
PAST
MASTERS
230
Arthur Conan Doyle
Bram Stoker
H. P. Lovecraft
A. Hyatt Verril
Damon Runyon
Edward Dyson
Sumner Locke
Malcolm Jameson
Baroness Orczy
Beatrice Grimshaw
and more

PAST MASTERS 230

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

24 July 2025

Contents

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1: One of the Heads

***Arthur H. Adams* (as by Henry James James)**

1872-1936

The Bulletin, 1 Aug 1918

"An 'Erb at Alexandria is worth two at Gov'ment House."— From Lola's Autograph Album.

THE HONORABLE CHARLES CHORROUGHCOP (pronounced "Chump") unpacked himself in Sydney without showing the slightest traces of his journey from England. Not a corner had been knocked off his kitbags or his complacency; his collars and his manners retained their high gloss; neither his shoes nor his accent had lost any of their polish. The whole ship's company deserved a certificate for their care of him; but even the stoker could see upon his eyeglass the legend "This Side Up," and upon the stiff creases of his trousers, "Use No Hooks," and upon his hot silk socks the admonition "Stow Away From Boilers."

But do not run away with the impression that the Hon. Charles was an idiot. He wore an eyeglass because he had lopsided vision, not because he had a lopsided brain; the creases remained in his trousers because they had been planted there by a tailor who knew his business; his accent and his mannahs had been imposed upon his plastic soul by Eton and Oxford; and he couldn't help being born an Honorable. What was left of the original Chorroughcop was good material.

The Hon. Charles was a simple, good-looking and ingenuous chap, modest and sincere, who went through existence with a humble wonder why the world tolerated at all a chap so painfully stoopid— what?

The Hon. Charles had been despatched from London to Sydney as an A.D.C. That was the only degree he seemed ever likely to get, though some years later he managed to acquire another one, the V.C. But the choice of becoming a Gentleman Help had been forced upon Charles. Ever since the war broke out he had been trying to enlist: but a lung that worked erratically had always failed him in the medical test. Even when a navvy, with creases in his moleskins and an eyeglass, turned up before the medical officer, that lynx-eyed official penetrated his disguise. Between enlistments Charles got a job in the War Office. He felt that he was doing his bit, but it seemed such a little bit. All he had to do was to send out form KZ 793348 to Deputy Foremen of Boot Factories, and then to send out form MJS 82465 to them, asking them why they hadn't replied to form KZ 793348. Then conscription came, and Charles joyfully lined up again and coughed. But England refused to conscript that wobbly, misfire lung.

Charles saw a specialist in eccentric lungs.

"Ye-e-s." said that doctor; "a couple of years in a warm climate will soon put that right. What about Australia?"

Luckily, Charles had heard of Australia. He hurried home to his mother, and his mother remembered that she had a second cousin in the Governor business; he was somewhere in Australia now; he would be delighted to have Charles visit him. Subsequently the Sydney newspapers announced that the Hon. Charles Chorroughcop had arrived as extra A.D.C. to the Governor, and all the society maidens in Sydney started voluntary-aid classes to study the pronunciation of his name.

But the first girl to meet the Hon. Charles socially was Lola of the chocolates, the startlingly beautiful assistant-forewoman of one of the big confectionery factories at Alexandria.

The factory girls, most of whom were congenital anti-conscriptionists, were enthusiastic workers for Billjim.* Conscription to them was a vague and dreadful thing, but Billjim in his uniform was both accessible and exciting. Their Red Cross Committee had done as much for him as any plutocratic centre with, a shop-window in Pitt-street and a line of limousines always waiting at the door. Their president was the wife of the owner of a factory whose most noticeable products, as far as Alexandria was concerned, were assorted smells with plenty of body in them. So when her Excellency, to show her encouragement of the movement, invited the committees of various groups of Red Cross workers to afternoon-tea at Government House— on a day when his Excellency was unfortunately obliged to be absent on the golf-links— Lola's committee was among the guests

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**Slang of the time for an Australian soldier in World War I, especially one of the Australian Light Horse.*

Lola gave to her committee a distinction that was the cause of her election. She didn't do any leal work, except to knit an occasional pair of socks that simply refused to recognise their relationship, or make a pair of pyjamas that distinctly limped; but her beauty and her "flash" manners appealed to her chums. They felt that Lola's eyes and Lola's figure would really help to win the war. And Lola certainly had ideas. Every girl who knitted socks put into the toe a little loving message for the wearer, with name and full address. Lola had the inspiration of knitting her own name around the top of each sock. Her bitterest enemy remarked that anyhow it: would keep that Billjim's feet warm. And it was Lola, too, who sewed up in the pocket of the pair of limping pyjamas she had constructed for an unknown sick Billjim the touching little message: "Think of me when you've got these on!" But she didn't add her name or address.

Obviously Lola was the right person to be on the committee.

The factory girls weren't keen on the invitation to Government House. All factory girls are snobs: they do not care to mix socially with other classes. It wasn't at all likely that there'd be a band, and dancing in the ballroom all the afternoon, or even a merry-go-round and swings. A mob of fat "flash" old women and a lot of speechifying, That seemed to be the idea "the heads" had of enjoying themselves. Still, the girls might get some new ideas of the latest fashions to copy. But there wouldn't be anything there in trousers.

The event, at least in its opening stages, confirmed Lola's pessimism. There was an informal welcome by "one of the heads"— a class that comprised everybody in the world, from the girls' bosssess to the King. There was a presentation of a bouquet of flowers, for which flowerless Alexandria had subscribed, to be handed over in a gloriously beautiful garden. Then there was tea on the lawn; and then they were told to make themselves quite at home and enjoy themselves. And not a boy in sight!

Lola, in her new dress that she was delighted to see was the latest thing in fashion, and her aeroplane hat that haloed her glorious coppery hair, wandered peevishly away from the crowd. A whole Saturday afternoon wasted! But the conscious-ness that she was wearing new silk stockings and that her underclothing was so full of lace-insertion that the rest didn't matter, prevented her giving way to absolute gloom. Wonderful how a little thing like this buoys up a woman!

So there was a reminiscent smile lingering on her beautiful face when, suddenly rounding a corner of a narrow garden-path, she m et the Honorable Charles Chorroughcop.

That amiable youth had been been shirking his job. This was his first appearance in Sydney society. Her Excellency had thought this affair, not being exactly a society function, would be an exellent one for breaking him in. But the appearance of so many females and the sudden consciousness that he was alone and unprotected, combined with what he had heard about the beauty and the paralysing allure of the Sydney Girl, had broken down his nerve, and he had fled to the conservatory to console himself with several cigarettes.

At the sight of this dazzling apparition the Hon. Charles caught his breath. That was, of course, bad for his wobbly lung; but Charles didn't mind. He would do it every day for such a cause. All that he had heard the loveliness ot the Sydney girl had failed to prepare him for Lola. He had never conceived her possibility,

However, his hand went automatically to llis straw hat, and he readjusted his fallen monocle, and stammered, "Ah, good afternoon. Warm, what?"

Lola assumed her haughtiest manner.

"Par*donne*?" she murmured in her only French.

"Sorry!" said the Hon. Charles, "but l— er—"

Lola swept him with her magnificent eyes as one sweeps the leaves off a path.

"I fancy you've made a mistake!"

She thought herself in King-street, waiting for a tram at night. There were always so many young men who seemed to be waiting for the same tram— till she caught it. She hadn't been introduced to this boy, anyhow. How dare he speak to her! But she liked it all the same.

Having thus withered the intruder Lola attempted to sail past him.

But the pathway was narrow, and the Hon. Charles wasn't going to let *that* escape.

"But, I say, y'know," he stammered, "I ought to introduce myself. I'm her Excellency's aide-de-camp. I live here, don't you know?"

"Go on!" said Lola in amazement. "One of the heads? Fancy!"

"Silly sort of job, ain't it?" he laughed, "Got to make my bally self useful, and all that tosh, you know. Entertain the guests and buzz round."

"Really! Well. I haven't seen you buzzing much, have I?"

"Too bally scared of all those women!"

The Hon. Charles laughed easily: he was really getting on quite nicely with this lovely creature. To his consternation a frown troubled the beauty of Lola's brow.

"I'll trouble you, Mister, not to use language in the presence of ladies!" And Lola made an elaborate pretence of sweeping past him. Not that she had the least intention of quitting this nice young boy.

By an effort Charles recalled his innocent "bally." He didn't know that Lola had never heard the adjective before, and therefore suspected it.

"I beg your pardon," he eagerly said.

"Granted," Lola benignly pronounced.

Charles was so relieved that he had a bright idea. "I say, Miss;" and paused.

But Lola wasn't going to give herself away till she knew more of him. "I say, I've got to entertain the guests. Couldn't I start by entertaining *you*?"

Lola began to think that her afternoon wasn't going to be quite wasted. This boy rather reminded her of 'Erb, of the boot-factory. In her most engaging manner she replied, "You have a neck!"

"What?" the aide-de-camp cried. "That's Australian slang! I've heard such a lot about it. Charming, I think, what? Especially as you say it!"

"Well, if it is," Lola retorted, suspecting his ingenuous admiration for criticism, and quick to seize her advantage: "I don't talk flash like you, Sissy!"

But these were merely verbal fireworks, necessary in factory conversation if you meant to keep your end up. Each took the other in, and the same thought struck each. At any moment this interesting encounter might be interrupted.

"I say, let's look at the flowers in the hot-house," the youth eagerly suggested.

Lola languidly assented. It didn't do to give yourself away.

He led her to the hot-house. Once inside that steaming paradise of blossom, and once assured that they had it to themselves, they paused.

There were gorgeous flowers there, but none so exotic and so fatally beautiful as Lola. She and he stood and stared at each other. The Hon. Charles had a sudden disintegrating thought. He was a prehistoric man in the lush tropical jungle of the steamy era of long-dead ages; and this girl, this exotic blossom, was his mate, his prey.....

She waited for him, the woman's eternal enigmatic smile on her brilliant lips, parted in expectation? All he had to do was to— But Charles was an Englishman and an aide-de-camp. Who was this girl? Evidently a society girl; that was obvious from her exquisite costuming, so regally worn.

Her accent was curious, and so were some of her expressions. He hadn't quite got over the shock of having had his pardon so curtly granted. But then he had been told about the Australian accent: so that was all right. Still, to take, advantage of a confiding Sydney society girl and rudely kiss her so soon after meeting her was hardly cricket. He would have plenty of opportunities of meeting her again; and in the meantime he would be able to find out her name. Better be careful, Charles!

But one look at Lola's impassive face undid, all his noble resolutions. She seemed quite oblivious to the admiration in his monocle.

"Sort of tropical forest racket, what?" he burst out. "You and me in the jungle sort-of-idea. I say, you do look top-hole! Ripping don't you know!"

Lola was wondering how long he was going to keep her waiting in that horrible, steaming place. Another minute and the perspiration would be making channels down the powder on her nose. Why didn't he kiss her at once and get it over? 'Erb would have done it three times by now!

"I'll trouble you to take your compliments where they are wanted, *if* you please," Lola retorted, in the best manner of Alexandria society, where the ruder a girl is the more flattered does her boy feel. But of course her dazzling smile undid it all.

Then Lola looked at him with those slowly-opening eyes of her. She had practised the trick so often before the little looking-glass in her bedroom that it was never known to fail. There was a whole film-scenario in that look. It said: "I am shy and innocent, and just a teeny bit afraid of you. But I trust you, trust you utterly I'm only a weak woman, though; I'm sure You'll be kind to me ; you won't hurt me, will you... darling?"

Charles's monocle dropped. He crouched ready to spring, pehistoric man in his tropical, steaming, lush jungle of the immemorial past. And Lola tensely hoped that her nose didn't shine.

But Charles was nervous, Charles was young, Charles was English. Nervously he took her neatly-gloved hand. And with the other he replaced his monocle. He didn't feel so naked with it on

"You dear!" he murmured. "I must see you again. Look here—"

He put his hand into his breast pocket and produced a little pack of blue

"There's a little private dance on Thursday next. I've got the job of sending the invitations out. Tell me your name and I'll send you one."

Tell that silly chump her name when he didn't know enough to kiss her! Lola was very angry indeed. All that time wasted!

"Not much!" she cried,

Charles mistook her heightened color for excitement. "Well, then," he said, "take one now. It doesn't matter about filling it in—" He thrust the invitation, for which society girls would have fought each other to the death, into her reluctant hand.

"We'll sit the dances out— here!" he added.

"Thank you for the invite" said Lola primly— though angry and disappointed she remembered her manners— "but I've got a previous engagement that night."

And though the nervous Charles waited eagerly for her appearance at that select function on Thursday evening, Lola never came. For Thursday was sacred to Mrs. Beberbaum's Select Dancing Academy, and Lola could depend on 'Erb. her new boy, kissing her good and hard at that shady street-corner on the way home. 'Erb wore his hair longer than that flash boy at Government House, and 'Erb knew how to treat a lady proper.

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2: The Diary of a Madman

Guy de Maupassant

1850-1893

"Un fou", *Le Gaulois*, 2 Sep, 1885; English translator anon.

A longer version, with supernatural elements, was published in 1887 as "The Horla", which was the basis of the 1963 horror movie starring Vincent Price and Nancy Kovack. That version is in Past Masters 225

HE WAS dead— the head of a high tribunal, the upright magistrate whose irreproachable life was a proverb in all the courts of France. Advocates, young counsellors, judges had greeted him at sight of his large, thin, pale face lighted up by two sparkling deep-set eyes, bowing low in token of respect.

He had passed his life in pursuing crime and in protecting the weak. Swindlers and murderers had no more redoubtable enemy, for he seemed to read the most secret thoughts of their minds.

He was dead, now, at the age of eighty-two, honored by the homage and followed by the regrets of a whole people. Soldiers in red trousers had escorted him to the tomb and men in white cravats had spoken words and shed tears that seemed to be sincere beside his grave.

But here is the strange paper found by the dismayed notary in the desk where he had kept the records of great criminals! It was entitled:

WHY?

20TH JUNE, 1851. I have just left court. I have condemned Blondel to death! Now, why did this man kill his five children? Frequently one meets with people to whom the destruction of life is a pleasure. Yes, yes, it should be a pleasure, the greatest of all, perhaps, for is not killing the next thing to creating? To make and to destroy! These two words contain the history of the universe, all the history of worlds, all that is, all! Why is it not intoxicating to kill?

25th June. To think that a being is there who lives, who walks, who runs. A being? What is a being? That animated thing, that bears in it the principle of motion and a will ruling that motion. It is attached to nothing, this thing. Its feet do not belong to the ground. It is a grain of life that moves on the earth, and this grain of life, coming I know not whence, one can destroy at one's will. Then nothing— nothing more. It perishes, it is finished.

26th June. Why then is it a crime to kill? Yes, why? On the contrary, it is the law of nature. The mission of every being is to kill; he kills to live, and he kills to kill. The beast kills without ceasing, all day, every instant of his existence. Man kills without ceasing, to nourish himself; but since he needs, besides, to kill for pleasure, he has invented hunting! The child kills the insects he finds, the little

birds, all the little animals that come in his way. But this does not suffice for the irresistible need to massacre that is in us. It is not enough to kill beasts; we must kill man too. Long ago this need was satisfied by human sacrifices. Now the requirements of social life have made murder a crime. We condemn and punish the assassin! But as we cannot live without yielding to this natural and imperious instinct of death, we relieve ourselves, from time to time, by wars. Then a whole nation slaughters another nation. It is a feast of blood, a feast that maddens armies and that intoxicates civilians, women and children, who read, by lamplight at night, the feverish story of massacre.

One might suppose that those destined to accomplish these butcheries of men would be despised! No, they are loaded with honors. They are clad in gold and in resplendent garments; they wear plumes on their heads and ornaments on their breasts, and they are given crosses, rewards, titles of every kind. They are proud, respected, loved by women, cheered by the crowd, solely because their mission is to shed human blood; They drag through the streets their instruments of death, that the passer-by, clad in black, looks on with envy. For to kill is the great law set by nature in the heart of existence! There is nothing more beautiful and honorable than killing!

30th June. To kill is the law, because nature loves eternal youth. She seems to cry in all her unconscious acts: "Quick! quick! quick!" The more she destroys, the more she renews herself.

2nd July. A human being— what is a human being? Through thought it is a reflection of all that is; through memory and science it is an abridged edition of the universe whose history it represents, a mirror of things and of nations, each human being becomes a microcosm in the macrocosm.

3rd July. It must be a pleasure, unique and full of zest, to kill; to have there before one the living, thinking being; to make therein a little hole, nothing but a little hole, to see that red thing flow which is the blood, which makes life; and to have before one only a heap of limp flesh, cold, inert, void of thought!

5th August. I, who have passed my life in judging, condemning, killing by the spoken word, killing by the guillotine those who had killed by the knife, I, I, if I should do as all the assassins have done whom I have smitten, I— I— who would know it?

10th August. Who would ever know? Who would ever suspect me, me, me, especially if I should choose a being I had no interest in doing away with?

15th August. The temptation has come to me. It pervades my whole being; my hands tremble with the desire to kill.

22nd August. I could resist no longer. I killed a little creature as an experiment, for a beginning. Jean, my servant, had a goldfinch in a cage hung in the office window. I sent him on an errand, and I took the little bird in my hand, in my hand where I felt its heart beat. It was warm. I went up to my room. From

time to time I squeezed it tighter; its heart beat faster; this was atrocious and delicious. I was near choking it. But I could not see the blood.

Then I took scissors, short-nail scissors, and I cut its throat with three slits, quite gently. It opened its bill, it struggled to escape me, but I held it, oh! I held it— I could have held a mad dog— and I saw the blood trickle.

And then I did as assassins do— real ones. I washed the scissors, I washed my hands. I sprinkled water and took the body, the corpse, to the garden to hide it. I buried it under a strawberry-plant. It will never be found. Every day I shall eat a strawberry from that plant. How one can enjoy life when one knows how!

My servant cried; he thought his bird flown. How could he suspect me? Ah! ah!

25th August. I must kill a man! I must—

30th August. It is done. But what a little thing! I had gone for a walk in the forest of Vernes. I was thinking of nothing, literally nothing. A child was in the road, a little child eating a slice of bread and butter.

He stops to see me pass and says, "Good-day, Mr. President."

And the thought enters my head, "Shall I kill him?"

I answer: "You are alone, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"All alone in the wood?"

"Yes, sir."

The wish to kill him intoxicated me like wine. I approached him quite softly, persuaded that he was going to run away. And, suddenly, I seized him by the throat. He looked at me with terror in his eyes— such eyes! He held my wrists in his little hands and his body writhed like a feather over the fire. Then he moved no more. I threw the body in the ditch, and some weeds on top of it. I returned home, and dined well. What a little thing it was! In the evening I was very gay, light, rejuvenated; I passed the evening at the Prefect's. They found me witty. But I have not seen blood! I am tranquil.

31st August. The body has been discovered. They are hunting for the assassin. Ah! ah!

1st September. Two tramps have been arrested. Proofs are lacking.

2nd September. The parents have been to see me. They wept! Ah! ah!

6th October. Nothing has been discovered. Some strolling vagabond must have done the deed. Ah! ah! If I had seen the blood flow, it seems to me I should be tranquil now! The desire to kill is in my blood; it is like the passion of youth at twenty.

20th October. Yet another. I was walking by the river, after breakfast. And I saw, under a willow, a fisherman asleep. It was noon. A spade was standing in a potato-field near by, as if expressly, for me.

I took it. I returned; I raised it like a club, and with one blow of the edge I cleft the fisherman's head. Oh! he bled, this one! Rose-colored blood. It flowed into the water, quite gently. And I went away with a grave step. If I had been seen! Ah! ah! I should have made an excellent assassin.

25th October. The affair of the fisherman makes a great stir. His nephew, who fished with him, is charged with the murder.

26th October. The examining magistrate affirms that the nephew is guilty. Everybody in town believes it. Ah! ah!

27th October. The nephew makes a very poor witness. He had gone to the village to buy bread and cheese, he declared. He swore that his uncle had been killed in his absence! Who would believe him?

28th October. The nephew has all but confessed, they have badgered him so. Ah! ah! justice!

15th November. There are overwhelming proofs against the nephew, who was his uncle's heir. I shall preside at the sessions.

25th January. To death! to death! to death! I have had him condemned to death! Ah! ah! The advocate-general spoke like an angel! Ah! ah! Yet another! I shall go to see him executed!

10th March. It is done. They guillotined him this morning. He died very well! very well! That gave me pleasure! How fine it is to see a man's head cut off!

Now, I shall wait, I can wait. It would take such a little thing to let myself be caught.

THE MANUSCRIPT contained yet other pages, but without relating any new crime.

Alienist physicians to whom the awful story has been submitted declare that there are in the world many undiscovered madmen as adroit and as much to be feared as this monstrous lunatic.

3: A Gipsy Prophecy

Bram Stoker

1847-1912

Collected in: *Dracula's Guest*, 1914

'I REALLY THINK,' said the Doctor, 'that, at any rate, one of us should go and try whether or not the thing is an imposture.'

'Good!' said Considine. 'After dinner we will take our cigars and stroll over to the camp.'

Accordingly, when the dinner was over, and the *La Tour* finished, Joshua Considine and his friend, Dr Burleigh, went over to the east side of the moor, where the gipsy encampment lay. As they were leaving, Mary Considine, who had walked as far as the end of the garden where it opened into the laneway, called after her husband:

'Mind, Joshua, you are to give them a fair chance, but don't give them any clue to a fortune— and don't you get flirting with any of the gipsy maidens— and take care to keep Gerald out of harm.'

For answer Considine held up his hand, as if taking a stage oath, and whistled the air of the old song, 'The Gipsy Countess.' Gerald joined in the strain, and then, breaking into merry laughter, the two men passed along the laneway to the common, turning now and then to wave their hands to Mary, who leaned over the gate, in the twilight, looking after them.

It was a lovely evening in the summer; the very air was full of rest and quiet happiness, as though an outward type of the peacefulness and joy which made a heaven of the home of the young married folk. Considine's life had not been an eventful one. The only disturbing element which he had ever known was in his wooing of Mary Winston, and the long-continued objection of her ambitious parents, who expected a brilliant match for their only daughter. When Mr. and Mrs. Winston had discovered the attachment of the young barrister, they had tried to keep the young people apart by sending their daughter away for a long round of visits, having made her promise not to correspond with her lover during her absence. Love, however, had stood the test. Neither absence nor neglect seemed to cool the passion of the young man, and jealousy seemed a thing unknown to his sanguine nature; so, after a long period of waiting, the parents had given in, and the young folk were married.

They had been living in the cottage a few months, and were just beginning to feel at home. Gerald Burleigh, Joshua's old college chum, and himself a sometime victim of Mary's beauty, had arrived a week before, to stay with them for as long a time as he could tear himself away from his work in London.

When her husband had quite disappeared Mary went into the house, and, sitting down at the piano, gave an hour to Mendelssohn.

It was but a short walk across the common, and before the cigars required renewing the two men had reached the gipsy camp. The place was as picturesque as gipsy camps— when in villages and when business is good— usually are. There were some few persons round the fire, investing their money in prophecy, and a large number of others, poorer or more parsimonious, who stayed just outside the bounds but near enough to see all that went on.

As the two gentlemen approached, the villagers, who knew Joshua, made way a little, and a pretty, keen-eyed gipsy girl tripped up and asked to tell their fortunes. Joshua held out his hand, but the girl, without seeming to see it, stared at his face in a very odd manner. Gerald nudged him:

'You must cross her hand with silver,' he said. 'It is one of the most important parts of the mystery.' Joshua took from his pocket a half-crown and held it out to her, but, without looking at it, she answered:

'You have to cross the gipsy's hand with gold.'

Gerald laughed. 'You are at a premium as a subject,' he said. Joshua was of the kind of man— the universal kind— who can tolerate being stared at by a pretty girl; so, with some little deliberation, he answered:

'All right; here you are, my pretty girl; but you must give me a real good fortune for it,' and he handed her a half sovereign, which she took, saying:

'It is not for me to give good fortune or bad, but only to read what the Stars have said.' She took his right hand and turned it palm upward; but the instant her eyes met it she dropped it as though it had been red hot, and, with a startled look, glided swiftly away. Lifting the curtain of the large tent, which occupied the centre of the camp, she disappeared within.

'Sold again!' said the cynical Gerald. Joshua stood a little amazed, and not altogether satisfied. They both watched the large tent. In a few moments there emerged from the opening not the young girl, but a stately looking woman of middle age and commanding presence.

The instant she appeared the whole camp seemed to stand still. The clamour of tongues, the laughter and noise of the work were, for a second or two, arrested, and every man or woman who sat, or crouched, or lay, stood up and faced the imperial looking gipsy.

'The Queen, of course,' murmured Gerald. 'We are in luck tonight.' The gipsy Queen threw a searching glance around the camp, and then, without hesitating an instant, came straight over and stood before Joshua.

'Hold out your hand,' she said in a commanding tone.

Again Gerald spoke, *sotto voce*: 'I have not been spoken to in that way since I was at school.'

'Your hand must be crossed with gold.'

'A hundred per cent. at this game,' whispered Gerald, as Joshua laid another half sovereign on his upturned palm.

The gipsy looked at the hand with knitted brows; then suddenly looking up into his face, said:

'Have you a strong will— have you a true heart that can be brave for one you love?'

'I hope so; but I am afraid I have not vanity enough to say "yes".'

'Then I will answer for you; for I read resolution in your face— resolution desperate and determined if need be. You have a wife you love?'

'Yes,' emphatically.

'Then leave her at once— never see her face again. Go from her now, while love is fresh and your heart is free from wicked intent. Go quick— go far, and never see her face again!'

Joshua drew away his hand quickly, and said, 'Thank you!' stiffly but sarcastically, as he began to move away.

'I say!' said Gerald, 'you're not going like that, old man; no use in being indignant with the Stars or their prophet— and, moreover, your sovereign— what of it? At least, hear the matter out.'

'Silence, ribald!' commanded the Queen, 'you know not what you do. Let him go— and go ignorant, if he will not be warned.'

Joshua immediately turned back. 'At all events, we will see this thing out,' he said. 'Now, madam, you have given me advice, but I paid for a fortune.'

'Be warned!' said the gipsy. 'The Stars have been silent for long; let the mystery still wrap them round.'

'My dear madam, I do not get within touch of a mystery every day, and I prefer for my money knowledge rather than ignorance. I can get the latter commodity for nothing when I want any of it.'

Gerald echoed the sentiment. 'As for me I have a large and unsaleable stock on hand.'

The gipsy Queen eyed the two men sternly, and then said: 'As you wish. You have chosen for yourself, and have met warning with scorn, and appeal with levity. On your own heads be the doom!'

'Amen!' said Gerald.

With an imperious gesture the Queen took Joshua's hand again, and began to tell his fortune.

'I see here the flowing of blood; it will flow before long; it is running in my sight. It flows through the broken circle of a severed ring.'

'Go on!' said Joshua, smiling. Gerald was silent.

'Must I speak plainer?'

'Certainly; we commonplace mortals want something definite. The Stars are a long way off, and their words get somewhat dulled in the message.'

The gipsy shuddered, and then spoke impressively. 'This is the hand of a murderer— the murderer of his wife!' She dropped the hand and turned away.

Joshua laughed. 'Do you know,' said he, 'I think if I were you I should prophesy some jurisprudence into my system. For instance, you say "this hand is the hand of a murderer." Well, whatever it may be in the future— or potentially— it is at present not one. You ought to give your prophecy in such terms as "the hand which will be a murderer's", or, rather, "the hand of one who will be the murderer of his wife". The Stars are really not good on technical questions.'

The gipsy made no reply of any kind, but, with drooping head and despondent mien, walked slowly to her tent, and, lifting the curtain, disappeared.

Without speaking the two men turned homewards, and walked across the moor. Presently, after some little hesitation, Gerald spoke.

'Of course, old man, this is all a joke; a ghastly one, but still a joke. But would it not be well to keep it to ourselves?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, not tell your wife. It might alarm her.'

'Alarm her! My dear Gerald, what are you thinking of? Why, she would not be alarmed or afraid of me if all the gipsies that ever didn't come from Bohemia agreed that I was to murder her, or even to have a hard thought of her, whilst so long as she was saying "Jack Robinson."'

Gerald remonstrated. 'Old fellow, women are superstitious— far more than we men are; and, also they are blessed— or cursed— with a nervous system to which we are strangers. I see too much of it in my work not to realise it. Take my advice and do not let her know, or you will frighten her.'

Joshua's lips unconsciously hardened as he answered: 'My dear fellow, I would not have a secret from my wife. Why, it would be the beginning of a new order of things between us. We have no secrets from each other. If we ever have, then you may begin to look out for something odd between us.'

'Still,' said Gerald, 'at the risk of unwelcome interference, I say again be warned in time.'

'The gipsy's very words,' said Joshua. 'You and she seem quite of one accord. Tell me, old man, is this a put-up thing? You told me of the gipsy camp— did you arrange it all with Her Majesty?' This was said with an air of bantering earnestness. Gerald assured him that he only heard of the camp that morning; but he made fun of every answer of his friend, and, in the process of this raillery, the time passed, and they entered the cottage.

Mary was sitting at the piano but not playing. The dim twilight had waked some very tender feelings in her breast, and her eyes were full of gentle tears. When the men came in she stole over to her husband's side and kissed him. Joshua struck a tragic attitude.

'Mary,' he said in a deep voice, 'before you approach me, listen to the words of Fate. The Stars have spoken and the doom is sealed.'

'What is it, dear? Tell me the fortune, but do not frighten me.'

'Not at all, my dear; but there is a truth which it is well that you should know. Nay, it is necessary so that all your arrangements can be made beforehand, and everything be decently done and in order.'

'Go on, dear; I am listening.'

'Mary Considine, your effigy may yet be seen at Madame Tussaud's. The juris-imprudent Stars have announced their fell tidings that this hand is red with blood— your blood. Mary! Mary! my God!' He sprang forward, but too late to catch her as she fell fainting on the floor.

'I told you,' said Gerald. 'You don't know them as well as I do.'

After a little while Mary recovered from her swoon, but only to fall into strong hysterics, in which she laughed and wept and raved and cried, 'Keep him from me— from me, Joshua, my husband,' and many other words of entreaty and of fear.

Joshua Considine was in a state of mind bordering on agony, and when at last Mary became calm he knelt by her and kissed her feet and hands and hair and called her all the sweet names and said all the tender things his lips could frame. All that night he sat by her bedside and held her hand. Far through the night and up to the early morning she kept waking from sleep and crying out as if in fear, till she was comforted by the consciousness that her husband was watching beside her.

Breakfast was late the next morning, but during it Joshua received a telegram which required him to drive over to Withering, nearly twenty miles. He was loth to go; but Mary would not hear of his remaining, and so before noon he drove off in his dog-cart alone.

When he was gone Mary retired to her room. She did not appear at lunch, but when afternoon tea was served on the lawn under the great weeping willow, she came to join her guest. She was looking quite recovered from her illness of the evening before. After some casual remarks, she said to Gerald: 'Of course it was very silly about last night, but I could not help feeling frightened. Indeed I would feel so still if I let myself think of it. But, after all these people may only imagine things, and I have got a test that can hardly fail to show that the prediction is false— if indeed it be false,' she added sadly.

'What is your plan?' asked Gerald.

'I shall go myself to the gipsy camp, and have my fortune told by the Queen.'

'Capital. May I go with you?'

'Oh, no! That would spoil it. She might know you and guess at me, and suit her utterance accordingly. I shall go alone this afternoon.'

When the afternoon was gone Mary Considine took her way to the gipsy encampment. Gerald went with her as far as the near edge of the common, and returned alone.

Half-an-hour had hardly elapsed when Mary entered the drawing-room, where he lay on a sofa reading. She was ghastly pale and was in a state of extreme excitement. Hardly had she passed over the threshold when she collapsed and sank moaning on the carpet. Gerald rushed to aid her, but by a great effort she controlled herself and motioned him to be silent. He waited, and his ready attention to her wish seemed to be her best help, for, in a few minutes, she had somewhat recovered, and was able to tell him what had passed.

'When I got to the camp,' she said, 'there did not seem to be a soul about, I went into the centre and stood there. Suddenly a tall woman stood beside me. "Something told me I was wanted!" she said. I held out my hand and laid a piece of silver on it. She took from her neck a small golden trinket and laid it there also; and then, seizing the two, threw them into the stream that ran by. Then she took my hand in hers and spoke: "Naught but blood in this guilty place," and turned away. I caught hold of her and asked her to tell me more. After some hesitation, she said: "Alas! alas! I see you lying at your husband's feet, and his hands are red with blood".'

Gerald did not feel at all at ease, and tried to laugh it off. 'Surely,' he said, 'this woman has a craze about murder.'

'Do not laugh,' said Mary, 'I cannot bear it,' and then, as if with a sudden impulse, she left the room.

Not long after Joshua returned, bright and cheery, and as hungry as a hunter after his long drive. His presence cheered his wife, who seemed much brighter, but she did not mention the episode of the visit to the gipsy camp, so Gerald did not mention it either. As if by tacit consent the subject was not alluded to during the evening. But there was a strange, settled look on Mary's face, which Gerald could not but observe.

In the morning Joshua came down to breakfast later than usual. Mary had been up and about the house from an early hour; but as the time drew on she seemed to get a little nervous and now and again threw around an anxious look.

Gerald could not help noticing that none of those at breakfast could get on satisfactorily with their food. It was not altogether that the chops were tough, but that the knives were all so blunt. Being a guest, he, of course, made no sign; but presently saw Joshua draw his thumb across the edge of his knife in an unconscious sort of way. At the action Mary turned pale and almost fainted.

After breakfast they all went out on the lawn. Mary was making up a bouquet, and said to her husband, 'Get me a few of the tea-roses, dear.'

Joshua pulled down a cluster from the front of the house. The stem bent, but was too tough to break. He put his hand in his pocket to get his knife; but in vain. 'Lend me your knife, Gerald,' he said. But Gerald had not got one, so he went into the breakfast room and took one from the table. He came out feeling its edge and grumbling. 'What on earth has happened to all the knives— the edges seem all ground off?' Mary turned away hurriedly and entered the house.

Joshua tried to sever the stalk with the blunt knife as country cooks sever the necks of fowl— as schoolboys cut twine. With a little effort he finished the task. The cluster of roses grew thick, so he determined to gather a great bunch.

He could not find a single sharp knife in the sideboard where the cutlery was kept, so he called Mary, and when she came, told her the state of things. She looked so agitated and so miserable that he could not help knowing the truth, and, as if astounded and hurt, asked her:

'Do you mean to say that *you* have done it?'

She broke in, 'Oh, Joshua, I was so afraid.'

He paused, and a set, white look came over his face. 'Mary!' said he, 'is this all the trust you have in me? I would not have believed it.'

'Oh, Joshua! Joshua!' she cried entreatingly, 'forgive me,' and wept bitterly.

Joshua thought a moment and then said: 'I see how it is. We shall better end this or we shall all go mad.'

He ran into the drawing-room.

'Where are you going?' almost screamed Mary.

Gerald saw what he meant— that he would not be tied to blunt instruments by the force of a superstition, and was not surprised when he saw him come out through the French window, bearing in his hand a large Ghourka knife, which usually lay on the centre table, and which his brother had sent him from Northern India. It was one of those great hunting-knives which worked such havoc, at close quarters with the enemies of the loyal Ghourkas during the mutiny, of great weight but so evenly balanced in the hand as to seem light, and with an edge like a razor. With one of these knives a Ghourka can cut a sheep in two.

When Mary saw him come out of the room with the weapon in his hand she screamed in an agony of fright, and the hysterics of last night were promptly renewed.

Joshua ran toward her, and, seeing her falling, threw down the knife and tried to catch her.

However, he was just a second too late, and the two men cried out in horror simultaneously as they saw her fall upon the naked blade.

When Gerald rushed over he found that in falling her left hand had struck the blade, which lay partly upwards on the grass. Some of the small veins were

cut through, and the blood gushed freely from the wound. As he was tying it up he pointed out to Joshua that the wedding ring was severed by the steel.

They carried her fainting to the house. When, after a while, she came out, with her arm in a sling, she was peaceful in her mind and happy. She said to her husband:

'The gipsy was wonderfully near the truth; too near for the real thing ever to occur now, dear.'

Joshua bent over and kissed the wounded hand.

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4: The Perfect Crime

Mark Hellinger

1903-1947

Sun News-Pictorial (Melbourne) 12 Dec 1936

THE MAN puffed his cigarette quietly. He was plotting a murder. There was nothing hysterical about the notion. He was ultra-sane. The person he wanted to kill was a man he didn't even know. The name was Briggs. Dave Briggs.

He closed his eyes, dwelling on half-formed ideas. Knife? Gun? At home? At the store? Or how about an ambush? Yes, that would be better. Wait for him near his house and, when he shows up, let him have it. He'd never know what hit him.

Not a bad idea, thought Johnny Monroe. Not bad— but not quite good enough. Johnny Monroe wanted to complete the perfect crime.

Several days before, Mrs. Monroe had begun another of her arguments with him. Johnny hated to argue with her. Because he loved his wife. Loved her deeply. But she was always finding fault with him. Little things. Why don't you take me out more often? Why do you have to work so late? Are you going to be a 35-dollar a week book-keeper all your life? I'm sick of you. And I'm not going to put up with it much longer.

That had gone on ever since they were married. But Johnny Monroe had always forgiven and forgotten. He loved the lady. So he passed the arguments off as "nerves," and promptly forgot each one in turn.

He forgot them, that is, until that terrible episode a few days before. He could repeat her statements now. almost word for word.

"There's no use going any further. Johnny." she had said. "I'm through— and I'm getting out. Right now. Oh, you needn't smile like that. I'm going to tell you something before I go. And then maybe you won't smile so much any more.

"I don't love you— and what's more, I never loved you! Why don't you smile now? And get this: I'm in love with a man who knows how to appreciate a girl like me. I love him. you understand? Love him!"

Johnny Monroe had leaped to his feet.

"Who is he, Margie? Do I know him?"

"Why, you couldn't get a mile of him! He's Dave Briggs. He owns that big hardware store on Second Street. And as soon as I get my divorce he's going to marry me. How do you like those onions?"

She rambled on like a mad woman.

Johnny had said nothing more; just stood there, drinking in every word. When she was dressed and packed, he had made no move to persuade her to stay. Soon she was gone.

For almost 24 hours after that, Johnny never moved from his chair. His mind was very clear on one point: he had to kill Dave Briggs. But how? He had no desire to go to the electric chair for his crime. And prison for life wasn't particularly alluring, either.

A wire arrived from his wife. It said she was heading West for a divorce. She had a lawyer, and the lawyer wished to know if Johnny intended to fight the case. Johnny tore the wire into a thousand pieces and sent no reply.

The following day— and for three days after that— Johnny went to the corner of Second and Main Streets. The huge Briggs hardware store was across the street, and Johnny watched the customers go in and out, in and out all day long. Soon he spotted the good-looking man who seemed to be important as he entered and left.

One afternoon he nudged a man who stood near him.

"Know that feller just coming out of the Store?" he risked casually. "That's Briggs himself, isn't it?"

"Yeah," returned the stranger. "That's Briggs. Know him?"

"I used to," said Johnny Monroe. "He's related to me— by marriage."

THE solution was quite simple. When it finally dawned on Johnny he almost shouted for joy. The plot couldn't fail. He had hit upon the perfect crime!

Some years back, when he had carried the payroll for his firm, he had purchased a pistol at the Briggs store. Now he would take the gun, go to the establishment and ask to see Mr. Briggs personally.

When Briggs arrived he'd complain bitterly. He'd say the gun was no good; that it jammed. With the clerk as witness, he'd attempt to show Briggs just how it jammed. The gun would go off and Mr. Briggs would die. It Would all be quite accidental— and Mr. Briggs Would be quite dead. Beautiful!

So Johnny did it. He walked into the store the next morning and asked for Briggs. The clerk wanted to know if he couldn't be of some assistance. But Johnny insisted that Mr. Briggs hear his complaint.

The owner was summoned, and he was solicitously attentive. With his revenge at hand, Johnny wasn't the least bit nervous. He explained the situation quite calmly to Mr. Briggs. The clerk butted in several times to offer suggestions. But Johnny ignored him.

"I did everything I could to make this gun work," said Johnny to Mr. Briggs, "but nothing helps. It's a rotten gun and I think you should make good on it. Look. I'll show you how it jams."

He had the gun aimed directly at Briggs's chest. The clerk walked around to get a better look. The gun went off with a terrific crash. And the clerk fell dead in Briggs's arms…

When Johnny Monroe left Police Headquarters he was a different man. The police hadn't suspected him at all. How could they? But that didn't help much.

Instead of Briggs, he had killed an innocent clerk named Harry Neely. Harry Neely— just a poor sucker who didn't know what it was all about.

Johnny Monroe went home. He packed and left town. What became of him after that I do not know. In killing Neely instead of Briggs he had bungled the perfect crime. And it wouldn't surprise me to learn that he later went insane or committed suicide...

IT WAS ABOUT two years later. Mrs. Johnny Monroe sat in a furnished room. Suddenly her room-mate swore softly.

"This nail file's no good," she complained. "Just bought it this mornin', too."

"Where'd you get it?" asked Mrs. Monroe listlessly.

"Down in Briggs's hardware store," said the other girl. "I—" She stopped abruptly, realising that she had said the wrong thing. Then she shrugged. "Well, as long as I brought it up," she added, "I might as well go on. You ever see Johnny since you got the divorce?"

Mrs. Monroe shook her head.

"Nope," she replied dully. "They tell me he disappeared right after the shooting. Wherever he is, I hope he's happier than I am." She sighed. "I'd like to see Johnny again," she went on, "if only to ask him one question.

"The night I left him I told Johnny I was going to marry Briggs. That was a lie, 'cause I didn't even know Briggs to talk to. And I can't for the life of me figure out how Johnny learned that Harry Neely was the man I really loved!"

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5: Peak of the Moon

Beatrice Grimshaw
1870-1953
The Red Book Magazine, Dec 1922

THE forest, on its climbing ridge, hung round about the clearing as hangs an old tapestry on a castle wall, full of mysterious greens and intriguing shadows. Trunks, tall and pale, made threadbare stitches on the giant fabric, where axes of long ago had broken their way to the sun. There was a stream in the bottom of the clearing; it ran between belts of fern trees like umbrellas of green lace, betel-nut trees, incredibly poised and slim, kapoks with yellow honey-sweet flowers and dangling pods; massed, luscious shrubs and trailers, nameless save to botanists. Lalang grass, kept free by savage hunting fires, filled all the rest of the clearing. And above there was sun, the pouring sun of Papua, not yellow-thick and full of lees as it shines on Port Moresby plains, but thin and clear like new glass. From the spine of the other ridge that was over against the forest one looked down and down, across blue valleys and green- clearings, black chines where the rivers ran, and a tumbling, crumbling mass of mountains unbroken by axe or foot, and last, a very long way away, some white beads scattered on the rim of the sea— Port Moresby.

Jimmy Conroy looked round him, from the view to the ridge, from the ridge into the clearing, down to Port Moresby and back again to the barely visible track on which he was standing. He drew his breath and let it out with a grunt of satisfaction.

"No damned people," he said.

There certainly were no people, damned or otherwise. Conroy had taken two days to travel up from the town, by ways not often used, and once off the one narrow road that led to Sapphire Creek, he and his two pattering mules had seen not a soul save one old gentleman of the rude Koiari tribe who was going down on a holiday to the seaside, with bamboos to carry back salt water. The old gentleman, dressed in a string of dogs' teeth and a worn-out check waistcoat, had not noticed Conroy and his beasts otherwise than to spit at them in passing; and further travellers there were none.

Among the mountains where they now had climbed, Conroy knew from a careful study of Government maps that there were no settlers or planters of any kind. The land on which he stood had formerly been planted and worked but was now forfeited to the Government, the owners having given it up as a bad job because of just that which had drawn Conroy thither— difficult, almost impossible approach. To get to Magani in those days, with the once cleared and dynamited track gone almost back to bush, was no trifling job.

Koiari there were, but the Koiari savage, who still resists, negatively, the civilization that has gathered in almost all his neighbours, is of necessity coy and retiring in his ways. And in any case this acreage of raw forest and springing ridge, this patch of discouraged clearing, knew Koiari only in the dry hunting days of July and August. Now, in April, there was not a moving thing for miles and days round Magani, save the pigs, black and brown, and the greyish wallabies, and the little, scuttering bandicoots and such small fry that lived their easy lives in the forest.

There were no people. None. Conroy repeated it, stretching himself luxuriously in unison with the suddenly stretched, freed feeling of his soul. That was what he had come for. That was why he had made the long rush up to Papua from Sydney, after.... it.... was over; the short, swift journey from Port Moresby, with the mules and the sixteen hundred pounds of stores, up to Magani— Magani, that nobody knew anything about nowadays, that no one supposed to be his goal, if anyone had cared to ask. He had spent all his money, every shilling he had left in the world, in doing it; but there he was at last with his stores for three months, and his four-legged carriers who wouldn't gossip or tell tales as two-legged ones would have done, and his mountains, and his forest, and his river, and peace— peace.

If the place didn't belong to him it belonged to nobody. It was his as far as all the primitive rights of man were concerned— wooding and watering, killing of beasts for food, and of trees for building stuff. There were many sheets of iron lying scattered about the hill top, relics of the days he dimly remembered when, as a lad of twelve, he had travelled with his father to New Guinea and had stayed for a night and a couple of days at the mountain estate of "The Company."

The iron had been a nice little house then. It would make a good sort of shack now, with new framing. He remembered the place more and more. It had always been his dream— so far away, so blue and clear, so peaceful. And it was like what he had dreamed— wonderfully so. How the thought of it had come over him, like a sudden hunger, in the court-house crowded with people who smelled of wet weather and smoke and beer— people packed like pins in a paper; people who lived and died with their breath in each other's faces, and their elbows in each other's eyes.

Eyes! The word burned. Eyes had scorched him, stripped him, during those wretched hours. Women had fixed lorgnettes upon him; red-faced men had gaped. On the ship he had chosen to feign sea-sickness— he, who was never ill on land or sea— and to stay in his cabin. In the town nobody knew him or his name— but if he had stayed things would have been bound to come out. He had not wanted to stay. He had only wanted to buy food, tinned and bagged food, cartridges and a few useful tools, until his money gave out; to load it all on the

mules he had bought, and then to go— and go. Papua was a devil of a country; no one knew it better than he did, but in Papua you could be free.

One does not rush the ramparts of the Astrolabe in the inside of a morning. It had been afternoon when Jimmy and the mules first caught the cool kiss of main range breezes; it was verging now towards night. Only another hour and the valley would fill up, like a lake fed by mountain torrents, with rising tides of purple and grey dusk. There would be no rain to-night; the south-east season had set in clear and dry. Conroy purposed to hobble his mules by and by, and turn them loose; then to sling his own hammock between a couple of old house piles that still stood by and sleep beneath the stars. No mosquito net for him— down on the plains men might be cursing and fighting mosquito hordes, sleeping, eating and working under stretched nets; but here, in the blue remoteness of the Astrolabe, the curse of Papuan life had no being.

So many other curses had no being. Conroy, making his fire in the lee of a sheet of iron, boiling his billy and frying bacon by the light of a hurricane lamp, conned them all over. The curse of the too-many people. The curse of the Sydney city face, hard, throwing off a casual glance as steel plate casts back an arrow. The curse of "appearances"— doing the things you did not wish to do, the things you ought not to do, the things you could not afford to do, because of what somebody whom you despised would think about it.

The curse of the airless houses, where you shut yourself away in the stuffy dark, like a punished dog in its kennel. The many curses of noise— street bands, blaring, bullying motor-horns, roaring of tramcars; the noise of voices, women's voices chitter-chattering foolishly, men's loud, boring tones, never ceasing. Here, the stars came out, large and silver, above the empty clearing, and beneath them there was so little sound— ruffle of windy grasses, lip-lap of the river— that you could almost hear them shine.

Having hobbled and turned out the mules, having fed, and slung up his hammock, Conroy, before lighting his pipe for a luxurious, sleepy smoke, performed a little ceremony. Out of his pockets, after long dredging, he produced a coin; a penny, useless in Papua, where nothing less than silver will buy anything one wants. He looked at it, bowed his head in mock good-bye, and tossed the penny, with all the strength of his nervy arm, away towards the crest of the hill.

"Go and join the rest of 'em, sonny," he said. "Find 'em if you can, and if you can't, stay away." He laughed— the first time in many a day— and bent down to light his pipe; the wind was getting up— faith, he'd want his blankets to-night if it got much colder.

When he raised his head again, a brown statue was standing beside him in the firelight; a very old, villainous-looking gentleman, skinny, cottony-haired, dressed in a string of teeth and a worn check tourist waistcoat.

"Hallo, Johnny," he exclaimed, "so you've turned up here; now what the devil brought you along, I wonder? "

He had spoken only to himself; but— much to his surprise— he was answered.

"Me come," said the old, villainous gentleman.

"Oh, so you speak English, do you? Well, what did you come for?"

"Me come. Altogether me come." The old man squatted down by the fire and began to warm his thin, bare legs. "Toback," he remarked.

Conroy, who had memories of the country, guessed that the old man was in all probability starved and neglected by his tribe, and had visited the camp with some intention of fastening himself on to the wealthy white. He felt a little dismayed. Three months' stores for one did not make three months' stores if you added another— an old and useless mouth—

"Me Babakori. Me no *kai-kai* plenty," put in the old man, with uncanny divination of his mood. "Me *kai-kai* little bit. All the time, me findem big black fig (pig), big wallaby, me tellem you altogether everything." He finished up with another "Toback."

Conroy gave him half a stick and thought rapidly. Mightn't he do worse, after all? This brown, ghostly thing of seventy years was not " people." He could think aloud, before it— he need never feel that it was there— and it would well save its keep for him. The old man must have been camp-boy to some white man in the past. A harmless, mindless thing.

Babakori, shredding tobacco for his long bamboo pipe, cocked an old eye of the kind that Victorians were used to call "leery," and asked :

"Where you woman, Taubada?" (chief).

"The answer, my wise Johnny," answered Conroy, in some amazement, " is the reason of my coming up here, which I don't propose to tell."

Babakori chewed that over visibly, like a parrot chewing a biscuit held in its claw, and seemed to come to a conclusion.

"You leaven woman along Sydney?"

"Right— though I don't know how you know."

"Him no like come-along a you?"

"Didn't ask her, Johnny. Couldn't." It was a curious relief— almost a pleasure— to talk in this whimsical, half comprehended fashion to the creature who seemed so little of a human being; the almost thing that blended in colour and limb with dim shapes of rocks and trees, half hidden in the firelight. It was like talking to oneself.

"What name (why?) you no askem him?"

"Because I'd lost all my money, Johnny."

"Me-fellow Babakori, no Donny. What name you losem money?"

"All kinds of ways. Mostly way of a damned tool. Speculating, backing wrong horses, cards a bit."

"New Guinea boy him flay cards, flenty him losem," commented the old man.

"What do you do when you lose?" asked Conroy, curiously.

"Me, sometime me go me stealem 'nother money, very good, suppose Govamen' he no catchem me-fellow," was the cool reply. It made Conroy wince. The parallel ....

"You been stealem money?" asked the old man, with an upward squint.

"Johnny," said Conroy slowly, his pipe between his teeth, "I'm blest if I know."

He did not know. After all that had been said in court— after he had been, somehow, let off with a cautionary address that flayed him alive, and was almost worse than jail— Jimmy Conroy, still, did not know whether he was in his own eyes a thief or not.

He had drawn against a non-existent bank balance and passed off the cheque.... Yes, but the remittance ought to have arrived before the cheque was presented. It did not arrive, because the man who owed him the money was dead and had left no sort of proof that money had ever been owed to Conroy at all. He ought not to have paid his hotel bill with the cheque. Yes, but he didn't think.... he was perfectly certain....

It had all been gone over and over in court, till his head swam with it; on that subject his head was swimming still. Out of it all some few clear facts emerged; he had been arrested at the railway station publicly, horribly. He had been tried for fraud on a hotel-keeper. He had got off by means of the First Offenders' Act, and he was just as much ruined for life as if he had been to prison for a year.

If he had not been locally known— if the horrible thing had occurred, say in Canada or the Argentine— it would have not been so bad. But the Conroys were a famous squatter family; or had been, till his father went through most of the property that the end-of-the- century " big drought " had spared. Plenty of people still knew all about them; knew how Jimmy, left an orphan, was brought up by guardians, who sold the remainder of the property for his benefit; how he took the capital into his own charge at twenty-one, cheerfully certain of making a fortune; how he speculated, muddled, lost, won, lost again; hunted "sure things" at Randwick, played auction bridge, and lent money to ladies whose dividends were, somehow, inexplicably delayed. A breach of promise, privately settled, hit him hard. The war almost put him on his feet again, because in Flanders there was not much opportunity for chasing dead certainties that only deserved the first half of their name, of "being let in on the ground floor" to enterprises that shortly collapsed and dropped you into the cellar. After the war— well, everyone knew what state the money market was in— money had

gone mad. Was it any wonder he could not pull things straight when Lloyd George and Billy Hughes and the British Empire couldn't? He had certainly tried— well, as a man does try when he has met the One Girl, and begins to fear the other thousand million unmarried men in the world may win the race away from him. And it ended with the shrieking scandal of the police court, the incredibly unbelieving hotel manager and bank manager and magistrate, and the cruel mercies of the First Offenders' Act— with all Sydney, all Australia, all the whole damned world (or so it seemed to Jimmy's flayed, raw mind) looking on.

And the Girl would marry someone else.

I have not drawn Jimmy as he lived, if I have not succeeded in showing you that he was impulsive by nature. The little boxful of medals that he never looked at— the letters he did not use after his name— proved one aspect of his impulsiveness. The loneness of the copper coin at present lying half-way up the hill-crest proved another. Jimmy, through his few-and- twenty years of life had, hitherto, spent himself and his resources of body, mind and purse in action.

About the first thing that had ever caused him to expend nerve force in thought was the Girl. There was nothing to be done about the Girl. She seemed to like him— Jimmy, swung between the heavens and hells of love uncertainty, was sometimes gloriously certain that she did. He could have stormed a dozen Hun trenches for her, single-handed; he could have fought for her in dizzying mid-air, walked across the continent of Australia barefoot, done any dangerous, difficult, painful thing, any dozens of such things, for her.

But one cannot many a girl who is gently bred and who goes to the best dances on war records or athletic "stunts." To give her a house in the right part of the right bay, down the harbour— and motor cars, and "little frocks" to wear, instead of simple dresses, which do not dress a woman— one must have money. Conroy had lost his; and every attempt he made towards getting it back only threw him further and further down the social ladder. Now he had reached the bottom in good earnest. Now, therefore, there was nothing to be done about the Girl— nothing but think.

Under the stars, with the mules standing still as black equestrian statues shorn of riders in the half dark, with the old Babakori asleep behind a log, with the deserted clearing of Magani all to himself, and nothing at last between him and his own soul, Conroy fell to thinking. And he found, as men from the days of Genesis upwards have, that thought, in such places during such hours, springs up like grass in rain.

Conroy had not understood the wild desire that drove him on to this desert place. He had only known that he wanted Magani, and had gone straight for it, as he had always gone for what he wanted. He had not known just what it was he wanted in this case, but had rushed towards it all the same. This night it

began to creep upon him that the thing he wanted, and might find, was just himself.

Dimly, through the fog of a mind ill-used to piloting itself, a light or two shone out. Might not the finding of oneself be the first necessary step towards the reaching of that treasure so far above and beyond oneself— the Girl? Jimmy did not know how that could be— yet he fancied it might be so. Or might have been had not the thing happened which had cast him out of his world, and which never for a moment could be forgotten.

And immediately he forgot it, in sleep.

During the days that followed, Jimmy, to his own amazement, was happy. It came to him with a shock that he, like millions of others, had never up to this known the taste of actual freedom. He had thought, on the whole, that he was fairly free, but now he knew. Day upon day he rolled out of his hammock at dawn, and sat pyjama-clad on a rock to drink the tea old Babakori brought him, as slowly as he liked, look out upon the dusky lands below Magani, and watch the marvellous mountain sunrise

"From its cold crown
And crystal silence creeping down."

Day after day he hunted the forgotten woods about the clearing for he knew not what— rivers unplaced on the maps, peaks no one had marked, strange flowers that stood up like rows of gold candles upon trailing cables of ground-vine, or peered with purple-red, flushed faces, incredibly huge, out of green thickets impenetrable with bamboo. Evening on evening, he and Babakori— who seldom spoke and scarcely seemed alive during the day— waited, silently, for the right moment of dusk, to creep forth, soft-footed, and stalk the wallabies and pigs that came out to feed towards the falling of the night. Back they would hurry, later, laden with food; then there would be a great fire lit and a lamp hung up, and with big knives the two would butcher the carcase, hanging the choice bits— the tail and thighs of the wallaby, the loin and liver of pork— high in the eucalyptus trees near the camp. There would be bits fried over the fire, better to eat than Jimmy had dreamed meat could be; and Babakori would rub his old stomach and grunt, and Jimmy would laugh at him, understanding. And while they fed, the giant frogs would keep up their goat-like bleating down by the river, and the night-birds would whistle like a man calling a dog or scream like a woman dying in agony. And Babakori, wise with strange wisdom that the white man never plumbs to its depth, would whisper, gnawing on a bone, of things that lived in the forest and did harm; of other things, good to men if men could catch and tame them— as, he explained, hastily swallowing his gnawed meat, men never did.

Conroy, asking him how, then, he could know the good will of the things, was told, in snatches of English "pidgined" to shreds, that they would throw largesse, once in a way— throw it and run, for fear of being caught. One had to treat them well.

"Taubada!" whispered the old man, looking round him fearfully, in the firelit shadow, "Taubada (chief) you tell along Babakori— what name you frow money long devil belong on-top?"

"Why?" repeated Conroy, puzzled— then remembering his careless casting away of the lone penny he laughed. "I told him to bring me some more, old boy," he said. " But the devil of it is, he never will."

The old man passed this over. "Taubada," he persisted, "what name, you frow money along big-on-top belong moon? "

"Along what? Oh, you mean the top of the mountain. Why, does it belong to the moon, old boy?"

"Belong moon, bee-cause all same moon, Taubada. Moon, bee-fore, one time fall down along top "— he pointed with a spidery claw— "altogether something he stop."

"The moon fell down on top of the mountain and some of it stopped behind. Babakori, you've missed your job, you should have been a— a real estate agent," commented Conroy, forking another choice bit of pig out of the frying pan. Conroy knew about real estate. A few of his light-heeled sovereigns had run away from him by that road.

Babakori, as usual, pursued his own parallel and independent line of thought.

"Altogether we-fellow we fright along that place," he confided, pointing with a gnawed bone towards the spiring peak that rose above the camp. "Me, one time me go make puri-puri (magic) there, me see moon, me run away." Lovingly and slowly he licked his fingers clean of gravy.

Conroy did not pay attention. He was looking down on the silent, moon-sapphired landscape below; sensing its cleanness, its emptiness of crawling, pullulating city life. "No damned people" would have been too violent a thought for him now. He was growing into the place; almost a part of it. He felt with it; knew that something of its strength and peace were passing into himself.

"If ever I went away from here again," he thought, "I'd be different. I'd have more hold of myself. That's what was wrong. Why, confound it, a horse one rode in the way one rides oneself would bolt. That's why one does bolt. Hands all over the shop, knees not taking hold, and the animal you ride knows and plays up like billy-oh. Funny thing that there should be two of you, horse and rider. I wonder if anyone ever thought of that before."

His mind, unused to effort, slid off the puzzling subject; went, by some zigzag of thought, to the question of stores. Babakori didn't cut them in half after all;

he was such a help about game— and fruit— and wild yams— and the bonzer little crayfish in the river that hadn't a name— and how to catch pigeon at dawn, in snares of bark fibre cunningly set. All in all, there would be near the full three months he had anticipated. One month was gone. Nearly two to run.

Conroy thought of the little hut he had put together out of loose sheets of iron for rainy and windy weather; of the home-like feeling he knew at night, sitting under its roof and reading old newspapers by lantern light; of old Babakori humming and droning about the place, and the river talking itself to sleep below. Of stalking, and shooting, and the strange, fresh pleasures savoured in thus, like the bush creatures, " seeking his meat from God." Of the warm smell of bracken in mid-morning when one lay sheltered from the hill-top wind for siesta. Of blue, thin skies above, and blue, far world below. Of a place where no one came; where no one knew you to be hid; where no alien minds or lives battered and butted against yours to deform it out of shape. Of peace, and peace....

He rose at last, thoughts turning bedward. The moon was sliding down behind the peak; it must be getting late.

Babakori, his banana leaf cigarette cocked in one corner of his mouth, looked up and seemed to judge and value him with a shrewd, leather-lidded eye.

"You good man," was his comment. Jimmy, aware that the old savage referred to no moral fineness he might suspect, but rather to five feet ten and a half of height, broad shoulders, mat-thick, ruddy hair, and dark eyes not wanting in fire, felt somewhat foolishly pleased. He knew he was a good man in that sense.

Babakori spoke again, and this time his speech was a cunning plea as old as the ages, on the lips of age. Would not his chief allow him to go and cheapen a nice girl for him? Me, Babakori, knew of several such, very good value for the pigs and axes asked as their price.

Jimmy, answering the simple soul as simply as he had spoken, declared an indifference to native beauty. He liked a white girl, he said, and she was not there. Where was she? Oh, a long way off, further than you could see.

Babakori, in a mixture of pidgin English and native, was understood to ask what the chief would give him if he brought her along. He recommended himself as an excellent and honest bargainer between parent and purchaser. He also explained that he could walk a very long way, if you gave him tobacco enough.

"I suppose you want a spell," was Jimmy's comment. "Well, you can take one, but come back in a couple of days like a good chap. I want you here."

"Me go?" asked Babakori, after consideration.

"Yes."

The old man got up, tied his bark fibre belt a little closer and slung his bamboo pipe over one shoulder. Thus prepared for travel, without further ado he turned away from the camp, and trotted in the moonlight down the track that led, at long last, to the coast and the road and the little, far-off town.

Conroy did not trouble himself overmuch as to what the old fellow might have at the bottom of his mind. Some native nonsense or other....

For three days he hunted, explored, and fed alone. On the fourth, he was beginning to feel what he had not felt since his arrival— bored. Towards sundown he went to the edge of the plateau and stood looking aimlessly out across the wrinkled map of mountain, plain and sea. It was impossible to get sight of anyone who might be on the way, but one could eye the distance and make rough calculations....

He wondered what on earth, after all, the old villain had really been about. There was no ripe betel-nut near Magani; in all likelihood, Babakori's holiday trip had to do with the providing of a fresh supply, for the Papuan without his betel-nut is as a white man without a smoke. But you never could tell. The native mind was full of odd turns.

Another day went by and Conroy found himself growing really uncomfortable. What the devil was the old man after? Was it even remotely possible that

Late in the afternoon a skinny, wiry figure hirpled its way up to the camp. It was Babakori, and he was not at all tired, though he had come all the way from the ocean and the town that day. Nor was he so hungry that the chunk of cold wallaby tossed to him by Conroy impeded his talk. Squatting on the ground, with his horny toes in the warm ashes of the fire, he stowed away the meat and retailed his adventures, without hindrance to either process.

"One steamer come in," he narrated. "Me I go along steamer, I want I ask some white man he give Babakori one sillin, two sillin."

"Greedy old beggar."

"Yes. One man he give, one girl he give. Me say, 'Tank you, missis, you good girl. I like you, makem wife belong my Taubada.' Den altogether white man too much he laugh, girl he say, 'Dis funny old man, you make him photograph.' Den white men he makem photograph, I go away, morning time I come back, I say, 'Me want my photograph.' Altogether man he laugh some more, he give me one. I think he make me pay, I run away very quick. Taubada, I look altogether along Porse Moresby girl, I askem cooky boy belong house, all that cooky boy he say you girl no stop. Dis girl along steamer he good girl, you better catch him. Dis girl give plenty something along me, suppose you have him."

"I'm afraid I can't oblige, Babakori. You know the boat will be gone by now."

The old man gave a grunt of disgust and sat for a moment looking at his leathery toes. He wriggled them about in the warm dust, drew them out reluctantly, and suggested :

"Maybe we go soot one big fig (shoot pig)."

"Show us your precious photo," said Jimmy, who did not feel particularly like shifting. Something had got hold of him— some ill spirit of the wilderness, that weighed down his limbs and paralysed them as the limbs of one who moves beneath deep water. Some nameless, nibbling pain was at his heart. Confound old Babakori and his talk of girls.

He reached for the picture, looked at it in the flaring sunset once, looked again, jumped to his feet, and let loose a shout that sounded across the valley.

"God!" shouted the wall of forest back at him, profanely.

Babakori, handling his pig spear, did not seem much moved. You never could count on what a white man might do.

Jimmy Conroy, with the little tin-type clutched in his hand, had forgotten Babakori as if he never existed. The figure standing on the Marsina's deck at the old man's back— peering forward, laughing into the camera, was that of Cecily, the Girl. The tall man almost hidden was James Weston, Cecily's father.

Of course! Of course! Weston, director of many companies, had big interests in the newly-acquired mandate territory further north, near Rabaul. It was the likeliest thing in the world that he should go up to look after them. And Cecily, when she heard about his going, would be sure to tease him to take her with him. She was such a darling tease.

No, he was sure she didn't know anything about him. Had forgotten he was alive, no doubt, or tried to, so far as the damned newspapers would let her. And the Marsina by this time probably was gone. And once people got to Rabaul you couldn't tell by what route they would return. The only sensible thing for him to do— the only thing, in fact— was to go out pig-hunting with Babakori, give the old man back his photograph, and forget.

By way of beginning he pulled out of his pocket his most cherished possession, a four-bladed silver-handled knife that Cecily had given him and offered to exchange it for the picture. Babakori showed his appreciation by snatching it like a dog and retreating to a safe corner behind a heap of stones, where he could gloat upon his treasure. He squatted down and examined it from every point of view, testing each blade, opening and shutting, holding the knife aloft to see its silver engine-turnings shine in the westering sun. Satisfied at last, he came forth, the knife concealed in his small bag of treasures.

Jimmy Conroy was gone.

The savage is hard to surprise. Babakori, looking to right and left, seeing the mark of footsteps on the path that led down towards the plain, and missing, at a glance, the brown suit-case that held his (Taubada's) personal goods, only made

several small pig grunts and went back to light the fire. Whatever white men did, sensible people must eat. And it was good to have command of the stores.

Late that night, when the town of Port Moresby had been long asleep, Conroy came quietly up the wide, grassy street and slung his mosquito net beneath the piles of an empty house. He had no money for hotels; well, he had food with him and he could wake before sunrise, wash and shave at some tank and be about before anyone thought of rising.

The *Marsina*, from what he had heard along the road, was not leaving until noon. There would be plenty of time to see Cecily, and see her he was determined to do, if the whole world and everybody's fathers stood in his way.

He did not sleep much, though his hard bed was not uncomfortable, and the air under the house came fresh and cool, far cooler than it would have been in a bed-room of the stuffy hotel. He was thinking, with thoughts made clear by the long tramp down, by the sudden shock of seeing Cecily's picture, above all by the silent, lonely weeks away in No-Man's-Land, where he, as other men, had gone to find he knew not what, and in seeking for it had attained to find— himself.

He knew now that he had been wrong in doubting himself. He, Jimmy Conroy, was no thief, not if a hundred hotel-keepers and a thousand newspapers said so. The money was to have been in the bank; the dead man had promised, and he wasn't the sort who ever broke promises. It had been due before. Conroy, being suddenly out of cash, wrote the cheque in response to the manager's demand for money. He had been foolish, but not criminal, in his own eyes, and those were the eyes that mattered. That the bank wasn't one in which he had ever had money did not matter. His dead friend had been repaying a loan by instalments, mostly delivered in person, but however they were paid, never late. This last payment was a big one; he had therefore told Jimmy it was to be banked. All that had been said in court, and promptly disbelieved. If it was true, why was there no memorandum among the dead man's papers? "Because," Jimmy had explained, "it was a very private matter." "In what way?" Jimmy wouldn't say. He was not going to tell the fellow's widow that her husband had been tangled up with a blackmailing woman. One had to keep one's mouth shut about some things. And George was really one of the best.

WELL, that was how it had gone. But Jimmy Conroy now knew that he had not been a thief. And somehow the knowledge was very much to him. It seemed to free him— to open the road....

He fell asleep.

Towards morning he half woke with the feeling of "something wrong." It held him for a minute or two, and then fatigue had its way and he dropped back into sleep again.

With the dawn he opened his eyes, saw the dim forest of the house-piles all round his bed and the lightening road beyond; smelled the wild mint of Port Moresby fresh in the dew, and heard the first faint sound of somebody's axe going for the morning fire. He pulled aside his net and came out from under the house. The sun was nearly up by now and the sea was a sheet of opal-blue, hemmed in by Hills of purest amethyst. The long black wharf stretched, many-legged, out into the deep; beyond, the dolphin, like a stand for a giant's flat-iron, showed up dark against growing gold. And there was no ship there.

"I knew it," he said to himself, without excitement, feeling his hands grow cold, his feet cling to the ground heavy as stones. "I heard her go in my sleep," he thought. "I ought to have waked up .... Midday, damn them? It was midnight they meant. If I'd known, I could have made better time, got on board for a minute, maybe—"

There was nothing to do about it. He went back.

During the next week or two he did more thinking than ever he had done in his life. It had not been one of Jimmy Conroy's habits, to say the least, but now he thought and thought for hours, for half a day, seated on one of the big warm rocks that overhung the plain, looking, without seeing, out across the matchless view that stretched to the Coral Sea. The view that held his eyes was quite another; that of his own life. Jimmy was looking it over and he did not find it good.

"Everything," he said to himself at last, his cold, smoked pipe hanging unheeded from one corner of his mouth, "everything that ever happened to me has been my own damned fault."

That was something. On another day this struck him:

"People don't understand. They judge me, all the pack of them, by what I've done."

Why shouldn't they? It took him some while to arrive at an answer to that. But by this time he had come to trust Magani. In that blue, empty world you need only throw a question out and wait patiently; by and by the answer was sure to come.

"I've got more in me than they know," was his final judgment. "If I had another chance I could use it. If I had money again I could make a decent hand of things. I know the horse I'm riding— now."

In the end it worked itself down to a fine point. He had to get money again.

Always, when he came so far, he used to get up, stretch himself, and begin to stare about. Papua was a curious country and it did strange things to your mind. Jimmy recognized that. He did not laugh at the blind, fitful instinct, not to be explained, that kept urging him to look— look. He knew there were odd scraps of knowledge scattered somewhere in his consciousness that might leap

suddenly into a connected chain, if only one got hold of them at the right end and pulled. But what was the end?

He found himself, one day, climbing where he had not gone before— up the narrow, rugged spire above his camp, called by Babakori, in native language, the Peak of the Moon. The old man saw him and yelled to him to come back. There were evils there, he said. The moon had dropped down, the moon left ill-luck behind it. Did not everyone know that a man went mad, or lost his sight, who dared so much as to sleep in moonlight? He did not want the chief to lose his sight; what would happen to Babakori if he did?

Conroy, laughing, desisted. He had grown almost fond of the queer old creature by now. Coming down the rocks again he chanced upon the penny he had thrown away. It lay in a nest of moss; it was almost as green as the moss from exposure.

"Look," said Conroy, and held it up.

Babakori shook his head. "No good, no good, Taubada," he said. "Dat spilit (spirit) no liking you, him trow back you money."

"No, he doesn't like me," laughed Conroy, and came down to the camping ground. The picture of the Girl was in his pocket; he drew it out, unconsciously, and looked at it as he looked half a hundred times a day.

Babakori, chewing sugar-cane and spitting it out unpleasantly, was understood to say that the Girl would have had better luck— that was, supposing she was a good girl, which girls on the whole were not.

"You black pig," said Conroy, suddenly flaming, " how dare you say such a thing? She's— she's—" he faltered for a word that might express to this savage minded old heathen something of what Cecily— gay, teasing, sunny-hearted maiden— was to him. Under his feet he saw his answer. He picked it and held it up to Babakori— a slender, pure white flower.

"That's what she is," he said, and there was a note of reverence in his voice that even the old savage understood. He laughed and plucked a red hibiscus bloom.

"New Guinea girl, dis one," he said. "Very nice girl New Guinea girl." He chuckled; the reminiscent, wicked chuckle of age.

Conroy stripped his white flower carefully of its thick green leaves and placed it, together with the picture, in the little bark case that he had made. He wore the case now, always, in the breast-pocket of his shirt.

And the days passed, and the days passed, till it was a fortnight. The boat was due again.

Conroy did not go down to the port for boat day. Where was the use? He had procured a passenger-list before leaving the town last time and had seen in it the names of Cecily and her father— single trip only. It was plain they did not mean to return by that route.

The *Melusia*, running directly south from Rabaul, would probably take them.

Nevertheless, on steamer day he could not rest. He watched, from his far headland, the little black plume of smoke show out on the horizon; saw the tiny speck that represented the *Marsina* creep ant-wise over the sea and hide behind the hills. Now the boat was alongside. Now the passengers would be coming off. But not Cecily. She was running south, south, ever so fast, a long way off, on the *Melusia*; Port Moresby would never see her again.

Conroy, in his little house of sheet-iron, dreamed strange dreams that night. They ought to have been melancholy dreams, but they were not. He could not recall them in the morning; still, he was sure of that. He wished he could remember; they had left a pleasant flavour.

But Cecily was gone.

Along towards midday he was busy cutting up a wallaby that had been shot somewhat later in the day than usual. His knife and hands were covered with blood; in a tin pan beside him, afloat in blood, lay the liver and the kidneys and the big, fleshy tail. He was severing one of the thighs, blood dripping on the ground as he worked, when he chanced to look up and saw, with a thump of the heart that turned him sick, James Weston.

The lean, grey man who walked the ways of this world circled with rainbow haloes, for Jimmy (and who knew for how many other young men? since Cecily had her full share of success), came forward as if he had just parted from Conroy an hour ago.

"Well, young man," he remarked, " you seem pretty dirty, and pretty busy."

Jimmy dropped his knife and ran for the basin.

Slushing himself with water as he spoke, he answered, in a tone of cool self-possession that Weston had never heard:

"I'm very glad to see you; are you making a stay in the country?"

"That's as may be," answered Weston. "I had to see a mineral prospect at the foot of this mountain and something told me, as the penny novelist says, to come further up. You have quite a nice little camp here, haven't you?"

"If you'll stop for lunch," said Jimmy, " my boy can give you a nice bit of steak; I'm sorry there won't be time to make wallaby tail soup."

"So am I," replied Weston, " if he's anything of a cook. I've a weakness for wallaby tail soup. However— That your house there?"

"Yes. Won't you come in? The sun's a bit strong at this hour."

Weston preceded him into the little house. It was cool, notwithstanding the heat of the morning, for Jimmy had built it well and left full space for ventilation at the top. A hammock chair, made out of sugar-bags, invited to rest. The grey man dropped into it. His eyes, sharp as skewers, roamed round the narrow room. There was one whisky bottle in it, unopened. Other bottles, empty, were piled away in a corner; their labels told of their former innocent contents—

sauce, olives, baking powder, vinegar, oil. The place was neat and clean; a range of books, on a bamboo shelf, seemed to have been in fairly constant use. Whatever the place was, it was not the home of a man who had sunk down in anything but income.

Conroy, opening the whisky and dipping water from his kerosene-tin bucket, played the host. Weston, meanwhile, talked lightly, drank a little, looked about him and seemed, all the time, to keep something unsaid within his mind. By and by it came out:

"Jimmy, you damned young fool!"

"What?" was all that Jimmy found to say.

"Jimmy, if you'd waited a bit you'd have known that Mrs. George came along and told."

"Mrs. George! She didn't know herself."

"My dear Conroy, when you get married"— Jimmy turned vivid crimson, and Weston, amusedly, scorched him with his eyes, "you'll find out just how much a wife does know, generally. I reckon she knew all along. Anyhow, when she got over his death— you know she was altogether knocked out by it; they had her in hospital— she told the whole yarn. Nobody bothered much, because nothing had been done to you anyhow "

"Nothing! my God, nothing but ruin."

"Rats! You deserved the little bit you did get, my boy; take it from me, a man who draws a cheque against a credit that he doesn't know— know— *know*— to be existent is looking for what he'll get, one day if not another. But I reckon you've had your lesson."

Conroy, being of the same opinion, had nothing to say. He sat on an up-ended log, drinking his own moderate portion of whisky— ("Not afraid of it anyhow," thought Weston)— and wondering, so hard that his mind seemed almost at bursting point, whether Cecily— Cecily—

As if the name had somehow travelled through silent air, Weston spoke it aloud.

"Cecily's a very modern daughter."

"Oh? "

"The new girl— not like their mothers— well, thank heaven my kiddy's straight. But there's no shrinking violet about any of them now."

"Cecily—" began Conroy, almost furiously. Weston lifted up his hand. "I know all that," he said.

"You might let me finish. Cecily— maybe because her mother didn't stay— is as up-to-date as any of 'em, in some ways. Not that I'm quarrelling with it or her. She's better friends with her old dad than I daresay we were with our parents. Well, the long and the short of it is, that Cecily thinks you proposed to her."

Waves of fire seemed rolling over Jimmy. He could not have told, under oath, under torture, whether it had ever got so far between himself and Cecily, or not. He had said all sorts of things, he knew— But then— it didn't matter; she knew.

"You might as well mention," said Weston, with horrid coolness— he was slowly lighting a very good cigar. " Have one? No? Well, between man and man, you might as well say if she's correct."

"Yes!" shouted Jimmy. True or not true, he didn't care,

"Well," continued Weston, "the kiddy was fretting somehow, off her feed and all that, and I took her on this trip. And on the way I got it out of her. But we hadn't a suspicion you were here until that very extraordinary savage henchman of yours came down to the boat to hunt for a wife for you and happened to mention your name."

"My name? Confound his—"

"Oh, no, don't confound him; it was just as well. My kiddy— Well, you can find out all that for yourself."

He paused and Jimmy realized that his luck was not yet at an end. He sprang to his feet.

"Is she there?"

"Didn't I say that something told me to come on up to the top? I reckon Cecily thinks she amounts to something "

The sentence was not finished before Weston found himself alone.

Outside, in the wind and the sun of the mountain top, was Cecily, wearing the most modern of knickers and puttees, with a big shade hat upon her wavy hair, a climbing stick in her hand, and a most old-fashioned blush upon her face. Jimmy, grown suddenly bolder, took her by one gloved hand and said, devouring her with his eyes:

"If— if you'll come a little way back and see the view—"

They went a little way to a spot where you could see some burnt trees and a few large lumps of rock. And Jimmy hugged her like a man. And Cecily, crying— why?— stretched up and hugged him back.

"I always did want you," she said. "You've been cruel to me, Jimmy. Dad could have got you a job."

"I'll get myself one," answered Conroy, with new-found hardihood. Not even in that moment could he picture himself as depending on Cecily's father. Then he said other things, pleasanter for the Girl to hear.

They were interrupted after a long, short time, by Babakori, who came, without apology, right on the middle of Jimmy's longest hug.

"You make you girl frowem money," was his remark.

"Go to hell. I beg your pardon, darling," was Jimmy's dual reply.

"What does he want?" asked Cecily, tidying her hair. Conroy explained.

"Oh, but I simply must," cried Cecily. "It sounds ducky. Where do I throw?"

"You frowem you money, up dat hill," directed Babakori. He scanned the girl the while with an appraising glance that made Jimmy all hot. "She doesn't understand," he thought. But he hurried the little ceremony over, and when Cecily had thrown he brought her back to Weston without more ado. Babakori remained squatting on the ground, mumbling and laughing to himself.

"We'll have to be going down now," said Weston presently. "We're putting up a mile or two from the foot; got our camp there. This mineral proposition— gems they say it is— well, there may be something in it or there may not. So far, I don't feel actually in love with it. There's been no real find."

Jimmy was glad to hear so much. It might mean delay.

When they were gone Magani grew dark, though the sun was not yet down. Jimmy, seated on his high rock, cursed himself for a fool. What, lament at her loss, when he had won her! There were a thousand and a thousand to-morrows.

But he was not so joyous as he might have been. Between the fair vision of Cecily and himself rose always that one galling sentence:

"Dad will get you a job."

It might have suited the Conroy of months ago. It rang all wrong in the ears of Conroy to-day.

"I'm worked up," he thought. "I'll go for a walk. And, of course, there was only one walk to take— the way that Cecily's feet had taken her, when Babakori made her climb up and throw.

Why, surely to goodness! was that the silver coin she had thrown, far up above his head? She must have the very deuce of an arm for a throw, thought Jimmy, not quite admiringly. But he climbed up after the coin, which shone out wonderfully in the fading sunset.

He did not find it. He found the thing that shone. When he found it, he sat down and looked— simply looked. It was quite a long while before he found breath to swear, quietly and emphatically.

"Opal!"

The crest of the rock was a sheer mass of opal matrix, hidden by foliage from below. When you mounted up close you could see, at one point only, an amazing outcrop of the precious gem— pale, gleaming, moon-coloured under the sinking sun. Peak of the Moon, indeed !

Jimmy Conroy, at the height of his high luck, neither laughed nor— as some men in such moments have done— broke into tears. He simply looked and looked, and said to himself with the calmness of one who knows the gods have heard:

"It seems that I'll be giving Dad the job— after all."

And the sun sank down upon Magani.

Of Babakori? He is back again in his village, but they do not neglect and starve him now; for he is rich.

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6: The Prevision

Edward Dyson (as by Ward Edson)

1865-1931

Punch (Melbourne) 16 Feb 1911

JAMES MOORE looked into the window of the cab as the cabbie whipped up his jaded, flea-bitten bay. He has insisted ever since that that impulse to look was in some measure inspired)— there was some occult force at .work, at least there was telepathy.

Moore uttered a profane expression, knocked his hat on the back of his head, clutched at the verandah post, and glared after the vehicle. A passing matron who heard the wicked word, spoken with such emphasis, and saw the young man's excited actions, came suddenly to the conclusion that Jimmie was either mad or drunk, and fled briskly up the street. Jimmie Moore repeated the ejaculation, slowly dragged a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his brow. He was running the handkerchief round the inside of his hat when a fit of activity fell upon him. He yelled to a passing hansom, and jumped in. Moore had made up his mind.

"Spencer-street, and quick about it," said Mr. Moore. "I want to catch the Sydney express."

Jimmie Moore had wandered from St. Kilda into Collins-street with no intention, and without bag or impedimenta. This sudden desire to betake himself over 600 miles of wearisome railways, and proceed to inhabit a city of humid heat and malignant mosquitoes, had sprung up in a second, as a result of a flying glimpse of a woman's face, and a simultaneous note of certain luggage labels.

Jimmie rushed the ticket box, secured a first single to the Beautiful Harbour, and then fled along the platform like a hunted dog. A porter was handling the four leather-covered boxes and the two dress-baskets from the cab drawn by the flea-bitten bay.

Moore was not long in discovering the face. It had a corner seat, and was sharing its attention between the platform and the porter piling belongings on the rack. Jimmie mounted that car, and hastened along the corridor. The train was not leaving for quite seven minutes, but young Mr. Moore was Thinking of the vital necessity of securing a seat in the immediate vicinity of the olive face and the slow, grey eye. He had always known she would have slow grey eyes of that commanding sort, eyes that sweep things lazily, and yet gather in all of interest.

The seat in the opposite corner had a dusty coat and two bundles on it. Jimmie carefully deposited these on the next seat, and plumped himself down in the corner.

At last! After waiting so long and wondering, so much, here he was vis-a-vis with The Face. By putting out his hand he might have touched her. He,was sorely tempted to do it. She had swept her eyes over him, and passed them on to the platform with absolute unconcern.

Jimmie was hurt. How could she possibly be so cold, so indifferent to the man who, for eleven solid months, had worshipped her with sincerest devotion! It seemed impossible to James Moore that sweet Alice Benlow could be quite indifferent to any suffering fellow creature.

He was a suffering fellow creature. Heaven and mundane forces, obvious and mysterious, had worked to bring them together again, and here she was, staring somewhat dully at a lot of stupid people, drifting on a dusty platform, while he was burning like a martyr's steak in a suburban hash-house, and,his heart was lop-lolliping from one side of his ribs to another, as if fighting to get out.

Alice Benlow! So that was her name? Sweet Alice Benlow! She was just as beautiful as he had believed her. Howw cleverly he had summed her up ! Here was everything he had insisted upon in her— sweetness, beauty, slow, kind, grey eyes, a tall, rather slight figure, a pretty hand, and a white, round, strong arm. The white, round, strong, arm, with the dainty hand drooping from it over the rest, like a lily on its stalk, had been a particular point. It looked now as it had looked when he first saw it—a miracle of perfection and beauty.

He had longed to kiss that shapely, white hand, and to run a train of kisses up to the; lacecovered elbow from the first moment. His longing was. keener now. What would she do if he were to stoop down suddenly and kiss the pink finger-tips? She would call the guard, and have him bundled out. He knew how she would do it, quite calmly, without any hysterics, but with a business-like decision.

He drew back hurriedly from the temptation. The train was moving, and the woman on Jimmie's left was saying to the woman ,on her left: "The impudence of some people— the downright cheek and audacity of them ! I put my things on that seat, and nobody had the right to touch them !"

"I should appeal to the guard if I were you, dear," said the party on the extreme left. Jimmie Moore said nothing; he was leaning back in the corner, with his eyes closed, feigning sleep and complete obliviousness. He could not see, but The Face was indulging in a faint smile.

Jimmie opened his eyes, and the faint smile vanished. There commenced here, and continued from North Melbourne to within a few miles of Wodonga, a long comedy, the chief actors in which were Jimmie Moore and Miss Alice Benlow. The comedy consisted mainly in a sort of contest of eyes, a game of visual hide-and-seek. Jimmie's eyes were the hunters, Alice's were the hunted, and for slow, grey eyes the latter displayed remarkable alertness and ingenuity

in evasion. At no point could the young man congratulate himself on having quite caught them. Once she lowered the window. His impetuosity in offering assistance almost threw hin. into her lap.

"Can I help you?"

She touched the clip, and lowered the window with aggravating ease.

"Thank you, it is very simple," she said.

Back in his corner he tried to look perfectly composed, but inwardly he was raging, To relieve his feelings he indulged in the moral exercise of spiritually kicking himself. His best friend could not have called him worse names. She dropped her book at the first stop. He pounced on it like a terrier.

"Thank you very much!" The tone was sweet, but non-committal, and . still she had not looked at him. She had not taken dinner in the car. Neither had he. At Seymour there was an opportunity —a very slight opportunity.

"Can I send you the refreshment stall?" he asked.

"If you will be so good."

"Delighted," he murmured. He went out with nothing gained. She was a traveller, her luggage was pasted with tickets from all the corners of the earth. She knew the portable refreshment stall would come to her without his intervention, and he knew she knew.

When the train was humming along once more, and Jimmie was back in his corner, the eyes were still evasive. He ventured a mild remark about a scrap of purple hill wheeling on the right. Her answer did not encourage further art criticism.

Jimmie leaned back, baffled. Her whole attitude was one of distinct discouragement. It was plain she distrusted him. Meanwhile, the miles were winging by. In all probability she had a sleeper. In that case he must lose her at Albury. Lose her after these long, wearisome months of hopeless hoping, lose her again when heaven had sent this, his one woman in all the world, out of the profundity of distance and the wastes of space, right into his keeping! No, not for all the conventions of all respectability, nor all the terrors of all law.

And still the miles went whirling past. Never had the express travelled with such stupid velocity, and still the slow, grey eves were bent on the 6d. Wells in the flower-like hand. He would speak! He didn't care. He would do something to enforce: her attention. Better take any risk than let her pass out of his life again like a ghost.

Time passed, and acres. The night came down, and they were shut in closer. The two women on Jimmie's left drifted out, the fat man in the other corner slept soundly, with a gurgle like an emptying bath. It was Jimmie's chance. He seized it. He learned forward, he fixed his eyes firmly upon the red lips of Miss Benlow's olive face and said impressively:

"Forgive me— please forgive me, but I must speak to you."

She looked at him now, slowly, without embarrassment, as he had expected. "You must speak to me?" she answered.

"Yes. I have met you before. I have known you for eleven months."

"That is hardly probable. I have just returned from abroad."

"I have known you for eleven months, four days and nine hours. I want to continue the acquaintance."

"I am afraid your wish cannot be gratified."

"To tell you the sober truth, I followed you from Collins-street in Melbourne. I took train to Sydney solely in the hope of renewing my— my acquaintance with you."

"You will excuse me, but this is an impertinence, is it not?"

"Not an impertinence. Whatever else you may think, you cannot deny that an absolute, almost reverent, respect underlies my attitude."

"You speak of acquaintance. I never saw you in my life before."

"I saw you eleven months and four days ago."

"Where were you, may I ask?"

"I was in Melbourne."

"Then let me assure vou you are wholly mistaken. Eleven months ago I was thousands of miles away."

"You were on a small railway siding at Two Horns; Nevada, U.S.A."

At last! A look of astonishment sprang into her grey eyes. She sat up, and the 6d. Wells slipped from her fingers to the floor. He did not trouble to raise it. "That is true," she said: "At the time you mention I was in Nevada."

''It was twenty minutes past twelve."

"Yes, at twenty-five minutes past twelve I took train there."

"At twenty past you were sitting a box." He looked at the things on the rack. "That box," he said, "the black one. Your hand rested along the rail at the end of the platform. Your face was pale, you gazing steadily before you, «-lUi an air of complete weariness."

"Who are you? What is the meaning of this?"

"Is it all true?"

"What you say is true. I was on the platform, I sat as you say, I felt as you have described. But you were there, or someone who was there has told you."

"I was not there, I have never spoken of you to a living being. I was in Melbourne, as I have told you. In fact, I have never been out of Australia. But. I saw you as plainly as I see you now, and was so impressed that the vision remained strong as life. For eleven months I have seen you like that, wondering all the time why your vision haunted me, utterly unable to banish it. Then in one brief moment your face flashed on me again from a cab window, your real face, this time. Can you wonder that I followed you? Is it surprising that I am here talking to you, that I have defied the conventions, and risked your anger (the

thing I dread most in the world) in order to learn what this all means, what wonder Fate is working out for me?"

"Can I believe you? It is so extraordinary, amazing."

"You will believe me. I swear to you I saw you as I have described. I noticed the long black lace scarf you were wearing."

"I lost it in San Francisco."

"Your hat was of white straw, with scarcely any trimming."

"This is uncanny. You're making me nervous."

"Will you allow me to introduce myself? My name is James Moore: I am an arttist— fairly successful— and was deemed sound and in my right mind till eleven months ago. Since then I have been haunted, as I have explained to vou. If you; think this a matter of some concern, some little interest, let me hunt up somebody in Sydney who can present me formally, and I will satisfy you I was in Melbourne on 9th of January at twelve o'clock, Nevada time." "How do you explain the—the vision?"

"I do not explain it. I accept it." There was a look in his eyes from which she turned with a new feeling at her heart.

Jimmie Moore found someone to introduce him formally to Miss Benlow's people. Alice was rich and self-willed, and had been wandering about the world, and up and down in it, seeking sights and satisfaction. She had returned, unsatisfied; but when a month later Jimmie asked her to be his wife she thought she had found satisfaction at last!

"I suppose I must say yes," she whispered. "Fate seems to have-determined on bringing us together."

"But you love me?"

"With my whole heart."

Jimmie believed it, but took no risks. It was not till after little Jimmie was born that he gummed up courage to admit that an American living picture film, in which a murderous cowboy's escape from the sheriff on to the train at Two Horns, Nevada, explained the whole mystery of his prevision. Alice was immortalised in that film without knowing it, and an announcement, on the platform and the station clock had provided Jim with time and date.

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7: The Righteous Lie

Sumner Locke

1881-1917

Weekly Times (Melbourne) 20 June 1908

THERE WAS an argument going on at the foot of the hill by the creek. Mirie, of the full hot blood of her father, stood grinding her heavy heel into the soft ground just near the hut that was her home.

"Mark this," said the man In the blue cotton shirt and mud-sprinkled pants, "the hut belongs to me. You can stay in it, but only with me."

Mirie's hands were fighting with an Imaginative enemy. She was crushing her nails into her palms as though the head of a viper was between her fingers.

"You never claimed the hut before," she lashed out.

"Your father paid me rent. Now I don't want the rent. I want you!"

The girl ground her heel still further into the earth, her teeth nearly biting into her tongue. There was nothing to be said. The man before her stood on his own right of land and property, such as it was, such as it had been since she had come from somewhere, she could never tell where, with the big, kindly, daring man who had died a week ago, and had been shovelled in a rough sort of way into a grave under the she-oak that grew beside the creek; the man with the nerve of iron, who had taught her to suffer no insult, but to hit out; the man who was her father.

It was all to Mirie, this spot of land, and the daily work with a couple of soft-eyed cows, the restful evenings watching the sunset grow grey from beside the brown mound that meant to her the man who was— just father.

She turned her eyes, dark and restive, upon the bully beside her. She only wanted the strength to crush the bullock-like throat between her hands. How often had he startled her at nights when her father had gone down to the store with the milk and butter. How often had he lain a dirty brawny hand on her hair from behind in the dark, and pulled her laughingly into his arms. Yes— there was a blue-black curve over on ear, where she had used her well-trained fist on him the last time he had done it, the night her father had died. Mirie almost choked with the tension of it all. She wanted to kill this thing before her, so that she could keep the three acres of land that meant everything in life to her.

"You won't turn me out!" her voice rang out defiantly. "There is a dead man protecting this place, and, like a dog, you will presently slink away with your head near the ground."

The man twisted the whip in his hand, so that it twirled round him like a smooth coil of a black snake, and Mirie watched it fascinated.

"That whip belonged to my father," she said.

"Everything here belongs to me— he owed me money. I am master of the situation."

His offensive, unscoured-looking face was thrust into that of the girl, as he spoke. Then, like the crack of the rifle, Mirie's palm shot across his features, and he wept back like a bolt to the ground.

"A first instalment!" she shouted. "Come to the hut if you want further payment like that."

The door banged, and the man in the blue shirt, recovering from the fist of so strong a woman, sat up and waited, with his mind bent on revenge. Mirie barfed the door by a swinging bolt that was her only safety now, and sat in the dark hut thinking things out.

Just across the hill, through the slit-like window, she watched the sun glow and then die into the grey band that bound western sky. She felt a nervous dread in the dark; it was the light she wanted. How long— how long would the moon take to trickle through the opening? Something was beating into her brain— like tones of a spirit voice that urged her to act, and act now. Was it her father? The steps outside told her the man-beast, waited too— and she knew there was going to be a— something. Her heart was thumping more fear into her— not for her safety, but for what she felt she had got to do.

In the corner opposite the slit a stray beam of light struck on the wall and outlined the double-breech-loader that had stood, seldom used, in all these years, and to the girl waiting in the dark it was a finger pointing to her to act— and to act now. Again the spirit voice of her father rang into her: "Never take an insult; hit hard!"

Before the light had travelled the space between the window and the girl, Mirie had unbarred the swing bolt and sat calm and still on the end of the table that was near the door, with the heavy gun resting on her knee and her hands in position to fire.

She laughed now— a boyish, heavy, ringing laugh, that to the man in the blue shirt, standing in the shade, had the effect of a syren call. He swung bending to the hut, where the patch of light fell on him, and she knew he could not see her form in the dark corner by the door.

"Give him a chance!" rang the voice in her ear.

Then the moon showed the hand of the man that held a weapon too. He was going to win this time by the force of a levelled pistol— so he thought, not knowing that Mirie of the full blood would have stood the ounce of lead rather than his touch.

The light travelled across the door step. Spread over the floor, her dangling feet were showing now, and the man stepped quickly into the hut.

"You shoot first!" said the voice in her, and she eased the gun to a level of his heart. The man held his weapon down out of the light, and laughed.

"I guess this is my game. Now—"

"Then it's my move—" As she spoke the light travelled to her knees; in another moment he would see the gun. A shifty movement from the girl, and another short laugh from the man.

"This it's my game, Miss Mirie—"

"Then you lose—"

Her voice snapped off short as he started towards where she sat. The light was a few inches off the gun she held level, and before it had reached her under arm she let her fingers fly back on the lock.

The reverberation shook the wooden hut, and the echo of the shot came back from the hills. The man in the blue shirt fell across her feet in the thin ribbon of moonlight that lit the place. The gun had dropped with the man, and she stood now over him— triumphal in every nerve— with the dead. Silence beating round her, and then the lone cry of a night bird in the creek.

A voice came through the door— harsh but low.

A lad who sometimes spoke to her, offering help with the milk cans, and once with a cow that had got caught beneath a brushwood fence, was staring into the hut. His voice was a command now.

"Better get that out of sight. It's the constable's patrol to-night in this part. That shot was heard at the hotel."

Mirie folded her arms.

"He was going to beat me, was he." Then she laughed hysterically. "The game was a nasty one. It was my move, you see; and they can take me now! If It's hanging, I'm going to my father! You see to that, will you? Out there, under the she-oak."

As she pointed, the boy caught her arm. "Sh—!!!"

The mounted man in plain clothes had let fall the panel-rail, and now rode his horse to the door of the hut.

"What's the fireworks here?" he asked, slipping to the ground and standing just in the doorway. In the half-light the lad still held the girl's hands. Now his wrist bent like iron to keep her from speaking. The constable was staring at the face of the man in the blue shirt lying between him and the two. Twice Mirie moved, and twice the lad's grip held her silent. The constable straightened up.

"Who's going with me?" The grip on the girl's wrist was tightened further.

"I am!" It was the lad who spoke.

But the constable saw the flash from the eyes of the girl— saw the lips part, and the attempted wrench of the arm— and in a moment had read the truth.

The lad's voice was husky— "You can take me!"

The constable turned from the two and stared into the night for a moment, then he faced about again and spoke slowly.

"It's a strange thing the way things happen to them that deserves it at times. Of course, there's accidents— and suicides and such like— and some is well rid of."

Here he looked at Mirie, but the girl was staring in a fixed gaze into the soft eyes of the lad. The constable coughed uneasily.

"Yes, there's often accidents among these hills— accidents with shooting and such doings."

The lad's hand bent again, and Mirie never flinched or moved her eyes.

"Yes,"— the constable belted his hat nervously— "yes, that's it; accident"— he nodded slowly at the lad— "through falling. It's mighty rough about here. Good night!"

No answer as he went out; no movement from Mirie— only the tight grip of the lad.

The constable reported: "Accident at Black Creek. Man killed by loaded gun while stumbling home in the dark. Must have fallen. Waiting burial, at place of Mirie Schuloff, daughter of man who died last week."

In the, moon-lit hut the lad still faced Mirie, but she had pulled her wrist from him.

"You would have gone, Why? I don't know you!"

The lad held her by both shoulders, and looked deep, into her dark eyes. She threw up her head in her naturally defiant way. "I'm not taking any sacrifices and I'm not sorry I did it. There's other women in these parts, as well as me. If you'd gone I'd have spoken— I'm no coward."

"Sh—!" Again the lad's hold tightened on her shoulders, and he had a wonderful new light in his face.

"It was an accident. Do you hear? An accident. And I've always wanted to help you, Mirie— I always wanted you."

The light crept out of the hut behind a cloud. There was nothing to see now, and her voice, changed and broken, came through the still night.

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8: Brickett Bottom

Amyas Northcote

1864-1923

Collected in: *In Ghostly Company*, 1921

THE REVEREND Arthur Maydew was the hard-working incumbent of a large parish in one of our manufacturing towns. He was also a student and a man of no strong physique, so that when an opportunity was presented to him to take an annual holiday by exchanging parsonages with an elderly clergyman, Mr. Roberts, the Squarson of the Parish of Overbury, and an acquaintance of his own, he was glad to avail himself of it.

Overbury is a small and very remote village in one of our most lovely and rural counties, and Mr. Roberts had long held the living of it.

Without further delay we can transport Mr. Maydew and his family, which consisted only of two daughters, to their temporary home. The two young ladies, Alice and Maggie, the heroines of this narrative, were at that time aged twenty-six and twenty-four years respectively. Both of them were attractive girls, fond of such society as they could find in their own parish and, the former especially, always pleased to extend the circle of their acquaintance. Although the elder in years, Alice in many ways yielded place to her sister, who was the more energetic and practical and upon whose shoulders the bulk of the family cares and responsibilities rested. Alice was inclined to be absent-minded and emotional and to devote more of her thoughts and time to speculations of an abstract nature than her sister.

Both of the girls, however, rejoiced at the prospect of a period of quiet and rest in a pleasant country neighbourhood, and both were gratified at knowing that their father would find in Mr. Roberts' library much that would entertain his mind, and in Mr. Roberts' garden an opportunity to indulge freely in his favourite game of croquet. They would have, no doubt, preferred some cheerful neighbours, but Mr. Roberts was positive in his assurances that there was no one in the neighbourhood whose acquaintance would be of interest to them.

The first few weeks of their new life passed pleasantly for the Maydew family. Mr. Maydew quickly gained renewed vigour in his quiet and congenial surroundings, and in the delightful air, while his daughters spent much of their time in long walks about the country and in exploring its beauties.

One evening late in August the two girls were returning from a long walk along one of their favourite paths, which led along the side of the Downs. On their right, as they walked, the ground fell away sharply to a narrow glen, named Brickett Bottom, about three-quarters of a mile in length, along the bottom of which ran a little-used country road leading to a farm, known as Blaise's Farm,

and then onward and upward to lose itself as a sheep track on the higher Downs.

On their side of the slope some scattered trees and bushes grew, but beyond the lane and running up over the farther slope of the glen was a thick wood, which extended away to Carew Court, the seat of a neighbouring magnate, Lord Carew. On their left the open Down rose above them and beyond its crest lay Overbury.

The girls were walking hastily, as they were later than they had intended to be and were anxious to reach home. At a certain point at which they had now arrived the path forked, the right hand branch leading down into Brickett Bottom and the left hand turning up over the Down to Overbury.

Just as they were about to turn into the left hand path Alice suddenly stopped and pointing downwards exclaimed: "How very curious, Maggie! Look, there is a house down there in the Bottom, which we have, or at least I have, never noticed before, often as we have walked up the Bottom."

Maggie followed with her eyes her sister's pointing finger.

"I don't see any house," she said.

"Why, Maggie," said her sister, "can't you see it! A quaint-looking, old-fashioned red brick house, there just where the road bends to the right. It seems to be standing in a nice, well-kept garden too."

Maggie looked again, but the light was beginning to fade in the glen and she was short-sighted to boot.

"I certainly don't see anything," she said, "but then I am so blind and the light is getting bad; yes, perhaps I do see a house," she added, straining her eyes.

"Well, it is there," replied her sister, "and to-morrow we will come and explore it."

Maggie agreed readily enough, and the sisters went home, still speculating on how they had happened not to notice the house before and resolving firmly on an expedition thither the next day. However, the expedition did not come off as planned, for that evening Maggie slipped on the stairs and fell, spraining her ankle in such a fashion as to preclude walking for some time.

Notwithstanding the accident to her sister, Alice remained possessed by the idea of making further investigations into the house she had looked down upon from the hill the evening before; and the next day, having seen Maggie carefully settled for the afternoon, she started off for Brickett Bottom. She returned in triumph and much intrigued over her discoveries, which she eagerly narrated to her sister.

Yes. There was a nice, old-fashioned red brick house, not very large and set in a charming, old-world garden in the Bottom. It stood on a tongue of land jutting out from the woods, just at the point where the lane, after a fairly

straight course from its junction with the main road half a mile away, turned sharply to the right in the direction of Blaise's Farm. More than that, Alice had seen the people of the house, whom she described as an old gentleman and a lady, presumably his wife. She had not clearly made out the gentleman, who was sitting in the porch, but the old lady, who had been in the garden busy with her flowers, had looked up and smiled pleasantly at her as she passed. She was sure, she said, that they were nice people and that it would be pleasant to make their acquaintance.

Maggie was not quite satisfied with Alice's story. She was of a more prudent and retiring nature than her sister; she had an uneasy feeling that, if the old couple had been desirable or attractive neighbours, Mr. Roberts would have mentioned them, and knowing Alice's nature she said what she could to discourage her vague idea of endeavouring to make acquaintance with the owners of the red brick house.

On the following morning, when Alice came to her sister's room to inquire how she did, Maggie noticed that she looked pale and rather absent-minded, and, after a few commonplace remarks had passed, she asked:

"What is the matter, Alice? You don't look yourself this morning."

Her sister gave a slightly embarrassed laugh.

"Oh, I am all right," she replied, "only I did not sleep very well. I kept on dreaming about the house. It was such an odd dream too the house seemed to be home, and yet to be different."

"What, that house in Brickett Bottom?" said Maggie. "Why, what is the matter with you, you seem to be quite crazy about the place?"

"Well, it is curious, isn't it, Maggie, that we should have only just discovered it, and that it looks to be lived in by nice people? I wish we could get to know them."

Maggie did not care to resume the argument of the night before and the subject dropped, nor did Alice again refer to the house or its inhabitants for some little time. In fact, for some days the weather was wet and Alice was forced to abandon her walks, but when the weather once more became fine she resumed them, and Maggie suspected that Brickett Bottom formed one of her sister's favourite expeditions. Maggie became anxious over her sister, who seemed to grow daily more absent-minded and silent, but she refused to be drawn into any confidential talk, and Maggie was nonplussed.

One day, however, Alice returned from her afternoon walk in an unusually excited state of mind, of which Maggie sought an explanation. It came with a rush. Alice said that, that afternoon, as she approached the house in Brickett Bottom, the old lady, who as usual was busy in her garden, had walked down to the gate as she passed and had wished her good day.

Alice had replied and, pausing, a short conversation had followed. Alice could not remember the exact tenor of it, but, after she had paid a compliment to the old lady's flowers, the latter had rather diffidently asked her to enter the garden for a closer view. Alice had hesitated, and the old lady had said "Don't be afraid of me, my dear, I like to see young ladies about me and my husband finds their society quite necessary to him." After a pause she went on: "Of course nobody has told you about us. My husband is Colonel Paxton, late of the Indian Army, and we have been here for many, many years. It's rather lonely, for so few people ever see us. Do come in and meet the Colonel."

"I hope you didn't go in," said Maggie rather sharply.

"Why not?" replied Alice.

"Well, I don't like Mrs. Paxton asking you in that way," answered Maggie.

"I don't see what harm there was in the invitation," said Alice.

"I didn't go in because it was getting late and I was anxious to get home; but—"

"But what?" asked Maggie.

Alice shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "I have accepted Mrs. Paxton's invitation to pay her a little visit to-morrow."

And she gazed defiantly at Maggie.

Maggie became distinctly uneasy on hearing of this resolution. She did not like the idea of her impulsive sister visiting people on such slight acquaintance, especially as they had never heard them mentioned before. She endeavoured by all means, short of appealing to Mr. Maydew, to dissuade her sister from going, at any rate until there had been time to make some inquiries as to the Paxtons. Alice, however, was obdurate.

What harm could happen to her? she asked. Mrs. Paxton was a charming old lady. She was going early in the afternoon for a short visit. She would be back for tea and croquet with her father and, anyway, now that Maggie was laid up, long solitary walks were unendurable and she was not going to let slip the chance of following up what promised to be a pleasant acquaintance.

Maggie could do nothing more. Her ankle was better and she was able to get down to the garden and sit in a long chair near her father, but walking was still quite out of the question, and it was with some misgivings that on the following day she watched Alice depart gaily for her visit, promising to be back by half-past four at the very latest.

The afternoon passed quietly till nearly five, when Mr. Maydew, looking up from his book, noticed Maggie's uneasy expression and asked:

"Where is Alice?"

"Out for a walk," replied Maggie; and then after a short pause she went on: "And she has also gone to pay a call on some neighbours whom she has recently discovered."

"Neighbours," ejaculated Mr. Maydew, "what neighbours? Mr. Roberts never spoke of any neighbours to me."

"Well, I don't know much about them," answered Maggie. "Only Alice and I were out walking the day of my accident and saw or at least she saw, for I am so blind I could not quite make it out, a house in Brickett Bottom. The next day she went to look at it closer, and yesterday she told me that she had made the acquaintance of the people living in it. She says that they are a retired Indian officer and his wife, a Colonel and Mrs. Paxton, and Alice describes Mrs. Paxton as a charming old lady, who pressed her to come and see them. So she has gone this afternoon, but she promised me she would be back long before this."

Mr. Maydew was silent for a moment and then said:

"I am not well pleased about this. Alice should not be so impulsive and scrape acquaintance with absolutely unknown people. Had there been nice neighbours in Brickett Bottom, I am certain Mr. Roberts would have told us."

The conversation dropped; but both father and daughter were disturbed and uneasy and, tea having been finished and the clock striking half-past five, Mr. Maydew asked Maggie:

"When did you say Alice would be back?"

"Before half-past four at the latest, father."

"Well, what can she be doing? What can have delayed her? You say you did not see the house," he went on.

"No," said Maggie, "I cannot say I did. It was getting dark and you know how short-sighted I am."

"But surely you must have seen it at some other time," said her father.

"That is the strangest part of the whole affair," answered Maggie. "We have often walked up the Bottom, but I never noticed the house, nor had Alice till that evening. I wonder," she went on after a short pause, "if it would not be well to ask Smith to harness the pony and drive over to bring her back. I am not happy about her— I am afraid—"

"Afraid of what?" said her father in the irritated voice of a man who is growing frightened.

"What can have gone wrong in this quiet place? Still, I'll send Smith over for her."

So saying he rose from his chair and sought out Smith, the rather dull-witted gardener-groom attached to Mr. Roberts' service.

"Smith," he said, "I want you to harness the pony at once and go over to Colonel Paxton's in Brickett Bottom and bring Miss Maydew home."

The man stared at him.

"Go where, sir?" he said.

Mr. Maydew repeated the order and the man, still staring stupidly, answered:

"I never heard of Colonel Paxton, sir. I don't know what house you mean."

Mr. Maydew was now growing really anxious.

"Well, harness the pony at once," he said; and going back to Maggie he told her of what he called Smith's stupidity, and asked her if she felt that her ankle would be strong enough to permit her to go with him and Smith to the Bottom to point out the house.

Maggie agreed readily and in a few minutes the party started off. Brickett Bottom, although not more than three-quarters of a mile away over the Downs, was at least three miles by road; and as it was nearly six o'clock before Mr. Maydew left time Vicarage, and the pony was old and slow, it was getting late before the entrance to Brickett Bottom was reached. Turning into the lane the cart proceeded slowly up the Bottom, Mr. Maydew and Maggie looking anxiously from side to side, whilst Smith drove stolidly on looking neither to time right nor left.

"Where is the house?" said Mr. Maydew presently.

"At the bend of the road," answered Maggie, her heart sickening as she looked out through the failing light to see the trees stretching their ranks in unbroken formation along it. The cart reached the bend. "It should be here," whispered Maggie.

They pulled up. Just in front of them the road bent to the right round a tongue of land, which, unlike the rest of the right hand side of the road, was free from trees and was covered only by rough grass and stray bushes. A closer inspection disclosed evident signs of terraces having once been formed on it, but of a house there was no trace.

"Is this the place?" said Mr. Maydew in a low voice.

Maggie nodded.

"But there is no house here," said her father. "What does it all mean? Are you sure of yourself, Maggie? Where is Alice?"

Before Maggie could answer a voice was heard calling "Father! Maggie!" The sound of the voice was thin and high and, paradoxically, it sounded both very near and yet as if it came from some infinite distance. The cry was thrice repeated and then silence fell. Mr. Maydew and Maggie stared at each other.

"That was Alice's voice," said Mr. Maydew huskily, "she is near and in trouble, and is calling us. Which way did you think it came from, Smith?" he added, turning to the gardener.

"I didn't hear anybody calling," said the man.

"Nonsense!" answered Mr. Maydew.

And then he and Maggie both began to call "Alice. Alice. Where are you?" There was no reply and Mr. Maydew sprang from the cart, at the same time bidding Smith to hand the reins to Maggie and come and search for the missing girl. Smith obeyed him and both men, scrambling up the turfy bit of ground, began to search and call through the neighbouring wood. They heard and saw nothing, however, and after an agonised search Mr. Maydew ran down to the cart and begged Maggie to drive on to Blaise's Farm for help leaving himself and Smith to continue the search. Maggie followed her father's instructions and was fortunate enough to find Mr. Rumbold, the farmer, his two sons and a couple of labourers just returning from the harvest field.

She explained what had happened, and the farmer and his men promptly volunteered to form a search party, though Maggie, in spite of her anxiety, noticed a queer expression on Mr. Rumbold's face as she told him her tale.

The party, provided with lanterns, now went down the Bottom, joined Mr. Maydew and Smith and made an exhaustive but absolutely fruitless search of the woods near the bend of the road.

No trace of the missing girl was to be found, and after a long and anxious time the search was abandoned, one of the young Rumbolds volunteering to ride into the nearest town and notify the police.

Maggie, though with little hope in her own heart, endeavoured to cheer her father on their homeward way with the idea that Alice might have returned to Overbury over the Downs whilst they were going by road to the Bottom, and that she had seen them and called to them in jest when they were opposite the tongue of land.

However, when they reached home there was no Alice and, though the next day the search was resumed and full inquiries were instituted by the police, all was to no purpose. No trace of Alice was ever found, the last human being that saw her having been an old woman, who had met her going down the path into the Bottom on the afternoon of her disappearance, and who described her as smiling but looking "queerlike."

This is the end of the story, but the following may throw some light upon it.

The history of Alice's mysterious disappearance became widely known through the medium of the Press and Mr. Roberts, distressed beyond measure at what had taken place, returned in all haste to Overbury to offer what comfort and help he could give to his afflicted friend and tenant.

He called upon the Maydews and, having heard their tale, sat for a short time in silence. Then he said:

"Have you ever heard any local gossip concerning this Colonel and Mrs. Paxton?"

"No," replied Mr. Maydew, "I never heard their names until the day of my poor daughter's fatal visit."

"Well," said Mr. Roberts, "I will tell you all I can about them, which is not very much, I fear."

He paused and then went on: "I am now nearly seventy-five years old, and for nearly seventy years no house has stood in Brickett Bottom. But when I was a child of about five there was an old-fashioned, red brick house standing in a garden at the bend of the road, such as you have described. It was owned and lived in by a retired Indian soldier and his wife, a Colonel and Mrs. Paxton. At the time I speak of, certain events having taken place at the house and the old couple having died, it was sold by their heirs to Lord Carew, who shortly after pulled it down on the ground that it interfered with his shooting. Colonel and Mrs. Paxton were well known to my father, who was the clergyman here before me, and to the neighbourhood in general. They lived quietly and were not unpopular, but the Colonel was supposed to possess a violent and vindictive temper. Their family consisted only of themselves, their daughter and a couple of servants, the Colonel's old Army servant and his Eurasian wife. Well, I cannot tell you details of what happened, I was only a child; my father never liked gossip and in later years, when he talked to me on the subject, he always avoided any appearance of exaggeration or sensationalism."

"However, it is known that Miss Paxton fell in love with and became engaged to a young man to whom her parents took a strong dislike. They used every possible means to break off the match, and many rumours were set on foot as to their conduct— undue influence, even cruelty were charged against them. I do not know the truth, all I can say is that Miss Paxton died and a very bitter feeling against her parents sprang up. My father, however, continued to call, but was rarely admitted. In fact, he never saw Colonel Paxton after his daughter's death and only saw Mrs. Paxton once or twice. He described her as an utterly broken woman, and was not surprised at her following her daughter to the grave in about three months' time. Colonel Paxton became, if possible, more of a recluse than ever after his wife's death and himself died not more than a month after her under circumstances which pointed to suicide. Again a crop of rumours sprang up, but there was no one in particular to take action, the doctor certified Death from Natural Causes, and Colonel Paxton, like his wife and daughter, was buried in this churchyard. The property passed to a distant relative, who came down to it for one night shortly afterwards; he never came again, having apparently conceived a violent dislike to the place, but arranged to pension off the servants and then sold the house to Lord Carew, who was glad to purchase this little island in the middle of his property. He pulled it down soon after he had bought it, and the garden was left to relapse into a wilderness."

Mr. Roberts paused.

"Those are all the facts," he added.

"But there is something more," said Maggie.

Mr. Roberts hesitated for a while.

"You have a right to know all," he said almost to himself; then louder he continued: "What I am now going to tell you is really rumour, vague and uncertain; I cannot fathom its truth or its meaning. About five years after the house had been pulled down a young maidservant at Carew Court was out walking one afternoon. She was a stranger to the village and a new-coiner to the Court. On returning home to tea she told her fellow-servants that as she walked down Brickett Bottom, which place she described clearly, she passed a red brick house at the bend of the road and that a kind-faced old lady had asked her to step in for a while. She did not go in, not because she had any suspicions of there being anything uncanny, but simply because she feared to be late for tea.

"I do not think she ever visited the Bottom again and she had no other similar experience, so far as I am aware.

"Two or three years later, shortly after my father's death, a travelling tinker with his wife and daughter camped for the night at the foot of the Bottom. The girl strolled away up the glen to gather blackberries and was never seen or heard of again. She was searched for in vain— of course, one does not know the truth— and she may have run away voluntarily from her parents, although there was no known cause for her doing so.

"That," concluded Mr. Roberts, "is all I can tell you of either facts or rumours; all that I can now do is to pray for you and for her."

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9: The Red Carnation

Baroness Orczy

1865-1947

Pearson's Magazine, June 1898

MADAME OLGA BORGENSKY would never, I am sure, of her own accord, have resumed her duties as political agent to the Russian Government.

When, two years ago, she had married Eugen Borgensky, a Pole, she had made both to herself and to him a solemn promise to renounce once for all a *métier* which, after all, most honest-minded persons would undoubtedly call that of a spy. And when, on the occasion of His Imperial Majesty the Tsar's visit to Vienna, Count Gulohoff approached her on the subject of her returning to the service of her country, she gave him a most emphatic refusal. I have it on the surest authority that this refusal annoyed and disappointed Count Gulohoff very considerably. He was at the time head of the third section of the Russian police, and had been specially ordered to watch over his Imperial master during the latter's stay in Vienna, and there was in his mind a suspicion, almost amounting to a certainty, that some plot was being brewed by the young Poles— chiefly wealthy and of noble parentage— who lived in Vienna, and had already given the home government one or two unpleasant nuts to crack.

Madame Olga Borgensky was just the person to help him to discover the headquarters of these young fire-eaters— she went everywhere, knew everybody— and if Count Gulohoff could have succeeded in dispatching one or two of them to cool in Siberia, he certainly would have been happier. But Madame Borgensky was obdurate— at any rate, at first.

During the early part of the evening at Princess Leminoff's ball, the indefatigable and diplomatic Count Gulohoff had made many an attack on her firmness of purpose, but she had an army of excuses and reasons at her command, and yet one little incident caused her suddenly to change her resolution.

It was after supper, during the *czimbalom* solo so exquisitely played by Derék Miksa, the *czigány*. Madame Borgensky was standing close to the band with her partner, young Prince Leminoff, and round her she noticed most of the young Poles that were such a thorn in the flesh to the Russian Government. She found herself wondering, while listening to Prince Leminoff's softly whispered nothings, whether it was mere coincidence that they each wore a red carnation in their buttonhole. The next moment she distinctly caught sight of a scrap of blue paper being slipped from the hand of Count Zamoisky into that of Dimitri Golowine, and then on to young Natcheff. I suppose it must have been that slip of paper that did the mischief, for one may as well expect a spaniel not to take

to the water after a wild duck than ask Madame Olga Borgensky not to follow up a political intrigue when she had by chance caught one thread.

In an instant the old instinct was aroused. Forgotten were her promises to her husband, the dangers she so often had to pass, the odiousness attached to her former calling. She saw but one thing; that was the slip of blue paper which, undercover of the pathetic Magyar love-songs, was being passed from hand to hand, and the contents of which she felt bound to know, in the interests of Russia, of the Tsar, whose life perhaps was being endangered by the plans of these fanatical plotters.

"Prince Leminoff, I feel hot and faint; please take me into the next room at once," she sighed, half closing her eyes, and tottering as if about to fall.

The young man started and turned a little pale. His fingers closed tightly over a scrap of blue paper that had just been thrust into his hand; but his tremor was only momentary. The next instant he was leading the now almost fainting lady into the smoking-room, where a bright blaze was burning in the hearth. Madame Borgensky sank back into an armchair close to the fire.

"Now light a cigarette, Prince," she said, when she had recovered a little; "the smell of the smoke would do me good. Really that music had got on my nerves." And she pushed the gold *étui* of cigarettes, that stood invitingly near, towards her young partner, who, without a moment's hesitation, and with the greatest sang-froid, folded the compromising paper he was still clutching into a long narrow spill, and after holding it to the fire one moment, was proceeding to light a cigarette with it, when:

"Allow me, Prince; thank you," said Madame Borgensky, gently taking it from between his fingers, and, with an apologetic smile, she lighted her own cigarette. To blow out the flame, throw the paper on the floor, and place her foot on it was the work of but a second, and the young Pole had barely realized what had actually happened when a cheery voice spoke to him from the door.

"Prince Leminoff, the last quadrille is about to commence. Everybody is waiting for you. Are you dancing it with Madame Borgensky?" And the Abbé Rouget, smiling and rubbing his little white hands, trotted briskly into the room.

"Shall we go, Madame?" said the young Prince after a slight hesitation, and offering the lady his arm.

"Please let me stay here a little while longer and finish my cigarette in peace. I really do not feel up to dancing just at this moment. I will give you an extra valse later on if you like."

"If Madame Borgensky will grant me the much sought for privilege," said the Abbé, "I should deem myself very lucky to be allowed to keep her company for half-an-hour."

"At any other time, Monsieur l'Abbé, I should only be too happy," said Madame Borgenky, "but just now I really would prefer to be alone. Five minutes' quiet will set me up for the rest of the evening."

"Your wishes are my commands, Madame; I will read my breviary till the sound of your voice calls me to your side."

And taking Prince Leminoff's arm, the Abbé led him towards the door. As soon as they were out of earshot:

"There is something amiss," said the Abbé. "What is it?"

"Only this," replied the young Pole. "A scrap of blue paper, containing our final arrangements for to-morrow night, is at the present moment under Madame Borgensky's foot. It is partly burnt. Can your Reverence find out how much of it has remained, and if there is any danger in proceeding to-morrow?"

"Easily, my son, quite easily; and if there is, I will find means to warn you—but if all is safe, I will wear the red carnation, as usual, at Madame Borgensky's ball. Say nothing to the others till then."

And the Abbé turned on his heel, and taking a breviary out of his pocket, sat down in a chair opposite Madame Borgensky, and proceeded to read the Latin text in a half-audible voice, apparently not taking the slightest notice of the lady. Olga Borgensky, however, had not yet succeeded in picking up the paper from under her foot; she was burning with impatience to know the contents, and her excitement became such that she could only with the greatest difficulty conceal it from the Abbé.

At length she could endure the suspense no longer, and she was just stooping forward to pick up the paper at all hazards, when the voice of Count Gulohoff startled her. He drew a stool close to her, and said in a low whisper:

"*Eh bien*, Madame? You see, I come back, an unvanquished enemy, to renew the attack."

"I may be able to serve Russia and help you, Monsieur," Madame Borgensky said excitedly from behind her fan. "Come to my ball to-morrow, and if I find no means of speaking to you privately before then, I will slip a letter for you inside the pink Sèvres vase that, as you know, stands in the centre of the mantelpiece in the ballroom. And now take the Abbé away if you can." Then she said in a louder tone of voice: "What a gay and animated dance this has been, even M. l'Abbé there has been reading his prayers with holy joy and vigorous piety, but I confess I am getting very tired, and would be so grateful if somebody will find out for me if Eugen Borgensky is in the ballroom and ready to take me home."

"I will go and find him at once," said Count Gulohoff rising, "and will your Reverence," he added, turning to the Abbé, "give me my revenge at piquet?"

"Oh! ah! yes! Did your Excellency speak to me?" said his Reverence, as if waking from a dream. "Forgive me, I was enjoying half-an-hour's communion

with the saints, which is most refreshing during the turmoil of a mundane gathering. What did your Excellency say?"

"I merely asked if you would care now to give me my revenge at piquet; if so, we had better go at once and secure a table before there is a rush for the cardroom."

"With all the pleasure in life," said the cheerful little Abbé, and putting his breviary into his pocket, he followed Count Gulohoff into the ballroom.

AT LAST! She was alone! Olga Borgensky drew from under her foot the scrap of paper, and feverishly unfolded and smoothed it. It had been more than half burnt, but the contents, such as they were, fully compensated her for all the difficulties she had encountered.

This is what she read:

ensky's ball
his carriage
thrown without much
lots as to who
alom solo, in the
red carnation in

At her ball then, in her home, which had been so hospitably opened to these young plotters, their infamous schemes were to be consummated.

No doubt existed in her mind. His Majesty the Tsar, as was well known, meant to honor her by appearing at her ball for an hour or so on the following evening.

When he re-entered "his carriage," a bomb would be "thrown without much" risk of detection, as the crowd would be sure to be very dense. In the meanwhile the conspirators meant to draw "lots as to who" should be the actual assassin, and this they meant to do during the "*czimbalom* solo," probably in the card or billiard-room, and those that were willing to perpetrate this dastardly deed, and thus to sacrifice themselves as well as their family, were to wear a "red carnation," which was evidently the badge of the fraternity.

The terrible part of the whole thing in Madame Borgensky's mind was that, as the infamous plot was to be carried through in her house, she, and especially her husband, were certain to be suspected of some sort of connivance, and might thereby lose their liberty, probably their lives.

Ah! how she hated these plotters now, with a bitter, deadly hatred, the hatred of the Russian against the Pole, the hatred born of fear! How thankful she was that Count Gulohoff had induced her to spy on them; she did not regret her action now, as at one moment she feared she would do.

"Why, my darling, how pale and agitated you look," said a loving voice, close to her elbow. "Count Gulohoff told me you had not been well, and I have ordered the carriage to take you home."

And Eugen Borgensky bent anxiously over his young wife, and scanned her wan-looking features and wild eyes.

"It is nothing, dear," she said; "a little too much excitement, I think. I will make my *adieux* to Princess Leminoff, and we will go home at once." When she joined him again a moment later, all her wonted composure had returned.

THE BORGENSKY'S BALL was to be one of the most brilliant functions of the season. Everybody had said so, for weeks past, ever since it had become generally known that his Imperial Majesty, the Tsar, meant to honor Olga Borgensky by being her guest for that evening. Everything the fair Russian did, she did well. The giving of entertainments she had studied and cultivated till she had brought it to the level of high art. She had been the Queen of Vienna society for some years now, ever since she had married Eugen Bongensky, the friend and confidant of his Eminence the Cardinal Primate of Hungary. All the doors of the most exclusive Vienna cliques had been widely thrown open for her, and *tout le monde* flocked to her soirées.

It was ten o'clock, and Madame Borgensky, exquisitely dressed and covered with diamonds, was ready to receive her guests, with the calm and grace that characterizes the "grande dame." A very careful observer, such as her husband probably, might, perhaps, notice that her hand shook slightly as she held it out to each fresh arrival, that her cheeks were unusually pale, and her lips quivered from time to time; also, that whenever she looked away from the door that gave access to her guests, it was to glance at the fine Italian marble mantelpiece at the furthest end of the ballroom, where a magnificent pale pink Sèvres vase of beautiful proportions and graceful lines stood in the centre among a multitude of other equally beautiful knick-knacks and silver trinkets of all kinds.

"Ah, M. l'Abbé, I am charmed to see you," said Madame Borgensky, as the Abbé Rouget, his breviary between his fingers, his fat face beaming with promises of enjoyment, arrived at the top of the stairs and greeted his hostess. "You will find Eugen in the cardroom, I think. I really have not seen him since I took up my post at the top of the stairs, but he was asking me whether we should have the pleasure of seeing you to-night."

"Ah, Madame! Eugen Borgensky is too kind. The archbishop, as you know, has allowed me innocent recreation from time to time-with the exception of dancing," he added with a half-regretful little sigh.

"Besides which, M. l'Abbé, you know you can always have half-an-hour's peace in the smoking-room during which to tell your beads," said Madame

Bongensky a little sarcastically, remembering in what an agonizing plight the holy man had placed her the evening before by his persistent devotions.

"I find when I have the pleasure of coming to this house, Madame, that I can always have the billiard-room to myself for a quiet meditation some time during the evening. It is necessary for the soul not to entirely lose sight of spiritual things in the brilliancy and gaiety of a mundane function. But I must not monopolize your kind attention so long," said the jovial Abbé, as he bowed to his hostess and began working his way through the now rapidly filling ballrooms.

Madame Borgensky looked anxiously after him, a puzzled expression on her face. Was it mere coincidence that the Abbé had in the buttonhole of his *soutane* a red carnation, exactly similar to the one worn by Prince Leminoff and three or four other young men she had noticed in the course of the evening, and the meaning of which was now clear to her? Surely he would not risk such a pleasant, assured position as he possessed for the sake of the destinies of a country that was not even his own.

Madame Borgensky caught herself now scanning the young men's buttonholes very curiously; there were at most only about ten or twelve of them that wore the red flower; the Abbé was certainly one, Prince Leminoff— foolish youth!— another, and... Ah! no! no! it is impossible, her eyes are deceiving her, her overwrought imagination is playing her own sight a cruel trick. She closed her eyes once or twice to chase away the fearful vision, but it would not go. It was true then? There, standing with his back to the pink Sèvres vase, a red carnation in his buttonhole, was Eugen Borgensky, her husband!

Ah! how could she have guessed? How could she know what a terrible deed she had done? She, Olga Borgensky, a happy, loving, and loved wife, had actually spied upon and betrayed her own husband into the hands of a police that knows of no pardon. But, no; all was not lost yet, thank God! she had so far told Count Gulohoff nothing. She had devised a means of communicating with him, that she had felt would be a safe one, in case she found no chance of speaking to him privately, and now it would prove her salvation.

Feverishly she turned to go into the ballroom, heedless if any one should notice her. What matter what people thought of her actions, as long as the terrible catastrophe is averted in time—

"His Imperial Majesty, the Tsar, "thundered the voice of the usher. All conversations ceased, and all necks were stretched forward to catch a glimpse of Alexander III., as he ascended the stairs, chatting pleasantly to Count Gulohoff.

Madame Borgensky, forced to pause, felt as if the whole room, the Tsar, her guests, were all changed into weird spectres that seemed to dance a wild fantastic dance around her; one moment she thought her senses would leave her... the next instant she had bowed after the approved Court fashion, and was

thanking Alexander III. for the honor he was doing her, while his Majesty, with his usual affability, was conversing pleasantly with her and Eugen Borgensky. She had lost sight of Count Gulohoff, who, exchanging handshakes, nods, and smiles, worked his way through the ballroom towards the mantelpiece, where the gay little Abbé was being monopolized by a group of pious *mondaines*, and seemed to be enjoying himself thoroughly.

"Ah, your Excellency is just in time," said his Reverence, "to settle a most knotty point. We are having, mesdames and I, a very animated discussion on pottery and china, namely, the superiority (which I call very exaggerated) of antique over modern manufacture, and I was contending that many a connoisseur is not guided, when buying a piece of china, by the actual quality of the ware, but merely by the mark upon it."

"Ah! M. l'Abbé is terribly sceptical of feminine knowledge," said the Countess Zichy, "but I am sure that in this instance he wrongs us grievously. I, myself (and I have no pretensions at being much of a connoisseur), need never look at the mark of a piece of china; I can always locate its origin, sometimes even its date. Does your Excellency doubt me?" she added, turning to Count Gulohoff, who had assumed a somewhat incredulous attitude.

"I would not do so for worlds," said the courtly Russian, "but I confess that I would feel very interested to test your knowledge, Comtesse; this room, for instance, is full of bibelots. Olga Borgensky has some rare and beautiful pieces; shall we experiment now, to commence with, on this exquisite pink vase?" And Count Gulohoff, inwardly thankful at the turn the conversation had taken, stretched out his hand towards the vase, from the inside of which he had already noticed protruding the corner of an envelope.

"Allow me, your Excellency," said the Abbé, "to lift the vase up for you."

"No! no! I have it quite safely," said Count Gulohoff, who, hearing the faint, crisp rustle of paper inside the vase, was tilting it towards him, in the hope that he could obtain the letter unperceived.

At that moment the Abbé, who was short and somewhat round, apparently in trying to reach the vase must have lost his footing, for he fell forward, and, in steadying himself, jerked the arm of Count Gulohoff so violently that the latter lost the grip he had on the vase, which fell crashing to the floor.

There was general consternation among the little group of male and female connoisseurs who had gathered round to see the end of the debate: the poor little Abbé especially seemed terribly distressed, trying to pick up the pieces, and wondering whether the valuable vase could by any possibility be repaired. Count Gulohoff was for one moment terribly disconcerted, when, in the crash, he lost sight of the letter; his mind was, however, soon set at rest, for he quickly noticed it lying on the floor, close to the priest's *soutane*, and he was able to pick it up unperceived.

MADAME BORGENSKY, forced in her capacity as hostess to be constantly attentive to His Imperial Majesty, doing the necessary presentations, and having to appear as gay and entertaining as possible, had not, from the end of the room where she was, noticed the little scene that was being enacted close to the mantelpiece. Had Count Gulohoff possessed himself of the letter, she wondered?— the letter that denounced her husband, as well as his friends. She endured most excruciating tortures of mind, all the more unendurable as she was, for the moment, at least, perfectly powerless to do anything. She was gaily chatting the while, gradually leading Alexander III. towards the further end of the ballroom in the hope that she might yet ward off this fearful, monstrous thing.

Ah! it was too late. She had caught sight of Count Gulohoff coming towards her, and she felt, more than she actually saw, that the fatal letter was in his hand.

"Will your Majesty, and also my fair hostess, deign to allow me to take my leave?" said the Count, bowing before the Tsar, while he threw a quick glance of intelligence at Madame Borgensky, who had now become deathly pale; "serious duties call me away."

"Yes, dear Count!" said his Majesty laughing. "I bet you he has discovered some conspiracy against my life, and is going to save me. I assure you, Madame, last year he discovered 365 plots, each one of which would inevitably have ended my days, were it not for the devotion and fidelity of Count Gulohoff."

"The devotion and fidelity of all your Majesty's right-minded subjects," said Count Gulohoff. "Madame Borgensky, I feel sure, would do what I have done, and more, were she but given the opportunity, which, after all, may arise any day."

"Indeed, your Majesty, and so would my husband, than whom your Majesty has no more faithful subject," said Madame Borgensky, vainly trying to master her emotion.

"I thank you, Madame," said the Tsar, with the charming cordiality so peculiar to him, "and I can assure you that in coming here I quite forget that I am the guest of a Pole. Well, *au revoir, cher Comte*. I shall leave soon after one o'clock, and I hope Madame Borgensky will allow me, for the moment, to monopolize her society and let me escort her to the supper-room."

And offering his fair hostess his arm, Alexander Nicolaïevitch led her across the room and down the stairs, followed by the respectful salutes of all, and the glances of admiration levelled at his beautiful partner, who, with eyes open wide with agonized fear, and cheeks blanched with terror, was making superhuman efforts to appear calm and self-possessed.

THE SUPPER was very gay. Alexander III., always a valiant trencherman, and notoriously as fond of a good glass of Tokay as of the society of a pretty woman, was graciousness itself, and deigned to enjoy himself vastly. As for the *czigány* who were playing during supper, he declared he had never heard more entrancing music, and when, after the feast, the traditional *czimbalom* solo was to be played, his Majesty declared his desire to listen to it, and afterwards watch the *czárdás* before he left.

It was while the gipsies, with all that peculiarly pathetic weirdness with which they play the Magyar folksongs, played that exquisite tune so dear to all Hungarian ears, "There is but one beautiful girl in all the world," that Madame Borgensky first realized that *something* after all might be done, if God would but help her, and allow her to think. Ah! how she prayed at that moment; inspiration such as she needed could but come from above.

She looked round at her guests; her husband, the Abbé Rouget, Prince Leminoff, and the dozen or so that wore the red carnation were absent. She knew where they were, and— oh! how terrible— knew what at that moment they were doing. Drawing lots as to who should do the assassin's deed. Oh! if it should be her husband. "Not that! not that, oh my God, direct his hand! he does not know! he does not understand!" she pleaded. "The Tsar is his guest! no! no! even *they* would think that deed too horrible."

"Ah! that music was indeed divine," said Alexander Nicolaïevitch, half dreaming, as the last chords of the czimbalom died away, "and it will long haunt my memory after I leave Vienna to-morrow. And now, my dear Madame Borgensky, I must reluctantly bid you farewell, thanking you for your kind hospitality. Believe me," his Majesty added, looking admiringly at his beautiful hostess, "that the remembrance of to-night will long dwell in my heart." And the tall figure of Alexander III. bent low to kiss gallantly the tips of Olga Borgensky's fingers that lay cold as ice in his hand.

"Ah! here comes our kind host," said his Majesty, as Eugen Borgensky, very pale, approached him. "My dear Borgensky, may I express a hope that next winter will see you and Madame at St. Petersburg? I can assure you she has left many friends and admirers there."

"Your Majesty's wishes are commands," said Eugen Borgensky, bowing coldly.

The Tsar shot an amused glance at him. "Jealous?" he asked Madame Borgensky *sotto voce*.

"No doubt," she answered, trying to smile.

And Alexander III., followed by his host, and two or three gentlemen of his suite, turned his steps towards the stairway, still having on his arm Olga Borgensky, from whom he seemed loath to part, and bowing cordially to those

whom he recognized among the guests, while the gipsy band struck up the Russian national hymn: "God Save the Tsar."

The poor unfortunate woman walked by his side as if in a dream; her movements were those of an automaton. Now, if in the next five minutes something did not happen— something stupendous, immense— the terrible deed would be accomplished, Heaven only knew by whose hands.

Once in the hall, while two or three of the gentlemen in attendance busied themselves round their Imperial master, helping him with his furs and gloves, and the brilliant equipage drew up under the portico, Madame Borgensky shot a quick glance into the street outside. The crowd was very dense; she recognized no one. Then, as if moved by sudden inspiration, when Alexander III. began at last an evidently reluctant leave taking, she walked up to one of the large banks of palms and cut flowers that had been erected on each side of the hall, and gathering a huge arm-full, she turned to the Tsar and said:

"These are for remembrance; let me place them in your carriage in memory of to-night." And she threw him one of those glances she alone had the secret of, which quite finished turning an Imperial head and subjugating an Imperial heart. Carrying her sweet-smelling burden, burying her head among the blossoms, she walked through the doorway to the Imperial carriage, closely followed by the Tsar. With her own hands she opened the carriage door, standing there, beautiful and defiant, daring them, the unknown assassins, to throw the bomb that would annihilate her, their hostess, the wife of their comrade, as well as him.

Then, when the Tsar had at last entered the carriage, she lingered on the steps, arranging the flowers, still chatting gaily, and when she herself had closed the carriage door, she stood, her hand in that of Alexander III. She meant to stand there till the coachman, whipping up the horses, had borne his Imperial master out of any danger. At last the lackeys were mounted, the Tsar gave her a last military salute, the coachman gathered the reins . . .At that moment Olga Borgensky felt two vigorous arms encircling her waist, and she was thrown more than carried violently to one side, while a second later a terrific crash rent the still night air.

There was a tremendous rush and tumult; something appeared to be smouldering some yards away in the middle of the road; while the Emperor's carriage, with its small escort of mounted cossacks disappeared, in a cloud of dust, along the brilliant road.

"Come in, Olga, you will catch cold," said her husband's voice close to her, as soon as she had partially realized the situation.

There seemed to be a great commotion both outside and in. She allowed Eugen Bongensky to lead her, past her astonished and frightened guests, into a small boudoir, where she saw the Abbé Rouget sitting in a huge armchair, with

eyes raised heavenwards, softly murmuring: *Mater Dei, ora pro nobis*." He seemed sublimely unconscious of any disturbance, and rose with alacrity to offer the half-fainting lady his seat.

At a knowing wink from the little Abbé's sparkling eyes, Eugen Borgensky, gently kissing his wife on the half-closed lids, left the two alone together. Olga Borgensky looked pleadingly at the Abbé; she was dying for an explanation, longing to know what had happened.

"Madame," at last said the jovial priest very earnestly, "your brave attitude tonight has averted a terrible catastrophe. You have no sympathies with our plots and plans, you do not understand them; but you well understood that, at any cost, any risk, your life with us would be sacred.

"One of us, the one who drew the fatal number, was stationed outside your gates, to rid Russia of her autocrat. On seeing you, his heart failed him, he threw the bomb in the middle of the road, where it could not reach you, even if it hit the Tsar. Both of you, however, are safe."

"But Count Gulohoff," she said— "he knew, he and the police must have been there; did they arrest any one? Was my husband seen?"

"No, Madame, Count Gulohoff was not present. I succeeded, by substituting a letter of my own for the one you had placed for him in the pink Sèvres vase, in inducing him to go with his minions to the other end of Vienna to seek for conspirators who will not be there. To-morrow the Tsar and Count Gulohoff will have left Vienna. It is true our plans have utterly failed, but we are also quite safe, and not even suspected."

"And Eugen Borgensky, my husband, M. l'Abbé?"

"I pledge you my word, Madame, that whilst I can do anything to prevent it, and I can do a great deal, he shall never again wear the red carnation."

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10: The Great Staircase at Landover Hall

Frank R. Stockton
1834-1902
Harper's Weekly, 17 Dec 1898

I WAS SPENDING a few days in the little village of Landover, simply for the purpose of enjoying the beautiful scenery of the neighborhood. I had come up from Mexico because the weather was growing too warm in that region, and I was glad of the chance to vary my interesting and sometimes exciting travels with a little rest in the midst of this rural quiet.

It was early summer, and I had started out for an afternoon walk, when, just upon the outskirts of the village, my attention was attracted by a little group at a gateway which opened upon the road. There were two women and an elderly man. The women appeared to be taking leave of the man, and one of them frequently put her handkerchief to her eyes. I walked slowly, because I did not wish to intrude upon what seemed to be an affecting leave-taking; so when I reached the gate the women had gone, but the man was still standing there, looking after them.

Glancing over the low fence, I saw a very pretty grove, apparently not well kept, and some distance back, among the trees, a large, old house. The man was looking at me with a curiosity which country people naturally betray when they see a stranger, and, as I was glad to have someone to talk to, I stopped.

"Is this one of the old family mansions of Landover?" I asked. He was a good-looking man, with the air of a head gardener.

"It is not one of them, sir," he answered; "it is the only one in the village. It is called Landover Hall, and the other houses growed up around it."

"Who owns it?" I asked.

"That is hard to say, sir," he said, with a grim smile; "though perhaps I could tell you in the course of a couple of weeks. The family who lived there is dead and gone, and everything in it is to be sold at auction."

I became interested, and asked some questions, which the man was very willing to answer. It was an old couple who had owned it, he said. The husband had died the previous year, and the wife about ten days ago. The heirs were a brother and sister living out in Colorado, and, as they had never seen the house, and cared nothing about it, or about anything that was in it, they had written that they wished everything to be sold, and the money sent to them as soon as possible.

"And that is the way it stands," said the old man. "Next week there is to be a sale of the personal property— a 'vandoo' we call it out here— and every movable thing in the house and grounds is to be sold to the highest bidder; and

mighty little the things will bring, it's my opinion. Then the house will be sold, as soon as anybody can be found who wants it."

"Then there is no one living in the house at present?" said I.

"Nobody but me," he answered. "That was the cook and her daughter, the chambermaid, who just left here. There is a black man who attends to the horses and cows, but he will go when they are sold; and very soon I will go too, I suppose."

"Have you lived here long?" I asked.

"Pretty near all my life," said he.

I was greatly interested in old houses, and I asked the man if I might look at the place.

"I have not had any orders to show it," he said; "but, as everything is for sale, I suppose the sooner people see the household goods the better; there's many a bit of old furniture, candlesticks, and all that sort of thing, which strangers might like to buy. Oh, yes; you can come in if you like."

I shall not attempt to describe the delightful hour I spent in that old house and in the surrounding grounds. There was a great piazza in front; a wide hall stretched into the interior of the mansion, with a large fireplace on one side and a noble staircase at the further end, a single flight of stairs running up to a platform, and then branching off on each side to the second floor.

On the landing stood one of the tallest clocks I have ever seen. There were portraits on the walls, and here and there a sporting picture, interspersed with antlers and foxes' heads mounted on panels, with the date of the hunt inscribed beneath. There was an air of largeness and gravity about the furniture in the hall, which was very pleasing to me, and when I entered the long drawing room I found it so filled with books and bric-à-brac of the olden days, with many quaint furnishings, that, had I been left to myself, even the long summer afternoon would not have sufficed for their examination. Upstairs was the same air of old-fashioned comfort. The grounds— the grass rather long, and the bushes untrimmed— were shaded by some grand old trees, and beyond there were gardens and some green pasture-fields.

I did not take the walk that I had proposed to myself. When I left the old house I inquired the name of the agent who had charge of the estate, and then I went back to the village inn, where I sat communing with myself for the rest of the afternoon and all the evening.

I was not yet thirty, I had a good fortune, and I had travelled until I was tired of moving about the world. Often I had had visions of a home, but they had been very vague and fanciful ones.

Now, for the first time in my life, I had seen a home for which I really might care; a house to which I might bring only my wearing apparel, and then sit down surrounded by everything I needed, not even excepting books.

Immediately after breakfast I repaired to the office of Mr. Marchmay, the lawyer who had charge of the property. I stayed there a long time. Mr. Marchmay took dinner with me at the inn, and in the evening we sent a telegram to Colorado. I made a proposition to buy everything for cash, and the price agreed upon between Mr. Marchmay and myself was considerably higher than could have been expected had the property been sold at auction. It is needless to say that my offer was quickly accepted, and in less than a week from the day I had first seen the old house I became its owner. The cook and the housemaid, who had retired in tears from its gateway, were sent for, and reinstalled in their offices; the black man who had charge of the horses and cows continued to take care of them, and old Robert Flake was retained in the position of head gardener and general caretaker, which he had held for so many years.

That summer was a season of delight to me, and even when autumn arrived, and there was a fire in the great hall, I could not say that I had fully explored and examined my home and its contents. I had had a few bachelor friends to visit me, but for the greater part of the time I had lived alone. I liked company, and expected to have people about me, but so long as the novelty of my new possessions and my new position continued I was company enough for myself.

At last the holiday season came around, and I was still alone. I had invited a family of old friends to come and make the house lively and joyous, but they had been prevented from doing so. I afterward thought of asking some of my neighbors to eat their Christmas dinner in the old house, but I found that they all had ties and obligations of their own with which I should not seek to interfere. And thus it happened that late on Christmas eve I sat by myself before a blazing fire in the hall, quietly smoking my pipe. The servants were all in bed, and the house was as quiet as if it contained no living being.

For the first time since I lived in that house I began to feel lonely, and I could not help smiling when I thought that there was no need of my feeling lonely if I wished it otherwise. For several years I had known that there were mothers in this country, and even in other countries, who had the welfare of their daughters at heart, and who had not failed to let me know the fact; I had also known that there were young women, without mothers, who had their own welfare at heart, and to whom a young man of fortune was an object of interest; but there was nothing in these recollections which interested me in these lonely moments.

The great clock on the landing-place began to strike, and I counted stroke after stroke; when there were twelve I turned to see whether I had made a mistake, and if it were now really Christmas day. But before my eyes had reached the face of the clock I saw that I was mistaken in supposing myself alone. At the top of the broad flight of stairs there stood a lady.

I pushed back my chair and started to my feet. I know my mouth was open and my eyes staring. I could not speak; I doubt if I breathed.

Slowly the lady descended the stairs. There were two tall lamps on the newel-posts, so that I could see her distinctly. She was young, and she moved with the grace of perfect health. Her gown was of an olden fashion, and her hair was dressed in the style of our ancestors. Her attire was simple and elegant, but it was evident that she was dressed for a festive occasion.

Down she came, step by step, and I stood gazing, not only with my eyes, but, I may say, with my whole heart. I had never seen such grace; I had never seen such beauty.

She reached the floor, and advanced a few steps toward me; then she stopped. She fixed her large eyes upon me for a moment, and then turned them away. She gazed at the fire, the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. There came upon her lovely features an almost imperceptible smile, as though it gave her pleasure thus to stand and look about her.

As for me, I was simply entranced. Vision or no vision, spirit from another world or simply a mist of fancy, it mattered not.

She approached a few steps nearer, and fixed her eyes upon mine. I trembled as I stood.

Involuntarily the wish of my heart came to my lips. "If—" I exclaimed.

"If what?" she asked, quickly.

I was startled by the voice. It was rich, it was sweet, but there was something in its intonation which suggested the olden time. I cannot explain it. It was like the perfume from an ancient wardrobe opened a hundred years after a great-grandmother had closed and locked it, when even the scent of rose and lavender was only the spirit of something gone.

"Oh, if you were but real!" I said.

She smiled, but made no reply. Slowly she passed around the great hall, coming so near me at one time that I could almost have touched her. She looked up at the portraits, stopping before some old candlesticks upon a bracket, apparently examining everything with as much pleasure as I had looked upon them when first they became mine.

When she had made the circuit of the hail, she stood as if reflecting. Fearful that she might disappear, and knowing that a spirit must be addressed if one wuuld hear it speak, I stepped toward her. I had intended to ask her if she were, or rather ever had been, the lady of this house, why she came, and if she bore a message, but in my excitement and infatuation I forgot my purpose; I simply repeated my former words— "Oh, if you were but real!"

"Why do you say that?" she asked, with a little gentle petulance. "I am not real, as you must know. Shall I tell you who I was, and why I am here?".I

implored her to do so. She drew a little nearer the fire. "It is so bright and cheerful," she said.

"It is many, many years since I have seen a fire in this hall. The old people who lived in this house so long never built a fire here— at least on Christmas eve."

I felt inclined to draw up a chair and ask her to sit down, but why need a ghost sit? I was afraid of making some mistake. I stood as near her as I dared, eagerly ready to listen.

"I was mistress of this house," she said. "That was a long, long time ago. You can see my portrait hanging there."

I bowed. I could not say that it was her portrait. An hour before, I had looked upon it as a fine picture; now it seemed to be the travesty of a woman beyond the reach of pigments and canvas.

"I died," she continued, "when I was but twenty-five, and but four years married. I had a little girl three years old, and the very day before I left this world I led her around this hail and tried to make her understand the pictures. That is her portrait on this other wall."

I turned, and following the direction of her graceful hand my eyes fell upon the picture of an elderly lady with silvered hair and benignant countenance.

"Your daughter?" I gasped.

"Yes," she answered; "she lived many years after my death. Over there, nearer the door, you may see the picture of her daughter— the plump young girl with the plumed hat."

Now, to my great surprise, she asked me to take a seat. "It seems ungracious," she remarked, "that in my own house I should be so inhospitable as to keep you standing. And yet it is not my house; it is yours."

Obedient to her command, for such I felt it to be, I resumed my seat, and to my delight she took a chair not far from me. Seated, she seemed more graceful and lovely than when she stood.

Her shapely hands lay in her lap; soft lace fell over them, like tender mist upon a cloud. As she looked at me her eyes were raised.

"Does it distress you that this house should now be mine?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no," she answered, with animation; "I am very glad of it. The elderly couple who lived here before you were not to my liking. Once a year, on Christmas eve, I am privileged to spend one hour in this house, and, although I have never failed to be here at the appointed time, it has been years, as I told you, since I saw a fire on that hearth and a living being in this hail. I knew you were here, and I am very glad of it. It pleases me greatly that one is living here who prizes this old place as I once prized it. This mansion was built for me by my husband, upon the site of a smaller house, which he removed. The grounds about it, which I thought so lovely, are far more lovely now. For four years I lived

here in perfect happiness, and now one hour each year something of that happiness is renewed."

Ordinarily I have good control of my actions and of my emotions, but at this moment I seemed to have lost all power over myself; my thoughts ran wild. To my amazement, I became conscious that I was falling in love— in love with something which did not exist; in love with a woman who once had been. It was absurd; it was ridiculous, but there was no power within me which could prevent it.

After all, this rapidly growing passion was not altogether absurd. She was an ideal which far surpassed any ideal I had ever formed for the mistress of my home. More than that, she had really been the mistress of this house, which was now my home. Here was a vision of the past, fully revealed to my eyes. As the sweet voice fell upon my ears, how could I help looking upon it as something real, listening to it as something real, and loving it as something real.

I think she perceived my agitation; she looked upon me wonderingly.

"I hoped very much," she said, "that you would be in this hall when I should come down tonight, but I feared that I should disturb you, that perhaps I might startle or—"

I could not restrain myself. I rose and interrupted her with passionate earnestness.

"Startle or trouble me!" I exclaimcd. "Oh, gracious lady, you have done but one thing to me tonight— you have made me love you! Pardon me; I cannot help it. Do not speak of impossibilities, of passionate ravings, of unmeaning words. Lady, I love you; I may not love you as you are, but I love you as you were. No happiness on earth could equal that of seeing you real— the mistress of this house, and myself the master."

She rose, drew back a little, and stood looking at me. If she had been true flesh and blood she could not have acted more naturally.

For some moments there was silence, and then a terrible thought came into my head. Had I a right to speak to her thus, even if she were but the vision of something that had been? She had told me of her husband; she had spoken of her daughter; but she had said no word which would give me reason to believe that little girl was fatherless when her mother led her around the hall and explained to her the family portraits. Had I been addressing my wild words of passion to one whose beauty and grace, when they were real and true, belonged to another? Had I spoken as I should not have spoken, even to the vision of a well-loved wife? I trembled with apprehension.

"Pardon me," I said, "if I have been imprudent. Remember that I know so little about you, even as you were."

When she answered there was nothing of anger in her tone, but she spoke softly, and with, I thought, a shade of pity.

"You have said nothing to offend me, but every word you have spoken has been so wild and so far removed from sense and reason that I am unable to comprehend your feelings."

"They are easy to understand!" I exclaimed. "I have seen my ideal of the woman I could love. I love you; that is all! Again I say it, and I say it with all my heart: Would you were real! Would you were real!"

She smiled. I am sure now she understood my passion. I am sure she expected it. I am sure that she pitied me.

Suddenly a change of expression came over her face; a beaming interest shone from her eyes; she took some steps toward me.

"I told you," said she, speaking quickly, "that what you have said seems to be without sense or reason, and yet it may mean something. I assure you that your words have been appreciated. I know that each one of them is true and comes from your heart. And now listen to me while I tell you— " At that moment the infernal clock upon the landing-place struck one. It was like the crash of doom. I stood alone in the great hall.

The domestics in that old house supposed that I spent Christmas day alone; but they were mistaken, for wherever I went my fancy pictured near me the beautiful vision of the night before.

She walked with me in the crisp morning air; I led her through the quiet old rooms, and together we went up the great staircase and stood before the clock— the clock that I had blessed for striking twelve and cursed for striking one. At dinner she sat opposite me in a great chair which I had had placed there— "for the sake of symmetry," as I told my servants. After what had happened, it was impossible for me to be alone.

The day after Christmas old Mr. Marchmay came to call upon me. He was so sorry that I had been obliged to spend Christmas day all by myself. I fairly laughed as I listened to him.

There were things I wanted him to tell me if he could, and I plied him with questions. I pointed to the portrait of the lady near the chimney-piece, and asked him who she was.

"That is Mrs. Evelyn Heatherton, first mistress of this house; I have heard a good deal about her. She was very unfortunate. She lost her life here in this hall on Christmas eve. She was young and beautiful, and must have looked a good deal like that picture."

I forgot myself. "I don't believe it," I said. "It does not seem to me that that portrait could have been a good likeness of the real woman."

"You may know more about art than I do, sir," said he. "It has always been considered a fine picture; but of course she lived before my time. As I was saying, she died here in this hall. She was coming downstairs on Christmas eve; there were a lot of people here in the hall waiting to meet her. She stepped on

something on one of the top steps— a child's toy, perhaps— and lost her footing. She fell to the bottom and was instantly killed— killed in the midst of youth, health, and beauty."

"And her husband," I remarked, "was he—"

"Oh, he was dead!" interrupted Mr. Marchmay. "He died when his daughter was but a mere baby. By the way," said the old gentleman, "it seems rather funny that the painting over there— that old lady with the gray hair— is the portrait of that child. It is the only one there is, I suppose."

I did not attend to these last words. My face must have glowed with delight as I thought that I had not spoken to her as I should not. If I had known her to be real, I might have said everything which I had said to the vision of what she had been.

The old man went on talking about the family. That sort of thing interested him very much, and he said that, as I owned the house, I ought to know everything about the people who formerly lived there. The Heathertons had not been fortunate. They had lost a great deal of money, and, some thirty years before, the estate had passed out of their hands and had been bought by a Mr. Kennard, a distant connection of the family, who, with his wife, had lived there until very recently. It was to a nephew and niece of old Mr. Kennard that the property had descended. The Heathertons had nothing more to do with it.

"Are there any members of the family left?" I asked.

"Oh yes!" said Mr. Marchmay. "Do you see that portrait of a girl with a feather in her hat? She is a granddaughter of that Evelyn Heatherton up there. She is an old woman now and a widow, and she it was who sold the place to the Kennards. When the mortgages were paid she did not have much left, but she manages to live on it. But I tell you what you ought to do, sir: you ought to go to see her. She can tell you lots of stories of this place, for she knows more about the Heathertons than anyone living. She married a distant cousin, who had the family name; but he was a poor sort of a fellow, and he died some fifteen years ago. She has talked to me about your having the old house, and she said that she hoped you would not make changes and tear down things. But of course she would not say anything like that to you; she is a lady who attends to her own business."

"Where does she live?" I asked. "I should like, above all things, to go and talk to her."

"It is the third house beyond the church," said Mr. Marchmay. "I am sure she will be glad to see you. If you can make up your mind to listen to long stories about the Heathertons you will give her pleasure."

The next day I made the call. The house was neat, but small and unpretentious— a great drop from the fine hall I now possessed.

The servant informed me that Mrs. Heatherton was at home, and I was shown into the little parlor— light, warm, and pleasantly furnished. In a few minutes the door opened, and I rose, but no old lady entered.

Struck dumb by breathless amazement, I beheld Evelyn Heatherton coming into the room!

I could not understand; my thoughts ran wild. Had someone been masquerading? Had I dreamed on Christmas eve, or was I dreaming now? Had my passionate desire been granted?

Had that vision become real? I was instantly convinced that what I saw before me was true and real, for the lady advanced toward me and held out her hand. I took it, and it was the hand of an actual woman.

Her mother, she said, begged that I would excuse her; she was not well and was lying down.

Mr. Marchmay had told them that I was coming, and that I wanted to know something about the old house; perhaps she might be able to give me a little information.

Almost speechless, I sat down, and she took a chair not far from me. Her position was exactly that which had been taken by the vision of her great-grandmother on Christmas eve. Her hands were crossed in her lap, and her large blue eyes were slightly upraised to mine. She was not dressed in a robe of olden days, nor was her hair piled up high on her head in bygone fashion, but she was Evelyn Heatherton, in form and feature and in quiet grace. She was some years younger, and she lacked the dignity of a woman who had been married, but she was no stranger to me; I had seen her before.

Encouraged by my rapt attention, she told me stories of the old house where her mother had been born, and all that she knew of her great-grandmother she related with an interest that was almost akin to mine. "People tell me," she said, "that I am growing to look like her, and I am glad of it, for my mother gave me her name."

I sat and listened to the voice of this beautiful girl, as I had listened to the words which had been spoken to me by the vision of her ancestress. If I had not known that she was real, and that there was no reason why she should vanish when the clock should strike, I might have spoken as I spoke to her great-grandmother. I remained entranced, enraptured, and it was only when the room began to grow dark that I was reminded that it was incumbent upon me to go.

But I went again, again, and again, and after a time it so happened that I was in that cottage at least once every day. The old lady was very gracious; it was plain enough that her soul was greatly gratified to know that the present owner of her old home— the house in which she had been born— was one who delighted to hear the family stories, and who respected all their traditions.

I need not tell the story of Evelyn and myself. My heart had been filled with a vision of her personality before I had seen her. At the first moment of our meeting my love for her sprung into existence as the flame bursts from a match. And she could not help but love me. Few women, certainly not Evelyn Heatherton, could resist the passionate affection I offered her. She did not tell me this in words, but it was not long before I came to believe it.

It was one afternoon in spring that old Mrs. Heatherton and her daughter came to visit me in my house— the home of their ancestors. As I walked with them through the halls and rooms I felt as if they were the ladies of the manor, and that I was the recipient of their kind hospitality.

Mrs. Heatherton was in the dining room, earnestly examining some of the ancestral china and glass, and Evelyn and I stood together in the hall, almost under the portrait which hung near the chimney-piece. She had been talking of the love and reverence she felt for this old house.

"Evelyn," said I, "if you love this house and all that is in it, will you not take it, and have it for your own? And will you not take me and love me, and have me for your own?"

I had my answer before the old lady came out of the dining-room. She was reading the inscription on an old silver loving-cup when we went in to her and told her that again Evelyn Heatherton was to be the mistress of the old mansion.

We were married in the early winter, and after a journey in the South we came back to the old house, for I had a great desire that we should spend the holidays under its roof.

It was Christmas eve, and we stood together in the great hall, with a fire burning upon the hearth as it had glowed and crackled a year before. It was some minutes before twelve, and, pur-posely, I threw my arms around my dear wife and turned her so that she stood with her back to the great staircase. I had never told her of the vision I had seen; I feared to do so; I did not know what effect it might have upon her. I cared for her so earnestly and tenderly that I would risk nothing, but I felt that I must stand with her in that hall on that Christmas eve, and I believed that I could do so without fear or self-reproach.

The clock struck twelve. "Look up at your great-grandmother, Evelyn," I said; "it is fit that you should do so at this time." In obedience to my wishes her eyes were fixed upon the old portrait, and, at the same time, looking over her shoulder, my eyes fell upon the vision of the first Evelyn Heatherton descending the stairs. Upon her features was a gentle smile of welcome and of pleasure. So she must have looked when she went out of this world in health and strength and womanly bloom.

The vision reached the bottom of the stairs and came toward us. I stood expectant, my eyes fixed upon her noble countenance.

"It seems to me," said my Evelyn, "as if my great-grandmother really looked down upon us; as if it made her happy to think that—"

"Is this what you meant?" said I, speaking to the lovely vision, now so near us.

"Yes," was the answer; "it is what I meant, and I am rejoiced. I bless you and I love you both. "

and as she spoke two fair and shadowy hands were extended over our heads. No one can hear the voice of a spirit except those to whom it speaks, and my wife thought that my words had been addressed to her.

"Yes," said my Evelyn; "I mean that we should be standing here in her old home, and that your arm should be around me."

I looked again. There was no one in the hall, except my Evelyn and myself.

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11: The Fakir

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

The Australian Woman's Mirror 28 April 1925

THE bush road was full of holes and bends, and here and there stumps not yet de-rooted, and Farmer was so busy keeping his car on the road that he paid little attention to the figure by the wayside.

Only he noticed in passing that the figure was strange and unusual. This tall, dark man was altogether different from the usual types of color. His figure, under his ill-fitting clothes of black alpaca gave an impression of strength and litheness; his features were strong and remarkably well developed, entirely different from the ordinary Hindu type. Something negroid possibly, but more definitely inclining to Arab characteristics.

More unusual than his appearance was the intense, louring stare of his black eyes, rivetted in a fixed way on the occupants of the car as it swept by. .

Suddenly Farmer noticed that his wife was shivering. The day was warm, there was no breeze, and the somnolent air fell warmly on their faces.

"What's the matter, Nell?" he asked, quickly.

"That black man!— did you see how he stared at me?" she exclaimed. "He has turned back and is following us now."

"Why? Did you look round?" he asked.

"No; but I *know*. I don't know how," she said. "Oh, Jack, drive on— quickly, please!"

He had slowed down to take a look back, and about two hundred yards behind them a break in some bushes that edged the road showed the man following.

"He's a queer-looking bird, certainly," he said, sending the car forward at a rather faster speed. "But there is no reason why you should be upset by a queer-looking nigger."

"It was the way he looked at me," she said, her voice sounding in a frightened whisper. "It made me think that I had seen him before. I seemed to see a lot of things— pictures of places I couldn't possibly have seen ever; and yet I seemed to know them quite well, and they made me afraid."

She shivered again.

"Queer," he commented. "It must be the heat. Try not to think of them."

"It's silly, of course," she said, with a queer, unmirthful laugh.

When they reached the Thompson's, Mrs. Thompson remarked that Mrs. Farmer looked ill, and took her into the shade of the open-air sitting-room, on to which the broad verandah opened at the back of the house.

Leaving the two women talking, Thompson drew Farmer inside to sample some whisky and to show him some curios recently added to his collection. A sudden staccato exclamation by Mrs. Thompson alarmed Farmer.

"Nellie! Nellie! What's the matter with you?" she cried.

Farmer was by his wife's side in a second. A look of terror was frozen on her face, and her eyes seemed to be staring at the opposite wall. They turned to his face with a piteous appeal as his arm fell reassuringly on her shoulder.

"Jack— that black man!" she cried. "He has passed this house and stopped near it."

The thing was uncanny. Farmer walked to the side of the house, and there, sure enough, was the man, squatting down at the side of the road. How could his wife know that he was there?

"It's very queer," he said returning and telling Thompson of the incident. "Must be some mesmeric influence. But, as I say, she is silly to let a thing like that upset her."

"But I have such an awful sensation of dread," said Mrs. Farmer. "Of course, it's impossible, but I can't escape a sense of having met that man before, and hated and feared him. And I seem to see—"

"I'm going to send him away," said Farmer, quickly, and strode out.

He came back with an uncomfortable feeling of puzzlement and dread. The black man had risen to meet him with a curiously dignified bow. His suavity when Farmer had addressed him in the rough terms he thought suitable for a black nonplussed the white man.

"What you bin do alonga here? What for you hang-about?" he had demanded.

"I am but a traveller through this country," said the black, in excellent, well-modulated English, and with easy politeness which made Farmer feel in the wrong.

"Well, you can't hang about here or you'll get into trouble," said Farmer gruffly; and then added, almost apologetically, in explanation: "My wife is in delicate health; seeing you seems to have upset her; and as I'm not going to have her upset I'll send for the police unless you move on.

"I do no harm," said the black, calmly. "I am going."

Farmer has a sense of being beaten when he returned to find his wife somewhat recovered.

"You want to run Nell down to the coast," said Mrs. Thompson. "She needs a change. A little incident like this wouldn t have this effect if her health was what it should be."

"If the change will do her good," Farmer promised, "I'll borrow my brothers house at Lane Cove, and we'll stay in town."

"Oh, Jack, thank you," cried Nell, with a fervor which surprised him. "I feel as though I'm in danger here— I don't know why, but still there is the feeling. Take me away at once."

"Oh, a couple of days won't matter," he answered. "Besides we've got to think of the trains."

He rang up the police station, and asked Sergeant Doolan, who had the legal destinies of the district in his charge, to keep an eye on a black man who was wandering in the neighborhood, and who, he said, was probably a prohibited immigrant somehow smuggled into the country.

"The man is all right," Sergeant Doolan told him that night. "He has passports and papers which show he is a qualified visitor. He's a man of education; and he has money. A queer bird, but no harm in him, I think. However, he will be watched."

Some apprehension made Farmer curse as he hung up the receiver. The feeling of uncanniness about the presence of the black came back to him.

It was in the middle of the night that he was awakened by a sense of emptiness in the bed beside him. With a start he sat up; and in the darkness caught the gleam of his wife's white-robed figure moving towards the verandah door. Springing from the bed, he flung his arms about her, but she struggled.

"They want me in the temple, and the High Priest is waiting for me," she said, urgently. "The people are all there—"

It sounded like madness.

"Nonsense, Nell. You're talking nonsense!" Farmer cried, shaking her. Suddenly she was clinging to him as if in terror, and crying:

"Oh, Jack, Jack, it is you. Oh, I am so glad— so glad! I seemed to see a big awful building, all dark, cut in the rock it seemed; and all around were black people, and strange houses, and in the distance tall mountains and the forest."

Farmer soothed her.

"Back to bed, Nell darling," he said, and she went obediently. "I'm going to have a look round."

Swiftly and silently he strode to the door, towards which she had been making, and went out. Suddenly in the darkness he felt arms twined softly about him.

"Be silent! Move as I guide you!" said a voice whose easy modulation he recognised.

The fact that the grip upon him was light gave Farmer an advantage. He visioned immediately that the waiting black had been expecting an unresisting woman, in a mesmeric condition, and felt a profound thankfulness that he had wakened. But he had little time for thought. A quick lurch forward, and they fell, and he could feel the wiry muscles springing with resolve below him. They rolled over, and Farmer felt his strength as but puny against that of a mighty

opponent. A hand crept upward, in spite of his resistance, towards his throat. He knew that once those powerful fingers fastened the life would be shaken from him in a few minutes.

He heard his wife's scream and the startled shouts of men who, roused by the sounds of a struggle, were making towards him. There were calls for lights, but the light was long in coming.

Farmer's mind worked quickly. Uppermost for a moment he gave way, letting the powerful opponent swing over on top of him; but before the impetus of that movement had stopped, he swung with all his strength. He heard the dull thud as the black's head collided with the heavy tub which held a palm, and his opponent's resistance became suddenly limp.

Then came lights and help. The black lay unconscious, blood on his head, breathing heavily. With the aid of Sam Giles Farmer tied him up as securely as he could, and together they carried the captive to an outshed, where they lay him on the ground and left him, padlocking the door.

"No chance of him getting out of those ropes," Farmer remarked.

"He's a Houdini if he does," grinned Sam.

"Well, ride in and bring Sergeant Doolan out," commanded Farmer. "I'll have to go and calm my wife. Better bring the doctor when you come, too."

Mrs. Farmer was hysterical, and she continued to talk deliriously about strange forests and temples and black faces till suddenly calmness returned to her and she fell unexpectedly asleep.

A little later Sergeant Doolan, the doctor and Sam arrived, and Farmer led them towards the outshed, flashing his torch ahead.

The torch light fell suddenly on the gaping darkness where the door, now swinging half off its hinges, should have been. Within they found the ropes in a tangle, burst apart in several strands, lying on the ground. Fear stabbed Farmer in the heart.

"By the living God!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what all this means, but I'm taking Nell to Sydney to-morrow!"

In Sydney Nell seemed to forget the strain and upset that had come so strangely ; and then came the arrival of her cousin, Patrick Clausen, an elderly man, much travelled, and scientific in his tastes. The episode of the strange black had seemingly been forgotten, although Farmer had heard from Sergeant Doolan that the escapee had not yet been captured.

They were sitting one evening in the comfortable sitting room of the Lane Cove house, when suddenly Farmer heard his wife exclaim, and looking at her saw her white and trembling.

"Jack!" she cried. "He has come again! He is somewhere here!"

It was something Farmer had been expecting, much as he tried to laugh at his fears. A stride took him to a drawer, and a revolver gleamed in his hand;

then he threw open a door, and stared into the moon-flooded garden which ran down to the gleaming water.

"He must be in the front! Come on Patrick!"

"What the—" began Patrick, but followed as Farmer rushed away.

Their search was fruitless— but when they returned the room was empty.

Farmer dashed to the window; and, far down, shadowed against the moon-gleam on the water, he saw two figures— one of them his wife, the other the black. With a shout he leapt out, his feet padding madly down the garden, with Clausen pounding windily behind him. As he reached the water's edge he saw his wife in a boat which the black was pushing from the shore. The black straightened himself to meet his rush, and the world swam round Farmer as a blow struck him on his forehead.

When his senses returned Clausen was beside him pointing excitedly first to a boat drifting well out from the shore, with his wife apparently in a state of trance as its one occupant, and then to a figure that leapt along the water's edge making for a point which jutted out lower down.

Frenziedly Farmer, with Clausen to help, burst the locks of the boat-shed and rushed the boat into the water, and the two sprang aboard and sculled desperately.

"Look!" cried Patrick, excitedly, "that fellow has dived into the water, and is swimming to the boat! And— good God! that ferry will cut her down!"

With its lights gleaming on the water the ferry came sweeping round a bend; but the drifting boat had been seen, and with a clang of bells the steamer twisted to avoid the collision. As the boat still rocked in the whirling waters Farmer and Clausen reached it, and Farmer dragged into his own boat a woman who woke from a dream to burst into an hysteria of terrified sobs.

Clausen rowed for the wharf which the ferry had reached, and as Farmer, thinkking of his wife, hurried her home, Clausen was attracted by a group on the jetty. In the centre was the dripping, mangled body of a black man, who still breathed, though gaspingly.

"This man was in the water, and as the ferry tried to avoid colliding with a skiff it ran him down," someone explained.

And then the black man spoke.

"A hundred years ago," he said, "she was stolen from our temple, and the curse was upon me who let her escape. I have searched and found— but failed! It was not ordained; but when I live again, again the search must be made."

"It is altogether curious— unexplainable," said Clausen some time afterwards, "but this may give some explanation for us to guess at: My ancestor and yours, Nell, John Cope, was a soldier of fortune and an explorer. Somewhere south of Abyssinia he ventured once in search of gold and ivory and

he came upon a strange city in which there was a temple with a white girl, who in some way had become deified. He helped her to escape and married her.

"And now, four generations later, comes a black man who recognises in you your great-grandmother who, by his own age, he could never have seen; and you, when he was near, got queer fancies of places you have never seen!"

"Mysterious!" exclaimed Farmer.

"Yet, perhaps, only the mystery of the hallucination of a black gifted with high mesmeric power," said Clausen. "Who can say?"

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12: Stellar Showboat

Malcolm Jameson

1891-1945

Planet Stories Fall 1942

SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR Billy Neville was annoyed, and for more reasons than one. He had just done a tedious year in the jungles of Venus stamping out the gooroo racket and then, on his way home to a well-deserved leave and rest, had been diverted to Mars for a swift clean-up of the diamond-mine robbery ring. And now, when he again thought he would be free for a while, he found himself shunted to little Pallas, capital of the Asteroid Confederation. But clever, patient Colonel Frawley, commandant of all the Interplanetary Police in the belt, merely smiled indulgently while Neville blew off his steam.

"You say," said Neville, still ruffled, "that there has been a growing wave of blackmail and extortion all over the System, coupled with a dozen or so instances of well-to-do, respectable persons disappearing without a trace. And you say that that has been going on for a couple of years and several hundred of our crack operatives have been working on it, directed by the best brains of the force, and yet haven't got anywhere. And that up to now there have been no such cases develop in the asteroids. Well, what do you want *me* for? What's the emergency?"

The colonel laughed and dropped the ash from his cigar, preparatory to lying back in his chair and taking another long, soothing drag. The office of the Chief Inspector of the A.C. division of the I.P. was not only well equipped for the work it had to do, but for comfort.

"I am astonished," he remarked, "to hear an experienced policeman indulge in such loose talk. Who said anything about having had the *best* brains on the job? Or that no progress had been made? Or that there was no emergency? Any bad crime situation is always an emergency, no matter how long it lasts. Which is all the more reason why we have to break it up, and quickly. I tell you, things are becoming very serious. Lifelong partners in business are becoming suspicious and secretive toward each other; husbands and wives are getting jittery and jealous. Nobody knows whom to trust. The most sacred confidences have a way of leaking out. Then they are in the market for the highest bidder. No boy, this thing is a headache. I never had a worse."

"All right, all right," growled Neville, resignedly. "I'm stuck. Shoot! How did it begin, and what do you know?"

THE COLONEL reached into a drawer and pulled out a fat jacket bulging with papers, photostats, and interdepartmental reports.

"It began," he said, "about two years ago, on Io and Callisto. It spread all over the Jovian System and soured Ganymede and Europa. The symptoms were first the disappearances of several prominent citizens, followed by a wave of bankruptcies and suicides on both planetoids. Nobody complained to the police. Then a squad of our New York men picked up a petty chiseler who was trying to gouge the Jovian Corporation's Tellurian office out of a large sum of money on the strength of some damaging documents he possessed relating to a hidden scandal in the life of the New York manager. From that lead, they picked up a half-dozen other small fry extortionists and even managed to grab their higher-up— a sort of middleman who specialized in exploiting secret commercial information and scandalous material about individuals. There the trail stopped. They put him through the mill, but all he would say is that a man approached him with the portfolio, sold him on its value for extortion purposes, and collected in advance. There could be no follow up for the reason that after the first transaction what profits the local gang could make out of the dirty work would be their own."

"Yes," said Neville, "I know the racket. When they handle it that way it's hard to beat. You get any amount of minnows, but the whales get away."

"Right. The disturbing thing about the contents of the portfolio was the immense variety of secrets it contained and that it was evidently prepared by one man. There were, for example, secret industrial formulas evidently stolen for sale to a competitor. The bulk of it was other commercial items, such as secret credit reports, business volume, and the like. But there was a good deal of rather nasty personal stuff, too. It was a gold mine of information for an unscrupulous blackmailer, and every bit of it originated on Callisto. Now, whom do you think, could have been in a position to compile it?"

"The biggest corporation lawyer there, I should guess," said Neville. "Priests and doctors know a lot of personal secrets, but a good lawyer manages to learn most everything."

"Right. Very right. We sent men to Callisto and learned that some months earlier the most prominent lawyer of the place had announced one day he must go over to Io to arrange some contracts. He went to Io, all right, but was never seen again after he stepped out of the ship. It was shortly after, that the wave of Callistan suicides and business failures took place."

"All right," agreed Neville, "so what? It has happened before. Even the big ones go wrong now and then."

"Yes, but wait. That fellow had nothing to go wrong about. He was tremendously successful, rich, happily married, and highly respected for his outstanding integrity. Yet he could hardly have been kidnaped, as there has never been a ransom demand. Nor has there ever been such a demand in any of the other cases similar to it.

"The next case to be partially explained was that of the disappearance of the president of the Jupiter Trust Company at Ionopolis. All the most vital secrets of that bank turned up later in all parts of the civilized system. We nabbed some peddlers, but it was the same story as with the first gang. The facts are all here in this jacket. After a little you can read the whole thing in detail."

"Uh, huh," grunted Neville, "I'm beginning to see. But why *me*, and why at Pallas?"

"Because you've never worked in the asteroids and are not known here to any but the higher officers. Among other secrets this ring has, are a number of police secrets. That is why setting traps for them is so difficult. I haven't told you that one of their victims seems to have been one of us. That was Jack Sarkins, who was district commander at Patroclus. He received an apparently genuine ethergram one day— and it was in our most secret code— telling him to report to Mars at once. He went off, alone, in his police rocket. He never got there. As to Pallas, the reason you are here is because the place so far is clean. Their system is to work a place just once and never come back. They milk it dry the first time and there is no need to. Since we have no luck tracing them after the crime, we are going to try a plant and wait for the crime to come to it. You are the plant."

"I see," said Neville slowly. He was interested, but not enthusiastic. "Some day, somehow, someone is coming here and in some manner force someone to yield up all the local dirt and then arrange his disappearance. My role is to break it up before it happens. Sweet!"

"You have such a way of putting things, Neville," chuckled the colonel, "but you do get the point."

He rose and pushed the heavy folder toward his new aide.

"Bone this the rest of the afternoon. I'll be back."

IT WAS QUITE LATE when Colonel Frawley returned and asked Neville cheerily how he was getting on.

"I have the history," Neville answered, slamming the folder shut, "and a glimmering of what you are shooting at. This guy Simeon Carstairs, I take it, is the local man you have picked as the most likely prospect for your Master Mind crook to work on?"

"He is. He is perfect bait. He is the sole owner of the Radiation Extraction Company which has a secret process that Tellurian Radiant Corporation has made a standing offer of five millions for. He controls the local bank and often sits as magistrate. In addition, he has substantial interests in Vesta and Juno industries. He probably knows more about the asteroids and the people on them than any other living man. Moreover, his present wife is a woman with an unhappy past and who happens also to be related to an extremely wealthy

Argentine family. Any ring of extortionists who could worm old Simeon's secrets out of him could write their own ticket."

"So I am to be a sort of private shadow."

"Not a bit of it. *I* am his bodyguard. We are close friends and lately I have made it a rule to be with him part of the time every day. No, your role is that of observer from the sidelines. I shall introduce you as the traveling representative of the London uniform house that has the police contract. That will explain your presence here and your occasional calls at headquarters. You might sell a few suits of clothes on the side, or at least solicit them. Work that out for yourself."

Neville grimaced. He was not fond of plainclothes work.

"But come, fellow. You've worked hard enough for one day. Go up to my room and get into cits. Then I'll take you over to the town and introduce you around. After that we'll go to a show. The showboat landed about an hour ago."

"Showboat? What the hell is a showboat?"

"I forget," said the colonel, "that your work has been mostly on the heavy planets where they have plenty of good playhouses in the cities. Out here among these little rocks the diversions are brought around periodically and peddled for the night. The showboat, my boy, is a floating theater— a space ship with a stage and an auditorium in it, a troupe of good actors and a cracking fine chorus. This one has been making the rounds quite a while, though it never stopped here before until last year. They say the show this year is even better. It is the "Lunar Follies of 2326," featuring a chorus of two hundred androids and with Lilly Fitzpatrick and Lionel Dustan in the lead. Tonight, for a change, you can relax and enjoy yourself. We can get down to brass tacks tomorrow."

"Thanks, chief," said Neville, grinning from ear to ear. The description of the showboat was music to his ears, for it had been a long time since he had seen a good comedy and he felt the need of relief from his sordid workaday life.

"When you're in your makeup," the colonel added, "come on down and I'll take you over in my copter."

IT DID NOT take Billy Neville long to make his transformation to the personality of a clothing drummer. Every special cop had to be an expert at the art of quick shifts of disguise and Neville was rather better than most. Nor did it take long for the little blue copter to whisk them halfway around the knobby little planetoid of Pallas. It eased itself through an airlock into a doomed town, and there the colonel left it with his orderly.

The town itself possessed little interest for Neville though his trained photographic eye missed few of its details. It was much like the smaller doomed settlements on the Moon. He was more interested in meeting the local magnate, whom they found in his office in the Carstairs Building. The colonel made the introductions, during which Neville sized up the man. He was of fair

height, stockily built, and had remarkably frank and friendly eyes for a self-made man of the asteroids. Not that there was not a certain hardness about him and a considerable degree of shrewdness, but he lacked the cynical cunning so often displayed by the pioneers of the outer system. Neville noted other details as well— the beginning of a set of triple chins, a little brown mole with three hairs on it alongside his nose, and the way a stray lock of hair kept falling over his left eye.

"Let's go," said the colonel, as soon as the formalities were over.

Neville had to borrow a breathing helmet from Mr. Carstairs, for he had not one of his own and they had to walk from the far portal of the dome across the field to where the showboat lay parked. He thought wryly, as he put it on, that he went from one extreme to another— from Venus, where the air was over-moist, heavy and oppressive from its stagnation, to windy, blustery Mars, and then here, where there was no air at all.

As they approached the grounded ship they saw it was all lit up and throngs of people were approaching from all sides. Flood lamps threw great letters on the side of the silvery hull reading, "Greatest Show of the Void— Come One, Come All— Your Money Back if Not Absolutely Satisfied." They went ahead of the queue, thanks to the prestige of the colonel and the local tycoon, and were instantly admitted. It took but a moment to check their breathers at the helmet room and then the ushers had them in tow.

"See you after the show, Mr. Allington," said the colonel to Neville, "I will be in Mr. Carstairs box."

NEVILLE SANK into a seat and watched them go. Then he began to take stock of the playhouse. The seats were comfortable and commodious, evidently having been designed to hold patrons clad in heavy-dust space-suits. The auditorium was almost circular, one semi-circle being taken up by the stage, the other by the tiers of seats. Overhead ranged a row of boxes jutting out above the spectators below. Neville puzzled for a long time over the curtain that shut off the stage. It seemed very unreal, like the shimmer of the aurora, but it affected vision to the extent that the beholder could not say with any certainty *what* was behind it. It was like looking through a waterfall. Then there was eerie music, too, from an unseen source, flooding the air with queer melodies. People continued to pour in. The house gradually darkened and as it did the volume and wildness of the music rose. Then there was a deep bong, and lights went completely out for a full second. The show was on.

Neville sat back and enjoyed it. He could not have done otherwise, for the sign on the hull had not been an empty plug. It was the best show in the void— or anywhere else, for that matter. A spectral voice that seemed to come from everywhere in the house announced the first number— The Dance of the Wood-

sprites of Venus. Instantly little flickers of light appeared throughout the house— a mass of vari-colored fireflies blinking off and on and swirling in dizzy spirals. They steadied and grew, coalesced into blobs of living fire— ruby, dazzling green, ethereal blue and yellow. They swelled and shrank, took on human forms only to abandon them; purple serpentine figures writhed among them, paling to silvery smoke and then expiring as a shower of violet sparks. And throughout was the steady, maddening rhythm of the dance tune, unutterably savage and haunting— a folk dance of the hill tribes of Venus. At last, when the sheer beauty of it began to lull the viewers into a hypnotic trance, there came the shrill blare of massed trumpets and the throb of mighty tom-toms culminating in an ear-shattering discord that broke the spell.

The lights were on. The stage was bare. Neville sat up straighter and looked, blinking. It was as if he were in an abandoned warehouse. And then the scenery began to grow. Yes, grow. Almost imperceptible it was, at first, then more distinct. Nebulous bodies appeared, wisps of smoke. They wavered, took on shape, took on color, took on the appearance of solidity. The scent began to have meaning. Part of the background was a gray cliff undercut with a yawning cave. It was a scene from the Moon, a hangout of the cliffdwellers, those refugees from civilization who chose to live the wild life of the undomed Moon rather than submit to the demands of a more ordered life.

Characters came on. There was a little drama, well conceived and well acted. When it was over, the scene vanished as it had come. A comedy team came out next and this time the appropriate scenery materialized at once as one of them stumbled over an imaginary log and fell on his face. The log was not there when he tripped, but it was there by the time his nose hit the stage, neatly turning the joke on his companion who had started to laugh at his unreasonable fall.

On the show went, one scene swiftly succeeding the next. A song that took the fancy of the crowd was a plaintive ballad. It ran:

They tell me you did not treat me right,
Nor are grateful for all I've done.
I fear you're fickle as a meteorite
Though my love's constant as the Sun.

There was a ballet in which a witch rode a comet up into the sky, only to turn suddenly into a housewife and sweep all the cobwebs away. The featured stars came on with the chorus, and Lilly Fitzpatrick sang the big hit song, "You're a Big, Bad Nova to Burn Me Up This Way!" Then a novelty quartet appeared, to play on the curious Callistan *bourdelangs*, those reeds of that planet that grow in bundles. When dried and cut properly, they make multiple-barreled flutes with a tonal quality that makes the senses quiver. The show closed with a grand finale and flooded the house with the Nova song.

It was over. The stage was bare and the shimmering curtain that was not a curtain was back in place. People began to rise and stream into the aisles.

"LA-DEEZ and gen-tul-men!"

The voice boomed out and people stopped where they stood. A man in evening clothes had stepped through the curtain and was calling for attention.

"You have seen our regular performance. We hope it has pleased you and you will come again next year. But if you will kindly remain in your seats, the ushers will pass around with tickets for the after-show. We have prepared for your especial delectation a little farce entitled, 'It Happens on Pallas.' Now, ladeez and gen'men, I assure you that this sketch was prepared solely for your entertainment and any resemblance of any character in it to any real person is purely coincidental. It is all in fun, and no offense intended. I thank you."

Billy Neville was bolt upright in his seat by then and his eyes glinted hard through narrow slits. Something had rung the bell in his memory, but he did not know what. He would have sworn he had never seen that announcer before, and yet....

The man stepped backward into the curtain and appeared to vanish. The audience were grinning widely and resuming their seats.

"This is going to be good," said the man next to him as he dug for the required fee. "It is their specialty. It beats the regular show, I think."

Neville paid the usher, too, and sat where he was. He shot a glance upward at the box and saw Mr. Carstairs and the colonel in animated conversation and apparently having a grand time. Presently the ushers had done their work. The hall began to darken and the scenery come up. The scene was the main street of New Athens, as some called Pallas' principal town. Neville relaxed and forgot his recent sudden tension for a moment.

But it was only for a moment. For an instant later he was sitting up straight again, watching the development of the act with cold intentness. For the two main characters were comedy parodies of Mr. Carstairs and Colonel Frawley. At first glance they *were* Mr. Carstairs and the colonel, but a second look showed it was only an impression. The police inspector's strutting walk was overdone, as were his other mannerisms, and the same was true of the magnate's character. Their makeup was also exaggerated, Mr. Carstair's mole being much enlarged and a great deal made of his plumpness. Yet the takeoff was deliriously funny and the audience rolled with laughter. Neville stole another look upward and could make out that both the subjects of the sketch were grinning broadly.

It was a silly, frothy skit about a dog, a lost dog. It seems that Mr. Carstairs had a dog and it strayed. He asked the police to help him find it and they helped. The inspector brought out the whole force. It was excruciatingly funny, and Neville roared at times along with the rest, though there were many local

references that he did not understand, nor did he know some of the minor characters were so splittingly entertaining. The man next to him writhed in spasms of delight and almost strangled at one episode.

"Oh, dear," he managed to gasp, "what a scream ... ho, ho, ho, ho, ... gup! It happened ... just like that ... he *did* lose a dog and all the cops on Pallas couldn't find it ... oh me, oh my...." Peals of laughter drowned out the rest.

The postlude came to its merry end. This time, the show was over for keeps and the audience began trooping out. Neville got up and looked around for his friend, but the box was empty. So he strolled down the aisle and had a closer look at the illusion of a curtain. He understood some of the effects achieved that night, but the curtain was a new one to him. After standing there a moment he discovered that he could hear voices through it. One was Colonel Frawley's. He was saying:

"Certainly I am not offended. I enjoyed it. I would like to meet the man and congratulate him on the takeoff."

Neville climbed up onto the stage and walked boldly through the curtain. There was a brief tingly feeling, and then he was backstage. Most of the actors had gone to their dressing rooms, but several stood about chatting with the colonel and Mr. Carstairs.

At that moment the man who had made the announcement came on the stage and spoke to Colonel Frawley.

"I dislike interrupting you, Inspector," he said obsequiously, "but one of our patrons is making trouble in the wash-room. She claims her pocket was picked. Would you come?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the colonel. "I stationed an operative there to prevent that very thing. No doubt it is a mistake. However, I'll do what I can."

He excused himself and hurried off. Then the man in black turned to Neville and said in an icy voice, "And you, sir— what is it you wish?"

Neville's mind worked instantly. He did not want to express interest in Mr. Carstairs, nor did he care to reveal to the showman his acquaintance with the colonel. So he said quickly:

"The curtain ... I was curious as to how it worked ... you see, once I...."

"Joe," called the man, wheeling, "explain the curtain to the gentleman."

Joe came. He led the way to the switchboard and began a spiel about its intricacies. Neville looked on, understanding it only in the high spots, for the board was a jumble of gadgets and doodads, and it was not long before he began to suspect that the long-winded explanation was a unique variety of double-talk.

"See?" finished the man, "it's as simple as that. Clever, eh?"

"Yes, indeed. Thanks."

Neville started back to the stage, but the announcer barred his way.

"The exit is right behind you, sir," he said in a chilly voice. The words and intonation were polite, but the voice had that iron-hand-in-velvet-glove quality used by tough bouncers in night clubs when handling obstreperous members of the idle rich. They were accompanied as well by a glance so uncanny and so charged with malignancy that Neville was hard put to keep on looking him in the eye and murmur another "Thank you."

But before Neville reached the exit, Colonel Frawley came through.

"Oh, hello. Where is Carstairs?"

Neville shook his head.

"A moment ago he was talking with his impersonator," offered the announcer, seeming to lose all interest in Neville's departure. "I'll see if he is still here. He may have gone into the actor's dressing room."

But as he spoke a dressing room door opened and Carstairs came out of it, smiling contentedly. He turned and called back to the actor inside:

"Thanks again for an enjoyable evening. You bet I'll see you next year." Then he came straight over to Frawley and hooked his arm in his. "All right, Colonel, shall we go? And Mr. Allington, too?"

Neville nodded, luckily recognizing his latest assumed name. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the dressing-room door slammed shut by the actor inside of it.

"I hate to hurry you, gentlemen," said the announcer, "but we blast out at once."

The trio retrieved their helmets and strode off into the night. By then, the skyport was deserted and the floodlights taken in. When they reached the copter they saw the flash and heard the woosh as the big ship roared away on her rockets.

"Back to the old routine and bedroom," sighed Mr. Carstairs as he heard it leave. "It was good while it lasted, though."

"Yep," chuckled the colonel. "Hop in and we'll drop you at home."

Three minutes later they were before the Carstairs' truly-palatial mansion.

"Come in a second and speak to Mariquita," invited the magnate.

"No, thanks. It's late...."

Neville's elbow dug into his superior's ribs with a vicious nudge.

"... but if you insist...."

Mrs. Carstairs met them in the ante-room, greeted the inspector cordially and kissed her husband affectionately. They stood for the rest of the brief visit with their arms circled about one another. Her Spanish blood heritage was evident in her warm dark eyes and proud carriage. Equally evident, were the lines of past suffering in her face. It did not take a detective to see that here was a pair who had at last found mutual consolation.

On the way back to headquarters nothing was said. But later, while they were undressing, the colonel remarked:

"Good show. Did it throw your mind off your troubles?"

"No," said Neville curtly.

"Well," said the inspector, "a good night's sleep will. G'night."

There was no sleep that night for Billy Neville, though. He spent it mentally digesting all the stuff he had read that afternoon, and all that he had seen and heard that night. He devoted many weary hours to a review of his own mind's copy of the famous rogue's gallery at the Luna Central Base. The picture he wanted wasn't there. He wished fervently he had taken that refresher course on hypnotism when they had offered it to him two years ago. He wished he had not been such a softy as to let himself be shunted off to look at that dizzy switchboard. He should have taken a closer look at the showboat people. He wished ... but hell, what was the use? Pallas' half-sized sun was up and today was another day.

The meanest of all trails to follow is a cold trail. Or almost. Perhaps the worst is no trail. It is hard to keep interest up. Then, too, Pallas was a dull place—orderly as a church, where people simply worked and behaved themselves. The days dragged by, and nothing out of the way happened. Neville went through the motions of trying to sell clothing in majestic lots of hundreds, but no one was interested. He even talked vaguely of looking for a site for an outer warehouse for his company. He saw Mr. Carstairs often and became a welcome guest at the house.

Yet with this lack of incident, Neville was at all times alert in his study of the man he was watching. He could not help remembering that little while after the showboat performance that Carstairs had been absent from them. He particularly kept his mind open for any slow change in him, such as could be the result of a mysterious delayed-action drug or from post-hypnotic effect. But there was none that he could detect, nor did the colonel notice anything of the sort, though Neville spoke to him on the subject several times.

The first indication that all was not well came from Mariquita Carstairs herself. Neville happened in one day for lunch and found her red-eyed and weeping. Then she added that she had worried a great deal the last few days about her husband's health.

"When I watch him when he doesn't know it," she said anxiously, "he looks *different*— so wily, crafty and wicked. And he is not like that. He is the dearest man in the world. He *must* be sick."

Neville left as early as possible, and at once consulted Frawley.

"Yes," said the inspector thoughtfully, "she's right. In the last day or so I've noticed a subtle change myself. I blundered into his office the other day and he

had his safe open and mountains of files all over the floor. He was actually rude to me. Wanted to know what I meant by barging in on him like that. Imagine!"

The communicator on the wall buzzed. The signal light showed it was the skyport calling. Neville could overhear what the rasping voice was saying.

"Peters at airport reporting. Mr. Carstairs has made reservation on ship *Fanfare* for passage to Vesta. Ship arrives in half an hour; departs immediately."

By the time Frawley had acknowledged and cut the connection, Neville had already ordered the copter.

"I'm on my way," he cried. "This is *it*! Give me a complete travel-kit quick and an Extra-Special transformation outfit."

Two minutes later Neville was on his way to the landing field, the two valuable bags between his knees. He was there when the spaceship landed, and was inside it before Simeon Carstairs showed up. The copter soared away the moment he had left it. Carstairs would not know he had a shadow.

Neville went straight to the captain, whom he found resting momentarily in his cabin. He flashed his badge.

"I am your steward from here to Vesta," he told him. "Send for your regular one at once and give him his instructions."

"But my dear sir," objected the captain, rising from his bunk, "as much as I would like to cooperate, I cannot do that. You must know that under the new regulations all members of a ship's crew must be photographed and the pictures posted in prominent parts of the ship. It is your own police rule and is for the protection of passengers from imposters."

"Never mind that," snapped Neville, "get him in here."

The steward came and Neville studied him carefully. He was a swarthy man with heavy shoulders and thick features. His eyes were jet black. But his height was little different from that of the special investigator.

"Say something," directed Neville, "I want to hear your voice. Recite the twelve primary duties of a steward."

The man obeyed.

"It's okay," announced Neville when he had finished. "I can do it."

He gave the captain a word of warning, then went with the steward to his room. There he handed the astonished man a hundred-sol credit note and told him to hit the bunk.

"Here's your chance to catch up on your rest and reading," said Neville grimly. "You don't leave that bunk until I tell you to, y'understand? If you do, it will cost you five years in the mines of Oberon."

The steward gasped and lay back on the pillow. He gasped some more when Neville yanked his box of transformations open and spread its contents on the table. His eyes fairly bulged as he watched Neville shoot injections of wax into

his deltoids and biceps until the policeman's shoulders were the twins of his own. He saw him puff up his face, thicken the nose and load the jowls, and after that paint himself with dye, not omitting the hair. Then, marvel of marvels, he saw him drop something in his eyes and sit shuddering for a few seconds while the stuff worked. When the eyes were opened again they were as black as his own!

"How's dis, faller?" asked Neville in the same flat, sullen tone the steward had used in the cabin. "Lanch is sarved, sor ... zhip gang land in one hour, marm ... hokay?"

"Gard!" was the steward's last gasp. Then he lapsed into complete speechlessness.

NEVILLE DARTED out into the passage. The baggage of the sole passenger to get on at Pallas lay in the gangway, and its owner, Mr. Carstairs, stood impatiently beside it. He growled something about the rotten service on the Callisto-Earth run, but let the steward pick up the bags. Then he followed close behind.

"Lay out your t'ings, sor?" queried Neville, once inside the room.

"No," said Carstairs savagely. "When I want anything I will ask for it. Otherwise, stay out of my room."

"Yas, sor," was what Neville said in return, but to himself "Phew! The old boy *has* changed. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on my way."

He had no intention of obeying Carstairs' injunction to stay out of his room. That night he served the evening meal, and with it was a glass of water. He had taken the precaution to drop a single minim of somnolene in it— that efficacious sleep-producer permitted to only seven members of the I.P., tasteless, colorless and odorless, and without after-effect.

In the second hour of the sleep period, the false steward stole down the passage and with a pass key unfastened the door lock. There was an inside bolt to deal with as well, but an ingenious tool that came with the travel-kit took care of that. A moment later Neville was in the slumbering man's room. Five minutes later he was back in his own, and stacked on the deck beside him was all the baggage the magnate of Pallas had brought with him.

One piece opened readily enough, and its contents seemed innocuous. But the methodical police officer was not content with superficial appearances. He examined the articles of clothing in it, and the more he looked the more his amazement grew. There were no less than four sets of costumes in it. Moreover, they were for men of different build. One stout, two medium, one spare. In the bottom was a set of gray canvas bags— slip-covers with handles. Neville puzzled over them a moment, then recognized their function. They were covers for the

very baggage he was examining. He had to use special tools to open the second bag and found it contained a makeup kit quite the equal of his own.

"Ouch," he muttered. "This guy is as good as I am."

The third and heaviest bag was a tougher job. It was double-locked and strapped, and heavy seals had been put on the straps. The Extra-Special travel-kit equipment took care of the locks and seals, but the contents of the bag were beyond anything a travel-kit could handle. They were documents— damning documents— neatly bundled up, each bound with its own ribbon and seal. Had Neville had twenty-four hours in a well-equipped laboratory with a sufficient number of assistants, he might have forged passable but less incriminating substitutes for them. As it was, he was helpless to do a very artistic job of switching. One package dealt with certain long-forgotten passages in Mrs. Carstairs' life, while others dealt with certain business transactions.

From that case, Neville chose to abstract all of them except the one which formed the outer wrapper. To make up the bulk he filled the bundle with blank paper, tied it up again and resealed it. He dealt likewise with the packet that contained the formulae for the radiation extraction process. And, for the good of the Service, he pursued the same course with regard to a rather detailed report on the foibles and weaknesses of a certain police colonel stationed in Pallas. There was not a hint of scandal or corruption in that, but often ridicule is as potent a weapon as vilification. After that came the tedious business of censoring the rest, repacking the bag as it had been, and restoring the locks and seals. The gently snoring Carstairs never knew when his bags were returned to him, nor heard the faint scuffling as his door was rebolted and relocked.

"VASTA, sor, in one hour," announced his steward to him eight hours later. "Bags out, sor?"

"When we get there," growled the magnate, yawning heavily, glancing suspiciously about the room. He locked the door behind the steward, didn't leave until the ship was cradled.

Neville watched him go ashore. Then he hurried in to see the skipper again.

"You will be compensated for this," he said hurriedly. "You can have your steward back on the job again. How long do you stay here?"

"Three hours, curse the luck. We usually touch and go, but this time I have an ethergram ordering me to wait here for a special passenger. Why in hell can't these hicks in the gravel belt learn to catch a ship on time?"

"Ah," breathed Neville. "That makes a difference. I think I'll stay with you. Have you a vacant room where I can hang out for the remainder of the voyage?"

"Yes."

Neville did another lightning change— back to Special Investigator Billy Neville of the I.P.— uniform and all. He was standing near the spacelock when the expected passenger came aboard.

Neville could not suppress a murmur of approval as he saw his quarry approaching. As an artist in his own right, he appreciated artistry when he saw it. The man coming down the field was Carstairs, but what a different Carstairs! He was more slender, he had altogether different clothes on, he had a different gait. His complexion was not the same. But the height was the same, and the bags he carried were the same shape and size, except for their gray canvas coverings. There was a little notch in the right ear that he had not troubled to rectify in the brief time he had had for his transformation in what was undoubtedly his pre-arranged hideaway on Vesta.

"What is the next stop, skipper?" Neville whispered to the captain.

"New York."

"I'll stay out of sight until then."

Any passenger on that voyage of the *Fanfare* will tell you that her captain should have been retired years before. He made three bad tries before he succeeded in lowering his ship into the dock at the skyport. The passengers did not know, of course, that he had to stall to permit a certain member of the I.P. to make a parachute landing from the stratosphere.

Billy Neville hit the ground not four miles from the designated skyport. A commandeered copter took him to it just in time to see the squat passenger vessel jetting down into her berth. He looked anxiously about the station. There was not a uniformed man in sight except a couple of traffic men of the local detachment. He needed help and lots of it.

Neville had no choice but to play his trump card. It was a thing reserved only for grave emergencies. But he considered the present one grave. He took his police whistle out of his vest pocket and shrilled it three times. It was a supersonic whistle— its tone only audible to first-class detectives having tuned vibrators strapped over their hearts. To sound a triple supersonic call was the police equivalent of sending out an eighth alarm fire-call. But Neville blew the blast. Then waited.

A man strolled up and asked the way to Newark.

"Wait," said Neville, only he did not use words but merely lifted his right eye-brow slightly. It was not long before four others came up and craved directions as to how to get to Newark. He lit a cigarette as they gathered around.

"The ship *Fanfare* has just landed— out of Callisto with wayside stops in the Belt. There is a passenger carrying three bags covered by gray canvas. Tail him. Tail everybody he contacts. If you need help, ask local HQ. If they can't give

enough, ask Luna. But whatever you do, don't make a pinch. This guy is small fry. My code number is...."

Neville knew better than to flash a badge on these men, even if he was in uniform. Both badges and uniforms could be counterfeited. But he knew that they knew from his procedure that he was a department agent.

"There he comes," he warned, and promptly ducked behind a fruit stall and walked away.

HEADQUARTERS readily gave him a rocket and a driver to take him to Lunar Base. He had no trouble breaking down the barriers between him and the second most important man in the I.P.— the first being the General-General in Charge of Operations. The man he wanted to see was the Colonel-General, Head of the Bureau of Identification.

Neville allowed himself to be ushered into the office, but it was not without trepidation, for old Col.-General O'Hara had a vile reputation as a junior-baiter. He was not at all reassured when he heard the door click to behind him with the click which meant to his trained ears that the door would never be opened again without the pressure of a foot on a certain secret pedal concealed somewhere in the room. Nor did the appearance of the man behind the desk do anything to relieve his own lack of ease.

O'Hara was a gnome, scarcely five feet tall, with bulging eyes and wild hair that stood helter-skelter above his wrinkled face. He was staring at his desk blotter with a venomous expression, and his lower lip hung out a full half-inch. Neville stood rigidly at attention before him for a full three minutes before the old man spoke. Then he looked up and barked a caustic, "Well?"

"I am Special Investigator Neville, sir," he said, "and I want the pedigree of a certain notorious criminal whose picture is lacking in the gallery."

"Stuff and nonsense!" snorted the Colonel-General. "There is no such criminal. Man and boy, I have run this bureau since they moved it to the Moon. Why— oh, why— do they let you rookies in here to bother me?"

"Sir," said Neville stiffly, "I am no rookie. I am a...."

"Bah! We have— or had, at last night's report— eight hundred and ninety-three of your 'specials' half of them on probation. When you've spent, as I have spent, sixty-two years...."

"I'm sorry, sir," urged Neville, "we can't go into that now. Do what you want to with me afterwards, but I assure you this is urgent. I am on the trail of a higher-up in the Callisto-Trojan extortion racket. Do I get the information I am after, or do I turn in my agent badge?"

"Huh?" said the old general, sitting up and looking him straight in the face. "What's that?"

"I mean it, sir. I have trailed one of the higher-up stooges to Earth and set shadows on him. I *think* I have seen the king-pin of the mob, and I want to know who he is," Neville went on to describe the presentation of the showboat entertainment, with special emphasis on his hunches and suspicions. To the civilian mind, the things he told might seem silly, but to a policeman they were fraught with meaning. His description of the suspect was not one of appearance; it was a psychological description— a description based wholly on intuition and not at all on tangibles. He had not proceeded far before the wrinkled old man thumped the desk with a gnarled fist.

"Hold it," he said, "I think I know the man you mean. But give me time— my memory is not what it used to be."

Neville waited patiently at the rigid attitude of attention while the shriveled old veteran before him rocked back and forth in his chair with the lids closed over his bulging eyes, cracking his bony knuckles like castanets. O'Hara seemed to have gone into something like a trance. Suddenly, after a quiver of the eyelids, he stared up at Neville.

"It all comes back now. You were a member of the class of '14 and I was instructor— a major then. I took all of you to see a certain show on Broadway, as they call it, in order...."

"Yes, sir," cried Neville, eagerly, "that was it! You told us the principal character in the play was the most dangerous potential criminal of our generation and that we should mark him well and remember. It was a very hard assignment, for we only saw him from before the foot-lights and he was acting the part of a Viking chieftain and most of his face was covered with false white whiskers."

Old O'Hara smiled.

"You seem to have been an apt pupil. At any rate, that man was Milo Lunko, a thoroughly unprincipled and remarkably clever blackmailer. He was so clever, in fact, that we were never able to make an arrest stick, let alone bring him to trial. That accounts for the absence of his picture from the gallery. He was also clever enough to fake his own death. The evidence we have as to that was so convincing we closed the file on him."

"It's open again," said Neville grimly. "How did he work?"

"Lunko was not only an actor, but a producer and clever playwright as well. He might have achieved fame and fortune legitimately, but he became greedy. He teamed up with a shady character named Krascbik who ran a private investigating agency, specializing in social scandals. Krascbik's men would study the private life of influential individuals and dig out their scandals. They would provide Lunko with slow-motion camera studies of them so he could learn the peculiarities of their carriage, mannerisms, voice, and all their other idiosyncracies.

"Lunko's next step would be to write a scurrilous play based on the confidential information provided by Krascbik, and put it in rehearsal, using characters that resemble the actual principals...."

"But that's libel," objected Neville, "why couldn't you haul him in?"

"Blackmail, young man, is a delicate matter to handle. The injured party shrinks from publicity and usually prefers to pay rather than have his scandal aired. Lunko never actually publicly produced any of those nauseous plays. His trick was to invite the victim to a preview— a dress rehearsal, then let Nature take its course. Invariably, the victim was frightened and tried to induce him to call off the presentation. Lunko would protest that the play had been written in good faith and had already cost him a great deal of money. The pay-off, of course, was always big. Lunko drove many people to the brink of ruin.

"One man did refuse to play with him, and turned the case over to us. Lunko carried out his threat and produced the show, much to the delight of the scandal-mongers. It was outrageously libelous and we promptly closed the joint and took him in...."

"And then...."

"And then," croaked O'Hara, rolling his pop-eyes toward the ceiling and pursing his lips, "and then we let him go. He had a trunkful of data on many, many important people. Some of them, I hate to tell you, were my seniors in this very Service. We could do nothing about it, for, unfortunately, all the stuff he had on them was true. We might have sent him to the mines for a short term, but he would have retaliated by standing our entire civilization on its head with his exposures. We compromised by letting him escape and go into exile. The understanding was that he was never to come inside the orbit of Mars. A while after that, he was reported killed in a landslide on Europa. We shut the book and proceeded to forget him."

"He mimicked the character exactly?"

"Not exactly. Just enough to clearly indicate them. Although, I am convinced that, if he chose, he could have taken off any person he had studied, with enough fidelity to fool anybody except perhaps a man's own wife."

Neville gave a little start. That was the item that had slowed him the most. Had Lunko improved his technique to the extent that he could even fool a wife? Was the Carstairs he was trailing really Carstairs, or an understudy? He had deceived both his old friend and his own wife for a time, but even they had admitted noting a subtle change. Who was this phoney Carstairs? Where was the real Carstairs? Or, Neville wondered, was his original theory of drugs or hypnotism correct?

"Thank you, General," he said. "You have been a big help. I have to go over to Operations now and get the past and future itineraries of the showboat. In another hour, I may begin to know something about this case."

"It's nothing," said O'Hara, promptly closing his eyes and folding his knotty fingers on his breast. "It's all in the day's work. Luck to you."

Neville heard the click as the secret door lock was released and he knew the interview was terminated. He backed away, stepped through the door and out into the corridor.

Neville went straight to the great library where the I.P. records are kept. An attendant brought him the bulky folder on the old Lunko gang. Neville found it engrossing reading, and the day waned and night came before he had committed all its contents to memory.

Billy Neville obtained a televise connection with Tellurian headquarters.

"How are your shadows doing?"

He had already learned the real identity of the man he had trailed from Pallas; he was an actor belonging to the original ring and went by the name of Hallam.

"Our shadows are doing fine," replied the officer at the other end, "but your friend Hallam seems unhappy. He made two calls on a high officer of the Radiation Corporation and after the second one he came very angry and ruffled looking. He has also called on several other persons, known to us as extortioners, and at least two of those are on his trail with blood in their eye."

"I know," chuckled Neville. "He sold 'em a bill of goods— rolls of blank paper. They think they've been double-crossed. And they have, only I'm the guy that did it. But say, we can't have him killed— not yet. Better round up all his contacts and put 'em away, incommunicado. I'm hopping a rocket right now and will be with you in a jiffy."

It did not take the police long to make the little jump from Luna to Tellus, and a couple of hours later Neville was confronting Hallam in a special cell. In his hands he held a first-class ticket to Titan in the Saturn group, which had come out of Hallam's pocket, as well as a handbill of the showboat announcing an appearance there in the near future.

"I just wanted to study your current rig, Hallam," explained Neville, opening up his makeup kit. "Impersonation is a game that more than one can play at. I'm going in your place to Titan. I'm a *teeny-weeny* bit curious as to what happens to your victims. Extortion carries good stiff sentences, but they lack the finality of that for murder."

THE NEVILLE that left the cell was the exact duplicate of Hallam, and by dint of exacting search of the actor's trick garments and the use of adroit questioning under pressure, the Special Investigator knew exactly what he had to do. And he knew ever better, after the spaceship he was riding settled down into the receiving berth on Titan. An actor of Lunko's— a skinny, gaunt fellow— was on

hand to meet him, and a little later they conferred in a well-screened spot with three of Lunko's jackals.

"The layout here is a cinch," explained the skinny actor. "The two biggest shots are the president of the Inter-satellite Transportation Company and the fellow who owns the bulk of shares in the *phlagis* plantations. A year or so ago they were mixed up in a most ludicrous near-scandal that people are still tittering over. A situation like that is a natural for us. Lunko has already sent the script on ahead. It's funny enough to tickle the town, but not so raw it will make the principals sore. We will deal with them in the usual way, when they come backstage after the show."

"Uh, huh," said Neville, and asked to see the descriptions. They lit up the projector and began running three-dimensional views of their intended victims. The preliminary studies had been most comprehensive and Neville knew before the hour was up that not a mannerism or intonation of voice had been overlooked. To persons skilled in disguise the problem was not so much one of imitation, but of introducing a telling imperfection that would allay suspicion of a possible more perfect imitation later.

The remainder of their time until the showboat came, they spent in gruelling rehearsals.

NEVILLE watched the show from the wings and was gratified to note the considerable sprinkling of plainclothes-men in the audience. The show was good, as it had been before, and the audience was highly enthusiastic. Then came the curtain call and the announcement of the special performance. When the lights were down and his cue came, Neville walked on and performed his silly role. Then there was a hubbub of applause and wild calls for an encore. A few minutes later the two men they had lampooned came backstage, grinning sheepishly, yet apparently resolved to show themselves good sports.

"You would have more privacy in the dressing rooms," suggested Lunko suavely, and ushered each into the private closet of the man who had just mimicked him. Neville found himself face to face with a near-double.

"Step on it," said Lunko harshly, who had followed. He flicked on a peculiarly brilliant overhead light, and the startled victim looked up at it with the helpless, hopeless gaze of a lamb being led to the slaughter. "Change your makeup while I drag the dope out of him. I've got another one to do after this, you know."

Neville grunted and began plucking away the comedy elements of his burlesque get-up. Then, with the deftness of long experience he made his appearance match the poor dupe's to the chair. Meanwhile Lunko had forced his victim into the depths of hypnotic trance and was extracting all the secret knowledge that the snooping jackals had been unable to obtain indirectly.

"You've got it all, now?" asked Lunko, impatiently, "The combination of his safe, his office and home habits? I've drained him dry, I believe."

Neville nodded.

"Stand back, you fool!" screamed Lunko, as Neville awkwardly stepped against him just as he was about to swing the bludgeon that would finish the now valueless victim, "we've just time to get this one into the incinerator...."

He never finished, for at that instant Neville sprang from the balls of his feet and a heavy fist smashed into the blackmailer's jaw with a crash that told of a shattered jawbone. Another battering ram of a fist smashed him to the floor.

Neville's high-frequency whistle was out and the shrill, inaudible alarm tingling on the breasts of the key men waiting outside. Then he was dashing for the adjoining dressing room where a similar little drama was just being brought to its close. A swift jab of fire from the blaster that appeared magically in Neville's hand sent the actor to his death. Other policemen were dashing up and the second hypnotist suddenly lost interest in his surroundings, going down onto his knees, a mass of battered pulp.

Then Neville sat down and began thoughtfully removing the makeup he so detested.

"I wonder," he complained to himself, "whether I'm ever going to get that leave."

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13: Shivering in the Dark

Anthony Abbot

Fulton Oursler 1893-1952

The Illustrated Detective Magazine May 1932

This magazine specialised in photo-illustrated stories in which celebrities themselves posed for scenes from fictional stories (with themselves as characters) by established detective authors. A somewhat specialised genre for sure! Actress Jean Harlow (1911-1937) was also given author credit in the magazine. Author "Anthony Abbott" (real name Fulton Oursler) puts himself in the story twice, both as Abbott and Oursler, which, as published, begins immediately below:

JEAN HARLOW and Anthony Abbot invite you to another of the season's unique mystery parties

EDITOR'S NOTE

"WON'T you come to our Mystery Party at midnight in the studio of the Tower Magazines?" This was the invitation recently given to an imposing list of celebrities by Miss Jean Harlow, famous and beautiful film star, and Anthony Abbot, the noted detective story writer. The guests were promised an exciting evening; but they did not know just how exciting it was going to be, nor that they had all been cast as characters in a new mystery story, written by Anthony Abbot and starring Jean Harlow, which was acted out and photographed as a part of the program of the party. Those present included: Jean Harlow, her stepfather (Dr. Marino Bello), George Creel, The Princess Kropotkin, Grace Perkins, Fulton Oursler, Arthur Garfield Hays, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Paddock, Lorimer Hammond, Mr. and Mrs. George Sylvester Viereck, John Mulholland, Carl Brandt, Carol Hill, and Nannine Joseph. Mr. Abbotts story, "*Shivering in the Dark*," which formed the basis for the mystery party, follows:

JEAN HARLOW will never forget it!

The cinema beauty with platinum tresses, favorite of millions of fans, and heroine of many dangers of the silver screen's make believe, now knows that life itself has its drama and its melodrama, its terror and danger and heart-break.

For Jean has just passed through three nights of mystery and horror more incredible than any scenario writer's dream.

It all happened during her recent visit to New York. She was in the East for a series of personal appearances at the great picture theatres of the metropolitan area. Never was a star more happily received. It seemed as if all the East were eager to show her hospitality. Her days and nights were a ceaseless round of public and private entertainments. There were times when the young actress

felt exhausted; when she was grateful for the refuge of the charming apartment where she, her mother and her step-father, Dr. Marino Bello, were staying.

The apartment was leased by a school-girl friend of Jean, who was going to Northern Africa on her honeymoon. When the bride learned that Jean was coming to New York, she mailed her the key to her apartment— on one of the high floors of an immense modern building overlooking the East River—and urged Jean to make use of the suite.

Jean was glad to accept this courtesy. She and her mother thought the rooms homelike and most attractive. Outwardly there was not the slightest hint of the creepy mystery which was soon to conceal itself behind the tasteful draperies and massive doors.

One night, Jean's mother and step-father were called out of town— by the illness of an old friend. Jean was not worried about being left alone. She is a realistic person, without a single superstition. After a weary day of meeting many people, in addition to appearances on the stage, she was glad to slip under the covers and fall promptly asleep.

PERHARS it was two hours later— certainly no more— when Jean opened her eyes. She felt vaguely alarmed. Something unusual had broken into her sound slumbers. She turned over in bed, raised herself on her elbow and listened with a sense of dazed, incredible curiosity.

The radio was playing!

"What a funny thing!" Jean thought, drowsily. "I could have sworn I turned that machine off before I went to bed!"

Whether, she had turned it off, or not, the radio was now playing a haunting melody. The machine was tuned in to a very low pitch, undeniably connected with some distant station. Suddenly the announcer spoke. Cleveland Ohio! An orchestra has just played *The Funeral March of a Marionette*.

With regret for her neglect, Jean Harlow sprang lithely to the floor. The girl who had captured the heart of the public with *Hell's Angels* and other brilliant performances, slipped tiny feet into platinum mules and pattered across the floor to the radio. She pressed the lever that turned off the current. Instantly there was silence in the room and the girl switched on the electric light to look at the time. A quarter past one, A. M.

Jean stretched her arms and yawned. It worried her that her sleep should have been disturbed, for tomorrow would be an especially exacting day. She must make several personal appearances, and she had promised to hold a reception on the stage for the Brooklyn children, and introduce them to the circus stars appearing on the same program— the clown, the midget, the acrobat and the juggler. Also she must go over the script of her next picture,

which had been sent from Hollywood by airplane mail. Also three speeches and two teas before dinner— she must get back to sleep!

Shivering a little in her sheer silk night-gown, over which she had not stopped to throw a negligee, the actress turned out the light. Back in bed, she found her fear of insomnia only a phantom. Before her head had rested on the pillow for a full minute, her eyes were shut again and she was breathing softly and regularly.

IT seemed to Jean Harlow that almost no time had passed when she was aroused a second time. She sat up, startled, unbelieving. It couldn't be so! Yet she could not doubt the evidence of her ears. Faint and far away it sounded, as it began to penetrate her sleep-drugged brain— music! It was jazz— radio jazz— and Jean had turned off that radio!

With a little gasp of fear, she started up to a sitting position. The rhythm grew clearer, louder. Undoubtedly, the radio was on again, tuned to fully half its potential volume. The apartment was echoing with the clamor of syncopation.

Shivering in the dark, Jean cowered against the pillow. What could it mean? Somebody had turned on that radio both times, while she slept. Somebody must be hiding in the apartment! And she was alone!

A dozen ideas scampered incoherently through her mind. She could scream— but who would hear her, through the thick walls of this high apartment? She could make a rush for the door. But she might be. seized in mid-flight.

The dread became insupportable. Anything would be better than sitting there, just waiting in the dark. She resolved to push the button and fill the room with light. And then she saw something that paralyzed her outstretched hand.

A face moved swiftly across the bottom of the bed, as if floating in the ether above the blankets. It was a fantastic countenance. Half a skull! Half like some strange, misshapen beast!

Cowering backwards, now fully awake, Jean covered her face with her hands. For an instant her heart Stopped beating, then pounded harder than ever.

What was this nightmare terror? Unable to bear it any longer, she reached out and touched the electric button, instantly flooding the room with a clear, soft light.

Rapidly her eyes searched every corner. But she saw nothing. The radio played, but there was no sign of the mysterious agency which had turned it on. The room seemed empty of any other human tenant except herself.

"Is there anybody here?" Jean called, faintly.

No answer. Jean waited and watched, surprised to find herself getting angrier every minute. Who would dare to treat her like this? In one bound she

left the bed once more, got into mules and wrap and began a determined search. First, after the manner of centuries of women, she looked under the bed. Then she hunted in closets, behind draperies, in every nook and corner.

But Jean Harlow found no one— nothing— no trace of any intruder— anywhere in the apartment.

It seemed as if she had heard and witnessed the utterly impossible. The doors were all securely locked from the inside. The windows opened on a sheer drop of fourteen stories to the street.

What did it all mean?

UNTIL daylight Jean Harlow sat in an armchair, with a fur coat over her night gown, in a brilliantly lighted apartment. Watchful and waiting, she sat there, trying to think it out. And as hour succeeded hour, she began to wonder if she had dreamed it all. Or had her nerves got the best of her? The more she reflected, the more reasonable the theory seemed.

"I had a waking nightmare," she decided. "It would be ridiculous to tell anyone."

So she kept the entire experience strictly to herself. Her friends looked at her tired eyes and told her they thought she needed a rest. Throughout the long day's activities at the studio from the stage reception with the cireus people until the last performance she kept telling herself the mysteries of the night before were only imagined fantasies, a kind of waking dream that had confronted her.

"I'm going home early tonight," she decided, ''and get a good night's rest."

Her rooms were tranquil when she got back to them. Mother telephoned from the sanitarium, where she was helping her friend. Alone in the apartment, Jean could not bring herself to touch the radio, but otherwise her state of mind was normal. She retired early. By a little after midnight she was sound asleep.

When she opened her eyes again the bedroom was flooded with sunshine. Nothing had happened! It was well into the morning and Jean felt refreshed and exhilarated. More than ever she felt sure that she had been imagining things. Singing before breakfast, she quaked under her cold shower and then went to the wardrobe.

With a gasp she stared at the strange sight she found there! Jean had not been imagining things!

While she slept some one had once more visited her apartment; had prowled through the darkened rooms, reached her wardrobe and fallen upon her lovely clothes every hat, every pair of stockings Jean Harlow owned had been ripped, torn, slashed, pulled out of seams, and irretrievably ruined!

Back into the living room tottered Jean Harlow, one hand thrown helplessly across her forehead. Her eyes were closed and her thoughts were reeling. For a

moment she wondered if she were going mad. She had heard of such things. Attacks of amnesia or even sleep-walking in which the victims destroyed their own most cherished possessions. At the thought of the wanton sabotage of her beautiful clothes Jean felt the tears rising to her eyes and sobs choking her throat. She was about to fall on the chaise longue in a storm of weeping— when something behind the pillows moved.

Hands at her ears and screaming, Jean backed hastily from the couch. A low, wailing cry came from the pillows— and then she came face to face and voice to voice with the creature. It was a cat, a silvery Siamese, with glowing, diabolesque eyes. The sight of it snapped her over-taut nerves and, still screaming frantically, she rushed to the door and threw it open.

The maid came and summoned the housekeeper and the housekeeper called the manager. The latter soon convinced the trembling girl that the cat was a harmless intruder. Probably the animal was a pet of some other tenant who had followed a maid into the rooms and lain hidden.

"All well enough," conceded Jean, forcing a smile, "but how about my wardrobe?"

Reilly was aghast. He promptly sent for the house detective and offered to call in the city police. But here Jean demurred. She was not anxious for such dubious publicity. The services of the apartment house investigator would be sufficient.

But the house detective, whose name was Morton, was not a Sherlock Holmes. He looked at the wreck of the magnificent Harlow wardrobe and scratched his head. No theory, he said, had as yet occurred to him. But that night— Mrs. Harlow still being absent— he promised to stand sentinel outside the door, which was to be unlocked. At the first scream from the actress, Morton was to rush into the room.

IT was this that decided Jean to take none of her friends into her confidence. The story sounded so preposterous that she was sure none of them would believe her.

"I'll face one more night of it," she decided, putting away new clothes, bought that afternoon. "And with Morton just outside the door I won't be afraid— not much, anyhow— unless I see that floating face again!"

But Jean found it hard to fall asleep on that third night. She rolled and tossed feverishly and then lay in long, trancelike periods of quiet, listening for the slightest sound. Finally she fell into a fitful sleep. When morning came, everything seemed serene; she opened the door and found Morton sitting on a chair just outside her door, fast asleep.

Five minutes later she made another disconcerting discovery. All her jewelry had been ruined! While she slept— and no doubt while Morton slept— the

diabolical visitor had returned. With some hammer-like tool he had battered bracelets, wrist-watch, rings and necklaces into junk.

Jean now had enough. Out of the apartment house she hurried and down to Exchange Place, where presently she was in conference with the celebrated New York lawyer, Arthur Garfield Hays, hero of many a legal battle. To Hays she told her incredible experiences.

"I believe every word of what you tell me," said Hays. "It looks to me as if you have some neurotic enemy, determined to torment you. It may be a case of persecution mania, *dementia praecox*— and your danger may be much greater than you suppose. But the culprit, whoever it is or whatever it is, must be a miracle man. There's no place to hide, you say— and yet he hides!"

"Mr. Hays," asked Jean, "do you believe in ghosts or anything like that?"

"Emphatically I do not," was Hays' reply. But any lawyer would give the same answer.

AT Hays' request, that same afternoon Inspector Michael Lodge, head of the Lodge Detective Agency and formerly a deputy commissioner of the New York Police Department, took charge of the case. After a talk with his new client, Lodge went to her apartment, while Jean hurried off to the theater. At the apartment, Michael Lodge was met with an instant manifestation of the malevolent force that seemed to stalk invisibly through those rooms.

House Detective Morton, who had stayed behind to guard the apartment in Jean Harlow's absence, was lying cozily on the rug apparently asleep once more. But Morton was not asleep. He was unconscious. Some one had slugged him from behind with a small club. When he awoke he could tell Inspector Lodge nothing valuable.

"One thing I know," he stated dazedly, "and that is there was nobody in this room. I searched it. And I locked myself in. And I hid in the closet and waited. 'The door was shut. And I was hit on the head in there. And somebody dragged me out here."

Lodge nodded thoughtfully and sent Morton away to have his head bandaged. Alone in the rooms, he made his own search, but with no impressive results. There seemed to be no clues. Presently he was joined by May Carey, his beautiful girl assistant, and the two of them talked out the case, as was their habit, at great length.

Their talk did not lead them very far, at first, but they had yet to talk to the manager of the apartment house, who was inclined to be a little skeptical of Jean's story. Many an actress had stayed under his roof, he didn't mind telling you. And sometimes they had queer notions.

"Who else lives on this floor?" demanded Inspector Lodge, by no means impressed with the manager's skepticism.

"The Princess Kropotkin is staying on the left. She lives there with her husband, Lorimer Hammond, the journalist. They are both friends of Miss Harlow's. To the right, there is a single room which has been reserved, but not occupied as yet. A Mr. Dingle engaged it by mail and had his baggage Sene, in. We are expecting him anyway."

"We'll visit both places now, if you don't mind."

In Princess Alexandra Kropotkin's suite, they found a fluttered maid, who said that her mistress was expected back at five o'clock. Lodge asked a few routine questions, but did not spend much time there. The vacant room on the other side was equally disappointing. The shades were drawn, and in the middle of the floor stood two suitcases and a trunk labeled with the name of "John P. Dingle." The place had evidently not been occupied for some time.

RETURNING to the Harlow suite, he went over every inch of the three rooms in a hunt for clues, then gave it up, shaking his head.

"I can't find a thing," he said to May. "No tracks or fingerprints. Nothing dropped from the guy's pocket. Its too bad we weren't called earlier."

At that moment, Jean Harlow came in, breathless. Lodge was glad to see her and presented May Carey.

"I'II be asking you, of course, whether you know of any enemy who might go to such desperate lengths to injure you," Lodge began.

"No, Inspector!" The platinum blonde beauty was positive about that.

"You haven't quarreled with anybody out at the Hollywood studio? Haven't given cause for professional jealousy?" he persisted.

"Not that I know of."

"Well, this has the earmarks of vengeance by a criminal maniac— probably a man— who's out to torture you mentally before he goes to something worse. It's serious. One act of vandalism might have been just a malicious stunt, but a series of them points to a plot. Hm!" Lodge changed the drift of his remarks brusquely: "By the way, have you used the radio since you last cut off the ghost music?"

She shuddered.

"I'd have died rather than touch it."

"Good!" he exclaimed, thinking as a detective and not of her feelings. "Then the knob used to tune in may carry the skulker's fingerprints."

He moved over to the radio cabinet and carefully unscrewed the part in question, which he handed to May.

"Take it down to the office, me darlin', and have 'em put through a rush job of developing the evidence and making an enlarged photograph. Get the print to me as quick as you can."

The girl operative was gone in an instant, and Lodge turned back to Miss Harlow.

"I've been thinking up a scheme," he announced. "I want you to throw a party tonight."

She stiffened, as though she resented his making fun of her.

"A party— feeling the way I do!"

"I'm not kidding. You have no shows tonight. Ask a bunch of friends for after dinner. You can take them a little into your confidence— but only a little. Tip them to pretend to go home early. They all leave— except May and myself, who will remain in the kitchen and the living room. You, Miss Harlow, must go to bed. Put out all your lights. We shall leave the back door in the corridor unlocked— your friends slip back into the living room. In the dark— all silent— difficult as it is, I can manage every bit of this— see?"

"Yes— and no! You expect to catch the creature with the help of all my friends?"

"If you put it that way—"

"But why not detectives all over the place, instead of my friends, who might be scared out of their wits?"

Lodge smiled.

"Now you are asking for a lecture on criminal psychology. I haven't the time — only get this. Vanity is the undoing of most criminals. I think our fellow will discover our plans in advance. In fact, I'm counting on it. But his vanity will make him so anxious to impress all these celebrities—"

Jean laughed.

"Do you really believe that?"

"I've been chasing criminals for forty years," Lodge reminded her.

Jean did some rapid thinking.

"I've been promising to give a reception for John Mulholland, the magician. He's terribly busy, but I shall try to get him to come on short notice. Then there's the Princess Kropotkin and her husband, from next door."

"Okay. Who else?"

"I could ask Arthur Garfield Hays. Any number of writers—George Creel, George Sylvester Viereck and his wife, Charley Paddock, the sprinter, and his prenty wife. Carol Hill, Carl Brandt, Nannine Joseph, all literary agents. Beatrice Doner, a singer, who lives 'in the house, I'm picking people who are all within easy reach. Then I expect my mother and stepfather home tonight, too."

"Fine," said Lodge. "If you think of a few more, ask them, too. Now I advise you to dine out and try to forget this business for a little while. You may need all your nerve for later on. I want you to be in bed by eleven sharp."

LEFT to himself shortly afterwards, Lodge resumed his investigation. He unearthed no clues, but then he had not expected to do so. He was dealing, he felt certain, with a crafty and bloodthirsty creature who had charted his course in advance and would be hard to catch. Though he had stopped short of saying it to Miss Harlow, Lodge believed that the mysterious fiend was working up to a murder.

At seven o'clock, the detective coolly abandoned the rooms and went downstairs to eat. He hoped that his foe would enter during his absence and perhaps leave a trace of his passage. But in this he was disappointed. He found only May Carey waiting for him outside the door of the suite. She handed him the photographic print he had ordered, and his eyes lit up.

"Snappy work, me darlin'," he said.

They went in together, and he turned on the lights to examine the photo. He scrutinized it for a long time in silence, then raised haggard eyes. May's face, also, was touched with panic.

"Why, the fingerprints on that radio knob are as small as those of a baby," he muttered. "A seven-year-old child would have left larger marks."

She nodded.

"I saw that. Wh-hat on Earth can it mean?"

The detective was astonished at the swift flood of Irish superstition that had welled up in him. But the next moment, the two of them took a grip on their imaginations, and became keen, logical detectives once more. Jean Harlow found them intently on the job when she returned from dinner.

Soon the guests began to arrive, and by nine o'clock more than a dozen were present. The hostess had asked several whom she had not mentioned when first making up her list. Gaiety effervesced as if no one had the least idea of impending tragedy. Yet all knew, at least a little, of the excitement that might be impending. Her stepfather, Dr. Marino Bello, never went far from Jean's side, and his watchful eyes were on the alert for any danger that might suddenly threaten this beautiful screen idol.

The magician, John Mulholland, most brilliant of the younger practitioners of an ancient art, set out his props on a little square table and proceeded to amaze the visitors with his dexterity. He performed the birdcage trick, in which canary as well as cage disappeared inexplicably when thrown into the air. He linked and unlinked a series of apparently solid metal rings. He filled a cup with water plucked from the air. Calling upon Arthur Garfield Hays and W. Adolphe Roberts, the writer, to act as magician's assistants, he performed marvels such as no one present had seen or dreamed of, with a pack of playing cards.

At a prearranged signal by Inspector Lodge, however, the party apparently broke up. Jean Harlow retired to bed and the suite was plunged into darkness. Then, one by one, the celebrities sidled back in from the corridor and took their

places in chairs, or standing tightly packed against the wall farthest from the windows. Lodge had posted himself nearest to the door of the bedroom, which had been left open. He had caleulated how to reach in a bound an electric switch by one of the windows that would light up the whole apartment.

A complete and eerie silence reigned. The guests were controlling their very breathing. So still it was the place might indeed have been untenanted. Yet the cards had been cleverly stacked against the intruder, should he come.

Without warning, the quiet exploded in a hell of noise. A crashing and splintering of glass was heard in Jean's room, and some heavy object fell to the floor with a jangle of additional breakage. Like a lost soul the motion picture actress screamed in her bed. The other women joined their shrieks to hers, and the men swore.

Lodge leaped toward the switch, as he had planned. But before he could press it, a small, furry, crouching thing that seemed neither human nor animal whizzed past him and vanished through the open window. He caught one glimpse of the creature—a bearlike monstrosity. In all his years of crime hunting, the Inspector had never known a thrill of horror to equal the one that beset him now. His scalp tingled and his spinal column turned to ice.

He had lost no time, nevertheless, in turning on the lights and then dashing into the bedroom, with sturdy Arthur Garfield Hays and the miracle-man Mulholland closest at his heels.

JEAN HARLOW was lying face down, her platinum hair spread over the pillow and covered with fragments of chipped glass. She turned over, brushing away the debris, and sobbed:

"The— the thing jumped out from under the bed. It had— had been hiding there."

On the floor were the remains of a huge mirror, which had missed Miss Harlow by inches. That it had been intended to fall squarely upon her and crush her to death could hardly be doubted. It had been hanging in a position which rendered this probable, but the frame had struck the head of her bed sidewise and had been deflected.

Lodge assured himself that she had not been wounded, then left her to the ministrations of her friends. He returned to the living room. The detective went straight to the window through which the mysterious being had seemed to catapult itself. There was a sheer drop to the street of several hundred feet!

Could the monster fly? As Lodge leaned out and flashed his pocket torch in search of evidence, he saw that there was a ledge connecting all the windows on that side of the building. But it was a ledge far too narrow even for an acrobat. Nevertheless, Lodge felt suspicious. The apartment: next to that particular

window was the one that had been reserved for the individual named John P. Dingle. And Lodge had been wondering about the absent Mr. Dingle.

Swinging around, Lodge beckoned to May, and then dropped his hand on George Sylvester Viereck's shoulder.

"Will you come along and help us?" he asked in an urgent voice.

"Certainly," replied the author.

The three left the suite, and with a pass key, the detective unlocked the door of the adjoining room. It was still unoccupied and innocent-looking, the shades down, and the trunk and two suitcases in the center of the floor.

"Please stand by and see that no one gets through the doorway," Lodge asked Viereck, and without waiting for an answer he started on a rapid tour of the place.

He searched in the bathroom, in the single closet and under the bed. But strangely, he seemed half-hearted in his search. His eyes kept turning back continuously to the apparently harmless pieces of baggage on the carpet.

Then, with a brusque movement, he leaped towards them. He seized the lid of the trunk aud wrenched at it, ignoring the lock. It cracked and gave way a little. Something that was not a steel bolt was holding it from the inside. It came up a few inches, and finally yielded with a rush.

As the lid flew up, the astounded May and Viereck, goggle-eyed, saw, hanging on to a leather strap in the form of a loop, fastened on the inner side of the lid, a tiny creature, alive and human— a manikin— a midget!

Lodge caught the creature by the scruff of his neck, pulled him loose and stood him on the carpet. He was not more than two feet tall, a correctly proportioned man dressed in a swallowtailed coat and with an old-looking, wizened face.

"You're a circus midget— on the same bill with Jean Harlow— that's what you are," the Inspector charged. "What the hell's the idea of this monkey business?"

The midget did not answer. His lips twisted in an evil grin. His eyes seemed unnaturally bright.

"Looks as if he was out of his mind," Lodge muttered, and still holding his captive by the collar he peered into the trunk.

One by one, he removed a bear-skin costume and a luminous mask which represented a human skull. Then a hammer, a knife and a short length of stove pipe.

He looked more closely and felt the inner surface of the trunk with his hand.

"Holes have been bored in the sides— air holes. It's as clear as mud that this fellow engaged the room so as to be right next to his victim, and then had himself shipped here in the trunk. It's been his hiding place ever since, of course."

The midget maintained a stubborn silence, until Lodge barked at him:

"Speak up. Why did you do it? Come clean."

"I loved her," the little man cried, shrilly.

Viereck gasped.

"What next!" he cried.

"An obsession of the kind is the thing to look for in these cases," explained Lodge, gravely. "Well just take him in to Miss Harlow and see whether she recognizes him."

They dragged the midget to the adjoining suite, where they found the visiting celebrities condoling with the star, as she recounted the sensations of terror she had so recently suffered. The moment she laid eyes on the prisoner, she gasped:

"Its Joe Gobbo. He's been working in the same theaters with me—"

"I thought so. What did you do to hurt his feelings?"

"Hurt him— Why, inspector, I scarcely knew him. I never—"

The midget interrupted. In a piercing, thin voice like a bat's squeaking, he told how he had adored her, and how once when he had hinted on the lot that he would like to see her alone, she had laughed carelessly. He had brooded over the rebuff, as he considered it. He had taken to drink, and his grief, becoming more and more intense, his love had turned to hate. With gruesome reiteration, he boasted that he had intended to destroy her at the end, and now he wished that he could die.

Lodge thought:

"It'll be a nasty job putting this pathetic fellow through the works and sending him to State Penitentiary."

But Joe Gobbo spared him the ordeal. By the time that he had finished his confession, he had gone hopelessly insane.

The keepers of a certain sanitarium say that the midget is quite harmless now. His only amusement is cutting pietures of Jean Harlow from magazines and newspapers, and pasting them upon the walls of his pleasant little room.

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14: The Hound

H. P. Lovecraft

1890-1937

Weird Tales Feb 1924

IN MY TORTURED ears there sounds unceasingly a nightmare whirring and flapping, and a faint, distant baying as of some gigantic hound. It is not dream— it is not, I fear, even madness— for too much has already happened to give me these merciful doubts. St. John is a mangled corpse; I alone know why, and such is my knowledge that I am about to blow out my brains for fear I shall be mangled in the same way. Down unlit and illimitable corridors of eldritch phantasy sweeps the black, shapeless Nemesis that drives me to self-annihilation.

May heaven forgive the folly and morbidity which led us both to so monstrous a fate! Wearied with the commonplaces of a prosaic world, where even the joys of romance and adventure soon grow stale, St. John and I had followed enthusiastically every aesthetic and intellectual movement which promised respite from our devastating ennui. The enigmas of the Symbolists and the ecstasies of the pre-Raphaelites all were ours in their time, but each new mood was drained too soon of its diverting novelty and appeal. Only the sombre philosophy of the Decadents could hold us, and this we found potent only by increasing gradually the depth and diabolism of our penetrations. Baudelaire and Huysmans were soon exhausted of thrills, till finally there remained for us only the more direct stimuli of unnatural personal experiences and adventures. It was this frightful emotional need which led us eventually to that detestable course which even in my present fear I mention with shame and timidity— that hideous extremity of human outrage, the abhorred practice of grave-robbing.

I cannot reveal the details of our shocking expeditions, or catalogue even partly the worst of the trophies adorning the nameless museum we prepared in the great stone house where we jointly dwelt, alone and servantless. Our museum was a blasphemous, unthinkable place, where with the satanic taste of neurotic virtuosi we had assembled an universe of terror and decay to excite our jaded sensibilities. lt was a secret room, far, far underground; where huge winged daemons carven of basalt and onyx vomited from wide grinning mouths weird green and orange light, and hidden pneumatic pipes ruffled into kaleidoscopic dances of death the lines of red charnel things hand in hand woven in voluminous black hangings. Through these pipes came at will the odours our moods most craved; sometimes the scent of pale funeral lilies, sometimes the narcotic incense of imagined Eastern shrines of the kingly dead, and sometimes— how I shudder to recall it!— the frightful, soul-upheaving stenches of the uncovered grave.

Around the walls of this repellent chamber were cases of antique mummies alternating with comely, life-like bodies perfectly stuffed and cured by the taxidermist's art, and with headstones snatched from the oldest churchyards of the world. Niches here and there contained skulls of all shapes, and heads preserved in various stages of dissolution. There one might find the rotting, bald pates of famous noblemen, and the fresh and radiantly golden heads of new-buried children. Statues and paintings there were, all of fiendish subjects and some executed by St. John and myself. A locked portfolio, bound in tanned human skin, held certain unknown and unnamable drawings which it was rumoured Goya had perpetrated but dared not acknowledge. There were nauseous musical instruments, stringed, brass, and wood-wind, on which St. John and I sometimes produced dissonances of exquisite morbidity and cacodaemoniacal ghastliness; whilst in a multitude of inlaid ebony cabinets reposed the most incredible and unimaginable variety of tomb-loot ever assembled by human madness and perversity. It is of this loot in particular that I must not speak— thank God I had the courage to destroy it long before I thought of destroying myself.

The predatory excursions on which we collected our unmentionable treasures were always artistically memorable events. We were no vulgar ghouls, but worked only under certain conditions of mood, landscape, environment, weather, season, and moonlight. These pastimes were to us the most exquisite form of aesthetic expression, and we gave their details a fastidious technical care. An inappropriate hour, a jarring lighting effect, or a clumsy manipulation of the damp sod, would almost totally destroy for us that ecstatic titillation which followed the exhumation of some ominous, grinning secret of the earth. Our quest for novel scenes and piquant conditions was feverish and insatiate— St. John was always the leader, and he it was who led the way at last to that mocking, that accursed spot which brought us our hideous and inevitable doom.

By what malign fatality were we lured to that terrible Holland churchyard? I think it was the dark rumour and legendry, the tales of one buried for five centuries, who had himself been a ghoul in his time and had stolen a potent thing from a mighty sepulchre. I can recall the scene in these final moments— the pale autumnal moon over the graves, casting long horrible shadows; the grotesque trees, drooping sullenly to meet the neglected grass and the crumbling slabs; the vast legions of strangely colossal bats that flew against the moon; the antique ivied church pointing a huge spectral finger at the livid sky; the phosphorescent insects that danced like death-fires under the yews in a distant corner; the odours of mould, vegetation, and less explicable things that mingled feebly with the night-wind from over far swamps and seas; and worst of all, the faint deep-toned baying of some gigantic hound which we could neither see nor definitely place. As we heard this suggestion of baying we shuddered,

remembering the tales of the peasantry; for he whom we sought had centuries before been found in this selfsame spot, torn and mangled by the claws and teeth of some unspeakable beast.

I remembered how we delved in this ghoul's grave with our spades, and how we thrilled at the picture of ourselves, the grave, the pale watching moon, the horrible shadows, the grotesque trees, the titanic bats, the antique church, the dancing death-fires, the sickening odours, the gently moaning night-wind, and the strange, half-heard, directionless baying, of whose objective existence we could scarcely be sure. Then we struck a substance harder than the damp mould, and beheld a rotting oblong box crusted with mineral deposits from the long undisturbed ground. It was incredibly tough and thick, but so old that we finally pried it open and feasted our eyes on what it held.

Much— amazingly much— was left of the object despite the lapse of five hundred years. The skeleton, though crushed in places by the jaws of the thing that had killed it, held together with surprising firmness, and we gloated over the clean white skull and its long, firm teeth and its eyeless sockets that once had glowed with a charnel fever like our own. In the coffin lay an amulet of curious and exotic design, which had apparently been worn around the sleeper's neck. It was the oddly conventionalised figure of a crouching winged hound, or sphinx with a semi-canine face, and was exquisitely carved in antique Oriental fashion from a small piece of green jade. The expression on its features was repellent in the extreme, savouring at once of death, bestiality, and malevolence. Around the base was an inscription in characters which neither St. John nor I could identify; and on the bottom, like a maker's seal, was graven a grotesque and formidable skull.

Immediately upon beholding this amulet we knew that we must possess it; that this treasure alone was our logical pelf from the centuried grave. Even had its outlines been unfamiliar we would have desired it, but as we looked more closely we saw that it was not wholly unfamiliar. Alien it indeed was to all art and literature which sane and balanced readers know, but we recognised it as the thing hinted of in the forbidden Necronomicon of the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred; the ghastly soul-symbol of the corpse-eating cult of inaccessible Leng, in Central Asia. All too well did we trace the sinister lineaments described by the old Arab daemonologist; lineaments, he wrote, drawn from some obscure supernatural manifestation of the souls of those who vexed and gnawed at the dead.

Seizing the green jade object, we gave a last glance at the bleached and cavern-eyed face of its owner and closed up the grave as we found it. As we hastened from that abhorrent spot, the stolen amulet in St. John's pocket, we thought we saw the bats descend in a body to the earth we had so lately rifled, as if seeking for some cursed and unholy nourishment. But the autumn moon

shone weak and pale, and we could not be sure. So, too, as we sailed the next day away from Holland to our home, we thought we heard the faint distant baying of some gigantic hound in the background. But the autumn wind moaned sad and wan, and we could not be sure.

Less than a week after our return to England, strange things began to happen. We lived as recluses; devoid of friends, alone, and without servants in a few rooms of an ancient manorhouse on a bleak and unfrequented moor; so that our doors were seldom disturbed by the knock of the visitor. Now, however, we were troubled by what seemed to be frequent fumblings in the night, not only around the doors but around the windows also, upper as well as lower. Once we fancied that a large, opaque body darkened the library window when the moon was shining against it, and another time we thought we heard a whirring or flapping sound not far off. On each occasion investigation revealed nothing, and we began to ascribe the occurrences to imagination alone— that same curiously disturbed imagination which still prolonged in our ears the faint far baying we thought we had heard in the Holland churchyard. The jade amulet now reposed in a niche in our museum, and sometimes we burned strangely scented candles before it. We read much in Alhazred's *Necronomicon* about its properties, and about the relation of ghouls' souls to the objects it symbolised; and were disturbed by what we read. Then terror came.

On the night of September 24, 19—, I heard a knock at my chamber door. Fancying it St. John's, I bade the knocker enter, but was answered only by a shrill laugh. There was no one in the corridor. When I aroused St. John from his sleep, he professed entire ignorance of the event, and became as worried as I. It was that night that the faint, distant baying over the moor became to us a certain and dreaded reality. Four days later, whilst we were both in the hidden museum, there came a low, cautious scratching at the single door which led to the secret library staircase. Our alarm was now divided, for besides our fear of the unknown, we had always entertained a dread that our grisly collection might be discovered. Extinguishing all lights, we proceeded to the door and threw it suddenly open; whereupon we felt an unaccountable rush of air, and heard as if receding far away a queer combination of rustling, tittering, and articulate chatter. Whether we were mad, dreaming, or in our senses, we did not try to determine. We only realised, with the blackest of apprehensions, that the apparently disembodied chatter was beyond a doubt in the Dutch language.

After that we lived in growing horror and fascination. Mostly we held to the theory that we were jointly going mad from our life of unnatural excitements, but sometimes it pleased us more to dramatise ourselves as the victims of some creeping and appalling doom. Bizarre manifestations were now too frequent to count. Our lonely house was seemingly alive with the presence of some malign being whose nature we could not guess, and every night that daemoniac baying

rolled over the windswept moor, always louder and louder. On October 29 we found in the soft earth underneath the library window a series of footprints utterly impossible to describe. They were as baffling as the hordes of great bats which haunted the old manor-house in unprecedented and increasing numbers.

The horror reached a culmination on November 18, when St. John, walking home after dark from the distant railway station, was seized by some frightful carnivorous thing and torn to ribbons. His screams had reached the house, and I had hastened to the terrible scene in time to hear a whir of wings and see a vague black cloudy thing silhouetted against the rising moon. My friend was dying when I spoke to him, and he could not answer coherently. All he could do was to whisper, “The amulet— that damned thing—” Then he collapsed, an inert mass of mangled flesh.

I buried him the next midnight in one of our neglected gardens, and mumbled over his body one of the devilish rituals he had loved in life. And as I pronounced the last daemoniac sentence I heard afar on the moor the faint baying of some gigantic hound. The moon was up, but I dared not look at it. And when I saw on the dim-litten moor a wide nebulous shadow sweeping from mound to mound, I shut my eyes and threw myself face down upon the ground. When I arose trembling, I know not how much later, I staggered into the house and made shocking obeisances before the enshrined amulet of green jade.

Being now afraid to live alone in the ancient house on the moor, I departed on the following day for London, taking with me the amulet after destroying by fire and burial the rest of the impious collection in the museum. But after three nights I heard the baying again, and before a week was over felt strange eyes upon me whenever it was dark. One evening as I strolled on Victoria Embankment for some needed air, I saw a black shape obscure one of the reflections of the lamps in the water. A wind stronger than the night-wind rushed by, and I knew that what had befallen St. John must soon befall me.

The next day I carefully wrapped the green jade amulet and sailed for Holland. What mercy I might gain by returning the thing to its silent, sleeping owner I knew not; but I felt that I must at least try any step conceivably logical. What the hound was, and why it pursued me, were questions still vague; but I had first heard the baying in that ancient churchyard, and every subsequent event including St. John’s dying whisper had served to connect the curse with the stealing of the amulet. Accordingly I sank into the nethermost abysses of despair when, at an inn in Rotterdam, I discovered that thieves had despoiled me of this sole means of salvation.

The baying was loud that evening, and in the morning I read of a nameless deed in the vilest quarter of the city. The rabble were in terror, for upon an evil tenement had fallen a red death beyond the foulest previous crime of the neighbourhood. In a squalid thieves’ den an entire family had been torn to

shreds by an unknown thing which left no trace, and those around had heard all night above the usual clamour of drunken voices a faint, deep, insistent note as of a gigantic hound.

So at last I stood again in that unwholesome churchyard where a pale winter moon cast hideous shadows, and leafless trees drooped sullenly to meet the withered, frosty grass and cracking slabs, and the ivied church pointed a jeering finger at the unfriendly sky, and the night-wind howled maniacally from over frozen swamps and frigid seas. The baying was very faint now, and it ceased altogether as I approached the ancient grave I had once violated, and frightened away an abnormally large horde of bats which had been hovering curiously around it.

I know not why I went thither unless to pray, or gibber out insane pleas and apologies to the calm white thing that lay within; but, whatever my reason, I attacked the half-frozen sod with a desperation partly mine and partly that of a dominating will outside myself. Excavation was much easier than I expected, though at one point I encountered a queer interruption; when a lean vulture darted down out of the cold sky and pecked frantically at the grave-earth until I killed him with a blow of my spade. Finally I reached the rotting oblong box and removed the damp nitrous cover. This is the last rational act I ever performed.

For crouched within that centuried coffin, embraced by a close-packed nightmare retinue of huge, sinewy, sleeping bats, was the bony thing my friend and I had robbed; not clean and placid as we had seen it then, but covered with caked blood and shreds of alien flesh and hair, and leering sentiently at me with phosphorescent sockets and sharp ensanguined fangs yawning twistedly in mockery of my inevitable doom. And when it gave from those grinning jaws a deep, sardonic bay as of some gigantic hound, and I saw that it held in its gory, filthy claw the lost and fateful amulet of green jade, I merely screamed and ran away idiotically, my screams soon dissolving into peals of hysterical laughter.

Madness rides the star-wind... claws and teeth sharpened on centuries of corpses... dripping death astride a Bacchanale of bats from night-black ruins of buried temples of Belial.... Now, as the baying of that dead, fleshless monstrosity grows louder and louder, and the stealthy whirring and flapping of those accursed web-wings circles closer and closer, I shall seek with my revolver the oblivion which is my only refuge from the unnamed and unnamable.

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15: The Red Ring

William Le Queux

1864-1927

Adventure Nov 1910

THE Usborne affair, though very remarkable and presenting many curious features, was never made public, for reasons which will quickly become apparent.

It occurred in this way. Just before eight o'clock one misty morning last Autumn Captain Richard Usborne, of the Royal Engineers, and myself were strolling together up and down the platform at Liverpool Street Station, awaiting the arrival of the Hook of Holland boat-train. We had our eyes well about us, for a man was coming to London in secret, and we members of the Secret Service were there to meet him, to examine his credentials and to pass him on to the proper quarter to be questioned and to receive payment— substantial payment— for his confidential information.

I had arranged the visit of the stranger through one of our secret agents, a German living in Berlin, but as I had never met the man about to arrive we had arranged that I should hold a pale-green envelope half concealed in my handkerchief raised to my nose, and that he should do the same.

"By Jove, Jerningham," Dick Usborne was saying, "this will be a splendid coup— the revelation of all that is going on in secret at Krupp's! The Department ought to make you a special grant for such a service. I hope, however," he added, glancing about him with some suspicion, "I hope none of our German friends have wind of this visit. If so it will fare badly with him when he gets back to Essen."

I had kept my eyes well about me and was satisfied that no secret agent of Germany was present.

A moment later the train drew into the station and amid the crowd I quickly distinguished a short, stout, middle-aged man of essentially Teutonic appearance, with a handkerchief to his face and in it anenvelope exactly similar to my own.

Our greeting was hasty. Swiftly we put him into the taxi we had in readiness, and as we drove along he produced certain credentials, including a letter of introduction from my friend in Berlin.

Herr Gunther— which was the name by which we knew him— appeared extremely nervous lest his presence in London should be known, True, he was to receive for his information and for certain documents which he carried in his breast pocket two thousand pounds of Secret Service moncy, but he seemed well aware of the ruin which would befall him if the argus-eyed Government of Germany became aware of his association with us.

We had both witnessed such misgivings on the part of informants before. Therefore we repeated our assurances in German— for the stranger did not speak English, and at St. Clement Danes Church in the Strand I stopped the taxi and alighted, for Dick Usborne was to conduct our friend to the house of our chief, General Kennedy, in Curzon Street, it not being considered judicious for Gunther to be taken to the War Office.

The German was to return again by the Hook of Holland route at nine o'clock that same night, therefore he had brought no baggage. Secret visits of this character are always made swiftly. The British public are in blissful ignorance of how many foreigners come to our shores and tell us what we most desire to know— for a substantial consideration.

On the day in question I played golf at Sunningdale, for I had been some months abroad, living in a back street in Brest, as a matter of fact, and was now on leave at home. I dined at the goli-club, and about ten o'clock that night: entered my rooms in Shaftesbury Avenue, where I found a telegram lying upon the table.

It had been despatched from the Brighton station at Victoria at 6.30, and read:

Come to me at once Dick. Am at Webster's. Can not come to you.

By this message I was greatly puzzled. Webster's was a small private hotel in Wilton Road, close to Victoria— a cheap, obscure little place in which I knew Usborne had sometimes hidden himself under the name of Mr. Clarke, for we are often compelled to assume fictitious names and also to keep queer company.

Why had he so suddenly gone into hiding? What had occurred?

At once I took a cab along Victoria Street and alighted before the house which was, to all purposes, a private one save for the lamp outside which stated it to be a hotel.

The black-bearded little manager whom I had met once before told me that my friend had arrived there at noon and taken a room, but that at two o'clock he hadgone out and had not returned.

"And he left no message for me? " I asked.

"None, sir."

"Did he bring any luggage?"

"Mr. Clarke seldom brings any luggage," was the man's reply.

I was puzzled. If Dick wished to see me so urgently, he would surely have remained at the hotel. He was aware I was going out to golf, although I had not told him where I intended playing.

While we were speaking I saw a chambermaid pass, and then it occurred to me to suggest that my friend might have returned unobserved. He might even be awaiting me in his room. He had said that he was unable to come to me, which appeared that he feared to go forth lest he should be recognized. I knew that Dick Usborne, whose ingenuity and daring were unequaled by any in our service, was a marked man.

Both the manager and the chambermaid of that frowsy place expressed themselves confidant that Mr. Clarke had not returned, but at last I induced the girl to ascend to his room and ascertain.

From where I stood in the hall I heard her knock and then try the door. She rattled it, and called to him. By that I knew it was locked— on the inside.

Instantly I ran up the stairs and, banging at the door, called my comrade by name. But there was no response.

The key was still in the lock on the other side, so a few minutes later we burst open the door by force and rushed into the dark room.

The manager lighted the iron gas-jet, and by its light a startling sight was presented. Lying near the fireplace in a half-crouching position, face downward, was Dick Usborne! Quickly I turned him over and touched his face. The contact thrilled me. He was stone dead.

His eyes, still open, were glazed and stared horribly, his strong hands were clenched, his jaw had dropped, and it was plain by the contortion of the body that he had expired in agony.

Quickly suspicious of foul play, I made a rapid examination of the body. But I could find no wound or anything to account for death. A doctor, hastily summoned from round the corner in Vauxhall Bridge Road, was equally without any clue.

"Suicide, I should think," he exclaimed when he had finished his examination. " By poison, most probably, but there is no trace of it about the mouth."

Then, turning to the police-inspector who had just entered, he added:

"The door was locked on the inside. It must therefore have been suicide."

"The gentleman was a friend of yours, I believe, sir?" asked the inspector, addressing me.

I replied in the affirmative, but declared that he was certainly not the man to commit suicide.

"There's been foul play— of that I'm positive!" I declared emphatically.

"But he locked himself in," the hotel manager argued. "He must have reentered unobserved."

"He was waiting here for me. He wished to speak to me," I replied.

The theory held by all present, however, was that it was suicide, therefore the inspector expressed his intention of having the body conveyed to the Pimlico mortuary to await the usual post-mortem.

I then took him aside down-stairs and, telling him in confidence who I was and what office my dead friend held, I said:

"I must ask you, inspector, to lock up the room and leave everything undisturbed until I have made a few inquiries myself. The public must be allowed to believe it a case of suicide, but before we take any action I must consult my Chief. You, on your part, will please inform Superintendent Hutchinson of the C. I. Department at Scotland Yard that I am making investigations. That will be sufficient. He will understand."

"Very well, sir," replied the inspector, and a few moments later I left the house in a taxi and was soon seated with General Kennedy in his cozy little library in Curzon Street explaining briefly my startling discovery.

"That's most remarkable!" he cried, greatly upset at hearing of our poor colleague's death. "Captain Usborne brought the man Gunther here just after nine, and we had breakfast together. Then he left, promising to return at three to again take charge of the stranger. He arrived about a quarter past three, and both he and the German left in a four-wheeler. That is the last I saw of either of them."

"Gunther was to leave to-night on his return to Essen. Has he gone?" I asked.

"Who knows?" exclaimed the shrewd gray-headed little man.

"We must find him," I said. Then after a moment's reflection, I added: "I must go to Liverpool Street Station at once."

"I can not see what you can discover," replied the General. "If Gunther has left he would not be noticed in a crowded train. Tf he left London, he's already on the North Sea by this time," he added, glancing up at the clock.

"Usborne has been assassinated. sir," I declared with emphasis. "He was my best friend. We have often been in tight corners on the Continent together. May I be permitted to pursue the investigation myself? ''

"By all means, if you really believe it was not a case of suicide."

"It was not— of that I'm quite certain."

I was suspicious of Gunther. The German might have been an impostor after all. Yet at Webster's Dick had not been seen with any companion. He had simply gone there alone in order to wait for me.

For what reason? Aye, that was the question.

With all haste I drove down to Liverpool Street. On my way I took from my pocket a slip of paper— the receipt from a touristagency for the first-class return ticket between London and Essen which I had sent to Gunther. It bore the number of the German's ticket. At the inspector's office I was shown all the tickets collected from passengers departing by the boat-train, and among them

found the German's voucher for the journey from Liverpool Street to Parkeston Quay.

I had at least cleared up one point. Herr Gunther had left London.

On returning to the dark little hotel in Wilton Road just after midnight I found a man I knew awaiting me— Detective Inspector Barker, who had been sent to me by Superintendent Hutchinson, the uniformed police having now been withdrawn from the house.

Alone, in the small sitting-room, we took counsel. Barker I knew to be a very clever investigator of crime, his specialty being the tracing and arrest of alien criminals who seek asylum in London and for whose extradition their own countries apply.

"I've seen the body of the unfortunate gentleman," he said. "But I can detect no suspicious circumstances. Indeed, for aught I can see, he might have locked himself in and died of natural causes. Have you any theory— of enemies, for example? "

"Enemies!" I cried. "Why, Dick Usborne was the most daring agent in our Service! It was he who discovered and exposed that clever German agent Schultz, who tried to secure the plan of the new Dreadnought. Only six months ago he cleared out a nest of German spies down at Beccles, and it was he who scented and discovered the secret store of German rifles and ammunition near Burnham-on-Crouch in Essex. But probably you know nothing of that. We've kept its discovery carefully to ourselves for fear of creating a panic. Dick, however, had a narrow escape. The night he broke into the cellars of the country inn where the depot had been established he was discovered by the landlord, a Belgian. The latter secured him with a rope, witha view to handing him over next day to the tender mercies of three Germans who lived at Maldon. But Dick succeeded in snatching up the Belgian's revolver and firing a shot which broke the blackguard's arm, and so escaped. Such a man is bound to have enemies— and vengeful ones, too," I added.

The mystery was full of puzzling features. The facts known were these: At noon Dick had arrived at that place and under the name of Mr. Clarke had taken a room. Just after three o'clock he had been at Curzon Street, but after that hour nothing more had been seen of him until we had found him dead.

The chief points were, first, the reason he had so suddenly gone into hiding, and, second, why he feared to come round to my rooms, although he desired to consult me.

Sending Barker across to Victoria Station to despatch a telegram, I ascended alone to the dead man's room and, turning up the gas, made a minute investigation. Some torn paper was in the fireplace— a telegraphform. This I pieced together and in surprise found it to be a draft in pencil of the telegram I had received— but it was not in Dick's handwriting.

I searched my dead friend's pockets, but there was nothing in them of any use as clue. Men of my profession are usually very careful never to carry anything which may reveal their identity. I carefully examined even the body of Dick himself. But I confess that I could form no theory whatever as to how he had been done to death or by what means the assassin had entered or left the room.

While bending over my dead friend I thought I detected a sweet perfume, and taking out his handkerchief placed it to my nostrils. The scent was a subtle and delightful one that I never remembered having smelt before— like the fragrant odor of a cottage garden on a Summer's night. But Dick was something of a dandy, therefore it was not surprising that he should use the latest fashionable perfume.

As I gazed again upon the poor white face I noticed for the first time that upon the cheek, just below the left eye, was a slight but curious mark upon the flesh, a faint but complete red circle, perhaps a little larger than a finger ring, while outside it, at equal distances, showed four tiny spots. All was so very faint and indistinct that I had hitherto overlooked it. But now, as I struck a vesta and held it close to the dead, white countenance, I realized the existence of something which considerably increased the mystery.

When Barker returned I pointed it out, but he could form no theory of why it showed there. So I took a piece of paper from my pocket and, carefully measuring the diameter of the curious mark, drew a diagram of it, together with the four spots.

Barker and I remained there together the greater part of the night, but without gaining anything to assist toward a solution of the mystery. The servants could tell us absolutely nothing. Therefore we decided to wait until the post-mortem had been made.

This was done on the following day and when we interviewed the two medical men who made it, and Professor Sharpe, analyst to the Home Office, who had been present, the latter said:

"Well, gentlemen, the cause of death is still a complete mystery. Certain features induce us to suspect some vegetable poison, but whether self-administered we can not tell. The greater number of vegetable poisons, when diffused through the body, are beyond the reach of chemical analysis. If an extract, or inspissated juice, be administered, or if the poison were in the form of infusion, tincture or decoction, a chemical analysis would be of no avail. I am about to make an analysis, however, and will inform you of its result."

I made inquiry regarding the curious ring-like mark upon the check, but one of the doctors, in reply, answered: "It was not present to-day. It has disappeared."

So the enigma remained as complete as ever.

Next day I traveled over to Essen and there met Herr Gunther by appointment at the Rheinischer Hof. From his manner I knew at once that he was innocent of any connection with the strange affair. I had indeed made inquiry and ascertained that he was no impostor, but one of the chief foremen at Krupp's Cast Steel Works, that vast establishment which supplies several of the great Powers of Europe with cannon.

When I told him of the strange occurrence in London he stood dumbfounded.

"The Captain called for me at Curzon Street," he said in German, "and we drove in a cab to his club, in Pall Mall, I think he said it was. We had a smoke there, and then, just at dusk, he said he had a call to make, so we took a taxi-cab and drove a long way, across a bridge— over the Thames, I suppose it was.

"Presently we pulled up at the corner of a narrow street in a poor quarter and he alighted, telling me that he would be absent only ten minutes or so. I waited, but though one hour passed, he did not return. For two whole hours I waited, then, as he did not come back and I feared I should lose my train, I told the driver to go to Liverpool Street. He understood me, but he charged me eighteen marks for the fare."

"And you did not see the Captain again?"

"No. I had something to eat at the buflet and left for Germany."

"Nothing happened while you were with the Captain?" I asked. "I mean nothing which, in the light of what has occurred, might be considered suspicious?"

"Nothing whatever," was the German's reply. "He met nobody while with me. The only curious fact was the appointment he kept, and his non-return."

In vain I tried to learn into what suburb of London he had been taken; therefore that same night I again Ieft for London via Brussels and Ostend.

Next day I called upon Professor Sharpe in Wimpole Street to ascertain the result of his analysis.

"I'm sorry to say that I've been unable to detect anything. If the Captain really died of poison it may have been one of those alkaloids some of which our chemical processes can not discover in the body. It is a common fallacy that all poisons can be traced. Some of them admit of no known means of detection. A few slices of the root of the exanthe crocata, for instance, will destroy life in an hour, yet no poison of any kind has been separated from this plant. The same may be said of the African ordeal bean, and of the decoction and infusion of the bark of laburnum."

"Then you are without theory— eh?"

"Entirely, Mr. Jerningham. As regards poisoning, I may have been misled by appearances, yet my colleagues at the postmortem could find nothing to

indicate death from natural causes. It is as extraordinary, in fact, as all the other circumstances,"

I left the house in despair. All Barker's efforts to assist me had been without avail, and now that a week had passed, and my dead friend had been interred at Woking, I felt all further effort to be useless.

Perhaps, after all, I had jumped to the conclusion of foul play too quickly. I knew that I alone held this theory. Our Chief was strongly of opinion that it was a case of suicide in a fit of depression, to which all of us who live at great pressure are frequently liable.

Yet when I recollected the strong character of poor Dick Usborne, and the many threats he had received during his adventurous career, I doggedly adhered to my first opinion.

Day after day, and with infinite care, I considered each secret agent of Germany likely to revenge himself upon the man who, more than any one else, had been instrumental in combating the efforts of spies upon our eastern coast. There were several mien I suspected, but against no one of them was there any shadow of evidence.

That circular mark upon the cheek was, to say the least, a very peculiar feature. Besides, who had drafted that telegram which had brought me to Wilton Road?

Of the manager at Webster's I learned that Mr. Clarke had for some months past been in the habit of meeting there a young Frenchman named Dupont engaged in a merchant's office in the city. At our headquarters I searched the file of names and addresses of our "friends," but his was not among them. I therefore contrived after several weeks of patient watching to make the acquaintance of the young man, who lived in lodgings in Brook Green Road, Hammersmith, but after considerable observation, my suspicions were dispelled. The reason of his meeting with Dick was, no doubt, to give information, but of what nature I could not surmise. From Dupont's employers I learned that he was in Brussels on business for the firm on the day of the crime.

There had apparently been some motive in trying to entice me to that obscure hotel earlier in the evening of the tragedy. Personally I did not now believe that Dick had sent me that telegram. Its despatch had been part of the conspiracy which had terminated so fatally.

NEARLY NINE MONTHS went by. On more than one occasion the Chief had referred to poor Dick's mysterious end, expressing a strong belief that my suspicions were unfounded. Yet my opinion remained unchanged. Usborne had, I felt certain, been done to death by one who was a veritable artist in crime.

The mystery would no doubt have remained a mystery until this day had it not been for an incident which occurred about three months ago.

I had been sent to Paris to meet, on a certain evening, in the café of the Grand Hotel, a person who offered to sell us information which we were very anxious to obtain regarding military authority along the Franco-German frontier.

The person in question turned out to be a chic and smartly dressed Parisienne, the dark-haired wife of a French lieutenant of artillery stationed at Adun, close to the frontier. As we sat together at one of the little tables, she bent to me and in confidence whispered in French that at her apartment in the rue de Nantes she had a number of important documents relating to German military operations which her husband had secured and was anxious to dispose of. If I cared to accompany her I might inspect them.

The lady's apartment, on the third floor of a large house, proved to be quite a luxurious little place, furnished with great taste, and when she had ushered me into her little salon, she left me for a few moments. We were alone, she said, for it would not be wise for any one to know that she had sold information of such vital importance to England. Her husband would get into serious trouble for not placing it at the disposal of the French Ministry of War.

A few moments later she returned, having taken off her hat and coat, bearing a small black portfolio such as is used by business men in France. Seating me at a table and standing by my side, she placed the papers before me and I began a careful perusal.

I suppose I must have been thus occupied for some ten minutes, when slowly, very slowly, I felt her arm steal around my neck.

In an instant I sprang to my feet. The truth that I had all along suspected was now plain. Facing her, I cried:

"Woman! I know you! These documents are pure fabrications— prepared in order to entrap me here! I believed that I recognized you at first— now I am convinced!"

"Why, monsieur!" she exclaimed in a voice of reproach. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, mademoiselle, that it was you— you, Julie Bellanger— who killed my friend Dick Usborne because he exposed you as a spy of Germany!" I cried.

"Killed your friend!" she gasped, trying to laugh. "You are mad, m'sieur!"

"Yes, you killed him! And shall I explain to you how you accomplished it?" I said, looking straight into her dark eyes. "Usborne had become friendly with you in Beccles, and you never suspected him in connection with the Secret Service. Among other things, he gave you a bottle of a new and extremely rare perfume which he had brought from Bucharest— that perfume which isnowupon you. As soon as we met to-night I recognized its fragrance. Well, Usborne having convinced himself that you were engaged with others in gathering information in Suffolk for the General Staff in Berlin, informed the police and you were ordered away. You came to London and, determined upon a terrible revenge,

took a room at that little hotel in Wilton Road where you knew he sometimes stayed. Then you sent him a telegram purporting to come from his friend Dupont, asking him to go to Webster's and meet him there. In response to this, poor Usborne went, but almost instantly on his arrival you paid your bill and left the hotel, taking your luggage to the cloak-room, across at Victoria. You then watched my friend out again and, reentering the hotel unseen, crept up to his room, the number of which you had already ascertained prior to leaving."

A sudden terror came into her eyes as she realized the intimateness of my knowledge. I went on relentlessly: "You concealed yourself until just before six. When he returned you emerged, and on pretense that you were ready to dispose of these selfsame papers, you induced him to sit down and examine them, just as I have done. Suddenly you placed your arm about his neck, while with your right hand you stuck the needle of the little hypodermic syringe— the one you now hold in your hand there— into the nape of his neck where you knew that the puncture would beconcealed by the hair. It contained a deadly vegetable poison—as it does now!"

"Its a lie!" she cried. "You can't prove it!"

"I can, for as you held him you pressed his left cheek against the breast of your blouse, against that little circular brooch you are now wearing— the ring with four diamonds set at equal distances around it. The mark was left there— upon his face!"

She stood staring at me, unable to utter a word.

"After you had emptied that syringe you held him until he lay dead. Then you removed all traces of your presence and, stealing from the room, turned the key from the outside by means of that tiny hand vise which I notice lies in the small bowl upon the mantelshelf yonder. Afterward you crept downstairs and sent me a telegram, as though from the man who had already died by your hand. And, mademoiselle," I added severely, "I, too, should have shared the same fate, had I not recollected the smell of the Roumanian perfume and seen upon your blouse the round brooch which produced the red ring upon my friend's countenance!"

Then, without further word, I crossed to the telephone and, taking up the receiver, called the police.

The woman, suddenly aroused by my action, dashed toward me frantically to stay my hand, but she was too late. T had given warning.

She turned to the door, but I barred her passage.

For a moment she looked around in wild despair, then ere I could realize her intention or prevent her, she stuck the point of the deadly needle— the needle she intended to use upon me because I had assisted in clearing out those spies from Suffolk— deeply into her white, well-molded arm.

Five minutes later, when two policemen came up the stairs to arrest her, they found her lying lifeless.

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16: The Informal Execution of Soupbone Pew

Damon Runyon
1880-1946
Adventure March 1911

What is it the Good Book says? I read it last night— it said:
That he who sheddeth another man's blood by man shall his blood be shed!
That's as fair as a man could ask it, who lives by the gun and knife—
But the Law don't give him an even break when it's taking away his life.

Ho, the Law's unfair when it uses a chair, and a jolt from an unseen Death;
Or it makes him flop to a six-foot drop and a rope shuts off his breath;
If he's got to die let him die by the Book, with a Death that he can see,
By a gun or knife, as he went through life, and both legs kicking free!

—Songs of the "'Shut-Ins."

THE condemned man in the cell next to us laughed incessantly. He had been sentenced that morning, and they told us he had started laughing as soon as the words, "may the Lord have mercy on your soul" were pronounced. He was to be taken to the penitentiary next day to await execution.

Chicago Red had manifested a lively interest in the case. The man had killed a railroad brakeman, so one of the guards told us; had killed him coldly, and without provocation. The trial had commenced since our arrival at the county jail and had lasted three days, during which time Red talked of little else.

From the barred windows of the jail corridor, when we were exercising, we could see the dingy old criminal court across the yard and Red watched the grim procession to and from the jail each day. He speculated on the progress of the trial; he knew when the case went to the jury, and when he saw the twelve men, headed by the two old bailiffs returning after lunch the third day, he announced:

"They've got the verdict, and it's first degree murder. They ain't talking and not a one has even grinned."

Then when the unfortunate was brought back, laughing that dismal laugh, Red said:

"He's nutty. He was nutty to go. It ain't exactly right to swing that guy."

Red and I were held as suspects in connection with an affair which had been committed a full forty-eight hours before we landed in town. We had no particular fear of being implicated in the matter, and the officers had no idea that we had anything to do with it, but they were holding us as evidence to the public that they were working on the case. We had been "vagged" for ten days each.

It was no new experience for us in any respect— not even the condemned man, for we had frequently been under the same roof with men sentenced to die. The only unusual feature was Red's interest in the laughing man.

"Red," I asked, as we sat playing cards, "did you ever kill a man?"

He dropped a card calmly, taking the trick, and as he contemplated his hand, considering his next lead, he answered:

"For why do you ask me that?"

"Oh, I don't know; I just wondered," I said. "You've seen and done so many things that I thought you might accidentally have met with something of the sort."

"It isn't exactly a polite question," he replied. "I've seen some murders. I've seen quite a few, in fact. I've seen some pulled off in a chief's private office, when they was sweating some poor stiff, and I've seen some other places."

"Did you ever kill a man?" I insisted.

He studied my lead carefully.

"I never did," he finally answered. "That is to say, I never bumped no guy off personal. I never had nothing to do with no job from which come ghosts to wake me up at night and bawl me out. They say a guy what kills a man never closes his eyes again, even when he really sleeps. I go to the hay, and my eyes are shut tight, so I know I ain't to be held now or hereafter for nothing like that."

We finished the game in silence, and Red seemed very thoughtful. He laid the cards aside, rolled a cigarette, and said:

"Listen! I never killed no guy personal, like I say; I mean for nothing he done to me. I've been a gun and crook for many years, like you know, but I'm always mighty careful about hurting any one permanent. I'm careful about them pete jobs, so's not to blow up no harmless persons, and I always tell my outside men that, when they have to do shooting, not to try to hit any one. If they did, accidental, that ain't my fault. One reason I took to inside work was to keep from having to kill any one. I've been so close to being taken that I could hear the gates of the Big House slam, and one little shot would have saved me a lot of trouble, but I always did my best to keep from letting that shot go. I never wanted to kill no man. I've been in jams where guys were after me good and strong, and I always tried to get by without no killings.

"I said I never killed a guy. I helped once, but it wasn't murder. It's never worried me a bit since, and I sleep good."

He walked to the window and peered out into the yard where a bunch of sparrows were fluttering about. Finally he turned and said:

"I hadn't thought of that for quite a while, and I never do until I see some poor stiff that's been tagged to go away. Some of them make me nervous— especially this tee-hee guy next to us. I'll tell you about Soupbone Pew— some day you can write it, if you want to."

SOUPBONE PEW was a rat who trained years ago with Billy Coulon, the Honey Grove Kid, and a bunch of other old timers that you've never seen. It was before my time, too, but I've heard them talk about him. He was in the Sioux City bank tear-off, when they all got grabbed and were sent to the Big House for fifteen years each. In them days Soupbone was a pretty good guy. He had nerve, and was smart, and stood well with everybody, but a little stretch in the big stir got to him. He broke bad. Honey Grove laid a plan for a big spring— a get-away— while they were up yonder. It looked like it would go through, too, but just as they were about ready, Soupbone got cold feet and gave up his insides.

For that he got a pardon, and quit the road right off. He became a railroad brakeman, and showed up as a shack running between Dodge City and La Junta. And he became the orneriest white man that God ever let live, too.

To hoboes and guns he was like a reformed soak toward a drunk. He treated them something fierce. He was a big, powerful stiff, who could kill a man with a wallop of his hands, if he hit him right, and his temper soured on the world. Most likely it was because he was afraid that every guy on the road was out to get him because of what he'd done, or maybe it was because he knew that they knew he was yellow. Anyway, they never tried to do him, that job belonging to Coulon, Honey Grove and the others.

Soupbone cracked that no 'bo could ride his division, and he made it good, too. He beat them up when they tried it, and he made it so strong that the old heads wouldn't go against a try when he was on the run. Once in a while some kid took a stab at it, but if he got caught by Soupbone he regretted it the rest of his life. I've heard of that little road into Hot Springs, where they say a reward used to be offered to any 'bo that rode it, and how a guy beat it by getting in the water-tank; and I've personally met that Wyoming gent on the Union Pacific, and all them other guys they say is so tough, but them stories is only fairy-tales for children beside what could be told about Pew. He went an awful route.

I've known of him catching guys in the pilot and throwing scalding water in on them; I've heard tell of him shoveling hot cinders into empties on poor bums laying there asleep. That trick of dropping a coupling-pin on the end of a wire down alongside a moving train, so that it would swing up underneath and knock a stiff off the rods, was about the mildest thing he did.

He was simply a devil. The other railroad men on the division wouldn't hardly speak to him. They couldn't stand his gaff, but they couldn't very well roar at him keeping 'boes off his trains because that was what he was there for.

His longest suit was beating guys up. He just loved to catch some poor old broken down bum on his train and pound the everlasting stuffing out of him. He's sent many a guy to the hospital, and maybe he killed a few before my acquaintance with him, for all I know.

Once in a while he ran against some live one— some real gun, and not a bum— who'd give him a battle, but he was there forty ways with a sap and gat, and he'd shoot as quick as he'd slug. He didn't go so strong on the real guns, if he knew who they was, and I guess he was always afraid they might be friends of Honey Grove or Coulon.

He was on the run when I first heard of him, and some of the kids of my day would try to pot him from the road, when his train went by, but they never even come close. I've heard them talk of pulling a rail on him and letting his train go into the ditch, but that would have killed the other trainmen, and they was some good guys on that same run then. The best way to do was to fight shy of Soupbone, and keep him on ice for Honey Grove and Coulon.

TRAINING with our mob in them days was a young kid called the Manchester Slim— a real kid, not over eighteen, and as nice and quiet a youngster as I ever see. He wasn't cut out for the road. It seems he'd had some trouble at home and run away. Old man Muller, that Dutch prowler, used to have him on his staff, but he never let this kid in on any work for some reason. He was always trying to get Slim to go home.

"Der road is hell for der kits," he used to say. "Let der ole stiffs vork out dere string, und don't make no new vuns."

The Slim paid no attention to him. Still he had no great love for the life, and probably would have quit long before if he hadn't been afraid some one would think he was scared off.

They was a pete job on at La Junta, which me and 'Frisco Shine and Muller had laid out. We had jungled up— camped— in a little cottonwood grove a few miles out of town, and was boiling out soup— nitro-glycerine— from dynamite, you know— and Muller sent the Slim into town to look around a bit. It was Winter and pretty cold. We had all come in from the West and was headed East. We was all broke bad, too, and needed dough the worst way.

Slim come back from town much excited. He was carrying a Denver newspaper in his hand.

"I've got to go home, Mull," he said, running up to the old man and holding out the paper. "Look at this ad."

Muller read it and called to me. He showed me a little want ad. reading that Gordon Keleher, who disappeared from his home in Boston two years before, was wanted at home because his mother was dying. It was signed Pelias Keleher, and I knew who he was, all right— president of the National Bankers' Association.

"Well, you go," I said, right off the reel, and I could see that was the word he was waiting for.

"For certainly he goes," said Muller. "Nail der next rattler."

"Al the passengers are late, but there's a freight due out of here to-night; I asked," said Slim.

"How much dough iss dere in dis mob?" demanded Muller, frisking himself. We all shook ourselves down, but the most we could scare up was three or four dollars.

"If you could wait until after to-night," I says, thinking of the job, but Muller broke me off with:

"Ve don't vant him to vait. Somedings might happens."

"I'd wire home for money, but I want to get to Kansas City first," said Slim. "That paper is a couple of days old, and there's no telling how long it may have been running that ad. I can stop over in K. C. long enough to get plenty of dough from some people I know there. I'm going to grab that freight."

"Soupbone on dat freight," said the 'Frisco Shine, a silent, wicked black.

"Ve'll see Soub," said Muller quietly. "I guess maype he von't inderfere mit dis case."

We decided to abandon the job for the night, and all went uptown. The Slim was apparently very much worried, and he kept telling us that if he didn't get home in time he'd never forgive himself, so we all got dead-set on seeing him started.

We looked up the conductor of the freight due out that night and explained things to him. None of us knew him, but he was a nice fellow.

"I tell you, boys," he said, "I'd let the young fellow ride, but you'd better see my head brakeman, Soupbone Pew. He's a tough customer, but in a case like this he ought to be all right. I'll speak to him myself."

Muller went after Pew. He found him in a saloon, drinking all by his lonesome, although there was a crowd of other railroad men in there at the time. Muller knew Pew in the old days, but there was no sign of recognition between them. The old Dutchman explained to Pew very briefly, winding up with:

"It vould pe a gread personal favor mit me, Soub; maype somedimes I return it."

"He can't ride my train!" said Pew shortly. "That's flat. No argument goes."

The Dutchman looked at him long and earnestly, murder showing in his eyes, and Pew slunk back close to the bar, and his hand dropped to his hip.

"Soub, der poy rides!" said Muller, his voice low but shaking with anger. "He rides your rattler. Und if anyding happens by dot poy, de Honey Grove Kit von't get no chance at you! Dot's all, Soub!"

But when he returned to us, he was plainly afraid for the Slim.

"You don't bedder go to-nide," he said. "Dot Soub is a defil, und he'll do you."

"I'm not afraid," said Slim. "He can't find me, anyhow."

The old man tried to talk him out of the idea, but Slim was determined, and finally Muller, in admiration of his spirit, said:

"Vell, if you vill go, you vill. Vun man can hide besser as two, but der Shine must go mit you as far as Dodge."

That was the only arrangement he would consent to, and while the Slim didn't want the Shine, and I myself couldn't see what good he could do, Muller insisted so strong that we all gave in.

WE WENT down to the yards that night to see them off, and the old man had a private confab with the Shine. The only time I ever saw Muller show any feeling was when he told the boy good-by. I guess he really liked him.

The two hid back of a pile of ties, a place where the trains slowed down, and me and Muller got off a distance and watched them. We could see Soupbone standing on top of a box-car as the train went by, and he looked like a tall devil. He was trying to watch both sides of the train at the same time, but I didn't think he saw either Slim or the Shine as they shot underneath the cars, one after the other, and nailed the rods. Then the train went off into the darkness, Soupbone standing up straight and stiff.

We went back to our camp to sleep, and the next morning before we were awake, the Shine came limping in, covered with blood and one arm hanging at his side.

I didn't have to hear his story to guess what had happened. Soupbone made them at the first stop. He hadn't expected two, but he did look for the kid. Instead of warning him off, he told him to get on top where he'd be safe. That was one of his old tricks. He didn't get to the Shine, who dodged off into the darkness, as soon as he found they were grabbed, and then caught the train after it started again. He crawled up between the cars to the deck, to tip the Slim off to watch out for Soupbone. Slim didn't suspect anything, and was thanking Soupbone, and explaining about his mother.

The moment the train got under way good, Soupbone says:

"Now my pretty boy, you're such a good traveler, let's see you jump off this train!"

The kid thought he was joshing, but there wasn't no josh about it. Soup pulleda gun. The Shine, with his own gun in hand, crawled clear on top and lay flat on the cars, trying to steady his aim on Soupbone. The kid was pleading and almost crying, when Soupbone suddenly jumped at him, smashed him in the jaw with the gun-barrel, and knocked him off the train.

The Shine shot Soupbone in the back, and he dropped on top of the train, but didn't roll off. As the Shine was going down between the cars again, Soupbone shot at him and broke his arm. He got off all right, and went back down the road to find the kid dead— his neck broke.

OLD man Muller, the mildest man in the world generally, almost went bug-house when he heard that spiel. He raved and tore around like a sure enough nut. I've known him to go backing out of a town with every man in his mob down on the ground, dead or dying, and not show half as much feeling afterward. You'd 'a' thought the kid was his own. He swore he'd do nothing else as long as he lived until he'd cut Soupbone's heart out.

The Shine had to get out of sight, because Soupbone would undoubtedly have some wild-eyed story to tell about being attacked by hoboes and being shot by one. We had no hope but what the Shine had killed him.

Old man Muller went into town and found out that was just what had happened, and he was in the hospital only hurt a little. He also found they'd brought Slim's body to town, and that most people suspected the real truth, too. He told them just how it was, especially the railroad men, and said the Shine had got out of the country. He also wired Slim's people, and we heard afterward they sent a special train after the remains.

Muller was told, too, that the train conductor had notified Pew to let Slim ride, and that the rest of the train-crew had served notice on Pew that if he threw the boy off he'd settle with them for it. And that was just what made Soupbone anxious to get the kid. It ended his railroad career there, as we found out afterward, because he disappeared as soon as he got out of the hospital.

Meantime me and Muller and the Shine went ahead with that job, and it failed. Muller and the nigger got grabbed, and I had a tough time getting away. Just before we broke camp the night before, however, Muller, who seemed to have a hunch that something was going to happen, called me and the Shine to him, and said, his voice solemn:

"I vant you poys to bromise me vun ting," he said. "If I don't get der chance myself, bromise me dot venefer you find Soubbone Bew, you vill kill him deat."

And we promised, because we didn't think we would ever be called on to make good.

Muller got a long jolt for the job; the Shine got a shorter one and escaped a little bit later on, while I left that part of the country.

A COUPLE of years later, on a bitter cold night, in a certain town that I won't name, there was five of us in the sneezer, held as suspects on a house prowl job that only one of us had anything to do with— I ain't mentioning the name of the one, either. They was me, Kid Mole, the old prize-fighter, a hophead named Squirt McCue, that you don't know, Jew Friend, a dip, and that same 'Frisco Shine. We were all in the bull-pen with a mixed assortment of drunks and vags. All kinds of prisoners was put in there over night. This pokey is down-stairs under the police station, not a million miles from the Missouri River, so if you

think hard you can guess the place. We were walking around kidding the drunks, when a screw shoved in a long, tall guy who acted like he was drunk or nutty, and was hardly able to stand.

I took one flash at his map, and I knew him. It was Pew.

He flopped down in a corner as soon as the screw let go his arm. The Shine rapped to him as quick as I did, and officed Mole and the rest. They all knew of him, especially the Honey Grove business, as well as about the Manchester Slim, for word had gone over the country at the time.

As soon as the screw went up-stairs I walked over to the big stiff, laying all huddled up, and poked him with my foot.

"What's the matter with you, you big cheese?" I said. He only mumbled.

"Stand up!" I tells him, but he didn't stir. The Shine and Mole got hold of him on either side and lifted him to his feet. He was as limber as a wet bar-towel. Just then we heard the screw coming down-stairs and we got away from Pew. The screw brought in a jag— a laughing jag— a guy with his snoot full of booze and who laughed like he'd just found a lot of money. He was a little, thin fellow, two pounds lighter than a straw hat. He laughed high and shrill, more like a scream than a real laugh, and the moment the screw opened the door and tossed him in, something struck me that the laugh was phoney. It didn't sound on the level.

There wasn't no glad in it. The little guy laid on the floor and kicked his feet and kept on laughing. Soupbone Pew let out a yell at the sight of him.

"Don't let him touch me!" he bawled, rolling over against the wall. "Don't let him near me!"

"Why, you big stiff, you could eat him alive!" I says.

The jag kept on tee-heeing, not looking at us, or at Pew either for that matter.

"He's nuts," said Jew Friend.

"Shut him off," I told the Shine.

He stepped over and picked the jag up with one hand, held him out at arm's length, and walloped him on the jaw with his other hand. The jag went to sleep with a laugh sticking in his throat. Soupbone still lay against the wall moaning, but he saw that business all right, and it seemed to help him. The Shine tossed the jag into a cell. Right after that the screw came down with another drunk, and I asked him about Pew.

"Who's this boob?" I said. "Is he sick?"

"Oh, he's a good one," said screw. "He only killed his poor wife— beat her to death with his two big fists, because she didn't have supper ready on time, or something important. That ain't his blood on him; that's hers. He's pretty weak, now, hey? Well, he wasn't so weak a couple of hours ago, the rat! It's the

wickedest murder ever done in this town, and he'll hang sure, if he ain't lynched beforehand!"

He gave Soupbone a kick as he went out, and Soupbone groaned.

Said I: "It's got to be done, gents; swing or no swing, this guy has got to go. Who is it— me?"

"Me!" said the Shine, stepping forward.

"Me!" said the Jew.

"Me!" chimed in Mole.

"All of us!" said the hophead.

"Stand him up!" I ordered.

The lights had been turned down low, and it was dark and shadowy in the jail. The only sound was the soft pad-pad of people passing through the snow on the sidewalks above our heads, the low sizzing of the water-spout at the sink, and the snores of the drunks, who were all asleep.

Us five was the only ones awake. The Shine and Mole lifted Soupbone up, and this time he was not so limp. He seemed to know that something was doing. His eyes was wide open and staring at us.

"Pew," I said in a whisper, "do you remember the kid you threw off your rattler three years ago?"

"And shot me in the arm?" asked Shine.

Pew couldn't turn any whiter, but his eyes rolled back into his head.

"Don't!" he whispered. "Don't say that. It made me crazy! I'm crazy now! I was crazy when I killed that little girl to-night. It was all on account of thinking about him. He comes to see me often."

"Well, Pew," I said, "a long time back you were elected to die. I was there when the sentence was passed, and it'd been cirried out a long time ago if you hadn't got away. I guess we'll have to kill you to-night."

"Don't, boys!" he whined. "I ain't fit to die! Don't hurt me!"

"Why, you'll swing anyway!" said Friend.

"No! My God, no!" he said. "I was crazy; I'm crazy now, and they don't hang crazy people!"

I was standing square in front of him. His head had raised a little as he talked and his jaw was sticking out. I suddenly made a move with my left hand, as though to slap him, and he showed that his mind was active enough by dodging, so that it brought his jaw out further, and he said, "Don't." Then I pulled my right clear from my knee and took him on the point of the jaw. The Shine and Mole jumped back. Soupbone didn't fall; he just slid down in a heap, like his body had melted into his shoes.

We all jumped for him at the same time, but an idea popped into my head, and I stopped them. Soupbone was knocked out, but he was coming back fast. You can't kill a guy like that by hitting him. The jail was lighted by a few

incandescent lights, and one of them was hung on a wire that reached down from the ceiling over the sink, and had a couple of feet of it coiled up in the middle. Uncoiled, the light would reach clear to the floor. I pointed to it, but the bunch didn't get my idea right away. The switch for the lights was inside the bull-pen, and I turned them off. I had to work fast for fear the screw upstairs would notice the lights was out and come down to see what the trouble was. A big arc outside threw a little glim through the sidewalk grating, so I could see what I was doing.

I uncoiled the wire and sawed it against the edge of the sink, close to the lamp, until it came in two. Then I bared the wire back for a foot. The gang tumbled, and carried Pew over to where the wire would reach him. I unfastened his collar, looped the naked end of the wire around his neck and secured it. By this time he was about come to, but he didn't seem to realize what was going on.

All but me got into their cells and I stepped over and turned the switch-button just as Pew was struggling to his feet. The voltage hit him when he was on all fours. He stood straight up, stiff, like a soldier at salute. There was a strange look on his face— a surprised look. Then, as though some one had hit him from behind, his feet left the floor and he swung straight out to the length of the wire and it broke against his weight, just as I snapped off the current. Pew dropped to the floor and curled up like a big singed spider, and a smell like frying bacon filled the room.

I went over and felt of his heart. It was still beating, but very light.

"They ain't enough current," whispered Mole. "We got to do it some other way."

"Hang him wid de wire," said the Shine.

"Aw— nix!" spoke up the Jew. "I tell you that makes me sick— bumping a guy off that way. Hanging and electricity, see? That's combining them too much. Let's use the boot."

"It ain't fair, kind-a, that's a fact," whispered McCue. "It's a little too legal. The boot! Give him the boot!"

The voice of the screw came singing down the stairs:

"Is that big guy awake?"

"Yes," I shouted back, "were all awake; he won't let us sleep."

"Tell him he'd better say his prayers!" yelled the screw. "I just got word a mob is forming to come and get him!"

"Let him alone," I whispered to the gang. Mole was making a noose of the wire, and the Shine had hunted up a bucket to stand Pew on. They drew back and Soupbone lay stretched out on the floor.

I went over and felt of his heart again. I don't remember whether I felt any beat or not. I couldn't have said I did, at the moment, and I couldn't say I didn't. I

didn't have time to make sure, because suddenly there run across the floor something that looked to me like a shadow, or a big rat. Then the shrill laugh of that jag rattled through the bull-pen. He slid along half stooped, as quick as a streak of light, and before we knew what was doing he had pounced on Soupbone and had fastened his hands tight around the neck of the big stiff. He was laughing that crazy laugh all the time

"I'll finish him for you!" he squeaked. He fastened his hands around Soupbone's neck. I kicked the jag in the side of the head as hard as I could, but it didn't phase him. The bunch laid hold of him and pulled, but they only dragged Soupbone all over the place. Finally the jag let go and stood up, and we could see he wasn't no more drunk than we was. He let loose that laugh once more, and just as the Shine started the bucket swinging for his head, he said: "I'm her brother!" Then he went down kicking.

WE WENT into our cells and crawled into our bunks. Soupbone lay outside. The Shine pulled the jag into a corner. I tell you true, I went to sleep right away. I thought the screw would find out when he brought the next drunk down, but it so happened that there wasn't no more drunks and I was woke up by a big noise on the stairs. The door flew open with a bang, and a gang of guys came down, wild-eyed and yelling. The screw was with them and they had tight hold of him.

"Keep in, you men!" he bawled to us.

"That's your meat!" he said to the gang, pointing at what had been Soupbone. The men pounced on him like a lot of hounds on to a rabbit, and before you could bat an eye they had a rope around Soupbone's neck and was tearing up the stairs again, dragging him along.

They must have thought he was asleep; they never noticed that he didn't move a muscle himself, and they took the person of Soupbone Pew, or anyways what had been him, outside and hung it over a telegraph wire.

We saw it there when we was sprung next morning. When the screw noticed the blood around the bull-pen, he said:

"Holy smoke, they handled him rough!" And he never knew no different.

If the mob hadn't come— but the mob did come, and so did the laughing jag. I left him that morning watching the remains of Soupbone Pew.

"She was my sister," he said to me.

I don't know for certain whether we killed Soupbone, whether the jag did it, or whether the mob finished him; but he was dead, and he ought to have died. Sometimes I wonder a bit about it, but no ghosts come to me, like I say, so I can't tell.

They's an unmarked grave in the potter's field of this town I speak of, and once in a while I go there when I'm passing through and meditate on the sins of

Soupbone Pew. But I sleep well of nights. I done what had to be done, and I close my eyes and I don't never see Soupbone Pew.

HE TURNED once more to gazing out of the window.

"Well, what is there about condemned men to make you so nervous?" I demanded.

"I said some condemned men," he replied, still gazing. "Like this guy next door.

A loud, shrill laugh rang through the corridors.

"He's that same laughing jag," said Chicago Red.

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17: The Ivory Boxes

Percy J. Brebner
1864-1922
The Weekly Tale-Teller 16 Nov 1912
Collected in: *Christopher Quarles*, 1914 as "The Affair of the Ivory Boxes"

THERE WAS a substantial aspect about Blenheim Square, not of that monotonous type which characterizes so many London squares, but a certain grace and consciousness of well-being.

The houses, though maintaining some uniformity, possessed individuality, and in the season were gay with window-boxes and flowers; the garden in the center was not too stereotyped in its arrangement, and plenty of sunlight found its way into it. The inhabitants were people of ample means, and the address was undoubtedly a good one. There was no slum in close proximity, that seamy background which so constantly lies behind a fair exterior of life; it was seldom that any but respectable people were seen in the square, for hawkers and itinerant musicians were forbidden; and, beyond a wedding or a funeral at intervals, nothing exciting ever seemed to happen there.

It looked particularly attractive when I entered it one spring morning early and made my way to No. 12.

As I approached the house and noted that the square was still asleep, an old gentleman, clad in a long and rather rusty overcoat, shuffled toward me from the opposite direction. He wore round goggles behind which his eyes looked unusually large, and a wide-awake hat was drawn over his silver locks.

He stopped in front of me and, without a word, brought his hand from his pocket and gave me a card.

"Christopher Quarles," I said, reading from the bit of pasteboard.

"My name. What is yours?"

"Murray Wigan," I answered, and the next instant was wondering why I had told him.

"Ah, I do not fancy we have met before, Detective Wigan. Perhaps we may help each other."

"You knew Mr. Ratcliffe?" I asked.

"No, but I have heard of him."

"I am afraid that—"

He laid two fingers of a lean hand on my arm.

"You had better. It will be wise."

A sharp retort came to my tongue, but remained unspoken. I can hardly explain why, because in an ordinary way his manner would only have increased my resentment and obstinacy.

I was young, only just over thirty, but success had brought me some fame and unlimited self-confidence. I was an enthusiast, and have been spoken of as a born detective, but the line of life I had chosen had sadly disappointed my father. He had given me an excellent education, and had looked forward to his son making a name for himself, but certainly not as a mere policeman, which was his way of putting it.

Indeed, family relations were strained even at this time, a fact which may have accounted for that hardness of character which people, even my friends, seemed to find in me.

My nature and my pride in my profession were therefore assailed by the old man's manner, yet the sharp answer remained unspoken.

"You will find that I am known to your people," he added while I hesitated.

I did not believe him for a moment, but there was something so compelling in the steady gaze from the large eyes behind the goggles that I grudgingly allowed him to enter the house with me.

Early that morning, before the first milk-cart had rattled through Blenheim Square, Constable Plowman had been called to No. 12 by the cook-housekeeper, who had found her master, Mr. Ratcliffe, dead in his study. Plowman had at once sent for a doctor and communicated with Scotland Yard. The doctor had arrived before me, but nothing had been moved by the constable, and the housekeeper declared that the room was exactly as she had found it.

The study was at the back of the house, a small room lined with books. In the center was a writing table, an electric lamp on it was still burning, and, leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on vacancy, sat Mr. Ratcliffe. The doctor said he had been dead some hours.

On the blotting-pad immediately in front of him was a large blue stone— a sapphire— and arranged in a rough semicircle round the pad were the various boxes of one of those Chinese curiosities in which box is contained within box until the last is quite small.

They were of thin ivory, the largest being some three inches square, the smallest not an inch, and they were arranged in order of size. There was no confusion in the room, no sign of violence on the dead man. Curtains were drawn across the window, which was open a little at the top.

At first my attention was somewhat divided; the old man interested me as well as the case.

He looked closely into the face of the dead man, then glanced at the curtained window, and nodded his head in a sagacious way, as if he had already fathomed the mystery. He looked at the sapphire and at the semicircle of boxes, but he did not attempt to touch anything, nor did he say a word.

Well, it is easy enough to look wise; it is when a man opens his mouth that the test begins. I came to the conclusion that he was a venerable fraud, and that

I had been a fool to let him come in. I dismissed him from my mind and commenced my own investigations.

On the window-sill there were marks which made it practically certain that someone had entered the room that way, but neither then nor later could I discover any footprints in the small garden which was some eight feet below the window.

The housekeeper, who had been with Mr. Ratcliffe a dozen years, explained that, on coming down that morning, she had gone into the study to draw the curtains as usual. The room was exactly as we saw it. Her master spent most of his time in his study when he was at home, and seemed to enjoy his own company. He went little into society, but a friend sometimes dined with him; indeed, his nephew, Captain Ratcliffe, had dined with him last night.

She had gone to bed before the captain left, and did not hear him go. She would not admit that her master was peculiar or eccentric in any way, but said he had seemed worried and rather depressed lately. The slightest noise in the house disturbed him, and she fancied he had got into the habit of listening for noises, for once or twice she had come upon him in a listening attitude. She knew nothing about the sapphire, and had never seen the ivory boxes before.

The old man never asked a question; I do not think he said a single word until we were leaving the house, and then he remarked in a casual manner:

"A curious case, Detective Wigan."

"Some curious points in it," I said.

I was glad when the old fellow had shuffled off. He was a disturbing influence. His eyes behind those goggles seemed to have a paralyzing effect upon me. I could not think clearly.

Certainly there were many curious points in the case, and my inquiries quickly added to the number.

Mr. Ratcliffe had traveled extensively, was a linguist, and a far richer man than his neighbors had supposed. Collecting precious stones had been his hobby, and in a case deposited with his bankers there were many valuable, and some unique, gems. Probably he had others with him in the house, but none were found except the sapphire lying on the blotting-pad. Robbers might have taken them, the marks on the window-sill were suggestive, but I was doubtful on this point. Even if robbers had entered the room, how was Mr. Ratcliffe's death to be accounted for? There was no mark upon the body, there was no trace of poison. The doctors declared he was in a perfectly healthy condition. There was no apparent reason for his death. Besides, if he had been robbed of his jewels, why should the sapphire have been left?

It was only natural, perhaps, that suspicion should fall upon the dead man's nephew. Might he not have left the house by the window? it was asked. I had put the same question to myself.

Captain Ratcliffe's behavior, however, was not that of a guilty man, although there were certain things which told against him.

He answered questions frankly and without hesitation. He was in a line regiment, and was somewhat heavily in debt. It was close upon midnight when he left his uncle, he said, and they had not gone into the study at all. They had sat smoking and talking in the dining room, and just before he left they had both had a little whisky. The empty glasses and the cigar ends in the dining room went to confirm this statement.

He knew about his uncle's hobby for stones, was surprised to find that he was such a rich man, and declared that he had no idea he was his heir. Mr. Ratcliffe had never helped him in any way; in fact, that very night he had refused, not unkindly but quite frankly, to lend him a sum of money he had asked for.

There had been no quarrel, and they had parted excellent friends.

I am convinced that a large section of the public wondered why Captain Ratcliffe was not arrested, and possibly some detectives would have considered there was sufficient evidence against him to take this course. I did not, although I had him watched.

The fact was that Christopher Quarles lurked at the back of my mind. I found that he had spoken the truth when he said that he was known at Scotland Yard. He was a professor of philosophy, and some two years ago had made what seemed a perfectly preposterous suggestion in a case which had puzzled the police, with the result that he had been instrumental in saving an innocent man from the gallows. A chance success was the comment of the authorities; my own idea was that he must have had knowledge which he ought not to possess. Now it might prove useful to cultivate the acquaintance of this mysterious professor, so I called upon him one morning in his house at West Street, Chelsea, as keen upon a difficult trail as I had ever been in my life.

The servant said the professor was at home and requested me to follow her.

Through open doors I had a glimpse of taste and luxury— softly carpeted rooms, old furniture, good pictures— and then the servant opened a door at the extreme end of the hall and announced me.

Astonishment riveted me to the threshold for the moment. Except for a cheap writing-table in the window, a big arm-chair by the fireplace, and two or three common chairs against the wall, this room was empty. There was no carpet on the floor, not a picture on the whitewashed walls. The window had a blind, but no curtains; there were no books, and the appointments of the writing-table were of the simplest kind possible.

"Ah, I have been expecting you," said Quarles, crossing from the window to welcome me.

A skull-cap covered his silver locks, but he wore no glasses, and to-day there were few signs of age or deterioration of physical or mental force about him. His shuffling gait when he had met me in Blenheim Square that morning had evidently been assumed, and probably he had worn glasses to conceal some of the expression of his face.

"You had been expecting me?" I said.

"Two days ago I gave the servant instructions to bring you in whenever you came. Zena, my dear, this is Detective Wigan— my granddaughter who often assists me in my work."

I bowed to the girl who had risen from the chair at the writing-table, and for a moment forgot the professor— and, indeed, everything else in the world. Since no woman had ever yet succeeded in touching any sympathetic chord in me, it may be assumed that she was remarkable. In that bare room she looked altogether out of place, and yet her presence transformed it into a desirable spot.

"You are full of surprises, professor," I said, with a keen desire to make myself agreeable. "I enter your house and have a glimpse of luxury through open doors, yet I find you in— in an empty room; you tell me I am expected, when until a few hours ago I had not determined to call upon you; and now you further mystify me by saying this lady is your helper."

"Philosophy is mysterious," he answered, "and I am interested in all the ramifications of my profession. To understand one science perfectly means having a considerable knowledge of all other sciences."

"My grandfather exaggerates my usefulness," said the girl.

"I do not," he returned. "Your questions have constantly shown me the right road to travel, and to have the right road pointed out is half the battle. Sit down, Mr. Wigan— in the arm-chair— no, I prefer sitting here myself. Zena and I were talking of Blenheim Square when you came in. A coincidence? Perhaps, but it may be something more. In these days we are loath to admit there are things we do not understand. This case puzzles you?"

The detective in me was coming slowly uppermost again, and I remembered the line I had decided to take with this curious old gentleman.

"It does. From first to last I am puzzled. To begin with, how came you to hear of the tragedy that you were able to be upon the scene so promptly?"

"Are you here as a spy or to ask for help? Come, a plain answer," said Quarles hotly, as though he were resenting an insult.

"Dear!" said the girl soothingly.

"Zena considers you honest," said the old man, suddenly calm again. "My helper, as I told you, and not always of my opinion. Let that pass. You are a young man with much to learn. I am not a detective, but a philosopher, and sometimes an investigator of human motives. If a mystery interests me I

endeavor to solve it for my own satisfaction, but there it ends. I never give my opinion unless it is asked for, nor should I interfere except to prevent a miscarriage of justice. If this is clear to you, you may proceed and tell me what you have done, how far you have gone in the unraveling of this case; if you are not satisfied, I have nothing more to say to you except 'Good morning!'"

For a moment I hesitated, then shortly I told him what I had done, and he listened attentively.

"I have always worked alone," I went on, "not without success, as you may know. In this case I am beaten so far, and I come to you."

"Why?"

"For two reasons. First— you will forgive my mentioning it again— your prompt arrival puzzled me; secondly, I believe in Captain Ratcliffe, and am anxious to relieve him of the suspicion which undoubtedly rests upon him."

The old man rubbed his head through his skull-cap.

"You would like to find some reason to be suspicious of me?"

"Mr. Wigan does not mean that, dear," said Zena.

The professor shook his head doubtfully.

"Crime as crime does not interest me. It is only when I am impelled to study a case, against my will sometimes, that I become keen; and, whenever this happens, the solution of the mystery is likely to be unusual. My methods are not those of a detective. You argue from facts; I am more inclined to form a theory, and then look for facts to fit it. Not a scientific way, you may say, but a great many scientists do it, although they would strenuously deny the fact. I can show you how the facts support my theory, but I cannot always produce the actual proof. In many cases I should be a hindrance rather than a help to you."

"It is courteous of you to say so," I returned, wishing to be pleasant.

"It is quite true, not a compliment," said the girl.

"First, the dead man," Quarles went on. "Quite a healthy man was the medical opinion— but his eyes. Did you particularly notice his eyes? You look into the brain through the eyes, see into it with great penetration if you have accustomed yourself to such scrutiny as I have done. Mr. Ratcliffe had not been dead long enough for his eyes to lose that last impression received from the brain. They were still looking at something, as it were, and they still had terror in them. Now he was a traveler, one who must have faced danger scores of times; it would take something very unusual to frighten him."

I acquiesced with a nod.

"We may take it, I think, that such a man would not be terrified by burglars."

I admitted this assumption.

"He was looking at the curtains which were drawn across the window— that is a point to remember," said the professor, marking off this fact by holding up a finger. "Then the little boxes; did you count them?"

"Yes, there were twenty-five."

"And the last one was unopened; did you open it?"

"Yes; it contained a minute head in ivory, wonderfully carved."

"I did not touch the box," said Quarles, "but if the toy was complete it would naturally contain such a head. Did you notice the nineteenth box?"

"Not particularly."

"Had you done so you would have noticed that it was discolored like the first and largest one, not clean and white like the others— and more, beginning from the nineteenth box the semi-circular arrangement was broken, as though it had been completed in a hurry, and possibly by different hands."

I did not make any comment.

"The largest box had become discolored because it was the outside one, always exposed; I judged therefore that the nineteenth box was discolored for the same reason. For some time it had been the outside box of the last few boxes. In other words, the toy in Mr. Ratcliffe's possession had not been a complete one. This led me to look at box eighteen, the last in Mr. Ratcliffe's series; it was just the size to contain the sapphire. This suggested that the sapphire was the central point of the mystery."

"You think the thieves were disturbed?"

"No."

"Then why didn't they take the sapphire?"

"Exactly. By the way, is the stone still at Scotland Yard?"

"Yes."

"Has it been tested?"

"No."

"Have it examined by the most expert man you can find. I think you will find it is paste, a wonderful imitation, capable of standing some tests— but still paste."

"Then why did Mr. Ratcliffe— an expert in gems, remember— treasure it so carefully?" I asked.

"He didn't," Quarles answered shortly. "It is obvious that a man who possessed such stones as were found in that packet at the bank would certainly not make such a mistake; yet he was apparently playing with his treasure when he met his death. My theory had three points, you see. First, the sapphire was the sole object of the robbery; secondly, the thieves had substituted an exact duplicate for the real stone; thirdly, the stone must have some special fascination for Mr. Ratcliffe, or he would have put it in the bank for safety as he had done with others."

"An interesting theory, I admit, but—"

"Wait, Mr. Wigan. I have said something about my methods. I began to look for facts to support my theory. You remember the cook-housekeeper?"

"Perfectly."

"She spoke of her uncle's sensitiveness to noises; she had on one or two occasions surprised him in a listening attitude. That gave me a clew. What was he listening for? Mr. Ratcliffe had only given way to this listening attitude recently; in fact, only since his return from his last voyage. It would seem that since his return his mental balance had become unstable. There was some constant irritation in his brain which brought fear, and in his dead eyes there was terror. My theory was complete; I had only to fit the facts into it. I suppose, Mr. Wigan, you have found out all about the people living on either side of Ratcliffe's house?"

"Both are families above suspicion," I answered. "I also tried Ossery Road, the gardens of which run down to those on that side of Blenheim Square. The house immediately behind No. 12 is occupied by a doctor."

"I know. I called upon him recently to put some scientific point to him," said Quarles with a smile. "I came to the conclusion that he could give me no information about Mr. Ratcliffe. Rather curiously, he did not like Mr. Ratcliffe."

"So I discovered," I answered, and I was conscious of resenting the professor's active interference in the case. There is no telling what damage an amateur may do.

"His dislike was a solid fact," said Quarles. "I congratulate you on not being put on a false scent by it. Many detectives would have been. The gardens end on to each other— a doctor, a knowledge of subtle poisons— oh, there were materials for an excellent case ready to hand."

"We are getting away from the point, professor," I said, somewhat tartly.

"No, I am coming to it. I concentrated my attention on the house two doors further down the road. It would not be difficult to creep along the garden wall even in the dark. Two Chinese gentlemen boarded there, I was told. No one had noticed them very particularly in the neighborhood. There are several boarding-houses in Ossery Road, and many foreigners over here for study or upon business go to live in them. I called, but the Chinese gentlemen were visiting in the country, and were not expected back for another fortnight. As a fact, they were not Chinamen at all, but Tibetans, and I do not fancy they will come back."

"Tibetans. How do you know? You did not see them?"

"No, it is a guess; because on his last journey Mr. Ratcliffe wandered in Tibet. I have correspondents in Northern India, and it was not very difficult to get this information by cable. You do not know Tibet, Mr. Wigan?"

"No."

"Nor I, except from travelers' tales and through my correspondents. A curious people, given to fetish worship in peculiar forms. I can tell you of one strange place, strange as Lhasa. Were you to go there presently— it might be too soon yet, I cannot say for certain— but presently, I am convinced you would

witness a scene of rejoicing, religious processions in the streets, men wearing hideous masks; and in a temple there you would find an idol with two blue eyes— eyes of sapphire."

"Two?"

"For some time there has been only one," said Quarles; "the other was stolen. You would find also in this temple talismans, ivory boxes fitting into each other, the smallest containing a little carved head representing the head of the idol. Further, you would be told some strange tales of this idol, of the psychic influence it possesses, and how those who offend it remain always under that influence which brings terror. Were you present at a festival in this temple, you would hear the idol speak. First you would find the great assembly in the attitude of listening, and then from the idol you would hear a sound, half sigh, half groan. I suppose the priests produce it mechanically— I do not know. It may be that—"

"If this be true the mystery is solved," I said.

"I think so," said Quarles. "The Tibetans followed Mr. Ratcliffe to recover the lost eye, I have no doubt of that, and to be ready for any emergency had supplied themselves with a paste duplicate of the stone. Exactly how Mr. Ratcliffe died I can only conjecture. I remember that his eyes evidently saw something, and I fancy terror killed him. The Tibetans had undoubtedly watched him constantly, and had found out that he had the stone hidden in the boxes. Probably they expected to find it so hidden, having discovered that Mr. Ratcliffe had discarded the inner boxes of the talisman at the time of the robbery. Having made certain of this, I think that on the fatal night they made the curious sound that the idol makes when speaking, expecting that he would be listening for it, as their priests declared those who offended the god always did, and as a curious fact Mr. Ratcliffe actually was, remember; then possibly they thrust between the curtains one of those hideous masks which figure in so many religious ceremonies in Tibet. Mr. Ratcliffe was in a state of mind to give any sudden terror an enormous power over him, and I think he died without any violence being offered him. So the gem was recovered, the paste sapphire and the remaining boxes being left as a sign that the god had been avenged, a sign which I believe I have been able to read. There are the theory and some facts; you must make further inquiries yourself."

The professor rose abruptly from his chair. Evidently he had no intention of answering questions, and he meant the interview to come to an end.

"Thank you," I said. "I shall take steps at once to find out if you are correct."

"For your own satisfaction, not mine," said Quarles; "I am certain. You asked how it was I came to Blenheim Square that morning. Chance! It is called that. I do not believe in chance. When I am impelled to do a thing, I do it because I recognize a directing will I am forced to obey. We live in a world girt with

miracles, in an atmosphere of mystery which is beyond our comprehension. We find names for what we do not understand, psychic force, mind waves, telepathy, and the like, but they are only names and do not help us much. Keep an open mind, Mr. Wigan; you will be astonished what strange imaginings will enter it— imaginings which you will discover are real truths. An empty mind in an empty room, there you have the best receptacle for that great will which guides and governs all thought and action. I speak as a philosopher, and as an old man to a young one. Come to me if you like when you are in a difficulty, and I will help you if I am allowed to. Do you understand? Good-bye."

SUBSEQUENT inquiries made by Scotland Yard through the authorities in India established the fact that the sapphire eye of the image in Tibet had been stolen; that Mr. Ratcliffe was in Tibet at the time; and that not long after the tragedy in Blenheim Square the jewel was restored to its place with much rejoicing and religious enthusiasm.

I was not disposed to like Professor Quarles nor to believe in him altogether. I found it easy to see the charlatan in him, yet the fact remained that he had solved the problem.

Certainly he was interesting, and, besides, there was his granddaughter, Zena. If only for the sake of seeing her, I felt sure I should have occasion to consult Christopher Quarles again.

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18: The Ultra-Elixir of Youth

A. Hyatt Verrill
1871-1954
Amazing Stories Aug 1927

FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL mankind has sought for the secret of eternal youth, for some means to prevent the ravages of age. In many lands and in many ways men have devoted their lives to endeavoring to make this dream of perpetual youth a reality. They have concocted weird mixtures or elixirs, they have wrought spells and practiced magic, they have searched in strange lands for a fabulous life-giving fountain, and they have been jeered at, ridiculed, scoffed at for their pains. Hence it will come as a most amazing surprise to the world to learn that one man actually accomplished his purpose, and discovered the secret which had so eagerly and vainly been sought for during countless centuries. Moreover, his discovery was made recently—within the past three years in fact, while more astonishing yet, the secret has been forever lost to the world.

Now that the man responsible for the results can never repeat his performance, and has left no detailed explanation of the means whereby the conditions were brought about, there is no reason why an account of the whole matter should not be published.

Undoubtedly many of my readers will recollect the excitement caused by the inexplicable disappearance of Doctor Elias Henderson, the well known and prominent biologist of McCracken College. Probably, too, it will also be remembered that, almost coincidentally with his disappearance, a number of the University students vanished, as well as two private citizens and a physician.

As a great many more or less conflicting accounts were published in the newspapers of the time, and as many of these were far from accurate, it may be well to give a brief resumé of the events, for, strange as it may seem, the disappearance, which for a time supplied headline material for the press, had a very direct bearing upon the discovery of perpetual youth, or rather, I might say, the discovery had a direct bearing upon the disappearances.

The facts in the case were simple and were well established. Five students, two private citizens, an instructor and a female doctor, together with Doctor Henderson, completely vanished without any apparent or determinate reason. The investigations which followed, and which oddly enough were only instituted after the disappearance of Doctor Henderson, revealed the fact that the ten missing persons had been absent from their accustomed haunts for some days before they had been missed. It was also established that all had been very friendly and that they had frequently met, apparently in secret, and that the other nine had made periodical visits to Dr. Henderson's laboratory. This,

however, was not strange, as it was well known that all, with the exception of the two citizens— one a merchant and the other a banker— had been taking courses in biology from Dr. Henderson. It was therefore assumed that the meetings referred to were in the nature of purely scientific affairs, although why the unscientific merchant and banker should have been present, or should have visited Dr. Henderson's laboratory, was a mystery.

Had Dr. Henderson not vanished, it is highly probable that he would have been suspected of making away with the others, but as he, too, had disappeared, any such theory was of course discarded. It was also determined that not one of the ten had any apparent reason for vanishing; not one was in debt or involved in any scandal, and no one could advance any reasonable theory for any person wishing to murder them, for with the exception of the banker and merchant, all were persons of very moderate means, while the banker and merchant were known never to carry large sums of money on their persons, but conducted practically all of their business by means of checks.

FINALLY, and making the case even more baffling, the garments of all the ten were found intact though carelessly tossed aside. The students' clothes were found in their several rooms, the garments of the merchant and banker were discovered in their private offices, the lady physician's garments were in her office, and Doctor Henderson's street clothes were found in a corner of his laboratory. No one who was questioned, and hundreds of persons were examined, could definitely swear as to when they had last seen the missing persons, and not one witness could be located who was positive as to the last person seen with any of the missing people. Doctor Henderson was a rather retiring, secretive man, and frequently slept on a cot in his laboratory, and as no one really knew when he had vanished, no one could remember having seen any stranger or other person with him when he was last seen. The janitor of the building, after striving his best to revisualize the events of the past few weeks, stated that he was under the impression that he had seen a young man— a youth of fifteen or thereabouts, entering and leaving the doctor's laboratory on several occasions, but he could not be sure whether or not he had ever seen the scientist in the young fellow's company. The servant at the home of Dr. Elvira Flagg, also was hazy in her memory, although she, too, declared that she had noticed a young man, and a girl of about the same age, who frequently entered and left the office; but whether in company with Dr. Flagg she was not sure. As the office boys of both the merchant and banker also remembered seeing a youth make frequent visits to their employers the police at once began a search for a stripling answering the rather vague descriptions of the several witnesses. No trace of such a person could be found, but, to their surprise and confusion, the garments of such a young fellow were found in a closet in Dr. Henderson's

room, in the suite occupied by the merchant, and in the hotel apartments of the banker. Nothing further was discovered, and the entire affair was given up as an unsolvable mystery. During the investigation however, evidences were discovered which tended to show that several other and hitherto unsuspected crimes had been committed by the missing parties. Just what these were, the authorities have never disclosed, but according to persistent rumor they were in the nature of infantile crimes. Gossip had it that persons had been questioned who insisted that they had heard the cries of infants issuing from Dr. Henderson's laboratory, that no children had ever come forth, and that it was their belief that the scientist and his friends had sacrificed the infants in some experiments or had actually subjected them to vivisection. Hence, in the minds of many persons, the missing ten had had good reason to disappear, being, so these worthies argued, fugitives from justice and from the wrath of the public. Indeed, rumor and gossip soon linked the names of the ten as members of some secret and horrible cult with human sacrifices and what not. And the action of the police in hushing up the matter and abandoning all efforts to solve the mystery, only confirmed these ugly rumors in the minds of many.

But like all other mysteries and scandals, the matter soon lost interest, and within a twelvemonth was practically forgotten. Thus matters stood when I received a letter from the regents of McCracken College in which I was offered the position of Professor of Biology left vacant by the disappearance of Dr. Henderson.

Ordinarily, I think, I would have declined, for I had an excellent position, and while the salary at McCracken was larger than that which I was receiving, yet it did not offer the scope in research work which I desired, and as I had a fairly good income of my own, the salary was not so important. But remembering the mystery which had surrounded the former biologist's disappearance, and having been well acquainted with Dr. Henderson when we were students together at Belmore, the offer somehow appealed to me, because for some inexplicable reason, I had a feeling that I might be able to solve the mystery.

I therefore accepted the position, and, a few weeks later, found myself in possession of Dr. Henderson's laboratory, instruments, notes and apparatus. I had in fact almost literally stepped into his shoes. I am not superstitious and am not nervous, and I have never been subject to hallucinations or to any sensations for which I cannot account upon scientific or medical grounds. But from the moment when I took charge of Dr. Henderson's work and laboratory I had the strange and wholly unaccountable feeling of being in the presence of others, of being constantly watched. At times this sensation became almost unbearable. Several times I found myself involuntarily stepping aside as if to avoid stepping upon or bumping into someone, although the room was empty, and once or twice I actually started and shivered as I seemed to feel hands

touching my limbs or body. It was, of course, ridiculous. I was no believer in ghosts or spirits, and I decided that it was merely a psychological matter, a reaction of my nervous system to the atmosphere of mystery which pervaded the place. Hence, I laughed at my own sensations, called upon my superior mentality to govern my subjective nerves, and proceeded with my work, but throughout my stay in the laboratory— which was, I must confess, of short duration— I never overcame the decidedly uncomfortable feelings which I have mentioned.

My first act upon taking possession of Dr. Henderson's apparatus and laboratory was to combine a thorough search of the premises with an equally thorough housecleaning. Dr. Henderson, like so many scientific men, was unfortunately far from orderly or neat. Instruments, books, papers, apparatus, formulæ and chemicals had been left in disarray, evidently having been left wherever the biologist had used them last; drawers and cupboards were piled full of a hodge-podge of odds and ends; soiled laboratory aprons, old shoes and dirty towels were tucked away here and there, and as I cleared up the place I wondered how the police could have made a thorough search of the room under the existing conditions. And it was soon evident that they had not. Among a pile of old magazines, discarded litmus paper, and other rubbish in a closet I came upon a find which, temporarily at least, completely knocked me out. This was in fact a bundle of infant's garments, rather mussed and soiled and evidently worn. For a space I sat, gazing at the tiny garments with a strange mingling of horror, dismay, amazement and wonder. Had the ugly rumors been true after all? Had my old classmate gone mad with his researches and had he actually sacrificed an innocent child on the altar of science? If not why should he have been in possession of these garments? Where were the remains of the child itself? And what had been his relations with the others who had vanished? What terrible things had occurred to cause them all to disappear? Surely, I thought, no matter what events had led up to the culminating destruction of the child, Dr. Henderson must have made notes of it somewhere. Whatever he had done had beyond doubt been done in a mistaken, a warped idea that it was in the cause of science; that the means would be justified by the end; and hence he would have been certain to have recorded his theories, or the results of his experiments. To solve the mystery I must find such notes, and, abandoning all other work, I sought diligently and feverishly for some note book, some pad or even some scrap of paper which might explain everything.

Of course, I realized, there was a possibility, even a strong chance that he had destroyed the notes or had taken them with him. The very fact that he had disappeared, together with the others who I no longer doubted had been implicated with him in the crime, proved that they realized the enormity of their deeds and hence would have destroyed any evidence or records. But the fact

that the garments had been left so carelessly about caused me to think that more conclusive proofs might also have been overlooked. Moreover, Dr. Henderson, as I had discovered already, was extremely absent-minded in ordinary matters, and he also had had a habit of jotting down notes on anything and everything that came to hand. Hence, I reasoned, even if he or the others had made away with the most important evidences, there was more than an even chance that they had overlooked or had completely forgotten stray notes which would throw light on the matter. It was slow work, studying the almost hieroglyphic-like writing of my predecessor and examining every scrap of paper, even the margins of leaves in books and pamphlets, for what I sought. And for hours my efforts were fruitless. At last, when I had almost abandoned hope, I opened a small drawer in a littered and dust-covered desk and made a second and most surprising discovery. The drawer was filled with the strangest collection of objects which could possibly be imagined in the laboratory of a scientist. There were infants' garments, bottles of prepared foods, a nursing bottle, safety pins, a rattle, various other objects requisite to the welfare of small children, and, what seemed to me most important of all, a square, rather thick book which, immediately I opened it I discovered was a diary. Here, if anywhere, I felt, lay the solution of the mysteries. The first entry was dated over three years back, but a short perusal of the pages proved that the diary had not been kept regularly or consecutively, and that for long periods, no dates had been entered. It was, in fact, more of a journal or note book than a diary, and almost feverishly I turned the pages, glancing only at the occasional dates, and to my delight found that the last dated entry was September 14th, of the current year, only a few days before the disappearance of Dr. Henderson had been made known. Beyond question, then, there would be references to the mysterious events, and turning back the pages, I set myself to the task of reading the volume page by page.

AND AS I did so I became more and more astounded at what I found, for the indisputable evidence of Dr. Henderson's writing proved that the vanished biologist, whose whole life had been devoted to science and proven facts, had believed in the wholly unscientific and preposterous dream of perpetual youth.

"I see no scientific reason why organic matter should deteriorate with age," he had written in one entry. "Age, in animals or plants, is merely the decay of certain tissues or cells brought about by various causes, most of which are unnatural, artificial or due to the abuse of nature's laws. I have talked with E. on the subject, and she agrees with me. If we admit Einstein's theory of relativity then age is merely relative— in the universal scheme of things the infant is as old as the senile centenarian or vice-versa. Biologically there is no such thing as old age. Growth, yes; the building up of tissues by cells, yes; but the healthy,

normal cell of the aged plant or animal is indistinguishable from the corresponding cell of the new-born infant or the seedling plant. Scientifically endless youth or the arresting of cellular decay may be impossible, but so many known facts refute scientific possibilities that I am beginning to lose faith in scientific laws."

A little later I came upon the following: "I have cautiously sounded my class by dwelling lightly upon the matter of arresting decay and producing so-called perpetual youth. I judge several of the young men were intensely interested as, after the lecture, they remained and plied me with many questions. The subject opens up endless vistas. If the breaking down of cellular tissues were possible, death could be averted, except by accident, and practical immortality could be achieved. And what tremendous accomplishments might be achieved by a scientist, an artist, any intellectual man, if he was assured of a virile, healthy existence for hundreds of years; if for a century or more he retained the energy, the brain power, the physical and organic status of the prime of life.

"I believe this might be accomplished. E. (I had already assumed that Dr. Elvira Flagg was the E. referred to) is as greatly interested in the subject as myself. In her practice she has opportunities to study living beings in all stages of cellular decay or age, and with physical and mental powers breaking down through various causes. Her observations are as valuable to me as are my biological experiments to her. Several of my young men are also vastly interested and we often discuss the matter together. Perhaps the time has not yet arrived when man can choose the age or physical state in which he elects to remain, but some day it will be as ordinary an affair as to select one's food or method of conveyance."

For several pages after this last entry Dr. Henderson's diary omitted all reference to the subject, and I began to think that his observations had been wholly theoretical, and that he had not seriously considered the matter. But in this I was grossly mistaken, for once again the subject was the sole topic of the notes.

"I believe that we are on the way to solving the problem of arresting the deterioration of organic matter when caused by the lapse of time," he had written. "A regrettable accident has indicated the path we should follow. Several weeks ago the huge airship *Colossus* was destroyed by an explosion when passing over the village of Emerson. One of my young men who resides in the vicinity of Emerson mentioned a most curious and interesting phenomenon which has occurred where the accident took place. The health of the residents has greatly improved; several of the aged inmates of the County Home have recovered full use of their limbs and eyesight, and some ancient and dying trees have shown unusual and most astonishing growth— putting out new shoots and fresh leaves. I have visited Emerson in company with E. and have verified all

these statements. Vegetation is far more luxuriant in the area about the village than elsewhere, and E. personally interviewed and examined a number of persons, and she assures me that there are indisputable proofs of marked rejuvenation. We believe that the QW gas with which the airship was inflated was the direct cause of these interesting phenomena. As workers in the laboratory where this gas is manufactured have exhibited no signs of similar effects, we can only assume that the explosion, which has so far been inexplicable, altered the gas in such a way as to produce some chemical compound which has the power to arrest the ravages of age and to cause rejuvenation in organisms. Unfortunately the composition of QW is a closely guarded secret, and the gas is not available for experimental purposes. Could we only obtain a small amount of the gas we might make astounding discoveries."

I was now as deeply interested in Dr. Henderson's records as he had been in his visionary dream of perpetual youth. The destruction of the *Colossus* was still fresh in my mind; it had been a nationwide sensation, for the explosion, the cause of which had never been found, had utterly destroyed the entire crew of the immense craft. Neither could I doubt the truth of Dr. Henderson's statements regarding the conditions which had followed the disaster. But, I reasoned, this might have been due to perfectly normal and easily explained causes which the biologist in his enthusiasm had overlooked. Was it not quite possible that the gas, or the compounds arising from its explosion, had acted as a fertilizer and had thus caused a sudden spurt of vegetable growth about Emerson? And was it not equally possible, and even reasonable, to suppose that the disaster, the excitement attendant upon it, and the shock of the explosion had caused a nervous exhilaration or had acted as a stimulant to the inhabitants, especially to the aged members of the community, which would, temporarily, give them new vigor and a false rejuvenation? Yes, unquestionably such was the case, for, I reasoned, had the effects been lasting, had there been any marked and unusual results from the explosion of the airship, the press would most certainly have gotten hold of it.

SUCH THOUGHTS raced through my brain as I perused the succeeding pages of my predecessor's journal, until once again, I found myself fascinated by the record.

"E. has solved one of the obstacles," it began. "Among her patients is a Mr. Burke, a wealthy merchant who is under a deep obligation to her. She has mentioned her desire to secure some QW gas for an experiment of great medical and scientific value and he has assured her that through political friends he can secure some. If we obtain this I shall endeavor to reproduce on a small scale such an explosion as occurred at Emerson, subjecting aged tissues to the resultant gases. The difficulty will be to obtain the same effects. QW is

theoretically non-explosive, and I am now devoting all my spare time to solving the problem of why the *Colossus* exploded. In this work I have the invaluable assistance of Montross, one of my students who has shown unusual ability in chemical research work and received his degree in that science last spring."

Evidently Dr. Henderson's problems occupied far too much of his time to permit him to make regular entries, or else nothing important enough to transcribe occurred, for the next entry in the journal was dated nearly two weeks after the foregoing, and, as was so often the case, made no reference to what had occurred in the interim.

"There is now no doubt in our minds that so-called age may be arrested," he wrote. "My experiment, 612A, has proved this. In a way, the explosion was rather disastrous, for it destroyed much valuable apparatus and quite seriously injured Montross. However, he is rapidly recovering and E. declares that the amazing rapidity with which his injured tissues are healing is due entirely to the effects of the unknown chemicals released by the breaking down of the QW gas. Evidently, too, the effects of these are incredibly rapid, for despite the fact that owing to the unexpected violence of the explosion having destroyed the apparatus designed to hold the resultant chemicals, the organisms I had in readiness have shown truly remarkable signs of rejuvenation. Indeed, E. and myself have felt the effects. We both have more vigor, greater vital force and greater clarity of thought than previously, and yet there must have been a most minute quantity of the chemicals produced by the explosion. Montross declares that now we have solved the problem of breaking down QW we can unquestionably produce the desired chemicals without resorting to such a roundabout and dangerous method.

"It is a great pity that science is so hampered by lack of funds. To secure the apparatus and chemicals required to carry on our experiments, and to perfect them, it will be necessary to secure large sums. Neither E., Montross nor myself possess sufficient money, and to solicit funds from the university or from others would be futile. We would be scoffed at if we divulged the purpose for which we require the money. I fear we will be forced to abandon further researches in this direction. What a pity, when the results might be of such incalculable benefit to mankind!"

Again there was a lapse, until under date of July 5th was the following: "Montross has paved the way for carrying on the experiments. His uncle, a Mr. Redfield, is a wealthy banker whose obsession has been a fear of becoming a helpless, decrepit old man. A few days ago he stated, in the presence of young Montross, that he would give a million if he could retain all his faculties until his death. This gave Montross an idea, and at the risk of being jeered at, he related what we had done and suggested that Redfield should finance our experiments. To his delight his uncle was intensely interested and expressed his willingness to

do so on the condition that he might be a witness of our experiments. I have agreed to this, as had E. Her friend, Burke, has also been taken into our confidence, and five of my students have been enlisted in the cause. We have agreed that what we do must be kept to ourselves until we meet with success or failure, and as E. puts it, we have formed a little scientific secret society. We have no desire to let others know what we are doing or to let the press reporters get hold of the matter. Hence we meet more or less secretly or in my laboratory where we are safe from prying eyes or listening ears.

"Montross is entirely recovered and is working diligently at his chemical preparations. Burke, by the way, has been of inestimable aid, for he has managed to secure the formula for QW. Political graft after all has its advantages."

As I read on, I became more and more amazed, more and more fascinated by the revelations of this intimate journal of the missing biologist. Already much which had been mysterious had been cleared up. The bond which had linked Burke, the hard-headed merchant and political boss, Redfield the millionaire banker, Dr. Flagg the female physician, Montross the instructor in chemistry, the five students and Dr. Henderson, was explained. The reason for the meetings of the ten was clear and, beyond question, all had seen fit to vanish for the same reason. I had little doubt now that even that reason would be divulged as I read on, and forgetting time, work and all else, I devoured the contents of the journal. But what I found exceeded my wildest dreams and fascinated, astounded, fairly trembling with excitement, I read the wholly incredible, yet indisputably true story of the most amazing events ever transcribed by human hands; a story which, omitting the dates and irrelevant entries, ran as follows:

"Montross has succeeded. He has separated over twenty hitherto unknown chemicals from the QW gas. Among these is an entirely new element which he has named Juvenum and which he believes holds the key to our success. Even if we fail, the discovery of this element will make him famous. Burke and Redfield are fairly crazy over the work. The latter has put his entire fortune at our disposal. E. has been untiring, and as soon as our labors are crowned with success or we are convinced of the futility of further investigations I shall make her my wife. If we succeed, the vista before us is too marvelous to realize; endless years of perpetual youth together; never to grow old, never to lose the freshness and beauty of her full womanhood, never to lose my vigor, my intellect, my enthusiasm! But we have all agreed not to keep the knowledge of our success from the world. We have argued at length on this. Burke and Redfield were at first all for retaining the secret. Burke saw a marvelous money-making opportunity in it, treating persons for fabulous sums— millionaires he stated would pay anything to retain their youth, while Redfield argued that if no one grew old the world would soon be overcrowded and dire results would

follow. E., however, pointed out that even if we could prevent the ravages of time we might not and probably would not be able to prevent the ravages of diseases nor fatalities through accidents and that, youth being more impulsive and reckless than maturity, the percentage of accidents and disease would be greater, while many persons would not care to avail themselves of the treatment. Montross also pointed out that the benefits derived by scientists and other intellectuals being able to carry on indefinitely would more than offset any dangers of overpopulation, and that, unquestionably, those men with their discoveries would be able to solve any such problems which might arise. He himself, he stated, would devote his entire life to producing artificial foods, thus reducing the areas essential to growing crops and rendering more space available for industries and housing. For my own part, I declared that it would be extremely selfish to retain the secret, and that we would, I felt sure, be heartily sick of youth if we found ourselves still young while all our friends and acquaintances were aging and our associates through decades were to be yet unborn generations. We have also discussed the question of our discovery producing immortality. None of us believe this will be possible, and I do not think any of us believe it desirable. Burke is a devout Roman Catholic; Redfield is a pillar of the Episcopal church; E. is very religious and a member of the Methodist church; Montross is an Episcopalian and while I profess no particular religion I am a firm believer in the omnipotence of the Creator and His wisdom. I believe, too, in a future existence of some sort, and neither the others nor myself would wish to forego the chances of such a state. Moreover, none of us, with the possible exception of some of my young and ultra-modern students, believe that man has the power to change the laws of Nature or to accomplish anything in opposition to the will of God. To prevent the visual ravages of time upon the system would, we all agree, be no violation of Nature's inexorable laws, whereas immortality would be in direct opposition to the entire scheme of things. To increase the span of life, and to retain the faculties of youth during that life, would be a blessing, but to live on forever would be a curse....

"We have carried on very extensive tests with various organisms, both vegetable and animal. We find that, as Montross expected, the new element Juvenum is the active principle, but we have met with an unexpected obstacle. While the lower forms of life respond to the treatment and become rejuvenated, or do not age, yet they soon cease to function or die. What a calamity it would be if man, in his desire for youth, should be compelled to shorten his existence, to flit, like a butterfly, for a brief space and then die while in the possession of the youth he sought! Perhaps, after all, our lives as they are, are preferable; perhaps old age has its advantages. However, we feel that the trouble is not insurmountable, that by experimenting we can produce the desired effects without the unfortunate results....

"WE HAVE hit it! Purely by accident we— for I must give credit to my assistants, and especially to Burke who is the last man in the world one would expect to make a discovery— purely by accident, I say, we have solved the problem. To while away the time, Burke brought a radio receiving set to the laboratory. One of the receptacles containing the organisms treated with Juvenum was close to the set, and whereas all other treated organisms died after a few days, those beside the radio set continued to live and thrive with remarkable vigor. Burke, oddly enough, was the first to notice it, and called our attention to it. Johnson, one of my students, is a radio enthusiast and possesses an intimate knowledge of the apparatus. He declared that the electro-magnetic waves, or the electrons from the tubes, must have been instrumental in producing the results, and we at once proceeded to experiment along these lines. Unquestionably Johnson was right. Organisms, both animal and vegetable, exposed to the vacuum tubes' action and treated with Juvenum become rejuvenated and thrive prodigiously, whereas others similarly treated, but kept from the tubes' influence, expire rapidly. The question now is, do the rejuvenated organisms retain their vigor and condition after a certain duration of exposure to the tubes or is the action of the radio energy essential in order for them to exist?...

"Perpetual youth is within our grasp! Once organisms are treated with Juvenum and subjected to the vacuum tubes' action, they retain their vigor and continue to live without aging. We now have a number which for several weeks have remained unchanged, yet which, under normal conditions, would have died of old age long ago. We are now ready to test our methods upon higher forms of life. Tomorrow we shall treat rabbits and guinea pigs, some potted plants and some birds. Montross has an ancient toothless dog of which he is very fond, but which he must destroy very soon. He is to try the effect of our treatment upon the beast. E. has offered a parrot which has been for many years in her family and which shows evidences of extreme age. Johnson facetiously offered to steal a decrepit cab horse and bring the creature to the laboratory, while Burke declared the best subject would be our octogenarian state senator, and Redfield suggested that we try the treatment on the local trolley line. We are all so elated that such nonsense is forgivable, and we are all terribly in earnest and are under such a nerve strain that we must find an outlet for our feelings. That we are on the verge of proving the epochal discovery we have made, I am convinced, for microscopic examinations of the cells and tissues which I have prepared show undeniable proofs of marvelous rejuvenation and increased vigor and resistance....

"We cannot believe our senses. Every experiment has been a tremendous success. Three days ago Montross's dog was a miserable half-blind, toothless

thing and today he is frisking about like a puppy; he can see almost as well as ever and teeth are sprouting from his gums. E.'s ancient parrot is gay with the plumage of a young bird, he talks and chatters constantly, and climbs about like an acrobat. So marvelous were the results that Burke, Redfield, Johnson and several of the others insisted on taking the treatment despite my advice, for I fear there are possibilities which we did not foresee and which may not be altogether desirable. I had sought for means of retaining youth, but our discovery goes beyond that and restores youth. In all probability further researches and experiments will enable us to administer a treatment in such a manner that almost any desired condition of maturity may be attained and permanently fixed, but at present we cannot be sure how much of age will be wiped away and how much of youthfulness will be restored. Earnestly I pointed out to Burke and Redfield that it would be far from desirable or pleasant if, after taking a treatment, they should be transformed to beardless boys, irresponsible youngsters whom no one would recognize. But they were adamant. They argued that by taking a light treatment they could test out the powers of the Juvenum, that as they had made the experiments possible they should be entitled to be the first to test the effects of the discovery, and that they hadn't the slightest fear of its restoring too much of their past youth. Johnson and the others sided with them, and at last, realizing, I fear a bit selfishly, that some one had to be the first to take the test, I consented.

"But I insisted that only a very light, almost superficial, treatment should be given, and to this they consented. I have watched them carefully; E. has kept accurate records of their pulse, respiration and temperature, and we find that they already show distinct signs of slight rejuvenation. Johnson and the other young men show it the most markedly, but this is to be expected of course, as their systems are more responsive and less deterioration of cells and tissues renders the action of the treatment more rapid....

"Everything is most satisfactory. Burke and Redfield look like men of forty, and declare they feel better than they have felt for years. Johnson has the fresh color and spirits of twenty, and his companions are in practically the same condition. Today, Montross took the treatment, and E. insists she will do so tomorrow. Of course, in that case, I can do no less than follow, and yet, somehow, I have a premonition that we have not yet learned all the powers or peculiarities of Juvenum, and that we have been over-hasty in submitting ourselves to the tests....

"A terrible thing has happened. My worst fears have been confirmed. We have all taken the treatment and we are all in the same awful predicament.

"For several days the animals treated remained in the same state to which they had been altered by the treatment. Then, to my horror and amazement, I noticed that the dog and parrot were showing signs of growing constantly

younger. The cur was acting more and more like a puppy; the parrot was losing its full plumage and was acquiring pin-feathers. I hurried to the apartments of Burke and Redfield and found both men in seclusion. Burke, who had been a stout, florid man of sixty had become unrecognizable as a young man of thirty,— slender, freckle-faced and red-haired. Redfield's alteration was even worse. From the paunchy, gray-whiskered banker he had become transformed into a sallow-faced young man, and, catching a glimpse of myself in a mirror, I discovered that I, too, have lost ten years in appearance. Almost too distraught to express my fears I rushed madly to E.'s office. But instead of the woman I had expected to wed I found a beautiful girl who, outwardly at least, appeared no more than twenty years of age. She, however, did not share my fears. She was overjoyed at the recovery of her youthful beauty and she was elated at the change which had taken place in myself. In vain I tried to explain to her that if the rejuvenation process continued we would all be regarded as mere boys and girls; that already Burke and Redfield were afraid to appear before their employees.

"But she, perhaps because of her medical and anatomical knowledge, argued that my fears were groundless. We were, as I well knew, in full possession of all the knowledge and experience we had acquired during our lives. Regardless of physical appearances we were mature, experienced, and fully developed mentally, and, she added, unquestionably the banker and merchant, with their youthful frame and vigor, could accomplish far more than in their physically aged condition.

"AFTER A TIME I felt that perhaps she was right. But I still feared that the process of rejuvenation might continue, that no one could foretell when it would cease.

"The only thing to do was to devote all of our energies to finding a means to control the action of the Juvenum, and I summoned Montross and the others, who had all leaped backwards for from ten to fifteen years. I explained my fears and the necessity of finding some means to check or control the action of our discovery.

"For a few days the effects of the treatment appeared to cease of their own accord, and no marked physical changes took place. Then, as if by magic, the rejuvenation process took hold once more, and in a few days Burke and Redfield had become scarcely more than youths. Johnson was a mere lad, while E. and myself, who had been the last to take the treatment and who had taken far less than the others, felt and looked like a youth and girl of eighteen. Burke and Redfield were beside themselves. They had important business to attend to, and already their absence from their offices was causing uneasiness. All seemed to look to me for a way out of their difficulties, and, without effect, I tried to make

them see that they were the ones who had insisted when I had cautioned and that, moreover, I had shown my faith in submitting to the treatment.

"Realizing that no one would recognize the banker or the merchant, I suggested that they go to their offices, put their business in order, and then retire to their apartments until I had had an opportunity to carry on further tests of formulæ Montross and myself had worked out....

"We are all lost. Nothing we can do will check the effect of the Juvenum. E. and myself are so changed that when, yesterday, we went to her office to secure some things she wanted, her housekeeper did not recognize us. We have all been obliged to purchase the garments of young people. And Burke and Redfield are worse off than any of the rest. Whether they received larger amounts of Juvenum than the others; whether, as I suspect, they surreptitiously treated themselves a second time, or whether the Juvenum acts more rapidly upon old persons, I do not know. But yesterday when, after repeated calls by phone, I got no reply and went to their apartments, I felt that I must be going mad. Burke had become a gawky boy of twelve and Redfield was unrecognizable as a lad of fifteen. Both were frenzied, both begged me to secure proper garments for them, and both were indescribably pitiful objects to behold—mere children with the brains, the intelligence, the knowledge, the thoughts of grown, experienced men.

"The only redeeming feature of the day was my marriage to E. We both felt that if we waited longer no minister would marry us, fearing we were under age, but our happiness we fear will be short lived. We all know now what is to follow. We all know that we are past human help unless a miracle occurs. Ours is an agony almost beyond endurance. The poor rejuvenated dog which Montross, poor fellow, offered in the cause of science, has proven an object lesson to us, has brought home to us the terrible consequence of attempting to interfere with the plan of the Creator. The creature is now a toothless, purblind puppy, while the parrot is a fledgling, raucous-voiced and almost naked. Did ever human beings face a like fate? If we are to believe the evidences of our senses we are slowly, but all too rapidly, growing constantly younger. In a short time,—God knows when,— we will be squalling, helpless babies! Already Burke and Redfield are toddling about, supporting themselves by chairs and burbling unintelligible words. Surreptitiously and at night E. and I managed to kidnap them from their rooms and bring them here. They were then boys of eight. And by dint of threats, by argument and through their own agony of suspense, I have managed to gather all the others together here in my laboratory. All I say, but Montross, Johnson and two others are missing. What has become of them we do not know. Perhaps they have committed suicide, perhaps they have gone mad, perhaps they have rushed madly away seeking to escape the inexorable fate before them....

"Such horror! I feel that I must go mad. Were it not for E. I would make away with myself. I know now what has become of Montross, Johnson and the others. I have found a note from Montross stating that he and Johnson had agreed to make a supreme test, to make a brave effort to avert the horrible fate to which we were doomed, to strive to check the accursed Juvenum by taking a stronger dose, in a hope, a mere chance that, like some poisons, one treatment would offset the other. What happened I know only too well. It is incredible! The thing is unthinkable, but true! The dog, two days ago, was a feeble puppy; yesterday it was a blind, newly-born, tiny thing; today it has vanished! The parrot became a fledgling, yesterday a round white egg appeared in its cage. Today the cage is empty. Nature is being reversed! With incredible speed we and all life subjected to the damnable treatment of Juvenum, are progressing backward. Beyond doubt Montross and the others have already vanished, have already passed back to the embryonic state, even to the unknown, unsolved mysterious source whence comes all life. My wife and I, of all the ten, remain as rational human beings. Burke and Redfield are gurgling, cooing, helpless babies whose wants occupy all of our time. And my heart is wrenched each time I look at my darling wife. No longer is she a woman, no longer a budding girl. She is a slim wisp of femininity perhaps twelve years of age, but still possessing all her womanly instincts, all her knowledge of medicine, all the thoughts, the longings, the ambitions that were hers when, seemingly ages ago, we first discussed the question of perpetual youth.

"But bravely, uncomplainingly, she has borne the ordeal which we are passing through. She has never blamed me; she is as patient, as smiling as cheerful as ever, though she knows that only a few days remain before she, too, will be a helpless infant.

"And the utter horror of it all, the most terrible part of the whole affair, is that even to the last minute, even though they crow and cry and drool like normal infants, Burke, Redfield and the others possess the intellects, the brains, the sensations of their mature years. I can see it, and I shiver with terror at the sight, for the agony of mind which is theirs is stamped upon their baby faces.

"I CAN SCARCELY bear to write. Redfield, Burke and the others have gone. Yesterday they were there, tiny, red-faced, toothless, newly-born babies, and today no trace of their presence remains. And my wife! As I write, she who was my beloved Elvira is creeping about the floor, while I, the last of the ten to succumb to the effects of our accursed experiments, sit at the desk, torn with unbearable dread, with indescribable horror at the fate which, so unconsciously, I have brought upon my wife and the others. And though I am writing this in the same hand which I used when a full grown man, although I have felt no change in my brain, yet I am but a youth, a mere stripling, a beardless boy of perhaps a

dozen years. Were it not for Elvira, were it not that until her last moment I must care for her, I would follow the example of Montross and Johnson and would hasten my end by taking a double dose of Juvenum. But instead, I have destroyed everything. Every chemical, every formula, everything to do with the damnable affair has been made away with. Never shall the world know how to do what we have done if I can prevent it. Nothing shall be left that will be available for others. And as soon as Elvira has drifted backward into that unfathomable beyond whence all life comes, I shall face the most terrible fate of all. No one will be left to care for me. I shall be a helpless infant and, must, I feel sure, go through the retrocessional process to oblivion, for I long ago promised Elvira that I would not take my own life, and, I feel sure, I will not be granted the solace of starving to death, for I am convinced that this whole horrible nightmarish affair is but a reversion of life as it has been for us; that time has been turned back, as related to our own existence, that if we survived the perils of infantile mortality nothing can prevent us from retroceeding in the same manner, and that, as long as I did not starve to death while an infant, I cannot hope to succumb to starvation now that my infancy is to be repeated, even though there are no loving hands to care for me.

"And another strange thing has happened. Of late I have been aware of the presence of beings about me. They are invisible, intangible, but I feel their nearness. Are they the spirits of my companions? Can it be possible that, having gone back beyond the stage of human form at birth, they have been unable to return to embryonic form, and are still filling the atmosphere about me?...

"These will be my last lines. My beloved wife has gone. To the very end she seemed happy. In her baby eyes, as I tenderly, though clumsily fed her, was the look of contentment; her baby mouth smiled, and there was none of the agony which contorted the infantile countenances of Burke, Redfield and the others. This morning she faded from sight and vanished, and I feel that somewhere she is watching me and waiting for me. I am more resigned to my fate now. And for the first time I have given thought to matters aside from our own affairs. What, I wonder, will the world think when it finds that ten members of its population have inexplicably vanished into thin air? No doubt there will be investigations; the police will be called in; but only to make the mystery the greater. What will they think when they find the baby clothes which have served for Burke, Redfield and even for Elvira in turn? Only I will be without the tiny garments. Long before my body is small enough for them I will be unable to dress myself. I will shrink to an infant in the clothes I have on, in the makeshift, cut-down things I am wearing, and crawling from them, a naked infant, I shall probably find them an interesting plaything. Strange, now that my fate is so near at hand, I am so calm, that I can see the humor of the situation. But my great regret is that after today I will be unable to record my sensations. Even if my mind

remains mature my childish hand will be unable to hold a pen or form the letters. I am now a child of eight or ten years in appearance and physical characters, and I am forced to sit upon a pile of books in order to write. Ever since this morning I have realized I am dwindling. I have been forced to add two books to the pile. But before I am unable to do so I must make some preparations. I will place this journal among the infant's garments and other things in a drawer beyond my own reach, for otherwise, in my infantile state, I may tear and destroy the only record I can leave of the incredible events which have transpired here in my laboratory. I can write no more. My brain is still clear and filled with the thoughts of a grown man,— yes even the scientific side of my intellect is unchanged. But I find the pen difficult to hold, and my childish fingers can scarcely form the characters I wish to write. And there is no more to record. I have sought perpetual youth and I have found it; but such a youth! Youth reduced to the *n*th degree, the utter youth of invisible existence, the youth of the pre-natal, inexplicable germ of life, perhaps the—"

THE JOURNAL ended in an undecipherable scrawl. Trembling, shaken, pale with the suspense of what I had read, I sat staring, and was aware for the first time that the vast laboratory was dusky with approaching night. Then, with a stifled cry, I sprang to my feet. An invisible, intangible presence seemed to be near. I could have sworn that fingers clutched my clothes. With my scalp tingling, terrified as I had never been in my life, I fled from the room which, despite common sense and reason, I felt sure was still tenanted by the missing ten. And I was even more terrified as another thought flashed across my mind. How did I know that some of the terrible element, Juvenum, might not have remained in the laboratory? How could I be sure that I had not inadvertently exposed myself to its effects? How could I be positive that I, too, might not find myself going backward, doomed eventually to pass out like a snuffed-out candle? Never again, I determined, would I enter the laboratory. I would resign the next day, I would return to my former work, and, for a space I knew, I would live in deadly fear of signs of regained youthfulness.

But fate took a hand in my plans. That night a disastrous fire swept McCracken College, the laboratory with all its contents was utterly destroyed, and to this day the true explanation of the disappearance of Dr. Henderson and the nine others has never been published.

And my fears proved groundless. I grew no younger, as the months passed, and when, a year after reading Dr. Henderson's amazing journal, my wife found several gray hairs over my temples, I felt sure that all danger of my having been exposed to the perils of perpetual youth were over.

And, as Dr. Henderson's diary has burned to ashes with the rest of his possessions, and I fear that the vivid memory of its contents might grow dim if I delay longer, I have decided that the world shall know the truth.

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19: The Ash-Tree

M. R. James

1862-1936

Collected in: *Ghost-Stories of an Antiquary*, 1904

EVERYONE who has travelled over Eastern England knows the smaller country-houses with which it is studded— the rather dank little buildings, usually in the Italian style, surrounded with parks of some eighty to a hundred acres. For me they have always had a very strong attraction: with the grey paling of split oak, the noble trees, the meres with their reed-beds, and the line of distant woods. Then, I like the pillared portico— perhaps stuck on to a red-brick Queen Anne house which has been faced with stucco to bring it into line with the "Grecian" taste of the end of the eighteenth century; the hall inside, going up to the roof, which hall ought always to be provided with a gallery and a small organ. I like the library, too, where you may find anything from a Psalter of the thirteenth century to a Shakespeare quarto. I like the pictures, of course; and perhaps most of all I like fancying what life in such a house was when it was first built, and in the piping times of landlords' prosperity, and not least now, when, if money is not so plentiful, taste is more varied and life quite as interesting. I wish to have one of these houses, and enough money to keep it together and entertain my friends in it modestly.

But this is a digression. I have to tell you of a curious series of events which happened in such a house as I have tried to describe. It is Castringham Hall in Suffolk. I think a good deal has been done to the building since the period of my story, but the essential features I have sketched are still there— Italian portico, square block of white house, older inside than out, park with fringe of woods, and mere. The one feature that marked out the house from a score of others is gone. As you looked at it from the park, you saw on the right a great old ash-tree growing within half a dozen yards of the wall, and almost or quite touching the building with its branches. I suppose it had stood there ever since Castringham ceased to be a fortified place, and since the moat was filled in and the Elizabethan dwelling-house built. At any rate, it had well-nigh attained its full dimensions in the year 1690.

In that year the district in which the Hall is situated was the scene of a number of witch-trials. It will be long, I think, before we arrive at a just estimate of the amount of solid reason— if there was any— which lay at the root of the universal fear of witches in old times. Whether the persons accused of this offence really did imagine that they were possessed of unusual power of any kind; or whether they had the will at least, if not the power, of doing mischief to their neighbours; or whether all the confessions, of which there are so many, were extorted by the mere cruelty of the witch-finders— these are questions

which are not, I fancy, yet solved. And the present narrative gives me pause. I cannot altogether sweep it away as mere invention. The reader must judge for himself.

Castringham contributed a victim to the *auto-da-fé*. Mrs Mothersole was her name, and she differed from the ordinary run of village witches only in being rather better off and in a more influential position. Efforts were made to save her by several reputable farmers of the parish. They did their best to testify to her character, and showed considerable anxiety as to the verdict of the jury.

But what seems to have been fatal to the woman was the evidence of the then proprietor of Castringham Hall— Sir Matthew Fell. He deposed to having watched her on three different occasions from his window, at the full of the moon, gathering sprigs "from the ash-tree near my house". She had climbed into the branches, clad only in her shift, and was cutting off small twigs with a peculiarly curved knife, and as she did so she seemed to be talking to herself. On each occasion Sir Matthew had done his best to capture the woman, but she had always taken alarm at some accidental noise he had made, and all he could see when he got down to the garden was a hare running across the path in the direction of the village.

On the third night he had been at the pains to follow at his best speed, and had gone straight to Mrs Mothersole's house; but he had had to wait a quarter of an hour battering at her door, and then she had come out very cross, and apparently very sleepy, as if just out of bed; and he had no good explanation to offer of his visit.

Mainly on this evidence, though there was much more of a less striking and unusual kind from other parishioners, Mrs Mothersole was found guilty and condemned to die. She was hanged a week after the trial, with five or six more unhappy creatures, at Bury St Edmunds.

Sir Matthew Fell, then Deputy-Sheriff, was present at the execution. It was a damp, drizzly March morning when the cart made its way up the rough grass hill outside Northgate, where the gallows stood. The other victims were apathetic or broken down with misery; but Mrs Mothersole was, as in life so in death, of a very different temper. Her "poysonous Rage", as a reporter of the time puts it, "did so work upon the Bystanders— yea, even upon the Hangman— that it was constantly affirmed of all that saw her that she presented the living Aspect of a mad Divell. Yet she offer'd no Resistance to the Officers of the Law; onely she looked upon those that laid Hands upon her with so direfull and venomous an Aspect that— as one of them afterwards assured me— the meer Thought of it preyed inwardly upon his Mind for six Months after."

However, all that she is reported to have said was the seemingly meaningless words: "There will be guests at the Hall." Which she repeated more than once in an undertone.

Sir Matthew Fell was not unimpressed by the bearing of the woman. He had some talk upon the matter with the Vicar of his parish, with whom he travelled home after the assize business was over. His evidence at the trial had not been very willingly given; he was not specially infected with the witch-finding mania, but he declared, then and afterwards, that he could not give any other account of the matter than that he had given, and that he could not possibly have been mistaken as to what he saw. The whole transaction had been repugnant to him, for he was a man who liked to be on pleasant terms with those about him; but he saw a duty to be done in this business, and he had done it. That seems to have been the gist of his sentiments, and the Vicar applauded it, as any reasonable man must have done.

A few weeks after, when the moon of May was at the full, Vicar and Squire met again in the park, and walked to the Hall together. Lady Fell was with her mother, who was dangerously ill, and Sir Matthew was alone at home; so the Vicar, Mr Crome, was easily persuaded to take a late supper at the Hall.

Sir Matthew was not very good company this evening. The talk ran chiefly on family and parish matters, and, as luck would have it, Sir Matthew made a memorandum in writing of certain wishes or intentions of his regarding his estates, which afterwards proved exceedingly useful.

When Mr Crome thought of starting for home, about half past nine o'clock, Sir Matthew and he took a preliminary turn on the gravelled walk at the back of the house. The only incident that struck Mr Crome was this: they were in sight of the ash-tree which I described as growing near the windows of the building, when Sir Matthew stopped and said:

"What is that that runs up and down the stem of the ash? It is never a squirrel? They will all be in their nests by now."

The Vicar looked and saw the moving creature, but he could make nothing of its colour in the moonlight. The sharp outline, however, seen for an instant, was imprinted on his brain, and he could have sworn, he said, though it sounded foolish, that, squirrel or not, it had more than four legs.

Still, not much was to be made of the momentary vision, and the two men parted. They may have met since then, but it was not for a score of years.

Next day Sir Matthew Fell was not downstairs at six in the morning, as was his custom, nor at seven, nor yet at eight. Hereupon the servants went and knocked at his chamber door. I need not prolong the description of their anxious listenings and renewed batterings on the panels. The door was opened at last from the outside, and they found their master dead and black. So much you have guessed. That there were any marks of violence did not at the moment appear; but the window was open.

One of the men went to fetch the parson, and then by his directions rode on to give notice to the coroner. Mr Crome himself went as quick as he might to the

Hall, and was shown to the room where the dead man lay. He has left some notes among his papers which show how genuine a respect and sorrow was felt for Sir Matthew, and there is also this passage, which I transcribe for the sake of the light it throws upon the course of events, and also upon the common beliefs of the time:

"There was not any the least Trace of an Entrance having been forc'd to the Chamber: but the Casement stood open, as my poor Friend would always have it in this Season. He had his Evening Drink of small Ale in a silver vessel of about a pint measure, and tonight had not drunk it out. This Drink was examined by the Physician from Bury, a Mr Hodgkins, who could not, however, as he afterwards declar'd upon his Oath, before the Coroner's quest, discover that any matter of a venomous kind was present in it. For, as was natural, in the great Swelling and Blackness of the Corpse, there was talk made among the Neighbours of Poyson. The Body was very much Disorder'd as it laid in the Bed, being twisted after so extream a sort as gave too probable Conjecture that my worthy Friend and Patron had expir'd in great Pain and Agony. And what is as yet unexplain'd, and to myself the Argument of some Horrid and Artfull Designe in the Perpetrators of this Barbarous Murther, was this, that the Women which were entrusted with the laying-out of the Corpse and washing it, being both sad Persons and very well Respected in their Mournfull Profession, came to me in a great Pain and Distress both of Mind and Body, saying, what was indeed confirmed upon the first View, that they had no sooner touch'd the Breast of the Corpse with their naked Hands than they were sensible of a more than ordinary violent Smart and Acheing in their Palms, which, with their whole Forearms, in no long time swell'd so immoderately, the Pain still continuing, that, as afterwards proved, during many weeks they were forc'd to lay by the exercise of their Calling; and yet no mark seen on the Skin.

"Upon hearing this, I sent for the Physician, who was still in the House, and we made as carefull a Proof as we were able by the Help of a small Magnifying Lens of Crystal of the condition of the Skinn on this Part of the Body: but could not detect with the Instrument we had any Matter of Importance beyond a couple of small Punctures or Pricks, which we then concluded were the Spotts by which the Poyson might be introduced, remembering that Ring of *Pope Borgia*, with other known Specimens of the Horrid Art of the Italian Poysoners of the last age.

"So much is to be said of the Symptoms seen on the Corpse. As to what I am to add, it is meerly my own Experiment, and to be left to Posterity to judge whether there be anything of Value therein. There was on the Table by the Beddside a Bible of the small size, in which my Friend— punctuall as in Matters of less Moment, so in this more weighty one— used nightly, and upon his First Rising, to read a sett Portion. And I taking it up— not without a Tear duly paid to

him wich from the Study of this poorer Adumbration was now pass'd to the contemplation of its great Originall— it came into my Thoughts, as at such moments of Helplessness we are prone to catch at any the least Glimmer that makes promise of Light, to make trial of that old and by many accounted Superstitious Practice of drawing the *Sortes;* of which a Principall Instance, in the case of his late Sacred Majesty the Blessed Martyr King *Charles* and my Lord *Falkland*, was now much talked of. I must needs admit that by my Trial not much Assistance was afforded me: yet, as the Cause and Origin of these Dreadfull Events may hereafter be search'd out, I set down the Results, in the case it may be found that they pointed the true Quarter of the Mischief to a quicker Intelligence than my own.

"I made, then, three trials, opening the Book and placing my Finger upon certain Words: which gave in the first these words, from Luke xiii. 7, *Cut it down*; in the second, Isaiah xiii. 20, *It shall never be inhabited*; and upon the third Experiment, Job xxxix. 30, *Her young ones also suck up blood*."

This is all that need be quoted from Mr Crome's papers. Sir Matthew Fell was duly coffined and laid into the earth, and his funeral sermon, preached by Mr Crome on the following Sunday, has been printed under the title of "The Unsearchable Way; or, England's Danger and the Malicious Dealings of Antichrist", it being the Vicar's view, as well as that most commonly held in the neighbourhood, that the Squire was the victim of a recrudescence of the Popish Plot.

His son, Sir Matthew the second, succeeded to the title and estates. And so ends the first act of the Castringham tragedy. It is to be mentioned, though the fact is not surprising, that the new Baronet did not occupy the room in which his father had died. Nor, indeed, was it slept in by anyone but an occasional visitor during the whole of his occupation. He died in 1735, and I do not find that anything particular marked his reign, save a curiously constant mortality among his cattle and live-stock in general, which showed a tendency to increase slightly as time went on.

Those who are interested in the details will find a statistical account in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 1772, which draws the facts from the Baronet's own papers. He put an end to it at last by a very simple expedient, that of shutting up all his beasts in sheds at night, and keeping no sheep in his park. For he had noticed that nothing was ever attacked that spent the night indoors. After that the disorder confined itself to wild birds, and beasts of chase. But as we have no good account of the symptoms, and as all-night watching was quite unproductive of any clue, I do not dwell on what the Suffolk farmers called the "Castringham sickness".

The second Sir Matthew died in 1735, as I said, and was duly succeeded by his son, Sir Richard. It was in his time that the great family pew was built out on

the north side of the parish church. So large were the Squire's ideas that several of the graves on that unhallowed side of the building had to be disturbed to satisfy his requirements. Among them was that of Mrs Mothersole, the position of which was accurately known, thanks to a note on a plan of the church and yard, both made by Mr Crome.

A certain amount of interest was excited in the village when it was known that the famous witch, who was still remembered by a few, was to be exhumed. And the feeling of surprise, and indeed disquiet, was very strong when it was found that, though her coffin was fairly sound and unbroken, there was no trace whatever inside it of body, bones, or dust. Indeed, it is a curious phenomenon, for at the time of her burying no such things were dreamt of as resurrection-men, and it is difficult to conceive any rational motive for stealing a body otherwise than for the uses of the dissecting-room.

The incident revived for a time all the stories of witch-trials and of the exploits of the witches, dormant for forty years, and Sir Richard's orders that the coffin should be burnt were thought by a good many to be rather foolhardy, though they were duly carried out.

Sir Richard was a pestilent innovator, it is certain. Before his time the Hall had been a fine block of the mellowest red brick; but Sir Richard had travelled in Italy and become infected with the Italian taste, and, having more money than his predecessors, he determined to leave an Italian palace where he had found an English house. So stucco and ashlar masked the brick; some indifferent Roman marbles were planted about in the entrance-hall and gardens; a reproduction of the Sibyl's temple at Tivoli was erected on the opposite bank of the mere; and Castringham took on an entirely new, and, I must say, a less engaging, aspect. But it was much admired, and served as a model to a good many of the neighbouring gentry in after-years.

One morning (it was in 1754) Sir Richard woke after a night of discomfort. It had been windy, and his chimney had smoked persistently, and yet it was so cold that he must keep up a fire. Also something had so rattled about the window that no man could get a moment's peace. Further, there was the prospect of several guests of position arriving in the course of the day, who would expect sport of some kind, and the inroads of the distemper (which continued among his game) had been lately so serious that he was afraid for his reputation as a game-preserver. But what really touched him most nearly was the other matter of his sleepless night. He could certainly not sleep in that room again.

That was the chief subject of his meditations at breakfast, and after it he began a systematic examination of the rooms to see which would suit his notions best. It was long before he found one. This had a window with an eastern aspect and that with a northern; this door the servants would be always

passing, and he did not like the bedstead in that. No, he must have a room with a western look-out, so that the sun could not wake him early, and it must be out of the way of the business of the house. The housekeeper was at the end of her resources.

"Well, Sir Richard," she said, "you know that there is but the one room like that in the house."

"Which may that be?" said Sir Richard.

"And that is Sir Matthew's— the West Chamber."

"Well, put me in there, for there I'll lie tonight," said her master. "Which way is it? Here, to be sure;" and he hurried off.

"Oh, Sir Richard, but no one has slept there these forty years. The air has hardly been changed since Sir Matthew died there."

Thus she spoke, and rustled after him.

"Come, open the door, Mrs Chiddock. I'll see the chamber, at least."

So it was opened, and, indeed, the smell was very close and earthy. Sir Richard crossed to the window, and, impatiently, as was his wont, threw the shutters back, and flung open the casement. For this end of the house was one which the alterations had barely touched, grown up as it was with the great ash-tree, and being otherwise concealed from view.

"Air it, Mrs Chiddock, all today, and move my bed-furniture in in the afternoon. Put the Bishop of Kilmore in my old room."

"Pray, Sir Richard," said a new voice, breaking in on this speech, "might I have the favour of a moment's interview?"

Sir Richard turned round and saw a man in black in the doorway, who bowed.

"I must ask your indulgence for this intrusion, Sir Richard. You will, perhaps, hardly remember me. My name is William Crome, and my grandfather was Vicar here in your grandfather's time."

"Well, sir," said Sir Richard, "the name of Crome is always a passport to Castringham. I am glad to renew a friendship of two generations" standing. In what can I serve you? for your hour of calling— and, if I do not mistake you, your bearing— shows you to be in some haste."

"That is no more than the truth, sir. I am riding from Norwich to Bury St Edmunds with what haste I can make, and I have called in on my way to leave with you some papers which we have but just come upon in looking over what my grandfather left at his death. It is thought you may find some matters of family interest in them."

"You are mighty obliging, Mr Crome, and, if you will be so good as to follow me to the parlour, and drink a glass of wine, we will take a first look at these same papers together. And you, Mrs Chiddock, as I said, be about airing this chamber…. Yes, it is here my grandfather died…. Yes, the tree, perhaps, does

make the place a little dampish…. No; I do not wish to listen to any more. Make no difficulties, I beg. You have your orders— go. Will you follow me, sir?"

They went to the study. The packet which young Mr Crome had brought— he was then just become a Fellow of Clare Hall in Cambridge, I may say, and subsequently brought out a respectable edition of Polyaenus— contained among other things the notes which the old Vicar had made upon the occasion of Sir Matthew Fell's death. And for the first time Sir Richard was confronted with the enigmatical *Sortes Biblicæ* which you have heard. They amused him a good deal.

"Well," he said, "my grandfather's Bible gave one prudent piece of advice— *Cut it down*. If that stands for the ash-tree, he may rest assured I shall not neglect it. Such a nest of catarrhs and agues was never seen."

The parlour contained the family books, which, pending the arrival of a collection which Sir Richard had made in Italy, and the building of a proper room to receive them, were not many in number.

Sir Richard looked up from the paper to the bookcase.

"I wonder," says he, "whether the old prophet is there yet? I fancy I see him."

Crossing the room, he took out a dumpy Bible, which, sure enough, bore on the flyleaf the inscription: "To Matthew Fell, from his Loving Godmother, Anne Aldous, 2 September, 1659."

"It would be no bad plan to test him again, Mr Crome. I will wager we get a couple of names in the Chronicles. H'm! what have we here? 'Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be.' Well, well! Your grandfather would have made a fine omen of that, hey? No more prophets for me! They are all in a tale. And now, Mr Crome, I am infinitely obliged to you for your packet. You will, I fear, be impatient to get on. Pray allow me— another glass."

So with offers of hospitality, which were genuinely meant (for Sir Richard thought well of the young man's address and manner), they parted.

In the afternoon came the guests— the Bishop of Kilmore, Lady Mary Hervey, Sir William Kentfield, etc. Dinner at five, wine, cards, supper, and dispersal to bed.

Next morning Sir Richard is disinclined to take his gun with the rest. He talks with the Bishop of Kilmore. This prelate, unlike a good many of the Irish Bishops of his day, had visited his see, and, indeed, resided there, for some considerable time. This morning, as the two were walking along the terrace and talking over the alterations and improvements in the house, the Bishop said, pointing to the window of the West Room:

"You could never get one of my Irish flock to occupy that room, Sir Richard."

"Why is that, my lord? It is, in fact, my own."

"Well, our Irish peasantry will always have it that it brings the worst of luck to sleep near an ash-tree, and you have a fine growth of ash not two yards from your chamber window. Perhaps," the Bishop went on, with a smile, "it has given you a touch of its quality already, for you do not seem, if I may say it, so much the fresher for your night's rest as your friends would like to see you."

"That, or something else, it is true, cost me my sleep from twelve to four, my lord. But the tree is to come down tomorrow, so I shall not hear much more from it."

"I applaud your determination. It can hardly be wholesome to have the air you breathe strained, as it were, through all that leafage."

"Your lordship is right there, I think. But I had not my window open last night. It was rather the noise that went on— no doubt from the twigs sweeping the glass— that kept me open-eyed."

"I think that can hardly be, Sir Richard. Here— you see it from this point. None of these nearest branches even can touch your casement unless there were a gale, and there was none of that last night. They miss the panes by a foot."

"No, sir, true. What, then, will it be, I wonder, that scratched and rustled so— ay, and covered the dust on my sill with lines and marks?"

At last they agreed that the rats must have come up through the ivy. That was the Bishop's idea, and Sir Richard jumped at it.

So the day passed quietly, and night came, and the party dispersed to their rooms, and wished Sir Richard a better night.

And now we are in his bedroom, with the light out and the Squire in bed. The room is over the kitchen, and the night outside still and warm, so the window stands open.

There is very little light about the bedstead, but there is a strange movement there; it seems as if Sir Richard were moving his head rapidly to and fro with only the slightest possible sound. And now you would guess, so deceptive is the half-darkness, that he had several heads, round and brownish, which move back and forward, even as low as his chest. It is a horrible illusion. Is it nothing more? There! something drops off the bed with a soft plump, like a kitten, and is out of the window in a flash; another— four— and after that there is quiet again.

"Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be."

As with Sir Matthew, so with Sir Richard— dead and black in his bed!

A pale and silent party of guests and servants gathered under the window when the news was known. Italian poisoners, Popish emissaries, infected air— all these and more guesses were hazarded, and the Bishop of Kilmore looked at the tree, in the fork of whose lower boughs a white tom-cat was crouching, looking down the hollow which years had gnawed in the trunk. It was watching something inside the tree with great interest.

Suddenly it got up and craned over the hole. Then a bit of the edge on which it stood gave way, and it went slithering in. Everyone looked up at the noise of the fall.

It is known to most of us that a cat can cry; but few of us have heard, I hope, such a yell as came out of the trunk of the great ash. Two or three screams there were— the witnesses are not sure which— and then a slight and muffled noise of some commotion or struggling was all that came. But Lady Mary Hervey fainted outright, and the housekeeper stopped her ears and fled till she fell on the terrace.

The Bishop of Kilmore and Sir William Kentfield stayed. Yet even they were daunted, though it was only at the cry of a cat; and Sir William swallowed once or twice before he could say:

"There is something more than we know of in that tree, my lord. I am for an instant search."

And this was agreed upon. A ladder was brought, and one of the gardeners went up, and, looking down the hollow, could detect nothing but a few dim indications of something moving. They got a lantern, and let it down by a rope.

"We must get at the bottom of this. My life upon it, my lord, but the secret of these terrible deaths is there."

Up went the gardener again with the lantern, and let it down the hole cautiously. They saw the yellow light upon his face as he bent over, and saw his face struck with an incredulous terror and loathing before he cried out in a dreadful voice and fell back from the ladder— where, happily, he was caught by two of the men— letting the lantern fall inside the tree.

He was in a dead faint, and it was some time before any word could be got from him.

By then they had something else to look at. The lantern must have broken at the bottom, and the light in it caught upon dry leaves and rubbish that lay there, for in a few minutes a dense smoke began to come up, and then flame; and, to be short, the tree was in a blaze.

The bystanders made a ring at some yards' distance, and Sir William and the Bishop sent men to get what weapons and tools they could; for, clearly, whatever might be using the tree as its lair would be forced out by the fire.

So it was. First, at the fork, they saw a round body covered with fire— the size of a man's head— appear very suddenly, then seem to collapse and fall back. This, five or six times; then a similar ball leapt into the air and fell on the grass, where after a moment it lay still. The Bishop went as near as he dared to it, and saw— what but the remains of an enormous spider, veinous and seared! And, as the fire burned lower down, more terrible bodies like this began to break out from the trunk, and it was seen that these were covered with greyish hair.

All that day the ash burned, and until it fell to pieces the men stood about it, and from time to time killed the brutes as they darted out. At last there was a long interval when none appeared, and they cautiously closed in and examined the roots of the tree.

"They found," says the Bishop of Kilmore, "below it a rounded hollow place in the earth, wherein were two or three bodies of these creatures that had plainly been smothered by the smoke; and, what is to me more curious, at the side of this den, against the wall, was crouching the anatomy or skeleton of a human being, with the skin dried upon the bones, having some remains of black hair, which was pronounced by those that examined it to be undoubtedly the body of a woman, and clearly dead for a period of fifty years."

20: The Gold Squid

Albert Dorrington

1874 - 1953

Sydney Mail 6 June 1928

'WE'LL buy no more wrecks,' Stark shouted across the board-room. 'The tin hull of that crook liner has cost us sixty thousand pounds. I hope you're listening, Gait? Sixty thousand golden goblets chucked into mud!'

Jeremy Sark was chairman of directors in the White Reef Salvage Company, and David Gait, who had supervised the recent unsuccessful attempts to recover specie contained in the hull of the SS Lismore, trembled slightly as he read his report.

The Lismore, a steamer of 8,000 tons burden, trading between Sydney, Macassar, and Hong Kong, had struck a reef in the Fanuti group of islands and had become a total wreck. Out of a crew and passenger list of seventy-five souls not one had survived the terrific seas that had driven the vessel to her undoing. In her bullion tank the Lismore had carried nearly 200,000 sovereigns, together with a quantity of bar silver from the Broken Hill mines.

Within a few weeks of the catastrophe the White Reef Salvage Company had sent Gait in charge of a salvage corps to the scene of the wreck. Gait and his party had been absent for six months. His report now showed that the heavy seas had pounded the vessel to driftwood. Not a pound's worth of salvage had been recovered, although Gait showed how he had blasted the surrounding reefs and shoals in his attempts to locale the missing bullion tank.

To Jeremy Stark it was unthinkable that an iron-bolted tank the size of a henhouse could disappear from a reef in mid-Pacific. Yet the reputation of David Gait stood by the report, and Gait's name among Sydney underwriters and marine surveyors was not to be trifled with. The acid test of thirty years' experience was behind the man. And Gait spoke his mind.

'It wasn't a wreck you bought, sir; it was a washaway pile of planks with the reef sharks swimming in between. We did what men could do. We tore up the banks for half a mile on each side of the hull for days on end, when the tide allowed, the gang worked without food or rest. I repeat, Mr. Stark, we found nothing. As for the bullion tank'— Gait snapped his fingers derisively— 'beyond a cartload of copper stew pans, and a cask of nails, there wasn't enough gold on the Lismore to buy a haircut.'

In an office adjoining the board-room Teddy Helmore sat listening to the storms of argument that blew over Gait's head. He was sorry for Gait and the little band of investors who had pinned their faith in his ability to bring the specie home. Now it was more than probable that the White Reef Salvage

Company would go into liquidation. Sixty thousand pounds gone and not a tin of beans to show for it!

Teddy Helmore, at £5 a week in Stark's office, was weary of the wood he sat on. Months ago his boyish imagination had burned white over the details of this particular wreck. He had visioned a whaleback reef in the lonely Pacific tides where the Lismore had belched and strewn her valuable cargo of sandalwood, silver, and gold across the coral floor of the atoll.

After Gait and the directors had left the board-room Teddy rose from his stool and passed inside. Stark was seated at his desk, his big, fighting chin cupped in the palms of his hands. He cast a sidelong glance in Helmore's direction, a kind of wolf stare he reserved for office boys and insurance touts.

'What the devil do you want?' he demanded wearily. 'Have you sent out the Bellman Tug Company's accounts yet?'

'I sent them in yesterday, sir,' Teddy informed him. 'I want to say that I'm going out to Fanuti to have a look at that heap of timber on the reef. Gait's through with the job, and I'm done with mine.'

Stark pivoted in his chair to glare at Teddy. 'You confounded ass!' he almost bellowed. 'Get back to your desk.'

Helmore braced his well-knit shoulders, glanced at his wrist watch, and then stepped to the rack where his hat and overcoat hung.

Stark's voice reached him as he gained the dark passage outside. 'Come back! How dare you visit Fanuti without a word of permission from the company? Are you mad?'

Teddy halted in the passage, a broad grin on his good-natured face. For days he had tried to overcome the overwhelming desire to explore the locality of the wreck. He did not doubt Gait's report or his honesty of purpose. He felt now that something had happened which Gait had overlooked. All through the long weeks of waiting for David's report he had been moved to a premonition of failure awaiting the salving of the wreck. Three years in Stark's office had taught him many things relating to ships and shoals, and the white-faced city men who gamble on the shifting tides.

Teddy was strong because he was alone in the world. There were no sick aunts or crippled brothers to tie him to his office stool. He had missed the loving hands and lips of his mother, but Nature had endowed him with a courage and vision that overleaped the city slave-lines.

'I am going to Fanuti, Mr. Stark,' he repeated with a smile. 'A few moments ago I heard you tell Charnley and Bream, the underwriters, that you'd gladly cut your losses for £500. If I heard rightly, Bream replied that you'd be lucky if you ever saw five hundred pence.'

Jeremy Stark made fresh mental valuations of Helmore as he surveyed his swank, boyish figure. Then his eyes batted owlishly as he completed his sinister scrutiny.

'Mr. Helmore, you can please go to the devil!' he exploded at last. 'From this moment your salary ceases. The company is satisfied with Gait's report. Go to Fanuti by all means. I can lend you some photographs of the wreck,' he added with a covert sneer. And the office door banged in Teddy's face.

TEDDY had invested £300 in war loan. He sold it and booked a passage to Honolulu. He was informed at the shipping office that a fortnightly service of cargo and copra tramps existed between Honolulu and the Fanuti group of islands. He was warned, however, of the difficulties of sea travel among the remote outlying islands. A glance at a navigators chart would show him the impossibility of maintaining direct communications with the thousand and one pinhead reefs in the archipelago. Teddy thanked the shipping clerk for the information, and hurried away to get his kit on board.

The mate of the schooner Cutty Sark threw Teddy's belongings into the forepart as the gangway rattled down to the shelf of reef under their bows.

'All ready, sir!' he called out. 'You'll need a Lick telescope to see the nearest hotel,' he added banteringly. 'But there's enough darned driftwood to build a dozen. Hope you'll enjoy your holiday, sir. We'll be back in a fortnight. Cheerio!'

The reefs at Fanuti sprawled to the uttermost sky-line. They were ugly reefs that threw up white plumes from the smoky surf, and there were reefs that grinned at him with the camaraderie of tombstones. Beyond the reef on which he stood lay a coastline of wind-torn palms and flame-crested trees. He counted a score of small tidal creeks that penetrated the jungle-covered flats and marshes. But chiefly his thoughts were centred about the forbidding whaleback shoal that had torn a brave ship to piecemeal.

It lay on the northern extremity of the atoll, its coral flukes thrust far out into the dazzling sheen of sapphire. The eternal thunder of breakers ran in a hoarse murmur along the fifty-mile front of beach and lagoon edge. The crying of sea-fowl wheeling and drowsing above the wreck struck sharply on his tingling nerves. Never in his life had Helmore dreamed of such loneliness and immensity of sea and forest line. He was sorry now to leave the homely little schooner that had brought him from Honolulu Not a hut or a roof broke the unending monotony of reefs and palms crests. But somewhere in the far west lay the village of Takananeena, which, according to the mate of the *Cutty Sark*, was peopled by a score or so of Bhugis men and Malay trepang fishers.

Teddy turned to the task he had planned to accomplish in Stark's office. He had enough stores to last him a month, without relying on game or food to be had in or about the lagoons. Piling his belongings between some reef boulders,

he marked the place with a stone cross and bent his steps in the direction of the wreck. The shoal itself sprawled whale-like in the white smother of brine and spindrift. At low tide a man could wade hip-deep on its smooth, wave-worn crest.

The hull of the Lismore had become a roost for squalling sea-birds and gannets. Never had Teddy seen so many beaks and wings hovering around a dead ship. All along the shoal was the mark of Gait's labours. The sea floor had been blasted with gelignite in the hope of locating the lost bullion tank. Gait in his desperation had evidently imagined that the heavy bullion box had slid through the torn strake of the ship's bottom to the shoal-gutter below.

The more Teddy gazed at the wreck the more convinced he became of foul work on the part of someone who had survived the horrors of the hurricane. Why had the sea left the engines intact, the kettles and pans and oil drums that littered the edge of the shoal? A storm capable of obliterating a tank full of metal sovereigns, and bar silver would surely have destroyed the galley pots and tinware. All around the shoal the water showed clear at ten fathoms. The great holes blasted in the vessel's sides by Gait's party revealed only the swarms of parrot-billed fishes swimming in and out.

Teddy was a good diver, but the sight of a score of swift-moving sharks on the ocean side of the wreck kept him within bounds. The night brought only the big white stars and a sky of velvet softness. His small tent proved sufficient for his needs. His oil stove and his saucepan gave him hot soup, toast, and coffee. Fresh water leaped from a spring not twenty yards from his camping ground. The mate of the *Cutty Sark* had dropped a dozen big bundles of bananas for his eating. And for the first time in many weeks Teddy Helmore enjoyed a pipe of tobacco outside the flap of his cosy tent.

The days passed slowly. Stripped to the waist and flayed by a merciless sun, he worked within the body of the hull, his feet safe from the saw-toothed sharks that haunted the reefs with the persistence of wolves. Once, while examining a breach outside the hull, he had slipped from his foothold on the planks and had fallen into the seething tide. Instantly a long torpedo body struck in his direction. Only by the width of a hand did he escape the sabre-toothed jaws that snapped on the plank he was quick enough to grasp. Teddy shivered as he struck down with an iron stanchion at the swinish eyes watching him from the water. Everywhere these grey-backed monsters stalked in his shadow, shepherding his movements with the silent ferocity of tigers. Above him screamed the senseless sea-hawks and terns, their wings beating and flashing near his body at times as he sat astride the reef-torn boilers inside the hull.

It was now evident to Helmore that the wreck was not worth fifty dollars as a side-line. After all, he had been a fool to dream of finding the bullion tank

where experts had failed. He would return to Sydney with barely enough money to cover expenses.

TURNING his back on the wreck he ventured inland, for the first time, among the stunted palms and guava patches. Again his eye was attracted by the scores of tide-water channels that intersected the low-lying spaces. Subconsciously he became aware that he was following a well-worn track from the wreck. Human feet had trodden the grass and coral! Nearing the edge of a deep channel his eye fell on a scrap of newspaper, pulped into the coral trash by a heavy foot, Teddy examined the paper carefully, and came to the conclusion that Gait or one of his men had wandered inshore and dropped it. Halting with the scrap of paper crushed in his palm, he glanced downward. At his feet, half-covered in coral dust, lay an Australian sovereign! Teddy choked in surprise as he examined the coin. It was from the Australian mint, pale yellow and new.

'And that's that!' he exclaimed, kneeling in the coral slush and scooping it with his hands. Through the tangle of lianas and ferns he crawled, searching feverishly for a trace where men had dug and buried. He found none. Helmore lay quite still in the cool, wet sand, and his thoughts went out to the late captain of the Lismore, Ben Mole by name. Mole's record was good, although, he had a trick of cutting loose with a rattan or belaying pin whenever his coolie crew got stale or sulked. No nonsense about Ben, except when he allowed the October hurricane to dish him for good and all, Teddy ruminated.

A faint foot fall reached the listening Teddy. It seemed to come from the forest side of the land, and was evidently made by a sandal on a limestone floor. It came nearer, stopped, and then, after a pause, advanced quickly in his direction. Turning slightly on his elbow, Helmore suppressed a cry of astonishment.

A girl of eighteen was crawling along the channel edge. At times she paused and lay still, as though waiting for a sound to reach her. She was dressed in a smock of peacock blue. Her heavily braided hair was drawn back over her brow, revealing a type of beauty that was distinctly European. The tawny gleam in her hair disproved any suggestion of a Malay ancestry, although the smock and the rich golden tan of her skin made it difficult to judge her nationality. She was certainly most attractive.

'In the name of Pat and Mike,' Helmore breathed, 'what fool game is she playing?'

Slowly, painfully she crawled through the sand until the edge of the channel was reached. Here she paused and drew breath sharply as she stared into the water below her elbow. With face set and pretty teeth clenched she plunged, her naked arm down and out of sight. Unable to control his curiosity, he slid

through the undergrowth until he lay within a dozen yards of the channel bank. Slowly he raised his eyes to the level of the stiff grass.

She was lying full stretch, her face bent to the water's level, her body writhing in her efforts to retain her position on the bank. It occurred to Helmore that something was tugging her arm, drawing her with irresistible force into the channel. A smothered cry of pain escaped her as the soft muscles of her arm quivered under the terrific strain. Then with a shout of relief she shook her arm free. Helmore' saw that, her tight-clenched hand was holding something. Crawling nearer, he stared in amaze as her tiny fist opened, allowing a score of gold coins to roll in the coral dust beside her.

A tense, hot silence followed her movement. She lay breathing heavily before turning again to the channel bank. In her face Helmore. detected a look of revulsion and fear. Her lips seemed to be framing a long-forgotten prayer. ,

Helmore controlled himself with a fierce effort as her hand slid again into the water. She made plunging, groping strokes to right and left, her, sandalled toes hooked in some outlying palm roots to prevent a sudden header into the water. This time her arm did not return so hastily. Her young limbs seemed to writhe in an agony of muscular activity. Deeper into the palm-roots went her toes, while her straight, boyish figure quivered like a breaking ash plant.

'My God! I... will not come, here again! Not for gold or the pain of his blows.... Never, never!'

It was evident to Teddy that she could not free her arm. This fact was made clear by the paroxysm of terror that suddenly overcame her. Again she took breath, and this time her hand jerked free, but held only a few strands of weed and sea-grass. She remained quite still on the ground, chafing her wrist and moaning in a sobbing underbreath.

Very quietly Helmore stepped beside her, anger, curiosity, and pity. showing in his eyes. His soft footfall brought her into a sitting posture, panic terror in her wide eyes, horror of a man's unexpected presence stamped on her young face. She was plainly greatly unnerved.

'I am sorry,' he began gently, 'but, like you, I imagined I was alone here. Are you hurt? And what is it that's—'

She leaped to her feet and regarded him with short, frightened glances that plainly revealed her intention to be gone at the earliest moment. Her eyes fell guiltily on the gold coins scattered in the dust. She did not speak. Teddy smiled reassuringly and lit a cigarette; then, as an afterthought, offered her his case. She shrank away with a gesture of refusal, her glance wandering in the direction of the wooded hills.

'Please don't run away;' he begged. 'Maybe we can help each other. Of course, you may go if you like,' he assured her; 'but before you go I'd like to save you from repeating this performance. Isn't there an easier way of getting what

you want?' he added, indicating the black, mud-stirred channel and the gold coins at her feet.

Her lips parted slightly; the fear in her eyes vanished as she gazed into his smiling face.

'Rabaul sends me to get the gold,' she confessed, with a slight shudder. 'He is blind through fishing with dynamite. He helped the English captain. Mole, to hide the money just here.'

Helmore's brow cleared suddenly. This quick-witted girl knew everything. Curiously enough, he was more interested in her presence on the island than in the gold that lay in the mysteriously muddy depths of the tidal inlet beside him.

'My father was a ship's captain,' she went on with a touch of sadness in her voice. 'He, too, was wrecked off these reefs many years ago. My mother lived with him at Takananeena. She died of fever a year after my father was drowned. Rabaul's wife sent me to school at the Mission House. They call me Anita,' she added simply.

Helmore was staring pensively into the turgid waters of the channel. Anita followed his glance, but not for a moment did she cease to rub and massage the livid weal on her wrist that showed like a whip stroke. '

'THE iron money-house is buried in the mud,'' she explained. 'After the storm that brought the ship to the reef the captain got ashore with three of his coolie men. All the others were drowned. Rabaul's wife saw the wreck, and watched the Australian captain carry all the gold and silver ashore. Then he made a raft from the broken timbers, and with the coolies to help he placed the empty gold tank on the raft and brought it to this channel. 'At low tide he dropped it into the mud. Next day he carried all the money and silver on the raft and brought it here. With the coolies he counted the gold and dropped it into the tank.

'Two nights after, they saw Rabaul's wife come down and try to get some of the coins from the tank. Rabaul says the coolies killed her. We never saw her again.

'Although Rabaul is blind,' she went on sadly, 'he is no fool. He told one of the parairi head-hunters in the hills that four foreign dogs from a wreck had killed Nayla, his wife. But Rabaul said nothing of the gold that the captain and coolies had sunk in the creek.' Anita paused and drew breath sharply, as though the pain of her thoughts had become unendurable. Helmore bound a silk kerchief about her wrist, and then drew away to a respectful distance. 'No one saw the three coolies or the Australian captain again.' Anita spoke with head averted, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the kerchief.

'And this Rabaul sends you here every day, I suppose, to get handfuls of money?' Teddy broke in at last. 'And by the look of your shoulders, Anita, and

those red stripes showing above your smock, 1 should say he persuaded you with a bamboo cane,' he added with rising anger.

Anita's silence seemed to verify the fact that Rabaul had driven her with blows and threats to the task of snatching coins from the tank in the creek. The rusted edges of the big bullion box wore visible now above the swirling outgoing tide.

Teddy became suddenly aware of a flat, black tentacle stretching across the surface of the tank. It seemed to search the air for a moment, before it sank in the muddy depths.

Teddy swore under his breath. 'A beastly squid!' he flung out. 'How did it get into the lank, Anita? And why did you risk putting in your arm when you knew it was there?' he demanded with growing amazement.

'It crawls in and out at high water,' she explained. 'The sharks drive it up the channels, and it sought shelter from them by climbing into the iron box. They could not reach it there.'

'And you stick your arm in while the squid is there?' he exploded in genuine anger.

Anita shrugged. 'I have fished off the reefs with Rabaul before the dynamite blinded him. I have killed reef eels with a stone and bathed among the sharks,' she answered simply. 'Someone had to get money for blind Rabaul. There was no food, and he has taken to drinking arrak. He must have gold. And, ... the squid in the tank may go away next tide. It is not very dangerous yet. It is only half-grown.'

Helmore was busy exploring the tank. The top had been removed by Ben Mols and his coolies. The four sides and bottom remained, with the silver and gold evidently intact within. As for the invading squid, he would prefer to have it killed outside the tank.

'Anita,' he said thoughtfully, 'the money and silver inside this tank belong to people in Sydney. They took a sporting chance when they bought it, and some of them are as poor as ourselves.'

Anita flinched, while her lips quivered at his statement.

'I am very sorry,' she began with child-like humility, 'but I did not know.'

'That's all right, Anita. Rabaul will have to do his own groping if he wants another handful of Australian gold. I'll see him do it, too.'

Teddy smote the corner of the tank a violent blow with the slick he carried, as a gentle reminder that things were about to happen. The impact of the stick caused a terrific commotion within the tank. Instantly the squid's dish-shaped body floated to the surface, its slimy tentacles outspreading like the branches of a tree. From the centre of the furious, clawing mass of muscles and venom a slug-like aperture showed and blinked in Helmore's direction.

'It is looking at us,' Anita said hurriedly. Then a mischievous twinkle lit her dark eyes. 'If we had a bar we could force down one of the sides of the tank. Then I would show you how to make this little octopus move into another house.

Teddy laughed at the prospect of a little sport after the weary days spent within the wreck, alone. Begging Anita to await his return, he hurried back to his camp and selected a crowbar from the pile of tools scattered along the beach. Guessing what was in Anita's mind regarding the squid's eviction from the tank, he collected several tins of preserved beef he had salved from the wreck. He then returned with his load to the waiting Anita.

THE tide was flooding the inlet. In a little while the water would be well over the tank. A few hefty strokes of the crowbar dislodged a couple of rusty bolts that held the seaward side of the tank into place. It fell with a loud splash to the floor of the channel. The tank was now like a lidless box with one of the sides gone.

Anita clapped her hands as Teddy broke open several of the beef tins and scattered their contents into the channel at distances of fifty feet apart, until the sea entrance was reached and similarly baited. Then he returned to the tank to watch results with Anita. They had not long to wait.

The scent of the newly-opened beef brought a couple of grey dorsal fins scouting near the channel opening. Swiftly these two livid, torpedo shadows turned and entered the channel, their great snouts scooping up the beef baits like shovels. Warily the saw-toothed monsters approached the tank, their jaws clashing in the flowing tide. Anita sat in the dry grass clasping her hands, her eyes dancing at the Homeric spectacle in full view.

For the squid there was no retreat except past the sabre-toothed sharks flashing nearer and nearer. Instinct warned it that the eternal enemy was at the gate. Instantly the viscid mass of tentacles became a mill-wheel of activity that beat and slogged the tank entrance with the force of a hundred hammers. The two reef sharks swept up to the opening like hounds scenting a badger. The slogging tentacles stayed them only for a moment. Then a blue-grey snout that had torn drowning men from the shoals slid like a battering-ram into the tank. Swift as light the viscid tentacles closed on the scissor-point jaws of the shark, enveloping it in a stranglehold of living muscle and flesh.

In the shift of one eye Helmore saw that a twelve-foot shark could not attack an octopus. The squid's hold pinned the head to the floor of the channel. In a second or two the reef shark would be a gasping mass of pulp and bone. But the sea-wolves of the Pacific know the squid from infancy to old age. The channel was now alive with bullhead sharks, frantic for food and scenting it in the open bullion box.

Their jaws snatched down at the dish-shaped body that still gripped the twelve-foot greyback to the floor. They tore the outstretched feelers, dragging the flat body to the surface. Like gluttons at a feast they hauled and towed the kicking, squirming mass into the open tide. In a moment, it seemed to the wide-eyed Anita, the channel was silent again, with the slowly rising waters washing and breaking into the bullion tank.

'A great scrap,' Helmore laughed to the silent Anita sitting in the grass. 'I'll drop into the tank now, before the tide gets higher.'

Standing almost shoulder-deep in the submerged tank, Helmore's bare feet touched the milled edges of the closely packed gold coins. They were ranged in long columns along the bottom, where lien Mole had placed them after emptying them from the wooden boxes supplied by the Mint. The silver ingots were packed like bricks against the sides.

The sun flamed over the western skyline, and Anita knew that within an hour the darkness would prevent her returning to the village.

Helmore was not without imagination. He saw what it meant for her to go back without money. There would be more beatings and ill-usage. It needed no effort on his part to envisage the living hell she must endure when the rascally Rabaul learnt that the rightful owners had taken away the gold and silver from the creek.

He gathered from what Anita had told him that fear of his neighbours had kept the blind old fisherman from descending upon the gold and silver and transferring it to his house. But Rabaul could trust no one, not even his relations. And so Anita had borne his terrible secret alone, together with the unenviable task of snatching gold coins from the retreat of a shark-hunted octopus.

'Anita,' he said cheerfully, 'you cannot go back to the village. A schooner will call here for me in a day or so to take me to Honolulu. I will take you to Sydney. I regard you as a partner in this important salvage operation,' he added gravely.

'But Rabaul will find his way here,' she warned. 'If he suspects the presence of a white man he will bring those horrible people who killed Captain Mole and his coolies.'

'We must risk it. Anita, and trust to these.' He drew a pair of flat-faced automatics from the coal he had left on the bank. 'Sixty a minute,' he added through his slightly clenched teeth, 'and plenty to follow.'

His quiet bearing calmed Anita's tense-drawn nerves. She decided without further questions to accept his generous offer.

THE shock of his life awaited Helmore as he neared the beach. A strange schooner was anchored within biscuit throw of the wreck. Seated outside his tent was the dour figure of Jeremy Stark, of the White Reef Salvage Company. At

sight of Helmore and Anita he rose from his camp-stool with something of the baulked tiger in his stooping shoulders.

'Hands off the wreck, Mr. Helmore!' he shouted, without a word of greeting. 'My party is in possession.'

'You've possessed yourself of my camp, at any rate,' Teddy answered, unruffled.

'This is not your island, nor your Sydney office. The darned wreck was any man's property the moment Gait abandoned it. Shall we have supper first, or the scrap?'

Jeremy wolfed the frayed edges of a cigar for a moment. Then he looked up slowly at the sun-tanned clerk in the canvas suit, and the wrath that had borne him across three oceans died.

'Helmore,' he began with an effort, 'I feel that you've got me, and... I'm a ruined man. I put everything into this venture, including my wife and my daughter's little fortune. In cities men are apt to forget themselves. Here'— his shaking hand indicated the jungle-darkened skyline— 'men may confess their sins. I never took you seriously, and I'm man enough to ask pardon.'

Anita drew a deep breath. Teddy's lips quirked strangely as he noted the sharp misery in the twitching face and mouth. It was a face that had once driven and heckled him without mercy. But here, on the reef, he—

Teddy took a bright new Australian sovereign from his pocket and flung it down on the coral floor. It rang clear as a bell in the still, warm air. With bent, quaking knees Jeremy stooped and snatched it up, his eyes bulging, his body swaying in an agony of doubt.

'One that the robbers left here,' he almost sobbed. 'My God, what beasts men are! They lie in wait to plunder ships. They hide and burrow, and run like the devil when you're cleaned out.'

Helmore exchanged swift glances with Anita. An unforgettable smile illumined her beautiful features.

'Yes, they steal and run,' she agreed.

'Mr. Stark,' Teddy broke in at last, 'a few pounds— fifty, a hundred, maybe— have been taken from the tank. The rest is intact, as far as one can judge. We'll pass over the conduct of Captain Mole in removing the specie. Dead men cannot defend their actions.'

'My dear Helmore,' Stark interrupted in a sudden gust of good-humour, 'I trust you completely. In the presence of this young lady'— he indicated Anita with, parental solicitude— 'you are at liberty to quote your own terms for the excellent service you have rendered the company. To be candid, I'd written off the wreck as a dead loss. You may now stand in to claim 50 per cent of the whole amount.'

Helmore shook his head.

'I'm thinking of the other shareholders, Mr. Stark. But if you'll sign up to help this young lady in Sydney, on account of help rendered in recovering the specie, I'll swap cigars with you and hand over the tank.'

Stark thrust out his hand, his eyes kindling strangely.

'Hang it, Helmore, you're decent. If you don't sign up to come into the firm with me I— I— upon my word, I won't touch the stuff.'

AT NOON the following day the schooner cleared the island, after the last ounce of specie had been stowed safely away. Anita and Stark watched the fading jungle-line and the white-winged birds crying over the wreck. There were tears in Anita's eyes. With all the pain and anguish of her past, the reefs and skies of the lonely atolls were very dear to her.

When Teddy joined them at dinner in the little stateroom aft, the shadow of grief and the memory of blind Rabaul had gone from her eyes. She held out her hand to him. Teddy bent over it for an instant, while Jeremy Stark whispered in his ear.

'Some girls bring trouble, but I'm predicting that this island waif will bring more happiness than all the yellow dough we lifted from that old tank. She's your find my boy, so watch your luck.'

From Teddy Helmore's point of view Stark's well-meant advice was utterly superfluous, a fact that was borne upon Anita long before they reached Sydney.

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21: The Lord of Chateau Noir

Arthur Conan Doyle

1859-1930

The Strand Magazine, July 1894

Set during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870

IT WAS in the days when the German armies had broken their way across France, and when the shattered forces of the young Republic had been swept away to the north of the Aisne and to the south of the Loire. Three broad streams of armed men had rolled slowly but irresistibly from the Rhine, now meandering to the north, now to the south, dividing, coalescing, but all uniting to form one great lake round Paris. And from this lake there welled out smaller streams— one to the north, one southward, to Orleans, and a third westward to Normandy. Many a German trooper saw the sea for the first time when he rode his horse girth-deep into the waves at Dieppe.

Black and bitter were the thoughts of Frenchmen when they saw this weal of dishonour slashed across the fair face of their country. They had fought and they had been overborne. That swarming cavalry, those countless footmen, the masterful guns— they had tried and tried to make head against them. In battalions their invaders were not to be beaten, but man to man, or ten to ten, they were their equals. A brave Frenchman might still make a single German rue the day that he had left his own bank of the Rhine. Thus, unchronicled amid the battles and the sieges, there broke out another war, a war of individuals, with foul murder upon the one side and brutal reprisal on the other.

Colonel von Gramm, of the 24th Posen Infantry, had suffered severely during this new development. He commanded in the little Norman town of Les Andelys, and his outposts stretched amid the hamlets and farmhouses of the district round. No French force was within fifty miles of him, and yet morning after morning he had to listen to a black report of sentries found dead at their posts, or of foraging parties which had never returned. Then the colonel would go forth in his wrath, and farmsteadings would blaze and villages tremble; but next morning there was still that same dismal tale to be told. Do what he might, he could not shake off his invisible enemies. And yet it should not have been so hard, for, from certain signs in common, in the plan and in the deed, it was certain that all these outrages came from a single source.

Colonel von Gramm had tried violence, and it had failed. Gold might be more successful. He published it abroad over the countryside that 500frs. would be paid for information. There was no response. Then 800frs. The peasants were incorruptible. Then, goaded on by a murdered corporal, he rose to a thousand,

and so bought the soul of Francois Rejane, farm labourer, whose Norman avarice was a stronger passion than his French hatred.

"You say that you know who did these crimes?" asked the Prussian colonel, eyeing with loathing the blue-bloused, rat-faced creature before him.

"Yes, colonel."

"And it was—?"

"Those thousand francs, colonel—"

"Not a sou until your story has been tested. Come! Who is it who has murdered my men?"

"It is Count Eustace of Chateau Noir."

"You lie!" cried the colonel, angrily. "A gentleman and a nobleman could not have done such crimes."

The peasant shrugged his shoulders. "It is evident to me that you do not know the count. It is this way, colonel. What I tell you is the truth, and I am not afraid that you should test it. The Count of Chateau Noir is a hard man, even at the best time he was a hard man. But of late he has been terrible. It was his son's death, you know. His son was under Douay, and he was taken, and then in escaping from Germany he met his death. It was the count's only child, and indeed we all think that it has driven him mad. With his peasants he follows the German armies. I do not know how many he has killed, but it is he who cut the cross upon the foreheads, for it is the badge of his house."

It was true. The murdered sentries had each had a saltire cross slashed across their brows, as by a hunting-knife. The colonel bent his stiff back and ran his forefinger over the map which lay upon the table.

"The Chateau Noir is not more than four leagues," he said.

"Three and a kilometre, colonel."

"You know the place?"

"I used to work there."

Colonel von Gramm rang the bell.

"Give this man food and detain him," said he to the sergeant.

"Why detain me, colonel? I can tell you no more."

"We shall need you as guide."

"As guide? But the count? If I were to fall into his hands? Ah, colonel—"

The Prussian commander waved him away. "Send Captain Baumgarten to me at once," said he.

The officer who answered the summons was a man of middle-age, heavy-jawed, blue-eyed, with a curving yellow moustache, and a brick-red face which turned to an ivory white where his helmet had sheltered it. He was bald, with a shining, tightly stretched scalp, at the back of which, as in a mirror, it was a favourite mess-joke of the subalterns to trim their moustaches. As a soldier he

was slow, but reliable and brave. The colonel could trust him where a more dashing officer might be in danger.

"You will proceed to Chateau Noir to-night, captain," said he. "A guide has been provided. You will arrest the count and bring him back. If there is an attempt at rescue, shoot him at once."

"How many men shall I take, colonel?"

"Well, we are surrounded by spies, and our only chance is to pounce upon him before he knows that we are on the way. A large force will attract attention. On the other hand, you must not risk being cut off."

"I might march north, colonel, as if to join General Goeben. Then I could turn down this road which I see upon your map, and get to Chateau Noir before they could hear of us. In that case, with twenty men—"

"Very good, captain. I hope to see you with your prisoner to-morrow morning."

It was a cold December night when Captain Baumgarten marched out of Les Andelys with his twenty Poseners, and took the main road to the north west. Two miles out he turned suddenly down a narrow, deeply rutted track, and made swiftly for his man. A thin, cold rain was falling, swishing among the tall poplar trees and rustling in the fields on either side. The captain walked first with Moser, a veteran sergeant, beside him. The sergeant's wrist was fastened to that of the French peasant, and it had been whispered in his ear that in case of an ambush the first bullet fired would be through his head. Behind them the twenty infantrymen plodded along through the darkness with their faces sunk to the rain, and their boots squeaking in the soft, wet clay. They knew where they were going, and why, and the thought upheld them, for they were bitter at the loss of their comrades. It was a cavalry job, they knew, but the cavalry were all on with the advance, and, besides, it was more fitting that the regiment should avenge its own dead men.

It was nearly eight when they left Les Andelys. At half-past eleven their guide stopped at a place where two high pillars, crowned with some heraldic stonework, flanked a huge iron gate. The wall in which it had been the opening had crumbled away, but the great gate still towered above the brambles and weeds which had overgrown its base. The Prussians made their way round it and advanced stealthily, under the shadow of a tunnel of oak branches, up the long avenue, which was still cumbered by the leaves of last autumn. At the top they halted and reconnoitred.

The black chateau lay in front of them. The moon had shone out between two rain-clouds, and threw the old house into silver and shadow. It was shaped like an L, with a low arched door in front, and lines of small windows like the open ports of a man-of-war. Above was a dark roof, breaking at the corners into little round overhanging turrets, the whole lying silent in the moonshine, with a

drift of ragged clouds blackening the heavens behind it. A single light gleamed in one of the lower windows.

The captain whispered his orders to his men. Some were to creep to the front door, some to the back. Some were to watch the east, and some the west. He and the sergeant stole on tiptoe to the lighted window.

It was a small room into which they looked, very meanly furnished. An elderly man, in the dress of a menial, was reading a tattered paper by the light of a guttering candle. He leaned back in his wooden chair with his feet upon a box, while a bottle of white wine stood with a half-filled tumbler upon a stool beside him. The sergeant thrust his needle-gun through the glass, and the man sprang to his feet with a shriek.

"Silence, for your life! The house is surrounded, and you cannot escape. Come round and open the door, or we will show you no mercy when we come in."

"For God's sake, don't shoot! I will open it! I will open it!" He rushed from the room with his paper still crumpled up in his hand. An instant later, with a groaning of old locks and a rasping of bars, the low door swung open, and the Prussians poured into the stone-flagged passage.

"Where is Count Eustace de Chateau Noir?"

"My master! He is out, sir."

"Out at this time of night? Your life for a lie!"

"It is true, sir. He is out!"

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"Doing what?"

"I cannot tell. No, it is no use your cocking your pistol, sir. You may kill me, but you cannot make me tell you that which I do not know."

"Is he often out at this hour?"

"Frequently."

"And when does he come home?"

"Before daybreak."

Captain Baumgarten rasped out a German oath. He had had his journey for nothing, then. The man's answers were only too likely to be true. It was what he might have expected. But at least he would search the house and make sure. Leaving a picket at the front door and another at the back, the sergeant and he drove the trembling butler in front of them— his shaking candle sending strange, flickering shadows over the old tapestries and the low, oak-raftered ceilings. They searched the whole house, from the huge stone-flagged kitchen below to the dining-hall on the second floor, with its gallery for musicians, and its panelling black with age, but nowhere was there a living creature. Up above,

in an attic, they found Marie, the elderly wife of the butler; but the owner kept no other servants, and of his own presence there was no trace.

It was long, however, before Captain Baumgarten had satisfied himself upon the point. It was a difficult house to search. Thin stairs, which only one man could ascend at a time, connected lines of tortuous corridors. The walls were so thick that each room was cut off from its neighbour. Huge fireplaces yawned in each, while the windows were 6ft. deep in the wall. Captain Baumgarten stamped with his feet, tore down curtains, and struck with the pommel of his sword. If there were secret hiding-places, he was not fortunate enough to find them.

"I have an idea," said he, at last, speaking in German to the sergeant. "You will place a guard over this fellow, and make sure that he communicates with no one."

"Yes, captain."

"And you will place four men in ambush at the front and at the back. It is likely enough that about daybreak our bird may return to the nest."

"And the others, captain?"

"Let them have their suppers in the kitchen. The fellow will serve you with meat and wine. It is a wild night, and we shall be better here than on the country road."

"And yourself, captain?"

"I will take my supper up here in the dining-hall. The logs are laid and we can light the fire. You will call me if there is any alarm. What can you give me for supper— you?"

"Alas, monsieur, there was a time when I might have answered, 'What you wish!' but now it is all that we can do to find a bottle of new claret and a cold pullet."

"That will do very well. Let a guard go about with him, sergeant, and let him feel the end of a bayonet if he plays us any tricks."

Captain Baumgarten was an old campaigner. In the Eastern provinces, and before that in Bohemia, he had learned the art of quartering himself upon the enemy. While the butler brought his supper he occupied himself in making his preparations for a comfortable night. He lit the candelabrum of ten candles upon the centre table. The fire was already burning up, crackling merrily, and sending spurts of blue, pungent smoke into the room. The captain walked to the window and looked out. The moon had gone in again, and it was raining heavily. He could hear the deep sough of the wind, and see the dark loom of the trees, all swaying in the one direction. It was a sight which gave a zest to his comfortable quarters, and to the cold fowl and the bottle of wine which the butler had brought up for him. He was tired and hungry after his long tramp, so he threw his sword, his helmet, and his revolver-belt down upon a chair, and fell

to eagerly upon his supper. Then, with his glass of wine before him and his cigar between his lips, he tilted his chair back and looked about him.

He sat within a small circle of brilliant light which gleamed upon his silver shoulder-straps, and threw out his terra-cotta face, his heavy eyebrows, and his yellow moustache. But outside that circle things were vague and shadowy in the old dining-hall. Two sides were oak-panelled and two were hung with faded tapestry, across which huntsmen and dogs and stags were still dimly streaming. Above the fireplace were rows of heraldic shields with the blazonings of the family and of its alliances, the fatal saltire cross breaking out on each of them.

Four paintings of old seigneurs of Chateau Noir faced the fireplace, all men with hawk noses and bold, high features, so like each other that only the dress could distinguish the Crusader from the Cavalier of the Fronde. Captain Baumgarten, heavy with his repast, lay back in his chair looking up at them through the clouds of his tobacco smoke, and pondering over the strange chance which had sent him, a man from the Baltic coast, to eat his supper in the ancestral hall of these proud Norman chieftains. But the fire was hot, and the captain's eyes were heavy. His chin sank slowly upon his chest, and the ten candles gleamed upon the broad, white scalp.

Suddenly a slight noise brought him to his feet. For an instant it seemed to his dazed senses that one of the pictures opposite had walked from its frame. There, beside the table, and almost within arm's length of him, was standing a huge man, silent, motionless, with no sign of life save his fierce-glinting eyes. He was black-haired, olive-skinned, with a pointed tuft of black beard, and a great, fierce nose, towards which all his features seemed to run. His cheeks were wrinkled like a last year's apple, but his sweep of shoulder, and bony, corded hands, told of a strength which was unsapped by age. His arms were folded across his arching chest, and his mouth was set in a fixed smile.

"Pray do not trouble yourself to look for your weapons," he said, as the Prussian cast a swift glance at the empty chair in which they had been laid. "You have been, if you will allow me to say so, a little indiscreet to make yourself so much at home in a house every wall of which is honeycombed with secret passages. You will be amused to hear that forty men were watching you at your supper. Ah! what then?"

Captain Baumgarten had taken a step forward with clenched fists. The Frenchman held up the revolver which he grasped in his right hand, while with the left he hurled the German back into his chair.

"Pray keep your seat," said he. "You have no cause to trouble about your men. They have already been provided for. It is astonishing with these stone floors how little one can hear what goes on beneath. You have been relieved of your command, and have now only to think of yourself. May I ask what your name is?"

"I am Captain Baumgarten of, the 24th Posen Regiment."

"Your French is excellent, though you incline, like most of your countrymen, to turn the 'p' into a 'b.' I have been amused to hear them cry '*Avez bitie sur moi*!' You know, doubtless, who it is who addresses you."

"The Count of Chateau Noir."

"Precisely. It would have been a misfortune if you had visited my chateau and I had been unable to have a word with you. I have had to do with many German soldiers, but never with an officer before. I have much to talk to you about."

Captain Baumgarten sat still in his chair. Brave as he was, there was something in this man's manner which made his skin creep with apprehension. His eyes glanced to right and to left, but his weapons were gone, and in a struggle he saw that he was but a child to this gigantic adversary. The count had picked up the claret bottle and held it to the light.

"Tut! tut!" said he. "And was this the best that Pierre could do for you? I am ashamed to look you in the face, Captain Baumgarten. We must improve upon this."

He blew a call upon a whistle which hung from his shooting-jacket. The old manservant was in the room in an instant.

"Chambertin from bin 15!" he cried, and a minute later a grey bottle, streaked with cobwebs, was carried in as a nurse bears an infant. The count filled two glasses to the brim.

"Drink!" said he. "It is the very best in my cellars, and not to be matched between Rouen and Paris. Drink, sir, and be happy! There are cold joints below. There are two lobsters, fresh from Honfleur. Will you not venture upon a second and more savoury supper?"

The German officer shook his head. He drained the glass, however, and his host filled it once more, pressing him to give an order for this or that dainty.

"There is nothing in my house which is not at your disposal. You have but to say the word. Well, then, you will allow me to tell you a story while you drink your wine. I have so longed to tell it to some German officer. It is about my son, my only child, Eustace, who was taken and died in escaping. It is a curious little story, and I think that I can promise you that you will never forget it.

"You must know, then, that my boy was in the artillery— a fine young fellow, Captain Baumgarten, and the pride of his mother. She died within a week of the news of his death reaching us. It was brought by a brother officer who was at his side throughout, and who escaped while my lad died. I want to tell you all that he told me.

"Eustace was taken at Weissenburg on the 4th of August. The prisoners were broken up into parties, and sent back into Germany by different routes. Eustace was taken upon the 5th to a village called Lauterburg, where he met with

kindness from the German officer in command. This good colonel had the hungry lad to supper, offered him the best he had, opened a bottle of good wine, as I have tried to do for you, and gave him a cigar from his own case. Might I entreat you to take one from mine?"

The German again shook his head. His horror of his companion had increased as he sat watching the lips that smiled and the eyes that glared.

"The colonel, as I say, was good to my boy. But, unluckily, the prisoners were moved next day across the Rhine into Ettlingen. They were not equally fortunate there. The officer who guarded them was a ruffian and a villain, Captain Baumgarten. He took a pleasure in humiliating and ill-treating the brave men who had fallen into his power. That night upon my son answering fiercely back to some taunt of his, he struck him in the eye, like this!"

The crash of the blow rang through the hall. The German's face fell forward, his hand up, and blood oozing through his fingers. The count settled down in his chair once more.

"My boy was disfigured by the blow, and this villain made his appearance the object of his jeers. By the way, you look a little comical yourself at the present moment, captain, and your colonel would certainly say that you had been getting into mischief. To continue, however, my boy's youth and his destitution— for his pockets were empty— moved the pity of a kind-hearted major, and he advanced him ten Napoleons from his own pocket without security of any kind. Into your hands, Captain Baumgarten, I return these ten gold pieces, since I cannot learn the name of the lender. I am grateful from my heart for this kindness shown to my boy.

"The vile tyrant who commanded the escort accompanied the prisoners to Durlack, and from there to Carlsruhe. He heaped every outrage upon my lad, because the spirit of the Chateau Noirs would not stoop to turn away his wrath by a feigned submission. Ay, this cowardly villain, whose heart's blood shall yet clot upon this hand, dared to strike my son with his open hand, to kick him, to tear hairs from his moustache— to use him thus— and thus— and thus!"

The German writhed and struggled. He was helpless in the hands of this huge giant whose blows were raining upon him. When at last, blinded and half-senseless, he staggered to his feet, it was only to be hurled back again into the great oaken chair. He sobbed in his impotent anger and shame.

"My boy was frequently moved to tears by the humiliation of his position," continued the count. "You will understand me when I say that it is a bitter thing to be helpless in the hands of an insolent and remorseless enemy. On arriving at Carlsruhe, however, his face, which had been wounded by the brutality of his guard, was bound up by a young Bavarian subaltern who was touched by his appearance. I regret to see that your eye is bleeding so. Will you permit me to bind it with my silk handkerchief?"

He leaned forward, but the German dashed his hand aside.

"I am in your power, you monster!" he cried; "I can endure your brutalities, but not your hypocrisy."

The count shrugged his shoulders.

"I am taking things in their order, just as they occurred," said he. "I was under vow to tell it to the first German officer with whom I could talk *têtê-à-têtê*. Let me see, I had got as far as the young Bavarian at Carlsruhe. I regret extremely that you will not permit me to use such slight skill in surgery as I possess. At Carlsruhe, my lad was shut up in the old caserne, where he remained for a fortnight. The worst pang of his captivity was that some unmannerly curs in the garrison would taunt him with his position as he sat by his window in the evening. That reminds me, captain, that you are not quite situated upon a bed of roses yourself, are you now? You came to trap a wolf, my man, and now the beast has you down with his fangs in your throat. A family man, too, I should judge, by that well-filled tunic. Well, a widow the more will make little matter, and they do not usually remain widows long. Get back into the chair, you dog!

"Well, to continue my story— at the end of a fortnight my son and his friend escaped. I need not trouble you with the dangers which they ran, or with the privations which they endured. Suffice it that to disguise themselves they had to take the clothes of two peasants, whom they waylaid in a wood. Hiding by day and travelling by night, they had got as far into France as Remilly, and were within a mile— a single mile, captain— of crossing the German lines when a patrol of Uhlans came right upon them. Ah! it was hard, was it not, when they had come so far and were so near to safety?" The count blew a double call upon his whistle, and three hard-faced peasants entered the room.

"These must represent my Uhlans," said he. "Well, then, the captain in command, finding that these men were French soldiers in civilian dress within the German lines, proceeded to hang them without trial or ceremony. I think, Jean, that the centre beam is the strongest."

The unfortunate soldier was dragged from his chair to where a noosed rope had been flung over one of the huge oaken rafters which spanned the room. The cord was slipped over his head, and he felt its harsh grip round his throat. The three peasants seized the other end, and looked to the count for his orders. The officer, pale, but firm, folded his arms and stared defiantly at the man who tortured him.

"You are now face to face with death, and I perceive from your lips that you are praying. My son was also face to face with death, and he prayed, also. It happened that a general officer came up, and he heard the lad praying for his mother, and it moved him so— he being himself a father— that he ordered his Uhlans away, and he remained with his aide-de-camp only, beside the condemned men. And when he heard all the lad had to tell— that he was the

only child of an old family, and that his mother was in failing health— he threw off the rope as I throw off this, and he kissed him on either cheek, as I kiss you, and he bade him go, as I bid you go, and may every kind wish of that noble general, though it could not stave off the fever which slew my son, descend now upon your head."

And so it was that Captain Baumgarten, disfigured, blinded, and bleeding, staggered out into the wind and the rain of that wild December dawn.

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