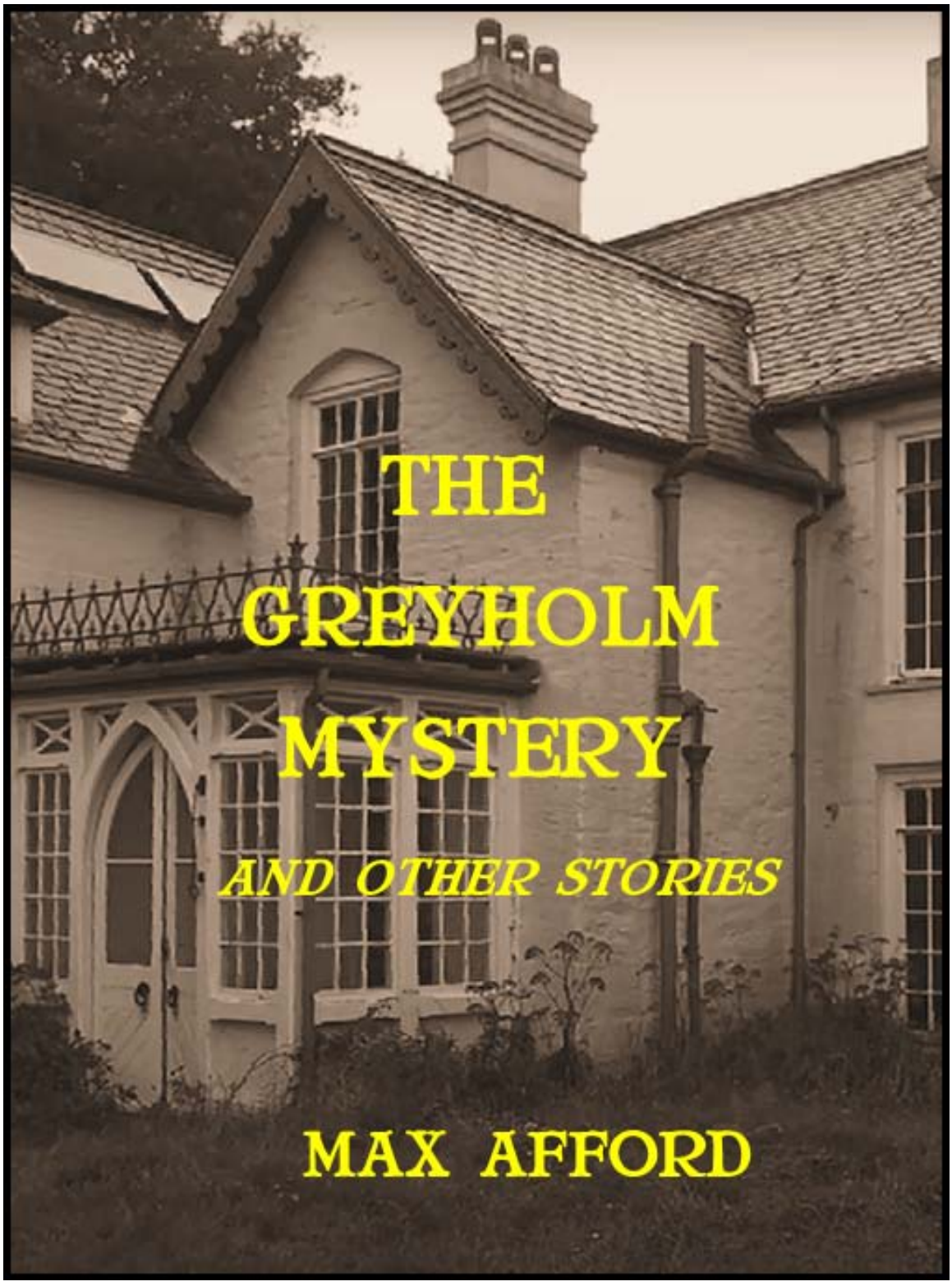
THE
GREYHOLM
MYSTERY
AND OTHER STORIES
MAX AFFORD

THE GREYHOLM MYSTERY

and other stories

Max Afford

Malcolm R. Afford, 1906-1954

Produced and Edited by Terry Walker, 28 March 2025

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Introduction

MALCOLM AFFORD (1906-1954) was one of Australia's most prolific authors of the 1930s, but much of his work has vanished.

He wrote only a handful of short stories and novels; all the rest, and it was vast, was in the form of radio plays and radio series, which in the period was broadcast live to air. As a result, only a handful of copies of any of it ever existed, and few have survived.

His short stories were published initially as by Malcolm Afford or Malcolm R Afford, in newspapers; but he was commonly known as "Max" and almost all his work was under that name.

The short stories in this collection are all that I could find searching through Australian newspaper files using the TROVE search facility, and also truffling the internet. They are arranged in chronological order. Only one story is not included, as the automatic OCR on that page of the newspaper failed, and and very little of it was rendered into text. As I am an extremely bad (and slow) copy typist, I will leave that story for someone else to retrieve. The story is:

The Third Presence, Smith's Weekly (Sydney) Sat 22 Sep 1928, Page 16

In later years, he also wrote a small number of novels, all of which can be found free online in MobileRead's library. They are:

Blood on his Hands (aka An Ear For Murder) 1936
Death's Mannikins (aka Dolls of Death) 1937
The Dead are Blind 1937
Fly by Night (aka Owl of Darkness) 1942
Sinners in Paradise 1946
The Sheep and the Wolves 1947

Project Gutenberg Australia has two of his radio plays, and two stage plays, available online in its library.

T. Walker, 28 March 2025

Who killed Sergius Quasimot?

Malcolm R. Afford

Observer (Adelaide) 22, 29 Aug 1925

This story is the earliest I could find, published when Afford was 20.

I WAS NEVER SURE as to what woke me, but my first thought was that morning had come, then, as my sleep-drugged brain began to function, I noticed the gaslight and the tight-drawn blinds. Then I sat up, and saw Ellmore struggling into his trousers.

"Just what," I enquired drowsily, "is the idea?"

Ellmore, his head enveloped in the folds of his shirt, did not answer for a moment, neither did he seem surprised at my being awake. But, as a matter of fact, I have yet to see Eugene Ellmore surprised at anything.

"There's an old man downstairs," he explained after a pause, "who says that his master has been murdered,"

I would have given worlds to possess my friend's imperturbableness at that moment, for I gasped involuntarily. Still half-asleep, I felt an urgent desire to pinch myself.

Ellmore and I had come to Green Hollow only that day. We were friends of long standing, and, we had both turned to the writing business, with the result that, while I was a reporter on The *Bexton Star*, my friend had achieved fame and wealth as a writer of detective fiction. When Ellmore had decided on Green Hollow as the environment for his next "six shilling sensationalism," he had wired me, asking if I felt like a holiday.

Somewhat needless to say, such a request was not made twice, and, as we motored into the rural village, the tranquility of the scene impressed us more than favourably. We put up at the only hotel in the town— a quaint, ivy-covered structure, whose old-world architecture both delighted and interested my companion not a little. I for myself had a particularly covetous eye on a placid pool, where green willows dropped their slender boughs to kiss the sparkling waters. I had a beautiful rod among my luggage.

We were naturally enough dog-tired after our journey, and after a nasty supper we requested our host, one Martin Pillsbury, to show us to our rooms.

Once there, hardly waiting to remove our clothes, we tumbled between the sheets, and now, just four hours afterwards, to be awakened by such an ominous word

Ellmore's voice cut sharply into my reverie. "If you're coming down you'd better hurry."

I jumped out of bed and began a hurried search for my carelessly tossed-off apparel.

"But why us?" I queried; "isn't there a village constable or something of that kind?"

"The village constable," answered Ellmore dryly, "has gone into the next village to enquire about a missing calf. The man below has evidently come to lay his troubles before us, merely because we are journalists from the city."

I was too busy dressing to make any reply, and I cannot ever remember donning my clothes in such a short space of time. Suffice to say, that five minutes later I was clothed and descending the stairs with my companion.

On the landing we met the redoubtable Pillsbury. He carried a bottle in one hand, and jerking the other in the direction of the parlour, whispered, "He's in there, gentlemen; I just gave him a peg o' brandy, and he nigh spilt half of it—he's shaking like a leaf."

Nodding, we followed our host to the cheery little room, where a man half sat, half lay upon the horsehair sofa. As we entered, I glanced round at the huge fire, newly kindled, crackling merrily in the fireplace, the somewhat gaudy prints that decorated the walls, and then to the person we had come to see.

He was, so I judged, a man well past 50, but his quick, bright eyes and firm lips conveyed no hint of declining mentality. I recognised the butler in the bowed shoulders, and the bent head, with the attendant side whiskers. Together with the white, tapering fingers, and the general neatness of attire, his occupation was written large upon him.

He rose as we entered, and made an attempt to pull himself together. That he succeeded was obvious from the forcedly calm manner with which he greeted us, as we were introduced.

We seated ourselves, and Ellmore, without preamble, came straight to the point.

"I do not say we can solve this affair for you, my dear sir," he said; "but we can judge when we have heard It. I do not wish to buoy you up with false hopes, but you have our promise to do all in our power to assist you."

The man on the couch took a sip from the glass at his side. "It is very kind of you to put yourself out for a stranger," he said, in a quiet, cultured voice; ''but I will tell what I, know of this affair, and you can tell me if there is anything you cannot understand. My name is Jenkyn, Thomas Jenkyn, and for 20 years I was included in the retinue of servants of Lady Bruce Dacre. A little over a year ago, however, her ladyship, disbanded her household, and I found myself temporarily out of employment.

"It was, at that time that I answered an advertisement for a .manservant, inserted in an evening journal, by a Mr. Sergius Quasimot. The advertisement stated that as the household was small, there were no 'set duties, but the applicant would have to be versatile enough to cover all serving duties. It was not, as you may guess, quite the situation I required, but the salary was exceedingly generous, so I applied, and by good luck, was accepted.

"I was straightway transferred here, to the master's country mansion, Deepdene, and I found the duties not nearly so arduous as what I had been used to. Besides thyself, the household included only a cook and a gardener. I never saw much of my master. He was a playwright, so I discovered, and spent a considerable portion, of his time travelling abroad, only coming home for the actual writing, for he was wont to say that the peaceful quiet of Green Hollow was ideal for the concentration of mind."

"Just one moment," interrupted. Ellmore. "Your master advertised himself as Sergius Quasimot. Was that his real name?"

Jenkyn shook his head. "That I cannot tell you," he replied. "During my entire stay at Deepdene, I never saw one single piece of the master's correspondence, or heard his name mentioned. However, judging by his looks, he was as English as you or I....'

"To resume, it was just about three months ago that I began to suspect anything peculiar. You see, the master had returned from one of his trips, and, apart from an occasional visit to town, was home most of his time.

"During these writing periods it was customary of me to go up to the study every day, empty the wastepaper basket, tidy, and generally clean up. But one morning, after the master had left the room, I went up, and was surprised to find the door locked. Of course, such a proceeding was no business of mine, but it interfered with my duties, so, when the master returned, I ventured the question—

" 'I went up to tidy the study, sir,' I began, 'and found the door locked. Perhaps a mistake—'

" 'Not at all, Jenkyn,' he interrupted, a trifle sharply, so I thought. 'Not at all— I desire a little privacy, and in future I will tidy the study myself.'

"Rather strange behaviour for a busy playwright, I thought, but it was less duties for my hands, and I would have probably forgotten all about it had not another incident occurred that recalled it to mind."

The narrator paused and took a sip of brandy.

"About a month later," he continued, "I was taking the master's supper up on the tray, and as the study door was now kept locked, it was my nightly custom to place the tray outside the door, and knock.

"Now on this particular night, I reached the door, and putting down the tray, was about to knock, when from inside the study came the sound of the master's voice. Naturally, I was surprised. I had been in the front hall all the evening, and had shown no one up, yet the master was clearly holding conversation with some one. What the exact words were I could not say, but I knew they were couched in tones of endearment.

"As I stood there, asking myself who the unknown occupant could be, and how he had achieved entrance, there came to my ears the sound of light footsteps crossing the room, and I could have sworn I heard the sound of a kiss. Hesitant, I stood motionless for almost a minute, then curiosity overcoming discretion, I knocked sharply on the door.

"Immediately I heard the quick footsteps, followed by a scuffling rustle of paper then came the sound of a key turned in the lock, and the door swung back to reveal the master flushed and angry, ins hair ruffled, his tie awry. Without giving me a chance to speak, he flew at me with the suddenness that took my breath away, and then, gentlemen, in the middle of that vehement tirade, be noticed the supper tray, and he changed round with a quickness that was amazing.

" 'I hope, Jenkyn,' he said significantly, 'that you have been long enough at your calling to know the value of discretion, and with that he picked up the tray and re-entered the study.

"But from where I stood, I obtained a searching glimpse of the entire room, and was amazed to find it as bare of human habitation, as the palm of your hand. I was more than surprised— I was dumbfounded, for if the master was enmeshed in some shady intrigue with a woman, (and all circumstances pointed to a woman), who was she, and where had she gone? Then— how had she first entered, and why all the secrecy?—they are questions, gentlemen, that lead up to to-night's fearful tragedy."

Jenkyn paused and drained his glass, as if nerving himself for the worst part of the ordeal. While our host re-filled the tumbler, Ellmore leaned forward and tapped the butler on the knee.

"You have been lucidity itself, so far," he said, encouragingly. "Continue in like manner, and you will have done more than your share in the solution of this mystery."

The butler smiled, a trifle shakily, then with a nervous cough, continued.

"I saw the master this morning, as usual, a little before 10 o'clock. It was his daily custom, when home, to arise at 7, breakfast at 8.30, then go for a short walk before commencing the day's task. Now, this morning I noticed him leaving the kitchen, and thinking such a procedure peculiar, I questioned the cook.

"Now, gentlemen, one of the master's peculiar traits was his hatred of animals. He couldn't bear even a dog or cat around the place, and when he heard of the cook keeping such an animal in the kitchen, for eating the food scraps, he intimated to the cook that either she or the animal must leave.

"I did not see him again till I took his tea up and found him busy with the typewriter.

" Not wanting to disturb him unnecessarily, I was about to depart when he called me. 'Er— Jenkyn,' he said, 'send up the supper at 9.30, instead of 10, tonight, please.'

"To make my story as short as possible, all went as arranged. I took the supper up, knocked, and retired. Then, knowing that I should not he required for some time, I returned to my room, to wait until the master should ring for me to take the tray away.

"The cook and the gardener, both living in the next village, were given the evening off, a privilege often allowed when the master was at home, and having no companionship, I settled myself for a quiet game of patience.

"I became so absorbed in my game that I lost all count of time, and was only recalled to my duties by the clock on the mantelpiece striking midnight. I sprang up, thinking that very probably the bell had rung, and that I, in my search for the elusive card, had not noticed it. Dropping everything, I started up the stairs at the double.

"Picture my astonishment, gentlemen, when upon reaching the study door, I beheld the supper tray in exactly the same position as I had left it. I bent forward, and lifting a corner of the white cover, found, as I half expected, the dainty viands untouched— and almost cold.

"What was the matter? Had the master, deeply engrossed in his work, forgotten all about his supper?

"So I knocked gently, and receiving no answer, knocked again, a trifle louder. Once more there was no response, save the all-pervading stillness that characterises an empty house. Then, borne on the wings of silence came the premonition that all was not as it should be. Hardly knowing what to do, I tried the door, but finding it still locked, I bent down and peered through the keyhole.

"There, gentlemen, I saw the master. He was directly in front of me, and in the bright study light, every detail stood out with horrifying clarity. He was seated in an armchair, his head lolling grotesquely on one shoulder, his face deathly pale. Just for one brief second I imagined he must have fallen asleep, then I noticed the peculiar rigidness of the pose, the clenched fingers, then, shifting my position I saw something that made we catch my breath in horror.

"The master's dressing gown was open at the waist, revealing the soft shirt within. Its white surface was stained crimson wet, shining as the light caught it, and from the centre of the wound protruded the murderer's weapon, a small, razor-edged knife that the master used as a paper cutter."

"And then," I interposed, speaking for the first time.

"I rose to my feet," continued the butler, shakily, "to find myself weak and shaking like an ague fit. I am getting on in years, and, as I paused irresolute, the enveloping silence became fraught with horror. Scarcely knowing what I was doing, I dashed down stairs panic stricken, caring not where I went, so long as I was away from the locked room with its ghastly tragedy.

"In my confused brain was the idea to get to some human habitation, and it was probably that which guided my feet in the direction of this hotel— and the rest, gentlemen, you know."

There was a silence in the room when the speaker had finished, a silence broken only by the crackling of flames or the occasional rattle of a coal as it fell into the hearth. Then Ellmore turned to the butler,

"If you will answer a few questions," he said quietly, "it will give us something to go on. "We've never seen the place "

Jenkyn nodded. "Anything that's in my power. Mr. Ellmore," he began.

"Well, I gather that you came away leaving everything as you found it?" Ellmore asked. "As the door is locked, does that make the study quite inaccessible?"

"Absolutely!"

"Windows?"

"Perfectly impossible to open them, for they are built, into the wall. You see, the master desired plenty of light, but to eliminate unnecessary draughts, he had the windows made fixtures."

"H'm— then how was the study aired?"

"By tiny ventilators," was the reply, "let into the ceiling, and worked by fans. As the study was the one room the master practically lived in, he saw that it lacked nothing in comfort."

Ellmore wrinkled his forehead. "And yet," he said, "in spite of all this apparent inaccessibility, some one came and went on two distinct occasions."

Jenkyn nodded. "And if I'm consulted, sir, it's a woman's work from every angle."

My friend rose, and stretched, himself.

"No good making blind theories till we see more of the tragedy itself." He consulted his wrist-watch. "Scot, it's almost 2 o'clock. Now, give us, Mr. Jenkyn, five minutes to complete our dressing, and we'll be at your service "

ii

IT WAS A NIGHT of brooding stillness, and an orbed moon, high risen, touched the world about us with her magic, whereas things familiar, became transformed into objects of wonder. The broad white road which we trod, became a gleaming causeway, banked on either side by gloomy woods, seemingly remote, and full of mystery. We spoke little as we walked, Ellmore and I abreast, the man, Jenkyn, a little in the lead, for each was busy with his own thoughts, but once Ellmore broke the silence with a whisper.

"That peculiar name, Sergius Quasimot," he murmured, "can't you place it at all?"

I shook my head a trifle uncertainly. "No," I answered slowly. "And yet— I think I've heard it— somewhere."

My companion came closer to me.

"Don't you recall a certain play, *Passions Pilgrims*, that thrilled the country from end to end. Don't you remember its anonymous author "

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed, not giving him a chance to finish. "Of course. And the whole country attempted to probe the mystery behind his alias "

"But they never could," my friend concluded. "He seemed to disappear off the face of the earth."

The road we were following presently brought up to a wide hedged in expanse, above whose green height the red roof of a country domicile, gleamed in the bright moonlight. Jenkyn led us through a gap in the leafy wall, and we found ourselves fronting a pair of high wrought-iron gates, whose massive proportions barred further progress. The butler, however, inserted an arm between the bars, and as the bolt shot bade, the gate revolved noiselessly on well-oiled hinges, and we slipped inside.

A moment later we were inside the house, and, Jenkyn leading, passed up the stairs. Here was ample proof of the lavish expenditure of the late owner, in the rich, red stair, carpet, whose thick pile completely deadened our footsteps, the exquisite Perugino's Archangel Gabriel, that eyed us, from its curtained recess, and the numerous beautiful bronzes that decorated each landing. The whole exuded an air of wealth and refinement. We were almost at the study before we realised its close vicinity. Ellmore walked up to the door, and tried the handle, but, perceiving it still fast, he ran his sensitive fingers over the panelling.

"Quite light in construction," he observed, as he tested it with his shoulder. "I think, gentlemen, if you will lend a hand—"

We backed up to it, and heaved with a will. The light framework creaked and groaned tinder the onslaught, then, with a crash, the entire door gaped upon one hinge, and, scrambling over the ruins, we were in the study.

Under such circumstances people act differently. Ellmore, for instance, went immediately to the body, Jenkyn hesitated just inside the door, while I made a rapid survey of the room.

It was not a large apartment, but careful distribution of the furniture made it appear so. A writing desk, several small inlaid tables, and three deep saddlebag arm chairs comprised the furniture of the room, while dotted here and there were further evidences of the late occupant's love of the artistic.

Prominent among these was a huge marble— Bernini's exquisite Apollo and Daphne— carved with such perfect artistry that the cold limbs seemed to glow with life and colour, the delicate pink shading of the stone enhancing the illusion. It was, I noticed, the most outstanding object in the room, for it stood over 5 feet high, being supported on a base almost 18 inches thick.

The floor was dark-stained, showing the purity of the marbles to perfection, and was carpeted with a number of Persian rugs, that strewed the surface at irregular intervals, while the walls, lined with books, were pierced by three long windows. And then I turned my attention to the body. It was sitting upright in the deep armchair, by the side of which stood a small table. On it I noticed freshly cut novel, an ash tray, and a half-smoked cigar.

I walked up and half lifted the head that lolled so grotesquely, and recognised the connoisseur in the Grecian nose and glazed blue eyes. Imagination, too, I read in the bulging forehead, genius in the thick, drooping eyelids, but I liked not the cruel lines at the corner of the mouth nor the thin, bloodless lips.

The chest was a less horrible sight than I had imagined, for, though over a dozen wounds had been inflicted, only two had been anything like mortal, and one of these had penetrated the heart. The depths of the small stabs could not have been more than an inch, or perhaps a little over, and it was from one of these that, Ellmore had extracted the weapon. On close examination this proved to he a paper knife, in the design of a Malay *kreese*. Though small, its curved blade was double edged, and razor sharp. It was obvious that the dead man had just recently opened his novel by its aid.

As I handed it back to Ellmore, he drew me to one side.

"I must admit I'm baffled for the time," he said quietly. "As you see, the very nature of the wounds point to an attack of unparalleled ferocity. The murderer stabbed away, regardless whether the blows told or not. By the nature of the body, I should say that the second, or perhaps third, blow killed, but the assassin would not, or could not, stop. Then, suddenly brought to

realization, he (or she) fled— in blind panic— not even pausing to extract the weapon."

I stared at the still form in the chair.

"It's a woman's job," I observed, "from start to finish. First we have the pattering footsteps, the endearing tones, and the kiss. Then, probably, things went a bit further, on this particular night, and the woman snatched up the knife, and, before she realized it, her passion bested her. Then, panic-stricken, she flew, leaving the room and its tragic secret behind her."

Ellmore patted me on the shoulder. "Marvellous, my dear Watson," be said, a trifle ironically. "Simply amazing; but, though I hate to tear down your remarkable theory, there are three questions I'd like to ask you—

"How did the woman get in? How did she go, and where? And how about this article?"

As be spoke. Ellmore drew his hand from beneath his coat, and revealed an ordinary dog whip, its plaited thong twisted round his fist.

"I found this," he explained, "tossed in yonder corner Now why did the deceased, who detested dogs, keep a whip in his private apartment"— he raised his voice— "Mr. Jenkyn."

The butler, who had kept himself posted at the ruined door, come forward, and Ellmore, shaking the whip at arm's length, asked.

"Have you ever seen your late master use this?"

Jenkyn eyed the object curiously.

"Bless my soul," he exclaimed. "A dog whip. I am certain it doesn't belong to the master. Why, I've tidied this study dozens of times, and I've never set eyes on it before."

Ellmore did not answer. He was gazing intently at the cruel black lash, then, as if the butler had never spoken, he said, "You, Mr. Jenkyn, know this apartment better than either of us. Go round, and see if everything is in order. Be careful, and miss nothing."

Jenkyn turned to obey, and Ellmore, carrying the whip beneath the huge chandelier, took from his pocket a small reading glass, and with its aid examined every inch of the lash. Every now and then he would pause, and gently untwine something therefrom. This he carefully transferred to an envelope.

He was deeply engrossed in his task when a cry from the far end of the room startled us both. Dropping the whip, we looked to see Jenkyn standing before a tiny curtained alcove, and as we drew near he turned a dismayed face toward us.

"Look, gentlemen," he cried, as he drew abreast. "The master's priceless Ming vase. Shattered— ruined!"

We peered inside the curtained recess, and discerned the ruins of an exquisite China vase strewing the dark stained floor. Its stand, one of the numerous inlaid tables, lay overturned on its side, and as I stooped to examine it closer, the butler broke forth again.

"Smashed," he repealed. "Oh, gentlemen, you have no idea how the master valued that piece of pottery. It was one of his most cherished possessions, and he once told me that it was over two thousand years old. Collectors had tried to buy it time and time again."

We retraced our steps, leaving Jenkyn standing contemplating the rained treasure. As we paused, Ellmore eyed me quizzingly.

"What," he asked, "do you make of this fresh, development?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Don't ask me," I returned. "I'm no detective. The blessed thing is more complicated than when we began."

Ellmore smiled. "I don't think so," he said. "However, give me five minutes, and then we'll get back to the hotel."

He crossed over to the body, and, bending, examined the right shoulder carefully. Then, taking from his pocket a small folding rule, he measured, first, the distance from the right shoulder to the table, then from the shoulder to the main wound. Then with a snap he closed the rule, and, transferring it to his pocket, walked over and reached for his hat.

Turning to Jenkyn, he said, "Cover the body, close and lock the house. As soon as it gets light, I'll motor into town for the coroner. And now for some fresh air and breakfast."

iii

I DID NOT SEE Ellmore again till the afternoon, for my repeated enquiries of the morning had done nothing more than elicit several abrupt unenlightening phrases. Knowing from past experience that my companion was wrestling mentally with the enigma of the locked room, I gave up my catechism in despair, and spent the remainder of the day, rod in hand, beside the neighbouring stream.

I had partaken of my lunch, and was just settling myself for a quiet time when an ear-splitting whistle broke the slumberous silence of the glade. Glancing up, somewhat irritably, I beheld Ellmore, garbed and goggled from his motor journey.

He slipped his goggles from his eyes as he approached, and, seating himself on a nearby log, waited for me to speak.

"Well," I greeted, somewhat warmly. "Still worrying over the mystery?"

Ellmore shook his head. "On the contrary," he smiled, "the mystery is solved, or, at least, theoretically solved."

I jumped to my feet in astonishment. "Good Lord," I ejaculated, "You've done that— already. How?"

Ellmore consulted his wrist watch.

"I know I appeared somewhat taciturn this morning," he said, "hut now I am quite at liberty to speak out. However, time's short, so let me do the explaining and you do the questioning after. I'll endeavour to make my theory—because, as I told you, it is only a theory— as plain as possible. Now, in this murder three peculiar facts stood out.

"Firstly, we have the haphazard peregrinations of some person, despite locked doors, and the apparent inaccessibility of the apartment.

"Next, we have the murder itself. It looks like an unpremeditated crime absolutely without motive— yet so savage that one might attribute it to the work of a homicidal maniac.

"Lastly, we have the peculiar nature of the wounds. Some deep, but the majority only puncturing the skin. Then, again, we have the singular discovery of the knife left in the wound— and this, to my mind, throws the whole affair in different light.

"Taking the series of incidents in their order, we have Jenkyn first hearing the sounds of a person (he thinks feminine) within the room. He is surprised, because he showed no one in, nor out. This person appears and disappears at will. How? Why?"

Ellmore paused, and bonding forward tapped me impressively on the knee. "Because," he finished, lowering his voice significantly, "that unknown occupant never left the study. He was there from the first moment the butler heard the voices— and he is there still."

I gazed at my companion in wide-eyed amazement. "Great Scott, man," I exclaimed, "you're mad. There isn't cover enough in that room to hide a baby of Hour, let alone a full-grown murderer."

Ellmore raised a protesting hand. "Wait— wait," he requested. "Remember, the murderer was small. He was so light on his feet that he only made pattering footsteps, and his strength was so puny that some of his knife wounds only penetrated an inch or so."

"But— but," I stammered, completely dumbfounded at the subtle turning of my evidence. "The absence of motive— and the amorous conversation of the victim—"

"And the dog whip— and the broken vase," mocked Ellmore with a grin. "Go on, build up your obstacles, and I'll flatten every one of them."

"Let us," he continued, "start at the beginning: We will attempt to reconstruct our crime. First we have our playwright, wealthy, sought after, but a man of strange impulses, quick tempers, and cruel nature.

"Such a man has many friends, admirers whom he may never have seen. Knowing his to be a bachelor, one of these sends him a present of an animal, thinking, probably, to lighten lonely hours.

"Just what this pet is I cannot definitely state, but from examination of hairs taken from the dog whip I judge that it is small chimpanzee.

"There are few animals in this world so likeably human as a baby chimpanzee, so, in spite of his hatred of animals, this creature of strange impulses begins to entertain some affection for his pet, but somewhat ashamed of his secret, he keeps the animal in his study, whose door is always locked. Next, Jenkyn hears the animal pattering about in the room, hears the master using the endearing animal talk, which we humans use to our pets. The baby pet gives forth some pleased guttural sound, which the butler mistakes for a kiss.

"From now on," continued my companion, "I can only theorize; but we know that, on the night of the murder, the playwright retires to his study early, to work, shall we say, till nine. Then, feeling in the mood for some recreation, he releases his pet, and then, seating himself in the armchair, he commences to cut the leaves of a new novel. This finished, he lays down the paper-knife, and is soon engrossed in the printed page.

"From this he is suddenly brought to earth by a shattering crash. Glancing up, he sees, horrified and enraged, the ruins of his priceless Ming vase, while the cause of the destruction crouches whimpering upon the floor. Then all that is cruel in the man's nature comes to the surface, and, crimson with rage, he snatches a dog whip from the drawer, and belabours the little animal unmercifully. His anger abating, he throws down the whip, and, turning, gazes for a time at the china fragments, till, with a sigh of resignation, he resumes his seat and takes up his novel. All is now quiet in the room. The man, with his interest centred upon his reading, does not see the animal, now turned from a docile, lovable pet, to a primitive savage brute, patter softly across the room, to leap on the table beside him. Its wicked bloodshot eyes glimpse the knife, and a gleam of intelligence shoots through the simian brain.

"Then, with the quickness that is almost amazing, the animal grasps the knife with its foot, and springs front the table to the man's broad shoulder. He. dropping the book on the side table, rises to push the animal away, but the chimpanzee, skilfully evading his clutch, raises the knife, and delivers the first and second stabs. It was this second stab, so I believe, that caught the heart. Then, in a wild paroxysm of bestial rage, the animal stabs about haphazard till

the taut-drawn muscles of the man relax, and the body slumps sideways. The animal, frightened by the movement, drops on to the floor, and leaving the knife in the wound, makes for his lair. Thus the whole business, from start to finish, did not take above twenty minutes."

I gazed at Ellmore in unconcealed admiration.

"You've certainly pieced it together perfectly," I admitted. "Every detail fits in with mosaic exactness." I paused for a moment; "but where was the murderer's (if I may term it so) lair? I can't think of any place in that room to shield a cat."

"Save," responded Ellmore, "a certain statue of shaded marble, with a base exactly twenty-two inches in height "

"Apollo and Diana," I exclaimed.

"Exactly," smiled my companion, as he rose from the log. "And now I'm going to return to the house to solidify my theory."

"And is there any room for me?" I asked, picking up my rod.

Ellmore shook his head. "I think not," he said quietly. "You see, the coroner and the doctor are going with me, and so it's best that only one makes his appearance. As it is, we've gone beyond our rights in this affair; but the Fates, thank heaven, have gifted me with a plausible tongue."

Seeing the wisdom of my friend's statement, I nodded, striving bard not to show my disappointment. I must have made a pretty bad job of it, for Ellmore clapped me on the shoulder.

"Cheer up, old man," he laughed. "I don't suppose there will be anything doing, but if there is, you can depend upon it that you'll be first to hear."

And so we separated, I going in the direction of the hotel, while Ellmore turned his steps toward the red-roofed bungalow.

We had finished tea, and Pillsbury and I were discussing the various angles of the crime, when in walked Ellmore. He threw his hat on to the and seated himself on the table.

"So that's the last of the Quasimot murder," he said, by way of greeting.

"Yes," he continued, in response to my look of enquiry. "The little beggar was there all right, and the statue base was an ideal den. One side was constructed like a sliding door so that its own weight kept it shut. Thus the animal could enter from the outside, but could not release itself. Air percolated through various minute fissures in Apollo's robe, and the whole box of tricks was so elaborate that it must have cost quite a sum to fit up."

"Do you think Quasimot had it especially constructed for his pet?" I asked.

Ellmore shook his head.

"No!" he replied, "Personally, I think this secret cavity was made as a hiding place for valuable articles. Quasimot, when he bought the statue, may never

have been aware of its existence, and probably discovered its whereabouts purely by accident."

"And the animal?"

My friend shrugged his shoulders. "Dead," he answered slowly. "Whether its demise was due to its incarceration, without food or water, or whether it expired of fright, I cannot say. At all events, Sergius Quasimot's murderer has been hunted down, a mystery solved, and here I am, ravenously hungry."

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The Greyholm Mystery

Saturday Journal (Adelaide) 6 Feb 1926

IT MAY BE that, somewhere on this green earth, there exists a more perfect specimen of English architecture than Greyholm Mansion that rears its bulk on the outskirts of Elmwood. Built on a rise, with its latticed windows and tall slender chimneys, half obscured by ivy, it overlooks the village like some guardian elder, a sturdy memorial of the age when laths and plaster were unknown.

But, if the house of Greyholm possessed beauty without, then, surely, the interior was equally enchanting. There were spacious chambers and pannelled corridors, wide window seats and generous hearths; there were great old halls, from which led sudden flights of steps, and everywhere within and without there lurked an indexable old-world charm that was the heritage of years.

We, Ellmore and myself, had come to Gryeyholm only that morning, to investigate the mystery surrounding the late owner's death, and, had we not been concerned in such a tragic business, we would have enjoyed a ramble through the old-fashioned dwelling; but duty, stern and prosaic, called, and we were forced to obey.

Howard Morton, the secretary, was the only person who could furnish with any details of the crime. We were sitting in the library, and the low-raftered ceiling, the book-lined walls, from whence old portraits looked down, like dream faces from dim nebulous backgrounds, the great carved mantel, against which the young man stood, all enhanced the beauty of the sunlit world without.

"Yes, gentlemen," he was saying, "it is a tragic business, for death under any circumstances is distressful; but for the last of a well-respected family to be so brutally murdered— it is truly appalling."

Ellmore nodded sympathetically.

"I understand," he murmured, "and the deceased leaves no relatives?"

"Not one," was the quiet reply. "The family lawyer has gone over the matter thoroughly, and is perfectly satisfied that he was the last of his line."

Ellmore eyed the secretary curiously. "And you. Mr. Morton, found the body. I believe?" .

The other nodded. "Yes," he replied. "But I will appear a very poor witness, for I can give you only a very meagre account of the whole affair. However, you are welcome to all I know."

"I need not remind you, my companion said quietly, "that you are our only witness. It is in yon that \ve look for a starting point, so he finished with a gesture of his hands.

"I need not tell you," the secretary began, "that my employer was a dealer in Spanish silks. The whole world knows of how Mr. Farland ran away to Spain as a young man, and there built up a business out of practically nothing, with which he cornered the entire silk trade. When he landed in England, from Jerez, where he had his factory, the papers were full of the affair for days after.

"I landed with him, and we came straight to Grevholm, which had been kept in order by the housekeeper and her husband. Some three months prior to his arrival Mr. Farland had engaged these domestics through an agency, and they were told to open up the house, in anticipation of their master's return.

"On our arrival, my employer detailed me to engage a butler and a cook, and I obtained these from the same agency, who showed me excellent references. These, with the aforementioned couple, comprise the retinue of domestics."

The speaker paused, and I glanced up. He was making a cigarette, and in the semi-darkness, his white slender fingers showed like the quivering antennae of some giant insect. As I was watching the deft manoeuvres the soft, cultured tones broke the silence the the room.

"When the owner settled in the house he turned the large room at tlie top of the building into an ofhee, for, although lie had retired from business, there was still much desultory matter to be gone through. For this purpose he had this office altered A partition built across one end of it. thus forming two rooms, though the one that I occupied was little more than an anteroom There was a door in the partition, and this led, of course, to the large office, and thus any one wishing to gain access thereto must first pass through niv outer room. There is, I believe, another door further down, but it is never used, and consequently is kept locked and bolted. For the murderer to have entered that way is perfectly out of the question."

"Has that door, to your knowledge, ever been opened on any occasion?"

"Never; in fact, it has been such a long time unusned that I doubt if the hinges will function at all."

"Yesterday," the secretary continued, "was an unusually busy day, and, among other things, there were the market duplicates to be checked. This, I might say, is no small piece of work, and I was busy well into the evening. At 6 o'clock Harrison, the butler, brought me some sandwiches and coffee, and I was just finishing these when my employer came in. He had evidently just returned from a motor drive, for he was garbed and goggled, and there were traces of dust on his clothes.

"He came over to the desk and said, 'As soon as I have changed, Morton, I'll have a look at those duplicates. Get the rough copy ready, and I'll run through them.' Then he turned and left the room.

"I next saw him when he entered the main office, about 10 minutes after. He took with him the copy, telling me to call for it in an hour's time, and that, gentlemen, was the last time I saw my employer alive. I worked on till about 9 o'clock; then, remembering about the papers, I rose and, walking across to the dividing door, knocking gently. There was no answer, and, thinking that perhaps the man inside had not heard me, I knocked again. Still there was no response and becoming a trifle impatient, I pushed the door open and peered inside."

The low, steady tones trembled ever so slightly, and, glancing out of the corner of my eve, I noticed the hand that gripped the mantel tightly clenched. I glanced at Ellmore, wondering if that astute person had noticed also, but one might as well have attempted to read the sphinx's visage.

"Mr. Farland was lying back in his chair, which was drawn up before his desk, his face turned towards the ceiling, and his body twisted on one side. I stared, as you might well imagine, thinking for one' brief moment that he had fallen into some kind of a fit. Then I noticed the slumped posture of the body and the curious rigidity of the limbs, and suddenly realized why my summons had gone unanswered.

"Scarcely able to believe my eyes, I advanced further into the room, and it took just one glance to ascertain the cause of the death, as from a great wound in his head the blood flowed crimson down the white set features and trickled on to the carpet.

"As I stared I became aware that the hands, hanging limply by his sides looked grotesquely out of proportion, and for a space I did not realize what it was that made them appear so: then witli a thrill of horror I recognised the significance.

"The middle finger of the right hand, gentlemen, was missing. It had been severed from the stump."

I caught my breath sharply. "Missing!" I exclaimed, speaking for the first time. "Just what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say," was the quiet reply. "The member had evidently been slashed off with some sharp instrument, for the remainder was a clean laceration."

"And then," prompted Ellmore.

"I stood paralysed for a moment, too stunned by the shock to make any movement Then, with an effort, I pulled myself together, and tried to think coherently. Perhaps you who often come in contact with death, will think me an arrant weakling but the was so disconcerting that, for a time, I was a mere bundle of nerves.

"I closed, and locked the death chamber, and going into my outer office, rang for the local police. This done, I slipped into the corridor, and closing the main door, I rang for the butler and gardener, telling them exactly what had happened, though I omitted the missing finger. I saw no use in alarming the female portion of the household more than was necessary.

"After dispatching the gardener for Dr. Pertwee, the village practitioner, I sat down to await the arrival of the local police. Of course, the services of the inspector were only temporary, just a mere formality to shift the responsibility off my shoulders.

"At length the inspector arrived, and after hearing the details of the case, was first to admit the impossibility of his coping single-handed with it. It was then, that he suggested that I should obtain your services, and the result was— this morning's hurried telegram.''

There was a silence when the man had finished, a silence broken only by the scrape of a chair, as Ellmore rose to his feet.

"I understand that nothing has been disturbed," he said, glancing at the secretary. "Did the inspector touch anything?"

The young man shook his head. "Not to my knowledge," he replied. "As far as I can say, he just took a hurried look around, and then went off. He is coming back this morning, but so far, the scene of the tragedy remains exactly as it was."

"And has the Coroner been informed?"

"Yes, the local police have that part of the business in hand, in fact, I believe that the inspector is doing it this morning."

"Very well," Ellmore moved across the room as he spoke. "Wtih your permission, Mr. Morton, we'll hare a look at the room, and the-body."

ii

WE FOLLOWED the secretary through the great old hall, up a wide flight of stairs, till we reached a narrow gallery, pierced at intervals by slender stained-glass windows, whose intricate designs made dancing patches of coloured sunlight on the tiled floor.

Traversing this, we found ourselves in a lofty passage, the monotony of the sombre grey panelling broken by two massive doors, before the nearest of which we paused.

"You see, gentlemen," our guide explained, "here are the two entrances mentioned. This"— he indicated the door opposite us— "leads into the small office, while that farther down, is the unused entrance. Thus, you can perceive that no one could enter the room, without my seeing them."

Ellmore shrugged his shoulders.. "Yet some one entered it."

While they were talking, I strolled down to the other door, intent on doing a little investigating on my own account. I found it all that the man had said; it was bolted, and better than that, a thin coat of dust lay undisturbed upon its surface.

I admit that I was stumped. If no one had passed the secretary in the anteroom, how had the murderer entered, and more puzzling still, how had he made his escape? Windows were out of the question, for Morton had explained that they were kept fastened.

It was a very puzzled amateur sleuth that rejoined the waiting couple.

The secretary turned his attention to the locked door, and as it swung open, I had a glimpse of a miniature office. The apartment was so tiny, that the small desk, the few scattered chairs, and the little bookcase seemed to leave hardly enough space to walk, but as we entered, I noticed my colleague favoured it with a sweeping glance that missed nothing.

We passed through this, and unlocking the partition door, came upon the larger office. It was low, and long, and lighted by two tall narrow windows, that pierced the wall at one side. The massive desk, the rich carpet, the deep leather chairs, all spoke of the owner's love of personal comfort, the luxurious comfort that only wealth can give.

From the furnishings, I turned my attention to the body. The inert form lolled grotesquely in front of the desk, half sitting, half lying in the low swivel chair. Ellmore was already hovering around the still form, noting every detail. He looked up, as I came forward.

"I believe, Milton, that you dabble in physiognomy," he said. "Look over this face, and see if the lines graven thereon can give us a commencing clue."

I stepped forward, and tilting back the lolling head, allowed the light to fall full upon the set features. Death had smoothed the face of many tell-tale lines, but the hopes and fears, passions and desires wore still deeply engraven.

"I see," I reported, "authority and cruelty in the firm narrow lips, avarice in the tapering forehead, obstinacy in the heavy jowl. Yet we have industry in the broad chin, and intellect in the deepset eyes. That is what I read in the features, for the facial lines are too contorted to distinguish their significance."

Ellmore nodded. "And making a summary of the character—"

"I should say that this man is of an obstinate, cruel nature, one who, when bent on anything, will let nothing swerve him from his purpose. That he makes success of what he does is shown by the fact that he employs intellect with industry, but he employ this success for the betterment of no one but himself."

Once again Ellmore nodded.

"Excellent," he murmured. "Now we have something to go upon. The next thing, my friend is the wound. Let us imagine that you are taking the case. As the famous Holmes was apt to say to Watson, you know, my methods, apply them. Now. how did this man die, and what was the weapon used?"

Anxious to show myself, I turned my attention to the body once again, and scrutinized the wound carefully.

"Bullet wound," I reported. "Fired at close range; I should say a dozen feet from the body. Shot entered the front of the skull, and came out at the back."

I turned to my comnanion. "Have I read the signs aright?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so," he smiled. "Now, just where do you surmise that the shooter stood when hie fired that shot?"

I paced a dozen steps to the front of tho desk. "Here, I should say; or here."

Ellmore's smile grew into a laugh. "Sorry to upset your theory," he said. "But, look here, when you examined the wound, were you struck by any peculiarity?"

"Only that it seemed a remarkably clean hole."

Ellmore shook his bead impatiently.

"No," he said. "I don't mean that. Look, here are two wounds, one where the bullet entered, the other where the bullet came out."

"Remarkable" I said. "And would it surprise you if I came to that conclusion when I first examined the wound?"

"Well," my companion continued, ignoring my delicate sarcasm, "can you tell me which wound is the highest, the front or the rear?"

I looked first at Ellmore, then at the object in question.

"Why," I cried, "the front— the one in the forehead."

"Just so. Then you will notice that the one in the rear occurs in the nape of the neck, and is larger than the front."

"Well what of it?"

"Don't you see, you ass, that if the shot, was fired from the front the murderer would have to be at least a dozen feet off the floor to get a slanting wound like that."

I gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Of course," I said, a trifle lamely, "I never thought of that— then the shot was fired from the back."

"Obviously and the weapon in the hands of some person almost on the floor."

Here, then, was a new theory. My eyes roved the room for a point in the rear of the desk, and almost on the ground, and immediately they came to rest on the bottom of the long windows.

I cannot ever recall having seen their like before. Tall and narrow, they opened down the centre, leaving an aperture of about two feet wide. They came within a foot of the floor, and gave the whole apartment a peculiar church-like appearance, then was the murderer's entrance. He had come by the window, and, crouching low upon the floor, fired— then I remembered that the secretary had said that they were locked on the inside.

"I was going to suggest the windows," I said apologetically, "but they were locked at the time of the tragedy."

Ellmore looked up with a smile. "What would you say if I told you that the windows were not locked at all that night? Morton remembered seeing them open in the earlier portion of the day, and they are shut now. It is an obvious fact that the murderer closed them."

"So the murerer did enter by the window?" I began, "Then—"

"We are more complicated than ever," finished my colleague. "There are more impassable barriers than locks and bolts. I take if. my friend, that you haven't looked out of that window yet?"

"No."

"Then I suggest that you rectify your error, at once."

Not a little puzzled by my friend's remank, I walked across to the nearest window, and releasing the brass-covered catch, allowed the frames to swing open. As they did so, I noticed n tiny balcony without. Stepping over the low sill, I grasped the slim iron railings that surrounded the little platform, and peered over.

Then I realized why the assassin had not entered the window. Below me was a sheer wall drop of 60 ft., a bare expanse that would not have given foothold to a spider, let alone a human being. Still unwilling to be beaten, I risked life and limb, and craning my body over the slender rails, gazed upward at the projecting eaves. It was in my mind that perhaps the assassin had lowered himself on to the balcony by means of a rope, but here again I drew back. The eaves overhung the balcony by a matter of four feet, and I had to admit the impossibility of any one risking life, and limb, to that extent. Again, they might have come that way, but they would have never returned likewise.

Thoroughly discouraged, I retraced my steps into the room again, to find Ellmore kneeling before one of the oak panels, the tapping softly with his pocket knife. He looked up as I entered.

"Behold me reduced to my last theory," he said. "Secret passages don't only exist in books." He rose to his feet, as he spoke. "But in this case they're as sound as a bell."

I shrugged my shoulders. "But there must be a loose end somewhere," I remarked.

My companion gave a gesture of impatience.

"Loose ends," he echoed. "Why the whole case reeks of loose ends. That's just the trouble, we can't lay our hand on anything definite. For instance, everything points to the murderer having entered by the window, yet we are faced with the obvious inaccessability of that blank wall. Unless our assassin arrived in an aeroplane, we must reject the theory altogether.

"Then, as regards the missing finger, who on earth would want to take such a grisly memento? That detail complicates matters still more. Then, look at it in this light. Here is a crime so amateurish that the murderer- hacks off the finger in a blundering, butcherish sort of way, yet covers his tracks, with the cleverness of a professional criminal. In view of the deceased's past, we might say that his sojourn in Spain has something to do with it, but— can we be sure. What if the whole business is the work of some well-known crimnal, who, knowing his victim's history, deliberately steals the finger in order to throw the police off the scent. It's the absence of clues that is so disconcerting. We haven't a thing to work on, not even the hackneyed finger print, or the cigar ash."

There was a silence for a moment, then as the thought struck me, I leaned forward. "Ellmore," I said quickly, "What about that secretary?"

He looked up quickly.

"Well," he demanded, "What about him?"

"Do you realize," I went on, "That it is only his evidence that no one passed him that night, that is holding us back."

"Well?"

"What is to stop him from working the whole business, and framing up this yarn about the market duplicate. He would have had ample opportunities, here, at the top of the house."

"And the motive?" Ellmore's tone was a trifle ironical.

"Er— well," I wasn't quite prepared for that. "We have to find that out," I finished lamely.

Ellmore rose to his feet, and walking forward, placed his hands on my shoulders.

"Mark, old chap," he said, havn't you been with me long enough to learn a little about human nature. Now, if this young man were guilty of this crime, the first thing he would do would be to get an alibi. He would take elaborate precautions to prove that he was nowhere near the room at the time of the tragedy. He knows that he would naturally, be the first person suspected, and were he guilty, he would take immediate steps to allay that suspicion. But our young friend does none of these things, on the contrary, he aids and abets us to find the murderer."

"At all events," I said, not wishing to relinquish my theory, "that young man is the only person who can give us any account of the deceased's affairs when he was in Spain."

Ellmore walked across.to the desk; and pressed a button thereon. "Agreed," he said. "This is, I am, afraid, a very forlorn hope, but it can do us no more harm, and maybe, some good if—" he broke off as the door opened, to admit the slim form of the secretary..

He advanced to the centre of the room and stood looking at each of us in turn. "You rang for me, gentlemen?" he said finally.

My colleague nodded. "We did," he returned. "Kindly take a seat, Mr. Morton; there are one or two little incidents tnat you may be able to enlighten us upon."

The man seated himself. "I am at your service, gentlemen," he said.

"Now," began my companion, "I understand that your employer engaged you in Jerez. Who were you with before Mr. Farland?"

"I was with Ansconi Brothers, the shipping agents. They handled the skipping of the Farland silks, and it was through them that I obtained the position of private secretary."

"And how long have you been in the ernploy of the deceased?"

The man thought for a moment. "It must be close on five years," he replied.

"And during that period you handled all your employer's correspondence, I presume?"

The other nodded. "Yes," he replied, "Every piece passed through my hands."

"Then you would know this. Did your employer, at any time, mix himself with any foreign secret society? Don't keep anything back, for I happen to knowthat there are branches of the infamous Caarrobi still flourishing in Spain at this present moment. I also happen to know the names of one or two of England's most illustrious houses that frequent their grisly meetings."

But the secretary shook his head.

"I see what you are driving at," he said, with a faint smile, "And I can assure you, gentlemen, that you are, to use the colloquialism, 'barking up the wrong tree.' My employer was a thorough business man, and be was too wide-awake to dabble in that sort of pastime. At all events, not an atom of his correspondece even suggested such a thing."

"And the same answer holds good, since his arrival in this country?"

"Certainly, and I cannot blame you for you asking. . When I, myself, saw the missing finger, the idea of a revengeful society occurred to me, but knowing the true facts, the idea appeared so ridiculous that I dropped it at once."

"And you have had no Holidays eiuce your landing?"

"Not exactly a holiday," was the reply, "But I was down with an attack of influenza about three days ago. Barring that, I have never been absent."

I saw my colleague lean forward. "Ah!" he ejaculated, "And who took the mail on that day?"

"The housekeeper, Mrs. Findlater. She would collect it from the postmen, end deliver it to the office."

Ellmore pushed back his chair. "Thank you, Mr. Morton," he said, "You have helped us considerably. Now, will you ask that housekeeper to step up here a moment? We will not need you, any more."

When he had gone, I turned to Ellmore.

"Not exactly encouraging," I murmured. "What do you think about it?"

He smiled enigmatically. "I shall say nothing till we have heard what the good Mrs. Findlater can tell us, and she is, at this moment, ascending the stairs."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the door opened once more, this time to admit a plump little woman, attired in a spotless apron. She eyed Ellmore and myself somewhat askance, but a few tactful words soon put her at her ease.

"Yes," she said, in answer to my friend's query, "I remember the day distinctly. There was only one letetr, and again, the master sent my husband on such a strange errand that my Joe thought he had taken leave of his senses, and—"

"Yes, yes," cut in Ellmore, interrupting the garrulous flow of conversation. "Let us take one thing at a time. There was only one letter, you say? Can you give us some idea of what it looked like? Think hard, for it is of the utmost importance."

The lady assumed an expression of deep concentration. "It was an ordinary envelope," she said slowly, "but the writing seemed— well, different from the ordinary."

Ellmore eyed her hopefully. "Can you tell us in what way it was different?" he said patiently.

"Perhaps it wasn't different at all," said this perplexing woman. "You see, it came through the post, just like an ordinary letter, only it had something of a foreign appearance about it. In fact, when I showed it to Joe. he said—"

"Quite so," responded my colleague quickly. "You did not happen to notice the postmark on the letter?"

"I can't say as I did."

"I believe, Mrs. Findlater, that you mentioned your master sending your husband on a peculiar errand. May I hear the full details of that?"

The housekeeper nodded, and smoothed down her apron.

"It was about an hour after I, had taken the mail up to the master's office that the bell rang. I answered it, and as I entered the room the master came out. He stopped when he saw me.

" 'Oh, Mrs. Findlater,' he said, 'have you been in the village lately?'

"It was only that day that Joe and I had been in to get the supply of provisions, so I told him, 'Yes, sir.'

"Then he said, 'I have always found you to be a wide-awake woman. Tell me, did you see any strangers in the village?'

"I thought for a moment. 'There was nothing new that I can place, sir, except the circus. But that's nothing new; it comes here every year.'

"Then he looked at me in such a peculiar manner that I thought of calling for my Joe. You see, my man was an army doctor before he married—"

"Please, please stick to your story," requested Ellmore, impatiently.

"Your employer looked at you in a peculiar manner—"

"Yes. Then. he said in a soft, voice; as though speaking to himself, 'A circus, I wonder—' then he seemed to see me.'.

" 'Mrs. Findlater,' he said, 'I want your husband to go down to the village and get me a handbill of that circus. Tell him to bring it straightup to me when he comes back. That will be all,' and he turned into the room again."

"And did your husband obtain the handbill?"

The woman nodded. "And he got one for ourselves, as we were going to see the show, when this terrible thing occurred.".

"Counld you let me have a glance at your bill?" said Ellmore. "I will not keep it above a couple of minutes."

The woman rose from her chair. "Certainly," she said. "I know exactly where it is. I will not keep you a minute.''

"The door had scarcelyiclosed behind her, When all passiveness left my companion. He sprang from his chair, and bounded over to the window. Swinging it open, lie, peered- out, and then retraced nis steps across, "the room. ... .

"At last," he said. "The missing link is supplied, and the case falls into place perfectly. But who would, have thought it. Clever, it was more than clever, it was a stroke of genius."

"What on earth are you mumbling about," I asked, eyeing him curiously. "You don't mean to sav you've solved this affair?"'

He nodded. "In theory, my friend," he said, "if not in practice, and I am just waiting for proof to solidify what is now but mere hypotheses."

"Then," I gasped, as the truth dawned on me, "the proof is in the circus hand bill?"

Ellmore nodded. "More than that, my dear Milton. The whole mystery, from beginning to end, centres upon that insignificant piece of paper."

"How—" I began, but he held up a warning finger, as the door opened, and the housekeeper entered the room, holding in her hand a brightly coloured paper. Without a word, Ellmore took it from her, and I watched the triumphant smile that overspread his face, as he read the printed lines. Then he crumpled the paper into his pocket, and turned to me

"Milton," he said. "Get on to the local police, and tell the inspector to bring his best man, and meet me here as soon as possible."

I jumped to my feet. "But, Ellmore," I said, "I don't understand. Why do you but my companion raised, a detaining hand.

"Not now, Mark," he "said. "I'll explain everything later. But, just now, even a few minutes' delay may prove fatal."

iii

THANKS to my companion's somewhat abrupt leave-taking, I had no idea of the hour of his return, and consequently, I was left to fill in the remainder of the afternoon, as best I might.

After callnig the inspector, and partaking of a hurried lunch, I wandered into the garden, and came to where the clipped yew hedge formed a border of vivid green against the more sombre hued evergreens.

This ran the entire length of the garden, to finish where the trim gravel paths began. And so, after strolling aimlessly backward and forward, chance led my steps beneath the very apartment where the tragedy had occurred, and sliding into a nearby seat, I gazed upwards.

The weather-beaten wall seemed prodigiously high, and the narrow window ridiculously tiny from where I stood, and if I had entertained any doubts about the; window being the mode of entry, they were swept away at once. Yet, I argued, why had Ellmore rushed to the window, and returned with the mystery solved? I stared at the grey expanse, as though to see the answer were written thereon.

Then, as I looked, something that had hitherto escaped my notice, caught my gaze. True, it was nothing extraordinary, just a half-obliterated circle, much the size of the rim of a breakfast cup. It was half-way up the wall, and it was the isolated position that made it visible. Was it this innocent looking mark that caught my colleague's eye? If he had read the riddle by its aid, he was far keener than I, for the discoloured sphere seemed to me no more than an ordinary damp spot, the like that are seen in every old wall

The bewildering fact was, to my mind, the abrupt ending of the case. One minute, Ellmore was baffled, and the next, he had read the riddle in an ordinary circus handbill.

At length, my head aching from making, and rejecting useless theories. I made my way into the house, to find Ellmore in close discussion with the inspector. They were talking, and examining some object encased in a small wooden box.

They looked up, as I entered, and noticed Ellmore covertly pocket the box before he turned to greet me.

"We pack our bags to-night," he announced, somewhat abruptly, "and catch the first train down in the morning."

I sat down in one of the huge armchairs.

"So soon," I asked. "You surely haven't completed the case?"

My companion dropped into a chair nearby.

"Certainly. The affair was solved this afternoon, but I waited to assist in the capture."

I stared at Ellmore.

"Capture," I repeated, parrot-like. "Whose capture? What capture?

A smile played around my companion's lips.

"Do you mean to tell me," he asked, "that you. haven't seen through the whole affair yet. Though I confess that is certainly complicated to—"

"Complicated!" I cried, "I should say so. Do you know that I have spent the entire afternoon trying to reason this tangle straight, and received nothing more definite than a headache?"

Ellmore thrust his hands in his pockets.

"And yet, as I look back on it, Milton, I could kick myself for not seeing the solution before. If you review it and cast up the items of evidence, you will see that we really had all the facts. The problem was merely to co-ordinate them, and extract their significance.

"The whole affair hinged on the murderer's entrance to the room. All evidence pointed to the man having entered the window, and to strengthen this theory we have the proof of the slanting bullet wounds. But— in the face of such evidence, we were faced with the apparent inaccessibility of the blank wall.

"Thus, if we believed our clue, our murderer was a man who could climb a 60 ft. wall like a fly. And this was actually done."

I thought of that bare grey wall, and of the height of the narrow windows.

"Impossible!" I gasped. "Surely no living man could do such a thing. It's absolutely impossible."

The speaker shook his head.

"Improbable, I grant," he said, "but not impossible, as you will see. Let us take 'the whole sequence of events,as they come. Firstly we have our merchant, wealthy, and self-made, who comes from a foreign country, to settle back to enjoy his wealth.

"Things go smoothly for a few months, till one day this man receives a letter. The voluble housekeeper assures us that her master looked 'strange' when he saw the handwriting. She, herself, then tells us that the missive has a different appearance from the ordinary mail.

"That gave me a commencing clue. The man comes from a foreign country, and he receives a foreign letter. Moreover, he is apprehensive at its coming. Now,the woman is asked of the presence of strangers in the village, and on hearing of the existence the circus, the master asks her to obtain a bill for him. Such a strange request brings us to question— what did he want with such an object?"

Ellmore paused, .and. looked at me. There was a moment's silence, then I hazarded a guess. "He thought that the writer might he employed in the circus."

"Exactly. Such a business employs men from all parts of the world, and it would be an excellent place to find a foreigner."

"Now, we are advancing at a great rate. Our merchant fears some foreigner; who he thinks may be employed in a nearby circus. So far, so good. Then, as the houskeeper was talking, the whole truth suddenly burst upon me, and the whole series of events became as clear as daylight. I presume that you have noticed a disc-like impression upon the wall of the apartment. Yes. Then what do you think is the cause of it?"

"Damp," I answered readily. "I've seen hundreds of the same patches on old walls, such as these."

Ellmore eyed me more in sorrow than in anger.

"Damp!" he exclaimed. "My dear Mark, did you ever see damp on a sun-dried wall like that one? Did you ever see a spot of damp in such a perfect circle, or one so isolated, as that. No, Mark. That was not a spot of damp. That was the missing link in the chain of evidence. It was the mark of a leather sucker."

I stared at the speaker in astonishment.

"A what!" I exclaimed.

He leaned forward, and topped me. on the knee. "Think back to when, you were a tiny lad, and used to. be taken to the circus. Of all the turns, what special one thrilled you most?" .

I pondered for a moment. "Oh! I don't know," I answered impatiently.

"What has that got to do with the business in hand? Still, if you "want to know, I suppose the acrobats."

"Now—do you remember one trick that was an absolute breathtaker to us children. I refer to the little man that used to strap four leather suckers on his hands and knees, and climb, hanging head downwards, along a perpendicular piece of boarding, suspended high above our heads. He was billed, if I remember rightly as 'the human fly,' and though it is 20 years ago, I recall one thing is particular. After he had finished his performance, the leather suckers, being soaked in some adhesive chemical, left wet, discoloured circles upon his walking board."

I was still staring at my companion, when the force of his illustration struck me.- "Why!" I gasped. "Put into plain English, you mean that the murderer was a performer in1 the travelling circus, doiDg an act, billed as 'The human fly.' He entered the locked room by climbing the blank wall by the aid of his leather suckers. It was, of course, the same trick that he did nightly ih the circus."

"Exactly. When the woman mentioned the circus, my thoughts flew immediately to the spot on the wall; and then I remembered the old-time trick. I wanted a glance at the handbill to verify my theory, and then I saw that such a turn was billed thereon."

"But, Ellmore," I argued, "there was only one mark on that wall. How came he to leave one by itself?"

"He did leave more than one," my colleague explained, "but the others had evidently dried out. This one may have had jmoft chetirical than the, test, dr. perhaps, "it was in a shady position. At all events, it remained after the other had faded."

"It was certainly clever," I agreed. "But what was this motive. We know it was not robbery."

My companion shook his head.

"No," he. said quietly. "It was revenge."

"It's a long story that began when the deceased was young, and hot headed, and being in a foreign country, was bent oh having a good time, regardless of the consequences. There was the usual unfortunate marriage, and a baby who never knew his father. That gentleman, not exactly yearning for a half cast son, bought the mother's silence.

"The woman, so I understand, fled from the country with her baby, and nothing was heard from her for almost 20 years. Now that period can provide many vicissitudes, and when the. mother returns, now an old woman, with a, grown son, she finds her former penurious, wastrel husband now a wealthy factory owner

She naturally claims this man as the father of her son, but unable to produce; proof is ridiculed. But the wealthy man knows it is the truth, and to make assurance doubly sure, brings a charge of insanity against the poor wronged mother. IIn Spain, as in other countries,, money can accomplish anything, and the poor creature is shut in a lunatic asylum.

But there is still the son to contend with, so, fearful of the consequences of his action, the father sails for his own country, where he thinks he should be safe.

Meanwhile, the unfortunate mother, now as insane as the other inmates, extracts from her son a grisly vow. He is to find his father, and revenge the wrong wrought upon his mother, sending her back his middle finger as proof of the vengeance.

The rest you know. The son, utilizing trick that he learned from one of his countrymen, came to this place with the circus. Making cautious enquiries, he tracked down his father, added a theatrical touch by sending an anonymous letter, then followed the same night, and killed, him. Shot him through the window with a silencer fixed to his revolver,"

There was a moment's silence, then:— "When you caught your prisoner." I asked, "was he violent?"

Ellmore shook his head. "He was, like most foreigners, a fatalist. When he saw that escape was out of the question he gave us his statement quite cheerfully. He seemed certain of the fact that no jury would convict him. Then he asked me personally to grant him one favour."

"Good lord, what was it?"

My companion drew the small wooden box from his pocket.

"He requested me to send this finger back to his mother in Spain."

I stored at the grisly memento. "But, of course, you won't do it?" I asked.:

Ellmore stood up, and returned the box to his pocket before he answered.

"That, as Kipling would say, is quite another story."

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The Flail

Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 26 May 1928

SEVEN-FIFTY-FIVE. There were but five minutes to go. In that tiny, ill-lighted place of execution, the atmosphere was heavy and close, witn tne suggestion oi a staie-ness that Is bred ia a robm newly opened. The small group of prison officials stood close as though by common consent, talking in whispers and striving to keep their eyes from the gloomy stage some twelve feet above them. A stage with Its enormously thick beam, its hempen loop and double trap-door— a stage upon which Tragedy hold the limelight and Drama played an endless repertoire. A stage that was to present the last personal appearance of Oscar Dowling, the Golgonna murderer. Though it was some time since the horrible details of this man's crime had shocked the Commonwealth, the particulars were still fresh in the public mind. The very brutality of the crime had been the defending counsel's strongest card, since It seemed impossible that a normally balanced person could lend a hand In such an atrocity. But, In spite of the vigorous plea of insanity, the judge had refused to reconsider his decision of the extreme penalty.

Few people who glimpsed Dowling in the court doubted the existence of some abnormality in the mental makeup of this man. Few would forget that heavy, sallow face, seared with lines of vile passion and cruelty— the protruding, irregular teeth, yellow as those of any hound, and the queer, green eyes that glowed with some inward lust.

And this was the man who now stood on the very brink of Eternity.

The room seemed in some way shrouded, so heavy and stifling was the silence, broken only by a cough or a whisper. Then, at a sign from the prison governor, two men slipped quietly from the shadows and approached him. They were hangmen, but save for the black masks which covered their eyes, they bore no resemblance to the hideous ghoule of history. The sheriff had few directions for James Tibey. Executioner for ten years, this thin, austere ex-minister knew his horrid business from A to Z, His hangings were as neat and finished as his personal appearance, and the prison authorities knew and appreciated it.

He moved across the flagged surface and cast an approving eye over the grim scaffold above him. He smiled— a faint wrinkling of his ascetic features, and deep in his sunken eyes there camo a gleam that was like the reflection of unholy flros. In the semi-darkness, he rubbed his hands gloatingly and his Hps toyed with the whispered phrases—

"I am the flail of the Lord, my God. I am the vengeance that sitteth in His Right Hand—"

James Tibey was eccentric. At least, that was the polite euphemism that the authorities used, and it was whispered in official circles that his condition was scarcely to be wondered at— But few— very few— knew different. They knew that It could all be traced to that paralysing shock twelve years ago.

He had been the Reverend James Tibey then, leading the simple uneventful life of a middle-class clergyman, The death of an ailing wife had left him free to follow his own inclinations, and to ease the aching void in his heart, Tibey had adopted an orphan child.

He lavished upon this ten-year-old boy all the pent up affection of a childless marriage. In a whimsical moment, Tibey had nicknamed his adopted son "Tabby," since the thumb of the boy's right hand was curiously deformed— the nail tapering and sharp like the claw of a cat. And the strange formation of the eyes that made it possible for the lad to see better than most in the dark— probably due to some pre-natal influence, Tibey told himself.

Yet, in spite of the close bond of affection that held the two, there were times in which the man of God wished he had inquired more closely into this nameless child's antecedents. His mission work in the slums had gained this man many friends— and the inevitable quota of enemies, and when TIbey's adopted son disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him up, the frantic guardian communicated at once with the police. Investigations followed, and suspicion settled upon the members of a drug ring, recently exorcised from its sordid haunts by this minister's tireless efforts.

But suspicion is one thing— proof entirely another. No definito steps could be taken, and the unfortunate man was left in an agony of heartbreaking suspense that gradually gave way to dull despair. And then came the final, shattering blow. Just a newspaper cutting it was, sent anonymously through the post. Barely a paragraph, giving the details of the body of a young boy which had been found on the railway line. The report concluded in saying that so mutilated was the body that identification was impossible.

And now— In the semi-darkness of that room of Death— Tibey recalled his night of prayer and his swearing of a great and sacred oath.

"And Thou, O God, shall bring them down into the Pit of Destruction. Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out their days. Vengeance is mine, O God—" And now—

Hush— A warder on either side, the doomed man approaches. From where he stood, Tibey could see his livid face like some gibbous splash of white against the dark background of the prison corridor.

His arms pinioned to his sides, they placed him gently on the trap. As if waiting for his cue, the watching man glided softly from the shadows. With quick, deft movements, he placed the noose about the criminal's neck, and fixed the white cap on his head. And as all eyes are fixed upon the man who stood on the very threshold of Death, softly through the gloom came the priest's muttered words—

"—And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us—"

Then, with a last, lingering affectionate look, the priest turns away. For a moment, the man stood motionless, head raised, lips moving slightly, eyes wide open and staring through the gloom—

Down below, white faces grow paler, hands tremble, heads are turned away—

The shadows shifted as James Tibey stepped forward. Very slowly, very deliberately he began to pull the white mask over the staring blue eyes. To those watching, the executioner seemed maddeningly slow— like one prolonging a supreme delight to the uttermost limit.

"—For Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory— for ever and ever— Amen."

Tibey stepped back— reaching for the bolt. Just one moment of horrible suspense— Eight o'clock boomed softly on the still morning air, and a truant bar of sunshine splashed the gloomy cell with a pool of dancing gold.

"A REMARKABLE case, Tibey," remarked the sheriff, as they left the room of execution. "What you would call an example of environment stronger than heredity."

"I did not study the case very closely," replied his companion, In his prim, soft tone. "As you know, I was brought from the other State on almost a day's notice."

"Of course— of course," the sheriff nodded heavily. "This affair has travelled all over the country. Strange though it may seem, they tell me that this Dowling came originally from real, clean stock, but he got in with the wrong crowd when quite a lad. It was said that they knocked him about— that his queer appearance was due to their rough handling."

They had halted— Tibey, because a sudden weakness had seized him, closing like a cold hand around his heart— the sheriff, because he was warming to his work, and it is easier to talk' to a man when he is standing still.

"Yes— and do you know, Tibey, there was the usual lot of nonsense that is part and parcel of such a case. They say that the gang used him principally because he could see at night, like a cat. Of course, it's ridiculous nonsense,

but there was evidence, to show that they called him 'Tabby,' and I myself have seen his deformed thumb— queer, you know— the nail is curved just like a cat's claw— But— Good God, man—"

He sprang forward and caught Tibey as he fell— a limp bundle in his arms.

"Like a Cat's Claw"

Marshlands

Mail (Adelaide), 14 Dec 1929

IN setting down an account of the queer affair at Marshlands I am prepared to offer no explanation other than the one here appended. Whether the interpretation is correct I cannot say, leaving such problems for the student and the investigator.

Marshlands is one of those places well off the beaten track. It is situated on silently elevated ground— an extensive island among miles of salty swamp. Bob Graham and I had been told about Marshlands from an old fisherman who had visited the place for a day's sport some months before.

We took Marshlands to our hearts from the moment we viewed it. There were wide pools of clean, hot sand, with deep shadowed pools for bathing. There were miles of endless purple lawns— sea lavender spiked with starry pink tufts of thrift and thickets of suaeda bushes. And there was a deep, treacherous estuary through which the tide swirled with an undercurrent like a mill-race. We dragged the boat up on to the shingle, and Graham stretched his arms wide, like one revelling in an ecstasy of freedom. But, stay— even as I turned my eye lighted upon something that brought a call to my lips.

Graham came hurrying toward me, and as he drew abreast I pointed across the flat country.

'Just cast your eye over there, old man. Do you see what I see?'

My companion turned and peered in the direction indicated. I saw him narrow his eyes, and the corners of his mouth turned down.

'A house,' he said. 'I wonder who the vandal could be. Not only must he violate the place with his presence, but he must raise a dwelling as a permanent reminder of his existence here.'

'I don't recall us buying the beach,' I reminded him. 'And it's barely possible that there are others just as susceptible to Marshlands as we ourselves are. But, cheer up. We will probably never see this snake in our Eden.'

Graham, however, refused to be comforted, and I could see that the idea of a possible interloper had taken deep root in his mind. But we had little time for conjecturing. The morning was slipping away fast, and there were a hundred and one things to be done.

The sun was setting when we finally put the last touches to our encampment and sat down to a well-earned meal. Nothing tires the body like hard exercise in the sea air and that night I slept like a log.

Awakening late in the morning, I was surprised to find empty blankets at my side. Evidently Graham had awakened before me and was enjoying a matutinal swim. Slipping into a bathing suit, I grabbed at a towel and doubled

out of the tent. It was another wonderful morning, but as I stood on the shelving beach, there was no sign of my companion. I stared at the endless spread of sand and swamp until the heat began to dazzle my eyes.

Puzzled, I turned toward the water, bathed and basked, then struck across the marsh to the camp. Mounting the slope, I heard a distant hail and turned to see Graham's sturdy figure racing toward me.

'I thought I'd be back before you were ; awake,' he greeted me as we fell into step. 'I've been doing a little exploring and it has taken me longer than I imagined. By the way, bow did you sleep?'

'I slept like a top, old man, I replied, looking at him curiously. 'But you took as though you had scarcely dosed your eyes all night.'

'Max,' he said, quietly, laying a hand upon my arm. 'Have I ever struck you as morbid and impressionable, or subject to influences that would leave the average man unaffected?'

I shook my head in a decided negative.

'Then,' he said, regarding me curiously, 'how is it that, tired as I was with yesterday's exertions, I was unable to sleep because of some terrible presentiment of evil that refused to leave me— an obscene influence that in some way embraced that solitary house we saw yesterday. An influence so strong that, with the first hint of dawn, I felt compelled to have a closer look at that house.'

I made no reply, but sat gazing at my companion in open-mouthed astonishment. Sane-minded, healthy bodied Robert Graham! What on earth had happened to bring about this change of mind in him? But although the silence lasted so long as to become awkward, Graham seemed, not to notice it. He began talking rapidly in a low undertone that was almost a mutter.

'I had to wade knee-deep across that wide estuary. Luckily, the tide was out. Then, rounding an overhanging shoulder of sandbank, I came upon the house. It is much nearer than it appears from here, evidently the flat nature of the country making distances deceptive. The place itself was small and square, with rambling outbuildings in the rear that have long since fallen into ruin. The appearance of the house suggested ineffable desolation— the door was hanging broken on its binges, the windows dirty and smashed, the chimney and part of the roof demolished through long exposure to the elements. This air of desertion showed plain that man had attempted to domesticate himself and failed.

'Another peculiar thing was the absence of all animal life on the surrounding land. Across the estuary the wild life was waking with the dawn; the air was filled with the screams and cries of sea birds, rabbits foraged in search of breakfast. But on this side the silence was uncanny in the extreme,

not a sound or sign of life. It was as though all Nature shunned it as a place accursed.

'I walked up and examined the house closer. It was of much greater age than I at first imagined, and one portion of the outer wall was covered with a patch of dull-red fungi. It must have been almost 9 o'clock; the sun was pouring down fiercely, yet by the house, the atmosphere had that dank clamminess of a newly opened grave. And all the time the conviction was growing on me that here was something unholy...

'Room by room, I explored the house, but nowhere was there a sign of even recent habitation. Discolored paper was peeling from the walls, the windows were thick with spidery weavings, and the air heavy with unventilated damp. But a close examination revealed nothing out of the ordinary, and I had almost reached the broken door when a sound froze my body motionless.

'From somewhere inside a thin, wailing cry arose, a sound like that of a very young child in an extremity of fear and terror.

'At first I told myself that it was merely a seabird calling, and then I remembered how all creatures seemed to shun this lonely place. As I stood listening, the sound ceased abruptly, and a dull, rattling sound became audible.

'Conquering the sensation of fear that was settling on my heart like a blanket, I turned and walked back through the empty rooms, finding nothing until I reached the apartment with the moss grown wall. And there, plain before me ion the rotting floor, I found this…'

Graham paused and drew some small object from beneath his towel. It was a small china ornament— a shepherdess— once pink and white, but now the coloring was sadly blurred. The ornament was chipped and cracked, as though it had been subjected to rough usage.

After a moment's scrutiny I handed it back to Graham.

'Well?' I said.

'Well,' be hanged,' replied Graham with sudden heat. 'I am the person to ask you that. What do you make of it all. Generally speaking, you've had more experience in this kind of thing than I have. What's your honest opinion of it all?'

'Since you must have it,' I answered, 'my honest opinion is that you partook too frequently of that tinned salmon last night. All those 'obscene influences' emanated from a disordered stomach.'

Graham appeared about to speak, but he remained silent, staring moodily at the sand. For some moments he remained thus, then gave as irritable shrug to his shoulders and laughed uneasily.

A WEEK PASSED— seven glorious, golden days, that seemed to drip from Paradise to earth— and then came Christmas Day. Graham and I dined royally off sausages and fried eggs, flavored with that wonderful sauce of healthy hunger, and voted it a Christmas dinner fit for the gods. Then we started on a long tramp that was to occupy the entire afternoon.

My friend had said nothing further regarding his queer story of the ruined house, and I was loth to reopen the subject. But I knew that Graham was far from easy in his mind; several times I had surprised him in fits of solitary brooding. But today Graham seemed more like his old self, and it was with an easy mind that I stepped out. We walked leisurely, since our time was our own— sometimes talking intimately on a variety of subjects, sometimes traversing leagues in that comfortable silence that marks the quintessence of friendship. Then— I forget just how— the talk veered round to psychic subjects, and Graham remarked thoughtfully—

'It's a terrible possibility, if there is any truth in the idea that a spirit is condemned to haunt the scene of its crime —waiting for the world to die.'

This was, bad— it meant that in spite of my companion's apparent lightheartedness— the germ of fear still lurked deep in his soul. When I spoke, annoyance brought to my tone almost a note of curtness.

'I've never given the subject that much consideration,' I said shortly.

Graham went on as though I had not spoken.

'Just think of it. The moment of foul satisfaction is gone for ever, yet all the time the guilty spirit must perpetuate its sin— the sin that brought only a momentary reward ages ago— but to which clings the eternally rehearsed punishment of loneliness, cold, and gloom.'

We had struck the basin of the estuary as he finished speaking, and as I took in the wide, blue sky, the swift-running, shallow water, and the long, purple marshlands, a sudden wave of exultation ran through my body.

'We've just about had enough of ghosts,' I laughed. 'Just put your mind on getting across this estuary while the tide is out.'

And so we strolled and lazed away the long afternoon, until the sudden disappearance of the sun warned us of the approach of a storm.

'Hello,' I cried. 'We're in for a father of a drenching. But your haunted house will shelter us. Come on, run for it.'

But Graham grasped my arm so that I swung round. In his eyes was an expression that I had never seen before— an expression that I could not define— much less describe.

'Max,' he whispered, and his voice was broken and husky. 'Don't go inside that house.'

The rain was pouring down fast and free, but it was not that, so much as this open display of cowardice that caused me to jerk my arm away in sudden anger.

'Well,' I retorted, 'if you're fool enough to stand out in the rain and get drenched, by all means do so. But don't think you can keep me out too.'

I turned and raced for the hanging door, dimly aware through the beat and swish of the driving rain that my companion was following.

We moved down the passage until we found a room protected from the driving rain. A high, square room, it was ventilated with one window which gave out on to the beach. The outer wall was stained with a great patch of green moss— an irregular splash that looked strangely sinister in the dim light. I recognised it as the room in which Graham had picked up the china ornament. I turned to him, and reading the question in my eyes, he nodded.

'Yes, I warned you not to come. This house is under a curse. You see, I—'

A crash of thunder, an awful detonation that seemed to rock the house on its foundations, drowned his words. And in the silence that followed I heard something that choked the breath in my throat. From somewhere near at hand came the thin wailing of a child, a petulant note of a small infant in fear and pain. I looked across at my companion, who was standing motionless, his head cocked on one side.

'Just the same as the other day,' he said softly: 'There's something going on in this house that is outside the pale of human understanding— something ungodly—'

He broke off abruptly, for at the far end of the passage there came a peal of harsh, mocking laughter that echoed between the bare and empty rooms. We both swung round simultaneously and caught a brief, momentary glimpse of a tall, thin figure in black, rocking with hellish laugher in the doorway. We dashed to the end of the passage and stared out into the driving rain. The beach was empty and deserted.

'Did we really see it,' I said hesitantly, 'or did we imagine—?'

'We saw it all right,' said Graham grimly. 'Something like a priest in a robe or cassock— a man with a furrowed, evil face, although I only glimpsed it for a brief second.'

We had returned to the windowed room and as I began to speak again, Graham held up his hand for silence. The rain had drooped to a soft drizzle, and in the silence I caught the soft pad-pad of footsteps, like the movements of one wearing slippers. Opposite the door, the sinister movement stopped, and into the room there floated a horrible odor of corruption and decay. The air in the room was icy cold, numbing in its very intensity. It seemed to me that a vague shadow passed the threshold.

I heard Graham scream, 'My God! It has come in.'

The next moment his body was bent back as if resisting some invisible presence. I saw his face wet with gleaming perspiration, heard his breath coming in great sighs, felt the floor trembling with his struggles. And like one roused from a nightmare, I flung myself across the floor and attempted to grapple with the terrible invisible something that faced us in that room. I heard a panting respiration that was neither Graham's nor my own, clutched wildly at what seemed a vague, fluttering shadow, and felt a hot, fetid, animal breath close to my face.

For some minutes this unbelievable struggle continued, and then the ghostly invasion ceased as suddenly as it had begun. A peal of devilish laughter rang through the house, then silence. Graham and I exchanged but one glance, and the next moment we were down the passage and out on the open beach.

iii

IT WAS almost three months later that I happened across something that the reader may— or may not— connect with our unenviable experience. I had gone with Graham to the Adelaide Public Library to look up some data in relation to an article upon which I was engaged. Graham, who was glancing through a bound copy of back-date papers, halted suddenly at a page and called me over to his side. He pointed without speaking to a column in the front page of one of Adelaide's leading dailies The date was December, 1906.

NOTORIOUS BABY FARMER
DIES THIS MORNING.

D'Aguanno, the Spanish baby farmer, was executed this morning. He went to his death unrepentant, refusing all religious comfort, and attempting to assault the officiating minister. D Aguanno, it will be remembered, carried on his horrible work in the Marshlands area, where he was locally known as 'The Jesuit,' on account of the long, black robe he wore. At the trial it was proved that D'Aguanno gave the children an ornament to play with before be strangled them with a leather strap. The bodies of no fewer than 10 children— ages ranging from three months to two years— were found , buried in various portions of the house.

'You see,' Graham said softly, 'he never absolved himself — he died unrepentant with those horrible crimes on his soul. Such spirits are earth bound, you know, I condemned for ever to haunt the scene of their crime through the countless aeons of eternity.'

Those solemn words struck a cord in my memory, and I glanced up in quick suspicion.

'You knew of this all the time,' I accused, stabbing a finger in the page. 'You had read it before we went to Marshlands. That was why you were so worried.'

Graham nodded again.

'I had read the trial just three days before our holidays, and I wanted to explore the house to see what it held. After my first experience I knew it was haunted. If you remember, I tried to tell you that night we sheltered in the house, but it was too late. We have passed through a very singular experience.'

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The Gland Men of the Island

Wonder Stories, Jan 1931

A venture into science fiction, and his only known sale to an American publisher.It is a novella, of some 12,000 words.

Chapter 1

TO MANY who read my account of our amazing adventure on the island of the Gland Men, it will serve as just another illustration of how devious is the path of science. It will illustrate also how, from the darkness that girds it round, terrible possibilities loom black and menacing, terrifying those daring enough to wander from the beaten track.

Another, and I fear greater, section of my readers may harbour no such sentiments, labelling the whole as a tissue of preposterous lies, but to those who condemn me, I say this. Take the facts— meagre, garbled— as they appeared in the newspapers and attempt to account for them in any other way. There is only one answer. It is impossible.

The intimate details were far too terrifying and astounding to permit of the facts being published verbatim, and it was mainly due to the newspaper's reticence that something bordering on a world-wide panic was averted.

Doctor Bruce Clovelly, D.D., F.R.C.S., will, of course, need no introduction, for his recent surgical triumphs in glanding have made his name almost a by-word, and it is with Guy Follansbee that we must concern ourselves. Follansbee, as I knew him in my days as laboratory assistant to the doctor— one of those singularly fortunate individuals who know exactly what they want and how to get it without offending a single soul— inclined to be cynical, yet straight as the proverbial string. He had inherited from his father an insatiable desire for adventure and an income that ran into I forget how many figures. Being a man of somewhat simple philosophy, he used the latter to appease the former.

It had taken our combined arguments, practised often and over long periods, to make the doctor even consider such a thing as recreation and I had experienced the hardest task of my life in getting him from his chambers in Gower Street, to which he clung like Diogenes to his wooden cavern. Even after his actual transplanting on to his opulent friend's yacht, the Silver Lady, he took his enforced holiday like a small boy takes his medicine, but as the illimitable miles of sparkling water grew between our vessel and his stuffy chambers, he turned about to enjoy himself.

We were midway between the Solomons and Santa Cruz Islands when the queer affair began. The morning had been oppressively calm and Follansbee,

the doctor and myself had taken the electric launch to examine the rock fauna that flourished so prolifically hereabouts. It was characteristic of the doctor that he could, when required, produce inexhaustible stores of unexpected knowledge on the most out-of-the-way subjects; and though I had never before heard him mention marine growths, here he was expounding in his most didactic manner to his slightly amused companion.

Having little taste in such matters, I was reclining upon the collapsible canvas chair, smoking a cigarette, and occasionally dipping my hand into the water, in order to convince myself that it would not emerge dyed blue. Whether, rocked by the gentle motion of the boat, I fell into a semi-doze or whether the change swept down so quickly that its coming was unnoticed, I cannot say. But I remember that I suddenly jumped to my feet and called my companions' attention to the unpleasant condition of the weather.

In the east, the sun, flattened to a disc of unhealthy brown, was gradually giving way to a dense bank of cloud that rushed down with the rapidity of a drop curtain. The water had lost its turquoise hue and undulated in a long oily swell that was strangely suggestive of hidden power underneath. Everywhere a heavy, pall-like silence hung over the face of Nature, fraught with an indescribable sensation of impending danger. Now and again there sounded, very faint and far-off, a curious humming sob, as of some gigantic beast in an agony of torture.

"Without the slightest intention of being a first-class Jonah," it was Follansbee's first remark as he boarded the launch. "I should say that we were in for something extra in the way of dirty weather."

Doctor Clovelly shrugged his shoulders. "I should have expected something like this to happen," he said irritably. "We should have never left the yacht. What are our chances worth if it catches us in the open sea?"

The explorer snapped finger and thumb. "Just that," he said grimly. "The only thing possible is to cut for the nearest island. With the weather like this the storm may be on us in five minutes, but on the other hand it may hang off for hours." He swung the wheel as he spoke and the launch cut through the swell with a curious sucking motion. "But the Lord help us," it was Follansbee speaking again, "if it brings typhoon in its wake."

I LEANED over the side and glanced at the approaching island. Through the haze, I discerned the woods that flanked the shining stretch of silver sand, unsullied by mark or impression, the thick vegetation that grew, tangled and luxurious, down to the water's edge. Here was a tumble-down native hut, raising its battered head above the mass of tropic greenery, there a sturdy giant palm, the trunk hidden from view by the enveloping folds of some

flaming parasite. As we neared the beach, I saw that the land sloped sharply into rolling hillocks, cut and serried by deep gullies whose black, forbidding extremities were lost beneath the shadow of the higher mountains.

I turned to our host. "Does it possess a name?" I queried.

He shook his head. "Probably one of the numerous islands that stud the Polynesia like stars in the Milky Way. They are here today and gone tomorrow, thrust up by some volcanic eruption, sucked under the sea by a tidal wave or some similar undersea disturbance."

"I sincerely hope that it remains stable during our occupation," I remarked. Then the launch grounded on the shore and I jumped out to aid Follansbee to beach it high and dry. This done, we took our first close look at the island, our enforced landing place.

As we stood on the clean fringe of sand, the hush of the elements was even more apparent. Not a leaf moved in the thick humid heat, not a bird flew or animal moved. It seemed as though all Nature was waiting breathlessly for the opening of the cataclysm. But for the low rumble of the breakers, we might have trod another planet, some long-dead world; and the thick sand, deadening our footsteps, gave us a peculiar disembodied sensation that was unpleasant in the extreme. It was Follansbee who broke the silence. "No good cooling our heels on this beach," he said. "Under the circumstances, I think it would be worth our while to do a little exploring. That track through the trees seems to suggest unlimited possibilities." He broke off and pointed to where a worn track wound its way through the undergrowth.

"At least," remarked the doctor, as we made our way toward it, "we cannot claim to be true Crusoes. Someone has used this path pretty frequently— and not so long ago, if we are to judge by its appearance."

"Animals—?" I suggested.

"Much too narrow," interjected Follansbee. "Then again, the beasts have no object in coming here; there is no water to drink, nothing to eat and from my experience of animals, they generally shun the seabeach." He glanced at the dry rotted grass. "No, my sonny, that track was made by one thing only—a number of men walking in single file."

I looked blankly at the waste of matted undergrowth and stunted trees, "But where on earth did they go?" I asked.

"That," was the reply, "is what we are going to find out."

In single file we followed the circuitous path for over a mile, Follansbee leading, his grey eyes gleaming, the doctor next and I bringing up the rear. Through virgin greenery that walled us on either side, so thick that one seemed to be treading some matted corridor we went on; beneath wild and tangled growth through which the sickly light scarcely penetrated, over young lush

leafage that overlay and half disguised the dank rottenness of the older vegetation, through which loathsome creeping things scuttled as we approached, things hideous and detestable to look upon.

The last portion of our journey was terrible. Here a fair-sized stream had become bogged by matted reeds and the spread of water was rapidly turning the surrounding country into a poisonous swamp. Clouds of insects hung over the black evil-smelling pools, some huge as wasps, with bodies of every conceivable hue and blend, some whose sting was death, others bred in the fever areas, carrying with them their dread legacy. The sibilant hum was discernable quite a distance away, and it sounded eerily out of place in that region of silence and decay.

Suddenly, with the abruptness that was almost startling, the forest ended and we saw ahead of us a flat plain. We were just about to step out on to the wide clearing, when Follansbee, who was leading, uttered a cry of amazement, stiffened and stood stock still. He was staring at some scene below him on the plain, and as we approached, he turned and finger on lip, pointed. Stepping quietly, we drew alongside him and I choked down the gasp that rose in my throat.

We were looking on a wide barren area of land, in the centre of which was a cluster of iron buildings. That they were tenanted was obvious by the thin trail of smoke that curled its way from the chimneys. One edifice, slightly isolated from the rest, was surrounded by a high wooden stockade, pierced at intervals by loopholes.

The Creatures of the Island

AS we watched, thunderstruck by our discovery, from one side of the stockade came a troupe of figures. There seemed no doubt that they were men, but such men as I have never before set eyes upon. They were of enormous stature, most of them being over eight feet in height. They moved with a peculiar lumbering gait, that was vaguely suggestive of something that I could not place. Their arms, swinging at their sides seemed absurdly out of proportion to their bodies, and the great hands clasped tightly upon an object that, at the distance looked like an axe.

Each wore a kind of khaki shirt and breeches, with leather leggings that reached from instep to knee. A sun helmet took the place of a hat and as one turned away from us, I noticed a peculiar irregular blotch upon the back of the shirt. At first, I took this to be some personal damage, but a further glance showed me that each wore a similar adornment. At the distance, however, it was impossible to distinguish the outline. "By Gad," exclaimed Follansbee, as

he unslung his glasses. "We seem to have stumbled on a modern Brobdingnag. Thank Heaven for that storm."

The doctor was already examining the monsters, so after a scrutiny, the explorer passed his glasses to me. I adjusted the powerful lens to my sight, and the approaching creatures leapt into my field of vision.

If, at a distance, these creatures looked unprepossessing, they seemed doubly so at close quarters. The lens picked out every detail with horrifying clearness, the broad, hunched shoulders, the long muscular arms, covered with coarse black hair, the slouching movement, caused, I now perceived, by the ridiculously short bandy legs. As one stopped to converse with his neighbour, he turned and the ragged blotch on his shirt took definite shape. I started again, thinking that my eyes were playing me tricks. The shape was that of a five-clawed dragon, reared in the act of striking. It was either stamped or sewn on in black cloth.

But it was the features that drew the eye and held it in sheer horror, so hideously repulsive were they. The tiny head, with its wide slobbering mouth, the wicked red eyes and the flat coarse nostrils inspired one with a thrill of disgust and loathing. The low receding forehead and the forward position of the ears showed that, were they humans, they were of a very low scale of civilization.

"My God!" I heard Clovelly gasp. "Are they man or beast?"

I opened my mouth to answer, when from behind there came a rustle of disturbed undergrowth. I swung around, but there was nothing to account for the sound, when, acting on some unknown impulse, I glanced up into the tangle of branches above. A cry of horror burst from my lips, for there above us, silent and motionless as the surrounding forest, crouched four of those hideous creatures that we had been watching. How long they had sat there, their blood-shot eyes contemplating our movements, will never be known, for as I sighted them, they became galvanized into life. With guttural screams they sprang upon us, and I was just about to run for my life, when one gathered me beneath his arm like a bundle of hay, and, with a curious wabbling stride, made for the walled-in building.

Chapter 2: A Place of Terror

IN an incredibly short space of time, we had reached the high partition. Here the creatures paused and shouting something in the guttural tongue, pointed to the gate, then to his companions in the rear. In my awkward position, I was unable to glimpse the one to whom he spoke, but it was

obviously the guardian of the portal, for even as I screwed my neck to breaking point, the obstacle swung back, and we passed through.

I judged, by the stamp of the feet behind, that my colleagues were likewise captives, and by the sounds of struggle, that they were not submitting so tamely as I. Perhaps I was unfortunate in possessing a particularly irascible gaoler, for my puny efforts at escape had resulted in nothing more than a cuff across the face that nearly took my head off. Maybe it was just a gentle reminder that he would stand for no nonsense, but it served to quiet me beyond further resistance.

We traversed a slight dip and breasting the slope, came to the main residence. It was much more pretentious than the outbuildings, with neatly laid paths and flowerbeds, though the blooms could not be called healthy. Across the roof were looped slender wires, standing clear against the coppery sky, terminating in twin aerial poles. It strengthened my conviction that we had reached the headquarters of this amazing island.

Four wooden steps led us into a wide hallway, carpeted with rush mats, that strewed the floor at regular intervals. A number of doors, dimly discernible in the uncertain light, opened off this passage, whose extremity was lost in the prevailing gloom.

It was here that my guard at last set me down and turning, signed to his companions to do likewise. I smoothed my rumpled apparel into something approaching order and turning, beheld Follansbee, as imperturbable as ever, in the act of lighting a cigarette. Clovelly, seemed still stunned with amazement and he looked at me with eyes that hinted a thousand questions.

Before he had time to utter a word, one of the creatures wheeled around and disappeared into one of the rooms. As he opened the door, I became aware of a peculiar odor— sweet, sickly— that emanated from behind it. For just a second it eluded me, then as it grew stronger, I recognized it immediately— chloroform.

I glanced at Clovelly, and smiled wryly. He was sniffing the air like a thoroughbred, his professional instincts aroused. I noticed the slender white fingers quiver like the antennae of some giant insect, itching for the scalpel or the forceps.

Seeing my interest, he opened his mouth to speak, but what he meant to say will never be known. Suddenly, tearing jaggedly across the stillness, there came a horrifying shriek of some poor soul in mortal agony. Higher and higher it rose, in shrill cadence, then at the highest note it ceased abruptly, to die away in a gurgling mumble, then silence— thick— enveloping— sinister—

I am not easily frightened, but an icy horror gripped my heart. Clovelly was white to the lips and even Follansbee was shaken out of his customary

equanimity. Our huge guardians seemed absolutely unmoved by the horrid experience, not an emotion was discernable upon their animal countenances, they were as devoid of expression as a rubber doll.

At that moment the door re-opened and our guide appeared. Taking advantage of the diversion, I crossed to the half-open door and essayed to peep inside. I was almost there when one of the creatures sprang forward and with an angry grunt, grasped my arm and with such force that I cried out. Our huge guide turned quickly and looking questioningly at his subordinate (as I took the other to be) fired a volley of unintelligible jargon at him. Suddenly the creature released me as though I had become red-hot and a look of something akin to deference crossed the bestial face. But I hardly noticed this, for my head was buzzing with a new discovery. The opening and shutting of the door had afforded me a momentary glimpse beyond— a fleeting vision of a modern operating theatre, the tables, instruments and assistants showing spotlessly clean in the bright artificial light.

One of the creatures crossed to a portion of the wall opposite the door and pressing on it, moved his hands in a curious circular manner.

The reason for this was plainly obvious the next moment, for there came the sound of a metallic click and a section of the wall swung back to reveal a door, set flush in the woodwork. With more haste than ceremony, we were thrust through this door, it clicked behind us— and for the first time since our capture, we were left alone.

BUT we had no desire to converse. We were struck silent by the extraordinary appearance of the singular apartment in which we found ourselves. I can close my eyes now, and recall every feature of that bizarre apartment as though it were yesterday, so indelibly are the details engraved on my mind.

It was circular in shape and lined with books from floor to ceiling, the reds and golds of the bindings reflecting the light from the mosaic-shaded lamp that hung in the center of the room. Beneath this was a huge bowl of roses, the colours shading from one extreme to the other. Some there were so dark as to appear almost black, to vivid scarlet and flaming yellow, to others so delicately tinted as to truly rival the shy blush of the maiden. They filled the room with a heavy, exotic perfume and as I gazed, one of the flowers, fullblown in that superheated atmosphere, burst slowly and the creamy petals drifted slowly— one by one— lightly as thistledown— onto the rich red carpet on the floor.

Behind this great bouquet was a square block of perfectly grained black marble, flanked on either side by fantastically wrought incense burners. Poised on the marble base was a five-clawed dragon, in the act of striking, carved

from solid ivory with the meticulous care that characterizes the oriental artist. So cleverly was it wrought that the object seemed to possess a personality that was both fascinating, yet repellent. It was wickedly beautiful in its own way, and it recalled to me similar emotions when I had first handled a Renaissance stiletto.

Directly opposite the carving, the books ended abruptly, to recommence at an interval of about three feet wide. Across the aperture was hung a heavy plush curtain, crimson with golden edging, and worked with poppies and roses. It fell in heavy folds that hung motionless in the still air, exuding an influence of the obscene and the unmentionable.

I turned and something caused me to rub my eyes. Of the door we had entered, there was no sign. Save for the curtained aperture, the book-lined walls continued in an unbroken line around the room. Hardly able to believe the evidence of my own eyes, I walked up and ran my fingers over them. My hand encountered bindings— red— gold— that winked mockingly in the vari-coloured radiance.

The choice of books in themselves was remarkable. The titles covered a wide range from the transcendental and metaphysical and all manner of works on the processes and oddities of the human thought seemed to be assembled there. They ranged from the days of black magic to psycho-therapeutics of the modern analytical school.

There were volumes by Zaasman and Jung, together with other foreign scientists on the morbid phenomena of the brain.

Interested in spite of myself, I took down one book in German, a tongue with which I am fairly conversant, but after a hurried glance returned it hastily to its position.

It was a study of Dementia Praecox and its plates of naked German lunatics almost turned my stomach, quite unused as I was to the German scientific treatment of the more repellent disorders of life.

At the end of the highest row were a number of volumes touching on the influence of suggestion on the human mind. They ranged from the early investigations of Bertrand and of James Braid to the more recent studies of auto-suggestion by Coue and other modern French writers in this line of thought.

"By Jove, Follansbee," the doctor's softly spoken remark brought me round like a shot. "You wanted adventure, you craved something different— well, you've got it, with a vengeance."

THE big explorer shrugged his shoulders. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, my dear Horatio—," he quoted. "We seem to have stumbled fairly into the latest six shilling sensationalism." He glanced at the watch on his wrist, "By the Lord Harry, it's almost ten o'clock. I could tackle the proverbial leg of an iron pot, I'm that peckish. I sincerely hope someone puts in an appearance shortly," he broke off and glanced round the room. "Who owns this musical comedy apartment, anyway?"

The doctor paced the room, his hands locked behind his back. "Do you know," he said, as he drew abreast of us, "I rather fancy that we are on the eve of a momentous discovery. Taking the curious events in their sequence, we have the finding of the Islands, the well-worn path through the woods of an apparently uninhabited island and our discovery of the giant creatures that eventually captured us. Add to that the fact that there is installed here something in the form of an operating theatre— so much is plain by the use of chloroform— and we are left to arrive at only one conclusion."

"Why," I broke in, "behind that door from whence the ether fumes emanated, is an operating theatre, up-to-date and modern in every respect. Though I caught just a glimpse as the door opened, I recognized the Newington naphtha flares, and they have yet to be installed in the Prince's Hospital. Evidently, whoever uses the room insists on every known appliance."

Clovelly nodded absently. "Exactly. It bears out my theory that before we leave this island, we are going to learn that science, in the hands of the unscrupulous, can do quite so much harm as it can do good." He turned to me. "You, Huxley, with your medical knowledge, can you not glimpse at what is taking place here?"

I shook my head and coloured slightly. "I can perceive nothing more than is apparent to all of us. In some manner, the ruler or owner of this island has possessed himself of some secret formula for the making of supermen. This he does by some delicate operation, for the elaborately equipped operating room and the modern Blood Filter are both necessary in the course of the metamorphosis."

"And have you no idea of how this transformation is effected?"

"Not the slightest, but I know enough to be aware that he has a tremendous power for good or ill. Just how he intends to use it is a matter for conjecture."

The doctor turned to Follansbee, but that gentleman was gazing intently at the curtained-off aperture. He closed his eyes tight and shook his head. "Either I'm going clean blind batty or my eyes have developed the shakes, but I'm certain that I saw that curtain move. I was just standing here when— look,

there now, do you see it?" he broke off abruptly and pointed a finger at the gently moving cloth.

We stared as if fascinated at the slowly writhing folds, as it twisted and coiled itself into thick pleats, to belly out like a sail in the sea breeze and then resolve into tiny undulations that rippled across the crimson surface. But the culmination came when from behind it there arose a peculiar coughing grunt, followed by a gasp of someone or something struggling for breath.

"What fresh deviltry is this?" muttered the explorer uneasily. He raised his voice. "Anyone there?" he called.

There was no answer, but I for one was hardly surprised. It was not enough for Follansbee, though. He squared his broad shoulders and clenched his fists. "I say," he called again, "is anyone there behind that curtain?"

But the silence of the weird circular chamber was unbroken. The curtains were motionless now. Another rose bloom, a flower almost dead black, fell to pieces. Almost mechanically, I counted the falling petals— one— two— three.

The big watcher paused just one second, then with chin jutting ominously, he strode toward the aperture. I could not but admire the stark courage of the man, facing unarmed a danger, increased a thousandfold because of its indefinable quality. Though my heart beat suspiciously fast, I stepped up beside him and we were almost to the curtain when an unlooked-for contingency occurred.

"I would advise you, gentlemen, to leave things that do not concern you, untouched. The consequences of spying are sometimes painful in the extreme."

THE voice was suave and modulated, but it possessed the quality of a revolver shot, it could not have startled us more. We whirled as if stung and gazed with wide eyes at the author.

He was standing a little in rear of Dr. Clovelly, and his manner of entry was a matter for conjecture. Certainly none of us had heard him, but as he was standing where I presumed the secret entrance to be situated, I judged that he had achieved egress in like manner.

It needed only a second's scrutiny to place the man as an Oriental, but he was clothed in a neat fitting grey suit and shod with smart, square-toed patent shoes. His skin was smooth and butter-yellow and a pair of large tortoise-shell glasses bridged his nose, the huge pebbles making the eyes absurdly out of proportion with the rest of the countenance. He wore his hair long and brushed back off a high intellectual forehead. He spoke with just a slightest trace of accent, a metallic enunciation of the consonant "r"— a trait which characterises even the most educated of Chinamen.

"I trust, gentlemen, that you will excuse the somewhat rough handling. Strangers are not welcome on the island of Ho Ming, especially white strangers."

As the insolent voice ceased, a thin ironical smile curved the thin lips, revealing two rows of yellow teeth. But there was no humour in the narrow-lidded, purple-black eyes, for in their inky depths there lurked the cruel passionless look of one who had gazed too long on agony and suffering to feel the sorrow and pity of it all. They reminded me of the loathsome orbs of a hooded cobra.

Follansbee was first to recover from his surprise. "If we are not asking too much," he asked quietly, "may I enquire just where we are and what relation you bear to all this." He waved his hand around the bizarre apartment.

With all the slow dignity of his race, the Chinaman raised his hand. "I will explain in my own time," he said blandly. "It is I who give orders now and you will obey—" He smiled at the angry Follansbee— "No! When steps will be taken to make you obey. We of Hankow have many methods of curing obstinancy."

Dr. Clovelly started forward. "We are British subjects," he cried. "If you harm us in any manner, the government will blow your island to Glory and you will end your career with a rope around your neck."

The Chinaman bowed and spread his hands. "If it eases you to entertain such delusions, Dr. Clovelly, by all means do so. But you have evidently forgotten the necessity of communicating your unfortunate position to your Government."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know many things, for I am the chosen ruler of the People of the Ming Dragon. You have arrived at a most opportune moment—" the Oriental broke off abruptly. "Gentleman, I have a proposition to put before you."

He walked over to the black marble dais and seated himself thereon. For a moment he sat thus, seeming deep in thought, then he raised his eyes and glanced at each of us in turn.

"Now," he began, "I want you to hold no delusions as to your position on this island. You are my Prisoners, for me to do with you as I whim. But you are all men who have achieved some fame in your respective professions and I have no desire to rob the world of your talents. So— I offer this truce."

He turned in his seat and directed a long slender finger at the doctor. "I know you, Clovelly, as one of the greatest of living authorities on the gland-grafting treatment. Your studies with Steinach in Vienna, when you unearthed the Cod Bone method proved to me that you had the business of glanding and

rejuvenation at your fingertips. Mr. James Huxley, your assistant, needs no introduction to me, nor does your friend, Mr. Follansbee.

"You have, no doubt, been rightfully bewildered over the strange creatures that inhabit this place, hesitating to categorise them as either man or beast. Let me set your mind at rest, and inform you that they are neither and yet both. That is to say, they possess the characteristics both animal and human, because they are of a scale of civilization that is intermediate. They eat, walk, talk and work, possess the strength of ten men, live to an almost prodigious age, and lastly, possess a certain immunity from sickness and disease. They are my Gland Men and are the latest triumph of modern science."

The monotonous tones ceased and the speaker, taking from his pocket an inlaid case, extracted a cigarette. I blinked my eyes and breathed hard, thoroughly convinced that I was mad or dreaming. The coloured shade stained the floor with its dancing hues, the rose-scented air seemed charged with the dominant personality of the owner. The scratch of a match recalled me and I saw the smoke curl through the nostrils of the Oriental, as he lay back and surveyed us with his narrow oblique eyes lowered to mere slits.

Chapter 3: A Gigantic Scheme

"NOW, GENTLEMEN, behind this is a story of patience and attention to detail that can only be achieved by one in search of an ideal. Up on the slopes of the White Headed Mountain, on the Western border of Tibet, there stands a Lamasery known as the 'Brothers of the Golden Khan'. It is the holy of holies, this desolate edifice, for in its sacred precincts there dwells the Most Illustrious Deity, the Grand Lama Dalai. He is a beautiful youth, with skin as soft as a maiden and limbs muscular and symmetrical. Though he has attained the distinguished age of two hundred years, he has the appearance of an unsullied youth, a fit spectacle for the thousands of devout Chinamen who yearly visited the shrine, leaving it richer by gifts and money.

"Now, my father entered that Lamasery as a youth, not because of any religious urgings, but because he regarded the permanent youth of their Deity to be nothing more than a gigantic hoax to attract money and notoriety to their shrine. He knew that the priests must possess some miraculous secret of preserving eternal youth and he meant to obtain that formula, cost what it may. That the task was no sinecure was obvious, but he had the patience and perseverance that only one of the East can inherit.

"For forty long years, my father lived with the priests, and he was just on the point of achieving his life's desire, when he was betrayed by a treacherous servant. He was caught and after a year of endless torture eventually made his

escape. He fled to Hankow, where I was studying surgery and delivered into my hands the sacred tomes containing the great secret formula. Further information I could not receive, for amongst other things, the Lama priests had torn my father's tongue from his mouth, thus making him dumb forever.

"Then followed a reign of terror for us. My father and I flew from place to place, but nowhere could we escape the watchful eye of the vengeful priests, who, by that time, had discovered the missing volumes. At length, I evolved a plan by which we would be free from further persecution. I personally sought an interview with the Great Emperor Dragon, the great Shem Sing, and laid my plans before him. He was delighted with the idea, and not only gave orders that I should be protected, but also agreed to finance the scheme in view.

"One of the chapters in the book dealt extensively with that branch of anatomy known as the Endocrine Glands. As you gentlemen are aware, this is but a newly discovered phase of surgery, but to the Holy Brothers, it had been old knowledge. There is nothing in this earth so strange and fantastic as the history of those obscure bodily organs that mean more than life to us.

"Amongst other things, the two most frequently mentioned were the thyroid, that shield-like gland astride our Adam's apple and the pituitary, hanging from the base of our brain by a hollow stem. The pituitary controls our growth, but the thyroid controls everything that makes our life worth while.

"Children with deficient thyroids— from atrophy, removal or injury— become things horrible to look upon, glibbering idiotic dwarfs—heavy featured and twisted in body. Cretins they are called, for they never metamorphose into normal adults. Hence the importance of the obscure organ.

"But the Brethren experimented on aquatic larvae. They caught a tadpole and removed its thyroid. It never became a frog, but remained a tadpole for the remainder of its existence. On the other hand, they gorged a tadpole with thyroxin, and almost immediately it changed to a frog. I say changed, gentlemen, not grew— because the tadpole did not grow. The frog, fully developed, remained only as large as a tadpole. Thyroxin feeding produces two results, it hastens metamorphosis, but retards growth.

"With this information, my father and myself started out upon our momentous scheme. We obtained the thyroid from an ape and transferred it to that of a three-months-old baby. Almost immediately the child began to exhibit simian characteristics— then the body began to alter shape. But the child grew no larger than the day the gland was transferred and it was to overcome this difficulty that we set ourselves.

"Now the growth, or pituitary gland is not a vital organ, but a normal gland is essential to normal life. An operation on the pituitary is enormously difficult— for one thing, it is only as big as the tip of the little finger and it is so

near the centre of the head that it is next to impossible to localize. But we finally overcame this difficulty and all was ready for the final experiment."

THIS was the scheme in mind. If a grafted thyroid could transform a child to an ape, would it not be possible to transplant the glands of an anthropoid to that of a growing human? An operation on the pituitary would overcome the difference in growth and the finished product would possess the strength and power of an anthropoid and the intelligence and appearance of a human being.

"Such was the scheme that occurred to me. Luckily I was possessed of twelve sisters, and each, in turn gave their lives for science. Still we were unsuccessful, the creatures of our experiments being things hideous and fearful to look upon, that were killed as soon as tested. Then our faithful servants professed themselves willing to give their lives. Three there were and by a strange freak of Fate, it was the last attempt that was successful. We achieved a huge beast, such as you see here today, and it was this creature that we took to the Emperor as proof of our good faith. Then we outlined to him our momentous scheme.

"What a great thing it would be for our decadent empire could we but manufacture an army of these Gland Men. They would be immune from hurts and outlive the strongest of soldiers. Again, they would seek for nothing in return, fighting but to appease their brutal instincts. With an army such as these, we could wipe the entire White Race from the world and restore China to her rightful position as Mistress of the World. The magnificence of the scheme fairly dazzled me, such prodigious possibilities did it possess.

"Here you see the great scheme in embryo. Thanks to the magnificent generosity of the Emperor, we have unlimited facilities for the great scheme in progress."

Once more he paused, and the hard black eyes, alight with the fire of fanaticism, gleamed and sparkled like wet anthracite coal. He leaned forward and waved a thin yellow hand in our direction.

"White men," he said, "Here is an undoubted truth. In a decade this colony will be a serious menace to your white civilization— and in fifty years we will sweep you off the earth. China will return to her rightful position, and the world will bow down to the despised Chinaman."

"Really," Follansbee's coolness was superb, "And if we whites are considered such a nonentity, why expound to such a length to us?"

The light died out of the Oriental's countenance and the eyes narrowed perceptibly. He inhaled deeply on his cigarette and as the smoke curled

through the flat nostrils, the pungent odour hung in wisps on the heavily scented air.

"My Gland Men," he murmured, so softly that the purring voice was scarcely heard, "lack but two things. One— the method of human speech, and the other— of paramount importance— is their sexlessness. It is upon you gentlemen that I rely for the rectification of those surgical errors."

Dr. Clovelly took a step forward. "And if we refuse?"

The Oriental shrugged his shoulders. "I have just attended to two operations this morning," he replied meaningly, "and in the advent of your refusal, I will attend three more tomorrow morning."

"Do you mean that you operate here?"

"Certainly. Why not? We have every facility of modern science, and a laboratory that is the last word in the up-to-date."

"But— but—" babbled Dr. Clovelly, amazedly, "Your supplies— and chemicals." Ho Ming gave an upward gesture of his hands.

"Wireless," he explained. "A call to our base will bring a ship load of supplies within a few days. That is what has cut that path through the undergrowth."

"But your— er— patients do not recover immediately. You must have a hospital, or something of the kind?"

"If you consent to my proposition, Dr. Clovelly, I will make arrangements for you to be shown over my island as soon as it is possible."

CLOVELLY spread his hands helplessly. "Under the circumstances," he acquiesced, "we can do nothing but submit. But you must promise that we meet with no treachery."

The Chinaman inclined his head. "Have no fear of that," he assured us. "And now I shall show you around. You shall see that this is no wild dream of mine. It has taken years to accrue the knowledge and effects, but it is all to the one purpose."

With his quick, silent walk, he crossed over to the crimson curtain and pausing before it, spoke for some moments in the pure liquid Ho Man dialect. From inside there came a rustle of silken garments and suddenly, as we listened, there arose again that evil voiceless murmuring that we had heard on the previous occasion. Ho Ming turned to and waved a hand in the direction of the curtained aperture.

"My illustrious Father— The Great Bald One— The Learned Wong K'tai, who first wrested the priceless formula from the Lama pigs and to whose patience and saintly perseverance, this island owes its existence."

So that was the solution of the peculiar sounds, and I was about to pace forward, when Ho Ming, with a peculiar smile held out restraining arm. He then picked up a slim ivory wand, and with a quick movement stabbed it at the curtain. Immediately there came a Szz and a bright flash as something shot through the air, but so quick— so unexpected— was the whole action that I did not have time to glimpse the object. The next moment the Chinaman, with a bland smile, moved forward and held aside the curtains.

The room into which we looked could not have been more than six feet square, but screened on all sides as it was by rich hangings, it gave the illusion of depths that was very cleverly carried out. The black velvet hangings were worked with a bewildering array of birds and flowers, in colours both rare and wonderful. Scarlet parrots, blue peacocks were entwined with crimson poppies and roses of every shade and hue. Gaudy though it undoubtedly was, there was nothing in it to offend the eye, for the colours were blended with the skill of an expert.

In the center of the room, in a huge chair that almost enveloped the slight form, sat the oldest Chinaman I have ever set eyes on. He was thin to emaciation and the rich purple robe he wore hung in folds about his skinny frame. His head, bowed slightly with the weight of years, was as bald as an egg and the long beard that hung from his chin was white as the driven snow. The face was seamed with a thousand wrinkles and only the beady eyes, sunk deep in the lined countenance, gave a hint of vitality. He sat motionless, like some grotesque idol, a fit parent to this place of sinister secrets.

Ho Ming entered the room and pausing before the chair, fell upon his knees. For some moments, there was a silence, then slowly, like one in a trance, one claw-like hand, yellow as ivory, was raised in salute. For a second it remained poised, then, as though its owner lacked strength to hold it in place, it fell limply back onto the chair. Ho Ming rose to his feet.

"The great One salutes you, and wishes you well. Gentlemen, you may consider yourselves doubly honoured."

He re-crossed the room and as he made his way through the doorway, the curtain dropped behind him. Synonymous with it came the swish and the flash, and the Oriental with quick movement touched a portion of the woodwork. Immediately the object came to rest and for the first time we saw it. It was a blade, some six inches wide and the width of the doorway, a blade razor-edged and weighted at the top. It ran down between the door-posts on a concealed wire, very much on the principle of the French device, the guillotine, at an almost incredible speed. The Oriental released it, and it disappeared into a slot in the floor.

"Quite Chinese," he purred. "Borrowed from the palaces of the Emperors. By the way," he turned to Follansbee, "It was as well that I arrived when I did, this morning, for had you stepped across the threshold, you would have been cleft in half." He walked to the book-lined wall and moved his hands in the circular manner we had noticed before. With a click of concealed machinery, the section swung back, and we filed into the dimly lit passage. "Now," our guide cautioned us, "Keep close to me and offer no resistance, no matter what happens."

Chapter 4: Awaiting the Storm

THE contrast between the brightly lit room and the semi-darkness of the passage was so great that for some moments I could perceive nothing, far less distinguish any objects. The luminous dial of my watch told me that it was just past the noon hour and I could not but help reflecting that we had certainly spent a crowded hour. It seemed incredible that all our strange adventures had been compassed in such a short space of time; already we seemed to have spent months on the island, and England and Prince Alfred's Hospital seemed very far away.

Gradually, as my eyes became accustomed to the light, I made out the various doors leading from the strange apartment. The Oriental Ho Ming took the lead and we others trailed behind him. At the end of the passage he paused before a door.

"This," our guide explained with a gesture, "is the laboratory. Here it is that the serum is compounded that speeds up our workers and helps them to overcome the laziness that they inherit from the anthropoid side of their nature. Adrenin, obtained as you know, from the adrenals near the kidneys, forms a large percentage of the serum. Adrenin is the greatest and most natural stimulant known to mankind."

He threw open the door and we surveyed a long low room, with wooden benches running the entire length. Upon these were placed a heterogeneous collection of scientific instruments— microscopes, galvanometers and centrifuges. Everything was scrupulously clean and three assistants in spotless overalls hovered silently about the room. Ho Ming gave a sharp order and immediately one of the men crossed to the bench and procured a test tube half-full of some dirty brown liquid. This he placed in his master's hand.

"This is the inoculation serum," explained the Chinaman. "You must understand that the ape-glands are incredibly strong and that if left to themselves, must ultimately reduce their owner to a state of bestial idiocy. To prevent this, an injection of the serum is necessary at least once a week. The

result of the adrenin in the blood is at once apparent. It speeds up the sluggish heart beat, drives fatigue from the muscles, and prepares the body for emergency function. A very simple formula," he returned the tube to its place as he spoke, "I discovered it something like two years ago."

He closed the door and we retraced our steps along the passage. "Removal of the thyroids and parathyroids necessitates cutting away certain portions of the larynx," he was explaining to the doctor. "We tried cutting through the windpipe into the cricoid cartilage—" and he rambled away into the realms of surgery with Clovelly listening delighted and entranced.

I took advantage of his immersion to drop back with Follansbee. "What do you think of it all, anyway?" I muttered.

He surveyed me for a moment, his grey eyes lighted humorously. "Two things strike me with perturbing force. One is that our Oriental friend is a loyal fanatic and means every word he says. The other is that we are in the very devil of a hole and I don't mind telling you young fellow, that just at present, I fail to see the tiniest loophole of escape."

"Do you think the man is mad?" I murmured, having digested the somewhat disturbing statement of the other.

Follansbee shrugged his shoulders— "He may be," he assented. "There is no doubt that he is clever— and cleverness and insanity often go hand in hand."

I glanced to where the two men were holding excited converse. "I do believe that Dr. Clovelly is really enjoying himself," I remarked softly. "He's hanging on to the Chinaman's words as though they were pearls of great price."

The other man smiled, a trifle grimly. "I think that the doctor will be quite safe," he returned. "It's little us that's worrying this child. You see, we may be guests of honor for as long as the childish vanity of our hosts continues, but one day, they'll run short of raw material, and then—" he made an expressive gesture.

I was about to reply, when the Chinaman paused with his hand on another door. He regarded us suspiciously as we walked up together and his voice was as sweet as honey as he observed.

"Do not linger behind, my friends," he glanced over his shoulder as he spoke. "There are many strange things in the abode of Ho Ming. Fingers that claw and grasp, hands that tear and break. It is very foolish to stray behind."

WITH that he pushed the door and as it swung open, we glimpsed a well-lighted apartment, with twin rows of beds running along either side. Around two of the nearest, white screens were placed and from behind one of these a

faint moaning emanated. The air was charged with the acrid tang of carbolic and as before, everything spoke of scrupulous attention to detail.

"My hospital," it was explained. "My patients come here from the operating tables and from here they emerge to the outbuildings, to do their allotted share among their fellows. There is no intervening period, which we know as convalescence. A week in hospital is long enough for the newly grafted gland to function. Then sunlight, fresh air and hard work do the rest. It is amazingly simple."

"But," I interpolated, "Where do you get your material to work on? It must come rather hard to find men willing to sacrifice themselves to this sort of Roman holiday."

"Convicts from the State Prisons furnish us with much work," was the cold reply. "Murderers, servants, and occasionally a few are pressed into service by my assistants, who form a modern equivalent to your old-time press-gang."

I grinned a trifle rudely. "Bang goes your dream of world revolution," I returned, "if that is how you progress. After weeding your prisons clear of undesirable characters the *magnum opus* will languish and finally die of insufficient means of support."

Ho Ming turned his unfathomable black eyes upon me. "Presumptous fool," he said, coldly. "China now possesses an army of six thousand men, drilled and perfect in the art of war. As soon as circumstances will allow sufficient serum will be despatched and under the treatment of my assistants, every soldier will become a Gland Man. After that every man who enters the army will be likewise glanded, and in time we shall possess an entire army of these supermen."

I raised no more questions, for if the Oriental was insane, there was assuredly method in his madness. In fact the gigantic scheme was too complete, and for the first time, the true meaning of this man's insane dream chilled me with its appalling possibilities. The doctor's voice broke in on my reflections.

"And are all your operations successful?" he asked. "In such a delicate business as this, one would think the failures outweighed the successes."

Ho Ming looked at the speaker, his eyes alight with a peculiar gleam. "Yes," he said, slowly, "we do have failures, in spite of our precautions. Before you see them, I warn you— they are not pretty to look upon."

He led the way through a side door and we found ourselves once more in the day light. The weather had changed completely since our sojourn inside. The sky, brassy before, was now almost clear, the hard blue sullied by a thick band of black clouds that spread themselves like some ebon canopy across the eastern sky. Little puffs of wind stirred the dust and dried leaves at our feet,

whirling them into the blue. The atmosphere was thick and heavy, so heavy indeed, that some difficulty was experienced in breathing, and the sun poured down with a fierce heat that was almost unbearable. The silence was broken intermittently by a low sibilant hum.

Follansbee glanced curiously around him. "It's coming," he said appreciatively, "It's coming, and by Heaven, I pity this place if it strikes it."

We skirted the main building and passed through the high wooden stockade till we reached the outbuildings. Some little way further on, we could perceive a number of the queer inhabitants engaged in erecting a new structure. They swung the huge tree-trunks as though they were light sticks and in an amazingly short time, the central framework was raised.

We passed a long building, constructed of rough hewn timbers, containing a number of small cubicles. Each separate room had its neatly folded mattress and shining eating utensils. The place contained no comforts whatever—just the bare necessities of living, and was obviously the domestic quarters of the strange beings that Ho Ming called his Gland Men.

The Revenge of Nature

A PECULIAR smell was predominant here increasing in strength as we made our way onward. Everyone is familiar with the loathsome, animal smell that is prevalent wherever beasts are incarcerated. It emanated from a tiny hillock, built over an underground cellar. A gate led us down about a dozen steps cut in the earth and brought us up before a massive iron door, with a barred grating set in the top. The snapping and snarling of animals came clearly to our ears, and the words of the Oriental "they are not good to look upon" took on fresh significance.

The Chinaman, who was in the lead, stepped forward and sliding back the grating motioned me up. I peered in, scarcely knowing what to expect, and hardly had I taken one brief glimpse when I recoiled was a gasp of horror. Even Dante, in hit journey through the innermost Hells, could scarcely have viewed such horrible creatures as haunted that underground pit.

There must have been over a dozen of them— loathsome— terrible. Some twisted beyond any semblance of recognition, others with stunted bodies and bloated appendages growing in various parts of their anatomy; They stood silent as I glimpsed them, looking at me mildly with their bloodshot eyes, gesticulating with their crooked, shrunken limbs. But the crowning horror was the undeniable fact that once these things had been men, even as you and I, living— hating— breathing.

As I stumbled up the stairs, sick with horror, I was joined by the Oriental, who stood watching me with a sardonic smile on his lips. I did not speak, but stood there, drinking in the thick air in thirsty gulps. And then suddenly it happened.

It began by the sunlight fading, and glancing up, I saw that the monstrous black cloud had overshadowed almost all the sky, leaving only a portion over the sea, that glowed eerily with an uncanny elfin radiance. The low intermittent humming had risen in cadence and was coming nearer every second. A patter of feet made me swing round, and there, his face white with terror, was one of the overalled assistants. He stepped up to the Chinaman and poured forth a string of incoherent language, that for a moment, eluded even his countryman. Then I saw Ho Ming's face turn a sickly green, his eyes protruded, and he barked back a question into the other's face, and I distinctly heard the name K'tai. Then without a word, Ho Ming turned on his heel and, side by side, the two raced for the main building as fast as they could move, leaving me standing wide-eyed with amazement.

A moment later I was joined by my companions, and to them I explained the sudden departure of the Chinaman. As I spoke, several big drops of rain commenced to fall, and Dr. Clovelly glanced anxiously at flee sky. "Hullo!" he ejaculated, "Here's that storm that you promised us, Follansbee."

But that gentleman jumped to his feet as though he had been stung. "Storm be damned," he exclaimed, "That 'storm' is a number one size typhoon, and it is heading this way. I give it five seconds to strike the island."

THE terrific upheaval of Nature lasted three hours, and to us adventurers, crouched in the groaning swaying forest, it was the final denounement of our astounding adventures on the Island of the Gland Men. Towards evening the hurricane dropped, but the rain poured down with unbridled fury, sweeping and lashing the vegetation before it. Such a deluge it is almost impossible to describe, rather it was as though the skies had opened and the seven seas poured their waters through the gap. Even in the thick of the matted vegetation, we were drenched to the skin, and it was almost dark when we eventually crawled forth from our shelter and took our last look at the Island. The downpour had abated somewhat, but it still swept in our faces with the sting of a whip-lash, and at length, wet, half-blinded and weighed down by the weight of our sodden garments, we gazed at what had once been the realization of a fanatic's dream.

Such a scene of destruction and chaos beggars description. The sturdy buildings had been swept away like match boxes before a summer breeze. The heaps of wood and iron were still faintly smouldering and when I remembered

the volatile chemicals that were ranged along the shelves, I percived that combustion must have wrecked quite as many of the edifices as the howling typhoon.

There was the half-erected framework, now splintered and scattered. There too, the poor dumb beasts that had once been men. The cataclysm had burst upon them before their bestial minds had time to realize its significance. The rain swept mercilessly down on the inanimate hairy bodies, as though gloating in its power over mere mortals.

The high stockade was, by some miracle, still standing in places. In other places it japed open, showing the destruction within the walls. Here the bodies were piled, corpses torn, scratched and bitten, telling of the panic that must have enveloped the community, as it fought for freedom. I wondered if any of the hideous denizens of the underground pit had escaped, but a glance assured me. The ruins of the main building were piled feet high over the vault of horror.

Of Ho Ming there was no sign. It was impossible that he had lived through the chaos that had enveloped the Island, but it was hardly probable that everyone was dead. We, to be sure, only owed our lives to our sheltered positions, but there might have been others.

The Island must have been situated in the very centre of the catastrophe; otherwise there was no manner of accounting for the terrible amount of damage. It seemed strange— ironical— that the toil and labour of a decade should thus be destroyed in a few hours. The Chinaman's scheme had been a marvel of completeness, but the best-laid plans—.

We retraced our steps in silence, each one a little chastened by the tragedy that we had passed through. We were nearly to the beach when I put the question.

"What made the Chinaman rush away like he did?" I asked Follansbee. "He turned a sickly colour and went for his life."

"Didn't you say that you heard his father's name mentioned?" the big man asked. "Well, it's obvious that the servant told him of the coming storm and he rushed off to comfort and protect his father. The paternal reverence is very strongly developed in the Oriental races, and he evidently cared for nothing as long as his father was safe. Recollect that all he had was made possible by the sacrifice of his parents."

We had reached the electric launch, beached high and dry where we had left it. As we swung it round, I voiced the unspoken question of the trio.

"Will anyone believe us?" I ruminated, "when we tell them where we have been and what we have seen? I very much doubt that I would, were a person to recount to me the—"

I broke off suddenly. The ground beneath our feet was shivering and heaving, and for a moment, I doubted the evidence of my eyes. The next moment it was still again, and I was about to ridicule the idea when Follansbee grasped me by the arm.

"Did you feel that?" he said. "For God's sake, get that launch on the water. There is going to be a lot of funny things happen here before long. Come on."

In less than twenty minutes we were in sight of the ship once more and then it was that Follansbee made the final remark.

"Not a word about our adventures," he warned, "I'll get Sparks to radio Port Moresby for a destroyer to clean up that Island. I suppose that it will be necessary to give them a bare outline."

And I turned to see the foreshore of the Island, still brooding and sinister, disappearing into the tropical night.

There is but one incident worth while recording, however, and it took the form of a radiogram that Follansbee received after his detailing the story to the Naval Authorities at Port Moresby.

"Searched water for some time in latitude given. Find no trace of Island. Suspect some elaborate hoax. Am temporarily dropping matter."

What is the explanation of that message. Can it be, as Follansbee informed me, that Ho Ming made his headquarters on one of these roving islands that are never in the same place for any length of time? Were the mysterious tremors we felt forerunners of another upheaval?

And if that is so, I often pause to think of the misguided genius that lies fathoms deep in the ocean and the terrible formula that must remain a secret till the sea gives up its dead.

SCIENTISTS admit that we are now on the verge of great discoveries in biology. We are just learning what we human beings are and what the forces are that control us. Why are some men small and others tall; why are some witty, clever, strong and successful and others dull, stupid and apparently without purpose or energy in life? The answer of the biologist is: Glands—little reservoirs of strange fluids, the fluids that course through our blood and determine our destiny. This seems almost magical—that for example a few drops of an unknown fluid can determine a man's entire destiny. Yet it has been proved to be true.

What a world we will have then when we finally discover how to control these glands and make them do for us what we will! We may have a nation of supermen or a nation of strong, stupid, slavish servants. It will all depend on

who controls the glands. The author of this exciting tale was a professor of medicine himself and his science is not only exact but his story most thrilling.

_____

Illusion

News (Adelaide), 29 Oct 1932

"AND here, ladies and gentlemen, we have Baby Flora, the world's weightiest woman. Twenty-five years of age, and weighs 25 stone."

Over the heads of the jostling crowd thronging the narrow avenues of Bentley's Mammoth Freak Show the voice of the barker vibrated rawly on the hot, dust-laden air. The fat woman's rouged lips curved in a mechanical grin as she faced the staring crowds who craned upwards to see this grotesque joke of Nature. Above their laughter and chatter sounded the ceaseless litany of Eddie Pinkus, the freak show spruiker.

"And now see the wonder woman, Madam Mysteria. She can peer into the future or probe the past."

The heavily made-up woman at the pointing end of the spruiker's stick looked down at the sea of staring faces. Her forced smile held more than a trade of contempt for this gaping mob. Pinkus noticed it, and his white teeth flashed. The woman's sneer changed to a pleased smirk, and a slow blush crept across her face. Those few in the crowd who noticed it wondered what amorous secret these two chared between them. But, the unfortunate freaks knew ony too well.

THE spruiker passed on, the crowd following like children at the heels of a master. The fat woman shook herself irritably, and her mountain of flesh-quivered jelly-like. The beads of. perspiration gathered on her forehead. She dashed them away with an impatient hand, and turned to the living skeleton.

"Did you see that?" she asked abruptly.

The living skeleton shrugged his shoulders. He used his body rather than his tongue for speech. But long association with these movements, had taught the other to understand them.

"It's all very well for you to say that we can't do anything. I only wish I were a man. The way he treats that little wife of his makes my blood boil."

The tattooed woman, on the opposite side, leanedd over. She was a withered, horse-faced woman, and now her high-toned voice was shriller than ever nith repressed excitemqnt.

"They 'ad a dreadful row las' night," she squeaked. "I couldn't 'elp 'earin' them. He told 'is wife that 'e wished she were dead." Her voice jumped to high notes. " 'E actually said that. one day 'e'd fix-that guillotine so that it would actually cut off 'er 'ead. The poor creature came running into my tent almost crazy with fear."

The fat woman drew a long breath. "I heard them," she said. "And I'll tell you something else." She lowered her voice to what she believed was a confidential whisper. "Pinkus and that woman are going away tonight-together!" She paused dramatically. "They're going to clear off and leave Norah to face the music alone."

FLORA, good-hearted soul that she was, would. have lowered her voice still more if she could have seen the girl who stood listening behind the booth. Norah Pinkus had slipped away from her exhibit for a minute. Returning, she heard her name mentioned, and had paused for a second.

"Oh—!" she breathed. The scarlet banners, the dirty-white canvas booths, the yellow sawdust and gaudy trappings made a drunken riot of color in her brain. She swayed and put out one hand to steady herself. Those sudden dizzy spells were becoming frequent lately. As she tightened her grip on the tent-pole her sleeve fell back to reveal four plum-colored bruises on her arm.

Norah had been the wife of Eddie Pinkus for almost a year now. She was barely out of her teens, this girl. Yet worry and some deeper emotion had carved her face in bitter lines. She stood there, pale as death, save where the twin daubs of rouge gave mockery of life to her face.

"Fool that I've been," whispered Norah. "Fool!"

Back into her mind flooded the promises this man had made to her. Eddie Pinkus gave his birthplace as California, but it was openly said that an adobe hut rather than a nursing home had been his earliest surroundings. A diversity of occupations from a gigolo in a Florida dance hall to a guitar player in a cheap vaudeville act had brought this dusky dandy to Australia, where the invasion of the talkies put an end to his livelihood.

Marriage with Norah Kelly, a stranded chorus girl, followed, and he persuaded her to join him in his illusionist act. Too late the girl learned that the "act" was nothing more than a cheap sideshow exhibit and her marriage a bitter mockery.

"Now, folks, we are actually going to show you a lady beheaded on the guillotine— a page from the French Revolution."

Norah started abruptly. Her partner's raucous voice bored into her thoughts. Realising that she would be wanted any minute, she began to walk quickly in the direction of the voice.

HERE Pinkus was smacking the painted banner with his cane. The crowd, incredulous, eyed him interestedly. They edged closer.

"What you see on the outside is nothing to the actual show. Beautiful Valerie Le Fay will allow herself to be strapped to the machine of death. The knife, weighing 20 pounds, will be released on her unprotected neck."

An awed silence fell on the crowd. Somewhere a girl giggled nervously. A wavering spate of chatter broke forth. But -Pinkus knew his public. He smiled engagingly.

"Of course, folks, we don't hurt the lady. It's only an illusion. Here's Miss Le Fay herself."

He swept back the curtains. Norah, just a second behind time, stepped through. Pinkus greeted her with an elaborate smile which began and ended at his lips. Now that the free entertainment was over, some of the crowd began to move away. A small group, however, clustered about the ticket window. But Pinkus had done his part for the moment. He took the girl's hand and led her through the stained curtains. In the tiny dressing room just close he dropped her hand and turned on her. Anger flared in his eyes, mottling his dusky skin.

"Late again! D'you think you're Greta Garbo, strolling in when you please? Get into that costume." Norah raised a hand to her face. It lay cold as marble against her burning forehead.

"I was sick, Ed," she whispered, "Honest I was sick. I was only away a few—
"

Pinkus, waved aside her explanations. He pushed her roughly.

"Get a move on. Those people outside have paid their money. Shut your mouth and hurry up."

Without a word, the girl turned and reached down the faded costume. Swiftly she donned the gown with its wide bustles and dirty lace trimmings. As she was adjusting the cotton-wool wig she caught a glimpse of her own pallid face in the glass. She wheeled suddenly on her husband.

"Eddie," she said slowly, "is it true that you're leaving me tonight for Madam Mysteria?"

Even as she spoke she stood appalled at the expression that crossed his face. For a moment murder stared at her. Then it was gone. Finkus showed his teeth in an open sneer.

"So you've been spying, eh? Well, you might aas well know the truth. I'm sick and tired of you and everything about you."

OUTSIDE the crowd was becoming impatient. Someone had started to clap. Fretful heels drummed on the wooden floor. But Norah heard nothing of this. -Her mind was numbed . When she spoke it was as though the woiscdaseme from some distance away.

"But Eddie— you can't lehve me now." Her hand flew to her throat. "Not after what I told you last week—"

But Pinkus was grinning as though this was a huge joke.

"Oh, yeah. Well, you'll have to think of something better than that. Those sob stories don'tfool me at all."

Then it seemed as though fear left her. Rage and panic fanned her courage. She faced the man squarely, head high, chin firm. But it was merely brave show, for her tones held the high note of hysteria.

"I've stood a lot from you, Eddie Pinkus. But this, is the limit— I warn you. You won't get away with this. I'll find some way to stop you."

In her anger she babbled her phrases. "If you aren't man enough to face facts, I'll go to Madam Misteria and tell her the truth."

Pinkus stiffened and the smile died on his lips. The tiny room quivered with their open hostility. Outside the crowd muttered in angry monotone. The sound crept into the room and stroked them with sly, taunting fingers. For Pinkus it was too much. He took a step forward and started to say something. Then, as anger choked speech, he lifted his cane and struck the girl full across the face. Norah gave a little, cut-off gasp of pain. She stood as though turned to stone. The stinging weal across her face changed slowly from crimson to dark red to the purplish blue of a crushed plum. Then she spoke. Softly, deliberately.

"This is the end! Goodbye, Eddie Pinkus." She turned swiftly to the mirror; daubed powder on the scar, straightened her wig, and moved out into the main tent.

A RAGGED burst of clapping heralded her appearance. The crowd was grouped closely about the guillotine, which was fenced off with ropes at the far end of the tent. The machine stood in a shadowed corner, partly to cloak its tawdriness but mainly to conceal the series of mirrors which made the illusion possible. Between the uprights the triangular knife gleamed like polished silver. Two men examining the hinged platform stepped aside as Norah, followed by Pinkus, entered the square. The man picked up a length of rope and began to bind the girl. His tongue kept pace with his nimble movements.

"Watch carefully, folk. I will bind the little lady on to the platform so that there is no chance "of her moving. You may examine the knots. I will then place her head through the aperture below the knife and lock the boards about her neck."

Strained silence flung back his tones. Then a lean murmur ran through the crowd, the hungry undertone of the pack that smells blood. Eyes were wide

with excitement. Breathing became audible. Pinkus laid Norah on the platform and pushed her head under the concealed mirror let in between the uprights.

At the same moment Norah worked her arm free and thrust a dummy head through the circular aperture in the boards. Under the pretence of testing the stability of the uprights Pinkus inserted a heavy steel pin in a socket some 6 in. from Norah's throat. It was this pin that prevented the knife from falling farther and gave the girl the opportunity to push the dummy head from its socket into the basket. At last Pinkus straightened and turned to the crowd.

"Now, folk— when I count three I will release the knife. One..."

Lying there, gazing through the scratched mirror at the knife suspended above her head, Norah heard him vaguely. All that protected her from the deathblow was that small pin placed in the upright. Her thoughts wandered.

Two centuries ago pepple had died like this. Was it a painless death?

Death...?

Of course. After that blow across the face it was useless to hope any longer. And Eddie and Madam Mysterna were to start life anew. Death... and a new life. It was funny. A new life as bright and attractive as— as that steel pin gleaming against the sombre woodwork. Somehow it fascinated her, that small pin . . . -"

"*THREE*!''

Came the rattle of a drum. But even that sodden rumle could not drown out the vindictive swish of the heavy blade. And then—

THERE was a sudden brittle smashing of glass, a choked-off sound that was partly scream, partly gasping cough. Then silence. Splinters of glass shot into the air, gleamed for a second, then dropped among the horrified audience. The dummy head remained in its socket, gazing out with foolish painted eyes.

Strangely enough, there was no pandemonium. The audience were too horrified. A medical student was first to recover. He jumped forward, and with the aid of another man raised the heavy blade from the shattered fragments of the mirror. Eddie Pinkus stood as if petrified, staring down at the figure of his wife lying still as in death.

Carefully gentle hands lifted the dying woman to the ground. The student made a temporary bandage of handkerchiefs, wrapping it round the wound in her throat. A group of men rushed away to telephone the ambulance. But one look at Norah's face convinced the others that the errand was useless.

Suddenly the eyelids trembled, fluttered open. A shudder ran through her body. Falteringly, one limp hand rose ever so slightly and gestured toward the pallid husband. The word was almost a sighing breath.

"Murderer..." Then the head fell back and the word ended in a throaty rattle.

Across the silence of the crowd the fat woman's scream tore the air. "Yes, a murderer— that's right. He threatened to do this. I heard him. Look.."

THE crowd rushed at Eddie Pinkus, clutching at him with cruel, tearing hands. For a moment Norah was forgotten. Only the vacant, china blue eyes of the dummy head saw her fingers slowly unclasp and release a shining steel pin which rolled away beneath the guillotine.

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The Scarecrow

Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 17 June 1933

THE departmental car, with the Australian Government brand on the side door, slid along the white ribbon of road that wound endlessly through the steep green slopes of the hills. Above the bonnet of the car, the heat danced in shimmering spirals, and the motor-meter thrust up a warning scarlet finger against the glass. The day was blazingly hot. Behind the car the dust hung like a thin dry mist for some time after it was disturbed. The leaves of the trees faltered like slender exhausted hands, sucked of all animation. The motionless air seemed filled with a breathless, waiting stillness.

"It's quiet," observed Miles Morton, of *The Star*.

He removed his hat and wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"It's the quiet that they like," the florid, heavily-built man who had been introduced as the Honorable Thomas Windsor, chairman of the Unemployed Farms Scheme, shifted in his seat and gazed appreciatively across the slopes, undulating and sun-dried to the brassy sky. From a distant valley, clear through the quivering air, came the barking of a dog.

He turned back to the journalist.

"When we gave these unemployed families the farms, the peace of the countryside was one of the first things that the womenfolk appreciated." There was slight unction in his tone. "Imagine it! Thirty acres of land, full equipment, and a house given to people who hadn't a penny in the world. Of course, the house is only iron and weatherboard, but you'd never get one of those families to return to the city"— he swung round to the round-shouldered little man in the rear seat— "would you, Mr. Percival?"

"No, sir," said the secretary obediently. He nodded a grey head to give emphasis to his words.

The Honorable Mr. Windsor linked his plump fingers about his silver-mounted walking-stick.

"The reason I'm taking you up here, Mr. Morton, is to let you see for yourself how truly happy and contented these families are."

He waved his stick towards the top of the nearest hill.

"See that house up there? That's the Hartley farm. Wonderful view from there. Mrs. Hartley has probably seen us coming already. Good-looking woman, about 30. Husband was shell-shocked in the war. Couple been up here about five years. Two kiddies, one a year old and the other going to school now. A happier pair doesn't exist on this earth. I want you to talk to Mrs. Hartley. They're our ideal pair."

"Good!" said Miles Morton briefly.

The stocky chauffeur gave the wheel, a twist, and the car shot into an open space of roadway. Morton turned his attention to the approaching farmhouse. It appeared to have been dropped, rather than built, on the dry, brown side of a hill that arched a steep back against the sky. It was a plain, four-square building, its grim ugliness unrelieved by bush or creeper. Over the white-painted iron roof, the air was swimming with the heat. Some small distance, down the hill his eye lighted thankfully on the soft green foliage of an orchard.

As the car hummed its way up the slope towards the belt of trees, a flock of clumsy dark shadows, broke from the thicket and disappeared in the haze.

"Starlings!" the big man muttered. He thumped aggressively with his stick. "They're the black devils that cause the losses. Even the scarecrows can't keep them away."

They were nearing the house now. It showed plain between the scant foliage of the trees, the narrow verandah untidy with rude blinds of split wheat-bags and heaped rubbish. Now the orchard was thinning, and Morton could see the wealth of scarlet and yellow fruit, wizened through lack of water, clinging to the boughs. In one of the largest trees, a gaunt parody of a man in tattered clothes was spread-eagled among the branches. A clay pipe was thrust into the paper-face and a greasy hat perched rakishly on its head. The rags hung limply in the still air. On another branch close by half a dozen fat birds picked lazily at the fruit.

"There's one scarecrow that isn't earning its keep!" Morton remarked. He threw up his hands, and the birds fled off to safety, watching him from afar with beady, vindictive eyes.

The car pulled up in the shade of the last grove of trees, and the three men stepped out of it.

It was Moira Hartley herself who opened the door. As she stood there, outlined against the black interior of the passage, her face impressed itself deeply on Morton's mind. For all her 30 years, it was the face of a child— an unhappy, worried child, with great violet-shadowed eyes and a scarlet mouth drawn down into a petulant droop. There was an expression about her lips that was both pitiful and hard, a strangely elusive impression that marked her face with an intangible bitterness.

Windsor acknowledged her greeting, and introduced the journalist. She returned his smile, but measured him with eyes that were deep and quiet. Then —

"Won't you come inside? You'll surely enjoy a cup of tea after your long ride."

But Windsor, with a glance at his companions, shook his head.

"Not just how, Mrs. Hartley, thank you. We'd like to take a walk round the farm. I suppose your husband's working out there?"

It seemed to Morton that Moira Hartley drew a deep breath before she replied.

"No; Jim's gone down to the city for the day. He'll be sorry he's missed you!" She allowed the door to swing behind her, and leaned against it.

The Hon. Thomas Windsor cleared his throat with an abrupt cough.

"It seemed to me, Mrs Hartley, that the farm isn't looking as well as it might. How is your husband's health?"

The shadows about the woman's eyes wavered, deepened. Her voice was dark with something approaching tragedy.

"He gets worse every day. It's his nerves, you know. -And the heat. That's why he's gone, to the city to-day— to see a doctor. But I don't think he'll be troubled much longer."

"Why?" Morton faced her. She looked at him, and deep in her eyes, he saw something that was like sunlight sparkling on still, shadowed water.

"Because I think that at last he's found a cure!"

An awkward silence fell upon the quartet standing there. It was broken by Mrs. Hartley, who turned and opened the door. Over her shoulder she told them— "While you're taking a look round the farm, I'll slip inside and make a cup of tea. It won't take a moment!"

A brief nod, and the dark mouth of the passage swallowed her. The three men turned about and stepped off the verandah.

"Better take the short cut through the orchard," advised Windsor, pointing with his stick. "We'll find it cooler."

Coming from the blazing sunlight into the dark green silence of the orchard-path was like plunging suddenly into cool water. They emerged from the orchard onto a high shoulder of land, and stood in the quivering heat to take in the surroundings.

It was a desolate scene. A rough patch of knee-high maize, turning sickly yellow under the sun, bowed before them. Some little distance away, an erection of gum-branches and mud housed a number, of dirty-feathered fowls, their beaks wide and gasping in the heat of the day.

A question occurred to Morton. "Why is it that the apple orchard is so well advanced when the rest of the farm is so uncultivated?"

Windsor was fanning himself with his hat.

"The orchard was part of an old garden that had been here for years," he explained.

"I don't envy anyone having, to work this land," remarked Morton, digging his heel into the iron soil.

As they passed through the orchard on their return, flocks of starlings plunged heavily through the foliage. Morton noticed that the tree in which the scarecrow sprawled produced the best fruit, and as they passed beneath, he reached up his hand to pluck an apple. He was tugging it from the branch when something wet fell on the back of his hand. Dropping the apple, he stared with narrowed eyes, slanting his hand against the light.

Windsor was speaking again: "We won't be able to wait for that cup of tea. There are other farms, to be visited." He turned to his secretary. "Would you tell Mrs. Hartley?"

"I'll do it," Morton broke in quickly, and both men, looking up, noticed how pale he had gone. But before they could speak, he was running towards the cottage.

He found Moira Hartley in the kitchen, a dark, hot little room, loud with the obscene hum of blowflies and redolent of warm stale cooking. She was sitting at the plain deal table, her head buried in her outflung arms. On the table was a tin bowl, half-filled with pinkish water. In another room, a thin, walling cry of a peevish cchild was heard. Although Morton entered noisily she made no effort to move.

The journalist, his back against the door, spoke quietly:

"Mrs. Hartley; why did you shoot your husband?"

A shudder passed through the woman's body, but she did not raise her head. Morton spoke again; his voice was soft with pity. "You shot your husband through the head. Then you saw our car coming, and knew you had just ten minutes to dispose of the dead body. You bandaged the wound to stop the bleeding, and carried the body to the orchard, thrusting it into the first tree. You pulled an old hat over the bandage, and placed a pipe in the dead mouth."

He paused for a moment.

"You loved your husband, Mrs. Hartley. Why did you kill him?"

Then it was that she raised her head, slowly, wearily. The pain of the whole world was in her face. Her eyes were dark, fathomless pools. But when she spoke, hers was not the lowered voice of a sinner confessing. It was high and almost triumphant.

"Yes, Mr. Morton. I loved him. And so I killed him.

He was an imbecile. For weeks, he was as a little child, helpless, unable even to feed himself. It was I who kept the farm going. See—" She thrust out her hands, palms upwards and the man saw that they were calloused and cracked. "I did the work of two while he crawled about, on all fours, screaming and laughing and crying.

"I don't know what came over me to-day. It was the heat, I think. I had been working all morning in the sun. When I came inside, tired and with a splitting head, I found that he had upset the safe. When I spoke, he cringed into a corner, whimpering. It came to me, quite suddenly, the splendid clean young man that he had been. So I took his service revolver from a drawer and shot him twice through the head."

Something choked in Morton's throat. He spoke huskily.

"And then?"

"I heard your car coming. I ran to the window and recognised it. So I hid the body in the tree. I don't know why. I'm not at all ashamed at what I did. It was panic, I suppose. Then I cleared up the mess and waited for you to come. I know that I'm a murderess, but that doesn't worry me. I'm quite ready to go with you. Jim would have done just the same for me, had the positions been reversed."

Moira Hartley paused, and stood up, tall and proud. The smile about her lips lighted her face almost divinely.

"You see, we were a very happy couple— Jim and I."

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Blood on his Hands

Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 6 Oct 1934

THE Reverend Paul Augustine Bellamy, of the Vicarage, Easterwood, gave the heavy blue curtains a final twitch into place and turned away from the window. His thin melancholy face, drained of color, looked more skull-like than ever. He stood for a moment with closed eyes as though seeking to steady himself before walking across the comfortably-furnished sitting room that looked out on to the quiet and respectable Acacia Avenue.

It was at this moment that the tall clock in the corner of the room chimed 11. Bellamy crossed to the small table near the fireplace, and took up the whisky decanter. He measured himself a stiff drink, but his trembling fingers spilt the liquid clumsily. A second attempt was more successful. He raised the glass to his lips, and was about to drink when the sound of footsteps running up the gravel path toward his door halted him.

The next moment, a sharp knocking sounded on the door. Bellamy half - turned, then drained the glass almost at a gulp. He was measuring himself a second drink when the summons was repeated, louder this time. He glanced swiftly about the room, and his narrowed eyes showed that his mind was working feverishly. Then a noise of a door opening in the rear of the house decided him. He swallowed his second drink, returned the glass to the table and walked out Into the wide hall. His man-servant, Hutchins, was moving toward the door. He halted as his master approached. Bellamy nodded curtly.

"You can go. I'll answer it."

He waited until the servant had cleared the hall, then turned toward the door. Just for one Instant he hesitated. Then squaring his shoulders, he threw the door wide. A figure, standing impatiently on the step, almost bounded into the hall. If his unexpected entry was surprising, the explanation that accompanied it was even more so.

"Sorry to burst in on you like, this," panted the new-comer. "But do you know there's a dead man lying across the path, outside your house?"

"A dead man?" Bellamy repeated. But there was the subtle impression that his reiteration was not so much surprise as to give him time to take stock of this sudden visitor.

He was a young man in his middle thirties— a young man rather shabbily dressed in an old overcoat, which. In spite of its shapelessness, had obviously passed through the hands of a good tailor during its manufacture. And so it was with the wearer. His unshaven face and carelessly knotted tie could not disguise the refinement in his voice, nor did it detract from the unconscious air of gentility that was part of him.

"A dead man?" Shocked surprise raised Bellamy's tone. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," the other returned. He added grimly, "I almost fell over him as I was walking past your house. Thought the best thing to do would be to telephone the police."

Bellamy nodded, "Very sensible. There's a telephone on the small table over there. The nearest police station is Easterwood— Easterwood 3824, I think the number is." And as the young man nodded and began to walk over to the instrument, he added, "You're quite sure the man is dead?"

The newcomer spoke over his shoulder. "If not, he's pretty near it." His voice dropped a tone. "As I bent over him, I heard him whisper something— something about a girl. Then he said, 'Shot me— jealousy—' and I heard him give a hollow rattling cough I didn't wait to hear any more— just dashed Into the nearest house, hoping to find a telephone handy."

He picked up the instrument and began to dial the number. Bellamy moved to the door and looked out. The night had been boisterous with wind and rain. Now the storm had spent Itself and the downpour had dwindled to a thin shower that gleamed like a curtain of golden threads where the light from the open door streamed out on it.

He turned back to his visitor, who was still waiting impatiently at the telephone.

"We can hardly leave the poor fellow out there in the rain," he said mildly. "Hadn't we better bring him inside here?"

Over the mouthpiece of the telephone, the young man's eyes were curious.

"Better not" he said shortly. "The police don't like to have anything disturbed, especially in a case like this."

"But ," began his host. But the other's voice cut in. "If you've got someone who could stand by the body until the police get here, it would help. Someone might stumble—" he broke off sharply to attend to the telephone.

Bellamy Inclined his head. "That's the least we can do. I'll get my man to stand by. The body was just outside the gate, you said."

And because he had turned down the hall to call Hutchins, the Reverend Paul Bellamy did not see that curious expression that gleamed once again in the young man's eyes, as though something very alert and intelligent had peered out for a moment.

Five minutes later, the two men were seated in comfortable chairs set before the newly-kindled fire in the sitting-room. Bellamy had placed the table with the decanter at his elbow, and was occupied in pouring a drink. He handed the glass to his companion, who took it and looked across inquiringly.

"Thanks. But what about yourself?"

Bellamy shook his head. "Not at the moment. But drink that down— you've had a nasty shock."

And as the other began to taste his drink, he added. "The police can't get here for another ten minutes?"

"No, They're coming over on push bicycles. How about that doctor?"

Bellamy did not answer at once. The shadow across his face was reflected in his voice when he said, "There won't be any immediate hurry for a doctor. That man outside is dead. He'd been shot through the heart— from behind."

The young man stared into the fire.

"I'm not surprised. I saw he was pretty far gone when I bent over him."

He shook his head slowly. "That's rather terrible."

"Might almost be the work of a woman," mused Bellamy. "Didn't you say something about the dying man mentioning a woman just before he died?"

"That's right." The visitor sat up and placed his glass on the table. "He said a girl's name— peculiar name it was— and then muttered 'shot me— jealousy'."

"You're perfectly sure of those words?"

The young man gave a tight smile that began and ended with his lips. "Perfectly! I've written too many stories in which the murderer's identity hangs on the dying man's words not to give them my closest attention."

His host gave a sudden ejaculation. "Of course! I knew your face was familiar, and I've been trying to place you ever since you stepped in here. You're Clive Hamilton, the playwright, aren't you? I've seen your picture in the illustrated papers." He sat back and surveyed his companion. "One of your mystery plays is opening in the city shortly."

Hamilton nodded.

"That's right. It's rather strange that you should mention the play, since it's partly responsible for my being mixed up in this business.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. The play is in the last stages of rehearsal, you see. But the producer wasn't satisfied with the last act— wanted more suspense, he said. So last week, he shot it back to me for revision. As the play is opening within the next fortnight, I had to have the corrections made within three days at the latest."

Bellamy pursed his lips.

"No light task, I should say."

"It did rather worry me," the playwright admitted. "It wasn't until late last night that I hit upon the right idea. All to-day I worked on it like a slave, stopping only to eat my meals. About an hour ago. I finished the act to my satisfaction. Then reaction set in— I felt excited, and nervous. Although it was

after 10 o'clock, I knew that It would be useless to try and sleep, so I decided to take a walk. Nowhere in particular. Just anywhere for the exercise.

"I didn't wait to shave or dress, since I meant to choose the loneliest and most deserted roads for my walk. But it was raining, so I slipped on an old overcoat and started out. I had never been down this way before, but it looked suitably dark and lonely. I strode along, deep in thought. Outside this house, I stumbled over something In the darkness. At first I thought it was a drunken man sleeping off a celebration— then I realised that even a drunken man would hardly sleep through a downpour such as we had just experienced. So I bent over the man. Then it was that I heard him mutter this queer name— wish I could remember it— and then those other words about being shot because of jealousy. It gave me a nasty shock, especially when he gave that hollow cough. I didn't wait to hear any more— just ran into the first house I came to, which happened to be this one."

His host was busy with the decanter.

"Then have another drink. You must have something to keep the cold out."

Without waiting for an acceptance, he passed over a liberal glass. Hamilton hesitated for a moment, then smiled as he took it.

"You're really very kind, showing this hospitality to a perfect stranger."

Bellamy, seated in his chair, laughed with him. Another silence fell upon the room, but this time there was a faint suggestion of awkwardness in the pause— that awkwardness which follows when a forced conversation between two strangers has covered all points of contact Bellamy had an uneasy sensation that the eyes of his visitor were covertly examining him, yet when he looked up the young man was puffing contentedly at his smoke.

He was looking toward an engraved silver cup that stood at one end of the mantelpiece.

Bellamy found himself suddenly wishing that the police would arrive, and it was almost with relief that he heard Hamilton's voice.

"You've been rather a sportsman in your time, I take it?" the playwright remarked.

His host smiled.

"I see you've noticed the cup."

Hamilton was looking about the room.

"Yes. And there's that gold shield over on the stand in the far corner. I suppose that's another prize?"

Bellamy nodded. "I received that for athletics at college," he said.

"And the silver cup?"

Hamilton's tone was that of a man deliberately making conversation to cover a waiting period. "Did you get that for athletics, too?"

There was an appreciable pause that made the queer note in Bellamy's voice even more noticeable as he replied, "No. I didn't get it for athletics. It was a prize for another kind of sport."

"Really? Do you mind If I have a look at it?"

"Not at all." The elder man rose to his feet. "I'll get it down for you."

But Hamilton already had the cup in his hands. He stood turning it over, so that the engraved surface caught the light.

"Presented to Paul Augustine Bellamy for winning highest aggregate marks in the State Revolver Shot Championship 1932."

There came a pause while he restored the cup to its position and turned to his host. That dull heaviness still lingered in his voice.

"So you were the champion revolver shot of the State two years ago, Mr. Bellamy?"

That gentleman nodded reminiscently. "Two years ago— and it seems only yesterday. How time does fly! Now, I doubt if I could hit a haystack at ten paces."

Hamilton smiled in agreement. 'Yes, I suppose one does get out of practice. I suppose that's why you shut your windows every night. Although, I should Imagine that even the most stout-hearted burglar would hesitate before he added that proof of your marksmanship to his swag!"

"How do you know that I close and lock my windows every night?"

The playwright shrugged his shoulders. "I saw you doing something at the window as I came running up the path to your door."

Unintentionally or otherwise, the slight pause gave significance to his next words. "I presumed you were locking it... for the same reason that every honest man locks his windows before retiring for the night."

Hamilton moved away from the fireplace and resumed his seat. When he spoke again, the heaviness had gone from his tone. It was almost careless when he remarked.

"You know, Mr. Bellamy, I can't help thinking over that dead man out there on the pavement. You say he was shot in the back. Then, if he could still speak to me, It must have occurred only a few minutes before I came along. It'd rather curious how the murderer could have got away so quickly."

"You didn't notice any conveyance in the street?"

"Nothing at all."

Bellamy's thin white fingers caressed the plush covering of his chair. "Strange," he murmured. "How could the murderer have got away?"

Hamilton sat upright, his body tense as though ready for a spring.

"Perhaps he didn't get away," he said quietly. "Perhaps he's still here— perhaps In the garden. He might even be in the house. Or in this very room!"

The Insistent buzz of the door-bell rang through the quiet house as the young man paused. Then it sounded again, urgently, authoritatively.

Bellamy, who had leapt to his feet, turned toward the door.

"That will be the police," he muttered. "Excuse me."

He returned a few moments later with a thick-set middle-aged man, who strode confidently into the room, was introduced as Sergeant Duffield, and raised his black eyebrows at the mention of Hamilton's name.

"I've heard of you," he announced. "You write those mystery stories and plays. So you found the body, eh? Can you give me a statement?"

Hamilton was smoking a second of his host's cigarettes. He nodded calmly.

"Certainly, if you likewise take a statement from Mr. Bellamy."

That gentleman eyed him in polite surprise. There was gentle reproof in his tone when he said, "My dear young man, what have I to do with this business? You burst into my house, demand the use of my telephone, accept my hospitality, and now you accuse me of knowing something about this unfortunate business!"

Hamilton faced him squarely.

"I accuse you of more than that," he said steadily. "I accuse you of being the murderer of that man out there on the pavement!"

"Here!" Sergeant Duffield's tone was sharp, "Hold on, young fellow! You can't make statements like that without proof!"

The playwright flung his cigarette into the fireplace and swung around on him.

"I'll give you proof," he said levelly. "It's been gathering before my eyes ever since I rang the doorbell tonight. I tell you that Mr. Bellamy shot that man from this window with a revolver fitted with a silencer. As I was coming up the path, he was shutting the window. When I rang the bell, I must have given him a nasty shock— he was pale and trembling when he opened the door.

"Then, when I told Bellamy that there was a dead man outside his house, he said, 'the body's just outside my gate.' I hadn't said anything about the body being near the gate. How did he know that?"

Duffield shifted impatiently.

"But this isn't proof, Mr Hamilton. You said you could give me proof!"

The young man pulled his overcoat about him.

"I can! When I stumbled over that man, he was dying. I could see his face quite plainly. He whispered what I first took to be a girl's name 'Belle Amy did this— shot me— jealousy.' Now I realised that he was trying to say Bellamy. He gave a gasp in the middle of the word that cut it in two— made It sound like a woman's name, Belle Amy."

No one spoke, and he finished quietly.

"The revolver, complete with silencer, is behind that gold shield on the table in the far corner."

Already Duffield had reached the stand, and was staring incredulously at the weapon. "Bellamy put it there after the shooting. My entrance prevented him from getting rid of it."

The clock in the room struck quarter past. Duffield, holding the revolver carefully in a handkerchief, moved back to the fireplace.

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell us all you know about this business, Mr. Bellamy."

The man addressed did not raise his eyes from the fire. Very gently he replied. "I know quite, a lot about it, Sergeant. Far more than Mr. Hamilton dreams I know. For Instance, I can tell you how, why, and when he shot poor John Weaver, who lies dead outside my house.

"You murdered Weaver, Mr. Hamilton, because you stole his plot and used it in your new play that is opening shortly. He threatened to expose you, and so you killed him to prevent a scandal. You see, Weaver came to me to-night with a written statement telling me how he sent you a play of his some months ago. He wanted you to read and criticise it. But you pretended it had never reached you, since that play contained a brilliant plot. You used the same plot in this new production. Weaver, reading a synopsis in the newspaper, recognised his own play and came to me to-night for advice."

The playwright had sunk into his chair. He tried to speak sneeringly, but his dry throat brought the words out as a thin whisper. "How do you know all this?"

The Reverend Bellamy raised his mild blue eyes to the young man's face. "Weaver came here to-night with a written statement of the facts— came to me for advice. I told him to go around and see you. He did so, but when he sent his card in to you and you recognised the name, you were afraid of your theft. You realised that it had been and you refused to see the man. You were in a panic, for the charge of plagiarism against a well-known playwright has serious consequences. So when Weaver left, you followed him to this lonely part of the road, and shot him in the back with, a revolver fitted with a silencer."

Duffield was staring at Bellamy in surprise. "How do you know all this?" he asked, not realising that he was echoing a question.

"By the simple solution of putting two and two together," was the reply. "I know that Hamilton did not see Weaver to-night, or he would have known something that I already knew. It was that poor John Weaver was dumb. So imagine my surprise when I recognised his body outside, since Mr. Hamilton had told me that this man, when dying, had spoken a few disjointed words.

Either Weaver had recovered his power of speech with death, or my informant was telling a deliberate lie."

Hamilton, his face paper-white, moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Why didn't I see him?" he muttered. "Why didn't I see him?"

"You were very quick-witted about that dying speech," Bellamy told him. "At first, I believe, you wore content to let it accuse an unknown person. Then, when you found the cup and discovered my name, you saw your chance to incriminate me. But in doing so, you gave yourself away in a dozen different directions.

"You said that this part of the suburb was strange to you, and yet over the telephone, you gave the police the street exactly. Then you said that you saw the dead man's face closely yet you admitted to coming out without matches. Again, it had been raining heavily. The road is tar-paved, but the path in front of my house is clay. Weaver's body lies in a mud-patch. If you had bent over the body as you described, you must have had mud on your shoes. Yet they are quite clean. All this proves one thing— that you followed Weaver and shot him from the road. He had come to town only this morning. You thought he had spoken to no one. If he were dead, you would be quite safe."

Hamilton, his face buried in his hands, did not speak as he paused.

It was Duffield who put the question. "But why give the alarm? Why didn't he slip away after the murder?"

Bellamy smiled gently. "It is publicity that makes the modern play a success. Mr. Hamilton has already shown his preference for the illustrated papers. Can't you see how every newspaper would take up the story— writer of mystery plays finds dead man and pins crime on murderer by sheer deduction? If his scheme had come off, it would have been worth hundreds of pounds in publicity. Mr. Hamilton's play would have run for months!"

The sergeant stared at the wretched playwright as though he could scarcely believe his eyes. "What about this revolver?" he asked.

"Oh that?" The elder man rose from his seat "Our young friend placed it. there for you to find when I left this room to let you in. He had it in his overcoat pocket all the time. I noticed the bulge and wanted to make sure by offering to take his coat, but he was too alert for that. Better take your man along, Sergeant. I don't think he'll give much trouble."

When Sergeant Duffield returned to the sitting room, Bellamy was on his knees before the fireplace, raking out the coals. He did not glance up as the other man entered, but merely observed: "I'm afraid our playwright will get his meed of publicity, only it will be a trifle different from what he planned. But he allowed his imagination to run away with him, and that's the worst of being too clever."

Duffield crossed to the chair and stood by.

"The cleverness was on your part, Mr. Bellamy," he said. "That was a right smart piece of deduction on your part. You pieced it together. Just like one of those chaps in a detective novel." He paused and then added, "There's only one thing I can't understand. How did you know the body was outside of your gate before you'd even seen it?"

Bellamy rose to his feet. His melancholy face was lit by a smile.

"If I tell you that, Sergeant, I'm afraid I'll lose all my credit for cleverness. You see, I didn't make any of those deductions, as you call them. I was merely bluffing that man into a confession. Because— I knew that Hamilton had shot a man outside my gate even before he rang my doorbell."

Sergeant Duffield stared at him. "But how on earth—?"

"Simply because I happened to be shutting my window before going to bed when I looked out and saw Hamilton shoot Weaver down," Bellamy said quietly.

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Danger Light

Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 9 Feb 1935

AS FAR down the bleak coast as Farneslaw the folk knew of Abel Wayne's light. North as far as Farneslaw, west toward where the son set beneath the tossing grey waters; south as far as Burdensea, the light flashed. The grey-faced convicts of Bittenboom prison, two miles across the rolling country-side, knew it likewise. Every few minites, the slender finger of light splashed pale gold on the walls of the highest sea-facing cells, and the men in these silent compartments blessed the pallid ray that, each night, became their sole contact with the outside world.

Almost as far reaching was Abel Wayne's reputation.

"Dependable, honest, God-fearing, but as hard as nails," they said of him along the coast. This gaunt, 50-year-old lightkeeper gloried in his reputation, as far as his cold nature allowed him to enthuse over anything. Only two things could arouse Abel Wayne from his stony self-control. They were his light and his Bible. But there was another unsuspected emotion in the heart of this solitary soul. The villagers of that bleak and unlovely settlement did not dream of it until one day Abel journeyed to the city and returned with a wife.

Hester Wayne, in her way, was almost as remarkable as her husband. She was over 40, yet her glossy black hair was untouched with grey. She had full and generous lips that the gossiping villagers declared were freshly painted every hour, yet they knew in their hearts that Wayne would never have permitted such a thing. It was her eyes that were her most . fascinating feature— deep violet wells in the paper-whiteness of her face, strange and inscrutable wells, in which much knowledge lurked— knowledge that had flown over and traced telling little rivulets about their corners.

They called her the Scarlet Woman in the village, since they openly resented Abel's choice in bringing down a wife that was so obviously not one of their kind. Hester retaliated by shunning her neighbors as much as possible, and she rarely ventured from the rocky promontory on which the lighthouse was built.

Her husband realised her position. In his own strange way he was touched and flattered; so much so, that he bought for his wife a powerful wireless set. Hester was overjoyed with the gift. It brought her in touch with the other world she loved, and she would sit for hours turning the polished dials, while Abel tended his light in the chamber overhead. Then a brief but welcome respite had occurred. Wayne's sister in the city became seriously ill, and Hester had journeyed up to nurse her. For more than a week she tended the invalid and then returned.

NOW, an hour since her homecoming, the woman sat hunched before the wireless cabinet listening to a cheeky syncopated fox-trot played in a city restaurant. It was almost midnight, yet Hester made no move. Athough barely an hour had passed since she returned, her visit to the city seemed years away.

But it would not be for long! Anytime now. Paul should make his break for freedom from that grim grey building across the land. A bitter smile drooped Hester's mouth. She knew how the villagers talked about her. What would they say if they knew the truth— that she had married Abel Wayne only to be near Paul when he made his escape?

On the moment Wayne had told her that his lighthouse was two miles from Bittenboom. she had made her plans almost before the words were out of his mouth. Pray God that she did not have to wait much longer! Her arms were hungry for Paul. As her long fingers played nervously with her dress, in fancy she was running them through the boy's brown curling hair, and her lips were tender for his firm young mouth.

"Stations 12RB and 12KO speaking. Weather conditions continue wet and squally, with cold winds and heavier rain....."

Hester started as the cheerful, disinterested voice of the announcer floated into the room.

"We break in on our weather report to announce that a breakaway occurred late this afternoon from Bittenboom prison. When the prisoners were being, marched back to their quarters from the quarries, one of their number slipped free under the cover of the fog. He is serving a five-year sentence for larceny, and is described as being young and pleasant-featured, with brown curling hair and brown eyes. He is serving his sentence under the name of Paul Thorpe....."

Hester Wayne gave a faint sharp breath. She glanced quickly over her shoulder in the direction of the light-chamber, and one hand clicked the wireless into silence. For a space she sat motionless, frozen as though in an attitude of listening. Only those full scarlet lips moved as though in prayer. So tense was the hush in that circular chamber that when a timid knock came to the door, it sounded thunderously loud. The woman sprang to her feet, and swung wide the door. The figure of a young man, clad in the hideous grey uniform, almost tumbled into the room. Then Hester had him in her arms, cradling him gently, crooning in an ecstasy of love.

"Paul— Paul, darling! I've waited so long to hold you like this ! Waited so long, darling Paul!"

She was kissing his hair, his eyes, his lips.

The young man drew himself gently away from her.

"Hester, dear, I know. But we have all our lives before us. Just now I must have food— and clothing. These things are sopping. I've been hiding out under the bushes in the fog."

Hester nodded reluctantly, and led him to a chair near the fire. "I've everything ready," she told him. "We can get away as soon as he is asleep."

The young man kneaded his fingers.

"What would he say if he knew I was here — and that I was your

Hester laid a gentle finger on his lips.

"Don't think about it, Paul. I daren't think myself! If he dreamt of what we meant to each other, he wouldn't hesitate to kill me, I'm sure!" Her voice softened. "But that's all past and done with, thank God! In another few hours we'll be free of him and his jealousies—" She broke off with a sharp breath of fear.

From somewhere overhead a powerful voice called. "Hester! Are you there, girl?"

Paul Thorpe sprang to his feet.

The woman grasped his arm. "Quickly!" Her eyes swept the room for cover, and rested on the small ClinhftAril ntlflpt fho flfalmnnw

She almost dragged the young man toward it.

"Hide in there," she whispered. "It's full of lumber, but you can squeeze in." With a swift movement she pushed him inside, closed the door, and stood with her back to it. At that moment Abel Wayne stepped into the room.

As gaunt and as rugged as though hewn from Farneshaw rock was this lightkeeper.

"Care to make your man a cup o' tea, lass?" he rumbled. " 'Tis cruel cold up there in that light tower!"

"It'll be ready in five minutes, Abel." Hester crossed and took down the kettle. She strove to make her voice flat and disinterested. "Anything happen while I was away In the city?"

Wayne grunted.

"Plenty, lass. Them damned Government people were down here all the week. A-tinkerin' and spyin'. They're going to run the old light with electric power now. While ye was away, the place was overrun with them blamed Government men, bringing in their dynamos and lights and switches. It's all fixed now, with an electric siren 'n everything."

Hester, busy at the table, said calmly: "You don't seem to be too keen on the change, Abel?"

Wayne swung around, and his pale eyes flared under their brows.

"I don't hold with change, my girl. The old light was good enough for my father— and his father before him! I hoped It would see me out, too!"

"That's where you're wrong, Abel. The world must change and progress— and our ideas must broaden with it. You're too intolerant!

Slowly the shaggy head turned and stared at her. Wayne's voice was curious. "What's come into you tonight, lass? You've never talked like that before."

Abruptly he sprang to his feet and stood looking down at her.

Abel raised knotted fists. "I tell ye it's that damned city! Bright lights, sparkle, dancing, glitter! It's like this new electrical business!"

He swung around and crossed to the heavy table, flinging open a drawer. From inside he drew out a large printed notice. It bore the flaring scarlet lettering:

DANGER!
HIGH-TENSION WIRES!
DO NOT TOUCH!

Abel thrust it In front of the woman's face.

"That's the placard that's going to hang before all this electrical contrivance. And that's why it's like the city. All sparkle and glitter and glamor!" His voice dropped to monotone. "But once you touch it, it means death! Death to all the important things of life— to faithfulness, truth, and honesty!"

After a while, he said grudgingly, "The fog's getting worse, I think. Wonder how long it'll keep on?"

"The wireless might tell us," his wife said indifferently. But all the time her mind was busy keeping pace with her nimble fingers setting out the crockery. She threw a covert glance at her husband, who was twisting the knobs of the cabinet with fumbling movements. To get hint out of the way I How? If Abel would only fall asleep, perhaps then...

Asleep! Her keen brain raced. In the same cupboard that sheltered Paul was a small tin of white powder which Hester had bought some weeks ago when the dark shadow of insomnia threatened her. She felt herself flushing guiltily, and the voice of the announcer calling Abel's attention was a relief. As she straightened, the clipped accents seemed to bore into her mind:

"....No further trace has been discovered of the escaped convict who broke from Bittenboom prison late this afternoon. Guards with bloodhounds are already on his track, and it is expected that an early arrest...."

It was too much! Hester almost flung herself at the instrument, and twisted the knob, silencing that cheerful, unemotional tone. Wayne was staring at her as though unable to believe his eyes.

"What's wrong with you to-night, girl!"

"I can't bear to listen to such things," the woman told him. She was breathing heavily. "Just imagine, it, Abel! That poor creature out there in the fog— a hunted man flying from place to place! No rest, no sanctuary— on a night like this!"

"He has sinned, lass! I have no pity for such people. If you transgress the laws of God, you must pay! That is written in the Book!"

Her full bosom rising and falling, Hester faced him.

"I suppose you wouldn't even hold out a helping hand to that poor hunted wretch?"

Wayne thrust his hands into the pockets of his oilskin.

"Why should I?" he said harshly. "Why should anyone? Where would honest people be if there was no punishment for the evildoer? We wouldn't sleep soundly at night!"

He turned away as though. to dismiss the subject. Hester opened lier mouth to speak, but in that moment the tall clock struck midnight. Wayne jumped to his feet.

"A plague on this damned gossiping! That light should have been on at the strike!"

He crossed the room with powerful strides,

"First time In 20 years I've been late— cursed Government interference!"

Running a malevolent eye over the assortment of nickelled switches on the wall, he thrust out a hand and manipulated them. The bright light in the room dimmed momentarily, then flashed on again as the electric fog-siren set up its melancholy wail in the tower overhead. Abel chuckled sourly.

"Hark at it — moaning like a sick cow!"

But the woman was staring at the light, a wrinkle forming between her eyes. "Did you see how it dimmed. Abel?" she said, "It's never done that before."

"You'll get your fill o' that kind o' thing now that the Government has taken It over," her husband told her grimly. "Now, hurry with that tea, lass. I can't stand here chatterln' all night."'

Hester nodded without speaking. Picking up the warmed pot from the hob, she left the room. Abel hunched in his chair, brooding over the leaping flames. Even his wife's voice failure to arouse him when she called, "Canister's empty. I'll have to draw tea from the case in the cellar."

Her husband's eyes never left the fire. Only his lips moved as he spoke curtly.

"I can wait."

Sitting there in the silence, it was as though every sound was magnified. He heard her move down the stairs, and her fumbling movements as she groped in the underground room. Then a hush, broken only by the monotonous wailing of the siren. Wayne's rough hands gripped the arm of his chair. Was it the reflection of the fire, or some deeper, more horrible inspiration, that painted his face with an expression that was not good to see? The next moment he straightened as his wifes footsteps blundered up the stairs and into the room. Fear, and something darker than fear, trembled her voice.

"Abel! Who shifted all the lumber into the cellar— the lumber that used to be in the cupboard under the stairs?'

Slowly her husband turned his head. "The Government men, Hester. They shifted it— they wanted that cupboard t empty."

"Empty! Then— then what's in that cupboard now?"

Wayne rose to his feet.

"Live wires, lass. Live wires… switches. One touch on them things means instant death. I'm going to hang that danger sign on that cupboard."

Hester Wayne swayed as though she would fall. The room danced before her eyes. Live wires! And Paul— Paul crouched there in the darkness, in his wet clothes, not knowing— not dreaming— until the switch was thrown, and the lights dimmed. . . . No! It couldn't be! It was too wicked! This was not punishment. It was torture! No! Then she was aware of her husband by her side, grasping her arm and staring down at her with those cold, bitter eyes.

"What's the matter with you, girl? You're whiter than seaspray !" She tried to make her lips form words. "I'm afraid," she whispered, dryly. "Live wires — I'm afraid "

Then his anger blazed forth. He thrust her from him with such force that she fell headlong across the room. Wayne stood over her, hands clenched, as if he would strike her.

"Afraid! And shall I tell you why you're afraid? Because you have your lover in that cupboard!" And as she made no answer, he raved on:—

"Think you that I was not watching from the stairs when you let him into this room? Think you that I did not I see him in your arms, kissing and I caressing him? I loved you; I took you in marriage, gave you everything you wanted! And all the time you were laughing at me, by God! Saving your kisses for this jail-bird!"

On its highest note, his voice cracked into terrible laughter.

"But you'll never feel his kisses again, woman! You'll never have his arms about you or his lips on yours now!"

He leaned over her and lowered his voice, spitting his words.

"Do you realise why this light dimmed when I switched on the current, woman? Your lover is in that cupboard. He leans against a wall of naked death. And when I throw the switch arid that wall, is flooded with' power, he burns in hell-fire! With three swift strides, he had reached the cupboard and grasped the knob.

"You wanted this curly-headed boy! You toasted his body ... . then take his . body! 'And may God have mercy on you!" .

He flung wide the door, and a limp figure sprawled grotesquely across the oil-cloth. From the gaping cupboard came a thin spume of smoke and the acrid tang of burning.

Her eyes glazed with terror, Hester was cradling the dead boy's head in her arms. "Paul... oh, my darling .... so white .... so still .... my darling boy!"

Over them her husband mocked cruelly. "Why don't you kiss him now, Hester? He is still your lover, woman! Or are you afraid of the consequences of your sin?"

Then it was that the woman Hester raised her head. There was in her face, in her voice, a new, strange dignity.

"I sinned, Abel! I know that I sinned. But it was a twenty-year-old sin. This boy was not my lover."

Abel Wayne spoke heavily.

"Not your lover? Then who was he?"

Hester Wayne lowered her eyes. The dark pain of the whole world was in her voice:—

"Paul Thorpe was my son, Abel. My twenty... year... old... son!"

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The Man in the Train

Mail (Adelaide), 17 Aug 1935

IT has been a rather unusual experience. To this day I do not know whether I have been the victim of a vulgar hoax, or whether I have actually talked with a murderer unsuspected by everyone save myself.

Some months ago, when the Melbourne centenary celebrations were at their height I determined to pay a visit to that capital. Accordingly, I booked my passage on the express and made my way to the platform some five minutes before the starting of the train. The usual crowd of visitors thronged the platform, and although the train seemed fairly crowded, I was pleased to find my compartment unoccupied. Under my arm were three detective novels which I had bought to wile away the tedium of the journey.

Scarcely had I read the opening paragraph of one book when the door of the carriage was pushed open and another passenger entered. Under my breath I prayed that he might move along, but no. He looked into my compartment, nodded to himself, and entering, took his seat directly opposite me. Over the edge of the book I studied him covertly. He was a middle-aged man, mild-eyed, and stoop-shouldered and dressed in a rusty black suit that gave him the appearance of an ancient crow. I docketed him at once; an insignificant unit in the great army of mankind. The unobtrusive type of person who married, raised a family, and died without leaving any appreciable mark on the world. I decided to ignore him and bury myself in my novel, which promised to be much more interesting than my companion. But he apparently, had other ideas.

The train had scarcely pulled out of the station when he gave a deprecatory little cough.

'So we're fellow-passengers?' he said brightly.

l nodded curtly without speaking, my eyes still on the book.

'I see you're interested in detective novels?' Again that self-conscious little cough. 'You know, they all seem rather ridiculous to me.'

This was heresy. I said coldly, 'Really?'

He nodded.

'Yes. Because no matter how brilliant the murderer may be, he always gets caught in the last chapter.'

He paused and looked up at me from under his blue-veined eyelids. His voice had a queer slur in it. 'In real life, the genuinely clever murderer never gets caught!'

It was a surprising remark under any circumstances. Coming from this watery-eyed little man, it was astonishing. I lowered the book and studied him.

I'm afraid there was more than a trace of amused condescension in my voice when I spoke.

'So— you're one of those people who believe there is such a thing as a perfect murder?'

He nodded. A shadow of a smile hung nervously on his lips. 'I don't believe. I *know* that there is such a thing!'

'Indeed?'

The little man laid a cold hand on my knee. 'You're sceptical, aren't you? And shall I tell you why? Because that's the genius of the perfect murderer. He accomplishes his task so well that people simply can't grasp the fact that a murder has been done. They not only close their eyes to the perfect crime— they close their intelligence, too.'

'But not you,' I said with faint irony.

He rubbed his hands. A smile lit his face.

'Oh, no. Not me. You see I know a perfect crime when I see one.'

'And where have you seen one?'

'You have one in this very city,' he said quietly. 'What about the Weldon mansions murder? Perhaps I can recall the facts to your mind. You see, I followed the case pretty closely And I think you'll find it more interesting than that fiction novel— because in the mansions murder case the murderer was never caught.'

'And that's why it's a perfect crime?'

'And that's why it's the perfect crime of ail time,' my companion repeated slowly. So serious was his manner, so convincing that ring in his voice, that I laid aside my novel and settled the rug more comfortably about my legs.

'Go ahead.' I invited.

HE sat with downcast eyes focused on his clasped fingers, as though seeking to marshal his thoughts. Presently, he looked up. gave that apologetic cough, and began.

'Weldon mansions was one of those buildings that reflect the modern idea of cave-dwelling in the heart of the city,' he said. 'It was one of the largest blocks of flats within the city area. I say 'was' because the place has since been demolished and the land used for some other purpose. But it was over a year ago that Weldon mansions leaped into newspaper prominence, for at that time it not only housed 50 paying boarders, but it gave shelter to one of the most baffling murder mysteries of all time.

'Among the fifty tenants who occupied the flats was a Miss Rose Reynolds. Very little was known about this woman. She was middle-aged, somewhere in her late thirties. And she was not particularly good looking, although she is

known to have possessed a rather attractive personality Also she had a little money, a nest-egg of some £500 left to her by an aunt.

'Now, like most women. Miss Reynolds had leanings toward the stage, and her spinster's life being rather lonely, she joined a dramatic society which was being formed by another tenant. This man was a Mr. Claude Bassett, who occupied the flat beneath that of Miss Reynolds. This Mr. Bassett was a professional actor who had fallen on lean times. It was believed that he had saved a little money and was living at the mansions until something should turn up for him. Being a lonely soul, it was inevitable that he and Miss Reynolds should be ultimately drawn toward each other. They spent quite an amount of time together, and it was during these conversations that Miss Reynolds confessed her leanings toward acting. Immediately Bassett told her of his plans and asked her to join his drama league. The spinster was willing.

'Miss Reynolds, according to Bassett's later evidence, showed remarkable aptitude for the stage. So much so that, a few months later, a local charity asked Mr. Bassett to produce and act in a one-act play for their programme. Bassett agreed, chose a drama containing two people, and asked Miss Reynolds if she would play opposite him. The woman was only too pleased. Thus rehearsals began, sometimes in Bassett's flat and sometimes in Miss Reynolds' rooms above. The play, I understand, was a novelty, and the producer insisted that the name and nature of the sketch should be kept a secret until the night of the play. There was, no doubt, clever showmanship in this, since curiosity surrounding a thing always increases its value.'

'NOW, I must explain that the flats at the mansions consisted of a sitting room, bedroom, and kitchen. Each flat was self-contained and entered from the main corridor by a single door. Miss Reynolds and Bassett occupied outside flats, by which I mean their windows looked out across the park in which the building stood. The mansions were 10 stories high. Bassett's flat was on the fourth floor, and Miss Reynolds on the fifth. A dumb-waiter arrangement ran between the floors. It served each tenant, and on this was placed any vegetables or groceries that the flat owners required from the store in the basement. It was loaded from the ground floor, and the tenants pulled the carrier up by means of cords attached.

'Now, we come to the afternoon of April 6. I remember the date quite clearly for it is my birthday. I am now going to give you a sequence of events as set down later in the evidence. At 3 o'clock that afternoon Bassett went to the flat occupied by Miss Reynolds, and reminded her of the final dress rehearsal that was to take place that evening. He told her that he was giving a small dinner in his flat before the rehearsal, that he had asked three acquaintances

from the surrounding flats, and wanted Miss Reynolds to make a fifth. After the dinner they could have their last rehearsal. Miss Reynolds agreed. She said that, as it was to be a dress rehearsal she would wear her stage frock down to dinner, and Bassett could suggest any alterations or additions.

'The rehearsal was timed to start at .8.30. At 7 o'clock, Miss Reynolds, the three men guests. and Bassett sat down to dinner. The spinster looked rather attractive. She was wearing a frock that was theatrical in the extreme, cut low at the back and with a bodice composed of scarlet roses entwined. She laughed and joked with the other guests, and indeed it seemed a merry party. About 8 o'clock the woman rose. and. refusing coffee on the plea of a headache, announced that she would go to her room. It was a half-hour before the rehearsal; during that time, she could take a small sleeping powder and the subsequent nap might relieve her aching head She asked Bassett not to come up to her rooms, where the rehearsal was to be held, until the half-hour was up.

'Leaving Bassett to clear away the dishes the three men accompanied Miss Reynolds up to her room. They saw her inside, watched her mix a sleeping powder. She then said she would lock herself in to prevent disturbance. The three men took their leave and heard her turn the key in the door. They made their way to Bassett's flat. As they entered he was standing by the dumb-waiter packing away the dirty dishes.'

Again the little man paused.

As he related the earlier history of the case other details floated back into my mind.

'Didn't one of these men say that, after Miss Reynolds shut and locked that door, he heard her talking to some one in the room?'

'Yes.' The speaker nodded.

'A point I forgot. As Miss Reynolds turned the key in the lock, the man closest to the door heard her say, "So, this is where you've been hiding?" He admitted that the words sounded strange, considering they had been in Miss Reynolds' room only a few seconds before, and they had seen no person. But it was no business of his, and it was not until later that those words took on a new significance.

'Well, the three men returned to Bassett's flat for coffee and cigarettes When the half-hour was up they decided to ho to their own rooms, which lay on the next floor beyond the suite occupied by Rose Reynolds. Bassett accompanied them They walked upstairs, reached Miss Reynolds' door and waited, talking, while Bassett knocked. There was no answer, and after a pause, he knocked again. Still there was no response. Then one of the men, recalling the sleeping draught the woman had mixed, suggested that she might

not be awake. Bassett suggested that the men hoist him up to the fan-light, so that he could peep inside the room and see what was the matter. The men agreed. Bassett was duly hoisted, he peered through the glass into the room— and the next moment, almost fell from their arms. The room was brilliantly lighted, and he could see the woman quite plainly. She lay on the floor, one hand flung out as though in sleep. But it was not this that chained her body into that rigid pose. Rose Reynolds lay motionless, bleeding from a great wound in her breast, a wound that was like a scarlet flower, blooming wider even as he watched.

'BASSETT recovered himself, jumped to the floor, and told the trio what he had seen They next tried the door, only to find it locked. Now there was mild pandemonium. While the three men considered breaking down the door. Bassett, the more self-contained of the four, ran downstairs to his own flat and telephoned the police. The manager of the flats was summoned with his pass-key and a little group of tenants gathered. It was this crowd that confronted Detective-Inspector Conway when he arrived some minutes later.

'At first it was found difficult to fit the pass-key into the lock, because Miss Reynolds' own key was already in the keyhole on the inside of the door. Eventually it was dislodged and the door opened. The crowd began to surge inside, but Conway ordered his men to bar the door. While the doctor was examining the woman's body. Conway took a look around— and what he saw worried him not a little.

'The body lay stretched out on the floor. It was some 20 ft. away from the locked door— locked on the inside, remember. There was no other entrance to the room, save the windows, which looked out on to a sheer drop of 50 ft. The wall was steep and bare, no ivy creeper on it or tree nearby. It seemed impossible that anyone could have entered that suite ,yet Miss Reynolds was not only dead—she had been murdered!'

With a rumble and a scream the train plunged into the first tunnel. The lights in the carriage flickered, on, grew brighter, and emphasized the temporary night that had fallen outside the windows. My companion had paused, not troubling to speak against the thunder of the train. I saw him give a half-amused glance at the discarded novel by my side. I had no thought for that now. Just then the train sprang out into the open and daylight flooded in.

'Go on.' I prompted.

'Rose Reynolds had been, shot through the heart. Medical evidence showed that the crime had been committed some 20 minutes before, and that the bullet came from a small revolver. Thus, while the four men jested and laughed in the room below that bullet had been discharged.

Death must have been practically instantaneous for the bullet-hole had pierced the scarlet rose and entered the heart. According to the doctor the woman had made an effort to rise— a last convulsive effort that ended in death.

'It was one of the constables who found the weapon. A small silver-plated revolver fitted with a silencer. It lay on the floor near the entrance to the kitchen. The position of the weapon weakened the suggestion of suicide, since a woman shot through the heart certainly cannot toss a revolver across the room. And the suicide theory was destroyed absolutely when impressions were discovered on the weapon. Plain on the silver-plating were fingerprints— with the exception of the fourth finger, which was missing.

'Bassett identified the revolver as belonging to Miss Reynolds, and told Conway of the words spoken by Miss Reynolds as the three men left her door:— "So, this is where you've been hiding?" To whom had she spoken, and why was the unknown person skulking in her room?

'Conway then began his investigation inside the mansions. In his questioning of Bassett, the inspector unearthed a curious point. In the corridor outside Miss Reynolds' rooms a wall telephone was situated. It struck Conway as peculiar that Bassett, in ringing for the police, should trouble to go down to his own apartment to telephone when there was an instrument almost at his elbow. Yet Bassett, when interrogated, explained this move in a perfectly logical manner. He said that he had not noticed the wall telephone. His thoughts had immediately flown to the instrument in his own rooms as a medium for the raising of the police. But although this explanation was quite feasible, Bassett could feel that Conway was not quite satisfied.

'You probably remember how Bassett moved heaven and earth to prove his innocence. The three men who had been present at the dinner swore that he had never been near Miss Reynolds' room. They described how they had left him at 8 o'clock and returning a few minutes later, had stayed with him until the half-hour had elapsed. They agreed that it would have been impossible for Bassett to have left his rooms during that time without their knowledge— indeed, during that 30 minutes their host had not moved from his chair. Yet medical evidence showed that it was during the time between 8 o'clock and 8.30 that Rose Reynolds had met her death.

'Finally, Basset insisted upon having impressions taken of his fingerprints to compare with those found on the revolver. This seemed hardly necessary, under the circumstances, since the right hand of Bassett was completely normal. Yet Conway was not a man to take anything for granted. He obtained impressions of Bassett's fingerprints and compared them with those on the

weapon. They were so completely dissimilar as to exonerate Bassett from all suspicion.

'Nevertheless, there were four questions that puzzled the good inspector not a little. Given the right answer to one of these would put him on the scent. He conned those questions again and again.

'Why was Miss Reynolds murdered?

'How did the murderer enter and leave the locked room?

'Who fired the shot and left the fingerprints on the revolver?

'Who was the mysterious person hiding in the room, to whom Miss Reynolds spoke before locking herself in?'

The little man paused. His watery-blue eyes held mine for a second and then dropped to the floor. He made a curious shrugging movement of his shoulders.

'No answer was ever made to any of those questions,' he said slowly. 'Detective-Inspector Conway was beaten from the start. You might remember he resigned from the department because of his failure. And the Weldon mansions murder remains one of the most baffling mysteries of all time.'

'A REALLY perfect murder?' I asked.

He repeated my words in that irritating way he had. 'A really perfect murder.' Then, after a short silence. 'Don't you agree?'

I shook my head. 'I do not agree.'

'Why?'

'Because, in your so-called "perfect murder," the criminal ties the loose ends of his crime with such neatness that nothing is left for the police to work upon. Yet in the Weldon mansion murder, a most vital clue was left. Not only did the murderer leave his revolver and silencer, but he made the stupid mistake of signing that weapon with his fingerprints. And fingerprints that showed his fourth finger was missing! Surely, with all our modern identification systems to work upon that weapon was as fatal as a visiting card with the murderer's name and address on it?'

My companion shook his head. In his pale blue eyes a curious amusement flamed for an instant and was gone.

'You think so? The police, my friend, were inclined to agree with you in the beginning, but they realised their mistake very bitterly as time went on. Do you realise that, with all their fingerprint system and their poroscopes and blood tests, they are no nearer the truth of the Weldon mansions murder than the day it was committed?'

A bleak little chuckle escaped him. It swelled suddenly to a chilly cackle that rocked his shrunken little body backwards and forwards. There were tears

of uncontrolled amusement in his eyes. He wiped them with a soiled handkerchief and sobered.

'Because that was the ingenious cleverness of the murderer. He left the police what appeared to be a most important clue— because he knew that it would be not only useless to them, but it also gave him an added advantage. In other words, he left them a clue so absolutely useless that it shielded him by pointing in the wrong direction! Conway was a clever man, but it never occurred to him that the revolver had been deliberately left on the floor! Imagine the criminal who plans a brilliant murder like this one leaving such incriminating evidence behind him? It was the limit in stupidity— but what brilliant stupidity!'

In his high-pitched, excited words there was some subtle gloating quality that was almost evil. He seemed transported by the idea of this perverted genius, and I felt a sudden dislike of this weak-eyed little person, chuckling to himself in the corner. An impulse seized me to prick the bubble of his tainted hero-worship. I stared at him coldly.

'Since you followed the case so closely perhaps you actually know who killed Rose Reynolds?'

He nodded calmly. His hands lay passive in his lap. 'Of course I know who killed her!'

'You do?'

'Certainly. It was Claude Bassett who planned it all!'

'Bassett?'

He nodded again.

'But— but this is absurd! Bassett had a cast-iron alibi! Three reliable witnesses were with him every moment of the half-hour when the shot was fired. The prints on the gun proved definitely that he had never handled the weapon!'

'And he had a normal right hand, didn't he?' my companion prompted. 'And apparently no motive for killing Miss Reynolds? Yet he did— in a manner so clever that it takes your breath away.'

'I still don't understand.'

The little man leaned forward. 'Listen,' he said. 'You say that Bassett was never alone. Then you're making exactly the same mistake as the police. Because there were two occasions when Bassett was very much alone. The first when he stayed behind to pack the dirty dishes in the dumb waiter while his guests went upstairs. The second when he went down to his own rooms to telephone— when there was a telephone at his elbow he could have used!'

'But Conway...' I began.

My companion waved a limp hand.

'Of course! Conway was on the right track. But he didn't delve far enough. He didn't ask himself why Bassett had to be alone on those two occasions. He didn't trouble to find out what that man did that was so secret that no other eyes could see it.'

'But Bassett explained about the telephoning.'

'Nonsense,' replied the little man sharply. 'Claude Basset! went down to his own rooms, not only to telephone, but to remove the final traces of the murder in the flat above. He did it. And so successfully that today he walks the streets a free man!'

'But how in the name of sin did he get into that locked room?'

The man opposite smiled slowly. He leaned back in his seat and folded his arms.

'That was another error on the part of the good Conway,' he said. 'He overlooked the most important factor in the case. Miss Reynolds and Bassett were rehearsing a one-act play for two people. And Conway did not even trouble to inquire the name of the play.' He leaned forward. 'Have you ever read Bram Stoker's thriller, *The Monkey Knows*?'

I nodded.

'Yes. That's the play which concerns a French actress who keeps a pet monkey. If I remember rightly, in the climax of the play, the animal, who has been trained to five a revolver, turns on his, mistress and shoots her through the heart—'

I paused abruptly, a thousand possibilities flooding through my mind. The little man took up my words.

'And in this particular case, Rose Reynolds was playing the part of the woman, and Bassett was producing the play.'

'I still don't see—?'

'Yet you recall how, when the guests came back after seeing Miss Reynolds to her room, Bassett was standing by the dumbwaiter?'

THERE was a long pause The train rattled across a set of points and plunged into a cutting.

I said slowly. 'Are you trying to suggest that Bassett pulled himself up to Miss Reynolds' flat in the dumb-waiter? Because if so might I point out firstly that the shot was not fired until 10 minutes later when Bassett was in the room below with his friends. And secondly, the dumb-waiter itself was much too small to accommodate the body of a grown man.'

There was something almost like a leer on the shabby man's face.

'Too small to hold the body of a grown man, perhaps. But not too small to take the body of a monkey.'

'A monkey?'

He nodded.

'A small orang-outang, to be correct. The orang-outang that was playing the third part in Bassett's production of *The Monkey Knows*.'

'You see, Bassett had obtained a small orang-outang for the play. It was a most intelligent beast, perfect except that the fourth finger of its right hand was missing. But that would never be noticed on the stage. Next came the training of the animal. They taught the beast on the principal of applied association of ideas. In the shooting scene of the play Miss Reynolds always wore that fantastic dress with its roses. Thus, by slow degrees, the animal came to associate that dress with the pulling of the trigger. Naturally, blank cartridges were used at the rehearsals. Until, toward the end, the link in the ape's brain was so definitely established that the mere sight of the woman wearing her scarlet dress was sufficient mental stimulus to produce the firing of the revolver. Bassett had studied animal psychology very well, you see. He had been an animal trainer at a circus during his rather checkered career.

'On the afternoon of the final rehearsal he brought the monkey secretly to his rooms, concealed it, and waited until his guests had gone up to Rose Reynolds' room. Then he placed the animal in the dumbwaiter, gave it a feed of bananas, and placed the revolver, fitted with a silencer and a real bullet, in its deformed hand. With a parting caress, he pulled the animal up on to the next floor. When his friends returned they found him standing near the dumb-waiter, ready with the excuse that be was packing away the dirty dishes.

'We can readily reconstruct what happened then. The animal, leaping out of the dumb-waiter, sees the woman lying asleep on the divan. She is wearing exactly the same dress she has worn at rehearsals. And the animal goes through its part of the play. Her contortions as she died probably frightened the animal, who dropped the revolver near the kitchen door, and sprang back into the dumb-waiter.'

Again that bleak smile.

'You see how cleverly it was worked? Only one thing remained— for Bassett to pull down the dumb-waiter to his own rooms and hide the animal. That was why he was so keen to be alone when he telephoned. The animal was concealed until late that night, when he took it away under the cover of darkness. There was one small flaw in the arrangement. He had either lo kill the animal or keep it with him, because it was too dangerous to turn free. He kept it with him, I believe Bassett was very fond of animals.'

The train plunged through a tunnel, and the lights in the carriage glowed stronger. The black walls raced along outside the window. Then, with a shrill scream, the train was out in the open again.

'But the fingerprints?' I objected.

My companion shifted his position.

'Don't you know that the fingerprints of an orang-outang are in every way similar to those of a human being?' he said slowly. 'All the human loops, whorls, and bifurcations are there, and they can be classified in the same letters and numbers as a set of human fingerprints.' He nodded. 'Oh, yes. That was proved quite recently at the Melbourne Zoological Gardens, when a fingerprint expert took impressions of an orang-outang there.'

'Then who was it that Miss Reynolds spoke to as she locked herself in her room?'

'She spoke to no person at all,' was the reply.

'Remember the words? "So, this is where you've been hiding?" These words form the opening line of Miss Reynolds first entrance in the play. The rehearsal was due to start in half an hour. The woman was merely going over her lines in her mind and happened to pronounce that sentence aloud!'

'But the motive? Why should Bassett want to kill this woman?'

My companion leaned forward and placed a hand on my knee.

'I happen to know that Bassett wanted money to start a small travelling show. He persuaded Miss Reynolds to put £300 into that show for him. In return, he promised to marry her. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that. He already had a wife. Miss Reynolds found this out and threatened, not only to make trouble for Bassett and his wife, but also to demand the return of her money. But Bassett had already spent it. So Miss Reynolds had to be removed.'

I must confess to gaping a little.

'But how do you know all this?'

He gave a bland smile.

'I know Bassett very well,' he explained 'He has rather a charming manner, although he's not much to look at. Certainly he doesn't look like a murderer— but then, real murderers never do. Take Crippen, for instance— an ordinary, everyday little man at whom you wouldn't glance twice.'

'But, knowing that this man is a murderer, why don't you go to the police and tell them what you know?'

The little man measured me with his eyes. His voice was very, quiet.

'Because,' he said slowly, 'if I did, they'd laugh at me. They'd say I had an overworked imagination. I don't warn to look a fool.'

His mood changed, and he smiled.

'But Bassett will probably give himself away one of these days.'

'In what way?'

The man rose to his feet.

'The trouble with these brilliant murderers is that they can't resist boasting about their crimes. Take the case of the Dusseldorf murderer, Peter Kurten, for instance. If he hadn't gone about boasting of his cleverness he might never have been caught. And Bassett will probably trip up the same way. He'll be so delighted over his crime that he won't be able to keep silent about it. One day, he'll open his mouth to the wrong man— and then—'

He finished the sentence with an expressive gesture.

WITH a shudder and gush of steam the train pulled to a stop at one of the small country stations that dot the line My companion gave a quick glance out of the window and nodded. 'Well, good-bye. I get off here.' He gave that apologetic smile.

'Now you can return to your detective novel— but don't take that stuff too seriously.'

Was it my imagination or was there a faint tinge of mockery in his smile?

The train drew to a halt. Outside on the platform stood a dumpy, big-bosomed woman, a typical country housewife. She swept the station with vague, tired eyes set in a placid face. Next moment the face lighted and I watched her come toward the carriage to meet my late companion, who took her hand and smiled in return. She was just the kind of woman I had judged was his wife, a fitting mate for the garrulous little man in his shabby black suit. I watched them walk along the platform, in the direction of the guard's van.

Craning my neck from the window. I perceived a small crowd of children gathered there, as though some attraction was exciting their curiosity. Presently, the cause was revealed. The man and his wife came walking along the platform, and by his side, trotting grotesquely, was a small orang-outang. On its head was a tiny red fez, and as the trio came opposite my window the little man looked up and saw me. He said something to the animal at his side.

With a clumsy, mechanical action, the ape put its hand to its head and doffed the fez. But it was not so much the gesture as something else I noticed. The right hand of the orang-outang was minus a fourth finger! On top of that shock came another. Now the trio had passed, and as I stared after them, I saw that the animal carried on its back an advertising placard. Even though they were some little distance away I caught the main lettering standing out in bold scarlet letters: —

'MILLIE, THE ONLY SHARPSHOOTING
ORANG-OUTANG IN EXISTENCE!'

Then the train gave a shrill scream and began to move off. The country-side sped past the windows. But I had no eyes for the scenery. I sat staring into space. What had the little man said about Basset—

'He had to keep the animal with him because it was too dangerous to turn free.' And then again that sly chuckling utterance— 'He'll be so delighted over his crime that he won't be able to keep silent about it....'

And as I half rose to pull the communication cord another remark of my late companion came forcibly to my mind. I recalled the quiet way he had measured me, with his eyes. What was it he had said about telling the police?

'They'd laugh... an over-worked imagination. I don't want to look a fool...'

What could I do? Should I call the guard, tell him what I knew and take the risk of being branded an imaginative fool. — or was that little man a superlative practical joker and the whole story just a vulgar hoax, the elaborate jest of a trickster? And now, months after the incident, I am still wondering!

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The Telephone Bureau

Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 12 Oct 1935

THE horrible business of Joan Gibson's indoor telephone-booth had its genesis in a perfectly a innocent letter she received from her friend, B Molly Stanley, who was acting as London correspondent of an Australian fashion magazine.

Wedged among the airy gossip of the metropolis, she made mention of the fact that Mayfair had embraced the new fad of indoor telephone-booths.

"Lady Welland-Cooke" (wrote Miss Stanley) "began the idea when she converted an old sedan-chair, and now the city is being combed from end to end. Every old curio, from cupboards to coffins, is being snatched up at really exorbitant prices, transported to drawing-rooms redolent of steel and glass."

JOAN GIBSON placed the letter down on her desk and her eyes travelled to the stack of neatly addressed envelopes that stood waiting to be posted. They were invitations to a house-warming to be given at her new home. This had been a wedding present from her parents when, three months before, she had become the wife of Ted Gibson, the city barrister. During the honeymoon, an army of decorators, furnishers and gardeners had swarmed over the new home, and now it was almost ready. The Gibson couple were temporarily occupying the house at Queenscliffe belonging to Ted's parents, who were in Melbourne.

Presently the door opened and her husband entered. Ted Gibson was in his middle thirties, a lean, serious-faced man.

"Still at it, Joan?"

"Yes, dear. But I'm almost finished." She hesitated a moment, then passed over the letter. "Read what Molly says about the indoor telephone-booths." She rose and indicated the paragraph with an ink-smudged forefinger.

Gibson ran his eyes over the words and looked up. Joan .was staring ahead thoughtfully. She spoke slowly, almost as though weighing every word.

"Wouldn't it be fun if we could fix up something like that for our house-warming? Something unusual."

Her husband shrugged.

"Please yourself; dear. But it won't be easy to find a sedan-chair in Sydney. Or would you—"

She ruffled his hair. "Don't be absurd, Ted. That's going to extremes. Surely it would be possible to hunt out some old-fashioned thing that would serve the purpose?"

Gibson tossed his cigarette in the fire.

"No time like the present," he announced. "We can go directly after lunch. It's a good afternoon for a run. And we'll probably want plenty of time, because I don't think we're going to find this search as easy as you think."

In this, Mr. Gibson showed himself as something of a prophet. Late that afternoon found them unsuccessful, but indefatigable. So far the quest had yielded nothing more satisfactory than a dreary round of period furniture, ranging between Jacobean cupboards to Victorian wardrobes.

They came upon their object by sheer Chance. Half-past five of a winter's afternoon found them" in that rabbit-warren of side streets near the' Quay. The couple wandered into a narrow cul-de-sac, on Gibson's assertion that this was the shortest cut between two main thoroughfares. They did not discover the error, for half-way down Joan paused and grasped her husband's arm.

"Look," she said.

He turned in the direction of her gesture.

Facing them was a small mousy shop with a low, jutting verandah that gave the place a skulking look, like a cap pulled down over the eyes. The contents of the double windows, smeared with shadows, seemed an indescribable confusion. There were mounds of rusty keys and door-knobs, little hillocks of ancient hammerheads and axe heads. From behind three blistered suitcases and the remains of a musical box, the broken teeth of a rake gaped vacuously.

From this unlovely collection, Gibson raised bewildered eyes to the barely legible sign on the window.

"Christian Christopolus. Old Iron and Second-hand Goods."

"What's the idea?"

But Joan was already half-way across the road, and he caught up with her as she stood , nose pressed almost against the window. Her breath clouded the glass.

"Don't you see it, Ted! Look, just inside the window— the very thing."

Gibson screwed his eyes and peered closer. Then he glimpsed it. It looked just like a tall cupboard constructed of iron. Standing about seven feet high, each join was studded with heavy rivets rusting with age. Its width was roughly four feet, so that a tall man might stand upright in it with some inches to. spare. The door, half-open, hung on scrolled hinges and the whole appearance reminded Gibson of an old-fashioned safe, except that the bottom of the door was slit with three narrow apertures.

In the fading afternoon light, the interior of. the shop glowed with the vague greenness of an undersea cavern. And the shabby little man who crept out of the darkness to meet them furthered the impression. He sidled forward like a crab, and they had the impression that he was trying to move round to cut off their retreat. A subtle uneasiness, bred by the undisguised squalor of

this forsaken collection and the depressing gloom of their surroundings, touched Joan Gibson. She came to the point abruptly, stabbing a finger at the tall object near the window.

"What is the price of that, please?" Her crisp tone echoed queerly in this place of shadows.

Something that could scarcely be called an expression crossed the proprietor's olive face; a wavering indistinctness, like a, face seen under, flowing water.

"Oh... that?" he said, and was silent.

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Gibson began impatiently, but her husband cut in.

"What is the thing, anyhow?"

"You take a look." The little Greek waved his hand in a vague gesture. They did so. Closer at hand, there was something disturbing and unlovely about that coffin-like object wrought in cold iron. Gibson gave the rigid side a sharp rap with his stick, and Joan, peering inside, started at the hollow sound. Presently she called, "Matches, please, Ted."

He crossed to her side, and, striking fine, looked over her shoulder. The tiny yellow flame burned soberly against the black walls. Halfway down, on either side, was an iron ring, the right-hand one bent into a rough oval. Some six inches from the floor, hanging from the rear wall, were two other rings. All four were worn as though powerful force had strained against them. Something else attracted Gibson's attention. On the inside of the door, near tile top, something darker than the iron had spread.

All this time Mr. Christopolus stood watching them, motionless and soundless as that thing of iron at his side. Only his eyes watched them. They turned to him. Without moving he said:

"You take it for five shillings?"

Excitement at the bargain chased the uneasiness from Joan's mind. She nodded. However, Ted Gibson's male caution was not so easily banished.

"It's rather an odd thing, isn't it?" he said levelly. "What is it? And where, did you get it?"

Mr. Christopolus shrugged. "What is it? .Who can say? It is very old, I think sometimes a hundred years. It has been here very long— so long I forgot how it came here. A business like animation crept into the muddy voice. "You take it for five bob— I pay delivery!"

Gibson looked at his wife. Even in the misty twilight he could see her eyes dancing.

"Ted, we must! It's the very thing! And a bargain at that. Five shillings— why…"

She broke to stare afresh at the iron cupboard, and, in the darkness, it seemed to have grown larger. Something in its appearance damped her enthusiasm. To her surprise, a faint shiver shook her. She took her husband's arm.

"Go on, Ted. Tell the man where to send it and let's go. It's— it's cold."

That was on Monday afternoon. The following day, Gibson returned to his office. That afternoon, Joan received a telephone call from the caretaker of her home, a Mr. Bert Beedon, informing, her of the safe arrival of the iron booth. Joan gave instructions that it was to be placed in the far corner of the drawing-room, and that a telephone was to be installed inside at the earliest possible moment.

"You've done extremely well, and thank you," Joan replied. "There's just one thing. Mr. Gibson and myself will be coming down on Friday night to look over the place. We may stay over the week-end."

FRIDAY morning dawned blue and cloudless. But in the afternoon the wind turned cold, bringing up leaden clouds that blotted out the sun, and trailed wet fringes over the hills. It was Ted who provided the second disappointment. Just before Joan was leaving, he rang to say that he could not get down until late— probably about midnight. Old Cornelius Hayden, the curator of the City Museum, had called for his services on some legal matter, and they were to discuss it over dinner at Hayden's house.

"It's a nuisance," Gibson admitted, "and I'll try and get away as soon as I decently can. I can hardly rush out of the old chaps place after eating his dinner, though. It will probably be somewhere about midnight before I get down."

It was a rather depressed young woman who drove the single-seater car out on to the main road. But the smooth singing of the tyres and the thought that, within the hour, she would be driving through the gates of her own home, revived her spirits. The doors of the green-painted garage stood open, and, as she ran the car inside, Beedon was waiting for her with an umbrella. He gave a little grin of welcome, and together they raced for the house. Inside was his wife, waiting, to take her rain-spattered burberry and hand her a cup of steaming tea Joan sipped it, stretching her feet to the warmth of the fire from the depths of a comfortable chair.

The Beedons hovered about, pleased and voluble.

"I'm dying to look over the place," Joan said. The fire and the beverage had brought a flush to her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. "The telephone is installed in the booth? Good! Everything else all right?"

For the first time, she noticed a slight hesitation in their garrulity. An uneasy glance passed between them. Mrs. Gibson set her cup on the table, and sat upright.

"What's the trouble?" she asked quietly.

The little man wrung uneasy hands and began a halting explanation Through his nervous phrases, Joan pieced together the story.

The first intimation of trouble had begun on the Wednesday night Mr. Beedon had doing his rounds to lock all doors and windows, and was about to return to the kitchen. The time was close on midnight and he was looking forward to his supper and his bed. But as he stood in the darkened corridor, an odd sound attracted his attention. A thick, half-stifled noise it was, something between a sob and a groan. Gave him the creeps, it did, coming out of the darkness like that. He couldn't seem to locate it, either. Then, as he stood listening, the sound stopped. There was a silence. Suddenly the hush was shattered with a terrifying scream that echoed through the silent building and died away in a horrible, murmurous gasping. The scream brought his wife to his side. Together, they switched on the lights and searched the place.

"But it was as bare as the palm of my 'and, ma'am!"

Mr. Beedon paused. Joan did not speak.

Those broken sentences had conjured up a, disturbing vision of two old people, frightened but resolute, prowling the darkened rooms in search of something that screamed in the night. Then she pulled herself together.

"Nonsense," she said curtly. "Must have been the cats."

"No cat ever screamed like that," returned Mr. Beedon, with polite firmness.

The clock was striking ten when she came to the drawing-room. She nodded appreciatively as Mrs. Beedon put a match to the ready-laid fire, and crossed to the iron cabinet in its corner. She could not help noticing how oddly the shining ebonite instrument contrasted with the sombre walls which housed it.

Joan turned back. "I'll stay here until Mr. Gibson arrives," she said, drawing up a chair. "You needn't wait up— he won't be in before midnight. Just some sandwiches and coffee will do."

JOAN GIBSON must have read for close on an hour when she looked up with a stifled yawn. Her first sensation was that the room had turned cold Glancing down at the fire, she saw that, the leaping flames had fallen to fiercely red embers. She heaped fresh wood on the fire, and watched the sickly green flame that poked around the edge of the log.

Then she became aware of the silence that had fallen on the room; the silence of night, of rolling fields and folded leafage, and of the things that creep by night. There was nothing soothing or restful in this silence; rather it held some disturbing quality that caused vague unease. She stood up, surprised to find her senses acute and throbbing. It was as though she could hear for miles; and. for the first time, the isolation of this white mansion touched her with a cold finger. And as she stood, looking about, it occurred. She did not actually hear the sound; it was more a gentle vibration of the atmosphere that registered on her strained senses. Yet she could have sworn that a low, gasping sob had echoed through that quiet, empty room.

With its passing came reaction. Joan Gibson, chuckled and settled herself in the chair. "Mustn't let the Beedons tell me any more ghost stories," she murmured, and picked up her book. But her jumping nerves refused the-anodyne of the plot After five minutes, she found herself watching out of the corner of her eye, and listening— for what?

She gave a shiver and sat up. If the room had been cold before, it was frigid now. The logs smouldered sullenly on a heap of almost dead coals. She had half a mind to ring for Mrs. Beedon, but, the clock chiming a quarter past eleven halted her. The good old soul would be snug in bed by now. She decided to mix herself a drink, and was half-way across the room to the tantalus, when she heard the sound again.

There was no mistaking it this time. From somewhere in that room came a strangled sob that ended in a moan of agony. It was not so much the sound itself as the anguish that trembled it. All the searing agony of the damned was concentrated in that sobbing moan. Joan wheeled, not so much frightened as amazed, since the noise was undoubtedly in the room. Her eyes encountering emptiness, surprise gave way to anger. If someone was playing tricks, someone, for instance, hiding near the telephone-booth.

She took three determined steps across the room — and it was on her as though she had stepped into a high wave that spread widely from the corner of the room. Her body prickled and a numbness clouded her mind. In that moment, she knew terror. Not the hot panic of crowds nor the furtive fear of everyday things; this was horror, a naked quivering horror that plucked at her taut nerves and closed a cold hand about her heart. Her swimming eyes took in the telephone-booth, and a dull thought crossed her mind that somewhere at the other end of that instrument was her husband. She clutched wildly at the idea, forcing it against the woolly clouding of her brain. And as quickly as her mind registered this, the wave fell away, and she was, as before, only dazed and trembling with the horror of it all.

Joan Gibson sank down in a chair and stared about her. That there was something in this room, something altogether monstrous and evil beyond conception, she had no doubt. Yet the moment of revealing horror had shaken, but not unmanned her. What could she do? Rouse the Beedons? What could they' do after she had openly scoffed at their warnings? Yet she dared not stay alone in that room. If only Ted...

Of course, the telephone! She would ring for her husband, begging him to come home at once.

Rather unsteadily, she crossed to the telephone-booth, and slipped inside, leaving the iron, door wide to obtain a good view of the room.

After the chill of the room, the atmosphere inside that narrow iron box was uncomfortably warm, and the walls gave forth a moist acrid odor that she could not place. Her fingers were unusually clumsy as she reached for the directory, and began to search for Cornelius Hayden's number. A heavy drop of perspiration plopped on to the printed leaf, and Joan, running, a hand over her face, found it dewed. The temperature inside the box seemed to have risen, for her loose dress clung to her moist body.

That sickly, acrid tang was stronger now. Desperately, she fought down the panic that gripped her, concentrating her mind on the locating of that number until the figures danced before her eyes. There had been no time to install a light in the booth, and she sloped the page to catch the reflection from the outside room. At last she found the name, and traced the number eagerly. Dropping the book, she turned and tugged the receiver from the hook. At the same moment, a darker shadow swept across her, like the lowering of a black wing.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something that brought a cut-off scream to her lips.

The iron door of the cabinet was closing slowly.

RECEIVER to ear, she beat at it desperately with her free hand. But she might as well have attempted to hold back the coming of nightfall. As though propelled by some invisible power, the iron portal swung into place until a narrow band of light between door and edge remained. Joan was about to drop the receiver and fight her way out, when the cheerful, disinterested voice of the operator spoke. Almost automatically, her eyes on that diminishing strip of light, she gave the number. Then it was too late— the iron door swung into place with a metallic ringing. She was imprisoned in the fathomless blackness of the iron box. A S the light was drained from . that prison! so was. her. courage sapped. The heat was unbearable, now— it was as though body and mind were wrapped in a searing flame. She was lost in the blackness of this

hellish night, her one link with the common world the wire that buzzed intermittently in her ear. She mustn't let go, they must answer... they must! She found herself praying, broken phrases that whispered from dry lips. "Dear God... make them answer... don't let me faint… dear God—"

Seconds were hours, minutes were dragging, tortured years.

Buzzz-buzzzz. Buzzzz-buzzzz.

Why didn't they answer?

Then her ears caught another sound, somewhere in that, lurid, darkness. It was the clink of metal against metal. Strong in her nostrils was that stench of rottenness, of decay; it rose and enveloped her, loathsome, revolting. Her head swam weakly and she put out her free hand to steady herself. Her groping fingers touched something that was not an iron wall— something on which tattered, rotting garments hung, foul with the embrace of the grave. It moved under her fingers.

Something in the cabinet beside her!

Then she screamed, her last vestige of self-control swept away in the unutterable horror of this thing at her side. She was battling with all the waning strength of body and mind against this rotted thing that jangled chains on its withered arms, and moaned and sobbed in horrid agony. In the blackness, she could see it dimly, an emaciated thing with shrunken head danced closer— she caught a glimpse of gaping eye sockets and a crooked fingers that sought her throat. She beat and kicked at it with the desperation of terror, and felt a bone crunch under her shoe. Now that shrunken head danced closer— she caught a glimpse of gaping eye-sockets and a fleshless mouth that sought...

And in that last unbearable moment, something clicked miles away and she heard her husband's voice.

"Ted!" she, screamed. "Ted— come home! Quickly Oh, God!..." and the receiver slipped from her fingers. In her ears was that hellish laughter, rising higher and higher.

Joan Gibson felt herself falling... falling through black depths into the blessed heart of oblivion.

THE young doctor at the Redbank private hospital nodded genially as Mr. Gibson was shown In.

"You've come to take her home?" he asked. "Good! You'll find Mrs. Gibson a new woman: A week here has done her the world of good." He pressed a button on his desk, and a nurse appeared.

"Mr. Gibson is taking his wife home this morning. Will you take him upstairs?"

He found Joan putting the finishing touches to her dressing. She had a pallor that made her eyes seem larger than ever, but she smiled and kissed her husband fondly. Then she said quietly. "Did you get rid of it?"

He nodded. "Madam Seven-foot will never trouble you again."

"Madame Seven-foot...?"

Ted Gibson sat down on the edge of the bed.

"That's the name the convicts gave to their most horrible form of torture—the sweat-box." He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a folded sheaf of papers. "It was Hayden who put me on the right track, Joan. I've traced that devilish thing down through his books on early Australia. Here's an extract from Condor's *'Early Convict Settlements*.' Listen:

" 'Perhaps the most barbarous punishment meted out to the convicts of Van Diemen's Land was that of the sweat-box, used throughout the heat of the summer. This was an iron cabinet, just high and wide enough to house a tall man. On the hottest days, these iron boxes were placed where the heat of the sun would strike them. The unfortunate wretch to be punished was chained inside the cabinet by manacles on his hands and ankles, the iron door closed upon him and there he remained. In an hour, that prison was like an oven, by noonday it was a stifling inferno. The inmates were allowed neither food nor water. Their suffering can be imagined. Some became lightheaded and howled, moaned, and laughed through their torture. Others, driven to the final extremity in their agony, dashed out their brains against the iron walls. The sweat-box, or 'Madam Seven-foot,' as It came to be known, proved even more efficacious than the 'cat,' and the most hardened criminals were broken under this torture. In 1810 the sweat-box was abolished by Act of Parliament, but its horror remains as one of the darkest blots oh the early history of this continent.' "

There was a silence. Joan looked up. Her voice had a tremor that she could not disguise.

"And we brought this horrible thing into our home. What did you do with it?"

"Hired four men with a boat to dump it in the sea," Gibson replied. "It was expensive, but I daren't leave it where it could be found. We don't want anyone else to go through the same experience."

JOAN GIBSON has mentioned her terrible adventure to very few people. Her proud and reserved nature shrinks from the incredulity that must follow Its narration. That is why even her most intimate friends cannot understand her aversion to the telephone, and why the sight of an ordinary street-corner cabinet sets her pale and trembling with fright .

———————

Poison Can Be Puzzling

The Australian Women's Weekly, 12 Feb 1944

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

"Isn't he marvellous!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the trouble, Chief?"

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

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

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

"Need we worry?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Something unearthly?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jeffery glanced up quickly.

"How do you know?"

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

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

"Why?" inquired Mr. Blackburn.

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

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

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

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

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

"Cass' floor," Elizabeth said briskly.

"How do you know?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Eleanor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the first time those pleasant even tones faltered.

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

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

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

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

"Eleanor... you...!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now they sat late over a barely tasted breakfast.

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

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

"Suicide!" returned Elizabeth.

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

"No reason at all."

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

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

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

Read's opening remark was deeply disgruntled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But that kitten," interrupted Elizabeth.

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

"Then even if Cass had drunk that water—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You've seen Harkness, Chief?"

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

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

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

Jeffery nodded.

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

"What did Cass want with the man?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Painful?"

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

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

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

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

"But the blood-spots—?"

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

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

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

"He looked awfully untidy—"

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

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

"Good heavens! You knew!"

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

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

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

"But, Jeff—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jeffery smiled, a cold, grim smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two minutes ticked away. Suddenly the inspector sprang towards the door.

"What's keeping him?" he barked.

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

———————————

The Happy Couple

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

IT WAS just ten o'clock when Steve Harper laid down his novel and stretched himself in the deep armchair. He was tired of the printed word and it was too early for bed.

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

Harper reached across and lifted the receiver.

"Harper speaking..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

George Wingate...suicide!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Matrimony had sobered George Wingate but little.

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

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

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

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

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

And now...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How did it happen?" asked Harper quietly.

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

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

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

She paused. No one spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Unless what?"

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

Harper turned from the woman to face the Inspector.

"I suppose it is suicide?"

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

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

"Of course. This way..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

"But you said it was straight out?"

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

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

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

Olga Wingate was afraid!

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

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

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

THEY BURIED George Wingate on the following day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Naturally."

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

"Yourself?" Steve asked quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

In that moment, Steve hated her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet, less than ten minutes later...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He closed his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

An unsuspected weapon, he thought again.

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

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

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

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

Then he saw the handbag.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Steve!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sit down, Steve," she said.

His lean body tightened in an instinctive shrinking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Steve Harper knew— and the realisation sickened him— that this woman spoke the truth. What could he bring forward to support his story? Suspicions— and a fragment of charred paper. A clever lawyer could explain those scattered words in a dozen innocent ways.

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

"Well, Stephen?"

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

"What do you ask?"

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

Olga Wingate nodded and her expression was almost sedate.

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

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

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

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

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

"And Mischa?"

"Leave Mischa out of this!"

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

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

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

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

"Last night I changed the toys before we started the bridge game. I knew George could never resist showing off in front of friends. He'd been drinking at dinner and his mind wasn't very clear. So he left the bridge table, walked into the dining-room, and picked up the loaded automatic."

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

She threw back her head and chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

_____

The Vanishing Trick

Detective Fiction, Dec 1948

Detective Fiction *was a short-lived Austalian magazine*

'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.

'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!'

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, stony-faced, 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.'

End