PAST MASTERS 233

John Buchan
A E W Mason
Melville Davisson Post
Hans Christian Anderson
Sydney Horler
Sheridan Le Fanu
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and more

PAST MASTERS 233

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

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Harriet Prescott Spofford

1835-1921

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CERTAINLY there was a house there, half-way up Great Hill, a mansion of pale cream-colored stone, built with pillared porch and wings, vines growing over some parts of it, a sward like velvet surrounding it; the sun was flashing back from the windows— but— Why? Why had none of the Godsdale people seen that house before? Could the work of building have gone on sheltered by the thick wood in front, the laborers and the materials coming up the other side of the hill? It would not be visible now if, overnight, vistas had not been cut in the wood.

The Godsdale people seldom climbed the hill; there were rumors of ill-doing there in long past days, there were perhaps rattlesnakes, it was difficult except from the other side, there was nothing to see when you arrived, and few ever wandered that way. Why any one should wish to build there was a mystery. As the villagers stared at the place they saw, or thought they saw, swarthy turbaned servitors moving about, but so far off as to be indistinct. In fact, it was all very indistinct; so much so that Parson Solewise even declared there was no house there at all. But when Mr. Dunceby, the schoolmaster, opened his spy-glass and saw a lady— who, he said, was tall, was dark, was beautiful, with flowing draperies about her of black and filmy stuff— come down the terrace-steps and enter a waiting automobile that speedily passed round the scarp of the hill and went down the other side, the thing was proved. Mr. Ditton, the village lawyer, also saw it without having recourse to the spy-glass; but as Mr. Ditton had but lately had what he called a nip, and indeed several of them, he was in that happy state of sweet good nature which agrees with the last speaker.

Every day for several days, even weeks, the lady was seen to enter the automobile, and be taken round the side of the hill and down to the plain intersected by many roads and ending in a marsh bounded by the great river. The car would go some distance, and then, apparently at an order given through the long speaking-tube, would turn about and take a different course, only to be as quickly reversed and sent to another road on the right or on the left. Sometimes it would seem to certain of the adventurous youth coming and going on the great plain that the chauffeur remonstrated, but evidently the more she insisted, and the car went on swiftly in the new direction, wrecklessly plunging and rocking over deep-rutted places as if both driver and passenger were mad. Indeed they came to call the woman the Mad Lady. She seemed to be on a wild

search for something that lay she knew not where, or for the right road to it in all the tangle of roads. One day, it was Mr. Dunceby and Mr. Ditton who, coming from a fishing-trip— Mr. Ditton's flask quite empty— saw a ride which they averred was the wildest piece of daredeviltry ever known, or would have been but for the black tragedy at its end.

The car was speeding down Springwood way, as if running a race with the wind, when suddenly it swerved, backed, and turned about, going diagonally opposite into Blueberry lane, crossed over from that by a short cut to Commoners, only to reverse again— the lady inside, as well as they could see, giving contradictory and excited orders— and after one or two more turns and returns and zigzags, the car shot forward with incredible swiftness, as if the right way were found at last, straight down the long dike or causeway over which the farmers hauled their salt hay from the marsh in winter— the marsh now swollen to a morass by the high tides and recent rains. And then, as if in the accelerating speed the chauffeur found himself helpless, they saw the car bound into the air— at least Mr. Ditton did— the lady fling the door open, crying: "It is here! It is here!" pitching forward at the words and tossed out like a leaf, the chauffeur thrown off as violently, and all plunged into the morass, sucked down by the quicksand, and seen no more.

When a deputation of the Godsdale people, the constable, the parson, the schoolmaster, Mr. Ditton, and some others, climbed the path to Great Hill top, they found the house there quite empty, no living soul to be seen, and without furnishing of any kind. Was it possible that every one had absconded during the time in which the people had exclaimed and discussed and delayed, and that they had taken rugs and hangings and paintings and statuary with them? Or, as Parson Solewise conjectured, had there never been anything of the sort there? Yet there were others who, on returning to the village, vowed that the rich rugs, the soft draperies, the wonderful pictures they had seen were something not known by them to exist before, and that turbaned slaves were packing them away with celerity.

One thing certainly was strange: a wing of the house had vanished, the porch and the eastern wing were there, but there was no west wing; if there ever had been the grass was growing over it. The schoolmaster said it was due to the perspective; they would see it when down in the village again. And so they did. Mr. Ditton, however, went back to review the case; but, on the spot again, there was no western wing to that strange building.

The automobile was raised by some friendly hands, chiefly boys, cleansed, and taken up Great Hill and left in its place. After that, for some years the good people of Godsdale talked of the mansion, and marvelled, and borrowed the schoolmaster's spy-glass to look at it. But at last it was as an old story, and half

forgotten at that; and then one and another had died; and no one came to claim the place; and other things filled the mind.

It so chanced that Mary Solewise, the old parson's daughter, one afternoon in her rambles with her lover, came out on the half-forgotten house and, stepping across the terrace, looked in at one of the windows that at a little distance had seemed to stare at them. Her lover was the young poet who had come to Godsdale for the sake of its quiet, that he might finish his epic to the resonance of no other noise than the tune in his thought. The epic is quite unknown now; but we all know and sing his songs, which are pieces of perfection. But he himself said Mary Solewise was the best poem he had found.

With a little money, some talent, and plenty of time, he was content till this song of Mary began to sing in his heart; and then when he found she was his for this life and all life to come, he found also that his small income needed to be trebled; it was too narrow a mantle to stretch over himself and Mary too. He could, after a fashion, make the little money sufficient, perhaps his verses would bring in something— verse had made more poets than Tennyson rich— but there was no roof to shelter her. And so in the midst of his happiness he was wretched. He could not enjoy the sunshine for fear of a weather-breeder. Of course if he chose to go back, if he chose to submit— but that sacrifice of honor was not to be dreamed. He lived in the hope that his epic would bring immediate fame and fortune, but, alas, his life and thought were so taken up by Mary that he could not work on the epic at all. They went off and sat down on the edge of the terrace. The great house, in the flickering afternoon sunshine through the shadows of leaves, seemed to tremble. One felt it might melt away. There was to the poet something really appealing about it. "This forsaken place has a personality," he said. "It seems as if it were asking some one to come and companion it, to save it from itself and the doom of forsaken things."

It was very evidently, indeed, by way of falling to pieces: bricks had toppled from the chimney-stacks, spiders had spun their webs everywhere, and one might expect to find a brother to dragons in the great halls. "To live in it?" asked Mary. "Why, the very thing! Let the creepers cover all the main part and hold it up with their strong ropes if need be. But there in the east wing the rooms are reasonable. You have such a knack with carpentry and machines and things, you could turn that long window into a door, we could bolt off the main part— and— and there we are!"

"It is God-given!" said the lover. "But would you not be afraid of ghosts? This is a place to be known of these shadowy people."

"I would give anything to see one!" she exclaimed, and then began to shiver as if fearing to be taken at her word. Her hair had fallen down in her struggles with bushes and boughs and briers on the way up; she was braiding it in a shining rope of gold.

"It will grow and shroud you in gold in your grave," he said, passing a tress of it across his lips.

The color mounted in her cheeks, exquisite as that on a rose-petal; nothing could be more the opposite of ghostliness than she, the very picture of vital strength.

All at once it seemed to the poet that here was a way to put fresh being into this dead place, to suspend its decay, till it gathered force and new meaning and became instead of a suspected apparition a thing glowing with life. He went to the window and looked in; it gave way under his hand, and he stepped across. "This shall be the door," he said.

"And this the living-room," she replied. And they went through the wing.

"It is quite ample enough," he exclaimed.

"More than enough," she said.

"It will do very well," he continued. "I will come up with old Will and brooms and pails, and clear out the dust and cobwebs and litter, and mop and scour. I can do it."

"And I can help. Oh, how I can help!"

"Here will be your sewing-room. Here will be my writing-room— only you will sit there, too. Here is our own room. How fine a great fire roaring up this chimney will be! Here can be pantry and kitchen. See— there is water running from some spring higher up the hill. It is really quite perfect. Why did we never think of it before? No one claims it. We shall be married now the moment it is ready to receive a bride. A fine place, those great halls, for children to romp in. I hear them now with their piping silver voices!"

"And I will have a garden on this side, with rows of lilies, with rows of roses, with white sweet-william against blue larkspur, with gillyflowers and pansies— oh, why didn't we think of this before!"

"We will need some furnishing—"

"Not a great deal. Mother and father will give us things they don't use. And we can make tables and dressers— you can."

"And I shall be paid for my verses the Magazine of Light accepted, some time."

"And there is the old automobile— though I don't know if I would like to ride in that, even if I could."

"I think I can furbish it up. I'll take a look at it. I always had a way with tools. Oh, yes, you will like to ride in it. It won't be quite— the same— may need some new parts."

"But— the poor Mad Lady— won't we be afraid?"

"Of what? She wouldn't hurt us if she could, and she couldn't if she would. She will be glad to have her limousine give pleasure to a young wife and her

adoring man-at-arms. Oh, Mary, we have a home! But it's too good to be true. Come, let us hurry down before the whole thing fades like a dream!"

The parson and the schoolmaster and Mr. Ditton all went up the next day to look over the possibilities, and they all agreed that the plan was feasible. "The main building," said the schoolmaster, "could be used for a boarding-school," and he pictured himself a delighted headmaster there in no time.

"A fine place for one of those retreats where people invite heaven into their souls," said the parson.

"A place for much revelry unseen by the curious. I wonder it has not been utilized," said Mr. Ditton. And then they all did their kind best to help the poet and his sweetheart.

It was the prettiest wedding under the sun. All the village took note, and part of the people followed the pleasant procession up the hill. They had turned out in a body two or three weeks before and made the path up the hill wide and smooth; and all the furnishings and belongings had been taken up some days ago. The bridegroom, dark and straight, prouder that morning than if the Iliad had been his achievement, walked with his wife who, a little pale, found some strength in leaning on his arm, her veil flowing about her, half veil, half scarf, the rose in her hair the beginning of a long garland of roses that the school-children had braided for her, that fell on her shoulder and trailed to her feet. A group of the children followed, marshalled by the schoolmaster, all prettily demure, but full of the suspended spirit of gambol and outcry. Then came the glad young friends and companions, and next them the parson and his wife, solemn as if they were ascending the mount of sacrifice, which indeed they were doing in giving their child to an almost unknown man. After these came all who wished them well sufficiently to climb the steep; while the music of a flute-blower went all the way along from the sheltering wood.

A passing cloud obscured the main building, but the sun lay full on the east wing, which seemed to give a smiling welcome. On the terrace was a fine banquet spread, and a wedding-cake for the bride to cut; and after the dainties had been enjoyed and Billy Biggs's pockets stuffed as full as his stomach, and the flute-blower had come out of the wood, they all swarmed through the east wing and over the great house; and the schoolmaster formed a class there and told them in his own way the story of a wedding where one of the guests, a person of deific quality, had turned jars of water into wine. "That," said he, "is what marriage does. It gives to those who have drunk only water the wine of life." It is to be doubted if the little people understood him, but the poet did.

After this came dancing; and presently sunset was casting ruby fires over all the world. And the old parson went to the new husband and wife, and blessed them as if all power were given him to bless, and he kissed them both, and led the way home.

Then Mary went inside and divested herself of her lovely finery, and made the tea, and they supped together, and then sat on the door-stone and watched the moon come up and silver the great morass in the distance; and at last they went inside, and the husband locked the door. "Oh," said Mary, "when I heard you turn the key I knew that we had left the world outside!"

"And that you and I are one!" said her husband.

The poet did not do much with his epic, after all, that year; but he gave us that charming masque of "Mornings in Arcady" that haunts its lovers as remembered strains of music do. And he made the beginnings of his wife's garden, and he wrought with his carpentry tools, and did some repairing on the motor-car; sooth to say, it needed a good deal of renewing, and it took all the amount of the check for his poem to replace the useless parts, and from other verses, too.

And by and by came the little child, as if a small angel had wandered out of heaven. And Mary began to have a strange foreboding about the main building, as of some baleful influence there that might harm the child. So her husband took the child with her and went all over the main building, and showed her there was nothing there but emptiness, not even gloom; for how could gloom live in a place flooded with sunshine through all its many windows? After the twin babies came, Mary had the clothes hung there to dry.

Sometimes now they had the flute-blower come up, and all their friends from the village, to make merry in the spacious places of the main building, which seemed to put on a brighter face in welcome. And again, when there was rumor of war the women gathered there to scrape lint and roll bandages, while their children played about. Sometimes in summer the Sunday-school received their lessons there and sang their hymns, and had their festa. And the poet had his wish of seeing his children at play there. Once in a while the visiting village children found themselves storm-bound there, staying for days together, and the wide rooms rang with their glad voices. The place was full of life.

One day when her mother was there, the poet came to his wife, heralded by a great puffing and blowing, sliding to the door in the motor-car. "It is quite regenerated," he said. "I have run it down the road and back to make assurance doubly sure. Now mother will keep the babies, and we will follow the poor Mad Lady's way. Oh, I have had motors before. I could have them again if I chose to accept the conditions."

"Oh, I shall be afraid!" she said.

"Of what?" he asked, as he had asked before. "The machine is all right. Shabby, but can go like blazes. A pity I had not attended to it when we first set up our gods here. What a thing it is to have a wife!" as she obediently took her seat.

"What a thing it is to have a limousine," she answered, "and a chauffeur!"

As the car slid along Mary idly took up the speaking-tube through which one gives orders to the man outside. It seemed to her that she heard murmurs in it like a voice. At first faint, then the murmurs swelled till they were not only distinct but startling. Mary dropped the tube, but caught it up again, and put it to her ear. It was a woman's voice evidently. "Down this way," it seemed to say. "No, no, try the first turn to the left. Oh, did I say the left? I mean the right. Don't go by it! Now, straight ahead. Oh, stop, stop, let me think— this is not right! The Springwood way, the Commoners, now the third from the forks. Why should it be so difficult to reach the road where they bring in the hay? Oh, shall we never arrive? Shall we never find it? It might be lost! It might be water-soaked! It is at the roots of the big tree that leans over the marsh. Oh, here, here! Put on more speed! Hurry, hurry, faster! It is precious, it is priceless, lives depend upon it!"

It was Mary's turn to try to say "Stop!" But she could not bring herself to use that speaking-tube. She flung herself against the glass between herself and her husband. He turned and saw her terror, and stopped instantly. "What is it, what is it?" he cried. "Oh, Mary, what is the matter?"

"The car is haunted! By the Mad Lady's voice!" she exclaimed. "I hear it in the tube there! Oh, it is dreadful!"

"Nonsense, my darlingest! It is the wind you hear. Let me try it. I hear nothing. You see we are not moving now."

"Then move!" cried Mary, "and put your ear where you would hear me if I used it. I will go and sit with you."

She did so, and he reseated himself, and the car moved on, and the poet listened. "By George, it is saying something," he exclaimed presently. "'The third from the forks.' Why, that is just where we are. 'It is such a small thing it might be lost.' By George, Mary, what does this mean? There it goes again, 'Speed, hurry, hurry, it is precious, it is priceless, lives depend—' This is the weirdest thing I ever came across," he said, as he wiped his forehead. "Look here, suppose we obey the directions, go where she says and see what will happen?"

Mary was trembling in every limb; her teeth chattered, but she tried not to have it seen. They began to go forward, turning the corner, coming out on the straight road to the marsh.

It was a season of low tides, and except for a short but terrific thunder-storm there had been no rain for weeks, so that the marsh had visibly shrunk. "There's no danger, we won't go out on the marsh, of course. That chauffeur, the Mad Lady's, must have lost control, he was going at such a horrific rate, they say."

"There is the big tree on the edge!" cried Mary, still in a tremor, her very voice shaking.

"Let us look. We will find some sticks and turn up the earth," said her husband.

"Oh, it is the most awful thing!" murmured Mary. "I feel as if we were meddling in some terrible conspiracy, as if— as if—"

"As if the Prince of the Powers of the Air had it in for you. Never fear, sweetheart, I'm here."

He worked out the foot-rest of the car and began to break with it the soil about the roots of the tree. And then he saw that the earth had been torn up by a thunderbolt fallen there not long since, stripping the bark off the tree, too, but making his work more easy.

"There's nothing there at all!" cried Mary. "It's all our imagination."

"There's nothing like effort," he replied. "Aha, what is this?" And there resounded a slight metallic clang, and he wrenched out and brought to light a small japanned box covered with rust and mould.

"It may contain a fortune in priceless stones," he said.

"She said it was priceless," Mary answered. But they had nothing with which to open it; and he turned the car and they went home, feeling as if they had a weight of lead with them.

The parson had come up for his wife, and was as interested as Mary and the poet. It took only a few minutes with a chisel to open the box. Inside was a fast-locked ebony casket. "It is too bad to break it," said Mary.

"There is nothing else to do," he said, prying it open. They found then a lock of curling hair, a slender gold ring, and a piece of thin parchment on which was written something illegible, neither name nor place being decipherable, but yet which had an air of marriage lines.

"Now what does this mean?" asked the poet. "A house takes shape out of the air apparently, a woman lives in it, and drives round wildly in search of this box that has perhaps been stolen from her, whose contents were needed to prove innocence, descent, rights to property, and what-not, and loses her life searching for it. We must get out of this, Mary! The whole thing is a baseless fabric and will melt away, and for all I know melt us with it."

The schoolmaster and Mr. Ditton coming up on their afternoon stroll in which they usually discussed points of the cabala, had heard the poet's words. "You are doubting the stability of the house?" said the schoolmaster. "You need not. It is written in the Zohar that thought is the source of all that is, and searching the Sephiroth we find that matter is only a form of thought. In fact the soul builds the body—"

"Many a castle in the air has been made solid by putting in the underpinning," said Mr. Ditton.

"My children," said the parson, "if the Mad Lady was able to project herself and her palace to this spot, for reasons of her own, you have projected into it yourselves. Your innocent and happy lives have filled it with vitality, and have fixed a dream into a home. It is as strong as the foundations of the earth. Stay

here in safety, the house and the home are permanent. The poor Mad Lady! Come, wife."

But Mary was still trembling a little.

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2: The Magic Walking Stick

John Buchan

1875-1940

In anthology: *Sails of Gold*, Scribner's, 1927

WHEN BILL came back for long-leave that autumn half he had before him a complex programme of entertainment. Thomas, the Keeper, whom he revered more than anyone else in the world, was to take him in the afternoon to try for a duck in the big marsh called Alemoor. In the evening Hallowe'en would be celebrated in the nursery with his small brother Peter, and he would be permitted to sit up after dinner till ten o'clock. Next day, which was Sunday, would be devoted to wandering about with Peter, hearing from him all the appetising home news, and pouring into his greedy ears the gossip of the foreign world of school. On Monday morning, after a walk with the dogs, he was to motor to London, lunch with Aunt Alice, go to a conjuring show, and then, after a noble tea, return to school in time for lock-up.

It seemed to Bill all that could be desired in the way of excitement. But he did not know just how exciting that long leave was destined to be.

The first shadow of a cloud appeared after luncheon, when he had changed into knickerbockers, and Peter and the dogs were waiting at the gun-room door. Bill could not find his own proper stick. It was a long hazel staff, given him by the second stalker in a Scotch deer-forest the year before— a staff rather taller than Bill, of glossy hazel, with a shapely polished crook, and without a ferrule, like all stalking sticks. He hunted for it high and low, but it could not be found. Without it in his hand Bill felt that an expedition lacked something vital, and he was not prepared to take instead one of his father's shooting sticks, as Groves, the butler, recommended. Nor would he accept a knubbly cane proffered by Peter. Feeling a little aggrieved and imperfectly equipped, he rushed out to join Thomas. He would cut himself an ashplant in the first hedge.

But as the two ambled down the lane which led to Alemoor, they came on an old man sitting under a hornbeam. He was a funny little wizened old man, in a shabby long green overcoat, which had once been black, and he wore on his head the oldest and tallest and greenest bowler hat that ever graced a human head. Thomas walked on as if he did not see him, and Gyp, the spaniel, and Shawn, the Irish setter, at the sight of him dropped their tails between their legs, and remembered an engagement a long way off. But Bill stopped, for he saw that the old man had a bundle under his arm, a bundle of ancient umbrellas and queer ragged sticks.

The old man smiled at him, and he had very bright eyes. He seemed to know what was wanted, for he at once took from his bundle a stick. You would not have said that it was the kind of stick Bill was looking for. It was short, and

heavy, and made of some dark foreign wood, and instead of a crook it had a handle shaped like a crescent, cut out of some white substance which was neither bone nor ivory. Yet Bill, as soon as he saw it, felt that it was the one stick in the world for him.

'How much?' he asked.

'One farthing,' said the old man, and his voice squeaked like a winter wind in a chimney.

Now a farthing is not a common coin, but Bill happened to have one— a gift from Peter on his arrival that day, along with a brass cannon, five empty cartridges, a broken microscope, and a badly-printed brightly-illustrated narrative called 'Two Villains Foiled.' But a farthing sounded too little, so Bill proffered one of his scanty shillings.

'I said one farthing,' said the old man rather snappily.

The small coin changed hands, and the little old wizened face seemed to light up with an elfish glee. ''Tis a fine stick, young sir,' he squeaked, 'a noble stick, when you gets used to the ways of it.'

Bill had to run to catch up Thomas, who was plodding along with the dogs, now returned from their engagement.

'That's a queer chap— the old stick-man, I mean,' he said.

'I ain't seen no old man, Maaster Bill,' said Thomas. 'What be 'ee talkin' about?'

'The fellow back there. I bought this stick of him.'

Thomas cast a puzzled glance at the stick. 'That be a craafty stick, Maaster Bill— ' but he said no more, for Bill had shaken it playfully at the dogs. As soon as they saw it they set off to keep another engagement— this time, apparently, with a hare— and Thomas was yelling and whistling for ten minutes before he brought them to heel.

It was a soft grey afternoon, and Bill was stationed beside one of the deep dykes in the moor, well in cover of a thorn bush, while Thomas and the dogs went off on a long circuit to show themselves beyond the big mere, so that the duck might move in Bill's direction. It was rather cold, and very wet underfoot, for a lot of rain had fallen in the past week, and the mere, which was usually only a sedgy pond, had now grown to a great expanse of shallow floodwater. Bill began his vigil in high excitement. He drove his new stick into the ground, and used the handle as a seat, while he rested his gun in the orthodox way in the crook of his arm. It was a double-barrelled, sixteen bore, and Bill knew that he would be lucky if he got a duck with it; but a duck was to him a bird of mystery, true wild game, and he preferred the chance of one to the certainty of many rabbits.

The minutes passed, the grey afternoon sky darkened towards twilight, but no duck came. Bill saw a wedge of geese high up in the sky and longed to salute

them; also he heard snipe, but could not locate them in the dim weather. Far away he thought he detected the purring noise which Thomas made to stir the duck, but no overhead beat of wings followed. Soon the mood of eager anticipation died away, and he grew bored and rather despondent. He scrambled up the bank of the dyke and strained his eyes over the moor between the bare boughs of the thorn. He thought he saw duck moving— yes, he was certain of it— they were coming from the direction of Thomas and the dogs. It was perfectly clear what was happening. There was far too much water on the moor, and the birds, instead of fighting across the mere to the boundary slopes, were simply settling on the flood. From the misty grey water came the rumour of many wildfowl.

Bill came back to his wet stand grievously disappointed. He did not dare to leave it in case a flight did appear, but he had lost all hope. He tried to warm his feet by moving them up and down in the squelchy turf. His gun was now under his arm, and he was fiddling idly with the handle of the stick which was still embedded in earth. He made it revolve, and as it turned he said aloud: 'I wish I was in the middle of the big flood.'

Then a remarkable thing happened. Bill was not conscious of any movement, but suddenly his surroundings were completely changed. He had still his gun under his left arm and the stick in his right hand, but instead of standing on wet turf he was up to the waist in water...And all around him were duck— shovellers, pintail, mallard, teal, widgeon, pochard, tufted— and bigger things that might be geese— swimming or diving or just alighting from the air. In a second Bill realised that his wish had been granted. He was in the very middle of the flood water.

He got a right and left at mallards, missing with his first barrel. Then the birds rose in alarm, and he shoved in fresh cartridges and fired wildly into the brown. His next two shots were at longer range, but he was certain that he had hit something. And then the duck vanished in the brume, and he was left alone with the grey waters running out to the dimness.

He lifted up his voice and shouted wildly for Thomas and the dogs, and looked about him to retrieve what he had shot. He had got two anyhow— a mallard drake and a young teal, and he collected them. Presently he heard whistling and splashing, and Gyp the spaniel appeared half swimming, half wading. Gyp picked up a second mallard, and Bill left it at that. He thought he knew roughly where the deeper mere lay so as to avoid it, and with his three duck he started for where he believed Thomas to be. The water was often up to his armpits and once he was soused over his head, and it was a very wet, breathless and excited boy that presently confronted the astounded keeper.

'Where in goodness ha' ye been, Maaster Bill? Them ducks was tigglin' out to the deep water and I was feared ye wouldn't get a shot. Three on 'em, no less! My word, ye 'ave poonished 'em.'

'I was in the deep water,' said Bill, but he explained no more, for it had just occurred to him that he couldn't. It was a boy not less puzzled than triumphant that returned to show his bag to his family, and at dinner he was so abstracted that his mother thought he was ill and sent him early to bed. Bill made no complaint, for he wanted to be alone to think things out.

It was plain that a miracle had happened, and it must be connected with the stick. He had wished himself in the middle of the flood-water— he remembered that clearly— and at the time he had been doing something to the stick. What was it? It had been stuck in the ground, and he had been playing with the handle. Yes, he had it. He had been turning it round when he uttered the wish. Bill's mind was better stored with fairy tales than with Latin and Greek, and he remembered many precedents. The stick was in the rack in the hall, and he had half a mind to slip downstairs and see if he could repeat the performance. But he reflected that he might be observed, and that this was a business demanding profound secrecy. So he resolutely composed himself to sleep. He had been allowed for a treat to have his old bed in the night-nursery, next to Peter, and he realised that he must be up bright and early to frustrate that alert young inquirer.

HE WOKE before dawn, and at once put on socks and fives-shoes and a dressing-gown, and tiptoed downstairs. He heard a housemaid moving in the direction of the dining-room, and Groves opening the library shutters, but the hall was deserted. He groped in the rack and found the stick, struggled with the key of the garden door, and emerged into the foggy winter half-light. It was very cold, as he padded down the lawn to a retired half-moon of shrubbery beside the pond, and his shoes were soon soaked with hoar-frost. He shivered and drew his dressing-gown around him, but he had decided what to do. In this kind of weather he wished to be warm. He planted his stick in the turf.

'I want to be on the beach in the Solomon Islands,' said Bill, and three times twisted the handle.

In a second his eyes seemed to dazzle with excess of light and something beat on his body like a blast from an open furnace....He was standing on an expanse of blinding white sand at which a lazy blue sea was licking. Behind him at a distance of perhaps two hundred yards was a belt of high green forest, out of which stuck a tall crest of palms. A hot wind was blowing and tossing the tree-tops, but it only crisped the sea.

Bill gasped with joy to find his dream realised. He was in the far Pacific where he had always longed to be...But he was very hot, and could not endure

the weight of winter pyjamas and winter dressing-gown. Also he longed to bathe in those inviting waters. So he shed everything and hopped gaily down to the tide's edge, leaving the stick still upright in the sand.

The sea was as delicious as it looked, but Bill, though a good swimmer, kept near the edge for fear of sharks. He wallowed and splashed, with the fresh salt smell which he loved in his nostrils. Minutes passed rapidly, and he was just on the point of striking out for a little reef, when he cast a glance towards the shore...

At the edge of the forest stood men— dark-skinned men, armed with spears.

Bill scrambled to his feet with a fluttering heart, and as he rose the men moved forward. He was, perhaps, fifty yards from the stick, which cast its long morning shadow on the sand, and they were two hundred yards on the farther side. At all costs he must get there first. He sprang out of the sea, and as he ran he saw to his horror that the men ran also— ran in great bounds— shouting and brandishing their spears.

Those fifty yards seemed miles, but Bill won the race. No time to put on his clothes. He seized his dressing-gown with one hand and the stick with the other, and as he twirled the handle a spear whizzed by his ear. 'I want to be home,' he gasped, and the next second he stood naked between the shrubbery and the pond, clutching his dressing-gown. The Solomon Islands had got his fives-shoes and his pyjamas.

The cold of a November morning brought him quickly to his senses. He clothed his shivering body in his dressing-gown and ran by devious paths to the house. Happily the gun-room door was unlocked, and he was able to ascend by way of empty passages and back-stairs to the nursery floor. He did not, however, escape the eagle eye of Elsie, the nurse, who read a commination service over a boy who went out of doors imperfectly clad on such a morning. She prophesied pneumonia, and plumped him into a hot bath.

Bill applied his tongue to the back of his hand. Yes. It tasted salt, and the salt smell was still in his nose. It had not been a dream...He hugged himself in the bath and made strange gurgling sounds of joy. Life had suddenly opened up for him in dazzling vistas of adventure.

HIS CONDUCT in church that morning was exemplary, for while Peter at his side had his usual Sunday attack of St. Vitus's Dance, Bill sat motionless as a mummy. On the way home his mother commented on it and observed that Lower Chapel seemed to have taught him how to behave. But his thoughts during the service had not been devotional. The stick lay beside him on the floor, and for a moment he had a wild notion of twisting it during the Litany and disappearing for a few minutes to Kamschatka. Then prudence supervened. He must go very cautiously in this business, and court no questions. That afternoon

he and Peter would seek a secluded spot and make experiments. He would take the stick back to school and hide it in his room— he had a qualm when he thought what a 'floater' it would be if a lower boy appeared with it in public! For him no more hours of boredom. School would no longer be a place of exile, but a rapturous holiday. He would slip home now and then and see what was happening— he would go often to Glenmore— he would visit any spot in the globe which took his fancy. His imagination reeled at the prospect, and he cloaked his chortles of delight in a fervent Amen.

At luncheon it was decided that Peter and he should go for a walk together, and should join the others at a place called the Roman Camp. 'Let the boys have a chance of being alone,' his father had said. This exactly suited Bill's book, and as they left the dining-room he clutched his small brother. 'Shrimp,' he said in his ear, 'You're going to have the afternoon of your life.'

It was a mild, grey day, with the leafless woods and the brown ploughlands lit by a pale November sun. Peter, as he trotted beside him, jerked out breathless inquiries about what Bill proposed to do, and was told to wait and see.

Arrived at a clump of beeches which promised privacy, Bill first swore his brother to secrecy by the most awful oaths which he could imagine.

'Put your arm round my waist and hang on to my belt,' he told him. 'I'm going to take you to have a look at Glenmore.'

'Don't be silly,' said Peter. 'That only happens in Summer, and we haven't packed yet.'

'Shut up and hold tight,' said Bill as he twirled the stick and spoke the necessary words...

The boys were looking not at the smooth boles of beeches, but at a little coppice of rowans and birches above the narrow glen of the hill burn. It was Glenmore in very truth. There was the strip of mossy lawn, the white-washed gable end of the lodge; there to the left beside the walled garden was the smoking chimney of the keeper's cottage; there beyond the trees was the long lift of brown moorland and the blue top of Stob Ghabhar. To the boys Glenmore was the true home of the soul, but they had seen it only in the glory of late summer and early autumn. In its winter dress it seemed for a moment strange. Then the sight of an old collie waddling across the lawn gave the connecting link.

'There's Wattie,' Peter gasped, and lifted up his voice in an excited summons. His brother promptly scragged him.

'Don't be an ass, Shrimp,' he said fiercely. 'This is a secret, you fathead. This is magic. Nobody must know we are here. Come on and explore.'

For an hour— it must have been an hour, Bill calculated afterwards, but it seemed like ten minutes— the two visited their favourite haunts. They found the robbers' cave in the glen where a raven nested, and the pool where Bill had

caught his first pound trout, and the stretch in the river where their father that year had had the thirty pound salmon. There were no blaeberries or crowberries in the woods, but there were many woodcock, and Bill had a shot with his catapult at a wicked old blackcock on a peat-stack. Also they waylaid Wattie, the collie, and induced him to make a third in the party. All their motions were as stealthy as an Indian's, and the climax of the adventure was reached when they climbed the garden wall and looked in at the window of the keeper's cottage.

Tea was laid before a bright peat fire in the parlour, so Mrs. Macrae must be expecting company. It looked a very good tea, for there were scones and pancakes, and shortbread and currant-loaf and heather honey. Both boys felt suddenly famished at the sight.

'Mrs. Macrae always gives me a scone and honey,' Peter bleated. 'I'm hungry. I want one.'

So did Bill. His soul longed for food, but he kept hold of his prudence.

'We daren't show ourselves,' he whispered. 'But, perhaps, we might pinch a scone. It wouldn't be stealing, for if Mrs. Macrae saw us she would say "Come awa in, laddies, and get a jeely piece." I'll give you a back, Shrimp, and in you get.'

The window was open, and Peter was hoisted through, falling with a bang on a patch-work rug. But he never reached the table, for at that moment the parlour door opened and someone entered. After that things happened fast. Peter, urged by Bill's anguished whisper, turned back to the window, and was hauled through by the scruff of the neck. A woman's voice was heard crying, 'Mercy on us, it's the bairns,' as the culprits darted to the shelter of the gooseberry bushes.

Billy realised that there was no safety in the garden, so he dragged Peter over the wall by the way they had come, thereby seriously damaging a pear tree. But they had been observed, and as they scrambled out of a rose-bed, they heard cries and saw Mrs. Macrae appearing round the end of the wall, having come through the stable yard. Also a figure, which looked like Angus, the river gillie, was running from the same direction.

There was nothing for it but to go. Bill seized Peter with one hand and the stick with the other, and spoke the words, with Angus not six yards away...As he looked once more at the familiar beech boles, his ears were still full of the cries of an excited woman and the frenzied howling of Wattie, the dog.

The two boys, very warm and flustered and rather scratched about the hands and legs, confronted their father and mother and their sister, Barabara, who was sixteen and very proud.

'Hullo, hullo,' they heard their father say. 'I thought you'd be hiding somewhere hereabouts. You young rascals know how to take cover, for you seemed to spring out of the ground. You look as if you'd been playing football.

Better walk home with us and cool down...Bless my soul, Peter, what's that you've got? It's bog myrtle! Where on earth did you find it? I've never seen it before in Oxfordshire.'

Then Barbara raised a ladylike voice. 'Oh, Mummy, look at the mess they've made of themselves. They've been among the brambles, for Peter has two holes in his stockings. Just look at Bill's hands!' And she wrinkled her finical nose, and sniffed.

Bill kept a diplomatic silence, and Peter, usually garrulous, did the same, for his small wrist was in his brother's savage clutch.

THAT NIGHT, before Peter went to bed, he was compelled once more to swear solemn oaths, and Bill was so abstracted that his mother thought that he was sickening for some fell disease. He lay long awake, planning out the best way to use his marvellous new possession. His thoughts were still on the subject next morning, and to his family's amazement he made no protest when, to suit his mother's convenience, it was decided to start for London soon after breakfast, and the walk with the dogs was cancelled. He departed in high spirits, most unlike his usual leave-takings, and his last words to Peter were fierce exhortations to secrecy.

All the way to London he was in a happy dream, and at luncheon he was so urbane that Aunt Alice, who had strong and unorthodox views about education, announced that in Bill's case, at any rate, the public school system seemed to answer, and gave him double her customary tip.

Then came the conjuring show at the Grafton Hall. Bill in the past had had an inordinate appetite for such entertainments, and even in his new ecstasy he looked forward to this one. But at the door of the hall he had a shock. Hitherto he had kept close to his stick, but it was now necessary to give it up and receive a metal check for it. To his mother's surprise he protested hotly. 'It won't do any harm,' he pleaded. 'It will stay beside me under the seat.' But the rule was inexorable and he had to surrender it. 'Don't be afraid, darling,' his mother told him. 'That funny new stick of yours won't be lost. The check is a receipt for it, and they are very careful.'

The show was not up to his expectations. What were all these disappearing donkeys and vanishing ladies compared to the performances he had lately staged? Bill was puffed up with a great pride. With the help of his stick he could make rings round this trumpery cleverness. He was the true magician...He wished that the thing would end that he might feel the precious stick again in his hand. At the counter there was no sign of the man who had given him the check. Instead there was a youth who seemed to be new to the business, and who was very slow in returning the sticks and umbrellas. When it came to Bill's turn he was extra slow, and presently announced that he could find no Number 229.

Bill's mother, seeing his distress, intervened, and sent the wretched youth to look again, while other people were kept waiting, but he came back with the same story. There was no duplicate Number 229, or any article to correspond to the check. After that he had to be allowed to attend to the others, and Bill, almost in tears, waited hysterically till the crowd had gone. Then there was a thorough search, and Bill and his mother were allowed to go behind the counter. But no Number 229 could be found, and there were no sticks left, only three umbrellas.

Bill was now patently in tears.

'Never mind, darling,' his mother said, 'we must be off now, or you will be late for lock-up. I promise that your father will come here to-morrow and clear up the whole business. Never fear— the stick will be found.'

But it is still lost.

WHEN BILL'S FATHER went there next day, and cross-examined the wretched youth— for he had once been a barrister— he extracted a curious story. If the walking-stick was lost, so also was the keeper of the walking-sticks, for the youth was only an assistant. The keeper— his name was Jukes and he lived in Hammersmith— had not been seen since yesterday afternoon during the performance, and Mrs. Jukes had come round and made a scene last night, and that morning the police had been informed. Mr. Jukes, it appeared, was not a very pleasant character, and he had had too much beer at luncheon. When the audience had all gone in, he had expressed to his assistant his satiety of life. The youth's testimony ran as follows: 'Mr. Jukes, 'e was wavin' his arm something chronic and carryin' on about 'ow this was no billet for a man like 'im. He picks up a stick, and I thought he was goin' to 'it me. "Percy, me lad," says 'e, "I'm fed up— fed up to the back teeth." He starts twisting the stick, and says 'e "I wish to 'eaven I was out of 'ere." After that I must 'ave come over faint, for when I looks again, 'e 'ad 'opped it.'

Mr. Jukes' case is still a puzzle to Mrs. Jukes and the police, but Bill understands only too clearly what happened. Mr. Jukes and the stick have gone 'out of 'ere', and where that may be neither Bill nor I can guess.

But he still lives in hope, and he wants me to broadcast this story in case the stick may have come back to earth. So let every boy and girl keep a sharp eye on shops where sticks are sold. The magic walking-stick is not quite four feet long, and about one inch and a quarter thick. It is made of a heavy dark-red wood, rather like the West Indian purpleheart. Its handle is in the shape of a crescent with the horns uppermost, made of some white substance which is neither bone nor ivory. If anyone sees such a stick, then Bill will give all his worldly wealth for news of it.

Failing that, he would like information about the man who sold it to him. He is very old, small and wizened, but his eyes are the brightest you ever saw in a human head. He wears a shabby, greeny-black overcoat which reaches down to his heels, and a tall, greeny-black bowler hat. It is possible that the stick may have returned to him. So if you meet anyone like him, look sharply at his bundle, and if it is there and he is willing to sell, buy it— buy it— buy it, or you will regret it all your days. For this purpose it is wiser always to have a farthing in your pocket, for he won't give change.

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3: The Hammer of the Gods

David Wright O'Brien (as by John York Cabot)
1918-1944
Amazing Stories, Jan 1941

DEEP in the jungle the tribal drums were throbbing with savage passion, their pulsating rhythm carrying clearly to the ears of the gigantic, superbly muscled barbarian who moved in great strides along the tangled underpath.

He was a handsome creature, this barbarian. Handsome as the panther is handsome, or the man-killing tiger. Strong features, cruelly chiseled, were beneath his mat of fierce hair. His body was hard and brown, clad in the skin of a jungle cat. And yet for all the strength and power of him, he moved through the twisted underbrush with the stealthy swiftness of an animal.

Across his back, carried as carelessly as though it might be but a load of twig kindling, was the still bleeding carcass of a freshly slain boar. Food for the tribal feasting. The smell of the animal's blood, hot and sweet in his nostrils, made the barbarian grin in anticipation.

"Ayi," he thought with savage satisfaction, "I, Tokar, return to the tribal campfires with meat for the bellies of my people."

And he grinned again in wolfish glee at the thought he had half-whispered in the murky twilight. For this very evening he, Tokar, The Mighty, would gain supremacy among his tribal fellows, would gain the honor of Tribal King. He, Tokar, would gain all this by overthrowing Orlo, the present tribal king.

"Ayi," he told himself righteously, "do I not bring the most meat to the tribal kettles? Am I not the swiftest of foot and the quickest in battle? Am I not Tokar, The Mighty? It is only right that I wrest the rule of the tribe from the weak hands of Orlo!"

The thought made Tokar feel good inside, and he took up a savage humming chant as he strode along, unconsciously moving to the rhythm of the booming jungle drums. For Tokar was not only thinking of the honor which he had long felt was due him, the honor of tribal kingship. He thought, too, of the spoils that would be his when he had slain Orlo.

Orlo had rich compounds, and Orlo, as befitted a tribal king, had strong women to work for him. All these would go to Tokar. All these and something else— The God Hammer.

At the thought of the God Hammer, the gigantic barbarian ran his tongue across his lips, shivering involuntarily. For was not the God Hammer a magic thing? Was it not glittering and shining in its magic power? Was it not the most prized trophy of the campfires?

"Ayi," Tokar wet his lips in anticipation at the thought, "the God Hammer, too, will be mine. Before the campfires are cold in the murk of morning, it will be mine!"

A QUARTER the length of a man's arm, cold and hard, with a hammer-like head on one end— that was the God Hammer. But, unlike war clubs, it was not of stone. It was of some magical substance, smooth and solid. Tokar had touched it once, unobserved by Orlo, and he shivered now, remembering the feel of it.

At the blunt end of the God Hammer there was a sort of magical ring, the very sight of which filled Tokar with a burning primitive curiosity. Again and again he had turned over the mystery of this ring in his mind, and again and again had found no answer. His desire to possess the God Hammer was increased to a feverish intensity because of his insatiable curiosity over the magic ring. The possession of such magic would be worth even more than Orlo's rich compounds and strong women.

Thus Tokar reasoned, while he hummed his savage chant and strode lightly along the tangled trail to the rhythm of the jungle drums.

All day, as he had stalked the wild boar, the thought of the God Hammer had been in his barbaric mind. And now, as his great strides bore him toward the village campfires at the end of day, the very drums seemed to throb his desire. The God Hammer. The God Hammer. Tokar, Tribal King, Possessor of The God Hammer.

The huge barbarian quickened his step, eager to gain the village. Already he was anticipating with raw relish the challenge he would fling at Orlo. On and on he moved, while the twilight deepened into dusk, and the dusk into night.

At length, through the tangled foliage of jungle growth, Tokar saw the first flickers of the flaming tribal fires. The path he trod grew wider and more clear, until at last he had view of the village a scant few hundred yards ahead.

By now the jungle drums were booming, thundering, in his ears, and the shrill cries of the dancing women came clearly to him. He smiled, knowing that the ceremony for the Feast had started, that Orlo was already at the campfires.

Dogs came dashing up to him from the village, yapping and nipping at his heels, followed by children of the tribe who squealed joyously at the sight of the freshly slain boar he carried.

Tokar was grinning widely now, his sharp white teeth shining like wolfish fangs, and he strode forward toward the campfire circles where his fellows awaited him. The campfire circles, where the drums throbbed and the women danced, and Orlo sat unsuspecting— holding the God Hammer.

Alone, Tokar made his way to the largest of the campfire circles. The Circle of the Braves, where Orlo presided over the wise men and tribal elders. Where

Orlo ruled with the God Hammer in hand. Tokar was conscious of the admiring eyes of his fellows as he strode into the center of the circle.

With a grunt, Tokar swung the slain boar down from his thickly muscled shoulder, dropping it to the earth. The cries of acclaim that came f rom his fellow tribesmen were music in his ears. Then the old crones, babbling happily, came from their kettles to group around the carcass of the kill. They stood there, motionless, while the campfires roared approval and Tokar, in the custom of the tribe, drew his stone knife, hacking off the left hind leg of the slain beast.

The drums were pounding wildly, now, while Tokar wrenched the leg free from the carcass, holding it aloft triumphantly, sinking his fanged teeth into the raw meat. Fresh blood ran down the sides of his cruel mouth.

BUT even as he gnawed the boar's leg, Tokar's glittering eyes sought out Orlo. Sought out Orlo, who squatted in state on a mud dais less that twenty yards from him, holding the God Hammer as a king might hold a sceptre.

Orlo, too, was huge and heavily muscled. But he was of lighter complexion than Tokar. His hair was light, while Tokar's was dark. And Tokar knew that he need have no fear of Orlo, for he, Tokar, was faster, stronger, than the man who held the God Staff.

Tokar dropped the boar's leg, holding his great arms high for silence. The wild cadence of the drums ceased abruptly, and Tokar faced Orlo directly, his wolf fangs exposed in a menacing grin.

Loudly then, Tokar trumpeted his challenge. Bellowed it so all could hear.

He saw the startled incredulity that leaped to Orlo's eyes, knew, with intense satisfaction, that he had caught him unprepared. Tokar grinned again, moved cat-like toward Orlo's dais.

Orlo had risen from the dais, God Hammer still in hand, surprise still stamped on his face. After the first shocked silence that fell over the campfires at Tokar's challenge, a throaty, savage murmur was rising from the tribesmen. A guttural growl of delight. There would be battle to give zest to the feasting.

Those around the fires remained motionless, according to tribal custom, making no attempt to interfere on either side. Tokar was going to fight for kingship. If he won, he would lead them. If not, Orlo would slay him. It was as simple as that. Tribal tradition gave any brave the right to challenge for kingship.

The drums had started again, and the fires leaped higher as men threw wood on them to better illumine the battle scene.

Tokar and Orlo were less than four feet apart, now, and were starting the preliminary circling, looking for openings. Orlo still held the God Hammer, and Tokar, seeing this, drew his stone knife again. He could read the fear in Orlo's eyes, and knew that the other could not depend on the magic of the God Hammer to aid him.

Then Tokar, bellowing wildly, lunged in on Orlo.

His great paws found Orlo's waist, and his thickly-muscled shoulder drove hard into his adversary's stomach. With his free hand, Orlo seized Tokar's mat of black hair, and with his other he tried to bring the God Hammer club-like down on his opponent's skull.

But Tokar had thrown him off balance, and now they were both pitching to the earth. Tokar had one hand free, now, and was driving his stone knife again and again into Orlo's shoulder, feeling the hot blood run stickily against his own throat.

They pitched wildly back and forth on the ground, first Tokar, then Orlo, gaining top position. But as they struggled, Tokar drove his stone blade home again and again wherever he found flesh. By now, some of Orlo's blood was in Tokar's mouth, and the taste filled him with triumph and strength.

Again and again, Tokar managed to roll free from the blows of the hard God Hammer, and at last he was able to seize Orlo's arm, bending it back until it snapped like a dry twig. The Hammer fell uselessly to the ground, and Tokar heard Orlo's grunt of pain. Then he sprang to his feet, seizing the God Hammer as he did so.

Orlo was slower rising, but Tokar permitted him to do so while the wild hammering of the drums and the babbling roar of voices from around the circle filled him with a heady intoxication. In his hand was the cool, hard, club— like weight of the God Hammer. In his heart was the savage certainty of victory, for Orlo was badly wounded.

TOKAR watched him pull himself to his feet, grinning at the sight of the blood that soaked his opponent's body. Orlo had been slashed by the stone knife at least twenty times, and his right arm hung broken and useless by his side.

The tribesmen were screaming for the kill, screaming for Tokar, their new king. And Orlo, dazed, bloody, and beaten, swayed drunkenly before him. Tokar stepped in, raising the God Hammer high above his head.

Orlo was too late in putting up his hands to ward off the blow of the God Hammer. Tokar brought the shining, hard Hammer down on Orlo's skull with crushing force. Orlo started to slump to the earth, and Tokar raised the club again and again, beating him across the head with it until Orlo lay motionless and crushed on the bloodstained mud.

And then the savage cadence of the drums became a wild, hysterical rhythm, while Tokar, licking his lips and baring his fanged teeth in wolf grins of triumph, held the God Hammer high above his head, waving it back and forth as a symbol of victory.

The flames leaped weirdly around the circle, throwing into sudden brilliance victor and vanquished, and the drums pitched into an incredible frenzy. Around the campfires a harsh, barbaric chant began, taken up by the voices of all the tribesmen until it was a wild, maddened song of blood and triumph.

Tokar made his way to the mud dais which had been Orlo's throne until now, head held high, chest thrust out, strutting like a peacock, the wild shouts of his fellows ringing in his ears. The women started a tribal dance, and crones brought food and drink to him.

But Tokar paid scant attention to all this, for his eyes were fixed lovingly on the God Hammer. It was his now. Ayi! His to control, his to work magic with. And he could find out, now, its secrets. Even to the magic ring.

In rapt fascination, Tokar inspected the God Hammer, his fingers touching the ring as he turned it about in his hands. There were queer symbols on the staff of the Hammer, evidently God Writing. Tokar's brow creased in perplexity. The God Writing was unlike the picture symbols which the wise men of his tribe inscribed on cave walls. Indeed, these were God Symbols.

He shook his head, looking at the symbols. They were strange, perfectly cut in the staff of the Hammer.

Tokar grinned, licking his lips foolishly in bewilderment. Perhaps, later, he would let the wise men of the tribe attempt to decipher these symbols. But now— there was the ring.

Inspecting the ring closely, Tokar saw that, by pulling it, he could release a pin at the base of the Hammer's head. Grinning in savage excitement, Tokar pulled the ring.

Tokar, the Mighty One, was momentarily conscious of a blazing, blinding, searing, explosion. An explosion which insured the fact that Tokar would never be conscious of anything again....

Never would the wise men of his tribe have the chance to decipher the strange, evenly cut God-Symbols which Tokar had seen on the base of the God Hammer. The symbols that read—

KRUPP MUNITIONS WORKS, 1940, HAND GRENADE

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4: The Little Mermaid

Hans Christian Andersen
1805-1875
(tr. M. R. James, 1862-1936)
First published in: "Eventyr, fortalte for Børn. Første Samling. Tredie Hefte." 1837.
("Fairy Tales Told for Children. First Collection. Third Booklet." 1837)

Original Danish title: *Den lille havfrue*

When I was in Copenhagen in 2004 I naturally walked down to the statue of the forlorn Little Mermaid, sitting on a rock looking sadly out to sea; and also visited the statue of Hans Christian Anderson opposite the Tivoli Gardens. [T.W.]

FAR OUT IN THE SEA the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest of cornflowers, and as clear as the clearest glass; but it is very deep, deeper than any anchor-cable can reach, and many church towers would have to be put one on the top of another to reach from the bottom out of the water. Down there live the sea people.

Now you must not think for a moment that there is only a bare white sandy bottom there; no, no: there the most extraordinary trees and plants grow, which have stems and leaves so supple that they stir at the slightest movement of the water, as if they were alive. All the fish, big and little, flit among the branches, like the birds in the air up here. In the deepest place of all lies the sea king's palace. The walls are of coral, and the tall pointed windows of the clearest possible amber, but the roof is of mussel-shells that open and shut themselves as the water moves. It all looks beautiful, for in everyone of them lie shining pearls, a single one of which would be the principal ornament in a Queen's crown.

The sea King down there had been a widower for many years, but his old mother kept house for him. She was a clever woman, but proud of her rank, for which reason she went about with twelve oysters on her tail, while the rest of the nobility might only carry six. For the rest she deserved high praise, especially because she was so fond of the little sea Princesses, her grandchildren. There were six of them, beautiful children, but the youngest was the prettiest of them all. Her skin was as bright and pure as a rose-leaf, her eyes were as blue as the deepest lake; but like all the rest, she had no feet—her body ended in a fish's tail. All the love-long day they might play down in the palace in the great halls where live flowers grew out of the walls. The big windows of amber stood open, and the fishes swam in through them, just as with us swallows fly in when we open the windows; but the fishes used to swim right up to the little Princesses and feed out of their hands and allow themselves to be stroked.

Outside the palace there was a large garden with fiery red and dark blue trees, whose fruit shone like gold, and their flowers were like a flaming fire, because they were always moving their stems and leaves. The ground was of the finest sand, but blue like the flame of sulphur. Over the whole expanse down there lay a wonderful blue sheen. You could more easily imagine that you were far up in the air and could see the sky above you and below you, than that you were at the bottom of the sea. In a dead calm you could see the sun: it looked like a purple flower out of whose cup all the light was streaming.

Each of the young Princesses had her little plot in the garden, where she could dig and plant as she liked. One would make her flower-bed in the shape of a whale, another preferred to have hers like a little mermaid, but the youngest made hers quite round, like the sun, and would only have flowers that shone red like it. She was an odd child, quiet and thoughtful, and whereas the other sisters would deck out their gardens with the quaintest things, that they had got from sunken ships, she would only have—besides the rose-red flowers that were like the sun far up in the sky—a pretty statue of marble. It was of a handsome boy, carved out of bright white stone, which had come down to the sea bottom from a wreck. Beside the statue she planted a rose-red weeping willow, which grew splendidly and hung its fresh branches over it, right down to the blue sand bottom, on which the shadows showed violet, and moved with the branches; it looked as if the top and the roots of the tree were playing at kissing each other.

She had no greater delight than in dreaming about the world of men up above. The old grandmother had to tell her all she knew about ships and horses and men and animals. It seemed to her particularly delightful that up there on earth the flowers smelt sweet (which they did not at the sea bottom), and that the woods were green and the fish which one saw among the branches could sing so loud and prettily that it was a joy to hear them. It was the little birds that the grandmother called fish, otherwise they could not have understood, for they had never seen a bird.

"When you're full fifteen years old," said the grandmother, "you shall have leave to come up out of the sea and sit on the rocks in the moonlight, and see the big ships that come sailing by; and forests and houses you shall see."

During the year that was passing one of the sisters was fifteen years old; but the rest—why, each was a year younger than the next, and so the youngest had a clear five years to wait before she could come up from the sea bottom and see how things go with us. But the first promised the next one to tell her what she had seen and had thought beautiful on the first day, for their grandmother didn't tell them enough: there were very many things they wanted to know about.

None of them was so full of longing as the youngest, the very one who had the longest time to wait, and was so quiet and thoughtful. Many a night she

stood at the open window and gazed up through the dark blue waters where the fish went waving their fins and tails. She could see the moon and the stars; of course they were very pale, but, seen through the water, they looked much larger than they do to our eyes. If something like a black cloud passed along beneath them, she knew that it was either a whale swimming above her, or even a ship with a number of people in it. Certainly they never thought that beneath them there was a lovely little mermaid stretching her hands up towards the keel.

And now the eldest Princess was fifteen years old and could rise up above the surface of the sea.

When she came back she had a hundred things to tell; but the most beautiful thing, she said, was to lie on a sandbank in the moonlight in the calm sea, and to see close by the shore the big town where the lights twinkled like hundreds of stars, and to hear the sound of music and the noise and stir of carts and people, and see all the church towers and steeples and hear the bells ringing; and just because she couldn't go up there, she longed after all that, most of all.

Oh, how the youngest sister did listen! And when, later on in the evening, she stood at the open window and gazed up through the dark blue water, she thought about the big town and all the noise and stir, and then she fancied she could hear the church bells ringing down to her.

The year after, the second sister had leave to rise up through the water and swim where she liked; she ducked up just as the sun was going down, and the sight of that she thought the most beautiful of all. The whole heaven, she said, had looked like gold, and the clouds—oh! the beauty of them she could not describe: red and violet, they sailed past above her, but far swifter than they there flew, like a large white ribbon, a skein of wild swans away over the water, to where the sun was. She swam towards it, but it sank, and the rosy glow died from the clouds and the face of the sea.

Next year the third sister went up; she was the boldest of them all; and so she swam up a broad river that ran into the sea. Beautiful green hills she saw, with rows of vines upon them. Palaces and mansions peeped out from among stately woods. She heard all the birds singing, and the sun shone so hot that she had to dive beneath the water to cool her burning face. In a little inlet she came upon a whole crowd of young human children; they were quite naked, and ran about and splashed in the water. She wanted to play with them, but they ran away in a fright, and then came a little black creature (it was a dog, but she had never seen a dog before) and it barked at her so dreadfully that she was terrified and took refuge in the open sea; but never could she forget the splendid woods and the green hills and the pretty children who could swim in the water, though they had no fish-tails.

The fourth sister was not so daring. She stayed out in the lonely sea, and told them that that was the most beautiful of all. You could see many many miles all round, and the sky arched over you like a great bell of glass. Ships she had seen, but far away they looked like gulls. The merry dolphins had turned somersaults, and the big whales had squirted up water out of their nostrils, so that it looked like hundreds of fountains all around her.

Now came the turn of the fifth sister. Her birthday, it happened, was in winter, and so she saw what the others had not seen on their first visit. The sea was all green to look at, and round about there floated large icebergs, everyone looking like a pearl, she said, and yet they were far bigger than the church towers that men built. They showed themselves in the strangest shapes and were like diamonds. She had seated herself on one of the largest, and all the ships made a wide circle in fear, away from the place where she was sitting and letting the wind set her long hair flying; but on towards evening the sky was covered with clouds, it lightened and thundered, while the black sea lifted the masses of ice high up, and made them glitter in the fierce lightning. Aboard of all the ships they took in sail, and there was anxiety and fear, but she sat calmly on her floating iceberg and watched the blue flashes strike zig-zagging into the shining sea.

The first time any of the sisters came to the top of the water, each one of them was always entranced by all the new pretty sights she saw, but now that, as grown girls, they had leave to go up whenever they liked, it became quite ordinary to them, and they longed to be at home again; and after a month had passed they said that after all it was far prettier down at the bottom, and there one was so comfortable at home.

On many an evening the five sisters would link arms together and rise in a row above the water. They had lovely voices, more beautiful than any human being's, and when a storm was coming on, and they thought some ships might be lost, they would swim before the ships and sing most beautifully of how pretty it was at the bottom of the sea, and bade the seafarers not to be afraid of coming down there.

But they could not understand their words; they thought it was the storm. Nor did they see any beautiful things down there either, for when the ship sank they were drowned, and only as dead corpses did they ever reach the sea King's palace.

When of an evening the sisters rose like this, arm in arm, up through the sea, their little sister was left behind quite alone, looking after them, and it seemed as if she must have wept, but a mermaid has no tears, and that makes her suffer all the more.

"Oh! if only I was fifteen," she said, "I know I shall become really fond of that world up there and of the people who have their homes there!"

At last she was fifteen years old.

"There now! We've got you off our hands," said the grandmother, the old widow Queen. "Come here, and let me dress you out like your other sisters"; and she put a wreath of white lilies on her hair, only every petal in the flower was a half-pearl, and the old lady made eight large oysters take tight hold of the Princess's tail, to indicate her high rank.

"But it hurts so," said the little mermaid.

"Yes, one must suffer a little for smartness' sake," said the old lady.

Oh dear! She would gladly have shaken off all this finery and put away the heavy wreath. The red flowers in her garden became her much better; but she dare not change it. "Good-bye," she said, and rose bright and light as a bubble, up through the water. The sun had just gone down when she lifted her head above the sea, but all the clouds were still glowing like gold and roses, and in the midst of the pale red heaven the evening star shone clear and beautiful. The air was soft and cool, and the sea dead calm. There lay a great ship with three masts; only a single sail was set, for no wind was stirring, and round about on the rigging and on the yard, sailors were sitting. There was music and singing, and as evening grew darker hundreds of variegated lamps were lit. They looked as if the flags of all nations were waving in the air. The little mermaid swam straight up to the cabin window, and every time a wave lifted her, she could see through at the windows, clear as mirrors, numbers of gaily dressed people; but the handsomest of them all was the young Prince with the big black eyes: he was certainly not much over sixteen, and this was his birthday, and that was why there were all these fine doings. The sailors danced on the deck, and when the young Prince came out there, more than a hundred rockets shot up into the sky. They shone as bright as day, and the little mermaid was quite frightened and dived down beneath the water, but soon she put up her head again, and then it seemed as if all the stars in the sky were falling down on her. She had never seen fireworks like that. Great suns whizzed round, splendid fire-fish darted into the blue heaven, and everything was reflected back from the bright calm sea. On the ship itself there was so much light that you could see every least rope, let alone the people. Oh! how handsome the young Prince was; he shook hands with the crew and smiled and laughed, while the music rang out into the beautiful night. It grew late, but the little mermaid could not take her eyes off the ship and the beautiful Prince. The coloured lamps were put out, no more rockets flew up into the sky, no more guns were let off, but deep down in the sea there was a murmur and a rumbling. Meanwhile she sat on the water and swung up and down, so that she could see into the cabin; but the ship now took a swifter pace, one sail after another was spread, the waves rose higher, great clouds came up in the distance, there was lightning. Oh, there would be a terrible storm; and the seamen took in sail. The great ship ploughed with the

speed of a bird over the wild sea, the water piled itself into huge black mountains, as if to top the masts, but the ship dived down like a swan between the tall billows, and rose again over the heaving waters. To the little mermaid it seemed just a pleasant jaunt, but not so to the sailors. The ship creaked and cracked, the stout planks bent with the mighty blows that the sea dealt. The mast snapped in the midst as if it had been a reed, and the ship heeled over on her side, while the water rushed into her hull. Now the little mermaid saw they were in peril; she herself had to beware of the beams and broken pieces of the ship that were driven about in the sea. At one instant it was so pitch-dark that she could see nothing whatever; then, when it lightened, it was so bright that she could see everyone on board. Everyone was leaping off as best he could. The young Prince above all she looked for, and she saw him, when the ship parted, sink down into the deep. For a moment she was full of joy that now he was coming down to her; but then she remembered that men could not live in the water, and that he could never come alive to her father's palace. No, die he must not! So she swam in among the beams and planks that drove about in the water, quite forgetting that they might have crushed her—dived deep beneath the water, and rose high among the billows, and so came at last to the young Prince, who could hardly keep himself afloat any longer in the stormy sea. His arms and legs were beginning to tire, his beautiful eyes were closing; but he would perforce have died had not the little mermaid come to him. She held his head above the water, and let the waves drive her with him whither they would.

AT DAWN the tempest was over; of the ship there was not a bit to be seen. The sun rose red and bright out of the water, and it seemed as if thereat life came into the Prince's cheeks; but his eyes were still closed. The mermaid kissed his fair high forehead and stroked back his wet hair. She thought he resembled the marble statue down in her little garden. She kissed him again and wished that he might live after all.

And now she saw in front of her the dry land, high blue hills on whose top the white snow shone as if swans were lying there. Down by the shore were lovely green woods, and in front of them lay a church or an abbey (she knew not what), but at least a building. Lemon and apple trees grew in the garden, and before the gate were tall palms. At this spot the sea made a little bay; it was dead calm, but very deep right up to the rocks where the fine white sand was washed up. Hither she swam with the fair Prince and laid him on the sand, but took care that his head should rest uppermost in the warm sunshine.

Now the bells rang out from the great white building, and a number of young maidens came out through the gardens. The little mermaid swam further out, behind some high boulders which stuck up out of the water, laid some sea-foam over her hair and her bosom, so that no one could see her little face, and

there she watched to see who would come to the poor Prince. It was not long before a young girl came that way, and seemed to be quite terrified, but only for a moment. Then she fetched more people, and the mermaid saw the Prince revive, and smile on all those about him. But on her, out there, he did not smile; he had, of course, no notion that she had rescued him. She felt very sad, and when he was carried into the great building, she dived sorrowfully down into the water, and betook herself home to her father's palace.

She had always been quiet and thoughtful, but now she became much more so. The sisters asked her what she had seen the first time she went up, but she did not tell them anything about it.

Every evening and morning did she go up to the place where she had left the Prince. She saw how the fruits in the garden grew ripe and were picked; she saw how the snow melted on the high mountains; but the Prince she never saw, so she always turned homeward sadder than before. It was her one comfort to sit in her little garden and throw her arms about the fair marble statue which was like the Prince; but she took no care of her flowers, and they spread as in a wild wood over all the paths, and wove their long stems and leaves in among the branches of the trees, so that it was quite dark there.

At last she could contain herself no longer, but told one of her sisters, and at once all the others got to know it, but nobody else except them and just one or two other mermaids, who didn't tell anyone but their dearest friends. One of these could tell who the Prince was: she too had seen the fete on the ship, and knew where he came from and where his kingdom lay.

"Come, little sister," said the other Princesses, and with their arms about each other's shoulders they rose in a long line out of the sea in front of the spot where they knew the Prince's palace was.

It was built of a kind of pale yellow shining stone, with great marble steps that you could go down straight into the sea. Stately gilded domes rose above the roof, and between the pillars that surrounded the whole building stood statues of marble which seemed alive. Through the clear glass of the tall windows you could see into the noble halls, where costly silk curtains and tapestries were hung, and all the walls were decked with great paintings that it was delightful to gaze at. In the middle of the largest hall a great fountain splashed; its jet soared high up towards the glass dome in the roof, through which the sun shone on the water and on the beautiful plants that grew in the wide basin.

Now she knew where he lived, and thither she came on many an evening and night upon the water. She swam much closer to the land than any of the others had dared to do; she even went right up the narrow canal beneath the stately balcony of marble, which cast a shadow far over the water. Here she

would sit and gaze at the young Prince, who believed himself to be quite alone in the bright moonlight.

Many an evening she saw him sail, to the sound of music, in his splendid boat, where the flags waved; she peeped out from among the green weed, and if the breeze caught her long silver white veil, and anyone saw it, they thought it was a swan flapping its wings.

Many a night when the fishermen lay out at sea with torches, she heard them telling all manner of good about the young Prince, and it made her glad that she had saved his life when he was being tossed half dead upon the waves, and she thought of how close his head had lain on her bosom, and how lovingly she had kissed him then; he knew nothing whatever about it, and could not so much as dream about her.

She became fonder and fonder of human people, and more and more did she long to be able to go up amongst them. Their world, she thought, was far larger than hers: for they could fly far over the sea in ships, climb high up above the clouds on the lofty mountains; and the lands they owned stretched over forests and fields farther than she could see. There was a great deal she wanted to know, but her sisters could not answer all her questions, so she asked the old grandmother: she knew well the upper world, as she very properly called the countries above the sea.

"If the human people aren't drowned," the little mermaid inquired, "can they go on living always? Don't they die as we do down here in the sea?"

"Yes," said the old lady, "they have to die, too, and besides, their lifetime is shorter than ours. We can live for three hundred years, but when we cease to be here, we only turn to foam on the water, and have not even a grave down here among our dear ones. We have no immortal souls, we never live again; we are like the green weed: once it is cut down it never grows green again. Human kind, on the other hand, have a soul that lives always after the body has turned into earth. It rises up through the clear air, up to all the shining stars; just as we rise out of the sea and look at the human people's country, so do they rise up to unknown beautiful places, which we never attain."

"Why did we have no immortal souls given us?" said the little mermaid, very sadly. "I would give all my hundreds of years that I have to live to be a human being for only one day, and then get a share in the heavenly world."

"You mustn't go thinking about that," said the old lady, "we have a much happier and better lot than the people up there."

"So then I've got to die and float like foam on the sea, and not hear the noise of the waves and see the lovely flowers and the red sun! Can't I do anything at all to gain an everlasting soul?"

"No," said the old lady, "only if a human being held you so dear that you were to him more than father or mother, and if with all his thoughts and

affections he clung to you and made the priest lay his right hand in yours with the promise to be faithful to you here and for ever, then his soul would flow over into your body, and you too would have a share in the destiny of men. He would give you a soul and still keep his own. But that can never happen. The very thing that is counted beautiful here in the sea, I mean your fish's tail, they think horrid up there on the earth; they have no notion of what's proper: up there people must needs have two clumsy props which they call legs, if they're to look nice."

The little mermaid sighed and looked sadly at her fish's tail. "Let's be cheerful," said the old lady. "We'll jump and dance about for the three hundred years we have to live. It's long enough in all conscience; after that one can sleep it out all the pleasanter in one's grave. To-night we're to have a court ball."

TRULY, it was a magnificent affair, such as you never see on earth. The walls and ceilings of the great ballroom were of glass, thick but clear. Many hundreds of large mussel-shells, rose-red and grass-green, were set in rows on either side, with a blue flame burning in them that lighted up the whole hall and shone out through the walls, so that the sea outside was all lit up. You could see all the innumerable fish, big and little, swimming round the glass walls. The scales of some of them shone purple-red, on others they shone like silver and gold. In the middle of the hall there flowed a broad rapid stream, and on it mermen and mermaids danced to their own beautiful singing. Such charming voices no one on earth possesses. The little mermaid sang the most beautifully of them all, and they clapped their hands at her, and for a moment she felt joy at her heart, for she knew that she had the loveliest voice of anyone on earth or sea. But soon she began to think again about the world above her. She could not forget the handsome Prince, and her own sorrow that she did not, like him, possess an immortal soul. So she stole out of her father's palace, and while everything there was song and merriment she sat sadly in her little garden. There she heard the beating waves sounding down through the water, and she thought, sure, he is sailing up there, he whom I love more than father or mother, he to whom my thoughts cling and in whose hand I would lay the destiny of my life. I would risk everything to win him and an immortal soul. While my sisters are dancing in my father's palace, I will go to the old Sea Witch. I've always been dreadfully afraid of her, but it may be she can advise me and help me.

So the little mermaid went off out of her garden, towards the roaring maelstrom behind which the witch lived. She had never been that way before. No flowers grew there, and no sea grass: only the bare grey sandy bottom stretched out round the maelstrom, where the water whirled round like a roaring millwheel and swept everything it caught hold of down with it into the deep. Right through those tearing whirls she must go to enter the Sea Witch's

domain, and here for a long way the only path ran over hot bubbling mire which the Witch called her peat moss. Behind it lay her house, in the middle of a hideous wood. All the trees and bushes of it were polypi, half animal and half plant, which looked like hundred-headed snakes growing out of the ground. All their branches were long slimy arms with fingers like pliant worms, and joint after joint they kept in motion from the root till the outermost tip. Everything in the sea that they could grasp they twined themselves about, and never let it go again. The little mermaid was in terrible fear as she stopped outside the wood. Her heart beat with terror, and she almost turned back, but then she thought of the Prince and of the human soul, and so she took courage. She bound her long flowing hair close about her head, so that the polypi should not catch her by it; she joined her two hands together on her breast, and darted along as a fish darts through the water, in among the terrible polypi, which stretched out their pliant arms and fingers after her. She saw that everyone of these held something it had caught, and hundreds of little arms held it like strong bands of iron. Men who had been lost at sea and had sunk deep down there, looked out, white skeletons, from among the arms of the polypi. Rudders of ships and chests they held fast; skeletons of land beasts, and even a little mermaid, which they had caught and killed. That, to her, was almost the most frightful thing of all.

Now she came to a great slimy clearing in the wood, where large fat water-snakes wallowed, showing their ugly whitey-yellow coils. In the centre of the clearing was a house built of the white bones of men: there the Sea Witch sat, making a toad feed out of her mouth, as we make a little canary bird eat sugar.

The hideous fat water-snakes she called her little chicks, and let them coil about over her great spongy bosom.

"I know well enough what you want," said the Sea Witch, "and a silly thing, too; all the same, you shall have your way, for it'll bring you to a bad end, my pretty Princess. You want to be rid of your fish tail and have two props to walk on instead, like humans, so that the young Prince may fall in love with you, and you may get him and an immortal soul." With that the Witch laughed so loud and so hideously that the toad and the snakes tumbled down on to the ground and wallowed about there. "You've come just in the nick of time," said the Witch; "to-morrow after sunrise I couldn't help you till another year came round. I shall make a drink for you, and with it you must swim to the land before the sun rises, put yourself on the beach there, and drink it up; then your tail will part and open into what men call pretty legs. But it'll hurt, it'll be like a sharp sword going through you. Everybody that sees you will say you are the prettiest human child they ever saw. You'll keep your swimming gait, and no dancer will be able to float along like you. But every step you take will be as if you were treading on a sharp knife, so that you would think your blood must gush out. If you can bear all that, I will do what you wish."

"Yes," said the little mermaid, with a faltering voice; and she thought of the Prince and of winning an immortal soul. "But remember," said the Witch, "when you've once taken a human shape, you can never become a mermaid again, you can never go down through the water to your sisters or to your father's palace; and if you don't win the love of the Prince, so that for you he forgets father and mother, and clings to you with all his thoughts, and makes the priest lay your hands in one another's, so that you become man and wife, then you won't get your immortal soul. On the first morning after he is married to anyone else, your heart will break and you will become foam on the water."

"It is my wish," said the little mermaid, pale as a corpse.

"But I must be paid, too," said the witch, "and it's not a small matter that I require. You have the loveliest voice of anyone down here at the bottom of the sea, and with it no doubt you think you'll be able to charm him; but that voice you must give me. I must have the best thing you possess as the price of my precious drink. I shall have to give you my own blood in it, that the drink may be as sharp as a two-edged sword.

"But if you take away my voice," said the little mermaid, "what have I left?"

"Your beautiful form," said the witch, "and your floating gait, and your speaking eyes: with them you can easily delude a human heart. What, have you lost courage? Put out your little tongue, and I'll cut it off for the price, and you shall have the potent drink."

"So be it," said the little mermaid, and the witch put her cauldron on the fire to boil the magic drink. "Cleanliness is a good thing," said she, and scoured out the cauldron with some snakes which she tied in a knot. Then she scratched herself in the breast and let the black blood drip into the pot. The steam took the most dreadful shapes, enough to fill one with fear and horror. Every moment the witch cast something afresh into the cauldron, and when it was really boiling, the sound was like that of a crocodile weeping. At last the drink was ready, and it looked like the clearest of water.

"There you are," said the witch, and cut off the tongue of the little mermaid. Now she was dumb, she could neither sing nor speak.

"If the polypi should catch you when you are going back through my wood," said the Witch, "just throw one drop of that drink on them, and their arms and fingers will break into a thousand bits." But there was no need for the little mermaid to do that; the polypi shrank back in fear before her when they saw the shining drink which glittered in her hand as if it had been a twinkling star. So she passed quickly through the wood, and the marsh, and the roaring maelstrom.

She could see her father's palace. The torches were quenched in the great ballroom. No doubt everyone in there was asleep, but she dared not go to them now that she was dumb and was going to leave them for ever. It seemed as if

her heart must burst asunder with sorrow. She stole into the garden and took one flower from each of her sister's flower-beds, and blew on her fingers a thousand kisses towards the palace, and rose up through the dark blue sea.

The sun was not yet up when she saw the Prince's palace, and clambered up the stately marble steps. The moon was shining beautifully bright. The little mermaid swallowed the sharp burning drink, and it was as though a two-edged sword was piercing her delicate body: she swooned with the pain, and lay as one dead. When the sun shone out over the sea, she awoke and felt a torturing pang, but right in front of her stood the beautiful young Prince. He fixed his coal-black eyes on her, so that she cast her own eyes down, and saw that her fish's tail was gone and that she now had the prettiest small white legs that any young girl could have. But she was quite naked, so she wrapped herself in her masses of long hair. The Prince asked who she was and how she had come there, and she gazed at him sweetly and yet sadly with her dark blue eyes, for she could not speak. Then he took her by the hand and led her into the palace. Every step she took was, as the witch had warned her, as if she was treading on pointed swords and sharp knives, yet she bore it gladly. Led by the Prince's hand, she walked light as a bubble, and he and everyone else marvelled at her graceful floating gait.

Costly robes of silk and muslin were put upon her, and she was the fairest of all in the palace; but she was dumb and could neither speak nor sing. Beautiful slave girls clad in silks and gold came forward and sang to the Prince and his royal parents. One sang more sweetly than all the rest, and the Prince applauded her and smiled on her. Then the little mermaid was sad, for she knew that she herself had sung far more sweetly; and she thought: Oh! if he could but know that to be near him I have given my voice away for ever!

Then the slave girls danced graceful floating dances to the noblest of music, and now the little mermaid raised her pretty white arms and rose on tip-toe and floated over the floor, and danced as none had ever yet danced. At every movement her beauty grew yet more on the sight, and her eyes spoke more deeply to the heart than the song of the slave girls.

Everyone was enraptured by it, and more than all, the Prince, who called her his little foundling; and she danced again and again, though every time her foot touched the ground it was as though she was treading on sharp knives. The Prince said that now she should always be near him, and she was allowed to sleep outside his door on a cushion of silk.

He had a boy's dress made for her, so that she might ride with him on horseback. They rode through the sweet-smelling woods, where the green boughs brushed her shoulders, and the little birds sang in the cover of the young leaves. With the Prince she clambered up the high mountains, and though her delicate feet were cut so that everyone could see, she only laughed, and

followed him till they could see the clouds beneath them like a flock of birds flying towards the distant lands.

At home at the Prince's palace, when at night all the others were asleep, she would go out to the broad marble stairs, and it cooled her burning feet to stand in the cold sea water, and then she thought about those who were down in the deeps below.

One night her sisters came up arm in arm, singing mournfully as they swam on the water, and she beckoned to them, and they recognized her, and told her how sad she had made them all. After that they visited her every night; and one night she saw far out in the sea, the old grandmother, who had not been to the top of the water for many a year; and the Sea King, with his crown on his head. They stretched their arms towards her, but they dared not trust themselves so near the land as the sisters.

Day by day she grew dearer to the Prince: he loved her as one might love a dear good child, but he never had a thought of making her his Queen: and his wife she must be, or else she could never win an immortal soul, but on his wedding morning she would turn into foam on the sea.

"Are not you fonder of me than of all the rest?" the little mermaid's eyes seemed to say when he took her in his arms and kissed her fair brow. "Yes, you are dearest of all to me," said the Prince, "for you have the best heart of them all. You are dearest to me, and you are like a young maiden whom I saw once and certainly shall never meet again. I was on a ship that was wrecked, and the waves drove me to land near a holy temple where a number of young maidens ministered. The youngest of them found me on the bank and saved my life. I saw her only twice. She was the only one I could love in all the world, but you are like her, you almost stamp her likeness on my soul. She belongs to that holy temple, and therefore my good fortune has sent you to me, and we never will part." "Ah, he doesn't know that I saved his life," thought the little mermaid. "I bore him over the sea, away to the grove where the temple stands; I sat behind him in the foam and watched to see if anyone would come, and saw the pretty maiden whom he loves more than me"; and the mermaid heaved a deep sigh. Weep she could not: "'The maiden belongs to the holy temple,' he said; she will never come out into the world: they will never meet again. I am with him, I see him every day. I will tend him and love him and give up my life to him."

But now the Prince was to be married, people said, and to take the beautiful daughter of the neighbouring king; and it was for that that he was fitting out such a splendid ship. "They say, of course, that the Prince is going to travel to see the country of the king next door, but it really is to see his daughter. He's to have a great suite with him." But the little mermaid shook her head and laughed: she knew the Prince's mind better than anyone else. "I must travel," he had said to her, "I must see the pretty Princess; my father and mother require

that, but they will not force me to bring her home as my bride. I cannot love her. She is not like the fair maiden of the temple, as you are. If ever I chose a bride it would be you first, my dumb foundling with the speaking eyes." And he kissed her red lips and played with her long hair and laid his head on her heart, so that it dreamed of man's destiny and an undying soul.

"You're not afraid of the sea, are you, my dumb child?" said he as they stood on the splendid ship that was to bear them to the country of the neighbouring King. And he told her of storms and calm, of strange fishes in the deep, and of what divers had seen down there, and she smiled at his description, for, of course, she knew more than anybody else about the bottom of the sea. In the moonlit night, when all but the steersman were asleep, she sat on the gunwale of the ship and gazed down through the clear water and fancied she saw her father's palace. On the summit of it stood the old grandmother, with a crown of silver on her head, gazing up through the swift current at the ship's keel. Then her sisters came up upon the water, and looked mournfully at her and wrung their white hands. She beckoned to them and smiled, and wanted to tell them that all was going well and happily with her; but then the ship's boy came towards her, and the sisters dived down: so he thought the white arms he had seen were foam on the sea.

Next morning the ship sailed into the harbour of the neighbouring King's fine city. All the church bells rang out, and from the tall towers there came blaring of trumpets, while the soldiers paraded with waving flags and glittering bayonets. Every day there was a fete, balls and parties followed on one another; but as yet the Princess was not there. She was being brought up far away in a sacred temple, they said, and there was learning all royal accomplishments. At last she arrived.

The little mermaid waited, eager to see her beauty, and she had to confess that a more graceful form she had never seen. The skin was so delicate and pure, and behind the long dark eyelashes a pair of dark-blue beautiful eyes smiled out.

"It is you!" said the Prince, "you, who saved me when I lay like a corpse on the shore!" and he clasped his blushing bride in his arms. "Oh, I am more than happy!" he said to the little mermaid; "my dearest wish, the thing I never dared hope for, has been granted me. You will rejoice in my happiness, for you are fonder of me than all the rest"; and the little mermaid kissed his hand, and thought she felt her heart breaking. His wedding morning would bring death to her, and would change her into foam upon the sea.

All the church bells were ringing; the heralds rode about and proclaimed the betrothal. On every altar fragrant oil was burning in precious silver lamps; the priests swung their censers, and the bride and bridegroom joined hands and received the blessing of the Bishop. The little mermaid, clad in silk and gold,

stood holding the bride's train; but her ears heard not the festal music, her eyes saw not the holy rite; she thought, on the eve of her death, of all that she had lost in the world.

That very evening the bride and the bridegroom embarked on the ship, and the cannons were fired and the flags waved, and amid-ship was raised a royal tent of gold and purple with the loveliest of curtains, and there the married pair were to sleep in that calm cool night.

The sails bellied in the wind, and the ship glided easily and with little motion, away over the bright sea.

When it grew dark, variegated lamps were lit and the crew danced merry dances on the deck. The little mermaid could not but think of the first time she rose up out of the sea and saw that same splendour and merriment; and she too whirled about in the dance, swerving as the swallow swerves when it is chased; and everyone was in ecstasies of wonder at her: never before had she danced so wonderfully. Sharp knives seemed to be cutting her delicate feet, but she hardly felt it: the wounds in her heart were sharper. She knew that was the last night she would see him for whom she had forsaken her race and her home, and given up her lovely voice, and daily had suffered unending pain unknown to him. This was the last night that she would breathe the same air as he, or see the deep ocean and the starlit heavens. An eternal night without thought, without dream, awaited her who neither had a soul nor could win one.

But all was joy and merriment aboard the ship till long past midnight. She laughed and danced with the thought of death in her heart. The Prince kissed his beautiful bride, and she played with his black hair, and arm in arm they went to rest in the splendid tent.

It was still and quiet now on the ship: only the helmsman stood at the tiller. The little mermaid laid her white arms on the bulwark and gazed eastward for the red of dawn: the first ray of the sun, she knew, would kill her. Then she saw her sisters rise out of the sea; they were pale as she, their beautiful long hair no longer fluttered in the breeze: it had been cut off.

"We have given it to the witch to make her help us, that you may not die to-night. She has given us a knife. Here it is! Do you see how sharp it is? Before the sun rises you must plunge it into the Prince's heart, and when his warm blood gushes out upon your feet, they will grow together into a fish tail and you will become a mermaid again, and will be able to come down to us in the water and live out your three hundred years before you turn into the dead salt sea foam. Make haste! He or you must die before the sun rises. Our old grandmother has been mourning till her white hair has fallen off as ours fell before the witch's shears. Kill the Prince and come back! Make haste: do you not see the red band in the heavens? In a few minutes the sun will climb into the sky, and then you must die'; and with a strange heavy sigh they sank beneath the waves.

The little mermaid drew aside the purple curtain of the tent and saw the beautiful bride sleeping with her head on the Prince's breast, and she stopped and kissed him on his fair brow, and looked at the sky where the red of the dawn was shining brighter and brighter, looked at the sharp knife, and fixed her eyes again on the Prince, who in his sleep was murmuring the name of his bride. She alone was in his thoughts, and the knife quivered in the mermaid's hand—but then—she cast it far out into the waves, and where it fell they shone red, and it seemed as if drops of blood spurted up out of the water. Once more she gazed with a half-dying glance on the Prince, and then threw herself from the ship into the sea, and felt that her body was dissolving into foam.

Now the sun ascended out of the sea, and his rays fell mild and warm upon the death-cold foam, and the little mermaid felt no touch of death. She saw the bright sun, and above her floated hundreds of lovely transparent forms. Through them she could see the white sails of the ship and the rosy clouds in the sky. Their voices were as music, but so ethereal that no human ear could hear it, just as no earthly eye could see them: wingless, they floated by their own lightness through the air. The little mermaid saw that she too had a body like theirs, which was rising further and further up out of the foam.

"To whom am I coming?" said she, and her voice rang like that of the other beings, so ethereally that no earthly music can re-echo its sound.

"To the daughters of the air," the others answered; "the mermaid has no immortal soul, and can never gain one unless she wins the love of a mortal; it is on a power outside her that her eternal being depends. The daughters of the air have no everlasting soul either, but they can by good deeds shape one for themselves. We are flying to the hot countries, where the stagnant air of pestilence kills men: there we waft coolness, we spread the perfume of the flowers through the air and send men new life and healing. When for three hundred years we have striven to do the good we can, we receive an immortal soul and have a share in the everlasting happiness of mankind. You, poor little mermaid, have striven for that too with all your heart; you have suffered and endured and raised yourself into the world of the spirits of the air, and you also, by good deeds, can shape for yourself an immortal soul in the space of three hundred years."

And the little mermaid raised her bright arms towards God's sun, and for the first time she felt the gift of tears.

On the ship there was stir and life again. She saw the Prince with his fair bride seeking for her: in deep sorrow they gazed down into the bubbling foam as if they knew she had cast herself into the waves. Unseen, she kissed the bride's forehead, and on him she smiled and then soared upward with the other children of the air to a rose-red cloud sailing in the heavens. "So, when three hundred years are over, we shall float into the heavenly kingdom, and we may

reach it yet sooner," whispered one of them. "Unseen we float into the homes of men, where children are, and for every day on which we find a good child that makes its parents happy and earns their love, God shortens our time of trial. The child does not know it when we are flying through the room; and when we smile on it in happiness, a year is taken from the three hundred. But if we see a perverse and evil child, we have to weep in sorrow, and every tear we shed adds a day to our time of trial."

5: A Dilemma O.H.M.S.

Mary Gaunt

1861-1942

Collected in: *The Ends of the Earth*, 1915

200 POUNDS REWARD

GREGORY CARTER, sometimes known as Nightfall Carter, having been outlawed by Her Majesty's Government of the Colony of Victoria for breaking gaol and committing various offences that endanger the lives and safety of Her Majesty's lieges, the above reward is offered for his body, alive or dead. He is thirty years of age, six feet high, fair hair, blue eyes, good-looking, and has a scar on his right cheek. A reward of 5 pounds will be paid to anyone giving notice of his whereabouts at the police camp, Deadman's.

BY ORDER.
JOCELYN RUTHVEN,
Gold Commissioner.

"Alive or dead," repeated the man who was reading it in the waning light, and then he laughed softly to himself. "Good-looking? Am I good-looking? Well, my poor old mother thought I was, thinks so still, perhaps, and Rosalie made no bones about telling me so," and he swore feelingly. "Alive or dead, alive or dead! Well, it will be dead, Your Majesty, it will be dead, Jocelyn Ruthven; that you may swear to."

The cold night wind was sighing down the gully, driving a drizzling, misty rain before it. As he turned away the wet branches of the messmate and tea-tree and golden wattle swung back in his face and beat on his shoulders, and he shook himself more than once to shake the wet away. "Brooker Crace," he said to himself, "you've about come to the end of your tether."

And then he swore an oath as he thought of the gold commissioner.

"Why should I be here starving and he a bloated trap living in luxury, hunting down an old chum. He was a good fellow Jocelyn in the old days, but I could always lick him," and he stretched out a sinewy arm and shook his fist in the air. But the fist trembled a little; the weather was cold and wet in the ranges, and he had had little enough to eat for the last week, barely enough to keep body and soul together. A strong man takes starvation hardly. He felt wolfish as the hunger gripped him, and he had nothing to stay it but a little tasteless wattle gum.

He reached the top of the ridge and looked down on the twinkling lights of the camp below. Deadman's of course. And Ruthven was commissioner there now. Not three years since they had landed in the colony, and Ruthven was gold

commissioner putting a price on his old friend's head, and that friend stood looking down on the camp, a fugitive and an outlaw starving and at bay.

How the twinkling lights beckoned him through the mist and rain. Should he go down and ask his old companion for a warm bed and some supper, just for old sake's sake? No, his old friend had put a price on his head. That he did not know it was he did not alter the fact. He would know him when his dead body was brought before him.

Then he started. Why not? As well go out with a flare, as go out he must. Could any misery be greater than dying by inches of starvation and cold on the ranges here. He would go down and stick up the camp. He would hold up Her Majesty's commissioner himself, and then he would die, but it would be a better death than that by starvation and hunger.

And down the hill he went straight for the police camp, and the only prayer he put up was that no one would see and recognise him before he was face to face with the gold commissioner. It should be a hand to hand fight— his life or Ruthven's— possibly his life and Ruthven's, and then things would be square. After all, it would not be a bad way of going out of the world, all things being considered. He was going to die, and he looked to his pistols, and went straight down the hill.

It was dark now, quite dark, and a shiver ran through him involuntarily as a challenge rang out, and he could not see the face of the challenger; but then he remembered he could not be seen either.

"Mr Ruthven is the commissioner here, isn't he?"

"What do you want with Mr Ruthven? He's just about to have his dinner." The outlaw hesitated a half-second; but, after all, all is fair in war, and it was war to the knife between him and the gold commissioner.

"Tell him his old schoolmate, Brooker Crace, asks for his hospitality."

He had thought how he should put it, and the formal words came best. He felt that the trooper was eyeing him doubtfully as much as to say that the commissioner's friend was very dilapidated; but, then, men came to see their friends in all sorts of guises in the 'fifties.

The trooper called another.

"Tell the commissioner, Wynne, his old schoolmate, Brooker Crace, asks for his hospitality."

Crace stood waiting, and the water ran down his back in little cold streams. He had reached the end now. This would certainly be death within the next ten minutes; but, at any rate, he would make his taking remembered, and his hand felt for his pistol. He never doubted but that the moment he came into the light Ruthven would recognise Nightfall Carter, the bushranger, who had terrorised the country for the last three months.

How dared he keep him waiting. Should he march up and tear aside the curtain?

Even as he decided he could wait no longer, the tent curtain was flung aside, and in the bright light stood a figure in the undress uniform of a cavalry officer, shouting a hearty welcome through the darkness.

"Brooker, old chap, is it you? Come in, come in; who'd have thought of seeing you?"

"And he hasn't seen me yet," thought the wretched fugitive as the trooper made way for him, and, clutching at his pistols, he stepped into the light, a ragged, unkempt figure, carrying his head defiantly.

"Brooker, old man, come in, come in," the commissioner laid a friendly hand on his shoulder, "I'm delighted to see you, delighted." And how could he shoot when those eyes were so kindly, that clasp so warm and friendly.

He had expected an order to throw up his hands the moment he stepped into the light, and then he would have known what to do; but as it was, he stood looking down at himself, travel-stained, ragged, torn, and the other saw his glance and thought he understood.

"We do come to queer places in life, don't we, old man, occasionally? Let an old chum lend you a change. Come into my bed tent. Dinner'll be ready in a few minutes. I daresay you'll be glad of it."

He thought of that notice up on the ridge there, 200 pounds for his body, alive or dead, signed by Jocelyn Ruthven, and then he allowed himself to be taken into the next tent and left there to change.

There was only a curtain between the tents, and the hunted man, as he put on the clean sweet clothes and left his rags on the floor, listened with straining ears to all that went on in the other room. He heard someone come up and salute.

"Why, Sells," said Ruthven's voice.

"If you please, sir, Merivale says," the sergeant's voice was low, but it was clear and distinct, and the outlaw had the ears of a hare, "that Nightfall Carter is in your tent."

There was a pause, a second's pause, and Crace clutched his pistol. Now was his time; should he rush in? "He's a clever chap is Merivale," said the commissioner's laughing voice. "I see promotion sticking out for him all along the line. There's nobody in my tent, sergeant, but my old schoolmate Mr Crace. He's a bit down on his luck, it's true, but it's rough he should be taken for a bushranger."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant's calm voice. "Merivale is a good man, too."

"Yes, he is. I won't remember it against him. Sergeant, tell my orderly I shall probably want Bluebell to-night. Brooker, old man."

The curtain was flung back and the man dressed as the commissioner's double looked at him with defiant eyes. He felt that Ruthven shrank before his look and he wondered vaguely why. He clutched his pistol. Now, should he shoot him now, or should he wait for the call to throw up his hands, for in Ruthven's face he saw that he too believed that Merivale's keen eyes had not deceived him.

For a moment the two men stood looking at each other, and the hunted eyes, defiant, yet beseeching in spite of themselves, looked straight into the accusing eyes opposite. Then the accusation changed to kindly pity.

"Brooker, old man, did you hear that? They want you for a bushranger. Nice goings-on for the gold commissioner. They'd break me to a certainty if I connived at the escape of Nightfall Carter in the guise of an old friend. Come along in to dinner," and he laid a hand on his shoulder.

Crace still clutched the pistol. He might want to use it any moment.

"Do you remember when we two lads played brigands in Crutchett Wood, and supped off old Crutchett's partridges! Nice young scamp I was. Do you remember we held it was always etiquette to hide our weapons when we were being entertained by the enemy, to affect a security even if we didn't feel it."

"If you only knew," began the hunted man, and to his own surprise his voice broke. "But I don't know," said the commissioner quickly. "The only enemy hereabouts is Nightfall Carter, that Merivale took you for, and he's hiding in the ranges, poor wretch."

Crace slipped his pistol under his tunic.

"What would happen if you did hide Nightfall Carter?"

"Knowingly? I'd be broke, of course. Imprisoned probably; compounding a felony, isn't it?"

"And promoted for catching him?" How queer his own voice sounded.

"Oh, well, that's as it may be, but I haven't the chance of catching him. I hear he's got clean away the other side of the Border. Come and have some dinner, and then I can lend you a horse, or you can stay the night, as you please."

Once more Crace looked at his host curiously.

He was starving, and a dainty dinner was a thing he had not seen since they two parted. For a moment or two they ate in silence, then Crace asked unsteadily:

"You think Carter a rank bad 'un?"

Ruthven looked at him keenly.

"Well, what do you think yourself? He's no saint, and there's a price on his head."

"He hasn't done half the things that have been set down to him, that I'll swear."

"More than likely," said Ruthven; "but I can't forgive him shooting that poor old thing on Baker's Crest."

"What poor old thing?"

Ruthven laid down his knife and fork and looked him in the face steadily.

"That poor old woman sticks in my gizzard, I can tell you. When I think of her shot in cold blood— I— hanging's too good for the man who did it."

Brooker Crace bent across the table solemnly.

"Jocelyn Ruthven, I never heard of that old woman on my— I swear," he said earnestly; "but," he added, "Nightfall Carter might say the same. All the crimes in the country for the last six months past have been laid to his charge."

"I wonder if the poor beggar would like to make a fresh start. Have some more chicken, Brooker. He's a tough old campaigner, but I can't afford to be particular."

"A fresh start!" said Crace. "My God if he could, if he only could! But with a price on his head—"

The servant came in, handing round potatoes, and Crace helped himself mechanically.

"He might— he might, you know," said Ruthven carelessly. "He's across the Border I have no doubt, and once in Sydney, getting away to California is easy enough. Are you going to stop with me to-night, Brooker, or must you go on?"

A wild gust of wind blew against the tent, and the sound of pouring rain was in their ears. Crace looked round him at the comfortable baize-lined tent, at the cosy fire.

"I must get on," he said, "I must get on. There's a— situation I shall lose if I don't get there to-morrow morning, and," he added with a bitter laugh, "I can't afford to lose much nowadays."

"I'll give you Bluebell," said the commissioner; "you can pay me for her the year after next. Have you finished? Well, I won't try to keep you. It's a wild night, and the sooner you are at your destination the better. Here though," Ruthven went to a big box in the corner. A man's bank in those old days was as often as not his breeches' pocket. Ruthven kept his pay in a box, and drew out a roll of notes. "Here, old man, let me be your banker. I ruined my own life very successfully a short time back. I've no particular need of these, and if they can help you to make a fresh start —"

Crace took them mechanically, but there were hot tears on his cheek.

"Here, orderly, orderly, tell them to send round Bluebell and saddle up the Colonel as well. Mr Crace has bought Bluebell, and I'll ride a bit of the way with him."

Up the gully swept the wind, bringing the driving rain before it, a dismal, dreary winter's night, and the two men rode out of the camp in silence.

And this was the man he had come down to kill, this was the man— he had— come— down— to— shoot. That was what the horses' hoof-beats said on the stones; that was what the rushing creek cried; that was what the rain shrieked, beating in his face like stinging whips.

He tried to speak but he could find no voice, and at last, when the commissioner pulled up and pointed to the track gleaming faintly white in the darkness, he laid his hand on his arm.

"Jocelyn, I want to tell you—"

"Don't tell me— don't tell me anything, for God's sake," said Ruthven in unfeigned alarm. "I'm the gold commissioner on Deadman's and I'm bound to take Nightfall Carter if I have the smallest inkling of his whereabouts."

"Nightfall Carter is dead; whatever happens, he is dead," said Crace, like a man who is taking a vow.

"I hope so with all my heart," said Ruthven; "and look here, old man, you're sure he didn't kill the old woman on Baker's Crest?"

"On my— yes," more firmly, "on my honour."

Ruthven stretched out his hand and grasped his old chum's.

"Good-bye, old man, good-bye. I must get back. Good-bye and good luck go with you."

"How am I to thank—" His voice was husky, and Ruthven cut him short.

"Good-bye. You'd have done as much I know for old sake's sake; good-bye," and he wheeled his horse and clattered back to camp.

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6: Only a Dream

H. Rider Haggard
1856–1925
Harry Furniss's Christmas Annual, 1905, as "A Wedding Gift"
Collected in: *Smith and the Pharoahs*, 1920

FOOTPRINTS— footprints— the footprints of one dead. How ghastly they look as they fall before me! Up and down the long hall they go, and I follow them. *Pit, pat* they fall, those unearthly steps, and beneath them starts up that awful impress. I can see it grow upon the marble, a damp and dreadful thing.

Tread them down; tread them out; follow after them with muddy shoes, and cover them up. In vain. See how they rise through the mire! Who can tread out the footprints of the dead?

And so on, up and down the dim vista of the past, following the sound of the dead feet that wander so restlessly, stamping upon the impress that will not be stamped out. Rave on, wild wind, eternal voice of human misery; fall, dead footsteps, eternal echo of human memory; stamp, miry feet; stamp into forgetfulness that which will not be forgotten.

And so on, on to the end.

Pretty ideas these for a man about to be married, especially when they float into his brain at night like ominous clouds into a summer sky, and he is going to be married to-morrow. There is no mistake about it— the wedding, I mean. To be plain and matter-of-fact, why there stand the presents, or some of them, and very handsome presents they are, ranged in solemn rows upon the long table. It is a remarkable thing to observe when one is about to make a really satisfactory marriage how scores of unsuspected or forgotten friends crop up and send little tokens of their esteem. It was very different when I married my first wife, I remember, but then that match was not satisfactory— just a love-match, no more.

There they stand in solemn rows, as I have said, and inspire me with beautiful thoughts about the innate kindness of human nature, especially the human nature of our distant cousins. It is possible to grow almost poetical over a silver teapot when one is going to be married to-morrow. On how many future mornings shall I be confronted with that tea-pot? Probably for all my life; and on the other side of the teapot will be the cream jug, and the electro-plated urn will hiss away behind them both. Also the chased sugar basin will be in front, full of sugar, and behind everything will be my second wife.

"My dear," she will say, "will you have another cup of tea?" and probably I shall have another cup.

Well, it is very curious to notice what ideas will come into a man's head sometimes. Sometimes something waves a magic wand over his being, and from

the recesses of his soul dim things arise and walk. At unexpected moments they come, and he grows aware of the issues of his mysterious life, and his heart shakes and shivers like a lightning-shattered tree. In that drear light all earthly things seem far, and all unseen things draw near and take shape and awe him, and he knows not what is true and what is false, neither can he trace the edge that marks off the Spirit from the Life. Then it is that the footsteps echo, and the ghostly footprints will not be stamped out.

Pretty thoughts again! and how persistently they come! It is one o'clock and I will go to bed. The rain is falling in sheets outside. I can hear it lashing against the window panes, and the wind wails through the tall wet elms at the end of the garden. I could tell the voice of those elms anywhere; I know it as well as the voice of a friend. What a night it is; we sometimes get them in this part of England in October. It was just such a night when my first wife died, and that is three years ago. I remember how she sat up in her bed.

"Ah! those horrible elms," she said; "I wish you would have them cut down, Frank; they cry like a woman," and I said I would, and just after that she died, poor dear. And so the old elms stand, and I like their music. It is a strange thing; I was half broken-hearted, for I loved her dearly, and she loved me with all her life and strength, and now— I am going to be married again.

"Frank, Frank, don't forget me!" Those were my wife's last words; and, indeed, though I am going to be married again to-morrow, I have not forgotten her. Nor shall I forget how Annie Guthrie (whom I am going to marry now) came to see her the day before she died. I know that Annie always liked me more or less, and I think that my dear wife guessed it. After she had kissed Annie and bid her a last good-bye, and the door had closed, she spoke quite suddenly: "There goes your future wife, Frank," she said; "you should have married her at first instead of me; she is very handsome and very good, and she has two thousand a year; *she* would never have died of a nervous illness." And she laughed a little, and then added:

"Oh, Frank dear, I wonder if you will think of me before you marry Annie Guthrie. Wherever I am I shall be thinking of you."

And now that time which she foresaw has come, and Heaven knows that I have thought of her, poor dear. Ah! those footsteps of one dead that will echo through our lives, those woman's footprints on the marble flooring which will not be stamped out. Most of us have heard and seen them at some time or other, and I hear and see them very plainly to-night. Poor dead wife, I wonder if there are any doors in the land where you have gone through which you can creep out to look at me to-night? I hope that there are none. Death must indeed be a hell if the dead can see and feel and take measure of the forgetful faithlessness of their beloved. Well, I will go to bed and try to get a little rest. I

am not so young or so strong as I was, and this wedding wears me out. I wish that the whole thing were done or had never been begun.

What was that? It was not the wind, for it never makes that sound here, and it was not the rain, since the rain has ceased its surging for a moment; nor was it the howling of a dog, for I keep none. It was more like the crying of a woman's voice; but what woman can be abroad on such a night or at such an hour— half-past one in the morning?

There it is again— a dreadful sound; it makes the blood turn chill, and yet has something familiar about it. It is a woman's voice calling round the house. There, she is at the window now, and rattling it, and, great heavens! she is calling me.

"Frank! Frank! Frank!" she calls.

I strive to stir and unshutter that window, but before I can get there she is knocking and calling at another.

Gone again, with her dreadful wail of "Frank! Frank!" Now I hear her at the front door, and, half mad with a horrible fear, I run down the long, dark hall and unbar it. There is nothing there— nothing but the wild rush of the wind and the drip of the rain from the portico. But I can hear the wailing voice going round the house, past the patch of shrubbery. I close the door and listen. There, she has got through the little yard, and is at the back door now. Whoever it is, she must know the way about the house. Along the hall I go again, through a swing door, through the servants' hall, stumbling down some steps into the kitchen, where the embers of the fire are still alive in the grate, diffusing a little warmth and light into the dense gloom.

Whoever it is at the door is knocking now with her clenched hand against the hard wood, and it is wonderful, though she knocks so low, how the sound echoes through the empty kitchens.

THERE I STOOD and hesitated, trembling in every limb; I dared not open the door. No words of mine can convey the sense of utter desolation that overpowered me. I felt as though I were the only living man in the whole world.

"*Frank! Frank!*" cries the voice with the dreadful familiar ring in it. "Open the door; I am so cold. I have so little time."

My heart stood still, and yet my hands were constrained to obey. Slowly, slowly I lifted the latch and unbarred the door, and, as I did so, a great rush of air snatched it from my hands and swept it wide. The black clouds had broken a little overhead, and there was a patch of blue, rain-washed sky with just a star or two glimmering in it fitfully. For a moment I could only see this bit of sky, but by degrees I made out the accustomed outline of the great trees swinging furiously against it, and the rigid line of the coping of the garden wall beneath them. Then a whirling leaf hit me smartly on the face, and instinctively I dropped

my eyes on to something that as yet I could not distinguish— something small and black and wet.

"What are you?" I gasped. Somehow I seemed to feel that it was not a person— I could not say, *Who* are you?

"Don't you know me?" wailed the voice, with the far-off familiar ring about it. "And I mayn't come in and show myself. I haven't the time. You were so long opening the door, Frank, and I am so cold— oh, so bitterly cold! Look there, the moon is coming out, and you will be able to see me. I suppose that you long to see me, as I have longed to see you."

As the figure spoke, or rather wailed, a moonbeam struggled through the watery air and fell on it. It was short and shrunken, the figure of a tiny woman. Also it was dressed in black and wore a black covering over the whole head, shrouding it, after the fashion of a bridal veil. From every part of this veil and dress the water fell in heavy drops.

The figure bore a small basket on her left arm, and her hand— such a poor thin little hand— gleamed white in the moonlight. I noticed that on the third finger was a red line, showing that a wedding-ring had once been there. The other hand was stretched towards me as though in entreaty.

All this I saw in an instant, as it were, and as I saw it, horror seemed to grip me by the throat as though it were a living thing, for as the voice had been familiar, so was the form familiar, though the churchyard had received it long years ago. I could not speak— I could not even move.

"Oh, don't you know me yet?" wailed the voice; "and I have come from so far to see you, and I cannot stop. Look, look," and she began to pluck feverishly with her poor thin hand at the black veil that enshrouded her. At last it came off, and, as in a dream, I saw what in a dim frozen way I had expected to see— the white face and pale yellow hair of my dead wife. Unable to speak or to stir, I gazed and gazed. There was no mistake about it, it was she, ay, even as I had last seen her, white with the whiteness of death, with purple circles round her eyes and the grave-cloth yet beneath her chin. Only her eyes were wide open and fixed upon my face; and a lock of the soft yellow hair had broken loose, and the wind tossed it.

"You know me now, Frank— don't you, Frank? It has been so hard to come to see you, and so cold! But you are going to be married to-morrow, Frank; and I promised— oh, a long time ago— to think of you when you were going to be married wherever I was, and I have kept my promise, and I have come from where I am and brought a present with me. It was bitter to die so young! I was so young to die and leave you, but I had to go. Take it— take it; be quick, I cannot stay any longer. *I could not give you my life, Frank, so I have brought you my death— take it!*"

The figure thrust the basket into my hand, and as it did so the rain came up again, and began to obscure the moonlight.

"I must go, I must go," went on the dreadful, familiar voice, in a cry of despair. "Oh, why were you so long opening the door? I wanted to talk to you before you married Annie; and now I shall never see you again— never! never! *never!* I have lost you for ever! ever! *ever!*"

As the last wailing notes died away the wind came down with a rush and a whirl and the sweep as of a thousand wings, and threw me back into the house, bringing the door to with a crash after me.

I staggered into the kitchen, the basket in my hand, and set it on the table. Just then some embers of the fire fell in, and a faint little flame rose and glimmered on the bright dishes on the dresser, even revealing a tin candlestick, with a box of matches by it. I was well-nigh mad with the darkness and fear, and, seizing the matches, I struck one, and held it to the candle. Presently it caught, and I glanced round the room. It was just as usual, just as the servants had left it, and above the mantelpiece the eight-day clock ticked away solemnly. While I looked at it it struck two, and in a dim fashion I was thankful for its friendly sound.

Then I looked at the basket. It was of very fine white plaited work with black bands running up it, and a chequered black-and-white handle. I knew it well. I have never seen another like it. I bought it years ago at Madeira, and gave it to my poor wife. Ultimately it was washed overboard in a gale in the Irish Channel. I remember that it was full of newspapers and library books, and I had to pay for them. Many and many is the time that I have seen that identical basket standing there on that very kitchen table, for my dear wife always used it to put flowers in, and the shortest cut from that part of the garden where her roses grew was through the kitchen. She used to gather the flowers, and then come in and place her basket on the table, just where it stood now, and order the dinner.

All this passed through my mind in a few seconds as I stood there with the candle in my hand, feeling indeed half dead, and yet with my mind painfully alive. I began to wonder if I had gone asleep, and was the victim of a nightmare. No such thing. I wish it had only been a nightmare. A mouse ran out along the dresser and jumped on to the floor, making quite a crash in the silence.

What was in the basket? I feared to look, and yet some power within me forced me to it. I drew near to the table and stood for a moment listening to the sound of my own heart. Then I stretched out my hand and slowly raised the lid of the basket.

"I could not give you my life, so I have brought you my death!" Those were her words. What could she mean— what could it all mean? I must know or I would go mad. There it lay, whatever it was, wrapped up in linen.

Ah, heaven help me! It was a small bleached human skull!

A dream! After all, only a dream by the fire, but what a dream! And I am to be married to-morrow.

Can I be married to-morrow?

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7: His Sister's Ticket

John Kendrick Bangs
1862-1922
Munsey's Magazine, Jan 1911
Sun (Sydney) 2 March 1911

SHE WAS a dream of beauty, and as she entered the Pullman at the South Station, Robertson all but gasped. He was not exactly a misogynist, but by those who know him best he was regarded as an almost certain candidate for the honors of permanent bachelorhood. Now, however; he was taken completely off his feet. If ever there was a case of love at first sight this was it.

Preceded by the dusky porter, the girl advanced along the aisle, and took the chair next to that in which Robertson sat. For a moment she gazed out through the window at the hurrying travellers on the station platform. Then, extracting her purse from her side-bag, she took out her ticket, and slipped it into the little crack between the window and the mahogany sill. This done, she rose, walked to the further end of the car, and stood on the front platform, glancing only semi-occasionally back in the direction where Robertson was trying to gather his scattered wits together.

Robertson's eyes followed her as she went, and when she disappeared upon the platform a bright idea flashed across his mind. Taking good care that none of the other occupants of the Pullman were observing him, he reached quickly over, seized the girl's ticket, and, putting it carefully away in his wallet, walked to the rear platform at the other end of the car.

"This may serve as a letter of introduction," he chuckled to himself, as he mentally ran over the possibilities of the immediate future. In a few moments the train started. Robertson wandered nonchalantly back to his seat, and burled himself in the pages of a magazine, his heart beating wildly.

The young woman had already returned to her chair, and was similarly occupied with a magazine of her own. Thus they both remained until, the train having passed the Back Bay Station, the conductor came along to collect his dues.

Robertson handed the official his ticket, and resumed his reading with admirable unconcern, although his inner perturbation grew more violent than ever.

"Ticket, please, madam," said the conductor courteously, addressing the girl. She raised her head and turned to the window-sill, reaching out her daintily-gloved hand for the evidence of her right to ride. Not finding it, she gave a musical little ejaculation of dismay.

"Why," she gasped, "I— I— I put it in that crack there not ten minutes ago, conductor. It can't have blown away, can it?"

"Not very well through a closed window," returned the conductor. "You've probably brushed it oil on to the floor."

A search followed— in which, of course, Robertson ostentatiously joined; but equally, of course, it was unavailing.

"Well, if that isn't the strangest thing!" said the girl. "I'm sure I put it there."

"I haven't a doubt of it, madam," said the conductor, pleasantly, though wearily; "but unfortunately it ain't there now."

"What have I got to do?" asked the girl, with some anxiety in her voice.

"I'm sorry, miss," said the conductor, "but I'll have to ask you to pay your fare. How far are you going?"

"New York," answered the girl.

"Then you'll have to pay me four dollars and sixty-six cents."

The girl bit her lip.

"But, conductor." she protested, "I— I can't— I haven't more than eighty cents in my pocket-book."

"I beg pardon for intruding," put in Robinson; "but if I can be of any assistance "

"Oh, I couldn't think of borrowing money from a stranger," began the girl.

"It won't he necessary for you to borrow any money from me." smiled Robertson graciously. "By a very fortunate circumstance I happen to have an extra ticket from Boston to New York in my pocket. My sister, who was coming over with me, was detained at the last moment, and I shall be glad to place her ticket at your disposal."

He opened his wallet and took the necessary article therefrom.

"These things are transferable, I believe, conductor?" he asked.

"No, they ain't," said the conductor, with a smile; "but of course, not being acquainted with your sister, I don't know that this young lady ain't the person for whom the ticket was issued. Maybe she'll be willin' to be one to you—"

"Oh, I couldn't think of—" began the girl, apparently very much flustered.

"It's the only way, miss," interrupted the conductor kindly. "It will save me the disagreeable necessity of askin' you to leave the train at Worcester."

"You might take the ticket now, conductor," suggested Robertson, "and give Miss— or— give this young lady time to think it over. If she decides not to accept it by the time we reach Springfield, you can give it back to me, and—"

"I am very much obliged to you," said the girl demurely. "My mind is already quite made up. I will accept the ticket."

"Good!" said the conductor, and he passed on, leaving Robertson and his new-found sister to pursue their journey in a pleasant interchange of ideas, which grow more and more animated as time passed.

"I thank you very much," Mr. Robertson," she said, when they parted at the Grand Central Station, "I will ask my father to send you a cheque for the ticket,

and perhaps some evening, when you have nothing better to do, you might call."

"Oh, please, don't " Robertson began, not caring to receive a cheque for the purloined ticket; but the cab had started, and he was left standing on the kerb, a prey to alternately uneasy and ecstatic reflections.

ii

SIX MONTHS LATER, during the Christmas holidays, Robertson, after a lonely dinner at his club, mounted the steps of Colonel Witherbee's mansion on upper Fifth-avenue. He had made not one but many calls upon Marjorie Witherbee since the episode of the lost ticket, and there had come into his life certain definite conclusions that branded the letters of doom upon his anti-hymeneal views. The self-centred life of an unfrocked monk might do for others, but not for him— that is, not if Marjorie could be induced to see things as he did. To-night would show whether she could or not.

More radiantly beautiful than ever, Miss Witherbee entered the drawing-room; and for a moment, dazzled by her loveliness, Robertson merely stood and gazed upon her. He had intended to approach the main subject of his evening's discourse gradually, but at the critical moment his feelings overpowered him, and without any preliminaries he plunged torrentially into the matter dearest to his heart.

"Miss Witherbee," he began, "I cannot put it off a minute longer. Ever since that afternoon last July, when the fates decreed that our paths should cross on that Boston train, I have had but one consuming idea. The moment I saw you I knew that my eyes beheld the one woman who could make my life a dream of happiness."

Miss Witherbee smiled sweetly, but she gently withdrew the hand which Robertson had impetuously seized.

"It Is very good of you to say so, Mr. Robertson," she replied. "I am proud to have inspired such feelings in you. Any woman might be so, knowing that a good man had—"

"Oh, don't talk that way, Marjorie!" cried Robertson. "You aren't any woman, and I don't pretend that I am a particularly good man. But I love you devotedly, and If you will only give me the right to do so I will show you by a lifelong—"

"It is the only way I can talk," returned Miss Witherbee. "I think you must have seen already that I hold you in the highest esteem. Indeed. I can't deny that my feeling has grown into some sort of an affection, but perhaps — perhaps," she went on hesitatingly, "it is the affection of a sister. That is the way we began, you may remember, and no doubt you know what a sister's affection

is. I have never met her, but I dare say that from the time you were a little boy you have had your sister's help in many, many ways. I am sure that whenever she had an opportunity to show her regard and sympathy for you she was ready, and I, too "

"I never had a sister!" cried Robertson petulantly.

"Never had a sister?" echoed Marjorie, her eyes bubbling over with suppressed merriment, which, however, Robertson was too much cast down to note. "Why, then, whose ticket was it that I used coming over from Boston?"

"Yours," confessed Robertson humbly. "I stole it."

"And— and you told a fib about its being your sister's ticket?" said Marjorie, with an admirable imitation of reproachfulness in her voice.

"Yes," said Robertson wearily. "It was a plain, everyday, common or garden prevarication." He rose up sadly. "I don't suppose there really is any hope for me now," he said. "You couldn't— no woman could care for a— liar."

He started for the door. In a moment she was at his side.

"Women have married men to reform them—"

She hesitated a moment, and then she went on softly: "Jack!"

A thrill of ecstasy passed through him, as he turned and caught her in his arms.

"When a man is willing to confess, there's hope for him," she added, smiling up at him; "and besides, Jack, dear, you know I am not the one who should condemn, for I, too, told a teeny-weeny little lie myself that day."

"You?" he cried. "I won't believe it."

"You must," she answered. "Do you remember when I said when the conductor demanded four dollars and sixty-six cents?"

"Remember it? Do I remember?" he replied: "I don't believe a single word has dropped from your lips in my hearing, that I have forgotten. You told the conductor that you only had eighty cents."

"Yes," said Marjorie. "And all the while I had forty-nine dollars in my purse."

"You had?" said Robertson, very much puzzled. "Why didn't you pay your fare?"

"Because, dear," she explained, "I wanted my own ticket back, and I saw you take it!"

"BY THE WAY, beloved," said Robertson, as he bade her good night two hours later, "here's that cheque your father sent me for my sister's ticket. I may be ninety-nine different kinds of a mendacious citizen, but I couldn't cash that!"

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8: Arms and the Curate

Sydney Horler

1888-1954

Pearson's Magazine July 1921

MY FULL NAME is Theopilus Cadwallaper Brown. The first-mentioned was my mother's choice, I believe, but the second, I am positive, my father's. Even my father, however, never had sufficient confidence in me, I feel sure, to lead him to think that I should ever live up to this desperate-sounding synonym. My respect for my father was very great, but I invariably used to sign my correspondence "Theo. C. Brown".

That was in the past; now, if I listen to my dear Moira, I shall more confidently subscribe myself thus: *I am, Very truly yours, T. Cadwallaper Brown (Rev.)*.

Before I go on to describe the reason why publicity may now be given to a name which formerly I kept not only in the background, but under strict subjection, so to speak, I must explain that for the past two years I have been a curate under the Rev. Adam Mofferty, at the living of St. Anthony's, in the rapidly growing suburb of Sholeby Shade (45 minutes from Baker Street, on the Westmead-Deeping line). They have been full years, ripe with experience. Little did I think when first I took up my abode among the somewhat mixed inhabitants of Sholeby Shade that I was about to enter upon the most momentous period of my life, nor that I was about to be the central figure in one of those dramas of the Lesser People which are so colourfully depicted in modern popular literature.

Almost my earliest impression was that I loved my superior's daughter, my incomparable Moira. The second was that I should need to call upon my entire stock of fortitude if I were not to be beaten to the ground beneath the cold and almost callous stare of my Vicar's wife. My chief desire is to be fair, not to let passion sway my judgment, yet I cannot blind myself to the fact that the outlook of my dear Moira's mother was greatly influenced by the large number of Aerated Bun Shares which she was said to hold. The Aerated Bun (with its associated industries) was paying well, it seemed.

Far be it from me to pass censure on a fellow creature (I trust no one will inform Mrs. Mofferty that I have described her in this manner), but I am afraid that my Vicar's wife preferred to attach more importance to the Aerated Bun than to her daughter's happiness. In short, she plainly showed that her consent to an engagement between Moira and myself was out of the question entirely.

The Rev. Adam Mofferty?

There was little if any help to be expected from my dear Vicar. The latter belonged to that not inconsiderable portion of the clergy of to-day who suffer

themselves to marry into a little money. Mrs. Mofferty was known by her few friends to be a "very capable manager". This was quite true; she not only managed her Aerated Bun Shares, but her husband and the parish as well. You will see the difficult position I was in. If it had not been for my dear Moira I could not have gone on. But whenever I looked into the brown eyes of my beloved I gained fresh strength. She was the torch that kindled me into a Man— if— er— you know what I mean.

It had always been a matter for wonderment to me why my dear Moira should return my affection, for she possessed not only rare personal beauty, but had other radiant attributes. She could give me a stroke on any long hole with the utmost ease; for instance, while she was the champion lady tennis player of Sholeby Shade. From my youth I was never athletically inclined, but in view of my dear girl's prowess I devoted what time I could to such pursuits as I thought were suitable to my physique and cloth.

Even so, I must confess to surprise when meeting Moira one evening as I was going to a gathering of my Boy Scouts (I had consented to become Scoutmaster with some trepidation on account of the short knickers, which are an indispensable part of the equipment), my dear girl said: "You should teach your Scouts boxing, darling. It would do them good— and yourself."

"What would your father say?"

The agitated words were the first that came to my lips. Moira gave a rippling laugh, looking bewitching as she did so. Even although I was quite considerably perturbed, I could not help noticing how charming she appeared.

"Oh, never mind daddy," she said, as though the matter were a subject for joking.

I could not subscribe to this feeling myself. Indeed, the Rev. Adam Mofferty was more a subject for tragedy than comedy with me. Only the night before he had thrown out such a forcible hint about the inadvisability of curates marrying on insufficient means that I had been thrown into the very depths of despair. In these circumstances I scarcely like running counter to my Vicar on any parochial matter. There was the ever-present fear of my losing my temper.

"My dear Moira," I replied earnestly, "I love you very dearly, and I would do anything in my power to promote your personal happiness. This, I trust, you know already. But as for boxing..."

She cut me short.

"I understand that the father of one of the Scouts is a retired boxer. His name is Scroggins, and he lives at Number three Meadow Street. He would help you all he could, no doubt, Theo dear," continued this remarkable girl of mine, coming closer, and looking at me in a way that made me wish I had not the meeting of the Earnest Endeavourers to attend that evening. "I am a great believer in boxing."

The words, to my surprise, were uttered in a tone of the deepest sincerity; indeed, even of gravity. Before I could voice my astonishment, Moira had extracted a promise from me. I am afraid we men are somewhat weak.

"You will see Mr. Scroggins, won't you, Theo?"

How could I refuse my dear Moira?

Meadow Street was a depressing neighbourhood, and if I had obeyed my own desire I should not have met the equally depressing Mr. Scroggins. The latter would have served quite well as a model for the late William Sykes. He had a close-cropped head, a nose that looked as though it had been stepped on, and singularly misshapen ears. The terrible thirst which seemed to afflict him at all hours stood in a category quite apart from his other disabilities. I confess that when I first saw Mr. Scroggins my courage failed me. Only by remembering the look in my dear Moira's eyes when I last saw her did I rally myself sufficiently to broach the subject.

I should perhaps make myself perfectly clear. Since I had given my promise to my dear Moira, I had thought well round this perplexing matter of boxing. The more I thought about it, the more perplexing it seemed to become. Some of the boys in the Scouts were fourteen and upwards. They were well-grown lads at that. You realize my anxiety, I feel sure. Sooner or later, I foresaw clearly, I should be drawn into the boxing. Being Scoutmaster, I should be expected to have some proficiency in the strenuous art. It would be humiliating to be knocked about at will by a mere boy.

When I explained to Mr. Scroggins that my desire in coming to him was not only to get his general advice about teaching the Scouts to box, but also to be initiated into the science myself, he burst into a coarse guffaw.

"You'd look a bit of orlright, guv'nor, preaching a sermon with a black eye!" he said.

Nettled by his crude humour, I fixed Mr. Scroggins with my stare. "You must on no account hit me— please understand that," I replied. "I have come to you to be taught boxing, not to be assaulted."

Mr. Scroggins seemed to have a difficulty in expressing himself from this point to the end of the interview, but he agreed to come to my house on the following evening and bring all that he considered necessary with him.

There must be a latent savagery, some lingering relic of the blood-lust of the Earliest Man, in every one of us. I am the most peaceable of persons, yet I freely confess that when, after a week's lessons, I accidentally struck Mr. Scroggins, my instructor, upon his misshapen nose, a strange thrill ran through me. Acting upon an instinctive impulse, I endeavoured to follow up my success, and, hitting out fanwise with both arms, I forced my instructor clean across the floor of the large attic wherein we were taking our exercise.

The breathing-space coming just then, my instructor was good enough to compliment me on the progress that he said I had made.

"You're comin' along like a 'ouse on fire," he said. "You're fast on your feet an' as slippery as a neel! In three months you'd almost forgit you ever was a curate. I was only tellin' Miss Mofferty so to-day. 'Is 'e really good?' ses she to me. ' 'E's a comer!' ses I to 'er. 'That's wot 'e is—a comer!' "

Now, while I did not exactly approve of my dear Moira associating with such an individual as Mr. J. Scroggins, yet because I knew she had my interests at heart I could not help but feel slightly flushed with my unexpected success, and with the aid of my instructor I flung myself yet more heartily into the scheme for teaching my Scouts how to master what most truly has been described as the Manly Art.

I was more than rewarded.

Not only did my dear Moira give me every encouragement, but the number of boys wishing to be Scouts increased every day. The list of applicants, indeed, soon assumed embarrassing proportions. It was while I was taxing my mind as to the best method by which I could cope with this rush of recruits, that my dear Moira came to me breathless with what she described as "an absolute inspiration"

"Theo, dear," she said, her pretty eyes gleaming, "here is a great opportunity for you! All the boys in the district are dying to join the Boy Scouts. The schoolroom is much too small. Now, I have a splendid idea; I've talked it over with Mr. Scroggins, and he has agreed to help me. You're listening, aren't you, dear?"

"Who could refuse to listen to such dulcet tones?" I replied. "Moira, you are a siren!"

Having acknowledged my somewhat daring remark with a bewitching smile, my dear Moira continued:

"You know that large, unused hall in Fairfax Street?" she said. "Well, a little money spent on it would make it a splendid headquarters for the Scouts. I've been to see the owner— it's Mr. Tweedale, the retired grocer. I talked to him ever so nicely, and— well, he's definitely promised to sell it to me!"

"But, my dear Moira," I said, aghast, "where is the money to come from? I am afraid—"

"Don't be silly!" she replied, almost snappishly in her excitement. "I have arranged all that too. Mr. Scroggins has agreed to hold a boxing exhibition in the Drill Hall, if we can engage it. There will be exhibitions by the Boy Scouts, which will be interesting enough in their way, of course; but the real attraction, the thing that ought to draw the money in, will be five or six rounds of proper fighting between two professional pugilists! Mr. Scroggins says that he is almost sure he can get One-Round Flanagan and Battling Benson to help us!"

Speech refused to come to me for a time. The mental picture of the Rev. Adam Mofferty hearing that these men with the dreadful names were going to perform before his parishioners, was so overpowering that I could only gasp and make panee, inarticulate noises.

"Your father..." I managed to exclaim at last.

"Daddy says he is going away. Far more important— so is mother! She announced at breakfast this morning that she was going the Daytons' in Buckinghamshire for a month— a whole month!"

"But she is bound to hear. So is your father."

My dear Moira put a slim finger on my lips. I knew then that she had made up her mind, and that nothing I could say would change her.

"In the whole world there is no more worthy object than the Boy Scout movement," she said with ringing earnestness. "Can you stop to consider smaller things when so much is at stake, Theo?"

Of course, I gave way. Lately I seemed to have got into the habit of giving way. But I will be quite frank and say that I viewed the future with the utmost misgiving.

My doubts filled the days. Ever before me was the terrifying spectacle of my dear Moira's mother when she heard— as she was bound to hear— that under my auspices those war-dogs of the prize-ring One-Round Flanagan and Battling Benson had come amongst the parishioners in a state of barbarous undress.

The pluck of my dear Moira was a source of unfailing amazement tome. She would laugh when I forecasted calamity ahead, and say that she had always believed in letting the future look after itself.

"And keep on having your boxing lessons with Scroggins," she added; "a man never knows what awkward position he may be placed in!"

I thought this remark somewhat strange, but I did not like to ask my dear Moira any more questions at that time. But I engaged my instructor for three evenings a week after this, instead of two. Following my usual frankness, I will say that by this time I had really taken a strong liking to the strenuous exercise. Perhaps this was because I became more deft in the use of the gloves.

One evening Scroggins asked me a question which made me rock on my feet.

" 'Ow would you like to stand up to a regular fighter?" he said. " 'Twould put the lid on that show Thursday night if you had a few rounds with Flanagan or the Battler."

"Heaven forbid!" I replied, horrified at the thought.

"Aw, you're too modest, guv'nor!'' replied the coarse if honest fellow, mistaking my objection. "You're so fast that 'e'd 'ave to be a scratch runner to catch you! 'Ere, come on now an' show me what you can really do !"

Saying this, my instructor struck me what I considered was an unnecessarily hard blow on the side of the head. If my poor dear father had been present I think he would have been astonished at what followed. I was so annoyed with Scroggins that I took him at his word. Feeling that I could only get satisfaction if I hurt him in return, I tried desperately hard to this end.

"That'll do !" Scroggins exclaimed somewhat faintly, after I had shaken him with a blow on the chin. One would have thought that he would have become violently angry with me; indeed, J was prepared for such an emergency; but on the contrary he seemed quite pleased, and as he put on his coat he was actually smiling.

"You'll do!" he said, with a smirk. I asked him what he meant, but he would not reply in words. His smile was sufficient; it loomed in a sinister fashion before me. Later I was destined to remember that smile.

The night of the Boxing Carnival (for so the posters announced the event) found me strangely excited. I could not forget that my whole future might be at stake. In spite of my protests my dear Moira persisted in being present, falling back upon the unassailable argument that the affair was in aid of the best possible cause. After that I gave in; Moira can be very strong-minded on occasion.

Leaving the tramway-car we turned down Fairfax Street. Already there was a great crowd outside. Whether it was to see my Scouts perform or to witness the more deadly labours of the two men with the harrowing names I could not determine. It was my dear Moira— my tender-hearted, sympathetic Moira— who decided the question for me.

"What pride a man must feel to know that the very mention of his name can draw such crowds!" she said burningly.

I grew hot and uncomfortable, for I could scarcely believe that it was my dear Moira speaking. Surely she did not admire these professional pugilists— crude men who hit one another as hard as possible in order to make a living. Occasionally I disagree with Moira and signify that I am displeased with her by remaining silent. Usually she notices the fact at once, and is anxious to make amends. But to-night she paid no heed whatsoever. I could not help but feel hurt.

Our entry into the crowded hall occasioned no little comment, and as I heard the whispers my spirits sank to zero. There were many present, I knew, who would consider it their bounden duty to write immediately to Mrs. Mofferty and inform her that her daughter was present, accompanied by the curate.

After the Scouts had given their various exhibitions— all of them highly creditable, I thought— there was an interval. It was during this period that the earthquake occurred.

Someone tapped my shoulder, and a Boy Scout in a thrilling whisper said: "Mr. Scroggins wants to see you and Miss Mofferty at once, sir!"

As I extended my hand to help my dear Moira upon the platform, the whispering became a tumult. I most sincerely wished that Moira had listened to me and had not caused so much publicity to be directed at us. These feelings were quickly forgotten, however, in the march of greater events.

Behind the platform, which had been transformed into a ring, Mr. Scroggins, who had rendered such yeoman service in arranging the affair, was wringing his hands. Never have I known a strong man so nearly reduced to tears.

"We shall 'ave to give 'em their money back, miss!" he said, almost falling upon my dear Moira in his agitation. "Oh, wot cruel luck— an' everythin' else goin' so well, too!"

"Why, whatever is the matter, dear Mr. Scroggins?" asked Moira. "The worst, miss— the very worst! Battling Benson 'as jes' sent a wire to say that 'e can't possibly turn up to-night !"

"In plain words, what does this exactly mean, Mr. Scroggins?"

My dear Moira's voice rang through the air like a bell.

"It means, miss, that Flanagan won't 'ave anyone to spar with— and the event wot drew all these people 'ere to-night will have to be declared 'off'! They'll want their money back as likely as not— an' I can't say that I shall blame 'em!"

"You must box with Flanagan yourself!" said my dear Moira, and I wondered why I had not thought of this myself.

"I'd give anythin' to be able to do so, miss, old man that I am now, but for the last two days I've bin all crippled up with lumbago, an' it's almost more than I can do to lift an arm. I should be perfectly useless with the gloves, sorry though I am to 'ave to say it."

"We must find someone!" said my dear Moira, and turned round. "Why, here is the very man!" she cried with triumph, pointing straight at— *me*!

The action was so unexpected that I could only gape, and while I was gaping Scroggins joined in the cry.

"Of course, miss! Why didn't I think of it myself?" he said, with what sounded to me perfectly horrible earnestness. "Mr. Brown 'ere is a fust-class boxer, an' can easily put up a good show against Flanagan, man-eater though 'One-Round' is. Remember, sir, it's only five rounds!" he added, advancing towards me.

"I don't care if it's only for five seconds!" I cried indignantly, having now found my voice. "I refuse absolutely! You must forgive me, my dear Moira," I went on, "if I say that I am surprised that you should propose such a thing. Think of the comment it would cause!"

"I am thinking of everything— trying to take a broad view," Moira replied. Now I came to think of it, the dear girl had grown into the habit of making very strange statements recently. "I am thinking of the splendid work put in by Mr. Scroggins here on behalf of one of the noblest causes in the world; I am thinking of what people will say when they find that they have been practically defrauded out of their money; I am thinking how much I shall be disappointed if you fail me in this crisis. Theo, you cannot disappoint me! I have set my heart on paying for this hall!"

While I stood wavering, caught upon the horns of a dreadful dilemma, someone shouldered his way past us.

" 'Ere, Scroggins, where's this chunk o' cheese I've got to murder?"

I looked round— and Moira is ready to give testimony to the effect that a sharp hissing sound escaped my lips as I caught sight of the speaker. This repulsive-looking creature was the pugilist One-Round Flanagan, evidently, for he was dressed in a gaudy bathrobe such as I had been given to understand professional pugilists wear when entering the ring. Where he had come from I did not know; it was quite sufficient that he was there, and looking at me as though I had done him a mortal injury— he, a fellow I had never seen before in my life!

"You will do this for me, Theo—my hero?" whispered Moira with a tensity that was electrifying.

Slowly I nodded my head. I dared not speak, for if I had been honest I must have said that it was not so much my dear Moira's persuasion as the scathing comparison to a chunk of cheese that had determined my decision.

Really, what followed had the bewildering uncertainty of a cinematograph film that is projected too quickly on the screen. My dear Moira withdrew, casting me a look of unquenchable pride as she went. Immediately she had gone, Scroggins hustled me into my gymnasium suit, which by some strange chance I found was already in the hall; and then, while my prospective opponent, whose personal appearance I liked less and less, muttered remarks about me which fairly made my blood boil, Scroggins patted me on the back and hastened away.

"Jes' goin' to say a few words," he explained. "When I clap me 'ands you come out and bow— you an' 'One-Round'— see."

The stage directions were simplicity itself. It was doing this thing that made the blood in my veins run cold. It happened that my opponent remedied this state of affairs, however. Upon hearing the announcer clap his hands both Flanagan and myself started forward— he confidently, I shaking in every limb.

Just as the curtain was pulled aside, he jostled me. It was intentional, I feel sure, for the man leered. It flashed across my mind that the early Christians must have been leered at in a somewhat similar manner by the lions in the

Roman arena. There was no mistaking the action, and a loud laugh went up. It was that laugh which made my cold blood turn warm. To be laughed at in front of my dear Moira! It was too much! All the time that Mr. Scroggins was saying something about "the man-eater from Muggleford on my right, and the best curate at his weight on my left", I was burning with indignation.

It was not surprising, then, that I should take the first opportunity of chasing my opponent. I am afraid it was rather a hard blow. But then, "One-Round" had a large nose even for a pugilist; it simply invited being hit. I myself hit it with such force that it started to bleed.

A howl of joy sounded from the body of the hall. But a deeper note of menace came from the man who, judging by his mien, had resolved upon my sudden death.

Flanagan, murder in his eyes, bore down upon me with the force of an ironclad. It was then that I realized how grateful I should be to Mr. Scroggins. He had said I was fast on my feet; I determined to be quicker on my feet that night than I had ever been before!

I found it was easy enough to outwit Flanagan if I only ran fast enough. I hope I shall not be accused of boasting when I say that at the end of the first round I had been so fast on my feet that my opponent had not been able to land one single damaging blow.

In these circumstances, and considering the terrible reputation of my opponent as a man-eater (whatever that may mean), I should have thought that a little encouraging applause on the part of the spectators would not have been amiss. But a stony silence filled the air instead. Even my dear Moira seemed to have lost some of her early enthusiasm.

A wise general keeps to a plan of campaign once he has proved the latter to be a success. I continued to be fast on my feet. Yet, much to my surprise, the crowd seemed to be annoyed at my success in escaping the vicious blows of my opponent. But the annoyance of the spectators was a mere trifle compared with the devastating anger of One-Round Flanagan.

Subsequently it transpired that the man had something of a record for hitting his antagonists so hard during the first round of a contest that they were unable to take any further interest in the proceedings. Flanagan's temper was explained, therefore. He felt his record was being tarnished.

"Stand still, can't you?" he yelled at last. "A feller wants a motor-cycle to keep up with you!"

You would never credit what a gust of laughter that primitive remark called forth. I knew instinctively that the laughter was directed at me, and my pride made me stop. With a look of cunning on his unpleasant face, One-Round Flanagan crept nearer, his right fist clenched to strike. In that tense moment a voice split the silence like the blare of a bugle. Never in my life had I heard so

much ferocity concentrated into any human utterance. Although it had a cultured note, it ended like a dreadful scream.

"Knock his block off! At him, Tiger!"

Those were the blood-curdling words, but whether they were meant to encourage my opponent or myself I could not determine. The effect of that exhortation was to make me swerve violently. In doing so I leant towards the audience. In this attitude I was able to recognize the author of that terrible appeal.

Sick with horror, I reeled backwards. Waving his hands frantically above a reddened face was the Rev. Adam Mofferty!

Despair seized me then. I wanted to be free of the shameful business. Filled with disgust, I swung my right fist viciously. To my surprise it encountered a solid object. When the mists had cleared before my eyes my opponent had vanished. When I looked again he was on the floor, with Mr. Scroggins counting numbers over his prostrate body.

After he had counted ten, Scroggins rushed across to me, and patted me so violently on the shoulder-blades that I coughed with discomfort.

"You've knocked 'im out!" cried Scroggins ecstatically.

Simultaneously the whole of the audience rose to their feet. They cheered me to the echo, much to my confusion. Standing well in front I saw the slim figure of my dear Moira. Her confidence in me had been restored, evidently, for her eyes were shining.

Scrunching the newspaper in her strong right hand, Mrs. Mofferty exclaimed passionately, as she stared at me: "It is almost unbelievable !"

I knew she referred to the headlines with which the reporter of the local Gazette had embellished his account of the boxing entertainment on the previous Thursday evening.

Earlier in the day I had seen them myself, and they had startled me almost as much as they now appeared to startle my Vicar's wife:

THE PUGILISTIC PARSON!
LOCAL CURATE KNOCKS OUT
FAMOUS BOXER
IN THREE ROUNDS!
VICAR'S DAUGHTER
LEADS THE CHEERING!

"I say it again: it is almost unbelievable," repeated Mrs. Mofferty.

"It is indeed !'' I found myself replying. ''I had no idea that so much publicity would be given to the affair."'

"You are brazen, I see!" commented Mrs. Mofferty in a voice that was as cold as ice. "Well, thank goodness, I have a weapon for that. It may interest you to know, Mr. Brown, that the Bishop is lunching with the Vicar to-day. To be perfectly frank with you, I shall give him to understand that your zeal is outrunning your discretion at St. Anthony's. The maid will see you out."

I left the house feeling like a condemned criminal, and in like mood returned to it at the earnest entreaty of my dear Moira, who rushed round in great haste.

"The Bishop wants to see you," she said.

I knew full well what it meant, but I flatter myself that I held my head fairly high as I entered the room wherein the Bishop of the diocese, the Vicar, and Mrs. Mofferty were all seated, smiling comfortably at one another.

A smile was not the correct impression to wear, it occurred to me. My bewilderment increased as the Bishop rose from his chair and advanced towards me with hand outstretched.

"My dear Mr. Brown," he said, while my head whirled round helplessly, "I have been working hard trying to console our dear friends for the loss which they are about to sustain. I read of your courageous conduct last Thursday evening with the utmost pleasure. I had no idea you were so capable a fellow. It happens that the Vicar of the large parish of St. Jude's has just retired, and I think you will make an admirable successor. In fact, I feel sure that you will do awfully well there! It is a rough— a very rough— district, and it won't be a bad thing for you to know how to use your fists."

Before I could say a word the Bishop had proceeded:

"My dear Mofferty has recently informed me that you are about to become engaged to his very charming daughter. My dear fellow, I once again wish you every happiness!"

My dear Moira will have it that I did it all myself. But, pursuing my usual policy of frankness, I decline to accept any undue credit in the affair. Subsequent to my being offered the living of St. Jude's she made a sensational confession. This was nothing less than the statement that she had entered into a conspiracy with Scroggins to force me to appear as a boxer ("You must admit you were an awful sissy before, Theo") at the entertainment in aid of the Scouts' new hall.

It seemed that she had unearthed her father's carefully guarded secret. The Rev. Adam Mofferty was, all unsuspected, a boxing enthusiast of the most zealous type. In his excitement over my victory, my dear Moira had extracted a promise from him that he would no longer stand in the way of my dear Moira and myself becoming engaged. There was still Mrs. Mofferty, it was true, but the dear Bishop (in conjunction with the Aerated Bun influence— St. Jude's is an acceptable living) converted her.

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9: Review:
Goldfinger, 1959 (Ian Fleming)

Terry Walker
(1944-)

In: *A Century of Sensational Fiction*, 2013

THE SENSATIONAL James Bond novels of the '50s and '60s seemed to bring a new sophistication and realism to spy novels. They certainly brought a vast new readership to the genre who would have scorned the elementary spy yarns of Oppenheim or Manning Coles. The Bond novels were tough, they were modern, they were fast-moving, and the resourceful hero was not a wealthy free-lance adventurer but rather a career civil servant in a strange line of work. He was 007, licensed to kill.

A lot of the apparent realism stemmed from the fact that author Ian Fleming worked in Naval Intelligence during the war, and knew the bureaucracy behind Britain's convoluted Secret Service system. James Bond's boss was "M", a convincing and authentic detail; Sir Stewart Menzies, a former head of the genuine S.I.S., invariably signed his papers with a simple "S". Fleming's own Naval Intelligence had a "Q" (for Quartermaster) Branch.

Although the James Bond novels have been described as sophisticated modern adventure stories, on re-reading them it is surprising just how much of the corny old tradition of John Buchan and "Sapper" lingers on. There are the hair's-breadth escapes, the endless convenient coincidences, the secret laboratories, the flamboyant villains, and the more or less indestructible hero. The big difference is the sex. If Fleming had written *Bulldog Drummond*, good old Capt Hugh Drummond would have been in bed with Phyllis Benton by page 90 at the latest, and the novel would have climaxed with Drummond rogering the beautiful Irma Petersen on the grand staircase of The Larches.

Ian Fleming's first Bond novel was published in 1953, and a new book appeared each year until *Octopussy* in 1966. He died in 1964 at the early age of 52. Under the name Robert Markham, Kingsley Amis wrote the first non-Ian Fleming James Bond novel, *Colonel Sun*, for the 1968 season. After a long gap a confusing sequence of new James Bond books began to appear from 1981, written by a variety of authors including John Gardner. It's fair to say that none of them, with the possible exception of *Colonel Sun*, stands serious comparison with Fleming's originals.

Auric Goldfinger

GOLDFINGER is an early entry in the James Bond saga, appearing well before the first successful movie. The tale opens in Miami, with James Bond resting after a messy case. Here he bumps into a former acquaintance, an American, who knows he is being cheated at cards by a certain Mr Auric Goldfinger but can't work out how it is being done. Can James Bond help? The Yank introduces Bond to Goldfinger, and they discover a mutual interest in golf and an identical handicap of 9. Goldfinger is one of Ian Fleming's more memorable villains:

Goldfinger was short, not more than five feet tall, and on top of the thick body and blunt, peasant legs, was set almost directly into his shoulders, a huge and it seemed exactly round head. It was as if Goldfinger had been put together with pieces of other people's bodies.

Bond solves the card-sharping scam, which results in an angry Goldfinger disgorging a large amount of money to his victim. Then, pausing only for a dirty weekend with Goldfinger's gorgeous assistant Jill Masterton, 007 returns to UK. He is soon being assigned to investigate a gold-smuggling racket being operated by, according to the Bank of England, one Auric Goldfinger. This is one of the many amazing coincidences that stipple the pages of this novel like buckshot in a dead grouse. Even more intriguing is the possibility that Goldfinger may be a paymaster for Bond's old enemy SMERSH (*smiert spionam*), the KGB's execution branch.

Goldfinger runs a gold-refining and metal smelter at Reculver on the Kent bank of the Thames Estuary, so Bond tootles down in Q Branch's Aston Martin DB3 to reconnoitre. Sadly for the movie fans this car lacks the ejector seat and the machine guns behind the indicator lights, but it does have revolving number plates and a radio tracking system. He then heads off to the golf club Goldfinger had told him he regularly played, in the hope of reviving the acquaintance and worming his way into Goldfinger's confidence.

In another remarkable coincidence Goldfinger turns up to play that very day, and there follows one of the most famous golf games in spy history. Spread over 18 holes and 23 pages, it kept me glued to the book in the days when I had never played a stroke of golf in my life, which suggests considerable descriptive skill on the part of Ian Fleming. Now that I have played a few strokes of golf (far too many per hole, it must be said), it's even more fun.

The game, in which both sides cheat enthusiastically and Bond "wins", results in an invitation to Goldfinger's country house and a scary introduction the amazing Oddjob, the deadly Korean man-servant/chauffer with the steel-brimmed bowler hat. It also begins the great chase, in which Bond, discovering

how Goldfinger smuggles gold out of England, follows him across Europe. Goldfinger is travelling in his antique bullet-proof Rolls-Royce, Bond in the DB3.

Tilly Soames

IN YET ANOTHER coincidence, Bond encounters a pretty girl named Tilly Soames, who is also following Goldfinger and who subsequently turns out to be none other than Tilly Masterton, sister of Jill Masterson. Tilly is out to kill Goldfinger, because he had murdered Jill shortly after the Miami episode. The upshot of all this is that James Bond and Tilly are captured by Goldfinger and taken to The Pressure Room for interrogation. Fans of the novel will recall (with watering eyes) the scene where Bond, strapped spreadeagled to a saw bench, watches a circular saw heading inexorably towards his mating tackle.

True to the tradition of Buchan and "Sapper", Goldfinger decides at the last minute not to kill Bond on the spot, which is a very big mistake. Thinking Bond is a free-lance criminal, he recruits the secret agent to aid in his great project: knocking over the Gold Depository at Fort Knox, Kentucky. This ambitious project requires a fair amount of clerical and logistical support, and Goldfinger as organised a conference with representatives of various American organised crime gangs, foreshadowing the sort of conference that Ernst Stavro Blofeld of SPECTRE conducted in later volumes. You begin to realise that this book is not to be taken too seriously when Goldfinger distributes a typed agenda to his potential recruits (and I love the last line of the document) :

Meeting to be held under the chairmanship of Mr Gold.
Secretaries: J Bond and Miss T Masterton.
Present:
Helmut M Springer, The Purple Gang, Detroit.
Jed Midnight, Shadow Syndicate, Miami and Havana
Billy (The Grinner) Ring, The Machine, Chicago.
Jack Strapp, The Spangled Mob, Las Vegas.
Mr Solo, Unione Siciliano.
Miss Pussy Galore, The Cement Mixers, Harlem, New York City.
A project with the operational name GRAND SLAM.
(Refreshments)

Ah, that wonderfully suggestive name Miss Pussy Galore! She is pale, dark-haired, violet eyed, beautiful, leather-clad and of course a lesbian. You don't have to be Nostradamus to foresee that James Bond will do something about that last state of affairs before the final curtain.

When I first read this book I thought that the gangster details were remarkably authentic. There really was a Purple Gang in Detroit, and everyone

has heard of the Chicago mob. Actually, Fleming didn't quite get it right, but he can't be blamed for that. It's only since all those Mafia gangsters started writing their memoirs recently that we got to know so much more about organised crime than Fleming did in the 1950s. The Chicago mob is known to insiders as the Outfit, not the Machine, while in the late 1950s Miami, Havana and Las Vegas were largely dominated by Meyer Lansky's Jewish gang, just as the New York mafia was at that time dominated by the devious Vito Genovese.

Operation Grand Slam

BY THE TIME the Great Fort Knox Caper, aka Operation Grand Slam, gets underway we have raced through to page 190, and Ian Fleming doesn't waste ink wrapping it all up in the remaining 30 or so pages. A cable that Goldfinger sent to Universal Export under Bond's name, explaining Bond's intention to go to the USA, lacks the secret codeword to guarantee authenticity, and so it tips off M that something is up. And Bond himself manages to transmit a warning to Felix Leiter of Pinkerton's, New York, with details of the scheme for the elaborate heist. Presumably both these worthies got the wheels turning, because the cavalry arrive in the nick of time; or in this case, the cavalry are lying in wait.

So naturally Goldfinger's grand scheme comes unglued, the mobsters are rounded up, Tilly Masterton steps in the way of a stray bullet and dies, and Goldfinger makes a bizarre getaway in a train. The US Army mops up, but it isn't over yet. Bond returns to London on a BOAC airliner (one with propellers, yet!), and is alarmed to discover that the plane has been taken over by Goldfinger. The villain is on his way to Moscow with his own hoard of gold, plus Oddjob and (for some unfathomable reason) Pussy Galore. Goldfinger thinks that James Bond, suitably gift-wrapped, would make a very neat present for SMERSH, and wants to take him to Moscow too.

Bond wins through, of course, thanks to a little help from the desirable Pussy Galore, and there is a great scene where Oddjob is inexorably sucked out of one of the plane's windows. The plane ditches in the ocean off Canada. All the remaining baddies conveniently drown, while James Bond and Pussy Galore bob to the surface and are rescued from the freezing ocean. As the curtain comes down, Bond is happily showing Pussy Galore what she has been missing during her lesbian years.

Deplorable Taste

IT'S ALL IN deplorable taste of course, and incredibly politically incorrect. But it's still great reading for various reasons. One is that Bond isn't the usual utterly

infallible dimple-chinned super-hero; he has a few endearing weaknesses (he doesn't like flying, for instance). The second is that Fleming had a considerable talent for making his improbable villains come to vigorous life. Both Goldfinger and Pussy Galore have full lives behind them, which accounts for them being where they are, and what they are. Furthermore, the central concept, the Fort Knox raid, may well have worked in real life. Granted, it involved killing the entire population of the town by poisoning the water supply, and then blasting the vault open with a tactical nuclear weapon, but within those givens it certainly seemed feasible to me.

The James Bond of Fleming's novels has been submerged under the increasingly gaudy and fantastic movies, and it is worth reminding ourselves that the man in the books was far more human, and far more interesting, than the one on the screen. Most of the original James Bond novels are still splendid reads, if a touch dated. Fleming was dead before Jumbo jets, Concordes and space shuttles arrived on the scene. Aston Martin is now owned by the Ford Motor Company, Universal Export has long departed from its HQ near Regent's Park to a vast, and very visible, fortress on the Albert Embankment, there has been a female "M" at the top of the Secret Intelligence Service, and the Double-0 section was probably sold by Margaret Thatcher to Group 4 or Securicor.

But that's all right. Bond was 35 when he made his fictional debut in 1953, so he must be in his 80s by now. It's time he wrote his memoirs.

Everybody else in the S.I.S. has.

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10: An Editorial Love Story

Edward Dyson

1865-1931

Punch (Melbourne) 20 Jan 1910

"I GAVE MY PAPER its peculiar name with a deliberate intention," said the brisk young editor of *NOW*. "My aim was to produce a weekly journal reflecting the living moment, sir, and so far I have succeeded. On *NOW* we must be smart, as smartness is conventionally understood, we must be optimistic, gay, creatures of the time. In short, sir, we must be young."

Harry Anglin pushed the slab of neatly-folded manuscript back to his visitor. The latter met his frank gaze, and nodded.

"And I am no longer young?" he said.

"You are old enough, Mr. Trope, to understand that this is not a matter of empty compliments. Your stuff is excellent in many ways, but much too solid for *NOW*."

"Certainly, I understand you, but editors of more solid prints, some of whom had not the grace to read my stuff. I'm afraid, tell me practically the same. I'm too old."

"Literally, and in a wide sense, that is rubbish. Men are never too old to write well, but they are often too old to write the frothy journalese we desire in the columns of *NOW*. I really do not think an elderly man could please us."

The stranger, a short, keen-eyed, grey-haired, grey-bearded man, looking more like a bushman than a writer, arose with a sigh, and took up his manuscript.

"Good day, young gentleman," he said.

"Good day to you, sir," replied the editor briskly, and before Trope had reached the office door Anglin's fountain pen was again chasing a quaint chain of adjectives across the paper, building up a semi-burlesque, slating leader on a social foible of the moment.

HARRY ANGLIN had made *NOW*. His paper sprang up almost in a night. He awoke one publishing morning to find himself infamous. The proprietor of a notorious dancing den had commenced proceedings for criminal libel as a consequence of *NOW*'s shocking disclosures, and already the city was making the paper's revelations the pet theme of gossip. *NOW* was only three months old, and was become an institution. *NOW* was very young. Distinct and vivid youth was its chief charm.

Harry Anglin himself was under twenty-eight, with an audacious style, crackling with gaiety. He wrote anything, from a smart review of a Shakespearian tragedy to a bold description of a prize fight. Pars, verse, articles,

stories, sketches flew from his pen, and were scattered through the pages of *NOW*, and *NOW* was appreciated.

But no one man can hold readers to a paper, and Anglin had half a score of smart young writers helping to keen his paper fresh and alert. For a time the succeeded, but when the libel action was disposed of *NOW* drifted into a rut, a rut of its own, it is true, but nevertheless a rut.

Anglin saw this, and, hating ruts, strove desperately to sustain his original aim, which was to make every issue of *NOW* a surprise.

It was at this time: that the contributions of "U. K. Lipt" began to awaken high hopes.

"U. K. Lipt" had been writing for several weeks, a neatly type-written story had come to hand, a couple of sets of topical, verse, a bunch of paragraphs, and a skit on a political incident— all good, all provocative of a certain amount of comment.

Then came a second story, accompanied by a letter from "U. K. Lipt," who, to Anglin's amazement, wrote in a neat, girlish hand, and signed herself, "Yours very gratefully, Ruth Rolandson."

The letter was brief, thanking the editor of *NOW* for the generous encouragement he had given a young writer, who had ventured timidly into the literary field, scarcely daring to hope that her work would be accepted.

"For your kindness I will try with all my power to give you good stuff," said Miss Rolandson.

Anglin whistled incredulously. "A girl, and a young one, and she wrote 'The Man Beneath the Bed,'" he murmured. "Here's a find!"

After that, practically everything " U. K. Lipt" sent to *NOW* was printed. It was certainly surprising stuff, written with great verve, but mellowed with an elderly cynicism that gave it an uncommon character. A paragraph of gay flippancy would terminate with an epigram as wise as an owl is supposed to be, and isn't.

"U. K. Lipt" was versatile, too, she turned her pen in many directions. Her mastery of the principles of the short story was astonishing in a mere girl, and Anglin had made up his mind that Ruth Rolandson was a mere girl. She had a trick of springing unexpected denouements that won her popularity in a very short time.

Harry Anglin was spreading himself on the Christmas number of *NOW*. The whole of the contributors were called upon for their very best. A feature of the issue was to be a Portrait of the author of each story or poem, to accompany each contribution. Miss Ruth Rolandson was written to for a head photograph to go with her subtle three column tale, "A Trick of Trade."

The photograph came to hand in due course. Anglin broke the envelope with some eagerness, He had been very curious about Miss Rolandson, but her letter came from a provincial town, and he had not yet had a chance of meeting her.

The editor drew out the picture. It was inscribed, "Yours sincerely, U. K. Lipt," and Anglin sank back in his swivel chair, and gazed in utter wonder. He was looking at the portrait of a singularlv beautiful girl of not more than twenty. There was absolutely no trace of literary character in the face. Never had Anglin known or heard of a woman with this delicate charm who couid do anything calling for unusual intellectual strength. Clever women had been beautiful, but never pretty in this soft, tender and ingenuous way.

For fully ten minutes the young editor sat and gazed at the photograph. He was convinced he had never seen so lovely a face. It appealed to him with bewildering effect. It moved and troubled him. After the ten minutes he bent his head and kissed the picture almost reverently. The letter was in the same girlish hand as had attracted him before, but "U. K. Lipt's" manuscript was always cleanly typewritten.

Again the authoress thanked *NOW* with all her heart for its kindly encouragement and generous pay.

"You cannot imagine how I love the paper," she wrote. "It has become a part of me. It has made Thursday the red-letter day of my life."

NOW's readers were even more surprised than the editor had been when "U. K. Lipt's" picture appeared. It seemed impossible that this could he the authoress of the audacious verse, the insolent paragraphs, and curious stories they had read with such avidity. Whence has come this pretty girl's worldly wisdom? How was it these large tender eyes had been able to search so deeply into life, and remain unclouded?

Harry Anglin preserved that photograph. More, he had it always near him, and now "U. K. Lipt's" work became of far greater value to the paper than formerly. What had seemed only clever and daring, regarded as the writing of a man, appeared miraculous as the work of a young and pretty girl. "U. K. Lipt's" witticisms and cynicisms were inestimably the richer for this knowledge, The editor of *NOW* read Ruth's stuff with singular avidity. Never was an editor more enchanted with the work of a protegée.

He wrote to Miss Rolandson, offering a permanent position on the staff of *NOW*, and awaited the answer with unusual anxiety.

Miss Rolandson replied that she was highly honoured, but deeply regretted that family matters precluded her accepting the offer or leaving her native town just then. Would Mr. Anglin allow the offer to stand over for a few months?

Mr Anglin allowed this very readily, and began to dream of the time when the beautiful original of the sweet picture stored so tenderly in soft bindings in his breast pocket, would be within reach and sight and hearing.

In point of solemn fact, Harry Anglin, the very worldly young editor of the most excellent paper of the day, was deeply, tenderly, devotedly, madly, ravenously in love with a photograph. All the other adjectives appropriate to love may be added, for Anglin was as much and as variously in love as a man could be.

That photograph never left him. He carried it as a man carries a secret sin, taking it out in his lonely moments, and treating it as a heathen treats his shrine.

The editor of *NOW* had his deeply sentimental side, and sentimental readers of his otherwise gay journal were delighted with a series of sonnets, "To a picture," that sobered, as it were, one column of *NOW* for several weeks in succession. Those verses were the editor's tribute to his divinity.

Harry wrote to Miss Rolandson again and again. Rather quickly his letters lost the formal manner of appreciative editor to valued contributor, and took on a more personal tone. He spoke of her beauty, of the admiration her work had provoked in him, of his great desire to see her.

Something of this passion was breathed into the later letters, but "U. K. Lipt" always answered decorously. She spoke of her gratitude to the editor., her affection for the paper, her hope of yet doing better things.

Then Anglin did a thing he would have scoffed at in another man in his sober moments as an action worthy of an actor— he sent his printed stippled photograph to Miss Rolandson. But all's fair in love, even a stippled photograph.

He again pressed Ruth to come to Melbourne, and take up the position he had offered her. He spoke of fine work they might do together.

The reply nearly stunned Anglin. She was coming! Within a few hours of his receiving the letter she would be with him!

The editor of *NOW* prepared for that meeting as he had never prepared for any event for was it not the greatest event in his life? She was coming, the girl of the photograph, the sweet woman of his dreams, the beloved. t was almost tragic. Anglin had allowed himself to become absorbed in this passion. Anticipation made him tremulous, nervous, apprehensive, pale.

When in this highly-strung state he had a caller, a grey-haired, grey-whiskered man, whose keen eye seemed familiar, though for the moment he could not recollect the owner. For a moment he did not try. He was rebellious against this intrusion upon his sacred, secret emotions. He wanted nothing, no one but the original of the fair, gentle vision that had so often visited him in fancy.

"I beg your pardon," said the visitor, "you do not remember me?"

"No," said Anglin shortly, "and if you will forgive I must send you away."

"And yet you asked me to come."

"I asked you to come— here— now?"

The visitor looked at his watch. "Here, now," he answered. "You recollect I offered you some manuscript shortly after you started your paper. My name is Trope."

"Ah, yes; I recollect now, but—"

"You said I was too old. I took my own method of convincing you to the contrary."

Anglin was deadly pale, he half arose, his hands steadying him upon the table.

"You say I sent for you to come here at this time?" he said. His voice had, something terrible in it.

"Yes," replied Trope. "I am a valued contributor to your paper; my pen name is 'U. K. Lipt.' "

Anglin crouched, into his chair again, his eyes shining, a red spot burning in the pallor of each cheek.

"U. K. Lipt?" he said harshly.

"Yes, sir. I hope I have satisfied vou I am not too old to write. By the. way, I sustained my little joke with the aid of my typewriter."

Anglin drew out the photograph, and held it towards him.

"And this?"

"That," replied Trope, "is a photograph of Miss Waters, something of a friend of mine, dead now these five years."

"My God!" whispered the Editor. He arose again, his eyes blazing, his hands fumbling in the drawer before him. "Go!" he said. "Go!" he almost screamed. "Can't you go, man, while you are safe?" His quavering hand held a revolver.

Trope dashed for the door. The report followed him.

They found the young editor in a heap under the office table, with the smoking revolver beside him. He was taken to the hospital, and the papers said that the clever young journalist, Henry Anglin, had sustained serious injuries, the result of the accidental explosion of a revolver; but it wasn't quite true. It is not nice to realise all in a moment that for twelve months you have been madly in love with a girl who has been dead for five years.

Anglin survived the shot, but *NOW* did not.

———————————

11: The Man In Yellow

"Sapper"

H. C. McNeile, 1888-1937

The Strand Magazine, Sep 1932

Collected in: *Ronald Standish*, 1933

I HAD KNOWN little Marjorie Beaumont since she was a child of six, but of late years since both her parents had died in one of the epidemics I had rather lost sight of her. She was living, I knew, somewhere down in Kent with an elderly uncle. Where, exactly, I was not sure till I received the letter I now held in my hand.

Groomley Park, Nr. Ashford.

*Dear Bob (*it ran*),*

Come and feed with me at the Six Hundred to-morrow (that's to-day when you get this) and meet Bungo. Also there is something I want to ask you about. Expect you one o'clock.

Yours,

Marjorie.

P.S.— You have got a pal who does things, haven't you? You know, arrests people, and all that.

I smiled slightly. As a description of Ronald Standish, the postscript was not without humour. But what on earth could she be wanting to see him about? And who was Bungo? Points which doubtless would be settled at the Six Hundred, where I duly arrived at a little after one.

I saw her at once in a far corner sitting with a good-looking youngster. They were deep in conversation— so deep, in fact, that I had reached the table before she saw me.

"Bob, you old dear," she cried, jumping up, "it's great of you to come. This is Bungo."

I shook hands.

"His real name," she continued, "is Jack Ayrton, but it's used so little that he's almost forgotten it himself. And he and I are engaged."

"Splendid," I said. "All the usual and that sort of rot. But where," I remarked, glancing at her left hand, "is the outward and visible sign of this happy state of affairs?"

"That," remarked Bungo gloomily, "is where you butt your head into the snag. We are engaged, but Uncle Henry thinks otherwise."

"I don't think you know him, Bob," put in the girl. "But I've lived with him at Groomley Park ever since the poor old parents died. He's been my guardian now for ten years."

"And he doesn't approve of the nuptials?" I said. "Why not?"

"The Lord knows," answered Bungo. "I knew Marjorie has a spot of cash belonging to her, but so have I."

"Ayrton's Fabrics for All," explained the girl. "That's his father."

"I see where the cash comes," I remarked. "Thanks: I can do another of those. Does Uncle Henry give no reason?"

"Uncle Henry says I'm too young," said the girl, lighting a cigarette. "Of course, I know that it will be lonely for the poor old fish when I join up with Bungo, and I don't want to hurt his feelings, Bob. He's been awfully good to me all these years. A the same time, he's got to get used to the idea; and he no understands that when I come of age next November, Bungo and I are going to pull it off. But until then I've promised him I won't."

"But what has this got to do with my pal who arrests people, and all that?"

The girl laughed and then grew serious again.

"Seems a bit obscure, I must admit," she answered. "What we've been telling you up to date has nothing to do with him, but Uncle has— over something completely different. Shall I tell him, Bungo, or will you?"

"You're in the chair, old soul," he remarked. "Cough it up."

"It started about three weeks ago," she began. "We were having breakfast, just he and I, when the post arrived. Bungo wasn't down, and so he didn't see the beginning of it. But I suddenly heard a noise like a pig grunting, and there was Uncle Henry, half out of his chair, staring at one of his letters as if it was a bomb. He was plucking at his collar with one hand, and clawing at the air with the other."

"That's when I came tottering in," said Bungo, "and I thought the old chap was having a fit. At any rate, Marjorie and I clustered round, and when the commotion had died down a bit we asked him what had stung him.

" 'They've found me,' he muttered. 'After all these years they've found me.'

"Which didn't convey much to us." The girl took up the story again. "So we laid him out to cool, and after a while tried to find out what the trouble was. But he wouldn't say anything more, and a few minutes later he left the room and went to his study, where he locked himself in, a thing I've never known him do before."

"Did you see the letter that had caused the trouble?" I asked.

"We got the envelope," said Bungo. "Here it is. But we didn't see the contents until much later."

I glanced at the envelope, but it did not seem to point to much. It. was addressed to Mr. Henry Beaumont, Groomley Park, Nr. Ashford, in what was a childish rather than an illiterate hand. The postmark was Folkestone.

"Not much there," I said, handing it back. "What happened next?"

"Nothing till dinner that night," answered the girl. "He remained in his study all day, and had his lunch there."

"Which must have been considerably more liquid than solid," jut in Bungo. "When Uncle arrived for dinner he was quite-nicely-thank-you."

"So would you have been, my lad," she cried, "under the circumstances. Anyway, Bob, we tackled him about it again, as this is what we gathered. All his early life was spent in the East and it seems that when he was a youngster he was pretty hot stuff. At any rate, one night in the dim, dark ages— Swettypore in ninety-four sort of business— he and some pals were making whoopee."

"And they got gloriously sprung," said Bungo.

"And having got gloriously sprung," continued Marjorie, "the proceeded to raise Cain round some especially sacred Buddhist temple. In fact, according to him, they laid out some priests, and concluded the entertainment by dancing the Lancers with some of the girls attached to the place."

"Who were a particularly sacred brand of virgin," explain Bungo.

"What a dam' fool thing to do," I remarked.

"So they all realised the next morning," he said. "And so Uncle Henry admitted when he told us. The fact remained, however, that it had been done, and there was no undoing it. But they were only passing through the place on their way home on leave, so at crack of dawn next morning they beat it while the going was good. But not before one thing had happened. Pinned to the table in the rest house they found a note: 'Vengeance will overtake you sooner or later.' "

"It seems to have been some time on the road," I murmured

"Just what I said to Uncle," cried Marjorie. "But he didn't agree. He said that Time was a totally different thing in the East from what we Westerners understood, especially where the religious orders were concerned. Thirty or forty years mean nothing to them with their conception of life after death."

"And this was three weeks ago," I said. "Has anything happened since?"

"For ten days nothing happened at all," she answered. "Bungo had to leave, so that Uncle and I were alone except for the servants, who are all women. He locked up with the utmost care every night, and always slept with a loaded revolver under his pillow, but when I suggested going to the police about it he refused point-blank. He seemed to be afraid that if he did he would have to tell them about this episode of the temple, which is not a thing he wants made public.

"Ten days ago, Bob, a second letter arrived, this time from Ashford. It came at breakfast, like the first, and again Uncle Henry shut himself up in his study the whole day. I begged him show me the two notes, but he wouldn't. He seemed apathetic, almost resigned, and grew quite irritable when I once more suggested the police.

"'What good would the police be in a case like this?' he snorted. What use would they be when pitted against the mysteries of the East? If these men mean to get me they will get me even if the whole of Scotland Yard is round the house.'

"So I had to let the matter drop. Uncle is as obstinate as a mule when he wants to be; and to make matters worse a few days later he got a bad attack of gout which, by the way, he is still suffering from. And then the day before yesterday occurred an incident which threw him into a veritable panic.

"I had been sitting with him for about ten minutes in his room before dinner, when my maid came in to ask me some question. And when she saw me she looked very surprised.

" 'I thought you'd already changed, miss,' she said.' 'I saw you in your yellow dress half an hour ago, and going into the master's bedroom."

"The effect on my uncle was electric.

" 'Yellow dress!' he shouted. 'My God! Search the house, Marjorie Search the house! Take my revolver with you?

"He tried to get up, but his gout was very bad that night. And so, amazed beyond measure at this extraordinary outburst, Janet— that's my maid— and I went into his room. It was empty. There wasn't a sign of anyone, or of anything having been moved. And then I sent for the chauffeur, who lives in a cottage close by, and with him we went over the house. We looked into cupboards; we looked under beds— not a sign of a soul. And having told Uncle Henry I asked him what on earth it was all about, and why such a harmless remark as Janet's should have caused such a commotion.

" 'Naturally you wouldn't understand, Marjorie,' he answered heavily. 'You've never been out East. But that yellow dress of yours is exactly the same colour as the robe which the Buddhist priests all wear.'

"I stared at him incredulously.

" 'You don't mean to say,' I cried, 'that you think that Janet saw a Buddhist priest going into your bedroom?'

" 'Then what did she see?' he said. 'It wasn't you. It couldn't have been one of the servants.'

" 'But there's no one there,' I assured him.

"He smiled pityingly."

" 'And you can't expect me to believe,' I cried, 'that they can vanish into thin air.'

"'I don't expect you to believe anything,' he answered quietly. 'Let us assume that Janet made a mistake.'

"But I could see that he did not think so, and that night after dinner I stuck in my toes. I took up the line that it wasn't fair to me; and that if he wouldn't tell

the police the least he could do was to allow me to ask someone else for help. And at last he consented, though he obviously considered it useless.

" 'Open the top drawer of my desk,' he said, 'and you'll find there the two notes that came by post.'

"I did so, and here they are, Bob."

She passed them over the table to me, and I examined them curiously. The writing was the same as that on the envelope, but the paper was different. It was a sort of parchment, about the size of a small luggage label, and it looked as if some sort of scratchy pencil had been used by the writer.

Do you remember Ranapore

So ran the first one, which had been posted in Folkestone.

The punishment will fit the crime

That was the second; which had come from Ashford. I handed them back to Marjorie, and shrugged my shoulders.

"It's beyond me, old thing," I said. "They look as if a child had written them when under the influence of drink. Did you uncle explain anything?"

"Only that that was the paper always used by the Buddhist priests, and that it was the leaf of some palm tree.

"'They're genuine, Marjorie, my dear,' he said. 'Only too well do I know it. No one but a priest would possess that paper; no one but a priest would understand how to do that writing, which is a special art. Go if you like and get anyone you wish to help but it is useless. They've found me, and there's no more to be said.'

"And so, Bob, I thought of you and that friend of yours."

"Whom I will get on the 'phone," I said. "And if he isn't playing golf or cricket we'll go along and see him at once."

Ronald was in, and ten minutes later we were all sitting in his room. He was dealing with a rusty niblick when we arrived, but Marjorie Beaumont retold her story he ceased operations on the club and listened intently.

"What's the verdict, Mr. Standish?" said Bungo, when she had finished.

Ronald was studying the two messages through a magnifying glass. "These are undoubtedly genuine," he remarked. "By that I mean that your uncle is perfectly right when he says that they are written by someone who has learned an art which is generally regarded as the exclusive property of the Buddhist priests. They scratch the words with a very fine pointed stylo, and then shake a dark powder over the leaf, which fills up the grooves of the letters. Then they wipe the rest of it off, leaving the writing showing up clearly."

"Brit do you really think the old dear is in any danger?" asked Marjorie anxiously.

"Frankly, Miss Beaumont, I am inclined to take the whole thing very seriously," he answered, "especially now that I have examined these messages.

If it was just some silly joke they would have been written on paper. You see, except in a museum this palm leaf is unprocurable in England; also the implement with which the writing was done."

"What ought we to do about it?" she cried.

"Well, if you like, and you don't think your uncle would object, I'll come down and look into things on the spot," he said.

"Mind! I should think he'd kiss you on both cheeks," said Bungo. "When can you go?"

"This afternoon," answered Ronald. "There are one or two things I must do first, and then I'll motor down with Bob."

"It's awfully good of you, Mr. Standish," said the girl. "And I know my uncle will think so too. Especially as even Bungo won't be there."

"Less of your 'even'," said Bungo, with a grin.

"I'll keep the two messages for the time being, if I may," said Ronald. "There are a few points I would like to verify. And we'll be with you in time for dinner."

Marjorie smiled at him gratefully and departed with Bungo.

"Nice children," remarked Ronald, watching them from the window. "What do you make of it, Bob?"

"There's only one thing that has struck me," I said. "If the writing was done by a genuine Buddhist priest there oughtn't to be much difficulty in putting one's hand on him."

"A very sapient remark, old boy," he agreed. "The only snag being that though the secret of this writing originated with the priests, there are other people who know it."

"You mean it may not be a priest at all, but someone else knows of this episode in the old man's past."

"Exactly," he said.

"But, then, how do you account for what the maid Janet saw?"

"I don't," he answered quietly. "For that, my dear Bob, is the most curious feature of a very curious case. A very curious case." he repeated, and seemed on the point of saying something Then he altered his mind and, crossing to a cupboard in corner, he took out a small bottle of dusting powder. He shook some carefully on to the second of the messages, and examined it through his magnifying glass.

I stared over his shoulder, and even with the naked eye I could see a confused medley of finger-prints, which was just what would have expected. Several people, including myself, had handled it, and I failed to see what he hoped to discover from such a blurred trail. But after a while a rather surprising thing occurred. Out of the jumble of marks, two prints began to stand out more clearly than the rest; one came directly under the centre of the word "punishment", the other midway between the words "fit the".

"We progress," he said tersely, "though I hardly expected such a clear result. Do you see those two prints, Bob? What do you make of them?"

"That two people have held the leaf more firmly than others," I answered promptly.

"Very nearly right," he remarked. "But it's one person, not two. Those finger-prints are identical. Let's try the other."

Again, only less clearly, two stood out from the others— one under "you", the other under the last syllable of "remember".

"Once more the same gentleman," he said. "And so, old lad, we have in our possession four perfectly good finger-prints of the left thumb of the writer of these messages."

"How on earth do you know that?" I cried.

"I know it because I've seen this writing being done," he said. "The trouble is that I'm afraid it isn't going to help us much. It is most improbable that the writer is an old criminal, so we can't trace him at Scotland Yard. And, since we can't trot round the population of Folkestone and Ashford asking 'em for prints of their left thumbs, we're not much forrader."

"But if we can find a Buddhist priest," I cried, "that print gives the proof."

"If," he answered cryptically. "At any rate, let's go and look for him. You get the bus, Bob, while I go round to the Yard to make absolutely certain he's not an old lag."

I picked him up an hour later at the club, and as soon as he saw me he shook his head.

"As I thought," he said. "They can't help us. So we'll have to see what we can do on our own."

We arrived at Groomley Park at half-past six, and it was evident at once that there had been further developments. Marjorie was standing on the doorstep with News written large on her face.

"Uncle Henry has found out where they are," she cried.

"You mean the message writer?" said Ronald, staring at her.

"Yes," she answered. "But come on up and see him and he'll tell you himself."

We followed her up the stairs, and I could see that Ronald was surprised, though he said no more.

"This is Mr. Standish, Uncle Henry," she said, opening the door into a room that was obviously his study. "And Bob Miller, whom you've heard me talk about."

I studied Mr. Beaumont covertly. He was sitting in an easy chair with one foot well wrapped up, stretched out in front of him.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said. "Sorry— but my damned foot prevents me getting up to greet you. Well— I gather Marjorie has told you the story."

"That is so, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald. "But I now hear that you've solved the mystery."

"Solved it," he cried. "Of course I have. And if the police weren't such infernal fools, and this wasn't such a regulation-infested country, I'd have the whole lot arrested to-night. Snake charmers— pah! they're no more snake-charmers than I am."

"At the moment," said Ronald mildly, "it seems a little hard to follow."

"The circus, sir," barked the old man. "One of those cursed things with brass bands and merry-go-rounds and things. My fool of a parlourmaid told me about it after lunch, and happened to mention there were Indian jugglers there. So I sent her out to make inquiries— they've pitched their show in the village a mile way— and what do you think I've discovered? The circus was in Folkestone when the first note was sent, and in Ashford at the time of the second. Isn't that proof, sir?"

He thumped the table at his side and glared at Ronald.

"A good piece of presumptive evidence, Mr. Beaumont," said quietly, "but, I fear, hardly proof."

"Bosh!" snorted the other. "Do you know anything about Buddhist writing?"

"A little," said Ronald mildly.

"Well— you've seen those two messages, haven't you, so what more do you want?"

"Quite so," answered Ronald soothingly. "They were most certainly written by someone who is conversant with the art and has used the proper implements. But that is not to say that one of this snake-charming troupe is of necessity the culprit. It certainly a coincidence, and one that is well worth following up, but that is as far as we can go at present."

The old gentleman snorted again. Then he turned to his niece.

"Go down and see about some drinks, my dear," he cried, "I would like a word with Mr. Standish alone."

"You see," he went on as the girl left the room, "it's the second message that worries me, about the punishment fitting the crime. Marjorie has already told you what we young fools did, and I am so desperately afraid that these devils may try and do something to her by way of revenge. For myself, I'm an old man and it doesn't matter, but if they hurt a hair of her head I'd never forgive myself."

"Naturally, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald gravely. "Some such idea had also occurred to me."

"She's a high-spirited child, and until she comes of age I fell she is my charge. Then, of course, she will have her own money and, I gather, proposes to desert me for young Ayrton. But until then I feel myself entirely responsible. And, if you will forgive my saying so, what I fear is that you are up against something you

don't understand. Janet is an unimaginative girl. What was it then, that she saw? They have powers of which we Europeans have no conception. And against those powers ordinary methods are of no avail."

"Then we must try extraordinary methods," said Ronald. "By the way, Mr. Beaumont, does that door lead to your bedroom?"

"It does," said the old man in some surprise. "Why?"

"That, then, is the room into which Janet saw or thought she saw the individual in the yellow dress disappearing."

"Yes. There is another door to it leading into the passage, and it was through that one the man vanished."

"You were in here at the time?"

"I was."

"And you heard nothing?"

"Not a sound. One doesn't hear these people when they walk, my young friend."

Ronald rose.

"Perhaps not, sir. Well, I think I'll just have a look round, and later on, Bob, you and I might go to the circus and have a shot at the coconuts. We'll report in due course, Mr. Beaumont."

We left the old gentleman muttering sarcastically to himself, and going along the passage encountered a quiet-looking woman of about forty dressed in black. Ronald stopped.

"Are you Janet— Miss Beaumont's maid?" he asked.

"I am, sir," she said.

"Would you please tell me exactly what happened that evening when you saw someone in yellow going into Mr. Beaumont's bedroom."

"There's nothing much to tell, sir," she said. "I was coming up the stairs, and I saw someone wearing a yellow dress standing just outside the bedroom door. It was exactly the colour of one of Miss Marjorie's evening frocks, and when whoever it was opened the door and went in I assumed it was her."

"Naturally," said Ronald. "And what did you do then?"

I did some sewing for half an hour, and then as I was returning to Miss Marjorie's room I heard her voice in Mr. Beaumont's study. So I went in to find out if there was anything she wanted, and I found that she hadn't dressed for dinner, so that it couldn't have been her I saw."

"So during that half-hour the passage, so far as you know, was empty."

"So far as I know, sir, it was."

"Thank you, Janet," he said. "That's all at the moment."

"A puzzling point, Bob," he continued as we went downstairs. "She doesn't strike me as the sort of woman who would imagine things. And if someone in a

yellow robe was really there, why did nothing happen? What was the object in getting thus far and then going no further?"

We found Marjorie in the hail, and she waved her hand at the drink tray.

"Help yourselves," she said. "Well, Mr. Standish, what do you I think?"

"I don't know what to think, Miss Beaumont," he answered frankly. "In fact, I'm completely nonplussed. I shall go to the circus and see these Indian jugglers, and perhaps we may find something. In any event I would not, if I were you, go far from the house alone, at any rate while they are in the neighbourhood."

He reverted again to Janet's story on the way there.

"It baffles me," he said. "It seems so absolutely pointless. Clearly there was no difficulty over the fellow getting away, but what earthly use was there in going there and then doing nothing? If he'd introduced a snake into the bedroom, or something of that sort, we should have had a motive. But as it is I'm defeated."

THE CIRCUS TURNED out to be a small one, and we had no difficulty in finding the jugglers. There were four of them, and when had paid our shillings and entered their booth we found them in a group of staring yokels watching a cobra swaying slowly and fro to the sound of a pipe whilst the player squatted on the ground in front of it.

"They're Tamils," whispered Ronald to me. "Fortunately I can talk a bit of their lingo. But we'll have to wait till their show is over. And then by means of a little ruse we may get some information. You didn't know I was something of a conjurer, did you Bob?"

We watched the mango tree grow, and all the other tricks familiar to those who go East, until at last the show ended and the audience departed. Whereupon Ronald, stepped forward and said something in a dialect which brought the four natives excitedly to their feet with broad grins on their faces. Next he produced from his pocket a pack of cards and I wondered what on earth was coming. Evidently he was going to show them some trick, but what good he hoped to obtain by that was obscure. And then suddenly the man's amazing ingenuity dawned on me, though I could not understand a word he was saying. For each of the natives had grasped one of the four corners of the pack with their left forefinger and thumb, so that four thumb-prints would be obtained on the top card.

I forgot even to look at the trick, so lost was I in admiration of his cleverness. And when a quarter of an hour later we were sitting in the neighbouring pub with the vital card in front of us he admitted that the trick had been a complete frost.

"However," he remarked as he sprinkled the dusting powder on the card's surface, "I dare say my reputation for sleight of hand survive the failure." The

four thumb-prints came out perfectly, and from his pocket he produced the second message. And a few moments' comparison established the complete innocence of the jugglers. None of the four thumb-prints on the card bore the smallest resemblance to those on the palm leaf.

"That settles that once and for all," he said, draining his tankard of beer. "So we've got to start all over again, Bob."

"I feel I'm being a fool," he said at length. "I feel I ought to be able to get something out of Janet's evidence. And I can't. Why should this man, having got into Beaumont's bedroom, having done all the difficult part safely, leave without profiting by it? Making all allowances for times not being accurate, the old man was alone after our unknown entered the bedroom. Why, Bob, why? Did he hear or see something that scared him? Or did he do something in that room which hasn't acted yet, and which sometime will function and kill Beaumont? Or…"

He fell into a deep reverie which lasted for ten minutes; then he beckoned to the landlord.

"How much longer is that circus remaining here?" he asked.

"It be going to-morrow morning, sir. Up to Tenterden."

"Thank you. Come on, Bob. Let's be getting back. And since I have a feeling that the very walls have ears, say nothing of our little effort in conjuring to-night."

A warning which proved unnecessary, for we found the whole house in a turmoil on our return. Another message had arrived. It seemed that Mr. Beaumont's gout being a little better, he had gone down to dinner. And on his return to his study he had found it lying on the table.

"There it is, sir," he roared, holding it out to Ronald. "The damned swine put there while I was downstairs. Take it, man, take it," he went on testily, "I can't hold my arm out the whole night."

I glanced at Ronald in some surprise, for he was staring at the little leaf of paper like a man bereft of his senses. Then in an instant his face was as expressionless as usual, and taking the note he read out the contents:

Be at Handel Corner at one to-night

"Where is Handel Corner?" he asked.

"About three miles from here," said Marjorie.

"And what do you propose to do about it?" asked Ronald.

"Do?" shouted the old man. "What the hell can I do with a foot like this? But you and your friend can do something. Go Handel Corner and catch this devil. Find out who it is, and haul him here for the police to deal with."

"A very good idea, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald thoughtfully "That should settle things once and for all."

"Take one of my revolvers and shoot the dog on sight." The old gentleman's wrath was rising.

"You had the house searched after you found this, I suppose?'

"Of course! Of course!" said Mr. Beaumont testily. "No trace of anyone. He vanished the same as he did last time. Don't take your car right up to the corner, Standish. Leave it some way off and walk. Then you'll trap the blackguard. Damn it!" he exploded, "what are you hesitating about? Surely two young men like you aren't frightened, are you?"

But Ronald did not even smile; I have never seen him look graver.

"No, Mr. Beaumont," he said at length, "not frightened, I assure you. Come along, Bob," he turned to me abruptly. "We shall have to be leaving shortly."

"And bring him back dead or alive," grunted the old man as we left the room.

"You're darned pensive, Ronald," I said as we went downstairs "What's the great idea?"

"Only that I've just solved the mystery of what Janet saw," he answered. "Where is Miss Beaumont?"

"Here she is," said Marjorie, appearing from the drawing— room. "Do you want to speak to me?"

"Yes, Miss Beaumont, I do," he said. "I want you please to obey my instructions implicitly, and I think we shall catch the gentleman who has been causing the trouble. Now, I have the best reasons for believing that the note your uncle received tonight is a trap with the sole purpose of getting us out of this house. I didn't tell Mr. Beaumont so, as his condition at the moment; owing to his gout, he is so excitable that it could do no good. It is far better that he should believe that Bob and I have gone to Handel Corner or he might spoil the whole thing. Now I come to what I want you to do, and I don't want you even to tell Janet. Go upstairs in a few minutes and undress in your own room, as usual. When you've dismissed your maid, turn out your light and then, without making a sound, go to some other room and stay there. Turn out the light there, too, and lock the door. Have you got me?"

"Perfectly," she said quietly. "I will do just what you say. But what are you and Bob going to do?"

"Just for the moment we'll leave that," he said gravely. "How long will it take you before you're ready?"

"Twenty minutes," she answered, and he glanced at the clock. "That will do nicely," he said, and we watched her going up the stairs.

"The most damnable quandary I've ever been in, Bob," he remarked as she disappeared. "However, it's got to be gone through. Let's get to it."

First he walked, into the billiard-room, where he opened a window noiselessly; then he rejoined me in the hall.

"Time we started," he said. "Let get the car."

"But," I began, "I thought you said— "

"You drive," he went on, opening the front door, "and I'll take the map."

Completely bewildered, I followed him to the garage, and we started off down the drive. But hardly had we turned into the main road, when he told me to stop.

"Now back to the house on foot," he said, "and keep on the grass."

Skirting the drive, we reached the open window in the billiard-room, and he put his lips to my ear.

"Take off your shoes," he whispered, "and don't make a sound." On tiptoe I followed him up the stairs, where the passage was in darkness, and he led the way to Marjorie's room. No light was shining through the keyhole, and very cautiously he opened the door. The room was empty. She had carried out her instructions.

"And now," he breathed, "we wait."

Screening his torch he flashed it round until he found a switch by the dressing-table.

"Sit by that, Bob," he whispered, "and for God's sake turn it on when I tell you."

Then he took off his coat and waistcoat, lay down on the bed and put out his torch.

Half-past twelve chimed faintly from the clock below in the hail. The house, save for the occasional crack of a floor board, was silent. A quarter to one; one, and I could hear the beating of my own heart. What were we waiting for? What was going to happen? And then quite suddenly came a much louder crack from just outside the door.

I heard Ronald move slightly on the bed, and with my pulse hammering and one hand on the switch I waited. Whatever it was, it was coming now. Old Beaumont had been right. It was Marjorie who was in danger.

The door was opening slowly, and I could see the faint outline of a cloaked figure standing there. Then, in a flash, it had disappeared and the springs of the bed shook. Came a sudden grunt and a snarl; then Ronald's quiet voice.— "Light, Bob."

I switched on, and stared in amazement at the scene. Standing by the bed was a man in a yellow robe. He was struggling furiously in Ronald's iron grasp, but after a time he grew quiet. His features were squat and almost Mongolian, but as I got up and went nearer there seemed to be something very odd about the face. Until Ronald put up a hand and pulled off— a mask.

"Well, Mr. Beaumont," said Ronald in a terrible voice, "Have you anything to say to excuse yourself for attempting such inconceivable crime as the murder of your niece?"

I stood rooted to the ground. Beaumont— her uncle. He stood there mouthing, helplessly. Then with a sort of strangled cry he bolted from the room. I turned to follow him, but Ronald stopped me.

"There is only one expiation," he said gravely. "Pray Heaven he takes it!"

He did a moment or two later, and the sound of the shot brought Marjorie rushing out of her room.

"What is it?" she cried wildly.

"I will explain things shortly, Miss Beaumont," said Ronald, laying his hand on her arm. "Please go downstairs now. Come with me, Bob."

We went to the study. There was nothing to be done. Ronald bent down and picked up a small bottle that was lying on the floor. And having pulled out the cork he sniffed it.

"The vile old devil," he said softly, slipping it into his pocket. "Prussic acid."

And so we went downstairs to the weeping girl through a crowd of frightened servants.

"Get the police and a doctor," said Ronald to the parlourmaid. "And no one is to go into the study till they come."

"It's very bad news I'm afraid, Miss Beaumont."

He drew her into the drawing-room.

"There is no doubt at all that this business has so preyed on your uncle's mind," he went on gravely, "that it sent him off his head. And to-night it came to a climax and he shot himself."

Which was the verdict ultimately returned at the coroner's inquest.

"Far better so, Bob," said Ronald to me after it was all over. "To tell the truth would only damage the girl and not hurt him."

"What made you get it first?" I asked.

"When he gave me that third note," he answered.

"I saw you staring at it," I said. "But you couldn't have spotted the thumb-print."

"No; but I spotted the thumb. In doing that writing the leaf is held firmly between the thumb and the first finger, and in the thumb-nail a nick is cut. Into that nick is put the implement the writer scratches with to keep it steady. And when I saw that he had just such a nick in his thumb I was completely dumbfounded. Up to that moment the truth had not even remotely dawned on me. And then I saw that it all fitted together, and that, at last, what Janet had seen became comprehensible. Naturally, nothing had been done by the man in yellow if he was Beaumont himself."

"But what was his idea in being seen?"

"To establish an atmosphere," he said promptly, "the atmosphere of the mysterious East. He started it with the notes and the story of his youth, and added to it as he went along. The circus was a golden opportunity to throw

suspicion on the wrong person, but he overlooked the little matter of finger-prints. And since the circus was moving early the next day it was clear he would have to act that night. His gout, of course, was a fiction, though a very plausible one. In fact, Henry Beaumont was as pretty a damned villain as I've ever come across."

"But the main question is still unanswered," I reminded him. "Why did he want to murder Marjorie?"

"We shall have that proved for certain shortly," he said. "But in the meantime I'll hazard a guess. In a few months Beaumont would have been called on to give an account of his stewardship of his niece's money. The ultimatum had gone forth; she was going to marry Bungo. Doubtless she still will. But I'm open to a bet with you, Bob, that a hundred per cent of their combined income will come from Ayrton's Fabrics for All."

"You mean he embezzled Marjorie's money?"

"Exactly," he remarked:

And once again he proved to be right: every penny had gone.

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12: The Vision of Tom Chuff

Sheridan Le Fanu

1814-1873

All the Year Round, 8 Oct 1870

AT THE EDGE of melancholy Catstean Moor, in the north of England, with half-a-dozen ancient poplar-trees with rugged and hoary stems around, one smashed across the middle by a flash of lightning thirty summers before, and all by their great height dwarfing the abode near which they stand, there squats a rude stone house, with a thick chimney, a kitchen and bedroom on the ground-floor, and a loft, accessible by a ladder, under the shingle roof, divided into two rooms.

Its owner was a man of ill repute. Tom Chuff was his name. A shock-headed, broad-shouldered, powerful man, though somewhat short, with lowering brows and a sullen eye. He was a poacher, and hardly made an ostensible pretence of earning his bread by any honest industry. He was a drunkard. He beat his wife, and led his children a life of terror and lamentation, when he was at home. It was a blessing to his frightened little family when he absented himself, as he sometimes did, for a week or more together.

On the night I speak of he knocked at the door with his cudgel at about eight o'clock. It was winter, and the night was very dark. Had the summons been that of a bogie from the moor, the inmates of this small house could hardly have heard it with greater terror.

His wife unbarred the door in fear and haste. Her hunchbacked sister stood by the hearth, staring toward the threshold. The children cowered behind.

Tom Chuff entered with his cudgel in his hand, without speaking, and threw himself into a chair opposite the fire. He had been away two or three days. He looked haggard, and his eyes were bloodshot. They knew he had been drinking.

Tom raked and knocked the peat fire with his stick, and thrust his feet close to it. He signed towards the little dresser, and nodded to his wife, and she knew he wanted a cup, which in silence she gave him. He pulled a bottle of gin from his coat-pocket, and nearly filling the teacup, drank off the dram at a few gulps.

He usually refreshed himself with two or three drams of this kind before beating the inmates of his house. His three little children, cowering in a corner, eyed him from under a table, as Jack did the ogre in the nursery tale. His wife, Nell, standing behind a chair, which she was ready to snatch up to meet the blow of the cudgel, which might be levelled at her at any moment, never took her eyes off him; and hunchbacked Mary showed the whites of a large pair of eyes, similarly employed, as she stood against the oaken press, her dark face hardly distinguishable in the distance from the brown panel behind it.

Tom Chuff was at his third dram, and had not yet spoken a word since his entrance, and the suspense was growing dreadful, when, on a sudden, he leaned back in his rude seat, the cudgel slipped from his hand, a change and a death-like pallor came over his face.

For a while they all stared on; such was their fear of him, they dared not speak or move, lest it should prove to have been but a doze, and Tom should wake up and proceed forthwith to gratify his temper and exercise his cudgel.

In a very little time, however, things began to look so odd, that they ventured, his wife and Mary, to exchange glances full of doubt and wonder. He hung so much over the side of the chair, that if it had not been one of cyclopean clumsiness and weight, he would have borne it to the floor. A leaden tint was darkening the pallor of his face. They were becoming alarmed, and finally braving everything his wife timidly said, "Tom!" and then more sharply repeated it, and finally cried the appellative loudly, and again and again, with the terrified accompaniment, "He's dying—he's dying!" her voice rising to a scream, as she found that neither it nor her plucks and shakings of him by the shoulder had the slightest effect in recalling him from his torpor.

And now from sheer terror of a new kind the children added their shrilly piping to the talk and cries of their seniors; and if anything could have called Tom up from his lethargy, it might have been the piercing chorus that made the rude chamber of the poacher's habitation ring again. But Tom continued unmoved, deaf, and stirless.

His wife sent Mary down to the village, hardly a quarter of a mile away, to implore of the doctor, for whose family she did duty as laundress, to come down and look at her husband, who seemed to be dying.

The doctor, who was a good-natured fellow, arrived. With his hat still on, he looked at Tom, examined him, and when he found that the emetic he had brought with him, on conjecture from Mary's description, did not act, and that his lancet brought no blood, and that he felt a pulseless wrist, he shook his head, and inwardly thought:

"What the plague is the woman crying for? Could she have desired a greater blessing for her children and herself than the very thing that has happened?"

Tom, in fact, seemed quite gone. At his lips no breath was perceptible. The doctor could discover no pulse. His hands and feet were cold, and the chill was stealing up into his body.

The doctor, after a stay of twenty minutes, had buttoned up his great-coat again and pulled down his hat, and told Mrs. Chuff that there was no use in his remaining any longer, when, all of a sudden, a little rill of blood began to trickle from the lancet-cut in Tom Chuffs temple.

"That's very odd," said the doctor. "Let us wait a little."

I must describe now the sensations which Tom Chuff had experienced.

With his elbows on his knees, and his chin upon his hands, he was staring into the embers, with his gin beside him, when suddenly a swimming came in his head, he lost sight of the fire, and a sound like one stroke of a loud church bell smote his brain.

Then he heard a confused humming, and the leaden weight of his head held him backward as he sank in his chair, and consciousness quite forsook him.

When he came to himself he felt chilled, and was leaning against a huge leafless tree. The night was moonless, and when he looked up he thought he had never seen stars so large and bright, or sky so black. The stars, too, seemed to blink down with longer intervals of darkness, and fiercer and more dazzling emergence, and something, he vaguely thought, of the character of silent menace and fury.

He had a confused recollection of having come there, or rather of having been carried along, as if on men's shoulders, with a sort of rushing motion. But it was utterly indistinct; the imperfect recollection simply of a sensation. He had seen or heard nothing on his way.

He looked round. There was not a sign of a living creature near. And he began with a sense of awe to recognise the place.

The tree against which he had been leaning was one of the noble old beeches that surround at irregular intervals the churchyard of Shackleton, which spreads its green and wavy lap on the edge of the Moor of Catstean, at the opposite side of which stands the rude cottage in which he had just lost consciousness. It was six miles or more across the moor to his habitation, and the black expanse lay before him, disappearing dismally in the darkness. So that, looking straight before him, sky and land blended together in an undistinguishable and awful blank.

There was a silence quite unnatural over the place. The distant murmur of the brook, which he knew so well, was dead; not a whisper in the leaves about him; the air, earth, everything about and above was indescribably still; and he experienced that quaking of the heart that seems to portend the approach of something awful. He would have set out upon his return across the moor, had he not an undefined presentiment that he was waylaid by something he dared not pass.

The old grey church and tower of Shackleton stood like a shadow in the rear. His eye had grown accustomed to the obscurity, and he could just trace its outline. There were no comforting associations in his mind connected with it; nothing but menace and misgiving. His early training in his lawless calling was connected with this very spot. Here his father used to meet two other poachers, and bring his son, then but a boy, with him.

Under the church porch, towards morning, they used to divide the game they had taken, and take account of the sales they had made on the previous

day, and make partition of the money, and drink their gin. It was here he had taken his early lessons in drinking, cursing, and lawlessness. His father's grave was hardly eight steps from the spot where he stood. In his present state of awful dejection, no scene on earth could have so helped to heighten his fear.

There was one object close by which added to his gloom. About a yard away, in rear of the tree, behind himself, and extending to his left, was an open grave, the mould and rubbish piled on the other side. At the head of this grave stood the beech-tree; its columnar stem rose like a huge monumental pillar. He knew every line and crease on its smooth surface. The initial letters of his own name, cut in its bark long ago, had spread out and wrinkled like the grotesque capitals of a fanciful engraver, and now with a sinister significance overlooked the open grave, as if answering his mental question, "Who for is t' grave cut?"

He felt still a little stunned, and there was a faint tremor in his joints that disinclined him to exert himself; and, further, he had a vague apprehension that take what direction he might, there was danger around him worse than that of staying where he was.

On a sudden the stars began to blink more fiercely, a faint wild light overspread for a minute the bleak landscape, and he saw approaching from the moor a figure at a kind of swinging trot, with now and then a zig-zag hop or two, such as men accustomed to cross such places make, to avoid the patches of slob or quag that meet them here and there. This figure resembled his father's, and like him, whistled through his finger by way of signal as he approached; but the whistle sounded not now shrilly and sharp, as in old times, but immensely far away, and seemed to sing strangely through Tom's head. From habit or from fear, in answer to the signal, Tom whistled as he used to do five-and-twenty years ago and more, although he was already chilled with an unearthly fear.

Like his father, too, the figure held up the bag that was in his left hand as he drew near, when it was his custom to call out to him what was in it. It did not reassure the watcher, you may be certain, when a shout unnaturally faint reached him, as the phantom dangled the bag in the air, and he heard with a faint distinctness the words, "Tom Chuff's soul!"

Scarcely fifty yards away from the low churchyard fence at which Tom was standing, there was a wider chasm in the peat, which there threw up a growth of reeds and bulrushes, among which, as the old poacher used to do on a sudden alarm, the approaching figure suddenly cast itself down.

From the same patch of tall reeds and rushes emerged instantaneously what he at first mistook for the same figure creeping on all-fours, but what he soon perceived to be an enormous black dog with a rough coat like a bear's, which at first sniffed about, and then started towards him in what seemed to be a sportive amble, bouncing this way and that, but as it drew near it displayed a

pair of fearful eyes that glowed like live coals, and emitted from the monstrous expanse of its jaws a terrifying growl.

This beast seemed on the point of seizing him, and Tom recoiled in panic and fell into the open grave behind him. The edge which he caught as he tumbled gave way, and down he went, expecting almost at the same instant to reach the bottom. But never was such a fall! Bottomless seemed the abyss! Down, down, down, with immeasurable and still increasing speed, through utter darkness, with hair streaming straight upward, breathless, he shot with a rush of air against him, the force of which whirled up his very arms, second after second, minute after minute, through the chasm downward he flew, the icy perspiration of horror covering his body, and suddenly, as he expected to be dashed into annihilation, his descent was in an instant arrested with a tremendous shock, which, however, did not deprive him of consciousness even for a moment.

He looked about him. The place resembled a smoke-stained cavern or catacomb, the roof of which, except for a ribbed arch here and there faintly visible, was lost in darkness. From several rude passages, like the galleries of a gigantic mine, which opened from this centre chamber, was very dimly emitted a dull glow as of charcoal, which was the only light by which he could imperfectly discern the objects immediately about him.

What seemed like a projecting piece of the rock, at the corner of one of these murky entrances, moved on a sudden, and proved to be a human figure, that beckoned to him. He approached, and saw his father. He could barely recognise him, he was so monstrously altered.

"I've been looking for you, Tom. Welcome home, lad; come along to your place."

Tom's heart sank as he heard these words, which were spoken in a hollow and, he thought, derisive voice that made him tremble. But he could not help accompanying the wicked spirit, who led him into a place, in passing which he heard, as it were from within the rock, deadful cries and appeals for mercy.

"What is this?" said he.

"Never mind."

"Who are they?"

"New-comers, like yourself, lad," answered his father apathetically. "They give over that work in time, finding it is no use."

"What shall I do?" said Tom, in an agony.

"It's all one."

"But what shall I do?" reiterated Tom, quivering in every joint and nerve.

"Grin and bear it, I suppose."

"For God's sake, if ever you cared for me, as I am your own child, let me out of this!"

"There's no way out."

"If there's a way in there's a way out, and for Heaven's sake let me out of this."

But the dreadful figure made no further answer, and glided backwards by his shoulder to the rear; and others appeared in view, each with a faint red halo round it, staring on him with frightful eyes, images, all in hideous variety, of eternal fury or derision. He was growing mad, it seemed, under the stare of so many eyes, increasing in number and drawing closer every moment, and at the same time myriads and myriads of voices were calling him by his name, some far away, some near, some from one point, some from another, some from behind, close to his ears. These cries were increased in rapidity and multitude, and mingled with laughter, with flitting blasphemies, with broken insults and mockeries, succeeded and obliterated by others, before he could half catch their meaning.

All this time, in proportion to the rapidity and urgency of these dreadful sights and sounds, the epilepsy of terror was creeping up to his brain, and with a long and dreadful scream he lost consciousness.

When he recovered his senses, he found himself in a small stone chamber, vaulted above, and with a ponderous door. A single point of light in the wall, with a strange brilliancy illuminated this cell.

Seated opposite to him was a venerable man with a snowy beard of immense length; an image of awful purity and severity. He was dressed in a coarse robe, with three large keys suspensed from his girdle. He might have filled one's idea of an ancient porter of a city gate; such spiritual cities, I should say, as John Bunyan loved to describe.

This old man's eyes were brilliant and awful, and fixed on him as they were, Tom Chuff felt himself helplessly in his power. At length he spoke:

"The command is given to let you forth for one trial more. But if you are found again drinking with the drunken, and beating your fellow-servants, you shall return through the door by which you came, and go out no more."

With these words the old man took him by the wrist and led him through the first door, and then unlocking one that stood in the cavern outside, he struck Tom Chuff sharply on the shoulder, and the door shut behind him with a sound that boomed peal after peal of thunder near and far away, and all round and above, till it rolled off gradually into silence. It was totally dark, but there was a fanning of fresh cool air that overpowered him. He felt that he was in the upper world again.

In a few minutes he began to hear voices which he knew, and first a faint point of light appeared before his eyes, and gradually he saw the flame of the candle, and, after that, the familiar faces of his wife and children, and he heard them faintly when they spoke to him, although he was as yet unable to answer.

He also saw the doctor, like an isolated figure in the dark, and heard him say:

"There, now, you have him back. He'll do, I think."

His first words, when he could speak and saw clearly all about him, and felt the blood on his neck and shirt, were:

"Wife, forgie me. I'm a changed man. Send for't sir."

Which last phrase means, "Send for the clergyman."

When the vicar came and entered the little bedroom where the scared poacher, whose soul had died within him, was lying, still sick and weak, in his bed, and with a spirit that was prostrate with terror, Tom Chuff feebly beckoned the rest from the room, and, the door being closed, the good parson heard the strange confession, and with equal amazement the man's earnest and agitated vows of amendment, and his helpless appeals to him for support and counsel.

These, of course, were kindly met; and the visits of the rector, for some time, were frequent.

One day, when he took Tom Chuff's hand on bidding him good-bye, the sick man held it still, and said:

"Ye'r vicar o' Shackleton, sir, and if I sud dee, ye'll promise me a'e thing, as I a promised ye a many. I a said I'll never gie wife, nor barn, nor folk o' no sort, skelp nor sizzup more, and ye'll know o' me no more among the sipers. Nor never will Tom draw trigger, nor set a snare again, but in an honest way, and after that ye'll no make it a bootless bene for me, but bein', as I say, vicar o' Shackleton, and able to do as ye list, ye'll no let them bury me within twenty good yerd-wands measure o' the a'd beech trees that's round the churchyard of Shackleton."

"I see; you would have your grave, when your time really comes, a good way from the place where lay the grave you dreamed of."

"That's jest it. I'd lie at the bottom o' a marl-pit liefer! And I'd be laid in anither churchyard just to be shut o' my fear o' that, but that a' my kinsfolk is buried beyond in Shackleton, and ye'll gie me yer promise, and no break yer word."

"I do promise, certainly. I'm not likely to outlive you; but, if I should, and still be vicar of Shackleton, you shall be buried somewhere as near the middle of the churchyard as we can find space."

"That'll do."

And so content they parted.

The effect of the vision upon Tom Chuff was powerful, and promised to be lasting. With a sore effort he exchanged his life of desultory adventure and comparative idleness for one of regular industry. He gave up drinking; he was as kind as an originally surly nature would allow to his wife and family; he went to church; in fine weather they crossed the moor to Shackleton Church; the vicar said he came there to look at the scenery of his vision, and to fortify his good resolutions by the reminder.

Impressions upon the imagination, however, are but transitory, and a bad man acting under fear is not a free agent; his real character does not appear. But as the images of the imagination fade, and the action of fear abates, the essential qualities of the man reassert themselves.

So, after a time, Tom Chuff began to grow weary of his new life; he grew lazy, and people began to say that he was catching hares, and pursuing his old contraband way of life, under the rose.

He came home one hard night, with signs of the bottle in his thick speech and violent temper. Next day he was sorry, or frightened, at all events repentant, and for a week or more something of the old horror returned, and he was once more on his good behaviour. But in a little time came a relapse, and another repentance, and then a relapse again, and gradually the return of old habits and the flooding in of all his old way of life, with more violence and gloom, in proportion as the man was alarmed and exasperated by the remembrance of his despised, but terrible, warning.

With the old life returned the misery of the cottage. The smiles, which had begun to appear with the unwonted sunshine, were seen no more. Instead, returned to his poor wife's face the old pale and heartbroken look. The cottage lost its neat and cheerful air, and the melancholy of neglect was visible. Sometimes at night were overheard, by a chance passer-by, cries and sobs from that ill-omened dwelling. Tom Chuff was now often drunk, and not very often at home, except when he came in to sweep away his poor wife's earnings.

Tom had long lost sight of the honest old parson. There was shame mixed with his degradation. He had grace enough left when he saw the thin figure of "t' sir" walking along the road to turn out of his way and avoid meeting him. The clergyman shook his head, and sometimes groaned, when his name was mentioned. His horror and regret were more for the poor wife than for the relapsed sinner, for her case was pitiable indeed.

Her brother, Jack Everton, coming over from Hexley, having heard stories of all this, determined to beat Tom, for his ill-treatment of his sister, within an inch of his life. Luckily, perhaps, for all concerned, Tom happened to be away upon one of his long excursions, and poor Nell besought her brother, in extremity of terror, not to interpose between them. So he took his leave and went home muttering and sulky.

Now it happened a few months later that Nelly Chuff fell sick. She had been ailing, as heartbroken people do, for a good while. But now the end had come.

There was a coroner's inquest when she died, for the doctor had doubts as to whether a blow had not, at least, hastened her death. Nothing certain, however, came of the inquiry. Tom Chuff had left his home more than two days before his wife's death. He was absent upon his lawless business still when the coroner had held his quest.

Jack Everton came over from Hexley to attend the dismal obsequies of his sister. He was more incensed than ever with the wicked husband, who, one way or other, had hastened Nelly's death. The inquest had closed early in the day. The husband had not appeared.

An occasional companion—perhaps I ought to say accomplice—of Chuff's happened to turn up. He had left him on the borders of Westmoreland, and said he would probably be home next day. But Everton affected not to believe it. Perhaps it was to Tom Chuff, he suggested, a secret satisfaction to crown the history of his bad married life with the scandal of his absence from the funeral of his neglected and abused wife.

Everton had taken on himself the direction of the melancholy preparations. He had ordered a grave to be opened for his sister beside her mother's, in Shackleton churchyard, at the other side of the moor. For the purpose, as I have said, of marking the callous neglect of her husband, he determined that the funeral should take place that night. His brother Dick had accompanied him, and they and his sister, with Mary and the children, and a couple of the neighbours, formed the humble cortège.

Jack Everton said he would wait behind, on the chance of Tom Chuff coming in time, that he might tell him what had happened, and make him cross the moor with him to meet the funeral. His real object, I think, was to inflict upon the villain the drubbing he had so long wished to give him. Anyhow, he was resolved, by crossing the moor, to reach the churchyard in time to anticipate the arrival of the funeral, and to have a few words with the vicar, clerk, and sexton, all old friends of his, for the parish of Shackleton was the place of his birth and early recollections.

But Tom Chuff did not appear at his house that night. In surly mood, and without a shilling in his pocket, he was making his way homeward. His bottle of gin, his last investment, half emptied, with its neck protruding, as usual on such returns, was in his coat-pocket.

His way home lay across the moor of Catstean, and the point at which he best knew the passage was from the churchyard of Shackleton. He vaulted the low wall that forms its boundary, and strode across the graves, and over many a flat, half-buried tombstone, toward the side of the churchyard next Catstean Moor.

The old church of Shackleton and its tower rose, close at his right, like a black shadow against the sky. It was a moonless night, but clear. By this time he had reached the low boundary wall, at the other side, that overlooks the wide expanse of Catstean Moor. He stood by one of the huge old beech-trees, and leaned his back to its smooth trunk. Had he ever seen the sky look so black, and the stars shine out and blink so vividly? There was a deathlike silence over the scene, like the hush that precedes thunder in sultry weather. The expanse

before him was lost in utter blackness. A strange quaking unnerved his heart. It was the sky and scenery of his vision! The same horror and misgiving. The same invincible fear of venturing from the spot where he stood. He would have prayed if he dared. His sinking heart demanded a restorative of some sort, and he grasped the bottle in his coat-pocket. Turning to his left, as he did so, he saw the piled-up mould of an open grave that gaped with its head close to the base of the great tree against which he was leaning.

He stood aghast. His dream was returning and slowly enveloping him. Everything he saw was weaving itself into the texture of his vision. The chill of horror stole over him.

A faint whistle came shrill and clear over the moor, and he saw a figure approaching at a swinging trot, with a zig-zag course, hopping now here and now there, as men do over a surface where one has need to choose their steps. Through the jungle of reeds and bulrushes in the foreground this figure advanced; and with the same unaccountable impulse that had coerced him in his dream, he answered the whistle of the advancing figure.

On that signal it directed its course straight toward him. It mounted the low wall, and, standing there, looked into the graveyard.

"Who med answer?" challenged the new-comer from his post of observation.

"Me," answered Tom.

"Who are you?" repeated the man upon the wall.

"Tom Chuff; and who's this grave cut for?" He answered in a savage tone, to cover the secret shudder of his panic.

"I'll tell you that, ye villain!" answered the stranger, descending from the wall, "I a' looked for you far and near, and waited long, and now you're found at last."

Not knowing what to make of the figure that advanced upon him, Tom Chuff recoiled, stumbled, and fell backward into the open grave. He caught at the sides as he fell, but without retarding his fall.

An hour later, when lights came with the coffin, the corpse of Tom Chuff was found at the bottom of the grave. He had fallen direct upon his head, and his neck was broken. His death must have been simultaneous with his fall. Thus far his dream was accomplished.

It was his brother-in-law who had crossed the moor and approached the churchyard of Shackleton, exactly in the line which the image of his father had seemed to take in his strange vision. Fortunately for Jack Everton, the sexton and clerk of Shackleton church were, unseen by him, crossing the churchyard toward the grave of Nelly Chuff, just as Tom the poacher stumbled and fell. Suspicion of direct violence would otherwise have inevitably attached to the

exasperated brother. As it was, the catastrophe was followed by no legal consequences.

The good vicar kept his word, and the grave of Tom Chuff is still pointed out by the old inhabitants of Shackleton pretty nearly in the centre of the churchyard. This conscientious compliance with the entreaty of the panic-stricken man as to the place of his sepulture gave a horrible and mocking emphasis to the strange combination by which fate had defeated his precaution, and fixed the place of his death.

The story was for many a year, and we believe still is, told round many a cottage hearth, and though it appeals to what many would term superstition, it yet sounded, in the ears of a rude and simple audience, a thrilling, and let us hope, not altogether fruitless homily.

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13: Blue Eyes and Diamonds

Lemuel De Bra

1884-1954

Argosy All-Story Weekly, 9 March 1929

DETECTIVE HARRY MILHOLLAND finished his demitasse and thoughtfully lighted a cigarette. Over the match flame he looked into the serious and troubled blue eyes of the girl who sat opposite him in the private dining room.

"Betty, you're the same old madcap! As spoiled as you are pretty, and as selfish as you are sweet! And even though you turned me down and married Chester Danford, it's terribly hard for me to refuse you anything; but I'm going to refuse you this! It's a wild scheme and I won't—"

"Oh, yes, you will, Harry!" Betty Danford interrupted, her blue eyes pleading as she wagged a reproving finger at the man. "You haven't the heart to leave me in this awful predicament when you can help me so easily. Understand, I don't want *you* to steal the necklace; I just want you to hire some one to do it. Surely you know lots of clever thieves who—"

"Who are behind the bars where they belong," Milholland finished, smiling grimly. "Say, Bet, why don't you go right to your husband and tell him the whole thing? Chester is good-hearted, and as square as they make 'em."

"No!" Betty compressed her lips and shook her head emphatically. "Tell Chester that I associated with those people? That I gambled and lost more than I could afford? Confess to him that I pawned the diamond necklace he gave me for a wedding present? And that I had a paste necklace made to deceive him? I can't do it, Harry! Why, it took me a week to muster up the nerve to tell you! And now you must help me! My scheme—"

"How much have you lost?" Detective Milholland demanded abruptly.

"I won't tell you!" Betty pouted prettily. "I'm ashamed of it. Besides, I wouldn't take your money even if you had any, and since everyone admits that you're an honest policeman, I know you must be dreadfully poor."

"I'm satisfied, Betty." Milholland smiled at the girl's naïve frankness. "Say, why couldn't you steal the necklace yourself?"

"Because I'm too much of a bungler. I've discovered that I can't even tell my husband a little fib without half choking. And the day I pawned the necklace and told Chester that I was having it cleaned and repaired was— was a regular nightmare. I'll never get over it. And I can't ever wear the paste string again. It chokes me. I'm in constant terror of my husband discovering the truth. Please don't keep me in torment any longer, Harry! Get some one you can trust and have him steal the paste string. I won't have to say a word. My darling hubby will think it was the genuine necklace that was stolen— and he'll want to get me another right away. In the meantime I'll have the pawnbroker break up the

necklace, sell the stones, and what's due me will clear up everything. Please, Harry!"

"Don't coax, Betty! This thing isn't half as easy as you think."

"Don't you know a man you can trust?"

"Sure, but—"

"And that you can get to-night?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then it's settled!" Betty Danford opened her hand bag and got out a key. "This is the key to the south door. Your man can get in with this key and then leave it in my room. When he's ready to leave, he can open the window in my room that lets on the porch roof, and go out the door the way he came. Chester will think that I forgot to lock the window and that the thief got in that way. There isn't much in the room worth stealing except the necklace. That's in a secret compartment in the bottom of the upper right-hand drawer of my dressing table. Your man had better take out all the drawers and dump the contents on the bed. Make it look like a real robbery. See, Harry? Well, when he does that, he'll discover the catch that operates the secret compartment. You can trust your man not to go into the dining room, can't you? Our silverware—"

"You can't trust any thief too far," Milholland said grimly. "Where'll you be? And your husband?"

"I'll get him to take me to dinner some place. There'll be no one in the house. Better— er— what do you say?— pull the job early. Say, eight o'clock. Then if your thief is seen going to the house, or leaving, no one will think anything of it. Eh, Harry?"

"Eight o'clock will do, but—"

"But me no buts! Harry Milholland, how can you be so obstinate?" Impulsively, Betty Danford reached across the table and "spanked" Milholland's big hand.

"Darn you, Betty!" muttered the detective, drawing his hand away as if the touch of the girl's fingers brought back an old heartache. "I don't want to do this thing, but I suppose I'll have to. It isn't fair to your husband, and I wash my hands of the whole affair. If anything goes wrong—"

"It's all my grief! Certainly!"

"That wasn't what I meant, Betty."

"No matter! Cheer up, old gloom! And I must be going." The girl jumped up and stepped around the table to the door. "Remember, I'm depending on you, Harry! 'By!" Smiling, she blew him a kiss and was gone, leaving Detective Milholland staring at the curtains, a troubled look on his face.

CHESTER DANFORD arrived late that evening and, to Betty's dismay, promptly declared that he was tired, half sick, and was going to retire at once. No, he didn't want any dinner! Go out? Absolutely impossible!

Betty, who all her young life had had her own sweet way, spent a desperate half hour getting her husband to change his mind. And when it was done, she could not shake off the feeling that she had aroused his suspicions.

"Bet," he said as they were at the door ready to leave, "you seem darned anxious to get me out of the house to-night. What's the idea, hon? Surprise party, or something? And, say— why'n thunder don't you wear your necklace any more? If this is a party, go put your sparklers on. You look half naked without 'em!"

Betty glanced at her wrist watch. It was five minutes to eight!

"All right, dear," she murmured. "If it pleases you, I'll wear them." She turned toward the stairway, then stopped. "No, Chester, let's do this: have our dinner at once, then come back here. I'll put on the necklace, all for you, and we'll go to—"

"You put it on now or I won't go a step," declared Chester Danford.

Betty stared at him, trying hard to hide her panic. "Chester Danford, just for that I won't wear that old necklace to-night— or ever again! How in the world can you be so obstinate?"

"The whole world is obstinate except you, isn't it, honey?"

"Certainly!" declared Betty, and tossed her head. "But, listen, sugar." Betty went to the hall seat and sat down beside her husband.

Two minutes later the front door closed behind them. As Betty stepped into the car she caught sight of a man strolling slowly down the sidewalk.

"Don't like the looks of that fellow," muttered Danford as he eased the car into the traffic. "You sure the house is all locked— windows 'n' everything, hon?"

"I think so," Betty half choked. "But I'm so hungry I— I can't think."

"Wish we'd stayed home. Bet, I got something to tell you. Was saving it for to-night—when we'd be all alone. Now that you've hustled me out of my house and home I think I'll make you wait awhile. Eh?"

"What's it about?" demanded Betty quickly.

"W-e-l-l, just to tease you a little, I'll tell you this much. Old Abe Arnstein has been a good friend of mine for years. Thinking, of course, that my darling little wife wouldn't have any secrets from me, he let something slip the other day. Well, here we are!"

"Let— something— slip!" The words came tonelessly from Betty's lips as she leaned on her husband's arm and stepped to the curb. "What on earth—"

"Don't talk here, Bet! Wait until we get a table."

Her appetite gone, Betty sat motionless while her husband gave the order.

"I don't suppose it amounts to anything," Betty managed to say when the waiter had left, "but what possible business could you have with Abe Arnstein that would interest me, Chester?"

Instead of replying, Chester Danford reached in his inside coat pocket and took out something wrapped in tissue paper, which he unfolded and held up.

"My necklace!" blurted Betty. "How in the world?"

"I told you Uncle Abe was a good friend of mine," said Danford. "When he discovered that I didn't know anything about your pawning your necklace he was in a terrible stew. Finally I got the whole story from him— and redeemed your necklace, of course."

Betty sat speechless.

"This afternoon I slipped home to tell you about it, but you were out. So I went to your room and got the phony string Abe had made for you. This is it. Do you—"

"This is it? Then where is the other— the genuine one?"

"Why, that's the surprise I was keeping for you, hon. I put your necklace in the secret compartment where you had this thing. Then —Gosh, Bet, what makes you so white?"

Chester's words seemed to come from afar off, yet they beat on Betty's ears like cruel hammers. The glass of water she reached for seemed to swim before her eyes.

"Close here— too warm. Back in a minute."

Her feet feeling as if they were made of lead, she ran for a taxi, tumbled in and gave a frantic order. As the taxi started Betty glanced at her wrist watch. Seven minutes past eight!

SO FAR as she could see, the house was dark when she reached home. Telling the driver to wait, Betty hurried up the walk and let herself in the front door. Punching on the lights, she ran up the stairs to her room. One look— and she flew to the phone.

"Harry!" she gasped when the connection had been made. "There's been a terrible mistake! I—"

"You better not talk over the phone!" cautioned Detective Milholland. "That man hasn't got here yet. I'm to meet him at the east end of Ellington Street bridge. You better hurry over there. I'll wait there."

Betty slammed up the receiver. As fast as her high heels could carry her, she tumbled down the stairs and out to the waiting taxi.

Two shadowy figures were standing on the sidewalk some fifteen feet from the end of the bridge when Betty slipped out of her taxi. As she hurried toward the men she caught a glimpse of the broad, slow-moving river, and the lights of the city beyond.

"So it's phony, eh?" one of the men shouted angrily. "Had me risk my life for a bunch o' bum rocks, did yuh? Well—"

The rest, Betty did not hear. Horrified, she saw the speaker spring back and raise his arm. His hand shot out. High over the bridge rail flew something that seemed alive with sparkling flame.

Fleeing steps pounding on the walk— a blur of voices— strong arms that caught her quickly— those were the last things Betty remembered.

"NEVER DREAMED you'd faint!" exclaimed Chester Danford when she had regained her senses. "Harry and I were sure that a girl who had the nerve to buck the gaming tables like you did could stand a little rough play. Have another nip o' this Scotch!"

"No," said Betty firmly, pushing the glass away. "I— I want to think. I came to in the taxi, recognized your voice, and got suspicious. I could have walked into the house— but it was nicer to be carried." Betty looked up at Detective Milholland. "So you— er— squealed, eh?"

"I did, Betty," Milholland admitted, accepting the glass Danford offered. "I had to play square with your husband. You know, two wrongs never make one right. So Chester and I framed it up to have one of my own men slip into the house and get the phony necklace. Knowing, of course, that you would phone me, I waited for the call, then hurried to meet you. There, on the bridge, we went through the little play suggested by Chester— and threw the paste necklace into the river!"

"Uh, huh." Betty's blue eyes were thoughtful. "Then, Chester, that story you gave me about Uncle Abe spilling the beans was all a fake?"

"All except that I did redeem your necklace, hon. It was the real one that I showed you to-night at the table. Gosh, you looked so sick I felt sorry for you. If you hadn't got out so quick I'd have given in and told you the truth. Well, it's over now; here—" Danford took out the diamond necklace, but Betty waved it away.

"You keep it awhile," she said, rising. "I'm not going to wear it until— until I feel that I deserve it. As for you, Harry Milholland, I'm just going to murder you the first day I have time. Moreover, you remember that this afternoon I was so grateful to you that I blew you a kiss? Well, I want it back!"

Before the astonished detective could move to prevent her, Betty kissed him smack on the lips. Then she slipped into her husband's arms.

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14: The Moving Finger

Lawrence B. Jupp
1871-1954
Kalgoorlie Western Argus 24 Nov 1908

The author was a wheat farmer in the York district of Western Australia.

IT was just before last harvesting that Maurice Woodgate came to the homestead one burning day, and after five minutes' flowery rhetoric, had me fully persuaded that unless I gave him a job, I should never know another happy hour.

He was a glib-tongued young chap; handsome enough in a way, with the manners of a lord— I mean the sort of lord you read about in books, not the kind some of us have run across out here.

"I'm travelling for my health," he told me, with a sly wink, one morning, when, having finished stripping the far paddock, we were taking a spell-oh in the shade of a thick cluster of she-oaks. "For the good of my health. When the old guv'nor relents or dies— I expect he'll die first, he was seventy-two last birthday— maybe I shall go home for the good of my soul. You Australians are too devil- may- care— too wild, for a quiet youngster with a delicate chest like myself." He grinned, and lit his pipe deliberately with a flaring wax match.

"That's right," I cried, angrily, snatching the box out of his hand. "Set the whole damn place afire, you son of Satan! Here, take these safeties, and if ever I catch you strike a wax light again while you're with me, I'll shoot you!"

He laughed lazily.

"Steady on— don't get waxy yourself, boss. I forgot, honour bright. I've been busy forgetting all my life, you know; it's come to be second nature with me. 'What a blessed thing it is to be in a state o' nature, ain't it,' as somebody or other said somewhere— Squeers, I think. Ever read Dickens, Mr. Oliver?"

"No," I grunted; "I've plenty to' do without wasting my time reading. Now, get a move on; we ought to have started the twelve-acre a week ago."

I soon got quite fond of Maurice; I never met a better tempered fellow in my life. A good worker, too; ignorant, of course, like most Britishers, but willing, and I'd any day sooner have to deal with a willing man, who hardly knows his right hand from his left, than a loafer who's for ever telling you what he would do if he were boss of the show— I've no time for that sort. It was all right enough my taking a fancy for Maurice, but unluckily my sister Betty, who kept house for me in those days, went and did exactly the same thing, only more so.

The first I knew of it was one evening as I drove home from the township, six miles away. As I turned into the lane that led up to the farmstead, I saw two figures, which I recognised at once, standing in the shadow of a great red-gum.

The moon was coming up, big and full, out of the dusky ranges; the western sky was the colour of ripe wheat, and all flecked with little drifting clouds as crimson as poppy heads. Betty and Maurice were staring at the moon, and how it was they didn't hear the sound of wheels, I can't think. Perhaps love is deaf as well as blind. They were holding hands, and looking so innocent and Sunday-afternoon-like that if it hadn't been for a strong sense of duty I should never have had the heart to interrupt love's young dream. However, it's no use risking nightmare, so I drew rein, and called out briskly: "Watered the horses yet, 'Timber-rails'?" (My nickname for Woodgate.) "Tea ready, Bet?" Poor Betty nearly jumped out her freckled skin.

"Bother you, Ted!" she said crossly; "you gave me quite a turn."

"WeII, 'Timber's' had his turn, you've had yours, and now it's mine," says I.

"What do you mean, stoopid?" asked Betty, gnawing at her finger.

"Why, tea of course," I said with a laugh; "come, bustle, my girl, I'm hungry. I'll walk up with you. Here, take the sulky round to the stable, Maurice."

Woodgate obeyed without a word. I'd never known him nonplussed before. He drove slowly away, whistling "The, Girl I Left Behind Me," between his teeth.

Betty's face showed very white in the half-light, and as we strolled towards the house, I asked her point-blank whether Woodgate had been making love. "For," I finished, "if so, out he goes quick and lively. I'll have none of that sort of tomfoolery while you're in my charge, understand that clearly, please."

Betty cried as if her heart would break: we had a bit of a scene, I can tell you; and— well, she's the only sister l ever had,— so at last I told her to dry those pretty eyes and say no more about, it.

"I'll speak to Maurice in the morning," I said, "Meantime don't worry your little head Sis. He hasn't behaved too good, I think, but it's no manner of use crying over spilt milk, and that's a solid fact."

I had a talk man to man with Woodgate the next day, and gave him my straightforward opinion of his conduct.

"I'm in the wrong," he confessed frankly; "I always am. But look here Oliver, I'm heels over ears in love with your sister, and I believe she cares for me; in fact, we've settled—"

"Oh, have you!" I interrupted wrathfully, but he held up an entreating hand.

"Listen to me a moment," he implored. "I've a trifle of money put by— not much, you know, 'bout a couple of hundred, and in six months' time, when I'm five-and-twenty, there's another eight hundred pounds coming to me under my mother's will. The old man can't keep me out of it, you see; he'd like to, but he can't get behind the law. I've been a bit harum-scarum, I admit, nothing more— I'm no crook. I mean to take up land; in six months from now you'll have taught me the ropes; and when I'm fairly settled down and got a home of my own, I

hope you won't see any just cause or impediment— as the parrots say— to my marrying your sister."

"Under those circumstances, and if she's still in the same mind," I said, "I'll give my consent to your engagement; then at the end of a year or so it'll be time enough to talk about marrying— she's full young yet, barely nineteen. But mind, if you stay on here with me— if I'm fool enough to allow it— there must be no smooging or nonsense of that kind: you'll just be an ordinary paid hand, living in your camp on the hill yonder, and, I'll not have you in the house at all unless by my special invitation. You'll do your own cooking in future; I'll give you your rations every week, and, you're not to see Betty, except I'm present. If you like to agree to these conditions you can stop on; if not, roll up your bluey, take your cheque, and clear at once— the sooner the better."

He made a wry face, but said he supposed it was a case of needs must be when the devil drives. Complimentary to me, I thought!

Rather to my surprise, Betty acquiesced in the arrangement quite cheerfully. I had expected a storm of tears and reproaches. That they continued their clandestine meetings I make no doubt; love plays fast and loose with hard and fast rules; but although I guessed pretty well what was going forward, I discreetly, or indiscreetly, turned the other way and said nothing. It is to be remembered I was young myself— not that I ever had any time for sweet-hearting, at least not until— but all that happened later, and has nothing to with this story.

ONE sultry afternoon, towards the end of harvesting, I was in the township waiting patiently while the harassed blacksmith shoed my mare, when I saw George Simpson come out of the "Rose Hotel" and cross the road directly in front of the forge. He was an old schoolmate of mine; his father's land had joined ours before the old chap took to rash speculation and lost every penny he possessed, including the farm and gear. When last I had heard of George he was up on the goldfields, knocking around and doing very little good for himself, from all accounts.

I hailed him by name; he had been drinking, and at the sound of my voice he gave a great start and stared about him in bewildered fashion. Then his inflamed eyes fell on me, and he lurched into the smithy and gave me a handgrip that set my fingers tingling.

"What fair wind's blown you in here, George " I asked. "Made your pile and come back to your native parts to splash it up?"

"No such cursed luck," said he. "I wasn't doin' too bad, by no means, until a dandy young bloke I took in as partner took me in. Went off and left me without a red cent— give you my word. Cute 'un, too, he was, my oath! Managed it so

that I couldn't set the traps on him; but if ever we drift alongside again I'll square matters, sure's my name's George Simpson."

"Ah," I said; "looking for a job, then. If so, you'd better come back with me to Gumberdine, I can keep you going for a month or two. Twenty-five bob a week and tucker."

"Till death do us part," said he, with a beery chuckle, and we clinched the bargain with another solemn shake of the fist.

As we drove up to the homestead I saw Betty scuttle into the house, and next instant Maurice, rather red in the face, came out of the cowshed carrying a bucket.

"That little Bet?" enquired George. "My word! she's growed a big lump of a girl. Last time I saw her she was doin' subtraction sums on a bit er slate, an' wipin' her nose on her pinny. It's a queer world, ain't it? Hullo! Who's the bloke with the bucket My oath! You don't mean to tell me it's Maurice Woodgate? Well, if this ain't a stroke o' luck."

"Know him?" I asked.

"Do I not," he responded with a curious relish. "Like my own brother— if I had one. No need to interdooce us— no need whatsumever."

"Here, 'Timber-rails,' " I called out. "I've brought you a mate— George Simpson from the fields. He says you're old pals."

Maurice dropped the bucket with a clatter, and went dead white; as the blood rushed back into his cheeks, he nodded curtly.

"I'll see to the mare, boss," he said in brusque tones: "If George Simpson goes up to my camp, I'll give him a shake-down until he can fix things for himself. The billy's just on the boil. I'll be there in two ticks."

He unharnessed the mare, and led her away to the stables.

George stared after him with a gaze of sodden gravity. "Fancy meetin' ole Maurice like this 'ere," he remarked, chuckling fatuously. "Quite a unexpected pleasure, I do assure you."

He stood there shaking his head and rumbling with mirth.

"Well," I said, somewhat mystified by his peculiar behaviour, but setting it. down to drink, that great leveller. "See you first thing, in the morning, George. I'll give Woodgate some extra tucker for the pair o' you. To-morrow we'll make matters properly ship-shape. Be good."

I watched him as he steered a devious course for the camp, pleased enough to be rid of him until he was sober; then I went indoors, and told Betty of the new arrival.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS affairs worked with tolerable smoothness. I had another hundred acres of wheat to strip, and the three of us set to with a will. George had rigged himself a tent close to Maurice's camp, but I noticed that, despite

their boasted acquaintanceship, the two men were on anything but friendly terms. I could have sworn that Woodgate's air of jaunty indifference was but a cloak beneath which he vainly strove to conceal a certain craven fear, lea shed together with a hatred that might at any moment break loose and become murderous. As for Simpson, he seemed to take a deliberate delight in goading his companion to the verge of madness by covert threats and mocking taunts, the hidden meaning of which I puzzled over in vain. I remember once seeing a cat and a snake manoeuvring for the advantage: the conduct of George and Maurice reminded me irresistibly of that strange scene. Still, so long as the two confined themselves to black looks and innuendoes, there was not much harm done, and; as I have said before, they both put in hard graft.

But a really embarrassing feature of the business was George Simpson's marked devotion to Betty. They had known one another ever since they were the tiniest tots, and George, who, when sober, was a good-looking, presentable young fellow, possessed a susceptibility which did more credit to his heart than his head. Of course, Betty enjoyed this double-homage with a zest born of considerable appetite, and the exercised her power despotically whenever I was safely out of the way.

It was no use my asking her who paid the men their wages; and when I threatened to sack the pair of them, she merely laughed, and in that case I mustn't expect her to help with the harvest. In fact, she had the whip-hand of the three of us, and knew it, too. Womanlike, she only played one tomfool off against the other. She didn't care a button for George, but cared very much that George should care for her. In spite of coquetry the whole of her silly heart was in a Maurice's grip, that there could be no doubt. Even George saw it, and as may be supposed, the knowledge did not to increase his goodwill towards his rival

As he last acre of sun-browned wheat fell to the busy stripper, I heaved a deep sigh of relief.

We were enduring an abnormal spell of heat and for miles round the forest was on fire. A dense haze hung about the wooded hills, and drifted slowly down the cultivated valleys. At night the sky was lurid with long leagues of burning bush, and as far as the eye could reach, red, twisting flames swept the countryside, leaving behind them a blackened trail grey with smouldering ashes.

The moon rose and cut her way through the reek like a crimson scimitar, and what wind there was blew fiery as the breath of a mighty furnace. Therefore, I rejoiced exceedingly when last brimming bag of grain was safely garnered in he big iron shed adjoining the stables.

That same evening George rode to the township, and consequent on a month's rigid abstinence, took with him a thirst aggravated by the exceptionally torrid temperature. He was decidedly shickered when he returned about

midnight. From my mattress on the verandah heard his husky voice beseeching imaginary comrades to make merry, requests interspersed with reprehensibly familiar appeals to his Creator for direct information concerning the probable duration of the hot spell, his fervid peroration I remember, contained an odious comparison, highly in favour the mean temperature of the nethermost regions. Then I turned over and fell asleep again.

At dawn I encountered a chastened George in the yard. His cheeks were white and placid; his nose shone angrily, and one of his eyes was in purple mourning.

"Hullo," I said. "What wrong with your eye? Been discussing politics?"

He gave me a sour look, then burst out excitedly, "See here, boss, if you don't want murder done, you'll git rid o' that dirty cow up yonder. S'truth! Ain't it bad enuff to rob a man without stoushin' him inter the bargin when he's half tight? He needn't think I'm afraid o' him— I'll show him who's the better man quick 'n' lively. Blank my blanky eyes if I don't!"

"He's blanked one of 'em for you already," I vouchsafed. "Now, look here, George, I don't want any more of this. If you and Maurice can't hit it off together, one or both of you'll have to go, see ?"

"I'll hit him off," growled he. "I wonder Betty has anythin' to say to a crook like—"

"Leave my sister's name out of it," I broke in, wrathfully. "I tell you once and for all. I won't have you chaps scrapping over her in this wild-dog fashion. I'll pack her off to stay with her aunt by to-morrow mornings train," I concluded, with an uneasy consciousness that I was proposing an undertaking immeasurably beyond my powers.

"I never mentioned Betty's name to him," declared George, hotly. "I know she's a precious sight too good for me, or him either for that matter, but if you think I'm goin' to sit quiet and let myself be bluffed by a low-down tough like Maurice Woodgate, who dursn't so much as show his ugly face on the fields, you're mistaken, Ted Oliver."

"Why," I cried, light dawning on me, "do you mean to tell me that Woodgate is the man who let you in?"

"I never said so," he interrupted sullenly. "Well, there're the horses to feed. I'd best get a move on."

He slouched off into the stables, and I went up to the camp to have it out with Maurice. His tent was empty, and presently I saw him the other side of the gully driving the sheep into the far paddock.

At the breakfast table I told Betty what had occurred, and hinted that one or other of the men would have to leave at the end of the week.

"Send George away, then. I'm quite sure he only got his deserts. I wonder Maurice let him off so easy. I heard his horrid drunken voice singing out at I

don't know what hour last night," she said, with all the callousness of a young woman who has by means of simple subtraction and her own powers of attraction succeeded in seducing the entire male sex to a solitary unit of colossal proportions.

"At any rate I shall speak very seriously to Woodgate," I replied, rising and swallowing my tea at a gulp. Betty made a face at me.

I did speak seriously to Maurice. He professed a profound penitence, and faithfully promised amendment for the future.

After tea that evening I peeped into the camp and discovered the erring twain apparently on excellent terms; they were playing piquet with a dirty pick of cards by the dim light of a hurricane lantern.

I was smoking a pipe preparatory to turning in, when I heard the sound of a shot ring out and wake a score of sleeping echoes that lurked somewhere in the rocky gully. Betty heard it too.

"What was that?" she asked, lifting a startled face from her needlework.

"I expect it's George after a native dog," I replied, calmly enough, although my heart was going dot and carry one. "There've been a few about lately. He told me he meant trying for a scalp or two."

Now this was lie. I hadn't heard of a dingo being seen in the neighborhood for months. I put down my pipe, went on to the verandah and stood there listening intently. I felt a touch upon my arm. Maurice seemed to have risen mysteriously from the long shadows which looked all the blacker by contrast with the wan light of the rising moon. His face was that of a corpse, and despite the stifling heat, his teeth were going like castanets.

"George has had an accident— shot himself," he said hoarsely. "Got any brandy?"

"Who's shot?— Oh, Ted!"

It was Betty's voice. She had followed me so silently that her scared quaver grated on my overstrung nerves with a sudden jar. Then she caught sight of Maurice's ghastly countenance and, "Oh, thank God!" she whispered.

'The words, simple and natural as they were, stung me like the flick of a whip. I swung around on her.

"Fetch the brandy," I said roughly, "and stop here till your wanted."

She ran indoors without a word, and, returning with the bottle, gave it to me. I noticed that she had a roll of lint in her hand and a big pair of scissors.

"Come," she said, and set off in the direction of the camp. It was sheer rank mutiny, but a woman seldom rebels without due cause. In a case such as this she involuntarily takes the lead by virtue of her womanhood; it is the sublime mothering instinct, I suppose, for which good gift of the great Mother of us all, we men ought to go down on our unaccustomed knees every day of our lives.

"How did it happen?" I asked Maurice, as we hastened after Betty.

"He was cleaning his revolver," he replied, brokenly. "There must have been a cartridge left in by mistake. I was reading. I heard the shot, and he called out, 'Oh, Christ, I'm done!' "

"Never knew he had a revolver," I grunted.

Maurice gripped me hard by the wrist.

"Call her back— don't let her go inside," he whispered, hoarsely. "There's blood all over the place; man, it's a shambles!"

"'I can't stop her," I said feebly; "she's got the bit in her teeth, you know that as well as I do."

He laughed softly, a horrid, mirthless laugh that sounded inexpressibly hideous in the still, dark, breathless night, beneath the watchful stars and haggard moon. Despite myself I shuddered, and at that moment we reached the camp. Betty had paused just outside George's tent; for an instant she hesitated, her hand at her heart, then she lifted the dingy flap and entered. Maurice and I were close behind her.

The wounded man lay half on the ground, half across his puddled mattress. His breath came in short, sobbing gasps, but he was fully conscious, and his gaze went past me and rested with strange malignity upon Woodgate's scared face. Betty was as white as death, but the brave girl knelt straight down and strove to staunch the red flow that welled ceaselessly from his side. His shirt was charred and blackened; the weapon must have been almost touching his body at the time of its discharge. With trembling hands I poured some brandy into a pannikin, and held it to his lips. He swallowed a little with difficulty then his glazed eyes sought Betty's and the ghost of a smile flickered over his grey, drawn features.

"Shot myself," he managed to jerk out. "Cleanin' that ole cow of a shootin'-iron— no skite."

The revolver lay on the floor close to my foot. I picked it up and glanced at it mechanically. By the uncertain light of the lantern I saw the initials "M.W.'" roughly scratched on the handle.

I turned to Woodgate.

"Don't stand there staring like a looney," I said, huskily. "Ride hell-and-leather to the township. Fetch the doctor— d'ye hear me?"

He made no answer; I doubt if he even heard my words. His mouth was all twisted on one side, and his starting eyes never left the waxen face that grinned wolfishly up at him. For a dreadful moment it seemed as if the two men were striving in ghastly fashion to stare each other out of countenance; then George laughed weakly.

"I'm euchred— make the most of it, mate," he muttered, so low that I hardly caught the words.

"Goodbye Ted— Betty— oh, my little lass!" The blood rushed into his throat and choked him; next minute his twisting limbs relaxed and he fell back dead.

Betty bent over the limp body and just touched the pale brow with her lips; then she rose to her feet and stood swaying from side to side; her eyes wide with horror. I thought she was going to fall. Maurice thought so, too, for he suddenly awoke from his stupor and sprang forward to catch her in his arms, but she flung out her hands, and repulsed him so violently that he reeled back and caught hold of me to steady himself.

"Don't let him touch you, Ted," she cried, and her voice frightened me, "There's blood on his hands! He's a murderer. He fired the shot. George lied to save him; to save me! Oh, my God!" She burst into a passion of tears. "Oh, let me go, let me go! I can't breathe— I'm suffocating!" And she fled into the night, crying out like a wild thing as she ran.

Maurice made as if to follow her, but I stayed him.

"Stop where you are," I said shakily; "there's something crook about all this. How came he to be cleaning your revolver? See, here are your initials, "M.W.," on the handle."

He shook me off with a savage oath, and stood for a moment scowling down at the expressionless, pinched features of the dead man with an ugly look of fear and baffled hatred; then he raised the flap of the tent and passed outside. I followed him.

"Where are you going?" I demanded, sternly.

"Going?" he said. "Where am I going?" He laughed harshly. "Why to the township to give myself up, of course."

He swung round on his heel and strode away into the darkness.

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15: Sir Galahad of Gila

George Allan England
1877-1936
Blue Book, Sep 1925

"SOME people, they calls me a coward, I know," smokily remarked Pierre Lablague, "but I guess I been brave as the next one. And anyhow, I kills my man, that time at Gila. It ain't every man, ba golly, can say he kill his— w'at you call?— his rival for a gal. No sir!"

Pierre nodded affirmation as he leaned far back in his rough plank chair. He squinted at the lumbermen's socks and moccasins that hung steaming on the wire over the roaring stove in Mackenzie's lumber-camp on the headwaters of the snowbound Androscoggin.

"No, ba golly!" he continued. "I ain't always been cook on a lumber-camp, same as now. I been out West, one time, me. Long time ago, that was. Star-X Ranch, Mister, with four t'ousand sheeps, near the Gila River. I ain't say why I walk on that ranch, one day, and ask for a job. Mebbe I *did* borrow a horse on the next State, and keep her too long. That ain't nobody's business, now. Anyhow, they ain't never ketch me. They follows the horse's tracks, after I turns her loose, and I gets clair.

"So then, I comes on the ranch, goes to the kitchen door; and the boss' wife, he's do a washin' on the back porch.

" 'I'll do that washin' for you, Missus, says I, polite. And the wife, he's kind of sick that day— awful hot day, I tol' you! — and he's let me. I do 'em good for the lady, and hang 'em all out on the line for him. *Sure* I can wash, and iron too. I can wash just so good like any womans or Chinamans, neither. Collar, stiff bosom, boil-shirt, ain't make no difference. I can do 'em so good, you'd just as soon have a regular laundry as have 'em.

"Well, I hangs out them clothes, and while I been work at that, the woman's daughter he's ride home, on the yard. My golly, that gal, he's w'at you call one peach! She's got eye on him blue like the bluin'water; long hair on his head, gold like one canary-bird; and w'en you talk about the shape, *bon Dieu*! That gal got a shape like a pippin!

"He ain't use no paint, that gal, but got fat cheeks on him, red like a boil' lobster. And w'en he's jump off his pony and smile at me, while I'm hang out the wash, his teeth shines whiter like her old man's shirt w'at I just been finish, me!

" 'Hello, stranger!' the gal say, just like that. 'Who's you, and w'at you do here?'

" ' Hello, you'self!' says I. 'That don't matter who I am, but I knows pretty gal w'en I sees him!

"By that she's laugh, and go on the house. And my heart, he's beat like flivver engine. Don't matter if I do have one, two wife somewheres in Canadaw. That been years ago, and I ain't hear nothin' from him, long time. Mebbe dead; how I know, me? Anyhow, I been Frenchmans, and m' heart he's go like you step on the gas.

"THAT gal, I sees him look out the window at me, and I know he's ask his mother 'bout me. Oh, I knows how the womens do, you bet my life!

" '*Pauvre* gal, ' I thinks. 'He's fall in love with me, already. Ain't over nineteen year old, but he's want to get married. If I only have the money, that's all right. But I ain't got one red cent. 'Pierre,' I says to myself, 'you got to work hard in here, get some money, not leave poor gal wear his heart out for nothin'!'

"And I makes my mind-right away, that gal he's goin' be Mrs. Lablague Number Tree. Four, mebbe. I forget "which.

"Pretty soon I gets all the wash hang out, and go on the house again. The woman, he's cook big supper, and the gal he's help some.

" 'Looks like you got lots cookin', says I.

" 'That's right,' say the lady. 'We got ten in the family, and twenty-four hired hand. That take some grub!'

" 'I'll help you, lady,' says I.

" 'Can you cook?' say the gal.

" 'Sure!' says I. 'Cook, ba golly, good like any womans! Cook all kinds things, specially woodchuck!'

"Woodchuck? say the gal. W'at's that?'

"Ain't that ignorant for you, Mister? Not know woodchuck! But out West, I shuppose they ain't have 'em.

" 'Wood*chuck*, says I. 'Why, he's grow everywhere in Canadaw, like big mushrat. You take a fat one, skin her and bake her good with sweet patate and plenty gravy, and I just so soon have chicken as have her. Or any odder man!'

"They laughs, and the gal say:

" 'I'm glad I ain't live in Canadaw, eat mushrat, me!' But all the time, I see he's crazy bout me. And I thinks:

" 'Well, mebbe you go Canadaw with me, after all, *hein*?'

"The woman, she's say his name is Mrs. Rawlins, and the gal, he's Polly Rawlins. And I tol' 'em my name, too. Only I ain't give my real name, on account of how I borrow that horse, and somebody been hunt me. I tol' em my name been 'Poleon Lamoureux. That's a good name, ain't it? Lamoureux mean, in French, a man w'at been in love. And I sure been in love with pretty Polly Rawlins. She ain't know w'at Lamoureux mean; but never mind, I goin' tol' her, soon enough. Just now, they talks "bout cookin'.

" 'If you can cook,' says Mrs. Rawlins, 'I like to have you help us with some doughnut.'

" Sure!' says I. 'Doughnut, I can cook him better like any womans. How many you want? Four, five dozen?'

" 'How long you think five dozen she's goin' last on this ranch?' says Polly. 'We fry her by the barrel, out on the yard. I show you, me!'

"I like to have Polly show me anyt'ing, so I say all right, and we mix up great immense batch dough, and take her out on the yard. They got big kettle out there, on some brick oven. I make one grand fire, and fry hundred doughnut all to one time. Fry more than barrel doughnuts. And Polly, he's come out once in a while to see me, and by the way he's laugh, I know he's love me 'most to death.

" 'You like sometime go Canadaw?' I ask. 'That's where they make doughnuts better as anywhere else, and have the Canadaw high-wine, and—'

" 'And mushrat!' she say. 'No sir!'

"Then he's go on the house again, but I know he ain't mean z0/ W'en womans say no, he mean yes, ain't she? Most all my wives says no, but they marries me just same. And me, fryin' doughnut on the yard, by the big cottonwood-tree, I know Polly he's just so good as mine, already!

"WELL, Mister," Pierre continued after tamping his pipe with an unseemly thumb, while cruel winds whirled snow over the camp, "after I fry doughnut 'bout one hour, some of the ranch mans begin to ride on the yard and come home for supper.

"They most all ain't pay no 'tention to me. But one big feller, more than six foot high and strong like bull, he's stop by the fire and look me over. He's all sunburn, that man, and got black eye and big mustache, with guns on his belt. And he's say:

" 'Who the devil you been, Shrimpy?'

" 'I been the new cook,' says I. 'And if I ain't friendly with a man, he's goin' get some slow pizen every day on his tea.'

" 'I'll shoot your block off!' say the man.

" 'Shoot quick, then!' says I, and dips up a scoop of the hot grease. 'Can you shoot quicker'n I can throw b'ilin' fat?'

"He ain't dare shoot. And some more of the men, they laugh, and he's go on the house, mad like hornet w'en you bust his nest down.

" 'You wait, you French jumpin'-jack!' he say. 'My name been Rattlesnake Sam, and no Frenchman goin' talk back to me. I ketch you away from the ranch, some day, and you goin' to be bait for coyotes!'

"I only lift my shoulder, 'cause why do I have to go away from the ranch? So long as my Polly, he's stay in there, I goin' stay too. And after we been marry, ain't I been the boss? I guess Rattlesnake Sam won't stay long, then!

"Supper-time, I helps Mrs. Rawlins and my Polly wait on table, and I spills some hot tea on Sam. The rest of the mans, they ain't let Sam shoot me. And after supper, I helps wash the dish, and w'en the womens go for make up some bed, I says:

" 'I help you make the bed, me!'

" ' Wat?' says my Polly. 'You know how to make the bed, too?'

" 'Sure!' says I. 'Aint no woman make a bed better than me!'

"That's true, too. I run lodgin'-house in Trois Riviéres, one time, with my wife Number T'ree or Four— I forgets which— and make lots beds. So I helps the womens, and I sees Polly he's laugh and love me more than ever. 'Cause why not? Ain't I the handy husband for a gal? Wash the clothes, wash the dish, fry doughnut, do the cookin', make the bed, do everything! Where you get American feller do all that? Or any odder man!

"Me and my Polly has some talk, and he's told me his father's been away to Santa Fe with big lot of sheep, and wont be back in'quite a while. And Polly say:

" 'You been a wonder, 'Poleon. You'll make one good man for some womans, ain't it?

" 'Sure!' says I. 'I'll make the best husband on the world for some pretty gal. And I knows who that gal is, too!'

"Then I look at Polly, hard, and he's got red on the face, like he's try hard not to laugh. But I know that ain't the real reason. It's the love in his heart for me, as do that. Ba golly, *oui*!

"After a while I go on the bunkhouse, have a smoke with the men, and sing some Canadaw song— '*Alouette*, *Genti Alouette'*, and '*En Roulant Ma Boule, Roulant*,' and like that. The men, they clap their hand an' call me fine feller. But Rattlesnake Sam, he's look mad and swear.

" 'Howl away, you Canadaw timberwolf!' he say. 'You ain't goin' howl very long. I soon put you out o' your misery!'

"But I only laughs at Sam.

" 'Look out you don't get put out o' your misery, you'self!' says I. 'On my country, we eat feller like you, most every mornin', before breakfast!'

"And by that, I turn in my bunk an' goes to sleep, and dreams about my Polly. I dreams I been the Prodigal Son, w'at get the fat calfs. ain't Polly got 'em? Ba golly, yes!

"MIDDLE of the night I wakes up and sees some spirit lights. Eh? Oh, sure, I believe on the spirits w'at comes back. I sees 'em often, me! One of my wives, she's often come to see me, in the shape of a light, so I knows one of 'em been

dead, anyhow. Though I ain't sure which one. Most always, that light been white. But that night, she's green. So I knows my wife been jealous on Polly, and is goin' make trouble for me if he can. But wat I care? ain't no green light goin' stop me! Red light, mebbe I stop, look and listen. But green light, no sir!

" 'Shine away!' says I. 'Burn all you wants to. I'm goin' make you greener than that, before I'm done!' And I go sleep again, very happy to think at least one wife can't make no trouble for me and my Polly.

"Next mornin' I gets up early, help make the breakfast, do big lot of work on the house, and all the mens ride away. Polly, he's mighty nice with me, and I see how the love been burn in his heart. He's laugh and laugh at me, like gal do w'en he's love a feller. I most make up my mind to ask him marry me right off quick; but no, no.

" 'Better wait few day,' says I to myself. 'Ain't no use tryin' to rush a gal. Gal, he's like a mule. More you try hurry him, more she ain't go. Take him easy, little while— then w'en you got him where you want him, lay the whip on, and she's go! Ain't I know, me?

"FEW days," continued Pierre, relighting his pipe with a splinter of blazing pine, "I make everything, to help the womens, on the house. And Rattlesnake Sam, he's jealous like a dog w'at see somebody get his bone away from him. 'Cause he got his eye on my Polly too. Anybody can see that, easy. Sam, he's wait to ketch me away from the ranch, so he can make coyote-bait with me, like he say.

"So, for a few days, I ain't even go outside the ranch yard. 'Cause if Sam kill me, they mebbe goin' to hang him for murder, and I ain't want to see no man get hang. I don't believe in hangin' people, me, not since that time I borrow the horse. And I ain't want to bust Polly's heart, neither.

" 'Pierre,' I thinks, 'you got to take good care you'self, and not get hurt. Not make this pretty gal cry his eye out, and die.' I know Polly's goin' die, if I get kill. Watch you' step, Pierre!

"After 'bout a week, though, I gets tired stayin' on the house and the yard. It been awful hot in there, and I wants to go out on the country, an' get some air. So I says to my Polly: 'I got all the work done, for today,' says I. 'You ain't got nothin' for do. W'at say me and you take horseback ride out on the hills?'

" 'Can you ride horse?' say the gal.

" 'Sure!' says I. 'Ride better like any Buffalo Bill. You come 'long with me, Polly, and we have little gallop somewheres!'

" 'Aint you scare Sam goin' ketch you,' she's say, 'and make you feel like a lead mine?'

" 'No, ba golly!' says I. 'I ain't scare of *nothing*! Ain't I tol' you I come from Canadaw? No Frenchman from Canadaw been scare of nothing!'

"How can I be scare, Mister? I know Sam he's ride away ten, fifteen mile to some sheep-camp on the Gila River. So the coast is all clair.

" 'Come along, Polly,' says I. 'Let's go!'

"POLLY, he's admire me 'cause I been so brave, and he's say all right. I been mighty glad, 'cause now I'm mebbe goin' ask her to marry me. Out on the country, I'm goin' ask dat gal, sure!

"We gets guns, and a couple of the best horse, and rides off down some little valley. We rides on some hill, and most of the time I'm almost keep up with Polly. After a while, Polly pull the rein and wait for me, and we gets off the horse and walks on the the sagebrush.

" 'Polly, says I, 'now I got something for ask you.'

" 'Wait,' she's say. 'Before you ask it, I got something to show you. Sam, he's got his own little private cimetery up that hill. He's plant quite a few there, w'at ask me questions. You like to see that cimetery?'

" 'Sure!' says I. 'Mebbe if she ain't full, that cimetery, I'll do the best I can to fill it— with Sam!'

"Polly, he's laugh, and we start up the rocks. But before we gets on the cimetery— *bon Dieu*! w'at a snake I see! That been a rattlesnake, Mister. It make a man rattled to see one, all right. She's got her head up and her teeth open. Her tail, seems like she's shake dice with it.

"W'en I sees that snake, I leaves Polly and runs away. Polly, he's shoot at the snake. You know 'bout rattlesnake— if you shoot 'em, they every time ketch the bullet in its mouth. This snake, he's ketch the bullet, but the bullet take his head right off too, tryin' to stop it. So the snake get kill. Then Polly's tell me come back. Shoot? Mister, that gal, he's the best shot, exceptin' me, anywheres round there. He can throw bottle on the air and bust 'em, shoot bird flyin', anything. W'en I comes back, he's mad, and call me a coward.

"No sir, I ain't no coward, me!' says I. 'All I run for is make the snake run after me, and get her tired out. Then I ketch her alive and carry her on the ranch, for Sam!'

"Polly, he's laugh, and I sees how he's love me more and more. "You been my noble knight!' she's say. 'Night or day, all same to me, I'm yours!' says I.

" 'My Sir Galahad!'

" 'No gal I had ever been half so pretty like you!' I says. 'You been the only gal I wants!'

"She take and explain to me w'at Sir Galahad been. That ain't got nothin' to do with no gal he ever had. No sir! This Galahad, he been one brave feller w'at ride round with a cook-stove on him, for clothes; and if anybody say somethin' to a gal, he knock his block off and bury 'em up, quick.

" 'All right, Polly,' says I. 'I'll be your Sir Galahad, and perteck you from all danger. Let the danger come!' says I, and gives the snake a kick. 'You ain't got to be 'fraid of nothin', so long I been on the job!' et 'Thanks, 'Poleon!' she say. 'But don't *never* run away no more. Promise me that!' 'I promises,' says I. 'Not even if I has to give up runnin' so as to tire out a rattlesnake!' And then I been just goin' ask Polly be my wife, w'en—ba golly, if Sam ain't come out from behind some rock, and ketch us!

"YES sir, that's wat Sam do! He ain't honest, that Sam. He make believe he's ride to Gila River, that mornin'. But he ain't go in there, at all. No sir! Like one damn coward, he's hide himself on the hills. And w'en he's see me and Polly ride away from the ranch, 'bout five mile, he's come ridin' on his horse out from behind some big rock, and draw his gun, and say: 'Now, you French son of a pup,' says he, 'we goin' to have first-class funeral, and you ain't goin' for smell none of the flowers, neither. I gives you one minute, by my watch, to say you' prayers!'

"Polly, he's get white like de snow in Canadaw, and say:

"Stop, Sam! You can't shoot a man in cold blood, like that!'

" 'Can't, eh?' says he, and take out his watch. 'In sixty second, this French jumpin'-jack, here, goin' over the Big Divide. And the seconds is goin' fast too. He better pray, some lively!'

"Wen I hears that, I shivers like it been winter in Canadaw. Must be I got a touch of the— w'at you call?— malaria, and ain't took enough quinine. Seems like I got the chills and fever, mighty bad. And w'at I do, me? I turns my horse round, and rides on the odder side of Polly, so she's between me and Rattlesnake Sam.

" 'Cause why? 'Cause I wants a little more time. I can't say all the prayers I know, in one minute!

"Look at the damn' coward!' says Sam. 'Hidin' behind a gal's petticoats!'

" 'Excuse me,' says I, 'but it ain't no petticoats, at all. Can't you see, you'self, she ain't got none on? She's got ridin'-pants on, and you can't call that no petticoat!'

" 'Don't make no difference,' say Sam, mad like a dog. 'Petticoats or pants, you can't hide behind 'em. Hurry up and pray,' he say. 'Your minute been half gone, already. In thirty second there's goin' to be a new fireman in hell!'

" 'Sam,' say my Polly, all shakin' like a custard w'en the kitchen door slam, 'you shoot 'Poleon, and it's goin' to put double the housework on me. If that's all you love me, Sam, wantin' to make me work twice as hard like now, I got my 'pinion of your love!'

"Sam, he ain't know w'at to say. He's kind of swaller, get red on the face, and put 'away his gun.

" 'Oh, devil!' he say. Then he turn round and kick his horse with the spur, and ride away fast, with me laughin' after him.

"Polly, she's nearly faint, and get all weak. I got to hold her up, round the waist. You bet I ain't mind that, much! But w'en I try for get one kiss, she's push me away, and ride toward the ranch.

"By that I sees Polly love me more than ever, and I remember w'at she say "bout how she can't afford to have me get kill, 'cause I helps her much with the work. And I rides after her, and says:

" 'Polly,' says I, 'that ain't no place for a peach like you to bloom, on this here Gila ranch. Not with all them rough mens, and you workin' like some slave for 'em! I'm wilin' to marry you any time, I says. 'And if you got the car-fare, we go back to Canadaw and run lodgin'-house togedder. And every dollar we make, I gives you five cents for you'self! Wat more can a brave feller like me offer? Or any odder man?'

"She's stop her horse and look at me, and I ain't know if she's goin' laugh or cry.

" 'Oh, 'Poleon, this is so quick!' she say. And I'm goin' for kiss her, but she's say: 'No, 'Poleon, not yet! No, my hero, my Sir Galahad of Gila! Wait till we been married,' he's say. 'I ain't let no man kiss me, till the ring been on my finger!'

" 'That ain't the way we does it in Canadaw!' says I, and keeps on tryin' to get one kiss. But pretty soon Polly, he's look like he get mad, and tol' me not to be one big fool. Gals all time talks dat way, don't they, to man they loves? Anyhow, she ain't let me kiss her, so I says:

" 'All right, Polly, I'll wait. Few days more, that don't matter. But I tol' you, gal, all the kiss w'at I ain't get now, they bearin' mighty big interest, for later!'

"She's only laugh, and we rides back on the ranch. And my heart, Mister, she's happy like a duck in a lake full with tadpole!

"THAT night," Pierre drew his romance toward its end, "after all the housework been done and I been goin' on the bunkhouse, Polly he's meet me in the dark. Meet me out by the corral, and whisper:

" 'Don't make no noise, 'Poleon! Keep quiet. I tol' you somethin'!'

" 'You mean you goin' run away with me, tonight, and we get marry right away in Las Vegas?! .

" 'Listen' he's say, breathin' like he's run a mile. 'Sam—you know w'at he do?'

"Don't know, and don't care!' says I. 'But after me and you been marry, I goin' fire him pretty quick!"

" 'No, no, you can't!' Polly say. ' 'Cause Sam, he's goin' kill you, right away tomorrow!'

" 'How he can kill me?' I ask. 'If he do, you have two times as much housework!'

" 'No I ain't,' Polly say. 'For Sam, he's send to Chaperito for one Chinamans, to do the housework. W'en the Chinamans get here, tomorrow, Sam goin' to have your funeral, right off.'

" 'That so?' says I. 'Well then, ba golly, me and you better get marry, tonight. Then I'll be boss here, and fire Sam, and hire you two Chinamans, myself!'

" 'No, Galahad, no!' say Polly. 'You go away quick, now. If you loves me, get away before the Chinamans get here, wat Sam hire. Go to Las Vegas, take the first train you can get. Go quick, and don't stop goin' till you're in Santa Fe, anyhow!'

" 'You meet me there, in Santa Fe?' I ask.

" 'Oh, yes, yes, anything!' she's say. 'Only hurry, hurry! Somebody might see me tellin' you to go. Then Sam, he wont wait for the Chinamans to get here. He'll start your funeral quick!'

"NOW, Mister, I ain't want no funeral, 'cause I got no good clothes with me, on the ranch. And w'at Frenchmans can have funeral without no good clothes? So I says:

" 'All right, Polly, I'll go. I'll take a horse and skidoo. But, you goin' for meet me sure, in Santa Fe, after two, t'ree day?'

"Yes, yes!' says Polly. 'But don't take no horse, whatever you do. Sam, he'll be sure to find it out, and call you horse thief. And then all the men here, they'll help him string you up on the big cottonwood!'

"I can see, myself, I don't want that. 'Cause I got awful tender neck, me.

" 'You got to walk away, and run,' say Polly.

" 'How I can run away?' says I. 'You make me promise, only today, I'll never run away no more.'

" 'Oh, for heaven's sake, don't argue,' she's say, all trimbly, 'or you'll be a dead man. Run, I tell you, like you never run before or since! Don't let no sagebrush grow under you' feets, tonight, or you' life ain't worth a grasshopper on a chickenyard!'

" 'It's been t'irty-two mile to Las Vegas,' says I. 'How a man can run t'irty-two mile in one night? They ain't do like that in Canadaw!'

" 'You'll do it, or die!' say Polly. 'You got any, money for car-fare, after you gets there?'

"Not one red!' says I.

"The gal, he's jam a bill on my hand, and push me toward the gate, in the dark, with the big star lookin' down on us like eyes of one million lucivee.

" 'Good-by, 'Poleon!' he's say. 'Good luck to you!'

" 'Not one little kiss?' says I. 'Not one, till we been marry in Santa Fe?'

" 'No, no!'

" 'All right, then,' says I. 'I ain't go away! Sam, he can have my funeral, all he want to; but without one little kiss, I goin' for stay right here, ba golly!'

"She's laugh, then, kind of like she's got the high-strikes, and puts up his mouth, and I'm gave him one good smack. Then he's push me through the gate, and run back on the house. And me, I'm beat it out on the country, along the trail to Las Vegas.

"WELL, Mister," continued Pierre, puffing the rankest of smoke toward the pendent socks and moccasins on the wire, "I walk and run, run and walk. My feets been get awful sore, but my heart been light like the bakin'-powder biscuit I make. 'Cause pretty soon I know my Polly, he's goin' to be anodder wife o' mine. And Sam goin' to be so mad he's drop dead.

"But I hopes Sam ain't drop dead, 'cause I wants to come back on the ranch with my Polly, and fire him. And the kiss I give dat gal, he's stay on my mouth. And how a man goin' get tired and thirsty, with a kiss like that?

"After four, five mile, I stops to rest, and lights a match, and looks at the money Polly's gave me. *Bon Dieu*! Twenty-dollar bill! ain't that luck? I rolls me a smoke, sits on the trail a few minute, and goes on. Walk and run, Mister, run and walk, hours and hours.

"You ain't never know how far is t'irtytwo mile, no sir, till you been walk and run 'em all in one night. The sweat, he's come down on my eye till I'm most blind. The bottom, she's come off my shoes, and I got to stop and tie 'em on with a strip tore off my shirt-tail. I get blister on the heel and toe, and my leg she's been so sore like one scalded pup.

"I been pantin' like dog I hear about, w'at chase rabbit in Death Valley, and it's so hot there, Mister, even though both dog and rabbit was go fast as they can, they was both walkin'. My tongue, she's pretty near drag on the ground. Seem like million mile; and by the time it come sunup and I gets on the railroad station, I can't crawl not one more foot, no sir, not for ten million dollar!

"Well, after while I gets to Santa Fe, and waits for my Polly come marry me. But that gal, he ain't come. Four day, five day, one week I waits, but no gal.

" 'Ba damn!' says I. 'Somethin' funny 'bout that! Somebody keep that gal from come and get marry with me. I got to go back on the ranch and save that *pauvre* gal. Sam may kill me, but no matter. I been one Sir Galahad for my Polly, so I got for go rescue her!

"Well sir, I go on the station to take train back to Las Vegas. And while I'm wait for the train, I pick up newspaper on the seat and read her. Oh, yes, I can read pretty good, if she's got big letters and the word ain't too long. First thing I see— what's this?— *miséricorde*! It's somethin' in big letter on top of the paper, w'at happen on the Star-X ranch!

" 'Hello!' says I. 'Wat now? I got to see 'bout this!'

"So I pays a boy five cents for read me that piece on the paper, all the small letters. And w'en I hears it, oh, Mister, seem like I goin' for die!

"Wat happen, Mister? Wat *ain't* happen? Everythin' happen! Rattlesnake Sam, he's find out, that night, how I run away. And he's jump on his horse and chase me. He's chase me 'bout seventeen mile. He's just get near me, w'en his horse she's step in one prairie-dog hole and bust her leg. Sam, he's have to shoot her. And then he's run after me on foot.

"But he ain't never ketch me. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's have a few drink, and the heat been too much for him, to run in them heavy leather pants he got on. He's fall down— that's how the newspaper say it must of happen— and one Gila-monster bite him on the neck. You know Gila-monster; fat lizard with pink and brown bead all over her, like lady's hand-bag. If she bite you, that lizard, *bon soir*! So they finds Sam on the trail with the Gila-monster bite on him, dead like nail on a door.

"So that's how I kill my rival for Polly. I run him to death, Mister, with the help of one Gila-monster. And that ain't all, too, Mister. No sir, ba golly! A funeral on the ranch ain't all they has. They has a weddin' too. Polly, she's up and marry a New York feller from Pinos Altos, w'at she been engage' to a long time. He's finish up his business in Pinos Altos and come on the ranch. And they has a big mariage, big celebration and barbecue. And the paper say they winds up the celebration by shootin' one Chinamans w'at been come to cook on the ranch, only few days ago.

"*Sacré nom d'un chien*! Can you beat dat, Mister? I'm askin' you!

"No, Mister, you can't beat that," Pierre sadly concluded, knocking out his pipe-ashes, now dead as his romance of the long ago. "Nobody can't beat that. A gal, you take a gal, now. They makes all kinds promises, says they loves you, and calls you Sir Galahad. And then you turns your back round, one minute, and I just so soon have 'em as have the devil! Or any odder man!"

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16: One of Them

A. E. W. Mason

1865-1948

Metropolitan, March 1916

AT MIDNIGHT on August 4th, Poldhu flung the news out to all ships, and Anthony Strange, on the *Boulotte,* took the message in the middle of the West Bay. He carried on accordingly past Weymouth, and in the morning was confronted with the wall of great breakers off St. Alban's Head. The little boat ran towards that barrier with extraordinary swiftness. Strange put her at a gap close into the shore where the waves broke lower, and with a lurch and a shudder she scooped the water in over her bows and clothed herself to her brass gunwale-top in a stinging veil of salt. Never had the *Boulotte* behaved better than she did that morning in the welter of the Race, and Strange, rejoicing to his very finger-tips, forgot the news which was bringing all the pleasure-boats, great and small, into the harbours of the south, forgot even that sinking of the heart which had troubled him throughout the night. But it was only in the Race that he knew any comfort. He dropped his anchor in Poole Harbour by mid-day, and fled through London to a house he owned on the Berkshire Downs.

There for a few days he found life possible. It was true there were sentries under the railway bridges, but the sun rose each day over a country ripe for the harvest, and the smoke curled from the chimneys of pleasant villages; and there was no sign of war. But soon the nights became a torture. For from midnight on, at intervals of five to ten minutes, the troop-trains roared along the Thames Valley towards Avonmouth, and the reproach of each of them ceased only with the morning. Strange leaned out of his window looking down the slopes where the corn in the moonlight was like a mist. Not a light showed in the railway carriages, but the sparks danced above the funnel of the engine, and the glare of the furnace burnished the leaves of the trees. Soldiers, soldiers, soldiers on the road to France. Then there came a morning when, not a hundred yards from his house, he saw a string of horses in the road and others being taken from the reaping-machines in a field. Strange returned to town and dined with a Mrs. Kenway, his best friend, and to her he unburdened his soul.

"I am ashamed... don't know how to look people in the face.... I never thought to be so utterly unhappy. I am thirty and useless. I cumber the ground."

The look of surprise with which his friend turned to him hurt him like the cut of a whip. "Of course you can't help," it seemed to say. "The world is for the strong, this year and the next, and for how many more?"

Strange had to lie on his back for some hours each day, and he suffered off and on always. But that had been his lot since boyhood, and he had made light

of his infirmity and grown used to it until this 4th of August. He had consoled himself with the knowledge that to the world he looked only rather delicate. He was tall, and not set apart from his fellows.

"Now," he said. "I wish that everybody knew. Yes, I wish that I showed that service was impossible. To think of us sitting here round a dinner-table— as we used to! Oh, I know what you'll think! I have the morbid sensitiveness of sick men. Perhaps you are right."

"I don't think it at all," she said, and she set herself to comfort him.

Strange went from the dinner-party to his club. There was the inevitable crowd, fighting the campaign differently, cutting up the conquered countries, or crying all was lost. Some of them had written to the papers, all were somehow swollen with importance as though the war was their private property. Strange began to take heart.

"They are not ashamed," he thought. "They speak to me as if they expected I should be here. Perhaps I am a fool."

A friend sat down by his side.

"Cross went yesterday," he said. "George Crawley was killed at Mons. Of course you have heard."

Strange had not heard, and there rose before his eyes suddenly a picture of George Crawley, the youngest colonel in the army, standing on the kerb in St. James's Street and with uplifted face blaspheming to the skies at one o'clock in the morning because of a whiskered degenerate dandy with a frilled shirt to whom he had just before been introduced. But his friend was continuing his catalogue.

"Chalmers is training at Grantham. He's with the new army. Linton has joined the Flying Corps. Every day someone slips quietly away. God knows how many of them will come back."

Strange got up and walked out of the club.

"I shall see you to-morrow," his friend cried after him.

"No, I am going back to my boat."

"For how long?"

"Till the war's over."

The resolution had been taken that instant. He loved the *Boulotte* better than anything else in the world. For on board of her he was altogether a man. She was fifty-five feet long over all, fourteen feet in beam, twenty-five tons by Thames measurement, and his debt to her was enormous. He had found her in a shed in the Isle of Wight, re-coppered her, given her a new boiler, fixed her up with forced draught, and taken out for himself after a year's hard work a master's certificate. He took her over to Holland, and since her bows worked like a concertina in the heavy seaway between Dover and Dieppe he strengthened them with cross-pieces. He never ceased to tinker with her, he groused at her,

and complained of her, and sneered at her, and doted on her in the true sailor's fashion. For some years past life had begun for him in the spring, when he passed Portland Bill bound westward for Fowey and Falmouth and the Scillies, and had ended in the late autumn, when he pulled the *Boulotte* up on the mud of Wootton Creek. Now he turned to her in his distress, and made a most miserable Odyssey. He spent a month in the estuary above Salcombe, steamed across to Havre, went down through the canals to Marseilles in the autumn of 1914, and sought one of the neutral coasts of the Mediterranean. Here, where men wore buttons in their coats inscribed, "Don't speak to me of the war," he fancied that he might escape from the shame of his insufficiency. He came to a pleasant harbour, with a broad avenue of trees behind the quay, and a little ancient town behind the trees.

"I will drop my anchor here," he said, "until the war ends"; and he remained, speaking to no one but his crew, sleeping in his little cabin, and only going on shore to buy his newspapers and take his coffee. And after five weeks the miracle began to happen. He was sitting on his deck one morning reading a local newspaper. At right angles to him half a dozen steamers, moored in a line, with their sterns to the quay and their anchors out forward, were loading with fruit. He looked up from his paper, and his eyes fell upon the nearest ship, which was showing him her starboard broadside. He looked first of all carelessly, then with interest, finally he laid his paper down and walked forward. The boat had received on the lower part of her hull, up to the Plimsoll line, a brilliant fresh coat of red paint. So far, of course, there was nothing unusual, but forward, halfway between her bows and her midships, and again aft on her quarter, she had a broad perpendicular line of the same red paint standing out vividly from the black of her upper plates. Strange called to his engineer, John Shawe, and pointed to the streaks.

"What do you make of them?" he asked.

Shawe shrugged his shoulders.

"Very wasteful it do seem, *sir,"* he said; and to a casual glance it did indeed appear as if the paint had been allowed, through some carelessness on deck, to drip down the side at those two points. Strange, however, was not satisfied. The bands of scarlet were too regular, too broad. He had himself rowed out in his dinghy past the steamer's bows.

"That will do, Harry," he said. "We can go back."

On the port bows and quarter of the steamer he had seen the same vivid streaks. Strange spoke again to John Shawe.

"Waste isn't the explanation, that's sure. You go about the town a bit, don't you? You know some of the men about the port. You might find out for me— quietly, you know— what you can about that boat"; and the phrase "quietly, you know," made all at once a different man of John Shawe. Strange at this time

was really more moved by curiosity than suspicion, but he did use the phrase, and John Shawe, a big, simple, south countryman, who knew his engine and very little else, swelled at once into a being of mystery, full of brow-twisting wisdom and portentously sly.

"I understand, sir," he said in a knowing whisper. "I know my dooty. It shall be done." He put on his best brass-buttoned coat that evening, and went down the three steps of the gangway ladder with a secret air, a sleuth; but he brought back his news nevertheless.

"All those boats, sir, are chartered by a German here named Rehnke."

"But some of them are English. They are flying the red flag," cried Strange in revolt.

"It's God's truth, sir, and here's more of it. Every one of them's bound for England, consigned to English firms. One's for Manchester, two for Cardiff, one for Liverpool."

"But it's impossible. It's trading with the enemy," Strange exclaimed.

"That don't apply to the enemy in neutral countries, they say. Oh, there's a deal of dirty work going on in England. Will you come on deck?"

Strange nodded. The saloon door opened into the cockpit, and the cabin roof was the deck of the after-part of the *Boulotte.* They climbed by a little ladder out of the cockpit. It was twelve o'clock on a night of full moon.

"Look, sir," said Shawe.

The English boat had sailed that afternoon. The starboard side of its neighbour was now revealed. Strange looked through his glasses and he saw. Over the bows of that tramp steamer at midnight a man was suspended on a plank, and he was painting a broad, perpendicular, red streak.

Strange thought over his discovery lying on his back in the saloon. Distinguishing marks on a row of ships chartered by a German— there was just one explanation for them! Strange did not even whisper it to John Shawe, but he went ashore the next morning and called upon the British Consul.

His card was taken into a room where two men were speaking. At once the conversation stopped, and it was not resumed. There was not a whisper, nor the sound of any movement. Strange had a picture in his mind of two men with their heads together staring at his card and exchanging an unspoken question. Then the clerk appeared again.

"Mr. Taylor will see you with pleasure," he said.

As Strange entered the room a slim, elderly, indifferent gentleman, seated at a knee-hole table, gazed vaguely at him through his spectacles and offered him a chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Strange?" he asked, and since Strange hesitated, he turned towards his companion.

"This is Major Slingsby," said the Consul. "He will not be in your way."

Major Slingsby, a square, short, rubicund man of forty, with the face of a faun, bowed, and, without moving from his chair, seemed, nevertheless, to remove himself completely from the room.

"Not at all," said Strange. He had not an idea that he was in the presence of the two shrewdest men in those parts. To him they were just a couple of languid people whom it was his duty to arouse, and he told his story as vividly as he could.

"And what do you deduce from these mysterious signs?" asked the Consul.

Strange's answer was prompt.

"German submarines in the Mediterranean."

"Oh! And why not the Channel?" asked Mr. Taylor. "These steamers are on their way there."

To that question there was no reply. Strange rose. "I thought that I ought to tell you what I had noticed," he said stiffly.

"Thank you, yes. And I am very grateful," replied Taylor.

Major Slingsby, however, followed Strange out of the room.

"Will you lunch with me?" he asked, and the question sent the blood rushing into Strange's face. He swung between his instinct to hide his head from any man who was doing service and his craving to converse with a fellow-countryman. The craving won.

"I shall be very pleased," he stammered.

"Right. It is half-past twelve now. Shall we say one at the Cafe de Rome?"

As they sat against the wall by the window of the cafe Slingsby talked of ordinary matters, which any one of those in the chairs outside upon the pavement might overhear and be none the wiser. But he talked sagely, neither parading mysteries nor pretending disclosures. He let the mere facts of companionship and nationality work, and before luncheon was over Strange was won by them. He longed to confide, to justify himself before a fellow-citizen of his miserable inertness. Over the coffee, indeed, he would have begun, but Slingsby saw the torrent of confession coming.

"Do you often lunch here?" he said quickly. "I do whenever I happen to be in the town. Sit in this window for an hour and you will see all the town paraded before you like a show, its big men and little men, its plots and its intrigues. There, for instance," and he nodded towards a large, stout person with a blonde moustache, "is Rehnke— yes, that's your man. Take a good look at him."

Strange looked at the German hard. He looked also towards a youth who had been sitting for the last hour over a cup of coffee and a newspaper outside the window. Slingsby interpreted the look.

"He's all right. He's trying to listen, of course. Most foreigners do, whether they understand your language or not. And he doesn't— not a word of it. I have

been watching him. However, we may as well go, for I would very much like you to show me your little boat."

Strange, eager and enthusiastic, jumped up from the table.

"Rather," he cried. "She's not big, of course, but she can keep the sea, especially since I strengthened her bows."

"Oh, you have done that, have you?" said Slingsby, as he paid the bill. "That's interesting."

They crossed the boulevard to the quay and went on board the *Boulotte.* Every inch of brass on her, from the stanchions round the deck to the engine-room telegraph, flashed, and she was varnished and white and trim like a lady fresh from her maid.

"What can you do with your forced draught?" asked Slingsby.

"Thirteen," replied Strange proudly. "With a good wind astern fourteen. Once I went out past the Needles buoy—" and off he went in a glowing account of a passage to Cherbourg at the end of a stormy September. Slingsby never once interrupted him. He followed meekly from the rudder to the bow, where he examined with some attention the famous struts and cross-pieces.

"You have got a wireless, I see," he said, looking up to the aerial, which, slackened and disconnected, dangled from the masthead.

"Yes. But it's a small affair. However, I can hear four hundred miles if the night's still. I can only send seventy."

Slingsby nodded, and the two men returned to the saloon. There, at last, over a whisky and soda, Strange was encouraged to unload his soul. The torture of the August nights on the Berkshire Downs above the Thames Valley, the intolerable sense of uselessness; the feeling that he wore a brand of shame upon his forehead for all men to see, and the poignancy of the remorse which had shrivelled him when a wounded soldier from Ypres or Le Cateau limped past him in the street; all tumbled from his lips in abrupt, half-finished sentences.

"Therefore I ran away," he said.

Slingsby sat back in his chair.

"So that's it," he said, and he laughed in a friendly fashion. "Do you know that we have all been greatly worried about you? Oh, you have caused a deuce of a fluttering I can tell you."

Strange flushed scarlet.

"I was suspected!" he cried. "Good God!" It just wanted that to complete his utter shame. He had been worse than useless; he had given trouble. He sat with his eyes fixed, in the depths of abasement. Then other words were spoken to him:

"How long will it take you to bring your boat to Marseilles?"

"You want it, then?" said Strange.

"I can use you," said Slingsby. "What's more, you are necessary."

Strange, with a buzzing head, got out his chart from a locker and spread it on the table. He took paper and a lead pencil and his compasses. He marked his course and measured it.

"Forty-seven hours' steaming and six hours to get up steam. It's four o'clock now, and the day's Tuesday. I can be at Marseilles on Thursday afternoon at four."

"I have done a good day's work," said Major Slingsby, as he rose to his feet, and he meant it. Slingsby was an intelligence officer as well as an officer of intelligence, and since he had neither boats to dispose of nor money to buy them with, Anthony Strange was a Godsend to him. "But I don't want you until to-day week. I shall want a little time to make arrangements with the French."

The *Boulotte* steamed round the point at three o'clock on the appointed afternoon. The pilot took her through the Naval Harbour into the small basin where the destroyers lie, and by half-past she was berthed against the quay. Strange had been for the best part of two days on his bridge, but at eleven he was knocking at a certain door without any inscription upon it in the Port office, and he was admitted to a new Major Slingsby in a khaki uniform, with red tabs on the collar, and clerks typewriting for dear life in a tiny room.

"Hallo," said Slingsby. He looked into a letter-tray on the edge of his desk and took a long envelope from it and handed it to Strange. "You might have a look at this. I'll come on board to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, if I were you I should go to bed, though I doubt if you'll get much sleep."

The reason for that doubt became more and more apparent as the evening wore on. In the first place, when Strange returned, he found workmen with drills and hammers and rivets spoiling, the white foredeck of his adored *Boulotte.* For a moment he was inclined, like Captain Hatteras when his crew cut down his bulwarks for firewood, to stand aside and weep, but he went forward, and when he saw the work which was going on his heart exulted. Then he went back to the saloon, but as he stretched himself out upon the cushions he remembered the envelope in his pocket. It was stamped "On His Majesty's Service," and it contained the announcement that one Anthony Strange had been granted a commission as sub-lieutenant in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. After that sleep was altogether out of the question. There was the paper to be re-read at regular intervals lest its meaning should have been misunderstood. And when its meaning was at last firmly and joyfully fixed in Strange's mind there was the paper itself to be guarded and continually felt, lest it should lose itself, be stolen, or evaporate into air. Towards midnight, indeed, he did begin to doze off, but then a lighter came alongside and dumped ten tons of Welsh steam coal on board, all that he could hold, it's true, but that gave him ten days' steaming at ordinary draught. And at eight o'clock to the minute Slingsby hailed him from the quay.

"You will go back now to your old harbour," he said. "You have been a little cruise down the coast, that's all. Just look out for a sailing schooner called the *Santa Maria del Pilar.* She ought to turn up in seven days from now to take on board a good many barrels of carbonate of soda. I'll come by train at the same time. If she arrives before and takes her cargo on board, you can wire to me through the Consul and then— act on your own discretion."

Strange drew a long breath, and his eyes shone.

"But she won't, I think," said Slingsby. "By the way, you were at Rugby with Russell of my regiment, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"And you know Cowper, who was admiral out here?"

"Yes, he's my uncle."

"Exactly."

Strange smiled. It was clear that a good many inquiries must have been made about him over the telegraph wires during the last week.

"Well, that's all, I think," said Slingsby. "You'll push off as soon as you can, and good luck."

But there was one further ceremony before the *Boulotte* was ready for sea. The small crew was signed on under the Naval Discipline Act. Then she put out, rounded the point, and headed for her destination over a smooth sunlit sea, with, by the way, an extra hand on board and a fine new capstan on her foredeck. Two days later she was moored in her old position, and Strange went to bed. The excitement was over, a black depression bore him down; he was deadly tired, and his back hurt him exceedingly. What was he doing at all with work of this kind? If he had to "act on his own discretion," could he do it with any sort of profit? Such questions plagued him for two days more, whilst he lay and suffered. But then relief came. He slept soundly and without pain, and rose the next morning in a terror lest the *Santa Maria del Pilar* should have come and gone. He went up on to the deck and searched the harbour with his glasses. There was but one sailing boat taking in cargo, and she a brigantine named the *Richard,* with the Norwegian flag painted on her sides. Strange hurried to the Consul, and returned with a mind at ease. The *Santa Maria del Pilar* had not yet sailed in between the moles. Nor did she come until the next afternoon, by which time Slingsby was on board the *Boulotte.*

"There she is," said Strange in a whisper of excitement, looking seawards. She sailed in with the sunset and a fair wind, a white schooner like a great golden bird of the sea, and she was nursed by a tug into a berth on the opposite side of the harbour. Slingsby and Strange dined at the Cafe de Rome and came on board again at nine. The great globes of electric light on their high pillars about the quays shone down upon the still, black water of the harbour. It was

very quiet. From the cockpit of the *Boulotte* the two men looked across to the schooner.

"I think there's a lighter alongside of her, isn't there?" said Slingsby.

Strange, whose eyesight was remarkable, answered:

"Yes, a lighter loaded with barrels."

"Some carbonate of soda," said Slingsby, with a grin. They went into the cockpit, leaving the door open.

It was a hot night, and in a cafe beyond the trees a band was playing the compelling music of *Louise.* Strange listened to it, deeply stirred. Life had so changed for him that he had risen from the depths during the last weeks. Then Slingsby raised his hand.

"Listen!"

With the distant music there mingled now the creaking of a winch. Strange extinguished the light, and both men crept out from the cockpit. The sound came from the *Santa Maria del Pilar,* and they could see the spar of her hoisting tackle swing out over the lighter and inboard over the ship's deck.

"She's loading," said Strange, in a low voice.

"Yes," answered Slingsby; "she's loading." And his voice purred like a contented cat.

He slept on a bed made up in the saloon that night, Strange in his tiny cabin, and at nine o'clock the next morning, as they sat at breakfast, they saw the *Santa Maria del Pilar* make for the sea.

"We ought to follow, oughtn't we?" said Strange anxiously.

"There's no hurry."

"But she'll do nine knots in this breeze." Strange watched her with the eye of knowledge as she leaned over ever so slightly from the wind. "She might give us the slip."

Slingsby went on eating unconcernedly.

"She will," he answered. "We are not after her, my friend. Got your chart?"

Strange fetched it from the locker and spread it out on the table.

"Do you see a small island with a lighthouse?"

"Yes."

"Four miles west-south-west of the lighthouse. Got it?"

"Yes."

"How long will it take you to get to that point?"

Strange measured his course.

"Five to five and a half hours forced draught."

"Good. Suppose we start at six this evening."

The *Boulotte* went away to the minute. At eight it began to grow dark, but no steaming light was hoisted on the mast, and no sidelamps betrayed her presence. In the failing light she became one with the sea but for the tiniest wisp

of smoke from her chimney, and soon the night hid that. A lantern flashed for a while here and there on the forward deck in the centre of a little group, and then Slingsby came back to Strange at the wheel.

"It's all right," he whispered softly.

Nights at sea! The cool, dark tent of stars, the hiss and tinkle of waves against the boat's side, the dinghy, slung out upon the davits, progressing above the surface of the water, the lamp light from the compass striking up on the brasswork of the wheel and the face of the steersman; to nights at sea Strange owed all the spacious moments of his crippled life. But this night was a sacred thing. He was admitted to the band of the young strong men who serve, like a novice into the communion of a church; and his heart sang within his breast as he kept the *Boulotte* to her course. At a quarter past eleven he rang the telegraph and put the indicator to "slow." Five minutes later he stopped the engine altogether. Four miles away to the north-eastward a light brightened and faded.

"We are there," he said, and he looked out over an empty sea.

Under Singsby's orders he steamed slowly round in a circle, ever increasing the circumference, for an hour, and then the new hand— who, by the way, was a master gunner— crept aft.

"There it is, sir."

A hundred yards from the port bow a dark mass floated on the sea. The *Boulotte* slid gently alongside of it. It was a raft made of barrels lashed together.

"We have seen those barrels before, my friend," said Slingsby, his nose wrinkling up in a grin of delight. Before daybreak the work was done. Fifty empty barrels floated loose; there was a layer of heavy oil over the sea and a rank smell in the air.

"Now," said Slingsby, in a whisper, "shall we have any luck, I wonder?"

He went forward. The capstan head had been removed, and in its place sat a neat little automatic gun, which could fling two hundred and seventy three-pound shells six thousand yards in a minute. For the rest of that night the *Boulotte* lay motionless without a light showing or a word spoken. And just as the morning came, in the very first unearthly grey of it, a wave broke— a long, placid roller which had no right to break in that smooth, deep sea. Slingsby dipped his hand into the cartridge box and made sure that the band ran free; the gunner stood with one hand on the elevating wheel, the other on the trigger; eight hundred yards away from the *Boulotte* there was suddenly a wild commotion of the water, and black against the misty grey a conning tower and a long, low body of steel rose into view. U-whatever-its-number was taken by surprise. The whole affair lasted a few seconds. With his third shot the gunner found the range, and then, planting his shells with precision in a level line like the perforations of a postage stamp, he ripped the submarine from amidships to

its nose. Strange had a vision for a second of a couple of men trying to climb out from the conning tower, and then the nose went up in the air like the snout of some monstrous fish, and the sea gulped it down.

"One of 'em," said Slingsby. "But we won't mention it. Lucky you saw those red streaks, my friend. If a destroyer had come prowling up this coast instead of the harmless little *Boulotte* there wouldn't have been any raft on the sea or any submarine just here under the sea. What about breakfast?"

Strange set the boat's course for Marseilles, and the rest of that voyage was remarkable only for a clear illustration of the difference between the amateur and the professional. For whereas Strange could not for the life of him keep still during one minute, Slingsby, stretched at his ease on the saloon sofa, beguiled the time with quotations from the "*Bab Ballads*" and "*Departmental Ditties.*

17: The Gloaming Ghosts

George Barr McCutcheon
1866-1928
The London Magazine, Jan 1922
Collected in: *Her Weight in Gold*, 1914

GLOAMING had been the home of the Gloames for two centuries at least. Late in the seventeenth century one of the forebears acquired the picturesque acres in Virginia and they have not been without a Gloame as master since that time. At the time when the incidents to be related in this story transpired, Colonel Cassady Gloame was the owner of the famous old estate and he was lord of the countryside. The power of the ancient Gloames was not confined to the rural parts of that vast district in southern Virginia; it was dominant in the county seats for miles around. But that is neither here nor there. The reader knows the traditional influence of every old Virginia family. It is like the royal household of an eastern monarchy. It leads, dominates, and sets the pace for all its little universe. No one cares to learn that the Gloames were the first family of them all; it does not matter especially that old Sir Henry settled there nearly a hundred years before the Revolution; it is simple history that some of the Gloames who followed after him fought like tigers for the country in one war and just as hard against it in another. Let it be understood that Gloaming was two centuries old and that there was no fairer, prouder name in all Virginia than that which had been handed down to Colonel Cassady Gloame, the last of the race.

The rambling old house that faced the river was known from one end of the state to the other, not only for its age, but for its hospitality. The Gloames, whether wild or sedate, had always been famous for the warmth of their hearts. The blood was blue and the hearts were true, is what the world said of the Gloames. The years had made but little change in the seat of the Gloames. The mansion, except for the repairs that time demanded, was virtually the same as in the days of old Sir Henry. Nine generations of Gloames had begun life in the picturesque old house and it had been the pride of each. It had borne good Americans and blue Virginians. The architecture, like its children, seemed perennial. Time made few inroads upon the character of its lines. Its furnishings and its treasures were almost as antique. Decrepit age alone was responsible for the retirement of historic bits of furniture. The plate was as old as the hills, the service as venerable. Gloaming looked to be the great-great-grand-parent of every other habitation in the valley.

Colonel Cassady Gloame was the last of the long and illustrious race. He was going to the grave childless; the name would end with him. True, he would doubtless leave a widow, but what is a widow when one figures on the

perpetuation of a name? The Colonel was far past sixty, his wife barely twenty-five. He loved her devotedly and it is only just to say that she esteemed him more highly than any other man in all the world. But there would be no children.

Mrs. Gloame, beautiful, cultured, gay as a butterfly, was the daughter of Judge Garrison of New York. She had been married for five years and she was not yet tired of the yoke. Her youth was cheerfully, loyally given over to the task of making age a joy instead of a burden to this gallant old Virginian. She was a veritable queen in this little Virginia kingdom. Though she was from the North, they loved her in the South; they loved her for the same reason that inspired old Colonel Gloame to give his heart and honour to her keeping— because they could not help it.

The Christmas holidays were always a season of great merriment at Gloaming. There never had been a Christmas Eve without festivities in the good old home of the Gloames. Sometimes, in the long array of years, there may have been sorrow and grief and trouble in the hearts of the inmates, but all such was dissipated when the Christmas bells began to ring. Even that terrible tragedy in the winter of 1769 lifted its shadow long enough to permit the usual happiness to shine through all the last week of the dying year.

There was always a genial house party in holiday times, and Gloaming rang free with the pleasures of the light-hearted. The Colonel himself was the merriest of the merry-makers, second only in enthusiasm to the sunny young wife from the North. The night of December 24, 1897, found the old mansion crowded with guests, most of whom were spending the week with the Gloames. There had been dancing and music and games, and eleven o'clock brought fatigue for even the liveliest of the guests. It was then that pretty Louise Kelly, of the Major Kellys of Richmond, peremptorily commanded the Colonel to tell the oft-told tale of the Gloaming Ghosts.

"Come to order," she cried to the guests in the double parlours. "Colonel Gloame is going to tell us about those dear old ghosts."

"Now, my dear Louise, I've told that story times without number to every soul in this house," remonstrated the Colonel. "You, to my certain knowledge have been an attentive listener for one hundred and nine times. Even though it brings upon my head the weight of your wrath, I must positively decline to—"

"You have nothing to say about it, Colonel Gloame," declared Miss Kelly definitely. "The first thing required of a soldier is duty. It is your duty to obey when commanded by the officer of the night. In the first place, you've not told the story to every one here. Lieutenant King has just confessed that he never has heard of the Gloaming Ghosts and, furthermore, he laughed when I told him that you boasted of real, live ghosts more than a hundred years old."

"Oh, we are very proud of our ghosts, Lieutenant King," cried Mrs. Gloame.

"I imagined that people lived in some terror of ghosts," ventured King, a young West Pointer.

"You couldn't drag the Colonel into the south wing up-stairs with a whole regiment of cavalry horses," said old Mr. Gordon, the Colonel's best friend.

"Tush," remonstrated the Colonel.

"There's a real ghost, a white lady who walks on air, who spends her time in the room whose windows look out over the low lands along the river," piped up little Miss Gordon, a grand-daughter in very short dresses.

"How romantic," laughed the Lieutenant.

The Colonel, despite his customary remonstrances, would not have missed telling the story for worlds. He liked to be coaxed. He was in his element when the score or more of eager guests, old and young, crowded into the room about him and implored him to go on with the tale.

"It's a mighty threadbare sort of a ghost we have here, my dear Lieutenant," he admitted at last, and there was a sigh of contentment from the lips of many. They knew the story would be forthcoming. "Poor old thing, I've told about her so often I'm afraid she'll refuse to come and visit us any more."

At this juncture, young Mr. Gates Garrison strolled leisurely into the room, coming from the dining-room where he had lingered with the apples and cider and doughnuts. He was a tall, fair young fellow of twenty-four, a year younger than his sister, the pretty Mrs. Gloame, and a senior in Columbia College. The Colonel stood with his back to the blazing grate, confronting the crowd of eager listeners, who had dragged chairs and settees and cushions from all parts of the house to prepare the auditorium.

"Come here, Gates, and hear the ghost story," cried his sister, making room between herself and Miss Kelly.

"Same old story?" inquired the law student, stifling a yawn.

"Of course; come and sit between us."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of ghosts," replied Gates indifferently.

Miss Kelly looked daggers through her tender blue eyes.

"I wonder what that boy has on his mind?" murmured Mrs. Gloame anxiously.

"Nothing," responded Miss Kelly, sweetly. But the Colonel was beginning.

"Whatever you may think of this story," he began, "I can assure you that there is a very deep mystery attached to Gloaming and as I cannot offer the faintest explanation except to call your attention to the supernatural conditions which exist, I am obliged to admit that I, for one, firmly believe the house is haunted. For several generations the Gloame family, to an individual, has believed in the ghost of the south wing and our faith cannot be shaken. We have the evidence of our ears, our eyes, and of all who have undertaken to explode the theory. I'll be just as brief as possible, Major Harper, so you need not look at

your wife's watch. My great-great-grandfather, Godfrey Gloame, was born in this house and he brought a beautiful bride here when he was married twenty-five years afterward. He was, as are all the Gloames, a Virginian of the old type, and he was a fire-eater, so the family records say. When he was married it was to a young lady of wealth and position in the North— a very gay and, if I must say it, a particularly— ah!— unsatisfactory mistress of a home." "What could you expect of a Yankee wife?" asked young Garrison, tantalisingly.

"They were different in those days," responded the grey old narrator, with a smile for his wife. "My great-great-grandmother was a beautiful woman, and she was well aware of that fact. Her husband was a jealous devil, as unreasonable as a jackass, and as stubborn as an ox. To make a long story short, after they had been married five years and had seen enough of the connubial hell to drive them both out of mind, he took a sudden fancy that she was false to him. A young Virginian, in fact, the very man who stood up with him at the wedding, was a frequent visitor at this house and was a decided favourite with my maternal ancestor. Godfrey went to drinking rather heavily, simply because he found it impossible to discover anything wrong in his wife's conduct— I may say that he had watched her, too, ladies and gentlemen. Being too honourable to accuse her of infidelity without having actual proof, he suffered in silence and his cups, all the time allowing the gap between them to grow wider and wider. One night he came home from Richmond late and saw his friend, Harry Heminway, leaving the place on horseback. Inflamed by jealousy, and drink, too, I reckon, he dashed up to his wife's room. I do not know what followed, for no one ever knew, but the next mornin' they found her dead on the bed, her throat cut from ear to ear in a most dreadful manner. He was dead on the floor, the same knife sticking in his breast. Their son, my great-grand-father, the famous General George W. Gloame, then a child of three, was lying on the bed with his mother, asleep."

"What beautiful nerves that kid must have had," muttered Gates.

"And did they never hang the murderer?" asked Lieutenant King.

"Good heavens, no! Didn't I say he had jabbed the knife into his own heart? How could they hang him? Well, all this happened in that room at the far end of the south wing— it's always locked now and has been for a hundred and thirty years. The furniture stands just as it was when that pair occupied the apartment. Now comes the strange part of the story."

"Ugh!" interrupted Miss Kelly, with a shudder. "Just hear how the wind whistles around the house. It positively gives me the shivers."

"Well, within a week after the murder queer things began to happen in that room," the Colonel went on. "Odd noises were to be heard, muffled screams came from behind the closed doors, and finally the people who lived here saw the white, ghostly form of my great-great-grandmother moving about in the

room and in the halls. Ever since that time her spirit can be seen up there, for it comes around once in a while to see if anybody desecrates the room by trying to sleep in it. With my own eyes I have seen it— dozens of times. Since my marriage it has not been here, but I expect it almost any night."

George Washington appeared suddenly in the hall door and his stentorian though eminently respectable tones startled the entire assemblage, the Colonel included. There were a dozen little feminine shrieks and more than one man caught his breath sharply. George Washington was the butler at Gloaming.

"Majah Harpeh's kerridge, *sah*," he announced obsequiously.

"Oh, I'm so glad," gasped Miss Kelly, mightily relieved. Then, in confusion: "I mean, Mrs. Harper, that I'm glad it isn't the ghost, you know."

Half an hour later the parlours were deserted, except for the presence of a tall young man with a far-away, dissatisfied look in his eyes. In all the spare bed chambers guests were preparing for bed. Young Garrison had said good night to all of them and remained below stairs to commune with himself at the midnight hour.

For many minutes he sat before the fireplace, staring moodily at the flames. Gates Garrison admitted reluctantly that it was all very nice at Gloaming, that it was "a bully place to spend the holidays and all that, you know," but for a very well-defined reason he was wishing they were over and he was back in New York once more. He was in love. It is not unusual for a young man of his age to be desperately in love and it is by no means unusual that he should be in love with the most impossible of persons. Gates Garrison's affections at this period of his life were the property in fee simple of a very pretty and decidedly popular member of the chorus at Weber & Field's. After convincing himself that he was quite alone in the huge old parlour, the hopeless Mr. Garrison guiltily drew from the inside pocket of his coat a thick and scrawly letter. Then he did things to this letter that in after years he would blush to acknowledge, if they remained a part of his memory. He kissed the scribble— undeniably. Then, with rapt eyes, he reread the lengthy missive from "Dolly." It had come in the morning mail and he had read it a dozen times. The reader is left to conjecture just what the letter contained. Mr. Garrison's thoughts were running something like this:

"Lord, if my sister knew about you, Dolly, she'd have so many fits that you couldn't count them. They think I'm an absolute stick when it comes to girls. If they only knew! What the deuce did I do with that photograph— ah, here it is. Inside vest pocket, left-hand side— just where it belongs."

He pulled a small photograph from his vest pocket and sat gazing at it rapturously. It was the portrait of the fair Dolly in tights. After a long scrutiny of this rather picturesque product of nature and the photographer, he arose and, with a sigh, turned off all the lights in the room, still holding the picture in his hand. The fire in the grate was now the only means of illumination in the parlour

and the halls were dark. Reconsidering his impulse to go to bed, he threw himself in a chair before the grate, his elbow resting on the mahogany table at its right. There he devoted himself to— dreams. A wave of cold air crossing his back brought him from dreamland.

"Some one must have left a door open," he grumbled. He looked up and down the hall and then resumed his seat before the fire. A moment later the chilly draft struck him again. "Confound it! There's a devil of a draft from somewhere. It goes clean through me. Must be a crack in the floor. That's the trouble with these shacks that somebody's grandfather built before the flood." He vigorously poked up the fire and drew his chair a little closer to the circle of warmth.

Had he turned his head for an instant as he sat down he could have seen that he was not alone in the room. A tall, shadowy woman in white was standing in the hall door, looking pensively in upon him. For a full minute she stood there, hesitating between modesty and curiosity, and then turned as if to glide away.

Reconsidering, she smiled defiantly and more or less nervously, and then turned back into the room. Of course, he did not hear her as she approached. The mere fact that her filmy white dress was of the fashion in vogue before the Revolution should prove her identity to the reader. She was the Gloaming Ghost.

Gates Garrison was softly, tenderly addressing the photograph of the airy but not ethereal Dolly. The words were not for the ears of others. Even the infatuated lover would have despised the strain of softness in his tones had he known there was a hearer.

"If you could but speak to me," he was saying to the picture, "you'd make me happy, I know. You'd tell me that you love me. You'd tell me that you hate that meddlesome old man Ellison. You've got it just as bad as I have, haven't you, Dolly?"

"What a real woman she seems to be," exclaimed a soft silvery voice at his shoulder. Garrison whirled and looked up into the beautiful face of the ghost.

"Great Heaven!" he gasped, struggling to his feet, his eyes riveted to the face of the wraith.

"Only a part of it, my dear sir," corrected the ghost, with a rare smile in which courage struggled with diffidence. "Dear me, why do you stare at me so rudely?"

She was standing directly before him now, tall and straight. He was hanging to the mantelpiece, almost speechless.

"Who— what in Heaven's name are you?" he cried.

"Why, don't you know me? I am Mrs. Godfrey Gloame," she replied, a touch of resentment in her voice.

"The— the ghost?"

"That's what they call me," she admitted sadly. "It's such a horrid thing to be called, too. In reality, I'm merely a visitor from another world. There are many more of my kind in this room at this instant, sir, but you cannot see them. They are visible to me, however. If it interests you in the least, I can tell you that you are surrounded by ghosts. Please don't run! They can not hurt you. Why should they, even if they could? What a big, strong man you are to be afraid of such perfectly harmless, docile beings as we. Over in that corner, looking from the window, stands my daughter-in-law, Mrs. George Gloame. I saw her husband, my son, sitting in the hallway as I came through. Judging from their attitudes, they've had another of those horrid quarrels. I hope you'll pardon me for disturbing you. You looked so lonely I couldn't resist the desire to come in and see. you as I was passing."

Gates was regaining his composure rapidly. The first uncanny shock was wearing off and he was confessing to himself that there was nothing to fear in the spectral bit of loveliness.

"I— I'm sure I appreciate the honour," he said, bowing low.

"Permit me to introduce myself," she went on, and he marvelled at her charm of manner. "I am the great-great-grandmother of Cassady Gloame, and the daughter of Van Rensselaer Brevoort, of New York. He is a millionaire."

"He must be a pretty old millionaire by this time, isn't he?"

"Oh, poor papa has been dead for a hundred and one years."

"Indeed? He isn't here, is he? I'm getting so I don't mind you in the least but I'd rather not meet any male— er— ghosts, if you please." Mrs. Godfrey Gloame laughed unrestrainedly.

"Don't you know that we are nothing but spectral air?" she cried derisively.

"Ah, since you speak of it, I did feel your draft when you came in," he said. "But, if you will pardon me, Mrs. Gloame, there is something uncanny about you just the same. You'll admit that, I'm sure. How would you have felt when you were in the flesh to have had a horrible ghost suddenly walk in upon you?" "Oh, I am horrible, am I?" she said as she leaned toward him with an entrancing smile.

"Heavens, no!" he retracted. "You are a marvel of beauty. I don't wonder that your husband was jealous." She did not appear to have heard the last remark.

"How I used to live in terror of ghosts," she cried, looking about apprehensively. "Would you believe it, sir, up to the time I was married I could not bear the thought of being left alone in the house for a single minute of the night. The darkness, the mystic flicker of the lights, the stillness seemed to swarm with spirits— Oh, you don't know how I suffered with the fear of them."

"And after you got married— what then?"

"I soon had material spirits to contend with."

"How so?"

"That is an extremely personal inquiry, sir."

"I beg pardon if I have overstepped the bounds of politeness."

"I may as well tell you that my husband drank terribly. It's all over the country anyhow, I hear."

"The Gloame pedigree says that you drove him to it."

"I know that is what the Gloames claim, but it is a shameless slander. My poor, dear husband has told me since that he was wrong and he would give all he has on earth to set me aright in that hateful old pedigree. The poor fellow killed himself, you doubtless know. I was never so shocked in my life as when I heard that he had committed such a brutal act." Mrs. Gloame was looking sadly, reminiscently into the fire and there was a trace of tears in her voice.

"But, my dear madam, didn't he begin by slaying you?" exclaimed Gates in surprise.

"To be sure, he did destroy me first or I might have kept him from committing the awful crime of suicide," she said, despondently.

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"BUT murder is so much worse than suicide," expostulated Garrison. "We hang men for murder, you know."

"I've a notion that it would be difficult to hang them for suicide. But you are quite wrong in your estimation of the crime. You do not know what it is to be murdered, I presume."

"Well, hardly."

"Nor what it is to commit suicide? Well, let me advise you, judging from what I know of the hereafter, get murdered in preference to committing suicide. I'd even suggest that you commit murder, if you are determined to do anything rash."

"And be hanged for it!" laughed Gates.

"You can be hanged or be d— — d, just as you like," she said meaningly. "I wish you could talk to my husband if you are thinking of doing anything of the kind. I'm sure your young love affairs must be getting to the suicide stage by this time."

"But I don't want to kill anybody, much less myself. Oh, I beg your pardon," he cried suddenly. "Pray have a chair, Mrs. Gloame. It was unpardonable in me to let you remain standing so long. I've been a trifle knocked out, I mean disconcerted. That's my only excuse."

"You are not expected to know anything about ghost etiquette," she said sweetly, dropping into a chair at the side of the table farthest from the fire. Garrison had some fear that her vapoury figure might sink through the chair, but

he was agreeably surprised to find that it did not. Mrs. Gloame leaned back with a sigh of contentment and deliberately crossed her pretty feet on the fender.

"Won't you sit nearer to the fire?" lie asked. "It's very cold tonight and you must be chilled to the bone. You are not dressed for cold weather." She was attired in a low-necked and sleeveless gown.

"I'm not at all cold and, besides, I did not bring my bones with me." He resumed his seat at the opposite side of the table. "Have you come far tonight?"

"From the graveyard a mile down the river. It is a beautiful cemetery, isn't it?"

"I am quite a stranger in these parts. Besides, I'm not partial to graveyards."

"Oh, dear me," she cried, in confusion. "The idea of my sitting here talking to a total stranger all this time. You must think me extremely bold."

"I am the bold one, madam. It's my first experience, you know, and I think I'm doing pretty well, don't you? By the way, Mrs. Gloame, my name is Gates Garrison, of New York, and my sister is the present Mrs. Gloame."

"The pretty young thing with the old Gloame husband?"

"Can't say she's pretty, you. know. She's my sister."

"I passed her in the hall tonight."

"The *dev*— the deuce you did!" cried Gates, coming to his feet in alarm. "Then she must be lying out there in a dead faint." He was starting for the door when she recalled him.

"Oh, she did not see me. She merely shivered and asked a servant to close the door. An ill wind seems to be a north wind, so far as ghosts are concerned," she concluded pathetically. "So you are from New York. Dear New York; I haven't been there in a hundred and thirty-five years, I dare say. One in my position rather loses count of the years, you know. I suppose the place is greatly changed. And your lady-love lives there, too, I see."

"My lady-love?" demanded Gates, taken back.

"Yes, the girl who is so well dressed from her shoulders up," with a tantalising smile.

"You mean— this?" he asked, turning a fiery red as he tried to slip the picture of Dolly under a book.

"Let me see it, please. Who is she?" He was ashamed, but he held out the picture. A poorly disguised look of disgust crossed the startled features of Mrs. Godfrey Gloame.

"She's— a friend of the Colonel's," said Gates promptly.

"I should think his wife would do well to be on her guard. This is the first time I ever saw such a costume. In my day a woman would not have dared to do such a thing. Don't you know her?"

"Oh, casually," answered he, looking away.

"I'm glad to hear that. She is nothing to you, then?"

He shook his head in fine disdain.

"I don't care much for you men in these days, Mr. Garrison," she said.

"You're not complimentary."

"When I compare the men of my day— men like Godfrey— with the men of today, I thank Heaven I had the honour to be killed by a gentleman. You don't know how many unhappy wives I meet in the cemetery."

"Well, there are no women like you in this day, either. You are beautiful, glorious," he cried, leaning toward her eagerly. She shrank back with a laugh, holding her hands between his face and her own.

"How lovely," she sighed. "But keep away, please."

"Well, I should say," he exclaimed, his teeth almost chattering, so cold was the air that fanned his face. "I never got such a frost from a woman in all my life."

"If my husband had heard your words of flattery he would have created a terrible disturbance. He was fearfully jealous— a perfect devil when the spell came over him."

"A devil then and a devil now, I may infer."

"Oh, no; you do him an injustice. Godfrey really was an angel, and if he had not killed himself I think he would not now be in such an uncertain position. He is still on probation, you see."

"Between two fires, as it were."

"I think not. The last time I saw him he was shivering."

"I don't wonder," said Gates, ruefully, recalling the chill of a moment since. "Does he ever come here?"

"Not often. There are so many unpleasant associations, he says. It was here that the funeral took place and he has expressed very strong exceptions to the sermon of a minister who alluded to him as an unfortunate victim of his own folly. The idea! It would have been folly, indeed, for Godfrey to have lived after I was dead. Every woman in Virginia would have been crazy to marry him. And then one of the pall-bearers did not suit him. He had cheated Godfrey in a horse trade, I think."

"I should like to have known Godfrey Gloame."

"You would have admired him. He was the best pistol shot, the bravest man in all Virginia. Three times he fought duels, coming off victorious each time. He would have been an ideal husband if he had not been so indolent, so dissipated, and so absurdly jealous of Harry Heminway. I shall never forgive him for killing me on account of poor Harry."

"Is that why he killed you?" asked Gates eagerly.

"He said so at the time, but he was sorry for it afterward. That is usually the way with jealous men."

"Whew!" exclaimed the man, starting up. "There's another draft, didn't you feel it?"

"It is my husband coming, I know his footstep," she said delightedly, looking toward the door.

"Holy smoke!" cried Gates, in alarm.

"Don't let him hear you speak of smoke. He is very touchy about it just now. Ah, come in, Godfrey, dear."

She crossed to the door to meet the tall, grey young man in the eighteenth century costume, Garrison looking on with open mouth, and rising hair.

Godfrey Gloame was a handsome fellow, albeit he was as transparent as glass. His hair was powdered with all the care of a dandy and his garments hung properly upon his frame. He kissed his wife and then glared at young Mr. Garrison.

"Who is this man, Beatrice?" he demanded, his hand going to his sword hilt. Mrs. Gloame caught the hand and there was passionate entreaty in her eyes. "Speak, woman! What are you doing here with him at this time of night?"

"Now, don't he cross, Godfrey," she pleaded. "It's only Mr. Garrison."

"And who the devil is Mr. Garrison?"

"What a very disagreeable ghost," muttered Gates, remembering that ghosts are harmless.

Mrs. Gloame led the unruly Godfrey up to the table and, in a delightfully old-fashioned way, introduced the two gentlemen.

"Mr. Garrison is the brother of my successor, the present mistress of Gloaming," she said.

"And a devilish pretty woman, too. I've seen her frequently. By the way, I stopped in her bedchamber as I came through. But that's neither here or there. What are you doing here with this young whipper-snapper, Beatrice?"

"Let me explain, Mr. Gloame," began Gates hastily.

"I desire no explanation from you, *sah*," interposed Godfrey, towering with dignity. "You would explain just as all men do under like circumstances. Beatrice, I demand satisfaction."

"Be rational, Godfrey, for once in your life. It is beneath my dignity to respond to your insult," said Mrs. Gloame proudly.

"Good for you, Mrs. Gloame," cried Garrison approvingly. "You would be a bully actress."

"*Sah*, you insult my wife by that remark," roared Godfrey Gloame, and this time the sword was unsheathed.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of you, old chap," said Gates bravely. "You're nothing but wind, you know. Be calm and have a chair by the fire. Your wife says you have chills."

"I do not require an invitation to sit down in my own house, *sah*. I am Godfrey Gloame, *sah*, of Gloaming, *sah*."

"You mean you were— you are now his shade," said Gates. "Ah, that's the word I've been trying to think of— shade! You are shades— that's it— shades, not ghosts. Yes, Mr. Gloame, I've heard all about your taking off and I am sure that you were a bit too hasty. You had no license to be jealous of your wife— she assures me of it, and from what I've seen of her I'd be willing to believe anything she says."

"Ah, too true, too true! I always was and always will be a fool. It was she who should have slain me. Will you ever forgive me, Beatrice, forgive me fully?" said Godfrey, in deep penitence.

"I can forgive everything but the fact that you were so shockingly drunk the night you killed us," said she, taking his hands in hers.

"Oh, that was an awful spree! My head aches to think of it."

"It was not the murder I condemn so much as the condition you were in when you did it," she complained. "Mr. Garrison, you do not know how humiliating it is to be killed by a man who is too drunk to know where the jugular vein is located. My neck was slashed— oh, shockingly!"

"Yes, my dear *sah*, if I must admit it, I did it in a most bungling mannah," admitted her husband. "Usually I am very careful in matters of importance, and I am only able to attribute the really indecent butchery to the last few sups I took from General Bannard's demijohn. My hand was very unsteady, wasn't it, dearest?"

"Miserably so. See, Mr. Garrison, on my neck you can see the five scars, indications of his ruthlessness. One stroke should have been sufficient, a doctor told me afterwards. This one, the last,— do you see it? Well, it was the only capable stroke of them all. Just think of having to go through eternity with these awful scars on my neck. And it was beautiful, too, wasn't it, Godfrey?"

Garrison thought it must have been the prettiest neck ever given to woman.

"Divine!" cried Mr. Gloame warmly. "My dear *sah*, there never lived a woman who had the arms, the neck, and shoulders that my wife possessed. I speak reservedly, too, *sah*, for since my demise I have seen thousands. A shade has some privileges, you know."

"Godfrey Gloame!" cried his wife, suspiciously. "What have you been doing? Have you been snooping into the privacy of—"

"Now, my dear girl, do not be too hasty in your conclusions. You'll observe, Mr. Garrison, that I am not the only jealous one. I have merely seen some shoulders. Very ordinary ones, too, I'll say. Oh, I am again reminded that I want an explanation for your damnably improper conduct tonight, madam. This thing of meeting a man here at twelve o'clock is—"

"Goodness!" cried Mrs. Gloame anxiously. "It is not twelve, is it! I must hasten away by a quarter after twelve."

"It lacks considerable of that hour," said Gates. Turning to Godfrey Gloame, who was leaning against the mantel, he went on to explain: "You see, sir, I was reading here and your wife dropped in— blew in, I might say— all without my knowledge, very much as you did. She had had no invitation, we had made no date— I mean arrangement— and I was paralysed at first. Your wife is a perfect stranger to me. There is a disparity in our ages that ought to protect her. I am twenty-four and she is at least a hundred and fifty."

"Sir! I am but twenty-five!" exclaimed Mrs. Gloame indignantly.

"Madam, I must remind you that you have a great-great-grandson in Colonel Gloame the present, who, by the way, is very proud of his ancestry. But pardon my jesting, please. Would you like a little brandy or a glass of wine? It is a cold night, even for shades. Let me prepare a toddy— it won't take a minute, and I know how to get up a cracker-jack. New thing in all of the New York clubs."

After a moment of indecision the two Gloames sank into chairs beside the table. Godfrey waved his hand pleasantly, courteously, to the young New Yorker.

"My dear *sah*," he said, "your explanation of this rather unaccountable situation is entirely acceptable. I see the position clearly, just as it is, and I humbly apologise for afflicting you with an insinuation. Beatrice, I crave your forgiveness again. Your proffer of the toddy, Mr. Garrison, is timely and I should be happy to place my approval upon your particular concoction."

"Godfrey," cried his wife in distress, "you swore you would never drink another drop."

"But this shall be the last," he pleaded, "so help me— so help me— Moses."

Garrison set to work with the Colonel's decanters, concocting a brew over the spirit lamp, the two wraiths looking on in silent admiration.

"How like you Mr. Garrison is, Godfrey," said Mrs. Gloame.

"Except the water, my dear," agreed Godfrey, taking it for granted that she referred to his ability to mix drinks. "Do you use the water to cleanse the goblet, Mr. Garrison?"

"Chief ingredient, Mr. Gloame," explained Gates, and Godfrey's heart sank heavily.

"By the way, have a cigarette while I am busy with this."

He tossed his cigarette case to Godfrey, who inspected it and the contents curiously.

"Are they to smoke, *sah*?"

"Certainly, light up, if Mrs. Gloame doesn't object."

"It used to be we had nothing but tobacco to smoke," said Godfrey Gloame, lighting a cigarette from a coal in the grate.

"Will it make him ill?" asked Mrs. Gloame. "He has a very frail stomach."

"I think the smoke will mix very nicely with his stomach," said Gates. "For want of something better to say, I'll ask you how you spent the summer."

"For my part, I stayed at home with the old complaint: nothing to wear," said Mrs. Gloame. "I am curious to know where my husband was, however."

"Well, I didn't need anything to wear," said he, naively. "My summer was spent a long way from heaven, and I have just this much to say to you mortals: you did not know what you were talking about when you said that the past summer was hotter than— excuse me, Beatrice; I almost uttered a word that I never use in the presence of a lady."

"You don't mean to say you have gone to— to— oh, you poor boy!" cried Mrs. Gloame, throwing her arms about her husband's neck.

"Not yet, dearest," said Godfrey consolingly. "I was merely spending a season with an old friend, Harry Heminway. He asked about you and I told him you were so far above him that he ought to be ashamed to utter your name. Ah, Mr. Garrison has finished the toddy."

Garrison ceremoniously filled the goblets and handed them to his guests. Godfrey Gloame arose grandly, holding his glass aloft.

"Well, Mr. Garrison," he said, "I can only say to you that I am glad to have met you and that I am sincerely sorry we have not been friends before. You have given us a very pleasant evening, quite unexpectedly, and I drink to your very good health." "Hold, sir!" cried Gates. "I am sure you will allow me to suggest an amendment. Let us drink to the everlasting joy of the fair woman who is your wife. May her shadow never grow less."

"Thank you," said she, "I bid you drink, gentlemen, and share the joy with me. Ah!" as she set the goblet down, "that is delicious."

"Superb!" cried her husband. "My dear *sah*, it thrills me, it sends a warmth through me that I have not experienced in a hundred and thirty-five years. How long do you expect to remain at Gloaming?"

"One week longer."

"I shall come again if you will but prepare another like this."

"You swore that this would be your last, Godfrey; are you as vacillating as ever!" cried his wife.

"I— oh, dearest, a few of these won't hurt me— you know they won't," came earnestly from the other wraith.

"If you touch another I shall despise you forever and forever," she cried firmly. "Take your choice, Godfrey Gloame."

"It's plain that I am doomed to eternal punishment, whichever way you put it," mourned poor Godfrey. "Take away the glasses, Mr. Garrison. I'll no more of it if my wife so disposes."

"Noble fellow," said Gates. "Have another cigarette!"

"Stay! I have heard that they are worse than liquor," objected Mrs. Gloame.

"I don't know but you are right," supplemented Gates.

"But I must have some sort of a vice, dear," pleaded poor Godfrey.

"Vice may be fashionable on earth, but if that's the case it was fashion that ruined us, you'll remember, Godfrey," she reminded him.

"That's worth thinking about," mused Garrison. "There is something deep in that observation. You spooks are—"

"'Spooks!" cried the Gloames, arising in deep resentment.

"I mean shades," apologised Gates. "You do say—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Godfrey, nervously, "but can you tell me what time it is?"

"Ten minutes after twelve, sir." "Oh, we must be going," cried Mrs. Gloame.

"What's the rush?" demanded Gates.

"We cannot stay out after twelve-fifteen, *sah*. We get an extra fifteen minutes on Christmas Eve, you know," explained Godfrey.

"We are led to believe that you stay out till the cock crows," said Gates.

"Oh, these absurd superstitions," cried Mrs. Gloame merrily. "How ignorant the people are. Are you going my way, Godfrey?"

"Yes, dear, and I care not what the direction may be. Good-night, Mr. Garrison."

"Good-night," added the beautiful Mrs. Gloame, "and a Merry Christmas. I sincerely hope we have not annoyed you."

"I have never enjoyed anything so hugely. No one will believe me when I tell this story at the club. Merry Christmas to both of you. You'll come again, won't you?"

They were at the door and looking back at him.

"If you care to come to the room in the south wing, you will find me there at most any time, Mr. Garrison," was her parting invitation. Gates was positive he heard Godfrey swear softly as they glided away in the darkness.

And no one did believe him when he told the story at the club.

18: The Haunted Door

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The author has several series characters, the best known being Uncle Abner, the pre-US Civil War detective; others are the slightly shifty laywer Randolph Mason, Sir Henry Marquis of Scotland Yard, and Monsieur Jonquelle, Prefect of the Paris Police. This is a Jonquelle story.

EARLY IN APRIL the Marquis Banutelli closed his villa at Bordighera, on the Mediterranean, and traveled to Geneva. He was in frail health, enervated by the sun of the Riviera and displeased with life.

He had intended to write a great opera at Bordighera, but he could not get the thing to go upon its legs. The Marquis blamed the commonplace times for this plague upon his opera. There was no longer anything mysterious or unknown in the world. A tram carried tourists to the Sphinx; the Americans had penetrated to the Pole— or pretended to have done so— and the English had entered Tibet.

Moreover the whole race of men was tamed; the big, wild, barbaric passions that used to rend the world were now harnessed to the plow. Men no longer climbed to the stars for a woman or carried a knife a lifetime for an enemy. The tragedies of love and vengeance were settled by the notary and the law court. Romance and adventure had been ejected out of life.

The Marquis was by no means certain he would find in Geneva what he had failed to find in Bordighera— that is to say, inspiration for his opera— though this city was the very realm of romance. It lay across the bluest lake in the world, beneath the sinister ridge of Salève; behind it was the range of the Jura; and beyond it Mont Blanc emerged on clear mornings from the sky. But he was sure to find there a bracing climate when the wind, like a curse of God, did not blow from the north.

The Marquis went to the very best hostelry and sat down in a sunny room where he could see that sight of the faërie— the great two-pointed, rose-colored sails of the stone boats descending Lake Leman.

It was early and there were but few guests— a Japanese, with a French wife; two or three English families, and a distinguished German. The German, alone, interested the Marquis Banutelli.

He was perhaps sixty-five— a commanding military figure. It was clear from every aspect that the man was a person of importance. Italy and the German Empire were now in very close relations. The Kaiser was thought to be mobilizing his armies. England and France seemed about to be forced into the

field. War was in the air; one saw soldiers on every hand, and all the fierce old hatreds had risen from the fields of Jena and Auerstädt, Metz and Sedan, as on the daybreak of a resurrection.

The Marquis inquired at the bureau, learned that the German was the Prince Ulrich Von Gratz, and presented himself. The two sat over their coffee a long time that evening in the foyer of the hotel. The talk ran upon the necessities and barbarities of war. Von Gratz was a soldier; he had gone through the Franco-German War: and his vivid and realistic experiences, the experiences of a man of action in the deadly struggle of two infuriated peoples, fascinated the Italian, who was essentially a dreamer.

The interest and appreciation of the Marquis seemed to inspire Von Gratz, and he entered into the details of that hideous barbarity by which the German armies crushed the provinces of France. The Marquis had read the La Débâcle of Zola and the tales of Maupassant, but he never until this day realized the stern implacable savagery with which the uhlan had forced the French peasant to remain a noncombatant while the German armies marched over his fields to Paris.

The acquaintance ripened into a fine intimacy.

During the day Von Gratz was not usually to be seen, and was understood to be concerned with one of those ponderous works on the science of war that engages the excess energy of the military German as a system of philosophy engages that of the scholastic. In the evening he smoked very black cigars from Homburg and talked with the Marquis.

The conversation was in French— a language the Italian invariably used in every country but his own. The German also spoke it with fluency and something approaching a proper accent. The Marquis Banutelli remarked upon this accomplishment, and Von Gratz replied that it had served him when he had occupied the Valley of the Jura during the Franco-German War. He added that his headquarters had been at Ferney, but a few miles from Geneva; and he mentioned the further confidence that one of his objects in coming to Geneva was to go over again the scenes of his military occupancy there. But this thing he had hesitated to do. The war spirit in France had vitalized old memories. He had held the province with an iron hand. He would be remembered and not welcome.

The incidents of this district, lying so close to Geneva, interested the Italian; and, as he was accustomed to walk in the afternoon, he determined to walk there. Von Gratz envied him this privilege, and deplored the fact that the present temper of France prevented him from accompanying the Marquis; but he got maps from the concierge and marked a route which he particularly wished the Marquis to go over.

The following afternoon the Marquis took the tram out of Geneva, got down when he had crossed the hill toward Ferney, and, according to his map, set out on a little road into the country. This road, bordered part of the way by great trees, within half a mile entered France. The Marquis knew the border by the square stone, carved on the French side with a fleur-de-lis. He also knew it by the little hut of plaited twigs in which the gendarme who guards the roads out of France protects himself from the rain and the winds.

This was an unkempt country road, and such are not usually under a sharp surveillance, but to-day it was sentineled like the main road into Geneva.

The Marquis was not molested and continued on his way; but he felt that the military instincts of France were at this time particularly alert. The road continued westward toward the Jura, but the Italian turned into the long wood that lies in the low valley between Geneva and Ferney. On all sides the flowers were beginning to come out. The path the Marquis followed had once been an ancient road, but it was now overgrown and, in fact, no longer even a path. One had continually to clamber over logs and to put aside the branches of trees.

Banutelli reflected that this had doubtless been a military road through the forest in the time of the Von Gratz occupation, and he determined to follow it. Presently it came out into a little meadow entirely inclosed by the wall of the forest.

An abandoned farmhouse stood here where the road emerged. It was a big, old house with timbered gables and a farmyard inclosed by a stone wall. The house and premises, though heavy and of sound material, were ragged with age. And this deserted house, hidden in the wood and to be reached only by an abandoned road, inspired the Italian with a sense of remote and sinister loneliness. Thus in old tales were haunted houses environed or the venue of revolting crimes.

He continued across the bit of meadow and through the fringe of forest, and found himself come almost immediately upon the main road from Ferney to Geneva. The Marquis crossed the border toward the environs of Geneva, where several gendarmes lounged on a bench in the sun before the bureau of police. And again he felt that all France was under a searching military surveillance.

That night he described the ancient road and the abandoned house to Von Gratz. He had been quite right in his conjecture. The Prince had occupied this very house when he held the province, and he had cut this road through the wood. He listened with interest to every detail. And when the Marquis, having concluded his description, added the sinister impression he had received, Von Gratz very gravely shook his head.

Some things had happened there.... It was no gentle work to hold a hostile district. He sat for some time silent, his face stern with the memory, but he did not disclose the reminiscence. Again he expressed the desire to revisit this

district, and again he regretted that the hostile attitude of France made it unsafe to do so.

He showed so keen an interest in all that the Marquis had observed that the Italian continued to take his walks in that direction. And thus, through the medium of another, Von Gratz was, in a manner, able to revisit the province which he had held under his heel.

He was interested in everything, but especially in the old road and the abandoned farmhouse, as— the Marquis sometimes thought— the criminal agent is interested in the place where he has accomplished a secret crime and would know how it has changed. It happened, for this reason, that Banutelli frequently chose this route; he remarked the trees that had failed across the ancient road, and the height and thickness of the bushes that had grown up in it.

Von Gratz was especially interested in every change that had taken place in the abandoned farmhouse. Did the great nail-studded door still hang upon its hinges, and the like? He seemed to learn with relief that this door was closed; and one night, when the Marquis reported that it was open, he exhibited a marked concern, as though every ravage of time upon this deserted house was in some sinister manner correlated to his own destiny.

The desire now to see this place for himself became a sort of obsession. He inquired precisely at what points on the route one was likely to meet the peasants. The Marquis replied that he would meet no one in the wood, and that the only peasants he was likely to pass were two big old men, who had recently come to spade up a potato field in the corner of the meadow beyond the farmhouse toward Ferney.

The Marquis thought that Von Gratz was unduly concerned about entering this bit of French territory. He had only to go in civilian dress, follow the old road, and turn back before the farmhouse to avoid the peasants entirely. And when he went up to his rooms that night it was with a suspicion that there was something appalling and sinister lying back of the German's anxieties. This impression was strengthened on the following day when he received a note from Von Gratz, saying that he had determined to visit the scene of his former headquarters, and closing with the strange request that if he did not return to luncheon the Marquis himself should come to search for him. The note prayed Banutelli, under no circumstances, to speak of the matter, and to come alone.

The Marquis was not very much concerned for the safety of Von Gratz, but when he did not find the German at luncheon, and learned that he had gone out of the hotel early and had not returned, he became uneasy, took the tram out of Geneva and crossed the French border.

The afternoon was perfect; the sun soft and caressing. The peasants were at work in the distant fields, and the gendarme dozed in his twig hut. The Marquis entered the wood and followed the old road. The buds were swelling; little

flowers were beginning to appear; and he wondered how anything harmful could have menaced Von Gratz in the peace and serenity of this April afternoon. He began to be impressed with the folly of his errand; but when he stopped on the edge of the wood to look over the abandoned farmhouse he thought he saw something move at a gabled window.

He looked closely and presently became certain that a hand beckoned him. The Marquis crossed to the open door and entered the farmhouse. The house was much larger than the Marquis had imagined and very stoutly built. It had been long abandoned, but it remained sound and tight.

The Marquis' footsteps echoed on the stone stairs, and in spite of his courage he felt a sense of fear of what he might be going to meet. As he neared the top of the stairs he heard his name called, and glancing up he saw Von Gratz's face, as though it looked at him from the wall. The next moment he realized that the German was peering at him through a little opening cut in a door.

"Prince!" cried Banutelli. "What has happened to you? And why are you here?"

"Marquis," replied Von Gratz, "I am a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" echoed the Italian. "Who has made you a prisoner? I will go at once for the gendarmes."

"No, my friend," replied Von Gratz, "the gendarmes would only get me killed. My one hope lies in your courage and devotion. Please to look through the window behind you and see if the two old peasants are at work in their potato field."

The Marquis turned to the little high window behind him on the stairs, and by standing on tiptoe was able to see out. On the edge of the forest beyond the little meadow the two old peasants labored with their spades, digging up the sod. The sun lay upon their stooped shoulders and their bent backs, and a vagrant wind stirred their white hair. They reminded the Marquis of the humble figures of the Angelus. He returned to the door.

"The peasants are there," he said. "What have these simple creatures to do with this outrage?"

"Simple creatures!" cried Von Gratz. "God in Heaven! The spirit of vengeance— tireless, patient and inexorable— has never dwelt on this earth as it dwells within the bosoms of those two peasants! Prepare yourself, Marquis, to hear the strangest thing that ever happened.

"When I entered this valley during the Franco-German War three brothers occupied this house. It was night when my advance reached the wood, and one of these brothers, coming to the door, fired a fowling-piece. When we entered he gave up the gun and explained that he had not intended to resist soldiers, but had been alarmed by a noise he did not understand. He was a fine young

peasant, concealed nothing, and answered every question without evasion. It was impossible not to believe him. I would willingly have set him at liberty; but he had fired on the uhlans and an example had to be made.

"I occupied the house and imprisoned him for five days in this very room in which I now stand until his offense should be thoroughly known throughout the whole province; and at the end of that time I had him stood up before the door of this house and shot, as a warning that any non-combatant firing on the soldiers would be thus shot against the door of his house. Each of the two older brothers came to me privately and begged me to shoot him instead of the boy; when I refused they looked at me for a long time, as one has seen an animal look at something it does not intend to forget."

Von Gratz paused.

"Marquis," he said, "you perhaps observed in the environs of Ferney an ancient chapel surmounted by a crucifix. When these two peasants became convinced that I would not take their lives in exchange for that of the boy, they went to this chapel in Ferney to pray." The German's voice descended into a whisper. "And they have continued to go there every day for forty years!"

The man's voice died out and he remained for some time silent, while the Italian endeavored to realize the vast infinite faith that no period of time could weaken, and that returned day after day, in the unfailing belief that it would in the end receive what it asked.

The voice began with an abrupt and unexpected question.

"Do you believe in God, Marquis?"

The amazed and bewildered Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he replied— "sometimes."

"I never did," continued Von Gratz. "But listen! The war passed and I returned to my estates in Baden. I was young then. I grew old. I forgot this incident. But one night in the castle at Waldshut I dreamed that I was standing in the edge of the wood before this house, looking at the door. The door was closed. I seemed greatly relieved— and I woke.

"Time ran on and the dream returned. And always as the thing reappeared my anxiety about the door became greater, and my relief at finding it still closed increased, as though this closed door stood between me and some appalling doom. The dream never varied. I looked always at this door in a sweat of dread!" Von Gratz paused. Then he went on like a disembodied voice:

"One never escapes from the superstitions of his childhood. I had heard that if one touched a dead man on the forehead he would not dream of him, or if he went to the scene of a haunting obsession it would disappear. I could no longer endure this hideous anxiety that recurred always in a shorter cycle. I determined to come here and revisit this house in the hope that this dream would cease.... But I found all France inflamed, and I hesitated until you told me that the door

was open. Then I determined to go. I dared not think what this accursed dream might become, now that the closed door was open."

The face of Von Gratz, framed in the narrow aperture of the oak door in the dim light of this garret, appeared fantastic and ghostlike.

"I came here. When I reached the border of the wood I was seized by two men, the sleeve of a blouse stuffed into my mouth, and carried into this house and up the stairs to this room. I was thrust in and the door locked.... Yes, the men were the two old peasants out there.... They told me that from the day their brother was shot against the door they had never ceased to pray to God to bring me back here; and they had never ceased to watch for me. They had abandoned the house as a sort of trap. They gave me precisely what I had given my own prisoner— a jug of water, black bread and a Bible. And they told me they would keep me a prisoner for five days, as I had kept the brother, and then shoot me against the door as I had shot him."

Banutelli was appalled.

"Great God!" he murmured. "What a revenge! What a revenge!"

And he continued to repeat the word, as though the very sound of it projected before him all the faith and patience and barbarity of these two terrible old men. Then he turned as though to descend the stair.

"I will bring the gendarmes. The French officers, at least, are not savages."

Von Gratz stopped him.

"No, my friend— that will not do. You would get me out, to be sure, but not alive, Marquis. Do you think a German officer could be rescued by gendarmes to-day in France and not somehow lose his life in the engagement— especially if that officer was Ulrich Von Gratz? Besides, how should I be regarded by the Emperor if I were found on French soil under such conditions? What explanation could be given? What international complications would follow?... I have thought the whole thing out. I must depend solely on you, Marquis. My brother Rudolph is now in Basel. Go to him there; tell him this thing in person and he will come here with his servants and release me. There is time enough. You will reach Basel to-morrow; these peasants will not murder me until the five days are up, and Rudolph will act swiftly."

"But, Prince," interrupted the Marquis, "how will your brother know that I come from you? There is nothing here with which to write a message. Suppose he should refuse to believe me— or take me for a madman?"

"I have also thought of that," replied Von Gratz.

He went away from the window and presently returned with the Bible of which he had spoken— a small, thick old book with a leather cover.

"During the Franco-German War," he continued, "the officers of the division to which Rudolph and myself belonged made use of this simple device. If a messenger bearing a dispatch brought with him any sort of book, no matter

what, marked with a fingerprint on any three of its successive pages ending in seven, the dispatch of that messenger was to be taken as of the most urgent necessity. I have thus marked this Bible on its seventh, its seventeenth and its twenty-seventh pages. Show it to my brother, and he will not only believe what you say but he will also know by this sign that I am in the most desperate position."

And he handed the thick old book through the opening in the door.

"You will find Rudolph Von Gratz at the Hotel of the Three Kings. And now farewell, my friend! My life will depend on your devotion! Go out of the house on the side you entered so that the peasants cannot see you from their field, flank the woods round them and return to Geneva, on the road from Ferney, as you have been accustomed to do."

The Marquis put the book into his pocket and left the house. He entered the woods and made a détour round the little meadow, keeping well within the cover of the trees; but when he came opposite to where the peasants worked he stopped.

The afternoon was entrancing; a warm vitalizing sun lay upon the earth; a breath of balmy air moved; the sounds of men and horses came to him from the distant fields; away in the blue sky the lark trilled. The mood of the world was a benediction. And the Italian shuddered!

It was the custom of poets in their tragedies to make the aspect of Nature symbolic of their motif, and it was thought that this relation struck the human mind with greater terror; but the exact reverse of that conception was true!

Under the gray roof of the distant farmhouse, peaceful in the sun, a human soul, entrapped by a supernal fantasy, awaited a doom as tragic as any in the Book of Kings! And before him, to the eye, two gentle old men digged a field that they might cultivate the fruits of the earth— while, in fact, they pursued an appalling vengeance.

The Marquis lifted his hat and wiped the sweat from his face. He looked at the two peasants, their bodies awkward and uncouth, their faces stolid; and he thought how he would have passed them by on his quest for the fierce old passions of the race. And yet these simple creatures had conceived and carried out a thing unequaled even in the Wars of Yahveh.

And this big, vivid, hideous tragedy went on, invisibly and without a sign, at the heart of this perfect day!

The man could not escape from the dominion of this oppressive idea; he continued to consider it as he crossed the fields and on the road from Ferney to Geneva. But out here in the sun, as he approached the voices and activities of men, as he observed the children at play and listened to the peasants calling in good will to one another, he found it difficult to accept as one of the realities of life the thing he had just experienced. It seemed now— here— like the

grotesque fancies of a nightmare. And unconsciously, as a sort of verification, the Marquis took the Bible out of his pocket and began to look at the pages Von Gratz had named. Yes; they were marked as the German had said, with a sort of smear, as though by a finger blackened on the hearth.

He was about to return the book to his pocket when he realized that the road before him was barred by a gendarme. He looked up. He had come to the line where the road crosses out of France. On a bench before the door of the bureau of police a thin, gray man, who looked like a gentleman of leisure, sat reading a journal. The Marquis stepped back and put the book into his pocket. At the same time a second gendarme came out into the road.

"Monsieur," he said, "we are compelled to detain you."

"Detain me!" echoed the Marquis. "For what reason?"

"Monsieur will doubtless learn that later on," replied the gendarme.

The Marquis was indignant.

"I protest against this outrage!" he said. "I am a subject of King Victor Emmanuel of Italy, and I demand instant permission to proceed!"

The gendarmes did not reply, but they now advanced as though they would take the Italian into custody. At this moment the man who sat on the bench before the door put down his journal, rose and came out into the road. As he approached the Marquis he bowed.

"Pardon, Monsieur," he said, "I have some trifling influence with the authorities here and I shall be charmed to be of service to so distinguished a personage as the Marquis Banutelli."

The Italian was at a loss to understand how his name and title should be known to this stranger; but he observed that the man was a gentleman and he was grateful for any means that offered him an escape from the gendarmes.

"I thank you, Monsieur!" he said. "I shall be obliged to you— or to any one— for permission to continue on my way to Geneva. I cannot understand why this indignity is put upon me."

The stranger made a slight conciliatory gesture.

"Ah, Monsieur, nations will have their little foibles." He looked at his watch. "And, now, if the Marquis Banutelli will do me the honor of drinking a cup of tea"— he indicated a neighboring villa— "I think I can promise him safe conduct to Geneva within the hour and the end of his anxieties."

They entered a gate of the villa and ascended a long garden that gained the summit of a hill toward Lake Leman. Here was a view unexcelled in the environs of Geneva. In one direction lay the ranges of Haute-Savoie and the White Mountain in the sky, and in the other the Jura and the incomparable valley beneath it.

At a table, on the summit of this garden, the stranger placed a chair for the Marquis facing the panorama of the Alps, and himself sat down beyond him,

where he could look into the French valley and the great road. Tea was brought and while he poured it and added a bit of lemon the stranger addressed the Marquis.

"Monsieur," he began, "I esteem myself singularly fortunate in this honor. I have long wished to have your opinion upon the structure of the German opera." He made a gracious gesture, as though in deference to so distinguished an authority. "It has always seemed to me that the machinery of German tragedy is unnecessarily ponderous, weighted down with the clumsiest devices and demanding at every turn heavy, lugubrious effects— as though the mystic German mind moved always in a dense, almost palpable atmosphere of romance. Or am I in this, Monsieur, merely misled by prejudice?"

The tea was excellent, the stranger had an engaging manner, and the question was launched upon the very sea the Marquis sailed. He was compelled to consider it; and he found his host following his words with so close an interest, such intelligent comment and so high a regard for the speaker's opinion that the Marquis was charmed.

A quarter of an hour— a half— three-quarters of an hour— fled. The Marquis was deep in the subtleties of his critique when suddenly his host pointed down to the road from Ferney.

"Pardon, Monsieur," he said, "but is not the person yonder, at this moment crossing out of France, the Prussian general, Prince Ulrich Von Gratz?"

The Marquis sprang up and turned about so quickly that he almost overthrew the table. The gendarmes were standing stiffly at attention and the big military figure of the German was striding past them into Switzerland. The Marquis caught his breath with a hissing murmur through the teeth.

"Thank God!" he cried. "He is safe!"

"Safe!" echoed his companion as though in astonishment "How could a distinguished stranger be other than safe on the soil of France?"

"But he is free! He has escaped!" continued the excited Banutelli. "He goes safely into Geneva! And I left him but now a prisoner awaiting death!"

Hurriedly and with gesticulation he recounted all the details of this sinister trap in which Von Gratz had been taken, with the supernatural pressure that had forced him to enter it, the fatal patience that received him, and the diabolic vengeance that awaited him— together with the part he had played and the message that he now carried to Prince Rudolph, in Basel.

The tall, gray man standing before the amazed Italian stooped and lighted a cigarette, striking the match slowly and with deliberation. Then he held it up, watching the flame die out, with a gentle, whimsical smile.

"Ah, Marquis," he said, "as you so aptly remarked but now in your discourse, the Germans are incurably romantic!" He threw away the bit of match with a little fillip of the fingers. "Who but a Teuton, if his object was to get something

taken out of France, something he feared to carry himself and which was to be placed by his agents in an abandoned house, with the signal that the door, usually closed, should be open when the thing was ready … what intriguer, Marquis, I ask it of you, but a German, to accomplish that simple end, would resort to all these involved and ponderous properties of the tragic poets, including dreams and visitations, an imaginary execution and a secret cipher, and involving an empty house tied up in a French lawsuit, and two simple old peasants who never harmed a creature in this world!"

"But, Monsieur," cried the astonished Marquis, "what thing could Prince Ulrich Von Gratz wish carried out of France, and who are you to know all this?"

"If you will permit me to examine the Bible in your pocket," replied the stranger, "I think I can undertake to reply."

The Marquis handed the man the book. He put it down on the table and, slipping the blade of a pocketknife along the edges of the leather cover, ripped it open. Within, making the thick back, were two closely folded packets of glazed cambric, crowded with drawings.

"These," he said, "are the plans of all the French forts along the range of the Vosges.... And I, Monsieur, am Jonquelle, the Prefect of Police of Paris!"

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19: The House of Death

F. Georgia Stroup

Fannie Georgia Stroup, 1882-1952

Weird Tales, March 1923

The first story known to be written by a woman to appear in Weird Tales*, and in the first issue. So far as can be established, it is the only story she is known to have ever published.*

THE THREE women looked about the little kitchen. For some reason, each seemed to avoid the eyes of the other.

"My land, but it's hot in here!" Mrs. Prentts moved to the north window to raise it.

As she propped up the heavy sash with a thin board that lay on the sill, a gust of hot wind swept through the room from a drought-parched Kansas corn field.

Seeking relief in action, her daughter, Seiina hastened to the opposite window and pushed it up, as a cloud of dust thickened in the road in front of the house. A small herd of bawling cattle were milling past the house in the heat and glare of the August sun. Their heads drooped dejectedly and their tongues lolled from parched mouths.

"My land, Seliny, there goes another bunch of cattle out west. Does beat all how hard 'tis to get water in this country. Jes' seems to me sometimes like I'd die for a sight of mountains an' green things an' a tumblin' little stream that'd run an' ripple all summer."

Motherly Mr. Collins wiped the perspiration from her large, red face and fanned herself with her blue sunbonnet.

"Didn't Mamie Judy come from the mountain country?" she asked.

"Yes: we went to the same school. When she was a girl she had the blackest eyes and the prettiest red cheek of any girl you ever did see. Didn't look much like she does now! A farmer wife soon goes to pieces. She was such a lively girl, too— so full of fun. An' now jes' to think what the poor thing's come to!"

Again the three women avoided each other's eyes. Then Selina spoke nervously:

"Do you 'spose she did it, Ma?"

"There you go with your 'sposin' again! Better get to work and straighten up this house. That's what we come over for, ain't it?"

Mrs. Collins rose heavily from her chair and unrolled and donned a carefully-ironed, blue-checked apron.

"Seems kinda funny to have the funeral here, don't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. The gravevard's handy an' it's so far to the church."

"Yes, that's so; 'tain't far to the cemetry. Always seemed to me that Mamie'd found it kinda spooky, always seein' the graveyard right through that window there over the stove. Bein' up on ton of that rise, an' oniv half'a mile away, would make it seem to me kinda like livin' in a gravevard."

"Selina, take this here bucket an' bring in some water. My land, I don't see how Mamie ever got through with all her work an' took care of the baby. Her bein' so old, an' it her first made it harder, too. Never thought her an' Jed would have any children."

"Things do need reddin' up pretty considerable," spoke Mrs. Collins, as she picked up some odds and ends of clothing from a corner, where they had lain long enough to accumulate a coating of acrid dust

"My, jes' look at the linin' in this firebox! How a'you ever 'spose Mamie managed to cook on it?"

"Must have been pretty hard. She didn't have things fixed as handy as some of the rest of us, even. You see, they didn't have much money to spend on things. Farmin' in Kansas ain't been a payin' business the last few years. When 'tain't too wet, it's too dry, or too hot, or too cold, or somethin'."

"Yes, it seems like there's always somethin'. There— I've got that sweepin' done. We'll let Selina scrub, while we fix up the front room."

The two women opened the door into the "front" room. The blinds were tightly drawn and the musty odor testified to its lengthy isolation.

"MY LAND! look at that, will you?"

Mrs. Prentis pointed to a cheap colored glass on the center-table, whicn held a pitiful little bouquet of one immortelle, six pale spears of a rank grass and a carefully-cut-out letterhead of a printed spray of orange blossoms.

"Who'd a thought of tryin' to make a bouquet out of that? I remember when, we were back in Tennessee, that Mamie was always findin' the first deeris tongues and other kinds of little earlv flowers. Us big girls always helped fill her little hands. Seemed like she never could get all she wanted. An' then think of livin' out here where there ain't water enough for things that to have it, let alone flowers. Why, I remember one summer when we even saved the dishwater to use several times, and then fed it to the pigs 'cause water was so scarce."

"Yes: the way farmer's wives have to worry 'long, 'tain't much wonder so many of em go crazy. I rend in th' paper that was round a bundle that come from the store that a bigger part o' farmers' wives went crazy than any other kind of women."

"Yes, I've heard that too. Let's jes' step in an' pick up in the bedroom, and then sweep both these rooms out together. The wind's in th' right direction."

"Yes, you come with me. We— we could get done sooner, workin' together."

"That must be the pallet an' this th' pillow. They say the baby had been dead for several hours when Jed found it"

"Yes, an' Mamie settin' out there in the barn door, with her head in her lap. Not cryin' nor nothin'."

The two women hesitated, lingered at their task. Something kept them from moving the things that the coroner had kept in so rigidly exact a position.

"Yes; there's somethin' mighty queer about it. My land, jes' think, she might be— HUNG!" in a hoarse whisper.

Both faces blanched at the hitherto unspoken possibility. A woman— neighbor and friend, and the childhood acquaintance of one of them— was imprisoned on the charge of killing her baby.

They felt that they ought to have a feeling of horror. It was a terrible crime, with seemingly only one explanation, but to both there arose visions of the unexpected satisfying of the craving mother heart of the workworn farm drudge; of her seeming happiness and joy at the little cuddling head in the hollow of her arm and the soft lips on the breast, as the little form was held tightly to its mother's bosom.

"I don't care what the coroner's jury said, I don't believe Mamie could 'a' done it. But still— if she didn't, who *did*?"

"Yes, an' then, if she didn't do it, why don't she sav so? She knows they might hang her."

"They say she ain't said one word since Jed found her out there in the barn door. My land, but ain't it hot?"

"Yes. there bein' no trees 'round here, jes' seems like the sun hakes right through the roof. Well, we might as well begin to pick up. The funeral's at ten tomorrow. I can come over early: can you?"

"Yes, I'll be here. I'm goin' to stay an' set up tonight. Mr. and Mrs. Shinkle said they'd come over. Selina can get supper for her pa an' th' boys."

"We'd better change them cloths."

The women tiptoed into the little lean-to, with that expectant hush that the presence of death always causes.

On on improvised table, a little form lay covered with a sheet, above a box of slowly melting ice. The country ministrations of neighborly service were completed, and the women left the room and returned to their task of cleaning in the front of the little farmhouse.

"My land, but it's quiet here! Bein' so far off the main road, seems like a person never sees nor hears nobody. It's enough to drive a person crary.

THE older woman had been standing for several minutes, with her mind preoccupied by struggling thought. At last she spoke:

"See here, Mis' Prentis. if this pillow'd been standing up like this, it could've fell over on the baby. See?"

Both women bent over the carefully folded bed-clothing, placed upon the floor for the sake of a slightly cooler strata of air and also to obviate the possibility of the baby rolling off, while the mother was busy in some of the many tasks of the unaided farmer's wife.

Little by little, the bedroom was straightened and the two rooms swept and dusted. Then Mrs. Prentis paused as she gave a final look around the rooms, walked to one of the windows on the south and ran a speculative finger over the glass. It was so heavily coated with dust as to be practically opaque. Then she stepped to the two windows on the east side of the room and looked at them. The panes of glass in both were clean and carefully polished.

"Now why do you suppose that is?" she asked.

"Now why do you suppose that is?

Mrs. Collins, who had been following her moves, shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered, "Did you notice that the one in the kitchen, on the south side above the stove, hadn't been washed, either? I noticed it when I went over to look at the firebox when you spoke."

"Yes, that's so," said Mrs. Prentis, standing in the kitchen door and glancing at the south windows of one room and then at the other.

"See here, do you 'spose— that is— I mean both of these windows on the south side are toward the graveyard— do you 'spose that Mamie left 'em that way on *purpose*?"

"Well, there's a good deal to do on a farm, and mebbe she got as far as the south side washin' windows some day, and then had to quit for some reason."

"Yes, but these ain't been washed for *months*. Poor little Mamie! Mebbe she just couldn't stand to be everlastingly seein' them gravestones."

"I wish, oh *how* I wish, I'd 'a 'come over here oftener! We don't live so far away; but seems like I never get time to get all my work done, and when I do there's not time to walk, or I'm too tired, an' o' course the horses are always busy."

''What with fruit cannin', and hayin' hands, an' threshin', an' little chickens, the summer's gone 'fore you know it, an' then the winter's too cold and snowy, or too wet an' muddy to get out, an' the first thing you know another year's slipped by."

Motherly Mrs. Collins nodded her head in sympathy. An older and a heavier woman, all that Mrs. Prentis had said applied better than equally well to her.

"No wonder Mamie loved the baby so," she said, "though she ain't been overly strong since it was bom. Jes' think of the years and years she was here all alone, for Jed used to work out a good deal an' she done all the work here. Years

an' years of stillness— an' then the baby she'd never give up wantin' and hopin' for."

"Yes, when I think what a woman's got to go through here on a farm, I don't never want Selina should get married. Seems like it's enough sometimes to make a mother wish her girl baby could die when it's little—"

She gasped. Both women gave a frightened start.

"No; course I don't mean that," she added hastily. "I jes' mean you love 'em so that it don't seem no ways right for 'em to have to now up to what you see in front of 'em."

"Well, we better quit talkin' an' lay out th' baby's things. 'Spose we look in the bureau in the bedroom."

They moved again to the inner room and pulled out the top drawer of the old-fashioned marble-topped bureau.

A few shirts, a pile of carefully mended underwear and some socks, rolled and turned together in two's, met their gaze.

"That's Jed's drawer. Let's see what's in the next one."

The second drawer revealed a freshly ironed white waist carefully folded above a meager pile of woman's underwear. Without a word, Mrs. Prentis pushed it shut.

The third drawer proved to be the one they wanted. Small piles of carefully made baby clothing of cheap material but workmanship of infinite pains, met their view.

Mrs. Collins wiped the tears from her cheek with the corner of her apron.

"See— they're nearly everyone made by hand and all white. Most of 'em jes' flour sacks, but look how Mamie's bleached 'em. An' see this drawn-work."

As she spoke, she placed a work-reddened hand beneath a narrow strip of open-work.

"Yes, you can go home now," in answer to a question from Selina in the kitchen.

"My, the pains she's took on all these little things! Seems as if she must a' been gettin' 'em ready all these years, an' now—" Her voice trailed off into silence.

The little clothing was laid on the bed in readiness for the morrow, and the women looked about as though hunting something more to do. Used to the busy hours of farm life, they felt impelled to some task that would occupy the passing hours.

"Let's see if there's anything we ought to do upstairs."

They climbed the narrow ladderlike stairway to an unfinished half-story garret-like room above.

"MY LAND, she was house-cleanin' this hot weather!"

Half of the stuffy little room had been thoroughly overhauled and the other end begun. A little old horsehair trunk stood in the middle of the floor, with portions of its contents scattered about

"I'll bet she was goin' to empty that for the babv's things. I showed her mine, jes' like it, that I fixed up for Selina when she was little."

"Well, we might as well pick up the things and put em back." said orderly Mrs. Collins, who suited the word to the action by laboriously bending with a slight grunt.

Mrs. Prentis pushed her back.

"Here, let me pick 'em up. There ain't no call for you to go stoopin' 'round in this heat. First thing you know you'll be havin' a stroke."

Some clothing and small articles were collected, and several bundles of yellowed old letters lay on the floor. From one of the packages the string had broken, evidently when it had been lifted from the trunk. One letter lay crumpled near its empty envelope, where it had been dropped.

With a wondering glance, the two women smoothed it out. The first paragraph was so yellowed and faded as to legible, but part of the second paragraph had been protected by the folded paper and they could read:

...will say that your wife it hopelessly insane. She may live for year, but will never regain her mentality, at cases like hers are incurable. We find upon in vestigation that the women of her family, for several generations, have become hopelessly insane at her age.

In view of the fact that your small daughter is tainted with this inherited insanity, we strongly advise you to take her to some new environment and, when she grows older, explain to her why marriage should be considered impossible for her.

As we can see the matter now, it it too bad that her mother was not warned of the same fact, and in view of all our information it would seem to have been better if we had not pulled her through that severe illness. If you—"

The remainder of the letter teas undecipherable. The two neighbors looked at each other, their eyes wide with horror. At last Mrs. Prentis gasped hoarsely:

"Do you 'spose that bundle broke open and Mamie read this letter? Her father died 'fore she was old enough to marry and left her this place partly paid for, and I remember when her and Jed was married how they planned to pay the rest of it off jes' as soon as possible."

"But," interrupted Mrs Collins, "the coroner's jury said yesterday that they wasn't any manner of doubt but that she wasn't crazy. She jes' set there, with her solemn big eyes, and looked straight ahead and never said a word.

"I wonder how a woman'd feel to know that the baby girl she loved bettern her own life would have to grow up in this drudgery and then finally spend the last of her years in a 'sylum?"

"Yes, and s'pose Mamie went crazy herself long 'fore the little girl grew up?"

"I wonder if a woman really loved her baby girl if she wouldn't rather—" she stopped once more with a frightened look.

Wheels were heard coming down the lane.

Mrs. Prentis spoke quickly: "Sarah Ann Collins, we're goin' right downstairs and stick this letter in that cook-stove, quick!"

IN THE little kitchen below, the women were cooking supper when the county attorney and another man entered.

"Good evening, ladies," said the attorney. "We decided to come out again and go carefully over the field to see if we could find any evidence. You haven't, by chance, found anything, have you?"

Mrs. Prentis looked covertly at Mrs. Collins, then answered:

"No; we jes' been cleanin' up. We ain't been lookin' for no evidence."

"Well, Walters," said the attorney, "you know juries when it comes to women. If there never is found a definite reason for her wanting the baby to die, no jury will ever believe she is guilty."

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20: Home

Lincoln Colcord

1883-1947

The Grand Magazine March 1913

Born at sea off Cape Horn; American newspaperman, author

IT was a sultry night towards the close of the south-west monsoon. Singapore sweltered under a thick, motionless heat, that seemed to descend vertically out of the sky. A party on the quarter-deck of the bark *Omega* sat restless and uncomfortable, cursing the climate, the land, the hemisphere. Conversation flagged: the tropics had conquered.

"Nichols, how long have you been out East?" someone asked apathetically,

"Let's see," answered the captain of the *Omega*. "Twenty-five from sixty.... By Jove, it's thirty-five years!"

"I should think you'd want to go home."

"Why?"

"Oh, to see the old town... renew your youth... Get out of this for a while, too!"

"Yes— the old town!" Nichols let his eye roam from face to face with a keen, quizzical glance. "On a clear winter morning, for instance ... hm-m, what? Perhaps there's been a fall of snow over night; the trees are loaded with it, the roads haven't been broken out, the whiteness spreads, undisturbed. Can't you see it?' … Nichols waved a hand.

"Can't you see the houses, the familiar houses of our boyhood, with snow banked in around 'em, with smoke rising straight up into the still air from every chimney? Can't you see the boys issuing from those houses, armed with wooden shovels— attacking the great drifts, the clean, hard-packed piles that cut like cheese? Stop a moment, and lean on your shovel. Can't you see the white fields rising behind the town; and the sharp line of the evergreen woods, spruce and fir and pine and hemlock, with their ragged tops etched against a wonderful blue sky? Can't you smell the pure air of the north? Can't you feel the cold— the still, stinging, invigorating cold— the potent cold, that stirs a fellow's blood, that makes him rise up in his might?"

"Don't, Nichols!" remonstrated a peevish voice.

Nichols laughed cynically.

"Nonsense!— you call that a longing for home? Why, you poor fools, that's nothing but man's devilish discontent. As a matter of fact, you wouldn't like that cold weather. You wouldn't enjoy digging into those snowbanks. Your feet would get numb, and your back would ache; you'd hire someone to shovel your paths, and go indoors yourself, and croon over the fire, and never look out on

the beautiful world. You'd sigh for the tropics— for palm trees to look at, and mangoes to eat— for a deck-chair to stretch out in, and a good Chinese steward to bring your drinks, and the sweat to trickle down your back... . Damn you all!— here you've got it. Now why aren't you satisfied? "

Nichols sat up with a jerk.

"You ask me why I don't go home?" he demanded. "I'll tell you why: because I affirm that I like the East. I like the hot weather, and all that goes with it. This alien coast has become my home... As for the other, the home of my boyhood, I have every reason for not wanting to go there. You yourselves have told me of the change. A railtoad has come to town. It has coal pockets and manufacturing plants now, electric lights and summer cottages, graft and corruption. It's lost the old distinction in the new mediocrity. The spot that I remember best of all— that lovely point to the eastward of the town, where a grove of spruce used to run down to the margin of the bay, where I've dreamed away so many afternoons with the sea-breeze murmuring overhead— has been stripped, you tell me, and levelled for the freight-yard of the railroad... Business? There's no business known that will bring back a lost dream!

"... So I couldn't find the old town if I sought it," Nichols continued. " How silly— for I have it with me, you fellows; I don't need to seek it, I go home often in spirit. I spend delightful hours there, visiting the ship-yards where we played as boys, listening to the old men, our faithless oracles. And because I haven't seen the distressing actuality, it all seems quite real to me; and I feel that the old times are living still. I like to think so. Hm-m?... Oh, of course, the lie of the land, hasn't been materially modified. But from what I hear, a veritable glacier— the Glacier of Progress— has swept over the men, the ideals, the life, and left them unrecognisable."

Nichols fell silent; and we waited, knowing that words lay on his mind.

"My friends, there's been but one true home-coming, in our wandering lives," he said at last. "That was the first home-coming, at the close of our maiden voyage. The others were merely repetitions, sweet as they may have been; we knew then what to expect; we anticipated the sensation. But that one was new, fresh, and absolutely beyond experience. All human sentiment was compassed within it— much that we'd never before felt, much that we'd but dimly realised, much that we'd known and suppressed, and that suddenly became wunsuppressable. Our hearts flamed with a great love, our souls reached out to embrace the world. Oh, that glory!— why couldn't we have held it?— why couldn't we have gone on, living in the light of that flame of love? All that we saw was beautiful; all that we touched was good; all: that we conceived was born of the noble part of us, of the love, of the dream, of the God in man! Why, why did we let it go? Listen....

"I started out in life at the call of duty, when I was sixteen. My father had died; I had become the head of the family; and we were poor. I chose the sea because, in those days, there was no other choice. I shipped with my uncle, in the old bark Hudson. She was then lying a the wharf below our house, refitting for a long voyage. One morning I said good-bye to my mother, dropped over the bank by a back way so that no one should see my tears, and went aboard. We sailed within the hour; and I soon lost sight of our house. The town sank in our wake, the bay widened, the land itself dwindled, shifted, and was gone. A new world, the world of the sea, spread before me— but I hadn't the spirit to look at it. I felt that I would never be happy again.

"You know it, you fellows... you remember, That dreadful sinking of the heart, that weight like lead dragging upon some indefinite region within, that aching gloom, that quick pain that grips and lets go, gtips and lets go.... Homesickness!— can anything be worse? One doesn't wish to have it cured. One bears it, looks it in the face, wrestles with it alone— and no other experience of life brings one nearer to the truth, or contributes more to one's poor store of nobility. In my case; I was too familiar with the water to be seasick, and too familiar with ships to be lost on the Hudson's deck. Seafaring had been bred into my bones. But because I knew so much, I think it made that first week harder. For I knew the pain of seafaring, too; I'd heard sad stories with the happy ones. And here I was, already embarked upon my voyage, surrounded by an unbroken horizon, by a barren and desolate sea. Death seemed very near to me, I remember — much nearer than it does to-day. This, I reflected, was the beginning; before I knew it, life would pass; then, *finis* ... oblivion. It didn't appeal to me as being quite worth while.

"But, of course, I got over that— soon, too, surprisingly soon. Life will triumph, you know— must triumph, since we're to make out a career in the shadow of an inexorable fate. Within a week I was myself again.

"I liked the work; seamanship, the sailing, handling, and care of vessels, had always held a rare fascination for me. But my training was severe. My uncle was a captain of the old school— what they used to call a hard man. I'd put myself in his hands; and, by Jove, he did his best! I was supposed to have better stuff in me than the ordinary boy before the mast; the way to bring it out was to ground me down... . Sounds odd, doesn't it, in our soft and humanitarian day? Let me tell you a secret— the more I see of life and results, the firmer is my belief in the old-fashioned discipline.

" 'So I learned— learned to live. I worked like a dog; I growled, cursed, hated my officers, hated the Old Man, my uncle, worst of all. Hard-hearted old devil!— it was all very well for him to claim the virtues of wisdom, but I had to do the sweating. I shovelled coal in the lower hold for twelve hours a day. I went aloft with my watch off the Horn and laid out on the upper-topsail yard when rain

turned to ice on the sail we were trying to reef, when every pitch of the old hooker came near tossing us over the lee-rail. Out on the West Coast, I rowed stroke in the captain's boat, rowed him for miles up and down those exposed and windy roadsteads, rowed till I expected my arms to come out of the sockets at every stroke ;. till I could cheerfully have killed the Old Man, lolling back in the stern-sheets and playing with the tiller ropes. I ate the coarse, unpalatable food of the forecastle, and grew like a weed. I had several fights with sailors, and won them all. I sauced the mate, and got my first licking. My uncle stood by while this happened. .. . I know now that I worked, played, thought, and suffered harder than any two men aboard, But, then, I had an idea that I was a miserable failure. The Old Man never opened his mouth in a word of praise; silence was his verdict for good work, and a sound rating for bad. Such training isn't conducive te egotism.

"Through all this I found little time to think of home, 'The town of my boyhood seemed far away, detached from my present existence, a part of a discarded dream. I heard from mother now and then— cried over her letters more than once, when I was tired and disheartened. My uncle seldom spoke to me of home, and then in such a way that I wished he'd kept still... .

" 'Come here a minute, I had a letter irom your mother to-day.' ... ' Yes, sir.' . 'She writes that she is well.' …. 'Yes, sir. She said in my letter.'…. 'You mustn't fail to answer it before we get away.' …. 'No, sir'... 'I am sending all your wages to her from here. You don't need any money, do you?' ... 'No,sir. That is. .. I'd like a few dollars, sir.' 'What for?'… 'To buy things with.' 'Hm!! Do you think that's the way to get it?' 'What, sir? I don't know what you mean.'... 'Well, you'd better learn. Now, go back to your work. There is nothing in this place that you want to buy.' ... These were our relations— by Jove, didn't I hate him! How did he know what I wanted to buy?— what business was it of his, anyway? Hadn't I earned the money? 'Go back to your work!' Well, who the devil had called me away from my work? To hell with the old brute!— I was glad that I'd sauced him.

"But I did write to my mother, immediately; I'd been neglecting that duty. I'm afraid that my letter was a trifle stilted; after subtracting the things I didn't want to tell her, the narrative lacked the essence of truth. Semetimes I felt like opening my heart to her— would have done so, if sry newly-acquired manhood hadn't revolted at the disclosure. For I was unhappy— oh, I won't attempt to deny it! No doubt she tead this between the lines. She must have felt my reticence, too— cried over it, prayed, and bowed before the sad but inevitable change. She had lived quietly, but knew much of life... My mother.

"We were gone three years on that voyage. We went to San Francisco, from there to Australia, from there to the West Coast with coal, from there to Holland with guano, from there to the East, to Batavia, to Shanghai, and finally to

Yokohama, where we loaded for New York. In Yokohama, our second mate left. That night the Old Man called me aft.

" 'You are to go second mate,' he said, ' Put your things in his room, and take up your duties at once.'

" 'That was all— no explanation of those duties, no word of encouragement. But I was encouraged, just the same; I knew that I couldn't be a total failure. My first command was for two men to bring my chest from the forecastle— put it into the second mate's room— and, over in that corner... how well I remember!

"Things were different now; I'd taken my first step upward. I redoubled my efforts; my responsibility weighed upon me.... Jove, I'd like to get such a second mate to-day! On the homeward run, I was too busy to indulge myself in sentimental anticipations. At odd moments, when my fancy did reach ahead, I couldn't make the approaching event seem real, probable, or even possible. I'd outgrown my boyhood, I'd completely changed my state of mind. And I thought, I remember, that I'd accordingly been weaned from home! ...

"We came in through an autumn storm, the tail-end of a hurricane. Wind and sea, rain, hail, and lightning, the blowing away of sails, the smashing of boats, the making and taking in of sail: these occupied my mind, from Hatteras to Barnegat. There the pilot boarded us, a towboat picked us up— and we were in. The first touch of Indian summer lay on the land, I remember. I gave the scene a glance or two, and thought it very beautiful, as all land is to sailors— but perhaps not quite as beautiful as Java, or Japan. "We hauled in to a pier on South Street, and began discharging the cargo. The crew left; the mate left; the work of the ship was done. I felt a bit dazed— a bit jealous, too, of the boss stevedore, who seemed of more importance than I was— I, who'd stood my watch through trades and storms, and helped to bring her in. I had no money; and I wouldn't ask the Old Man for any. So I stayed aboard, busied myself at odd jobs, and grew restless. Mother wrote, begging me. to hurry home; but a strange spirit had come over me. I can't define it, I can't account for it now. Had the opportunity offered I would have shipped at once for another voyage.

" 'One morming the Old Man took me up to the commissioner's and paid me off. We came out of the office together, and walked back towards the ship.

" 'Well, my boy,' said my uncle suddenly, ' the voyage is over. What are you going to do now?'

" 'I stopped short, and looked at him in astonishment. His manner, the very tone of his voice, had softened. He stood before me as I remembered him, the friend of my boyhood.

" 'I don't know, sir,' I answered. 'I was thinking.' ...

" 'You're going home, of course?'

" 'Of course."... I echoed.

" 'Then you'd better go with me to-morrow morning. Here's a good restaurant; let's have a square meal, and talk it over. Wake up, my boy! You're going home!'

"The words came to me like a bugle call on the field of battle. My heart gave a great leap; the world and everything in it changed in the twinkling of an eye. I felt the dammed-up sentiment of three years tising within me like a flood. We entered the restaurant, sat down and all at once I lost control of myself. For some minutes I cried on the table. When at length I got courage to look up, I saw that my uncle had chosen a quiet corner, and that I hadn't been observed. His eyes were fixed on his plate, with a sober and serious gaze.

" 'I guess I'm a fool, sir,' I said. "I want to go home. I want my mother.'

" 'Poor boy!' he whispered, as if speaking to himself. 'I hope it's over now.' After a pause, he addressed me directly. ' Next voyage, you're going out mate with me. You have done well.'

" 'I wish to God you'd told me so a year ago!' I cried.

" 'He looked me over with his thoughtful eyes.

" 'I might have spoiled it all,' he said. 'Some day you'll understand.'

"So it came about that we were chums again, and went home together like two boys. All the way I flattened my face against the car window, watching the sweet things of the land slip past. Beside me, my uncle talked, telling tales of the town that lay at the end of our journey, drawing me back by every word to my boyhood, to the spirit and presence of home.

"In those days the railroad didn't come within six miles of the town. At Portland, we wired Newall Rich, who kept the village livery stable, to meet us at the train. Now, I'd never been aware of a particular fondness for Newall Rich. I'd known him, I'd laughed at his quaint sayings, I'd thrown snowballs at him and stolen rides on his teams. Once he'd horsewhipped me cruelly. But, looking over my uncle's shoulder as he wrote the telegram, the familiar mame gave me an unaccountable thrill, 'Newall Rich!' I cried. 'Think of that.' . Thereafter, my mind kept recurring to Newall Rich. Would he get the message in time?— would anything prevent his meeting us?— would he bring tke old hack?— would he be as fat as ever?

"Newall met us. As the train drew in, I caught sight of his short round figure.

" 'Here they are!' he chanted, dancing along the platform. 'Ha! The Honourable Commodore!'— Newall held a humorist's licence. 'And here's Bertie, little Bertie!' He immediately broke out in one of his ridiculous verses:

Little Bertie,
Sailor-man,
Tucks his shirtie
With one hand!

"I was vastly amused. Funny duck, Newall!— good soul as ever lived. I forgave him those cuts with the whip— forgave him freely. For this was a real welcome, a welcome into the bosom of the town. When I went away I hadn't been of enough importance to merit a verse from Newall. We piled into the hack— yes, he'd brought that venerable relic— our trunks were strapped on behind, and off we rattled. The windows were open, soft autumn smells came to us, the sun set, twilight descended upon the land. We followed a road high above the sea, with woods on our left, and cleared land between us and the shore. Along our route lay old farmhouses, flashing their lights at us through the dusk. The gardens were waiting for the harvest; we saw ripe pumpkins among the withering corn. Peace and sleep filed the air— a holy quietness. There was never such a country in the world!

"With every mile the scene grew more familiar.... 'See, Uncle Ross— there's the haddock-hole, off that point! I could put you right on top of it."

"We'll try it some day, my boy... Who lives here, Uncle Ross?'... 'I don't remember. Ask Newall.' 'Where are we now? I'd forgotten there was a hill here.' ' Yes, a fellow forgets those things at sea,'

"But there was one hill I hadn't forgotten. From it, on this road, one got his first view of the town. As we rose towards its crest, a new sensation gripped my heart— a sensation which wasn't direct in itself, but was more a premonition of sensations to come. Something unexpected was going to happen to me, something high, rare, divine. The forces of my consciousness gathered to meet it. My blood tingled, my fingers couldn't keep still, Soon I felt that we'd stopped rising. Now!...I drew a long breath, and leaned forward.

"Then I saw the town. It lay in a broad valley, surrounded on three sides by rising ground. On the fourth side, an arm of the bay made in to form the harbour. Lights twinkled among the trees; village sounds rose through the still air. I looked once, shut my eyes, opened them suddenly... The vision persisted! No words came to my lips now. I was trying to locate a certain house across the valley, trying to grasp, to comprehend.... Over among those trees my mother was waiting. I had been allowed to return. A song broke out in my heart, and throbbed to the pounding of the horses' hoofs: 'Almost there!— almost there!— almost there!'

"We descended the hill at a gallop, and entered the village. The bright lights of the stores illuminated our vehicle, men turned to scrutinise us, we heard our names go from mouth to mouth. This passed, like a lantern-slide, and we went on to the eastward.... By the old Custom House, down into the hollow, rising now on the opposite hill— 'Almost there!— almost there!' Our house stood at the top of that hill. In the darkness, we reached it before I could get my bearings. The hack stopped with a jolt. A spell had settled on me; my mind was a

blank, my senses were numb with joy. I found myself on the walk. Someone was moving inside the house... running. 'The door opened, a light flashed in my face... 'Mother!'... 'My boy! My boy!'... I had come home."

Nichols passed his hand across his eyes.

"I'd come home," he repeated, after a pause. "Mother had expected me at the front door; but it was the back door that I'd gone to, the door that I'd always used as a boy. I went into the kitchen, took off my coat, steod in the centre of the floor and looked around. Everything was the same... everything! It seemed as if I'd been out playing that afternoon, and had come back just in time for supper. Delicious odours filled the room— I'd lived on salt horse for three years, remember. While mother took up the supper, I hung around the fire. She said I interfered with her, and pushed me away. And when it transpired that she'd forgot to salt the biscuits; the blame fell to me. Oh, you fellows, have you forgotten? …. It was sweet to be home.

" 'Mother,' I said suddenly, ' the wind's coming up from the southward.'

"She stopped short and gazed at me.

" 'How on earth?'… she demanded.

" 'Hear that howl in the chimney? South-east wind."

" 'To think that you should remember!' said my mother, looking at me through tears.

"We sat at supper a long time. There was a rast chicken, with new vegetables— mashed potatoes, turnip, marrow, boiled onions; there was a little dish of spiced gooseberry, my favourite condiment; there was one of mother's famous lemon pies. We talked of the voyage, of the news of the town; a wide field lay before us. It wasn't brilliant conversation; no one else in the world would have been interested in it; but to me it was joy and peace and contentment, the best of life. Now and then, as we gazed at each other across the table, personalities interrupted the history.

" 'Mother, you haven't grown any older.' ... She had, though; I trembled to see it. But she smiled at me, well pleased.

" 'Haven't I, Bert? Oh, look at my hair!'

"Then it was her turn:

" 'Bert, how you've thickened up! You're going to be a big man, like your father.'

"I knew very well that I'd never be a big or a strong man... but how sweet it was!

"Late that night I went up to my old room. I found it exactly as I'd left it, three years before. The pictures, the ornaments, the books, were all there— things that I'd forgotten, but that a single sight of brought back with their buried associations. And stddenly the realisation came to me, of how much care it meant to keep this room unchanged, Each little knick-knack had been loved for

my sake, dusted fondly a dozen times, and put back in its place. My mother had done it, alone here, with her boy far off on the perilous waters. What thoughts were in this air, if I could only know them!— what love was about me, if I were only worthy to receive!

"Mother came up a little later, and found me sitting with my head in my hands.

" 'What is it, Bert?' she cried in a frightened voice.

" 'Mother, mother— it's too hard for you.... I can't bear it!—'

"She came and knelt at my side.

"Perhaps I'm not as lonely as you imagine,' she told me. 'My neighbours are good. I keep busy. And then, I have a Comfort.'

"True!— I'd forgotten that. It silenced me like a shock, like a bolt from the blue; it overturned all my conceptions. Then she bowed her face on my knees, and prayed. Her faith reached me, she brought it down out of the sky.... How strange, to think of it to-day! I haven't heard a prayer for years.

"We talked far into the night. It was one of those close, deep talks, full of love and truth, which stand like milestones in the life of a wanderer. Mother searched me for the record of those three years; and I found that I had no desire to hold anything back. Some of it must have pained her; but I doubt if my small misdeeds seemed as serious to her as they did at that moment to me. She didn't absolve me, however— she was too wise.

"I awoke early the next morming— awoke into a town that never existed, into a light that never shone. In our latitude, the real Indian summer had come. After breakfast I saw that the tide was out, took a pail and a hoe, and went to the shore for a mess of clams. Memories flooded upon me, stooping there above the hoe, pulling aside the rockweed, inhaling the musky odour of the flats; each clam that I found was an adventure, a diamond, a nugget of pure gold. When I straightened up to ease my back, and cast an eye around the bay, the past cameeven nearer. 'There it lay, the scene of my youthful voyages— mine still, all mine! A golden haze hung over the water; along the margin the land had already begun to turn brown. The smell of autumn fires was in the air. Home! The soul, the spirit, the heart, what we call life, seemed here to find its fullest expression.

"When I'd filled my pail, I left it at the head of the beach, and wandered off to the eastward— toward that point that's now utterly and for ever spoiled. I found rocks that I remembered— rocks with peculiar veins of quartz in'em.... You fellows know the second ledge to the eastward, beyond my house? The Sunday before I'd left home I'd spent an hour or two on that ledge, the mest miserable boy in the world; and while sitting there I'd employed my hands in driving an old spike into the rotten slate with a big flat stone. By Jove, I found that spike! ... It seemed a very wonderful thing— an event full of significance. I

sat down there, gazed at the rusty spike sticking out of the ledge, and trembled before the profound and inscrutable purposes of life... I can't point out the connection now. As I said, I've lost the chance.

"A little way beyond, I came across a boy sailing a boat. He looked up at my approach, and tried to conceal his toy.

" 'Hello!' I cried, ' what's your name?' 'Sammy Curtis.' 'What are you up to, there?' 'Nothin'.' I'd have delighted to play with him awhile; I wanted to, my heart cried out for the old game. But something lay between us... the door was closed. My fault, of course, for talking like a man. From a distance, I saw that he'd returned to his play— returned to an enchanted shore that I'd never visit again. I wasn't sad about it— only grave, startled, a bit troubled. This boy's condemnation smote me with a vague alarm. Did he know, too, what I'd won? Had I really won anything?

"After a while I went back home. Mother was busy in the kitchen. 'Mother,' I said, ' it's kind of hard, sometimes, to grow up.' She looked at me keenly, fathoming my trouble at a glance. 'That's not the right way to think about it,' she answered. 'It can't be helped.' ... She trailed off into silence; I had a feeling that, whatever she might profess, in secret she shared my vain regrets. 'Just don't forget, boy,' she said at last. "Don't forget!' ...I've remembered that all these years.

"But marvels were happening that morning; and I couldn't bother long with a serious mood. I sat down by the north window, and looked up the road. Who was this coming?— could it be?... 'Mother!' I cried. 'Here's old Sam Colson going by!' 'Yes?'... queried my mother, from the pantry. I wondered if she could have understood. I'd told her that old Sam Colson was going by! Soon Manly Tripp, with his bow legs, waddled past; and after him stalked Marlboro Pikes, as martial-looking as ever. I laughed with the quick familiarity of it all, When Josiah Harriman appeared with his old lame horse— the horse that looked and walked so ridiculously like the master— I could contain myself no longer. 'Mother, here's Josiah Harriman, driving the same old lame horse!' She came to the window, and smiled at me indulgently. 'It seems good to you, doesn't it, boy?" she said. J caught her hand. 'Good?'... I cried. We were so happy.... I'd come home.

"That afternoon I went to the village, and renewed my acquaintance with the town. I couldn't tell you whom I saw— I've forgotten many of their names. But I enjoyed the afternoon. No doubt I bragged shamelessly; posed as a man of the world, swore, told silly stories, and smoked big cigars. No doubt the men made fun of me; but I didn't mind it, wasn't aware of it. The boys gave me their unstinted adulation... The dream brushed me; and all humanity appeared good, true, noble, in my eyes. Even old Ike Sloan, whom everybody knew as a worthless cuss, revealed a new inwardness. 'Bert Nichols?' he mumbled,

thrusting out a palsied claw. 'Home— from— sea?'— you remember how he used to speak in gasps. ' Home— from— sea, Bert? Think— you'll— like— it? Goin'— to keep— it— up? Better— stick— to — it— good— job."

"I gave his hand a hearty shake. Poor old Ike!— who should judge him? Perhaps he wasn't such a bad sort, after all.

"So the day went," Nichols mused. "A dream, a dream!... For one day, life disclosed itself to me, I saw beneath the surface into the deep heart of it, into the secret places where truth and beauty hide. The eyes of faith were given me. And what I beheld there in the dream, inspired me, purified me, filled me with messages of love. Ah, my friends, I might have done great things ,.. in that dream.

"...But I lost it. I went out into a world which is not the true world, into life which is not the true life at all. Scene by scene, the dream was taken from me; my trust was betrayed, my faith languished. I learned that sentiment is not legal tender, that love is not the goal of humanity, that honour is no talisman. I learned that truth must fight hard for its own, win seldom, lose so often and so much that the heart faiis to look back upon the disastrous field. Understand me, you fellows— -my quarrel is not with life. Life is fine, splendid, glorious; nothing that it has brought me has clouded the wonder of its eternal dawn. But this thing we call 'the world'— this thing that's not life, not truth, not nobility, but something artificial, something to conceal the truth, as clothes conceal our true bodies— something man-made, not God-given: this is what I hate! It won't let us live, this world. It would tun us all in a mould; it would take us, and melt us down. It makes truth fight... And we, in our blindness, in our human weakness, conform. We lock up the truth in our hearts, and fill our mouths with platitudes.... Who will go out with me against the world? Who will cry from a high mountain? ... Nonsense!— I hate it. It has denied all that I loved, it has robbed me of my dream. I am not reconciled."

Nichols got up and went to the tail. Suddenly he faced us.

"But I have the memory!" he cried fiercely. "My mother's face, her prayer, her love— the old times, the old hard lessons, the sadness, the ecstasy, the truth like a flame— home, and the dream of what life might have been... I haven't forgotten it. It's here— in a place so secret, so secure, that only God and I hold the key. The world hasn't been able to violate that place yet— though I suppose it'll find a way, in the ages to come."

———————

21: Sherlock Holmes in Russia

The Story of a Skat Scoring Book

Maurice Baring

1874-1945

In: *Russian Essays and Stories*, 1908

(With apologies to Sir A. Conan Doyle)

IT was in November 1907 that I went to Moscow to meet Sherlock Holmes, who was returning via Kiachta by the Trans-Siberian Railway from Afghanistan, where rumour said he was connected with certain not altogether official negotiations between the British Government and the Ameer of Afghanistan. During his return journey, Holmes, indefatigable as usual, had enabled the Russian police to lay hands at Irkutsk on the ringleaders of a daring revolutionary band who were plotting to kidnap the Emperor of Russia. So much I had gathered from a laconic post card dated Ufa, in which he also requested me to meet him at Moscow on the 20th of November. When, however, I arrived at Moscow, I found the following telegram awaiting me:—

"Take night train town O——; government Z——; meet you station; prospect excellent sport; bring furs."

To any one acquainted with Sherlock Holmes' methods and habits this seemed to signify that his ever-restless brain was once more on the scent of some thrilling mystery or some baffling crime. After spending the day at Moscow, I took the night train, as directed, and I arrived the next morning at O——. I found my friend awaiting me at the station, muffled in a thick shouba, and smoking a pipe of more than usually strong tobacco.

"I hope you have brought a warm coat, Watson," was his greeting; "we have got a thirty-mile drive before us;" and giving orders to a porter to carry my bag, in Russian, which he spoke fluently, he led the way through the station to where a sledge drawn by three horses, harnessed abreast, awaited us.

"Jump in," he said, "we have no time to lose. We are driving," he continued, as we made ourselves comfortable in the straw and wrapped ourselves up with a thick fur rug, "to the property of Prince B——, whose acquaintance I made in Transbaikalia, and who invited me to stay with him for a few days' wolf shooting. The Prince is expecting you." During the first half-hour of the drive Holmes discoursed learnedly on old violins and Elzevir editions, interrupting his discourse to point out from time to time the effects of light on the snowy plain, or to make some pregnant comment on the manners and customs of the villagers whom we passed. Then, when we had driven for about half an hour, he said, "You will now oblige me, Watson, by not talking to me until we arrive at

our destination. I am engaged in following a train of speculation which requires all my attention."

Knowing my friend's habits I showed neither surprise nor annoyance, and it was not long before I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke we had reached the property of Prince B——. Prince B——'s home was situated at a stone's-throw from a long straggling village composed of log-built huts, and now mantled in a thick covering of snow.

The houses, for there were two, were situated in the midst of a garden plentifully wooded with pine trees and Siberian firs. The houses were separate, although close to each other; both of them were two-storeyed, the first, at which the horses pulled up, being built of wood painted red, the second, and farther one, of white bricks.

"You have already been here two or three days?" I ventured to ask, as we drove through the garden gate.

"Watson, you are incorrigible," replied Holmes. "Had you observed the name of the station whence my message was despatched you would have known that I myself arrived this morning from the town of A——, which a glance at the map would have shown you is a twelve hours' journey from O——. This is the first time I have the pleasure of enjoying the Prince's hospitality, and when the Prince invited me he begged me, if possible, to persuade you to accompany me. I am glad you have come, for who knows but that I may need your assistance before long."

I could not help thinking that the reproach was in this case scarcely justified, since, being entirely ignorant of the Russian language, I could not be expected to decipher the name of a telegraph station, but I merely replied: "You have at present no immediate problem on hand?"

"Watson," said Holmes, as we reached the front door, "every fresh human being we meet is a possible problem."

We were met and warmly welcomed by the Prince, and after we had been shown to our rooms, which were in the further stone house, we were conducted to the drawing-room in the wooden house, where the Prince and his family awaited us. The Prince was a middle-aged man with silver-grey hair and mild grey eyes; he wore a grey undress military tunic, and Holmes remarked, as we washed our hands upstairs, that he supposed I had already noticed the Prince was a general adjutant of the Emperor's suite; that he had served in Turkestan before he had been in the Far East; that he was at present suffering from a slight toothache; and that he had been on two big game expeditions in Africa. I confessed that all this had escaped me, and Holmes said that he hadn't time to detail to me the links of the chain, but if I would glance at the Prince's uniform, the spots on his forehead, the iodoform stain on his upper lip, and the antelope horns in the front hall, with their respective dates, perhaps all would be clear to

me. The Prince's family consisted of his wife, his eldest son, and his daughter. The Princess was a dark, thin, young-looking woman, with large grey eyes, and the son, Prince Alexander, a tall, dark young man of about twenty-three, dressed in an ordinary tweed shooting suit; the daughter, Princess Barbara, was a girl of nineteen, very fair, with blue eyes. The whole family talked English with the greatest fluency.

As soon as the Prince had presented us to his family, he led us into the dining-room, where lunch awaited us.

"You have been having a busy morning practising the flute," said Holmes to Prince Alexander. "I hope we may have the pleasure of playing some duets together. I have brought my violin with me."

"Yes, I have been playing this morning," answered the young man; then he paused in amazement, and added, "But how on earth did you— You couldn't have seen my flute, because it's in my room."

"Your forefinger, my dear sir," answered Holmes, "has the dent which is peculiar to flute players; that you have been playing this morning I concluded from the fact that you have not been out of doors, and that the music—music for piano and flute—on the drawing-room piano had been evidently quite recently ransacked by some one in a hurry to find a particular piece of music."

"Your reputation does scant justice to your powers," answered the young man; "but I doubt if you can guess what my sister has been doing all the morning."

"I never guess," answered Holmes; "but the problem is an extraordinarily simple one. The Princess has been occupied in making green pottery, and this morning has fired a kiln."

"It's quite true; how could you know it?" said the young Princess.

"In the drawing-room," answered Sherlock Holmes, "I could not help noticing a certain tray. On this tray were a quantity of small green pots which were evidently just finished, and had, moreover, that particular grace peculiar to an amateur's work. Your left hand, Princess, you will observe, is faintly tinged with red lead glaze, your cheeks are slightly flushed, and I noticed as you entered the room the smell of smoke which necessarily clings to a person who has been standing all the morning close to a kiln. You see how childishly simple are my methods." The Prince and his family expressed surprise and delight. During the rest of luncheon Holmes kept his guests delighted with his varied knowledge.

As soon as luncheon was over we repaired to the drawing-room, in a corner of which an open card table had been placed.

"We always play cards after luncheon," said the Prince; "I hope you and Mr. Watson will join us. It is no use telling you, Mr. Holmes," he added, as he stuffed tobacco into a long cherry-wood pipe, "what game we play, because I am sure

you know already, only I shall be curious to see how you arrived at the knowledge."

"Certainly," said Holmes; "it is true I have drawn certain conclusions, but I dare say I am mistaken. I exclude bridge, vindt, whist, and all kindred games, because your packs are obviously not full packs. I know, on the other hand, that more than two play, for you said *we*, and asked me and Watson to join you. I exclude piquet, therefore, and all kindred games. There remain préférence and the national German game, skat. As your nephew, who has been on a recent visit here, is studying at Heidelberg, I concluded that he had introduced the game of skat, of which German students are exceedingly fond, to you."

"Perfectly correct," said the young Prince; "but how did you know I had a cousin, and that he was at Heidelberg?"

"The photograph of a young student in the dress of the Saxo-Borussen Korps, which is in my bedroom, and the group of students, both signed Fritz von Interlacken, dated October 1907, told me that a student had been here recently; the inscription on the bowl of your pipe, Prince, 'Fritz, S.L., Onkel Peter, July 1907,' told me the rest."

"Wonderful," said the Prince; "and how simple it seems when one is told; but will you and Watson join us and cut?"

"Watson," said Holmes, "plays nothing but whist, and I, although I know the principles of many card games, am an indifferent player in practice."

"Papa," broke in the young Princess, "the skat-book has gone."

"Ring," said the Prince. "We are new to the game," he added, "and a small book, which contains the rules, and is, moreover, a scoring book, is of great assistance to us." The butler entered the room, and declared that Prince Alexander took the book every evening to his room in the other house, and left it in the front hall in the morning.

"I take it to learn the rules," said Prince Alexander, "but I always bring it back."

"You can look in my room," he added, to the butler, "but I know it isn't there." The butler went out.

"Did you bring it back this morning?" asked his father.

"I didn't take it away last night. It was on the table, and I think I left the money I won in it, nine roubles in paper."

"Then," said the Prince, laughing, "this is a matter for Mr. Holmes, and, by the way, we forgot to tell him, at least I didn't forget, but I purposely didn't mention it at luncheon, that last night we had a robbery here."

"Indeed," said Holmes, folding his hands and looking up to the ceiling, "you interest me extremely."

"I'm afraid it's not very interesting," said the Princess, "but, it's rather comical. Our four best kitchen saucepans have been stolen, two or three of the

Prince's shirts, two or three of Alexander's, and some inexpensive silver links belonging to him."

"Would you like me to try and find the thief?" asked Holmes.

"We would be delighted if you could find the kitchen saucepans," said the Princess, "as it is inconvenient for the cook. It doesn't matter about the thief."

"Do you give me leave to cross-examine the members of your household and your servants?" asked Holmes.

"Of course," said the Princess, "we know it is no one in the house, but we have several bad characters in the village."

The butler now entered once more, and said that he had searched everywhere in both houses and the book was nowhere to be found.

"Then we must play without it," said the Princess. "Alexander, get some paper to score on; the book," she added, "was most convenient, as it had blank leaves at the end, perforated at the edge, which one could tear off for the score. And one saw the score at a glance. You won't play, Mr. Holmes?"

"I prefer to look on," said Holmes, and when I had likewise declined to play, the Prince and the Princess and Princess Barbara sat down at the table. Prince Alexander also declined to play, on the ground that he was too busy.

"As you are not going to play, Prince Alexander," said Holmes, "perhaps you will help me presently to conduct my preliminary investigations."

"Certainly," said the young prince.

"Nobody can possibly have stolen the skat-book, in any case," said the Princess.

"I'm not so sure," said Prince Alexander, "if I left my money in it, as I think I did."

Holmes took no notice of this remark, but after he had watched three games in perfect silence he suddenly addressed the Princess: "You said you had several bad characters in the village; is there any one whom you would particularly suspect? Who, for instance, is the worst character?"

"There are several in the village," said the Princess; "and one of the clerks in our office—what we call the 'Kontora'—an educated man, is suspected of carrying on social revolutionary propaganda, but there is no evidence against him. They say, too, that he steals—only not saucepans."

"Yes, but that's all rubbish," said the young Prince. "He's an honest, hard-working man."

"Why don't you send him away?" asked Holmes.

"Oh, he would burn our house!" said the Princess, laughing. "Besides, he's quite harmless."

"Most interesting," said Holmes. "And can I see this gentleman?"

"Oh, certainly," said the Princess. "Alexander will take you to the Kontora."

"Let us go to the other house," said the young Prince to Holmes, "and you can begin your investigations. It will be great fun."

"May Watson come too?" asked Holmes.

"Of course," said the young Prince; "the investigations would have no value without Dr. Watson's presence."

"Before we do anything else," said Holmes, "will you show me the kitchen, and we will solve the question of the saucepans?" The kitchen was in a building by itself, separate from both houses, and situated on an elevation beyond the further stone house, in which were our rooms and that of the young Prince. We went there, and the white-frocked Parisian cook explained in precise phrases exactly what had disappeared, ending up his narrative with an exclamation of disgust. Sherlock Holmes was soon on all fours beneath the kitchen window. He examined the wall, the window-sill, and the ground, with a strong magnifying glass; then, like a hound following a strong scent, he walked swiftly from the kitchen into the garden, and stopped before a heap of snow beside a clump of trees. "If we could have a spade"—a spade was soon brought, and Holmes, after a few vigorous strokes, revealed to the astonished gaze of the Prince, the cook, and a crowd of moujiks, four large kitchen saucepans. "Now," said Holmes to the young Prince, "I will continue the investigations, if you permit it, in your room." And we went into the stone house together.

As we entered the house, a young man approached the Prince and said a few words to him; he wore top-boots, long hair, a dark blue sarsenet shirt without a collar, buttoned at the side, a pince-nez, a black jacket, and an astrakhan cap.

The Prince said something to this man in Russian, and led us into a room on the ground floor adjoining his own sitting-room, saying: "I beg your pardon, Mr. Holmes, but do you mind waiting here one moment? I have to speak to a man on business; it is a matter of a few minutes only."

The Prince then went into his sitting-room, which was connected with the room in which we were by a door; the door was ajar, and appeared, indeed, to be one of those doors which never shut, so that fragments of the conversation which took place between the Prince and the young man were audible. They were, of course, speaking Russian.

Holmes lit a pipe and sat down on a divan; presently one of the voices next door sank to a whisper, and the opening and shutting of a drawer were heard. Then the young man took his departure, and the Prince, opening the door, invited us into his room. "Please sit down," he said, pointing to a divan, and he himself took a seat at a writing-table which was placed sideways in the middle of the room. "Now that we have found the saucepans, I suppose all further investigations are needless, Mr. Holmes?" he said.

"We have not yet found the thief," replied Holmes.

"That, I am afraid, will be more difficult," said the Prince.

"Nor have we found your skat-scoring book," said Holmes.

"Oh, that's sure to turn up!" said the Prince. "I will send for the maid who cleans our rooms and you can examine her. She is an old peasant woman who has been with us ever since I have been born," and saying this the Prince went to the door and shouted, "Mavra!"

An elderly woman dressed in a peasant's dress, consisting of a blue cotton petticoat and a large apron, and a black handkerchief over her head, entered the room, and smilingly greeted the company. What followed I was unable to understand, but Holmes later in the afternoon dictated to me at my request what took place in detail. The Prince asked Holmes to examine her, and Holmes did not allude to the saucepans, but asked her whether she had seen a small green book anywhere.

She said she had seen it, she had seen it every day. It was there.

"In the other house?" asked Holmes.

"Yes, in the other house," she answered.

"Did you see it yesterday?"

"Yes, yesterday it was lying *there*."

"In this house?" asked Holmes.

"Yes," she replied. "There."

"Somebody said," interrupted the Prince, "that some books were left on the window-sill upstairs in this house, and that they had got wet and had been taken to be dried?"

"Yes," said Mavra, smiling cheerfully, "they say some books got wet and were taken to be dried."

"Where?" asked Holmes.

"They were lying *there*. And then to-day I said to Masha: 'Where are those books?' And she said: 'What have I got to do with books, and what have you got to do with books?'"

"In this house?"

"Yes, *there*."

"Who dried them?" asked Holmes.

"I cannot know," she answered; "perhaps André knows."

"Who is André?" asked Holmes.

"The night watchman," answered the young Prince.

"And after the books were dried did you see them?" asked Holmes.

"Yes," she answered.

"Where?" he asked.

"They were lying *there*," she replied.

"In the other house?"

"Yes, *there*."

At that moment the butler entered, and the Prince asked him whether the skat-book or any other books had got wet from being left on the window-sill and had been dried. He replied that there were two books on the window-sill upstairs; they were still there, but nobody had dried them, because they had never been wet, and the skat-book was not among them. The young Prince repeated that they had played skat the preceding evening and had used the scoring book, which had been left on the drawing-room table.

"Thank you," said Holmes to the maid. "That is quite sufficient for the present. I should now like, if possible, to go to your office." "Certainly," said the Prince, "let us go." We walked down to the office, which was about five minutes' walk from the house, during which time Holmes carried on an animated conversation with the Prince on the political situation in Russia. We reached the office, and entered into a bare room, furnished with a stove and a writing-table, where we found two clerks at work. One of the clerks was the young man whom the Prince had just interviewed. "Which is the gentleman you mentioned?" asked Holmes in an aside to the Prince. "The man with a blue shirt," replied the Prince: "would you like to examine him?" "No thank you," replied Holmes. "I have seen all I wanted to see. I will now, if you permit me, go for a walk in the village by myself; I wish to think over a few things." We returned to the house, and Holmes set out by himself for the village. I went up to my room to take a nap, for I was still rather tired after the journey.

Holmes returned towards five o'clock in the afternoon, and, settling himself in an arm-chair, he said: "If you care to hear, Watson, I will tell you the result of my investigations."

"If you found the thief," I said, "you deserve credit, for the vagueness of this family and the unconcern with which they regard this robbery appals me." "Very true," replied Holmes. "The matter was, as I had anticipated, far more complicated than appeared at first sight. It frequently happens that problems which appeared to consist of mere trifles turn out to be matters of deep importance and difficult of solution. In this case, what put me on the scent was the disappearance of the skat-book. It is obvious that a thief, whose object is money, would not steal such a thing. When I found the saucepans in the garden my supposition was confirmed. The theft was a blind."

"But there was money in the book," I interrupted; "and, besides, some shirts and a pair of links disappeared."

"I am coming to that presently," answered Holmes. "I concluded from the manner in which the saucepans had been stolen and hidden that the thief was no ordinary thief. Further data in our possession told me that one of the clerks was under suspicion of carrying on revolutionary propaganda. The young Prince interviews him and receives from him a small cardboard box which he was carrying when we met him, a fact which you no doubt overlooked. He placed the

box in a drawer which has no lock. (Note once more the vagueness and the carelessness of these people!) While the young Prince was interviewing the clerk I overheard a portion of their conversation, and I ascertained that the contents of the cardboard box consisted of bombs, and that it was proposed to bring about a *coup* to-morrow, which was to take place at the railway station."

"With what object?" I asked.

"We will come to that later," said Holmes. "Let us take things in their order. When we visited the office, I noticed that on the clerk's table lay a sheet of paper perforated at the edge, covered on one side with figures, and evidently torn from a card scoring book, for it had divisions and lines printed on it for scoring. When I returned from the office on my way to the village the young Prince took me once more into his room, and by skilfully leading the conversation into a channel of argument (the young man is, you have noticed, argumentative) I finally made him a bet on the matter of a date, the settling of which made it necessary for him to fetch a book of reference; he went eagerly in search of a dictionary of biography, which I knew was in the other house, and once left alone I made two important discoveries. In one of his writing-table drawers I found a cardboard box containing four narrow bombs made of a high explosive, and in another drawer I found the silver links and nine roubles in paper which the young Prince said he had lost at cards last night. But more important still was my second discovery. I found several pages torn from a scoring book and covered with figures, which are not those which occur in skat or in any other game; and I also found on the edge of the fireplace a half-burnt piece of paper, torn from the same book, but, mark this, from the text of the book, and not a blank leaf perforated at the edge, likewise covered with figures. I then went to the village and had a notable conversation with the village policeman. He furnished me with interesting information with regard to the inhabitants of the village and the political situation generally. When asked as to the clerk we saw to-day he said he was very 'red,' meaning revolutionary. He said the old Prince refused to send him away at the instigation of his son. The young Prince was also 'red,' he said, and this was the most dangerous feature in the situation. The policeman had no doubt that he communicated with the revolutionary party through the channel of the clerk.

"I questioned him as to the theft of the saucepans, and to my astonishment he said he knew quite well who had stolen them. I asked who. He said there was a man in the village formerly employed in the Prince's office who had once been sent to Siberia but who had returned. He was now a professional pick-pocket, and was enjoying a holiday. 'But if you know he did this why don't you arrest him?' I asked.

" 'God be with him, no,' replied this astonished and astonishing policeman. 'Why arrest him? He has already been in prison once.'

" 'What for?' I asked.

" 'He killed the brother of the gamekeeper,' said the policeman, 'and he stole hens.' Of course I knew that he was lying, because a real thief would have taken the saucepans away, and had the policeman known him he would have arrested him. 'Does the Prince know this?' I asked. 'Of course he knows it,' answered the policeman. 'Then why does not he insist on his arrest?' I asked. 'The Prince has pity on us,' said the policeman. 'We are poor people. If he were arrested he would soon come back again and probably kill me; he would certainly burn my house. The Prince knows. What does it matter if he stole a few saucepans? The Prince will buy new ones. The Prince does not mind. He will do no further harm. He has come back to see his home and his native village.' Questioned as to whether the clerk was connected with the theft, the policeman laughed. He said the clerk was 'red,' and busied himself with politics, but was not a hooligan.

"I asked him if sufficient proof were found whether he would arrest the thief. 'May God forfend!' answered this amazing policeman. I also ascertained from him that a large sum of money, about half a million roubles, will be transported from the town of O—— to the town of X—— to-morrow. Then I returned home.

"You now doubtless understand the object of the *coup*. It is to obtain money for the revolutionary funds, and the object of the theft of saucepans was to throw suspicion, when the *coup* should take place, on an indefinite band of robbers who would be supposed to be lurking in the neighbourhood.

"Now we come to further links in the chain. The young Prince, as you remember, was in the habit of taking the skat-scoring book every evening from the drawing-room in the wooden house to his sitting-room in this house, and of bringing it back every morning and leaving it in the front hall. Why did he do this; and why the front hall? I suppose that even you, Watson, have already concluded that the spurious thief of the saucepans and the leading spirit of this dark conspiracy is none other than the young Prince. He could not communicate openly with the clerk, nor see him too often without raising suspicion, so every evening he wrote what he had to say in cipher on the blank leaves provided at the end of the book for scoring purposes, and left the book in a prominent place. The clerk called at the house on business matters and tore off a leaf from the book and left an answer in it, if he wished to do so."

"Most ingenious," I interrupted; "but why did the book disappear?"

"The Prince destroyed it. The scrap of burnt paper I found in the fireplace told me that; since it was not, as I told you, one of the blank leaves, but a page of the text of the book itself. The Prince being, like all the members of his family, as you yourself have observed, and like most Russian revolutionaries, excessively vague happy-go-lucky, had worked out his cipher all over the book,

and as the *coup* is to come off to-morrow he thought it best to be on the safe side and to destroy a document which might possibly prove compromising. By the ingenious lie of the money left in it he included it in the robbery."

"And what steps have you taken?" I asked.

"I sent an express telegram, in cipher, to my friend L—— of the Chief Department of the Police in St. Petersburg acquainting him of the facts."

"And what will be the result?" I asked.

"They will prevent the *coup* coming off—it was to be to-morrow evening," answered Holmes.

The bell now rang for tea, and during the rest of the evening the matter of the theft was only once or twice jokingly referred to. Holmes and the Prince appeared to think that as the saucepans had been found there was no further use bothering about the thief. After dinner, Holmes, the young Prince, and the young Princess delighted us with a trio for flute, violin and piano, and the time passed rapidly and pleasantly. I found it difficult to believe that the young man who was so carelessly and easily "entertaining" us was really a dangerous criminal on the eve of carrying out a gigantic *coup*; but my experience as Holmes' biographer has convinced me that such cases are, alas! only too frequent. The next morning I spent in writing letters, and Holmes did nothing but lie on the sofa and smoke a quantity of shag tobacco. We all met once more at luncheon. After luncheon, as we were drinking our coffee in the drawing-room, the young Prince said he had an interesting communication to make to us, which was as follows: At the railway station there is a large wooden building made for storing corn. The merchants store their corn there, for which they receive a receipt stating the value of what is stored. If it is destroyed the Government is responsible for the amount.

Now it appeared that the stationmaster had arranged with one of the merchants to give him a duplicate receipt for an amount of corn worth an immense sum. He made out a false duplicate for this immense sum. It was further arranged that the merchant should deliver an infinitesimal quantity of corn, worth a few shillings, and that the corn storing-house should be set on fire and burnt. The stationmaster was to receive a handsome commission. But, as it was impossible to tamper with the books, owing to the number of officials employed, in which the amounts received were entered and kept at the station, it was likewise settled to burn the station and thus destroy the compromising documents it contained, and render comparison between the false duplicate received by the merchant and the original receipt entered in the station books impossible. It was further settled to do the burning by means of bombs and to attribute the whole affair to the revolutionaries. The plot, however, had been discovered by the clerk in the Prince's office who was a friend of a new assistant stationmaster, and he had brought the bombs to the house and had told the

whole story to the young Prince, who had immediately communicated with the Police Captain of the district in the town of O——. As he finished his story the young Prince added: "It shows what idiots our local police are, because they suspected this very clerk of being a revolutionary." Holmes' face remained impassive during the recital of this story, but I could not help feeling that my friend was somewhat anxious. "It was quite a problem in your line Mr. Holmes," said the Princess, "but I feel you have done enough for us in finding our saucepans, only I do wish we could find the scoring book." "I can't remember," said the young Prince, whether it was yesterday or the day before yesterday morning that the book was in my room. I remember tearing a leaf out of it, having no other paper handy, to write a receipt for the clerk who brought me some money from the Kontora. But there was no money in it, because I found the money I won last night, and the silver links also, in a drawer. So the book wasn't stolen."

"Has any one looked in the card table?" asked the young Princess. And as no one had looked there, a leaf of the card table was raised, and there lay a small green book—the skat scoring book. At that moment the butler entered the room endeavouring to master convulsions of laughter, and said that the village police-inspector, the Stanovoi, was outside saying he had received orders from St. Petersburg to arrest Prince Alexander and to send him immediately to the town of O—— for being implicated in an "expropriation" plot to rob the train. The whole family burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter, and the old Prince explained to Holmes that the police-inspector had probably made this idiotic mistake on purpose, since he had twice been found poaching in their woods and that they had complained and asked for his removal.

Then together with his son he went and interviewed the police-inspector. They came back presently saying that the matter was an idiotic and inexplicable mistake connected with the affair of the station, but that the police-inspector, although he was well aware of this, owing to the grudge he bore the family insisted on carrying out his orders. So the young Prince had to leave for O—— that afternoon, amidst universal merriment, and he exhorted Holmes as he departed to obtain his release. We also left for Moscow the next day, whither Holmes said he had suddenly been summoned upon urgent business. When we arrived at Moscow we received a telegram saying that Prince Alexander had been immediately released with many apologies for the mistake, that the police-inspector had been dismissed from his post, and that the merchant and the stationmaster had been arrested. Holmes never referred to the matter again, nor does he like any mention made of the game of skat. But it seems to me that this comparative failure only serves to heighten the brilliance of his many successes, and it is for this reason I have recorded it.

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22: Shadows in the Moonlight

Robert E. Howard
1906-1936
Weird Tales April 1934

A Conan the Barbarian adventure

A SWIFT crashing of horses through the tall reeds; a heavy fall, a despairing cry. From the dying steed there staggered up its rider, a slender girl in sandals and girdled tunic. Her dark hair fell over her white shoulders, her eyes were those of a trapped animal. She did not look at the jungle of reeds that hemmed in the little clearing, nor at the blue waters that lapped the low shore behind her. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed in agonized intensity on the horseman who pushed through the reedy screen and dismounted before her.

He was a tall man, slender, but hard as steel. From head to heel he was clad in light silvered mesh-mail that fitted his supple form like a glove. From under the dome-shaped, gold-chased helmet his brown eyes regarded her mockingly.

'Stand back!' her voice shrilled with terror. 'Touch me not, Shah Amurath, or I will throw myself into the water and drown!'

He laughed, and his laughter was like the purr of a sword sliding from a silken sheath.

'No, you will not drown, Olivia, daughter of confusion, for the marge is too shallow, and I can catch you before you can reach the deeps. You gave me a merry chase, by the gods, and all my men are far behind us. But there is no horse west of Vilayet that can distance Irem for long.' He nodded at the tall, slender-legged desert stallion behind him.

'Let me go!' begged the girl, tears of despair staining her face. 'Have I not suffered enough? Is there any humiliation, pain or degradation you have not heaped on me? How long must my torment last?'

'As long as I find pleasure in your whimperings, your pleas, tears and writhings,' he answered with a smile that would have seemed gentle to a stranger. 'You are strangely virile, Olivia. I wonder if I shall ever weary of you, as I have always wearied of women before. You are ever fresh and unsullied, in spite of me. Each new day with you brings a new delight.

'But come— let us return to Akif, where the people are still feting the conqueror of the miserable *kozaki*; while he, the conqueror, is engaged in recapturing a wretched fugitive, a foolish, lovely, idiotic runaway!'

'No!' She recoiled, turning toward the waters lapping bluely among the reeds.

'Yes!' His flash of open anger was like a spark struck from flint. With a quickness her tender limbs could not approximate, he caught her wrist, twisting it in pure wanton cruelty until she screamed and sank to her knees.

'Slut! I should drag you back to Akif at my horse's tail, but I will be merciful and carry you on my saddle-bow, for which favor you shall humbly thank me, while—'

He released her with a startled oath and sprang back, his saber flashing out, as a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle sounding an inarticulate cry of hate.

Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loincloth, which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire.

'You Hyrkanian dog!' mouthed this apparition in a barbarous accent. 'The devils of vengeance have brought you here!'

'*Kozak!*' ejaculated Shah Amurath, recoiling. 'I did not know a dog of you escaped! I thought you all lay stiff on the steppe, by Ilbars River.'

'All but me, damn you!' cried the other. 'Oh, I've dreamed of such a meeting as this, while I crawled on my belly through the brambles, or lay under rocks while the ants gnawed my flesh, or crouched in the mire up to my mouth— I dreamed, but never hoped it would come to pass. Oh, gods of Hell, how I have yearned for this!'

The stranger's bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips.

'Keep back!' ordered Shah Amurath, watching him narrowly.

'Ha!' It was like the bark of a timber wolf. 'Shah Amurath, the great Lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you— you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them— *ai*, you dog, you filthy dog!' His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.

In spite of the terror of his wild appearance, Olivia looked to see him fall at the first crossing of the blades. Madman or savage, what could he do, naked, against the mailed chief of Akif?

There was an instant when the blades flamed and licked, seeming barely to touch each other and leap apart; then the broadsword flashed past the saber and descended terrifically on Shah Amurath's shoulder. Olivia cried out at the fury of that stroke. Above the crunch of the rending mail, she distinctly heard the snap of the shoulder-bone. The Hyrkanian reeled back, suddenly ashen,

blood spurting over the links of his hauberk; his saber slipped from his nerveless fingers.

'Quarter!' he gasped.

'Quarter?' There was a quiver of frenzy in the stranger's voice. 'Quarter such as you gave us, you swine!'

Olivia closed her eyes. This was no longer battle, but butchery, frantic, bloody, impelled by an hysteria of fury and hate, in which culminated the sufferings of battle, massacre, torture, and fear-ridden, thirst-maddened, hunger-haunted flight. Though Olivia knew that Shah Amurath deserved no mercy or pity from any living creature, yet she closed her eyes and pressed her hands over her ears, to shut out the sight of that dripping sword that rose and fell with the sound of a butcher's cleaver, and the gurgling cries that dwindled away and ceased.

She opened her eyes, to see the stranger turning away from a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being. The man's breast heaved with exhaustion or passion; his brow was beaded with sweat; his right hand was splashed with blood.

He did not speak to her, or even glance toward her. She saw him stride through the reeds that grew at the water's edge, stoop, and tug at something. A boat wallowed out of its hiding-place among the stalks. Then she divined his intention, and was galvanized into action.

'Oh, wait!' she wailed, staggering up and running toward him. 'Do not leave me! Take me with you!'

He wheeled and stared at her. There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.

'Who are you?' he demanded.

'I am called Olivia. I was *his* captive. I ran away. He followed me. That's why he came here. Oh, do not leave me here! His warriors are not far behind him. They will find his corpse— they will find me near it— oh!' She moaned in her terror and wrung her white hands.

He stared at her in perplexity.

'Would you be better off with me?' he demanded. 'I am a barbarian, and I know from your looks that you fear me.'

'Yes, I fear you,' she replied, too distracted to dissemble. 'My flesh crawls at the horror of your aspect. But I fear the Hyrkanians more. Oh, let me go with you! They will put me to the torture if they find me beside their dead lord.'

'Come, then.' He drew aside, and she stepped quickly into the boat, shrinking from contact with him. She seated herself in the bow, and he stepped into the boat, pushed off with an oar, and using it as a paddle, worked his way tortuously among the tall stalks until they glided out into open water. Then he

set to work with both oars, rowing with great, smooth, even strokes, the heavy muscles of arms and shoulders and back rippling in rhythm to his exertions.

There was silence for some time, the girl crouching in the bows, the man tugging at the oars. She watched him with timorous fascination. It was evident that he was not an Hyrkanian, and he did not resemble the Hyborian races. There was a wolfish hardness about him that marked the barbarian. His features, allowing for the strains and stains of battle and his hiding in the marshes, reflected that same untamed wildness, but they were neither evil nor degenerate.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'Shah Amurath called you a *kozak*; were you of that band?'

'I am Conan, of Cimmeria,' he grunted. 'I was with the *kozaki*, as the Hyrkanian dogs called us.'

She knew vaguely that the land he named lay far to the northwest, beyond the farthest boundaries of the different kingdoms of her race.

'I am a daughter of the King of Ophir,' she said. 'My father sold me to a Shemite chief, because I would not marry a prince of Koth.'

The Cimmerian grunted in surprize.

Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. 'Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbaric, Conan of Cimmeria.'

'We do not sell our children,' he growled, his chin jutting truculently.

'Well— I was sold. But the desert man did not misuse me. He wished to buy the good will of Shah Amurath, and I was among the gifts he brought to Akif of the purple gardens. Then—' She shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

'I should be lost to all shame,' she said presently. 'Yet each memory stings me like a slaver's whip. I abode in Shah Amurath's palace, until some weeks agone he rode out with his hosts to do battle with a band of invaders who were ravaging the borders of Turan. Yesterday he returned in triumph, and a great fete was made to honor him. In the drunkenness and rejoicing, I found an opportunity to steal out of the city on a stolen horse. I had thought to escape— but he followed, and about midday came up with me. I outran his vassals, but him I could not escape. Then you came.'

'I was lying hid in the reeds,' grunted the barbarian. 'I was one of those dissolute rogues, the Free Companions, who burned and looted along the borders. There were five thousand of us, from a score of races and tribes. We had been serving as mercenaries for a rebel prince in eastern Koth, most of us, and when he made peace with his cursed sovereign, we were out of employment; so we took to plundering the outlying dominions of Koth, Zamora and Turan impartially. A week ago Shah Amurath trapped us near the banks of Ilbars with fifteen thousand men. Mitra! The skies were black with vultures. When the lines broke, after a whole day of fighting, some tried to break through

to the north, some to the west. I doubt if any escaped. The steppes were covered with horsemen riding down the fugitives. I broke for the east, and finally reached the edge of the marshes that border this part of Vilayet.

'I've been hiding in the morasses ever since. Only the day before yesterday the riders ceased beating up the reed-brakes, searching for just such fugitives as I. I've squirmed and burrowed and hidden like a snake, feasting on musk-rats I caught and ate raw, for lack of fire to cook them. This dawn I found this boat hidden among the reeds. I hadn't intended going out on the sea until night, but after I killed Shah Amurath, I knew his mailed dogs would be close at hand.'

'And what now?'

'We shall doubtless be pursued. If they fail to see the marks left by the boat, which I covered as well as I could, they'll guess anyway that we took to sea, after they fail to find us among the marshes. But we have a start, and I'm going to haul at these oars until we reach a safe place.'

'Where shall we find that?' she asked hopelessly. 'Vilayet is an Hyrkanian pond.'

'Some folk don't think so,' grinned Conan grimly; 'notably the slaves that have escaped from galleys and become pirates.'

'But what are your plans?'

'The southwestern shore is held by the Hyrkanians for hundreds of miles. We still have a long way to go before we pass beyond their northern boundaries. I intend to go northward until I think we have passed them. Then we'll turn westward, and try to land on the shore bordered by the uninhabited steppes.'

'Suppose we meet pirates, or a storm?' she asked. 'And we shall starve on the steppes.'

'Well,' he reminded her, 'I didn't ask you to come with me.'

'I am sorry.' She bowed her shapely dark head. 'Pirates, storms, starvation—they are all kinder than the people of Turan.'

'Aye.' His dark face grew somber. 'I haven't done with them yet. Be at ease, girl. Storms are rare on Vilayet at this time of year. If we make the steppes, we shall not starve. I was reared in a naked land. It was those cursed marshes, with their stench and stinging flies, that nigh unmanned me. I am at home in the high lands. As for pirates—' He grinned enigmatically, and bent to the oars.

The sun sank like a dull-glowing copper ball into a lake of fire. The blue of the sea merged with the blue of the sky, and both turned to soft dark velvet, clustered with stars and the mirrors of stars. Olivia reclined in the bows of the gently rocking boat, in a state dreamy and unreal. She experienced an illusion that she was floating in midair, stars beneath her as well as above. Her silent companion was etched vaguely against the softer darkness. There was no break or falter in the rhythm of his oars; he might have been a fantasmal oarsman,

rowing her across the dark lake of Death. But the edge of her fear was dulled, and, lulled by the monotony of motion, she passed into a quiet slumber.

Dawn was in her eyes when she awakened, aware of a ravenous hunger. It was a change in the motion of the boat that had roused her; Conan was resting on his oars, gazing beyond her. She realized that he had rowed all night without pause, and marvelled at his iron endurance. She twisted about to follow his stare, and saw a green wall of trees and shrubbery rising from the water's edge and sweeping away in a wide curve, enclosing a small bay whose waters lay still as blue glass.

'This is one of the many islands that dot this inland sea,' said Conan. 'They are supposed to be uninhabited. I've heard the Hyrkanians seldom visit them. Besides, they generally hug the shores in their galleys, and we have come a long way. Before sunset we were out of sight of the mainland.'

With a few strokes he brought the boat in to shore and made the painter fast to the arching root of a tree which rose from the water's edge. Stepping ashore, he reached out a hand to help Olivia. She took it, wincing slightly at the bloodstains upon it, feeling a hint of the dynamic strength that lurked in the barbarian's thews.

A dreamy quiet lay over the woods that bordered the blue bay. Then somewhere, far back among the trees, a bird lifted its morning song. A breeze whispered through the leaves, and set them to murmuring. Olivia found herself listening intently for something, she knew not what. What might be lurking amid those nameless woodlands?

As she peered timidly into the shadows between the trees, something swept into the sunlight with a swift whirl of wings: a great parrot which dropped on to a leafy branch and swayed there, a gleaming image of jade and crimson. It turned its crested head sidewise and regarded the invaders with glittering eyes of jet.

'Crom!' muttered the Cimmerian. 'Here is the grandfather of all parrots. He must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?'

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and, soaring from its perch, cried out harshly: '*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*' and with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows.

Olivia stared after it, feeling the cold hand of nameless foreboding touch her supple spine.

'What did it say?' she whispered.

'Human words, I'll swear,' answered Conan; 'but in what tongue I can't say.'

'Nor I,' returned the girl. 'Yet it must have learned them from human lips. Human, or—' she gazed into the leafy fastness and shuddered slightly, without knowing why.

'Crom, I'm hungry!' grunted the Cimmerian. 'I could eat a whole buffalo. We'll look for fruit; but first I'm going to cleanse myself of this dried mud and blood. Hiding in marshes is foul business.'

So saying, he laid aside his sword, and wading out shoulder-deep into the blue water, went about his ablutions. When he emerged, his clean-cut bronze limbs shone, his streaming black mane was no longer matted. His blue eyes, though they smoldered with unquenchable fire, were no longer murky or bloodshot. But the tigerish suppleness of limb and the dangerous aspect of feature were not altered.

Strapping on his sword once more, he motioned the girl to follow him, and they left the shore, passing under the leafy arches of the great branches. Underfoot lay a short green sward which cushioned their tread. Between the trunks of the trees they caught glimpses of faery-like vistas.

Presently Conan grunted in pleasure at the sight of golden and russet globes hanging in clusters among the leaves. Indicating that the girl should seat herself on a fallen tree, he filled her lap with the exotic delicacies, and then himself fell to with unconcealed gusto.

'Ishtar!' said he, between mouthfuls. 'Since Ilbars I have lived on rats, and roots I dug out of the stinking mud. This is sweet to the palate, though not very filling. Still, it will serve if we eat enough.'

Olivia was too busy to reply. The sharp edge of the Cimmerian's hunger blunted, he began to gaze at his fair companion with more interest than previously, noting the lustrous clusters of her dark hair, the peach-bloom tints of her dainty skin, and the rounded contours of her lithe figure which the scanty silk tunic displayed to full advantage.

Finishing her meal, the object of his scrutiny looked up, and meeting his burning, slit-eyed gaze, she changed color and the remnants of the fruit slipped from her fingers.

Without comment, he indicated with a gesture that they should continue their explorations, and rising, she followed him out of the trees and into a glade, the farther end of which was bounded by a dense thicket. As they stepped into the open there was a ripping crash in this thicket, and Conan, bounding aside and carrying the girl with him, narrowly saved them from something that rushed through the air and struck a tree-trunk with a thunderous impact.

Whipping out his sword, Conan bounded across the glade and plunged into the thicket. Silence ensued, while Olivia crouched on the sward, terrified and bewildered. Presently Conan emerged, a puzzled scowl on his face.

'Nothing in that thicket,' he growled. 'But there was something—'

He studied the missile that had so narrowly missed them, and grunted incredulously, as if unable to credit his own senses. It was a huge block of greenish stone which lay on the sward at the foot of the tree, whose wood its impact had splintered.

'A strange stone to find on an uninhabited island,' growled Conan.

Olivia's lovely eyes dilated in wonder. The stone was a symmetrical block, indisputably cut and shaped by human hands. And it was astonishingly massive. The Cimmerian grasped it with both hands, and with legs braced and the muscles standing out on his arms and back in straining knots, he heaved it above his head and cast it from him, exerting every ounce of nerve and sinew. It fell a few feet in front of him. Conan swore.

'No man living could throw that rock across this glade. It's a task for siege engines. Yet here there are no mangonels or ballistas.'

'Perhaps it was thrown by some such engine from afar,' she suggested.

He shook his head. 'It didn't fall from above. It came from yonder thicket. See how the twigs are broken? It was thrown as a man might throw a pebble. But who? What? Come!'

She hesitantly followed him into the thicket. Inside the outer ring of leafy brush, the undergrowth was less dense. Utter silence brooded over all. The springy sward gave no sign of footprint. Yet from this mysterious thicket had hurtled that boulder, swift and deadly. Conan bent closer to the sward, where the grass was crushed down here and there. He shook his head angrily. Even to his keen eyes it gave no clue as to what had stood or trodden there. His gaze roved to the green roof above their heads, a solid ceiling of thick leaves and interwoven arches. And he froze suddenly.

Then rising, sword in hand, he began to back away, thrusting Olivia behind him.

'Out of here, quick!' he urged in a whisper that congealed the girl's blood.

'What is it? What do you see?'

'Nothing,' he answered guardedly, not halting his wary retreat.

'But what is it, then? What lurks in this thicket?'

'Death!' he answered, his gaze still fixed on the brooding jade arches that shut out the sky.

Once out of the thicket, he took her hand and led her swiftly through the thinning trees, until they mounted a grassy slope, sparsely treed, and emerged upon a low plateau, where the grass grew taller and the trees were few and scattered. And in the midst of that plateau rose a long broad structure of crumbling greenish stone.

They gazed in wonder. No legends named such a building on any island of Vilayet. They approached it warily, seeing that moss and lichen crawled over the stones, and the broken roof gaped to the sky. On all sides lay bits and shards of

masonry, half hidden in the waving grass, giving the impression that once many buildings rose there, perhaps a whole town. But now only the long hall-like structure rose against the sky, and its walls leaned drunkenly among the crawling vines.

Whatever doors had once guarded its portals had long rotted away. Conan and his companion stood in the broad entrance and stared inside. Sunlight streamed in through gaps in the walls and roof, making the interior a dim weave of light and shadow. Grasping his sword firmly, Conan entered, with the slouching gait of a hunting panther, sunken head and noiseless feet. Olivia tiptoed after him.

Once within, Conan grunted in surprize, and Olivia stifled a scream.

'Look! Oh, look!'

'I see,' he answered. 'Nothing to fear. They are statues.'

'But how life-like— and how evil!' she whispered, drawing close to him.

They stood in a great hall, whose floor was of polished stone, littered with dust and broken stones, which had fallen from the ceiling. Vines, growing between the stones, masked the apertures. The lofty roof, flat and undomed, was upheld by thick columns, marching in rows down the sides of the walls. And in each space between these columns stood a strange figure.

They were statues, apparently of iron, black and shining as if continually polished. They were life-sized, depicting tall, lithely powerful men, with cruel hawk-like faces. They were naked, and every swell, depression and contour of joint and sinew was represented with incredible realism. But the most life-like feature was their proud, intolerant faces. These features were not cast in the same mold. Each face possessed its own individual characteristics, though there was a tribal likeness between them all. There was none of the monotonous uniformity of decorative art, in the faces at least.

'They seem to be listening— and waiting!' whispered the girl uneasily.

Conan rang his hilt against one of the images.

'Iron,' he pronounced. 'But Crom! In what molds were they cast?'

He shook his head and shrugged his massive shoulders in puzzlement.

Olivia glanced timidly about the great silent hall. Only the ivy-grown stones, the tendril-clasped pillars, with the dark figures brooding between them, met her gaze. She shifted uneasily and wished to be gone, but the images held a strange fascination for her companion. He examined them in detail, and barbarian-like, tried to break off their limbs. But their material resisted his best efforts. He could neither disfigure nor dislodge from its niche a single image. At last he desisted, swearing in his wonder.

'What manner of men were these copied from?' he inquired of the world at large. 'These figures are black, yet they are not like negroes. I have never seen their like.'

'Let us go into the sunlight,' urged Olivia, and he nodded, with a baffled glance at the brooding shapes along the walls.

So they passed out of the dusky hall into the clear blaze of the summer sun. She was surprized to note its position in the sky; they had spent more time in the ruins than she had guessed.

'Let us take to the boat again,' she suggested. 'I am afraid here. It is a strange evil place. We do not know when we may be attacked by whatever cast the rock.'

'I think we're safe as long as we're not under the trees,' he answered. 'Come.'

The plateau, whose sides fell away toward the wooded shores on the east, west and south, sloped upward toward the north to abut on a tangle of rocky cliffs, the highest point of the island. Thither Conan took his way, suiting his long stride to his companion's gait. From time to time his glance rested inscrutably upon her, and she was aware of it.

They reached the northern extremity of the plateau, and stood gazing up the steep pitch of the cliffs. Trees grew thickly along the rim of the plateau east and west of the cliffs, and clung to the precipitous incline. Conan glanced at these trees suspiciously, but he began the ascent, helping his companion on the climb. The slope was not sheer, and was broken by ledges and boulders. The Cimmerian, born in a hill country, could have run up it like a cat, but Olivia found the going difficult. Again and again she felt herself lifted lightly off her feet and over some obstacle that would have taxed her strength to surmount, and her wonder grew at the sheer physical power of the man. She no longer found his touch repugnant. There was a promise of protection in his iron clasp.

At last they stood on the ultimate pinnacle, their hair stirring in the sea wind. From their feet the cliffs fell away sheerly three or four hundred feet to a narrow tangle of woodlands bordering the beach. Looking southward they saw the whole island lying like a great oval mirror, its bevelled edges sloping down swiftly into a rim of green, except where it broke in the pitch of the cliffs. As far as they could see, on all sides stretched the blue waters, still, placid, fading into dreamy hazes of distance.

'The sea is still,' sighed Olivia. 'Why should we not take up our journey again?'

Conan, poised like a bronze statue on the cliffs, pointed northward. Straining her eyes, Olivia saw a white fleck that seemed to hang suspended in the aching haze.

'What is it?'

'A sail.'

'Hyrkanians?'

'Who can tell, at this distance?'

'They will anchor here— search the island for us!' she cried in quick panic.

'I doubt it. They come from the north, so they can not be searching for us. They may stop for some other reason, in which case we'll have to hide as best we can. But I believe it's either pirate, or an Hyrkanian galley returning from some northern raid. In the latter case they are not likely to anchor here. But we can't put to sea until they've gone out of sight, for they're coming from the direction in which we must go. Doubtless they'll pass the island tonight, and at dawn we can go on our way.'

'Then we must spend the night here?' she shivered.

'It's safest.'

'Then let us sleep here, on the crags,' she urged.

He shook his head, glancing at the stunted trees, at the marching woods below, a green mass which seemed to send out tendrils straggling up the sides of the cliffs.

'Here are too many trees. We'll sleep in the ruins.'

She cried out in protest.

'Nothing will harm you there,' he soothed. 'Whatever threw the stone at us did not follow us out of the woods. There was nothing to show that any wild thing lairs in the ruins. Besides, you are soft-skinned, and used to shelter and dainties. I could sleep naked in the snow and feel no discomfort, but the dew would give you cramps, were we to sleep in the open.'

Olivia helplessly acquiesced, and they descended the cliffs, crossed the plateau and once more approached the gloomy, age-haunted ruins. By this time the sun was sinking below the plateau rim. They had found fruit in the trees near the cliffs, and these formed their supper, both food and drink.

The southern night swept down quickly, littering the dark blue sky with great white stars, and Conan entered the shadowy ruins, drawing the reluctant Olivia after him. She shivered at the sight of those tense black shadows in their niches along the walls. In the darkness that the starlight only faintly touched, she could not make out their outlines; she could only sense their attitude of waiting— waiting as they had waited for untold centuries.

Conan had brought a great armful of tender branches, well leafed. These he heaped to make a couch for her, and she lay upon it, with a curious sensation as of one lying down to sleep in a serpent's lair.

Whatever her forebodings, Conan did not share them. The Cimmerian sat down near her, his back against a pillar, his sword across his knees. His eyes gleamed like a panther's in the dusk.

'Sleep, girl,' said he. 'My slumber is light as a wolf's. Nothing can enter this hall without awaking me.'

Olivia did not reply. From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a

barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which had frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smoldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man the world called civilized. As a delicious languor stole over her relaxing limbs and she sank into foamy billows of slumber, her last waking thought was a drowsy recollection of the firm touch of Conan's fingers on her soft flesh.

ii

OLIVIA DREAMED, and through her dreams crawled a suggestion of lurking evil, like a black serpent writhing through flower gardens. Her dreams were fragmentary and colorful, exotic shards of a broken, unknown pattern, until they crystalized into a scene of horror and madness, etched against a background of cyclopean stones and pillars.

She saw a great hall, whose lofty ceiling was upheld by stone columns marching in even rows along the massive walls. Among these pillars fluttered great green and scarlet parrots, and the hall was thronged with black-skinned, hawk-faced warriors. They were not negroes. Neither they nor their garments nor weapons resembled anything of the world the dreamer knew.

They were pressing about one bound to a pillar: a slender white-skinned youth, with a cluster of golden curls about his alabaster brow. His beauty was not altogether human— like the dream of a god, chiseled out of living marble.

The black warriors laughed at him, jeered and taunted in a strange tongue. The lithe naked form writhed beneath their cruel hands. Blood trickled down the ivory thighs to spatter on the polished floor. The screams of the victim echoed through the hall; then lifting his head toward the ceiling and the skies beyond, he cried out a name in an awful voice. A dagger in an ebon hand cut short his cry, and the golden head rolled on the ivory breast.

As if in answer to that desperate cry, there was a rolling thunder as of celestial chariot-wheels, and a figure stood before the slayers, as if materialized out of empty air. The form was of a man, but no mortal man ever wore such an aspect of inhuman beauty. There was an unmistakable resemblance between him and the youth who dropped lifeless in his chains, but the alloy of humanity that softened the godliness of the youth was lacking in the features of the stranger, awful and immobile in their beauty.

The blacks shrank back before him, their eyes slits of fire. Lifting a hand, he spoke, and his tones echoed through the silent halls in deep rich waves of sound. Like men in a trance the black warriors fell back until they were ranged along the walls in regular lines. Then from the stranger's chiseled lips rang a terrible invocation and command: '*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*'

At the blast of that awful cry, the black figures stiffened and froze. Over their limbs crept a curious rigidity, an unnatural petrification. The stranger touched the limp body of the youth, and the chains fell away from it. He lifted the corpse in his arms; then ere he turned away, his tranquil gaze swept again over the silent rows of ebony figures, and he pointed to the moon, which gleamed in through the casements. And they understood, those tense, waiting statues that had been men....

Olivia awoke, starting up on her couch of branches, a cold sweat beading her skin. Her heart pounded loud in the silence. She glanced wildly about. Conan slept against his pillar, his head fallen upon his massive breast. The silvery radiance of the late moon crept through the gaping roof, throwing long white lines along the dusty floor. She could see the images dimly, black, tense— waiting. Fighting down a rising hysteria, she saw the moonbeams rest lightly on the pillars and the shapes between.

What was that? A tremor among the shadows where the moonlight fell. A paralysis of horror gripped her, for where there should have been the immobility of death, there was movement: a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of ebon limbs— an awful scream burst from her lips as she broke the bonds that held her mute and motionless. At her shriek Conan shot erect, teeth gleaming, sword lifted.

'The statues! The statues!— *Oh my God, the statues are coming to life!*'

And with the cry she sprang through a crevice in the wall, burst madly through the hindering vines, and ran, ran, ran— blind, screaming, witless— until a grasp on her arm brought her up short and she shrieked and fought against the arms that caught her, until a familiar voice penetrated the mists of her terror, and she saw Conan's face, a mask of bewilderment in the moonlight.

'What in Crom's name, girl? Did you have a nightmare?' His voice sounded strange and far away. With a sobbing gasp she threw her arms about his thick neck and clung to him convulsively, crying in panting catches.

'Where are they? Did they follow us?'

'Nobody followed us,' he answered.

She sat up, still clinging to him, and looked fearfully about. Her blind flight had carried her to the southern edge of the plateau. Just below them was the slope, its foot masked in the thick shadows of the woods. Behind them she saw the ruins looming in the high-swinging moon.

'Did you not see them?— The statues, moving, lifting their hands, their eyes glaring in the shadows?'

'I saw nothing,' answered the barbarian uneasily. 'I slept more soundly than usual, because it has been so long since I have slumbered the night through; yet I don't think anything could have entered the hall without waking me.'

'Nothing entered,' a laugh of hysteria escaped her. 'It was something there already. Ah, Mitra, we lay down to sleep among them, like sheep making their bed in the shambles!'

'What are you talking about?' he demanded. 'I woke at your cry, but before I had time to look about me, I saw you rush out through the crack in the wall. I pursued you, lest you come to harm. I thought you had a nightmare.'

'So I did!' she shivered. 'But the reality was more grisly than the dream. Listen!' And she narrated all that she had dreamed and thought to see.

Conan listened attentively. The natural skepticism of the sophisticated man was not his. His mythology contained ghouls, goblins, and necromancers. After she had finished, he sat silent, absently toying with his sword.

'The youth they tortured was like the tall man who came?' he asked at last.

'As like as son to father,' she answered, and hesitantly: 'If the mind could conceive of the offspring of a union of divinity with humanity, it would picture that youth. The gods of old times mated sometimes with mortal women, our legends tell us.'

'What gods?' he muttered.

'The nameless, forgotten ones. Who knows? They have gone back into the still waters of the lakes, the quiet hearts of the hills, the gulfs beyond the stars. Gods are no more stable than men.'

'But if these shapes were men, blasted into iron images by some god or devil, how can they come to life?'

'There is witchcraft in the moon,' she shuddered. '*He* pointed at the moon; while the moon shines on them, they live. So I believe.'

'But we were not pursued,' muttered Conan, glancing toward the brooding ruins. 'You might have dreamed they moved. I am of a mind to return and see.'

'No, no!' she cried, clutching him desperately. 'Perhaps the spell upon them holds them in the hall. Do not go back! They will rend you limb from limb! Oh, Conan, let us go into our boat and flee this awful island! Surely the Hyrkanian ship has passed us now! Let us go!'

So frantic was her pleading that Conan was impressed. His curiosity in regard to the images was balanced by his superstition. Foes of flesh and blood he did not fear, however great the odds, but any hint of the supernatural roused all the dim monstrous instincts of fear that are the heritage of the barbarian.

He took the girl's hand and they went down the slope and plunged into the dense woods, where the leaves whispered, and nameless night-birds murmured drowsily. Under the trees the shadows clustered thick, and Conan swerved to avoid the denser patches. His eyes roved continuously from side to side, and often flitted into the branches above them. He went quickly yet warily, his arm girdling the girl's waist so strongly that she felt as if she were being carried rather than guided. Neither spoke. The only sound was the girl's quick nervous

panting, the rustle of her small feet in the grass. So they came through the trees to the edge of the water, shimmering like molten silver in the moonlight.

'We should have brought fruit for food,' muttered Conan; 'but doubtless we'll find other islands. As well leave now as later; it's but a few hours till dawn—'

His voice trailed away. The painter was still made fast to the looping root. But at the other end was only a smashed and shattered ruin, half submerged in the shallow water.

A stifled cry escaped Olivia. Conan wheeled and faced the dense shadows, a crouching image of menace. The noise of the night-birds was suddenly silent. A brooding stillness reigned over the woods. No breeze moved the branches, yet somewhere the leaves stirred faintly.

Quick as a great cat Conan caught up Olivia and ran. Through the shadows he raced like a phantom, while somewhere above and behind them sounded a curious rushing among the leaves, that implacably drew closer and closer. Then the moonlight burst full upon their faces, and they were speeding up the slope of the plateau.

At the crest Conan laid Olivia down, and turned to glare back at the gulf of shadows they had just quitted. The leaves shook in a sudden breeze; that was all. He shook his mane with an angry growl. Olivia crept to his feet like a frightened child. Her eyes looked up at him, dark wells of horror.

'What are we to do, Conan?' she whispered.

He looked at the ruins, stared again into the woods below.

'We'll go to the cliffs,' he declared, lifting her to her feet. 'Tomorrow I'll make a raft, and we'll trust our luck to the sea again.'

'It was not— not *they* that destroyed our boat?' It was half question, half assertion.

He shook his head, grimly taciturn.

Every step of the way across that moon-haunted plateau was a sweating terror for Olivia, but no black shapes stole subtly from the looming ruins, and at last they reached the foot of the crags, which rose stark and gloomily majestic above them. There Conan halted in some uncertainty, at last selecting a place sheltered by a broad ledge, nowhere near any trees.

'Lie down and sleep if you can, Olivia,' he said. 'I'll keep watch.'

But no sleep came to Olivia, and she lay watching the distant ruins and the wooded rim until the stars paled, the east whitened, and dawn in rose and gold struck fire from the dew on the grass-blades.

She rose stiffly, her mind reverting to all the happenings of the night. In the morning light some of its terrors seemed like figments of an overwrought imagination. Conan strode over to her, and his words electrified her.

'Just before dawn I heard the creak of timbers and the rasp and clack of cordage and oars. A ship has put in and anchored at the beach not far away— probably the ship whose sail we saw yesterday. We'll go up the cliffs and spy on her.'

Up they went, and lying on their bellies among the boulders, saw a painted mast jutting up beyond the trees to the west.

'An Hyrkanian craft, from the cut of her rigging,' muttered Conan. 'I wonder if the crew—'

A distant medley of voices reached their ears, and creeping to the southern edge of the cliffs, they saw a motley horde emerge from the fringe of trees along the western rim of the plateau, and stand there a space in debate. There was much flourishing of arms, brandishing of swords, and loud rough argument. Then the whole band started across the plateau toward the ruins, at a slant that would take them close by the foot of the cliffs.

'Pirates!' whispered Conan, a grim smile on his thin lips. 'It's an Hyrkanian galley they've captured. Here— crawl among these rocks.

'Don't show yourself unless I call to you,' he instructed, having secreted her to his satisfaction among a tangle of boulders along the crest of the cliffs. 'I'm going to meet these dogs. If I succeed in my plan, all will be well, and we'll sail away with them. If I don't succeed— well, hide yourself in the rocks until they're gone, for no devils on this island are as cruel as these sea-wolves.'

And tearing himself from her reluctant grasp, he swung quickly down the cliffs.

Looking fearfully from her eyrie, Olivia saw the band had neared the foot of the cliffs. Even as she looked, Conan stepped out from among the boulders and faced them, sword in hand. They gave back with yells of menace and surprize; then halted uncertainly to glare at this figure which had appeared so suddenly from the rocks. There were some seventy of them, a wild horde made up of men from many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shemites. Their features reflected the wildness of their natures. Many bore the scars of the lash or the branding-iron. There were cropped ears, slit noses, gaping eye-sockets, stumps of wrists— marks of the hangman as well as scars of battle. Most of them were half naked, but the garments they wore were fine; gold-braided jackets, satin girdles, silken breeches, tattered, stained with tar and blood, vied with pieces of silver-chased armor. Jewels glittered in nose-rings and ear-rings, and in the hilts of their daggers.

Over against this bizarre mob stood the tall Cimmerian in strong contrast with his hard bronzed limbs and clean-cut vital features.

'Who are you?' they roared.

'Conan the Cimmerian!' His voice was like the deep challenge of a lion. 'One of the Free Companions. I mean to try my luck with the Red Brotherhood. Who's your chief?'

'I, by Ishtar!' bellowed a bull-like voice, as a huge figure swaggered forward: a giant, naked to the waist, where his capacious belly was girdled by a wide sash that upheld voluminous silken pantaloons. His head was shaven except for a scalp-lock, his mustaches dropped over a rat-trap mouth. Green Shemitish slippers with upturned toes were on his feet, a long straight sword in his hand.

Conan stared and glared.

'Sergius of Khrosha, by Crom!'

'Aye, by Ishtar!' boomed the giant, his small black eyes glittering with hate. 'Did you think I had forgot? Ha! Sergius never forgets an enemy. Now I'll hang you up by the heels and skin you alive. At him, lads!'

'Aye, send your dogs at me, big-belly,' sneered Conan with bitter scorn. 'You were always a coward, you Kothic cur.'

'Coward! To me?' The broad face turned black with passion. 'On guard, you northern dog! I'll cut out your heart!'

In an instant the pirates had formed a circle about the rivals, their eyes blazing, their breath sucking between their teeth in bloodthirsty enjoyment. High up among the crags Olivia watched, sinking her nails into her palms in her painful excitement.

Without formality the combatants engaged, Sergius coming in with a rush, quick on his feet as a giant cat, for all his bulk. Curses hissed between his clenched teeth as he lustily swung and parried. Conan fought in silence, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

The Kothian ceased his oaths to save his breath. The only sounds were the quick scuff of feet on the sward, the panting of the pirate, the ring and clash of steel. The swords flashed like white fire in the early sun, wheeling and circling. They seemed to recoil from each other's contact, then leap together again instantly. Sergius was giving back; only his superlative skill had saved him thus far from the blinding speed of the Cimmerian's onslaught. A louder clash of steel, a sliding rasp, a choking cry— from the pirate horde a fierce yell split the morning as Conan's sword plunged through their captain's massive body. The point quivered an instant from between Sergius's shoulders, a hand's breadth of white fire in the sunlight; then the Cimmerian wrenched back his steel and the pirate chief fell heavily, face down, and lay in a widening pool of blood, his broad hands twitching for an instant.

Conan wheeled toward the gaping corsairs.

'Well, you dogs!' he roared. 'I've sent your chief to hell. What says the law of the Red Brotherhood?'

Before any could answer, a rat-faced Brythunian, standing behind his fellows, whirled a sling swiftly and deadly. Straight as an arrow sped the stone to its mark, and Conan reeled and fell as a tall tree falls to the woodsman's ax. Up on the cliff Olivia caught at the boulders for support. The scene swam dizzily before her eyes; all she could see was the Cimmerian lying limply on the sward, blood oozing from his head.

The rat-faced one yelped in triumph and ran to stab the prostrate man, but a lean Corinthian thrust him back.

'What, Aratus, would you break the law of the Brotherhood, you dog?'

'No law is broken,' snarled the Brythunian.

'No law? Why, you dog, this man you have just struck down is by just rights our captain!'

'Nay!' shouted Aratus. 'He was not of our band, but an outsider. He had not been admitted to fellowship. Slaying Sergius does not make him captain, as would have been the case had one of us killed him.'

'But he wished to join us,' retorted the Corinthian. 'He said so.'

At that a great clamor arose, some siding with Aratus, some with the Corinthian, whom they called Ivanos. Oaths flew thick, challenges were passed, hands fumbled at sword-hilts.

At last a Shemite spoke up above the clamor: 'Why do you argue over a dead man?'

'He's not dead,' answered the Corinthian, rising from beside the prostrate Cimmerian. 'It was a glancing blow; he's only stunned.'

At that the clamor rose anew, Aratus trying to get at the senseless man and Ivanos finally bestriding him, sword in hand, and defying all and sundry. Olivia sensed that it was not so much in defense of Conan that the Corinthian took his stand, but in opposition to Aratus. Evidently these men had been Sergius's lieutenants, and there was no love lost between them. After more arguments, it was decided to bind Conan and take him along with them, his fate to be voted on later.

The Cimmerian, who was beginning to regain consciousness, was bound with leather girdles, and then four pirates lifted him, and with many complaints and curses, carried him along with the band, which took up its journey across the plateau once more. The body of Sergius was left where it had fallen; a sprawling, unlovely shape on the sun-washed sward.

Up among the rocks, Olivia lay stunned by the disaster. She was incapable of speech or action, and could only lie there and stare with horrified eyes as the brutal horde dragged her protector away.

How long she lay there, she did not know. Across the plateau she saw the pirates reach the ruins and enter, dragging their captive. She saw them swarming in and out of the doors and crevices, prodding into the heaps of

debris, and clambering about the walls. After awhile a score of them came back across the plateau and vanished among the trees on the western rim, dragging the body of Sergius after them, presumably to cast into the sea. About the ruins the others were cutting down trees and securing material for a fire. Olivia heard their shouts, unintelligible in the distance, and she heard the voices of those who had gone into the woods, echoing among the trees. Presently they came back into sight, bearing casks of liquor and leathern sacks of food. They headed for the ruins, cursing lustily under their burdens.

Of all this Olivia was but mechanically cognizant. Her overwrought brain was almost ready to collapse. Left alone and unprotected, she realized how much the protection of the Cimmerian had meant to her. There intruded vaguely a wonderment at the mad pranks of Fate, that could make the daughter of a king the companion of a red-handed barbarian. With it came a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized man who treated her with kindness unless there was an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and— so far— demanded nothing in return. Laying her head in her rounded arms she wept, until distant shouts of ribald revelry roused her to her own danger.

She glanced from the dark ruins about which the fantastic figures, small in the distance, weaved and staggered, to the dusky depths of the green forest. Even if her terrors in the ruins the night before had been only dreams, the menace that lurked in those green leafy depths below was no figment of nightmare. Were Conan slain or carried away captive, her only choice would lie between giving herself up to the human wolves of the sea, or remaining alone on that devil-haunted island.

As the full horror of her situation swept over her, she fell forward in a swoon.

iii

THE SUN was hanging low when Olivia regained her senses. A faint wind wafted to her ears distant shouts and snatches of ribald song. Rising cautiously, she looked out across the plateau. She saw the pirates clustered about a great fire outside the ruins, and her heart leaped as a group emerged from the interior dragging some object she knew was Conan. They propped him against the wall, still evidently bound fast, and there ensued a long discussion, with much brandishing of weapons. At last they dragged him back into the hall, and took up anew the business of ale-guzzling. Olivia sighed; at least she knew that the Cimmerian still lived. Fresh determination steeled her. As soon as night fell, she would steal to those grim ruins and free him or be taken herself in the

attempt. And she knew it was not selfish interest alone which prompted her decision.

With this in mind she ventured to creep from her refuge to pluck and eat nuts which grew sparsely near at hand. She had not eaten since the day before. It was while so occupied that she was troubled by a sensation of being watched. She scanned the rocks nervously, then, with a shuddering suspicion, crept to the north edge of the cliff and gazed down into the waving green mass below, already dusky with the sunset. She saw nothing; it was impossible that she could be seen, when not on the cliff's edge, by anything lurking in those woods. Yet she distinctly felt the glare of hidden eyes, and felt that *something* animate and sentient was aware of her presence and her hiding-place.

Stealing back to her rocky eyrie, she lay watching the distant ruins until the dusk of night masked them, and she marked their position by the flickering flames about which black figures leaped and cavorted groggily.

Then she rose. It was time to make her attempt. But first she stole back to the northern edge of the cliffs, and looked down into the woods that bordered the beach. And as she strained her eyes in the dim starlight, she stiffened, and an icy hand touched her heart.

Far below her something moved. It was as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below her. It moved slowly up the sheer face of the cliff— a vague bulk, shapeless in the semi-darkness. Panic caught Olivia by the throat, and she struggled with the scream that tugged at her lips. Turning, she fled down the southern slope.

That flight down the shadowed cliffs was a nightmare in which she slid and scrambled, catching at jagged rocks with cold fingers. As she tore her tender skin and bruised her soft limbs on the rugged boulders over which Conan had so lightly lifted her, she realized again her dependence on the iron-thewed barbarian. But this thought was but one in a fluttering maelstrom of dizzy fright.

The descent seemed endless, but at last her feet struck the grassy levels, and in a very frenzy of eagerness she sped away toward the fire that burned like the red heart of night. Behind her, as she fled, she heard a shower of stones rattle down the steep slope, and the sound lent wings to her heels. What grisly climber dislodged those stones she dared not try to think.

Strenuous physical action dissipated her blind terror somewhat and before she had reached the ruin, her mind was clear, her reasoning faculties alert, though her limbs trembled from her efforts.

She dropped to the sward and wriggled along on her belly until, from behind a small tree that had escaped the axes of the pirates, she watched her enemies. They had completed their supper, but were still drinking, dipping pewter mugs or jewelled goblets into the broken heads of the wine-casks. Some were already snoring drunkenly on the grass, while others had staggered into the ruins. Of

Conan she saw nothing. She lay there, while the dew formed on the grass about her and the leaves overhead, and the men about the fire cursed, gambled and argued. There were only a few about the fire; most of them had gone into the ruins to sleep.

She lay watching them, her nerves taut with the strain of waiting, the flesh crawling between her shoulders at the thought of what might be watching her in turn— of what might be stealing up behind her. Time dragged on leaden feet. One by one the revellers sank down in drunken slumber, until all were stretched senseless beside the dying fire.

Olivia hesitated— then was galvanized by a distant glow rising through the trees. The moon was rising!

With a gasp she rose and hurried toward the ruins. Her flesh crawled as she tiptoed among the drunken shapes that sprawled beside the gaping portal. Inside were many more; they shifted and mumbled in their besotted dreams, but none awakened as she glided among them. A sob of joy rose to her lips as she saw Conan. The Cimmerian was wide awake, bound upright to a pillar, his eyes gleaming in the faint reflection of the waning fire outside.

Picking her way among the sleepers, she approached him. Lightly as she had come, he had heard her; had seen her when first framed in the portal. A faint grin touched his hard lips.

She reached him and clung to him an instant. He felt the quick beating of her heart against his breast. Through a broad crevice in the wall stole a beam of moonlight, and the air was instantly supercharged with subtle tension. Conan felt it and stiffened. Olivia felt it and gasped. The sleepers snored on. Bending quickly, she drew a dagger from its senseless owner's belt, and set to work on Conan's bonds. They were sail cords, thick and heavy, and tied with the craft of a sailor. She toiled desperately, while the tide of moonlight crept slowly across the floor toward the feet of the crouching black figures between the pillars.

Her breath came in gasps; Conan's wrists were free, but his elbows and legs were still bound fast. She glanced fleetingly at the figures along the walls— waiting, waiting. They seemed to watch her with the awful patience of the undead. The drunkards beneath her feet began to stir and groan in their sleep. The moonlight crept down the hall, touching the black feet. The cords fell from Conan's arms, and taking the dagger from her, he ripped the bonds from his legs with a single quick slash. He stepped out from the pillar, flexing his limbs, stoically enduring the agony of returning circulation. Olivia crouched against him, shaking like a leaf. Was it some trick of the moonlight that touched the eyes of the black figures with fire, so that they glimmered redly in the shadows?

Conan moved with the abruptness of a jungle cat. Catching up his sword from where it lay in a stack of weapons near by, he lifted Olivia lightly from her feet and glided through an opening that gaped in the ivy-grown wall.

No word passed between them. Lifting her in his arms he set off swiftly across the moon-bathed sward. Her arms about his iron neck, the Ophirean closed her eyes, cradling her dark curly head against his massive shoulder. A delicious sense of security stole over her.

In spite of his burden, the Cimmerian crossed the plateau swiftly, and Olivia, opening her eyes, saw that they were passing under the shadow of the cliffs.

'Something climbed the cliffs,' she whispered. 'I heard it scrambling behind me as I came down.'

'We'll have to chance it,' he grunted.

'I am not afraid— now,' she sighed.

'You were not afraid when you came to free me, either,' he answered. 'Crom, what a day it has been! Such haggling and wrangling I never heard. I'm nearly deaf. Aratus wished to cut out my heart, and Ivanos refused, to spite Aratus, whom he hates. All day long they snarled and spat at one another, and the crew quickly grew too drunk to vote either way—'

He halted suddenly, an image of bronze in the moonlight. With a quick gesture he tossed the girl lightly to one side and behind him. Rising to her knees on the soft sward, she screamed at what she saw.

Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk— an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

In general outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flabby-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusk-like fangs. It was covered with shaggy grayish hair, shot with silver which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breathtaking; the huge arms were like knotted trees.

The moonlight scene swam, to Olivia's sight. This, then, was the end of the trail— for what human being could withstand the fury of that hairy mountain of thews and ferocity? Yet as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the bronzed figure facing the monster, she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling. This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious. With a flash of white tusks, the monster charged.

The mighty arms spread wide as the beast plunged, stupefyingly quick for all his vast bulk and stunted legs.

Conan's action was a blur of speed Olivia's eye could not follow. She only saw that he evaded that deadly grasp, and his sword, flashing like a jet of white lightning, sheared through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sward as the severed member fell,

twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan's black mane.

Only the iron neck-muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck that instant. His left hand darted out to clamp on the beast's squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute's hairy belly. Then began a terrific struggle, which lasted only seconds, but which seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.

The ape maintained his grasp in Conan's hair, dragging him toward the tusks that glistened in the moonlight. The Cimmerian resisted this effort, with his left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher-knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds. Swiftly the terrible strength of the anthropoid overcame the leverage of braced arm and knee. Inexorably Conan's arm bent under the strain; nearer and nearer he was drawn to the slavering jaws that gaped for his life. Now the blazing eyes of the barbarian glared into the bloodshot eyes of the ape. But as Conan tugged vainly at his sword, wedged deep in the hairy body, the frothing jaws snapped spasmodically shut, an inch from the Cimmerian's face, and he was hurled to the sward by the dying convulsions of the monster.

Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing and writhing, gripping, man-like, the hilt that jutted from its body. A sickening instant of this, then the great bulk quivered and lay still.

Conan rose and limped over to the corpse. The Cimmerian breathed heavily, and walked like a man whose joints and muscles have been wrenched and twisted almost to their limit of endurance. He felt his bloody scalp and swore at the sight of the long black red-stained strands still grasped in the monster's shaggy hand.

'Crom!' he panted. 'I feel as if I'd been racked! I'd rather fight a dozen men. Another instant and he'd have bitten off my head. Blast him, he's torn a handful of my hair out by the roots.'

Gripping his hilt with both hands he tugged and worked it free. Olivia stole close to clasp his arm and stare down wide-eyed at the sprawling monster.

'What— what is it?' she whispered.

'A gray man-ape,' he grunted. 'Dumb, and man-eating. They dwell in the hills that border the eastern shore of this sea. How this one got to this island, I can't say. Maybe he floated here on driftwood, blown out from the mainland in a storm.'

'And it was he that threw the stone?'

'Yes; I suspected what it was when we stood in the thicket and I saw the boughs bending over our heads. These creatures always lurk in the deepest

woods they can find, and seldom emerge. What brought him into the open, I can't say, but it was lucky for us; I'd have had no chance with him among the trees.'

'It followed me,' she shivered. 'I saw it climbing the cliffs.'

'And following his instinct, he lurked in the shadow of the cliff, instead of following you out across the plateau. His kind are creatures of darkness and the silent places, haters of sun and moon.'

'Do you suppose there are others?'

'No, else the pirates had been attacked when they went through the woods. The gray ape is wary, for all his strength, as shown by his hesitancy in falling upon us in the thicket. His lust for you must have been great, to have driven him to attack us finally in the open. What—'

He started and wheeled back toward the way they had come. The night had been split by an awful scream. It came from the ruins.

Instantly there followed a mad medley of yells, shrieks and cries of blasphemous agony. Though accompanied by a ringing of steel, the sounds were of massacre rather than battle.

Conan stood frozen, the girl clinging to him in a frenzy of terror. The clamor rose to a crescendo of madness, and then the Cimmerian turned and went swiftly toward the rim of the plateau, with its fringe of moon-limned trees. Olivia's legs were trembling so that she could not walk; so he carried her, and her heart calmed its frantic pounding as she nestled into his cradling arms.

They passed under the shadowy forest, but the clusters of blackness held no terrors, the rifts of silver discovered no grisly shape. Night-birds murmured slumberously. The yells of slaughter dwindled behind them, masked in the distance to a confused jumble of sound. Somewhere a parrot called, like an eery echo: '*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*' So they came to the tree-fringed water's edge and saw the galley lying at anchor, her sail shining white in the moonlight. Already the stars were paling for dawn.

iv

IN THE GHASTLY whiteness of dawn a handful of tattered, blood-stained figures staggered through the trees and out on to the narrow beach. There were forty-four of them, and they were a cowed and demoralized band. With panting haste they plunged into the water and began to wade toward the galley, when a stern challenge brought them up standing.

Etched against the whitening sky they saw Conan the Cimmerian standing in the bows, sword in hand, his black mane tossing in the dawn wind.

'Stand!' he ordered. 'Come no nearer. What would you have, dogs?'

'Let us come aboard!' croaked a hairy rogue fingering a bloody stump of ear. 'We'd be gone from this devil's island.'

'The first man who tries to climb over the side, I'll split his skull,' promised Conan.

They were forty-four to one, but he held the whip-hand. The fight had been hammered out of them.

'Let us come aboard, good Conan,' whined a red-sashed Zamorian, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at the silent woods. 'We have been so mauled, bitten, scratched and rended, and are so weary from fighting and running, that not one of us can lift a sword.'

'Where is that dog Aratus?' demanded Conan.

'Dead, with the others! It was devils fell upon us! They were rending us to pieces before we could awake— a dozen good rovers died in their sleep. The ruins were full of flame-eyed shadows, with tearing fangs and sharp talons.'

'Aye!' put in another corsair. 'They were the demons of the isle, which took the forms of molten images, to befool us. Ishtar! We lay down to sleep among them. We are no cowards. We fought them as long as mortal man may strive against the powers of darkness. Then we broke away and left them tearing at the corpses like jackals. But surely they'll pursue us.'

'Aye, let us come aboard!' clamored a lean Shemite. 'Let us come in peace, or we must come sword in hand, and though we be so weary you will doubtless slay many of us, yet you can not prevail against us many.'

'Then I'll knock a hole in the planks and sink her,' answered Conan grimly. A frantic chorus of expostulation rose, which Conan silenced with a lion-like roar.

'Dogs! Must I aid my enemies? Shall I let you come aboard and cut out my heart?'

'Nay, nay!' they cried eagerly. 'Friends— friends, Conan. We are thy comrades! We be all lusty rogues together. We hate the king of Turan, not each other.'

Their gaze hung on his brown, frowning face.

'Then if I am one of the Brotherhood,' he grunted, 'the laws of the Trade apply to me; and since I killed your chief in fair fight, then I am your captain!'

There was no dissent. The pirates were too cowed and battered to have any thought except a desire to get away from that island of fear. Conan's gaze sought out the blood-stained figure of the Corinthian.

'How, Ivanos!' he challenged. 'You took my part, once. Will you uphold my claims again?'

'Aye, by Mitra!' The pirate, sensing the trend of feeling, was eager to ingratiate himself with the Cimmerian. 'He is right, lads; he is our lawful captain!'

A medley of acquiescence rose, lacking enthusiasm perhaps, but with sincerity accentuated by the feel of the silent woods behind them which might mask creeping ebony devils with red eyes and dripping talons.

'Swear by the hilt,' Conan demanded.

Forty-four sword-hilts were lifted toward him, and forty-four voices blended in the corsair's oath of allegiance.

Conan grinned and sheathed his sword. 'Come aboard, my bold swashbucklers, and take the oars.'

He turned and lifted Olivia to her feet, from where she had crouched shielded by the gunwales.

'And what of me, sir?' she asked.

'What would you?' he countered, watching her narrowly.

'To go with you, wherever your path may lie!' she cried, throwing her white arms about his bronzed neck.

The pirates, clambering over the rail, gasped in amazement.

'To sail a road of blood and slaughter?' he questioned. 'This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows.'

'Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red,' she answered passionately. 'You are a barbarian, and I am an outcast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of earth. Oh, take me with you!'

With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips.

'I'll make you Queen of the Blue Sea! Cast off there, dogs! We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantaloons yet, by Crom!'

End