I give the true story of the *Malabar* gold robbery, especially as the lapse of time would make it somewhat difficult for the police to work up a case, even by producing my narrative in court. I could always swear that it is founded strictly on fiction, and defy the law to prove otherwise.

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19: The Mystery on Daffodil Terrace

Percy Fitzgerald

Percy Hetherington Fitzgerald, 1834-1925

London Society, May 1862

THE HOUSE was pointed out by a young Arab of the crossing, who had been skipping on before the decent inquirer in black, as the manner of his tribe is. And he pattering away to his Augean beat, the decent stranger looks up through his glasses at the house with much relish— as though it were a ripe and luscious fruit. He seemed to have ample value for his money, and literally gorged his eyes with the prospect.

Had he been a miser he might have groaned over his misspent pennies: for the spot was advertised ever so conspicuously by a group of the great unclean— men and women of the broad rag world hanging about, in the middle of the road— leaning on the rails, and on the gate, kept fast locked, to have their full of staring. Scraps of this shabby community dribbled away at one end, while other scraps came and restored the fit balance at the other. And though no one of them could say that they expected the front to tumble flat like a "practical" scene out of a pantomime, or that the doors were to be flung open and they were to be invited in to hospitality, and be otherwise handsomely treated, still they all had some good purpose in staring at the house, and found the process satisfactory. They had been staring since eight o'clock on that morning, and would stare on until dark. And, it may be repeated, they had good method in their staring.

THE NEXT question is— for those not of the locality— what these units of the great corps of the unwashed were staring at. At a house; but this is too general. At number five, then, Daffodil Terrace— number five being but an inch out of so many hundred yards of neat, bright-red brick ribbon, reeled off in a terrace ad infinitum— a row of pantomime houses projected in *aeternum*— beautifully chastened, and in a manner Ruskinized by little edging and confectionery work of parti-coloured bricks, mainly mustard colour, and producing a very "tasty" effect. Contractor had done his work nobly and was actually reeling off miles of a similar pattern, just like an expert shopman at his counter— on the new building grounds out towards the country. But why should the unwashed, and the butcher-boy element, and the strap-and-pot element so fancy this special number five, particularly when They had a whole file, stretching to number two hundred and eighty or so to pick from? Why, the fact is, it was whispered that a very ugly business had taken place there that morning— very painful for the immediate family, and most undesirable for the neighbourhood, in reference to a letting or other view. The life of a line of

respectable tenements should move in smooth, equable course, and should not be disturbed by vulgar spasmodics. As it is with your true persons of quality, who have nothing marked in dress or manner, so with your true houses of quality. And yet here was nothing short of suicide, gross, flagrant, outspeaking suicide entailing a distressing publicity— and the whole notorious train of coroner, police, doctors, post-mortems, and the other disagreeable incidents. The curious part of the business was, that this was about the last sort of catastrophe mankind, in that neighbourhood, might reasonably have looked for.

For only a few days back they had been very busy with an expected nuptial rite, whereof the scene was to be in that very house. The actors, properties, incidents, and decorations of that ceremonial had all been in possession of the public for some time. The neighbourhood had been rife with the particulars. It was a common fund, in which all had a common interest. They knew the name of the man, the woman, his substance, her substance, what difficulties lay between— in short, the whole prelude of the thing. It was to be a very gay thing, and a very happy thing; much desired too by all parties. The name of the woman or girl (so people from within the rails told it to those without) was Margaret— Margaret Joy— an only daughter. The house was the house of the Joy family, father and mother; the name of the man, who was to take this woman for his wedded wife, was Mr. Hengist, a City person who had travelled, and the name of what lay upstairs, covered up with a sheet, was Martha Joy, wife of the house.

Now for this marriage, and this suicide, and the tangled yarn that led to both. Suicide lies up there in ghastly reality: marriage is scattered to the winds now, beyond hope of re-establishment

TO BEGIN by looking back a few years or so, when the Joy family first came to the decent neighbourhood, and the placid respectability of speckless brickwork. The head of the Joy family, then about forty-five; the gentlewoman who was titularly mistress, but in plain fact, a sort of lady-like upper servant, ordering meals and looking after all things— about eight-and-thirty. She and he bright brick house had about come together; for Joy, elderly as he was, had married and moved into the neighbourhood almost simultaneously. House and wife came together; house quite new and brilliant; wife second-hand and a little worn— nay, bringing with her drags impedimenta in the shape of human baggage— a growing youth— her only jointure as a widow. Joy, this ripe bride groom of forty-six, was a quiet, placid merchant-man, with a cold, dry, calm face, not overcharged with blood;— one who crept along the walls and dark lanes of life, keeping out of the light, and avoiding brushing skirts with all he

met— a tall man, a bent man, a slight man, a silent man, a man that had made money silently; without emotion or agitation had married, and moved into the staring brick neighbourhood almost simultaneously— a man that had been perhaps proved by fire in the earlier portion of his days; that had been wrung and wasted by the hot winds of tremendous domestic tribulation. It was said, indeed, that his whole family, mother, sisters, and one brother, had been swept away suddenly— in about a week's time— by a destroying plague, then epidemic. Such a bit of tragedy was in good keeping with that sad and impassive face, and might be read there in plain, bold figures. Some sort of tragedy had been scorched and seared into his face, and he wore the scars very palpably.

He then, wandering along this sad seashore, fell in with this Calypso of a widow, and finding she had some sort of balm, which, without curing, did somewhat allay the pain of his open wounds, took her in— love they were both past— she, perhaps, more moved by a sort of compassion or sympathy for the poor silent wayfarer. However, on whatever pretext, they were joined, and came to the house together, taking with them, too, her daughter, soft Margaret a sweet, milky-looking child, whose destiny it was to be passive in every possible relation of life. The son was an evil scapegrace, who had rushed away into open wickedness, and it had been well had he been never more heard of. But, unhappily, he showed himself, comet-like, at irregular intervals, and always under circumstances of dubious colour, in a sort of disreputable halo; so that this fitful manifestation, though satisfactory as allaying any personal fears that might be entertained as to his safety, was attended with such pain and discomfort to his surviving relation, that on the whole it had been better he had sunk at once forever into the limbo or worse place prepared for such disreputable meteors.

On the new Mrs. Joy these wearing sorrows told with nearly the same characteristic handwriting as on her husband's features. They had each their own private store of affliction; and what little balance of cheerfulness was over and above they spent with all good heart upon each other. And so they made their lives somewhat sweeter— after a fashion.

HE WAS in a sort of traffic or business, as has been already mentioned, and had brought together a decent sufficiency, to which he was daily adding. Thus the true bitter of sorrow, poverty, had not oozed into their cup. Grief is more tolerable when it can sob on soft cushions, and recline undisturbed, without work or labour, in handsome apartments. For such sorrows there are luxuries. And so they moved forward upon the even tenor of their way, inhabiting the bright vermilion house and, in some sort, one of the pillars of that select villa

neighbourhood. Naturally all persons round took pride in denizens of such position; and thus they moved forward steadily and peacefully-impelled by the sure hand of destiny— on to the fatal beginning of that end which has been shadowed at the opening of this story. For though we know that grim and pitiless Greek notion of fate has been swept away, still to us, who look down at the march of a story and its characters, it has very much the look of that old cruel force; and we see the men and women of the piece walking on unconsciously to their doom; and as they walked, the Chorus in those old Greek plays chanted *Ai! Ai!* compassionately bewailing their fate in, as it were, a monk's hymn.

THERE HAD come to live, some few doors below them, a wealthy man called Hengist, but of a somewhat curious nature. A man touching five-and-thirty, solitary, and hurrying with extraordinary swiftness down the headlong montagne Russe (roller-coaster) of old bachelorhood. He would have been at the bottom and lost irretrievably had not someone laid hold of him and checked him.

But of a very curious nature— suspicious, and slightly eccentric, which comes of living alone— an avaricious creature, which was strange in one so young; who had been abroad in India, and come home invalided, and tolerably wealthy; had been left more moneys; and now, too delicate to add more moneys still to that, had retired to watch life and look on jealously. Everybody, of course, had designs against his personal liberty; all— more particularly the women were banded together to suspend the Habeas Corpus specially in his behalf. Along those trimly carved walks female bandits were abroad. They lay in ambuscade.

And yet he was amiable in his character; full of charities, and the test of charities, local subscriptions. For him kept house a matron of tolerably and satisfactory antiquity. He read of the long evenings by his shaded lamp; walked abroad during the day; went into London now and again, but with terrible reluctance; and fancied he was killing weary days with good effect. So *he*, too, moved forwards, slowly, yet surely, to whatever crisis our modern Fate kept in store for him.

This was not so very long arriving. We may guess easily enough. These lonely wrecks are easy spoil. Betimes every morning, the soft, milk-faced girl used to go forth to take her country walk, as she fancied it, and inhale the morning air well charged with copious villa particles. Regularly would she flit by the window— somewhere near the same hour— where this Hengist would be seen framed in his huge sheet of plate glass, in a miscellany of urn and teapot and rolls, and the newspaper in full sail, making his lonely breakfast. Regular,

too, used this Hengist lift his head, and look out on her as she passed. The true, charitably-minded will see a purpose in this steady morning, artful baiting of traps, and such unhandsome hints. But she was wholly innocent of any such purpose. In the long file of shining brick mansions there was much more company, just as busy, and with about the same unflagging regularity. That breakfasting behind plate glass was an ordinary ceremony enough along the line of villas.

The course of these things we may all guess out pretty easily. In what comes by custom we take interest. This strange suspicious Hengist began to look for her regularly, as he did for his rolls and newspaper; and if rain or other reason hindered her coming, became uncomfortable, as though he had been defrauded of a portion of his breakfast. With him all women were more or less marauders— in respect to moneyed men at least; but here he was impregnable, and perfectly secure, for he could look on unperceived and unsuspected. By and by came opportunity, as opportunity will come always. The "administration" charged with the arrangement of such little matters contrived it by the agency of a lost dog, or bird, or kitten.

Bird it was. The young lady's parrot had one evening fluttered away, having a chain to its foot, taking the intervening walls like fences, and hotly pursued. Mr. Hengist was in his garden at the time, and captured it promptly. Presently the sad faced parent comes and knocks, and to him the prisoner was handed over— not, however, before he is bidden to sit down and rest, though he be not tired, and they condole with each other on some district grievances— ill scavengering, inefficient watering of streets, and the like. Then he goes his way. Such a foundation the other is not slow to improve. Sometimes they meet going into London, by rail or stage, sometimes along the public highway; the sad-faced gentleman accepting tolerantly rather than seeking him. By and by he gets on a stage further— still in his old cautious way; receding now with mistrust— now advancing— until at last he has entered, has been made known to the sober sorrowful mistress of the mansion, and to the damsel that was wont to trip past his window as he breakfasted.

He was not unamiable, this Hengist, and soon domesticated himself readily enough. Not one of them sought him. The parents were glad because they thought such an acquaintance would vary the somewhat monotonous existence of their daughter's life. For, odd as he was, his oddity came not of vacuity. He had seen much and travelled a good deal, and was ready enough with a dry speech and caustic remark, not altogether unamusing. So he was very soon dovetailed into their course of life: came in of evenings when it suited him, played cards, read books to them, or to himself when it pleased him, and on the whole found it a rather agreeable sort of club.

There was a cousin, too, who came out occasionally from London; a gay, open-faced, open-mouthed carle, rather boisterous, and wearing his heart, not exactly upon his sleeve, but displayed conspicuously upon every part of his person. The cousin, Wilsden by name, came out in rather conspicuous contrast beside the somewhat crusted nature of the other. He, in truth, rather looked down on him, as deficient; was merry at his expense, and gave him a private nickname. But he could rarely come of evenings; so that Hengist had a tremendous advantage over him. Night, after all, is the true season for social business.

Sometimes it flashed upon him that he was standing on the edge of a precipice— that here was a band of insidious plotters, artfully leagued against his person and liberty. At this notion he would take fright and stay away a week, sometimes two; until, as they made no sign, and did not come with violence to storm him in his castle, he was much relieved, and came back of his own motion, with a sort of penitential air. Then he would find the loud cousin in firm possession, and feel a sort of curious resentment within himself for having given him such an advantage. Perhaps it was a diluted jealousy.

So he came and went, and stayed away, and came again; and all the while was growing rather fond of this white-faced girl. The sad-eyed parents looked on from afar, and let him have his way. They did not see into these things; they did not heed them. The pale-faced child did not consider him much in any light whatsoever— just tolerated him; but it is to be suspected, was seriously inclined to the boisterous cousin. So the thing went on, but growing, in some shape, all the while.

The wild comet still reached its perihelion occasionally, and flashed upon the horizon as usual; but latterly with a steadily increasing recurrence. Every six months there was some fresh disgrace— every month— and presently every fortnight, or so. And for all these, rescues had to be found. By and by came bill transactions, ugly in character, and all but reaching to an exposé, but happily warded off at a large sacrifice. There was no end to these trials. The worn face of the parent became yet more worn.

WITH HER husband, also, things had not gone so prosperously of late. Real languid insouciance of affliction and *coeur brisé* (heartbreak) does not do for the world of business. A heavy loss came, and he looked on insensibly. He set himself, without much exertion, to repair this casualty, and did not succeed. Thus was much capital being nibbled. After all, what was dross to the poor *coeur brisé!* He only followed the thing for distraction's sake. And so the money began to drip— drip away through his fingers— like so much water. One evening he told his wife quite plainly that they should have to live very

savingly now, and stint themselves a good deal; for that he had met with very heavy losses, and nearly all his money was gone— a statement which she accepted with more trepidation and alarm than one would have expected from her dulled nature. But the fact was, at that moment it came most unfortunately, and she was thinking, not of herself, nor of that pale-faced girl, but of the wild, erratic comet, then gyrating with its most tremendous velocity, and committing the worst extravagances in its course. All along she had furnished secret supplies; fed its fires from her own private stores; pinched her own moderate expenses to have yet a greater surplus. And yet the drain seemed endless. It lay upon her as a tremendous weight, that this lost youth would one day break out into some great and indelible disgrace, such as would fix upon him the attention of the kingdom. And to avert some most horrible catastrophe, by evoking pecuniary emollients, was her pious aim. That destiny would bring such a thing about before the end came, she firmly believed; but her wish was to avert as long as possible what was to come inevitably. It was before her of nights; and disturbed even such unquiet dreams as she had. It made her restless during the day; and, above all, she had to carry this about within her, unsupported— for her husband had troubles sufficient of his own: and, indeed, had the errors of this scapegrace never very glaringly laid open before him.

Thus it will be seen what curious elements were all working together simultaneously within the spick and span red-brick house, each in a channel of its own, and mostly unsuspected by the others. The father had his private tribulation— the mother hers; the visitor, his little bit of disquietude; and the pale-faced daughter, such sorrow as she found in her parents' sorrow.

It was found, after some fruitless efforts to retrieve his ill-luck, that they had barely sufficient for a contracted existence, and that they must, before the end of the year, actually quit the staring brick house, and seek some more suitable residence.

On this there came a visible change in the pale-faced girl. She was gracious to the visitor; soothed his dudgeon; all but broke with the cousin. It looks doubtful, yet it came from the best of motives. She would save those she loved from shipwreck, at whatever risk or sacrifice. Cousins' loves must all go overboard when wreck is at hand.

AT LAST it came to one gloomy evening in the month of misfortunes, November— or at least that month which supplies fitting scenery and furniture for troubles of all kinds— when the two are sitting in the shadow, each with their own private weight of care upon their hearts. Things were coming to a yet poorer pass. The world was using them yet more and more cruelly still.

Something like a catastrophe was impending over their heads, and could not be delayed more than a month or so. His was not the mind for a crisis, and therefore ill-suited to finding out a remedy. His was not a bold, fighting nature, that would struggle before it would die, but would surrender tamely, and without a blow.

To the door then comes the scarlet postman of the district, and a letter is brought. In troubled times all letters bring evil news, or, at least, are expected to do so. This one was opened by Mrs. Joy, and read privately in her own chamber:

Madam,

I am sorry to be obliged to communicate to you so unpleasant a piece of intelligence as this letter contains, but it is better for you that you should learn the worst at once. A bill was presented to me for payment a few days since, bearing what appeared to be my own signature.

I saw at once it was a forgery, and had no doubt whose was the hand that did it. As you are aware I had been obliged to discharge your son from my employment about a month ago; but he was very soon discovered, and admitted the charge.

I have long hesitated between my duty to public justice and to friendship, as to what course I shall take in this matter. However, feeling for your situation acutely, and knowing that you have other troubles sufficient, I would be willing on receipt of the sum (£150) to forego any further proceedings in the business. I hope it will be a lesson to the young man.

The money I must have in a few days, as the bill must be taken up.

I am, dear madam, yours, etc.,

Jaspar Brown.

This was a terrible stroke— both the moral blow, as well as the physical inconvenience. Moneys were not to be found now; and this was truly the last straw breaking the camel's back. And yet it did not come with such a shock; for previous misfortunes had toned them to a suitable frame of mind. And so they sat on, in the gloom of that miserable evening, without proposing remedy or relief, until their daughter, now out for some time, came in.

SHE WAS nervous and shy, and somewhat flurried. She had a wonderful piece of news to break to them which she did almost joyfully. She had been out walking; had met Mr. Hengist, who had turned around and walked with her; had spoken with her seriously, and in that odd, jerky way of his had actually proposed to her. He was very good, very generous, and all the rest of it; and she was sure in time she would come to like him. So for that night, at least, the angel of trouble folded up his wings. The clouds were dispersed, the mists and unwholesome damps of pecuniary embarrassment were shattered. There was jubilee in the bright brick house. Still, for the present, money was

lacking; and though things pointed to the new bridegroom as deliverer, there came difficulties in the way, which effectually cut off that hope of rescue. For this curious nature of Hengist was so strange and flighty, there was no knowing at what turn it would be scared and take flight.

And in an early interview with the father, it was very soon apparent that this was dangerous ground. For when it was told to him that no fortune could be offered to him with the girl, he fell into great disorder, and spoke of mistakes and misapprehensions, and finally said he had been deceived, and went his way, leaving them with the impression that all was over. There are rich men who think it due to their dignity that riches should be brought to them. So for three or four days he was not heard of; but then re-appeared as usual, and made no further allusion to the money question.

Then came another difficulty. From him had to be concealed the whole of the pecuniary difficulties; for he often made loud proclamation that he had a horror of bankrupt men and women— that such persons seemed to be decayed and mouldy, and to be eaten away with the leprosy of debt. He used to add, too, that he took such pride in his father-in-law being a sound, substantial man; and that here after they would one day join their capital and work wonders in the fiscal world. This was a favourite theme of his, and he laid out grand schemes sitting with them over the fire; and pointed with unutterable disgust to such and such a one who had broken down and failed. All the while they listened ruefully, and with a flutter at their hearts.

Pity them we must, for they knew not where to turn: and the girl herself was wholly innocent, for they had been careful only to let her know in a misty way of their embarrassments. Then there was another and last difficulty. For a few weeks, indeed, by desperate exertion, they might tide over the danger: but here was this man very slack indeed about his nuptials. He must have time to wind up his affairs. He must go up to the North to sell houses or lands; in short, there must be a couple of months, or six weeks at the least, before he could be ready. And his humour was so fretful; it was dangerous to press him much by way of remonstrance or argument. And, by and by, he gave up that shiny brick house of his in the Terrace, meaning to take one in London— and went away, as he said, to wind up his affairs for matrimony,

THE BUSINESS of the scapegrace son had been tided, though temporarily, by the agency of a short bill at three weeks. Mr. Jaspar Brown, a matter-of-fact businessman, had agreed to stay destiny by execution, for that brief span. But this they knew to be but a poor shift— a mere staving off, by the very frailest barrier. And though here a sort of delivery was held out to them with one hand, there was a certain inevitable thunderbolt of destruction menacing them

from the other. No possible mode of extrication could they discover. Poor suffering souls! Theirs was not the spirit of youth, fertile in devices, daring and vigorous. Misfortune had made them sluggard. And so they were hurried along, through the gloom and shadows, to the day of reckoning, for sins scarcely their own.

And the day of Joy, too, drew on with equal speed. Hengist, the bridegroom, reappears by-and-by, elated, buoyant, having wound up all things, but more than ever repugnant to broken, bankrupt men. Joyful too was the girl, for she saw deliverance from these gloomy times close at hand— deliverance for herself and parents. Dark care sat beside them alone, and yet they told not of the Nemesis that hung over them.

And so the days wore on. All this time the future bridegroom stopped with them, for his home was gone, and he was shrewd and saving, like all rich men.

He had the best bedroom, and was made much of, as was only fitting— at least for the short span the thing would hold out to. Often he said to his future father, regretfully, “Could you not make me out some little money— say five hundred pounds— three— two— one hundred?” And the other had to take refuge in some poor weak pretence about a vow, and about all coming to her eventually, after his death. And the marriage-day was now good three weeks away, and Nemesis but a day or two!

From Jaspar Brown delay had been begged, nay, implored, in piteous letters from Mrs. Joy. Which procedure rather fortified that gentleman in his stern denials; all humblings and self-abasements in money matters being, as is well known, the most fatal instruments. They are confessions of weakness and danger. In a stiff letter Jaspar Brown buttoned up his pockets and refused an hour’s delay. He was astounded at such ingratitude; disgusted, perhaps, at a man reputed wealthy breaking up so disreputably. The law should take its course. Not an hour— not an hour. Nemesis advancing slowly.

OF A SATURDAY evening Mrs. Joy is sitting dismally over her fire; the others have gone out, and will be in by dinner-time. A weary Saturday; always a day of battle, of siege, of expostulation and entreaty. The gates and approaches were now tolerably clear, and Mrs. Joy sitting over her fire. Suddenly a knock, and she draws a deep sigh, for she knows here is yet another battle to fight, when she thought all was over for the day. She goes out wearily on the old errand, and is face to face with two shabby, scrubby fellows, whose type proclaims itself even to those who have never before been acquainted with it. The flaming red muffler and heavy sticks were sufficient. *We* know these sort of men, and their errand. So did the poor woman then, without the aid of that fluttering piece of paper. They were sheriff’s men, and they were now in

possession. These were civil and considerate fellows on the whole, and gave no pain in working out their dirty work.

Her wits nearly deserted her at the first, then came back to her with an extraordinary force and vitality. What was to be done? What *could* be done? Time but a few minutes; for they might return at any moment. Servant abroad, in garden or yard, so that exposure was happily spared. At this moment not a soul in the house but she herself and those earthly emissaries. And there were twenty pounds or thereabouts— about as much use as twenty pence— a mere scrap. *But there was more money than that in the house!* There was absolutely no help near. The very sight of those sheriff's aides-de-camp— in their drab uniform— waiting in the hall, scared her. The bare notion of that process of the law maketh the heart sink; and praying to these coarse emissaries for a few moments' grace, she fled away, shrinking, fluttering, and almost gasping with terror, to her own room, there to strive desperately and see if anything in the world could suggest itself. At such a crisis, hemmed up into a moral corner, with such cruel wolves at the gate, no wonder if the wildest, even the most unlawful thoughts of extrication, suggested themselves importunately. Someone had received moneys for sale of interest in lease— or lands— and had gone to London too late for banking hours, and had brought his moneys back, and had surely not taken them out with him in his walk. They were lying, in all probability, upstairs in that leathern case of his, in the best bedroom— good yellow gold and notes. We must not judge this poor broken soul too harshly. Think of the two figures before her, now masters of the house; think of the foul associations connected with such ministers; think of those who were walking home with sure steps, and perhaps now not a hundred yards away; think of the fair marriage hanging on a thread; think of black despair at her heart, clouding her eyes, and senses, and moral conscience; think of these things, and let us pity— if we must condemn— that poor frail creature now stealing upstairs.

THERE, the air is cleared; the foul sheriff's ministers are gone; but not a minute too soon, for here return the trio from their walk, two very gay and cheerful. That evening passes by; so does the Sunday morning, and public worship, at which all attend. Not until the noon of Sunday does Mr. Hengist come tearing down from his room crying aloud that he has been robbed; that he is undone; that he is ruined; that he will bring everyone to justice.

There is the usual *esclandre* (scandalous talk) and hubbub. Policemen enter; search, and inspect, and inquire. Three hundred pounds nearly. It is a heavy loss. On whom does suspicion naturally rest in such cases? On the servants. Call them up: and some wretched trembling Susan, or Mary Jane, I

brought in and put to the question. She cries and sobs circumstances of strong suspicion. Strange to say the box had been neatly opened with a false key; but no key could be found. Still there was nothing beyond suspicion, until in the passage leading to the kitchen, or scullery, or outhouse, was found just such a little Bramah key, which Mrs. Joy identified as hers. This was enough; and Susan or Mary Jane was led away disgracefully in custody.

All this while Mrs. Joy said not a word, looking quite stony and immoveable. Her eyes had a cold, glassy stare. She was as that Nemesis of whom we have been speaking. She was determined to go through with her part, whatever she had undertaken. And she did it bravely; for it is a painful and unpleasant thing to have such a scene in a respectable family. Then when all was over, and the purloining maid taken away, she passed upstairs to her own room.

Hengist was nigh to being distracted, and sat at the fire moaning over his lost treasures. Mr. Joy took his daughter into another room, and told her wearily of what she had not known before. He was tired of the struggle, he said. It must end in a day or two. He could fight it off no longer. It was better that she should know all at once.

This unfortunate business of the robbery would finish it. Tomorrow; he saw, would bring the end. She was much confounded at such speeches, yet soothed him affectionately, telling him that all would yet be well. He was to cheer up, and all would yet be well. Ah! vain, but fond speech! There is a day when all will yet be well— yet how far away.

She trips off, and passes into the parlour, where there is the other still moaning over his lost ingots. She sets herself to sooth him, humouring him, encouraging him with hope that they will be found. He is at first sour and pettish. But it is hard to resist that sweet face and voice. It was this man's bent of mind to be cheerful, and before very long she had brought him to be tranquil, to say, what did he care for a few guineas? that he had plenty more as good; with other speeches to the same tune.

Then on this favourable basis she went something further. She brought him to remark what dismal, downcast faces her parents bore, and to ask what sorrows troubled them. Gently she broke it all to him, saying it in a sweet voice, telling him even of that immediate danger which was to come tomorrow. "It is better," she said, "that you should know these things now than later; I myself have only learnt them this evening. I thought we were rich and flourishing; it has turned out otherwise. It is not fair to you that you should enter into our family not knowing of these things; and therefore it is only right that you should be set free."

Hengist was much astonished at this straightforward proposal. That it should have come from him, he could understand; but from her, it was utterly incomprehensible. He was troubled. At first he almost thought there must be something behind, some little plot or deception. Then he became aggrieved. Why did she treat him in this way? what had he done? It has been mentioned that his was a very curious nature; not very firm or vigorous, and full of contradiction. Presently he had forgotten his money losses, and had fallen into a generous mood, and was ready even to furnish such aid as might ward off present difficulties.

WITH A LIGHT HEART she flew to her father. He took it placidly: he was past any violent emotions of joy or sorrow. “You have saved us,” he said; “you are an angel. But run now and tell your poor mother, she is in her room upstairs, and takes this to heart more than any of us.” The angel kissed her father’s pale forehead, and bade him be of good heart. “We shall all be very happy together yet,” she said; “bright days are in store for us.” And she glided away very softly upstairs. That sweet-sounding but delusive anthem has been sung over and over again. The night of troubles in this instance was passing away, and it did seem fairly open to them to suppose that here a glimmer of dawn was breaking. It was likely they were all going to be very happy.

From many weary and wakeful nights it was natural that the poor woman of sorrows upstairs should be seeking a little rest during the daytime. And so her daughter entered cautiously and on tiptoe, fearing to disturb her.

It was growing on to be very dark, and through the window came but a half-light. No doubt she was sleeping profoundly. And yet, dark as it was, there was light to perceive that on the table lay a letter or packet newly folded and directed. There are occasions when there will be a chain of arguments in the sight of a straw; and a sudden instinct made her turn to the bed where the dark shadowy figure was lying, in her daily dress, so profoundly still and motionless, that—

She darted to the bedside, and then she saw it all.

NOW WE CAN GUESS at the secret of that crowd of unwashed waiting outside the railing of the bright red house on that Monday morning. The coroner came that day; and his jury came; and policemen came. There was not much investigation needed. There was the unfailing little phial, with the strange scent; and the doctor came and told his story. It was very clear. The packet, however, was not submitted to those intelligent persons, for it contained a confession so piteous and dismal— the last outpouring of a heart broken, and a spirit crushed. Well might the old formula of insanity—

temporary or not— be read in the daily papers; often but a fiction soothing to afflicted relatives, but in this instance to be regarded with all indulgence. Decayed and deserted, the whole story may be now read in that tenement itself! A blight has seized it, and I do not believe that any projected marriage ever took place.

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20: The Forest of Lost Men

Beatrice Grimshaw

1870-1953

The Blue Book Magazine, Aug 1934

English born journalist and best-selling novelist of the 1930s who lived much of her life in Papua, where this story is set.

I DON'T MIND talking to you (he said)— you've been in the big bush yourself, and you know.

It's those new chums I can't stand, the fellows out from Home that knows it all before they ever set foot on a coral beach. They know everything, and they believe nothing; if you tell them anything that couldn't have happened at four o'clock in the afternoon in the Strand, London, they think right off you're "having the loan of them."

It was one of that kind that went up the Kikiramu with me the year after the war; he couldn't learn anything, he thought— but the Kikiramu learned him.

His name was Harlow, a nice fellow enough, if he hadn't been so sure and certain that human knowledge began and ended with what they stuff down their throats in lectures. Cambridge, he was— science of some sort; one of the lost chicks of them exploring expeditions that come out every year in the dry, to find what no one's ever found before. And maybe some of them does find it, those who get fever and die; but the rest of 'em never finds much beyond the last plantation in the hills, where they can get a drink.

And they spend their money, and go home, them who can; but the rest stops, and sometimes it's bad for them. I've known one to sit down in an armchair in broad daylight in front of a hotel and blow his brains out with a revolver that was bought but not paid for at the store.

Harlow hadn't got to that yet; he had a bit left, and he was all on to gamble and make it more, like they do in the books about Monty Carlo. I'd been south with a good shammy (to Sydney with a lot of gold), and I was back, broke. Where there's gold in New Normandy— and it isn't an island proper, but a country of itself, so gold takes finding— I'll find it. I've lived that way, cleaning up a thousand or so a year, but spent it as quick as it came, ever since the Second Jubilee.

Well, we got together, and went up the Kikiramu, mates. You know how it is when you're mates with a man; you've got to find the best in him, and he in you; and you've got to stick, no matter what happens. I could tell you things— but you've lived in the bush yourself: you know....

After we'd had a week together on the river, crawling up and camping among the alligators in the mud, and being bit by sand-flies and mosquitoes about all the time, though sometimes worse, I got to like Harlow quite a bit, because all the time I was learning him, and it's natural.

I learned him to "crack hardy" when it rained on us twelve inches in six hours, and the flour got melted, and the bed-sacks, so that you could have wrung a horse's ration of water out of them. And when we walked so far the first day we landed that we ached too much to sleep, but by four o'clock we had to be up and on, for a worse day! Things like that. It done him so much good, you wouldn't believe.

But for all I was making him over, I couldn't get him to change his mind about the things and people in the bush, which he knew nothing of any more than a monkey knows about mathematics. Of course, he let on he knew everything.

We got to the field, which was at the bottom of a river gorge thousands of feet deep, and I staked claims for both, and we set our boys to work getting down to the wash. There was unknown tribes about us in the bush, which was a hundred or two feet high, and as thick as hairs on a new hair-brush. I didn't take any notice of them, and they took none of us, except sometimes when they came and pegged spears among us, themselves hid so that you couldn't see 'em. I'd fire a shot at random, and let it go. But Harlow, he was keen as terriers after rats, about those useless heathen. Keener than he was after the gold. Most of the work was done by me, in fact; as soon as he knew (for I was fool enough to tell him) that the Lakalakas was unknown to whites, you couldn't hold him.

"Let them alone, and they'll let you alone," I told him, one night when we were sitting together as far away from the boys' camp-fires as we could get, fighting mosquitoes over a little smoke of our own. "If once you get them snake-headed," I told him, "they'll show their spite— catch a boy and roast him alive on a stick, maybe. They're used to being shot at," I told him, but don't you go trying to find any of their villages, not if you value your life, and want to keep your signed-on labour."

He said, sitting there over the smoke, with his face dirty, but white under the dirt, and his eyes as big and blue as a girl's full of that sort of ginger that one likes to see: "The name of science," says he, "is sacred," says he. "If I don't come to the claim tomorrow," he says, "you'll know I've gone to look."

He didn't come. That was the best day we'd had so far; it was Saturday, and I cleaned up, and it ran about a hundred ounces for the week; so, if you understand, I was pretty busy, and pretty well pleased, and hadn't much thought left for young Harlow. I reckoned he'd be all right.

When he came back, he dropped like a pig when you club it, right in the doorway of the tent. "I'm done," he said. "But oh, Tim Monahan," says he, "I'm so happy I could die this minute!"

Then he told me what he'd seen. He had that sort of beginner's luck makes a man lift gold out of a creek first time he tries, and maybe never again. He'd found what no one else had found,— a village of the Lakalakas— and they hadn't killed him for doing it. They were more or less pigmy, he told me, not the size of a boy of twelve, but bunches of muscle, and all naked except for boar-tusks and shells; and they had spears all carved and painted, like the ones they use to peg at us in the dark. He danced before them and sang, to show it was peace, and they were that pleased they took him by the hand, and led him to the men's house, which was full of all manner of queer things— heads and dried guts, among them. And it was too dark for photos, but he said, when he went away, "I'll come back," and made signs about returning.

"What do you think of it?" says he.

"I don't think," says I. "I've enough to do looking after two teams of boys and two men's claims, without taking time off to think."

"I'm sorry," says he, all grieved. "I didn't— I'm afraid I've not been exactly playing the game; but after I've got my photos," says he, "it'll be all right." And he went to sleep.

I called up my head boy by and by, a wicked young savage that I liked quite a bit, and he knew it, and would tell me things.

"What do you reckon they let him go for?" I said. "I remember a mate of mine when the Wakaka field brake out, that was taken and eat alive for less— eat by bits, cutting off what they wanted. And I went through a village for it, afterward.... What do you reckon?"

The boy said, straight away: "They think him mad."

"Oh!" says I. I understand. Savages won't kill a madman. But they will do queer things to him, if he gets across their hawser, in a way of speaking.

The boy stood up in the firelight, with the smoke curling round him like he was some picture of a heathen god in the clouds; a fine chap he was, clean as bronze, and clever in his own way; and it came to me then, how little we knew about any of them, after all.

"The Lakalakas," he said, "are very great sorcerers."

I didn't laugh, at that; nor you wouldn't. You know....

"Well," said I, passing him out a fig of tobacco, to keep him going, "what sort do they do?"

He said something then that I can't translate; it was a native word meaning something like enchantment, putting spells on you; but, if you get me, it had to do with your surroundings too, and the way they was related to you.

"Oh," says I at once, "you mean the cursed forest."

He didn't say any more; he bit the fig of tobacco, and moved away, and I knew he meant: "You've got enough for your money." So I shut up.

But I thought a bit that night in spite of what I'd said about thinking; and in the morning I said to my mate: "You've got a nice little locket hanging on your watch-chain."

"If I have," said he, "whose business is—"

"I'm not asking what's in it," I said. "I lay she's a bonzer little lassie, anyhow. I reckon you'd better think about her, and think twice, before you set out after them Lakalaka men again. You got away once," says I, "and I reckon they won't kill you; but—"

"You mind your mining," he says, "and I'll attend to my science."

Well, I don't believe in interfering with people's fancies, even with the best intentions; many a man has spoiled a nice profile doing it. So I said no more. But I noticed him opening up the locket, later on that night, and looking hard at what was inside. If I happened to be walking behind him just at that moment, it was no fault of mine; and if I had a girl with that kind of hair that shows gold even in a photo, and eyes like hers, I wouldn't mind anybody taking a look.... She was handsome enough, too— I don't mean Harlow's lass. But she couldn't do with the mining; women are that way. And gold-mining, you never know how the years go.... I pay a bloke in Sydney to keep a few flowers on her grave, but most like he drinks the money…

Well, I'm sorry; this isn't my yarn. I meant to say, that Harlow was as near as nothing to taking my advice, and keeping off of the Lakalakas. But he didn't. And next day he went out, and didn't come back.

When he'd been away a day and a night, I started after him. I took two or three carriers with me, loaded no more than thirty pounds apiece, because I thought there was maybe going to be work. One of them was the boy I'd been talking to; Hanua was his name.

"If you see one of the Lakalaka dogs," says I, "sing out." For though you never see one of the tribe unless they wanted, the dogs gave them away sometimes, coming and going for a drink, or looking at you out of the bush; small black dogs they were, that never made a noise, and didn't look natural nor real. Like the ghosts of dogs that have died and gone to hell, I used to think.

To walk through that country, it's like an ant going up and down the teeth of a comb. We climbed till the sweat ran off us like rain off a roof, and we went down sliding, and climbing again; and so it went on all morning till about one o'clock, when I called a halt, and got out the food.

WHILE WE were eating our tin and biscuit, Hanua, sitting near me, caught me by the arm and pointed. The small wicked face of a black dog was looking out of the bush, just where you couldn't have taken two steps without cutting your way. I think it smelled the tinned meat, but it would come no nearer, not even when I threw a bit at it. It just lifted its lips and cursed us, like, and then it wasn't there.

But now I knew the Lakalakas was following us.

So did the carriers; and before I had time to do anything but pull my revolver out of my belt, not even time to threaten them with it, they had dropped their loads and was away. You can't follow a naked native into the bush. In two minutes, with hardly as much noise as would wake a sleeping cat, they had got down the side of the nearest gully, and was running along the stones at the bottom; and that was all I ever saw of them again. Or anyone else.... What? I don't know, and I don't want to think; some of them was decent boys enough.

Hanua, he finished chewing the wad of meat and biscuit he had in his mouth, and then he says: "You-me go look, suppose you die, me die." And he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and stood up. And I clapped him on the shoulder, and I says: "Suppose no die, you live with me."

It was up and down again after that, up and down fit to break the heart of a goat or any army mule, only neither one of them could have gone where we were going. And hot. And there was snakes; I trod on a tiger snake, and he just missed me; and one of them pythons swung out of a tree, yards of him, at Hanua, but Hanua slashed his head off with his clearing-knife, and never looked behind. We didn't have any time to spare; we were making for the village in the hills, and wanted to get there before dark, always provided the Lakalakas didn't spear us first.

Why they did not, considering they must have been following all the time, was what I didn't understand, and didn't much like. We saw no more of them, nor their dogs. And when we come, after an hour or more, on a bit of flat ground, the relief was that wonderful that I could have laid down and slept, just where I was.

It was thick with forest, bigger and blacker than any I had seen before. I couldn't remember the like of the trees, not exactly; they had red papery trunks, that bled like arms and legs when you hit them; and their leaves, a good way up, were long and thin like worms. A kind of fir-tree, maybe, but I didn't know it. It smelled bad in there, the sort of smell there is in a butcher's shop on a hot day; but there was nothing to account for it— it seemed just to be in the air. The bush ropes that tangled everything together, and that you had to cut through, same as in other places, wasn't like common bush ropes,

not plain brown and green; but they was spotted red, and dirtied up with white, as if some one'd been spilling blood and brains on them.... What? Oh, yes, you do see that sort of thing in the bush, but not that much of it.

I stood on the edge of it all looking in, and I didn't like the look of it, but it was on the line I'd marked out with the compass, and we couldn't afford to waste time. So in we went, and Hanua, he pulled a long breath or two through his teeth, and said nothing, but I knew what he thought.

"Come on, old son," I says, clapping his shoulder. "It can't take us ten minutes to go through, judging by the lie of the hills and the river, and I don't hold with that heathen rubbish, anyhow." For you see, there was chat about that place, though no other white man had ever seen it; and they said that it was cursed, in a way, and that when you got in, you couldn't get out again.

YOU MAY believe me or you may not, but I've looked up the place since, and there isn't room for it, anywhere, unless in a spot that's no more than half a mile across. Judging, that is, by the lie of the river, which we did map out careful, and did know— rivers with gold in them gets mapped out soon and good. I tell you, there's no room for it— but all the same, the boy and I walked all afternoon, and we didn't get across it. The compass was no good; I reckoned there must be an outcrop of ironstone somewhere about, though I can't say I seen it. We blazed the way as we went, and we didn't come back on any of our blazes.

When it came near dark, we undid the bit of tarpaulin that we carried instead of a tent, and we didn't light any fire, because of the Lakalakas. And Hanua and me, we sat down beside one another, because I reckoned he was a man, for all he was a naked savage, and we talked a bit, quiet, in his own native talk.

He says: "This is the Forest of Lost Men."

I says: "I've heard of it, but I don't understand. What is it?"

He says: "The sorcerers of the Lakalakas are greater than any other sorcerers, and they have put spells, big spells, on this place, and it goes for miles and miles. And it isn't really there, more than a little bit of it," he says: "but once you get into it, you go on walking and walking, and you walk till maybe you die."

"*Koi-koi*!" says I, which is what you say in the Islands, when you mean damn nonsense.

"No *koi-koi*," he says, and sits with his head on his hand.

We never slept; it wasn't a place to sleep in. There was queer noises, like children crying, but there weren't no children there. You weren't quite sure if you was there yourself; but all the same you knew, worse luck, that you was

nowhere else. When the light came, late, through all those trees, we up and ate a bit. And we walked. And we walked. Like they used to do in Flanders, when the roads was a thousand miles long before a halt. And we walked.

And that night we slept a little, but we were hungry, because the food was near gone. And next day we walked. And we walked. And there was almost nothing left to eat, and no water except what we licked off the leaves of the trees in the early morning. And all the time it was the dark trees with the wormy leaves, and the bush ropes spotted dirty white and red. There was no footmarks, nor anything of that kind; but we found a bit of necktie stuck on a thorn, and it was blue with stripes, the colour of Harlow's school tie, which he thought a lot of. So we knew we were on the right track, if that was any good to anyone, we being all in the same box now.

End of the next day, Hanua says: "They been following us somewhere outside this place," he says; "and when we drop, they'll come in. The sorcerers will come and take us away," he says, "and even the dogs will be full tonight," he says.

All of a sudden I gave a whoop. "The dogs!" I says. You see, I'd got an idea. I was a cattle-hand once in the Northern Territory, and it learns you to be quick. Or dead.

"I reckon," I says, talking to myself for a bit, "that you can't enchant a dog. If there's such a thing as enchantment. Because," I says to myself, "you must have a soul for them games, and a dog he has no soul."

WE'D KEPT one little bit of meat for the last, and I took it, and used the last of the matches to make fire with. And I hung the meat before the fire on a scrap of bark fibre, and I cut myself a length of small bush rope, tough as a whip. And I waited.

It was near half an hour before the thing I was waiting for, happened. Just as the light was beginning to go, at the time those dogs come out to get a drink in the rivers, and hunt food in the bush,— because their masters they don't feed them, except when there's plenty of roast enemy about, just then, I saw a small black wicked face looking out of the bush, and a small black snout working up and down, at the smell of the cooking meat.

Hanua, he didn't move no more than one of the trees, and I stayed quiet. The dog put out its head, and half its body, and then it stopped. But that was enough for me; I had the loop of the bush creeper around its body, from twenty feet away, before you could wink,— and it kicking like a roped bullock, more than you'd think that anything ten times its size could have done.

We got the tarpaulin over it in a minute, and it bit right through it like it was an alligator, and near took a piece out of me. It did get a bite at Hanua, before we had the rope knotted safe around its neck, and let it go.

We kept hold of that rope the way a drowning man keeps hold of the life-line they throw him from the beach. And we followed the dog, where it went. And in ten minutes— you may call me a liar if you like, because it don't make any difference to me— we were out of the wood, and it was only a black patch of trees behind us, looking not much bigger than you could throw a stone across.

We cut the line, and let the little devil of a dog go; and Hanua, he burned his arm with a firestick, to take the poison out. And we got back to the camp, I don't just know how, for it came on dark in no time at all, and the compass was still crook— is to this day.

Afterwards we had all the men on the field out looking, and maybe we found the wood that was cursed, and maybe we didn't; there was nothing to tell us. If we did, it wasn't working, for nobody got lost. But I reckon we never came across it at all.

We didn't find Harlow, either. Only the other half of his necktie, floating down the river, miles away....

What? Oh, no, they don't kill lunatics; and they didn't kill him. He turned up again, like his necktie. It was in Sydney, a year after, and no one knows to this day what he saw, or how he got down to the coast again. The yarn he pitched— and he quite believed it— was that he had looked for the Lakalaka villages, didn't find any, never saw the tribes at all, and had an attack of fever in the bush that took away his memory.

I don't know about fever. Something did; that's sure. The less you know about those matters, the better; I'd sell a lot of what I remember, for half of nothing with the tail cut off.

I sent his share of the gold we won. It was after that that he got married, to the girl in the locket.... Me? No. The bush has got me, and you know what that is.

End