PAST MASTERS 238

Stanley G. Weinbaum
Edward Dyson
Katherine Mansfield
Sydney Horler
Mary Shelley
W. W. Jacobs
D. H. Souter
Robert Hichens
H. P. Lovecraft

and more

PAST MASTERS 238

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

10 October 2025

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1: The Detective Who Talked

Edgar Wallace

The Pall Mall Magazine, Jul 1928
Collected in: *The Orator*, 1928

One of Edgar Wallaces's numerous series characters was Inspector Oliver Rator, inevitably nicknamed Orator. There were 12 stories about him in all, only one of which was in the "first person"; this is it.

LET me say at first I was never a man for talking, and very early on in my police career I learned a lesson which should be taught to all young constables: "Don't talk at the wrong time or listen to the wrong people."

I was rather proud of my brevity in speech, and if anybody had told me that I talked too much, I should have been slightly amused. And yet I did when I tackled the most interesting case that has ever come my way, the Blidfield murder.

I knew old Angus Blidfield slightly. He was the owner of a big house in Bloomsbury Square. He had converted the property into flats, and he himself occupied the first floor, that is to say the entrance floor, with his niece, Miss Agnes Olford.

Old Blidfield was a bachelor, a very rich man and rather eccentric. In spite of his money he was very mean, and was something of a miser. I did not know then that he kept large sums of money in the house, and I suppose only about two other people did. His niece knew, though she wasn't aware how much money the old man had in that japanned tin box of his which he kept under the bed

She was very pretty, but a rather spiritless little thing, who occupied a position in his household which no self-respecting slave would have accepted. She did the housework— they kept no servants— attended to the old man's correspondence, and during his periodical breakdowns in health was nurse to him as well.

I knew his doctor, a young fellow named Lexivell, a very smart young man who had a suite of apartments in Gower Street. I got to know him through our divisional surgeon being taken ill. We had to get a doctor for something or other— to test a drunk, or something unimportant— and the station sergeant remembered young Lexivell and brought him in.

"Now your fortune's made," I told him, when I heard that the old man had appointed him a sort of doctor to the household.

Dr. Lexivell laughed.

"He wanted to make me a sort of honorary physician," he said, "but I very carefully explained to him that I had to live."

I wasn't very much surprised at this, because Mr. Blidfield never spent an unnecessary penny. He used to go out every morning with a market bag and do his own shopping, going as far as the Edgware Road to save a penny on potatoes.

I don't think there was very much the matter with him, but he was something of a crank about his own health, and called the doctor in on the slightest provocation. If he had been a paying patient, the hobby would have been very acceptable to the doctor, who hadn't a very large practice, and who, as I knew, was living up to his income if not beyond.

One day I heard that the old man was seriously ill, and, meeting Dr. Lexivell by accident at the corner of Tottenham Court Road, he told me that Angus had "developed a heart."

"It is nothing very serious, but he will have to look after himself," he said. "I wanted him to get a nurse, but he wouldn't hear of it. I'm not at all pleased with the idea of that girl and an old man who may pop off at any moment being together in the flat alone."

He was going to tell me something, but stopped himself, and then, changing his mind, he said after a moment's hesitation:

"It's no business of mine, but when I have been there late at night I've always found a couple of men either outside the door or on the opposite side of the road watching the house. I saw one of them— a dark, foreign-looking fellow. It's the same two, I'm sure. I spoke to Mr. Blidfield about it, and to my surprise he knew the house was being watched, but immediately turned the subject as though he was not anxious to discuss it."

Dark, sinister men who watch houses are always interesting to me, and I strolled round one afternoon, not expecting, however, to find the watchers on duty. As a matter of fact they weren't. I rang the bell of the flat, and Miss Olford opened the door to me. Her uncle had gone driving. It was his one extravagance. He used to hire a car about twice a week from a local garage and be driven into the country.

Pretty little Miss Olford looked very tired herself. She had been up until three o'clock that morning.

"The doctor says that between eleven and three are the critical hours with uncle, and has told me I ought not to go to bed before three. He has been bullying uncle to get a nurse, but I don't think he will."

"What is the matter with him?" I asked.

She was very vague, apparently knew nothing except what the doctor had told her. I did not mention the dark watchers, because I did not want to alarm her. I suggested that she should go to sleep there and then, but she shook her head.

"Uncle may be back at any moment and he will want his tea," she said.

So far as I could gather— I did not see Mr. Blidfield— the doctor's efforts to procure a nurse were not very successful. Less than a week after I called, nurses became unnecessary.

I was anxious to know all about the two men who were watching the house. One of my detectives had seen two people behaving suspiciously in the square

and had questioned them, but they had given satisfactory account of themselves. I called on Mr. Angus Blidfield on the Saturday afternoon, and this time had the good luck to find him at home.

We knew one another slightly, well enough, at any rate, for me to excuse my calling to enquire after his health.

"There's little wrong with me but palpitation," he grumbled. "That young doctor's out after fees, but he'll get nothing from me! He wanted me to get nurses in— they all work together, these medical people, and I've no doot that he'd get a commission out of their salary. A pound a day for nurses!"

Though he treated his illness lightly, it wasn't difficult to see that he was a little uneasy about himself. Not so uneasy, however, that he was prepared to spend fabulous sums on nurses.

It was a Saturday night— and it was the night I talked too much, so I am not likely to forget it. A very unpleasant night it was for the month of May. Snow and sleet, which more properly belong to January, was being flung by a forty-mile wind in the faces of people who were foolish enough to venture into the great open spaces, as the cinema calls them.

The great open space in question was Bloomsbury Square, and the time was a quarter to one in the morning. I was battling along the bleakest stretch of the square, my umbrella held before me, though for all the protection it gave me I might as well have been without it.

If I had come into a head-on collision with another man similarly hidden (which was quite possible, for the wind was blowing from every direction) there would have been no more than an apology on either side. But the fellow who barged into me came sideways. The first impression I had was that he had been blown off the roof by the force of the wind; my second impression was that he had come down a flight of steps leading from one of the houses in the square. It was so dark and miserable that I didn't even notice which house it was.

I was surprised by the collision into saying many things that I should not have said. I've got a far-reaching voice, and every word must have been heard in spite of the gale. He was cursing, not quite so loudly but distinctly, as he searched the pavement for something he had dropped. He found it at last, picked it up, fumbled and dropped it again. I heard the clang of it and knew that it was a key.

By this time my anger had evaporated, and the realisation that my remarks were somewhat uncalled for came to me. I stooped to aid in the search, touched a piece of sodden string, which was suddenly jerked away from me by the stranger. Without a word of greeting or farewell, apology or acceptance of apology, the man tried to brush past me. Again we collided, this time violently. There was a crash, and something fell to the pavement. By the light of a street lamp I saw that it was a very shiny silver case, larger than a cigar- or cigarette-case. It flew open as it fell and two or three tiny and indistinguishable articles fell out. With a curse, the

man stooped, gathered them together and flew on. I did not see his face, but then, I had made no attempt to help him in his search— though he needed help. One hand still grasped the umbrella, which, even as he rose, was blown inside out.

That began and ended the incident. In a few seconds the man had vanished into the darkness, and I was on my way to my lodgings.

I had taken a few paces when I found something attached to the rubber sole of my shoe— a little obstruction that made for awkward walking. Bracing myself against a lamp-post, I lifted my sole and drew the thing clear.

I did not throw it away, because it was not my habit to throw away valuable things, but went home, put my find on the mantelpiece, had supper, and went to bed. I was just falling asleep when I realised that the man must have come from the Blidfield house.

I was called at half-past five by the telephone, and I learned that Angus Blidfield had been murdered. His niece had gone into his room at half-past five, at which hour he was invariably awakened, to take him a cup of tea, and had found him lying dead on the floor, with terrible injuries to his head. These had been inflicted by a life-preserver which the old man kept hanging on the rail of his bed as a weapon of defence against burglars.

A big steel deed-box which he kept under his bed was found to have been forced open, and was empty. By the time I arrived, the house was in the possession of the police, and the mechanical side of Scotland Yard were making the usual search for finger-prints. The room was still a little hazy from the smoke of burnt magnesium, for the photographer had just finished his work when I came in.

I found the girl in the dining-room, very white and shaky, but she told her story with great clarity.

This was her story, that the doctor had called at half-past eight the previous evening, had seen her uncle and had said that there was no longer any necessity for her nightly watch. She could not go to bed before eleven, but at that hour, absolutely weary to death, she had gone to bed and was instantly asleep. She was awakened by her alarm clock at half-past five, at which hour she invariably rose to make a cup of tea for her uncle. It was then that she discovered the murder.

"You heard nothing in the night?"

She shook her head.

"No sound at all?"

"Nothing," she said. "I hardly heard the alarm clock."

I went back to the room where the murder had been committed, and made a very careful examination. The window was drawn down from the top about two inches, but evidently the intruder or intruders had not come this way. Outside the window was a deep, wide area. The door of the flat opening from the passage

bore no jemmy marks, and the lock, which was a particularly complicated one, had not been forced.

The girl could give me no information about the contents of the black box, except that it contained money— how much, or in what shape it was, she could not say. I was questioning her when Dr. Lexivell arrived. At her request one of the detectives had telephoned to him, the instrument being in the room where the body was lying.

He and the divisional surgeon arrived simultaneously and made an examination of the body, and Lexivell came in to see me.

"This is a bad business. Have you any idea who did it?"

I shook my head.

"Not the slightest," I said, and it was then that I had my lesson that a still tongue makes a wise head, for I spoke foolishly. "It was a rotten night," I said, "and I should imagine that even the policeman on the beat was not looking for burglars. I personally was in bed at midnight."

It was one of those foolish lies which even clever people tell, though I am not particularly clever. I saw the girl's grave eyes fixed steadily on mine, and something in that gaze emphasised my stupidity. I believe women have a sixth sense, or perhaps it's only an animal instinct, which enables them to penetrate and look into a man's mind. It was the only time in my life that I have felt, and probably looked, confused.

"Have you traced the men I spoke to you about?" asked the doctor.

To tell the truth, I had forgotten the watchers. My mind was so occupied with something more important that I did not give much thought to them even at that moment.

I sent the girl out of the house to a neighbouring hotel, and waited till the body was moved before I began an inch by inch search. There was nothing in the shape of documentary clues that could give us the slightest help. Stuck in the edge of a looking-glass on the old man's dressing chest was a card bearing two telephone numbers, one of which was the doctor's and the other the local garage from which he hired his car. On his bedside table was a white paper, bearing the label of a local chemist, which contained a sleeping-draught that he had not opened. I drew the attention of Dr. Lexivell to this and he nodded.

"Yes, I ordered that for him, but he had a great aversion to drugs of any kind, and though he promised me he would take it, apparently he did not."

"Had you ordered a sleeping-draught before?"

He shook his head.

"No. You see I wanted to give this unfortunate girl a good night's sleep. There's no doubt that, although his heart was a little dicky, it wasn't as bad as he imagined— in fact, much of it was sheer nerves."

He had not, he said, heard from the old man after his visit, and an enquiry at the telephone exchange confirmed that no call had been put through.

I saw Miss Olford at the hotel. Her uncle was not aware, she told me, that she was in the habit of sitting up half the night. She and the doctor had entered into an amiable conspiracy to keep from him the fact that any alarm was felt about his condition.

I asked her a question.

"Ordinarily, are you a light or a heavy sleeper?"

She smiled faintly at this.

"I am a very light sleeper. The least noise disturbs me. When Uncle Angus used to move about in the middle of the night he always woke me up, and I think this worried him a little, for he had ideas about young people having lots of sleep. He told the doctor, and Dr. Lexivell wanted to treat me for insomnia, but I hate drugs of any kind."

That day I interviewed the lawyer, and discovered that the girl was Angus Blidfield's sole heir. She had a brother, a ne'er-do-well who lived in London and had apparently been in some trouble with the police. It was not she but the doctor who told me this.

"I've often wondered if he was the fellow who was always hanging about the house."

It wasn't difficult to trace young Olford, but he could give my sergeant no other information than that, at the time the murder was committed, he was in bed. Such rough-and-ready enquiries as we were able to make immediately confirmed this alibi.

It was one of the most interesting days I have ever spent— or would have been but for that cloudy sort of uncomfortable feeling a man has when he realises every other minute how foolish he has been.

I pushed out two of my best men to pursue enquiries in a certain direction. I knew they would take some time to get the information I wanted, and that the period of waiting was full of unpleasant possibilities. At nine o'clock that night I was writing my first report. I do the work that requires a great deal of thought in my own flat, which at this time was off Guilford Street. My apartment was also on the ground floor, that is to say on the street level, and my dining-room overlooked a courtyard at the back of the flat, a small, square space which was approached by a door through which tradesmen come to deliver their goods. There was a wall about eight feet high, easily scalable; but I don't think the gentleman who called upon me troubled to climb the wall, because afterwards the door, which was usually kept locked after six p.m., was found open.

It was quite dark, and the rain of the previous night had hardly ceased, though it was warmer. I had written about four folio pages when there was a startling crash. Something was flung through the window and dropped at my feet. If it had

fallen under the table out of sight, I should not have been alive to-day, but fortunately I saw it. It was a Mills' bomb.

I didn't stop to pick it up and throw it back the way it came, because I know enough of Mills' bombs to realise that time is the essence of the contract. I made one leap for my bedroom and got to the cover of the wall before it exploded. But even so I didn't escape altogether, for a ricochetting segment of the bomb cut through my boot.

The noise was terrific. I staggered out into the wrecked room, so dazed that I didn't know what I was doing, and not until the fire engines arrived was I anything like myself.

Nobody was killed, thank God, but the flats above and below were partially destroyed. The bomb blew a hole in the floor, wrecked every stick of furniture there was in the room and gave the newspapers material for a two days wonder.

But to me that bomb spoke a message of four words: "You talk too much." And I've never forgotten it.

I got to Scotland Yard, and about midnight I had my room so full of bookmakers, moneylenders, bill discounters, keepers of gambling houses, etc., that I had to open the window to let in the pure air.

At half-past one in the morning there was an accident in Little Creefield Street. Two taxi-cabs collided, there was a smashing of glass and a wild hullaballoo raised by a passenger, who had to be lifted out of the cab although it wasn't even overturned. A policeman blew a whistle, and when Dr. Lexivell put his head out of the window to find out what had happened, he learned that the passenger had broken an ankle and had cut his face with glass.

"I'll come down in a minute," said the doctor.

When he got to the street he found half a dozen men surrounding something that lay on the ground. They opened to let him come through— and then grabbed him.

My Chief thought it was rather a theatrical way of making an arrest, but I was justified when we searched the doctor; he had an automatic in his hip pocket— he hadn't even put up the safety catch. When I searched his room I found a couple of Mills' bombs in a locked cupboard— this was just after the war: he had been in the Army and had collected quite an armoury of deadly weapons.

All the precautions we took to arrest him would not have been necessary but for my telling him that I was in bed at the moment when, he knew very well, he had collided with me in Bloomsbury Square. He had recognised my voice, but had been pretty sure I hadn't recognised him, although, after he missed the silver end of a hypodermic syringe which he had dropped in the collision, and which I had found stuck in my sole, he might have supposed I had some clue.

I saw him after his conviction, and he was perfectly frank about the whole affair.

"I was broke and in the hands of moneylenders, and desperately pushed for 'ready,' " he said. "Patients will often tell doctors what they will not even confess to their lawyers, and almost the first time I met old Blidfield he told me that he kept eight thousand pounds in cash in the box under his bed. I don't know why, but probably he was dodging taxation.

"The difficulty was to find an opportunity for robbing him without incriminating myself. He was a bit of a hypochondriac, and my first idea was to persuade him he was ill, give him drugs, and, whilst he was doped, to help myself. Against this there was the fact that he had a niece in the flat and that he wouldn't take drugs in any circumstances.

"I did persuade him that his niece was looking ill, and that she was not getting enough sleep, and he agreed to give me the key of the flat so that if he called me at any hour of the night I could come in without disturbing the girl. But here again I was met with this difficulty, that Agnes Olford was a singularly light sleeper. I tried to treat her, but she shared the old man's objection to any kind of sedative. It was an inspiration to induce her to sit up until three o'clock every morning in case the old man wanted her.

"After a week of this I knew there would be no light sleeping on the night I made my attempt. It took a lot to persuade the old boy that one sleeping-draught would not start him on a career of drug-taking, but I thought I had convinced him, and when I called in the evening he told me that he would take it. I arrived at the house about half-past twelve. The girl, I knew, was so dead sleepy that I had nothing to fear from her. I thought all that was necessary would be to open the box at my leisure and get away before he woke up. I had planned, by the way, one or two artistic touches to give a verisimilitude to the theory of burglary. As it happened, they weren't necessary. Blidfield was asleep: I didn't realise that he had not taken the drug until I had got the strong box open and heard his voice challenging me. There was a little struggle—" The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, I recognised your voice the moment I heard it," he went on, "but I was hoping that you hadn't recognised me, and there would have been no trouble if you had not made it very clear, not only that you suspected but that you knew I was the murderer. In your business it is a great mistake to talk too much."

I have never forgotten my lesson.

2: Jerry Stokes

Grant Allen
1848-1899
The Strand Magazine, March 1891

JERRY STOKES was a member of Her Majesty's civil service. To put it more plainly, he was the provincial hangman. Not a man in all Canada, he used to boast with pardonable professional pride, had turned off as many famous murderers as he had. He was a pillar of the constitution, was Jerry Stokes. He represented the Executive. And he wasn't ashamed of his office, either. Quite on the contrary, zeal for his vocation shone visible in his face. He called it a useful, a respectable, and a necessary calling. If it were not for him and his utensils, he loved to say to the gaping crowd that stood him treat in the saloons, no man's life would be safe for a day in the province. He was a practical philanthropist in his way, a public benefactor. It is not good that foul crime should stalk unpunished through the land; and he, Jerry Stokes, was there to prevent it. He was the chosen instrument for its salutary repression. Executions performed with punctuality and despatch; for terms, apply to Jeremiah Stokes, Port Hope, Ontario.

Not that philanthropy was the most salient characteristic in Jerry's outer man. He was a short and thick-set person, very burly and dogged-looking; he had a massive, square head, and a powerful lower jaw, and a coarse, bull neck, and a pair of stout arms, acquired in the lumber trade, but forcibly suggestive of a prize-fighter's occupation. Except on the subject of the Executive, he was a taciturn soul; he had nothing to say, and he said it briefly. Silence, stolidity, and a marked capacity for the absorption of liquids without detriment to his centre of gravity, physical or mental, were the leading traits in Mr. Stokes' character. Those who knew him well, however, affirmed that Jerry was "a straight man"; and though the security was perhaps a trifle doubtful, "a straight man" nevertheless he was generally considered by all who had the misfortune to require his services.

It was a principle with Jerry never to attend a trial for murder. This showed his natural delicacy of feeling. Etiquette, I believe, forbids an undertaker to make kind inquiries at the door of a dying person. It is feared the object of his visits might be misunderstood; he might be considered to act from interested motives. A similar and equally creditable scruple restrained Jerry Stokes from putting in an appearance at a court of justice when a capital charge was under investigation. People might think, he said, he was on the lookout for a job. Nay, more; his presence might even interfere with the administration of justice; for if the jury had happened to spot him in the body of the hall, it would naturally prejudice them in the prisoner's favour. To prevent such a misfortune— which would of course, incidentally, be bad for trade— Mr. Stokes denied himself the congenial pleasure of following out in detail the cases on which he might in the end be called upon to

operate— except through the medium of the public press. He was a kind-hearted man, his friends averred; and he knew that his presence in court might be distasteful to the prisoner and the prisoner's relations. Though, to say the truth, in thus absenting himself, Mr. Stokes was exercising considerable self-denial; for to a hangman, even more than to all the rest of the world, a good first-class murder case is replete with plot-interest.

Every man, however, is guilty at some time or other in his life of a breach of principle; and once, though once only, in his professional experience, Jerry Stokes, like the rest of us, gave way to temptation. To err is human; Jerry erred by attending a capital trial in Kingston court-house. The case was one that aroused immense attention at the time in the Dominion. A young lawyer at Napanee, it was said, had poisoned his wife to inherit her money, and public feeling ran fierce and strong against him. From the very first, this dead set of public opinion brought out Jerry Stokes' sympathy in the prisoner's favour. The crowd had tried to mob Ogilvy— that was the man's name— on his way from his house to jail, and again on his journey from Napanee to Kingston assizes. Men shook their fists angrily in the face of the accused; women surged around with deep cries, and strove to tear him to pieces. The police with difficulty prevented the swaying mass from lynching him on the spot. Jerry Stokes, who was present, looked on at these irregular proceedings with a disapproving eye. Most unconstitutional, to dismember a culprit by main force, without form of trial, instead of handing him over in due course of law to be properly turned off by the appointed officer!

So when the trial came on, Jerry Stokes, in defiance of established etiquette, took his stand in court, and watched the progress of the case with profound interest.

The public recognised him, and nudged one another, well pleased. Farmers had driven in with their waggons from the townships. All Ontario was agog. People stared at Jerry, and then at the prisoner. "Stokes is looking out for him!" they chuckled in their satisfaction. "He's got no chance. He'll never get off. The hangman's in waiting!"

The suspected man took his place in the dock. Jerry Stokes glanced across at him— rubbed his eyes— thought it curious. "Well, I never saw a murderer like him in my born days afore," Jerry philosophised to himself. "I've turned off square dozens of 'em in my time, in the province; and I know their looks. But hanged if I've come across a murderer yet like this one, any way!"

"Richard Ogilvy, stand up: are you guilty or not guilty?" asked the clerk of assigns.

And the prisoner, leaning forward, in a very low voice, but clear and distinct, answered out, "Not Guilty!"

He was a tall and delicate pale-faced man, with thoughtful grey eyes and a high white forehead. But to Jerry Stokes' experienced gaze all that counted for

nothing. He knew his patients well enough to know there are murderers and murderers— the refined and educated as well as the coarse and brutal. Why, he'd turned off square dozens of them, and both sorts, too, equally. No; it wasn't that— and he couldn't say what it was but as Richard Ogilvy answered "Not Guilty" that morning a thrill ran cold down the hangman's back. He was sure it was true: he felt intuitively certain of it.

From that moment forth, Jerry followed the evidence with the closest interest. He leaned forward in his place, and drank it all in anxiously. People who sat near him remarked that his conduct was disgusting. He was thirsting for a conviction. It was ghastly to see the hangman so intent upon his prey. He seemed to hang on the lips of the witnesses for the prosecution.

But Jerry himself sat on, all unconscious of their criticism. For the very first time in his life, he forgot his trade. He remembered only that a human soul was at stake that day, and that in one glimpse of intuition he had seen its innocence.

Counsel for the Crown piled up a cumulative case, very strong and conclusive against the man Ogilvy. They showed that the prisoner had lived on bad terms with his wife— though through whose fault they had lived so, whether his or hers, wasn't very apparent. They showed that scenes had lately occurred between them. They showed that Ogilvy had bought poison at a chemist's in Kingston on the usual plea, "to get rid of the rats." They showed that Mrs. Ogilvy had died of such poison. Their principal witness was the Napanee doctor, a man named Wade, who attended the deceased in her fatal illness. This doctor was intelligent, and frank, and straightforward; he gave his evidence in the most admirable style— evidence that told dead against the prisoner in every way. At the close of the case for the Crown, the game was up: everybody in court said all was finished: impossible for Ogilvy to rebut such a mass of damning evidence.

Everybody in court— except Jerry Stokes. And Jerry Stokes went home— for it was a two days' trial— much concerned in soul about Richard Ogilvy.

It was something new for Jerry Stokes, this disinterested interest in an accused criminal; and it took hold of him with all the binding and compelling force of a novel emotion. He wrestled and strained with it. All night long he lay awake, and tossed and turned on his bed, and thought of Richard Ogilvy's pale white face, as he stood there, a picture of mute agony, in the court-house. Strange thoughts surged up thick in Jerry Stokes' soul, that had surged up in no other soul among all those actively hostile spectators. The silent suffering in the man's grey eyes had stirred him deeply. A thousand times over, Jerry said to himself, as he tossed and turned, "That man never done it." Now and again he dozed off, and awoke with a start, and each time he woke he found himself muttering in his sleep, with all the profound force of unreasoned conviction, "He never done it! he never done it!"

Next morning, as soon as the court was open, Jerry Stokes was in his place again, craning his bull-neck eagerly. All day long he craned that bull-neck and

listened. The public was scandalised now. Jerry Stokes in court! Jerry Stokes scenting blood! He ought to have kept away! This was really atrocious!

Evidence for the defence hung fire sadly. To say the truth, Ogilvy's counsel had no defence at all to offer, except an assurance that he didn't do it. They confined themselves to suggesting a possible alternative here, and a possible alternative there. Mrs. Ogilvy might have taken the rat-poison by mistake; or this person might have given it her somehow unawares, or that person might have had some unknown grudge against her. Jerry Stokes sat and listened with a sickening heart. The man in the dock was innocent, he felt sure; but the case— why, the case was going dead against him!

Slowly, as he listened, an idea began to break in upon Jerry Stokes' mind. Ideas didn't often come his way. He was a thick-headed man, little given to theories, and he didn't know even now it was a theory he was forming. He only knew this was the way the case impressed him. The prisoner at the bar had never done it. But there had been scenes in his house— scenes brought about by Mrs. Ogilvy's conduct. Mrs. Ogilvy, he felt confident from the evidence he heard, had been given to drink— perhaps to other things; and the prisoner, for his child's sake (he had one little girl of three years old), was anxious to screen his wife's shame from the public. So he had suggested but little in this direction to his counsel. The scenes, however, were not of his making, and he certainly never meant to poison the woman. Jerry Stokes watched him closely as each witness stood up and told his tale, and he was confident of so much. That twitching of the lips was no murderer's trick. It was the plain emotion of an honest man who sees the circumstances unaccountably turning against him.

There was another person in court who watched the case almost as closely as Jerry himself, and that person was the doctor who attended Mrs. Ogilvy and made the *post-mortem*. His steely grey eyes were fixed with a frank stare on each witness as he detailed his story; and from time to time he gave a little satisfied gasp, when anything went obviously against the prisoner's chances. Jerry was too much occupied, however, for the most part, in watching the man in the dock to have any time left for watching the doctor. Once only he raised his eyes and caught the other's. It was at a critical moment. A witness for the defence, under severe cross-examination, had just admitted a most damaging fact that told hard against Ogilvy. Then the doctor smiled. It was a sinister smile, a smile of malice, a smile of mute triumph. No one else noticed it. But Jerry Stokes, looking up, observed it with a start. A shade passed over his square face like a sudden cloud. He knew that smile well. It was a typical murderer's.

"Mind you," Jerry said to himself, as he watched the smile die away, "I don't pretend to be as smart a chap as all these crack lawyer fellows, but I'm a straight man in my way, and I know my business. If that doctor ain't got a murderer's face on his front, my name isn't Jeremiah Stokes; that's the long and the short of it."

He looked hard at the prisoner, he looked hard at the doctor. The longer and harder he looked, the more was he sure of it. He was an expert in murderers, and he knew his men. Ogilvy hadn't done it; Ogilvy couldn't do it; the doctor might; the doctor was, at any rate, a potential murderer. Not that Jerry put it to himself quite so fine as that; he contented himself with saying in his own dialect, "The doctor was one of 'em."

Evidence, however, went all against the prisoner, and the judge, to Jerry's immense surprise, summed up upon nothing except the evidence. Nobody in court, indeed, seemed to think of anything else. Jerry rubbed his eyes once more. He couldn't understand it. Why, they were going to hang the man on nothing at all but the paltry evidence! Professional as he was, it surprised him to find a man could swing on so little! To think that our lives should depend on such a thread! Just the gossip of nurses and the tittle-tattle of a a doctor with a smile like a murderer's!

At last the jury retired to consider their verdict. But they were not long gone. The case, said everybody, was as clear as daylight. In the public opinion it was a foregone conclusion. Jerry stood aghast at that. What! hang a man merely because they thought he'd done it! And with a face like his! Why, it was sheer injustice!

The jury returned. The prisoner stood in the dock, now pale and hopeless. Only one man in court seemed to feel the slightest interest in the delivery of the verdict. And that one man was the public hangman. Everybody else knew precisely how the case would go. But Jerry Stokes still refused to believe any jury in Canada could perpetrate such an act of flagrant injustice.

"Gentlemen of the jury, do you find the prisoner, Richard Ogilvy, Guilty or Not Guilty of wilful murder?"

There was a slight rhetorical pause. Then the answer rang out, in quietly solemn tones: "We find him Guilty. That is the verdict of all of us."

Jerry Stokes held his breath. This was appalling, awful! The man was innocent. But by virtue of his office he would have to hang him!

IF ANYBODY had told Jerry Stokes the week before that he possessed an ample, unexhausted fund of natural enthusiasm, Jerry Stokes would have looked upon him as only fit for Hatwood Asylum. He was a solid, stolid, thick-headed man, was Jerry, who honestly believed in the importance of his office, and hanged men as respectably as he would have slaughtered oxen. But that incredible verdict, as it seemed to him, begot in him suddenly a fierce outburst of zeal which was all the more violent because of its utter novelty. For the first time in his life he woke up to the enthusiasm of humanity. You'll often find it so in very phlegmatic men; it takes a great deal to stir their stagnant depths; but let them once be aroused, and the storm is terrible, the fire within them burns bright with a warmth

and light which astonishes everybody. For days the look on Richard Ogilvy's face, when he heard that false verdict returned against him, haunted the hangman's brain every hour of the twenty-four. He lay awake on his bed and shuddered to think of it. Come what might, that man must never be hanged. And, please heaven, Jerry added, they should never hang him.

The sentence, Canadian fashion, was for six clear weeks. And at the end of that time, unless anything should turn up meanwhile to prevent it, it would be Jerry's duty to hang the man he believed to be innocent.

For all those years, Jerry had stolidly and soberly hanged whomever he was bid, taking it for granted the law was always in the right, and that the men on whom he operated were invariably malefactors. But now, a great horror possessed his soul. The revulsion was terrible. This one gross miscarriage of justice, as it seemed to him, raised doubts at the same time in his startled soul as to the rightfulness of all his previous hangings. Had he been in the habit of doing innocent men to death for years? Was the law, then, always so painfully fallible? Could it go wrong in all the dignity of its unsullied ermine? Jerry could hang the guilty without one pang of remorse. But to hang the innocent!— he drew himself up; that was altogether a different matter.

Yet what could he do? A petition? Impossible! Never within his memory could Jerry recollect so perfect a unanimity of public opinion in favour of a sentence. A petition was useless. Not a soul would sign it. Everybody was satisfied. Let Ogilvy swing! The very women would have lynched the man if they could have caught him at the first. And now that he was to be hanged, they were heartily glad of it.

Still, there is nothing to spur a man on in a hopeless cause like the feeling that you stand alone and unaided. Jerry Stokes saw all the world was for hanging Ogilvy with the strange and solitary exception of the public hangman: And what did the public hangman's opinion count in such a case? As Jerry Stokes well knew, rather less than nothing.

Day after day wore away, and the papers were full of "the convict Ogilvy." Would he confess, or would he not? that was now the question. Every second night the Toronto papers had a special edition with a "Rumoured Confession of the Napanee Murderer," and every second morning they had a telegram direct from Kingston jail to contradict it. Not a doubt seemed to remain with anybody as to the convict's guilt. But the papers reiterated daily the same familiar phrase, "Ogilvy persists to the end in maintaining his innocence."

Jerry had read these words a hundred times before, about other prisoners, with a gentle smile of cynical incredulity; he read them now with blank amazement and horror at the callousness of a world which could hang an innocent man without appeal or inquiry.

Time ran on, and the eve of the execution arrived at last. Something must be done: and Jerry did it. That night he sat long in his room by himself, in the

unwonted throes of literary composition. He was writing a letter— a letter of unusual length and surprising earnestness. It cost him dear, that epistle; with his dictionary by his side, he stopped many times to think, and bit his penholder to fibre. But he wrote none the less with fiery indignation, and in a fever of moral zeal that positively astonished himself. Then he copied it out clean on a separate sheet, and folded the letter when done, with a prayer in his heart. It was a prayer for mercy on a condemned criminal— by the public hangman.

After that he stuck a stamp on with trembling fingers, and posted it himself at the main office.

All that night long Jerry lay awake and thought about the execution. As a rule, executions troubled his rest very little. But then, he had never before had to hang an innocent man— at least he hoped not— though his faith in the law had received a severe shock, and he trembled to think now what judicial murders he might have helped in his time unconsciously to consummate.

Next morning early, at the appointed hour, Jerry Stokes presented himself at Kingston jail. The sheriff was there, and the chaplain, and the prisoner. Ogilvy looked at him hard with a shrinking look of horror. Jerry had seen that look, too, a hundred times before, and disregarded it utterly: it was only the natural objection of a condemned criminal to the constitutional officer appointed to operate on him. But this time it cut the man to the very quick. That an innocent fellow-creature should regard him like that was indeed unendurable, especially when he, the public hangman, was the only soul on earth who believed in his innocence!

The chaplain stood forward and read the usual prayers. The condemned man repeated them after him in a faltering voice. As he finished, the sheriff turned with a grave face to Jerry. "Do your duty," he said. And Jerry stared at him stolidly.

"Sheriff," he began at last, after a very long pause, bracing himself up for an effort, "I've done my duty all my life till this, and I'll do it now. There ain't going to be no execution at all here this morning!"

The sheriff gazed at him astonished.

"What do you mean, Stokes?" he asked, taken aback at this sudden turn. "No reprieve has come. The prisoner is to be hanged without fail to-day in accordance with his sentence. It says so in the warrant: 'wherein fail not at your peril.'"

Jerry looked round him with an air of expectation. "No reprieve hasn't come yet," he answered, in a stolid way; "but I'm expecting one presently. I've done my duty all my life, sheriff, I tell you, and I'll do it now. I ain't a-going to hang this man at all because I know he's innocent."

The prisoner gasped, and turned round to him in amaze. "Yes, I'm innocent!" he said slowly, looking him over from head to foot; "but you— how do you know it?"

"I know it by your face," Jerry answered sturdily; "and I know by the other one's face it was him that did it."

The sheriff looked on in puzzled wonderment. This was a hitch in the proceedings he had never expected. "Your conduct is most irregular, Stokes," he said at last, stroking his chin in his embarrassment; "most irregular and disconcerting. If you had a conscientious scruple against hanging the prisoner, you should have told us before. Then we might have arranged for some other executioner to serve in your place. As it is, the delay is most unseemly and painful: especially for the prisoner. Your action can only cause him unnecessary suspense. Sooner or later this morning, somebody must hang him."

But Jerry only looked back at him with an approving nod. The sheriff had supplied him, all inarticulate that he was, with suitable speech. "Ah, that's just it, don't you see," he made answer promptly, "it's a conscientious scruple. That's why I won't hang him. No man can't be expected to go agin his conscience. I never hanged an innocent man yet— leastways not to my knowledge; and s'help me heaven, I won't hang one now, not for the Queen nor for nobody!"

The sheriff paused. The sheriff deliberated. "What on earth am I to do?" he exclaimed, in despair. "If *you* won't hang him, how on earth at this hour can I secure a substitute?"

Jerry stared at him stolidly once more, after his wont. "If *I* don't hang him," he answered, with he air of on who knows his ground well, "it's *your* business to do it with your own hands. 'Wherein fail not at your peril.' And I give you warning beforehand, sheriff, if you *do* hang him— why, you'll have to remember all your life long that you helped to get rid of an innocent man, when the common hangman refused to execute him!"

To such a pitch of indignation was he roused by events that he said it plump out, just so, "the common hangman." Rather than let his last appeal lack aught of effectiveness in the cause of justice, he consented so to endorse the public condemnation of his own respectable, useful, and necessary calling!

There was a pause of a few minutes, during which the sheriff once more halted and hesitated; the prisoner looked around with a pale and terrified air; and Jerry kept his eye fixed hard on the gate, like one who really expects a reprieve or a pardon.

"Then you absolutely refuse?" the sheriff asked at last, in a despairing sort of way.

"I absolutely refuse," Jerry answered, in a very decided tone. But it was clear he was beginning to grow anxious and nervous.

"In that case," the sheriff replied, turning round to the jailor, "I must put off this execution for half an hour, till I can get someone else to come in and assist me."

Hardly had he spoken the words, however, when a policeman appeared at the door of the courtyard, and in a very hurried voice asked eagerly to be admitted. His manner was that of a man who brings important news. "The execution's not

over, sir?" he said, turning to the sheriff with a very scared face. "Well, thank heaven for that! Dr. Wade's outside, and he says, for God's sake, he must speak at once with you."

The sheriff hesitated. He hardly knew what to do. "Bring him in," he said at last, after a solemn pause. "He may have something to tell us that will help us out of this difficulty."

The condemned man, thus momentarily respited on the very brink of the grave, stood by with a terrible look of awed suspense upon his bloodless face. But Jerry Stokes' lips bore an expression of quiet triumph. He had succeeded in his attempt, then. He had brought his man to book. That was something to be proud of. Alone he had done it! He had saved the innocent and exposed the guilty!

As they stood there and pondered, each man in silence, on his own private thoughts, the policeman returned, bringing with him the doctor whose evidence had weighed most against Ogilvy at the trial. Jerry Stokes started to see the marvellous alteration in the fellow's face. He was pale and haggard; his lips were parched; and his eyes had a sunken and hollow look with remorse and horror. Cold sweat stood on his brow. His mouth twitched horribly. It was clear he had just passed through a terrible crisis.

He turned first to Jerry. His lips were bloodless, and trembled as he spoke; his throat was dry; but in a husky voice he still managed to deliver himself of the speech that haunted him. "Your letter did it," he said slowly, fixing his eyes on the hangman; "I couldn't stand *that*. It broke me down utterly. All night long I lay awake and knew I had sent him to the gallows in my place. It was terrible— terrible! But I wouldn't give way: I'd made up my mind, and I meant to pull through with it. Then the morning came— the morning of the execution, and with it your letter. Till that moment I thought nobody knew but myself. I wasn't even suspected. When I saw *you* knew, I could stand it no longer. You said: 'If you let this innocent man swing in your place, I, the common hangman, will refuse to execute him. If he dies, I'll avenge him. I'll hound you to your grave. I'll follow up clues till I've brought your crime home to you. Don't commit two murders instead of one. It'll do you no good, and be worse in the end for you.' When I read those words— those terrible words!— from the common hangman, 'Ah, heaven!' I thought, 'I need try to conceal it no longer.' All's up now. I've come to confess. Thank heaven I'm in time! Sheriff, let this man go. It was I who poisoned her!"

There was a dead silence again for several seconds. Jerry Stokes was the first of them all to break it. "I knew it," he said solemnly. "I was sure of it. I could have sworn to it."

"And I am sure of it, too," the condemned man put in, with tremulous lips. "I was sure it was he; but how on earth was I to prove it?"

The sheriff looked about him at all three in turn. "Well," he said deliberately, with a sigh of relief, "I must telegraph for instructions to Ottawa immediately.

Prisoner, you are *not* reprieved; but under these peculiar circumstances, as Dr. Wade makes a voluntary confession of having committed the crime himself, I defer the execution for the present on my own responsibility. Jailer, I remit Mr. Ogilvy to the cells till further instructions arrive from the Viceroy. Policeman, take charge of Dr. Wade, who gives himself into custudy for the murder of Mrs. Ogilvy. Stokes, perhaps you did right after all. Ten minutes' delay made all the difference. If you'd consented to hang the prisoner at first, this confession might only have come after all was over."

The doctor turned to Jerry, with the wan ghost of a grim smile upon his work and pallid face. The marks of a great struggle were still visible in every line. "And you won't be baulked of your fee, after all," he added, with a ghastly effort at cynical calmness; "for you'll have me to hang before you have seen the end of this business."

But Jerry shook his head. "I ain't so sure about that," he said, scratching his thick, bullet poll, and holding his great square neck a little on one side. "I ain't so sure of my trade as I used to be once, sheriff and gentlemen. I always used to hold it was a useful, a respectable, and a necessary trade, and of benefit to the community. But I've began to doubt it. If the law can string up an innocent man like this, and no appeal, except for the exertions of the public executioner, why, I've began to doubt the expediency, so to speak, of capital punishment. I ain't so certain as I was about the usefulness of hanging. Dr. Wade, I think somebody else may have the turning of you off. Mr. Ogilvy, I'm glad, sir, it was me that had the hanging of you. An onscrupulous man might ha' gone for his fee. I couldn't do that: I gone for justice. Give me your hand, sir. Thank you. You needn't be ashamed of shaking hands once in a way with a public functionary— especially when it's for the last time in his official career. Sheriff, I've had enough of this 'ere work for life. I go back to the lumbering trade. I resign my appointment."

It was a great speech for Jerry— an oratorical effort. But a prouder or happier man there wasn't in Kingston that day than Jeremiah Stokes, late public executioner.

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3: A Party of Four

Stanley J. Weyman

1855-1928

Short Stories, Oct 1895

IT IS OF NO IMPORTANCE to any one why, on that particular evening, I did not go down Bond Street to my club, as I had done many hundreds of times before; why, instead of betaking myself like a sensible man to my dinner, I plunged into Brook Street, and went mooning westward through the drizzle. Perhaps I was tired of dining, having dined so often before, only to dine again. Or perhaps I had taken afternoon tea and been snubbed, or wanted something out of the common to happen, or really had no reason at all for the freak.

It had an unpleasant beginning near Grosvenor Square. A little short of that place a hansom dashed up to the pavement, and, drawing up sharply beside me, splashed me so freely that I stopped short with a mild exclamation. The words were still in the air when two people jumped out of the cab, under a lamp as it chanced; and, while I stood glowering upon them, proceeded to pay the driver. The one was a tall girl, dressed in mourning; the other, a child of twelve or thirteen, wearing short, full skirts of that age, a purple cloak lightly edged with fur, and a big purple hat, partly covered by a white veil. Still standing, as much from indignation as to wipe the mud from my cheek, I heard what followed.

"Kitty!" exclaimed the child, as the elder girl held up the fare, "do not pay him; let him wait for us."

Kitty shook her head. "Why, dear?" she answered, gently; "we shall have no trouble in finding another."

"But you will stay so long," her sister— I concluded they were sisters— pleaded, "and it is cold."

"Indeed I will not stay long," was the elder's reply. "I will stay a very, very little time, darling."

Now, said I to myself, that girt is in trouble; and as they moved toward the square, I, too, walked on, so that when they reached the corner, and stopped abruptly, I nearly ran against them. They were standing arm-in-arm, looking toward the inner pavement, which runs round the garden. Without intending to listen I heard, as I tacked round them— their umbrella acting as a sounding-board— a few more words.

"Look, Kitty!" the younger was saying, "there she is again!"

"Poor thing!" replied the elder girl.

And that— that was all I heard. But the voice was the voice of an angel— in trouble. And the pathos and sorrow that rang in the two words set my curiosity vibrating more briskly than all their previous talk, or even their air of good breeding— out of place in the streets after nightfall— had been able to do.

"There she is again!" I said to myself. Up to this time I had learned involuntarily what I had. Now I took the first step toward meddling in a strange business by crossing the roadway to the garden, instead of keeping along the outer pavement. I would see who was there again. And I did. I came upon her at once— a short, middle-aged woman, plainly dressed so far as I could see, and apparently of the lower class. She was standing still, her back to the garden railings, her eyes strained— or did I judge of that by her attitude?— in an intent looking toward the houses opposite her. There was nothing odd about her except this air of watching, and perhaps her position; nor anything to connect her with the two girls now lost in the gloom, but probably not far off. She did not move nor avert her eyes as I brushed close before her, but only drew a quick sigh, as of impatience at the obstacle which for a moment intervened between her and her object.

Naturally I examined the house at which she was looking. It was the second from the corner, a large house with a brightly lit porch and heavy double doors. The rooms on the ground floor and the floor above were partly visible. Upstairs the curtains had been drawn, but not closely. In the dining-room below they had not been drawn, so that I could see what was passing within.

But the scene was commonplace enough. Two servants, an old man and a young one, were putting the finishing touches to a well-appointed dinner-table; walking round it and daintily moving this thing and that. There were good pictures on the walls, there was plate on the sideboard, and shaded lamps cast a warm glow upon glass and flowers. But in all this there was nothing which might not be seen in a thousand houses.

Yet stay. While I looked, the men paused at their work. The elder seemed to be speaking to the other with animation, as if he were arguing with him or scolding him. More than once he raised his hands energetically, while the figure of the young man betrayed some shame, I thought, and more obstinacy. Still there was nothing marvelous in this, a servants' dispute, and I was moving away, pishing and pshawing, when I saw, a few yards from me, in the same attitude and gazing in the same direction as the middle-aged woman, my former friends— the two girls of the cab. It was wonderful how my curiosity was set a-thrilling again. Not caring whether they saw me or not, or what they thought of me, I crossed over to the pavement to read the number of the house.

I was making a note of it, when one leaf of the doors was thrown open violently, and a voice cried, "Out you go, my lad!"

And out accordingly, and down the steps, forcibly impelled, as it seemed to me, from behind, came the young man-servant, he whom I had seen in the dining-room. He held, in a helpless kind of way, as if they had been thrust upon him, an overcoat and a hat, and his face wore as foolish an expression of discomfiture as I ever saw.

"Come, none of that, Mr. Bund!" he cried, in weakly remonstrance, as he poised himself on the lowest step. "I do not see why I should go right away. I will not be turned out, sir!"

"Yes, you will, James," replied the butler, giving him a gentle push which landed him staggering on the pavement. "You will go, or you will wait at table, which you were engaged to do, my lad."

"Not on them!" exclaimed the young man, with a burst of excitement. "Why, you do not know the minute when one of them might turn round and—"

"Hold your tongue!" broke in the other, imperiously, "or you will get into worse trouble than this; you mark my words."

"You give me a month's wages," said the ejected one.

He seemed to be a weak young man and easily cowed.

"Not I!"

"Then let me get my things."

"Your things! You can come and get them to-morrow," was the contemptuous answer. "You do not go down into the kitchen to chatter to-night, which is what you would be at. You are a mean cur, James, that is what you are!"

"I would not talk of curs in that house, if I were you," retorted James spitefully. "People who live in—"

He did not finish. His taunt, which seemed to me harmless enough, seemed quite otherwise to the butler. The latter sprang down the steps, swelling like a turkey-cock, and would certainly have fallen upon the offender had not the young man, with a faint cry of alarm, fled and disappeared in the darkness.

"What is the matter, butler?" I asked, as he remounted the steps.

He eyed me sharply. "Oh, only a servant that would be master," he answered. "Pretty short-handed he has left me, too, hang him!"

"With a party on your hands?" I said, sympathetically.

"Party of four," he answered, shortly, his hand on the door; and he again looked me over, in doubt, I think, whether he should add "sir" or not. I was wearing an old overcoat above my evening clothes, and, instead of an opera hat, had carelessly put on, the evening being damp, a low-crowned black hat. I interpreted his glance, and suddenly saw a way in which I might gratify my curiosity.

"Look here!" I said, preparing to make a bold plunge for it, "I can wait at table, and I am a respectable man. I will give you a hand for the evening, if you like."

He whistled softly, looking much astonished. "Could not do it," he said, shaking his head. "There is plate about, and I do not know you from Adam."

"I am just off a job," I urged, more eager now, and pleased to find my invention serve me so well. "I go out evenings. I am not badly off, but I would rather take half-a-crown and my supper, and perhaps extend my connection, than

waste time. Look here, I have a gold watch— legacy from an old master. Suppose I hand it over to you as security. Terms, half-a-crown and my supper."

"You can wait?"

"Rather!" I said, presumptuously.

He wavered, poising my watch, an old-fashioned timekeeper, which had been my father's, in his hand. "I am loath to let a stranger in the house," he said, "but there is nothing Sir Eldred hates so much as a bad service. I am half inclined to try you, young man. I like your looks."

I could have said much on that, but refrained. "All I want is a job," I answered, modestly.

"Then in you come," he said, making up his mind. "It is just striking eight, and Sir Eldred is an impatient man at the best of times. Slip your coat and hat under this bench. And look slippery yourself, for there goes the master's bell. I will take the meats and wines, and do you take the sauces and the vegetables. The girl brings everything to the door. You understand, do you?"

I said "Yes," and did as I was bidden. But the prospect before me seemed more dubious now. My fingers had suddenly become thumbs, a very odd thing. And even my cheeks fell to burning, when almost immediately four gentlemen filed into the room and sat down at the round table. Two minutes had not elapsed, however, before I was myself again; following my leader with cayenne pepper and lemon as to the manner born, and displaying, I flatter myself, a fair amount of readiness and aplomb.

And so incongruous a party, for a West-End dining-room, were those four at the table, that I felt my curiosity was justified. I had no difficulty in picking out Sir Eldred. He alone looked at me with passing surprise. He was a man of refined type, with aquiline nose, blue eyes, and a long fair beard; fastidious, whimsical, and a bit of an epicure, if appearances went for anything. Facing him, wearing a kind of undress uniform jacket, sat a man whom he addressed as "Skipper," a short, sturdy sailor with a tanned face and a goatee beard, and the separate use of an oath which was new to me.

The third at table, sitting at Sir Eldred's right, was a pale, sickly youth, who from the moment of entering the room never ceased to fidget, I might almost say, to shiver and shake. If he touched a glass, it rattled against its fellows. If I handed a dish to him, he knocked it with his elbow; and his fingers so persistently dropped his knife and fork, that I am sure the only food that reached his lips was the bread he continually crumbled. He wore the regulation dinner-dress, but his hair was not that of a gentleman, although he came into the room on his host's arm, and Sir Eldred showed him much attention, even clapping him on the shoulder as he sat down, and saying, kindly, "Come, cheer up, my boy. We are all here again, you see."

"Aye, cheer up, lad," cried the skipper, bluntly, as he spread his napkin with elaborate ease. "Care killed a cat!"

"Oh, don't! don't!" cried the youth, staggering to his feet, as though a pin had run into him. "How can you! You— you—" Trembling, he cast a vicious glance, half hate, half fear, at the sailor.

"Skipper! skipper!" said Sir Eldred, reproachfully, laying his hand on the young man's arm and drawing him down again, "be a bit more careful."

"By the Lassie Kowen!" replied the sailor, "but I forgot." And he showed a certain amount of real concern, though for the life of me I could not see what harm he had done.

"Come, we are all here," repeated the host, with an air of satisfaction. "Where" (to the butler) "is the claret, Bund? Bring it round, and let us drink our toast and be thankful."

A sort of grace this, I thought. With some ceremony the butler, bidding me by a glance to stand back, brought from the sideboard a salver, bearing a Venetian glass carafe of claret and four glasses. One of these he filled and gave to his master, who waited with it in his hands until all were served. Then saying, with a ghost of a smile, "To our next meeting, gentlemen," Sir Eldred raised it to his lips and drank it dry. The sailor followed suit, tossing off the wine with much braggadocio, and smacking his lips afterward with such gusto that I could scarcely think the liquor merely claret. The fourth at table, whom I have not described— a stout, melancholy man of pasty complexion, with a big, bald head and thick lips: he wore evening-dress, but I saw the breadth of his thumb, and set him down for a master-saddler— took his glassful without looking up or saying a word. But even in him, as he set down the glass, I detected a curl of the lip that betokened relief. There remained only the young man at the host's right hand.

Sir Eldred, beginning his soup, cast an anxious glance at him. "Peter thinks," he said, lightly, "that he drinks best who drinks last. Come, pass the Rubicon! I mean," for it was evident that the youth did not understand him, "drink it off and no heeltaps, my boy."

Thus adjured, the young fellow raised the glass to his lips with an unsteady hand, and, with a queer, shrinking look in his face that was as unintelligible to me as the rest of the scene, did as he was ordered; not the least strange item being the interest which I could see the other three secretly took in this simple action.

"That is well done. We shall make a toper of you yet!" cried the host, slapping the table cheerily— over-cheerily, perhaps. "Seven from forty-two leaves thirty-five. Skipper, you want something with more body in it. Bund, quick with the sherry! Friedricsson, you liked the soup last night. What of this? Now, Peter, to dinner! Care killed a—" He stopped with his mouth wide open, an expression of wrathful surprise on his face; and the skipper, who had had his glass of sherry,

roared, "Ho! ho! ho! If the pilot do not know the shoals, it is small blame to the sailor-man, Sir Eldred. That is good sea-law, by the Lassie Kowen."

"I hate a sea-lawyer," retorted the baronet, testily.

"So do I," was the hearty answer. After which the conversation, though always jerky, a fitful merriment alternating with a thoughtful pause, grew more general. The man of leather, who kept his appetite in spite of depression, gave gloomy praise to the cook. The youthful Peter hazarded a few tremulous remarks. And from these I gathered that this was not the first nor was it meant to be the last occasion of the quartette dining together.

I stealthily rubbed my eyes, yet still they were all there, the fastidious baronet, the tradesman, the cockney clerk, the merchant-mate. There, notwithstanding my rubbing, they still sat, hobnobbing together in this house in Grosvenor Square, and feigning, for some inscrutable reason, to be of the same rank in life: to be one and all bred to the napkin. Was it some new Abbey of Thelema? I asked myself. Some extravagant offshoot of Toynbee Hall? Some whim of a rich Socialist? Or was the baronet mad? Or the youth some near relation, yet a monomaniac who had to be honored? Or had I really strayed into the land where cream tarts are dashed with pepper? I wondered, and remembering what the young footman had let fall, grew suspicious. It pleased me to hear outside the occasional rattle of a carriage and the heavy tread of a policeman.

It was in the baronet my curiosity centred. And, taking every opportunity of watching him, I was presently rewarded. I was handing some jelly to his opposite neighbor, when I saw him pause with his fork halfway to his lips, and listen. I listened too, and was conscious of a stir in the hall— of a noise as if some one or something shuffling to and fro, with every now and then a shorter throb of sound. Listening intently, I forgot what I was about, and though the skipper had helped himself, I continued to hold the dish before him, until his harsh voice roused me with a start.

"Guess I'll not take the whole cargo this voyage," he said. "You've dropped anchor too near inshore, young man."

I drew back in confusion, but escaped notice, as Sir Eldred rose.

"I am afraid," he exclaimed, looking round in anger for the butler, who had slipped toward the door. "I am afraid— How is it, Bund, that my orders have been neglected?"

Bund not answering, the sailor seemed at once to understand.

"Oh! by the Lassie Kowen! that is too bad," he cried, violently. "Not that I mind for myself, not I. But our mate here—" and glancing at the gloomy epicure, he left his sentence unfinished.

"Go and see, Bund!" ordered Sir Eldred, wrathfully. "Go and see!"

The butler had been standing near the door, with his hand upon it. Now he slid quickly out, and at once the noise ceased. While he was absent I noticed that the

stout man desisted from eating, and sat with his eyes fixed upon the door and a look of dull alarm in them.

"Well?" said Sir Eldred when Bund came back. "Well?"

"She went out by the area door, sir," the butler said in a low tone, "and came in by the front. I can assure you, sir, it will not occur again. I have—" and he added something, the meaning of which I could not catch.

With that the incident ended, but it seemed to have destroyed such good fellowship as had existed. The bald tradesman left his jelly on his plate, and looked as if he was going to be ill. Sir Eldred's face wore a frown. The skipper tossed off two glasses of sherry, one on top of the other. Only the white-faced clerk, fumbling with his bread, had betrayed no particular emotion, being too much taken up with his troubles, whatever they were, to perceive anything strange, or to sympathize with the feelings of his companions.

"Whatever was the matter outside or whoever was the intruder," I thought, "they are a nervous lot. One is as bad as another. And then, who in heaven's name are they? Conspirators, madmen, actors, or practical jokers?"

By this time dinner was over. The wine was being put on the table, and I was dreading the order to withdraw— for curiosity raised to the pitch which mine had reached is an intolerable thing— when, following the skipper's eye, I saw a tear— an unmistakable tear, big, leaden and unconventional— trolling down the fat face of the man known as Friedricsson. The skipper saw it, too, as I have hinted.

"Come," cried he, bluntly, "don't give way, brother. We are all in the same boat."

The stout man seemed by a melancholy shake of the head to demur.

"You do not think so? Come, how do you foot it up?" asked the sailor, briskly, affecting interest, as I thought, to draw the other into an argument.

"They have neither wife nor child," he began. "You have only a wife."

"You have no call to 'only' her," interrupted the merchant-mate, sharply. "She is a woman in a hundred, aye, in a thousand! God bless her!" and he drank her health defiantly.

"Well, you have no children," the other meekly answered, "and I have seven. Perhaps that seems a small thing to you, and to make no difference."

But the skipper, nodding gravely, confessed that there was something in the distinction. And on the instant a ray of light pierced my mind. I divined who was the plainly dressed woman I had seen watching the house. Clearly the woman in a hundred. The skipper's wife. And the two girls, then— who were they? Sir Eldred had no wife or child. No; but at mention of those relations, a flush and a momentary parting of the lips, as in a smile arrested by some gloomy thought before it took shape, had been visible to one observing him. No, he had no wife or child; but that he had one who some day might be his wife I felt sure; as sure of it as she was then waiting and watching outside, sharing for some unknown reason

the ill-lit, windswept pavement with the other woman, and doing wifely service before her time.

No wonder that I marveled as I set on the olives. What— what on earth did it all mean? The glimpse of light I had gained only made the darkness more visible. But there!— my chance was gone. The butler was giving me the sign to retire. The wine was already beginning to pass round the table. And though my eyes dwelt on the baronet to the last, that last had come, in another moment the door would have been closed behind me, when a sound, clear and prolonged, broke the momentary stillness of the square. There was nothing in the sound— to me, though I have heard it in lonely farmhouses and found it eerie enough, and though I know that it is a sound of awe to superstitious folk. It alone would not have stayed my hand upon the door; but the effect it produced did. The baronet swore, disturbed, as it seemed to me, for others rather than for himself. Friedricsson started nervously in his seat and looked behind him. The sailor muttered something, and fidgeted oddly with his collar. Again the sound rose and fell dismally, and this time two of the four drank off a glass of wine as if by a single impulse. The skipper was not one of these. He looked flushed, and was straining as if he had something in his windpipe. The clerk's face I could not see, his back being toward me. But he seemed little moved, even when a third time the long, dreary howl of a dog rose on the night air; and Sir Eldred, with a fiercer oath, sprang up.

"Bund, where the fiend is that brute?" he cried, roughly. "It is not Flora? Then send out and have it stopped. Have it stopped! Do you hear, you fool? Don't stand there gaping." And he flung his napkin on the table wrathfully. "Go!"

I turned hurridly to the butler, who was by my side, to learn why he did not go. He go? His whole soul was crying to be gone to feet that would not carry him away. His face froze me. His fat cheeks were quivering with overmastering terror, and his eyes looking past me— past Sir Eldred— were the eyes of a man looking upon death. I turned with a quick shudder to confront the worst.

Ha! The skipper was clawing at his throat in an ugly fashion. His face had grown purple, and his hair become disarranged in a wonderfully short time. He was beginning, too, to utter hoarse noises. A fit! I said to myself, and with a malediction on the butler's cowardice (I am not particularly brave, but there are some things, such as loosening a neckcloth, which one does owe to one's fellow-creatures) I sprang forward and undid the poor fellow's collar; and then tried to get him to lie down, not knowing whether that were right or not, but thinking, as he was inclined to be violent, that so he would do himself least harm.

"A doctor!" I cried, trying to restrain him, for he was pulling the cloth from the table. "Quick, fetch a doctor!" I dare say that I spoke almost as imperiously as had Sir Eldred himself, for the truth was that I was disgusted with them, one and all. The butler had escaped. I heard him fling open the outer door and rush down the steps. And I hoped that he had gone for a doctor. But of the others only Sir Eldred,

and he but perfunctorily, as I thought, and with a daintiness that could never have been less in place, gave me any assistance. The clerk had flung himself face downward on a sofa, and was visibly shaking from head to foot. The bald tradesman had retreated to the other end of the room, and was looking at us in silence over the back of an armchair, behind which he had intrenched himself. No help would come from them, although the poor sailor was now in evil case, foaming at the mouth, and working his jaws. Remembering or fancying that the tongue is sometimes injured in these fits, I snatched a spoon from the floor and tried to insert the handle between his teeth, so as to prevent their closing; but before I could effect this, Sir Eldred clutched my arm and knocked the spoon from my grasp.

"Are you mad?" I cried, enraged by his interference.

"Are you mad, man?" he answered, scarcely able to speak for excitement, and still holding my wrist while the perspiration ran down his face. "Are you mad, or a fool, or tired of your life? Hold him down! That is enough, if you can do it. Bund has gone for the doctor. By heaven, you are a foolhardy fellow, but a brave one!"

"The doctor will come, I dare say," I answered, not understanding him one whit. "But I do not fancy he will put our friend's tongue in, if once he bites it off."

I meant to be rude. It is not easy to hold down a man in a fit, and be civil to the lookers-on in kid gloves. But somehow Sir Eldred missed the rebuke. "Be more cautious, man," he said, chidingly. "If I had thought this would happen, I would have left the poor fellow to himself. And Higginson? He said he would come at any hour, night or day! And why the deuce does he not come? But here he— Hallo!"

I glanced up; not at the wretched cowards— they were beneath regard— but at the new-comer. It was not the doctor. But it was the next best thing; it was the woman I had seen in the square— the skipper's wife. And I never felt more thankful to see any one. She would know something about these attacks, and what ought to be done. When I heard her cry "Jack!" and rush toward him with arms outstretched to clasp him, and, wife-like, save him from himself, the action seemed to me the most natural in the world. I did not dream of interfering or standing in her way. Nay, I doubted my eyes when Sir Eldred rose from his knees with a sharp cry, and, seizing the woman by both wrists, bore her back by main force. "Are you mad?" I heard him say, using the same words he had used to me, as he struggled with her. "You can do no good, my poor soul; be calm. The doctor is coming?"

She did not speak, but she wrestled with him, bringing down in another minute the tablecloth, with all the service, pell-mell upon me and the floor. And then she fell into hysterics.

I snatched a hasty glance at her, and saw Sir Eldred trying to soothe her in a clumsy fashion. Then I had as much as I could do to hold my patient. I jerked out of his way a broken decanter, but he dashed his head so violently from side to

side, amid the débris of knives and shattered glass, that he threatened each minute to do himself an injury or to do me one. He was a stout, heavy man. I could not by myself move him to a safer place; and though the noise was appalling, and the whole house must have been alarmed minutes ago, no one came to my help. I was breathless and giddy. The poor fellow was growing more and more violent as my grasp upon him relaxed, and I felt that in another moment he must take his chance, when, just at the crisis of his paroxysm, a small gloved hand slid into the little space under my eyes and deftly removed a broken plate, which I had been making frantic but vain efforts to push away with my foot. Away went its jagged edges out of sight, and away the same dexterous hand swept half-a-dozen other ugly things. Then this *dea ex machina,* by a few gentle touches, stilled the poor man.

"Good, indeed! a thousand thanks!" I cried, eagerly, raising my eyes to the face of the girl in mourning. "He is not," I added, seeing how white the face was, "a pleasant sight, but he is better. I think I can manage him now."

As I spoke I looked from her to the others, having leisure now to think of them. At the same instant Sir Eldred glanced up from his charge. Our eyes did not meet; but I saw his, as they rested on the girl beside me, suddenly dilate. His lips moved. He dropped his burden as if she had been lead, and, springing forward, laid his hands upon the girl's shoulders— to pull her away, as it seemed. But so panic-stricken was he, that he had no strength to do it, and only rocked her to and fro, saying, hoarsely: "Helen! Helen! Come; you are killing me! Think what might—"

"Happen!" and, turning upon him, while his lips still faltered, a look full of pure exultation that glorified her face, she added: "And what then? I should but share your fate— for better, for worse!"

That did give him strength. "Oh!" he said ragefully, and dragged her away. I heard her utter a faint cry of protest, and then she fainted, as a stout, clean-shaven man came briskly in.

"Dear! dear! dear!" he exclaimed, looking nervously round at the strange scene— the senseless girl, the sobbing woman, the baronet on his knees beside the sofa, the two pale-faced cravens at the farther end. "Dear! dear! dear! We must get rid of these people. We can do nothing with these people here. It is a pity I was out. And what is it, eh? What is it?"

"Well, it might be the black death!" I replied, testily. He had not asked the question as seeking information, but mechanically, as if it were a form to be gone through. "People could not be much more afraid of the poor fellow."

"But," he answered, kneeling down suddenly, and laying his hand on the skipper's forehead so as to raise the eyelids, "this is not hydrophobia? this is only a fit! and not the first he has had either. Sir Eldred! Mr. Friedricsson! Where are you? There is no cause for alarm. Our friend is only in a fit. It is not hydrophobia!"

"Who said it was?" I replied, groping about for the truth, and yet at once understanding a part of it, and shuddering.

"The servant. Still it was an excusable error under the circumstances," replied the doctor, cheerily. "But I always thought Sir Eldred's quixotic plan a mistaken one. Though M. Pasteur considered all danger over, yet during the six weeks of probation there is always a risk. There! He is coming round. He will do well now. I must go and see the ladies."

I detained him for a moment. Of course he took me for a guest. "Were they bitten at the same time?" I asked.

"All four on the same day. By different animals though. One by a cat," he replied, genially. "Sir Eldred by a foxhound puppy, just off the walk. They entered M. Pasteur's establishment also on the same day, were inoculated on the same day, and discharged the same day. Singular thing, was it not? So Sir Eldred— kind-hearted man, but whimsical— said, 'They should see it out together and fare the same.' Ha! ha! Coming, Sir Eldred. The young lady is upstairs, is she?"

He hurried away, and Bund coming in, I caught the butler's eye, as he lifted it from a sorrowful contemplation of the wreck on the floor. "You have made your fortune, young man," he said, as unasked he put my watch into my hand. "I liked your looks from the first. Sir Eldred is asking to see you. And you are to call a cab."

I did so; and getting into it drove to my club to supper.

4: Around the Corner

D. H. Souter

1862-1935

The Bulletin, 3 Jun 1920

D. H. Souter was a leading black-and-white illustrator of Australia's Jazz Age, as well as a writer.

"ADVENTURE waits for all of us just round the corner, but mostly we keep straight on, our eyes fixed on the stars or else bent on the dust at our feet, and the greatest happiness of life goes for ever untasted."

Mrs. King-Wallen read this thought-compelling sentence in an otherwise dull book. She realised that she had been keeping straight on along the conventional track trodden by most women whose husbands earn two or three thousand pounds a year. At times she had found it rather dull, for Mr. King-Wallen had many things to attend to besides his wife. Occasionally it was a little disappointing. Not a couple of hours ago he had rung up to say that he was dining in town and going to Melbourne that night on a matter of business. Business had to be attended to— she knew that. Business was always most important. It was business that provided the elegancies of the King-Wallen *menage*. It was business that provided the costumes of its lady, frequently entitling her to mention in the society columns of the press.; and this was not the first time that business had left her stranded at the heel of a wearisome day to read a footling book with only one good line in it.

"Adventure waits for all of us just round the corner."

She threw the book away and rose to look at herself in the panel mirror of her sitting-room. A striking figure, thirty or maybe thirty-five ; tall, slim and dark eyed, wearing a blue-green costume with a transparent over-drape of black sparingly powdered with silver. From a platinum necklet studded with emeralds hung a pear-shaped black opal. A slave-bangle gleamed on her upper arm. A black ribbon, low on her brow, bound her black hair, and a tiny emerald shone in the pink lobe of each ear. Surely more than chance had garbed her to queen it in some high quest on a warm summer night, with a declining moon in the sky and a city of nigh upon a million souls for her to adventure in.

She chose a small dark toque from her hat cabinet, pulling it well down over her ears. She posed imperiously before the glass and smiled to think she was not unlike Theda Bara. A china clock on a side-table tinkled ten. She caught up a Mother Hubbard cloak necked with black satin, and, wrapping it round her, stole down the back stair, through the deserted kitchen and along the bricked path leading by the kitchen garden to the tradesmen's entrance and out into the world so that "the greatest happiness of life" might not be forever untasted.

The Little Lane of Back Gates was full of darkness. The moon was too low to touch more than the tops of things with silver. A turn to the right and one to the left, and she was in the main thoroughfare. Around corners Adventure waited.

She was in a fairly fashionable avenue with few people about at this odd hour. The houses stood high and well back in umbrageous gardens. There were lights in most of the windows ; she caught snatches of song, jubilance of laughter, the wail of a violin or a flute sobbing in the shadow. The street stretched to where the harbor gleamed invitingly. She walked aimlessly, her mind openly receptive, content to take the cup of happiness from the first hand that offered it. She was at the end of the street now. A strip of park lay between her and the harbor, where a ferry-boat like a jewelled insect slid along the smooth water. She stood by the white painted turnstile and noted the couples that sat in the shelter of the trees.

A pair detached themselves from the friendly shadow and passed arm-encircled though the gate. For all the notice they took of her she might have been on another plane— an earth-bound spirit with whom they had no concern. She also would seek where they had found such happiness. She walked, mincingly along the asphalt paths to the rhythmic lap of wavelets on a sandy beach. The path held pools of moonlight for her to wade in and masses of shadow where she could hide and watch far lights dancing to the music of the stars.

The park was very lonely here. She sat down on a broad seat under a whispering pine, a smile of expectancy trembling under her drooped eyelids. A motor-car hooted in the distance and a man came towards her from the water's edge. Slight of figure and with bowed head he stumbled as he walked as if his shoulders bore a heavy load. Water dripped from his coat sleeves and the legs of his trousers were quite wet. He sank almost at her feet, his elbows on the seat and his face buried in his hands.

Did he pray?

He crossed his arms and laid his head in the crook of his elbow. His face was towards her— a boyish face, haggard yet not unhandsome. His hat fell off and uncovered a crop of short, sandy hair. His eyes were red and swollen as if they had wept much, and his pointed, girlish chin gripped a mouth that could kiss or curse with equal fervor. His body sagged as if he slept, and she drew the skirt of her cloak around his shoulders. A ship's bell chimed across the water. A cloud blotted out the moon. She bent over him and, wrapping him in her garment, drew his head into the warmth of her bosom. With a deep sigh of content he nestled close like a tired child, his chin, rough with a day's beard, pressing pleasantly on her bare flesh. He sobbed in his sleep and she crooned him an almost forgotten song which she had last sung to her dead child. In time he awoke wonderingly, but she soothed him into silence and kissed his pale lips.

Neither explained. It was an episode planned in the beginning of time. His cheap, slop-tailored clothes and his ill-kept hands showed her that otherwise they

could have never met. The richness of her dress, the fashion of it and the scented softness of her body was a new experience to him. He played with her necklet like a shy child with a strange toy. He wove his fingers in her hair and caressed the delicate modelling of her ears. He thrust his hand among her gauzy chiffons and embraced her as if she were his day-old bride.

As the gibbous moon set behind the headland they rose and turned towards the city. They spoke little— only some vague words of endearment. The one cloak covered them both and the friendly night kept them hidden until they came to a naked portico where a great light glared like the blare of a trumpet.

"Dearest," he said, "I must leave you here."

She made no protest: it was all of a piece with the night's happenings. She kissed him on the eyes, on the ears and on the mouth, and he, sensing a ritual, sealed her thus also.

"Good-bye," she said, as he walked up the steps, and a sleepy policeman blinked at them from a grated window.

The sharp wind that precedes the dawn swept across the city and set her shivering. Day was breaking as she reached her trades-man's-entrance again. She crept up to her room unnoticed. The wonderful night of adventure had passed.

She slept dreamlessly until afternoon, when her maid woke her, relating the latest tragedy detailed in the early edition of the evening paper. Her senses, still tangled with sleep, lagged behind the narration.

"Terrible—"

What was it that "went forever untested"?

"Early this morning—"

Not terrible — wonderful!

"At the foot of our own street, almost at our very door—"

Yes, it was just grey daylight!

"Found her out with another man—"

Was it a door where the bright light was?

"Strangles her and holds her under the water—"

Whatever on earth is the girl talking about?

"Serves her right: no man should hang for a woman like that—"

The sleeves of his coat and the legs of his trousers were quite wet.

"The detectives are on the track of a fashionably-dressed woman who kissed him good-bye on the steps of the Paddington Police Station. I suppose she was no better than the other woman: it's a pity he didn't strangle her too."

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5: Coker

D. H. Souter

The Bulletin, 23 Jun 1921

COKER was no chicken.

Nearer 50 than 60, all his discretionable years had been spent in establishing himself as a leading citizen. To a man of his mentality it was a simple process; but the school he favored was very narrow in its outlook. The higher one graduated the less one was fitted to solve many of the problems liable to be met with later in life.

Thus when Miss Muffitt applied for the job of private secretary, Coker blinked at her over his glasses, gave her the job and tell head over ears in love with her in three simultaneous or closely correlated movements. This was quite at variance with his established principle, which was to think twice before deciding once on even the most trivial matter.

it was quite a new experience for him, so he could only flounder about in the slough of his own admiration and make things very uncomfortable for both of them. He never thought of side-tracking his emotion as an agreeable finale to a dull business day; nor of allowing it to spend its force in a lot or harmless little pleasantries that would have hurt neither of them, but should have amused both. He took to lying awake o' nights thinking how adorable she was, instead of kissing her smartly on the nape of the neck and taking her out to dinner and being done with it.

Mostly she wore a black frock of filmy substance through which her arms and shoulders shone like antique silver. Her yellow hair, heaped high on the top of her head, left a couple of vagrant curls to nestle behind her ears in a manner most disturbing to one who has no defence against this sort of offensive. When she stooped over her stenography on the days she wore her grey ninon, Coker used to shut his eyes: but even then he could sense the bows of pink baby-ribbon that spangled her underwear. Had he not practised this system of voluntary blindness he might have seen things even more disturbing.

Coker was a big man: fifteen stone, mostly fat, and when he settled down in his office chair he looked like a great inverted pear, the illusion being helped by a little wisp of grey hair on the top of his camouflaged baldness which suggested the stem of the fruit as we sometimes see it with the biscuits and cheese, at the end of a good dinner, when a pretty woman is not so immediately desirable as a cup of black coffee and a good cigar.

Coker learned that she was known as Dick. He was quite scandalised when he heard one of his clerks address her thus familiarly. Anybody less like Dick would be hard to imagine. Blanche, very likely, or Florence; or Violet, because her eyes were a deep blue, though her complexion was roses and lilies—really "crême de Ninon,"

but Coker didn't know that, and her hair like the gold we won when we ran a silk-worm farm in the privacy of our bedroom.

Yet "Dick" fitted. She had a quick, boyish step, a little, boyish laugh, and her figure was not yet matured enough to preclude the idea that she could pose most provocatively as a boy scout at a fancy-dress ball. She had a trick of stooping her head just a little and glancing up out of the corner of her eye. At other and rarer times she would throw her head back and stare defiance at you with a jutted chin most disconcertingly.

Coker married?

Oh, rather! Years and years ago, to a large, slow-thinking, solemn woman, who might, have been a half-sister, a maiden aunt or some such near relation, so much did she resemble him both physically and in temperament. It seemed almost indecent to suggest that there had ever been passionate moments between them. They had a small and pimply family that wore round-rimmed glasses and held minor positions in Sunday-schools. God knows how they happened! Maybe, like Topsy. "they just growed", but none of them ever cost Coker a tithe of the sleep that he lost over Dick, nor caused him a hundredth part of the anxiety either.

It never entered his head to fire her. In fact, he stuck another 10 shillings a week on to her screw, winch even then was barely enough to meet her expenses, considering how high the ragmen had bumped everything a girl like Dick just had to have. She wore a slave bangle above her left elbow that set Coker's fingers itching, and he went hot and cold all over every time her skirts brushed his trouser legs. He often lost the sequence of his ideas when dictating to her, and the climax was reached when he began to say his prayers regularly— a thing he hadn't done for years— winding up with "O Lord, bless Dick and keep us."

Rather a lame conclusion, but there are some things it is not proper to petition the Almighty straight-out about.

But you can refer such things to the opposition firm.

Yes, if the Devil would let him hold Dick in his arms for an hour he could chop the last year of his life off altogether! Three hundred and sixty-five days— 8760 to 1. Tremendous odds, but the gamble was worth it.

He made the proposition to the Devil after a very perturbing day. Dick— he always thought of her as Dick now— had turned up wearing a dark-blue frock of some diaphanous stuff, with practically no sleeves or top to it. She couldn't have been less conscious of her costume if she had been buttoned from chin to toes in an army overcoat. It would be wrong to say that Coker was tempted. That implies a certain amount of intention, and intention is born of a belief in one's capacity to achieve. Coker just desired supinely.

It was close on midnight. The house was quiet and stuffy. Except for the almost soundless ticking of the clock on his dressing-table and the somnolent

glucks and gurgles of Mrs. Coker in the next bed, everything was as silent as the grave.

He felt a lot better after he had made the suggestion. It was something, even if it came to nothing. Quite a business proposition. If there was no reply in a day or two, or by the end of the week, he would cry off, express contrition in the proper quarter, feel that he had added to the joy of Heaven, and also passed through quite an experience.

He turned over and went to sleep at once and slept like a top right up to breakfast-time. He woke up with a. wonderful gratefulness that he had not died in the night, and was greatly relieved to find, that no calamity had struck his household while he slept. He was cautiously cheerful at breakfast. and purposely avoided asking a blessing on the rolled oats. He would play the game. One cannot serve two masters and expect full pay from both.

Hopefully, yet fearfully, he went to business. Something might happen during the day.

Nothing did.

Well, there was plenty of time— maybe the thing needed looking into. He wouldn't close right away on a proposition himself, if there were no competitor in the market.

Next morning he actually pinched Dick's elbow and got a rattly little laugh and a startled smile in return.

He walked on his toes for the rest of the day— half-day only— and if Sunday hadn't intervened between that and their next meeting, there was no telling what his next move might have been.

He refused to go to church. No, He hadn't a cold; he didn't want to go, that was all. Mrs. Coker went without him and told the parson that her husband really needed a long holiday.

That very night he attacked the problem again. If he had known any incantations for raising the Devil he would have tried them. In his anxiety to trade he made a cut—13 minutes instead of the original 60. As day was breaking he made his final bid. Five minutes it the thing went through within 24 hours. It was surely a tempting offer. They couldn't expect him to cut lower than that. There it was; his final offer. He turned over and went to sleep as a kookaburra in the big pine just outside his window laughed at a blear-eyed sun peering over Waverley Cemetery.

He was alertly expectant all day, looking forward to a peaceful morrow, for by then the thing would be settled one way or another. He felt strangely confident about that. Several times he thought the great adventure was just beginning, but always something intervened.

About half-past four he had a great idea. The Spottiswoode matter had to be hurried through. Would Dick give him a couple of hours after tea? She could wire her mother that she would be sent home in a taxi about nine.

No need for that. Dick lived in a room and fed herself. Nobody cared where she was, so long as her rent was paid every Saturday.

What an ass he was not to have discovered those details before!

Why—

It was left at that. Lots of possibilities, but no plan at all. The other party had to attend to that.

Perhaps the suggestion that they go across to the Blue Cafe for a bit of fish was part of it. Coker ordered a small bottle of wine to be served with the meal. He was going to be a real sport and give it every chance. They went into the lift together just on six. One of those automatic lifts where you shut yourself in, press a button and trust to luck.

Sometimes it is all right, sometimes things happen. This time the lift jibbed and Dick crowded close to Mr. Coker.

The scheme was working, but he wasn't going to be bluffed off by any "fun in a lift" business. He pushed Dick away and pulled the safety catch. The lift, shot off with a *whizz-zz*, and the girl was flung hard against her employer.

They were found in each other's arms, and both quite unconscious. They took Miss Muffitt home about nine. She was only shaken, but they took Mr. Coker to the morgue.

Heart failure, accelerated by shock.

It was pleaded by the Devil at the Court of Celestial Equity that Coker was going to die of heart failure in nine months, anyhow.

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6: The Unbaited Trap

Albert Payson Terhune
1872-1942
The Red Book Magazine, Dec 1915

JOAN and Hugh Vedder had been married eight years— ever since she was twenty and he was thirty. Happy the nation— tenfold happier the wedded couple— that has no history. And the Vedders had been very happy indeed.

There had been no struggle to make both ends meet. From the first, the Wolf and the Door had never been within a mile of each other. Vedder was a good business man, a good husband, a good comrade. Joan was more than satisfied with her quiet, home-loving mate, and with the quiet home he loved.

If there were no thrills in their lives, neither were there any heartaches. They loved each other; they suited each other. A placidly sweet engagement merged very naturally into a sweetly placid married life. 'Their friends were of their own sort— pleasant, ultra-respectable folk, fairly well-to-do, simple in tastes, . clean. If they were not very inspiring, none of them knew it.

All this was in New York, mind you— in the actual New York, not the New York of fiction or of visitors' tales; the real New York, which holds more quiet, steady, home-loving people than any other city in America. New York is merely Pompton, New Jersey, or Grayling, Michigan, seen through a magnifying glass. Everything (except human nature and the average apartment) is on a gigantic scale; that is all. There is no greater number of social strata; there is nothing to differentiate the metropolis from any other village, except that it is infinitely larger.

And the Vedders had lived for eight years in New York as though New York were Springfield, Massachusetts.

THEN a man whom Vedder knew in business— Archer Dunne— became associated with Hugh in a real-estate deal. Their wives met. And the Vedders were asked to dine with the Dunnes.

That started it. Right around the corner from their own apartment, the Vedders walked in on a new world: a world of jolly liveliness that was only a shade too lively and too jolly, a world that sparkled and was professionally gay. To the home-staying Vedders, there was nothing tawdry in the sparkle, nothing forced or fevered, in the gaiety. It was all spontaneous and novel and delightful.

As the bread-and-butter child might revel in its first course-dinner, so did the Vedders revel in this glitter-world into which they had blundered. There was something thoroughly likable about Joan and Hugh, a unique something that attracted the clique of people they met through the Dunnes. The "something" was wholesomeness, though neither they nor their new friends realized it. It was a

novelty to the Dunnes' set, a novelty that made its two possessors very welcome among the home-haters.

The Dunne set can be found in a village as well as in Gotham. In the village its membership scarce reaches into the dozens. It swells far into the thousands in New York, but only because New York is that many times larger. In the village it is made up of women who would rather board than do their own cooking and who dawdle away precious baking-day afternoons in gossiping and in playing progressive euchre or putting on their best clothes and walking down to see the five-fifteen train come in. Its men would rather make five dollars on a semi-doubtful horse swap than earn ten dollars at the factory. They dress better than their neighbors ; and they have the rare gift of getting perpetual credit, on no security, at the grocer's.

In New York, the women of the Dunne set plead the servant-problem bugaboo as an excuse for living at hotels instead of keeping house. Their men, once wooed from the old-fashioned home idea, abet them in this. These same men are in New York merely because they can make more money with less work there than anywhere else, and because so-called good times are to be had in all sizes, varieties and locations.

Both the men and the women, being divorced from home ties, have plenty of time to get into mischief. They keep open the doors of the flashier dining places, the after-theater restaurants and certain types of theaters; and they keep the taxicab companies from bankruptcy.

Time, to them, is like deer to a sportsman: something to be killed as quickly, as excitingly and as frequently as possible.

It is a dreary, dreary routine, this life of the home-haters, whether on Main Street, Yaphank, or on Broadway, Manhattan.

Yet, to the visiting Vedders, it was a grown-ups' fairyland. To them, restaurant dinners still had the charm of brilliant novelty. Cabaret brass was virgin gold. A theater evening was an exception, not a rule. Butterfly people were a marvel and a joy to these staid home-dwellers.

Once or twice, just at first, they both noticed and wondered at a certain queer freedom of speech, at jokes and discussions on themes their old friends had always avoided.

But they told, themselves and each other that they must not be provincial or prudish, and that they had probably become too narrow-minded from long lack of friction with up-to-date people. And, in an amazingly short time, the feeling of embarrassment died a natural death.

Into this gay new world the two stay-at-homes launched themselves with all the blended zeal of explorers and proselytes. And daily they learned more and more of its astounding ways.

For example, Hugh found that a man who likes to spend all his evenings at home with his own wife is in danger of becoming a fossil. Worse still, he is in peril of ridicule from wiser folk. Mrs. Dunne herself told him this— this and a hundred other interesting things. She told him in such a pretty, tactful way, and so convincingly, that he began to look back on the old life as a new-hatched millionaire remembers his dinner-pail and his one shirt a week.

Women learn anything and everything far more quickly than do men. Their powers of adaptation are positively uncanny. While a lucky-strike miner is still trying to learn not to eat with his knife, his once-calicoed wife already can go through the complete litany of afternoon tea or dinner etiquette.

So it was with Joan. Before Hugh had fairly begun to realize his new surroundings, those surroundings fitted her like a made-to-order glove. She learned to laugh prettily, instead of showing blank dismay, when the women around her spoke openly of flirting with other women's husbands. She learned not to shudder— even inwardly— when folk talked of the liaisons of seemingly respectable men, as of everyday matters.

She scoffed daintily at old fogies of both sexes who were tied bovinely and complacently to marital apron-strings. She looked back with amused self-contempt to the prehistoric days when she had deemed it "fast" for a woman to smoke a cigarette or drink a cocktail, and when the sight of even a mildly drunken man had filled her with sick horror.

True, she could never learn to smoke without choking, and cocktails always tasted like hair-oil and made her sick. And she could not bring herself to adopt, personally, the loose-moraled conditions that had once shocked and now amused her. But she was no spoil-sport. And the Dunne set adopted her without question.

JOAN was mentally adapting herself to her new sphere to an extent she had not counted on. For example, she unconsciously found herself beginning to compare Hugh with the men around him, and her own uneventful wedded life with their wives'. And at last she saw she had been deprived of something.

Hugh was a dear, faithful old chap. But he was not inspiring. She recognized that, now. And her love-life, by contrast to some of her present friends', had been a stagnant mill-pond compared to a cataract. Yes, she had missed much.

Fate had robbed her of the one "grand passion" that is every woman's right, had shackled her to conventionality, when the right man might have swept her off her feet and set her thrilling. She had never thrilled. She yearned to.

And bit by bit, merciless self-analysis told her she had never loved Hugh, did not love Hugh, never could love Hugh— in the mad, reckless "world-well-lost-for-love" fashion that she felt her nature could rise to under the proper incentive— or improper incentive, as the case might be.

No, her affection for poor old Hugh was more maternal than marital. She felt a tender devotion for him, a. desire to make his road smooth, a keen motherly interest in his success, a worried solicitude for his welfare. That was all. He could not appreciate her. He never had appreciated her. Wild, all-encompassing sex-love had passed her by. And she rebelled. It was not fair that she should go through life cheated out of the one Great Love.

Joan Vedder was quite certain that she arrived at all these sorry conclusions without one atom of outside help. If she had been told that they were the direct result of a score or more of fragmentary talks with Archer Dunne, she would have denied it vehemently and honestly.

True, she liked Dunne, admired him and enjoyed hearing him talk. He knew so much of life, of love. He had such rare insight into feminine nature. He understood her as no man had ever understood her. His tired dark eyes seemed to look down into the very soul of her, to read all her heart-emptiness, her capabilities for sublime love, the strangely elusive charm that made her so different from all other women. He said so himself. And she knew it was true.

IT was coming home from Shanley's that Dunne told Joan about the "elusive charm" and her unlikeness to other women. Ten of them had gone to the theater and to supper. That left two over, after two taxies were filled for the homeward ride. And she and Dunne chanced to be the two. Hence the *téte-à-téte* in a third taxicab.

"I never understood why men could rave about the subtle mystery and the miracle of women," he was saying, "until I met you. Till then, all women had seemed to me pretty much alike, and not at all mysterious. And then I met you— my Lady of Mystery. Tell me what it is that makes you so different— so unforgettable."

"Why," she laughed, embarrassed, "I'm a very ordinary mortal, I'm afraid."

"The man who lets you think so deserved a 'very ordinary mortal' for a wife," said Dunne, savagely. "And he is about the only man of my acquaintance who hasn't got one."

Vaguely, she felt she ought to rebuke him for the implied slur on Hugh. But the impulse was not strong enough to rise all the way to her lips. Besides, she found it inexplicably sweet to listen to such unwonted praise of herself.

How this man understood her! How he read her! It was— it was almost supernatural. How different from Hugh's boorish compliments, which usually took the form of a bear-pat on the shoulder and some such coarse words as "Old girl, you're all to the good!"

"I'll be a better man— I'll be a happier man— always and always," Dunne was murmuring, "for having known the One Woman. You don't know what it means to me, Lady of Mystery."

His hand closed softly over hers. There was nothing of flirtation in the gesture. So tender, so reverent it was, that Joan had not the heart to draw her hand away.

"I am glad," she said, shyly. "I'm glad if I've— helped."

"Helped?" he echoed. "Why, you've made 'a new heaven and a new earth' for me. Oh, if I could tell you all- it had meant— all it will mean— forever, till I am dust! Will you let me tell you, darling ?"

His free hand was stealing about her waist. And even Joan could read nothing of reverence in this new gesture.

"Don't, please," she said, moving forward. "You mustn't."

"Forgive me!" he cried, all contrition. "But if only you knew! You must know, Joan!"

And, all at once, Joan knew. This man loved her. And something told her it was the Great Love— the wild, adoring, suicidal love that her life had missed. The thought thrilled her to the soul. It surged through her, setting her warm blood atingle, her brain awhirl.

"I— I mustn't listen to you," she said feebly.

"You must!" he urged with really beautiful abandon, his body trembling from head to foot. "You must, my sweetheart. Heaven has brought you to me, from all the world. I *can't* lose you! I won't lose you."

The taxi lurched around a corner. Joan forced herself to turn from the man's imploringly hypnotic eyes and to look out of the window. By the delicatessen store with the gilded boar's head on a blue platter in the window, she saw the cab was turning into her own street. In another two minutes she would be at home. Dunne also saw where they were.

"Listen, dear heart," he said adoringly, "I must leave you in a minute or so. When can I see you again— *alone*? I must see you, to-morrow. Say I may."

She hesitated, her mind still in a delicious turmoil.

"Do you know the Prince Croesus Hotel?" he went on. "The tea-room is so cozy and dim-lit and secluded. Will you meet me there— say, at five— tomorrow afternoon? Tell me you will! I must see you."

"Y-es," she heard herself answer faintly, through no volition of her own.

"Thank you ten million times!" he exclaimed, fervently.

As she timidly eluded his effort to kiss her, he added more prosaically:

"I'm certain I can make it by five. I've a big directors' meeting at three. But it ought to be over in time for me to get to the Prince Croesus before five o'clock. If I'm detained, I'll telephone you. But I'll move heaven and earth to get there."

"You— you can't telephone me," she faltered. "How can you? If I go there to meet you, it wouldn't do to have a page shouting my name all over the room. Don't you see it wouldn't?"

"H'm?' he meditated. "That's so! But— "

"I have it," she broke in. "If you find you must telephone, ask for 'Mrs. Senoj.' "

" 'Senoj?' " he repeated, puzzled. "How did you ever happen to think of such a queer name as that? Is it a real name, or did you make it up? How do you spell it?"

"S-e-n-o-j,' she answered. "It's Jones backward. I— "

The taxi halted with a jerk, in front of the Vedder apartment. Hugh was on the steps, waiting for them. So was Mrs. Dunne. A departing taxicab had just disgorged them. There were voluble farewells. Hugh and his wife went indoors, together, both phenomenally silent, for once in their lives.

THE Prince Croesus Hotel is a half-block off Broadway. It runs through from one numbered street to another. It is one hotel in a hundred. And the other ninety-nine are precisely like it— except for the tea-room.

The Prince Croesus tea-room is an institution. It is known to lovers from Greenwich village to the Bronx. Also it is wholly respectable. `

A huge room, it is, fully one hundred and fifty by ninety feet in area— a room of magnificent distances. The distances are rendered greater by the subdued light that bathes the place in a soft, warm dimness through which the solitary little pink light on every table shines like a misted star. Coming in from the bright foyer, one's first impression is of a twilight blur, spotted here and there by tiny table lamps that glow but do not illumine.

The walls and ceilings are in somber colors, arabesqued and frescoed and latticed in neutral tints that absorb light without reflecting it. There is no regular arrangement of tables. Practically all of them hug closely the four walls or snuggle in half-niches. At the tables are low *fauteuils* and lower chairs— wicker and upholstered in gray. The room's center is given up to the big pillars, to a table or two sheltered by them, and to a writing desk and a lounge.

It is an odd place, this tea-room of the Prince Croesus, a place devoted to low lights, to lower voices, to tender silences. It is as far removed from New York's life and racket and rush as any hidden valley in the Lotos Land.

Into the tea-room, at five the next afternoon, came Joan Vedder. She paused for an instant in the curtain-hung doorway to accustom her eyes to the soft gloom. At first she could distinguish nothing. Then, gradually, her eyes began to take in vague details. Two white-capped maids and a waiter or so were moving about silently. But no one came forward to usher her to a table.

As she stood there, hoping that Dunne would appear out of the dim-lit spaces. to guide her to her place, a man and woman just beside her rose to their feet and (after various athletic feats with a tight overcoat and with a wrap which insisted on holding itself upside down) departed, whispering. Joan sat down at the table they had vacated.

By this time her eyes had focused themselves to the half-light. She could see, for instance, that every other table within her range of vision was occupied. And

at all the tables but one, were a man and a woman, alone together. Sometimes the couple sat in the big, low wicker chairs; oftener on one of the very narrow *fauteuils*, side by side. And at least three such pairs were semi-openly "holding hands."

The one table, forming the exception to this rule, was the gathering point of three old ladies, a young woman, a six year old child and a thoroughly uncomfortable looking man with lonely whiskers. The group were as out of place as a wheelbarrow in a temple of Venus. And they evidently knew it.

At the other tables some of the couples were drinking highballs or cocktails. A very few were sipping tea and nibbling at English muffins. One fat and bald-headed old man with a bilious visage had just ordered for his opulent-figured companion a bottle of champagne. The beverage was long in arriving, and the wine-opener was fretfully rapping on the table with his thick finger-tips and inquiring of the head waiter:

"Can't I get a little service here?"

Joan presently lost interest in what was going on around her. She sat where she could see the doorway, and toward the doorway she looked, far more in fear than in hope, waiting to see Archer Dunne's trim figure appear there, waiting to hear his tenderly contrite apologies for being late.

(It chanced that Archer Dunne, at that moment, was neither contrite nor tender. He was fuming in blasphemous impotence, as a subway rush-hour "block" held him in a stuffily smelly subway train, stalled midway between Twenty-third and Twenty-eighth streets.)

The day had not been wholly pleasant for Joan. On the preceding night, the excitement of what she had gone through and the dazzling revelation of Dunne's love for her had kept her buoyed and strangely exultant. She had felt like a heroine in a popular novel.

The sound of Hugh's tranquil snores in the next room, had sickened her at thought of his material grossness. She wished he would sleep more quietly and leave her in peace to her new golden dreams.

But the morning had dawned rainy and raw, as the next morning has a cynical way of doing. And reaction had set in. First of all, oddly enough, she had regretted repeating the idiotic name "Senoj" to Archer Dunne. Not because it was idiotic, but because, to her, it had once been half sacred— although she had not thought of it for many months, until it had popped unbidden into her mind when the question of a telephonic name came up.

When she and Hugh had been engaged— oh, a century or more ago, when she was in her late teens— she used to telephone to him every day at his office. And as the engagement was not yet announced, she did not want to telephone so often under her own name for fear the office people might talk (which they did).

Thus, after one of the long conspiracy-conferences so dear to true lovers, she and Hugh had evolved "Jones" as a pseudonym to throw the others off the track. She would henceforth announce herself to the office telephone-girl as "Miss Jones." Then it had occurred to Hugh that "Jones" was such a terribly plain name that the operator might suspect it was not genuine. Whereat, in real inspiration, Joan had suggested that they pronounce it backward. And, for months thereafter, the demure telephone-girl had called daily to Hugh:

"Mr. Vedder, Miss— er— Senoj is on the wire."

And that was the name she had been so disloyal as to give to Archer Dunne to use!

Joan felt as if she had shown one of Hugh's love-letters to a stranger. She did not see how she could have been so base as to take the holy name of Senoj in vain. Well, it was done! and anyhow, the chances were fifty to one that Archer would be at the tea-room ahead of her. So she felt at liberty to pass on to the next worry.

Underneath the jolly veneer of the past few. months, her older principles began to stir. It was one thing to realize that she did not love her husband except in a maternal way, and that she had an inalienable right to at least one Great Love in her life. It was quite another thing to listen, unrebuking, to the love vows of another woman's husband, to arrange to meet him clandestinely. And her lately deadened Puritan conscience throbbed uncomfortably.

She had forced back the moss-covered old scruples that threatened to engulf her new ideas of freedom. She had forced them back, after an all-day battle. And now she was here— here in this dim-lit Lovers' Lane of a tea-room, waiting to hear Archer Dunne tell her again that he loved her; that she was the One Woman; that she was a Wonder Girl; that she was his adored Lady of Mystery.

And now, after all, he was: not here to tell her these glorious things. The anti-climax of the situation jarred upon Joan's taut nerves.

A man parted the curtains and came uncertainly into the room, silhouetted for a moment against the glare of light from the foyer. At sight of his blackly outlined figure, Joan was certain he was Dunne. To her amaze, she was aware of a little pang of sick terror, something perilously akin to disgust— not at all the joyous thrill she expected.

Then the man moved forward, and she saw he was not Dunne at all, but one of the ten thousand other New Yorkers cast in the same general mold and clad after the same sartorial pattern. And she felt a sudden glad relief, a relief that bewildered her.

The man glanced about him. A stunningly pretty woman, far down the room, raised a white-gloved arm in signal, and he hastened eagerly toward her.

Joan did not note his progress. She was too much absorbed in wondering at her own unexpected change of mind. From her unbidden emotions at first glimpse

of the newcomer, she realized with a shock that she did not at all want to meet Archer Dunne, that she was not in the very least in love with him, that she did not even want to hear him say again that he loved her or call her his Lady of Mystery.

She could not think why she had come here at all. She had not wanted to come. She knew that, now. It was abominable that Dunne should have dared to suggest such a thing, that he should have insulted her by telling of his love.

A wave of righteous indignation against the man and against herself swept over Joan. What had she done, what had she said,— she, a happy wife, — to make any man think he had a right to regard her as the type of woman to whom he could make love, whom he could meet, like this, in secret?

With charming dearth of logic, Joan raged against the man she had come to meet. Unsparingly she told herself how vile she was, how ungrateful and disloyal to the dearest husband in all the world.

BY comparison with Dunne, Hugh stood out as a Galahad. This clean minded, honorable husband of hers at whom she had lately scoffed was worth fifty Archer Dunnes— she realized that now, even if Hugh did snore sometimes. She liked to hear him snore. It was normal. It was wholesome. And that was more than anyone could say of a man who tried to steal other men's wives and who tried to disgust those wives with their own husbands— while accepting the husbands' friendship and hospitality.

Inch by inch (her eyes ever furtively upon the curtained doorway), Joan Vedder forced herself to go over the last few months' happenings. And with a belated clearness of view she saw the line of blunders that had led her to the brink where now she stood. So, they say, a criminal, after conviction, looks back with clarified vision at the path he trod so blindly.

With a gush of love and repentance, Joan's heart went out to Hugh Vedder.

On quick impulse she gathered up her wraps and got to her feet. She was going home. And what was more, she was going to tell her husband the whole nasty, horrible story and ask him if he would forgive her. She knew he would. And she wanted to get out before Archer Dunne could arrive. It would avert an unpleasant scene.

HALFWAY to the door, Joan saw the curtains part. A woman came in. At the first brief glimpse of her, Joan shrank back and crouched against the wall, flattening her slender body as much as she could, to avoid notice. For she recognized the newcomer.

It was Archer Dunne's wife.

Mrs. Dunne was alone. Her eyes still unused to the dimness, she passed close by Joan without seeing her and went on toward the lower end of the long room.

Here were tragedy and complication and French farce, all rolled into one! Suppose Archer Dunne had arrived five minutes sooner? Joan turned sick at the thought. This woman would have caught her and Dunne together— and here, of all places on earth!

Dizzy at thought of her own miraculous escape, Joan tottered out through the doorway and into the foyer. There were several men and women loitering about. Down the foyer, and moving toward the tea-room, a bell-boy was shuffling.

As the bell-boy advanced, he intoned nasally, at ten-second intervals:

"Mrs. Senoj, please!— *Mrs. Senoj, please!*— Mrs. Senoj, please!"

Joan was minded to flee past him. Then natural pluck came to her aid. Soon or late, she must tell Archer Dunne that she wanted nothing more to-do with him. It would be easier to say it over the telephone than face to face— and far safer than by letter. She halted the chanting bell-boy.

That worthy hireling checked his eternal drone of "Mrs. Senoj, please!" and graciously told her to what telephone booth to go.

Once inside the booth, Joan once more took hold of her slipping courage and picked up the receiver. But her quavered "Hello" sounded hoarse and unnatural, even to herself. Nervousness had turned her throat and mouth into desert dryness.

"Hello," came the man's answer, in somewhat faltering tones— tones, however, which gradually gained in strength and steadiness as, without waiting for further word from the suddenly trembling Joan, he went on speaking:

"You will probably think I am a cur or a milksop," he began. "And perhaps I am. But I can't meet you there, today, or any other day. I thought I could. I thought I wanted to. But I can't. And I find I don't want to. Please don't think I'm trying to be rude. I'm not. But it's got to be said, once and for all."

Joan gasped. Then she listened open-mouthed, breathless, as he continued:

"I've been thinking it over, all day, all last night. I haven't been able to think of anything else. And the more I've thought, the more clearly I've seen I can't do it. You are laughing at me for a fool. I don't blame you. But my ways aren't your ways. And now I see they never can be. I— I love my own wife. I love her with all my heart and soul. I love her so much that I can't enjoy even a harmless little flirtation with any other woman. I love her so much that I can't dishonour her by meeting any other woman and taking tea with her alone, at such a place as the Prince Croesus. I can't. I'm sorry. I tried to. I tried to make myself think it was all right, that even such an innocent affair with you would be a delightful adventure. But it's no use.

"I know what you are thinking of me. I know how a woman of the world regards such things and how you will look down on me for a milk-and-water Puritan. But I can't help it. There are still such things as right and wrong, even here in New York. To you, such a thing would be all right. To me, it would be wrong—

hideously wrong. I would despise myself, forever, and I wouldn't dare look my sweet-soiled wife in the face again. I suppose you won't want to see me any more. I think it would be wiser and happier for all of us, in the circumstances, to let the whole pleasant acquaintanceship drop, here and now. I'll arrange it with my wife without giving any reason. I can do it. And you can say whatever you think best to Mr. Dunne. Good-by."

Joan listened in dumbly horrified fascination— even to the faint click as her husband, at the wire's far end, hung up the receiver.

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7: Halima and the Scorpions

Robert Hichens

1864-1950

Collected in: *The Black Spaniel, and Other Stories*, 1905

IN travelling about the world one collects a number of those trifles of all sorts, usually named "curiosities," many of them worthless if it were not for the memories they recall. The other day I was clearing out a bureau before going abroad, and in one of the drawers I came across a hedgehog's foot, set in silver, and hung upon a tarnished silver chain. I picked it up in the Sahara, and here is its history.

MOHAMMED El Aïd Ben Ali Tidjani, marabout of Tamacine, is a great man in the Sahara Desert. His reputation for piety reaches as far as Tunis and Algiers, to the north of Africa, and to the uttermost parts of the Southern Desert, even to the land of the Touaregs. He dwells in a sacred village of dried mud and brick, surrounded by a high wall, pierced with loopholes, and ornamented with gates made of palm wood, and covered with sheets of iron. In his mansion, above the entrance of which is written "L'Entrée de Sidi Laïd," are clocks innumerable, musical boxes, tables, chairs, sofas, and even framed photographs. Negro servants bow before him, wives, brothers, children, and obsequious hangers-on of various nationalities, black, bronze, and *café au lait* in colour, offer him perpetual incense. Rich worshippers of the Prophet and the Prophet's priests send him presents from afar; camels laden with barley, donkeys staggering beneath sacks of grain, ostrich plumes, silver ornaments, perfumes, red-eyed doves, gazelles whose tiny hoofs are decorated with gold-leaf or painted in bright colours. The tributes laid before the tomb of Cheikh Sidi El Hadj Ali ben Sidi El Hadj Aïssa are, doubtless, his perquisites as guardian of the saint. He dresses in silks of the tints of the autumn leaf, and carries in his mighty hand a staff hung with apple-green ribbons. And his smile is as the smile of the rising sun in an oleograph.

This personage one day blessed the hedgehog's foot I at present possess, and endowed it solemnly with miraculous curative properties. It would cure, he declared, all the physical ills that can beset a woman. Then he gave it into the hands of a great Agha, who was about to take a wife, accepted a tribute of dates, a grandfather's clock from Paris, and a grinding organ of Barbary as a small acknowledgment of his generosity, and probably thought very little more about the matter.

Now, in the course of time, it happened that the hedgehog's foot came into the possession of a dancing-girl of Touggourt, called Halima. How Halima got hold of it I cannot say, nor does anyone in Touggourt exactly know, so far as I am aware. But, alas! even Aghas are sometimes human, and play pitch and toss with

magical things. As Grand Dukes who go to disport themselves in Paris sometimes hie them incognito to the "Café de la Sorcière," so do Aghas flit occasionally to Touggourt, and appear upon the high benches of the great dancing-house of the Ouled Naïls in the outskirts of the city. And Halima was young and beautiful. Her eyes were large, and she wore a golden crown ornamented with very tall feathers. And she danced the dance of the hands and the dance of the fainting fit with great perfection. And the wives of Aghas have to put up with a good deal. However it was, one evening Halima danced with the hedgehog's foot that had been blessed dangling from her jewelled girdle. And there was a great scandal in the city.

For in the four quarters of Touggourt, the quarter of the Jews, of the foreigners, of the freed negroes, and of the citizens proper, it was known that the hedgehog's foot had been blessed and endowed with magical powers by the mighty marabout of Tamacine.

Halima herself affirmed it, standing at the front door of her terraced dwelling in the court, while the other dancers gathered round, looking like a troop of macaws in their feathers and their finery. With a brazen pride 272she boasted that she possessed something worth more than uncut rubies, carpets from Bagdad, and silken petticoats sewn with sequins. And the Ouled Naïls could not gainsay her. Indeed, they turned their huge, kohl-tinted eyes upon the relic with envy, and stretched their painted hands towards it as if to a god in prayer. But Halima would let no one touch it, and presently, taking from her bosom her immense door key, she retired to enshrine the foot in her box, studded with huge brass nails, such as stands by each dancer's bed.

And the scandal was very great in the city that such a precious thing should be between the hands of an Ouled Naïl, a girl of no repute, come thither in a palanquin on camelback to earn her dowry, and who would depart into the sands of the south, laden with the gold wrung from the pockets of loose livers.

Only Ben-Abid smiled gently when he heard of the matter.

Ben-Abid belonged to the *Tribu des blancs*, and was the singer attached to the café of the smokers of the hashish. He it was who struck each evening a guitar made of goatskin backed by sand tortoise, and lifted up his voice in the song "Lalia":

Ladham Pacha who has left the heart of his enemies trembling—
O Lalia! O Lalia!
The love of women is no more sweet to me after thy love.
Thy hand is white, and thy bracelets are of the purest silver—
And I, Ladham Pacha, love thee, without thought of what will come.
O Lalia! O Lalia!

The assembled smokers breathed out under the black ceiling their deep refrain of "Wurra-Wurra!" and Larbi, in his Zouave jacket and his tight, pleated skirt,

threw back his small head, exposing his long brown throat, and danced like a tired phantom in a dream.

Ben-Abid smiled, showing two rows of lustrous teeth.

"Should Halima fall ill, the foot will not avail to cure her," he murmured. "Ben Ali Tidjani's blessing could never rest on an Ouled Naïl, who, like a little viper of the sand, has stolen into the Agha's bosom, and filled his veins with subtle poison. She deems she has a treasure; but let her beware: that which would protect a woman who wears the veil will do naught for a creature who shows her face to the stranger, and dances by night for the Zouaves and for the Spahis who patrol the dunes."

And he struck his long fingers upon the goatskin of his instrument, while Kouïdah, the boy who played upon the little glasses and shook the tambourine of reeds, slipped forth to tell in the city what Ben-Abid had spoken.

Halima was enraged when she heard of it, more especially as there were found many to believe Ben-Abid's words. She stood before her room upon the terrace, where Zouaves were playing cards with the dancers in the sun, and she cursed him in a shrill voice, calling him son of a scorpion, and requesting that Allah would send great troubles upon his relations, even upon his aged grandmother. That the miraculous reputation of her treasure should be thus scouted, and herself insulted, vexed her to the soul.

"Let the son of a camel with a swollen tongue dare to come to me and repeat what he has said!" she cried. "Let him come out from his lair in the café of the hashish smokers, and, as Allah is great, I will spit in his face. The reviler of women! The son of a scorpion! Cursed be his—"

And then once more she desired evil to the grandmother of Ben-Abid, and to all his family. And the Zouaves and the dancers laughed over their card games. Indeed, the other dancers were merry, and not ill-pleased with Ben-Abid's words. For even in the Sahara the women do not care that one of them should be exalted above the rest.

Now, in Touggourt gossip is carried from house to house, as the sand grains are carried on the wind. Within an hour Ben-Abid heard that his grandmother had been cursed, and himself called son of a scorpion, by Halima. Kouïdah, the boy, ran on naked feet to tell him in the café of the hashish smokers. When he heard he smiled.

"To-night I will go to the dancing-house, and speak with Halima," he murmured. And then he plucked the guitar of goatskin that was ever in his hands, and sang softly of the joys of Ladham Pacha, half closing his eyes, and swaying his head from side to side.

And Kouïdah, the boy, ran back across the camel market to tell in the court of the dancers the words of Ben-Abid.

That night, when the nomads lit their brushwood fires in the market; when the Kabyle bakers, in their striped turbans and their close-fitting jerseys of yellow and of red, ran to and fro bearing the trays of flat, new-made loaves; when the dwarfs beat on the ground with their staffs to summon the mob to watch their antics; and the story-tellers put on their glasses, and sat them down at their boards between the candles; Ben-Abid went forth secretly from the hashish café wrapped in his burnous. He sought out in the quarter of the freed negroes a certain man called Sadok, who dwelt alone.

This Sadok was lean as a spectre, and had a skin like parchment. He was a renowned plunger in desert wells, and could remain beneath the water, men said, for a space of four minutes. But he could also do another thing. He could eat scorpions. And this he would do for a small sum of money. Only, during the fast of Ramadan, between the rising and the going down of the sun, so long as a white thread could be distinguished from a black, he would not eat even a scorpion, because the tasting of food by day in that time is forbidden by the Prophet.

When Ben-Abid struck on his door Sadok came forth, gibbering in his tangled beard, and half naked.

"Oh, brother!" said Ben-Abid. "Here is money if thou canst find me three scorpions. One of them must be a black scorpion."

Sadok shot out his filthy claw, and there was fire in his eyes. But Ben-Abid's fingers closed round the money paper.

"First thou must find the scorpions, and then thou must carry them with thee to the court of the dancers, walking at my side. For, as Allah lives, I will not touch them. Afterwards thou shalt have the money."

Sadok's soul drew the shutters across his eyes. Then he led the way by tortuous alleys to an old and ruined wall of a *zgag*, in which there were as many holes as there are in a honeycomb. Here, as he knew, the scorpions loved to sleep. Thrusting his fingers here and there he presently drew forth three writhing reptiles. And one of them was black. He held them out, with a cry, to Ben-Abid.

"The money! The money!" he shrieked.

But Ben-Abid shrank back, shuddering.

"Thou must bring them to the dancers' court. Hide them well in thy garments that none may see them. Then thou shalt have the money."

Sadok hid the scorpions upon his shaven head beneath his turban, and they went by the dunes and the lonely ways to the café of the dancers.

Already the pipers were playing, and many were assembled to see the women dance; but Ben-Abid and Sadok pushed through the throng, and passed across the café to the inner court, which is open to the air, and surrounded with earthen terraces on which, in tiers, open the rooms of the dancers, each with its own front door. This court is as a mighty rabbit warren, peopled with women instead of rabbits. Pale lights gleamed in many doorways, for the dancers were dressing and

painting themselves for the dances of the body, of the hands, of the poignard, and of the handkerchief. Their shrill voices cried one to another, their heavy bracelets and necklets jingled, and the monstrous shadows of their crowned and feathered heads leaped and wavered on the yellow patches of light that lay before their doors.

"Where is Halima?" cried Ben-Abid in a loud voice. "Let Halima come forth and spit in my face!"

At the sound of his call many women ran to their doors, some half dressed, some fully attired, like Jezebels of the great desert.

"It is Ben-Abid!" went up the cry of many voices. "It is Ben-Abid, who laughs to scorn the power of the hedgehog's foot. It is the son of the camel with the swollen tongue. Halima, Halima, the child of the scorpion calls thee!"

Kouïdah, the boy, who was ever about, ran barefoot from the court into the café to tell of the doings of Ben-Abid, and in a moment the people crowded in, Zouaves and Spahis, Arabs and negroes, nomads from the south, gipsies, jugglers, and Jews. There were, too, some from Tamacine, and these were of all the most intent.

"Where is Halima?" went up the cry. "Where is Halima?"

"Who calls me?" exclaimed the voice of a girl.

And Halima came out of her door on the first terrace at the left, splendidly dressed for the dance in scarlet and gold, carrying two scarlet handkerchiefs in her hands, and with the hedgehog's foot dangling from her girdle of thin gold, studded with turquoises.

Ben-Abid stood below in the court with Sadok by his side. The crowd pressed about him from behind.

"Thou hast called me the son of a scorpion, Halima," he said, in a loud voice. "Is it not true?"

"It is true," she answered, with a venomous smile of hatred. "And thou hast said that the hedgehog's foot, blessed by the great marabout of Tamacine, would avail naught against the deadly sickness of a dancing-girl. Is it not true?"

"It is true," answered Ben-Abid.

"Thou art a liar!" cried Halima.

"And so art thou!" said Ben-Abid slowly.

A deep murmur rose from the crowd, which pressed more closely beneath the terrace, staring up at the scarlet figure upon it.

"If I am a liar thou canst not prove it!" cried Halima furiously. "I spit upon thee! I spit upon thee!"

And she bent down her feathered head from the terrace and spat passionately in his face.

Ben-Abid only laughed aloud.

"I can prove that I have spoken the truth," he said. "But if I am indeed the son of a scorpion, as thou sayest, let my brothers speak for me. Let my brothers declare to all the Sahara that the truth is in my mouth. Sadok, remove thy turban!"

The plunger of the wells, with a frantic gesture, lifted his turban and discovered the three scorpions writhing upon his shaven head. Another, and longer, murmur went up from the crowd. But some shrank back and trembled, for the desert Arabs are much afraid of scorpions, which cause many deaths in the Sahara.

"What is this?" cried Halima. "How can the scorpions speak for thee?"

"They shall speak well," said Ben-Abid. "Their voices cannot lie. Sleep to-night in thy room with these my brothers. Irena and Boria, the Golden Date and the Lotus Flower, shall watch beside thee. Guard in thy hand, or in thy breast, the hedgehog's foot that thou sayest can preserve from every ill. If, in the evening of to-morrow, thou dancest before the soldiers, I will give thee fifty golden coins. But, if thou dancest not, the city shall know whether Ben-Abid is a truth-teller, and whether the blessings of the great marabout can rest upon such a woman as thou art. If thou refusest thou art afraid, and thy fear proveth that thou hast no faith in the magic treasure that dangles at thy girdle."

There was a moment of deep silence. Then, from the crowd burst forth the cry of many voices:

"Put it to the proof! Ben-Abid speaks well. Put it to the proof, and may Allah judge between them."

Beneath the caked pigments on her face Halima had gone pale.

"I will not," she began.

But the cries rose up again, and with them the shrill, twittering laughter of her envious rivals.

"She has no faith in the marabout!" squawked one, who had a nose like an eagle's beak.

"She is a liar!" piped another, shaking out her silken petticoats as a bird shakes out its plumes.

And then the twitter of fierce laughter rose, shriek on shriek, and was echoed more deeply by the crowd of watching men.

"Give me the scorpions!" cried Halima passionately. "I am not afraid!"

Her desert blood was up. Her fatalism— even in the women of the Sahara it lurks— was awake. In that moment she was ready to die, to silence the bitter laughter of her rivals. It sank away as Sadok grasped the scorpions in his filthy claw, and leaped, gibbering in his beard, upon the terrace.

"Wait!" cried Halima, as he came upon her, holding forth his handful of writhing poison.

Her bosom heaved. Her lustrous eyes, heavy with kohl, shone like those of a beast at bay.

Sadok stood still, with his naked arm outstretched.

"How shall I know that the son of a scorpion will pay me the fifty golden coins? He is poor, though he speaks bravely. He is but a singer in the café of the smokers of the hashish, and cannot buy even a new garment for the close of the feast of Ramadan. How, then, shall I know that the gold will hang from my breasts when to-morrow, at the falling of the sun, I dance before the men of Touggourt?"

Ben-Abid put his hand beneath his burnous, and brought forth a bag tied at the mouth with cord.

"They are here!" he said.

"The Jews! He has been to the Jews!" cried the desert men.

"Bring a lamp!" said Ben-Abid.

And while Irena and Boria, the Golden Date and the Lotus Flower, held the lights, and the desert men crowded about him with the eyes of wolves that are near to starving, he counted forth the money on the terrace at Halima's feet. And she gazed down at the glittering pieces as one that gazes upon a black fate.

"And now set my brothers upon the maiden," Ben-Abid said to Sadok, gathering up the money, and casting it again into the bag, which he tied once more with the cord.

Halima did not move, but she looked upon the scorpion that was black, and her red lips trembled. Then she closed her hand upon the hedgehog's foot that hung from her golden girdle, and shut her eyes beneath her ebon eyebrows.

"Set my brothers upon her!" said Ben-Abid.

The plunger of the wells sprang upon Halima, opened her scarlet bodice roughly, plunged his claw into her swelling bosom, and withdrew it— empty.

"Kiss her close, my brothers!" whispered Ben-Abid.

A long murmur, like the growl of the tide upon a shingly beach, arose once more from the crowd. Halima turned about, and went slowly in at her lighted doorway, followed by Irena and Boria. The heavy door of palm was shut behind them. The light was hidden. There was a great silence. It was broken by Sadok's voice screaming in his beard to Ben-Abid, "My money! Give me my money!"

He snatched it with a howl, and went capering forth into the darkness.

WHEN the next night fell upon the desert there was a great crowd assembled in the café of the dancers. The pipers blew into their pipes, and swayed upon their haunches, turning their glittering eyes to and fro to see what man had a mind to press a piece of money upon their well greased foreheads. The dancers came and went, promenading arm in arm upon the earthen floor, or leaping with hands outstretched and fingers fluttering. The Kabyle attendant slipped here and there with the coffee cups, and the wreaths of smoke curled lightly upward towards the wooden roof.

But Halima came not through the open doorway holding the scarlet handkerchiefs above her head.

And presently, late in the night, they laid her body in a palanquin, and set the palanquin upon a running camel, and, while the dancers shrilled their lament amid the sands, they bore her away into the darkness of the dunes towards the south and the tents of her own people.

The jackals laughed as she went by.

BUT THE hedgehog's foot was left lying upon the floor of her chamber. Not one of the dancers would touch it.

That night I was in the café, and, hearing of all these things from Kouïdah, the boy, I went into the court, and gathered up the trinket which had brought a woman to the great silence. Next day I rode on horseback to Tamacine, asked to see the marabout and told him all the story.

He listened, smiling like the rising sun in an oleograph, and twisting in his huge hands, that were tinted with the henna, the staff with the apple-green ribbons.

When I came to the end I said:

"O, holy marabout, tell me one thing."

"Allah is just. I listen."

"If the scorpions had slept with a veiled woman who held the hedgehog's foot, how would it have been? Would the woman have died or lived?"

The marabout did not answer. He looked at me calmly, as at a child who asks questions about the mysteries of life which only the old can understand.

"These things," he said at length, "are hidden from the unbeliever. You are a Roumi. How, then, should you learn such matters?"

"But even the Roumi—"

"In the desert there are mysteries," continued the marabout, "which even the faithful must not seek to penetrate."

"Then it is useless to"

"It is very useless. It is as useless as to try to count the grains of the sand."

I said no more.

Mohammed El Aïd Ben Ali Tidjani smiled once more, and beckoned to a negro attendant, who ran with a musical box, one of the gifts of the faithful.

"This comes from Paris," he said, with a spreading complacence.

Then there was within the box a sounding click, and there stole forth a tinkling of Auber's music to *Masaniello*, "Come o'er the moonlit sea!"

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8: Life of Ma Parker

Katherine Mansfield

Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp, 1888-1923

The Nation and Atheneum 26 Feb 1921

The (London) Evening News 16 Jan 1923

Collected in: *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, 1922

New Zealand author of literary short stories, who died on 9 January 1923.

WHEN the literary gentleman, whose flat old Ma Parker cleaned every Tuesday, opened the door to her that morning, he asked after her grandson. Ma Parker stood on the doormat inside the dark little hall, and she stretched out her hand to help her gentleman shut the door before she replied. "We buried 'im yesterday, sir," she said quietly.

"Oh, dear me! I'm sorry to hear that," said the literary gentleman in a shocked tone. He was in the middle of his breakfast. He wore a very shabby dressing-gown and carried a crumpled newspaper in one hand. But he felt awkward. He could hardly go back to the warm sitting-room without saying something— something more. Then because these people set such store by funerals he said kindly, "I hope the funeral went off all right."

"Beg parding, sir?" said old Ma Parker huskily.

Poor old bird! She did look dashed. "I hope the funeral was a— a— success," said he. Ma Parker gave no answer. She bent her head and hobbled off to the kitchen, clasping the old fish bag that held her cleaning things and an apron and a pair of felt shoes. The literary gentleman raised his eyebrows and went back to his breakfast.

"Overcome, I suppose," he said aloud, helping himself to the marmalade.

Ma Parker drew the two jetty spears out of her toque and hung it behind the door. She unhooked her worn jacket and hung that up too. Then she tied her apron and sat down to take off her boots. To take off her boots or to put them on was an agony to her, but it had been an agony for years. In fact, she was so accustomed to the pain that her face was drawn and screwed up ready for the twinge before she'd so much as untied the laces. That over, she sat back with a sigh and softly rubbed her knees....

"Gran! Gran!" Her little grandson stood on her lap in his button boots. He'd just come in from playing in the street.

"Look what a state you've made your gran's skirt into— you wicked boy!"

But he put his arms round her neck and rubbed his cheek against hers.

"Gran, gi' us a penny!" he coaxed.

"Be off with you; Gran ain't got no pennies."

"Yes, you 'ave."

"No, I ain't."

"Yes, you 'ave. Gi' us one!"

Already she was feeling for the old, squashed, black leather purse.

"Well, what'll you give your gran?"

He gave a shy little laugh and pressed closer. She felt his eyelid quivering against her cheek. "I ain't got nothing," he murmured....

The old woman sprang up, seized the iron kettle off the gas stove and took it over to the sink. The noise of the water drumming in the kettle deadened her pain, it seemed. She filled the pail, too, and the washing-up bowl.

It would take a whole book to describe the state of that kitchen. During the week the literary gentleman "did" for himself. That is to say, he emptied the tea leaves now and again into a jam jar set aside for that purpose, and if he ran out of clean forks he wiped over one or two on the roller towel. Otherwise, as he explained to his friends, his "system" was quite simple, and he couldn't understand why people made all this fuss about housekeeping.

"You simply dirty everything you've got, get a hag in once a week to clean up, and the thing's done."

The result looked like a gigantic dustbin. Even the floor was littered with toast crusts, envelopes, cigarette ends. But Ma Parker bore him no grudge. She pitied the poor young gentleman for having no one to look after him. Out of the smudgy little window you could see an immense expanse of sad-looking sky, and whenever there were clouds they looked very worn, old clouds, frayed at the edges, with holes in them, or dark stains like tea.

While the water was heating, Ma Parker began sweeping the floor. "Yes," she thought, as the broom knocked, "what with one thing and another I've had my share. I've had a hard life."

Even the neighbours said that of her. Many a time, hobbling home with her fish bag she heard them, waiting at the corner, or leaning over the area railings, say among themselves, "She's had a hard life, has Ma Parker." And it was so true she wasn't in the least proud of it. It was just as if you were to say she lived in the basement-back at Number 27. A hard life!...

At sixteen she'd left Stratford and come up to London as kitching-maid. Yes, she was born in Stratford-on-Avon. Shakespeare, sir? No, people were always arsking her about him. But she'd never heard his name until she saw it on the theatres.

Nothing remained of Stratford except that "sitting in the fire-place of a evening you could see the stars through the chimley," and "Mother always 'ad 'er side of bacon, 'anging from the ceiling." And there was something— a bush, there was— at the front door, that smelt ever so nice. But the bush was very vague. She'd only remembered it once or twice in the hospital, when she'd been taken bad.

That was a dreadful place—her first place. She was never allowed out. She never went upstairs except for prayers morning and evening. It was a fair cellar. And the cook was a cruel woman. She used to snatch away her letters from home before she'd read them, and throw them in the range because they made her dreamy.... And the beedles! Would you believe it?— until she came to London she'd never seen a black beedle. Here Ma always gave a little laugh, as though— not to have seen a black beedle! Well! It was as if to say you'd never seen your own feet.

When that family was sold up she went as "help" to a doctor's house, and after two years there, on the run from morning till night, she married her husband. He was a baker.

"A baker, Mrs. Parker!" the literary gentleman would say. For occasionally he laid aside his tomes and lent an ear, at least, to this product called Life. "It must be rather nice to be married to a baker!"

Mrs. Parker didn't look so sure.

"Such a clean trade," said the gentleman.

Mrs. Parker didn't look convinced.

"And didn't you like handing the new loaves to the customers?"

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Parker, "I wasn't in the shop above a great deal. We had thirteen little ones and buried seven of them. If it wasn't the 'ospital it was the infirmary, you might say!"

"You might, *indeed*, Mrs. Parker!" said the gentleman, shuddering, and taking up his pen again.

Yes, seven had gone, and while the six were still small her husband was taken ill with consumption. It was flour on the lungs, the doctor told her at the time.... Her husband sat up in bed with his shirt pulled over his head, and the doctor's finger drew a circle on his back.

"Now, if we were to cut him open *here*, Mrs. Parker," said the doctor, "you'd find his lungs chock-a-block with white powder. Breathe, my good fellow!" And Mrs. Parker never knew for certain whether she saw or whether she fancied she saw a great fan of white dust come out of her poor dead husband's lips....

But the struggle she'd had to bring up those six little children and keep herself to herself. Terrible it had been! Then, just when they were old enough to go to school her husband's sister came to stop with them to help things along, and she hadn't been there more than two months when she fell down a flight of steps and hurt her spine. And for five years Ma Parker had another baby— and such a one for crying!— to look after. Then young Maudie went wrong and took her sister Alice with her; the two boys emigrated, and young Jim went to India with the army, and Ethel, the youngest, married a good-for-nothing little waiter who died of ulcers the year little Lennie was born. And now little Lennie— my grandson....

The piles of dirty cups, dirty dishes, were washed and dried. The ink-black knives were cleaned with a piece of potato and finished off with a piece of cork. The table was scrubbed, and the dresser and the sink that had sardine tails swimming in it....

He'd never been a strong child— never from the first. He'd been one of those fair babies that everybody took for a girl. Silvery fair curls he had, blue eyes, and a little freckle like a diamond on one side of his nose. The trouble she and Ethel had had to rear that child! The things out of the newspapers they tried him with! Every Sunday morning Ethel would read aloud while Ma Parker did her washing.

"Dear Sir,— Just a line to let you know my little Myrtil was laid out for dead.... After four bottils... gained 8 lbs. in 9 weeks, *and is still putting it on*."

And then the egg-cup of ink would come off the dresser and the letter would be written, and Ma would buy a postal order on her way to work next morning. But it was no use. Nothing made little Lennie put it on. Taking him to the cemetery, even, never gave him a colour; a nice shake-up in the bus never improved his appetite.

But he was gran's boy from the first....

"Whose boy are you?" said old Ma Parker, straightening up from the stove and going over to the smudgy window. And a little voice, so warm, so close, it half stifled her— it seemed to be in her breast under her heart— laughed out, and said, "I'm gran's boy!"

At that moment there was a sound of steps, and the literary gentleman appeared, dressed for walking.

"Oh, Mrs. Parker, I'm going out."

"Very good, sir."

"And you'll find your half-crown in the tray of the inkstand."

"Thank you, sir."

"Oh, by the way, Mrs. Parker," said the literary gentleman quickly, "you didn't throw away any cocoa last time you were here— did you?"

"No, sir."

"*Very* strange. I could have sworn I left a teaspoonful of cocoa in the tin." He broke off. He said softly and firmly, "You'll always tell me when you throw things away— won't you, Mrs. Parker?" And he walked off very well pleased with himself, convinced, in fact, he'd shown Mrs. Parker that under his apparent carelessness he was as vigilant as a woman.

The door banged. She took her brushes and cloths into the bedroom. But when she began to make the bed, smoothing, tucking, patting, the thought of little Lennie was unbearable. Why did he have to suffer so? That's what she couldn't understand. Why should a little angel child have to arsk for his breath and fight for it? There was no sense in making a child suffer like that.

...From Lennie's little box of a chest there came a sound as though something was boiling. There was a great lump of something bubbling in his chest that he couldn't get rid of. When he coughed the sweat sprang out on his head; his eyes bulged, his hands waved, and the great lump bubbled as a potato knocks in a saucepan. But what was more awful than all was when he didn't cough he sat against the pillow and never spoke or answered, or even made as if he heard. Only he looked offended.

"It's not your poor old gran's doing it, my lovey," said old Ma Parker, patting back the damp hair from his little scarlet ears. But Lennie moved his head and edged away. Dreadfully offended with her he looked— and solemn. He bent his head and looked at her sideways as though he couldn't have believed it of his gran.

But at the last... Ma Parker threw the counterpane over the bed. No, she simply couldn't think about it. It was too much— she'd had too much in her life to bear. She'd borne it up till now, she'd kept herself to herself, and never once had she been seen to cry. Never by a living soul. Not even her own children had seen Ma break down. She'd kept a proud face always. But now! Lennie gone— what had she? She had nothing. He was all she'd got from life, and now he was took too. Why must it all have happened to me? she wondered. "What have I done?" said old Ma Parker. "What have I done?"

As she said those words she suddenly let fall her brush. She found herself in the kitchen. Her misery was so terrible that she pinned on her hat, put on her jacket and walked out of the flat like a person in a dream. She did not know what she was doing. She was like a person so dazed by the horror of what has happened that he walks away— anywhere, as though by walking away he could escape....

It was cold in the street. There was a wind like ice. People went flitting by, very fast; the men walked like scissors; the women trod like cats. And nobody knew— nobody cared. Even if she broke down, if at last, after all these years, she were to cry, she'd find herself in the lock-up as like as not.

But at the thought of crying it was as though little Lennie leapt in his gran's arms. Ah, that's what she wants to do, my dove. Gran wants to cry. If she could only cry now, cry for a long time, over everything, beginning with her first place and the cruel cook, going on to the doctor's, and then the seven little ones, death of her husband, the children's leaving her, and all the years of misery that led up to Lennie. But to have a proper cry over all these things would take a long time. All the same, the time for it had come. She must do it. She couldn't put it off any longer; she couldn't wait any more.... Where could she go?

"She's had a hard life, has Ma Parker." Yes, a hard life, indeed! Her chin began to tremble; there was no time to lose. But where? Where?

She couldn't go home; Ethel was there. It would frighten Ethel out of her life. She couldn't sit on a bench anywhere; people would come arsking her questions.

She couldn't possibly go back to the gentleman's flat; she had no right to cry in strangers' houses. If she sat on some steps a policeman would speak to her.

Oh, wasn't there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody worrying her? Wasn't there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out— at last?

Ma Parker stood, looking up and down. The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon. And now it began to rain. There was nowhere.

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9: The Prodigal Daughter

J. Winton Heming
1900-1953
The Australian Woman's Mirror, 23 March 1926

ZARIEN DELLAMESTRO, the famous prima donna, had sung all over the world and, even if she had not had a good press-agent, her matrimonial adventures would have made the name of anyone with such a voice as hers familiar to everybody. She had had four husbands. One a mere count, whom she raised from mediocrity for a year (the period of their wedded bliss); another a millionaire who gave her jewels, cars, palaces, and then her liberty by running off with a far prettier member of her chorus. The others were not so important, but— well, they had happened.

But everyone knows these things. What everyone does not know is that Zarien Dellamestro once lived on a tiny farm belonging to her father, Bill Perkins, near the erstwhile sleepy town of Wandibindi; that she had been called by the industrious inhabitants of that hamlet by the prosaic name of Eliza, and that she had run away from there with a travelling circus more than thirty years ago.

The prima donna made certain that no one would learn these things. Her publicity manager created for her a romantic history— she was born in Spain of poor parents, "discovered" and sent to Italy to be trained as a worldconqueror. Zarien lived up to the publicity-man's tale faultlessly and, being a woman, could keep secrets well enough where her own reputation was concerned. So her lowly past lay almost forgotten by the prima donna herself.

But memory is never quite dead; and one day, as Zarien sat in her suite in a palatial hotel and gazed out broodingly over Sydney's wet roof-tops, the memory of her childhood was vividly alive.

"Thirty years!" she murmured to the splashing rain. "Thirty years! Dad and Mum will be nearing sixty; little Tom and Bertha and Kate will be grown up."

And her first boy, Jim Brown, he would be grown up, too— that awkward youth she had thought so much of.

Zarien Dellamestro sighed, and over her soul swept a flood of nausea, a sickness of the artificial laughter and tinsel, a revulsion against the pettiness of stage life, a hatred of the noise and bustle and wet pavements and work, work, work of the cities. Oh, to loaf in the cool shade of a tree, to see nothing but the lowing cattle and to know that no one would remind you that you were due at Such-and-such or had an appointment with So-and-so in a few moments!

Suddenly to Zarien Dellamestro, to the world's prima donna, the prospect of being Eliza Perkins again became dazzling.

"Home is not far away," she mused. "And I am sick— sick to death of all this!"

She rose and paced the room.

"I wonder if they are still all there— whether the girls are married? If Oh, I'm homesick! What's to stop me going? My season has ended —I am supposed to be resting. What a welcome they would give me!... I'll go. Yes; I'll retire, and loaf for the rest of my life."

She stepped to a pushbell on the wall and pressed it with a dainty forefinger. Her maid appeared.

"Find Hart," Zarien commanded. "Ring the company's offices, his club, everywhere —but find him. And see if Mr. Drake is in his suite and send him to me."

A little while— a very little while, for a prima donna's commands must be instantly obeyed— and Drake, Zarien's business manager, and Hart, her publicity-man, entered together. Drake was a small, grey-haired, worried-looking man— as is natural in one who handles the business affairs of a temperamental artist; Hart was a portly, genial-faced liar. Drake stood at attention; Hart lounged forward and dropped into an armchair.

"How much money do I possess?" Zarien asked Drake.

"At present excluding a few minor accounts unpaid two hundred and twenty-six thousand, eight hundred and twenty-four pounds, eight shillings," that estimable ready-reckoner retorted glibly.

"It is enough," the prima donna replied. She turned to Hart, who was teasing one of her prize puppies. "I want you to announce that," she paused dramatically, "I have decided to retire from the stage."

The shock of her words flung Hart to his feet, while Drake rocked on his heels.

"You w-w-what?" Hart cried.

Zarien would not have been who she was had she not thoroughly enjoyed the sensa- tion her words created; but even as she enjoyed it the piquant scent of the open fields was in her nostrils.

"I have decided to retire," she repeated, "and I mean it."

The train which carried (the late) Zarien Dellamestro, prima donna— who had now become just plain Eliza Perkins, prodigal daughter— back to her home-town was stuffy and dirty, but she did not mind. As she climbed down to the platform of her destination she inspected the rather elaborate station. Her town had not boasted a railway-station when she had left it, and she could not at once get her bearings.

She beckoned a porter.

"Could you tell me," she asked him, "if the Perkinses still live here?"

"The Perkinses," he echoed. "The Perk— yes, follow the road for two miles west. It's a little tumble-down place."

"Can I get a conveyance?"

"Yes, plenty. There's a taxi-rank outside."

Taxi-rank! Eliza opened her eyes with astonishment. The old town was "looking up."

She astonished the porter by giving him a tip, and passed through the gate to the outer world. She shut her eyes. She could picture in her mind the scene before her.

Then she opened her eyes— and gasped! The town-pump— that old-time centre of village gossip— had metamorphosed into a fine war memorial and splashing fountain. In the background stood, not Casey's Pub, but a three-storey, imposing structure— the Commercial Hotel. She looked for the Town Hall and saw instead a long, brick building—the Rialto Picture Palace— while the Town Hall stood, a pile of grey masonry, just beyond it. On her right the general store was no more, for where it had been stood a "Universal Emporium." The little church had grown to a cathedral, and the tumble-down, ricketty houses that she had known were now shops. Shops! There were shops everywhere—large, impressive shops. A line of six taxi-cabs was in the near foreground. Even the park of happy memory was built on.

Eliza groaned. To leave the city for this— a smaller edition of the city itself !

She directed the uniformed, middle-aged taxi-driver to convey her to the Perkins's farm.

During the two-miles journey she searched in vain for the lowing cattle of her memory, and she was surprised to find a new concrete bridge over the creek in which she had once bathed.

The taxi stopped before a ramshackle, rambling farmhouse which crouched some distance back from the road. The sight of it brought a flood of memories surging over Eliza's heart. It, at least, was unchanged. Except for many signs of decaying old age it was the same homestead she had left.

She sighed happily as the taxi-driver set her suit-case down beside her. She turned questioning eyes to him.

"Haven't I seen you before?" she asked.

The man eyed her appraisingly.

"I dunno," he said. "I lived 'ere all me life. Name's Jim Brown."

Eliza recoiled. Could it be? This grey-haired, ogling, tobacco-chewing male her Jim Brown— her first sweetheart! She choked, pushed a ten-shilling note into his hand and almost ran.

A woman appeared at the doorway of the house. Eliza looked hard— and harder.

Yes, this would be her mother, this dirty, slatternly woman who was dressed— if one could call it dressed— in an old, dipping, dragging skirt and shabby blouse.

As the woman left the doorway and came out on to the verandah there streamed behind her eight other persons. Eliza shuddered. Although she could not positively identify any one of the brood she could make some fairly accurate

guesses. The untidy woman with the three dirty children clinging to her skirt would be her sister Bertha. The moustached man who kicked at the dog as though from habit she could not place— maybe he was Bertha's husband. The tall, vacant-eyed man picking his teeth— for Eliza had evidently interrupted the midday meal— was surely brother Tom. The old, peering, unkempt man would be her father; while the younger woman chewing the greasy dish-cloth would be her sister Kate.

Into Eliza's mind came the resolve that she would not proclaim her identity straightaway. She would wait a little while.

"Yes, ma'am?" her mother said with a toothless grin as the singer approached.

"I— I— was looking for a quiet place to stay," Eliza murmured. "And I was— er— advised to come here."

Her mother and the "chorus" stared vacantly, and the prima donna felt more stage-fright than she had ever experienced at any public appearance before.

"We ain't got much room," the old woman said after a pause. "But if yer like ter stay— an' pay— yer can."

"Better come inside," Bertha said, and led the way down a dark passage where Eliza stumbled over strewn home-made toys.

They entered what Eliza remembered had been the "parlor." The couch in the corner was covered with disarranged bed-clothes and the dust on the furniture totally obscured its original color.

"We wasn't expectin' visitors," Bertha said.

Eliza picked the cleanest and clearest chair and sat down. The family had taken up a position in the doorway— except the children, who were climbing on the visitor's chair. Eliza frowned at them vainly.

"Yer comes fr'm the city, don't yer?" her father asked.

She nodded.

The old man swallowed hard and scowled.

"Ever meet a girl called Eliza Perkins there?" he asked.

Eliza didn't know why, but her head wagged a negative.

"She's me daughter," the old man went on. "She run away years ago with a circus. I'm afraid to think what she'd be now. She was alwus a wild one, an' I 'ope she never comes back 'ere— that's all I 'opes—the ungrateful strumpet."

It was Eliza's turn to swallow.

"I'll fix yer up a room," her mother put in.

"No— er— don't trouble," the prodigal daughter said hastily. "I don't think I— well, I can't stay— I won't be staying, thank you. I must get away."

She rose suddenly and made for the door. The amazed family fell back before her. They did not speak. Their minds were groping for the reason of this sudden change.

Eliza stumbled down the passage, came upon Bertha's eldest hopeful striving to break open her suit-case with a large stone, seized the case and went dizzily on down the path— the dog yapping at her heels.

"Home!" she sobbed. "Home, sweet home— what a mockery!"

She dragged herself over the two miles of uneven road in a daze, while the hot sun she had yearned for burnt and stung her. On one of her frequent rests she took her cheque-book from her handbag and scribbled out a cheque with her father's name after the word "Pay." She made it out for a substantial amount and, her conscience somewhat satisfied, continued onwards.

Two days later the world was informed through the mighty agency of the Press that "Zarien Dellamestro has been prevailed upon by the clamant, insistent voice of her adoring public to leave her retirement, and she has decided to return to the stage."

And before we blame Eliza let us remember the Biblical injunction:

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

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10: My Maiden Brief

W. S. Gilbert

William Schwenck Gilbert, 1836-1911

The Cornhill Magazine, Dec 1863

Collected in: *Foggerty's Fairy and other tales*, 1890

LATE ON A certain May morning, as I was sitting at a modest breakfast in my "residence chambers," Pump Court, Temple, my attention was claimed by a single knock at an outer door, common to the chambers of Felix Polter, and of myself, Horace Penditton, both barristers-at-law of the Inner Temple.

The outer door was not the only article common to Polter and myself. We also shared what Polter (who wrote farces) was pleased to term a "property" clerk, who did nothing at all, and a "practicable" laundress, who did everything. There existed also a communion of interest in tea-cups, razors, gridirons, candlesticks, &c.; for although neither of us was particularly well supplied with the necessaries of domestic life, each happened to possess the very articles in which the other was deficient. So we got on uncommonly well together, each regarding his friend in the light of an indispensable other self. We had both embraced the "higher walk" of the legal profession, and were patiently waiting for the legal profession to return the compliment.

The single knock raised some well-founded apprehensions in both our minds.

"Walker!" said I to the property clerk.

"Sir!"

"If that knock is for me, I'm out you know."

"Of course, sir!"

"And Walker!" cried Polter.

"Sir!"

"If it's for me, I'm not at home!" Polter always rejoiced if he could manage to make the conversation partake of a Maddisonian Mortonic character you want; Mr. Walker opened the door.

"Mr. Penditton's a breakfasting with the Master of the Rolls, if it's him and if it isn't, Mr. Polter's with the Attorney General."

"You don't say so!" remarked the visitor; "then you'll give this to Mr. Penditton, as soon as the Master can make up his mind to part with him."

And so saying, he handed to Walker a lovely parcel of brief paper, tied up neatly with a piece of red tape, and minuted "Central Criminal Court, May Sessions, 1860. —The Queen on the prosecution of Ann Black v. Elizabeth Briggs. Brief for the prisoner. Mr. Penditton, one guinea. —Poddle and Shaddery, Brompton Square."

So it had come at last! Only an Old Bailey brief, it is true; but still a brief. We scarcely knew what to make of it. Polter looked at me, and I looked at Polter, and then- we both looked at the brief.

It turned out to be a charge against Elizabeth Briggs, widow, of picking pockets in an omnibus. It appeared from my "instructions," that my client was an elderly lady, and religious. On the 2ud April then last she entered an Islington omnibus, with, the view of attending a tea and prayer meeting in Bell Court, Islington. A woman in the omnibus missed her purse, and accused Mrs. Briggs, who sat on her right, of having stolen it. The poor soul, speechless with horror at the charge, was dragged out of the omnibus, and as the purse was found in a pocket in the left hand side of her dress, she was given into custody. As it was stated by the police that she had been "in trouble" before, the infatuated magistrate who examined her committed her for trial.

"There, my boy, your fortune's made," said Polter.

"But I don't see the use of my taking it," said I, "there's nothing to be said for her."

"Not take it? Won't you though? I'll see about that. You shall take it, and you shall get her off, too! Highly respectable old lady— attentive member of well known congregation— parson to speak to her character, no doubt. As honest as you are!"

"But the purse was found upon her."

"Well, sir, and what of that? Poor woman left handed, and pocket in left of dress. Robbed woman right-handed, and pocket in right of dress. Poor woman sat on right of robbed woman. Robbed woman, replacing her purse, slipped it accidentally into poor woman's pocket. Ample folds of dress, you know— crinolines overlapping, and all that. —Splendid defence for you!"

"Well, but she's an old hand, it seems. The police know her."

"Police always do; 'always know everybody'; police maxim. Swear anything, they will."

Polter really seemed so sanguine about it that I began to look at the case hopefully, and to think that some thing might he done with it. He talked to me with such effect that he not only convinced me that there was attorney; a good deal to be said in Mrs. Briggs's favour, but I actually began to look upon her as an innocent victim of circumstantial evidence, and determined that no effort should be wanting on my part to procure her release from a degrading but unmerited confinement.

Of the firm of Poddle & Shaddery I knew nothing whatever, and how they came to entrust Mrs. Briggs's case to me I can form no conception. As we (for Polter took so deep a personal interest in the success of Mrs. Briggs's case that he completely identified himself, in my mind, with her fallen fortunes,) resolved to go to work in a thoroughly business-like manner, we determined to commence

operations by searching for the firm of Poddle & Shaddery in the *Law List*. To our dismay the *Law List* of that year had no record of Poddle, neither did Shaddery find a place in its pages. This was serious, and Polter did not improve matters by suddenly recollecting that he once heard an old Q.C. say that, as a rule, the farther west of Temple Bar the shadier the so that assuming Polter's friend to have come to a correct conclusion on this point, a firm dating officially from Brompton Square, and whose name did not appear in Mr. Dalbiac's *Law List*, was a legitimate object of suspicion. But Polter, who took a hopeful view of anything which he thought might lead to good farce " situations," and who probably imagined that my first appearance on any stage as counsel for the defence was likely to be rich in suggestions, remarked that they might possibly have been certificated since the publishing of the last *Law List*; and as for the dictum about Temple Bar, why, the case of Poddle and Shaddery might be one of those very exceptions whose existence is necessary to the proof of every general rule. So Polter and I determined to treat the firm in a spirit of charity, and accept their brief. As the May sessions of oyer and terminer did, not commence until the 8th, I had four clear days in which to study my brief and prepare my defence. Besides, there was a murder case, and a desperate burglary or two, which would probably be taken first, so that it was unlikely that the case of the poor soul whose cause I had espoused would be tried before the 12th. So I had plenty of time to master what Polter and I agreed was one of the most painful cases of circumstantial evidence ever submitted to a British jury; and I really believe that, by the first day of the May sessions, I was intimately acquainted with the details of every case of pocket-picking reported in *Cox's Criminal Cases* and *Buckler's Shorthand Reports*.

On the night of the 11th I asked Bodger of Brasenose, Norton of Gray's Inn, Cadbury of the Lancers, and three or four other men, college chums principally, to drop in at Pump Court, and hear a rehearsal of my speech for the defence, in the forthcoming *cause celebre* of the Queen on the prosecution of Ann Black v. Elizabeth Briggs. At nine o'clock they began to appear, and by ten all were assembled. Pipes and strong waters were produced, and Norton of Gray's was forthwith raised to the Bench by the style and dignity of Sir Joseph Norton, one of the Barons of Her Majesty's Court of Exchequer; Cadbury, Bodger, and another represented the jury; Wilkinson of Lincoln's Inn was counsel for the prosecution, Polter was clerk of arraigns, and Walker, my clerk, was the prosecutrix.

Everything went satisfactorily; Wilkinson broke down in his speech for the prosecution; his witness prevaricated and contradicted himself in a preposterous manner; and my speech for the defence was voted to be one of the most masterly specimens of forensic ingenuity that had ever come before the notice of the Court; and the consequence was that the prisoner (inadequately represented by a statuette of the Greek slave) was discharged, and Norton, who would have looked

more like a Baron of the Exchequer if he had looked less like a tipsy churchwarden, remarked that she left the Court without a stain on her character.

The Court then adjourned for refreshment, and the conversation took a general turn, after canvassing the respective merits of "May it please your ludship," and "May it please you, my lud," as an introduction to a counsel's speech— a discussion which ended in favour of the latter form, as being a trifle more independent in its character, I remember proposing that the health of Elizabeth Briggs should be drunk in a solemn and respectful bumper; and as the evening wore on, I am afraid I became exceedingly indignant with Cadbury, because he had taken the liberty of holding up to public ridicule an imaginary (and highly undignified) *carte-de visite* of my unfortunate client.

The 12th May, big with the fate of Penditton and Briggs, dawned in the usual manner. At ten o'clock Polter and I drove up in wigs and gowns to the Old Bailey; as well because we kept those imposing garments at our chambers, not having any use for them elsewhere, as to impress passers-by and the loungers below the Court with a conviction that we were not only Old Bailey counsel, but had come down from our usual sphere of action at Westminster, to conduct a case of more than ordinary complication. Impressed with a spectacles; sense of the propriety of presenting an accurate professional appearance, I had taken remarkable pains with my toilet. I had the previous morning shaved off a flourishing moustache, and sent Walker out for half-a dozen serious collars, as substitutes for the unprofessional "lay-downs" I usually wore. I was dressed in a correct evening suit, and wore a pair of thin gold and Polter remarked, that I looked the sucking Bencher to the life. Polter, whose interest in the accuracy of my "get-up" was almost fatherly, had totally neglected his own; and he made his appearance in the raggedest of beards and moustaches under his wig, and the sloppiest of cheap drab lounging-coats under his gown.

I modestly took my place in the back row of the seats allotted to the Bar; Polter took his in the very front, in order to have an opportunity, at the close of the case, of telling the leading counsel, in the hearing of the attorneys, the name and address of the young and rising barrister who had just electrified the Court. In various parts of the building I detected Cadbury, Wilkinson, and others, who had represented judge, jury, and counsel, on the previous evening. They had been instructed by Polter (who had had some experience in "packing" a house) to distribute themselves about the Court, and, at the termination of the speech for the defence, to give vent to their feelings in that applause which is always so quickly suppressed by the officers of a court of justice. I was rather annoyed at this, as I did not consider it altogether legitimate; and my annoyance was immensely increased when I found that my three elderly maiden aunts, to whom I had been foolish enough to confide the fact of my having to appear on the 12th, were seated in state in that portion of the room allotted to friends of the Bench

and Bar, and busied themselves by informing everybody within whisper-shot, that I was to defend Elizabeth Briggs, and that this was my first brief It was some little consolation, however, to find the unceremonious manner in which the facts of the cases that preceded mine were explained and commented on by judge, jury, and counsel, caused those ladies great uneasiness, and, indeed, compelled them, on one or two occasions, to beat an unceremonious retreat.

At length the clerk of arraigns called the case of Briggs, and with my heart in my mouth I began to try to recollect the opening words of my speech for the defence, but I was interrupted in that hopeless task by the appearance of Elizabeth in the dock.

She was a pale, elderly widow, rather buxom, and remarkably neatly dressed in slightly rusty mourning. Her hair was arranged in two sausage curls, one on each side of her head, and looped in two festoons over the forehead. She appeared to feel her position acutely, and although she did not weep, her red eyes showed evident traces of recent tears. She grasped the edge of the dock, and rocked backwards and forwards, accompanying the motion with a low moaning sound, that was extremely touching. Polter looked back at me with an expression which plainly said, "If ever an innocent woman appeared in that dock, that woman is Elizabeth Briggs!"

The clerk of arraigns now proceeded to charge the jury. "Gentlemen of the jury, the prisoner at the bar, Elizabeth Briggs, is indicted for that she did, on the 2nd April last, steal from the person of Ann Black a purse containing ten shillings and fourpence, the moneys of the said Ann Black. There is another count to the indictment, charging her with having received the same, knowing it to have been stolen. To both of these counts the prisoner has pleaded 'Not Guilty,' and it is your charge to try whether she is guilty or not guilty." Then to the Bar, "Who appears in this case?"

Nobody replying on behalf of the Crown, I rose and remarked that I appeared for the defence. A counsel here said that he believed that the brief for the prosecution was entrusted to Mr. Porter, but that that gentleman was engaged at the Middlesex Sessions in a case which was likely to occupy several hours, and that he (Mr. Porter) did not expect that Briggs's case would come on that day. A consultation then took place between the judge and the clerk of arraigns. At its termination, the latter functionary said, "Who is the junior counsel present?"

To my horror, up jumped Polter, and said, "I think it's very likely that I am the junior counsel in court. My name is Polter, and I was only called last term!"

A titter ran through the crowd, but Polter, whose least fault was bashfulness, only smiled benignly at those around him. Another whispering between judge and clerk. At its conclusion the clerk handed a bundle of papers to Polter, saying, at the same time:

"Mr. Polter, his lordship wishes you to conduct the prosecution."

"Certainly," said Polter; and he opened the papers, glanced at them, and rose to address the court.

He began by requesting that the jury would take into consideration the fact that he had only that moment been placed in possession of the brief for the prosecution of the prisoner at the bar, who appeared from what he had gathered from a glance at his instructions, to have been guilty of as heartless a robbery as ever disgraced humanity. He would endeavour to do his duty, but he feared that, at so short a notice, he should scarcely be able to do justice to the brief with which he had been most unexpectedly entrusted. He then went on to state the case in a masterly manner, appearing to gather the facts, with which, of course, he was perfectly intimate, from the papers in his hand. He commented on the growing frequency of omnibus robberies, and then went onto say:

"Gentlemen, I am at no loss to anticipate the defence on which my learned friend will base his hope of inducing you to acquit that wretched woman. I don't know whether it has ever been your misfortune to try criminal cases before, but if it has, you will be able to anticipate his defence as certainly as I can. He will probably tell you, because the purse was found in the left-hand pocket of that miserable woman's dress, that she is left-handed, and on that account wears her pocket on the left side, and he will then, if I am not very much mistaken, ask the prosecutrix if she is not right-handed, and, lastly, he will ask you to believe that the prosecutrix sitting on the prisoner's left, slipped the purse accidentally into the prisoner's pocket. But, gentlemen, I need not remind you that the facts of these omnibus robberies are always identical. The prisoner always is left-handed, the prosecutrix always is right-handed, and the prosecutrix always does slip the purse accidentally into the prisoner's pocket instead of her own. My lord will tell you that this is so, and you will know how much faith to place upon such a defence, should my friend think proper to set it up." He ended by entreating the jury to give the case their attentive consideration, and stated that he relied confidently on an immediate verdict of "Guilty." He then sat down, saying to the usher, "Call Ann Black."

Ann Black, who was in court, shuffled up into the witness-box, and was duly sworn. Polter then drew out her evidence, bit by bit, helping her with leading questions of the most flagrant description. I knew that I ought not to allow this, but I was too horrified at the turn matters had taken to interfere. At the conclusion of the examination in chief Polter sat down triumphantly, and I rose to cross-examine.

"You are right-handed, Mrs. Black?" (Laughter.)

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Very good. I've nothing else to ask you."

So Mrs. Black stood down, and the omnibus conductor took her place. His evidence was not material, and I declined to cross-examine. The policeman who

had charge of the case followed the conductor, and his evidence was to the effect that the purse was found in her pocket. I felt that this witness ought to he cross-examined, but not having anything ready, I allowed him to stand down. A question, I am sorry to say, then occurred to me, and I requested his lordship to allow the witness to be recalled.

"You say you found the purse in her pocket, my man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you find anything else?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"Two other purses, a watch with the bow broken, three handkerchiefs, two silver pencil-cases, and a hymn-book. (Roars of laughter.)

"You may stand down."

"That is the case, my lord," said Polter.

It was now my turn to address the court. What could I say? I believe I observed, that, undeterred by my learned friend's opening speech, I did intend to set up the defence he had anticipated. I set it up, but I don't think it did much good. The jury, who were perfectly well aware that this was Polter's first case, had no idea but that I was an old hand at it; and no doubt thought me an uncommonly clumsy one. They had made every allowance for Polter, who needed nothing of the kind, and they made none at all for me, who needed all they had at their disposal. I soon relinquished my original line of defence, and endeavoured to influence the jury by vehement assertions of my personal conviction of the prisoner's innocence. I warmed with my subject, (for Polter had not anticipated me here), and I believe I grew really eloquent. I think I staked my professional reputation on her innocence, and I sat down expressing my confidence in a verdict that would restore the unfortunate lady to a circle of private friends, several of whom were waiting in the court below to testify to her excellent character.

"Call witnesses to Mrs. Briggs's character," said I.

"Witnesses to the character of Briggs!" shouted the crier.

The cry was repeated three or four times outside the court; but there was no response.

"No witnesses to Briggs's character here, my lord!" said the crier. Of course I knew this very well; but it sounded respectable to expect them.

"Dear, dear," said I, "this is really most unfortunate. They must have mistaken the day."

"Shouldn't wonder," observed Polter, rather drily.

I was not altogether sorry that I had no witnesses to adduce, as I am afraid that they would scarcely have borne the test of Polter's cross-examination. Besides, if I had examined witnesses for the defence, Polter would have been entitled to a reply, of which privilege he would, I was sure, avail himself. Mr. Baron

Bounderby proceeded to sum up, grossly against the prisoner, as I then thought, but, as I have since had reason to believe, most impartially. He went carefully over the evidence, and told the jury that if they believed the witnesses for the prosecution, they should find the prisoner guilty, and if they did not why, they should acquit her. The jury were then directed by the crier to " consider their verdict," which they couldn't possibly have done, for they immediately returned a verdict of "Guilty." The prisoner not having anything to say in arrest of judgment, the learned judge proceeded to pronounce sentence— inquiring, first of all, whether anything was known about her?

A policeman stepped forward, and stated that she had twice been convicted at this court of felony, and once at the Middlesex Sessions.

Mr. Baron Bounderby, addressing the prisoner, told her that she had been most properly convicted, on the clearest possible evidence; that she was an accomplished thief, and a most dangerous one; and that the sentence of the court was that she be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for the space of eighteen calendar months.

No sooner had the learned judge pronounced this sentence than the poor soul stooped down, and taking off a heavy boot, flung it at my head, as a reward for my eloquence on her behalf; accompanying the assault with a torrent of invective against my abilities as a counsel, and my line of defence. The language in which her oration was couched was perfectly shocking. The boot missed me, but hit a reporter on the head, and to this fact I am disposed to attribute the unfavourable light in which my speech for the defence was placed in two or three of the leading daily papers next morning. I hurried out of court as quickly as I could, and hailing a Hansom, I dashed back to chambers, pitched my wig at a bust of Lord Brougham, bowled over Mrs. Briggs's prototype with my gown, packed up, and started that evening for the West coast of Cornwall. Polter, on the other hand, remained in town, and got plenty of business in that and the ensuing session, and afterwards on circuit. He is now a flourishing Old Bailey counsel, while I am as briefless as ever.

11: Mr. Pettiloe Cites a Case

Sydney Horler

1888-1954

Collected in: *The Screaming Skull and Other Stories*, 1930

"WHEN you ask me if murder is ever justified," said Mainwaring, "you strike at the very root of modern Justice. By temperament, legal training, and— yes, actual experience— I say 'No.' The man who takes life— any human life— should be punished. If insane, he should be sent to a place appointed to hold criminal lunatics; if sane, he should go to the scaffold. In the case of—"

The famous medico-jurist, the "scientific policeman," as he had so often been called, stopped as though conscious that he was about to say something which must remain locked within his own breast, something which he could not discuss even in the smoking-room of his favourite club.

"Well," commented Sir Benjamin Shipsbee, whose reputation as a surgeon was almost as great as was that of Mainwaring as a crime pathologist, "I don't agree with you. We all know that the law must outwardly be respected, but there have been many instances In my own practice when a slip of the knife would have brought the greatest relief and happiness to the world generally. I may say, however," looking round the small circle of interested listeners, '' that I never had sufficient courage to put my view into effect."

There was a silence for a few moments, and then Pettiloe, the solicitor, moved his chair slightly nearer the fire.

"I have only been concerned in one actual murder," he said, in a quiet, even tone, "but I must say I agree with Shipsbee. In my case, for instance, after I had killed this man, I never had a moment's remorse."

Although not a word was spoken, cigars were taken out of mouths.

Pettiloe a murderer! This was a notable jest. Why, his solemn respectability was one of the club's stock jokes. Each one of them had known Pettiloe practically all his life. A milder-mannered man never drew up a Bill of Costs. He had pale blue eyes, old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers, and wore a fob on his watch-chain.

"Never knew you specialised in doubtful humour before," said Sir Ronald Mainwaring, in his customary dry, clipped tone.

"Phew! You gave me quite a shock, Pettiloe," was Shipsbee's contribution.

"If only one of your clients had heard you!" laughed Ferriburn, the actor.

"I dare say what I said just now startled you," remarked Pettiloe. "No, Mainwaring," looking at the man whose evidence had sent so many criminals to the scaffold, "I was not joking. But, all the same, even you could not get me hanged for this twenty-years-old crime— if you decide it was a 'crime.' I killed too skilfully for that. As for my clients, Ferriburn, I am giving up practice in a week's

time and the man who is succeeding me is one of the most respected solicitors in London: Meredith; you all know him." The spellbound audience nodded.

"It is not conscience, nor any feeling of remorse, that makes me willing to tell you this story— should you care to listen to it," went on the even voice of this grave little man, who might have stepped out of a previous century. "Understand me, I have no fear. But the argument which has started among us to-night is of such an interesting nature, and deals so vitally with one of the most important problems of human conduct, that I was constrained to say what I did. The man I killed deserved death— which is why I support Shipsbee's view."

There was a scraping of chairs, a general leaning forward, and then, with a gesture that he might have used to a client to whom he was about to explain an intricate point of law, Pettiloe told his story.

"The thing wanted care," he said. "Naturally, being in the prime of life and successful— I was forty-one at the time it happened— I did not desire to be arrested and hanged."

"No," with a bright smile, "I didn't devote myself to the reading of detective fiction. What I did was to study this problem just as I should have studied any particularly difficult piece of ordinary business. And in the end I knew that my idea was flawless. That I am telling you this now, even although twenty years have passed, is sufficient proof that it was flawless.

"We will call the man 'James Morrison.' That was not his real name, of course. Morrison was generally spoken of as being one of the 'lucky kind.' Certainly he had many advantages. He was strikingly handsome in the fine, commanding way which both men and women admire; he had been left money by his father as well as by other relatives; he was universally popular. Both dogs and children adored him. Life, in the expressive phrase, 'had no corners for him'— women openly flattered him, men apparently trusted him. I trusted him myself."

The speaker paused to sip the teetotal drink which was by his elbow.

"One of my clients," resumed Pettiloe, "had been left a house on the Cornish coast. It was a huge, rambling place, hundreds of years old, very lonely and very eerie. There was not another dwelling within a mile. Consequently it had lain derelict for years. When it had been made habitable, my client invited me down. It was mid-March— but I went.

"How I induced my client to leave the house this particular night and how I contrived to be alone in it with Morrison would take me some time to tell you— and, as neither circumstance, although bearing on the main story, is material in itself, I do not propose to waste that time. It is sufficient for me to state, I think, that on the night of the— er— occurrence— the man Morrison, who was down from London at my invitation, and I were alone in the house except for the two old cronies, man and wife, who acted as servants.

"We had a very decent dinner, considering—"

Pettiloe stopped to take another sip at his innocuous teetotal drink. Four pairs of eyes did not leave his face, which up till now had displayed no emotion: the elderly solicitor might have been recounting a dry anecdote about the conveyancing of some property.

"I HAD A particular reason for inviting Morrison to the place," Pettiloe continued. "Morrison, who was a professed disbeliever in anything ghostly, was to be put to a severe test that night.

"Whilst he was sipping his wine, the wind from the sea howled round the gables, and blew in fitful gusts against the mullioned panes. Strange and remote noises came to us from other parts of the house, just as though some storm-tossed spirit was breathing a chilling breath in corridors that had recently been disturbed by human foot after the lapse of countless years."

Pettiloe's tone became more concise. He cleared his throat and went on:

"I purposely brought the conversation round to haunted houses.

" 'I suppose you are going to tell me that this place is haunted !' scoffed the man Morrison. 'Well, bring out your ghost!'

" 'Yes,' I told him gravely, 'this house has the reputation of being haunted by a particularly sinister ghost. Perhaps I should have warned you before you came, Morrison.'

"He laughed at that.

" 'You can't scare me, Pettiloe ; if it interests you—as it evidently does, judging by your expression— tell me about the thing by all means. By the way, what sex is this particular demon supposed to be?'

" 'Female!'

"Again he laughed heartily.

" 'Well, that's all right, anyway,' he said, or words to the same effect. 'I'm rather fond of the ladies. And what is this particular specimen supposed to do?'

" 'You had better hear the complete legend first, Morrison. The ghost is said to be the disturbed spirit of a certain Lady Sybil Trevillion. This house was built by a famous Cornish family, the Trevillions, in the middle of the seventeenth century. Lady Sybil was the young wife of the second of the line. She married at the age of twenty, and is said to have been so beautiful that visitors came from all over England, and even from abroad, just to see her.'

" 'H'm!' commented the man Morrison. 'I should have liked to set eyes on her myself.'

" 'Amongst those who came,' I went on with the legend, 'was a noted roué, my Lord Charles Chichester. Hearing of the wonderful beauty of this young Cornish bride, he journeyed from London, and, under a subterfuge, claimed hospitality for the night. A heartless scoundrel, he drugged the wine of his host, and then, with

the assistance of some of his boon companions, burst into the room of Lady Sybil... .'

" 'The unfortunate girl died shortly afterwards. Her body was buried in the family vault, but her spirit— her *avenging* spirit— is said to haunt this house.'

" 'Well,' commented the man listening, yawning, 'let us hope she leaves me alone, at all events. But what do you mean by "avenging " spirit, Pettiloe?'

"I hesitated purposely before I replied, and then said, as though reluctantly giving him the information: 'The report, however well founded it is I cannot say, of course, from personal knowledge, is that she seizes the throat of any sleeping man and kills him in revenge for the horror which was visited upon her by the infamous Lord Charles Chichester.

"Morrison became quite convulsed with laughter at this.

" 'And you, a solicitor, one of the fellows that the chap must have meant when he wrote 'grave and reverend seigneurs,' a dry-as-dust cove like you— surely you don't believe this awful tosh? Why, if you like, you can put me in this blessed haunted room to-night!'

" 'You asked for the legend,' I replied, as though feeling offended.

" 'I know— and, by George, you've given me a beauty, a perfectly wonderful yarn! But, man, you must have got hold of the wrong story; all the ghosts I have ever heard about have belonged to rotters, not their victims. It should be that chap Chichester who wanders about moaning, by rights.'

"Talk turned to other matters after that— I had said enough about the ghost topic— and it was quite early when we rose from our chairs. The man Morrison was tired, he said, and I, being his host, raised no objection to his evident wish to get to bed.

"There was neither gas nor electricity in the house— my client, the new owner, was very old-fashioned in some ways— and so I lighted the guest to his room by candle.

" 'I must say, Pettiloe, you're looking after me very well,' he exclaimed, glancing round the room which old Trethewy, the butler, and his wife, had done their best to make as comfortable as possible— roaring fire in the grate, cigarettes— really, I'm very much indebted to you. Now,' going to the box of cigarettes which I had placed myself on the dressing-table, 'I have just one letter to write and then I'll get between the sheets. Good night, Pettiloe,' lighting the cigarette he had selected, 'you're a good sort.'

"I went to the door, and laughed— as pleasantly as I could contrive in the peculiar circumstances.

" 'Oh, I don't know whether I ought to tell you, Morrison,' I said, 'but this is the room which the ghost of Lady Sybil Trevillion is supposed to haunt.'

"He turned swiftly and looked at me. Whether I showed anything in my face I don't know— I certainly tried, as you may imagine, not to disclose my real

feelings— but my heart stood stillforamoment. Should he desire to leave this room— and I had planned so carefully—

"But, to my immense relief, he merely laughed.

" 'You can't scare me, Pettiloe—good night!'

"I slammed the door. The noise enabled me to lock it from outside without the man Morrison hearing the key click in the well-oiled lock. As I walked away I knew he would never leave the room alive. He would die— horribly. Just as I had intended he should die."

It was Ferriburn who broke the poignant silence which followed.

"You killed him! How?" he cried.

Pettiloe finished what was in his glass.

"You shall hear," he said. "The room in which I had placed this man Morrison was at the end of a long corridor. If he cried out in the night I did not hear him— not, that is to say, that I slept. As for the Trethewys, they were right away in the other wing; a battalion of marching soldiers would not have disturbed them.

"At six o'clock I rose, dressed, and went along to the man Morrison's room. After unlocking the door and hiding the key in a place where I knew it could never be found, I knocked on the door.

"I did that, as you might say, for appearance's sake. I did not expect to get any answer.

"And I didn't.

"Then I opened the door, gave one look— and started to yell. I had dwelt for so long upon the moment when I should give that yell that it might almost be said I had actually rehearsed it.

" 'Trethewy! Trethewy!' I roared, with the full force of my lungs.

"The old Cornishman, only half-dressed, came shambling along the corridor.

" 'For the love of God, what's happened, sir?' he asked.

"I pointed a shaking finger at the room in which—

" 'I think Mr. Morrison is dead,' I said; 'I went along to rouse him a few minutes ago, he having remarked last night that he wanted to be up early to see the sunrise over the sea, and knocked on his door. Getting no answer, I pushed the door open, and then—'

"By this time I had the poor old man shaking from head to foot.

"If you're afraid of what you'll see, Mr. Pettiloe, I'll come in with you," he said.

"We went in together. But we had scarcely crossed the threshold before old Trethewy set up a wailing that for sheer melancholy I have never known equalled. His finger, quivering like a leaf in a gale, pointed all the time at the bed.

"I must say the sight was unnerving— even to me, who had expected something of the sort. The man Morrison had undressed and apparently had got into bed. I say 'apparently' because when we found him all the clothes were on the floor, just as though he had kicked them off in delirium.

"The man's fingers were locked round his throat so tightly that it took the local doctor, for whom I sent Trethewy at once, some time to disentangle them. The expression on the face was terrible— it was as though the dead man had been visited by such a horror that it had demented him—"

"The ghost?" asked Ferriburn, and his voice snapped like a violin-string.

"The fingers that tore the life out of the man Morrison's throat belonged to himself," replied Pettiloe; "besides, there never was any ghost; I concocted that legend of dreadful mystery myself. Do I look like a man who would spend a night in a haunted house?"

"Then— how?" demanded the actor. Shipsbee, the surgeon, and Mainwaring, the "scientific policeman," remained silent, but both had drawn, tense faces.

Pettiloe turned to them now.

"You must forgive me putting the question to you," he said, '' but have either of you ever heard of the drug called by the Bgandu natives of South-West Africa, 'The Red Killer'?"

"It has never been used in England," snapped Mainwaring.

Pettiloe supplied a contradiction.

"I can assure you it has, Mainwaring, because I used it myself in the case now under discussion."

Leaving the eminent toxicologist frowning, Pettiloe went on: "For the benefit of you others who do not possess Mainwaring's remarkable knowledge, I will explain that this highly dangerous drug has not even to this day found its way into any European pharmacopeia, or, indeed, into any literature of toxicology.

"The Bgandu natives, however, are fully aware of its potentialities; chopped fine, and put into the victim's food, it promotes such strong cerebral activity that the man or woman is first driven mad and then dies.

"It was Gervais, my client, who showed me some of the poisonous fibre— the drug is really a native root. He had brought some back from Bgandu as a curiosity. He little dreamt, of course, that I should mix it with tobacco, and place the cigarettes thus prepared so that an inveterate smoker like the man Morrison would be bound to notice them.

"How many of the drugged cigarettes the man Morrison smoked I cannot tell you— needless to say, I removed all trace of them, even the ash, before the police arrived— but there is no doubt that his brain was soon driven into a very excited condition. Whilst in that abnormal state, he may have believed that he saw the ghost of Lady Sybil Trevillion, and imagined that it was her fingers which were at his throat; or it may be that— as Gervais told me he had known from the one case of white-man 'red-killer' poisoning he had ever known— the drug had produced strong self-homicidal symptons. In any event, the result was the same; the man died— and, strictly speaking, I killed him."

"You will ask the reason, of course, and naturally, having said so much, I will tell you.

"The man Morrison was a Lord Charles Chichester of a later day. His methods were different, but he did the same evil— The girl I was engaged to marry. Good-night, all."

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12: The Tall Clock

J. H. M. Abbott
1874-1953
The Australian Woman's Mirror, 2 Feb 1926

UP at Peberdy's Crossing, on the Williams River a lovely place of weeping-willows, swaying, blue-green reed-beds fringing either bank, mirror-like reflections of tall yellow-and-pink stemmed eucalypts in the placid bosom of the wide waters, the carolling of magpies and the morning and evening guffawing and hullabalooing of wise old kookaburras— there is a venerable farmhouse with a wide verandah having little cabin-like rooms at either end, a high-pitched, shingled roof, and an air of possessing a history that is the story of early New South Wales. It is a place that it is restful and pleasant to look upon even when passing by, as the little steamer trading between Newcastle and Clarence Town draws into the ricketty wharf to pick up the shining milk-cans arrayed in double rank upon its worn grey decking.

A place of great peacefulness and beauty, and behind it lies the long, blue range called Thompson's Mountain— a camel-backed elevation of no great height, and colors that change, through indigo and blue and deep purple, during all the hours between dawn and dusk. Even at night, when the Southern Cross glistens in the blue-black sky above it, and the warrior Orion, with his sword and belt, goes marching from east to west across the heavens, there is no mistaking the dark hump of Thompson's Mountain.

In 1745 Thompson's Mountain was better known to the inhabitants of the Lower Hunter estuary and its tributary valleys as Pandomar, and it kept to this immemorial name for another four-score years, until old Jamie Thompson came from Scotland and squatted there in a little hut of slabs and bark. A dour Scot was Jamie, possessed of very little besides the grant of land given him here by Governor Darling, a pair of strong arms, a hard head containing a shrewd brain, a few cattle and horses, and the tall clock which still ticks out the seconds at the foot of the mountain, and was exactly one hundred years old when it came, in 1830, to begin its long sojourn in the place where it has ever since been ticking.

It is curious that it should have been taken out of its packing-case on the left bank of the Williams River and freshly wound again almost upon the hundredth anniversary of its delivery by its maker at the house in Perth of Jamie Thompson's grandfather, Simon Thompson— for the peculiar reason that, as it was just too years before it came to its second home, so did exactly a century separate the only two events in its somewhat uneventful history that may be regarded as sensational. With the exception of these two happenings— in 1745 and 1845— the ancient time-piece has seen nothing, in the 196 years of its existence as a going concern, but the many thousands of faces that have paused before its dial to

observe the time of day. It has done its work faithfully and well for nearly 200 years— only twice in all that time has its placid existence been disturbed by the violence and foolishness incidental to the alarums and excursions of Man.

On the first occasion, Mistress Simon Thompson writes in a letter to her sister-in-law, Miss Jean Thompson, in Edinburgh, towards the end of 1745. Her letter, in a little mahogany-box with brass clasps, reposes in the rosewood case of the old clock as it stands in the hall of the homestead to-day at Thompson's Mountain. It is explainable that Mistress Simon was an Englishwoman— she had little sympathy for Charles Edward Stuart and his adventurings in search of a throne. Here is some of the letter that might easily have been the end of the Thompsons. It is too discursive to quote fully:

...On Monday se'nnight befel a strange thing, the which put us all in a grete Flusteration and much Feare, but which, I doe thanke God, did end in Misfortune onlie to one well-desarving of suche. 'Tis beyond my pow'rs, my deare Jean, to inform you of the deepe Gratitude wee feele to Almighty God for his mercy toward us, and I schal not att^{t} ye taske.... While wee were seated at supper on that evg.— Simon, Dorothy, little Jamie and myself— came a loude and insistant knokking at y^{e} streete Door. Whereupon, in muche mistifycation, my Husbonde arose from his chaire for to enquire who might be theare. As I have inform'd you, the Towne is under Marshall Law, the which is no law at all, and constant and regular— or, rather, irregular— searching of Households for conceal'd Rebbels goes on still on y^{e} part of ye English Souldiers. 'Tis well known that Simon hath lytel love for y^{e} Prince and his Cause, and I have none at all, but neverthelesse have wee been visited as frequently as have oure nayboures, 'Twas with ye notion that againe the Souldiers were come to Searche that Simon went to y^{e} Door.

Here follows a lengthy and somewhat irrelevant disquisition upon the character, manhood and estimable qualities of Mr. Simon Thompson, together with a eulogy of the writer's daughter, Dorothy— her conduct, lady-like deportment and bravery upon this thrilling occasion. There is only space here for the facts:

'Twas not a searche-Party of Souldiers, but onlie one single Officer, and him very Dronken, and a German to boote. He pusht past my Husbande, calling him a vile name, and stagger'd to where Dorothy and mee stoode by y^{e} Clocke. "Frawleen," saith he, very thicklie, as y^{e} Germans talke —I trye to imitate his speache— "I lof you. You are fery pootiful. Mine Zeeber, I want you— and I will you haf. I am Gabdain Von Muller, of His Majesty's Hanoverian Guards, in the Army of His Highness, the Duke of Gumberlandt."

She was very Pale and frightened, but at once Dorothy stept forward, snatched a Pistol from his Belt, cockt it, and presented it at him. He laugh'd in a dronken fashion, and went to sieze her in his Arms. Whereupon, with no more ado, she fir'd y^e^ Pistol, and he dropt Dead.... A terrible time wee had, a-burying of Him in y^e^ Garden— but by God's mercy 'twas safely done by Daylight, and soe far no Suspicion hath fallen upon us.... Simon is in much Terror, and a little Madde, I thinke. He hath a strange notion that y^e^ Clocke will testify against us. For to humour him, I doe pretende y^e^ Clocke hath given me assurance 'twill speake no worde of y^e^ businesse. Ye Souldiers have arrested some People, but y^e^ disappearance of Captain Von Muller remaineth a mysterie.... I beg you, my dear Jean, for to destroy this Letter...

"Which, of course," said my host, the Thompson of to-day, as he replaced the faded document in its box, "she didn't do. So we have it here as a valuable adjunct to my great-great-grandfather's clock. I suppose this Von Muller was never found, and that he's still where they buried him. At any rate, nothing unpleasant ever happended to old Simon,"

"And Dorothy?"

"Oh, well— all I know about her is that she's been dead some time. We haven't a very complete record of the family— beyond the big Bible, which I'll show you after. Things must have got lost, or been purposely destroyed, when the migration was made from Perth to this place."

I got up and examined the clock. A beautiful bit of cabinet work in the rose-wood case, which stands nearly seven feet high. The face bears the maker's name— "Jas. Dunbar," over "Perth"— and some quaint floral devices. A smaller dial, just above the "VI," records the days of the month. It keeps very accurate time, and the musical chime of its striking at the hour is extraordinarily clear and distinct. How many more generations of Thompsons and others will the old timepiece survive?

"And what was the second affair?" I asked Peter Thompson as I sat down again. "Was there a 'Dorothy' in that, too?"

He nodded his head.

"Yes. My mother. An extraordinary repetition of history— almost incredible. And exactly a century— to the month— since the other Dorothy shot King George the Second's Hanoverian captain in Perth. It's unfortunate, however, that the man my mother shot— here, where we're sitting— was an Irishman, and not a German. Otherwise the two stories would almost coincide. I've little doubt," he added, drily, "that, in course of time, Tom O'Rourke will become a German, though."

"Inevitably," I agreed. "That's how history's made— a good coincidence is seldom spoiled for a ha'porth of inaccuracy. Or a good story. You were going to say?"

"This second adventure of the old clock's— oh, yes. It happened in 1845—a year before I was born. By that time my father, James Thompson, who settled here in 1830, had begun to prosper, and had built this house. Did it well, didn't he? It'll last another eighty years, at least. He had just been married— my mother was one of the Macgregors, of Maitland— and hadn't long brought his bride to Thompson's Mountain.

"Well, one Summer evening in December, she was sitting here knitting, with the doors and windows open. My father was away to Port Stephens over some cattle business with the A.A. Company, and the only people about the place were the cook— an old chap who'd been an assigned servant— and a young immigrant, and they were both in the men's barracks, a hut that used to stand a couple of hundred yards behind the house. Suddenly she was conscious of an interference with the light, and looked up to find a big, hairy man with a gun in his hand, blocking up the front door.

"There were one or two bushrangers knocking about this part of the country then, who were more or less harmless runaways from assigned service, and didn't do much damage besides robbing huts of tucker, killing an occasional beast, and sometimes sticking up a mail-man; but there was one fellow, Tom O'Rourke, a deserter from a company of the 99th Regiment that had been stationed at Newcastle, who was regarded as being really dangerous. He was one of the Queen's bad bargains, as they used to say— game for any villainy, and a holy terror to the women. You understand? My father always kept a loaded pistol in the case of the clock, and had taught my mother how to use it, and told her that if Black Tom should ever turn up whilst he was absent to use it at once. Not to think twice about shooting him.

"When she looks up, there's this big ugly brute gloating over her from the doorway. He put up his gun and covered her.

" 'Good-day, missus,' he says. 'D'ye know who I am? Well, I'm Tom O'Rourke— and I know well ye're all alone. Now, don't scream— else I'll blow y'r pretty head off.'

"I've heard my mother say she was in deadly terror —but she must have been pretty cool. A Currency Lass, she was— and there's never been much wanting with them when it came to pluck. So she stood up and began to roll up her knitting.

"Black Tom leant his gun against the doorpost and took a step or two into the room.

" 'This is easy,' he says, grinning at her. 'You an' me'll be good friends, missus. I ain't half a bad covey when ye gets to know me.'

" 'All right, Mr. O'Rourke,' says my mother— 'I know I'm all alone. Just a moment, until I put my knitting away, if you don't mind.'

"She turned and opened the clock-case— there—as if to put her wool away. O'Rourke came towards her, with his arms spread out as though to grab her.

"She wheeled round with the pistol in her hand—it's one of those two over the fire-place, the right-hand one—and that's all Tom O'Rourke ever knew of the affair. Clean through the heart he got it. When old Danny, the cook, and the young fellow came running over from the hut they found my mother in a faint, sitting on the floor, with her head leaning back inside the clock-case against the weights. The clock had stopped at twenty minutes past six. Black Tom, as dead as a doornail, was lying across her legs. The brute must almost have had her when she fired. Well, the old clock's seen two little adventures," he said. "I wonder how many more it will see?"

Clear and sharp, as if in answer to him, the tall clock rang out eleven times.

"Well, now," laughed old Mr. Thompson as he rose and went to the sideboard, "I wonder if the old fellow really means it?"

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13: The Bailiffs Are In

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

Bulletin, 26 Dec 1932

The Australian Woman's Mirror, 27 Dec 1932

TO find the telegram awaiting her at the place where she was expecting a season of release from her home cares came as a shock to Hilda. She paused a moment before tearing the cover.

Please come home. The bailiffs are in.

Hilda laughed quite mirthlessly and handed the paper to Andy, standing questioningly beside her.

Without meeting them, she had been living for years under the shadow of the bailiffs.

Then Andy had come into their lives again, brought home boisterously by Ted. They had all been friends in the days before Hilda had married, and now Andy exuded prosperity; he had the qualities that earn it. He had paid Hilda the compliment of remaining unmarried.

His continued friendship was pleasant. He was always kindly; he showed he realised the circumstances of their life without commenting upon them. Hilda felt when he made the suggestion about their being his guests at. a theatre party that it was prompted by a feeling that she needed some relaxation from the life she was leading.

"It's jolly good of you, Andy!" Ted had said enthusiastically. "It's just the thing Hilda wants; she's mad about the theatre, and we haven't been for donkey's ages. But someone has to look after the kids. I tell you what— if it would be all the same to you to take Hilda by herself I could run the children to a picture-show."

It had become a more or less regular thing by Ted's own arrangement. Hilda fell into the plan and enjoyed her outings after a first feeling of resentment. The growth of an understanding between her and Andy was slow and imperceptible.

"He tries to be such a good fellow," Hilda commented. "He can't help his irresponsibility."

"Oh, he's a good fellow!" agreed Andy. "He's not a home-bird, really. If he was free he'd be out half the night and thoroughly enjoy the life. It never appealed to me. A fireside to sit beside comfortably has always been my dream."

There was something wistful in the way Andy said that. Hilda began to see her life and Ted's from the viewpoint Andy gave her. Her marriage with Ted had been a mistake; he would be happier without her. He did not complain, because it was

his nature to laugh at trouble, but in reality she and the children were a load for a man not built for carrying burdens.

Andy, without being at any time lover-like, made plain to her what he was prepared to do. He wanted her for his wife; had wanted her before she was married, and had not given up the hope even then; and he wanted no stain upon her. In this there was the absence of a lover's quick passion, but there was something magnificent about his stolid conventionality, his devotion.

A feeling of tranquillity in the prospects of the future had come to Hilda; there was delight in the warm welcome that Agnes Curnow gave her; when, Ted in his hearty way agreeing, she had been driven by Andy down to those old friends of theirs at Cronulla. She had gone there feeling that this was the end of the old life.

Then had come the telegram, shattering everything!

"The damn fool, letting this happen," snapped Andy, looking darkly at the wire. "And then worrying you over it! What will it be for?"

"I don't know," said Hilda with a little hysterical laugh. "Ted pockets the bills and says they'll be all right; he tries to keep me from knowing about the summonses. He's always kept the bailiffs off hitherto— I even if we had to move. This might be any of a dozen things."

"If we knew the amount I could wire the money ; anything to prevent your holiday being spoiled."

Anxiety about her home and children that she thought she had put behind her was dragging at Hilda's heart.

"I think I'll have to go home," she said. "Afterwards, when matters are settled, I'll come again. Agnes won't mind when I explain."

The sound the car made as it reached the cottage brought the children running out surprised to see her. Enid came rushing into her mother's arms.

"Mummy!" she cried excitedly. "We've got a bailiff! He's such a nice bailiff He brought me some chocolates."

Hilda, worried, pressed into the house hardly replying to the children's exuberance, her arms over their shoulders; Andy followed. Ted looked up in surprise from the business of frying something over the fuel stove in the kitchen. An apron was aound his waist.

"Why, hallo!" he cried. He put down the cooking fork he was using and approached to kiss her.

With Andy looking on, Hilda felt a srange guiltiness in responding. It seemed grotesquely, unfaithfulness to a man to whom she had promised her future.

"Meet the bailiff— a darned decent chap, name of Simpson," said Ted quite cheerfully, waving a hand that passed over a table untidily set without a cloth and covered with used dishes and other parapernalia, including an opened bottle of beer, to indicate the untidy-looking man who had risen in an embarrassed fashion

from a chair in the corner. "We're just having a little snack— the kiddies have had theirs. You and Andy'll have some bacon and eggs, won't you?"

His cheerfulness was typical of Ted, as so was his talk of bacon and eggs instead the trouble that had brought her back.

"What's it for, Ted?" she demanded, in your wire you didn't say anything about the amount or who the people were.".

"Oh, that's fixed!" he said airily. "I ouldn't have sent that wire to you. It was an impulse. I sent another telegram telling you not to worry after I received the money wire from old Chalmers in response to my request for advance payment for the work I'm doing for him. I didn't expect him to send it, although explained the circumstances. It was Peachey, the storekeeper, put in the bailiff; but that enabled me to pay him off— and the other one, too."

"The other one?"

"Yes; that milkman chap— Cowdrey. A paltry twenty-two and sixpence, and even a quid for the expenses on top of that. He put in a bailiff, too. It doesn't matter, though; I paid them off."

"Then what on earth is this— gentleman— Simpson, is it?— doing here?"

Ted exploded with a laugh.

"Oh, we've had an orgy of bailiffs— and a man to cut off the gas, too; hence the stove. Simmie's another— at least he's same one who came for Peachey. He'd hardly gone than he came back again— this time for Darrell and Co. A good chap! He brought back some fruit and sweets for the kiddies."

"You see, ma'am," said Simpson, with an apparent realisation that his gifts might not be so well appreciated by the mother, "I don't like this business— it's an unpleasant job especially when it's done upon good people like y'r 'usband; but it's good work for me— two in one day— an' I thought the kids—"

"What is the amount?" demanded Hilda brusquely.

"Four fifteen and seven, including all fees up to to-night."

"Don't worry, I'll get it fixed all right," said Ted. "If old Chalmers came to light so easily there's others who will give advances."

But you'll be without the money later on," said Hilda despairingly. Despairingly, appealingly, she looked at Andy. His face was dark with discontent. No wonder! It was not fair to expect—

Andy's hand went in search of his pocket-book, and Simpson, looking reluctantly at the eggs and bacon still on the stove, which Ted remembered in time to save from a condition of harsh departed.

"See you again, mister," he said, nodding to Ted.

"Not— not to-day, anyway, Simpson," Ted laughed after him. He became serious as he turned towards his wife and Andy. "It's very good of you, Andy, and it was damned selfish of me calling you back from your holiday, Hilda. You see I was a bit off my feet. I didn't think Chalmers would send that money."

Hilda, who had looked into one of the inner rooms, gave an exclamation.

"Why, what's this, Ted? You've got everything packed up!"

"That? Oh, yes !" Ted laughed. "That's why I was glad to get you away. I knew trouble was coming, and I'd decided to reorganise things. We were going to move— I wasn't going to tell you until the thing was done. I was afraid it'd worry you."

Hilda sent a despairing look towards Andy. Ted was hopeless.

"You see, Hilda, things have been going all to pot with work; money harder to get than ever. I haven't wanted to worry you, but we've got to reorganise. There's a little place I can get down at Kogal Bay; it's small— only a camp cottage, really— but it's comfortable enough and the outlook is splendid.

"What's more to the point, it's only ten bob a week. I was hoping to move down there to-night directly it was dark enough," he added with a laugh. "But the bailiffs came sooner than I expected, and I must have lost my head, sending that wire to you. I meant to come down and tell you after I'd got the move done. My idea was that, with the rent down to nothing, I could give you a regular allowance to manage on— I ought to have tried that before—and we could struggle through some way until things became better. But you're standing'—wait until I get a comfortable chair for you."

He dashed out of the room.

If Ted had made his proposal a few months before Hilda's heart would have been full of gladness and hope.

"It's awful," said Andy, responding to the glance she gave him.. "A terrible life to give any woman. Why don't you tell him now that you're through with it?"

"Oh, no," she began wildly.

"It's the opportunity," he persisted. "Agnes Curnow wanted to know why you didn't bring the children. You could take them back with you. Make the matter plain to Ted. It's only fair to him as well as yourself. He'll be able to look after himself— that's about all he can do."

Ted came back with easy chairs, but

Andy moved towards the door.

"I noticed a garage down the street, he said. "The car's short of petrol, and I think I'll get the tank filled. You kiddies like to come for a ride?" .

They skipped out with him joyfully at the suggestion, and Hilda was left alone with her husband. Feeling-a sort of desperation at the hurt she must give him she felt that Andy was right. Only by speaking now could she.open the door to the serene Eden whose lure had now fallen upon her.

"Ted, I think it time we should make an end to matters between us. You were never built for responsibility; you will do better on your own account. Andy says he will be able to find me a position at a good salary, and I'll take the children.

There will be no more of all this trouble and you will have the burden of us lifted from your shoulders."

He stared at her incredulously.

"Burden? What burden?" he demanded. "I don't understand a word you're saying "

"When I went to stay at the Curnows' this morning I didn't intend to come back. I intended to get a position and keep myself, and I meant later to ask you to let me have the children. I want you to agree for us to have a divorce." .

"A divorce?" he gasped, unbelieving. "What ever for?"

"Simply because our life together has been a mistake —a mistake for both of us. It's brought trouble upon you, and it's been a nightmare to me. All the suspense and difficulty.... I've got past the limit of endurance."

"You mean —your love is dead?" he said blankly. "I've killed it? And all the time I've been trying to keep the worries from you—all I could. I know I manage financial matters pretty rottenly—" He stopped suddenly, and anger electrified him.

"It's Andy!" he flamed. "That's why you want a divorce! Of course; he has money! He's been making love to you! By God, I'll— Pretending to be my friend, too."

She caught his arm as, furiously, he moved to the door.

"Listen, Ted; Andy hasn't made love to me— not in the way you think."

"But if you get a divorce you'll marry him? That's the idea, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted frankly. "But don't think that there has been any love-making between us. Only I know Andy wanted me before you and I were married, Ted. He still wants me. If I am free he will marry me."

"And you—you want that?"

His anger had suddenly spluttered away, leaving him queerly unemotional.

"Ted, life has been a nightmare to me; I want peace and security. I know now our marriage was a mistake; I want to mend the mistake."

He listened almost apathetically, she thought, as she went on explaining her viewpoint.

Somehow, when the thought of the re-planning of their lives had come to her, she had anticipated no difficulty with Ted. There was no selfishness in Ted's nature; he wanted people to be happy, and he could be happy in feeling that he assisted their happiness, even if it meant his own sacrifice. The idea that her happiness lay in being away from Ted might hurt him, but he would, she had thought, raise no serious objection.

"You shouldn't have allowed Andy to pay off that bailiff," he said. "It's placing me under an obligation to him I wish it hadn't happened. If matters are going to end between us all the stuff might just as well have been sold off.

"I've meant the best you know, Hilda, but I always seem to make a mess of things; and it's what's going to make you happy that matters. But there's the children; they're my children."

"I want the children— l must have them, Ted! I'm their mother, and I can look after them. They can go to good schools regularly. And of course you are their father. You will see them regularly. I could take them away with me now. Mrs. Curnow asked me to bring them."

"I'll see them every week?"

"Whenever you like."

He got up and moved towards the sitting-room; there was only the droop in his figure to tell how life had gone out of him. Yet he seemed resigned.

"Instead of taking the furniture to Kogal Bay I'll store it. You might like it later on if you're going to take a place with the kids. I'll pick out a few things you'll want and have them sent to you. There's the car outside now. You'd better go out and tell Andy. Tell him he's won. I won't meet him."

She made a step towards" him, her heart touched by the hurt that must be in him. Truly, the bailiffs were in as far as he was concerned.

She paused. She must keep Andy from coming in; afterwards she would return and say good-bye.

"He's agreed to everything," she told Andy, who just then stepped out of the car. The children had met her, hilarious after their short drive, and gone back with her.

"The children will come back with us; if you don't mind waiting, I'll get them out some decent clothes."

The gleam of triumph in his eyes filled her with a sudden revulsion.

For a moment, as she thought of the broken Ted, she hated Andy for that look. He was so assured, so self-seeking; the sacrifice that Ted was prepared to make without a complaint for her happiness was one that Andy would be incapable of making.

Her heart melted afresh as she entered the house with the children; she suspected from his sudden movement that Ted had been sitting with his head-sunk in his hands and had risen to prevent her seeing him like that. Poor fellow! What was he feeling?

As she proceeded to find clothes for the children and put them on the way to dressing, into which they entered greatly excited at the prospect of a holiday, he moved about as if he did not desire to speak to her,

She found, when she could leave the children, that he had put apart a pile of their own boxes and belongings.

"I'll have these taken away and sent to you; you II get them to-morrow," he said without looking at her.

"Why the cot?" she.asked.

"Well you see, Hilda, you don't know what may happen. Somebody may find out where the furniture's been stored and seize it, I thought you might like to be sure of the cot. Both Teddy and Inez slept in it. I wouldn't myself like any chance of it going."

She was infinitely touched. That was like Ted. Her heart was wounded by the wound he was giving him. All very well for Andy to say that he would soon get over it.

Her arm went over his shoulder.

"Do you feel it all very much, Ted?"

Even then he did not look at her.

"What I feel is—that you care more for Andy, and I didn't know! I had a great idea that we could make things better in that camp cottage; but of course Andy can make your life comfortable. As you love him— well, that's all that matters."

She could not endure it any more. He was as much a child as one of her children whom she could not desert. And she could not desert him, for she did not love Andy, had never loved Andy; she had only been allured by the prospect of escape from a life of strain by the future of security he had offered. And there was a glimmer of hope that was better.

"Ted," she whispered, "I don't think we shall go. It's you I love, really; and that idea of the camp cottage is beautiful. If you'll only let me manage—"

She knew by the emotion she felt in him as he turned and seized her how much, really, he had felt, how much he had been prepared to suffer in letting her go the way he thought she desired.

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14: Legal Cruelty

John Hay Beith1876-1952
Collected in: *The Shallow End*, 1924

AS A PHILOSOPHER once pointed out, there is always something pleasing to us in the spectacle of a fellow-creature in difficulties. That is why people flock to the Law Courts for a day's pleasure. And they seldom draw a blank day, for our Royal Courts of Justice offer an infinite variety of entertainment. If you are seriously interested in legal problems you can visit a court containing as many as three judges at once, taking it in turn to keep awake while counsel discuss among themselves, in passionate undertones, something absorbing *in re Perkins dec.* (*App. by defdts. from judgt. of Mr. Justice Dudde, pt. hd*.). At least, that is what it says on the printed slip out in the corridor. You sometimes see as many as half-a-dozen spectators in these courts. You can get a seat there, which is more than you can do in the Probate, Divorce, and Admiralty Division, where people stand packed like herrings all day long, on the off chance, presumably, of hearing some stirring tale of a collision between two dredgers off Wapping, or the romantic proving of a faultily drafted will.

Or if you are not specially interested in any particular branch of the law, you can simply browse round, as we are doing to-day. By "we" I mean myself and my cousin George, from Rutlandshire, who has come up from the country to buy his autumn suit and see life in London. Last autumn he bought blue serge and went to the Hippodrome; this year he has gone in for a grey tweed and the Royal Courts of Justice. After all, variety is the spice of life.

We met with disappointment, however, on the very threshold of our enterprise. We asked a question of an affable policeman at the entrance.

"Which court, sir? You won't find him in any court to-day. He's retired, quite recent."

"Oh, I say!" said George. "How rotten!"

We paused irresolutely upon the steps.

"Let's go to the Vaudeville," I said. "They've got a pretty funny man there just now, and it's quite close."

But George demurred.

"No," he said, "let's go in. We're sure to find somebody. Who else is funny here?" he asked the policeman.

"Nobody at all, sir— present company always excepted," replied the policeman politely.

We passed into the central hall, feeling somehow that we had lost the first hole.

IF YOU ARE a stranger to the Law, you are conscious at first of a certain diffidence about entering a court of justice at all. It seems so impertinent to push open a swing door uninvited, and intrude upon an intimate discussion of somebody else's private affairs. So at first we walked delicately, shrinking painfully from doors furnished with doorkeepers. Presently we paused outside one which no one appeared to be guarding, and peeped through the glass panel. Beyond a red curtain we caught a glimpse of a white wig, presiding over more white wigs.

"Let's oil in here," said George. "They can only throw us out."

"And we do pay income-tax," I added resolutely.

At this moment I felt a tap on my shoulder. I started, I admit. One does in these surroundings.

"Entrance reserved for counsel in robes, gentlemen," intimated a stern voice. Then, with a genuine effort at mitigation: "Of course I *might* oblige you—"

"Oh, sorry!" we said, and hurried guiltily away round a corner. Here we found another court, and entered, timidly. But our diffidence was unjustified. Nobody took the slightest notice of us. The Judge sat apparently writing a letter home, while a gentleman with wig much awry, surrounded mysteriously and unexpectedly by pyramids of cigar-boxes, read to him, with passionate emotion, extracts from an extraordinarily prosaic periodical called *The Trademarks Journal*. The same thing was happening in the next court, except that the reader this time was mumbling from a musty volume of *Law Reports*, while the Judge was sleeping like a child. Evidently the bedtime story has caught on in the Law Courts in no uncertain fashion.

"This is pretty fair rot," observed George, as we emerged once more into the comparative ozone of the corridor. "I wonder where the Nuts are. We'll find them all together somewhere."

He was right. The very next court was packed to the doors. A blast of hot air— I speak literally, not figuratively— greeted us as we struggled in. It was a large court, and in the centre of the throng stood an extremely important-looking King's Counsel, who, we were informed in a reverential whisper by an unclean stranger with whom we found ourselves sharing some fifteen square inches of floor space, was Sir Turnham Dippey, the celebrated witness-baiter, engaged in his daily avocation of impressing his personality upon the court— in other words, scoring off people who were not in a position to retaliate. Presently we began to grasp the rules of the game. They were simple, and the system of scoring was clearly defined. For instance, to irritate opposing Counsel counted one point. Thus:

"I am afraid I must ask the witness to repeat his answer. My friend was talking, and I could not hear."

If you can administer an indirect reproof to the Judge for inattention, you score two points. A good plan is to refer to a note of his which you know he has not taken, and make him hunt for it. But full points can only be attained by

proficiency in that favourite and perennial sport of the legal profession, the scarification of witnesses. There are three clearly marked variations of the theme.

Firstly, comic repetition of a perfectly ordinary answer, for the edification of the jury; or indeed of anybody present who will laugh. Thus:

"And what were you doing there at all?"

"I was waiting for my wife."

"Oh! You were waiting for your wife." (To the jury) "Note, ladies and gentlemen— he was waiting for his wife!" (Loud laughter.)

The Judge (exercising his undoubted right). "He was there for the purpose of keeping an appointment with his better half." (Roars of delight.)

Secondly, simulated indignation over the shiftiness of some particularly straightforward witness.

"*You were standing about six or eight yards away*? What do you mean by giving me an answer like that? Six or eight yards! Which was it— six yards, or eight? Come now, answer me! You can't waste the time of the ladies and gentlemen of the jury in this way, you know. Six or eight yards, indeed!"

But the third gambit is the favourite. It is the most consummate jest in the legal repertoire.

On this occasion the great man began by lulling his victim into a sense of false security.

"Now, Mr.— thank you! Mr. Dumble! You say you were standing at the corner of the street about fifty yards from the scene of the quarrel, at about five minutes to four in the afternoon on the day on which the quarrel occurred, and that it was raining at the time. Is that correct?" He cooed encouragingly.

"That's right, sir," said Mr. Dumble nervously.

"Thank you." His voice rose. "Now, you're quite sure? Positive? You would swear to that?"

"That's right, sir." Mr. Dumble, who was not accustomed to public appearances, or words of more than one syllable, broke into a light perspiration.

"Then why," demanded Sir Turnham Dippey, throwing off the mask and plucking a document from the desk before him, "when you made a declaration upon the subject last October— a declaration which was taken down in writing and read aloud to you, and which you afterwards signed— did you say that you were standing sixty yards away, and that it was five minutes past four, and that the weather was only moderately fine? What? *You don't remember saying these things last October*? My dear sir, look at this document! Isn't that your signature? *You didn't read the statement*? Then why in the name of common sense and common honesty did you put your signature to it? Answer me that, if you can! *You thought it didn't matter*? Great heavens— *not matter*? You see, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the type of witness which my friend thinks fit to put into the box!"

"What a game!" remarked honest George, *sotto voce*. "Let's get out!"

In the next court the atmosphere was comparatively salubrious: that is to say, it smelt of decayed book-bindings instead of warm humanity. Here a rosy-faced old gentleman in gold-rimmed spectacles was benignantly refereeing in a rough-and-tumble between two overheated Counsel, engaged, as far as we could gather, in a life-and-death struggle for the person of a dazed youth, with rumpled hair and a dirty collar, who stood behind a barrier in one corner. We sidled into a pew, and endeavoured to pick up the thread of the story. Apparently a motor-car (of an inexpensive and widely-advertised brand) had run into a stationary donkey-cart and killed the donkey; and the first Counsel, a prognathous gentleman with a Lancashire accent, was claiming damages in no uncertain voice. The defence suggested that the donkey had in some way provoked or enraged the Ford, and submitted that there was no case. The Judge pointed out with a kindly smile that a dead donkey is a case in itself, and that the court was sitting to appraise responsibility for its decease. This intimation came as an obvious surprise to the rumpled young gentleman in the witness-box. Appearances to the contrary, he was not a criminal on trial for his life, but an independent citizen of London who, passing at the time of the accident, had volunteered, under an impulse of misguided public spirit, to come and give evidence. What his original impression of the cause of the disaster may have been it was now impossible to say: after his examination in chief, cross-examination, and re-examination, it was obvious that he had made up his mind that he had assassinated the donkey himself; and he stood waiting, in limp and apathetic resignation, to hear sentence pronounced.

The roar of battle grew louder.

"Going to see a good scrap at last!" said George, in my ear.

Again he was doomed to disappointment. With startling suddenness the tumult ceased; the prognathous one sank back like a dying gladiator, and Counsel for the Defence announced:

"My friend and I have decided to settle the case, my lord." (He did not say "m'lud." They never do, we found.)

"I thought you would," replied the Judge, as unruffled as ever. "How much?"

A modest figure was named— painfully disproportionate to the magnitude of the recent conflict.

The Judge began to write in a book. There was a general upheaval, and the young gentleman behind the barrier, amazed and incredulous, staggered out into the world a free man. We followed his example, while there was yet time.

"Well," remarked George, "if ever I find myself up against those chaps"— alluding apparently to the Legal Profession in general— "I hope I shall be in the dock and not in the witness-box! Taxi!"

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15: The Nameless City

H. P. Lovecraft

1890-1937

Weird Tales, November, 1938

WHEN I DREW NIGH the nameless city I knew it was accursed. I was traveling in a parched and terrible valley under the moon, and afar I saw it protruding uncannily above the sands as parts of a corpse might protrude from an ill-made grave. Fear spoke from the age-worn stones of this hoary survivor of the deluge, this great-grandmother of the eldest pyramid; and a viewless aura repelled me and bade retreat from antique and sinister secrets that no man should see, and no man else had ever dared to see.

Remote in the desert of Araby lies the nameless city, crumbling and inarticulate, its low walls nearly hidden by the sands of uncounted ages. It must have been thus before the first stones of Memphis were laid, and while the bricks of Babylon were yet unbaked. There is no legend so old as to give it a name, or to recall that it was ever alive; but it is told of in whispers around campfires and muttered about by grandams in the tents of sheiks so that all the tribes shun it without wholly knowing why. It was of this place that Abdul Alhazred the mad poet dreamed on the night before he sang his unexplainable couplet:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange eons even death may die.

I should have known that the Arabs had good reason for shunning the nameless city, the city told of in strange tales but seen by no living man; yet I defied them and went into the untrodden waste with my camel. I alone have seen it, and that is why no other face bears such hideous lines of fear as mine; why no other man shivers so horribly when the night wind rattles the windows. When I came upon it in the ghastly stillness of unending sleep it looked at me, chilly from the rays of a cold moon amidst the desert's heat. And as I returned its look I forgot my triumph at finding it, and stopped still with my camel to wait for the dawn.

For hours I waited, till the east grew gray and the stars faded, and the gray turned to roseate light edged with gold. I heard a moaning and saw a storm of sand stirring among the antique stones, though the sky was clear and the vast reaches of the desert still. Then suddenly above the desert's far rim came the blazing edge of the sun, seen through the tiny sandstorm which was passing away, and in my fevered state I fancied that from some remote depth there came a crash of musical metal to hail the fiery disk as Memnon hails it from the banks of the Nile. My ears rang and my imagination seethed as I led my camel slowly across

the sand to that unvocal stone place; that place too old for Egypt and Meroë to remember; that place which I alone of living men had seen.

In and out amongst the shapeless foundations of houses and palaces I wandered, finding never a carving or inscription to tell of these men, if men they were, who built this city and dwelt therein so long ago. The antiquity of the spot was unwholesome, and I longed to encounter some sign or device to prove that the city was indeed fashioned by mankind. There were certain *proportions* and *dimensions* in the ruins which I did not like. I had with me many tools, and dug much within the walls of the obliterated edifices; but progress was slow, and nothing significant was revealed. When night and the moon returned I felt a chill wind which brought new fear, so that I did not dare to remain in the city. And as I went outside the antique walls to sleep, a small sighing sandstorm gathered behind me, blowing over the gray stones though the moon was bright and most of the desert still.

I AWAKED just at dawn from a pageant of horrible dreams, my ears ringing as from some metallic peal. I saw the sun peering redly through the last gusts of a little sandstorm that hovered over the nameless city, and marked the quietness of the rest of the landscape. Once more I ventured within those brooding ruins that swelled beneath the sand like an ogre under a coverlet, and again dug vainly for relics of the forgotten race. At noon I rested, and in the afternoon I spent much time tracing the walls and the bygone streets, and the outlines of the nearly vanished buildings. I saw that the city had been mighty indeed, and wondered at the sources of its greatness. To myself I pictured all the splendors of an age so distant that Chaldea could not recall it, and thought of Sarnath the Doomed, that stood in the land Mnar when mankind was young, and of Ib, that was carven of gray stone before mankind existed.

All at once I came upon a place where the bed-rock rose stark through the sand and formed a low cliff; and here I saw with joy what seemed to promise further traces of the antediluvian people. Hewn rudely on the face of the cliff were the unmistakable façades of several small, squat rock houses or temples, whose interiors might preserve many secrets of ages too remote for calculation, though sandstorms had long since effaced any carvings which may have been outside.

Very low and sand-choked were all of the dark apertures near me, but I cleared one with my spade and crawled through it, carrying a torch to reveal whatever mysteries it might hold. When I was inside I saw that the cavern was indeed a temple, and beheld plain signs of the race that had lived and worshipped before the desert was a desert. Primitive altars, pillars, and niches, all curiously low, were not absent; and though I saw no sculptures nor frescoes, there were many singular stones clearly shaped into symbols by artificial means. The lowness of the chiselled chamber was very strange, for I could hardly kneel upright; but the

area was so great that my torch showed only part of it at a time. I shuddered oddly in some of the far corners; for certain altars and stones suggested forgotten rites of terrible, revolting, and inexplicable nature and made me wonder what manner of men could have made and frequented such a temple. When I had seen all that the place contained, I crawled out again, avid to find what the other temples might yield.

NIGHT had now approached, yet the tangible things I had seen made curiosity stronger than fear, so that I did not flee from the long moon-cast shadows that had daunted me when first I saw the nameless city. In the twilight I cleared another aperture and with a new torch crawled into it, finding more vague stones and symbols, though nothing more definite than the other temple had contained. The room was just as low, but much less broad, ending in a very narrow passage crowded with obscure and cryptical shrines. About these shrines I was prying when the noise of a wind and of my camel outside broke through the stillness and drew me forth to see what could have frightened the beast.

The moon was gleaming vividly over the primitive ruins, lighting a dense cloud of sand that seemed blown by a strong but decreasing wind from some point along the cliff ahead of me. I knew it was this chilly, sandy wind which had disturbed the camel and was about to lead him to a place of better shelter when I chanced to glance up and saw that there was no wind atop the cliff. This astonished me and made me fearful again, but I immediately recalled the sudden local winds that I had seen and heard before at sunrise and sunset, and judged it was a normal thing. I decided it came from some rock fissure leading to a cave, and watched the troubled sand to trace it to its source; soon perceiving that it came from the black orifice of a temple a long distance south of me almost out of sight. Against the choking sand-cloud I plodded toward this temple, which, as I neared it, loomed larger than the rest, and showed a doorway far less clogged with caked sand. I would have entered had not the terrific force of the icy wind almost quenched my torch. It poured madly out of the dark door, sighing uncannily as it ruffled the sand and spread among the weird ruins. Soon it grew fainter and the sand grew more and more still, till finally all was at rest again; but a presence seemed stalking among the spectral stones of the city, and when I glanced at the moon it seemed to quiver as though mirrored in unquiet waters. I was more afraid than I could explain, but not enough to dull my thirst for wonder; so as soon as the wind was quite gone I crossed into the dark chamber from which it had come.

THIS TEMPLE, as I had fancied from the outside, was larger than either of those I had visited before; and was presumably a natural cavern since it bore winds from some region beyond. Here I could stand quite upright, but saw that

the stones and altars were as low as those in the other temples. On the walls and roof I beheld for the first time some traces of the pictorial art of the ancient race, curious curling streaks of paint that had almost faded or crumbled away; and on two of the altars I saw with rising excitement a maze of well-fashioned curvilinear carvings. As I held my torch aloft it seemed to me that the shape of the roof was too regular to be natural, and I wondered what the prehistoric cutters of stone had first worked upon. Their engineering skill must have been vast.

Then a bright flare of the fantastic flame showed me that for which I had been seeking, the opening to those remoter abysses whence the sudden wind had blown; and I grew faint when I saw that it was a small and plainly *artificial* door chiselled in the solid rock. I thrust my torch within, beholding a black tunnel with the roof arching low over a rough flight of very small, numerous, and steeply descending steps. I shall always see those steps in my dreams, for I came to learn what they meant. At the time I hardly knew whether to call them steps or mere footholds in a precipitous descent. My mind was whirling with mad thoughts, and the words and warnings of Arab prophets seemed to float across the desert from the lands that men know to the nameless city that men dare not know. Yet I hesitated only a moment before advancing through the portal and commencing to climb cautiously down the steep passage, feet first, as though on a ladder.

It is only in the terrible phantasms of drugs or delirium that any other man can have such a descent as mine. The narrow passage led infinitely down like some hideous haunted well, and the torch I held above my head could not light the unknown depths toward which I was crawling. I lost track of the hours and forgot to consult my watch, though I was frightened when I thought of the distance I must be traversing. There were changes of direction and of steepness; and once I came to a long, low level passage where I had to wriggle feet first along the rocky floor, holding the torch at arm's length beyond my head. The place was not high enough for kneeling. After that were more of the steep steps, and I was still scrambling down interminably when my failing torch died out. I do not think I noticed it at the time, for when I did notice it I was still holding it above me as if it were ablaze. I was quite unbalanced with that instinct for the strange and the unknown which had made me a wanderer upon earth and a haunter of far, ancient, and forbidden places.

In the darkness there flashed before my mind fragments of my cherished treasury of demoniac lore; sentences from Alhazred the mad Arab, paragraphs from the apocryphal nightmares of Damascus, and infamous lines from the delirious *Image du Monde* of Gauthier de Metz. I repeated queer extracts, and muttered of Afrasiab and the demons that floated with him down the Oxus; later chanting over and over again a phrase from one of Lord Dunsany's tales— "the unreverberate blackness of the abyss." Once when the descent grew amazingly

steep I recited something in singsong from Thomas Moore until I feared to recite more:

A reservoir of darkness, black
As witches' cauldrons are, when fill'd
With moon-drugs in th' eclipse distill'd.
Leaning to look if foot might pass
Down thro' that chasm, I saw, beneath,
As far as vision could explore,
The jetty sides as smooth as glass,
Looking as if just varnish'd o'er
With that dark pitch the Sea of Death
Throws out upon its slimy shore.

Time had quite ceased to exist when my feet again felt a level floor, and I found myself in a place slightly higher than the rooms in the two smaller temples now so incalculably far above my head. I could not quite stand, but could kneel upright, and in the dark I shuffled and crept hither and thither at random. I soon knew that I was in a narrow passage whose walls were lined with cases of wood having glass fronts. As in that paleozotic and abysmal place I felt of such things as polished wood and glass I shuddered at the possible implications. The cases were apparently ranged along each side of the passage at regular intervals, and were oblong and horizontal, hideously like coffins in shape and size. When I tried to move two or three for further examination, I found that they were firmly fastened.

I saw that the passage was a long one, so floundered ahead rapidly in a creeping run that would have seemed horrible had any eye watched me in the blackness; crossing from side to side occasionally to feel of my surroundings and be sure the walls and rows of cases still stretched on. Man is so used to thinking visually that I almost forgot the darkness and pictured the endless corridor of wood and glass in its low-studded monotony as though I saw it. And then in a moment of indescribable emotion I did see it.

Just when my fancy merged into real sight I cannot tell; but there came a gradual glow ahead, and all at once I knew that I saw the dim outlines of the corridor and the cases, revealed by some unknown subterranean phosphorescence. For a little while all was exactly as I had imagined it, since the glow was very faint; but as I mechanically kept stumbling ahead into the stronger light I realized that my fancy had been but feeble. This hall was no relic of crudity like the temples in the city above, but a monument of the most magnificent and exotic art. Rich, vivid, and daringly fantastic designs and pictures formed a continuous scheme of mural painting whose lines and colors were beyond description. The cases were of a strange golden wood, with fronts of exquisite

glass, and containing the mummified forms of creatures outreaching in grotesqueness the most chaotic dreams of man.

To convey any idea of these monstrosities is impossible. They were of the reptile kind, with body lines suggesting sometimes the crocodile, sometimes the seal, but more often nothing of which either the naturalist or the paleontologist ever heard. In size they approximated a small man, and their forelegs bore delicate and evidently flexible feet curiously like human hands and fingers. But strangest of all were their heads, which presented a contour violating all known biological principles. To nothing can such things be well compared— in one flash I thought of comparisons as varied as the cat, the bulldog, the mythic satyr, and the human being. Not Jove himself had had so colossal and protuberant a forehead; yet the horns and the noselessness and the alligator-like jaw placed the things outside all established categories. I debated for a time on the reality of the mummies, half suspecting they were artificial idols; but soon decided they were indeed some paleogean species which had lived when the nameless city was alive. To crown their grotesqueness, most of them were gorgeously enrobed in the costliest of fabrics, and lavishly laden with ornaments of gold, jewels, and unknown shining metals.

The importance of these crawling creatures must have been vast, for they held first place among the wild designs on the frescoed walls and ceiling. With matchless skill had the artist drawn them in a world of their own, wherein they had cities and gardens fashioned to suit their dimensions; and I could not help but think that their pictured history was allegorical, perhaps showing the progress of the race that worshipped them. These creatures, I said to myself, were to the men of the nameless city what the she-wolf was to Rome, or some totem-beast is to a tribe of Indians.

Holding this view, I thought I could trace roughly a wonderful epic of the nameless city; the tale of a mighty sea-coast metropolis that ruled the world before Africa rose out of the waves, and of its struggles as the sea shrank away, and the desert crept into the fertile valley that held it. I saw its wars and triumphs, its troubles and defeats, and afterward its terrible fight against the desert when thousands of its people here represented in allegory by the grotesque reptiles were driven to chisel their way down through the rocks in some marvelous manner to another world whereof their prophets had told them. It was all vividly weird and realistic, and its connection with the awesome descent I had made was unmistakable. I even recognized the passages.

AS I CREPT along the corridor toward the brighter light I saw later stages of the painted epic— the leave-taking of the race that had dwelt in the nameless city and the valley around for ten million years; the race whose souls shrank from quitting scenes their bodies had known so long where they had settled as nomads in the

earth's youth, hewing in the virgin rock those primal shrines at which they had never ceased to worship. Now that the light was better I studied the pictures more closely and, remembering that the strange reptiles must represent the unknown men, pondered upon the customs of the nameless city. Many things were peculiar and inexplicable. The civilization, which included a written alphabet, had seemingly risen to a higher order than those immeasurably later civilizations of Egypt and Chaldea, yet there were curious omissions. I could, for example, find no pictures to represent deaths or funeral customs, save such as were related to wars, violence, and plagues; and I wondered at the reticence shown concerning natural death. It was as though an ideal of immortality had been fostered as a cheering illusion.

STILL NEARER the end of the passage were painted scenes of the utmost picturesqueness and extravagance; contrasted views of the nameless city in its desertion and growing ruin, and of the strange new realm of paradise to which the race had hewed its way through the stone. In these views the city and the desert valley were shown always by moonlight, a golden nimbus hovering over the fallen walls and half revealing the splendid perfection of former times, shown spectrally and elusively by the artist. The paradisal scenes were almost too extravagant to be believed, portraying a hidden world of eternal day filled with glorious cities and ethereal hills and valleys.

At the very last I thought I saw signs of an artistic anticlimax. The paintings were less skilful, and much more bizarre than even the wildest of the earlier scenes. They seemed to record a slow decadence of the ancient stock, coupled with a growing ferocity toward the outside world from which it was driven by the desert. The forms of the people— always represented by the sacred reptiles— appeared to be gradually wasting away, though their spirits as shown hovering above the ruins by moonlight gained in proportion. Emaciated priests, displayed as reptiles in ornate robes, cursed the upper air and all who breathed it; and one terrible final scene showed a primitive-looking man, perhaps a pioneer of ancient Irem, the City of Pillars, torn to pieces by members of the older race. I remembered how the Arabs fear the nameless city, and was glad that beyond this place the gray walls and ceiling were bare.

As I viewed the pageant of mural history I had approached very closely the end of the low-ceiled hall, and was aware of a gate through which came all of the illuminating phosphorescence. Creeping up to it, I cried aloud in transcendent amazement at what lay beyond; for instead of other and brighter chambers there was only an illimitable void of uniform radiance, such as one might fancy when gazing down from the peak of Mount Everest upon a sea of sunlit mist. Behind me was a passage so cramped that I could not stand upright in it; before me was an infinity of subterranean effulgence.

Reaching down from the passage into the abyss was the head of a steep flight of steps— small, numerous steps like those of the black passages I had traversed—but after a few feet the glowing vapors concealed everything. Swung back open against the left-hand wall of the passage was a massive door of brass, incredibly thick and decorated with fantastic bas-reliefs, which could if closed shut the whole inner world of light away from the vaults and passages of rock. I looked at the steps, and for the nonce dared not try them. I touched the open brass door, and could not move it. Then I sank prone to the stone floor, my mind aflame with prodigious reflections which not even a death-like exhaustion could banish.

As I lay still with closed eyes, free to ponder, many things I had lightly noted in the frescoes came back to me with new and terrible significance— scenes representing the nameless city in its heyday, the vegetation of the valley around it, and the distant lands with which its merchants traded. The allegory of the crawling creatures puzzled me by its universal prominence, and I wondered that it should be so closely followed in a pictured history of such importance. In the frescoes the nameless city had been shown in proportions fitted to the reptiles. I wondered what its real proportions and magnificence had been, and reflected a moment on certain oddities I had noticed in the ruins. I thought curiously of the lowness of the primal temples and of the underground corridor, which were doubtless hewn thus out of deference to the reptile deities there honored; though it perforce reduced the worshippers to crawling. Perhaps the very rites here involved a crawling in imitation of the creatures. No religious theory, however, could easily explain why the level passage in the awesome descent should be as low as the temples—or lower, since one could not even kneel in it. As I thought of the crawling creatures, whose hideous mummified forms were so close to me, I felt a new throb of fear. Mental associations are curious, and I shrank from the idea that except for the poor primitive man torn to pieces in the last painting, mine was the only human form amidst the many relics and symbols of primordial life.

But as always in my strange and roving existence, wonder soon drove out fear; for the luminous abyss and what it might contain presented a problem worthy of the greatest explorer. That a weird world of mystery lay far down that flight of peculiarly small steps I could not doubt, and I hoped to find there those human memorials which the painted corridor had failed to give. The frescoes had pictured unbelievable cities and valleys in this lower realm, and my fancy dwelt on the rich and colossal ruins that awaited me.

MY FEARS, indeed, concerned the past rather than the future. Not even the physical horror of my position in that cramped corridor of dead reptiles and antediluvian frescoes, miles below the world I knew and faced by another world of eery light and mist, could match the lethal dread I felt at the abysmal antiquity of

the scene and its soul. An ancientness so vast that measurement is feeble seemed to leer down from the primal stones and rock-hewn temples of the nameless city, while the very latest of the astounding maps in the frescoes showed oceans and continents that man has forgotten, with only here and there some vaguely familiar outline. Of what could have happened in the geological ages since the paintings ceased and the death-hating race resentfully succumbed to decay, no man might say. Life had once teemed in these caverns and in the luminous realm beyond; now I was alone with vivid relics, and I trembled to think of the countless ages through which these relics had kept a silent, deserted vigil.

Suddenly there came another burst of that acute fear which had intermittently seized me ever since I first saw the terrible valley and the nameless city under a cold moon, and despite my exhaustion I found myself starting frantically to a sitting posture and gazing back along the black corridor toward the tunnels that rose to the outer world. My sensations were like those which had made me shun the nameless city at night, and were as inexplicable as they were poignant. In another moment, however, I received a still greater shock in the form of a definite sound— the first which had broken the utter silence of these tomb-like depths. It was a deep, low moaning, as of a distant throng of condemned spirits, and came from the direction in which I was staring. Its volume rapidly grew, till soon it reverberated frightfully through the low passage, and at the same time I became conscious of an increasing draft of cold air, likewise flowing from the tunnels and the city above.

The touch of this air seemed to restore my balance, for I instantly recalled the sudden gusts which had risen around the mouth of the abyss each sunset and sunrise, one of which had indeed revealed the hidden tunnels to me. I looked at my watch and saw that sunrise was near, so braced myself to resist the gale that was sweeping down to its cavern home as it had swept forth at evening. My fear again waned low, since a natural phenomenon tends to dispel broodings over the unknown.

More and more madly poured the shrieking, moaning night wind into that gulf of the inner earth. I dropped prone again and clutched vainly at the floor for fear of being swept bodily through the open gate into the phosphorescent abyss. Such fury I had not expected, and as I grew aware of an actual slipping of my form toward the abyss I was beset by a thousand new terrors of apprehension and imagination.

The malignancy of the blast awakened incredible fancies; once more I compared myself shudderingly to the only human image in that frightful corridor, the man who was torn to pieces by the nameless race, for in the fiendish clawing of the swirling currents there seemed to abide a vindictive rage all the stronger because it was largely impotent.

I think I screamed frantically near the last— I was almost mad— but if I did so my cries were lost in the hell-born babel of the howling wind-wraiths. I tried to crawl against the murderous invisible torrent, but I could not even hold my own as I was pushed slowly and inexorably toward the unknown world. Finally reason must have wholly snapped; for I fell to babbling over and over that unexplainable couplet of the mad Arab Alhazred, who dreamed of the nameless city:

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange eons even death may die.

Only the grim brooding desert gods know what really took place— what indescribable struggles and scrambles in the dark I endured or what Abaddon guided me back to life, where I must always remember and shiver in the night wind till oblivion— or worse— claims me. Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing— too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours of the morning when one cannot sleep.

I HAVE SAID that the fury of the rushing blast was infernal— caco-demoniacal— and that its voices were hideous with the pent-up viciousness of desolate eternities. Presently these voices, while still chaotic before me, seemed to my beating brain to take articulate form behind me; and down there in the grave of unnumbered eon-dead antiquities, leagues below the dawn-lit world of men, I heard the ghastly cursing and snarling of strange-tongued fiends. Turning, I saw outlined against the luminous æther of the abyss what could not be seen against the dusk of the corridor— a nightmare horde of rushing devils; hate-distorted, grotesquely panoplied, half-transparent devils of a race no man might mistake— the crawling reptiles of the nameless city.

And as the wind died away I was plunged into the ghoul-peopled darkness of earth's bowels; for behind the last of the creatures the great brazen door clanged shut with a deafening peal of metallic music whose reverberations swelled out to the distant world to hail the rising sun as Memnon hails it from the banks of the Nile.

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16: The Time Jumpers

Phil Nowlan

Philip Francis Nowlan, 1888-1940

Amazing Stories, Feb 1934

Nowlan is best known for creating "Buck Rogers"

OUR first experience with the time-car was harrowing.

It followed two experiments in which I had shot the contraption into the past and brought it back to the present again under automatic control. A very simple clockwork mechanism had served to throw the lever after I got out of the car, and then to reverse it again after ten minutes.

I had set the space-time co-ordinates for roughly 50,000 years, had hooked up the clockwork control, and stepping out, was about to close the door when Spot, a mongrel terrier, who used to make himself at home around the laboratory, frisked into the machine out of my reach and barked playful defiance at me.

In less than two seconds the car would start its maiden journey into the past. Spot wanted to play tag inside the car, and kept out of my reach. I didn't dare go in after him. I had no intention of risking my life in any time-travelling adventure until I had a better idea of what would happen.

There was only one thing to do. I slammed the door and let Spot make the experiment.

Two backward leaps carried me to the opposite wall of the laboratory. From there I watched in breathless fascination.

Spot was up on his hind legs at one of the heavy quartzine windows. I could see rather than hear him barking. I could see too the blue glow that flashed up in one of the vacuum tubes inside the car. There came a low humming noise that grew in pitch and intensity, until I clapped my hands to my ears. Then I blinked, for the car was wavering and flickering, faster and faster as the hum faded into wave-lengths too short to affect my eardrums. It took on an intangible ghostly appearance. I could see right through its shadowy form. Then it was gone.

I RUSHED to the spot where it had stood, waving my arms in front of me, and even ventured to stand where it had been. There was no doubt of it. It had gone.

I don't know how many minutes elapsed before I backed away from that spot again. I had been too excited to look at my watch. But when I realized how dangerous it would be to be standing there when the car returned—if it returned—I not only backed away, but scrambled for the great outdoors, taking a position some hundred feet away in the field to stare at the laboratory doors, while my heart pounded away the slow, breathless minutes. If my calculations had

been correct the car should return precisely to its former position. But they might not be exactly correct.

Nothing happened until I was conscious of the unpleasant feeling in my ears. Then the high whine became audible, and lowered in pitch until with a rumble it ceased, and I ran excitedly for the doors.

The car was there, not a foot out of position, but coated with black, dank mud nearly one-third of the way up. Spot was not at the window.

But Spot wasn't dead. I could hear his terrified yowls plainly even through the thick walls of the machine. When I threw open the door he slunk whimpering out, and not for several minutes did he recover sufficiently to begin jumping at my legs in an access of gratitude.

Maybe it was the operation of the machine ; or maybe it was something he saw in the dim, distant past, into which I had hurled him so unceremoniously, that had terrified the dog. But at any rate, the important thing was that he had come through the experience safely. And, I figured, what a dog could do, I could do.

I left the co-ordinates as they were and sent the machine back again the next day, after I had rigged an automatic movie camera inside it. Again the timecar came back safely; but the film on development proved a disappointment. The exposure wasn't right, and it had registered only the faintest of impressions, of fern-like vegetation and great shadowy beasts. It was hopeless to even try to identify them.

IT was just a couple of days after this that Cynthia dropped in and nearly got us both into trouble. Cynthia is a kind of a cousin. At least I have always regarded her as such. She's the daughter of old Dr. Smith, inventor of the cosmic energy generator which is now so rapidly revolutionizing industry and transportation. He was also my guardian. I always called him uncle, and so Cynthia has always seemed like a cousin to me.

She used to stop in at my laboratory every once in a while to see how my "crazy" idea of the time-car was developing. She knew all about it, of course, because her Dad had been good enough to supply me with one of his generators after I had used up all my modest fortune in buying up the total world supply of dobinium. There wasn't much of it, just a few ounces that had been extracted from a meteor that fell in Arizona. It was valuable only as a scientific curiosity, for no experimenters but myself had ever found a practical use for it. Yet when induced to activity through a bombardment of rays from the cosmic generator, its emanations formed the basis of the complex reactions of pure and corpuscular energy by which I was able to cut the curvature of space-time and hurl a material object backward along the time coordinates.

Of course I had explained it all to Cynthia many times, and I believe she did grasp the fundamental idea of the thing in a vague sort of way. She couldn't be her

father's daughter, without having some sort of scientific head. But she had always been a bit skeptical about it.

"Why Ted Manley!" she gasped. "You don't stand there and expect me to believe that you actually sent this thing backward in time, and then brought it back— I mean forward— or whatever you call it, into the present, do you ?"

"Ask Spot," I told her. "He made the trip in it." Spot jumped and cavorted around, trying to share her interest with a stick that he alternately dropped at her feet and pretended to run off with.

She tossed her head. "I don't believe it," then more seriously: "Why Ted! You— you know the whole idea is so— so unbelievable! There must be some other explanation." All the while she was gazing at the time-car with a curiosity she had never shown before.

"MAY I get in it?" she asked at last, and as was typical with her, she jumped in and sat on one of the leather-padded seats without waiting for my reply. I followed her in and closed the door.

"It is simple enough to operate," I said. "All you have to do is set the space-time co-ordinates so the beam of the indicator light falls on the year you want to visit. The motion of the earth through space since that time has been calculated and the machine set for it. I never would have been able to do it if they hadn't let me use the Calhoun Calculating Machine down in Washington." I waxed more enthusiastic. "But that isn't all! You see this adjustment here? By simply setting the latitude and longitude dials you can bring the machine to any part of the earth you want to-"

"And what's this lever for?" Cynthia interrupted me as she reached above her head. The lever moved half an inch under the pressure of her hand. And we were in for it!

A sudden droning hum, rising in pitch rapidly, made our teeth chatter and our ears hurt. Cynthia, her pretty little face a picture of horrified astonishment, shrieked as she glanced out one of the quartzine windows and saw the laboratory vanishing in a shimmering maze of vibrations.

"Now you've done it!" I groaned. "I don't know what the co-ordinates are set for, nor when or where we're going to land I"

Cynthia just had time to flash me a look of contrition, when again we felt the intangible pain of the vibrations, which lowered in pitch until they were audible and then rumbled to a quick stop. We turned frantically to the windows.

SAND dunes everywhere. No. Over to one side, where we could see between them, there was a glimpse of bluegreen sea. The time-car was half buried in the sand, tilted at a slight angle. Otherwise everything seemed quite natural and we were in full possession of our faculties, having suffered no discomfort other than

the terrible ringing in our ears and uncomfortable sense of vibration, which evidently had been due to the sound alone. Cynthia was still gasping for breath.

At length she gathered herself together and said: "Well, Ted, at least your machine goes somewhere! This looks like a deserted part of the Jersey coast to me."

"You'll find we've gone somewhen as well as somewhere," I replied, "but I haven't the least idea about-"

"Ted! Look! Look!" Cynthia grabbed my arm and pointed through the window toward the ocean.

A strange looking craft had run up on the beach even as we had been talking. It was a long, slender affair resplendent in brilliant colors, with a striped, square sail, and a row of shields along the rails. Long sweeps, glistening in the sun, were tossed inboard, and several armored figures leaped into the shallow water and waded ashore. They carried axes, and looked warily toward the dunes.

"Norsemen!" I muttered. "Now do you believe me, Cynthia ?"

The girl gulped and nodded. "You win, Ted," she admitted. "It's— it's magic!— unbelievable! But, oh Ted, I'm kind of— frightened. Suppose something should— should happen!"

And as if enough hadn't happened already, one of the Norsemen spied our little time-car through the gap in the dunes. He pointed to us with his axe and spoke to another Norseman, evidently their leader. This one raised his arm, pointing first to the left and then to the right, and two compact parties of warriors trotted out of our line of vision, heading toward the dunes as though to top them at some distance to either side of us. A third group, under the command of the leader, waited, gazing in our direction.

There was nothing for us to do but wait, or flash back to the Twentieth Century. We were partly buried in the sand and it was impossible to open the doors.

AFTER a bit the Norsemen on the beach must have received a signal from those who had disappeared, for the leader waved his arm to the right and left. Then, with the remaining group he marched grimly toward us through the soft sand.

They paused about fifty feet away and exchanged startled glances as they caught sight of our faces pressed to the quartzine windows. The chief waved his axe and shouted something. They all came running toward the time-car, spreading out to surround it. And I didn't like the look on their faces as they closed in.

"I— I think we b-better be g-going," Cynthia suggested. I thought so, too, and reached for the reverse lever. But to my consternation the handle moved too freely, and the shaft didn't turn at all. The little set-screw had loosened, and must have been barely hanging in place by the last thread, for when I fumbled at it with

clumsy fingers, it dropped out. And to make matters worse, I snatched at it instinctively and only succeeded in batting it out of sight somewhere on the floor.

I heard Cynthia's little gasp of fear as I dropped on my knees to search for it. It was not to be seen. In a panic I jumped to my feet again, wondering if I could turn the shaft with my fingers.

The Norse warriors were not a bit frightened by what must have appeared to be a weird metal box. Nor was there the least sign of friendliness in the bearded faces that pressed against the windows, or the fierce, hostile eyes that glared in at us with glances that roved curiously over the intricate set-up of coils, condensers, and the blue glow of the vacuum tubes.

Suddenly they withdrew a few paces, and an argument developed between the leader and another. They pointed toward us with their axes.

"Quick, Ted!" Cynthia whispered. "What's the matter ? Throw the switch! Can't you see they're going to try to break in?"

It was true. The warrior who had been talking to the chief stepped up and took his position before one of the quartzine windows, planting his feet wide and swinging up his great axe for a mighty blow.

I gripped the starting shaft with my fingers until they hurt. I saw the Norseman's bearded lips curl back, and his muscles tense. I felt the shaft turn reluctantly.

Instantly the time-car hummed and vibrated. Slowly at first, it seemed, the axe swung downward. Then faster. The hum was a high whine.

Down came the axe in a powerful, slashing stroke as Cynthia and I shrank against the far side of the car. Straight through the side wall and quartzine window it clove, as though nothing were there to stop it. Amazement and panic flashed in the warrior's eyes. Then the shrill whine was descending to a hum that lowered quickly to silence. Through the windows of the time-car we saw the interior of my laboratory; and Spot, his tail between his legs, scrambling madly for the peaceful sunlight beyond the open doors of the building.

Cynthia was visibly trembling, and I know my own hand was none to steady as I helped her out of the car. She pushed me aside, weakly. With a sort of hollow feeling in the region of my stomach, and in a bit of a daze, I watched her as she walked a little uncertainly to the labor-atory doors and inspecting herself in the tiny mirror of the Dorine, powdered her nose.

Then she turned and said: "We'll be better prepared for our next trip!"

CYNTHIA simply wouldn't hear of being left behind on the next trip. All my arguments as to the dangers involved fell on deaf little ears. I turned to propriety.

"But listen, Cyn," I protested. "Can't you see I can't let you do that? It would be highly unorthodox."

"Could anything be less orthodox than jumping into the past across time curves, or whatever you call them?" she countered. "Why strain the straw off the camel's back and then swallow the camel?"

"But you've got to remember that we're not really cousins," I insisted, "and it wouldn't be right to go off this—"

"Who's going to see us," Cynthia interrupted, "except a lot of people who have been dead for centuries maybe? Pooh for them! Don't be so completely ga-ga, Ted. We've known each other like a brother and sister all our lives, and if Dad could go off to Europe and trust me here during vacation, I don't see why—"

"All right. All right. We won't argue any more about it," I conceded. "Maybe we can make a short trip anyhow; start early in the morning and be back at night. What period do you think we should visit?"

Cynthia suggested Colonial days, or the American Revolution. "Think what a lot of hopelessly lost historical data we could gather, Ted," she said. We couldn't have gotten anything out of those Norsemen anyhow, even if they hadn't tried to smash us up. We couldn't have understood their language."

"No," I admitted. "But at least we established one thing. The Norse did get as far down as the Jersey coast. Do you remember how fine that sand was? I don't think there are any beaches just like that, with such fine sand, much farther north than the South Jersey coast, are there ? And by the way—we were so excited we never checked up on how far into the past we went."

We looked at the time-car's control dials. They registered 968-237. That meant 968 years ago, and 237 days; or, as a rapid calculation showed me, June 7, 993 A. D.

"Maybe it was Leif Ericcson himself we saw," Cynthia ventured.

"Maybe," I agreed, "but I don't want to be caught again by Leif or any of his friends; not cooped up in an iron box half buried in the sand that way. What we've got to do, Cyn, is to equip this car with a flock of rocket tubes, so we can shoot up in the air with it before we jump the time gap. Did you ever stop to think what might have happened if we had materialized in the year 993 under a pile of rocks or something? We can't always be sure what was at a given spot on the earth's surface at a given time. Maybe the ground level was way above what it is now, or way below. We might be buried— or drop a couple of hundred feet!"

"Any way you dope it, Ted, will be okay with me. Well, I'll be seeing you." And Cynthia hopped into her neat little sportster rocket plane and flashed away toward town.

It took me several days to make the necessary changes in the time-car. Fortunately I had counted on the possibility of making them from the beginning, and had designed the car so that the rocket tubes could be readily attached.

History contains many references to flaming "stars" in the sky. Of course the natural thing to assume is that the ancients had so recorded the observation of

meteors. Even to-day people talk of "shooting stars." But I chuckled as I wondered if any of these might have been— or would be— whichever way you choose to put it— my time car, riding down on its rocket blast, or shooting across the countryside.

Cynthia and I decided we'd try to land near New York about the year 1750. But the problem of costume bothered us. The things you can get from a theatrical costumer may pass pretty well behind the footlights in 1962, but we had a hunch they'd look pretty sad face to face with the people of 1750. In the end we compromised on a plan of representing ourselves as frontiersmen. That wasn't hard. Cynthia sewed fringe on our shirts and made fur caps with tails on them. She got herself a haircut like mine, and when we were all dressed up she might have passed for my younger brother. Both of us had spent plenty of time outdoors, so we were sufficiently tanned for the parts we determined to play. And for safety's sake we carried in concealed holsters a pair of neat little rocket guns that discharged tiny explosive rockets with no more noise than a slight hiss.

WE roared aloft on a powerful blast, and after a careful survey of the sky to see that, there were no other craft near enough to take notice of our sudden disappearance in mid-air, we jumped the time-gap.

I thought I had set the co-ordinates for a spot on the Hudson, a few miles above New York. But either I made a mistake or there was some slight element of error in the mechanism, for we materialized over a wooded countryside that was not familiar to us. The forest, however, offered good concealment for the time-car, and we descended. It was something of a job to bring the 'bus down among the trees, but at last I maneuvered over a tiny clearing, and let her drop.

"Now that we're here," I said, "and all ready for the adventure, I don't quite like the idea of leaving the time-car. It seems too much like cutting off our only possible method of returning to our own century."

"We might have to stay here, and get married and become our own ancestors," Cynthia giggled. Then more seriously: "You've got a lock on it, haven't you? Lock the door and come on."

"You know, Cyn, that's a puzzling aspect of this time-travelling you just brought up," I said as we headed into the woods away from the machine. "Seriously how, just suppose we did have to stay here in this period, and we did get married and have children, and our own descendents were— I mean will be— hobnobbing with us back— I mean forward— in 1963!"

Cynthia thought this one over. Then she said: "I have a feeling something would happen to prevent that, Ted. I don't pretend to understand all this relativity thing. And I don't know more than the A B C of the space-time continuum. But I just have a hunch that somehow that sort of thing couldn't happen. I don't know just how to explain it. It's as though we don't really belong in this century—as

though we're not really all here, even though the ground is solid under foot, and the trees are very real, and so on.

"I don't know whether you noticed it or not," she went on, "but something very funny happened to us back there in 993. That Norseman's axe sliced right into the time car. The blade was way inside the field of the coils. But it didn't come back to the 20th Century with us in the car."

"Well that incident is easy to explain," I said. "I won't go into the mathematical theories involved, but I can give you a kind of a simile. It would be relatively as different a thing for the Norseman to go forward into the future as it would be for us to return back into the past. And our time-car isn't designed to carry anything forward into the future. But even if it were, you see, it could only be done along the co-ordinate of the time-norm and the Norseman would be dead some ten centuries as we arrived back in the 20th Century. We'd have nothing with us but his skeleton, if we had even that. See? You can't go into the future except along the norm, and that means the full ageing process, even if you accomplish it in a relative instant. It's quite different from our returning to the future where we already—"

"You needn't bother to go any further," Cynthia cut in. "I'm dizzy. But I still have that hunch that though we seem normal and feel normal in this period, we're really not entirely real and— Oh what's the use of trying to put it in words? Anyhow, we're not going to be caught in this century and have to stay here."

BUT something happened at this instant that made it look as though Cynthia was wrong.

Something whizzed blindingly between our head and thudded into a tree behind us, where it stuck, quivering. It was an Indian arrow!

For one startled instant we stood as though paralyzed. Then Cynthia cried out: "Back to the time-car, Ted! Don't let them get there ahead of us!" And we were racing madly back through the forest to an accompaniment of blood-curdling yells that seemed to come from every direction.

Now more arrows were whirring past our ears, and the yells were closer. Cynthia tripped over a projecting root, and had I not caught her, would have fallen flat. As it was, we lost precious seconds.

Just why neither of us thought to use the rocket guns, we had so carefully provided ourselves with, I don't know. I suppose it was because neither of us was accustomed to firearms and we didn't instinctively think of them. People act more by instinct than by reason in a crisis like this.

That neither of us was hit by the savages' arrows was due no doubt to the fact that the forest grew very thickly here, and it was difficult for them to get a clean sight on us as we ducked, dodged, jumped and slip on among the trees in our desperate flight.

We were back now, I thought, where the time-car should have been. .But we must have veered off our 'path, for I could catch no glimpse of it among the trees ahead. There seemed to be no escape for us. The Indians were closer than ever, and flashing occasional glances over my shoulder, I glimpsed bronzed figures following, and felt that their purpose was not so much to overtake us as surround us.

Then suddenly the horrifying war whoops were stilled. And glancing back, I saw no bronzed bodies among the trees.

"Wh-what's the ma-matter?" Cynthia panted as she ran. "Aren't th-they chchasing us any m-more ?"

"I I do-don't thuh-think so," I replied. "But we— better— k-keep running!"

We continued our desperate flight a bit farther, but when there was no sign of pursuit we slowed down to a hurried walk, panting and gasping too hard to talk right away.

"I DON'T think we came nearly this far from the time-ship," Cynthia said at last. "If we've lost it, Ted, we are in a tough spot!"

"Well, I'm afraid we have," I had to admit. "But I'm even more uneasy about those Indians. We must have looked like easy pickings to them. I wonder why they quit so suddenly?"

I had lagged a few paces to look back. When I turned to follow Cynthia I ran square into her. She was backing toward me, her arms outstretched to warn me, her gaze centered on a spot in the forest ahead where an indefinable patch of bright blue showed.

"Do you see it?" she whispered. "It's cloth I think. And I'm sure I saw it move!"

A voice, all the more startling because of its low, tense tone, made us snap our eyes suddenly to the left. "Stand where ye are!" it commanded, "and reach for no weepons!"

Only half concealed behind a tree a blue-coated figure stood, levelling a long rifle at us. Two or three others were moving softly out from their concealment toward us. I heard a faint sound to the right. There were more of them. We were surrounded.

"Reach for the sky, Cyn!" I said under my breath. "We're in a trap!"

Except that they were all badly in need of shaves, and their hair, which was arranged in little pigtails, looked kind of gummy, they didn't seem like a bad lot. Some wore buckskin leggings with their military coats, and others wore coonskin caps, and some had fringed hunting shirts. But there was an air of alertness and straightforwardness about them that relieved \ny mind considerably.

"Colonial troops!" Cynthia whispered.

"I hope so!" I replied.

Their leader stood before us now. "No rifles, hey?" he said. "Where did ye come from? Ye're not French!"

"HARDLY," I replied. "We— we got lost. And Indians chased us."

"They'd be Algonkin devils," he commented. "Allies o' the French. They'd had yer skelps before now if— but here! We got no time to waste. Hi there! Robinson! Altrock! Take these two pris'ners back to the Colonel, will ye! And mind ye salute him precise. What with these red-coated macaronis tramping all through the forest, the Colonel's startin' to set a heap o' store by cer-ee-monial!" And with that he was gone. His men, too, with the exception of the two into whose keeping he had given us, had faded silently into the forest.

And now a vague sound, of thousands of men tramping and crashing on through the forest in the distance, came to us from the other direction.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked one of the lads, for both were but youngsters.

"To th' Colonel," he replied curtly as they started us off down a trail in the direction of the crashing sound. And after a bit he made us draw aside while a long column of grenadiers in brilliant scarlet and white uniforms, marched by.

"British Redcoats!" Cynthia exclaimed.

"Aye," the boy muttered bitterly. "The rapscallions! One of these days the Colonies'll get tired o' their high-handed ways an—" A bit startled at his own temerity he let his remark trail off into incoherence.

Our two guards weren't so communicative. Besides, Cynthia and I were getting an eyeful of the Britishers. They weren't nearly so impressive, we found, as the pictures of them in the history books. The queues and powdered hair didn't stand close inspection, and the mixture of sweat and powder didn't improve the appearance of the rather ill-fitting scarlet coats. The officers, of course, had better fitting uniforms and were much snappier in appearance. But all of them were pretty sorry looking from the knees down. The column evidently had forded a creek and splashed mud all over itself. And the high grenadier-hats frequently were knocked off by overhanging boughs, causing considerable confusion and evoking blistering comments from sergeants. Altogether it gave me quite a chuckle, and I saw the corners of Cynthia's mouth twitching.

Immediately after the grenadiers came a party of mounted officers. Most of these wore the scarlet of the British regulars, but there was one conspicuous in buff and blue, whose keen glance instantly spotted the two Colonials and ourselves. He leaned forward to say something to the rather pompous Redcoats ahead of him, who could have been nothing less than a general, and saluting, pulled out of position and rode over to where we waited, well off the trail.

"Robinson and Altrock, isn't it ?" he inquired as the two lads executed smart salutes. "And whom have we here ? Prisoners ?"

"Aye, sir! The Cap'n sent us back wi' them, sir."

NOW I had been gazing at this big, deep-voiced officer, with a disconcerting feeling that I had met him before, which of course was obviously ridiculous, since I had spent all of my life, but the past hour or so, in quite another century. And I noticed too that Cynthia was looking at him with astonishment.

"General Washington!" she burst out at last. "The Father of His Country!"

He turned on her sharply: "What's this— what's this?" he demanded. "You know me? But what is this nonsense of 'General,' and 'Father of My Country?' I am Colonel George Washington, of General Braddock's staff. But I don't understand the rest of your remark!"

Cynthia drew back in confusion as I whispered to her: "Sh! He isn't a general yet, and the Revolution has not been fought yet, CynJ"

Washington heard some of this, I thought; and I fancied I saw a startled gleam in his eyes for just a moment. But if so, he had a good poker face. Even as I looked, his face was grave and calm. The two Colonials told him how they

had picked us up in the forest, and mentioned the force of Algonkins that had chased us. He seemed concerned at this.

"We're halting a few rods up the trail," Washington said. "Bring your prisoners up there. General Braddock may want to question you, young men." His second remark was addressed to us. Evidently he had not penetrated Cynthia's disguise. He swung his horse about and galloped away.

Cynthia nudged me. "Why didn't you tell him ?" she demanded.

"Tell him what?" I asked, still somewhat in a daze from the novelty of meeting a great historical character face to face, in the flesh.

"Why, about the ambush, stupid!"

"Oh," I said. "I forgot about that. But I will tell him."

It was about twenty minutes later that we approached Washington for the second time. He stood alone with General Braddock. The other officers had withdrawn. Braddock's manner was a bit impatient with Washington, though in a friendly sort of way.

"How now, Washington?" he was saying. "What can these ragged Colonials of yours, and these two babes o' the woods, tell us that we don't already know?" Washington winced and frowned slightly at the reference to "ragged Colonials," but he said:

"If it please you, sir, they have to report a large force of French Indians ahead of us. The point is they must have known of our near approach or they would not have been in such great force, nor withdrawn so quietly and readily."

"Gad's 'Ounds, sir!" Braddock said testily. "But we already know Indians and French are ahead of us. And they must needs learn of our advance before we reach 'em! What of it all?"

"Just this sir!" I stepped forward and saluted. "It is the intention of the French to ambush you, and—"

"What!" Braddock roared. "Ambush British Regulars! Let them try it! We'll sweep straight through their ambush with cold steel!" He turned angrily away, and addressing Washington, said:

"Come. I'm sick of this assumption that any naked rabble of savages the French can gather together with bribes of beads and trinkets can halt the advance of regular troops. You hear me, Washington? We're going straight through to Duquesne*. Let me hear no more of any talk to the contrary." And he strode off, the very picture of stiff, military indignation.

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** Now Pittsburgh.*

Washington gave us a quick glance and raised his eyebrows significantly. He nodded his head slightly toward the forest.

"He means for us to scram," said Cynthia.

"How about it?" I asked the two Colonials. "Do we go free?"

"I reckon ye do," said one of the lads slowly. "Our orders was to bring ye to the Colonel. We ha' done that. There's no more orders, so belike we'd better be returning to our command." They headed into the trees and soon were lost to sight.

WE withdrew sufficiently far to be inconspicuous, and sat down to rest. "You see how it is, Ted," Cynthia said thoughtfully. "Here we are with absolute pre-knowledge of what is going to happen— about Braddock's defeat, I mean— we warn him in plain words. But does it do a particle of good? No. He just gets mad and walks away. Washington knows the danger, but there's nothing even he can do about it. As for us— it's just as I said. We simply don't belong in this period. I don't believe anything we could do could possibly change the course of history the slightest bit from what it is to be, because, you see, it already was— at least to us!"

"I guess you're right, Cyn," I said. "But you've got to admit that this is a lot of fun. Look at that old sergeant over there. How funny he looks in that badly fitting red coat, and the green grass stains on the seat of his pants. Yet I bet he's a real hard boiled egg in his outfit. None of them seem to see anything funny about themselves, or dream that they look to us like a bunch of comic-opera soldiers."

"No," said Cynthia, "and the tragedy of it all is that before they know it they're going to get bowled right over, just like a bunch of comic-opera soldiers— all except the blood and the slaughter— and— and there isn't a single thing we can do to prevent it." She sighed. "Well, Ted, we ought to try to locate the time-car

before the slaughter starts. There's no reason why we should get dragged into it. It's not our fight."

I agreed with her. But before we set out we paused to look at a command of Iroquois Indians trailing silently, grimly past, on toward the head of the column. Then a bugle blew, sergeants shouted commands, and the column of Redcoats formed quickly and marched off up the trail.

AS nearly as we could figure it, our time car must be some distance ahead and off to the right of the trail somewhat farther on. And we followed intending to strike off among the trees somewhat farher on. And w followed slowly, because we wanted to be alone when we came to the machine. There was no use in having an audience to witness our return to the 20th Century.

But we were not destined to accomplish our purpose as easily as that. A crashing volley of musketry was borne back to us on the wind. Wild yells in the distance. More musketry fire, a bit more ragged this time. The sounds were coming nearer. Blood-curdling war cries of the Indians. The screams of terrified and tortured men. Musketry fire swelling into an almost continuous roll, and coming nearer.

"The slaughter will center chiefly on the trail!" I told Cynthia. "Let's beat it, quick! Straight to the right, away from the trail! And don't forget we've got rocket guns. We'll use them if we have to!"

Away we went through the trees, keeping a sharp lookout to the left, in the direction of the French. The firing was more behind us now, and was resuming something of its volley character.

"That's George Washington's work!" Cynthia panted, as we ran. "You know he was responsible for rallying the troops and preventing worse slaughter."

But as though to belie her words a wave of Redcoats, in mad panic swept down on us from our left. Some were cursing. Some laughing hysterically as they tripped and ran. They hurled their muskets and cross belts away, tossed aside their headgear. Some staggered and fell. One held up a bloody hand transfixed by an arrow shrieking insanely: "The Red Hand of O'Neil!— See the Red Hand of O'Neil!"

There was no sense in what they did. There couldn't have been a large force of pursuers. But these proud regulars, the pride of the British army, had simply cracked under the strain of battle conditions to which they were not accustomed. For the moment they were not disciplined troops, but fear-crazed animals, running in horror from some deadly terror they could not see.

I dragged Cynthia behind a great tree which, flanked by a couple of smaller ones quite close to it, formed a natural shelter, and held her, trembling in sheer horror, while the wave of panic-stricken troops surged by.

AS a matter of fact there were no pursuers. Not at the moment, at least. We ran from one to another of the fallen Britishers. They were all dead except one; and he died in our arms as we tried to relieve his suffering with water from his canteen.

"Well, Cyn, I guess it's no use hanging around here," I said as we stood up. "We know already how complete this victory is going to be. If we don't find that time-car pretty quick, we're not going to get back to the 20th Century at all."

"Oh, how horrible and bloody it all is," Cynthia said. Her voice trembled. "The way we read it in our school histories, it didn't seem like this at all, did it? Just to think! This poor fellow probably has a mother and father waiting for him on some peaceful English countryside, looking forward to the day when he comes home from the wars and-"

"Come, Cyn," I said, taking her elbow and steering her gently on through the forest. "It's all very sad and terrible. But there's nothing we can do about it. And we have to get back to that timecar !"

Several times we heard distant shrieks and cries; and two or three times musket shots. Once a party of Iroquois, allies of the English, crossed our trail ahead of us. We could see them slinking through the trees, glancing back occasionally in the direction of the French lines.

"That means the French or the Algonkins can't be far away," Cynthia said. "What do you think we better do?"

"I don't know. If we only knew exactly where the time-car is," I told her, "I'd take a chance and try to crash straight through to it. These are the days of solid shot, you know. Not even explosive artillery projectiles have been invented yet. So unless we met an overwhelming opposition we ought to be able to scare off Indians with the explosive bullets of our automatics."

In the end I decided to climb a tree and see if we could get our bearings that way. I selected the tallest I could find, and finally made my way to the top, though I am quite sure that, had there been any Algonkins in the immediate neighborhood, they would have been attracted by the commotion I made.

All I could see in every direction was forest. No— was I mistaken? Did I see a flash, as though of the distant reflection of sunlight on glass, way over there? I couldn't be sure, but we had no better guide. So carefully noting the direction, I descended, and we set forth cautiously in that direction, pausing every few moments to listen carefully.

"I THINK we've come about the right distance," I said at length. "Let's circle about carefully. Isn't that a clearing over there?"

"I don't know," Cynthia replied. "That outcropping of rocks is in the way. You can't see very well what is beyond."

We made our way to the little ridge, and as Cynthia anxiously watched me, I crawled to the top, and exposing myself as little as possible, looked over.

There was the time-car, just as we had left it. I could see it through the trees about two hundred yards away. And gathered around it, touching and thumping it in obvious amazement, were some two dozen Indians. Even at this distance I could tell from their headdress that they were not the friendly Iroquois, but Algonkins.

Cynthia crawled up beside me and together we watched, hoping the Indians would pass on in their pursuit of the British column. But they didn't. Instead, when they had gotten through thumping and scratching at the locked car, they proceeded to squat and stretch themselves on the ground as though waiting for something, or someone.

"Do you suppose they can damage it?" Cynthia whispered.

"I hardly think so," I replied. "Not with tomahawks, knifes and arrows. None of them seem to have guns. A bullet might crack one of the quartzine windows, but I don't think it would break it. They're pretty thick, you know. The only trouble is there's no telling what a bunch of fool Indians will do. Suppose they took it into their heads to build a great bonfire around it?"

Then suddenly the savages were on their feet. The white uniform of a French officer had appeared among them. They gathered around him, gesticulating and pointing at our time-car. He stood with folded arms, ignoring the machine with a great air of dignity.

At length he held up his hand with a dramatic gesture and said something. The Indians backed away and subsided. Then he turned and gravely inspected the car, giving no sign, that we could see, of surprise.

"He naturally wouldn't," Cynthia murmured. "That's one reason the French were so successful with the Indians. They knew how to put on an act with them. Look, Ted! he acts as though a time-car were an every-day affair with him! Maybe he'll order them to go away and leave it."

"Not he!" I said. "He's caught sight of the coils and gadgets inside. He'll try to devise some way of breaking into it."

I WAS right. The Frenchman slowly drew his pistol from his belt and examined the priming. He was going to try to shoot the lock. Not that he could have broken in that way. But he might have ruined it and prevented our ever getting it open. The time for action had come. I raised my gun and took careful aim at the ground some thirty feet this side of him.

I squeezed the trigger gently. The slight hiss from the muzzle was lost in the detonation of the tiny rocket-bullet where it hit the ground.

For a split second the Algonkins remained as though paralyzed, each in the position he had been in at the instant. Then, as though full of coiled springs, they leaped madly in every direction away from the spot where the explosion had occurred. The Frenchman had whirled and faced us, or rather the point of the explosion.

"Come, on, Cyn!" I cried. "We'll have to wade right into 'em!"

"Shoot at the ground in front of them!" she suggested.

We went over the top of the rock, shooting slowly and deliberately as we went, virtually laying a barrage down in front of us.

The officer shrank back from the terrific explosions and raised his futile pistol. But his shot went far wide of the mark as he staggered back, blinded from the approaching explosions, and threw his arm up before his eyes.

That lad had courage, though. The detonating bullets, which were somewhat more powerful than the old-fashioned hand-grenades of 1917, were something entirely beyond any war experience he could ever have had back in the 1750's. But he didn't turn and run. He just backed slowly away among the trees, calling back to his Indians to turn and face the music. I could have blown him to bits any time I wanted to, but I didn't have the heart. As Americans this might have been our war. But we weren't Americans of that period, and somehow I didn't feel justified in doing a thing more than was necessary to win our way back to our own century.

STEADILY we approached the timemachine. The Frenchman was some three hundred yards away now, taking advantage of the shelter of the trees. We only caught occasional glimpses of him. The Indians were completely gone, probably a half mile away by now.

Finally my gun just clicked. The magazine was empty. "Have you any shots left?" I called to Cynthia.

She nodded. "A few," she said.

"Then give him a final barrage," I said. "I'll open up the car."

I leaped to the door of the time-vehicle and inserted the key. With a sigh of relief I opened the door and turned toward Cynthia. Her magazine was empty too, and she was running toward me. A bullet clanged against the metal panel beside me. Frenchy was still in the game, and coming back at us. He had sensed that we had run out of ammunition, and was coming on the run with no attempt at concealment.

In we jumped, and I slammed and locked the door while Cynthia threw the power switch. Would those tubes never develop their blue glow? The officer was plunging toward us at full speed, sword in hand. He had thrown away his useless pistol.

Cynthia's hand trembled on the rocketblast lever. I glanced alternately at the running Frenchman and the vacuum tubes. There was a faint glow in them now.

"Don't throw it yet!" I cautioned her. "Not till the tubes develop full glow. There's nothing he can do to us with that sticker of his, but if he gets too close the rocket blast will burn him to a cinder!"

He was still thirty feet away when Cynthia finally pushed the lever over. A blast of flame mushroomed out from under the car as we rose on it. The Frenchman halted short, staggered back and threw his arm up to protect his eyes. Then we were roaring aloft, with him standing there gazing up after us in amazement.

"I WONDER if this will go down in history?" Cynthia said. "I don't remember reading of anything like it, do you?"

"Not much," I chuckled. "Just let him try to tell a story like this when he gets to Fort Duquesne or to Quebec! Who'd believe him?"

I pulled the time-gap switch.

"Well," I said as we drifted down over my laboratory on reduced rocket blast, and, in the good old 20th Century, "I like adventure, Cyn, but that was a little too hot for comfort."

"It was a little exciting," Cynthia replied, "but scarcely esthetic. Next time let's pick a more picturesque period of history."

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17: The Blue Ushabti

Valentine Williams
1883-1946
The Strand Magazine, Jan 1937
Collected in: *Mr Treadgold Cuts In*, 1937

"Crime is the war which ignorance wages upon knowledge. You will only defeat the criminal by being better informed than he is."
—The Maxims of H. B. Treadgold.

MARCUS WEBBER is not the type of man I have much use for. A pompous fellow with a strident voice and aggressive manner, he is a member of my club and abuses the relationship between us to force his company upon me at lunch, poison my food by his persistent nagging at the waiters, and destroy my postprandial digestive processes by talking at the top of his voice about himself in the smoke-room afterwards. Knowing him to be unquenchably inquisitive, I was not inordinately surprised when he started to pump me after dinner one night about Mr. Treadgold, wanting to know whether his ability as a crime investigator was as high as it was represented, and whether he was a trustworthy person. I attached no importance to it at the time, but I was not particularly edified to discover, next morning, that Webber had approached Mr. Treadgold, describing himself as a friend of mine.

Few customers of Bowl, Treadgold & Flack ever penetrate as far as the small and dingy office at the back of the fitting- rooms where, under the owl-like regard of the founder of the business, his great-grandson directs the fortunes of the firm. Facing old Josiah, sporting a white beaver hat of the Regency period, the portrait of Grandfather Treadgold, Alderman of the City of London in his day, bewhiskered and olympic in his furred robes and chain, as the Victorian Royal Academician depicted him, hangs over the fireplace, while above the desk a coloured daguerrotype of Daniel Flack, old Jos Bowl's son-in-law, and a very bad painting of Cousin Oliver Treadgold, the New York one, looking extremely British and dogged beside a looped-back curtain displaying the Pine Street shop before demolition, gaze down from the wall.

A corner cupboard houses the decanter of 1900 vintage port and the box of Partagas, produced only for the benefit of especially honoured clients, flanking a vast safe of ancient lineage which Mr. Treadgold would be the first to proclaim definitely non- burglar-resisting. For the rest, some moth-eaten examples of military millinery of a bygone age, and a faded scarlet tunic with tarnished gold lace in a wall-case, bundles of patterns stacked on a side-table, and a tray of pins and tailor's chalks on the desk, remind the visitor that, five days a week from ten to five, and on Saturdays from ten to one, Mr. Treadgold, whose deductive powers

command the respect of Scotland Yard and Center Street alike, is outwardly a tailor and nothing but a tailor.

Fresh from his morning ablutions, his kindly face shining with soap and health, his grizzled hair neatly brushed, his moustache impeccably trim, Mr. Treadgold was at his desk, opening his morning mail when I walked in on him. He fished a letter out of a tray and passed it across to me. "From your friend, Marcus Webber, George," he remarked. "I know the name, don't I? Just what does he do?"

I glanced at the letter. It was brief and to the point. The writer would be glad to see Mr. Treadgold on an urgent private matter of the most confidential nature. A P.S. said, *"I may mention that I am a friend of Mr. George Duckett, who is a member of my club."*

Dash the fellow's impudence— he was a member of my club! "It's Professor Webber, the Egyptologist," I explained.

H.B. dandled his head. "Of course. I thought the name was familiar."

"He's an eminent savant, and he belongs to my club. But his only claim to my friendship is the fact that I haven't brained him to date with a newspaper-holder, for of all the crashing bores..."

"He telephoned just now— he's on his way here. He seems worried— look at the way his signature on that letter drops! What can you tell me about him in the meantime?"

"He's considered one of the foremost Egyptologists. He's been excavating for years, with a fair measure of success, I believe. At his house at Roehampton he has one of the best private collections of Egyptian antiquities in the country, I've been told."

Mr. Treadgold's eyes sought the clock. "He spoke of calling here at eleven. It's that now. You'd better wait and see what he wants."

Webber is a round-faced, chubby man in gold spectacles. He is not the sort of person who entertains the slightest doubt as to his universal popularity, and he greeted me quite cordially. It was evident he had come prepared to patronise Mr. Treadgold.

"The only reason I've decided to consult you," he told him self-importantly after I had introduced them to one another, "is because I'm loath to appeal to the— ahem!— more regular authorities. It must, therefore, be understood— clearly understood, Mr. Treadgold— that I'm counting on your absolute discretion." He turned a gooseberry eye on me—"Yours, too, Duckett." Mr. Treadgold, idly stabbing the blotter with his letter-opener, said nothing, and the professor went on:

"I possess, as you may know, a small but valuable collection of Egyptian antiquities. Mr. Treadgold, in circumstances as mysterious as they are distressing, one of the most prized pieces in my collection has disappeared."

H.B. raised his head sharply— he reminded me of an old dog pointing.

"A blue glass ushabti of Thoueris, the hippopotamus-headed goddess," Webber proceeded. "It appears to have been clandestinely abstracted and a replica left in its place."

"A ushabti— that's a small figure, isn't it?" Mr. Treadgold questioned.

"A figurine or statuette. Two evenings ago— on Tuesday, to be exact— I had some friends to dinner and bridge to meet Professor Larned, the American Egyptologist, who published that remarkable report on the graffiti of the Nubian rock tombs. I saw a lot of him in Egypt last winter. My collection is housed in a museum specially built onto my house at Roehampton, and after dinner I took Larned and the rest of my guests to see it. We were there for perhaps an hour, and then went to the drawing-room for our bridge. It's my habit to work in the museum with my secretary in the mornings— I'm writing a book on the scarabs of the Eighteenth Dynasty— and yesterday morning, by pure chance, I went to the case where the ushabti stands to get out a certain scarab I wanted to describe. I perceived immediately that the ushabti was not the original— it was a replica."

"The original's valuable, I suppose?"

The professor seemed to explode. "It's unique, my dear sir! It's from the tomb of Queen Ty. For colour and design it's unequalled— an exquisite thing. It's no more than six inches high, but it gave me more satisfaction than almost any other piece in my collection."

"What's it actually worth?"

He spread his hands. "That's hard to say. Personally, I wouldn't take two thousand pounds for it— it's insured for a thousand. Any dealer, I imagine, would buy it blind for three or four hundred pounds."

"The collection's insured, then?"

"For sixty thousand pounds."

Mr. Treadgold whistled. "Then the ushabti wasn't the most valuable piece, I take it?"

"In actual value, no. Some of the jewellery I have is worth a great deal more, for instance. But I'm not concerned with the cash value. I want my ushabti back. Otherwise, I could go to the insurance company. But they'll insist on my calling in the police. And that I'm resolved not to do. I should prefer to give the thief a chance to make restitution."

"And if you can't discover the thief?"

Webber's sigh was like air escaping from a cushion. "Then I must take my loss. The facts must not come out."

"Why not?"

"Because I should be the laughing-stock of all my colleagues. You see, I was instrumental in giving the thief his chance to effect this substitution."

Mr. Treadgold leaned back in his chair. "Don't you think you'd better tell this from the beginning?"

With a nervous hand the professor pawed his thinning hair. "I bought this ushabti in Egypt two winters ago from a leading Luxor dealer. In the Gebbel above Luxor, lives an exceedingly adept forger of Egyptian antiquities. In an idle moment I let this fellow make me a copy of the ushabti. It stood on an open shelf over my desk in the museum. The first thing I did on discovering the substitution was to go to the shelf where the copy stood. It had vanished."

"Have you any idea how the substitution was carried out?"

He sighed. "It's only too evident, unfortunately. Going round the collection, I showed Larned the ushabti and, I suppose, rhapsodised about it a bit— at any rate, he asked permission to take it out of the case. I opened the case—"

"Are the cases usually kept locked?"

"Always. There's only one key, a master key to all the cases and the room as well, and it never leaves me." He drew a key- chain from his pocket and showed, on a bunch of keys attached to it, a small gilt key. "The ushabti passed from hand to hand, and when it eventually came back to me I restored it to its place and locked the case again."

"And, as far as you know, the case remained locked until the next morning when you went to it?"

"Absolutely!"

"Then, instead of the original, you were obviously handed the replica to return to the case?"

He spread his hands. "I suppose so. And yet I can't think how I failed to detect it. The copy is remarkably faithful, but it'd never deceive an expert— not at close quarters, at any rate."

"Do you remember who handed the ushabti back to you?"

He shook his head dolefully. "I'm afraid I don't. There was such a crowd of us, laughing and talking."

"Do you suspect anyone in particular?"

With a haggard air our visitor ruffled his hair. "Yes and no. Suppose I tell you about my guests. We were nine, including my wife— two tables of bridge; Mrs. Webber doesn't play. The party consisted of Professor Larned, Colonel and Mrs. Allerton, neighbours of ours at Roehampton, Charles Cavander, the art dealer, and a friend of his, Mrs. Fleming, young Bewlish, who was out with me as draughtsman on my last expedition, and my secretary, Mercia Day, who lives in the house."

"All old friends, were they?"

"Mrs. Fleming had not been to the house before, Cavander brought her."

"What type of person is she?"

"Pretty and frivolous, a social butterfly." Mr. Treadgold winced at the bromide. "She's living apart from her husband— I'm told that Cavander wants to marry her. I should explain that I don't know Cavander very well. He consults me sometimes in matters appertaining to Egyptian art."

"He'd be liable to appreciate the merits of the ushabti, wouldn't he?"

Webber cast him an admiring glance. "Oh, definitely. But so would Bewlish— Bewlish even more so. He's been working at Egyptology ever since he was at Oxford."

"That gives us three of the party, then, with what you might call a professional interest in the ushabti— Cavander, Bewlish and, of course, Professor Larned?"

Webber looked shocked. "You can leave Larned out of it. He's an eminent savant, a most high-minded man. Besides, he has ample private means."

"What about this secretary of yours?"

"Miss Day? She's as good an Egyptologist as any of us. She's been with me for six years and has accompanied me on all my expeditions."

"That adds a fourth to our list." Pensively Mr. Treadgold nibbled his thumb. "How many of you knew about this replica?"

The Professor started.

"'Pon my soul, I never thought of that. A shrewd question, my dear sir, and easily answered— besides myself, only Bewlish and Mercia Day. They were with me that day at Luxor when I ordered the copy and, as a matter of fact, Bewlish helped Miss Day and me to unpack it with the rest of my acquisitions when we got back to London."

"Then it looks as if our suspicions narrow down to one of these two?"

"I had already arrived at this conclusion," said Webber pedantically. "On the one hand, Miss Day is in and out of the museum all the time— she'd have ample opportunity for planning a coup of this description. On the other, she and Bewlish are as thick as thieves, and I've an idea that the young man's in money trouble. Between ourselves, some bank called him on the telephone when he was at my house the other morning, and from what I happened to overhear I gathered they were pressing him about some bill that was falling due."

"Does Bewlish work in the museum, too?"

"Not regularly. When I'm home I employ him on occasional research work at the British Museum or the Bodleian, and he often drops in to see me. He has a few hundreds a year of his own, I understand, but even with what I pay him I imagine he lives well above his income. Smart clothes, a sports car." He paused, and added acridly: "A good draughtsman but uppish."

"Have you spoken of this business to anybody except ourselves?"

"Not to a living soul. My hope was that you'd evolve some means of inducing the thief to replace the ushabti in the belief that the fraud had not been remarked."

Mr. Treadgold nodded. "That would certainly seem to be the wisest course in the circumstances. You didn't mention the loss to your secretary?"

"With this idea in mind, I carefully refrained from doing so. She was not in the museum when I detected the substitution, and unless she's the delinquent it's

highly improbable that she'll notice it. I left the replica in situ, and from the outside of the case you'd scarcely know it from the genuine ushabti."

"Did you tell your wife?"

The pudgy face assumed a contemptuous expression. "I tell my wife nothing, on principle."

"Did you handle the replica?"

The professor smiled condescendingly. "I may not be a criminologist, even an amateur one, Mr. Treadgold, but my reason informs me that there's a good chance of the thief's finger- prints as well as of course, my own, being found upon the false ushabti. And that reminds me. Through the kind offices of one of the assistant commissioners, I had my finger-prints taken at Scotland Yard this morning— you will require them, I believe, if you are to isolate the thief's on the replica." He drew a sheet of paper from his pocket and laid in on the desk.

"You think of everything," said Mr. Treadgold, not without a certain dryness. "Could I visit the museum with Mr. Duckett, say, at about half-past six this evening?"

"The sooner the better!"

"I agree with you, George," Mr. Treadgold remarked when the professor had left us; "a thoroughly objectionable fellow. He mistrusts his secretary, despises his wife and eavesdrops on people's private conversations. It must be a positive pleasure to rob him." He glanced at his watch. "I think I shall devote my lunch hour to a flying trip to the British Museum."

I laughed. "Do you really imagine that paddling round a lot of mummies is going to tell you who pinched old Webber's ushabti?"

He smiled sedately. "Crime is the war which ignorance wages upon knowledge. You will only beat the criminal by being better informed than he is. I like to equip myself before tackling an unfamiliar subject. Besides, aren't we told that the desire for knowledge, like the thirst for riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it?"

I did not recognise the quotation; but I knew where it came from. I was in no mood for *Tristram Shandy* however, and so I told him.

"Between you and the professor," I said brutally, "I've had all the culture I can stand for one morning. But I'll go with you to Roehampton this evening if you like."

I put that in to mollify him, for if there is one thing H.B. likes when he goes sleuthing it is a sympathetic listener— a "stooge," as he calls it in his abominable American slang.

The museum at Karnak House, as the professor's place was called, was a spacious apartment lined with glass vases and permeated with the faintly sweet aroma peculiar to mummies. Webber unlocked a case and showed us, surrounded by a number of other antiquities, a little statuette, in hue a deep peacock blue,

representing a woman with the head of a hippopotamus. It struck me as being a singularly repulsive object, but then I am not an Egyptologist. He likewise drew our attention to a shelf of books above the desk against the farther wall, where, he told us, the replica had originally stood.

Mr. Treadgold on the job is direct in his methods. Having received the ushabti, or rather the copy, in a silk handkerchief, he bore it to the desk, where he had already deposited the battered attache-case containing his fingerprint outfit, and told the professor we would not detain him. Rather unwillingly Webber withdrew, saying he would have a glass of sherry for us in his "den" when we had finished.

Mr. Treadgold is a slow and very conscientious worker, and I soon tired of watching him manipulate his blower and powdered graphite. I was drifting round the cases when the door of the museum was silently pushed open and a dark-haired young woman, with a timorous glance behind her, came sidling in. Swiftly she went to the desk and addressed my companion.

"Mr. Treadgold," she said rather breathlessly, "I can get the ushabti of Thoueris back for you if you'll agree to ask no questions and to say nothing to the professor about how it was recovered. I'm Mercia Day, Professor Webber's secretary."

Mr. Treadgold glanced up from his work. "You know me, do you?"

"Mr. Bewlish spoke of you once in connection with the Carshalton diamonds case. Lady Carshalton's his aunt."

H.B. bent his bushy eyebrows at her. "So you knew the ushabti was missing?"

She nodded. "Professor Webber may consider himself a great diplomat, but I can always tell when he's upset. Ever since yesterday he's been asking me roundabout questions about the party on Tuesday night, continually harping on the moment when the ushabti was being handed round, besides pumping me about Mr. Bewlish's private affairs."

"Is Mr. Bewlish a particular friend of yours?"

"Mr. Bewlish is a very nice man, and I see a good deal of him." She paused. "But to return to the ushabti. On one pretext or another, ever since yesterday morning the professor has kept me out of the museum, although we have urgent work to finish. This afternoon, however, just before you came, I caught him before the open case where the Thoueris ushabti is normally kept, peering at it through a magnifying glass, and I saw at a glance that the figure was not the original, also that the copy had disappeared from the shelf. Then, when I heard you announced, I couldn't resist listening at the door when he was talking to you about finger-prints."

Mr. Treadgold's blue eyes dwelt sternly on her face. She was a quiet, self-possessed girl who, without being directly beautiful, had a wealth of character in her expression. "And you say you can get the ushabti back?" he questioned.

She nodded.

"How long will it take you?"

"Give me until to-morrow morning."

He nodded and drew a card from his pocket. "Very well. Call me at that number at noon."

She was going when he called her back. "Were any of the women wearing gloves on the night of the party?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Thanks. That was all."

As deferentially as though she had been a customer at Savile Row, he escorted her to the door.

"Nothing like a reputation!" I chaffed him. "She'd only to hear your name and she owned up at once."

Mr. Treadgold was repacking his paraphernalia. "So you think it was she who boned the hippo-headed lady, do you?"

"Don't you?"

He sighed. "That's just the trouble. I do. But I don't see why she went to all the risk and trouble of taking that particular statuette when—" He broke off. "Do you realise that there are scarabs, no longer than a small match-box, in this room, which cost our friend Webber as much as five and six thousand pounds? They were telling me about them at the British Museum to-day."

"I suppose this copy he had gave her the idea of lifting the ushabti."

"It's a reason, but a poor one, George."

When we went in search of the professor, a slender, rather pallid woman met us in the hall. "I'm Mrs. Webber," she announced. "The professor has an early dinner engagement and went to his room to dress. Would you care to wait in the drawing- room?"

We found Mercia Day in the drawing-room. There was a decanter of sherry on the piano, and she poured us a glass apiece.

"I suppose you're as keen an Egyptologist as your husband, Mrs. Webber?" I remarked, to make conversation.

"Indeed, she's not," Miss Day broke in. "She regards the professor and me as nothing better than a couple of grave- robbers."

Mrs. Webber smiled wistfully. "I must say I find the living Egypt more interesting than the dead," she observed.

"The professor always insists on Mrs. Webber going out to Egypt with him," Miss Day volunteered. "But while we're grubbing in the Gebbel she remains in Cairo, sitting on all kinds of committees of Egyptian ladies for the relief of the poor."

"An admirable idea!" declared Mr. Treadgold warmly.

"I wish my husband thought as you do," said Mrs. Webber. "He doesn't like Egyptians, and it angers him to think of me spending my time in the women's

quarters of the Cairo palaces or in the hovels of the Arab city..." She broke off. "But forgive me— I don't know why I should bother you with all this."

I could have told her. Old H.B. has a charm of manner which leads the most unlikely people to confide in him at sight— time and time again I have noticed it. He did not reply now, and, as though to change the subject, picked up a large photograph that lay loose on the piano and regarded it.

It was a head and shoulders of a girl in a black *décolleté*, an Egyptian, as the thin gauze veil imperfectly concealing the lower part of the face suggested. Several ropes of magnificent pearls were coiled about the creamy, pale coffee-coloured neck. The eyes, lustrous and black above the wisp of gauze, were magnificent. The photograph bore the name of a well- known Mayfair photographer.

"What a lovely face!" said Mr. Treadgold.

Rather hastily Mrs. Webber took the photograph from him. "I'd rather my husband didn't see that," she remarked. "He doesn't approve of my being friendly with the Egyptians."

"Why, it's the Princess Murad Ali!" exclaimed the secretary, glancing over her shoulder. "I thought you told me she was ill in Cairo. This picture was done in London."

"She's here with her husband," said Mrs. Webber shortly, and slid the photograph out of sight into a drawer. "She gave me that photo to-day. But please don't tell the professor..."

Webber's voice boomed from the door— he was in evening dress with a decoration at the neck. "Sorry to leave you like this, Treadgold, but I'm dining out to-night." He ignored his wife and she went quietly away, taking the secretary with her.

"Well," barked the professor, "what about those finger- prints?"

"I'll report on them to-morrow," was Mr. Treadgold's reply. "I may have news for you by then. If I can recover the ushabti, are you prepared to ask no questions?"

Webber frowned. "Well, it depends."

"It's likely to be a condition," H.B. told him. "I'll telephone you in the morning."

I told H.B. I would give him dinner at my club.

"A rum business, George," he observed glumly as we drove Pall Mall-ward, "a devilish rum business. My head's no better than a puzzled skein of silk, as Tristram Shandy's father remarked on a celebrated occasion, all perplexity, all confusion, withinside." He grunted. "Well, the night brings counsel, they say. Let's wait and see what the Day will bring us in the morning." He grinned at his atrocious pun.

But the Day forestalled us. She was at Bury Street when we went round to H.B.'s chambers after dinner.

"I spoke too soon," she told Mr. Treadgold in an agitated voice. "I can't help you after all." She gazed at him despairingly. "You suspect me, don't you? And so does Webber."

Mr. Treadgold humped his shoulders. "I don't see why you shouldn't have taken a more valuable object— one of those scarabs from the Carnarvon sale, for instance— if it was a question of raising money"— he made a deliberate break— "for a friend..."

Her cheeks flamed. "You know— about that bill?"

"Not as much as I should like to know, my dear."

"Excuse me a minute!" She darted out.

In about five minutes she was back, dragging by the hand a broad-shouldered, reluctant young man. "This is Michael Bewlish," she announced, and added to the youth: "You'd much better make a clean breast of it, Mike."

"I only heard about this business from Mercia to-night," said Bewlish. "But she never pinched that ushabti and no more did I, though, when you hear the facts, you'll say it looks worse than ever for us. Some months ago I backed a bill for three hundred pounds for a friend of mine."

"For Charles Cavander," Mercia Day put in.

Mr. Treadgold sat up abruptly. "The Cavander who was at the Professor's that night?"

Bewlish nodded, tight-lipped. "He's crazy about this Fleming woman and she's deuced expensive."

"Is he a good judge of Egyptian art?"

The young man's air was haggard. "None better. But old Charles wouldn't do a thing like that. He's out of town to-night, but first thing in the morning—"

"What you have to do, young man," said Mr. Treadgold sternly, "is to keep this thing under your hat. And that applies to you as well," he told Miss Day. "What happened about that bill?"

"My aunt, Lady Carshalton, whom I think you know, stumped up," Bewlish replied. "Charles is going to pay her back by instalments."

"Every word this young man says further embroils the situation," Mr. Treadgold declared. "For the lord's sake, George, take him into the dining-room and give him a drink, while I have a word in private with Miss Day."

What that word was did not transpire, for after their departure, Mr. Treadgold became impenetrably mute, and next morning I had to go to Manchester on business. On my return, two days later, I found a note from Mr. Treadgold, telling me I was expected to dine at Karnak House that evening. Dinner was at eight, and he would meet me there.

There was no sign of Mr. Treadgold when I was shown into the drawing-room, and Miss Day was missing, too. But I had a thrill when Webber introduced me to

the other guests— with the addition of H.B. and myself, it was the same party which had been present on the occasion of the theft of the ushabti.

One of them was the thief— I glanced them over as the cocktails went round. The Allertons— one could safely exclude them, a placid, suburban couple. Larned, the American Egyptologist, plump and grey-haired, looked harmless enough as he made himself agreeable to Mrs. Webber, but I was aware to what lengths the mania of collecting will carry the most respectable individuals. With Cavander and his lady friend, Mrs. Fleming, I was less favourably impressed. He was too well-dressed, too sure of himself, a *poseur*, and I suspected, a bit of an adventurer into the bargain. The woman, a dazzling blond, with the air of flaunting her beautiful clothes at one, was a fit associate for him, it seemed to me. I could not help noticing that young Bewlish was palpably nervous, his face turned to the door.

When at length Mr. Treadgold, accompanied by Mercia Day, appeared, I divined that a climax was at hand. Success always buoys him up; there was a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes, a certain bristling eagerness under his bland exterior, which told me that things were going his way. I had a surprise at dinner. Mrs. Fleming, who was on my right, said to me: "So our tailor friend is taking up Egyptology?"

I was giving nothing away. "Well, he collects stamps, so why not antiquities?" I returned with a laugh.

"They say he's going to make Marcus Webber an offer for his collection, that he's sending the valuers in to-morrow."

"Who says so?"

"Charles Cavander heard a rumour somewhere. I tackled Mrs. Webber just now and she didn't deny it."

We had our coffee at the table and went in a body to the museum afterward. There seemed to be something in the story Mrs. Fleming had told me, for Webber and Larned took H.B. from case to case, the rest of us trailing behind. They started at the near wall beside the door. The case containing the ushabti of Thoueris was against the opposite wall; I could see the little blue statuette with its repulsive head staring from behind the glass. I wondered what would happen when they reached it, for at close quarters like this Larned would surely detect the forgery.

Webber talked incessantly. The cases were unlocked— presumably in readiness for Mr. Treadgold's inspection— and he opened one after the other to take out some jar or figurine, some scarab or amulet, and expatiate upon it.

And then the light went out, plunging us all into Stygian darkness. I heard a little squeak of excitement— it sounded like Mrs. Fleming— and Webber roaring to Miss Day to bring candles. Little points of light appeared in the gloom; two of the crowd had snapped on their cigarette lighters. I had a glimpse of Webber, a match in hand, striding toward the door, but before he reached it, the light went on again.

There was a little sign of relief from everybody.

"Well, I never knew that to happen before," Webber grumbled. "It must have been a temporary failure at the power station." He had a scarab in his hand which he replaced in its case. "We now come to the jewellery," he said to Mr. Treadgold.

H.B. cleared his throat. "I think I'd prefer," he remarked, enunciating clearly, "to have a look at that charming Thoueris ushabti you told me about."

Webber stared at him blankly, then shot across the room. He opened the case and whipped out the little statuette. "Why— what—" he spluttered incoherently.

"A delightful piece," said Professor Larned, blinking through his glasses, then exclaimed: "But, dear me, you've cut yourself!"

Webber's fingers were red. He felt the statuette, then his hand went into the case. "There's red ink or something spilt on the velvet," he observed in a puzzled voice. He turned to Larned. "Will you excuse us a moment? There's something I want to show Mr. Treadgold in my study."

I followed them outside.

"You got it back then?" cried our host when the door had closed behind us. Mr. Treadgold's nod was very bland. "But that red ink?"

H.B. showed his fingers. They, too, were smeared with red. "It was you who put it back just now when the light went out?" Webber demanded.

Mr. Treadgold nodded almost imperceptibly. "You must let me have my little joke. Now, if you'll rejoin your guests, I want a word with my friend, George Duckett."

"But, look here—" the Professor was beginning.

"No questions was the arrangement," H.B. shut him up. "We'll be with you in a minute." So saying he pulled open the door, thrust Webber inside, and catching my arm, fairly ran me upstairs to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Webber was just coming out. At the sight of us she fell back a pace, quickly thrusting her hands behind her.

"Show me your hands, please!" Mr. Treadgold said to her.

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "Why should I show you my hands?"

"You can show them either to me or to your husband, madam," was the bleak rejoinder.

For a long moment she made no move, then slowly brought her right hand out from behind her back. The fingers were stained crimson even as her husband's, as Mr. Treadgold's were. "So you got the ushabti back from your friend, the Princess Murad Ali?" Mr. Treadgold demanded.

"You know?" she said in a choking voice.

"I made it my business to know. Thoueris, the hippopotamus- headed goddess, is the protective deity of women in child-birth, they told me at the British Museum, and the Princess gave birth to a son and heir the day before yesterday, didn't she?"

She bowed her head. "It's her first child, and she's been married eight years. It meant so much to her to bear her husband a son— she persuaded him to let her come to London so that the baby might be born under the best possible conditions. Egyptian women have such faith in these charms, and after all, this was the amulet of a great Queen. The Princess knew about this ushabti and begged me to lend it to her for a day or two until the child was born. I was sure it wouldn't be missed, especially as I put that copy in its place— I could have taken the copy, I suppose, but it seemed like cheating the poor thing. Then the baby was late in arriving, and I only got the ushabti back yesterday..."

"And you hadn't the chance to borrow that master key again?"

She shrank back aghast. "How did you discover that?"

"You took the key that night after the party while your husband was asleep, didn't you?"

She stared at him in terror. "Does my husband know?"

He shook his head. "Have no fear— your husband knows nothing and need know nothing. But the only finger-prints on the replica are his, showing that the thief must have handled it with gloves."

She bowed her head. "I remembered I mustn't leave any fingerprints."

"No one wore gloves at the party, therefore it was evident to me that the substitution was effected, not while you were all in the museum, but at some later time that night. What decided you to put the ushabti back just now?"

"Mercia Day told me two days ago you'd be sending the valuers in to-morrow, and I realised that the fraud was bound to be detected. Ever since yesterday I've carried the ushabti round with me, waiting for a chance to put it back. I was standing near the case when the light went out to-night— it seemed like a heaven-sent chance."

Mr. Treadgold chuckled. "It was hardly that, Mrs. Webber. I was virtually certain what had become of the ushabti, but I wanted to make sure. I got Miss Day to spread this completely unfounded rumour in order— forgive me!— to force your hand. And a little stain on the velvet inside the case did the rest."

"Then it was Miss Day who put out the light?" I exclaimed.

He chuckled again. "The switch is by the door. I waited until all the group were bunched around us, then gave her the signal." He turned to Mrs. Webber.

"Your secret is safe with me, Madam. A little pumice-stone will take that red ink off your fingers. And may the blessing of Thoueris be with the little prince and his mother!"

He slipped his arm into mine. "Come, George, let's go back to the museum!"

18: A Game With Death

Mark Hellinger

1903-1947

Collected in: *Moon Over Broadway*, 1931

IN YEARS gone by when it was legal for people to drink and nobody got half as soused as they do today, many saloon owners had a profitable sideline. They would pick out certain individuals who looked as though they were but two steps from the grave and insure their lives for several thousand dollars. The policies, of course, were payable to them.

A despicable thing. Certainly. But many saloon owners did it and they could see little harm in the trick. The unfortunates who were insured had but little time to live anyhow. The saloon owner then plied them with drinks free of charge. The insured man thus moved a little closer to his grave, and the saloon owner a little closer to his money.

Since prohibition descended upon us I haven't heard much about this racket. As a matter of fact, I didn't hear about it at all until recently, when the story that follows was related to me. I do not ask you to believe it. I merely recite it to you as a good yarn that is supposed to be true...

JOHN DOYLE was a very sick man. He lived on the lower East Side in a dingy tenement. He looked the typical bum.

About a year ago John Doyle visited a doctor. The doctor was in one of those hospital clinics maintained for poor people. A severe cough was worrying John. He dropped into the clinic one afternoon.

The doctor looked him over.

"If you live three months," he informed the down-and-outer, "I will be very much surprised. Are you a heavy drinker?"

Doyle admitted that he was. The doctor nodded.

"There is no medicine that can save you. If you can get any money, go to the mountains at once. That's the only advice I can give you."

John Doyle walked from the clinic. He bummed a quarter from one passerby and a dime from another. With the thirty five cents clenched in his fist, he hurried to his favorite speakeasy. Around eleven o'clock that night, the sick man was still in the speakeasy. He was drunk now. He had unfolded the tale of his sad condition to anyone who would listen. As they listened they bought him drinks.

The gentleman who supplied the spot with alleged liquor drifted in. He looked over at Doyle, who was swaying at the bar.

"Yesh, boys," he heard Doyle say. "I'm a goner in three months. In three months I'm a goner. Doct' saysh to me that I got to go away to live. I don't want to go 'way. I'm gonna die right here in li'l ole New York. Thass the place to die."

The bootlegger arched his eyebrows. Here was a great case for the old time insurance racket. He had worked with a phoney doctor before. Why not again?

He led Doyle to one side.

"Look here, bo," murmured the bootlegger. "I just heard you sayin' you ain't got long to live. Is that right?"

Doyle shook his head drunkenly.

"Thass right. Only got three months to go. Thass all. Maybe even less. Will you buy In" drink?"

The bootlegger tapped Doyle's arm.

"Listen, feller," he whispered, "Not only am I going to buy you plenty of drinks, but I'm goin' to give you a hundred bucks in the bargain. Here's how you can earn the century."

And the racketeer explained the old gag. Insurance to the extent of $8,000 was to be taken out in the name of John Doyle. A phoney doctor would give him a hurried examination, pass him through, and cut with the bootlegger when Doyle had gone to another world. The bootlegger, of course, would pay the premium.

"Shay," cried Doyle, "thass okey by me. I got nothin' to lose an' a hundred bucks to gain. Sure I'll do it, ole pal."

The two men shook hands. They agreed to meet on the morrow...

EVERYTHING went according to schedule. The gyping doctor looked at Doyle the following day and asked him how he felt.

"Fine," said Doyle.

"I'm glad to hear it," said the doctor. "Sign this paper, I find you in very good condition."

Doyle grinned. He was given his hundred dollars. The doctor grinned. The bootlegger grinned. Everybody was happy. And the quicker that John Doyle would die, the happier they all would be....

But fate has a queer way of shifting things around. The three months passed with John Doyle drinking more than ever. The cough was still with him but it was growing no worse. Four months passed. Five months.

The bootlegger was growing a trifle nervous. In addition to the $100 for Doyle, the premium on the policy had been more than $150.

Uncanny luck seemed to follow John Doyle. There was a fire in his tenement house one night. Two people were burned to death. Doyle wasn't there. He had stepped out of his bed and gone around the corner for a drink.

The bootlegger thought of slipping the man a little poison liquor. Nobody would ever know the difference. He would be found dead and people would all say he died just as they had expected. But the bootlegger felt he would wait a little longer before taking such a drastic step. After all, he couldn't linger much longer....

One Saturday night, Doyle stood in the familiar speakeasy. The joint was crowded. The register tinkled merrily. Men jostled one another in an effort to reach the bar. Doyle sat in a corner, his head in his hands.

Suddenly came loud voices.

"I ain't pushin' nobody."

"You were so. You was pushin' me."

"You're a dirty liar."

Doyle raised his head. He knew what was coming. He had heard too many of these arguments not to know. Maybe there would be trouble. Maybe not. Best thing to do was to get out fast.

He started for the door. The voices grew louder.

"Call me a liar, you dirty——. Call me that, will you? Call me—"

Another voice. Shrieking.

"For God's sake, fellers. Look out. He's got a gun!"

Fearful words. Doyle had reached the door. Before he could catch the knob the door was thrown open. It hit Doyle and he fell to the floor. A drunk staggered in. A shot rang out from the rear. The drunk fell to the floor with a bullet through his heart.

The drunk who had thrown open that door had saved John Doyle's worthless life. Doyle arose and glanced at the dead man's face. He whistled softly and staggered out into the night before the first policeman arrived.

The dead man was the bootlegger who had insured his life...

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19: The Man in the O. P. Box

Edward Dyson
1865-1931
(as by "Dy Edwardson")
Punch, Melbourne, 23 Oct 1913

One of a series featuring Austin Porteous

THE PLAY had been "La Tosca,'' with Jane Stomray, the celebrated American beauty, in the title role. The show was over, and the theatre was empty of its audience. A few busy employees were bustling about, drawing long, calico coverings over the circle seats in the dim light afforded by half-a-dozen gas jets. A startled youth appeared in the office of the manager of the front of the house.

"Better come an' look at a bloke in the box, boss," he said.

"What's he doing in the box?" asked the intelligent management.

"Dunno. He might be sleepin', but he might be dead."

"Dead!"

The gifted management was on its feet at once.

The occupant of the O.P. box was a stoutish, baldish gentleman of about forty-five, in full evening dress. He sat in a padded armchair well back in the box, shielded from view from other parts of the house. The occupant of the O.P. box was dead. He had been shot clean through the head.

Almost instantly every intellect thrown into connection with the case of the dead man in the O.P. box dissolved into a condition of tumult.

Detective Brain had been first to respond to the telephoned appeal for the police. He found the man in the O.P. box undisturbed. Nothing on earth would ever disturb him again, said Detective Brain.

"If it didn't seem to the gifted management the height of improbability that a man could be shot through the head in a crowded theatre, and nobody be aware of the fact, I should say this man had been shot."

"Bless my soul! why assume that it was done in a crowded theatre, Henry?" asked Austin Porteus, who happened to be taking supper with his friend when the call came, and had accompanied him.

"You think the man was killed elsewhere, and carried here?" questioned Brain. "Preposterous!"

"Preposterous, but not impossible. However I think nothing of the kind; but I do think he may have been shot after the theatre emptied."

The doctor verified Detective Brain's opinion the man had been shot in his chair. A fairly large bullet had gone clean through his head. Death had been instantaneous and there was little bleeding. He had been dead a little over fifteen minutes.

There was no mystery attaching to the man himself. He was a comparative stranger in Melbourne, but a frequent patron of this particular house. He had occupied the same box five times during the run of 'La Tosca'. In fact his chauffeur in a large grey and black motor was waiting patiently at the door, Mr. Anderson Black sat in his box awaiting the judgment.

The papers next morning gave prominence to the mystery of the man in the O. P Box. He was known to be a wealthy American. He was staying at the most expensive hotel in town, and living like a man with a million.

Mr. Anderson Black had arrived in Melbourne six weeks earlier— one week after the opening of Jane Stomray's season. Miss Stomray in a tearful interview admitted that she had some little knowledge of Mr. Black. He had made her acquaintance during her list season in San Francisco, just prior to the date of her departure for Australia. He had professed greatest admiration for her— had been most generous in his gifts of jewellery (thrown to her in bouquets), and had not missed one night at the theatre during the last three weeks of her San Francisco season.

Miss Stomray believed Mr. Black had followed her from America. In fact, he had declared that he had no other object in visiting Australia. than to be near her.

Miss Stomray knew nothing of the American's life and connections. She did not know what his business was, or to what part of America he really belonged; but she had taken it for granted that he was very rich. She had not encouraged his advances in any way. In fact, she had returned several of his recent gifts. She was engaged to Mr. Daring, talented member of her company. They were to be married on their return to America, and it grieved her very much to have his name associated with that of Mr. Anderson Black.

Mr. Daring had greatly resented Mr. Black's too obvious attentions, and had once threatened to horsewhip that gentleman. Suspicion attached to Daring, but Daring, who was playing Scarpia, had been under the eye of the audience up to within a few minutes of the conclusion of the drama; and from the time of his supposed death at the end of the first scene of the last act had apparently engaged himself in his dressing-room. But Daring had at least a motive in wishing Anderson Black out of the way, and he was notoriously jealous of Miss Stomray, and was recognised by the other members of the company as an exceedingly hot-tempered man.

Brain and his friend, the plump, dimpled, white-haired and cherubic antiquarian, went together again in the theatre next morning.

"It's an amazing thing that I can find no one who heard the shot," said Brain.

"Not at all, my dear friend. Nothing amazing about it. Nobody heard it, because everybody heard it."

"What?" Brain wheeled on his friend. "Drop paradox. How in the deuce could nobody hear it because everybody heard it?"

"Well, there was much firing, and everybody was expecting it, and everybody heard. Why should anyone pick out or recollect the actual shot that killed Anderson Black? You will remember that in the last scene of 'La Tosca' the hero is shot at the order of Scarpia by a small body of musketeers. Well, that volley of shooting was sufficient to account for no one hearing any individual report."

"By the holy! Why didn't you mention that before? It may be an accidental death. It certainly is. A loaded cartridge was introduced by mistake, and the bullet struck Black here in the box."

"What could be simpler?" said Austin Porteus, his eyes twinkling behind his large glasses. "I have suggested it as possible; but there were two shots fired into the box."

"Two! How do you make that out?"

"They have recovered one, or portion of one, from Black's brain, the other passed through the curtain here, making this small hole, struck and penetrated the woodwork of the gas bracket, and is now embedded in the plaster of the theatre wall behind that woodwork. If you care to try you may feel it with a knife blade."

That evening the "*Herald*" published, with the air of excitement newspapers so curiously assume on such occasions, a full and detailed explanation of the shooting of Anderson Black, due to the discoveries of that patient and most perspicacious investigator— Detective Henry Brain.

It was plain that loaded cartridges had by some dreadful mischance got among those served out to the soldier supers detailed for the execution of the artist hero in "La Tosca." The supers were instructed not to fire point blank at the actor, which accounted for his escape— and in all probability for the bullet reaching Black, his position being not far out of the line of fire.

Of course, there was an investigation into the origin of the cartridges; but the gunsmith who supplied them was absolutely positive that no bulleted cartridges were in the package he delivered at the theatre.

"That," said Brian, "is a thing he could not be positive about. You cannot eliminate the possibility of human error."

"No," replied Porteus with a fat chuckle; ''otherwise the police force might attain perfection."

Austin Porteus had appeared little in this case. He was present at the theatre after the discovery of the body only in the absence of the employees; but he had manifested great curiosity concerning all the hands, and Brain's men had collected many details which he seemed to consider of greater interest than Brain's investigations at the gunsmith's.

It was on the evening of the day following the death of Anderson Black that Austin Porteus, accompanied by a square box and a portmanteau, appeared on the mat of Mrs. Greenleigh's humble boarding-house in West Richmond, where he

had taken a small room, for the use of which and his bed and hoard he was to pay the munificent sum of 18 shillings per week.

But Austin Porteus was a man of simple tastes and wide and generous interests. There was no reason at all why he should not go to dwell in amity with an upholsterer, two carpenters, two drivers of lorries, a shopman at a leather warehouse, two corporation labourers and a scene-shifter.

It was perhaps just a coincidence that the scene-shifter was engaged at the Imperial Theatre, where Jane Stomray was starring, in "La Tosca."

It may have been only natural for Austin Porteus to single out Stores, the scene-shifter, for his blandest and most genial attentions, Stores being easily the most interesting man in the company. To Ephraim Stores, Mr. Porteus was merely a quaint, elderly gentleman with absurd powder-puff whiskers and curious, old-fashioned spectacles, who kept a little shop somewhere, and who could talk interestingly of all sorts of people and places.

At first Stores was very reticent; but within a week the pair were quite confidential friends, and Porteus found Ephraim Stores to be a man far above his present station in life.

The antiquarian had been nine days at Mrs. Greenleigh's. It was Sunday afternoon. He had entered Stores' room. For the moment Stores was absent, and Austin Porteus drew a very large Colt's revolver from his inner pocket and placed it upon the small table in the room beside Stores' hat and pipe.

Stores returned a minute later, and Porteus continued to inspect a book he had taken from the shelf. He asked presently in his pleasantest voice, and without any stress at all: "Why do you pretend to be a Lancashire man, Stores?"

"Pretend?" replied Stores. He turned sharply towards the elder man, whose dimpled face betrayed nothing.

"Yes. You try to put a Lancashire touch into your speech, and you don't do it well. Why not admit you are an American. There's no prejudice against Americans here."

"But I am not an American.

Austin Porteus smiled. "You come from the Pacific Slope. If I don't much mistake, you are an actor. You—"

Austin Porteus ceased speaking; his big, round, horn-rimmed glasses were fixed on Stores. Stores's eyes were fixed upon the revolver on his table, and in them was a look of utter terror. He reached a trembling hand, shifted his hat to cover the revolver. Then, finding the antiquarian watching him, he took up the revolver.

"Did you put that there?" he asked, and his voice ran thin despite the effort he made to control it.

Austin Porteus went to the door, and shut it. Then he returned to the table, and said: "Let us sit down. Tell me why you killed Anderson Black."

Stores fell back, feeling for the wall behind him, and a black menace came into his eyes.

"You are mad!" he said.

"Sit down," repeated Austin Porteus without feeling, "and tell me why you killed him. I know how you did it. I take it for granted you followed him from America to kill him. I know you saw your opportunity to fire from a position in the wings covered by the gaol wall, simultaneously with the firing of the soldiers in the play. But why did you do it?"

As Stores did not answer, but stood with his back to the wall, his eyes turning occasionally to the window, seeking a possible way of escape, Porteus went on: "It would be foolish for you to bolt now. That would be a confession of guilt. I could, out of my imagination, provide half-a-dozen excellent reasons why Anderson Black should be killed; but I prefer facts. Tell me. I know that you actually fired at Anderson Black once before, and missed him. I know that, because I found the bullet hole in the curtain at the back of the box, and the bullet in the wall beyond. That bullet was grazed and broken; but the lead on the grazed surface had a dull tinge showing that it has not been fired within forty-eight hours.

"You fired twice at Anderson Black. You were determined to kill him. And 'La Tosca' offered you a magnificent opportunity. Coming away from the theatre you threw the revolver you shot him with into the small pond in the gardens— the only water you passed on your way home. I found it there myself by simply taking off my boots and socks and paddling. One is safe in 90 cases out of 100 in assuming that the assassin will throw his weapon into water— the first water he comes to."

"I am no assassin," said Stores fiercely.

"Well, avenger— if you like the term better. Why did you kill him?"

"Because he ruined my life and my happiness. I was an actor. You guessed right. I am an American. Again you guessed right. I did kill Anderson Black, and I am telling you so, because I don't believe you would destroy the man who has taken clean vengeance on a foul villain.

"I was acting with my wife in a theatre in Sacramento, when Anderson Black came into our lives. He was a wealthy orchardist. My wife was very young and very pretty. Under my tuition she was making strides in her profession. One day she disappeared. I neither saw not heard of her for five years, and then I saw her body in the Morgue at San Francisco. She had been living in the Chinese quarter for some time. She had killed herself. Her life for two years past had been hideous. Anderson Black had taken her from me. He had tired of her, and had kicked her into the slums.

"Over her poor, wasted body I swore to have vengeance. I tracked Black down. It was not difficult. He was now the adoring follower of Jane Stomray. But there

were to be no more victims for him— I had sworn it. The killing of this beast was as sacred a trust in my soul as any that possessed the medieval knights.

"I followed Anderson Black from America to Australia, knowing that I should find him wherever Jane Stomray might be appearing. I took this job as scene-shifter, because he was always about the theatre. The shooting of the hero in "Tosca" suggested a magnificent idea. I could kill my beast of prey in circumstances that would leave no suspicion upon me. I lurked in the wings watching my chance.

"You are right. I had fired at him two nights previous ; but my hand was tremulous. I missed, As luck would have it, he noticed nothing. The firing of the volley covered my shot— and perhaps Black was a little drunk.

"But I got him. I aimed for the centre of his forehead, and I can shoot. He is dead, and I am content... They talk of the remorse of the murderer. I have none of it— I feel only happiness. If I betrayed trepidation just now, was only the instinct of the animal whose safety is threatened. I could go to the gallows as gallantly as a martyr. Try me, if it is your business."

Austin Porteus held out his hand. "Goodnight, Ephraim Stores, and long life," he said. "My imagination was not at fault. I had built up your story fairly accurately."

Austin Porteus left Mrs. Greenleigh's lodgings next day.

Throughout the remainder of the run of "La Tosca," the gifted management was particularly careful about the cartridges it used in the execution scene: but its contingent of scene shifters remained unchanged.

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20: The Strange High House in the Mist

H. P. Lovecraft

1890-1937

Weird Tales, Oct 1931

A much reprinted and anthologised H. P. Lovecraft short story

IN THE MORNING mist comes up from the sea by the cliffs beyond Kingsport. White and feathery it comes from the deep to its brothers the clouds, full of dreams of dank pastures and caves of leviathan. And later, in still summer rains on the steep roofs of poets, the clouds scatter bits of those dreams, that men shall not live without rumor of old strange secrets, and wonders that planets tell planets alone in the night. When tales fly thick in the grottoes of tritons, and conchs in seaweed cities blow wild tunes learned from the Elder Ones, then great eager mists flock to heaven laden with lore, and oceanward eyes on the rocks see only a mystic whiteness, as if the cliff's rim were the rim of all earth, and the solemn bells of buoys tolled free in the æther of faëry.

Now north of archaic Kingsport the crags climb lofty and curious, terrace on terrace, till the northernmost hangs in the sky like a gray frozen wind-cloud. Alone it is, a bleak point jutting in limitless space, for there the coast turns sharp where the great Miskatonic pours out of the plains past Arkham, bringing woodland legends and little quaint memories of New England's hills. The sea-folk in Kingsport look up at that cliff as other sea-folk look up at the pole-star, and time the night's watches by the way it hides or shows the Great Bear, Cassiopeia, and the Dragon. Among them it is one with the firmament, and truly, it is hidden from them when the mist hides the stars or the sun. Some of the cliffs they love, as that whose grotesque profile they call Father Neptune, or that whose pillared steps they term "The Causeway;" but this one they fear because it is so near the sky. The Portuguese sailors coming in from a voyage cross themselves when they first see it, and the old Yankees believe it would be a much graver matter then death to climb it, if indeed that were possible. Nevertheless there is an ancient house on that cliff, and at evening men see lights in the small-paned windows.

The ancient house has always been there, and people say One dwells within who talks with the morning mists that come up from the deep, and perhaps sees singular things oceanward at those times when the cliff's rim becomes the rim of all earth, and solemn buoys toll free in the white æther of faëry. This they tell from hearsay, for that forbidding crag is always unvisited, and natives dislike to train telescopes on it. Summer boarders have indeed scanned it with jaunty binoculars, but have never seen more than the gray primeval roof, peaked and shingled, whose eaves come nearly to the gray foundations, and the dim yellow light of the little windows peeping out from under those eaves in the dusk. These

summer people do not believe that the same One has lived in the ancient house for hundreds of years, but can not prove their heresy to any real Kingsporter. Even the Terrible Old Man who talks to leaden pendulums in bottles, buys groceries with centuried Spanish gold, and keeps stone idols in the yard of his antediluvian cottage in Water Street can only say these things were the same when his grandfather was a boy, and that must have been inconceivable ages ago, when Belcher or Shirley or Pownall or Bernard was Governor of His Majesty's Province of the Massachusetts-Bay.

Then one summer there came a philosopher into Kingsport. His name was Thomas Olney, and he taught ponderous things in a college by Narragansett Bay. With stout wife and romping children he came, and his eyes were weary with seeing the same things for many years, and thinking the same well-disciplined thoughts. He looked at the mists from the diadem of Father Neptune, and tried to walk into their white world of mystery along the titan steps of The Causeway. Morning after morning he would lie on the cliffs and look over the world's rim at the cryptical æther beyond, listening to spectral bells and the wild cries of what might have been gulls. Then, when the mist would lift and the sea stand out prosy with the smoke of steamers, he would sigh and descend to the town, where he loved to thread the narrow olden lanes up and down hill, and study the crazy tottering gables and odd-pillared doorways which had sheltered so many generations of sturdy sea-folk. And he even talked with the Terrible Old Man, who was not fond of strangers, and was invited into his fearsomely archaic cottage where low ceilings and wormy panelling hear the echoes of disquieting soliloquies in the dark small hours.

Of course it was inevitable that Olney should mark the gray unvisited cottage in the sky, on that sinister northward crag which is one with the mists and the firmament. Always over Kingsport it hung, and always its mystery sounded in whispers through Kingsport's crooked alleys. The Terrible Old Man wheezed a tale that his father had told him, of lightning that shot one night *up from* that peaked cottage to the clouds of higher heaven; and Granny Orne, whose tiny gambrel-roofed abode in Ship Street is all covered with moss and ivy, croaked over something her grandmother had heard at second-hand, about shapes that flapped out of the eastern mists straight into the narrow single door of that unreachable place— for the door is set close to the edge of the crag toward the ocean, and glimpsed only from ships at sea.

At length, being avid for new strange things and held back by neither the Kingsporter's fear nor the summer boarder's usual indolence, Olney made a very terrible resolve. Despite a conservative training— or because of it, for humdrum lives breed wistful longings for the unknown—he swore a great oath to scale that avoided northern cliff and visit the abnormally antique gray cottage in the sky. Very plausibly his saner self argued that the place must be tenanted by people

who reached it from inland along the easier ridge beside the Miskatonic's estuary. Probably they traded in Arkham, knowing how little Kingsport liked their habitation, or perhaps being unable to climb down the cliff on the Kingsport side. Olney walked out along the lesser cliffs to where the great crag leaped insolently up to consort with celestial things, and became very sure that no human feet could mount it or descend it on that beetling southern slope. East and north it rose thousands of feet perpendicular from the water, so only the western side, inland and toward Arkham, remained.

ONE EARLY MORNING in August Olney set out to find a path to the inaccessible pinnacle. He worked northwest along pleasant back roads, past Hooper's Pond and the old brick powder-house to where the pastures slope up to the ridge above the Miskatonic and give a lovely vista of Arkham's white Georgian steeples across leagues of river and meadow. Here he found a shady road to Arkham, but no trail at all in the seaward direction he wished. Woods and fields crowded up to the high bank of the river's mouth, and bore not a sign of man's presence; not even a stone wall or a straying cow, but only the tall grass and giant trees and tangles of briars that the first Indian might have seen. As he climbed slowly east, higher and higher above the estuary on his left and nearer and nearer the sea, he found the way growing in difficulty till he wondered how ever the dwellers in that disliked place managed to reach the world outside, and whether they came often to market in Arkham.

Then the trees thinned, and far below him on his right he saw the little hills and antique roofs and spires of Kingsport. Even Central Hill was a dwarf from this height, and he could just make out the ancient graveyard by the Congregational Hospital, beneath which rumor said some terrible caves or burrows lurked. Ahead lay sparse grass and scrub blueberry bushes, and beyond them the naked rock of the crag and the thin peak of the dreaded gray cottage. Now the ridge narrowed, and Olney grew dizzy at his loneness in the sky. South of him the frightful precipice above Kingsport, north of him the vertical drop of nearly a mile to the river's mouth. Suddenly a great chasm opened before him, ten feet deep, so that he had to let himself down by his hands and drop to a slanting floor, and then crawl perilously up a natural defile in the opposite wall. So this was the way the folk of the uncanny house journeyed betwixt earth and sky!

When he climbed out of the chasm a morning mist was gathering, but he clearly saw the lofty and unhallowed cottage ahead; walls as gray as the rock, and high peak standing bold against the milky white of the seaward vapors. And he perceived that there was no door on this landward end, but only a couple of small lattice windows with dingy bull's-eye panes leaded in Seventeenth Century fashion. All around him was cloud and chaos, and he could see nothing below but the whiteness of illimitable space. He was alone in the sky with this queer and very

disturbing house; and when he sidled around to the front and saw that the wall stood flush with the cliff's edge, so that the single narrow door was not to be reached save from the empty æther, he felt a distinct terror that altitude could not wholly explain. And it was very odd that shingles so worm-eaten could survive, or bricks so crumbled still form a standing chimney.

As the mist thickened, Olney crept around to the windows on the north and west and south sides, trying them but finding them all locked. He was vaguely glad they were locked, because the more he saw of that house the less he wished to get in. Then a sound halted him. He heard a lock rattle and a bolt shoot, and a long creaking follow as if a heavy door were slowly and cautiously opened. This was on the oceanward side that he could not see, where the narrow portal opened on blank space thousands of feet in the misty sky above the waves.

Then there was heavy, deliberate tramping in the cottage, and Olney heard the windows opening, first on the north side opposite him, and then on the west just around the corner. Next would come the south windows, under the great low eaves on the side where he stood; and it must be said that he was more than uncomfortable as he thought of the detestable house on one side and the vacancy of upper air on the other. When a fumbling came in the nearer casements he crept around to the west again, flattening himself against the wall beside the now opened windows. It was plain that the owner had come home; but he had not come from the land, nor from any balloon or airship that could be imagined. Steps sounded again, and Olney edged around to the north; but before he could find a haven a voice called softly, and he knew he must confront his host.

Stuck out of a west window was a great black-bearded face whose eyes were phosphorescent with the imprint of unheard-of sights. But the voice was gentle, and of a quaint olden kind, so that Olney did not shudder when a brown hand reached out to help him over the sill and into that low room of black oak wainscots and carved Tudor furnishings. The man was clad in very ancient garments, and had about him an unplaceable nimbus of sea-lore and dreams of tall galleons. Olney does not recall many of the wonders he told, or even who he was; but says that he was strange and kindly, and filled with the magic of unfathomed voids of time and space. The small room seemed green with a dim aqueous light, and Olney saw that the far windows to the east were not open, but shut against the misty æther with dull thick panes like the bottoms of old bottles.

That bearded host seemed young, yet looked out of eyes steeped in the elder mysteries; and from the tales of marvelous ancient things he related, it must be guessed that the village folk were right in saying he had communed with the mists of the sea and the clouds of the sky ever since there was any village to watch his taciturn dwelling from the plain below. And the day wore on, and still Olney listened to rumors of old times and far places, and heard how the kings of Atlantis fought with the slippery blasphemies that wriggled out of rifts in ocean's floor, and

how the pillared and weedy temple of Poseidonis is still glimpsed at midnight by lost ships, who know by its sight that they are lost. Years of the Titans were recalled, but the host grew timid when he spoke of the dim first age of chaos before the gods or even the Elder Ones were born, and when *the other gods* came to dance on the peak of Hatheg-Kla in the stony desert near Ulthar, beyond the River Skai.

IT WAS at this point that there came a knocking on the door; that ancient door of nail-studded oak beyond which lay only the abyss of white cloud. Olney started in fright, but the bearded man motioned him to be still, and tiptoed to the door to look out through a very small peephole. What he saw he did not like, so pressed his fingers to his lips and tiptoed around to shut and lock all the windows before returning to the ancient settle beside his guest. Then Olney saw lingering against the translucent squares of each of the little dim windows in succession a queer black outline as the caller moved inquisitively about before leaving; and he was glad his host had not answered the knocking. For there are strange objects in the great abyss, and the seeker of dreams must take care not to stir up or meet the wrong ones.

Then the shadows began to gather; first little furtive ones under the table, and then bolder ones in the dark panelled corners. And the bearded man made enigmatical gestures of prayer, and lit tall candles in curiously wrought brass candlesticks. Frequently he would glance at the door as if he expected some one, and at length his glance seemed answered by a singular rapping which must have followed some very ancient and secret code. This time he did not even glance through the peephole, but swung the great oak bar and shot the bolt, unlatching the heavy door and flinging it wide to the stars and the mist.

And then to the sound of obscure harmonies there floated into that room from the deep all the dreams and memories of earth's sunken Mighty Ones. And golden flames played about weedy locks, so that Olney was dazzled as he did them homage. Trident-bearing Neptune was there, and sportive tritons and fantastic nereids, and upon dolphins' backs was balanced a vast crenulate shell wherein rode the gray and awful form of primal Nodens, Lord of the Great Abyss. And the conchs of the tritons gave weird blasts, and the nereids made strange sounds by striking on the grotesque resonant shells of unknown lurkers in black sea-caves. Then hoary Nodens reached forth a wizened hand and helped Olney and his host into the vast shell, whereat the conchs and the gongs set up a wild and awesome clamor. And out into the limitless æther reeled that fabulous train, the noise of whose shouting was lost in the echoes of thunder.

ALL NIGHT in Kingsport they watched that lofty cliff when the storm and the mists gave them glimpses of it, and when toward the small hours the little dim

windows went dark they whispered of dread and disaster. And Olney's children and stout wife prayed to the bland proper god of Baptists, and hoped that the traveller would borrow an umbrella and rubbers unless the rain stopped by morning. Then dawn swam dripping and mist-wreathed out of the sea, and the buoys tolled solemn in vortices of white æther. And at noon elfin horns rang over the ocean as Olney, dry and light-footed, climbed down from the cliffs to antique Kingsport with the look of far places in his eyes. He could not recall what he had dreamed in the sky-perched hut of that still nameless hermit, or say how he had crept down that crag untraversed by other feet. Nor could he talk of these matters at all save with the Terrible Old Man, who afterward mumbled queer things in his long white beard; vowing that the man who came down from that crag was not wholly the man who went up, and that somewhere under that gray peaked roof, or amidst inconceivable reaches of that sinister white mist, there lingered still the lost spirit of him who was Thomas Olney.

And ever since that hour, through dull dragging years of grayness and weariness, the philosopher has labored and eaten and slept and done uncomplaining the suitable deeds of a citizen. Not any more does he long for the magic of farther hills, or sigh for secrets that peer like green reefs from a bottomless sea. The sameness of his days no longer gives him sorrow, and well-disciplined thoughts have grown enough for his imagination. His good wife waxes stouter and his children older and prosier and more useful, and he never fails to smile correctly with pride when the occasion calls for it. In his glance there is not any restless light, and if he ever listens for solemn bells or far elfin horns it is only at night when old dreams are wandering. He has never seen Kingsport again, for his family disliked the funny old houses and complained that the drains were impossibly bad. They have a trim bungalow now at Bristol Highlands, where no tall crags tower, and the neighbors are urban and modern.

But in Kingsport strange tales are abroad, and even the Terrible Old Man admits a thing untold by his grandfather. For now, when the wind sweeps boisterous out of the north past the high ancient house that is one with the firmament, there is broken at last that ominous, brooding silence ever before the bane of Kingsport's maritime cotters. And old folk tell of pleasing voices heard singing there, and of laughter that swells with joys beyond earth's joys; and say that at evening the little low windows are brighter than formerly. They say, too, that the fierce aurora comes oftener to that spot, shining blue in the north with visions of frozen worlds while the crag and the cottage hang black and fantastic against wild coruscations. And the mists of the dawn are thicker, and sailors are not quite so sure that all the muffled seaward ringing is that of the solemn buoys.

Worst of all, though, is the shrivelling of old fears in the hearts of Kingsport's young men, who grow prone to listen at night to the north wind's faint distant sounds. They swear no harm or pain can inhabit that high peaked cottage, for in

the new voices gladness beats, and with them the tinkle of laughter and music. What tales the sea-mists may bring to that haunted and northernmost pinnacle they do not know, but they long to extract some hint of the wonders that knock at the cliff-yawning door when clouds are thickest. And patriarchs dread lest some day one by one they seek out that inaccessible peak in the sky, and learn what centuried secrets hide beneath the steep shingled roof which is part of the rocks and the stars and the ancient fears of Kingsport. That those venturesome youths will come back they do not doubt, but they think a light may be gone from their eyes, and a will from their hearts. And they do not wish quaint Kingsport with its climbing lanes and archaic gables to drag listless down the years while voice by voice the laughing chorus grows stronger and wilder in that unknown and terrible eyrie where mists and the dreams of mists stop to rest on their way from the sea to the skies.

They do not wish the souls of their young men to leave the pleasant hearths and gambrel-roofed taverns of old Kingsport, nor do they wish the laughter and song in that high rocky place to grow louder. For as the voice which has come has brought fresh mists from the sea and from the north fresh lights, so do they say that still other voices will bring more mists and more lights, till perhaps the olden gods (whose existence they hint only in whispers for fear the Congregational parson shall hear) may come out of the deep and from unknown Kadath in the cold waste and make their dwelling on that evilly appropriate crag so close to the gentle hills and valleys of quiet, simple fisher folk. This they do not wish, for to plain people things not of earth are unwelcome; and besides, the Terrible Old Man often recalls what Olney said about a knock that the lone dweller feared, and a shape seen black and inquisitive against the mist through those queer translucent windows of leaded bull's-eyes.

All these things, however, the Elder Ones only may decide; and meanwhile the morning mist still comes up by that lonely vertiginous peak with the steep ancient house, that gray, low-eaved house where none is seen but where evening brings furtive lights while the north wind tells of strange revels. White and feathery it comes from the deep to its brothers the clouds, full of dreams of dank pastures and caves of leviathan. And when tales fly thick in the grottoes of tritons, and conchs in seaweed cities blow wild tunes learned from the Elder Ones, then great eager vapors flock to heaven laden with lore; and Kingsport, nestling uneasy on its lesser cliffs below that awesome hanging sentinel of rock, sees oceanward only a mystic whiteness, as if the cliff's rim were the rim of all earth, and the solemn bells of the buoys tolled free in the æther of faëry.

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21: The Fete Night

Alice J. Muskett
1869-1936
The Australian Magazine, 29 April 1899

Australian artist and writer, and early feminist, who studied art in Paris and who published short stories and a semi-autobiographic novel.

ONCE a week they shut out the world, he and she, pausing in their busy world to snatch some brief moments of joy, and laugh at Fate.

He was a sculptor, a rough, loosely-built Scotch-man, the last man in the world one would expect to dream the delicate dreams that took shape in his brain; proud, reticent, poor. All his days were spent in hard work that only gained him the means of keeping on with the struggle, and perhaps a little now and then to send to the mother and delicate sister in Scotland. Was the day ever likely to come when he could think of marriage even as a remote possibility?

And she? She was a Finnish girl, tall, strong, broad-browed, with a firm chin, and a hand that seemed formed to help weaker fellow-beings; proud, reticent, poor as he. She was a worker in silver; she drew her own designs, and thought herself happy when she could earn enough to pay for a "course" in one of the big studios, and study from the model. She had her dreams, too, this girl with the fearless eyes. But for her daily needs she had often to depend on what she made by drawing illustrations for a fashion journal. The Finn, in her shabby clothes and patched boots, drew the delicate robes, the hats gay as some tropical bloom, the dainty, costly trifles and accessories that go to form a rich woman's toilet.

They were neither of them young, they were both of them saddened, perhaps even a little embittered, by the apparent futility of their lives, by the strange power chance seemed to play in the world's destinies.

Their acquaintance had started in a casual way quite foreign to the usual habits of either. They had met daily in their frequent goings and comings, for they both lived in the same court in one of the poorer quarters of Paris. He had a damp studio on the ground floor; she, at the other end of the court, had a draughty garret on the sixth storey, whose one advantage was that it gave an unequalled view of the sunrise over a sea of roofs. They dined, too, at the same little restaurant, supposing, of course, that they had money to pay for dinner. Little kindnesses on his part that sprang from that supreme courtesy, thought for others, called out gratefulness on hers. They advanced to exchanging words and smiles in passing; little by little they had been drawn together by reason of their very reserve. Thus kindly Mother Nature had pity on her children, and knowing their hard lives, their dull outlook, fostered the delicate seeds of love. With her

cunning, inevitable laws, she led by insignificant steps to a crisis that made the man break his self-imposed vow of silence to speak of his love.

That was four years ago, and they were daily growing firmer comrades and lovers. She could speak English now. They were no longer compelled to exchange their thoughts in the French that was at first their only common language, a fact which had given their early days of friendship a ludicrous difficulty.

At times it seemed bitterly hard, the hopeless drudging poverty. The man would grind his teeth in despair, such a horrible weight of failure seemed upon him. Less clever men grew rich while he toiled, and feared the utter dearth of his artist's inspiration through lack of expression. Then he would blame himself that he had virtually bound her to him, and call himself weak for having spoken. But she would tell him it had been a moment of strength, not weakness, when he opened the door of love to her.

But she, too, sometimes, womanlike, wept out her passionate longing for ordinary domestic happiness such as even the jolly, round-faced concierge seemed able to know. But the worst of all was when over-taxed nerves revenged themselves by an irritability that tortured their owners to harsh words and reproaches that stung cruelly, till their fruitless love seemed a curse instead of a blessing. Not the least of their troubles were the gossiping tongues and wagging heads of the many inhabitants of the court. She grew more and more reserved, and he more bitter for her sake. But all this is the sordid part, the background against which to place the happy meetings, the quiet assurance of sympathy, above all the sweet night of the week so looked for by both of them.

One week it fell on her birthday by a chance they hailed as a good omen. It was a cold day in January; the snow had been thick on the ground since morning, and as the dusk gathered it began to fall once more. In the centre of the court-yard was a tiny garden plot with a tall tree and a few sturdy shrubs, all heavily laden with snow. One long branch of the tree bent beneath the weight, and pointed finger-like twigs to the door of the sculptor's studio— so Hilda thought when she came down from her garret and peeped out into the court-yard. She had no hat, but a thick, dark shawl was wrapt about her head and shoulders. Lightly she hurried across the snowy ground and tapped at his door, six little knocks; that was their signal— one, two— three, four— five, six. "Open— to me— dearest," that is what they said.

The door opened, he put his hand out and drew her in.

Her shawl had slipped back and her dark hair was powdered with light flakes of snow. In the darkness her face gleamed white, and she looked like a child, breathing quickly with parted lips. As he kissed her the little bunch of violets at her throat seemed to fling their sweetness at him in a gust of perfume. Her cheek

against his was cold with the fresh vigour of the outside air. He held his arm round her and drew her further into the room.

“How sweet you smell,” he said, touching her flowers. “You are early; see, I have not lit my lamp.”

The big, barn-like studio took an air of mystery and distinction in the semi-darkness. The poverty was hidden, and only the charm allowed sway. The upper half of the big window was uncurtained. The opposite houses had every projection marked with snow; the flakes drifted past like a flock of white bees. Strange forms showed here and there against the walls; on the modelling stand was a mass of clay swathed in wet linen; in the middle of the room on a pedestal was a white plaster figure of a hooded woman, whose face leaned forward from the shadows with earnest question. At the end of the studio furthest from the modelling stand, the open door of the stove made a square of dull gleaming fire. By the side of the shabby couch stood a little table covered with a white cloth.

They stood resting against one another. She drew a long sigh, and let her head fall on his shoulder “like a tired bird who has reached home,” she often told him. He whispered to her as he stroked her hair, “Many happy returns of the day to my Northern darling. She knows it is not for want of love that I have nothing to offer her. How many birthdays does this make since we have known one another? Four! Four long years. But I have something to tell you, Hilda, a good piece of news. Guess—"

“You have sold something?”

“Yes, my little ‘Belle Dame Sans Merci’ for five hundred francs. What do you think of that ? Give me a kiss for it, *mon ami*."

She kissed him tenderly. She was not cold to her lover, this quiet woman.

“Now you can have a new coat,” were her first words.

“I begin to dream of a block of marble,” he said, laughing and glancing backward at the white figure on the pedestal.

She was full of eager questionings. Who was the purchaser, when had he sold it, was it gone already, the little statue, the dear little statue? She asked one thing after another, her eyes glowing as no triumph of her own would have made them glow. She wound her arms around him and lavished sweet praise upon him. “Her clever sculptor, her dear lover,” believing in him with an earnest faith that gave him courage.

In truth, the sale had come opportunely when he was at a loss for money to buy even clay for modelling. The removal of the immediate pressure wrought him to an extreme degree of tension. That morning he had been in despair; the advent of this purchaser seemed a miracle. Her murmured words quieted his nerves with a delicious relief, just as her cool hands soothed his hot forehead.

At last he unwound her arms and bade her rest on the couch while he prepared dinner. Not one thing should she do, he told her, on this her fete night.

So he arranged his scanty pillows for her, and covered her feet with his overcoat, first drawing off her clumsy shoes and kissing each arched instep.

“You shall have those shoes with the buckles we saw the other day,,” he said, nodding gravely at her as he sat on the edge of the couch.

Then he began to lay the table with dainty precision. He was a man who loved little refinements, this sculptor who cooked and swept, yes, and washed his own clothes sometimes.

Hilda let her body relax with a long sigh. How sweet, how exquisitely sweet, it was to be loved and tended. That morning she, too, had been seized with a fit of despair, and wept her heart out over some harsh words from her employer. But Andrew must not know this: she trusted his eyes would not notice the trace of tears.

The meal was a very simple one, the only adornment of the table Hilda’s bunch of violets, but they pledged one another in the snow-white wine as gaily as if it were champagne they were drinking. Hilda herself had brought some almonds and raisins as a surprise for the birthday feast, and over these they chattered like children. They spent the money many times in anticipation, ignoring the fact the greater part must go in sheer necessities, first of all to the inexorable landlord. They planned what they would do if the money were five times as much. Andrew’s plaster cast, which had already received a “mention," should be done in marble. This woman of whom he had dreamed, who stood fearlessly seeking life’s truth, should burst the shroud of plaster and live. It should receive a medal. Hilda dressed in sweeping silk and large plumed hat should go with him to see it in the Salon. And so on, their animation growing as they proceeded.

When the lingered-over meal came to an end, Andrew moved the little table bodily into a corner; he would not allow Hilda to put the things away as usual. To-night was a golden night, he said, they could be as lazy as they pleased. Then he lit his pipe and she her cigarette, and they were happy. The rough studio, with its one lamp, became a bower of love. The storm outside belonged to the world outside; both were barred from this home of tender hearts.

Hilda’s cigarette was soon finished, and then she began to sing.

It was a Finnish song, a slow, half sad air. Her voice had the throbbing depth of a violoncello. Andrew had heard her sing it so often that he could almost follow the words. A girl is on a hillside tending the cows. She is knitting, and as the needles flash in her fingers, she thinks of her home which she left to go into service. Her father was a blacksmith; his forge was by the highway. The glow of the fire and the sound of the hammer were woven in with every incident of her life. She learnt to know all the people who passed each market-day, and best of all she learnt to know a stalwart, fair-haired young farmer who drove a white horse to market, a slow-moving, majestic white horse. Always there was some need for

him to stop at the smithy for a few moments and exchange shy looks with the daughter, as well as greetings with the blacksmith.

Did that white horse and its driver still pass every market-day, she wondered? And did his master ever think of the blue-eyed girl who brooded over his few words and passionate looks till they had become the essence of her life?

The song ended. Andrew puffed slowly at his pipe, his eyes fixed on Hilda's full throat that curved as she sang. She was silent a moment when she ceased singing, her thoughts flying north through the storm to her own childhood's home. Andrew laid down his now-finished pipe, the sound making her swift thoughts leap back to her lover. She held out her arms to him, and he slipped from his chair, kneeling by her side, and laying his head on her bosom.

"I love you with all my heart," she told him, whispering low as if afraid of the sound of her own voice, hiding her eyes against him.

" And I you," he whispered back.

Neither youth, nor wealth, nor beauty, nor genius was theirs, yet for a little time all was forgotten except that they were together and that they loved one another. The rough man, embittered with his fruitless struggles, ready to answer harsh words with harsh words; the woman, seeing the years slip by and leave her still drudging, were transiormed to as passionate sweet lovers as any who ever wooed in the scented moonlit air of a southern night.

"There must be a God," she whispered to him, her lips trembling against his cheek, her eyes brimming over with quick tears. "There must be a God to put such love in our hearts."

Her tender faith of girlhood had died before the harsh facts, the cruelties, the injustice of her daily toil, but for a time the white light of Love resolved all the conflicting hues of life. It was always she who put her thoughts into words; he was tongue-tied, could only kiss her and hold her close to him, looking at her with the pathetic look of yearning such as one often sees in a dog's eyes. It used to touch her infinitely, this look of patient tenderness.

" It chokes me, my love for you," she told him to-night, pulling restlessly at her round throat. " I want to say something, and I cannot. L am not clever enough to put it into my work as you do, and it chokes me."

She strained him to her, half sobbing, he soothing her, hushing her, as tenderly as mother with her child.

The hours passed all too quickly; they were hastening to midnight when she left him. They parted lingeringly; she had given her last kiss and he had opened the door when she stopped him, one hand above his on the lock, the other round his neck.

" God bless my dearest lover! " she cried.

THE SNOW had ceased falling, everything was white and still. She slipped shadow-like up the court-yard and climbed to her bare garret. To-morrow the burdens must be taken up once more, but to-night— to-night— everything was lost in boundless love.

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22: The Sisters

James Joyce

1882-1941

Collected in: *The Dubliners*, 1914

THERE WAS NO HOPE for him this time: it was the third stroke. Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of window: and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of a corpse. He had often said to me: "I am not long for this world," and I had thought his words idle. Now I knew they were true. Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work.

Old Cotter was sitting at the fire, smoking, when I came downstairs to supper. While my aunt was ladling out my stirabout he said, as if returning to some former remark of his:

"No, I wouldn't say he was exactly... but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion...."

He began to puff at his pipe, no doubt arranging his opinion in his mind. Tiresome old fool! When we knew him first he used to be rather interesting, talking of faints and worms; but I soon grew tired of him and his endless stories about the distillery.

"I have my own theory about it," he said. "I think it was one of those ... peculiar cases.... But it's hard to say...."

He began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory. My uncle saw me staring and said to me:

"Well, so your old friend is gone, you'll be sorry to hear."

"Who?" said I.

"Father Flynn."

"Is he dead?"

"Mr Cotter here has just told us. He was passing by the house."

I knew that I was under observation so I continued eating as if the news had not interested me. My uncle explained to old Cotter.

"The youngster and he were great friends. The old chap taught him a great deal, mind you; and they say he had a great wish for him."

"God have mercy on his soul," said my aunt piously.

Old Cotter looked at me for a while. I felt that his little beady black eyes were examining me but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat rudely into the grate.

"I wouldn't like children of mine," he said, "to have too much to say to a man like that."

"How do you mean, Mr Cotter?" asked my aunt.

"What I mean is," said old Cotter, "it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be.... Am I right, Jack?"

"That's my principle, too," said my uncle. "Let him learn to box his corner. That's what I'm always saying to that Rosicrucian there: take exercise. Why, when I was a nipper every morning of my life I had a cold bath, winter and summer. And that's what stands to me now. Education is all very fine and large.... Mr Cotter might take a pick of that leg mutton," he added to my aunt.

"No, no, not for me," said old Cotter.

My aunt brought the dish from the safe and put it on the table.

"But why do you think it's not good for children, Mr Cotter?" she asked.

"It's bad for children," said old Cotter, "because their minds are so impressionable. When children see things like that, you know, it has an effect...."

I crammed my mouth with stirabout for fear I might give utterance to my anger. Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

It was late when I fell asleep. Though I was angry with old Cotter for alluding to me as a child, I puzzled my head to extract meaning from his unfinished sentences. In the dark of my room I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. I drew the blankets over my head and tried to think of Christmas. But the grey face still followed me. It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region; and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly as if to absolve the simoniac of his sin.

The next morning after breakfast I went down to look at the little house in Great Britain Street. It was an unassuming shop, registered under the vague name of *Drapery*. The drapery consisted mainly of children's bootees and umbrellas; and on ordinary days a notice used to hang in the window, saying: *Umbrellas Re-covered*. No notice was visible now for the shutters were up. A crape bouquet was tied to the door-knocker with ribbon. Two poor women and a telegram boy were reading the card pinned on the crape. I also approached and read:

July 1st, 1895
The Rev. James Flynn
(formerly of S. Catherine's Church, Meath Street)
aged sixty-five years.
R. I. P.

The reading of the card persuaded me that he was dead and I was disturbed to find myself at check. Had he not been dead I would have gone into the little dark room behind the shop to find him sitting in his arm-chair by the fire, nearly smothered in his great-coat. Perhaps my aunt would have given me a packet of High Toast for him and this present would have roused him from his stupefied doze. It was always I who emptied the packet into his black snuff-box for his hands trembled too much to allow him to do this without spilling half the snuff about the floor. Even as he raised his large trembling hand to his nose little clouds of smoke dribbled through his fingers over the front of his coat. It may have been these constant showers of snuff which gave his ancient priestly garments their green faded look for the red handkerchief, blackened, as it always was, with the snuff-stains of a week, with which he tried to brush away the fallen grains, was quite inefficacious.

I wished to go in and look at him but I had not the courage to knock. I walked away slowly along the sunny side of the street, reading all the theatrical advertisements in the shop-windows as I went. I found it strange that neither I nor the day seemed in a mourning mood and I felt even annoyed at discovering in myself a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death. I wondered at this for, as my uncle had said the night before, he had taught me a great deal. He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly. He had told me stories about the catacombs and about Napoleon Bonaparte, and he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest. Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me, asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts. The duties of the priest towards the Eucharist and towards the secrecy of the confessional seemed so grave to me that I wondered how anybody had ever found in himself the courage to undertake them; and I was not surprised when he told me that the fathers of the Church had written books as thick as the *Post Office Directory* and as closely printed as the law notices in the newspaper, elucidating all these intricate questions. Often when I thought of this I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice. Sometimes he used to put me through

the responses of the Mass which he had made me learn by heart; and, as I pattered, he used to smile pensively and nod his head, now and then pushing huge pinches of snuff up each nostril alternately. When he smiled he used to uncover his big discoloured teeth and let his tongue lie upon his lower lip—a habit which had made me feel uneasy in the beginning of our acquaintance before I knew him well.

As I walked along in the sun I remembered old Cotter's words and tried to remember what had happened afterwards in the dream. I remembered that I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I had been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange— in Persia, I thought.... But I could not remember the end of the dream.

In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of mourning. It was after sunset; but the window-panes of the houses that looked to the west reflected the tawny gold of a great bank of clouds. Nannie received us in the hall; and, as it would have been unseemly to have shouted at her, my aunt shook hands with her for all. The old woman pointed upwards interrogatively and, on my aunt's nodding, proceeded to toil up the narrow staircase before us, her bowed head being scarcely above the level of the banister-rail. At the first landing she stopped and beckoned us forward encouragingly towards the open door of the dead-room. My aunt went in and the old woman, seeing that I hesitated to enter, began to beckon to me again repeatedly with her hand.

I went in on tiptoe. The room through the lace end of the blind was suffused with dusky golden light amid which the candles looked like pale thin flames. He had been coffined. Nannie gave the lead and we three knelt down at the foot of the bed. I pretended to pray but I could not gather my thoughts because the old woman's mutterings distracted me. I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back and how the heels of her cloth boots were trodden down all to one side. The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin.

But no. When we rose and went up to the head of the bed I saw that he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice. His face was very truculent, grey and massive, with black cavernous nostrils and circled by a scanty white fur. There was a heavy odour in the room— the flowers.

We blessed ourselves and came away. In the little room downstairs we found Eliza seated in his arm-chair in state. I groped my way towards my usual chair in the corner while Nannie went to the sideboard and brought out a decanter of sherry and some wine-glasses. She set these on the table and invited us to take a little glass of wine. Then, at her sister's bidding, she filled out the sherry into the glasses and passed them to us. She pressed me to take some cream crackers also but I declined because I thought I would make too much noise eating them. She seemed to be somewhat disappointed at my refusal and went over quietly to the

sofa where she sat down behind her sister. No one spoke: we all gazed at the empty fireplace.

My aunt waited until Eliza sighed and then said:

"Ah, well, he's gone to a better world."

Eliza sighed again and bowed her head in assent. My aunt fingered the stem of her wine-glass before sipping a little.

"Did he ... peacefully?" she asked.

"Oh, quite peacefully, ma'am," said Eliza. "You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him. He had a beautiful death, God be praised."

"And everything...?"

"Father O'Rourke was in with him a Tuesday and anointed him and prepared him and all."

"He knew then?"

"He was quite resigned."

"He looks quite resigned," said my aunt.

"That's what the woman we had in to wash him said. She said he just looked as if he was asleep, he looked that peaceful and resigned. No one would think he'd make such a beautiful corpse."

"Yes, indeed," said my aunt.

She sipped a little more from her glass and said:

"Well, Miss Flynn, at any rate it must be a great comfort for you to know that you did all you could for him. You were both very kind to him, I must say."

Eliza smoothed her dress over her knees.

"Ah, poor James!" she said. "God knows we done all we could, as poor as we are— we wouldn't see him want anything while he was in it."

Nannie had leaned her head against the sofa-pillow and seemed about to fall asleep.

"There's poor Nannie," said Eliza, looking at her, "she's wore out. All the work we had, she and me, getting in the woman to wash him and then laying him out and then the coffin and then arranging about the Mass in the chapel. Only for Father O'Rourke I don't know what we'd have done at all. It was him brought us all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel and wrote out the notice for the *Freeman's General* and took charge of all the papers for the cemetery and poor James's insurance."

"Wasn't that good of him?" said my aunt.

Eliza closed her eyes and shook her head slowly.

"Ah, there's no friends like the old friends," she said, "when all is said and done, no friends that a body can trust."

"Indeed, that's true," said my aunt. "And I'm sure now that he's gone to his eternal reward he won't forget you and all your kindness to him."

"Ah, poor James!" said Eliza. "He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now. Still, I know he's gone and all to that...."

"It's when it's all over that you'll miss him," said my aunt.

"I know that," said Eliza. "I won't be bringing him in his cup of beef-tea any more, nor you, ma'am, sending him his snuff. Ah, poor James!"

She stopped, as if she were communing with the past and then said shrewdly:

"Mind you, I noticed there was something queer coming over him latterly. Whenever I'd bring in his soup to him there I'd find him with his breviary fallen to the floor, lying back in the chair and his mouth open."

She laid a finger against her nose and frowned: then she continued:

"But still and all he kept on saying that before the summer was over he'd go out for a drive one fine day just to see the old house again where we were all born down in Irishtown and take me and Nannie with him. If we could only get one of them new-fangled carriages that makes no noise that Father O'Rourke told him about, them with the rheumatic wheels, for the day cheap— he said, at Johnny Rush's over the way there and drive out the three of us together of a Sunday evening. He had his mind set on that.... Poor James!"

"The Lord have mercy on his soul!" said my aunt.

Eliza took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes with it. Then she put it back again in her pocket and gazed into the empty grate for some time without speaking.

"He was too scrupulous always," she said. "The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And then his life was, you might say, crossed."

"Yes," said my aunt. "He was a disappointed man. You could see that."

A silence took possession of the little room and, under cover of it, I approached the table and tasted my sherry and then returned quietly to my chair in the corner. Eliza seemed to have fallen into a deep revery. We waited respectfully for her to break the silence: and after a long pause she said slowly:

"It was that chalice he broke.... That was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still.... They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him!"

"And was that it?" said my aunt. "I heard something...."

Eliza nodded.

"That affected his mind," she said. "After that he began to mope by himself, talking to no one and wandering about by himself. So one night he was wanted for to go on a call and they couldn't find him anywhere. They looked high up and low down; and still they couldn't see a sight of him anywhere. So then the clerk suggested to try the chapel. So then they got the keys and opened the chapel and the clerk and Father O'Rourke and another priest that was there brought in a light for to look for him.... And what do you think but there he was, sitting up by

himself in the dark in his confession-box, wide-awake and laughing-like softly to himself?"

She stopped suddenly as if to listen. I too listened; but there was no sound in the house: and I knew that the old priest was lying still in his coffin as we had seen him, solemn and truculent in death, an idle chalice on his breast.

Eliza resumed:

"Wide-awake and laughing-like to himself.... So then, of course, when they saw that, that made them think that there was something gone wrong with him...."

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23: The Haunted Orchard

Richard Le Gallienne
1866-1947
Harper's Magazine, Jan 1912.

SPRING WAS ONCE MORE in the world. As she sang to herself in the faraway woodlands her voice reached even the ears of the city, weary with the long winter. Daffodils flowered at the entrances to the Subway, furniture removing vans blocked the side streets, children clustered like blossoms on the doorsteps, the open cars were running, and the cry of the "cash clo' " man was once more heard in the land.

Yes, it was the spring, and the city dreamed wistfully of lilacs and the dewy piping of birds in gnarled old apple-trees, of dogwood lighting up with sudden silver the thickening woods, of water-plants unfolding their glossy scrolls in pools of morning freshness.

On Sunday mornings, the outbound trains were thronged with eager pilgrims, hastening out of the city, to behold once more the ancient marvel of the spring; and, on Sunday evenings, the railway termini were aflower with banners of blossom from rifled woodland and orchard carried in the hands of the returning pilgrims, whose eyes still shone with the spring magic, in whose ears still sang the fairy music.

And as I beheld these signs of the vernal equinox I knew that I, too, must follow the music, forsake awhile the beautiful siren we call the city, and in the green silences meet once more my sweetheart Solitude.

As the train drew out of the Grand Central, I hummed to myself,

"I've a neater, sweeter maiden, in a greener, cleaner land"

and so I said good-by to the city, and went forth with beating heart to meet the spring.

I had been told of an almost forgotten corner on the south coast of Connecticut, where the spring and I could live in an inviolate loneliness—a place uninhabited save by birds and blossoms, woods and thick grass, and an occasional silent farmer, and pervaded by the breath and shimmer of the Sound.

Nor had rumor lied, for when the train set me down at my destination I stepped out into the most wonderful green hush, a leafy Sabbath silence through which the very train, as it went farther on its way, seemed to steal as noiselessly as possible for fear of breaking the spell.

After a winter in the town, to be dropped thus suddenly into the intense quiet of the country-side makes an almost ghostly impression upon one, as of an enchanted silence, a silence that listens and watches but never speaks, finger on lip. There is a spectral quality about everything upon which the eye falls: the woods, like great green clouds, the wayside flowers, the still farm-houses half lost

in orchard bloom— all seem to exist in a dream. Everything is so still, everything so supernaturally green. Nothing moves or talks, except the gentle susurrus of the spring wind swaying the young buds high up in the quiet sky, or a bird now and again, or a little brook singing softly to itself among the crowding rushes.

Though, from the houses one notes here and there, there are evidently human inhabitants of this green silence, none are to be seen. I have often wondered where the countryfolk hide themselves, as I have walked hour after hour, past farm and croft and lonely door-yards, and never caught sight of a human face. If you should want to ask the way, a farmer is as shy as a squirrel, and if you knock at a farm-house door, all is as silent as a rabbit-warren.

As I walked along in the enchanted stillness, I came at length to a quaint old farm-house— "old Colonial" in its architecture— embowered in white lilacs, and surrounded by an orchard of ancient apple-trees which cast a rich shade on the deep spring grass. The orchard had the impressiveness of those old religious groves, dedicated to the strange worship of sylvan gods, gods to be found now only in Horace or Catullus, and in the hearts of young poets to whom the beautiful antique Latin is still dear.

The old house seemed already the abode of Solitude. As I lifted the latch of the white gate and walked across the forgotten grass, and up on to the veranda already festooned with wistaria, and looked into the window, I saw Solitude sitting by an old piano, on which no composer later than Bach had ever been played.

In other words, the house was empty; and going round to the back, where old barns and stables leaned together as if falling asleep, I found a broken pane, and so climbed in and walked through the echoing rooms. The house was very lonely. Evidently no one had lived in it for a long time. Yet it was all ready for some occupant, for whom it seemed to be waiting. Quaint old four-poster bedsteads stood in three rooms— dimity curtains and spotless linen— old oak chests and mahogany presses; and, opening drawers in Chippendale sideboards, I came upon beautiful frail old silver and exquisite china that set me thinking of a beautiful grandmother of mine, made out of old lace and laughing wrinkles and mischievous old blue eyes.

There was one little room that particularly interested me, a tiny bedroom all white, and at the window the red roses were already in bud. But what caught my eye with peculiar sympathy was a small bookcase, in which were some twenty or thirty volumes, wearing the same forgotten expression— forgotten and yet cared for— which lay like a kind of memorial charm upon everything in the old house. Yes, everything seemed forgotten and yet everything, curiously— even religiously— remembered. I took out book after book from the shelves, once or twice flowers fell out from the pages— and I caught sight of a delicate handwriting here and there and frail markings. It was evidently the little intimate library of a young girl. What surprised me most was to find that quite half the books were in

French— French poets and French romancers: a charming, very rare edition of Ronsard, a beautifully printed edition of Alfred de Musset, and a copy of Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. How did these exotic books come to be there alone in a deserted New England farm-house?

This question was to be answered later in a strange way. Meanwhile I had fallen in love with the sad, old, silent place, and as I closed the white gate and was once more on the road, I looked about for someone who could tell me whether or not this house of ghosts might be rented for the summer by a comparatively living man.

I was referred to a fine old New England farm-house shining white through the trees a quarter of a mile away. There I met an ancient couple, a typical New England farmer and his wife; the old man, lean, chin-bearded, with keen gray eyes flickering occasionally with a shrewd humor, the old lady with a kindly old face of the withered-apple type and ruddy. They were evidently prosperous people, but their minds— for some reason I could not at the moment divine— seemed to be divided between their New England desire to drive a hard bargain and their disinclination to let the house at all.

Over and over again they spoke of the loneliness of the place. They feared I would find it very lonely. No one had lived in it for a long time, and so on. It seemed to me that afterwards I understood their curious hesitation, but at the moment only regarded it as a part of the circuitous New England method of bargaining. At all events, the rent I offered finally overcame their disinclination, whatever its cause, and so I came into possession— for four months— of that silent old house, with the white lilacs, and the drowsy barns, and the old piano, and the strange orchard; and, as the summer came on, and the year changed its name from May to June, I used to lie under the apple-trees in the afternoons, dreamily reading some old book, and through half-sleepy eyelids watching the silken shimmer of the Sound.

I had lived in the old house for about a month, when one afternoon a strange thing happened to me. I remember the date well. It was the afternoon of Tuesday, June 13th. I was reading, or rather dipping here and there, in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. As I read, I remember that a little unripe apple, with a petal or two of blossom still clinging to it, fell upon the old yellow page. Then I suppose I must have fallen into a dream, though it seemed to me that both my eyes and my ears were wide open, for I suddenly became aware of a beautiful young voice singing very softly somewhere among the leaves. The singing was very frail, almost imperceptible, as though it came out of the air. It came and went fitfully, like the elusive fragrance of sweetbrier— as though a girl was walking to and fro, dreamily humming to herself in the still afternoon. Yet there was no one to be seen. The orchard had never seemed more lonely. And another fact that struck me as strange was that the words that floated to me out of the aerial music were French,

half sad, half gay snatches of some long-dead singer of old France, I looked about for the origin of the sweet sounds, but in vain. Could it be the birds that were singing in French in this strange orchard? Presently the voice seemed to come quite close to me, so near that it might have been the voice of a dryad singing to me out of the tree against which I was leaning. And this time I distinctly caught the words of the sad little song:

"Chante, rossignol, chante,
Toi qui as le cœur gai;
Tu as le cœur à rire,
Moi, je l'ai-t-à pleurer."

But, though the voice was at my shoulder, I could see no one, and then the singing stopped with what sounded like a sob; and a moment or two later I seemed to hear a sound of sobbing far down the orchard. Then there followed silence, and I was left to ponder on the strange occurrence. Naturally, I decided that it was just a day-dream between sleeping and waking over the pages of an old book; yet when next day and the day after the invisible singer was in the orchard again, I could not be satisfied with such mere matter-of-fact explanation.

"A la claire fontaine,"

went the voice to and fro through the thick orchard boughs,

"M'en allant promener,
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné,
Lui y a longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oubliai."

It was certainly uncanny to hear that voice going to and fro the orchard, there somewhere amid the bright sun-dazzled boughs— yet not a human creature to be seen— not another house even within half a mile. The most materialistic mind could hardly but conclude that here was something "not dreamed of in our philosophy." It seemed to me that the only reasonable explanation was the entirely irrational one— that my orchard was haunted: haunted by some beautiful young spirit, with some sorrow of lost joy that would not let her sleep quietly in her grave.

And next day I had a curious confirmation of my theory. Once more I was lying under my favorite apple-tree, half reading and half watching the Sound, lulled into a dream by the whir of insects and the spices called up from the earth by the hot sun. As I bent over the page, I suddenly had the startling impression that someone

was leaning over my shoulder and reading with me, and that a girl's long hair was falling over me down on to the page. The book was the Ronsard I had found in the little bedroom. I turned, but again there was nothing there. Yet this time I knew that I had not been dreaming, and I cried out:

"Poor child! tell me of your grief— that I may help your sorrowing heart to rest."

But, of course, there was no answer; yet that night I dreamed a strange dream. I thought I was in the orchard again in the afternoon and once again heard the strange singing— but this time, as I looked up, the singer was no longer invisible. Coming toward me was a young girl with wonderful blue eyes filled with tears and gold hair that fell to her waist. She wore a straight, white robe that might have been a shroud or a bridal dress. She appeared not to see me, though she came directly to the tree where I was sitting. And there she knelt and buried her face in the grass and sobbed as if her heart would break. Her long hair fell over her like a mantle, and in my dream I stroked it pityingly and murmured words of comfort for a sorrow I did not understand.... Then I woke suddenly as one does from dreams. The moon was shining brightly into the room. Rising from my bed, I looked out into the orchard. It was almost as bright as day. I could plainly see the tree of which I had been dreaming, and then a fantastic notion possessed me. Slipping on my clothes, I went out into one of the old barns and found a spade. Then I went to the tree where I had seen the girl weeping in my dream and dug down at its foot.

I had dug little more than a foot when my spade struck upon some hard substance, and in a few more moments I had uncovered and exhumed a small box, which, on examination, proved to be one of those pretty old-fashioned Chippendale work-boxes used by our grandmothers to keep their thimbles and needles in, their reels of cotton and skeins of silk. After smoothing down the little grave in which I had found it, I carried the box into the house, and under the lamplight examined its contents.

Then at once I understood why that sad young spirit went to and fro the orchard singing those little French songs— for the treasure-trove I had found under the apple-tree, the buried treasure of an unquiet, suffering soul, proved to be a number of love-letters written mostly in French in a very picturesque hand— letters, too, written but some five or six years before. Perhaps I should not have read them— yet I read them with such reverence for the beautiful, impassioned love that animated them, and literally made them "smell sweet and blossom in the dust," that I felt I had the sanction of the dead to make myself the confidant of their story. Among the letters were little songs, two of which I had heard the strange young voice singing in the orchard, and, of course, there were many withered flowers and such like remembrances of bygone rapture.

Not that night could I make out all the story, though it was not difficult to define its essential tragedy, and later on a gossip in the neighborhood and a

headstone in the churchyard told me the rest. The unquiet young soul that had sung so wistfully to and fro the orchard was my landlord's daughter. She was the only child of her parents, a beautiful, willful girl, exotically unlike those from whom she was sprung and among whom she lived with a disdainful air of exile. She was, as a child, a little creature of fairy fancies, and as she grew up it was plain to her father and mother that she had come from another world than theirs. To them she seemed like a child in an old fairy-tale strangely found on his hearth by some shepherd as he returns from the fields at evening— a little fairy girl swaddled in fine linen, and dowered with a mysterious bag of gold.

Soon she developed delicate spiritual needs to which her simple parents were strangers. From long truancies in the woods she would come home laden with mysterious flowers, and soon she came to ask for books and pictures and music, of which the poor souls that had given her birth had never heard. Finally she had her way, and went to study at a certain fashionable college; and there the brief romance of her life began. There she met a romantic young Frenchman who had read Ronsard to her and written her those picturesque letters I had found in the old mahogany work-box. And after a while the young Frenchman had gone back to France, and the letters had ceased. Month by month went by, and at length one day, as she sat wistful at the window, looking out at the foolish sunlit road, a message came. He was dead. That headstone in the village churchyard tells the rest. She was very young to die— scarcely nineteen years; and the dead who have died young, with all their hopes and dreams still like unfolded buds within their hearts, do not rest so quietly in the grave as those who have gone through the long day from morning until evening and are only too glad to sleep.

NEXT DAY I took the little box to a quiet corner of the orchard, and made a little pyre of fragrant boughs— for so I interpreted the wish of that young, unquiet spirit— and the beautiful words are now safe, taken up again into the aerial spaces from which they came.

But since then the birds sing no more little French songs in my old orchard.

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24: The Sisters of Albano

Mary Shelley
1797-1851
First published 1828 (probably in "*The Keepsake*", a magazine)
Collected in: *Tales and Stories*, 1891

"And near Albano's scarce divided waves
Shine from a sister valley;— and afar
The Tiber winds, and the broad ocean laves
The Latian coast where sprang the Epic war,
'Arms and the Man,' whose re-ascending star
Rose o'er an empire; but beneath thy right
Tully reposed from Rome; and where yon bar
Of girdling mountains intercepts the sight
The Sabine farm was till'd, the weary bard's delight."

IT WAS TO SEE this beautiful lake that I made my last excursion before quitting Rome. The spring had nearly grown into summer, the trees were all in full but fresh green foliage, the vine-dresser was singing, perched among them, training his vines: the cicada had not yet begun her song, the heats therefore had not commenced; but at evening the fire-flies gleamed among the hills, and the cooing aziola assured us of what in that country needs no assurance— fine weather for the morrow. We set out early in the morning to avoid the heats, breakfasted at Albano, and till ten o'clock passed our time in visiting the Mosaic, the villa of Cicero, and other curiosities of the place. We reposed during the middle of the day in a tent elevated for us at the hill-top, whence we looked on the hill-embosomed lake, and the distant eminence crowned by a town with its church. Other villages and cottages were scattered among the foldings of mountains, and beyond we saw the deep blue sea of the southern poets, which received the swift and immortal Tiber, rocking it to repose among its devouring waves. The Coliseum falls and the Pantheon decays,— the very hills of Rome are perishing,— but the Tiber lives for ever, flows for ever, and for ever feeds the land-encircled Mediterranean with fresh waters.

Our summer and pleasure-seeking party consisted of many: to me the most interesting person was the Countess Atanasia D——, who was as beautiful as an imagination of Raphael, and good as the ideal of a poet. Two of her children accompanied her, with animated looks and gentle manners, quiet, yet enjoying. I sat near her, watching the changing shadows of the landscape before us. As the sun descended, it poured a tide of light into the valley of the lake, deluging the deep bank formed by the mountain with liquid gold. The domes and turrets of the far town flashed and gleamed, the trees were dyed in splendour; two or three slight clouds, which had drunk the radiance till it became their essence, floated

golden islets in the lustrous empyrean. The waters, reflecting the brilliancy of the sky and the fire-tinted banks, beamed a second heaven, a second irradiated earth, at our feet. The Mediterranean, gazing on the sun,— as the eyes of a mortal bride fail and are dimmed when reflecting her lover's glance,— was lost, mixed in his light, till it had become one with him.— Long (our souls, like the sea, the hills, and lake, drinking in the supreme loveliness) we gazed, till the too full cup overflowed, and we turned away with a sigh.

At our feet there was a knoll of ground, that formed the foreground of our picture; two trees lay basking against the sky, glittering with the golden light, which like dew seemed to hang amid their branches; a rock closed the prospect on the other side, twined round by creepers, and redolent with blooming myrtle; a brook, crossed by huge stones, gushed through the turf, and on the fragments of rock that lay about, sat two or three persons, peasants, who attracted our attention. One was a hunter, as his gun, lying on a bank not far off, demonstrated, yet he was a tiller of the soil; his rough straw hat, and his picturesque but coarse dress, belonged to that class. The other was some contadina, in the costume of her country, returning, her basket on her arm, from the village to her cottage home. They were regarding the stores of a pedlar, who with doffed hat stood near: some of these consisted of pictures and prints— views of the country, and portraits of the Madonna. Our peasants regarded these with pleased attention.

"One might easily make out a story for that pair," I said: "his gun is a help to the imagination, and we may fancy him a bandit with his contadina love, the terror of all the neighbourhood, except of her, the most defenceless being in it."

"You speak lightly of such a combination," said the lovely countess at my side, "as if it must not in its nature be the cause of dreadful tragedies. The mingling of love with crime is a dread conjunction, and lawless pursuits are never followed without bringing on the criminal, and all allied to him, ineffable misery. I speak with emotion, for your observation reminds me of an unfortunate girl, now one of the Sisters of Charity in the convent of Santa Chiara at Rome, whose unhappy passion for a man, such as you mention, spread destruction and sorrow widely around her."

I entreated my lovely friend to relate the history of the nun. For a long time she resisted my entreaties, as not willing to depress the spirit of a party of pleasure by a tale of sorrow. But I urged her, and she yielded. Her sweet Italian phraseology now rings in my ears, and her beautiful countenance is before me. As she spoke, the sun set, and the moon bent her silver horn in the ebbing tide of glory he had left. The lake changed from purple to silver, and the trees, before so splendid, now in dark masses, just reflected from their tops the mild moonlight. The fire-flies flashed among the rocks; the bats circled round us: meanwhile thus commenced the Countess Atanasia:—

The nun of whom I speak had a sister older than herself; I can remember them when as children they brought eggs and fruit to my father's villa. Maria and Anina were constantly together. With their large straw hats to shield them from the scorching sun, they were at work in their father's *podere* all day, and in the evening, when Maria, who was the elder by four years, went to the fountain for water, Anina ran at her side. Their cot— the folding of the hill conceals it— is at the lake-side opposite; and about a quarter of a mile up the hill is the rustic fountain of which I speak. Maria was serious, gentle, and considerate; Anina was a laughing, merry little creature, with the face of a cherub. When Maria was fifteen, their mother fell ill, and was nursed at the convent of Santa Chiara at Rome. Maria attended her, never leaving her bedside day or night. The nuns thought her an angel, she deemed them saints: her mother died, and they persuaded her to make one of them; her father could not but acquiesce in her holy intention, and she became one of the Sisters of Charity, the nun-nurses of Santa Chiara. Once or twice a year she visited her home, gave sage and kind advice to Anina, and sometimes wept to part from her; but her piety and her active employments for the sick reconciled her to her fate. Anina was more sorry to lose her sister's society. The other girls of the village did not please her: she was a good child, and worked hard for her father, and her sweetest recompense was the report he made of her to Maria, and the fond praises and caresses the latter bestowed on her when they met.

It was not until she was fifteen that Anina showed any diminution of affection for her sister. Yet I cannot call it diminution, for she loved her perhaps more than ever, though her holy calling and sage lectures prevented her from reposing confidence, and made her tremble lest the nun, devoted to heaven and good works, should read in her eyes, and disapprove of the earthly passion that occupied her. Perhaps a part of her reluctance arose from the reports that were current against her lover's character, and certainly from the disapprobation and even hatred of him that her father frequently expressed. Ill-fated Anina! I know not if in the north your peasants love as ours; but the passion of Anina was entwined with the roots of her being, it was herself: she could die, but not cease to love. The dislike of her father for Domenico made their intercourse clandestine. He was always at the fountain to fill her pitcher, and lift it on her head. He attended the same mass; and when her father went to Albano, Velletri, or Rome, he seemed to learn by instinct the exact moment of his departure, and joined her in the *podere*, labouring with her and for her, till the old man was seen descending the mountain-path on his return. He said he worked for a contadino near Nemi. Anina sometimes wondered that he could spare so much time for her; but his excuses were plausible, and the result too delightful not to blind the innocent girl to its obvious cause.

Poor Domenico! the reports spread against him were too well founded: his sole excuse was that his father had been a robber before him, and he had spent his early years among these lawless men. He had better things in his nature, and yearned for the peace of the guiltless. Yet he could hardly be called guilty, for no dread crime stained him. Nevertheless, he was an outlaw and a bandit; and now that he loved Anina, these names were the stings of an adder to pierce his soul. He would have fled from his comrades to a far country, but Anina dwelt amid their very haunts. At this period also the police established by the French Government, which then possessed Rome, made these bands more alive to the conduct of their members; and rumours of active measures to be taken against those who occupied the hills near Albano, Nemi, and Velletri, caused them to draw together in tighter bonds. Domenico would not, if he could, desert his friends in the hour of danger.

On a *festa* at this time— it was towards the end of October— Anina strolled with her father among the villagers, who all over Italy make holiday by congregating and walking in one place. Their talk was entirely of the *ladri* and the French, and many terrible stories were related of the extirpation of banditti in the kingdom of Naples, and the mode by which the French succeeded in their undertaking was minutely described. The troops scoured the country, visiting one haunt of the robbers after the other, and dislodging them, tracked them as in those countries they hunt the wild beasts of the forest, till, drawing the circle narrower, they enclosed them in one spot. They then drew a cordon round the place, which they guarded with the utmost vigilance, forbidding any to enter it with provisions, on pain of instant death. And as this menace was rigorously executed, in a short time the besieged bandits were starved into a surrender. The French troops were now daily expected, for they had been seen at Velletri and Nemi; at the same time it was affirmed that several outlaws had taken up their abode at Rocca Giovane, a deserted village on the summit of one of these hills, and it was supposed that they would make that place the scene of their final retreat.

The next day, as Anina worked in the *podere*, a party of French horse passed by along the road that separated her garden from the lake. Curiosity made her look at them; and her beauty was too great not to attract. Their observations and address soon drove her away; for a woman in love consecrates herself to her lover, and deems the admiration of others to be profanation. She spoke to her father of the impertinence of these men; and he answered by rejoicing at their arrival, and the destruction of the lawless bands that would ensue. When in the evening Anina went to the fountain, she looked timidly around, and hoped that Domenico would be at his accustomed post, for the arrival of the French destroyed her feeling of security. She went rather later than usual, and a cloudy evening made it seem already dark; the wind roared among the trees, bending

hither and thither even the stately cypresses; the waters of the lake were agitated into high waves, and dark masses of thundercloud lowered over the hill-tops, giving a lurid tinge to the landscape. Anina passed quickly up the mountain-path. When she came in sight of the fountain, which was rudely hewn in the living rock, she saw Domenico leaning against a projection of the hill, his hat drawn over his eyes, his *tabaro* fallen from his shoulders, his arms folded in an attitude of dejection. He started when he saw her; his voice and phrases were broken and unconnected; yet he never gazed on her with such ardent love, nor solicited her to delay her departure with such impassioned tenderness.

"How glad I am to find you here!" she said; "I was fearful of meeting one of the French soldiers: I dread them even more than the banditti."

Domenico cast a look of eager inquiry on her, and then turned away, saying, "Sorry am I that I shall not be here to protect you. I am obliged to go to Rome for a week or two. You will be faithful, Anina mia; you will love me, though I never see you more?"

The interview, under these circumstances, was longer than usual. He led her down the path till they nearly came in sight of her cottage; still they lingered. A low whistle was heard among the myrtle underwood at the lake-side; he started; it was repeated; and he answered it by a similar note. Anina, terrified, was about to ask what this meant, when, for the first time, he pressed her to his heart, kissed her roseate lips, and, with a muttered "Carissima addio," left her, springing down the bank; and as she gazed in wonder, she thought she saw a boat cross a line of light made by the opening of a cloud. She stood long absorbed in reverie, wondering and remembering with thrilling pleasure the quick embrace and impassioned farewell of her lover. She delayed so long that her father came to seek her.

Each evening after this, Anina visited the fountain at the Ave Maria; he was not there: each day seemed an age; and incomprehensible fears occupied her heart. About a fortnight after, letters arrived from Maria. They came to say that she had been ill of the malaria fever, that she was now convalescent, but that change of air was necessary for her recovery, and that she had obtained leave to spend a month at home at Albano. She asked her father to come the next day to fetch her. These were pleasant tidings for Anina; she resolved to disclose everything to her sister, and during her long visit she doubted not but that she would contrive her happiness. Old Andrea departed the following morning, and the whole day was spent by the sweet girl in dreams of future bliss. In the evening Maria arrived, weak and wan, with all the marks of that dread illness about her, yet, as she assured her sister, feeling quite well.

As they sat at their frugal supper, several villagers came in to inquire for Maria; but all their talk was of the French soldiers and the robbers, of whom a band of at least twenty was collected in Rocca Giovane, strictly watched by the military.

"We may be grateful to the French," said Andrea, "for this good deed; the country will be rid of these ruffians."

"True, friend," said another; "but it is horrible to think what these men suffer: they have, it appears, exhausted all the food they brought with them to the village, and are literally starving. They have not an ounce of maccaroni among them; and a poor fellow who was taken and executed yesterday was a mere anatomy: you could tell every bone in his skin."

"There was a sad story the other day," said another, "of an old man from Nemi, whose son, they say, is among them at Rocca Giovane: he was found within the lines with some *baccallà* under his *pastrano*, and shot on the spot."

"There is not a more desperate gang," observed the first speaker, "in the states and the *regno* put together. They have sworn never to yield but upon good terms. To secure these, their plan is to waylay passengers and make prisoners, whom they keep as hostages for mild treatment from the Government. But the French are merciless; they are better pleased that the bandits wreak their vengeance on these poor creatures than spare one of their lives."

"They have captured two persons already," said another; "and there is old Betta Tossi half frantic, for she is sure her son is taken: he has not been at home these ten days."

"I should rather guess," said an old man, "that he went there with good-will: the young scapegrace kept company with Domenico Baldi of Nemi."

"No worse company could he have kept in the whole country," said Andrea; "Domenico is the bad son of a bad race. Is he in the village with the rest?"

"My own eyes assured me of that," replied the other.

"When I was up the hill with eggs and fowls to the piquette there, I saw the branches of an ilex move; the poor fellow was weak perhaps, and could not keep his hold; presently he dropped to the ground; every musket was levelled at him, but he started up and was away like a hare among the rocks. Once he turned, and then I saw Domenico as plainly, though thinner, poor lad, by much than he was,— as plainly as I now see— Santa Virgine! what is the matter with Nina?"

She had fainted. The company broke up, and she was left to her sister's care. When the poor child came to herself she was fully aware of her situation, and said nothing, except expressing a wish to retire to rest. Maria was in high spirits at the prospect of her long holiday at home; but the illness of her sister made her refrain from talking that night, and blessing her, as she said good-night, she soon slept. Domenico starving!— Domenico trying to escape and dying through hunger, was the vision of horror that wholly possessed poor Anina. At another time, the discovery that her lover was a robber might have inflicted pangs as keen as those which she now felt; but this at present made a faint impression, obscured by worse wretchedness. Maria was in a deep and tranquil sleep. Anina rose, dressed herself silently, and crept downstairs. She stored her market-basket with what

food there was in the house, and, unlatching the cottage-door, issued forth, resolved to reach Rocca Giovane, and to administer to her lover's dreadful wants. The night was dark, but this was favourable, for she knew every path and turn of the hills, every bush and knoll of ground between her home and the deserted village which occupies the summit of that hill. You may see the dark outline of some of its houses about two hours' walk from her cottage. The night was dark, but still; the *libeccio* brought the clouds below the mountain-tops, and veiled the horizon in mist; not a leaf stirred; her footsteps sounded loud in her ears, but resolution overcame fear. She had entered yon ilex grove, her spirits rose with her success, when suddenly she was challenged by a sentinel; no time for escape; fear chilled her blood; her basket dropped from her arm; its contents rolled out on the ground; the soldier fired his gun, and brought several others round him; she was made prisoner.

In the morning, when Maria awoke she missed her sister from her side. I have overslept myself, she thought, and Nina would not disturb me. But when she came downstairs and met her father, and Anina did not appear, they began to wonder. She was not in the *podere*; two hours passed, and then Andrea went to seek her. Entering the near village, he saw the contadini crowding together, and a stifled exclamation of "Ecco il padre!" told him that some evil had betided. His first impression was that his daughter was drowned; but the truth, that she had been taken by the French carrying provisions within the forbidden line, was still more terrible. He returned in frantic desperation to his cottage, first to acquaint Maria with what had happened, and then to ascend the hill to save his child from her impending fate. Maria heard his tale with horror; but an hospital is a school in which to learn self-possession and presence of mind. "Do you remain, my father," she said; "I will go. My holy character will awe these men, my tears move them: trust me; I swear that I will save my sister." Andrea yielded to her superior courage and energy.

The nuns of Santa Chiara when out of their convent do not usually wear their monastic habit, but dress simply in a black gown. Maria, however, had brought her nun's habiliments with her, and, thinking thus to impress the soldiers with respect, she now put them on. She received her father's benediction, and, asking that of the Virgin and the saints, she departed on her expedition. Ascending the hill, she was soon stopped by the sentinels. She asked to see their commanding officer, and being conducted to him, she announced herself as the sister of the unfortunate girl who had been captured the night before. The officer, who had received her with carelessness, now changed countenance: his serious look frightened Maria, who clasped her hands, exclaiming, "You have not injured the child! she is safe!"

"She is safe— now," he replied with hesitation; "but there is no hope of pardon."

"Holy Virgin, have mercy on her! What will be done to her?"

"I have received strict orders: in two hours she dies."

"No! no!" exclaimed Maria impetuously, "that cannot be! You cannot be so wicked as to murder a child like her."

"She is old enough, madame," said the officer, "to know that she ought not to disobey orders; mine are so strict, that were she but nine years old, she dies."

These terrible words stung Maria to fresh resolution: she entreated for mercy; she knelt; she vowed that she would not depart without her sister; she appealed to Heaven and the saints. The officer, though cold-hearted, was good-natured and courteous, and he assured her with the utmost gentleness that her supplications were of no avail; that were the criminal his own daughter he must enforce his orders. As a sole concession, he permitted her to see her sister. Despair inspired the nun with energy; she almost ran up the hill, out-speeding her guide: they crossed a folding of the hills to a little sheep-cot, where sentinels paraded before the door. There was no glass to the windows, so the shutters were shut; and when Maria first went in from the bright daylight she hardly saw the slight figure of her sister leaning against the wall, her dark hair fallen below her waist, her head sunk on her bosom, over which her arms were folded. She started wildly as the door opened, saw her sister, and sprang with a piercing shriek into her arms.

They were left alone together: Anina uttered a thousand frantic exclamations, beseeching her sister to save her, and shuddering at the near approach of her fate. Maria had felt herself, since their mother's death, the natural protectress and support of her sister, and she never deemed herself so called on to fulfil this character as now that the trembling girl clasped her neck,— her tears falling on her cheeks, and her choked voice entreating her to save her. The thought—O could I suffer instead of you! was in her heart, and she was about to express it, when it suggested another idea, on which she was resolved to act. First she soothed Anina by her promises, then glanced round the cot; they were quite alone: she went to the window, and through a crevice saw the soldiers conversing at some distance. "Yes, dearest sister," she cried, "I will— I can save you— quick— we must change dresses— there is no time to be lost I— you must escape in my habit."

"And you remain to die?"

"They dare not murder the innocent, a nun! Fear not for me— I am safe."

Anina easily yielded to her sister, but her fingers trembled; every string she touched she entangled. Maria was perfectly self-possessed, pale, but calm. She tied up her sister's long hair, and adjusted her veil over it so as to conceal it; she unlaced her bodice, and arranged the folds of her own habit on her with the greatest care— then more hastily she assumed the dress of her sister, putting on, after a lapse of many years, her native contadina costume. Anina stood by, weeping and helpless, hardly hearing her sister's injunctions to return speedily to

their father, and under his guidance to seek sanctuary. The guard now opened the door. Anina clung to her sister in terror, while she, in soothing tones, entreated her to calm herself.

The soldier said they must delay no longer, for the priest had arrived to confess the prisoner.

To Anina the idea of confession associated with death was terrible; to Maria it brought hope. She whispered, in a smothered voice, "The priest will protect me— fear not— hasten to our father!"

Anina almost mechanically obeyed: weeping, with her handkerchief placed unaffectedly before her face, she passed the soldiers; they closed the door on the prisoner, who hastened to the window, and saw her sister descend the hill with tottering steps, till she was lost behind some rising ground. The nun fell on her knees— cold dew bathed her brow, instinctively she feared: the French had shown small respect for the monastic character; they destroyed the convents and desecrated the churches. Would they be merciful to her, and spare the innocent? Alas! was not Anina innocent also? Her sole crime had been disobeying an arbitrary command, and she had done the same.

"Courage!" cried Maria; "perhaps I am fitter to die than my sister is. Gesu, pardon me my sins, but I do not believe that I shall out live this day!"

In the meantime, Anina descended the hill slowly and trembling. She feared discovery,— she feared for her sister,— and above all, at the present moment, she feared the reproaches and anger of her father. By dwelling on this last idea, it became exaggerated into excessive terror, and she determined, instead of returning to her home, to make a circuit among the hills, to find her way by herself to Albano, where she trusted to find protection from her pastor and confessor. She avoided the open paths, and following rather the direction she wished to pursue than any beaten road, she passed along nearer to Rocca Giovane than she anticipated. She looked up at its ruined houses and bell-less steeple, straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of him, the author of all her ills. A low but distinct whistle reached her ear, not far off; she started,— she remembered that on the night when she last saw Domenico a note like that had called him from her side; the sound was echoed and re-echoed from other quarters; she stood aghast, her bosom heaving, her hands clasped. First she saw a dark and ragged head of hair, shadowing two fiercely gleaming eyes, rise from beneath a bush. She screamed, but before she could repeat her scream three men leapt from behind a rock, secured her arms, threw a cloth over her face, and hurried her up the acclivity. Their talk, as she went along, informed her of the horror and danger of her situation.

Pity, they said, that the holy father and some of his red stockings did not command the troops: with a nun in their hands, they might obtain any terms. Coarse jests passed as they dragged their victim towards their ruined village. The

paving of the street told her when they arrived at Rocca Giovane, and the change of atmosphere that they entered a house. They unbandaged her eyes: the scene was squalid and miserable, the walls ragged and black with smoke, the floor strewn with offals and dirt; a rude table and broken bench was all the furniture; and the leaves of Indian corn, heaped high in one corner, served, it seemed, for a bed, for a man lay on it, his head buried in his folded arms. Anina looked round on her savage hosts: their countenances expressed every variety of brutal ferocity, now rendered more dreadful from gaunt famine and suffering.

"Oh, there is none who will save me!" she cried. The voice startled the man who was lying on the floor; he lept up— it was Domenico: Domenico, so changed, with sunk cheeks and eyes, matted hair, and looks whose wildness and desperation differed little from the dark countenances around him. Could this be her lover?

His recognition and surprise at her dress led to an explanation. When the robbers first heard that their prey was no prize, they were mortified and angry; but when she related the danger she had incurred by endeavouring to bring them food, they swore with horrid oaths that no harm should befall her, but that if she liked she might make one of them in all honour and equality. The innocent girl shuddered. "Let me go," she cried; "let me only escape and hide myself in a convent for ever!"

Domenico looked at her in agony. "Yes, poor child," he said; "go save yourself: God grant no evil befall you; the ruin is too wide already." Then turning eagerly to his comrades, he continued: "You hear her story. She was to have been shot for bringing food to us: her sister has substituted herself in her place. We know the French; one victim is to them as good as another: Maria dies in their hands. Let us save her. Our time is up; we must fall like men, or starve like dogs: we have still ammunition, still some strength left. To arms! let us rush on the poltroons, free their prisoner, and escape or die!"

There needed but an impulse like this to urge the outlaws to desperate resolves. They prepared their arms with looks of ferocious determination. Domenico, meanwhile, led Anina out of the house, to the verge of the hill, inquiring whether she intended to go. On her saying to Albano, he observed, "That were hardly safe; be guided by me, I entreat you: take these piastres, hire the first conveyance you find, hasten to Rome, to the convent of Santa Chiara: for pity's sake, do not linger in this neighbourhood."

"I will obey your injunctions, Domenico," she replied, "but I cannot take your money; it has cost you too dear: fear not, I shall arrive safely at Rome without that ill-fated silver."

Domenico's comrades now called loudly to him: he had no time to urge his request; he threw the despised dollars at her feet.

"Nina, adieu for ever," he said: "may you love again more happily!"

"Never!" she replied. "God has saved me in this dress; it were sacrilege to change it: I shall never quit Santa Chiara."

Domenico had led her a part of the way down the rock; his comrades appeared at the top, calling to him.

"Gesu save you!" cried he: "reach the convent—Maria shall join you there before night. Farewell!" He hastily kissed her hand, and sprang up the acclivity to rejoin his impatient friends.

The unfortunate Andrea had waited long for the return of his children. The leafless trees and bright clear atmosphere permitted every object to be visible, but he saw no trace of them on the hill-side; the shadows of the dial showed noon to be passed, when, with uncontrollable impatience, he began to climb the hill, towards the spot where Anina had been taken. The path he pursued was in part the same that this unhappy girl had taken on her way to Rome. The father and daughter met: the old man saw the nun's dress, and saw her unaccompanied: she covered her face with her hands in a transport of fear and shame; but when, mistaking her for Maria, he asked in a tone of anguish for his youngest darling, her arms fell— she dared not raise her eyes, which streamed with tears.

"Unhappy girl!" exclaimed Andrea, "where is your sister?"

She pointed to the cottage prison, now discernible near the summit of a steep acclivity. "She is safe," she replied: "she saved me; but they dare not murder her."

"Heaven bless her for this good deed!" exclaimed the old man fervently; "but you hasten on your way, and I will go in search of her."

Each proceeded on an opposite path. The old man wound up the hill, now in view, and now losing sight of the hut where his child was captive: he was aged, and the way was steep. Once, when the closing of the hill hid the point towards which he for ever strained his eyes, a single shot was fired in that direction: his staff fell from his hands, his knees trembled and failed him; several minutes of dead silence elapsed before he recovered himself sufficiently to proceed: full of fears he went on, and at the next turn saw the cot again. A party of soldiers were on the open space before it, drawn up in a line as if expecting an attack. In a few moments from above them shots were fired, which they returned, and the whole was enveloped and veiled in smoke. Still Andrea climbed the hill, eager to discover what had become of his child: the firing continued quick and hot. Now and then, in the pauses of musketry and the answering echoes of the mountains, he heard a funeral chant; presently, before he was aware, at a turning of the hill, he met a company of priests and contadini, carrying a large cross and a bier. The miserable father rushed forward with frantic impatience; the awe-struck peasants set down their load— the face was uncovered, and the wretched man fell helpless on the corpse of his murdered child.

The Countess Atanasia paused, overcome by the emotions inspired by the history she related. A long pause ensued: at length one of the party observed, "Maria, then, was the sacrifice to her goodness."

"The French," said the countess, "did not venerate her holy vocation; one peasant girl to them was the same as another. The immolation of any victim suited their purpose of awe-striking the peasantry. Scarcely, however, had the shot entered her heart, and her blameless spirit been received by the saints in Paradise, when Domenico and his followers rushed down the hill to avenge her and themselves. The contest was furious and bloody; twenty French soldiers fell, and not one of the banditti escaped,— Domenico, the foremost of the assailants, being the first to fall."

I asked, "And where are now Anina and her father?"

"You may see them, if you will," said the countess, "on your return to Rome. She is a nun of Santa Chiara. Constant acts of benevolence and piety have inspired her with calm and resignation. Her prayers are daily put up for Domenico's soul, and she hopes, through the intercession of the Virgin, to rejoin him in the other world.

"Andrea is very old; he has outlived the memory of his sufferings; but he derives comfort from the filial attentions of his surviving daughter. But when I look at his cottage on this lake, and remember the happy laughing face of Anina among the vines, I shudder at the recollection of the passion that has made her cheeks pale, her thoughts for ever conversant with death, her only wish to find repose in the grave."

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25: Tidal Moon

Stanley G. Weinbaum
1902-1935
Thrilling Wonder Stories, Dec 1938

BOB AMHERST shivered a little despite the heated interior of the autobus, but grinned none the less as he made out the frosty towers of Hydropole. He was always glad to return to the polar city, if only for the pleasure of staring up at buildings piled story upon story like those of his native Syracuse on a gray planet some half a billion miles sunward.

Hydropole, south polar city of Jupiter's third major moon, Ganymede, was a chilly town at all seasons with its thirty degree Fahrenheit mean, and its variation of only ten degrees. But it was certainly the only settlement on the satellite that was worthy of the title of city.

Amherst had served four terrestrial years on the watery planet as collector for Cree, Inc., moving from town to town gathering the precious medicinal moss, to take it finally to Hydropole, the rocket port, for transshipment to Earth.

He was one of the hundreds of such collectors for the giant company, each with his own route, each picking his own way from town to town, riding his hipp (the sea-horse of Ganymede, *Hippocampus Catamiti*) through the wild torrents of the afterfloods, past mountains whose locked valleys were apt to spill countless millions of tons of water upon him with no warning save the crash of the bursting mountain walls.

Only in Hydropole was there safety. Situated on the south pole, it escaped the great wash of water which, due to the strong gravitational pull of Jupiter, every three months encircled the tiny moon.

As a result, only in, and for a few miles around Hydropole, was there vegetation. Save for the strange moss, cree, which clung so close to the rocky crevices of the mountain that even the raging tides could not pry it loose, not a living plant broke the great, gray expanse of rock.

So, on Ganymede, all life revolved about the blue moss, cree. Ages back, the Nympus, natives of Ganymede, had carried it deep underground where, piled layer after layer on the solid rock around the doomed villages, it served as earth. There, with seeds garnered from the small area about Hydropole, they grew the small variety of food on which they lived.

Above ground the moss had a deep, blue color. As litmus paper, colored by the Earth lichen, *rocella tinctoria* shows the presence of acid or alkali by its color change, so Ganymedian cree reacted to the ammoniated atmosphere of the planet. The air underground, however, artificially produced, had little ammonia content, and there the moss was red. Indeed, even the mountain cree, after being

washed by the hydrogen containing waters of the flood, for a short time showed red.

Up to a short time ago, the gatherers had had only a limited time in which to pick the moss. Red cree lacked the medicinal quality of the blue in which, partly because of its chemical reaction to the ammoniated air and partly due to the latent eggs it harbored, lay the curative power so much in demand on Earth. Now, however, Carl Kent had evolved a formula by which cree picked red might be endowed with the healing power of the blue. So, in the area around his small trading station in Aquia, red as well as blue cree was gathered.

The autobus turned silently down the wide street of Hydropole. Robot-guided, insulated from noise and cold, it was certainly preferable to traveling by hipp. But hipp travel was unavoidable from here on. The trip to Aquia verged on the wet side of the planet— the side from which burst the mighty floods. So, added to steep, rocky drops, impassable by autobus, were the dank, muddy flats which only the hipp could traverse.

Amherst zipped the parka-like garment closed about his long, muscular body, pulling the sillicellu visor before his rugged features before he stepped from the autobus. The cold was penetrating. Even vacuum suits— misnamed, for they did not work on the principle of the thermos bottle but had the inner layer held from the outer by thin, radium-warmed wires— were scant enough protection.

Turning, he watched the Nympus unload the autobus. There was something revolting about them as they waddled about on their short legs, jointed only at hip and ankle; their heads, flaring into strange mushroom tops almost hiding their noseless faces; their arms, long and webbed to their bodies.

'Umhurr.' He turned to the queer, throaty croak. It was the Nympus' version of his name.

'Yes?'

'Go see.' One long, webbed arm pointed in the direction of the rocket port office.

'Oh, thanks.' He walked toward the circular glass dome, under which MacGowan sat looking, for all the world, like some giant god's experiment under a bell jar.

'Hello, Bob. How goes it?' MacGowan's round, smooth-cheeked face was sharp contrast to Amherst's rather angular, wind-beaten features.

'As always. What's new here?'

'Nothing. Except there's a rumor that they've discovered red cree on Io.'

'Io? That's Jupiter's first major moon.'

'Right. And a skin exporting company called Ionian Products has it tied up as tightly as Cree, Inc., has Ganymede.'

'Well, red cree is no good, Mac. There's no curative power in it.'

MacGowan leaned back in his chair.

'You forget,' he answered, 'that since Carl Kent's discovery we pick red cree on Ganymede.'

'Yes. I did forget.' Amherst stretched his long legs before him. 'I haven't been to Aquia since the formula's been in use there.' For a moment his thoughts dwelt on the small domed settlement, on the young girl, Carol Kent, with her pixie face and laughing eyes. 'Say,' he sat up suddenly as the full implication of MacGowan's words penetrated his mind, 'that's bad. Those birds will glut the market!'

'Well, so far it's only a rumor. And Carl Kent is the only one who knows his formula anyway. Still, you'd better tell him when you get to Aquia. I got the dope two months ago.'

'Amherst shook his head.

'That's ironic. In 2083, two months' old news has to be carried by hipp. It's like going back to post medievalism.'

'It is. But you know radio is useless on the flood belt of Ganymede. The atmosphere's too disturbed. It's only at Hydropole that we can get reception.' MacGowan's eyes caught a notation on his desk. 'Oh, I almost forgot. I've got company for you to Aquia.'

'Who?'

'Kirt Scaler.' He spoke into his desk transmitter. 'Ask Mr. Scaler to come in.'

'I don't know what he's here for,' he continued, turning back to Amherst, 'but his papers are in order and I don't think he'll cause you much trouble.'

Yes, Amherst agreed, as Kirt Scaler entered, this man certainly looked as if he could take the hazardous journey to Aquia in his stride. His red-brown eyes, on a level with Amherst's own, had the serene out-flowing look of the hardened adventurer. One saw him gazing long distances, accepting danger, meeting and conquering it. His teeth flashed white against tawny skin, and the steely grip of his hand did not belie the reckless strength of his appearance.

'Business trip?' Amherst asked.

'No, just touring.'

Amherst smiled at the idea of anyone's taking a pleasure trip on Ganymede.

'You've traveled by hipp, I suppose.'

'No. This is the first time I've left earth.'

Strange how mistaken one can be, Amherst reflected. He could have sworn this man had been hardened by such adventure as existed, nowadays, only on the planets.

'In that case,' he smiled, 'you've got something interesting in store for you tomorrow.'

Flood time was coming near. Seasickness and Amity, the two hipps, were restless. Always, at flood time, the instinct to be free rose in them, filling them with a wild yearning to buck the mountainous tide of water, to swim fiercely to the top, there to sport with the large Gamma Rorqual, that ferocious whale-like

mammal with the long spiked tooth from which only the hipps, because of their hard, outer shell, were safe.

Even when the flood was not imminent, hipps were not the easiest riding. They walked with a queer, undulating motion: the two feet forward first while the body rested on the tail, then the tail brought to meet the feet. On their twenty-foot long body, the rider had to pick his seat carefully. If he sat too near the head, the animal would not move: too near the tail meant that he would be jarred at every step. A little behind the legs was best. There he could ride with a minimum of jolting.

Night was coming on. Though the men had been out only a few hours, the sky was already darkening. Days were short in Ganymede. Thus far, they had spoken intermittently; the discomforts of travel occupied much of their attention. Scaler, it turned out, was a rather taciturn man, revealing little of his past and nothing of his reasons for touring Ganymede. He rode silently, looking neither right nor left, keeping his eyes fastened on the green-scaled back of Amity, his hipp.

There was, however, not much to look at. If one excepted the scattered stilt houses in the flats, nothing broke the monotony of mountains, rocks and mudholes. Still, Amherst reflected, stilt houses ought to be interesting to a man from Earth. He remembered the first time he had seen the square boxlike hives made of compressed cree, standing on twenty-foot poles— how he had wondered if, indeed, they could survive the flood. No one had stayed above ground long enough to find out.

Carl Kent, however, with his inquiring mind, had found out how they worked. At the first ten feet of water, the Nympus drew the stilts up through the sides of the house, allowing it to float. But no one, save the Nympus who lived inside one, could say for sure whether it survived the flood, for the water carried it so far from the original starting point that there was no way of checking.

Suddenly a scream broke the air— a raucous, harsh scream, but, unmistakably, a scream of pain. They were rounding down a mountain and, as they covered the next turn, they came upon a hideous struggling mass of flesh. While from a slimy, flat body long tentacles gripped the rock, others clung to the writhing form of a Nympus. Creeping, in the manner of a snake, they encircled his flailing arms, drawing the heavy body with its long center spear greedily toward the native.

Scaler stared horrified, his face paling behind the visor. The animal looked like some grotesque nightmare. Amherst drew his gun and fired. There was a soft hiss, before the thing collapsed, spilling its yellowish blood on the rock.

The Nympus sprang to his feet, chattering wildly, then, rushing to a crevice in the mountain where the cree showed blue, placed a handful of the wet moss on his wounds.

For a moment the tentacles waved feebly; then, falling into the sticky mess which had once been a body, lay still. Only the long spear retained definite shape.

'There,' Amherst said, 'is evolution in a nutshell.'

'It hadn't evolved very far,' Scaler breathed deeply. 'It looked like a jelly fish with a horn.'

'Perhaps it was once jelly fish,' Amherst returned. 'It's hard to tell now. It has metamorphosed too often from its original form. Like the butterfly which goes through successive stages from egg to larva, larva to chrysalis, chrysalis to butterfly, this, starting out as an amoeba-like protoplasm and, like the amoeba, absorbing food at every part of its body, changes form each time it surrounds its prey.'

'You mean it doesn't absorb, it *becomes* what it eats?'

'Exactly. This amoeba attaches itself to a higher form of life and becomes that form, always, however, retaining its original power of *becoming* its next prey. But, here's the strange thing: certain characteristics of its previous meal may remain even after it has adopted another form. This one, for example, was part Gamma Rorqual, as you can see from the spike, part land leet— it had land leet tentacles— and if we hadn't come along, it would have been part Nympus as well.'

'Funny planet,' Scaler remarked.

Slowly, they continued down the mountain, reaching now and then a bleak plateau which wind and water had swept to glassy smoothness. The flying mammals which always heralded the flood swooped overhead.

As they crossed one of the plateaus, above the roar of the wind they heard a loud beating. A mammoth bird, jet black against the mountain, its two sets of wings flapping alternately at a spread of thirty feet, came toward them. Flying the gale, it neared them quickly. For a second, the men sat transfixed; then, wrenching themselves from the coma of fear, drew guns. Seasickness beat her tail frantically, jolting Amherst's gun from his hand.

'Don't shoot, Scaler,' he yelled, diving after the spinning weapon. 'You'll never kill it.'

Before Amherst could reach his gun, Scaler fired. His shot, far to the right, missed the body. Yet the bird dropped, thrashing, to the ground. Again he fired and, with a scream so shrill it hurt their eardrums, it lay still.

'Whew! That was close,' Amherst said. 'Say, how did you know?'

'Know what?'

'Know enough to break the wing muscle.'

'It's a Blanket Bat,' Scaler answered. 'It doesn't kill, but it draws electrical energy from its prey and leaves it weak to the point of helplessness. That's the only way you can ground them too. There's a similar species on Io.'

'Right.' Amherst looked speculatively at his companion. 'But I was sure a man with no planetary experience would have aimed left, at the heart. That would have been unfortunate. For, as you undoubtedly know inasmuch as you hit it squarely on your second shot, the heart of the Blanket Bat is in the center.'

Scaler shrugged.

'Even on Earth,' he answered, 'those things get around.'

When they reached the bottom of the mountain, it was too dark to go further. Jupiter shone pale and ghostlike in the night sky and far off, a tiny pinprick in the black, was Earth. The wind had risen, so they tethered Seasickness and Amity to a rock and took shelter in the lee of the mountain. A few land leets, disturbed by their presence, dragged themselves slowly from the rock. Amherst, who always preferred fresh food to the concentrates of his kit, caught and cooked them in the ray stove for dinner. The octopus-like animals were good eating, so afterward the two men settled down contentedly for the night.

The next morning, as soon as the sun had risen, they started on their way. Today their travel was over the flats where, every now and then, a stilt house stood high on the bleak landscape. Once in awhile they found a Nympus lying lazily before one, but they did not stop. In the outlying sections, Nympus spoke a Ganymedian patois which few Earthmen understood.

As they splashed along, Scaler broke a long silence to ask, 'By the way, Amherst, just what is cree?'

'Cree is the source of the drug *crephine* used in the treatment of all the malignant diseases. It not only deadens pain, but heals.'

'But there's so much of it on Ganymede,' Scaler objected, 'it doesn't seem as if there'd be use for all of it.'

'It takes over a bale of cree to produce one ounce of *crephine,'*Amherst answered, 'And in the past ten years the demand for it has increased enormously. Besides, on most of Ganymede the time for picking is short.'

'You mean on account of the floods? But why *most* of Ganymede then? Why isn't gathering time short on the whole planet?'

'Because,' Amherst started— then, 'I was thinking of Hydropole,' he amended. 'The floods don't cover that but, of course, there's little cree there. Yes, the time for gathering is short on account of the floods.'

'And on account of the color change after the floods?' Scaler asked slyly.

'Yes, that's true. How did you know?'

'I guess I read it somewhere. By the way,' he asked casually, 'what's the trader at Aquia like?'

'Carl Kent? He's a nice fellow. Lives there with his daughter, Carol.'

'Is that where we stay out the flood?'

'Yes. They're glad enough to see a new face.'

'There's no way of leaving the village during flood time, I suppose.'

'None whatever. You couldn't open a door against the pressure of the water even if you wanted to, which no one does. Once underground, you've got to stay there!'

Scaler hummed to himself a few minutes before he spoke again.

'When does this next flood pass?' he asked finally.

'Let's see.' Amherst shifted his position on Seasickness' back. 'It's due in two days now. You can probably leave Aquia about May twelfth, terrestrial date. By the way,' he faced Scaler squarely, 'how do you expect to get back to Hydropole? You'd never find your way alone.'

'Oh, I figured that out with MacGowan. I'll wait there until you make the trip to Dripwater and Weepy Hills. You always stop at Aquia on your way back, don't you?'

'Yes. But I can't see what you expect to do for two months in the settlement at Aquia.'

'More sightseeing, perhaps,' Scaler smiled.

When night came on, they did not stop. Flood time was too close to waste time in rest. Now, near the wet side of the planet, mudholes occurred frequently; though the hipps braved them valiantly, progress was slow. The wind had increased and, riding against it, they were forced to hold their seats tightly.

After a few hours, they came to a mountain. Knowing the dark, rocky climb would slow them still more, Amherst decided to cut around on the flats. Riding the uncharted ground, half asleep, suddenly he felt a bright light shining on him. In the mountain's shadow, the night was black and the unexpected glare shocked him awake. From the side a huge, black bulk, that blinding light in its center, moved toward him. A grinding sound, as of rocks rubbed one on the other, deadened his ears, above everything, he was conscious of the light.

Scaler, riding nearest the mountain, continued forward, but Seasickness suddenly switched her course, heading straight for the glare. Amherst jerked the guiding rein, but she did not turn. Then, as the beam fell full on him, he felt himself being drawn. Ahead was the light, bright, warm, hypnotizing — at either side was nothing.

He felt his mind sinking, felt his body go lax, lean forward. Then something flew before his eyes. For a second, the light was blocked off, and in that second his strength flowed back. At once, he realized the thing ahead had been drawing his will from him— that if he were ever to get away, he must shield Seasickness' eyes and pull the rein hard. Now the bulk was so close that he could make out a great, yawning hole, inside which a piston-like rod moved up and down.

As he stared, a rock rolled into the hole and, on the descent of the piston, was ground to bits. With a mighty effort, he shut his eyes. Then, raising his visor to the freezing air, he gripped Seasickness' reins in his teeth and, blindfolding her with his hands, pulled with all the strength he had in him. She swerved.

Now— if the thing didn't change direction, they were safe. Otherwise they were sunk. Without looking full into the light, Amherst watched breathing deeply to still the pounding of his heart. Safe! The thing moved steadily forward, unaware that its prey had escaped.

Scaler, outside the hypnotic power of the light, asked what the trouble was.

'We couldn't change direction while the light shone on us,' Amherst told him, 'But that wasn't the strangest thing. That beacon or animal or whatever it was, *ate rocks!* Outside of the Pyramid Builder of Mars, I've never heard of that before.'

'Evidently it wanted to add you to its mineral diet,' Scaler observed.

'And it almost did.' Amherst laughed in relief. 'So it must be the extreme of omnivorous, needing life as well as minerals to keep it going.'

'Just another verse in the saga of evolution.' Scaler shifted his position on Amity's back and closed his eyes for a few minute's rest.

TWO TERRESTRIAL days later they sighted the domes of Aquia which, huddled on the Ganymedian waste, resembled the half-buried eggs of some giant bird, left ages back to turn the same slate gray as the rest of the landscape. Faint on each dome were the outlines of a door, sole evidence of human habitation in the clustered mounds. Still, to the two men, stiff and tired after days and nights of riding, the sight of the small, domed village was cheering.

'So this is Aquia,' Scaler sighed. 'Aquia of Ganymede. It sounds almost Biblical.'

From far away came a dull roar. 'Just to make it more so,' Amherst answered, 'here's the flood.'

Bob Amherst looked admiringly at the slim girl in the trading station.

'Is it you, Carol, or is it what you're going to be ten years hence?' he said lightly, his eyes twinkling. Last time he had seen the girl, she had been a gangling child of sixteen or so; now she was a blonde goddess, rounded, appealing, vital. Her golden hair and blue eyes were in sharp contrast to the drabness of the trading station. She seemed to have grown up all at once.

'I hope it's both.' She shut the door against the freezing outside air.

'Why, you're beautiful.' To hide his astonishment, he spoke to her as a child. 'Your hair is combed, and your face is clean, and— '

'And you're too fresh.' Her eyes turned to Scaler.

'Oh, I forgot. This is Mr. Scaler, Carol.'

Scaler's brown eyes swept over her appreciatively.

'Where's your father?' Amherst asked.

Carol's face sobered.

'Father didn't come back last flood time. I'm carrying on.'

Didn't come back! There was no need to say more. Everyone knew what it meant to be caught away from the domed village when the torrents of water came thundering down. It was tough! Carl Kent could be spared least of the traders on Ganymede. And it was a pity that he had to go so soon after his precious formula had been completed. It was too bad for Carol, too. She was all alone now.

They followed her through the underground passage which led from the trading station to her living quarters. Under the domes, so exact in their engineering that they could withstand the terrific pressure of water during the flood, the air was warm. They removed their vacuum suits.

Outside Carol's door which, like all the rest opened onto a central square, Nympus and Earthmen scurried about to make ready for the deluge. Like a huge ant hill, the village teemed with activity. Tanks had to be made ready to store the water from which their oxygen came. The nitrogen mixers had to be checked so that they would be prepared to blend perfectly the two gases and insure the air supply for the duration of the flood.

While Amherst went about his business, looking over the cree, tethering the hipps in their floating cages anchored to the village, seeing that all was ready for the tidal rush, Scaler and Carol sat together in the warm, Earthlike room that Carl Kent had furnished.

'When you said you were carrying on here, the most important trading station on Ganymede, I could hardly believe it.' Scaler's warm, brown eyes rested admiringly on the girl's face.

'I have to. I'm the only one who could. Father was caught in the flood before he had a chance to set up laboratories in the other stations.'

'Was he planning to? I should think it would be dangerous to let too many people learn his secret.'

'Not at all,' Carol answered. 'There's no cree anywhere but Ganymede, and Cree, Inc., covers the entire planet.'

'Oh, I didn't know.' He moved over to sit next to her. 'It's too bad for you to bury yourself here,' he said abruptly. 'You don't belong. You should be living on Earth— seeing, doing and, most important, being seen.'

Carol smiled. She had never visited the small pinprick in the black called Earth, but she had read of it, read of its cities built into the air, its underground highways, its beautiful women. 'Tell me about the World,' she said softly. 'Is it so different from Ganymede?'

'So very different, I don't know where to begin.'

'I've always wanted to see New York.' She looked enviously at Scaler.

Amherst entered the room in time to hear her last words.

'It's nothing but froth, Carol,' he broke in. 'There are many things on Earth we wouldn't want on Ganymede.'

Scaler smiled.

'Gangsters and greed,' he said, 'went out long ago.'

'Gangsters did,' Amherst answered shortly. Suddenly the thought of Scaler's presence during the long flood period annoyed him. Perhaps, without knowing, he had been looking forward to being alone with Carol. Now, he realized that Scaler,

shut in the underground village with nothing to occupy his time, would make that impossible.

At that moment, deep underground as they were, they heard the crash of mountain walls as the flood came pouring down. As always, in the village of the cree-gatherers, it was quiet, almost menacingly quiet, as if everyone stood impassive, waiting to see whether or not this time the domes would hold. For a few hours, until the air tanks were working efficiently, they would have this strange, dead sensation in their heads.

As Amherst had foreseen, Carol and Kirt Scaler spent much time together. Often they walked the narrow tunnels leading to the farms and there stood on the flat-covered expanse, like some tremendous basement, the water valves overhead dripping flood water brought from the surface to the crop below. And sometimes they stood by the nitrogen mixers, deafened by the mighty roar as the artificial air came pouring out.

Indeed, Scaler seemed to have perpetual interest where life at Aquia was concerned. Often Amherst entered a room to hear him questioning Carol about various technicalities. But at other times, he fought clear of anything to do with Ganymede and, instead, talked at length about the world Carol had never seen. At such times, she listened fascinated, a faraway look in her blue eyes as if they saw, through Scaler's, the things he was describing.

As the days passed, Amherst became more and more aware of Scaler's attraction for the girl though, as yet, he was not sure whether it was the man himself who charmed her or the world he came from. Thinking to find out, he waited for one of the few times that he and Carol were alone together. Then, walking over and taking her chin in his hand, he asked, 'Just how much do you know about Kirt Scaler, Carol?'

'Not very much. What difference does it make?'

'It might make a lot. It might be a revival of the old, old stories of the city slicker and the farmer's daughter.'

She jerked away angrily.

'Mind your own business, Bob Amherst.'

He put his arm around her.

'You're my business.'

'Since when.'

Lacking an answer, he pulled her to him and kissed her roughly. She jerked away, flouncing angrily from the room.

He watched her go absentmindedly, not so much concerned with her anger as with trying to decide what it would mean to him if she were indeed serious where Kirt Scaler were concerned.

Since Carl's death, he had felt an increasing sense of responsibility for Carol—and something more too. For Carol, even as a young girl, had aroused in him a

more than friendly interest. So the thought of her falling in love and, perhaps, marrying someone else was painful. Besides, the more he saw of Scaler, the more he realized how uncommunicative the man really was. He had not yet given reason for his trip to Aquia other than the obviously ridiculous one of 'touring.'

And surely, attractive as Carol was, tales of her charm had not drawn him almost four hundred million miles through space. Still, aside from Scaler's interest in the life at Aquia, so far Carol seemed his only excuse for coming.

FOR THE next few days, Carol treated Amherst coolly, never giving him a chance to speak to her alone and continuing to spend much time in Scaler's company. Amherst seldom entered a room but that he saw the golden head in close proximity to the brown, and heard, with a twinge at his heart, the soft note in Scaler's voice.

As the days passed, however, Scaler seemed to become restless. Often he wandered the village alone, not waiting for Carol. Once Amherst found him scanning a terrestrial calendar and figuring on a small pad he carried. Consequently, Amherst's heart lightened a bit, though, as yet, he could not break through Carol's reserve.

Just a day and a half before complete ebb, he was sitting alone in the trading station when the girl entered.

'It's funny,' she said abruptly, 'I can't find the formula. I know it by heart, of course, but the paper is gone.'

'Gone!' Amherst jumped to his feet, recalling, for the first time in weeks, the rumor that red cree had been found on Io.

'Don't get excited, Bob,' she said coldly, seating herself leisurely. 'What would anyone want it for?'

'They've discovered red cree on Io.' Amherst was halfway out the door. What a fool he had been not to tell Carol, especially after he had been told to bring the news to Carl. She hurried to follow him.

Inside the laboratory, he turned to face her.

'It's my fault,' he groaned. 'I should have told you. News of your father's death must have knocked it from my mind. Are you sure it's gone? Nothing seems to have been disturbed.'

'Yes. I kept it here.' She opened a drawer.

'Who has been in this room, Carol? Who, besides yourself, has ever been here?'

'Some Nympus gatherers, when Father was alive.'

'Who else?' Amherst paced the floor impatiently. 'They haven't the intelligence to steal it.' He paused for a moment. 'Did you ever bring Scaler in?' he asked.

'Yes, once. He wanted to see red cree under treatment.'

'Of course he did.' Amherst turned abruptly. 'Stupid of me not to have suspected it. He was undoubtedly sent here by Ionian Products just to get the formula. Touring, indeed! No wonder he recognized the Blanket Bat!'

'What shall we do?' Carol rummaged helplessly through the papers in the drawer.

'Search the village. He can't possibly leave until the water ebbs and that's at least a day and a half away. He must be here somewhere. There's no place else to go.'

They hunted the village for Scaler, but the search was fruitless. It seemed impossible for a man to disappear in the small underground village, and yet five precious hours had gone and they had found no trace of him. It was incredible.

'Bob, what will it mean to Cree, Inc., if Ionian Products exports blue cree to Earth?' Carol asked anxiously after a while.

'Severe competition, a glutted market, shrinkage in sales, eventual bankruptcy, perhaps. You know there's an enormous expenditure required to keep the company going on Ganymede.'

'Then we've got to find Kirt Scaler. Father would— would have hated that!'

'I know.' Amherst stood undecided for a moment. 'There's only one thing left for us to do though: we must start over. Somewhere, we have missed him.'

Three hours later, footsore and weary, they returned again to the farms, their second quest as unproductive as the first.

Far in the distance a lone Nympus worked the field, at the entrance to the tunnel.

'You know strange Earthman?' Amherst spoke wearily to the toiling Nympus.

'Yeh.' The crusty, mushroom head nodded rapidly.

'Have you seen him today?'

'Yeh.' The head nodded again.

'Where!' Amherst grasped the green, scaled shoulder. The Nympus waved an arm vaguely toward the outskirts of the farm, to the bare rock wall where the farm ended.

'Where?' Amherst shook the native's shoulder excitedly.

'In Iticht phulph.'

'In locked valve,' Amherst shouted. 'Of course. It's the only place he could be.'

At that moment, far down the farm, almost where the rock wall began, a stream of water shot heavily to the earth. 'That's the one,' Amherst cried. 'That valve was just opened to the outside. Carol,' he cried as he started running toward the water, 'get me a vacuum suit and bring it here— quickly!'

When he reached the spot, the water had thinned to a narrow stream. Evidently ebb was over. A mound of cree earth beneath the pipe opening showed how Scaler had managed to reach his hiding place. Through the slanting man-sized aqueduct, Amherst could see light from above. Undoubtedly Scaler had just

escaped. Probably knowledge that the Nympus farmer had seen him, had made him aware of the danger of hiding there longer.

However, it was impossible to follow until Carol returned with the vacuum suit. He waited impatiently, comforting himself with the thought that Scaler could not get very far in the torrents of the afterflood on foot, and that, as no one had been above ground since the flood started, there was no hipp tethered outside to carry him. As relief for his impatience, Amherst piled more cree on the mound Scaler had left. It would save time when Carol arrived with the suit if he could raise himself easily to the opening in the rock ceiling.

At last Carol, clad in a vacuum suit herself, came running across the field.

'You can't come,' Amherst told her. Hurriedly he stepped into the garment she handed him. Without replying she stood watching him draw his long body through the pipe opening.

Creeping up the slanting hundred yard aqueduct as quickly as possible, Amherst emerged dripping to the wet Ganymedian surface. A few seconds later, Carol appeared.

'Go back.' He was trying to free his sillicellu visor of the mud it had gathered on the ascent through the wet pipe. Scaler was not in sight.

A rocket ship, however, was visible in the sky. He started walking, Carol beside him. Scaler might easily be in the valley on the other side of the hill.

'What's that ship doing?' Carol asked. 'It can't land here.'

'It looks as if it's going to.'

True, the ship was coming lower. A mile or so in front of them, it lost altitude rapidly. Wonderingly, they watched it, knowing no rocket ship had ever landed in the muddy areas of Ganymede until, straining their eyes, they saw a ladder unfurling from its fuselage. So that was going to be the manner of Scaler's escape!

Amherst started to run, splashing through the water and mudholes which slowed his progress. Carol followed, gaping with the exertion of pulling her self in the heavy suit through the sticky mud.

Hopelessly, they saw the ship dip behind the brow of the hill, to rise a second later with a black dot clinging to its downflung ladder. As they watched disconsolately, the red speck soared high in the sky. Red! The color of the space ships of Io! For, since the signing of the Interplanetary Peace Treaty, each planet colored its space ships differently. There was no doubt now where their formula was going.

Carol sat down despondently. For a few moments neither spoke. At last they rose and, silently, started to walk toward the village of the cree gatherers.

'What was the formula, Carol?' Amherst asked finally. 'As long as Scaler is taking it to Ionian Products, I might as well know.'

'It was simple,' the girl said. 'It merely duplicated the chemical changes taking place in the moss after the passing of the flood. The color change in cree is due to

ammonia in the air, as you know. Well, part of the medicinal value lies there and part in latent eggs deposited in the moss. Father's formula was exactly that: an equal mix of blue gallnuts and ammonia.'

Bob Amherst stopped abruptly. 'Gallnuts, did you say? Blue gallnuts?'

Yes. It's the name given the vegetable excrescence which forms around the egg of the gall-ant. We breed gall-ants, pulverize their eggs and— '

'Carol!' Amherst pounded his knee in delight. 'We're saved! Much good our formula will do them,' He waved toward Io, ghostlike in the pale sky.

'Why? They've got the cree on Io.'

'They've got the cree all right, and they've got the formula— but they haven't got the ants! And they'll never get them either. Gall-ants can't live in methane— I remember that from Biology— and the air on Io is mostly methane!'

'Why can't they?'

'Because their systems are geared to breathing ammoniated air— exactly the opposite of methanated air. Don't you see? Ammonia is a base: methane is a hydrocarbon, an acid.'

'Well, can't they make ammonia?'

'Of course. But where will they get the ants? Gall-ants breed only on Ganymede, in Ganymedian cree. To get the ants they'd have to buy our cree and, inasmuch as they'd have to use the ant eggs to get the gallnuts to make the formula to turn their cree blue,' Amherst drew a long breath, 'the ants couldn't reproduce. So they'd have to continue buying our cree to get the ants to get the nuts to get— '

'I see,' Carol interrupted. 'Never mind the rest.'

'Besides which,' Amherst continued, 'even after they succeeded in turning the cree blue— if they succeeded, which they wouldn't, inasmuch as we wouldn't sell them the cree to get the ants to get the nuts and so forth — they'd have to keep the methanated air of Io away from it. Otherwise it would turn red again. Think what that means: hundreds of bales of cree vacuum-packed to shield them from contact with the outside air. It would raise the cost of production so enormously, they couldn't compete with us anyway.'

'I guess you're trying to say they can't use the formula. Anyway, I'm relieved.' Carol sighed.

'So am I— for another reason, though.'

'What other reason is there?'

'That it was only the formula Scaler wanted after all.'

'What do you mean, only?' She turned to face him before the smooth, round dome of the trading station.

'For awhile I thought it was you.'

'Oh that.' Carol scuffed one foot on the ground. 'Yes, he wanted me too. I refused him.'

'But why? You seemed to like him well enough at first.'

'I did,' she said slowly, 'at first. It was that kiss changed my mind — that rough one.'

26: The End of the Path

Newbold Noyes

1892-1942

Every Week, 12 July 1915

SET FAR BACK in the hills that have thrown their wall of misty purple about the laughing blue of Lake Como, on a sheer cliff three thousand feet above the lake, stands a little weather-stained church. Beneath it lie the two villages of Cadenabbia and Menaggio; behind and up are rank on rank of shadowy mountains, sharply outlined against the sky,— the foothills leading back to the giant Alps.

The last tiny cream-colored house of the villages stands a full two miles this side of the tortuous path that winds up the face of the chrome-colored cliff. Once a year, in a creeping procession of black and white, the natives make a pilgrimage to the little church to pray for rain in the dry season. Otherwise it is rarely visited.

Blagden climbed slowly up the narrow path that stretched like a clean white ribbon from the little group of pastel-colored houses by the water. There was not a breath of wind, not a rustle in the gray-green olive trees that shimmered silver in the sunlight. Little lizards, sunning themselves on warm flat stones, watched him with brilliant eyes, and darted away to safety as he moved. The shadows of the cypress trees barred the white path like rungs of a ladder. And Blagden, drinking deep of the beauty of it all, climbed upward.

When he opened the low door of the little chapel the cold of the darkness within was as another barrier. He stepped inside, his footsteps echoing heavily through the shadows, though he walked on tiptoe. After the brilliant sunlight outside he could make out but little of the interior at first. At the far end four candles were burning, and he made his way toward them across the worn floor.

In a cheap, tarnished frame of gilt, above the four flickering pencils of light, hung a picture of the Virgin. Blagden stared at it in amazement. It had evidently been painted by a master hand. Blagden was no artist; but the face told him that. It was drawn with wonderful appreciation of the woman's sweetness. Perhaps the eyes were what was most wonderful,— pitiful, trusting, a little sad perhaps.

The life-sized figure, draped in smoke-colored blue, blended softly with the dusky shadows, and the flickering candlelight lent a witchery to blurred outlines that half deceived him,— at moments the picture seemed alive. She was smiling a little wistful smile.

And the canvas over the heart of the Virgin was cut in a long, clean stroke— and opened in a disfiguring gash. Beneath it, on a little stand, lay a slim-bladed, vicious knife, covered with dust.

Blagden wonderingly stooped to pick it up— and a voice spoke out of the darkness behind him.

"I would not touch it, Signor," it said, and Blagden wheeled guiltily.

A man was standing in the shadow, almost at his elbow.

He was old, the oldest man Blagden had ever seen, and he wore the long brown gown of a monk. His face was like a withered leaf, lined and yellow, and his hair was silver white.

Only the small, saurian eyes held Blagden with their strange brilliance. The rest of his face was like a death mask.

"Why not?" said Blagden.

The monk stepped forward into the dim light, crossing himself as he passed the picture. He looked hesitatingly at the younger man before him, searching his face with his wonderfully piercing eyes. He seemed to find there what he was searching for, and when he spoke Blagden wondered at the gentleness of his voice.

"There is a story. Would the Signor care to hear?"

Blagden nodded, and the two moved back in the shadows a short distance to the front line of little low chairs. Before them, over the dancing light of the four candles, stood the mutilated picture of Mary, beneath it the dust-covered dagger.

And then the withered monk began speaking, and Blagden listened, looking up at the picture.

"It all happened a great many years ago," said the old man; "but I am old, so I remember.

"Rosa was the girl's name. She lived with her father and mother in a little house above Menaggio. And every day in the warm sunlight of the open fields she sang as she watched the goats for the old people, and her voice was like cool water laughing in the shadows of a little brook.

"She was always singing, little Rosa; for she was young, and the sun had never stopped shining for her. People used to call her beautiful.

"And there was Giovanni. Each morning he would pass her home where the yellow roses with the pink hearts grew so sweetly, and always she would blow him a kiss from the little window.

"Then Giovanni would toil with all the strength of his youth, and he too would sing while he toiled; for was it not all for her?

"Often Rosa's goats would stray toward Giovanni's vineyard as dusk came, and they would drive them home together, always laughing, always singing, hand in hand, as the sun slipped golden over the top of the hills across the lake. Sometimes they would walk together in the afterglow, and Giovanni would weave a crown of the little flowers that grew about them, and his princess would wear it, laughing happily.

"They were like two children, Signor. There were nights spent together on the lake, when he told her of his dreams, while the gentlest of winds stirred her curls against his brown cheek, and the moon's wake stretched like a golden pathway from shore to shore.

"They were to be married when the grapes were picked, people used to whisper.

"And then one day a new force came into the girl's life. The Church, Signor!

"No one understands when or why this comes to a young girl, I think. She was torn with the idea that she should join her church, go into the little nunnery across the lake, and leave the sunshine.

"She did not want to go, and it was a strange yet a beautiful thing. This young, beautiful girl who seemed so much a part of the sunshine and the flowers was to close the door of the Church upon it all!

"You are thinking it was strange, Signor.

"Giovanni was frantic— you can understand.

"He had dreamed so happily of that which was to be, that now to have the cup snatched from his lips was torture. He took her little sun-kissed hands in his and begged on his knees with tears streaming down his cheeks. And Rosa wept also— but could not answer as he begged. I think she loved the boy, Signor. Yet there is something stronger than the love of a boy and a girl.

"She asked for one more night in which to decide. She would come up here to this little church and pray for Mary to guide her. He kissed her cold lips and came away.

"He was a boy, and he never doubted but that she would choose his strong young arms.

"The girl came here. All night she knelt on the rough stone floor, praying and— weeping; for she loved him. And the Virgin above the four candles looked down with the great, wistful eyes you see— and bound the girl's soul faster and faster to her own.

"And when morning came she entered the white walls across the lake without seeing her lover again.

"Giovanni went mad, I think, when they told him. He screamed out his hate for the world and his God, and rushed up the little white path to where we are sitting now, Signor.

"Once here, he drew the dagger you see beneath the Virgin and stabbed with an oath on his lips. That is why I did not let you touch it."

Blagden nodded, and the old monk was silent for a moment before he went on.

"Giovanni disappeared for two days. When he came back his face was that of a madman still. He was met by a white funeral winding up the little path. You

understand, Signor,— a virgin's funeral. Giovanni was hurrying blindly past when they stopped him.

"There was no reproach spoken for what he had done, no bitterness; only a kind of awe— and pity.

"Rosa had died on her knees in the nunnery at the exact time he stabbed yonder picture. And they told him months afterward that her face was strangely like that of the Virgin when they found her,— beautiful and pleading and sad. There was no given cause for her death— there are things we cannot understand. She was praying for strength, the sisters said."

The monk ceased speaking, and for a long moment they sat silent, Blagden and the withered, white-haired man, staring mutely up at the beautiful face above them. It was Blagden who broke the silence.

"What do you think happened?" he asked slowly.

"I do not know," said the monk.

There was another pause, then Blagden spoke again.

"Anyway," he said, brushing his hand across his eyes, "she paid in part the debt Giovanni owed his God."

"Yes?" said the monk softly. "I wonder, Signor! For I am Giovanni."

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27: The Grey Parrot

W. W. Jacobs

1863-1943

The Strand Magazine, Oct 1898

THE CHIEF ENGINEER and the Third sat at tea on the s.s. *Curlew* in the East India Docks. The small and not over-clean steward having placed everything he could think of upon the table, and then added everything the Chief could think of, had assiduously poured out two cups of tea and withdrawn by request. The two men ate steadily, conversing between bites, and interrupted occasionally by a hoarse and sepulchral voice, the owner of which, being much exercised by the sight of the food, asked for it, prettily at first, and afterwards in a way which at least compelled attention.

"That's pretty good for a parrot," said the Third critically. "Seems to know what he's saying too. No, don't give it anything. It'll stop if you do."

"There's no pleasure to *me* in listening to coarse language," said the Chief with dignity.

He absently dipped a piece of bread and butter in the Third's tea, and losing it chased it round and round the bottom of the cap with his finger, the Third regarding the operation with an interest and emotion which he was at first unable to understand.

"You'd better pour yourself out another cup," he said thoughtfully as he caught the Third's eye.

"I'm going to," said the other dryly.

"The man I bought it off," said the Chief, giving the bird the sop, "said that it was a perfectly respectable parrot and wouldn't know a bad word if it heard it I hardly like to give it to my wife now."

"It's no good being too particular," said the Third, regarding him with an ill-concealed grin; "that's the worst of all you young married fellows. Seem to think your wife has got to be wrapped up in brown paper. Ten chances to one she'll be amused."

The Chief shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "I bought the bird to be company for her," he said slowly; "she'll be very lonesome without me, Rogers."

"How do you know?" inquired the other.

"She said so," was the reply.

"When you've been married as long as I have," said the Third, who having been married some fifteen years felt that their usual positions were somewhat reversed, "you'll know that generally speaking they're glad to get rid of you."

"What for?" demanded the Chief in a voice that Othello might have envied.

"Well, you get in the way a bit," said Rogers with secret enjoyment; "you see you upset the arrangements. House-cleaning and all that sort of thing gets

interrupted. They're glad to see you back at first, and then glad to see the back of you."

"There's wives and wives," said the bridegroom tenderly.

"And mine's a good one," said the Third, "registered A1 at Lloyd's, but she don't worry about me going away. Your wife's thirty years younger than you, isn't she?"

"Twenty-five," corrected the other shortly. "You see what I'm afraid of is, that she'll get too much attention."

"Well, women like that," remarked the Third.

"But I don't, damn it," cried the Chief hotly. "When I think of it I get hot all over. Boiling hot."

"That won't last," said the other reassuringly; "you won't care twopence this time next year."

"We're not all alike," growled the Chief; "some of us have got finer feelings than others have. I saw the chap next door looking at her as we passed him this morning."

"Lor'," said the Third.

"I don't want any of your damned impudence," said the Chief sharply. "He put his hat on straighter when he passed us. What do you think of that?"

"Can't say," replied the other with commendable gravity; "it might mean anything."

"If he has any of his nonsense while I'm away I'll break his neck," said the Chief passionately. "I shall know of it."

The other raised his eyebrows.

"I've asked the landlady to keep her eyes open a bit," said the Chief. "My wife was brought up in the country, and she's very young and simple, so that it is quite right and proper for her to have a motherly old body to look after her."

"Told your wife?" queried Rogers.

"No," said the other. "Fact is, I've got an idea about that parrot. I'm going to tell her it's a magic bird, and will tell me everything she does while I'm away. Anything the landlady tells me I shall tell her I got from the parrot. For one thing, I don't want her to go out after seven of an evening, and she's promised me she won't. If she does I shall know, and pretend that I know through the parrot What do you think of it?"

"Think of it?" said the Third, staring at him. "Think of it? Fancy a man telling a grown-up woman a yarn like that!"

"She believes in warnings and death-watches, and all that sort of thing," said the Chief, "so why shouldn't she?"

"Well, you'll know whether she believes in it or not when you come back," said Rogers, "and it'll be a great pity, because it's a beautiful talker."

"What do you mean?" said the other.

"I mean it'll get its little neck wrung," said the Third.

"Well, we'll see," said Gannett. "I shall know what to think if it does die."

"I shall never see that bird again," said Rogers, shaking his head as the Chief took up the cage and handed it to the steward, who was to accompany him home with it.

The couple left the ship and proceeded down the East India Dock Road side by side, the only incident being a hot argument between a constable and the engineer as to whether he could or could not be held responsible for the language in which the parrot saw fit to indulge when the steward happened to drop it.

The engineer took the cage at his door, and, not without some misgivings, took it upstairs into the parlour and set it on the table. Mrs. Gannett, a simple-looking woman, with sleepy brown eyes and a docile manner, clapped her hands with joy.

"Isn't it a beauty?" said Mr. Gannett, looking at it; "I bought it to be company for you while I'm away."

"You're too good to me, Jem," said his wife. She walked all round the cage admiring it, the parrot, which was of a highly suspicious and nervous disposition, having had boys at its last place, turning with her. After she had walked round him five times he got sick of it, and in a simple sailorly fashion said so.

"Oh, Jem," said his wife.

"It's a beautiful talker," said Gannett hastily, "and it's so clever that it picks up everything it hears, but it'll soon forget it."

"It looks as though it knows what you are saying," said his wife. "Just look at it, the artful thing."

The opportunity was too good to be missed, and in a few straightforward lies the engineer acquainted Mrs. Gannett of the miraculous powers with which he had chosen to endow it.

"But you don't believe it?" said his wife, staring at him open-mouthed.

"I do," said the engineer firmly.

"But how can it know what I'm doing when I'm away?" persisted Mrs. Gannett.

"Ah, that's its secret," said the engineer; "a good many people would like to know that, but nobody has found out yet. It's a magic bird, and when you've said that you've said all there is to say about it."

Mrs. Gannett, wrinkling her forehead, eyed the marvellous bird curiously.

"You'll find it's quite true," said Gannett; "when I come back that bird'll be able to tell me how you've been and all about you. Everything you've done during my absence."

"Good gracious!" said the astonished Mrs. Gannett.

"If you stay out after seven of an evening, or do anything else that I shouldn't like, that bird'll tell me," continued the engineer impressively. "It'll tell me who comes to see you, and in fact it will tell me everything you do while I'm away."

"Well, it won't have anything bad to tell of me," said Mrs. Gannett composedly, "unless it tells lies."

"It can't tell lies," said her husband confidently, "and now, if you go and put your bonnet on, we'll drop in at the theatre for half an hour."

It was a prophetic utterance, for he made such a fuss over the man next to his wife offering her his opera-glasses, that they left, at the urgent request of the management, in almost exactly that space of time.

"You'd better carry me about in a bandbox," said Mrs. Gannett wearily as the outraged engineer stalked home beside her. "What harm was the man doing?"

"You must have given him some encouragement," said Mr. Gannett fiercely— "made eyes at him or something. A man wouldn't offer to lend a lady his opera-glasses without."

Mrs. Gannett tossed her head— and that so decidedly, that a passing stranger turned his head and looked at her. Mr. Gannett accelerated his pace, and taking his wife's arm, led her swiftly home with a passion too great for words.

By the morning his anger had evaporated, but his misgivings remained. He left after breakfast for the *Curlew*, which was to sail in the afternoon, leaving behind him copious instructions, by following which his wife would be enabled to come down and see him off with the minimum exposure of her fatal charms.

Left to herself Mrs. Gannett dusted the room, until, coming to the parrot's cage, she put down the duster and eyed its eerie occupant curiously. She fancied that she saw an evil glitter in the creature's eye, and the knowing way in which it drew the film over it was as near an approach to a wink as a bird could get.

She was still looking at it when there was a knock at the door, and a bright little woman— rather smartly dressed— bustled into the room, and greeted her effusively.

"I just came to see you, my dear, because I thought a little outing would do me good," she said briskly; "and if you've no objection I'll come down to the docks with you to see the boat off."

Mrs. Gannett assented readily. It would ease the engineer's mind, she thought, if he saw her with a chaperon.

"Nice bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, mechanically bringing her parasol to the charge.

"Don't do that," said her friend hastily.

"Why not?" said the other.

"Language!" said Mrs. Gannett solemnly.

"Well, I must do something to it," said Mrs. Cluffins restlessly.

She held the parasol near the cage and suddenly opened it. It was a flaming scarlet, and for the moment the shock took the parrot's breath away.

"He don't mind that," said Mrs. Gannett.

The parrot, hopping to the farthest corner of the bottom of his cage, said something feebly. Finding that nothing dreadful happened, he repeated his remark somewhat more boldly, and, being convinced after all that the apparition was quite harmless and that he had displayed his craven spirit for nothing, hopped back on his perch and raved wickedly.

"If that was my bird," said Mrs. Cluffins, almost as scarlet as her parasol, "I should wring its neck."

"No, you wouldn't," said Mrs. Gannett solemnly. And having quieted the bird by throwing a cloth over its cage, she explained its properties.

"What!" said Mrs. Cluffins, unable to sit still in her chair. "You mean to tell me your husband said that!"

Mrs. Gannett nodded.

"He's awfully jealous of me," she said with a slight simper.

"I wish he was my husband," said Mrs. Cluffins in a thin, hard voice. "I wish C. would talk to *me* like that. I wish somebody would try and persuade C. to talk to me like that."

"It shows he's fond of me," said Mrs. Gannett, looking down.

Mrs. Cluffins jumped up, and snatching the cover off the cage, endeavoured, but in vain, to get the parasol through the bars.

"And you believe that rubbish!" she said scathingly. "Boo, you wretch!"

"I don't believe it," said her friend, taking her gently away and covering the cage hastily just as the bird was recovering, "but I let him think I do."

"I call it an outrage," said Mrs. Cluffins, waving the parasol wildly. "I never heard of such a thing; I'd like to give Mr. Gannett a piece of my mind. Just about half an hour of it. He wouldn't be the same man afterwards— I'd parrot him."

Mrs. Gannett, soothing her agitated friend as well as she was able, led her gently to a chair and removed her bonnet, and finding that complete recovery was impossible while the parrot remained in the room, took that wonder-working bird outside.

By the time they had reached the docks and boarded the *Curlew* Mrs. Cluffins had quite recovered her spirits. She roamed about the steamer asking questions, which savoured more of idle curiosity than a genuine thirst for knowledge, and was at no pains to conceal her opinion of those who were unable to furnish her with satisfactory replies.

"I shall think of you every day, Jem," said Mrs. Gannett tenderly.

"I shall think of you every minute," said the engineer reproachfully.

He sighed gently and gazed in a scandalised fashion at Mrs. Cluffins, who was carrying on a desperate flirtation with one of the apprentices.

"She's very light-hearted," said his wife, following the direction of his eyes.

"She is," said Mr. Gannett curtly, as the unconscious Mrs. Cluffins shut her parasol and rapped the apprentice playfully with the handle. "She seems to be on very good terms with Jenkins, laughing and carrying on. I don't suppose she's ever seen him before."

"Poor young things," said Mrs. Cluffins solemnly, as she came up to them. "Don't you worry, Mr. Gannett; I'll look after her and keep her from moping."

"You're very kind," said the engineer slowly.

"We'll have a jolly time," said Mrs. Cluffins. "I often wish my husband was a seafaring man. A wife does have more freedom, doesn't she?"

"More what?" inquired Mr. Gannett huskily.

"More freedom," said Mrs. Cluffins gravely. "I always envy sailors' wives. They can do as they like. No husband to look after them for nine or ten months in the year."

Before the unhappy engineer could put his indignant thoughts into words there was a warning cry from the gangway, and with a hasty farewell he hurried below. The visitors went ashore, the gangway was shipped, and in response to the clang of the telegraph the *Curlew* drifted slowly away from the quay and headed for the swing-bridge slowly opening in front of her.

The two ladies hurried to the pier-head and watched the steamer down the river until a bend hid it from view. Then Mrs. Gannett, with a sensation of having lost something, due, so her friend assured her, to the want of a cup of tea, went slowly back to her lonely home.

In the period of grass-widowhood which ensued, Mrs. Cluffins's visits formed almost the sole relief to the bare monotony of existence. As a companion the parrot was an utter failure, its language being so irredeemably bad that it spent most of its time in the spare room with a cloth over its cage, wondering when the days were going to lengthen a bit. Mrs. Cluffins suggested selling it, but her friend repelled the suggestion with horror, and refused to entertain it at any price, even that of the publican at the corner, who, having heard of the bird's command of language, was bent upon buying it.

"I wonder what that beauty will have to tell your husband," said Mrs. Cluffins, as they sat together one day some three months after the *Curlew's* departure.

"I should hope that he has forgotten that nonsense," said Mrs. Gannett, reddening; "he never alludes to it in his letters."

"Sell it," said Mrs. Cluffins peremptorily. "It's no good to you, and Hobson would give anything for it almost."

Mrs. Gannett shook her head. "The house wouldn't hold my husband if I did," she remarked with a shiver.

"Oh, yes, it would," said Mrs. Cluffins; "you do as I tell you, and a much smaller house than this would hold him. I told C. to tell Hobson he should have it for five pounds."

"But he mustn't," said her friend in alarm.

"Leave yourself right in my hands," said Mrs. Cluffins, spreading out two small palms and regarding them complacently. "It'll be all right, I promise you."

She put her arm round her friend's waist and led her to the window, talking earnestly. In five minutes Mrs. Gannett was wavering, in ten she had given way, and in fifteen the energetic Mrs. Cluffins was *en route* for Hobson's, swinging the cage so violently in her excitement that the parrot was reduced to holding on to its perch with claws and bill. Mrs. Gannett watched the progress from the window, and with a queer look on her face sat down to think out the points of attack and defence in the approaching fray.

A week later a four-wheeler drove up to the door, and the engineer, darting upstairs three steps at a time, dropped an armful of parcels on the floor, and caught his wife in an embrace which would have done credit to a bear. Mrs. Gannett, for reasons of which lack of muscle was only one, responded less ardently.

"Ha, it's good to be home again," said Gannett, sinking into an easy-chair and pulling his wife on his knee. "And how have you been? Lonely?"

"I got used to it," said Mrs. Gannett softly.

The engineer coughed. "You had the parrot," he remarked.

"Yes, I had the magic parrot," said Mrs. Gannett.

"How's it getting on?" said her husband, looking round. "Where is it?"

"Part of it is on the mantelpiece," said Mrs. Gannett, trying to speak calmly, "part of it is in a bonnet-box upstairs, some of it's in my pocket, and here is the remainder."

She fumbled in her pocket and placed in his hand a cheap two-bladed clasp knife.

"On the mantelpiece!" repeated the engineer staring at the knife; "in a bonnet-box!"

"Those blue vases," said his wife.

Mr. Gannett put his hand to his head. If he had heard aright one parrot had changed into a pair of vases, a bonnet, and a knife. A magic bird with a vengeance.

"I sold it," said Mrs. Gannett suddenly.

The engineer's knee stiffened inhospitably, and his arm dropped from his wife's waist She rose quietly and took a chair opposite.

"Sold it!" said Mr. Gannett in awful tones. "Sold my parrot!"

"I didn't like it, Jem," said his wife. "I didn't want that bird watching me, and I did want the vases, and the bonnet, and the little present for you."

Mr. Gannett pitched the little present to the other end of the room.

"You see it mightn't have told the truth, Jem," continued Mrs. Gannett. "It might have told all sorts of lies about me, and made no end of mischief."

"It couldn't lie," shouted the engineer passionately, rising from his chair and pacing the room. "It's your guilty conscience that's made a coward of you. How dare you sell my parrot?"

"Because it wasn't truthful, Jem," said his wife, who was somewhat pale.

"If you were half as truthful you'd do," vociferated the engineer, standing over her. "You, you deceitful woman."

Mrs. Gannett fumbled in her pocket again, and producing a small handkerchief applied it delicately to her eyes.

"I— I got rid of it for your sake," she stammered. "It used to tell such lies about you. I couldn't bear to listen to it."

"About *me!*" said Mr. Gannett, sinking into his seat and staring at his wife with very natural amazement. "Tell lies about *me!* Nonsense! How could it?"

"I suppose it could tell me about you as easily as it could tell you about me?" said Mrs. Gannett. "There was more magic in that bird than you thought, Jem. It used to say shocking things about you. I couldn't bear it."

"Do you think you're talking to a child or a fool?" demanded the engineer.

Mrs. Gannett shook her head feebly. She still kept the handkerchief to her eyes, but allowed a portion to drop over her mouth.

"I should like to hear some of the stories it told about me— if you can remember them," said the engineer with bitter sarcasm.

"The first lie," said Mrs. Gannett in a feeble but ready voice, "was about the time you were at Genoa. The parrot said you were at some concert gardens at the upper end of the town."

One moist eye coming mildly from behind the handkerchief saw the engineer stiffen suddenly in his chair.

"I don't suppose there even is such a place," she continued.

"I— b'leve— there— is," said her husband jerkily. "I've heard— our chaps— talk of it."

"But you haven't been there?" said his wife anxiously.

"*Never!*" said the engineer with extraordinary vehemence.

"That wicked bird said that you got intoxicated there," said Mrs. Gannett in solemn accents, "that you smashed a little marble-topped table and knocked down two waiters, and that if it hadn't been for the captain of the *Pursuit*, who was in there and who got you away, you'd have been locked up. Wasn't it a wicked bird?"

"Horrible!" said the engineer huskily.

"I don't suppose there ever was a ship called the *Pursuit*," continued Mrs. Gannett.

"Doesn't sound like a ship's name," murmured Mr. Gannett.

"Well, then, a few days later it said the *Curlew* was at Naples."

"I never went ashore all the time we were at Naples," remarked the engineer casually.

"The parrot said you did," said Mrs. Gannett.

"I suppose you'll believe your own lawful husband before that damned bird?" shouted Gannett, starting up.

"Of course I didn't believe it, Jem," said his wife. "I'm trying to prove to you that the bird was not truthful, but you're so hard to persuade."

Mr. Gannett took a pipe from his pocket, and with a small knife dug with much severity and determination a hardened plug from the bowl, and blew noisily through the stem.

"There was a girl kept a fruit-stall just by the harbour," said Mrs. Gannett, "and on this evening, on the strength of having bought three-pennyworth of green figs, you put your arm round her waist and tried to kiss her, and her sweetheart, who was standing close by, tried to stab you. The parrot said that you were in such a state of terror that you jumped into the harbour and were nearly drowned."

Mr. Gannett having loaded his pipe lit it slowly and carefully, and with tidy precision got up and deposited the match in the fireplace.

"It used to frighten me so with its stories that I hardly knew what to do with myself," continued Mrs. Gannett "When you were at Suez—"

The engineer waved his hand imperiously.

"That's enough," he said stiffly.

"I'm sure I don't want to have to repeat what it told me about Suez," said his wife. "I thought you'd like to hear it, that's all."

"Not at all," said the engineer, puffing at his pipe. "Not at all."

"But you see why I got rid of the bird, don't you?" said Mrs. Gannett. "If it had told you untruths about me, *you* would have believed them, wouldn't you?"

Mr. Gannett took his pipe from his mouth and took his wife in his extended arms. "No, my dear," he said brokenly, "no more than you believe all this stuff about me."

"And I did quite right to sell it, didn't I, Jem?"

"Quite right," said Mr. Gannett with a great assumption of heartiness. "Best thing to do with it."

"You haven't heard the worst yet," said Mrs. Gannett. "When you were at Suez—"

Mr. Gannett consigned Suez to its only rival, and thumping the table with his clenched fist, forbade his wife to mention the word again, and desired her to prepare supper.

Not until he heard his wife moving about in the kitchen below did he relax the severity of his countenance. Then his expression changed to one of extreme anxiety, and he restlessly paced the room seeking for light. It came suddenly.

“Jenkins,” he gasped, “Jenkins and Mrs. Cluffins, and I was going to tell Cluffins about him writing to his wife. I expect he knows the letter by heart.”

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