PAST MASTERS 184

F. Scott Fitzgerald
Edgar Wallace
Edgar Allan Poe
James Oliver Curwood
W. L. Alden
J. S. Fletcher
George Ade
Arthur Leo Zagat
Stacy Aumonier

and more

PAST MASTERS 184

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

1 Nov 2024

Contents

_____

1: The Devil of the Marsh

H. B. Marriott Watson

1863—1921

In: *Diogenes of London*, Methuen, 1893

IT WAS nigh upon dusk when I drew close to the Great Marsh, and already the white vapours were about, riding across the sunken levels like ghosts in a churchyard. Though I had set forth in a mood of wild delight, I had sobered in the lonely ride across the moor and was now uneasily alert. As my horse jerked down the grassy slopes that fell away to the jaws of the swamp I could see thin streams of mist rise slowly, hover like wraiths above the long rushes, and then, turning gradually more material, go blowing heavily away across the flat. The appearance of the place at this desolate hour, so remote from human society and so darkly significant of evil presences, struck me with a certain wonder that she should have chosen this spot for our meeting. She was a familiar of the moors, where I had invariably encountered her; but it was like her arrogant caprice to test my devotion by some such dreary assignation. The wide and horrid prospect depressed me beyond reason, but the fact of her neighbourhood drew me on, and my spirits mounted at the thought that at last she was to put me in possession of herself Tethering my horse upon the verge of the swamp, I soon discovered the path that crossed it, and entering struck out boldly for the heart. The track could have been little used, for the reeds, which stood high above the level of my eyes upon either side, straggled everywhere across in low arches, through which I dodged, and broke my way with some inconvenience and much impatience. A full half-hour I was solitary in that wilderness, and when at last a sound other than my own footsteps broke the silence the dusk had fallen.

I was moving very slowly at the time, with a mind half disposed to turn from the melancholy expedition, which it seemed to me now must surely be a cruel jest she had played upon me. While some such reluctance held me, I was suddenly arrested by a hoarse croaking which broke out upon my left, sounding somewhere from the reeds in the black mire. A little further it came again from close at hand, and when I had passed on a few more steps in wonder and perplexity, I heard it for the third time. I stopped and listened, but the marsh was as a grave, and so taking the noise for the signal of some raucous frog, I resumed my way. But in a little the croaking was repeated, and coming quickly to a stand I pushed the reeds aside and peered into the darkness. I could see nothing, but at the immediate moment of my pause I thought I detected the sound of some body trailing through the rushes. My distaste for the adventure grew with this suspicion, and had it not been for my delirious infatuation I had assuredly turned back and ridden home. The ghastly

sound pursued me at intervals along the track, until at last, irritated beyond endurance by the sense of this persistent and invisible company, I broke into a sort of run. This, it seemed, the creature (whatever it was) could not achieve, for I heard no more of it, and continued my way in peace. My path at length ran out from among the reeds upon the smooth flat of which she had spoken, and here my heart quickened, and the gloom of the dreadful place lifted. The flat lay in the very centre of the marsh, and here and there in it a gaunt bush or withered tree rose like a spectre against the white mists. At the further end I fancied some kind of building loomed up; but the fog which had been gathering ever since my entrance upon the passage sailed down upon me at that moment and the prospect went out with suddenness. As I stood waiting for the clouds to pass, a voice cried to me out of its centre, and I saw her next second with bands of mist swirling about her body, come rushing to me from the darkness. She put her long arms about me, and, drawing her close, I looked into her deep eyes. Far down in them, it seemed to me, I could discern a mystic laughter dancing in the wells of light, and I had that ecstatic sense of nearness to some spirit of fire which was wont to possess me at her contact.

'At last,' she said, 'at last, my beloved!' I caressed her.

'Why,' said I, tingling at the nerves, 'why have you put this dolorous journey between us? And what mad freak is your presence in this swamp?' She uttered her silver laugh, and nestled to me again.

'I am the creature of this place,' she answered. 'This is my home. I have sworn you should behold me in my native sin ere you ravished me away.'

'Come, then,' said I; 'I have seen; let there be an end of this. I know you, what you are. This marsh chokes up my heart. God forbid you should spend more of your days here. Come.'

'You are in haste,' she cried. 'There is yet much to learn. Look, my friend,' she said, 'you who know me, what I am. This is my prison, and I have inherited its properties. Have you no fear?'

For answer I pulled her to me, and her warm lips drove out the horrid humours of the night; but the swift passage of a flickering mockery over her eyes struck me as a flash of lightning, and I grew chill again.

'I have the marsh in my blood,' she whispered: 'the marsh and the fog of it. Think ere you vow to me, for I am the cloud in a starry night.'

A lithe and lovely creature, palpable of warm flesh, she lifted her magic face to mine and besought me plaintively with these words. The dews of the nightfall hung on her lashes, and seemed to plead with me for her forlorn and solitary plight.

'Behold!' I cried, 'witch or devil of the marsh, you shall come with me! I have known you on the moors, a roving apparition of beauty; nothing more I

know, nothing more I ask. I care not what this dismal haunt means; not what these strange and mystic eyes. You have powers and senses above me; your sphere and habits are as mysterious and incomprehensible as your beauty. But that', I said, 'is mine, and the world that is mine shall be yours also.'

She moved her head nearer to me with an antic gesture, and her gleaming eyes glanced up at me with a sudden flash, the similitude (great heavens!) of a hooded snake. Starting, I fell away, but at that moment she turned her face and set it fast towards the fog that came rolling in thick volumes over the flat. Noiselessly the great cloud crept down upon us, and all dazed and troubled I watched her watching it in silence. It was as if she awaited some omen of horror, and I too trembled in the fear of its coming.

Then suddenly out of the night issued the hoarse and hideous croaking I had heard upon my passage. I reached out my arm to take her hand, but in an instant the mists broke over us, and I was groping in the vacancy. Something like panic took hold of me, and, beating through the blind obscurity, I rushed over the flat, calling upon her. In a little the swirl went by, and I perceived her upon the margin of the swamp, her arm raised as in imperious command. I ran to her, but stopped, amazed and shaken by a fearful sight. Low by the dripping reeds crouched a small squat thing, in the likeness of a monstrous frog, coughing and choking in its throat. As I stared, the creature rose upon its legs and disclosed a horrid human resemblance. Its face was white and thin, with long black hair; its body gnarled and twisted as with the ague of a thousand years. Shaking, it whined in a breathless voice, pointing a skeleton finger at the woman by my side.

'Your eyes were my guide,' it quavered. 'Do you think that after all these years I have no knowledge of your eyes? Lo, is there aught of evil in you I am not instructed in? This is the Hell you designed for me, and now you would leave me to a greater.'

The wretch paused, and panting leaned upon a bush, while she stood silent, mocking him with her eyes, and soothing my terror with her soft touch.

'Hear!' he cried, turning to me, hear the tale of this woman that you may know her as she is. She is the Presence of the marshes. Woman or Devil I know not, but only that the accursed marsh has crept into her soul and she herself is become its Evil Spirit; she herself, that lives and grows young and beautiful by it, has its full power to blight and chill and slay. I, who was once as you are, have this knowledge. What bones lie deep in this black swamp who can say but she? She has drained of health, she has drained of mind and of soul; what is between her and her desire that she should not drain also of life? She has made me a devil in her Hell, and now she would leave me to my solitary pain,

and go search for another victim. But she shall not!' he screamed through his chattering teeth; 'she shall not! My Hell is also hers! She shall not!'

Her smiling untroubled eyes left his face and turned to me: she put out her arms, swaying towards me, and so fervid and so great a light glowed in her face that, as one distraught of superhuman means, I took her into my embrace. And then the madness seized me.

'Woman or devil,' I said, 'I will go with you! Of what account this pitiful past? Blight me even as that wretch, so be only you are with me.'

She laughed, and, disengaging herself, leaned, half-clinging to me, towards the coughing creature by the mire.

'Come,' I cried, catching her by the waist. 'Come!' She laughed again a silver-ringing laugh. She moved with me slowly across the flat to where the track started for the portals of the marsh. She laughed and clung to me.

But at the edge of the track I was startled by a shrill, hoarse screaming, and behold, from my very feet, that loathsome creature rose up and wound his long black arms about her shrieking and crying in his pain. Stooping I pushed him from her skirts, and with one sweep of my arm drew her across the pathway; as her face passed mine her eyes were wide and smiling. Then of a sudden the still mist enveloped us once more; but ere it descended I had a glimpse of that contorted figure trembling on the margin, the white face drawn and full of desolate pain. At the sight an icy shiver ran through me. And then through the yellow gloom the shadow of her darted past me, to the further side. I heard the hoarse cough, the dim noise of a struggle, a swishing sound, a thin cry, and then the sucking of the slime over something in the rushes. I leapt forward: and once again the fog thinned, and I beheld her, woman or devil, standing upon the verge, and peering with smiling eyes into the foul and sickly bog. With a sharp cry wrung from my nerveless soul, I turned and fled down the narrow way from that accursed spot; and as I ran the thickening fog closed round me, and I heard far off and lessening still the silver sound of her mocking laughter.

_____

2: The House on Hardress Head

J. S. Fletcher

1863-1935

The Red Magazine, 15 Sep 1913

In: *Paul Campenhaye, Specialist in Criminology*, 1918

Campenhaye was a "consulting detective" in a short story series which appeared in magazines such as "Red Magazine," "Top Notch", and "The Novel Magazine" between 1911 and 1915, which was published in book form in 1918.

THAT THE MOST desperate adventures of our lives are those into which we are plunged without warning is, I fancy, the belief of all men in whose careers adventure has played a considerable part. There are times when a man is prepared for adventure of the supremely dangerous sort, and as often as not those times yield nothing very exciting; there are others when he is expecting nothing but the ordinary, and suddenly finds himself confronted by a situation that will try his nerve to the last degree of endurance. Certainly, the most desperate situation I ever found myself in, during my career as a specialist in criminology, was forced upon me as suddenly as a lightning flash breaks out of a summer sky. At one moment I was wrapped in a confident security, the next I was facing death.

It was in the late summer of 19— that I had occasion to travel down to the North of England in connection with a certain notorious blackmailing case. My business obliged me to remain overnight in a small seaside resort, Greyscale, the one place of any size (and it was no more than a village) on Wearcombe Bay, an inlet of the Irish Sea, which has a reputation for its sudden and violent storms.

The season at Greyscale was over; it had been a particularly wet and unfriendly summer, and in the little hotel to which I betook myself there was no other guest. And as it was barely five o'clock when I arrived within its doors, I decided, rather than wait for dinner, to have an old-fashioned, north-country high tea, and afterwards, the September evening then promising to turn out finely, to explore the neighbourhood as well as I could while the light lasted. Over an excellent cold ham I asked the waiter what there was of special interest in the vicinity. He shrugged his shoulders.

"No old ruins— castles, churches, eh?" I asked.

"Nothing nearer than Burton Abbey, and that's twenty miles off, sir," he answered. "No, sir, there's nothing to see here; and nothing to do, either," he added with another shrug.

"What do the people do who come here, then?" I asked.

"There are only two sorts do come here, sir," he answered. "One's invalids and the other's children. The children play on the beach, and the invalids go driving to the Head."

"The Head? What's that?" I enquired.

He turned, pointing out of the coffee-room window to where a great, black, frowning promontory jutted out into the sea at the northern arm of the bay. It was shaped like a whale, and there was something in its appearance that was sinister and forbidding. It looked strangely mysterious.

"Hardress Head, sir," said the waiter. "Parties is very fond of driving up there. Splendid views from the top, sir. They do say as how you can see the Welsh mountains from there. I ain't never seen them myself, but I've seen the Isle of Man."

There was a solitary fly standing in front of the hotel when I went out, and I got into it and told its driver to take me up to the Head. The road lay along the northern shore of the bay, and at first was flanked by the usual rows of seaside houses and villas. But before we had gone a mile it became solitary enough, and I begun to realise that before Greyscale had sprung into existence, Wearcombe Bay, on that side, at any rate, must have been a veritable wilderness.

Now and then we passed a fisherman's cottage; then we came to a wide-spreading marsh, at the foot of the promontory, on which there was not even a hut to be seen; the promontory itself, seen at close quarters, looked wilder, gloomier, more sinister than ever. I have, however, a strong liking for the wild, and I began to be fascinated by this vast mass of earth-clad rock, which lay between land and sea like some mighty survival of the long-dead ages, silently watching for its prey.

There was a winding road up the promontory at the end of the houseless marsh, and at its foot my driver dismounted, and began the ascent, walking at the side of his horse. The horse was a poor, nearly worn-out animal; I soon recognised that I could walk thirty miles while it staggered up ten. And so I sprang out of the ramshackle conveyance, told the man I would walk, and drew out some loose silver wherewith to pay him. He looked at me in some surprise.

"Don't you want me to come up to the top and wait, sir?" he asked.

"No, thank you," I answered. "I shall walk back. I want a walk."

He stared at me again, and then looked up at the sky.

"This is a queer part of the world for storms, sir," he said. "I'm thinking there may be one to-night. And it'll be dark soon, and the Head's a wild, queer place. You'd better let me wait."

Now, the evening was as fair as an evening in the first week of September well could be, and I saw no sign of any storm. And so I dropped some silver into his hand and moved off.

"All right, my man," I said. "I don't want you any more. I shall walk back."

And I strode away up the winding road, and at the next turn saw the decrepit horse picking its slow way down to the marshland and Greyscale. I was glad then to be free of it and its driver, but—

I was very soon on the summit of the Head, and at once rewarded for my journey. On that summit, the resemblance to a whale was more striking than ever. It was a long, whale-backed expanse of wiry turf, with here and there a patch of purple heather and a cluster of grey, rain-worn rocks; here and there, too, I saw sheep of the mountain sort, thin and shy; in one place was a cairn of stones. But of any sign of human life or habitation there was nothing. And of that I was glad. What I wanted was the wildness, the solitude of it all; and I had it in plenty. All around lay the sea north and south I could make out where lay the little towns along the coast; north-west I saw the range of the Lake mountains; south-east, the long, rounded outlines of the Penine Range. And, in front, over a belt of shining gold, the sun was sinking in the distance in which lay Ireland and the Atlantic.

I remained rambling about the Head for a long time after the sun was set. I wandered along the edges on both sides, and found that they were precipitous, going down by sheer straight falls of cliff to the sea-lapped beach below. But a road, fairly well made, and in good repair, ran straight across the turf and the heather to the extreme point; and after a time I followed it, desirous of seeing all that I could before the daylight went. And when I came to the end of this road I found that the Head was not, after all, without human habitation.

Instead of dropping to the sea precipitously, the western extremity of the great promontory shelved gradually downwards, and in a crescent-shaped cove just beneath the point to which I had come I saw a house of grey stone, standing with grey stone walls upon a plateau of green lawn. It was a square-built house; and when I looked more closely at it I was struck by the fact that its occupants had made no attempt to surround it with garden or shrubbery, or even to plant near it any of those hardy trees which one associates with the coast. It was just a solid, substantial habitation, and it suggested a curious feeling of isolation and solitude. On its lawn there was not even that usual ornament of such places, a flagstaff; nor was there a sign of life about it.

I went a little distance down the face of the point— went down, indeed, until I was within a few yards of the wall of this solitary house. And it was then that, without the slightest warning, the whole face of the evening changed,

and that, literally within a moment, I found myself in one of those storms for which Wearcombe Bay is famous. Whence or how it came I do not know. What I do know is that with incredible swiftness the twilight became darkness, the sea assumed the colour of ink, a sudden hurricane sprang up which twisted me round as if I had been a piece of straw, and everything seemed to be filled and maddeningly alive with the screams and screeches of a million demons. And then, just as suddenly, down came the rain with all the force of a tornado in the tropics.

I had nothing with me in the shape of overwear but a light summer coat, which I had carried over my arm, and without hesitation I dashed open the gate of the house, and ran helter-skelter towards the only shelter I could think of. I had come to the conclusion, in looking at it, that the house was empty; for there was no sign of smoke issuing from the chimneys and no glimmer of light in the windows. But I had noticed that over the front door there was a portico, and for this I made and was thankful to reach it. Already the light overcoat which I had hastily slipped on was soaked through.

The storm hurtled and screamed around that portico with a force and fury that was truly hellish. I stood partly protected, at any rate, and looked out upon the sea, which was now lashed and beaten into a rage as fierce as that of the wind above it. I should scarcely had thought that a man could have made himself heard by shouting in that pandemonium, but suddenly I heard a soft, silky voice at my very ear:

"Will you be pleased to walk in and shelter, sir?"

I turned as if I had been shot, and found myself confronting a gigantic, full-blooded negro, clothed in immaculate evening dress.

I was so much astonished, so utterly taken aback, at the sight of this unexpected figure that I seemed to lose all power of speech, and for a moment could only stand stupidly staring at the man. He smiled, showing a set of magnificent teeth, and bent down to me from his great height.

"My mistress says, will you walk in and shelter, sir?" he repeated. "This storm is likely to continue some time, sir."

Then my wits came back to me. This was evidently the butler.

"Oh, thank you!" I said, stepping within the door which he held open. "It is very kind of your mistress."

The negro bowed and smiled again, and, closing the outer door, led me across the hall to another, which he opened with another bow.

"Please to be seated, sir," he said. "If you will allow me, I will dry your overcoat, sir."

I gave him the coat and entered the room. It was a small, snugly-furnished apartment, evidently a breakfast-parlour, and from the window there was a

view of the bay which I had not seen from the Head. But the storm was now at its height, and everything outside was a tempest of blackness. I turned from the window to the cheery fire which burnt in the open grate. It struck me as being strange that within this house, which had looked so cold and desolate from without, there should be warmth and human life, and I wondered who the black man's mistress was that she should elect to live in such a lonely and deserted spot. And, while I was wondering, I heard the door quietly opened, and I turned from warming my chilled hands to see a lady enter the room, and advance towards me with a stately bow. And as soon as I saw her, I had a curious but quite vague impression that somewhere, a long time ago, I had seen her before.

She was a woman of nearly middle-age, and in her time she had been very beautiful; and she was still very handsome in a regal and commanding fashion. There were streaks of grey in her dark hair, and many lines of bygone passions and emotions on her cheek and brow, but she was a woman to look at and to wonder about, and the flash of her eye was as keen as that of a hawk's.

She smiled very graciously as she entered the room, but I had an instinctive feeling that she could look lightnings if her mood inclined her, and that she was of an imperious temper. And once more I found myself wondering if I had ever seen her before, and, if so, where.

"I am afraid you are fairly caught in one of our famous storms," she said pleasantly, as she stopped half-way across the room, and, resting one shapely hand on the table, looked at me with a curiously steady and penetrating glance. "They come on very suddenly."

"So I perceive," I answered. "I was warned, but foolishly gave no heed to the warning. It is very kind of you to give me shelter," I continued. "I ran for your porch, believing the house to be empty."

She nodded and, turning to the window, drew aside the curtain and looked out on the storm-tossed bay.

"No," she said, "this house is never empty, though I daresay it looks so from the outside. I suppose you were exploring the Head?"

"I had been walking about it," I replied. "I am obliged to remain overnight in Greyscale, and as there was nothing to see there I set out for— this."

"And this will last for some time," she said. "We who live around the bay know these storms. Some of them are over very quickly; some last for hours. This is one of the lasting sort. They are always worst, and longest, when they come on with such startling suddeness. So," she continued, turning from the window, "you are a prisoner, for, at any rate, an hour or two; and as I was just about to dine, may I offer you some dinner to while away the time?"

This was said with such ready and genuine hospitality that I could only bow as ready an acceptance.

"You are most kind," I replied. "I— I really believe that I am hungry."

She smiled and moved to the door, which she had left open.

"I will send for you in a few minutes," she said, and sailed out.

Left alone, I again looked around the room. This was certainly an adventure— to be caught in a storm on a lonely and wild headland of the Irish Sea, to find a comfortable house and a hostess of gracious and distinguished manners, and to be asked to dine. But any man who has led the strange life that I have led is always ready for surprises, and I congratulated myself that I was within four walls, warm and dry, instead of huddling under some rock, half-starved to death, or trudging across that storm-swept promontory soaked to the skin.

Within a few minutes the negro appeared and conducted me to another room, wherein was a table laid for two. It was a small, cosy room, furnished with a sort of simple luxury, and there was no light in it but the shaded candles on the dinner-table. I had a general impression of pictures and books and old china as I took my seat opposite my hostess near the cheery hearth; I had a clearer one of spotless linen, shining silver, and delicate glassware. And in that room there was nothing to be heard of the storm that raged without.

There were three things that I remember to this day about that dinner, to which I had been invited so unexpectedly. First, that, though simple, it was exquisitely, perfectly cooked. Second, that it was served swiftly, silently, by the giant negro, who was the deftest hand at his work that I have ever encountered. And third, that my hostess proved herself a most agreeable and fascinating one, a ready and clever conversationalist on all the topics of the day, showing herself thoroughly conversant with the more important social and political questions which were then to the front. But as we were sipping some coffee, which was equal to anything I have ever tasted in the Near East, she gave me a surprise. We were speaking of some event that had recently happened in London, and I asked her if she had witnessed it. She flashed a quick look, accompanied by a strange smile, across the table.

"I have not been in London for ten years," she said. "Indeed, with the exception of my going about in my yacht in the bay there, and in the Channel, I have never been off this Head for ten years. All my knowledge of the outside world is got from newspapers— or by hearsay."

I scarcely knew what reply to make to this. I daresay my glance at her smartly-gowned figure showed my surprise. She laughed softly and looked across the room. The negro, who in spite of his enormous bulk, moved about with the lightness of a fairy, came forward with a decanter.

"Still," she said, "we are not quite out of the world. I can always ask a guest to eat good food and drink good wine. I have been out of things so much, though, that I scarcely know whether gentlemen still drink port after dinner. If they do, let me ask you to drink my health in some that my grandfather laid down in 1842. I have had a bottle decanted in your honour."

I bowed my acknowledgments; the negro filled my glass. He was passing round the table to his mistress, when she suddenly stopped him.

"I have no port glass," she said quietly, looking down at her cover.

The man turned to the sideboard, which was hidden in the shadows at the side of the room, and I heard a tinkle of glass. He came back and helped my hostess to wine out of what looked to be the same decanter from which he had served me. I knew, when too late, that in that moment, so cleverly contrived, he had changed the decanters, and that what he gave her, was not what he had given me.

She took her glass by its slender stem, delicately poised it in her slim fingers, and bent to me graciously across the table, the rosy glow from the shaded candles gleaming on the purple of the wine.

"To your health, my guest!" she said.

I entered into her mood.

"To your health, my hostess!" I answered.

"No heel-taps!" said she.

"No heel-taps!" said I.

She raised her glass with a daring smile and drained it. I followed her example.

It was the last thing that I remember except that I have some vague and misty recollection of hearing a woman's mocking laughter as I slipped away into a sea of black, surging waters that drew me down into their very depths.

I do not know how long it was before I regained consciousness. Slowly, as a man wakes from the more stupefying forms of sleep, I woke and stirred and looked around me; and, although I was only partially conscious, my brain reeled at what I saw, and I closed my eyes, again sick with fear. But within the moment, my will had asserted itself, and I opened them again, and looked steadily at my surroundings.

I found myself lying on a sort of truckle or camp bed, in a room which was more like a cell in a prison than an apartment in a private house. The walls were of cement; the window was of dull glass and heavily barred, only one half of it was above ground level. In one corner of the place there was a washstand; close by it was a plain, wooden stool. On a shelf were two or three simple drinking utensils; ranged alongside them were a Bible and some commonplace works of fiction. Whether this was a prison cell or not, it was plain that it either

was, or was meant to resemble, one, and under any other circumstances I should have smiled at the resemblance. I could almost smell the prison atmosphere.

But I myself? I was clad in an old, much-worn suit of yellow tweed, a knickerbocker suit, finished off with rough stockings. My own underclothing and all linen had disappeared; beneath the old suit was nothing but a coarse shirt of grey flannel. And I was in chains!

The chains were ingeniously contrived. They were light, but they were of steel. I could move my hands; I could help myself in many ways, but I was securely fastened to a staple in the wall at the side of the bed; and though I could reach the washstand and the stool, and the shelf on which the books stood, I could not reach the lower end of the room or cell. And there was the door, and in one of its upper panels there had been newly-cut a round peep-hole, over which, on the outside, hung a disc or movable panel. Truly, a prison cell!

I sat up presently, clanking my fetters, and tried to think quietly. I was trapped— that much was certain. But by whom? And again it was borne in upon me that somewhere— somewhere— I had met that woman before. But where? I dropped my head— heavy and confused still from the drug which I had swallowed— in my hands, and tried to think, to recollect, to get some grip on facts, to—

"Well, Mr. Paul Campenhaye, so at last we meet again!"

I turned sharply. A man had noiselessly entered the room, and was standing at the door, looking at me with a smile which made the blood run cold within me. And behind him stood— the woman!

I remembered everything when I saw those two together. And I know what I had to deal with, and I recognised that my chances of getting out of that house alive were very small. In fact, I gave myself up for lost. And yet, in that moment, my will reasserted itself, and I felt no fear but rather a desire to deal with the situation as if I still had an equal chance in its possibilities.

"You know me?" said the man.

I nodded my head carelessly.

"I know you. The last time I saw you was in the dock at the Old Bailey," I replied.

"Where you had brought me, after tracking me down mercilessly," he said, with a flash of his eye that boded no good to me.

"I did my duty," I said. "And I should do it again."

"What duty was it of yours?" he asked fiercely. "You were not of the police. You took it up as what you call yourself— an expert in criminology— and you hunted me like vermin until you had trapped me."

"It was at the request of the family of one of your victims, as you are aware," I answered, "and you richly deserved the ten years' penal servitude you got, Mr. Vansittart, or Captain Molyneux, or whatever you now call yourself."

He came nearer, and for a moment I thought he was going to strike me.

"Anyway, we have trapped you," he said sullenly. "I little thought when I happened to catch sight of you in Greyscale this afternoon that we should have the pleasure of entertaining you. But there you are. You don't know how rejoiced my wife and I were when we saw you approaching this house. And you see how, while she played hostess, I made your apartment ready!"

"Don't be a fool, man!" I said. "You know as well as I do that you can't keep me here. There will be a search—"

They both laughed scornfully.

"You fell over the rocks during the storm," said the man. "You will never be seen again. That's literally true, Campenhaye."

"So you mean to murder me?" I said.

"We mean to give you a taste of what you gave me," he answered. "You shall have practical knowledge of imprisonment. When we are tired of you— well, then, probably, we shall put you out of the way very quietly."

"You are bringing more trouble on yourself," I said. "This will be found out!"

"It will not be found out," he replied with quiet assurance. "There are three of us in this house— my wife, myself, and our devoted servant. We shall say, if we are asked about you, that we saw you blown over the cliffs, and we shall be believed. We are much respected here as a quiet couple,— living a retired life and having no interest in anything but ourselves, our books, and our yacht. None will doubt our word. You are dead, Campenhaye. This room is sound-proof, and you are as far from civilisation and man as if you were in one of the old oubliettes of the Bastille. You will have a lot of time to reflect upon what you have brought me to."

I looked steadily at the two of them. There was no pity in either face, especially in the woman's. And I remembered, then, how on the trial of the man on a particularly infamous charge— made all the worse because of his social position— she had sat at the Old Bailey watching me with hatred in her face. No; I should find no mercy, now that I had fallen by mere chance into their hands. But I was not going to show the white feather.

"We shall see," I said.

Then they went away and left me to silence. Into that place there never came even the sound of the sea beneath the cliffs, nor the crying of the curlews as they flew over the headlands. It was, in truth, as silent as the grave.

When I look back upon the days that followed I can scarcely realise them; they are, at this distance of time, as a nightmare. They came and went with a regularity and a sameness that began to be maddening; if I had not had a daily expectation of release, I think I should have lost my reason. But I cherished that expectation; it seemed to me impossible that I should be kept a prisoner. And yet, when a fortnight had gone by— I kept account of the time by scratching marks on the wall— I began to feel that the boast of my gaolers might be a true one, and that I should never have my liberty again. And one day he and the woman came down with mocking smiles on their faces, and he threw me a copy of a London newspaper.

"There, Campenhaye," he said, with a sneer, "didn't I tell you that you were dead? There's your obituary notice, my man; you may read it."

I read what there was to read with a dull consciousness that it might just as well have been literally true. It set forth that Mr. Paul Campenhaye, the famous expert in criminology, about whose disappearance there had been so much uneasiness, had doubtless been lost in a storm which raged in Wearcombe Bay on the night of September 5th. Mr. Campenhaye had gone to Greyscale on business and in the evening of the day in question had been driven up to the Head. In the storm that followed, two residents of the Head, Mr. and Mrs. Verinder, much respected in the district, and their butler, had seen a man blown over the cliffs at the place called Dead Man's Gap, and there seems to be little doubt that this was Mr. Campenhaye. The body had probably been washed out to sea, and had not yet been recovered.

"So you're dead, you see, Mr. Campenhaye," said Vansittart, or Molyneux, or Verinder, whichever was his real name. "Dead as Moses! No one will ever look for you here. You're safe— safe as I was in the place you sent me to. And if you feel lonely— well, you're not any lonelier than my wife was here for ten years, waiting for me, you cur!"

"Why don't you kill me, and have done with it?" I asked.

"We will kill you whenever you like; there's no hurry," he answered calmly. "You haven't had your gruel yet. I want you to feel what I felt."

Then he asked me with a brutal laugh if I had any complaints. And the woman bade me be sure and read the Bible every day.

They added to the torture of my confinement by enforcing idleness upon me. The negro brought my food, which was carefully contrived to resemble prison fare. At first I tried to talk with him, hoping that I might eventually bribe him. But he was stolid and forbidding; it was plain that he was in truth a devoted servant, and therefore hated me. And once, when almost driven desperate, I offered him a thousand pounds to effect my release, he struck me heavily over the mouth. And after that I never spoke to him again. Indeed, I

began to take refuge in silence. The man and woman came every day to gloat over me; eventually I took no heed of them.

"Don't sulk, Campenhaye," said the man one morning, "that's the way towards madness. I nearly went mad that way when you put me away. Don't you try it: be cheerful. Perhaps we shall kill you very soon. But not to-day— to-day we're going out in the yacht. It will be delightful out on the open sea, to think of you fastened up here with your skilly and your thoughts and your conscience. Don't you wish you'd never tracked me down, Campenhaye?"

There came a morning when no one came near me. I have already said that my prison was as silent as a grave; all that day I never heard a sound. Night came and I was still left alone; for twenty-four hours I had not touched food. And the next morning came, and after it came noon and then night, and my gaolers still made no appearance. I began then to suspect that they were going to starve me to death; and I think I went mad at the thought, and tried to break my chains. But that night went by, and another morning came and the pains of starvation were beginning to get acute.

I got the idea, then, that they were watching my agonies through the spy-hole in the door, and I suppose I lost all self-control, for I burst into shoutings and denunciations. I must have lost consciousness after that, for I suddenly came to myself to find two men bending over me, while a third was busied with my fetters. In one of them I recognised the police superintendent at Greyscale, with whom my business had been when I came down there. Horror-stricken enough he and the others looked. And one of them put brandy to my lips.

"Why, Mr. Campenhaye, how on earth came you here?" asked the police superintendent. "We thought you were all drowned!"

"I was trapped," I answered, when I could speak. "The people of the house and their man— the black man— where are they?"

The men standing round looked at each other.

"That's just why we came here," said the police superintendent. "They're drowned, Mr. Campenhaye, all three. The yacht capsized off Greyscale two days ago. This gentleman is their solicitor. But you don't mean to say that they treated you like this?"

At that moment I made no answer.

THEY TOOK ME to the little hotel in Greyscale, and there I was nursed back to strength. But during the time I remained there I never looked in the direction of the black and sinister promontory in which I had been immured in a living grave.

3: The Staircase at Heart's Delight

Anna Katharine Green

1846-1935

In: *A Difficult Problem and Other Stories*, New York, 1900

An Ebenezer Gryce case

IN THE spring of 18—, the attention of the New York police was attracted by the many cases of well-known men found drowned in the various waters surrounding the lower portion of our great city. Among these may be mentioned the name of Elwood Henderson, the noted tea merchant, whose remains were washed ashore at Redhook Point; and of Christopher Bigelow, who was picked up off Governor's Island after having been in the water for five days, and of another well-known millionaire whose name I cannot now recall, but who, I remember, was seen to walk towards the East River one March evening, and was not met with again till the 5th of April, when his body floated into one of the docks near Peck's Slip.

As it seemed highly improbable that there should have been a concerted action among so many wealthy and distinguished men to end their lives within a few weeks of each other, and all by the same method of drowning, we soon became suspicious that a more serious verdict than that of suicide should have been rendered in the case of Henderson, Bigelow, and the other gentleman I have mentioned. Yet one fact, common to all these cases, pointed so conclusively to deliberate intention on the part of the sufferers that we hesitated to take action.

This was, that upon the body of each of the above-mentioned persons there were found, not only valuables in the shape of money and jewelry, but papers and memoranda of a nature calculated to fix the identity of the drowned man, in case the water should rob him of his personal characteristics. Consequently, we could not ascribe these deaths to a desire for plunder on the part of some unknown person.

I was a young man in those days, and full of ambition. So, though I said nothing, I did not let this matter drop when the others did, but kept my mind persistently upon it and waited, with odd results as you will hear, for another victim to be reported at police headquarters.

Meantime I sought to discover some bond or connection between the several men who had been found drowned, which would serve to explain their similar fate. But all my efforts in this direction were fruitless. There was no bond between them, and the matter remained for a while an unsolved mystery.

Suddenly one morning a clue was placed, not in my hands, but in those of a superior official who at that time exerted a great influence over the whole force. He was sitting in his private room, when there was ushered into his presence a young man of a dissipated but not unprepossessing appearance, who, after a pause of marked embarrassment, entered upon the following story:

"I don't know whether or no I should offer an excuse for the communication I am about to make; but the matter I have to relate is simply this: Being hard up last night (for though a rich man's son I often lack money), I went to a certain pawnshop in the Bowery where I had been told I could raise money on my prospects. This place— you may see it some time, so I will not enlarge upon it— did not strike me favourably; but, being very anxious for a certain definite sum of money, I wrote my name in a book which was brought to me from some unknown quarter and proceeded to follow the young woman who attended me into what she was pleased to call her good master's private office.

"He may have been a good master, but he was anything but a good man. In short, sir, when he found out who I was, and how much I needed money, he suggested that I should make an appointment with my father at a place he called Groll's in Grand Street, where, said he, 'your little affair will be arranged, and you made a rich man within thirty days. That is,' he slily added, 'unless your father has already made a will, disinheriting you.'

"I was shocked, sir, shocked beyond all my powers of concealment, not so much at his words, which I hardly understood, as at his looks, which had a world of evil suggestion in them; so I raised my fist and would have knocked him down, only that I found two young fellows at my elbows, who held me quiet for five minutes, while the old fellow talked to me. He asked me if I came to him on a fool's errand or really to get money; and when I admitted that I had cherished hopes of obtaining a clear two thousand dollars from him, he coolly replied that he knew of but one way in which I could hope to get such an amount, and that if I was too squeamish to adopt it, I had made a mistake in coming to his shop, which was no missionary institution, etc., etc.

"Not wishing to irritate him, for there was menace in his eye, I asked, with a certain weak show of being sorry for my former heat, whereabouts in Grand Street I should find this Groll.

"The retort was quick. 'Groll is not his name,' said he, 'and Grand Street is not where you are to go to find him. I threw out a bait to see if you would snap at it, but I find you timid, and therefore advise you to drop the matter entirely.'

"I was quite willing to do so, and answered him to this effect; whereupon, with a side glance I did not understand, but which made me more or less

uneasy in regard to his intentions towards me, he motioned to the men who held my arms to let go their hold, which they at once did.

" 'We have your signature,' growled the old man as I went out. 'If you peach on us or trouble us in any way we will show it to your father and that will put an end to all your hopes of future fortune.' Then raising his voice, he shouted to the girl in the outer office, 'Let the young man see what he has signed.'

"She smiled and again brought forward the book in which I had so recklessly placed my name, and there at the top of the page I read these words: 'For moneys received, I agree to notify Rube Goodman, within the month, of the death of my father, so that he may recover from me, without loss of time, the sum of ten thousand dollars as his part of the amount I am bound to receive as my father's heir.'

"The sight of these lines knocked me hollow. But I am less of a coward morally than physically, and I determined to acquaint my father at once with what I had done, and get his advice as to whether or not I should inform the police of my adventure. He heard me with more consideration than I expected, but insisted that I should immediately make known to you my experience in this Bowery pawnbroker's shop."

The officer, highly interested, took down the young man's statement in writing, and, after getting a more accurate description of the house itself, allowed his visitor to go.

Fortunately for me, I was in the building at the time, and was able to respond when a man was called up to investigate this matter. Thinking that I saw a connection between it and the various mysterious deaths of which I have previously spoken, I entered into the affair with much spirit. But, wishing to be sure that my possibly unwarranted conclusions were correct, I took pains to inquire, before proceeding upon my errand, into the character of the heirs who had inherited the property of Elwood Henderson and Christopher Bigelow, and found that in each case there was one among the rest who was well known for his profligacy and reckless expenditure. It was a significant discovery, and increased, if possible, my interest in running down this nefarious trafficker in the lives of wealthy men.

Knowing that I could hope for no success in my character of detective, I made an arrangement with the father of the young gentleman before alluded to, by which I was to enter the pawnshop as an emissary of the latter. Accordingly, I appeared there, one dull November afternoon, in the garb of a certain Western sporting man, who, for a consideration, allowed me the temporary use of his name and credentials.

Entering beneath the three golden balls, with the swagger and general air of ownership I thought most likely to impose upon the self-satisfied female who presided over the desk, I asked to see her boss.

"On your own business?" she queried, glancing with suspicion at my short coat, which was rather more showy than elegant.

"No," I returned, "not on my own business, but on that of a young gent—"

"Any one whose name is written here?" she interposed, reaching towards me the famous book, over the top of which, however, she was careful to lay her arm.

I glanced down the page she had opened and instantly detected that of the young gentleman on whose behalf I was supposed to be there, and nodded "Yes," with all the assurance of which I was capable.

"Come, then," said she, ushering me without more ado into a den of discomfort where sat a man with a great beard and such heavy overhanging eyebrows that I could hardly detect the twinkle of his eyes, keen and incisive as they were.

Smiling upon him, but not in the same way I had upon the girl, I glanced behind me at the open door, and above me at the partitions, which failed to reach the ceiling. Then I shook my head and drew a step nearer.

"I have come," I insinuatingly whispered, "on behalf of a certain party who left this place in a huff a day or so ago, but who since then has had time to think the matter over, and has sent me with an apology which he hopes"—here I put on a diabolical smile, copied, I declare to you, from the one I saw at that moment on his own lips— "you will accept."

The old wretch regarded me for full two minutes in a way to unmask me had I possessed less confidence in my disguise and in my ability to support it.

"And what is this young gentleman's name?" he finally asked.

For reply, I handed him a slip of paper. He took it and read the few lines written on it, after which he began to rub his palms softly together with an unction eminently in keeping with the stray glints of light that now and then found their way through his bushy eyebrows.

"And so the young gentleman had not the courage to come again himself?" he softly suggested, with just the suspicion of an ironical laugh. "Thought, perhaps, I would exact too much commission; or make him pay too roundly for his impertinent assurance."

I shrugged my shoulders, but vouchsafed no immediate reply, and he saw that he had to open the business himself. He did it warily and with many an incisive question which would have tripped me up if I had not been very much on my guard; but it all ended, as such matters usually do, in mutual understanding, and a promise that if the young gentleman was willing to sign a

certain paper, which, by the way, was not shown me, he would in exchange give him an address which, if made proper use of, would lead to my patron finding himself an independent man within a very few days.

As this address was the one thing I was most desirous of obtaining, I professed myself satisfied with the arrangement, and proceeded to hunt up my patron, as he was called. Informing him of the result of my visit, I asked if his interest in ferreting out these criminals was strong enough to lead him to sign the vile document which the pawnbroker would probably have in readiness for him on the morrow; and being told it was, we separated for that day, with the understanding that we were to meet the next morning at the spot chosen by the pawnbroker for the completion of his nefarious bargain.

Being certain that I was being followed in all my movements by the agents of this adept in villainy, I took care, upon leaving Mr. L— , to repair to the hotel of the sporting man I was personifying. Making myself square with the proprietor I took up my quarters in the room of my sporting friend, and the better to deceive any spy who might be lurking about, I received his letters and sent out his telegrams, which, if they did not create confusion in the affairs of "The Plunger," must at least have occasioned him no little work the next day.

Promptly at ten o'clock on the following morning I met my patron at the appointed place of rendezvous; and when I tell you that this was no other than the ancient and now disused cemetery of which a portion is still to be seen off Chatham Square, you will understand the uncanny nature of this whole adventure, and the lurking sense there was in it of brooding death and horror. The scene, which in these days is disturbed by elevated railroad trains and the flapping of long lines of parti-coloured clothes strung high up across the quiet tombstones, was at that time one of peaceful rest, in the midst of a quarter devoted to everything for which that rest is the fitting and desirable end; and as we paused among the mossy stones, we found it hard to realise that in a few minutes there would be standing beside us the concentrated essence of all that was evil and despicable in human nature.

He arrived with a smile on his countenance that completed his ugliness, and would have frightened any honest man from his side at once. Merely glancing my way, he shuffled up to my companion, and leading him aside, drew out a paper which he laid on a flat tombstone with a gesture significant of his desire that the other should affix to it the required signature.

Meantime I stood guard, and while attempting to whistle a light air, was carelessly taking in the surroundings, and conjecturing, as best I might, the reasons which had induced the old ghoul to make use of this spot for his diabolical business, and had about decided that it was because he was a ghoul,

and thus felt at home among the symbols of mortality, when I caught sight of two or three young fellows who were lounging on the other side of the fence.

These were so evidently accomplices that I wondered if the two sly boys I had engaged to stand by me through this affair had spotted them, and would know enough to follow them back to their haunts.

A few minutes later, the old rascal came sneaking towards me, with a gleam of satisfaction in his half-closed eyes.

"You are not wanted any longer," he grunted. "The young gentleman told me to say that he could look out for himself now."

"The young gentleman had better pay me the round fifty he promised me," I grumbled in return, with that sudden change from indifference to menace which I thought best calculated to further my plans; and shouldering the miserable wretch aside, I stepped up to my companion, who was still lingering in a state of hesitation among the gravestones.

"Quick! Tell me the number and street which he has given you!" I whispered, in a tone quite out of keeping with the angry and reproachful air I had assumed.

He was about to answer, when the old fellow came sidling up behind us. Instantly the young man before me rose to the occasion, and putting on an air of conciliation, said in a soothing tone:

"There, there, don't bluster. Do one thing more for me, and I will add another fifty to that I promised you. Conjure up an anonymous letter— you know how— and send it to my father, saying that if he wants to know where his son loses his hundreds, he must go to the place on the dock, opposite 5 South Street, some night shortly after nine. It would not work with most men, but it will with my father, and when he has been in and out of that place, and I succeed to the fortune he will leave me, then I will remember you, and—"

"Say, too," a sinister voice here added in my ear, "that if he wishes to effect an entrance into the gambling den which his son haunts, he must take the precaution of tying a bit of blue ribbon in his buttonhole. It is a signal meaning business, and must not be forgotten," chuckled the old fellow, evidently deceived at last into thinking I was really one of his own kind.

I answered by a wink, and taking care to attempt no further communication with my patron, I left the two, as soon as possible, and went back to the hotel, where I dropped "the sport," and assumed a character and dress which enabled me to make my way undetected to the house of my young patron, where for two days I lay low, waiting for a suitable time in which to make my final attempt to penetrate this mystery.

I knew that for the adventure I was now contemplating considerable courage was required. But I did not hesitate. The time had come for me to

show my mettle. In the few communications I was enabled to hold with my superiors I told them of my progress and arranged with them my plan of work. As we all agreed that I was about to encounter no common villainy, these plans naturally partook of finesse, as you will see if you follow my narrative to the end.

Early in the evening of a cool November day I sallied forth into the streets, dressed in the habiliments and wearing the guise of the wealthy old gentleman whose secret guest I had been for the last few days. As he was old and portly, and I young and spare, this disguise had cost me no little thought and labour. But assisted as I was by the darkness, I had but little fear of betraying myself to any chance spy who might be upon the watch, especially as Mr. L— had a peculiar walk, which, in my short stay with him, I had learned to imitate perfectly. In the lapel of my overcoat I had tied a tag of blue ribbon, and, though for all I knew this was a signal devoting me to a secret and mysterious death, I walked along in a buoyant condition of mind, attributable, no doubt, to the excitement of the venture and to my desire to test my powers, even at the risk of my life.

It was nine o'clock when I reached South Street. It was no new region to me, nor was I ignorant of the specified drinking den on the dock to which I had been directed. I remembered it as a bright spot in a mass of ship-prows and bow-rigging, and was possessed, besides, of a vague consciousness that there was something odd in connection with it which had aroused my curiosity sufficiently in the past for me to have once formed the resolution of seeing it again under circumstances which would allow me to give it some attention. But I never thought that the circumstances would involve my own life, impossible as it is for a detective to reckon upon the future or to foresee the events into which he will be hurried by the next crime which may be reported at police headquarters.

There were but few persons in the street when I crossed to The Heart's Delight— so named from the heart-shaped opening in the framework of the door, through which shone a light, inviting enough to one chilled by the keen November air and oppressed by the desolate appearance of the almost deserted street. But amongst those persons I thought I recognised more than one familiar form, and felt reassured as to the watch which had been set upon the house.

The night was dark and the river especially so, but in the gloomy space beyond the dock I detected a shadow blacker than the rest, which I took for the police boat they had promised to have in readiness in case I needed rescue from the waterside. Otherwise the surroundings were as usual, and saving the gruff singing of some drunken sailor coming from a narrow side street near by,

no sound disturbed the somewhat lugubrious silence of this weird and forsaken spot.

Pausing an instant before entering, I glanced up at the building, which was about three stories high, and endeavoured to see what there was about it which had once arrested my attention, and came to the conclusion that it was its exceptional situation on the dock, and the ghostly effect of the hoisting-beam projecting from the upper story like a gibbet. And yet this beam was common to many a warehouse in the vicinity, though in none of them were there any such signs of life as proceeded from the curious mixture of sail loft, boat shop, and drinking saloon, now before me. Could it be that the ban of criminality was upon the house, and that I had been conscious of this without being able to realise the cause of my interest?

Not stopping to solve my sensations further, I tried the door, and, finding it yield easily to my touch, turned the knob and entered. For a moment I was blinded by the smoky glare of the heated atmosphere into which I stepped, but presently I was able to distinguish the vague outlines of an oyster bar in the distance, and the motionless figures of some half-dozen men, whose movements had been arrested by my sudden entrance. For an instant this picture remained; then the drinking and card playing were resumed, and I stood, as it were, alone, on the sanded floor near the door.

Improving the opportunity for a closer inspection of the place, I was struck by its picturesqueness. It had evidently been once used as a ship chandlery, and on the walls, which were but partly plastered, there still hung old bits of marlin, rusty rings, and such other evidences of former traffic as did not interfere with the present more lucrative business.

Below were the two bars, one at the right of the door, and the other at the lower end of the room near a window, through whose small, square panes I caught a glimpse of the coloured lights of a couple of ferryboats, passing each other in midstream.

At a table near me sat two men, grumbling at each other over a game of cards. They were large and powerful figures in the contracted space of this long and narrow room, and my heart gave a bound of joy as I recognised on them certain marks by which I was to know friend from foe in this possible den of thieves and murderers.

Two sailors at the bar were bona fide habitués of the place and so were the two other waterside characters I could faintly discern in one of the dim corners. Meantime a man was approaching me.

Let me see if I can describe him. He was about thirty, and had the complexion and figure of a consumptive, but his eye shone with the yellow glare of a beast of prey, and in the cadaverous hollows of his ashen cheeks and

amid the lines about his thin drawn lips there lay, for all his conciliatory smile, an expression so cold and yet so ferocious that I spotted him at once as the man to whose genius we were indebted for the new scheme of murder which I was jeopardising my life to understand. But I allowed none of the repugnance with which he inspired me to appear in my manner, and, greeting him with half a nod, waited for him to speak. His voice had that smooth quality which betrays the hypocrite.

"Has the gentleman any appointment here?" he asked, letting his glance fall for the merest instant on the lapel of my coat.

I returned a decided affirmative. "Or rather," I went on, with a meaning look he evidently comprehended, "my son has, and I have made up my mind to know just what deviltry he is up to these days. I can make it worth your while to give me the opportunity."

"Oh, I see," he assented with a glance at the pocketbook I had just drawn out. "You want a private room from which you can watch the young scapegrace. I understand, I understand. But the private rooms are above. Gentlemen are not comfortable here."

"I should say not," I murmured, and drew from the pocketbook a bill which I slid quietly into his hand. "Now take me where I shall be safe," I suggested, "and yet in full sight of the room where the young gentlemen play. I wish to catch him at his tricks. Afterwards—"

"All will be well," he finished smoothly, with another glance at my blue ribbon. "You see I do not ask you the young gentleman's name. I take your money and leave all the rest to you. Only don't make a scandal, I pray, for my house has the name of being quiet."

"Yes," thought I, "too quiet!" and for an instant felt my spirits fail me. But it was only for an instant. I had friends about me and a pistol at half-cock in the pocket of my overcoat. Why should I fear any surprise, prepared as I was for every emergency?

"I will show you up in a moment," said he; and left me to put up a heavy board shutter over the window opening on the river. Was this a signal or a precaution? I glanced towards my two friends playing cards, took another note of their broad shoulders and brawny arms, and prepared to follow my host, who now stood bowing at the other end of the room, before a covered staircase which was manifestly the sole means of reaching the floor above.

The staircase was quite a feature in the room. It ran from back to front, and was boarded all the way up to the ceiling. On these boards hung a few useless bits of chain, wire, and knotted ends of tarred ropes, which swung to and fro as the sharp November blast struck the building, giving out a weird and strangely muffled sound. Why did this sound, so easily to be accounted for,

ring in my ears like a note of warning? I understand now, but I did not then, full of expectation as I was for developments out of the ordinary.

Crossing the room, I entered upon the staircase, in the wake of my companion. Though the two men at cards did not look up as I passed them, I noticed that they were alert and ready for any signal I might choose to give them. But I was not ready to give one yet. I must see danger before I summoned help, and there was no token of danger yet.

When we were about half-way up the stairs the faint light which had illuminated us from below suddenly vanished, and we found ourselves in total darkness. The door at the foot had been closed by a careful hand, and I felt, rather than heard, the stealthy pushing of a bolt across it.

My first impulse was to forsake my guide and rush back, but I subdued the unworthy impulse and stood quite still, while my companion, exclaiming, "Damn that fellow! What does he mean by shutting the door before we're half-way up!" struck a match and lit a gas jet in the room above, which poured a flood of light upon the staircase.

Drawing my hand from the pocket in which I had put my revolver, I hastened after him into the small landing at the top of the stairs. An open door was before me, in which he stood bowing, with the half-burnt match in his hand. "This is the place, sir," he announced, motioning me in.

I entered and he remained by the door, while I passed quickly about the room, which was bare of every article of furniture save a solitary table and chair. There was not even a window in it, with the exception of one small light situated so high up in the corner made by the jutting staircase that I wondered at its use, and was only relieved of extreme apprehension at the prison-like appearance of the place by the gleam of light which came through this dusty pane, showing that I was not entirely removed from the presence of my foes if I was from that of my friends.

"Ah, you have spied the window," remarked my host, advancing toward me with a countenance he vainly endeavoured to make reassuring and friendly. "That is your post of observation, sir," he whispered, with a great show of mystery. "By mounting on the table you can peer into the room where my young friends sit securely at play."

As it was not part of my scheme to show any special mistrust, I merely smiled a little grimly, and cast a glance at the table on which stood a bottle of brandy and one glass.

"Very good brandy," he whispered; "not such stuff as we give those fellows downstairs."

I shrugged my shoulders and he slowly backed towards the door.

"The young men you bid me watch are very quiet," I suggested, with a careless wave of my hand towards the room he had mentioned.

"Oh, there is no one there yet. They begin to straggle in about ten o'clock."

"Ah," was my quiet rejoinder, "I am likely, then, to have use for your brandy."

He smiled again and made a swift motion towards the door.

"If you want anything," said he, "just step to the foot of the staircase and let me know. The whole establishment is at your service." And with one final grin that remains in my mind as the most threatening and diabolical I have ever witnessed, he laid his hand on the knob of the door and slid quickly out.

It was done with such an air of final farewell that I felt my apprehensions take a positive form. Rushing towards the door through which he had just vanished, I listened and heard, as I thought, his stealthy feet descend the stair. But when I sought to follow, I found myself for the second time overwhelmed by darkness. The gas jet, which had hitherto burned with great brightness in the small room, had been turned off from below, and beyond the faint glimmer which found its way through the small window of which I have spoken, not a ray of light now disturbed the heavy gloom of this gruesome apartment.

I had thought of every contingency but this, and for a few minutes my spirits were dashed. But I soon recovered some remnants of self-possession, and began feeling for the knob I could no longer see. Finding it after a few futile attempts, I was relieved to discover that this door at least was not locked; and, opening it with a careful hand, I listened intently, but could hear nothing save the smothered sound of men talking in the room below.

Should I signal for my companions? No, for the secret was not yet mine as to how men passed from this room into the watery grave which was the evident goal for all wearers of the blue ribbon.

Stepping back into the middle of the room, I carefully pondered my situation, but could get no further than the fact that I was somehow, and in some way, in mortal peril. Would it come in the form of a bullet, or a deadly thrust from an unseen knife? I did not think so. For, to say nothing of the darkness, there was one reassuring fact which recurred constantly to my mind in connection with the murders I was endeavouring to trace to this den of iniquity.

None of the gentlemen who had been found drowned had shown any marks of violence on their bodies, so it was not attack I was to fear, but some mysterious, underhanded treachery which would rob me of consciousness and make the precipitation of my body into the water both safe and easy. Perhaps it was in the bottle of brandy that the peril lay; perhaps— but why speculate

further! I would watch till midnight and then, if nothing happened, signal my companions to raid the house.

Meantime a peep into the next room might help me towards solving the mystery. Setting the bottle and glass aside, I dragged the table across the floor, placed it under the lighted window, mounted, and was about to peer through, when the light in that apartment was put out also. Angry and overwhelmed, I leaped down, and, stretching out my hands till they touched the wainscoting, I followed the wall around till I came to the knob of the door, which I frantically clutched. But I did not turn it immediately, I was too anxious to catch these villains at work.

Would I be conscious of the harm they meditated against me, or would I imperceptibly yield to some influence of which I was not yet conscious, and drop to the floor before I could draw my revolver or put to my mouth the whistle upon which I depended for assistance and safety? It was hard to tell, but I determined to cling to my first intention a little longer, and so stood waiting and counting the minutes, while wondering if the captain of the police boat was not getting impatient, and whether I had not more to fear from the anxiety of my friends than the cupidity of my foes.

You see, I had anticipated communicating with the men in this boat by certain signals and tokens which had been arranged between us. But the lack of windows in the room had made all such arrangements futile, so I knew as little of their actions as they did of my sufferings; all of which did not tend to add to the cheerfulness of my position.

However, I held out for a half-hour, listening, waiting, and watching in a darkness which, like that of Egypt, could be felt, and when the suspense grew intolerable I struck a match and let its blue flame flicker for a moment over the face of my watch. But the matches soon gave out and with them my patience, if not my courage, and I determined to end the suspense by knocking at the door beneath.

This resolution taken, I pulled open the door before me and stepped out. Though I could see nothing, I remembered the narrow landing at the top of the stairs, and, stretching out my arms, I felt for the boarding on either hand, guiding myself by it, and began to descend, when something rising, as it were, out of the cavernous darkness before me made me halt and draw back in mingled dread and horror.

But the impression, strong as it was, was only momentary, and, resolved to be done with the matter, I precipitated myself downward, when suddenly, at about the middle of the staircase, my feet slipped and I slid forward, plunging and reaching out with hands whose frenzied grasp found nothing to cling to, down a steep inclined plane— or what to my bewildered senses appeared

such— till I struck a yielding surface and passed with one sickening plunge into the icy waters of the river, which in another moment had closed dark and benumbing above my head.

It was all so rapid I did not think of uttering a cry. But happily for me the splash I made told the story, and I was rescued before I could sink a second time.

It was full half an hour before I had sufficiently recovered from the shock to relate my story. But when once I had made it known, you can imagine the gusto with which the police prepared to enter the house and confound the obliging host with a sight of my dripping garments and accusing face. And, indeed, in all my professional experience I have never beheld a more sudden merging of the bully into a coward than was to be seen in this slick villain's face, when I was suddenly pulled from the crowd and placed before him, with the old man's wig gone from my head, and the tag of blue ribbon still clinging to my wet coat.

His game was up, and he saw it; and Ebenezer Gryce's career had begun.

Like all destructive things the device by which I had been run into the river was simple enough when understood. In the first place it had been constructed to serve the purpose of a stairway and chute. The latter was in plain sight when it was used by the sailmakers to run the finished sails into the waiting yawls below. At the time of my adventure, and for some time before, the possibilities of the place had been discovered by mine host, who had ingeniously put a partition up the entire stairway, dividing the steps from the smooth runway. At the upper part of the runway he had built a few steps, wherewith to lure the unwary far enough down to insure a fatal descent. To make sure of his game he had likewise ceiled the upper room all around, including the inclosure of the stairs.

The door to the chute and the door to the stairs were side by side, and being made of the same boards as the wainscoting, were scarcely visible when closed, while the single knob that was used, being transferable from one to the other, naturally gave the impression that there was but one door. When this adroit villain called my attention to the little window around the corner, he no doubt removed the knob from the stairs' door and quickly placed it in the one opening upon the chute. Another door, connecting the two similar landings without, explains how he got from the chute staircase into which he passed on leaving me, to the one communicating with the room below.

THE MYSTERY was solved, and my footing on the force secured; but to this day— and I am an old man now— I have not forgotten the horror of the moment when my feet slipped from under me, and I felt myself sliding

downward, without hope of rescue, into a pit of heaving waters, where so many men of conspicuous virtue had already ended their valuable lives.

Myriad thoughts flashed through my brain in that brief interval, and among them the whole method of operating this death-trap, together with every detail of evidence that would secure the conviction of the entire gang.

_____

4: The Set of Poe

George Ade

1866-1944

Worker (Wagga, NSW) 21 Dec 1911

MR. WATERBY remarked to his wife: 'I'm still tempted by that set of Poe. I saw it in the window to-day, marked down to fifteen dollars.'

'Yes?' said Mrs. Waterby, with a sudden gasp of emotion, it seemed to him.

'Yes— I believe I'll have to get it.'

'I wouldn't if I were you, Alfred,' she said. 'You have so many books now.'

'I know I have, my dear, but I haven't any set of Poe, and that's what I've been waiting for a long time. This edition I was telling you about is beautifully gotten up.'

'Oh, I wouldn't buy it, Alfred,' she repeated, and there was a note of pleading earnestness in her voice. 'It's so much money to spend for a few books.'

'Well, I know, but—' and then he paused, for the lack of words to express his mortified surprise.

Mr. Waterby had tried to be an indulgent husband. He took a selfish pleasure in giving, and found it more blessed than receiving. Every salary day he turned over to Mrs. Waterby a fixed sum for household expenses. He added to this an allowance for her spending money. He set aside a small amount for his personal expenses and deposited the remainder in the bank.

He flattered himself that he approximated the model husband. Mr. Waterby had no costly habits and no prevailing appetite for anything expensive.

Like every other man, he had one or two hobbies, and one of his. particular hobbies was Edgar Allan Poe. He believed that Poe, of all American writers, was the one unmistakable genius. The word 'genius' has been bandied around the country until it has come to be applied to a long-haired man out of work or a stout lady who writes poetry for the rural press. In the case of Poe, Mr. Waterby maintained that; 'genius' meant one who was not governed by the common mental processes, but who spoke from inspiration, his mind involuntarily taking superhuman flight into the realm of pure imagination,' or something of that sort.

At any rate, Mr. Waterby liked Poe and he wanted a set of Poe. He allowed himself not more than one luxury a year, and he determined that this year the luxury should be a set of Poe.

Therefore, imagine the hurt to his feelings when his wife, objected to his expending fifteen dollars for that which he coveted above anything else in the world.

As he went to his work that day he reflected on Mrs. Waterby's conduct. Did she not have her allowance of spending money? Did he ever find fault with her extravagance? Was he an unreasonable husband in asking that he be allowed to spend this small sum for that which would give him many hours of pleasure, and which would belong to Mrs. Waterby as much as to him?

He told himself that many a husband would have bought the books without consulting his wife. But he (Waterby) had deferred to his wife in all matters touching family finances, and he said to himself, with a tincture of bitterness in his thoughts, that probably he had put himself into the attitude of a mere dependent. For had she not forbidden him to buy a few books for himself?

Well, no, she had not forbidden him, but it amounted to the same thing. She had declared that she was firmly opposed to the purchase of Poe.

Mr. Waterby wondered if it were possible that he was just beginning to know his wife. Was she a selfish woman at heart? Was she complacent and good-natured and kind only while she was having her own way? Wouldn't she prove -to be an entirely different sort of woman if he should do as many husbands do— spend his income on clubs and cigars, and private amusement, and give her the pickings of small change?

Nothing in Mr. Waterby's whole experience as a married man had so wrenched his sensibilities and disturbed his faith as Mrs. Waterby's objection, to the purchase of the set of Poe. There was but one way to account for it. She wanted all the money for herself, or else she wanted, him to put it into the bank so that she could come into it after he— but this was too monstrous.

However, Mrs. Waterby's Conduct helped to give strength to Mr. Waterby's meanest suspicions. Two or three days after the first conversation she asked: 'You didn't buy that set of Poe, did you, Alfred?'

'No, I didn't buy it,' he answered, as coldly and with as much hauteur as possible.... He hoped to hear her say: 'Well, why don't you go and get it? I'm sure that you want it, and I'd like to see you buy something for yourself once in a while.' That would have shown the spirit of; a loving and unselfish wife.

But she merely said, 'That's right; don't buy it,' and he was utterly unhappy, for he realised that he had married a woman who did not love him and who simply desired to use him as a pack-horse' for all household burdens.

As soon as Mr Waterby had learned the horrible truth about his wife he began to recall little episodes dating back years, and now he pieced them together to convince himself that he was a deeply wronged person.

Small at the time and almost unnoticed, they now accumulated to prove that Mrs. Waterby had no real anxiety for her husband's happiness. Also, Mr. Waterby began to observe her more closely, and he believed that he found new evidences of her unworthiness. For one thing, while he was in gloom: over

his discovery and harassed by doubts of what the future might reveal to him, she was content and even-tempered.

The holiday season approached, and Mr. Waterby made a resolution. He decided, that if she would not permit him to spend a little money on himself he would not buy the customary Christmas present for her.

'Selfishness is a game at which two can play,' he said. -

Furthermore; he determined that if she asked him for any extra money for Christmas he would say: 'I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't spare any. I am so hard up that I can't even afford to buy a few books I've been wanting for a long time. Don't you remember that you told me that I couldn't afford to buy that set of Poe?"

Could anything be more biting as the sarcasm or more crushing as to logic? He rehearsed this speech and had it all ready for her, and he pictured to himself her humiliation and surprise at discovering that he had some spirit after all and a considerable say-so whenever money was involved.

Unfortunately for his plan, she did not ask for any extra spending money, and so he had to rely on the other mode of punishment. He would withhold the expected Christmas present. In order that she might fully understand his, purpose,' he would give presents to both of the children

It was a harsh measure, he admitted, but perhaps it would teach her to have some consideration for the wishes of others.

It must be said that Mr. Waterby was not wholly proud of his revenge when he arose on Christmas morning. He felt that he had accomplished his purpose, and he told himself that his motives had been good and pure, but still he was not satisfied with himself.

He went to the dining-room, and there on the table in front of his plate was a long box, containing ten books, each marked 'Poe.' It was the edition he had coveted.

'What's this?' he asked, winking slowly, for his mind could not grasp in one moment the fact of his awful shame.

'I should think you ought to know, Alfred,' said Mrs. Waterby, flushed, and giggling like a school-girl.

'Oh, it was you—'

'My goodness, you've had me so frightened! That first day, when you spoke of buying them and I told you not to, I was just sure that you suspected something. I bought them a week before that.'

'Yes— yes,' said Mr. Waterby, feeling the saltwater in his eyes. At that moment he had the soul of a wretch being whipped at the stake.

'I was determined not to ask you for any money to pay for your own presents,' Mrs. Waterby continued. 'Do you know I had to save for you and the

children out of my regular allowance. Why, last week I nearly starved you, and you never noticed it at all. I was afraid you would.'

'No, I didn't notice it,' said Mr. Waterby, brokenly, for he was confused and giddy.

This self-sacrificing angel— and he had bought no Christmas present for her. It was a fearful situation, and he lied his way out of it.

'How did you like your present?' he asked.

'Why, I haven't seen it yet,' she said, looking across at him in surprise.

'You haven't? I told them to send it up yesterday."

The children were shouting and laughing over their gifts in the next room, and he felt it his duty to lie for their sake.

'Well, don't tell me what it is,' interrupted Mrs. Waterby. 'Wait until it comes.'

'I'll go after it.'

He did go after it, although he had to drag a jeweller away from his home on Christmas-day and have him open his great safe. The ring which he selected was beyond his means, but when a man has to buy back his self-respect the price is never too high.

_____

5: In The Next Room

Alice Perrin

1867-1934

The Belgravia Annual Summer 1893

Express and Telegraph (Adelaide), 9 Dec 1905

In: *East of Suez*, 1901

Alice Perrin was a popular author of novels and short stories set in the Asia specially India where she spent many years as the wife of an irrigation engineer. Her short story collection "East of Suez" contained 14 stories published in magazines such as "The Windsor" and "The Belgavia" between 1892 and 1897. "Arnold", in the first paragraph of this story, refers to a character in the previous story in the collection.

LONG YEARS after I had shaken the sandy soil of Usapore from my feet, I met a lady on board a P. and O. steamer to whom I told the story of Arnold.

"I could tell you a story about Usapore, too," she said, "only nobody ever believes a word of it."

"I would believe anything you told, me," I replied, "and anything about Usapore that was unpleasant. Tell me the story now, we have half an hour before dinner, and your husband is still playing whist."

So she allowed herself to be persuaded, and it appeared that only the previous year George, her husband, who was a Bengal civilian, had been suddenly ordered to Usapore m the middle of the hot weather, and she, being a model wife, made prompt preparations to accompany him;

"And would you believe it," she said, still sore at the recollection, "my cook and butler refused to come with me. I had been so kind to them, given them good wages, and clothes, and medicine, and everything they wanted, and I imagined they would never leave us. However, they did, and we had to rely , on picking up others at Usapore. We had an awful journey, the heat, flies, and dust simply indescribable, and the *dak* bungalow to end with. You must know what a ghastly little building that is."

"Indeed, I do," I sighed in sympathy.

"Well, then, we could not get a house, every bungalow was occupied, and our predecessor had been a bachelor and chummed with some other men. So at last we had to take a ruin belonging to a native, that had been-built, in the Old days long before the Mutiny. Perhaps you remember it . Down by the river.

"I think I do," I said, searching, my memory; "but it was only occupied by natives then as far as I recollect."

"It is pulled down now, I believe, and a good thing too, for, in spite of what George or anyone else may say, that house was haunted!"

"Really!"

"Yes, and you shall hear all about it if you have the patience to listen. It was a rambling old stone building, with fairly good verandahs; but filthy dirty, and very much out of repair. However, three of the rooms were quite habitable, which, were really all we needed, as we only expected to remain in the place for about three months. We had brought our camp furniture with us, and were soon able to leave the miseries of the *dak* bungalow. I had got a cook, but no *khansamah* (butler), and had almost made up my mind to do without one, when a man suddenly presented himself and his written character, and requested to he taken into our service The characters were good and the man's appearance respectable, so I engaged him.

"The first night in our new quarters passed quietly enough, but the next morning, just after George had started for office, my *ayah* entered my room crying.

" *'Mem-sahib*,' she whimpered, 'do not keep the new *khansamah*. The watchman's wife tells me—'

"I interrupted her and said I would not listen to tales of the other servants, so she said no more, but all the same I felt a little curious, and in consequence observed the new man closely when he came for orders. There certainly was something rather peculiar about him, though what I could not exactly say, and as I had no fault to find with him I dismissed him from my thoughts...

"A fortnight passed away, and then one night I awoke very suddenly with a conviction that something had roused me. I first thought that the punkah had stopped, but found I was mistaken, and gradually I became aware of a sound in the drawing-room, out of which our bedroom opened, and I sat up to listen.

"An indistinct murmur of two voices was going on in the next room, with something in the sound that was oddly familiar to me, though at the moment I could not name what it recalled to my mind. Thinking that for some reason the servants must have come into the house, I called out, but received no answer, neither did the low murmur cease.

"I got out of bed, and, taking the hand lamp from the dressing-table, I peered with it into the drawing-room. All was dark, and the noise suddenly stopped.

"I called two or three times, and the watchman, hearing me, came into the verandah. He declared nobody had been about, that all the servants, with the exception of himself and the punkah-coolies, were asleep in their quarters, and no one had entered the bungalow: I concluded I must have been dreaming, and went back to bed puzzled and restless.

"The incident worried me so that I told my husband about it in the morning, and, as he only said that it must have been the punkah-coolies

talking, I dropped the subject to avoid argument. I saw him drive off to the courts, and then sent for the *khansamah* to bring me his daily accounts. . y

"He began reading them out in the usual nasal monotone, 'soup— eggs— fowls,' &c., when it flashed across me in a second that this was what the sounds had reminded me of the previous night— a servant and his mistress going through the daily accounts. The murmur of the voices came back to me with redoubled distinctness, and I could only imagine that I had dreamt I was listening to myself taking down the items.

"Two or three nights afterwards the same thing happened again. I woke up with a start, and instantly my thoughts reverted to. my dream, but this time I was positive I was wide awake. Nevertheless, there was a low, murmur of voices in the drawing room. I could have sworn to its being a native giving in his accounts to his mistress, and I could even distinguish the woman's voice as she acknowledged each item.

"I woke George, then sprang out of bed, and rushed with the lamp to the drawing room door, followed sleepily by my husband, but directly I entered the room not a sound was to be heard except, the chirrup of a musk-rat as it scuttled round the wall.

"Dreaming again," said George.

"In spite of his unbelief I insisted on his going through all the rooms and verandahs with me, and even out into the garden, where we found the watchman asleep, and while the unlucky sleeper was being shaken and abused I went back to bed feeling somewhat small, but at the same time determined to leave no stone unturned until the mystery was solved.

"With great difficulty I persuaded George to stay awake for an hour, but to my intense annoyance we heard nothing. I began to doubt my own senses, and George made idiotic jokes about my having eaten cheese toast at dinner.

"News came the next day of a disturbance in the district, and George was obliged to hurry off at a moment's notice, making the best arrangements he could, as he did not expect to get back for the night.

"The same evening I went for a long ride by myself, and returned rather late. I paused on my way through the drawing room to turn up the shaded lamps, and as I did so I was surprised to see Eli Bux, the new *khansamah*, standing by my writing table with a kitchen knife and an old account book in his hands. Then I saw him walk into my bedroom, and, calling his name, followed him. But when I entered the room he was not there.

"I knew my eyes had not deceived me. for I particularly remarked that the man seemed to stoop a good deal, which I had never observed in mm before: I called the *ayah*, and asked if Eli Bux had passed through my room, but she declared he had not. I sent her into the kitchen to enquire what he had been

doing in the drawing room, but she returned with the startling renouncement that the *khansamah* had gone to the city early in the afternoon, and had not yet returned:

"The *ayah* naturally concluded that I should be vexed at the idea of his absenting himself just when dinner should have claimed his attention, and, seizing the opportunity, she once more burst forth into abuse of Eli Bux, but I snubbed her again, as, in any case, it was none of her business.

"I felt a little nervous when I went to bed that night, and lay sleepless for a long time, half expecting to hear the voices in the drawing-room, and hardly knowing whether I hoped or dreaded that I should do so. I wondered again if I had really heard them, or if they simply existed in my imagination. If the former, I felt that there must be something strange in connection with the house; if the latter, that I must be out of sorts and require a doctor's advice.

"I must at last have fallen into a doze, for I suddenly opened my eyes to see by the dim, lowered light of the lamp, the figure of a native man standing by my dressing-table with his back towards me. I caught sight of his face reflected in the glass. It was Eli Bux!

"I watched him for about a minute, and saw that he was ransacking my dressing table drawers and opening the various little boxes in which I kept pins and scraps of jewellery. He put his hand under the looking-glass, and I knew he was feeling for the rings and brooch I wore every day.

"I was literally paralysed with fright, felt as if I had been turned to stone when the man looked into the mirror, and caught sight of my reflection, open-mouthed and horror-struck, watching him from the bed. He turned slowly round, and in his hand was a long, sharp knife.

"I tried to scream, but my voice failed me, and we remained motionless, staring at one another. The punkah was still, and the mosquitoes were buzzing savagely round my bed. The man took a step towards me. Then another. His eyes flittered, and his fingers felt along the edge of the knife

"Suddenly a sound broke the stillness, the voices were in the drawing-room, and this time louder and clearer than they had ever been before, Eli Bux started, and Looked wildly round. So he, too, could hear the voices. He listened for a second. Then an expression of abject terror crossed his face, and with a hoarse yell he rushed out into the verandah. I heard a muffled cry as of someone choking, followed by a heavy fall.

"I felt sure he was murdering the punkah-coolies, and then my presence of mind returned. I sprang out of bed and ran into the drawing-room; all was quiet there again, not a sound to be heard. I ran through the hall and into the front verandah, where I called and shouted at the top of my voice, and stepped down on the gravel path, meaning to make my way to the servants' quarters.

But I had hardly gone two yards when my heart again stood still with fear. I saw something moving in the deep shadow of the trees, and a pariah, dog flitted past me in the moonlight, uttering a long, dismal howl.

"It was more than my over-strung nerves could bear. Scarcely knowing what I was doing, I fled like a hunted creature back into the house, and had barely reached my room when I fell to the floor in a dead faint.

"When I recovered consciousness it was broad daylight, and George and the doctor were binding over my bed, while the ayah stood weeping copiously in the background, expressing her firm conviction that I was quite dead.

"When I had swallowed some brandy, and been made to keep quiet for an hour, I was strong enough to tell George my story, not forgetting the part that 'the voices' had played. He heard me to the end with a grave face, and then told me that Eli Bux had been discovered dead in my verandah.

"The watchman and the two coolies had been drugged, and on the ayah coming to call me in the morning, she had found the two coolies still in a heavy sleep, with the dead body of Eli Bux between them. My watch and rings were, found in his pocket, and it was subsequently proved on examination that he had died from heart disease, from which he must have been suffering for years previously.

"When I was better I called the *ayah* and gave her leave to tell me all she knew about the *khansamah*, and delighted at obtaining a hearing, she poured forth a voluble tale as to Eli Bux having been an accomplished scoundrel, and added, that his father had been a great deal worse. Then she paused, and I impatiently told her to continue.

" 'Surely the *mem-sahib* has heard what happened in this house?' she said, and when I shook my head she told me that the father of Eli Bux had been *khansamah* to a lady in that very bungalow when the Mutiny broke out, and that her husband was shot while he was at his office, and that the butler cut his mistress' throat in the drawing-room, and ran off with all the jewellery and money he could find.'

" 'And the watchman's wife,' continued the *ayah* with relish, 'says that Eli Bux had lots of that poor *memsahib*'s jewellery buried somewhere, given him by his old father when he lay dying.'

"After this I felt I could stay in that horrible bungalow no longer. George did not believe the *ayah*'s story, and declared it was all a native yarn, but I know it was true, for I heard the spirit voices of that unfortunate woman and her murderer, and the man I saw in the drawing-room was the ghost of Eli Bux's father. Those voices saved my life, for if Eli Bux had not heard them, and, knowing what they were, died of fright, he would have cut my throat.

"My husband is still sceptical about the voices, for though he lived in the house for three months after I had gone, he never heard anything unusual."

_____

6: The Two Men Who Murdered Each Other

Valma Clark

1894-1953

Weird Tales, July-August 1923

IT WAS ON CAPE COD one August, while I was browsing through antique shops in quest of a particular kind of colonial andirons for one of our patrons, that I stumbled onto the Old Scholar.

There, in a white farmhouse back from the King's Highway, among a litter of old Cape lanterns and great bulging liqueur bottles of green and amber glass, ancient teakettles and brass door knockers and the inevitable bayberry candles, I came upon painted book ends of heavy wood on which bright orange nymphs disported themselves against a velvet-black background. A bizarre color scheme, was my first conventional reaction.

Yet the details of face and hair were traced most delicately in brown and purple, as though a brush with a single fine bristle had been used; the work was exquisite, and on the whole the effect was charming. Then it struck me: Jove, it was after the manner of the old, fine, red-figured Greek vases— classic, that was it!

The nymphs, too, were classic; this slim one was, without doubt, Nausicaa playing at ball with her maidens. There were other classical subjects: a graceful Aphrodite riding a quaintly stiff swan; nimble sileni frolicking on a seesaw...

Pagan mythology running riot, within a small space, in this home of New England antiques— it was at least odd! Here, where one sought the genuine old colonial— though usually in vain, to be sure— to come upon this curious classical twist!

Even as I wondered, my eye fell upon a fresh subject, and the wonder changed to genuine admiration and sharpened to a very keen curiosity concerning the artist who achieved such arresting beauty with such crude materials. It was a broken painting, like a Venus with a missing arm. It showed the head and shoulders of Pallas Athena and the head and shoulders of a youth who played to her on a double flute. The goddess' head, which still bore the warrior's helmet, was bent in a listening attitude toward the music, and her pose was one of relaxation and peace after fierce combat.

It was a quiet thing, with quiet, flowing lines, for all the unfinished ragged edge which cut the figures off just above the waist. Somehow, it held the dignity and sincerity of great religious art. And now I noticed that there were other identical Athenas, that the fragmentary painting recurred on fully half the book ends: as though it were the motif of all his work, I thought— the one serious theme running through all these lighter themes.

"But only a man thoroughly steeped in Greek mythology— loving it— could do that—"

"Pardon, sir?" said the young woman who kept shop."This! It's rather remarkable. Who is he— tell me about him!" I begged of her impulsively.

"I can't tell you much. He lives alone over on the back shore, and he brings us these to sell. His name is Twining— 'Tinker' Twining, they call him."

"But this broken thing— what does it mean?"

She shook her head.

"He never talks; only say he hasn't the pattern for the rest, and it would be sacrilege to finish it without the true lines."

"Hm— reverence and a conscience," I muttered. "Rare enough these days. I'll take the pair of them. How much?"

"Five dollars."

"And a pair of the nymphs," I added, since it seemed absurdly cheap.

"Sorry, but we've only one of these. It's used as a door prop, you see."

"No, not a door prop!" I lamented. "But I'd use mine as book ends, and I'd put the Romantic Poets between them."

"I'll tell you—" the girl turned suddenly helpful— "you might leave an order with us for Mr. Twining to paint you one. He'd be glad to do it."

"Or I might take the order to Mr. Twining myself," I exclaimed eagerly. "I've a car outside and I've time to kill. How do I get to him?"

"But you can't drive. You follow the sand road to the end, and then take a narrow path across to the ocean side. It's three miles over, the only house—"

"No matter! I've a fancy to meet him. Oh, I see by your face you wouldn't advise it."

"It's only that he's— something of a hermit," she hesitated. "He's a very courteous old gentleman, but no one ever visits him."

"Then it's time someone started, and I've a faculty for getting on with hermits," I assured her gaily.

I thanked her, found a quiet inn, parked my car for the night, and started on a late afternoon ramble for the back shore and a Mr. "Tinker" Twining.

ii

I FOLLOWED a sand trail like a wind-white chalk line between growths of springy hog cranberry, scrub oak and pine— a most desolate and forsaken country— until at last I stepped out abruptly upon a high cliff over the Atlantic Ocean.

Clouds had sponged out the blue sky, and instead of the late sunlight there was a strange yellow glow over everything. All those light, bright Cape colors— turquoise blue and gay copper-gold and honey-yellow— had been dimmed.

The sea was very still, of dull purples and greens, and the broad cream beach, below the sand scrap upon which I stood, had a grayish tinge. Above me, on the highest point of the cliff and huddled too close to its shifting edge, was one of those low, weather-beaten Cape houses. I climbed to it, and wading through beach grass and vines of the wild beach pea, came to the back door.

The house was quiet, and I had a glimpse of a scrupulously neat, old-style kitchen— cumbersome flatirons in a row and a brick oven built into the chimney— as I stood there hesitating.

Then, against a further window which framed the lowering sea and sky, I saw the profile of an old, white-haired man.

He sat at a work bench and he held a brush poised in his hand, but he was not painting. His head was up and he was listening— it was almost as though he were listening to that strange electric-yellow that permeated all the air, was the queer thought I had. I was struck at once by the extreme delicacy and the fine-drawn suffering of the old man's face; indeed, the lines of that tragic profile might have been traced with the single fine bristle of his own brush, in those same delicate browns and purples.

Moreover, the setting was all wrong: the old, frail face was somehow not up to that sullen sweep of sky and ocean. It was as though an exquisite thing of beaten and fretted silver should be mounted alone upon a coarse expanse of dull burlap— a broad background that called for granite at least.

I tapped, and the old man stirred."Good afternoon," I called.

He came slowly to the door.

"They sent me from that antique place— the Open Latch. I'd like to get you to do me another book end."

"Book end?" he muttered.

"I hoped you might be willing to paint it and send it on to me."

"Ah, yes." Clearly he was following me only with his eyes; with his soul he was still listening to his own thoughts.

I found myself puzzled as to how to reach him. A baffling aroma of archaism hung about this elderly man: breathed not only from his worn black suit, which was not of this day, but also from his manner and the very inflection of his voice, which were somehow reminiscent of the old school.

"The nymphs," I insisted, "the one of Nausicaa."

There I caught him. "Nausicaa— you knew?"

"Well, I guessed."

"They don't as a rule; in the general they are merely odd little maidens sporting at ball." His smile came out as pure gold filtered from the dross of suffering— a rare, lovable smile that immediately won me to the old gentleman. "I shall be happy to paint the Nausicaa for you, sir," he added formally, and awaited my further pleasure.

"The name," I said. "Perhaps you'd better jot down my name and address."

"Of course— the name." Obediently he brought pad and pencil, and in a fine, scholarly hand wrote "Mr. Claude Van Nuys," with my New York address.

Absently, he permitted me to pay him and stood ready to bid me good afternoon.

Still I lingered. "The sileni; and the goddess on the swan— Aphrodite, isn't she?"

"You pass, my boy— grade A," he smiled.

"And the Pallas Athena— that's splendid work, only why— ?"

"Ah, the Athena!" A flicker of pain touched the old man's face, and he grew reticent and vague again.

I would have given him up then, had not a terrific and absolutely unheralded blast of wind come to my assistance, striking up the sand in swirling clouds about us.

"Whew!" I whistled, covering my face against the cut of that fine shot. "We're in for a gale, yes? I say—"

But I was shocked to dumbness by the look of strained and unadulterated horror on old Mr. Twining's face. He was breathing hard and backing into the house as though driven against the storm.

"A bad night," he muttered. "Wind and a sea ... It was just such a night—" He rediscovered me with a start and with something approaching relief, I thought.

"But you couldn't stay out in this," he reasoned, more to himself than to me. "It then becomes necessary— Sir,"— he slipped easily into the role of courteous host— "will you accept the shelter of my roof until the storm passes?"

He waited for me to precede him into the house, saw me seated in the only comfortable chair in the dim living room, and, having first excused himself, sat down at his work bench and again took up his brush.

Slowly the room darkened. The old man forgot me and relapsed into mutterings, quivering under each shrill onslaught of the wind, pausing to listen for the moan of the surf below.

"You're deucedly close to this cliff," I ventured once, when a shower of sand swished against the window-pane.

"Eh— the cliff? Some winter nights she'll rise up to the very house and drench the glass of my windows— the sea will," he shuddered. "She's eating back— eating back; forty years ago, when I first came here, there was a front yard."

"But isn't it unsafe?"

"Perhaps," vaguely.

So he worked on until he could no longer see, and then he lit a candle, and turned to the tracing of a pattern from the colored plate of a book. There were several similar volumes at his elbow, and I dared to take one up and run it through. They were, as I had guessed, plates of the more famous Greek vases— mostly those of the red-figured period. "Douris— Euphronios— Hieron," I read aloud. "Oh, and those exquisite old white lekythoi!"

The effect upon the old man was instantaneous. Those names— Hieron, white lekythoi— were the magic passwords to him! He turned to me as a starved dog might turn to food:

"Ah, you know them— the cup-painters!" And he loosed upon me such a flood of scientific enthusiasm and technicalities and dates, with such an undercurrent of reverence and love for the pure beauty of these old vases, as left me breathless, feeling that I had at last found a scientist and a poet rolled into one.

"You know, you know!" he exulted. "Now you recall the Douris Athena—"

"But I know nothing, really," I interrupted him, impelled to honesty by his own intense sincerity. "My knowledge of the classics is general. We deal only in period stuff at the House of Harrow, where I'm a buyer— English and French periods mostly— for a Fifth Avenue clientele. Oh, I once dipped into Greek art on my own account, picked up the patter, but beyond that—"

He would not have it.

"You speak the language," he insisted. "And do you know that it is nearly half a century since I've met a man who's ever heard of Euphronios, the master cup-painter? Lord, how it takes me back!"

The old man laughed. The storm and his terrors were forgotten; the glow in his heart burned up in his cheeks like a fever.

"This— these books,"— his hand swept the colored plate— "they're all I have left— the only link I allow myself."

"Do you mean—? With your passion for the classics, you shut yourself up alone here— starve yourself! But in God's name, man, why?"

"That's why— in God's name." The old man's head was bowed; for a moment the pain was back on his face. But that brittle zest flamed up in him again. "You questioned about my Athena! You are the first man who would comprehend. Wait!"

Smiling like a child with a secret, he tiptoed to a chest of drawers, brought out something wrapped in tissue paper. Very tenderly he unwound the papers, and produced before me the broken half of a red-figured cylix [a cylix is a shallow two-handled cup supported by a stemmed base — M.K.] with one handle attached but with the standard missing. He waited triumphantly for my exclamation.

"Why," I said lamely, "the interior is that same Athena with her flute player. It seems— a very fine fragment—"

"Fine!"— he scorned the adjective. "Fine? Sir, this is the best of its kind— the aristocrat of the Greek vase. See!— The finished lines went something like this."

He caught up a pencil, laid the fragment flat on a sheet of white paper, and completed the broken figures of the Athena and the youth. I noted his hands as he sketched: fine, long-fingered hands, nervous, but sure at their work.

"You see?" he asked. "Now on the exterior of the cylix we have Athena mounting her quadriga after the battle. Is it not a contrast, that peaceful Athena and this Athena? Is he not, indeed, an artist of variety, the man who could do those two things, each so perfectly? You will note the horses— the bold, vigorous lines— the power and swing. It is naked, masculine drawing this— yes, scriptural. Euphronios—" Old Twining broke off, returned to his more precise exposition: "The other half of the cup— the exterior— showed Athena sending her spear into the giant Ankelados—"

"But where is the other half?" I wondered. "You must have seen it, since you hold the answer to the riddle."

"Yes," he returned slowly, "I have seen it; God knows I do hold the answer to the riddle..."

But he came back to me— or rather to the beloved fragment of the cylix.

"The coloring!" he breathed. "That deep orange glow and the velvet black and that fine gloss over all ... The secret of Greek potters, buried with them. Perfect to the very eyelashes..."

Sitting there, he lost himself in reverent admiration of the shard. He did not touch it— it was as though the fragment were too precious to handle; but he gave his soul to it through his eyes. He was oblivious to the wail of a rising wind and the thunder of a rising surf.

"It is," he announced quietly at last, "the half of a genuine, unpublished Euphronios."

I stared. "You say this is— an unpublished Euphronios?"

"Yes. The signature was on the other piece."

"But man alive, given that other piece— and you must know where it is to be so familiar with it— this fragment is worth a king's ransom. A genuine whole Euphronios— why, the museums alone, bidding against each other—"

"The other half is gone," spoke the old man, "gone forever. But this piece itself is still worth more than a king's ransom; not in gold, but in the coin of knowledge— the knowledge it will give the world of Greek art."

His gray eyes wandered to a vision; the poet was drowned in the farseeing scientist.

For that instant I felt myself in the presence of nobility— but the old man's dignity was abruptly shattered. With the rush as of an oncoming engine, the full blast of an Atlantic gale struck us: screamed and whined and groaned, and shook the old house until it rattled like a bag of loose bones.

In the same moment the rain came down in a deluge, swept the window-panes and beat a very devil's tattoo upon the roof. I flatter myself I am no coward, but I found myself clutching at the heavy work bench for anchorage. By the wavering candlelight I discovered my host pressed to his eyes. He seemed to be in physical agony; it flashed to me that he was suffering a stroke of some kind.

I reached him in two steps: "What is it? Sir— Mr. Twining!"

His mutterings were part of a disjointed prayer. I laid my hand on his shoulder, and suddenly he was clinging to me, like a child who finds an unexpected hand in the dark, and was speaking rapidly, incoherently: "No, no, it's not the storm; it's the things it brings up here, in my head— images— scenes no human being should have... staged. I live it over again— over and over— like Macbeth. Don't leave me— don't! It's His will. He sends you, and the storm holds you here— impossible for you to reach the village this night. You shall stay with me, be my first guest in forty years. You shall hear my tale— and judge me."

"Yes, yes," I soothed him, drawing him to a chair, "of course I'll stay."

iii

HE SUBSIDED then, his head dropped to his arms which he had flung out on the bench before him; as the wind died down a little, he slowly regained complete control of himself.

"It's mad of me," he sighed, facing me at last. "Sometimes I fear I am growing a little mad. But I've a fancy to tell to you— an impartial stranger— the story of how I came by the Euphronios fragment. But you must be hungry; you shall first have supper with me."

He became again the solicitous but unobtrusive host. He moved expertly about the kitchen, set a meticulous table with white linen cloth and pewter utensils, and served me clam broth out of a blue bowl, and brown bread and honey, and some sort of flower wine of which Horace might have sung. The old man himself supped on three steamed clams and a glass of cold water. Yet he was the perfect host with his fine, aloof hospitality.

At last we settled to the story. Sitting there on opposite sides of his work bench, with the storm rising and falling in intermittent gusts, and with the broken fragment of the vase between us, its colors glowing out like black onyx and orange coral under the sputtering light of the candle, we dropped back into the old man's past:

"I was abroad," he began, "in the middle of the eighties, on a year's leave of absence from my college, and with me was my friend— Lutz, let us call him— Paul Lutz. I may say here that I had no right to play friend to him, for at heart I despised him— despised his methods, his creeds. One of my college colleagues, a younger man than I, he seemed to have taken a liking to me.

"It was odd, for he was of a wealthy family, and beyond our common interest in archeology and classical subjects— an interest which was rather a fad with him, I suspected— we were at opposite poles. He was shrewd, brilliant even, but how shall I describe him— he had thick fingers. He was the handsome, spoiled, Byronic type: a full-blooded dark man, part Jewish. I have sometimes wondered if I did not keep him by me to watch him, for we were rivals in the same field, even in the same little department, and in those days I made finger exercises of the theories of other scholars and dreamed of striking a great new chord of my own. I wanted fame, you see, recognition, and I was suspicious of Lutz's brilliance. I dare say the basis of many apparent friendships in this world in really a strong rivalry and a mutual suspicion.

"Lutz and I were rivals in more ways than one. There was ... a young lady in our college town; she received us both. Her name— it would do no harm to tell it now— was Lorna Story, and she was like her name, a fine, silver-gray girl. She had a beautiful mind ... and a light shining through her gray eyes that was like the haunting line of a poem..."

The old man sat silent for a time, as he had been silent before the fine beauty of his Greek vase, and his old, frail face was lit by the same inner glow. He moved to take up from the base of the candlestick a hurt night moth, and, cupping it gently in his two hands, opened the window a crack and released it. Then he continued:

"Lutz and I were in Athens together in the spring in the interest of our college museum, which was then in its infancy. We had at our joint disposal a fund for any valuable specimens, and we haunted the excavation fields and the

markets for antiquities. It was the merest chance which led us to the Acropolis at the time they had just started on the work of clearing out the debris which dated before the destruction of the Persians. And it was the merest chance which took us to the spot at the moment the workmen brought to light the vase, in two pieces.

"A vase by the potter Euphronios— and the signature was actually visible through the coating of white earth deposits— here in this debris which went back to the days before the Persian sacking in 480! Now Euphronios had long been fixed at a date considerably later. That difference in dates was important: the inferences that followed— why, I had hit upon a tremendous, an epoch-making discovery! I saw my path to scholarly fame opening up before me.

"I talked with the young Greek who was directing operations there, and secured his promise that I should examine the specimen when it had been thoroughly cleaned. Lutz edged close to me, and I saw that he, too, was excited by the vase, though concealing his excitement under an air of indifference. But I had no time for Lutz. I got away from him. I pursued those inferences for miles through the streets of Athens, and then tested out my conclusions in the classical library out at the American School. There was no error in my facts, no flaw in my logic.

"I walked the streets longer— hours longer— bit by bit built up my article. Then, in the flush of masterly achievement, I turned back to the small hotel where we were stopping.

"I opened the door of our room to find Lutz bent low over the table. He was gloating over something: "You beauty! And to fit with never a flaw— '

" 'Good Lord!' I discovered. 'It's the vase!'

" 'Right, old boy,' Lutz grinned up at me. 'I've finished giving her a bath with aqua fortis— oh, my caution was extreme, never fear. Now what do you think?'

"Think! What could I think? The colors were as you see them now, startling, like black and orange enamel. Forgetful of theories, I fell into rhapsodies with him. Lutz caressed the glossy, painted surface with his plump hands and fairly purred; I darted from the tracery of face and garments to the Greek letters of the signature and sipped the honey of our rare find after my own fashion.

"We were like two eager boys who have come upon Captain Kidd's treasure. We dropped into heated argument, I recall: Lutz preferred the strong, battling Athena who hurled her spear at the giant, while I maintained that the quiet Athena, who sat with her head bowed to the music of her flute player was the greater art. Laughingly, I took possession of my favorite half of the vase and left Lutz to his savage goddess.

"Then the serious significance of the vase and my intended article intruded, and I returned to earth.

" 'But how under heaven did you come by it, Lutz?'

"He laughed, cast an apprehensive glance toward the hallway: 'It's a long story. I say, will you lock that door behind you? Thanks. Whether that Greek was a fool that he should let this slip through his fingers, or whether it was a question of drachmas or whether it was a little of both— idiocy and greed— what does it matter? The vase is here— mine. Well, then— '

" 'But it belongs by right to the Greek government— the Museum of the Acropolis,' I protested, weakly enough.

" 'Naturally, I know.' He smiled. 'But it does not go to the Greek government, nor to the Acropolis. Now why quibble, Twining? You know these things are done every day.'

"I did know: in spite of laws, valuable classical pieces were continually turning up in the States; indeed, our own college had purchased specimens of doubtful past.

" 'How much, then?'

" 'Guess!' And he named a sum that startled me.

" 'It's a lot,' I grumbled. 'And look here, Lutz, I expect to be consulted at least in the disposal of the fund. Still, anything within reason for it ... a superb nucleus of our collection...' Then the thrill of my discovery caught me again: 'Its value is greater than you realize, Lutz. You saw nothing strange in finding a vase by Euphronios in the Persian rubbish? Why, wake up, man! If Euphronios and his contemporaries lived and painted before the Persians, it simply means that the whole chronology of Greek vases must be pushed back half a century. And that's going to mean that Greek painting developed before Greek sculpture, instead of the contrary, as we've always believed. Now do you see! Do you begin to see how this one small vase is going to revolutionize all of our concepts of Greek art? Why, it's colossal! When my article appears— when it's published and quoted and discussed and rediscussed in all the periodicals— '

" 'Hold on!' commanded Lutz. 'We'll not make a splurge of this vase yet. You'll hang off on that article a while— promise me?'

" 'I don't follow you,' I returned, stiffening. 'Why should I make promises— ?'

" 'But I insist that you shall!'

" 'And I reply that I won't!'

"Lutz's black eyes narrowed, his face tightened to an expression of hard shrewdness. 'As I see it, your theory depends upon your establishing the fact that the vase came out of that Persian junk; unless you can guarantee that, the whole theory goes smash. I think you'll find no one who'll swear to that. You'd

have to swear to it alone. And if it came to a showdown, it would be your one word against our several words. Since the thing you're trying to prove is contrary to accepted ideas, the public would find it easier to believe us.'

" 'But the vase was taken from the Persian debris; you yourself saw it, this very morning!'

" 'Perhaps.'

" 'Yet you would— lie?'

" 'Perhaps.'

" 'But why? Can't you grasp it? It means,' I reiterated patiently, 'a big discovery concerning Greek art, and Greek art is the basis of other arts. You wouldn't keep that knowledge from the world? Oh, you're afraid of losing— but whether the vase goes to a Greek museum or to our museum, is nothing compared to the fact it will establish. You simply don't understand!'

" 'It's you,' said Lutz softly, 'who misunderstands. Did I neglect to tell you that I paid for the vase with a check on my own bank?'

" 'You didn't draw on the fund?'

" 'No.'

" 'Why— what—?'

" 'So you see, old top, you haven't been getting me quite straight: this cylix is my find!'

" 'What do you mean?'

"He colored then, beneath his dark skin. 'It's not for the college museum; it's for— my own private museum. I mean to make it the start of the very finest private collection in the States.' He held out his hand for my half of the cup.

"But I drew back, hugged the fragment against my breast. 'Do you stand there and tell me that you're not a scientist at all, but a greedy sensualist? You will remember, Lutz, that you're here for the college, sent by the college— '

" 'And I've worked like the devil for the college!' he broke in roughly. 'I'll continue to work for the college through all the regular channels. But this thing's not regular; it's most— irregular; and the irregularity is my own doing. I'll keep this vase for myself, and I'll suffer my own damnation for it. If you'll kindly hand over that piece—'

"Then I flared: 'I'll do nothing of the sort. If you think you can gag me to silence— force me to sit still and blink at your dirty greed— No, I'll keep this half as guarantee to us both that you'll see the light of day and do the right thing!'

"We had it hot, then. He had paid for it with his own money, had not touched a penny of the college fund; he had me there.

"But I swore, if he insisted upon taking the fragment from me, that I should report him to Greek authorities who watched that no Greek treasures should go from the country without government sanction.

"That held him. He desisted, even tried to square himself with me. Probably Lutz merely delayed the issue until we should be safely out of Greece. For myself, I was firmly resolved that I should finally prevail upon him; and I did not doubt that I should publish my article and either return the vase to Greece or hand it over to my college museum.

"Meantime, we sailed for home, taking passage, as we had planned, on a small trading vessel that wound a leisurely circle about the Atlantic islands and certain South American ports before it brought up and dropped anchor in New York Bay. The truce still held. Each of us guarded jealously his half of the vase, and each kept aloof from the other.

"It was a childish situation. I tried to tell myself that he was only a willful, spoiled boy, acting in character, but my secret hatred of him grew out of all proportion to the quarrel, which was serious enough, truly.

iv

"THERE WAS an implicit understanding between us that the reckoning would come when the ship landed us on home soil. But the ship was destined not to land.

"We were in mid-Atlantic, some eight hundred miles off the Cape Verde Islands and bound for Porto Seguro, when the crash came. It was night, with a heavy gale blowing, and at first I thought the sudden wrench which almost jerked me from my upper berth was a particularly violent wave. Then a grinding and shuddering through all the ship's frame and an abrupt cessation of the engine's throbbing, pulled me stark awake. I hung over the edge of my birth:

" 'What is it?'

" 'Don't know,' yawned Lutz below, struggling from luxurious sleep. 'Better find out— what? 's a damn nuisance—'

"I groped for the light, and we got into clothes, the ship pitching now so that it was impossible to keep a footing. We spoke no further word, but Lutz paused in drawing on his trousers to take from beneath his pillow the box which contained his half of the precious vase; and I reached for my own piece, and kept it by me while I finished lacing my shoes. Each of us eyed the other suspiciously; and Lutz was quick to follow me when, with my treasure, I mounted to the ship's deck.

"The little boat wallowed there in the trough of the sea, a dead and passive thing. With its heart stilled, it seemed strangely aloof from the wild sounds of the storm and the shrill cries of men— as a clock which has stopped ticking off the time is aloof from the currents of noisy life which flow past it.

"Apparently the crew had gone wild, and the captain, too, had completely lost his head, for we passed him sobbing on the deck, unable to give us a coherent word. The men were fighting like freshmen in a college rush over lifeboats which they were attempting to lower to the water.

" 'No chance here,' growled Lutz. 'Lord, let's get out of this mess!'

"I trailed him forward, battling against the wind and the waves which broke over the deck. Once I stumbled over a big brute who was on his knees blubbering like a child. I shook him: "What did we hit?'

" 'Reef. She's a-goin' down, sir— a goin' down. May the good, kind Lord have mercy—'

"Another time I might have pitied this snivelling creature who could not die like a man, but now I stepped over him, intent upon keeping an eye upon Lutz, even as he was intent upon keeping an eye upon me. Lutz was far forward, clinging to a rail, staring over the ship's side. I reached him, clung with him, and followed his gaze.

"There below us, close against the ship, bobbled a little white dory, looking as frail as an eggshell upon the dim, surging mass of waters; it had been launched probably in the first wild moment, and then abandoned for the heavier, more seaworthy boats.

" 'A chance,' spoke Lutz. 'I'll— risk it!'

"He turned to me then, and his eye rested speculatively upon the pocket of my coat which held the vase.

" 'No, you don't!' I said sharply. 'I'll take that risk with you.'

"We stood measuring each other. It was a contest of wills that threatened any moment to degenerate into a physical struggle. 'Oh, I see you are thinking it unlikely'— Twining's long-fingered, nervous old hand shaded his eyes from the candlelight— 'that we two men should have stood there wrestling over a Greek vase when any moment threatened to plunge us into eternity. But if you cannot believe that, young man, then you know nothing of the collector's passion or the scholar's passion.

"We measured each other, I say— oh, quietly. All about us was the terror of the storm— the same wash and slap and snarl that you hear now about this very house; and concentrating upon him, probing him, my heart filled with intense hatred of him, slowly and surely, as a jug that is held under a single stream fills with water— such a hatred as threatened to overflow— a killing

hatred! There, on just such a night as this, murder was born in me— murder, I tell you!

"The crisis passed. Unexpectedly, Lutz gave in: 'Oh, all right; together still— for a little time—'

"A wave drenched us. We recovered, strained into the darkness to determine whether the little dory had been swamped. But no, she still rode the sea, miraculously right side up.

" 'Come along, then!' snapped Lutz. 'There's no time to waste.'

"Our time was indeed short. We gathered what store of things we could together, and since the decks of the ship were by this time ominously close to the water, the drop into the tossing small dory was easier than it might have been. Lutz took the oars. Some way he had maneuvered us about the bow of the ship, and now we were clear of the sinking vessel, carried swiftly away from it by the sea.

"The rest is a blur. I recall dark shapes— bits of bobbing wreckage— and the white circle of an empty life saver. I did not see the ship go down. One minute there were lights; and the next minute there was darkness over all the ocean, and the human voices had subsided into the voices of wind and water. For the sea itself claimed all my attention and held it.

"That night was a business of separate, marching waves, with a separate prayer for each wave, that it would not break at the wrong moment. A hundred times I shut my eyes and abandoned hope, and a hundred times I opened them and found us safe. Lutz, an athlete in his day, hung onto the oars, but he was powerless against that surge of water. It was only a miracle which kept us afloat. Our little dory rode the waves like a cork, but she still rode them.

"With the breaking of the sullen dawn, the wind died. The rain settled to a steady downpour, and the waves, as the day wore on, subsided to the long, low rollers that last for hours after such a gale. The gray sea was a vast, unbroken stretch without a trace of life; perhaps the miracle that had saved our frail boat had not held for those heavier dories...

"Anyway, to cut it short, we drifted that day without sight of a single vessel. Wet through and numb with cold, I was glad to take a shift at the oars while Lutz slept. Our hastily gathered provisions were found to consist of half a pail of soda biscuits, a lantern without oil, some miscellaneous ropes and tarpaulins— and that was all!

"We ate sparingly of the biscuits, drank rain water caught in the cracker pail. Our boat, we discovered, was leaking badly through seams in the bow; so we crowded as much weight to the stern of the craft as we could, and I was kept busy bailing out the water.

"Late in the afternoon, when the situation looked worst, we perceived a black speck upon the horizon. The speck grew into a pile of dark rocks— bare and uninhabited, we saw, as the current carried us close. Somehow, we gained the sheltered side of the island, and there, in a narrow inlet, achieved a landing. The mass of rocks was perhaps fourteen hundred feet long and half as wide. It rose abruptly from the sea, a lonely, desolate pile. The only life was sea gulls, insects and spiders, and a few fish in the surrounding waters. We were together there on the island for four days.

"Through all those four days, half starved and suffering from exposure as we were, Lutz and I nursed each his own half of the cylix and kept a watchful eye upon the other half. The strain of the situation grew intolerable. Now through what follows I don't know how to account for myself; whether it was a fever working in my blood— but no, I was coldly, calculatingly sane as I laid my plans. Yet before that crisis I had never in my life been a vicious man.

"You see, figuring our location from the ship's map as near as I could remember it, I came to believe that this solitary rock was one visited and described by Darwin in his investigation of volcanic islands. If it was the island I believed it to be, then it lay off the ocean lines and was very rarely passed by ships. Our chance of being rescued, if we stayed on the island then, was slight.

"I did not mention these deductions to Lutz. Nor, after Lutz had eaten our last cracker, did I tell him of my own small reserve supply of concentrated meat, which I carried always in my pocket at that time to save the trouble of too frequent meals. At first I did not myself comprehend the drift of my own thoughts.

"Then, on the second night, while Lutz slept under a tarpaulin and while I fought off a twisting hunger, I saw the event quite clearly. Lutz would be the first to succumb to weakness; I would hold on longer than he could. The boat was our best risk, but in its present leaky condition it was unseaworthy for two men. Now one man, huddled back in the stern ... there was just a chance. And the vase— the whole vase— in my possession; and my article secure...

"Deliberately, I broke off a piece of the dried meat, which I had not touched until that moment.

"Perhaps I should have weakened in my course and divided my slender provision with him— I do not know. But on the following morning Lutz, sprawled on his stomach over the rock's edge, with his pocketknife tied to a pole, managed to spear a small fish. He did not share with me. Desperate for food, he devoured the thing raw, and the sight nauseated and hardened me.

"I begrudged him the strength he was storing up; but I did not doubt the issue. For all his athletic build, Lutz was soft with soft living. Moreover, my will was stronger than his. So I ate sparingly of my dried meat while Lutz slept, and

I maintained a patient watch over the Euphronios fragment which was not yet in my hands.

"Meantime, I kept up some pretense of friendship and good cheer with him. He insisted upon piling up wet driftwood for a fire in case a ship should come our way, and I encouraged him to the effort; though we had no matches, he thought he might manage a spark, and while I knew that this rock was too soft to serve as flint, I agreed with him.

"I watched him burn up energy and grow hourly weaker, and waited ... waited...

v

"MURDER WAS in the air between us, and since those things breed, I wondered that a murdering hatred of me did not spring up in his heart to match my own, and that he did not tackle me there on the rocks and fight it out with me.

"But no— though I sometimes fancied he looked at me oddly, he remained amiable. Lutz was as determined as I to have his way about the vase; beyond that, he was still my friend in his loose, selfish way— my friend as much as he had ever been. As my friend, Lutz, gross and unscrupulous as he was, could never have guessed the thing that was going on in my mind. That was my great sin, the crime that makes me doubly cursed; it was my friend whom I betrayed— a man who was bound to me in friendship.

"When, on the fourth day, the rain ceased, and a hot, tropical sun blazed out and dried up the pools in the rocks which had furnished our water, I felt myself slipping. The heat on those naked rocks was worse than the chilling rain. A fever grew in me. I could not afford to wait longer. While my companion drowsed in a kind of stupor, I gathered a few things into the boat, stowed my own precious fragment in a concealed nook far up in the bow, and then moved cautiously toward Lutz.

"A dizziness seized me... but I went on... I had rehearsed it all fifty times, you understand, so that I knew every move by heart; and though my memory of the actual events is not clear, I must have gone through with it as I had planned. I suppose I may have awakened him in shoving off the boat, for I have a hazy recollection of a fight.

"And when I came to, alone in the dory, in a calm blue sea, I felt a soreness at my throat, and afterward I was to find black finger marks there, which I carried with me for days. Perhaps I had actually killed him, left him in a heap on the rocks— I couldn't remember. But whether I had murdered him outright with my own hands or not, it did not matter; I had murdered him as surely by

abandoning him there on that forgotten island and taking the one chance for myself. I was a murderer by intent and by cold calculation— a murderer of my friend and colleague!"

"And your own fate?" I prompted old "Tinker" Twining gently.

"I was picked up several days later, in a state of semi-consciousness, by a small passenger steamer, just as I had foreseen. In the long voyage home, I lived through nightmares. I felt impelled to confess the truth and to beg the Captain to turn back for Lutz, but I knew that it was now too late. I suffered alone as I deserved to suffer.

"There were nights when I felt my fingers sinking into the flesh of his throat... other nights when I looked at my own hands and could not believe it. My half of the vase— did I tell you that I must somehow have failed to secure Lutz's half, strong as my determination had been, since only this fragment was found in the dory, hidden under the bow where I had placed it? This piece, though I hated it in my reaction, I kept always before me as the reminder, the sackcloth and ashes of my sin.

"The steamer landed me in Boston, and I wandered up here to the Cape. Since the Agricola had gone down with all souls reported lost, I was dead to the world. That was well, for, having murdered my friend for a piece of pottery, I was unfit for human society. This penalty of my crime followed as a natural sequence: to drop out of the world and the work I loved; to read no books and to take no periodicals on my own subject; in short, to give up the thing that was most vital to me. That would be prison for me— a prison worse than most criminals ever know.

"I found this remote house, got in touch with my lawyer at home, and, having pledged him to secrecy, arranged that my small, yearly income should be paid regularly to a T. Twining at this address. I had no close relatives, and the old lawyer has long since died, leaving my affairs in the hands of an incurious younger partner. There was no hitch.

"So I settled here, and eked out my income with this painting. Though I fixed my own terms of imprisonment, I have lived up to them. In all those forty years I have permitted myself no inquiries and I have heard no news of anyone I ever knew in the old days. I have virtually buried myself alive.

"Ah, you are thinking it wrong of me to have buried, too, the half of this valuable cylix, since, fragment though it is, it would have been sufficient to establish the fact. Perhaps it was wrong. But, don't you see, I could establish nothing without first revealing my identity and giving my word as a scientist that the shard came from the Persian debris? That way lay danger— the danger of being drawn back into the old life; there, too, lay honor for me who deserved nothing but contempt.

"And always in the background there was Lorna Story. No, the temptations were too many; I could not risk it. But I have bequeathed that knowledge to posterity; I have left a written confession and a statement. Tell me— you have recently come out of the world— you don't think it will be too late after my death, do you?"

Though I had some shadowy idea of what extensive excavations and what far-reaching discoveries had been made in the classical world of recent years, I assured the old man that it would perhaps not be too late. I had not the heart to rob him of the little outworn theory that he hugged close.

"And so," he concluded his story, "you see before you a murderer! Your verdict would be—?"

"But how can you be sure?" I countered. "If you slipped up on the vase, you may have slipped up on other details of your program. Besides, his chance on the island was as good as yours in a leaking dory. Who shall say?"

Old Twining merely shook his head. He returned again to the glowing fragment on the table between us.

"Ah, you are thinking that the vase is my consolation— that I wanted to keep it. And perhaps I did," he owned wistfully. "I swear to you I abhor the deed it stands for, but I can no more help loving it in itself—" He lost himself, wandered off once more into the fine points of his treasure.

But the wind rose up again, and the old man's head dropped to his hands. I was with him all that night and I saw him suffer the tortures of an eternally damned soul with a razor blade conscience.

The storm over, he was the kindly, considerate host when he bade goodbye on the following morning. I left him with the feeling that I had been in the presence of as fine a gentleman as I had ever met; that his story of the preceding night was utterly incongruous to the man as he was. It would be a physical impossibility, I protested, for that gentle old scholar to harm an insect.

His mind had wandered at times: could it be that he was suffering some kind of an hallucination, the result, perhaps, of an overacute conscience? I believed there was some factor to his story which I had not got hold of, and I promised myself to visit him again.

vi

BUT TIME PASSED. I was abroad in England and in France. Then two years later, back again in New York, I picked up the missing link in the old scholar's story:

It was inevitable, I suppose, that, as buyer for the House of Harrow, I should sooner or later stumble into Max Bauer. At a private sale I lazily bid

against the wealthy collector for a jade bowl and good-naturedly lost to him. I talked with him, and when he urged me to dine with him that evening and see his treasures, I assented.

I don't know why I accepted his invitation, for I did not like the man; but I was mildly curious about his collection, and alone in the city in midsummer, I welcomed any diversion.

So he dined me and wined me— especially the latter— to repleteness in the ornate dining-room of his luxurious apartment, which was after the manner of a banquet hall. I watched him pick apart the bird that was set before him, and found something cannibalistic in the performance; and I watched him again over a rich mousse, and liked him less and less. His hand was always upon the bottle; he gave me no peace— urged things upon me, made a show of his food and his service.

The meal over, still keeping the decanter by him, he trailed me through rooms littered with oriental junk. He bragged and boasted, told the history of this piece and that: how he had robbed one man here and tricked another there. His voice thickened, as his enthusiasm grew, and I turned thoroughly uncomfortable and wondered when I could break away.

Clearly, the man attracted few friends of a caliber to appreciate his art treasures, for under my perfunctory approval, he became increasingly garrulous, until at last he invited me into the inner shrine, the small room which held his most private and precious possessions.

We stopped before a water color painting of a slim girl in gray.

"My wife," said old Bauer with a flourish. "Her last portrait."

I turned incredulously from that white-flower face, with its fine, subtle smile, half-ironical and half-tired, to my gross-featured host— and I shuddered.

"A handsome woman," he mumbled. "Picture doesn't do her justice. Face so-so, but a body... a body for an artist to paint..."

I looked away from him— followed the gray girl's eyes to the object below her upon which she ironically smiled: it was a red-figured Greek vase, and I remember thinking that this man must have changed— that his taste, his very life, must have degenerated, like the retrogression from the fine to the decadent, since such a girl had married him.

Then something familiar in the vase struck me— like the broken pattern of a forgotten dream... It was the fragment of a vase, the half of a cylix, on which an orange goddess stood with uplifted spear.

"Ah," I breathed, "the Athena— Euphronios!"

"So you're up to it!" chuckled old Bauer. "Not many of 'em are. Classic stuff: I used to aim for a collection of the pure Greek, but I've grown out of

that; not that I wouldn't have achieved it if my taste hadn't changed, y'understand, for I'm generally successful— I get the things I set out for.

This—" he scowled at the vase— "is my one failure. But there's a story,"— he poured himself another whisky (to my infinite relief forgot to press me)— "want to hear it, eh?"

I looked at him carefully: the plump fingers; the full, sensual lips; the dark skin and the nose— probably Jewish blood. What was the name?— Lutz, that was it!

Decidedly, I did want to hear his story!

vii

"MY ONE failure," he emphasized it, slumping into a chair. "Not my fault, either; the fault of a stuffy old fool. He doted on me, played the fatherly role and I tolerated him as you will such folks. I cribbed a lot off of him; I was keen on the classics at that time, and he knew a thing or two.

"Besides, he was sweet on Lorna, and you never could tell about her— odd tastes; it was best to keep track of him. We traveled together for the college— you'd never guess I'd been a college professor in my day, would you? I happened onto this thing quite by luck— a genuine Euphronios, broken clean in two pieces. I wanted it, and I managed it. This fellow— old Gooding— had a notion of turning it in to the college museum; he had some other fool's idea of proving something-or-other— a rare, old bird, a pedant, you understand. It was a shaky business; I'd no intention of publishing my Euphronios at this time. But he was set— you'd never believe how set!— and since I couldn't afford to stir up a row there in Athens, I humored him.

"Once we were clear of Greece— once we struck home ground— but we never struck home ground on that ship. She went down!"— with a flourish of his glass. "Yes, dammit all, regular desert island stuff. We were hung up on a rock in mid-ocean, the two of us, old Gooding hugging tight to half the vase, and me nursing the other half. Can't say I ever was more damned uncomfortable in my life.

"He had this eccentric idea of honor and he had it hard like religion, and he hung on like a bulldog. It was war between us. Oh, he doted upon me right enough, still insisted upon the paternal role, but I'd no intention of letting him pull this thing."

Again Bauer fumbled for the bottle, spilled whisky into his glass.

"The old idiot— you'd think he'd've seen what he was driving me to, but not him. I had a couple of matches in my pocket— I'd held out on him, y'understand. And I'd built up a pile of driftwood for a signal fire to the first

ship that passed. But I'd no notion of saving him, too. No, I had a contrary notion of setting him adrift in the dory.

"Oh, it was easy: he'd gone weaker than a cat, y'understand— all gray matter an' no physh— physhique, ol' Cheever Gooding. I'd take my chances on the island with a heap of dry wood an' two matches for a l'il bonfire, an' with the c-cup, both pieces of it safe.

"Murder?" Bauer laughed. " 's'n ugly word, eh?" He pursued with an uncertain finger an injured fly which crawled across his trousers leg. "Bah, they say this man kills for hate, that for love— all good, noble motives. But your true collector— you 'n' me— kills for a c-cup. Killing's natural— th'easiest thing in the world— when you're preshed for time. 'N I was preshed for time, see? There was a ship out there— I saw the smoke. I got him into the dory, but it was a fight; there was life in the ol' bird yet, though the sun'd laid him low. Leaky boat— not much chance for him— still I'd be sure. I choked him gently— oh, quite gently— like thish,"— Bauer demonstrated by crushing the fly very thoroughly between his thumb and forefinger— "till the breath was gone from him. Then I looked for th'other half of the vashe— couldn't find it. The smoke was close— couldn't wait. P'raps he's hid it in the rocks, I shay. So I shoves him off, an' the tide carries him 'way from the ship's smoke— bob-bobbin' away.

"I runs up an' sends my twigs a-blazin' to the sky. 'N I searches everywhere for the c-cup— in every crack— an' no luck! Guns shalute— ship's comin'; li'l dory bobs off there a mere sun spot; still no luck. Can you beat it? All my work for nothing! 'Cause, see, I'd murdered him— an' what for? Damn him, his skin's too cheap —

"Say, you're not leavin'? My one failure— I've had everything else: Lorna an' thish here c-c'lection— everything! But this one l'il broken c-cup— too bad— too bad—"

I left him caressing the vase with his hands as old "Tinker" Twining had caressed it with his eyes. But before I went, my gaze fell again upon the painting of Bauer's wife, and I remembered the other man's words for her: "A beautiful mind, and a light shining through her gray eyes that was like the haunting line of a poem."

"Body love and soul love," I muttered.

Bauer sought me out the following morning.

"What did I tell you last night?" he asked.

I told him briefly.

"Fiction!" he shrugged with an uneasy laugh. "I get to running on— You'll forget it?"

I was ready for him.

"Yes," I agreed. "I'll forget it— on one condition: that you run down to the Cape with me to— pass judgment on an antique; to give me your honest, expert advice— free of charge."

He consented at once, the connoisseur in him aroused.

vii

SO WE CAME down to the Cape on a clear blue morning after rains.

I made inquiries at the village concerning old "Tinker" Twining, and was prepared for what I found. I had come in time, a woman told me; she was troubled about him, though, since he would allow no one to stop in the house and care for him.

We took the trail over to the back shore; and I held Bauer off, answered his questions vaguely. It was a different day from that sullen one on which I had first walked this path; an exquisite morning, requiring you to capture the shine of each separate leaf— the upward-tossed, silver poplar leaves and the varnished oak leaves— if you would adequately describe it.

This meeting I had planned solely for the sake of the old scholar; if, in aiding Twining to clear his conscience, I also cleared the conscience of Max Bauer, that I could not help. But Bauer, I assured myself, had no conscience; one way or the other, it would not matter to him.

Still, it was a situation without parallel, I thought: two men, each living, and each believing himself to have murdered the other. And to bring those two men together, face to face, would be smashing drama!

But life is seldom as spectacular as we anticipate; my fireworks fizzled. Beyond a stretch of beach grass— running silver under the sunlight— and humped up there precariously over sands, stood the same little rusty gray house. The door was half open, and the work bench was deserted. We found the old man in a bedroom over the sea, lying in a black walnut bed under a patchwork quilt.

He was propped up on pillows, and the worn face was silhouetted against the ocean, blue today with pale sweepings, and flowing out to silver under the sun. The elderly scholar was delirious, his mind wandering over that old sin; he was still paying the penalty for a murder of the imagination.

"My friend," he muttered, "the man who was bound to me in friendship— certain death—"

"Listen!" I said. "This is Max Bauer, the man you thought you killed! You didn't murder him; you only thought you did. He's here safe— look!"

But the other did not grasp it; only repeated the name "Max Bauer," and turned away with a long shudder.

Then Bauer was chattering at my shoulder: "Gooding— old Cheever Gooding himself!"

"Perhaps that's what you called him— the man you strangled— It's no use— no earthly use; he's still under the illusion— we can never make it clear to him now."

"But how—?" I turned impatiently at Bauer's insistence, gave him curtly and succinctly, in four sentences, the clues he had missed.

He sat there. "So he tried to murder me! The old— skunk!"

And later, "B'God," he whispered, "how he's gone! A shadow..."

I looked at Bauer, sitting corpulent and gross.

"Yes," I replied, "a shadow."

But already Bauer's eyes had roved from Twining to a thing on the quilt which he had missed in the patchwork colors, a thing of orange and black.

"Lord, it's the missing half!" he exclaimed, and now there was genuine feeling in his voice.

I stood between Bauer and that object, guarding Twining's treasure. And still I tried to give old Twining back his clear conscience.

"It's Max Bauer," I insinuated, "Max Bauer."

I must have got it across for as Bauer edged closer and as I seized the shard, the old man stared at that sensual, dark face with an expression of recognition. There must have come to him then some inkling of the situation.

"Yes," he whispered, "let him have it." He took the fragment from me, held it up tenderly for a moment in his two frail, fine old hands, and then placed it in the thick hands of Max Bauer. Bauer closed upon it greedily.

"Murdered him!" moaned Twining.

"Murdered me nothing," chuckled Bauer, who could now, with the vase in his grasp, afford to be generous. " 'S all right, old man; we're quits."

But Twining was fumbling for a piece of paper. "This!" he breathed. "Tell them where— painting before sculpture—"

"But great Caesar, they've known all this for forty years!" exploded Bauer, scanning the written statement. "Why, they've found fragments of another Euphronios in that same Persian dirt heap; someone else proved that very thing and the Lord knows how many other things. Just fragments though, y'understand— not a perfect one like this." Bauer let the paper flutter from his hands; I quietly picked up Twining's confession and later dropped it into the stove. The old man relapsed into his former state of wandering misery, with apparently no recollection of the episode.

Bauer left soon after that.

"A good day for me, and I owe it all to you, Van Nuys— My thanks," he made genial acknowledgment from the doorway.

I choked on my disgust of him. So Max Bauer, whom only circumstances outside of himself had saved from actual murder, went up to the city, successful and carefree, to add to his many treasures old "Tinker" Twining's one treasure.

I stayed with the old scholar, whose every instinct would have held him from the murder he had planned, and watched him wear himself out, suffering to the last breath for his one mental sin.

That is why I hope at the final reckoning, God will take some account of the sensitiveness of the souls he weighs, and will fix his penalties accordingly.

_____

7: Financing Finnegan

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1896-1940

Esquire, Jan 1938

FINNEGAN and I have the same literary agent to sell our writings for us— but though I'd often been in Mr. Cannon's office just before and just after Finnegan's visits, I had never met him. Likewise we had the same publisher and often when I arrived there Finnegan had just departed. I gathered from a thoughtful sighing way in which they spoke of him—

"Ah— Finnegan—"

"Oh yes, Finnegan was here."

—that the distinguished author's visit had been not uneventful. Certain remarks implied that he had taken something with him when he went— manuscripts, I supposed, one of those great successful novels of his. He had taken "it" off for a final revision, a last draft, of which he was rumored to make ten in order to achieve that facile flow, that ready wit, which distinguished his work. I discovered only gradually that most of Finnegan's visits had to do with money.

"I'm sorry you're leaving," Mr. Cannon would tell me, "Finnegan will be here tomorrow." Then after a thoughtful pause, "I'll probably have to spend some time with him."

I don't know what note in his voice reminded me of a talk with a nervous bank president when Dillinger was reported in the vicinity. His eyes looked out into the distance and he spoke as to himself:

"Of course he may be bringing a manuscript. He has a novel he's working on, you know. And a play too."

He spoke as though he were talking about some interesting but remote events of the cinquecento; but his eyes became more hopeful as he added: "Or maybe a short story."

"He's very versatile, isn't he?" I said.

"Oh yes," Mr. Cannon perked up. "He can do anything— anything when he puts his mind to it. There's never been such a talent."

"I haven't seen much of his work lately."

"Oh, but he's working hard. Some of the magazines have stories of his that they're holding."

"Holding for what?"

"Oh, for a more appropriate time— an upswing. They like to think they have something of Finnegan's."

His was indeed a name with ingots in it. His career had started brilliantly and if it had not kept up to its first exalted level, at least it started brilliantly all

over again every few years. He was the perennial man of promise in American letters— what he could actually do with words was astounding, they glowed and coruscated— he wrote sentences, paragraphs, chapters that were masterpieces of fine weaving and spinning. It was only when I met some poor devil of a screen writer who had been trying to make a logical story out of one of his books that I realized he had his enemies.

"It's all beautiful when you read it," this man said disgustedly, "but when you write it down plain it's like a week in the nut-house."

From Mr. Cannon's office I went over to my publishers on Fifth Avenue and there too I learned in no time that Finnegan was expected tomorrow.

Indeed he had thrown such a long shadow before him that the luncheon where I expected to discuss my own work was largely devoted to Finnegan. Again I had the feeling that my host, Mr. George Jaggers, was talking not to me but to himself.

"Finnegan's a great writer," he said.

"Undoubtedly."

"And he's really quite all right, you know."

As I hadn't questioned the fact I inquired whether there was any doubt about it.

"Oh no," he said hurriedly. "It's just that he's had such a run of hard luck lately— "

I shook my head sympathetically. "I know. That diving into a half-empty pool was a tough break."

"Oh, it wasn't half-empty. It was full of water. Full to the brim. You ought to hear Finnegan on the subject— he makes a side-splitting story of it. It seems he was in a run-down condition and just diving from the side of the pool, you know— " Mr. Jaggers pointed his knife and fork at the table, "and he saw some young girls diving from the fifteen-foot board. He says he thought of his lost youth and went up to do the same and made a beautiful swan dive— but his shoulder broke while he was still in the air." He looked at me rather anxiously. "Haven't you heard of cases like that— a ball player throwing his arm out of joint?"

I couldn't think of any orthopedic parallels at the moment.

"And then," he continued dreamily, "Finnegan had to write on the ceiling."

"On the ceiling?"

"Practically. He didn't give up writing— he has plenty of guts, that fellow, though you may not believe it. He had some sort of arrangement built that was suspended from the ceiling and he lay on his back and wrote in the air."

I had to grant that it was a courageous arrangement.

"Did it affect his work?" I inquired. "Did you have to read his stories backward— like Chinese?"

"They were rather confused for a while," he admitted, "but he's all right now. I got several letters from him that sounded more like the old Finnegan— full of life and hope and plans for the future—"

The faraway look came into his face and I turned the discussion to affairs closer to my heart. Only when we were back in his office did the subject recur— and I blush as I write this because it includes confessing something I seldom do— reading another man's telegram. It happened because Mr. Jaggers was intercepted in the hall and when I went into his office and sat down it was stretched out open before me:

WITH FIFTY I COULD AT LEAST PAY TYPIST AND GET HAIRCUT AND PENCILS LIFE HAS BECOME IMPOSSIBLE AND I EXIST ON DREAM OF GOOD NEWS DESPERATELY FINNEGAN

I couldn't believe my eyes— fifty dollars, and I happened to know that Finnegan's price for short stories was somewhere around three thousand. George Jaggers found me still staring dazedly at the telegram. After he read it he stared at me with stricken eyes.

"I don't see how I can conscientiously do it," he said.

I started and glanced around to make sure I was in the prosperous publishing office in New York. Then I understood— I had misread the telegram. Finnegan was asking for fifty thousand as an advance— a demand that would have staggered any publisher no matter who the writer was.

"Only last week," said Mr. Jaggers disconsolately, "I sent him a hundred dollars. It puts my department in the red every season, so I don't dare tell my partners any more. I take it out of my own pocket— give up a suit and a pair of shoes."

"You mean Finnegan's broke?"

"Broke!" He looked at me and laughed soundlessly— in fact I didn't exactly like the way that he laughed. My brother had a nervous— but that is afield from this story. After a minute he pulled himself together. "You won't say anything about this, will you? The truth is Finnegan's been in a slump, he's had blow after blow in the past few years, but now he's snapping out of it and I know we'll get back every cent we've—" He tried to think of a word but "given him" slipped out. This time it was he who was eager to change the subject.

Don't let me give the impression that Finnegan's affairs absorbed me during a whole week in New York— it was inevitable, though, that being much in the offices of my agent and my publisher, I happened in on a lot. For instance, two days later, using the telephone in Mr. Cannon's office, I was accidentally switched in on a conversation he was having with George Jaggers.

It was only partly eavesdropping, you see, because I could only hear one end of the conversation and that isn't as bad as hearing it all.

"But I got the impression he was in good health... he did say something about his heart a few months ago but I understood it got well... yes, and he talked about some operation he wanted to have— I think he said it was cancer... Well, I felt like telling him I had a little operation up my sleeve too, that I'd have had by now if I could afford it.... No, I didn't say it. He seemed in such good spirits that it would have been a shame to bring him down. He's starting a story today, he read me some of it on the phone....

"... I did give him twenty-five because he didn't have a cent in his pocket... oh, yes— I'm sure he'll be all right now. He sounds as if he means business."

I understood it all now. The two men had entered into a silent conspiracy to cheer each other up about Finnegan. Their investment in him, in his future, had reached a sum so considerable that Finnegan belonged to them. They could not bear to hear a word against him— even from themselves.

ii

I SPOKE my mind to Mr. Cannon. "If this Finnegan is a four-flusher you can't go on indefinitely giving him money. If he's through he's through and there's nothing to be done about it. It's absurd that you should put off an operation when Finnegan's out somewhere diving into half-empty swimming pools."

"It was full," said Mr. Cannon patiently— "full to the brim."

"Well, full or empty the man sounds like a nuisance to me."

"Look here," said Cannon, "I've got a talk to Hollywood due on the wire. Meanwhile you might glance over that." He threw a manuscript into my lap. "Maybe it'll help you understand. He brought it in yesterday."

It was a short story. I began it in a mood of disgust but before I'd read five minutes I was completely immersed in it, utterly charmed, utterly convinced and wishing to God I could write like that. When Cannon finished his phone call I kept him waiting while I finished it and when I did there were tears in these hard old professional eyes. Any magazine in the country would have run it first in any issue.

But then nobody had ever denied that Finnegan could write.

iii

MONTHS passed before I went again to New York, and then, so far as the offices of my agent and my publisher were concerned, I descended upon a quieter, more stable world. There was at last time to talk about my own

conscientious if uninspired literary pursuits, to visit Mr. Cannon in the country and to kill summer evenings with George Jaggers where the vertical New York starlight falls like lingering lightning into restaurant gardens. Finnegan might have been at the North Pole— and as a matter of fact he was. He had quite a group with him, including three Bryn Mawr anthropologists, and it sounded as if he might collect a lot of material there. They were going to stay several months, and if the thing had somehow the ring of a promising little house party about it, that was probably due to my jealous, cynical disposition.

"We're all just delighted," said Cannon. "It's a God-send for him. He was fed up and he needed just this— this—"

"Ice and snow," I supplied.

"Yes, ice and snow. The last thing he said was characteristic of him. Whatever he writes is going to be pure white— it's going to have a blinding glare about it."

"I can imagine it will. But tell me— who's financing it? Last time I was here I gathered the man was insolvent."

"Oh, he was really very decent about that. He owed me some money and I believe he owed George Jaggers a little too— " He "believed," the old hypocrite. He knew damn well— "so before he left he made most of his life insurance over to us. That's in case he doesn't come back— those trips are dangerous of course."

"I should think so," I said "—especially with three anthropologists."

"So Jaggers and I are absolutely covered in case anything happens— it's as simple as that."

"Did the life-insurance company finance the trip?"

He fidgeted perceptibly.

"Oh, no. In fact when they learned the reason for the assignments they were a little upset. George Jaggers and I felt that when he had a specific plan like this with a specific book at the end of it, we were justified in backing him a little further."

"I don't see it," I said flatly.

"You don't?" The old harassed look came back into his eyes. "Well, I'll admit we hesitated. In principle I know it's wrong. I used to advance authors small sums from time to time, but lately I've made a rule against it— and kept it. It's only been waived once in the last two years and that was for a woman who was having a bad struggle— Margaret Trahill, do you know her? She was an old girl of Finnegan's, by the way."

"Remember I don't even know Finnegan."

"That's right. You must meet him when he comes back— if he does come back. You'd like him— he's utterly charming."

Again I departed from New York, to imaginative North Poles of my own, while the year rolled through summer and fall. When the first snap of November was in the air, I thought of the Finnegan expedition with a sort of shiver and any envy of the man departed. He was probably earning any loot, literary or anthropological, he might bring back. Then, when I hadn't been back in New York three days, I read in the paper that he and some other members of his party had walked off into a snowstorm when the food supply gave out, and the Arctic had claimed another sacrifice.

I was sorry for him, but practical enough to be glad that Cannon and Jaggers were well protected. Of course, with Finnegan scarcely cold— if such a simile is not too harrowing— they did not talk about it but I gathered that the insurance companies had waived habeas corpus or whatever it is in their lingo, and it seemed quite sure that they would collect.

His son, a fine looking young fellow, came into George Jaggers' office while I was there and from him I could guess at Finnegan's charm— a shy frankness together with an impression of a very quiet brave battle going on inside of him that he couldn't quite bring himself to talk about— but that showed as heat lightning in his work.

"The boy writes well too," said George after he had gone. "He's brought in some remarkable poems. He's not ready to step into his father's shoes, but there's a definite promise."

"Can I see one of his things?"

"Certainly— here's one he left just as he went out."

George took a paper from his desk, opened it and cleared his throat. Then he squinted and bent over a little in his chair.

"Dear Mr. Jaggers," he began, "I didn't like to ask you this in person—" Jaggers stopped, his eyes reading ahead rapidly.

"How much does he want?" I inquired.

He sighed.

"He gave me the impression that this was some of his work," he said in a pained voice.

"But it is," I consoled him. "Of course he isn't quite ready to step into his father's shoes."

I was sorry afterwards to have said this, for after all Finnegan had paid his debts, and it was nice to be alive now that better times were back and books were no longer rated as unnecessary luxuries. Many authors I knew who had skimped along during the depression were now making long-deferred trips or paying off mortgages or turning out the more finished kind of work that can only be done with a certain leisure and security. I had just got a thousand dollars advance for a venture in Hollywood and was going to fly out with all the

verve of the old days when there was chicken feed in every pot. Going in to say good-by to Cannon and collect the money, it was nice to find he too was profiting— wanted me to go along and see a motor boat he was buying.

But some last-minute stuff came up to delay him and I grew impatient and decided to skip it. Getting no response to a knock on the door of his sanctum, I opened it anyhow.

The inner office seemed in some confusion. Mr. Cannon was on several telephones at once and dictating something about an insurance company to a stenographer. One secretary was getting hurriedly into her hat and coat as upon an errand and another was counting bills from her purse.

"It'll be only a minute," said Cannon, "it's just a little office riot— you never saw us like this."

"Is it Finnegan's insurance?" I couldn't help asking. "Isn't it any good?"

"His insurance— oh, perfectly all right, perfectly. This is just a matter of trying to raise a few hundred in a hurry. The banks are closed and we're all contributing."

"I've got that money you just gave me," I said. "I don't need all of it to get to the coast." I peeled off a couple of hundred. "Will this be enough?"

"That'll be fine— it just saves us. Never mind, Miss Carlsen. Mrs. Mapes, you needn't go now."

"I think I'll be running along," I said.

"Just wait two minutes," he urged. "I've only got to take care of this wire. It's really splendid news. Bucks you up."

It was a cablegram from Oslo, Norway— before I began to read I was full of a premonition.

AM MIRACULOUSLY SAFE HERE BUT DETAINED BY AUTHORITIES PLEASE WIRE PASSAGE MONEY FOR FOUR PEOPLE AND TWO HUNDRED EXTRA I AM BRINGING BACK PLENTY GREETINGS FROM THE DEAD.

FINNEGAN

"Yes, that's splendid," I agreed. "He'll have a story to tell now."

"Won't he though," said Cannon. "Miss Carlsen, will you wire the parents of those girls— and you'd better inform Mr. Jaggers."

As we walked along the street a few minutes later, I saw that Mr. Cannon, as if stunned by the wonder of this news, had fallen into a brown study, and I did not disturb him, for after all I did not know Finnegan and could not whole-heartedly share his joy. His mood of silence continued until we arrived at the door of the motor boat show. Just under the sign he stopped and stared upward, as if aware for the first time where we were going.

"Oh, my," he said, stepping back. "There's no use going in here now. I thought we were going to get a drink."

We did. Mr. Cannon was still a little vague, a little under the spell of the vast surprise— he fumbled so long for the money to pay his round that I insisted it was on me.

I think he was in a daze during that whole time because, though he is a man of the most punctilious accuracy, the two hundred I handed him in his office has never shown to my credit in the statements he has sent me. I imagine, though, that some day I will surely get it because some day Finnegan will click again and I know that people will clamor to read what he writes. Recently I've taken it upon myself to investigate some of the stories about him and I've found that they're mostly as false as the half-empty pool. That pool was full to the brim.

So far there's only been a short story about the polar expedition, a love story. Perhaps it wasn't as big a subject as he expected. But the movies are interested in him— if they can get a good long look at him first and I have every reason to think that he will come through. He'd better.

_____

8: The Bronze Parrot

R. Austin Freeman

1862-1943

The Times Red Cross Story Book, 1915

Best known for his Dr Thorndyke detective stories; but this is not one of them.

THE REVEREND DEODATUS JAWLEY had just sat down to the gate-legged table on which lunch was spread and had knocked his knee, according to his invariable custom, against the sharp corner of the seventh leg.

"I wish you would endeavour to be more careful, Mr. Jawley," said the rector's wife. "You nearly upset the mustard-pot and these jars are exceedingly bad for the leg."

"Oh, that's of no consequence, Mrs. Bodley," the curate replied cheerfully.

"I don't agree with you at all," was the stiff rejoinder.

"It doesn't matter, you know, so long as the skin isn't broken," Mr. Jawley persisted with an ingratiating smile.

"I was referring to the leg of the table," Mrs. Bodley corrected, frostily.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" said the curate; and, blushing like a Dublin Bay prawn, he abandoned himself in silence to the consideration of the numerical ratios suggested by five mutton chops and three prospective consumers. The problem thus presented was one of deep interest to Mr. Jawley, who had a remarkably fine appetite for such an exceedingly small man, and he awaited its solution with misgivings born of previous disappointments.

"I hope you are not very hungry, Mr. Jawley," said the rector's wife.

"Er— no— er— not unusually so," was the curate's suave and casuistical reply. The fact is that he was always hungry, excepting after the monthly tea-meetings.

"Because," pursued Mrs. Bodley, "I see that Walker has only cooked five chops; and yours looks rather a small one."

"Oh, it will be quite sufficient, thank you," Mr. Jawley hastened to declare; adding, a little unfortunately perhaps: "Amply sufficient for any moderate and temperate person."

The Reverend Augustus Bodley emerged from behind the Church Times and directed a suspicious glance at his curate; who, becoming suddenly conscious of the ambiguity of his last remark, blushed crimson and cut himself a colossal slice of bread. There was an uncomfortable silence which lasted some minutes, and was eventually broken by Mrs. Bodley.

"I want you to go into Dilbury this afternoon, Mr. Jawley, and execute a few little commissions."

"Certainly, Mrs. Bodley. With pleasure," said the curate.

"I want you to call and see if Miss Gosse has finished my hat. If she has, you had better bring it with you. She is so unreliable and I want to wear it at the Hawley-Jones' garden party to-morrow. If it isn't finished you must wait until it is. Don't come away without it."

"No, Mrs. Bodley, I will not. I will be extremely firm."

"Mind you are. Then I want you to go to Minikin's and get two reels of whitey-brown thread, four balls of crochet cotton and eight yards of lace insertion— the same kind as I had last week. And Walker tells me that she has run out of black lead. You had better bring two packets; and mind you don't put them in the same pocket with the lace insertion. Oh, and as you are going to the oil-shop, you may as well bring a jar of mixed pickles. And then you are to go to Dumsole's and order a fresh haddock— perhaps you could bring that with you, too— and then to Barker's and tell them to send four pounds of dessert pears, and be sure they are good ones and not over-ripe. You had better select them and see them weighed yourself."

"I will. I will select them most carefully," said the curate, inwardly resolving not to trust to mere external appearances, which are often deceptive.

"Oh, and by the way, Jawley," said the rector, "as you are going into the town, you might as well take my shooting boots with you, and tell Crummell to put a small patch on the soles and set up the heels. It won't take him long. Perhaps he can get them done in time for you to bring them back with you. Ask him to try."

"I will, Mr. Bodley," said the curate. "I will urge him to make an effort."

"And as you are going to Crummell's," said Mrs. Bodley, "I will give you my walking shoes to take to him. They want soling and heeling; and tell him he is to use better leather than he did last time."

Half an hour later Mr. Jawley passed through the playground appertaining to the select boarding-academy maintained by the Reverend Augustus Bodley. He carried a large and unshapely newspaper parcel, despite which he walked with the springy gait of a released schoolboy. As he danced across the desert expanse, his attention was arrested by a small crowd of the pupils gathered significantly around two larger boys whose attitudes suggested warlike intentions; indeed, even as he stopped to observe them, one warrior delivered a tremendous blow which expended itself on the air within a foot of the other combatant's nose.

"Oh! Fie!" exclaimed the scandalised curate. "Joblett! Joblett! Do you realise that you nearly struck Byles? That you might actually have hurt him?"

"I meant to hurt him," said Joblett.

"You meant to! Oh, but how wrong! How unkind! Let me beg you— let me entreat you to desist from these discreditable acts of violence."

He stood awhile gazing with an expression of pained disapproval at the combatants, who regarded him with sulky grins. Then, as the hostilities seemed to be— temporarily— suspended, he walked slowly to the gate. He was just pocketing the key when an extremely somnolent pear impinged on the gate-post and sprinkled him with disintegrated fragments. He turned, wiping his coat-skirt with his handkerchief, and addressed the multitude, who all, oddly enough, happened to be looking in the opposite direction.

"That was very naughty of you. Very naughty. Some one must have thrown that pear. I won't tempt you to prevarication by asking who? But pears don't fly of themselves— especially sleepy ones."

With this he went out of the gate, followed by an audible snigger which swelled, as he walked away, into a yell of triumph.

The curate tripped blithely down the village street, clasping his parcel and scattering smiles of concentrated amiability broadcast among the villagers. As he approached the stile that guarded the foot-path to Dilbury, his smile intensified from mere amiability to positive affection. A small lady— a very small lady, in fact— was standing by the stile, resting a disproportionate basket on the lower step; and we may as well admit, at once and without circumlocution, that this lady was none other than Miss Dorcas Shipton and the prospective Mrs. Jawley.

The curate changed over his parcel to hold out a welcoming hand.

"Dorcas, my dear!" he exclaimed. "What a lucky chance that you should happen to come this way!"

"It isn't chance," the little lady replied. "I heard Mrs. Bodley say that she would ask you to go into Dilbury, so I determined to come and, speed you on your journey" (the distance to Dilbury was about three and a half miles) "and see that you were properly equipped. Why did not you bring your umbrella?"

Mr. Jawley explained that the hat, the boots, the fresh haddock and the mixed pickles would fully occupy his available organs of prehension.

"That is true," said Dorcas. "But I hope you are wearing your chest protector and those cork soles that I gave you."

Mr. Jawley assured her that he had taken these necessary precautions.

"And have you rubbed your heels well with soap?"

"Yes," replied the curate. "Thoroughly; most thoroughly. They are a little sticky at present, but I shall feel the benefit as I go on. I have obeyed your instructions to the letter."

"That is right, Deodatus," said Miss Dorcas; "and as you have been so good, you shall have a little reward."

She lifted the lid of the basket and took out a small paper bag, which she handed to him with a fond smile. The curate opened the bag and peered in expectantly.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Bull's-eyes! How nice! How good of you, Dorcas! And how discriminating!" (Bull's-eyes were his one dissipation.) "Won't you take one?

"No, thank you," replied Dorcas. "I mustn't go into the cottages smelling of peppermint."

"Why not?" said Deodatus. "I often do. I think the poor creatures rather enjoy the aroma, especially the children."

But Dorcas was adamant; and after some further chirping and twittering, the two little people exchanged primly affectionate farewells; and the curate, having popped a bull's eye in his mouth, paddled away along the foot-path, sucking joyously.

It is needless to say that Mrs. Bodley's hat was not finished. The curate had unwisely executed all his other commissions before calling on the milliner; had ordered the pears, and even tested the quality of one or two samples; had directed the cobbler to send the rector's boots to the hat-shop; and had then collected the lace, black lead, cotton, pickles and the fresh haddock and borne them in triumph to the abode of Miss Gosse. It appeared that the hat would not be ready until seven o'clock in the evening. But it also appeared that tea would be ready in a few minutes. Accordingly, the curate remained to partake of that meal in the workroom, in company with Miss Gosse and her "hands"; and having been fed to bursting-point with French rolls and cake, left his various belongings and went forth to while away the time and paint the town of Dilbury— not exactly red, but a delicate and attenuated pink.

After an hour or so of rambling about the town, the curate's errant footsteps carried him down to the docks, where he was delighted with the spectacle of a military transport, just home from West Africa, discharging her passengers. The khaki-clad warriors trooped down the gang-planks and saluted him with cheerful greetings as he sat on a bollard and watched them. One even inquired if his— Mr. Jawley's— mother knew he was out; which the curate thought very kind and attentive of him. But what thrilled him most was the appearance of the chaplain; a fine, portly churchman with an imposing, coppery nose, who was so overjoyed at the sight of his native land that he sang aloud; indeed, his emotion seemed actually to have affected his legs, for his gait was quite unsteady. Mr. Jawley was deeply affected.

When the soldiers had gone, he slowly retraced his steps towards the gates; but he had hardly gone twenty yards when his eye was attracted by a small object lying in the thick grass that grew between the irregular paving-

stones of the quay. He stooped to pick it up and uttered an exclamation of delight. It was a tiny effigy of a parrot, quaintly wrought in bronze and not more than two and a half inches high including the pedestal on which it stood. A perforation through the eyes had furnished the means of suspension, and a strand of silken thread yet remained to show, by its frayed ends, how the treasure had been lost.

Mr. Jawley was charmed. It was such a dear little parrot; so quaint; so naive. He was a simple man and small things gave him pleasure; and this small thing pleased him especially. The better to examine his find, he seated himself on a nice, clean, white post and proceeded to polish the little effigy with his hand-kerchief, having previously moistened the latter with his tongue. The polishing improved its appearance wonderfully, and he was inspecting it complacently when his eye lighted on a chalked inscription on the pavement. The writing was upside down as he sat, but he had no difficulty in deciphering the words "Wet Paint."

He rose hastily and examined the fiat top of the post. There is no need to go into details. Suffice it to say that anyone looking at that post could have seen that some person had sat on it. Mr. Jawley moved away with an angry exclamation. It was very annoying. But that did not justify the expressions that he used, which were not only out of character with his usual mild demeanour, but unsuitable to his cloth, even if that cloth happened to be— but again we say there is no need to go into details. Still frowning irritably, he strode out through the dock gates and up the High Street on his way to Miss Gosse's establishment. As he was passing the fruiterer's shop, Mr. Barber, the proprietor, ran out.

"Good-evening, Mr. Jawley. About those pears that you ordered of my young man. You'd better not have those, sir. Let me send you another kind."

"Why?" asked the curate.

"Well, sir, those pears, to be quite candid, are not very good—"

"I don't care whether they are good or bad," interrupted Mr. Jawley. "I am not going to eat them," and he stamped away up the High Street, leaving the fruiterer in a state of stupefaction. But he did not proceed directly to the milliner's. Some errant fancy impelled him to turn up a side street and make his way towards the waterside portion of the town, and it was, in fact, nearly eight o'clock when he approached Miss Gosse's premises (now closed for the night) and rang the bell. The interval, how ever, had not been entirely uneventful. A blue mark under the left eye and a somewhat battered and dusty condition of hat and clothing seemed reminiscent of recent and thrilling experiences, and the satisfied grin that he bestowed on the astonished

caretaker suggested that those experiences, if strenuous, had not been wholly unpleasurable.

The shades of night had fallen on the village of Bobham when Mr. Jawley appeared in the one and only street. He carried, balanced somewhat unsteadily on his head, a large cardboard box, but was otherwise unencumbered. The box had originally been of a cubical form, but now presented a slightly irregular outline, and from one corner a thin liquid dripped on Mr. Jawley's shoulder, diffusing an aroma of vinegar and onions, with an added savour that was delicate and fish-like. Up the empty street the curate strode with a martial air, and having picked up the box— for the thirteenth time— just outside the gate, entered the rectory, deposited his burden on the drawing-room sofa, and went up to his room. He required no supper. For once in a way he was not hungry. He had, in fact, taken a little refreshment in town; and whelks are a very satisfying food, if you only take enough of them.

In his narrow and bumpy bed the curate lay wakeful and wrapped in pleasing meditation. Now his thoughts strayed to the little bronze parrot, which he had placed, after a final polish, on the mantelpiece; and now, in delightful retrospection, he recalled the incidents of his little jaunt. There was, for instance, the slightly intoxicated marine with whom he had enjoyed a playful interview in Mermaid Street. Gleefully he reconstituted the image of that warrior as he had last seen him, sitting in the gutter attending to his features with a reddened handkerchief. And there was the overturned whelk stall and the two blue-jackets outside the "Pope's Head." He grinned at the recollection. And yet there were grumblers who actually complained of the dullness of the clerical life!

Again he recalled the pleasant walk home across the darkening fields; the delightful rest by the way side (on the cardboard box), and the pleasantries that he had exchanged with a pair of rustic lovers— who had told him that "he ought to be ashamed of himself; a gentleman and a minister of religion, too!" He chuckled aloud as he thought of their bucolic irritation and his own brilliant repartee.

But at this moment his meditations were broken into by a very singular interruption. From the neighbourhood of the mantelpiece, there issued a voice, a very strange voice, deep, buzzing, resonant, chanting a short sentence, framed of yet more strange and unfamiliar words:

"Donköh e didi ma turn. On esse?"

This astounding phrase rang out in the little room with a deep, booming emphasis on the "turn," and an interrogative note on the two final words There followed an interval of intense silence, and then, from some distance, as it seemed, came the tapping of drums, imitating most curiously the sound and

accent of the words—"turn," for instance, being rendered by a large drum of deep, cavernous tone.

Mr. Jawley listened with a pleased and interested smile.

After a short interval, the chant was repeated; and again, like a far-away echo, the drums performed their curious mimicry of speech. Mr. Jawley was deeply interested. After a dozen or so of repetitions, he found himself able to repeat, with a fair accent, the mysterious sentence, and even to imitate the tapping and booming of the drums.

But, after all, you can have too much of a good thing; and when the chant had continued to recur, at intervals of about ten seconds, for a quarter of an hour, Mr. Jawley began to feel bored.

"There," said he, "that'll do," and he composed himself for slumber. But the invisible chanter, ignoring his remark, continued the performance da capo and ad lib.— in fact, ad nauseam. Then Mr. Jawley became annoyed. First he sat up in bed, and made what he considered appropriate comments on the performance, with a few personal references to the performer; and then, as the chant still continued with the relentless persistence of a chapel bell, he sprang out and strode furiously over to the mantel piece.

"Shut up!" he roared, shaking his fist at the invisible parrot; and, strange to say, both the chant and the drumming ceased forthwith. There are some forms of speech, it would seem, that require no interpreter.

When Mr. Jawley entered the breakfast-room the following morning, the rector's wife was in the act of helping her husband to a devilled kidney, but she paused in the occupation to greet the curate with a stony stare. Mr. Jawley sat down and knocked his knee as usual, but commented on the circumstance in terms which were not at all usual. The rector stared aghast, and Mrs. Bodley exclaimed in shrill accents:

"Mr. Jawley, how dare—"

At this point she paused, having caught the curate's eye. A deathly silence ensued, during which Mr. Jawley glared at a solitary boiled egg. Suddenly he snatched up a knife, and with uncanny dexterity decapitated the egg with a single stroke. Then he peered curiously into the disclosed cavity. Now if there was one thing that Mr. Jawley hated more than another, it was an underdone egg; and, as his eye encountered a yellow spheroid floating in a clear liquid, he frowned ominously.

"Raw, by gosh!" he exclaimed hoarsely, and, plucking the egg from its calyx, he sent it hurtling across the room. For several seconds the rector stared, silent and open-mouthed, at his curate; then, following his wife's gaze, he stared at the wall, on the chrysanthemum paper of which appeared a new motive

uncontemplated by the designer. And, meanwhile, Mr. Jawley reached across the table and stuck a fork into the devilled kidney.

When the rector looked round and discovered his loss he essayed some spluttered demands for an explanation. But, since the organs of speech are associated with the act of mastication, the curate was not in a position to answer him. His eyes, however, were disengaged at the moment, and some compelling quality in them caused the rector and his wife to rise from their chairs and back cautiously towards the door. Mr. Jawley nodded them out blandly, and being left in possession, proceeded to fill himself a cup of tea and another of coffee, cleared the dish, emptied the toast-rack, and having disposed of these trifles, concluded a Gargantuan repast by crunching up the contents of the sugar basin. Never had he enjoyed such a breakfast, and never had he felt so satisfied and joyous.

Having wiped his smiling lips on the table cloth, he strolled out into the playground, where the boys were waiting to be driven in to lessons. At the moment of his appearance, Messrs. Joblett and Byles were in the act of resuming adjourned hostilities. The curate strode through the ring of spectators and beamed on the combatants with ferocious benevolence. His arrival had produced a brief armistice, but as he uttered no protests, the battle was resumed with a tentative prod on the part of Joblett.

The curate grinned savagely. "That isn't the way, Joblett," he exclaimed. "Kick him, man. Kick him in the stomach."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Joblett, regarding his preceptor with saucer eyes. "Did you say kick him?"

"Yes," roared the curate. "In the stomach. Like this!"

He backed a few paces, and fixing a glittering eye on Byles' abdomen, rushed forward, and, flinging his right foot back until it was almost visible over his shoulder, let out a tremendous kick. But Byles' stomach was not there. Neither was Byles— which, of course, follows. The result was that Mr. Jawley's foot, meeting with no resistance, flew into space, carrying Mr. Jawley's centre of gravity with it.

When the curate scrambled to his feet and glared balefully around, the playground was empty. A frantic crowd surged in through the open house door, while stragglers hurriedly climbed over the walls.

Mr. Jawley laughed hoarsely. It was time to open school, but at the moment he was not studiously inclined. Letting himself out by the gate, he strolled forth into the village, and sauntered up the street. And here it was, just opposite the little butcher's shop, that he encountered the village atheist. Now this philosopher who, it is needless to say, was a cobbler by profession, had a standing and perennial joke, which was to greet the curate with the words:

"How do, Jawley!" and thereby elicit a gracious "Good-morning, Mr. Pegg," and a polite touch of the hat. He proceeded this morning to utter the invariable formula, cocking his eye at the expectant butcher. But the anticipated response came not. Instead, the curate turned on him suddenly and growled:

"Say 'sir,' you vermin, when you speak to your betters."

The astounded cobbler was speechless for a moment; but only for a moment.

"What!" he exclaimed, "me say' sir' to a sneakin' little devil-dodger, what—"

Here Mr. Jawley turned and stepped lightly over to the shop. Reaching in through the open front, he lifted a cleaver from its nail, and, swinging it high above his head, rushed with a loud yell at the offending cobbler. But Mr. Pegg was not without presence of mind, which, in this case, connoted absence of body. Before you could say "wax," he had darted into his house, bolted the door, and was looking down with bulging eyes from the first floor window on the crown of the curate's hat. Meanwhile the butcher had emerged angrily from his shop, and approached the curate from behind.

"Here," he exclaimed gruffly, "what are you doing with that chop—" here he paused suddenly as Mr. Jawley turned his head, and he continued with infinite suavity:

"Could you, sir, manage to spare that cleaver? If you would be so kind—"

Mr. Jawley uttered a sulky growl and thrust the great chopper into its owner's hands; then, as the butcher turned away, he gave a loud laugh, on which the tradesman cleared his threshold at a single bound and slammed the half-door behind him. But a terrified backward glance showed him the curate's face wreathed in smiles, and another glance made him aware of the diminutive figure of Miss Dorcas Shipton approaching up the street.

The curate ran forward to meet her, beaming with affection. But he didn't merely beam. Not at all. The sound of his greeting was audible even to Mr. Pegg, who leaned out of his window, with eyes that bulged more than ever.

"Really, Deodatus!" exclaimed the scandalised Miss Dorcas. "What can you be thinking about; in such a pub—" Her remonstrances were cut short at this point by fresh demonstrations, which caused the butcher to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, and Mr. Pegg to gasp with fresh amazement.

"Pray, pray remember yourself, Deodatus!" exclaimed the blushing Dorcas, wriggling, at length, out of his too-affectionate grasp. "Besides," she added, with a sudden strategic inspiration, "you surely ought to be in school at this time."

"That is of no consequence, darling," said Jawley, advancing on her with open arms; "old Bod can look after the whelps."

"Oh, but you mustn't neglect your duties, Deodatus," said Miss Dorcas, still backing away. "Won't you go in, just to please me?"

"Certainly, my love, if you wish it," replied Jawley, with an amorous leer. "I'll go at once— but I must have just one more," and again the village street rang with a sound as of the popping of a ginger beer cork.

As he approached the school, Mr. Jawley became aware of the familiar and distasteful roar of many voices. Standing in the doorway, he heard Mr. Bodley declare with angry emphasis that he "would not have this disgraceful noise" and saw him slap the desk with his open hand; whereupon nothing in particular happened excepting an apparently preconcerted chorus as of many goats. Then Mr. Jawley entered and looked round; and in a moment the place was wrapped in a silence like that of an Egyptian tomb.

Space does not allow of our recording in detail the history of the next few days. We may, however, say in general terms that there grew up in the village of Bobham a feeling of universal respect for the diminutive curate, not entirely unmixed with superstitious awe. Rustics, hitherto lax in their manners pulled off their hats like clock-work at his approach; Mr. Pegg, abandoning the village street, cultivated a taste for foot paths, preferably remote, and unobstructed by trees; the butcher fell into the habit of sending gratuitous sweetbreads to the Rectory, addressed to Mr. Jawley, and even the blacksmith, when he had recovered from his black eye, adopted a suave and conciliatory demeanour.

The rector's wife, alone, cherished a secret resentment (though outwardly attentive in the matter of devilled kidneys and streaky bacon), and urged the rector to get rid of his fire-eating subordinate; but her plans failed miserably. It is true that the rector did venture tentatively to open the subject to the curate, who listened with a lowering brow and sharpened a lead pencil with a colossal pocket-knife that he had bought at a ship-chandlers in Dilbury. But the conclusion was never reached. Distracted, perhaps, by Mr. Jawley's inscrutable manner, the rector became confused and, to his own surprise, found himself urging the curate to accept an additional twenty pounds a year, an offer which Mr. Jawley immediately insisted on having in writing.

The only person who did not share the universal awe was Miss Dorcas; for she, like the sun-dial, "numbered only the sunny hours." But she respected him more than any; and, though dimly surprised at the rumours of his doings, gloried in secret over his prowess.

Thus the days rolled on and Mr. Jawley put on flesh visibly. Then came the eventful morning when, on scanning the rector's Times, his eye lighted on an advertisement in the Personal Column:

"Ten pounds reward. Lost; a small, bronze effigy of a parrot on a square pedestal; the whole two and a half inches high. The Above Reward will be paid on behalf of the owner by the Curator of the Filmographical Department of the British Museum, who has a photograph and description of the object."

Now Mr. Jawley had become deeply attached to the parrot. But after all it was only a pretty trifle, and ten pounds was ten pounds. That very afternoon, the Curator found himself confronted by a diminutive clergyman of ferocious aspect, and hurriedly disgorged ten sovereigns after verifying the description; and to this day he is wont to recount, as an instance of the power of money, the remarkable change for the better in the clergyman's manners when the transaction was completed.

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Jawley re appeared in the village of Bobham. He carried a gigantic paper parcel under one arm, and his pockets bulged so that he appeared to suffer from some unclassified deformity. At the stile, he suddenly encountered Mr. Pegg, who prepared for instant flight, and was literally stupefied when the curate lifted his hat and graciously wished him "good evening." But Mr. Pegg was even more stupefied when a few minutes later, he saw the curate seated on a doorstep with the open parcel on his knees, and a mob of children gathered around him. For Mr. Jawley, with the sunniest of smiles, was engaged in distributing dolls, peg-tops, skipping-ropes and little wooden horses, to a running accompaniment of bull's-eyes, brandy balls and other delicacies, which he produced from inexhaustible pockets. He even offered Mr. Pegg, himself, a sugar-stick which the philosophic cordwainer accepted with a polite bow and presently threw over a wall. But he pondered deeply on this wonder and is probably pondering still in common with the other inhabitants of Bobham.

But though, from that moment, Mr. Jawley became once more the gentlest and most amiable of men, the prestige of his former deeds remained; reverential awe attended his footsteps abroad, devilled kidneys and streaky bacon were his portion at home; until such time as Miss Dorcas Shipton underwent a quieter metamorphosis and became Mrs. Deodatus Jawley.

And thereafter he walked, not only amidst reverence and awe, but also amidst flowers and sunshine.

P.S.— THE CURIOUS who would know more about the parrot, may find him on his appropriate shelf in the West African Section, and read the large, descriptive label which sets forth his history:

"Bronze gold-weight in the form of a parrot. This object was formerly the property of the great Ashanti War Chief, Amankwa Tia, whose clan totem was a parrot. It was worn by him, attached to his wrist, as an amulet or charm and, when on a campaign, a larger copy of

it, of gilded wood, was carried by the chief herald, who preceded him and chanted his official motto. It may be explained here that each of the Ashanti generals had a distinguishing motto, consisting of a short sentence, which was called out before him by his heralds when on the march, and repeated, with remarkably close mimicry, by the message drums. Thus, when several bodies of troops were marching through the dense forest, their respective identities were made clear to one another by the sound of the chant on the drums. Amankwa Tia's motto was: *'Donköh e didi ma turn. On esse*?' Which may be translated '(Foreign) Slaves revile me. Why?' A somewhat meaningless sentence, but having, perhaps, a sinister significance."

9: The Yellow-Back

James Oliver Curwood

1878-1927

Hearst's Magazine May 1919

ABOVE GOD'S LAKE, where the Bent Arrow runs red as pale blood under its crust of ice, Reese Beaudin heard of the dog auction that was to take place at Post Lac Bain three days later. It was in the cabin of Joe Delesse, a trapper, who lived at Lac Bain during the summer, and trapped the fox and the lynx sixty miles farther north in this month of February.

"*Diantre*, but I tell you it is to be the greatest sale of dogs that has ever happened at Lac Bain!" said Delesse. "To this Wakao they are coming from all the four directions. There will be a hundred dogs, huskies, and malamutes, and Mackenzie hounds, and mongrels from the south, and I should not wonder if some of the little Eskimo devils were brought from the north to be sold as breeders. Surely you will not miss it, my friend?"

"I am going by way of Post Lac Bain," replied Reese Beaudin equivocally.

But his mind was not on the sale of dogs. From his pipe he puffed out thick clouds of smoke, and his eyes narrowed until they seemed like coals peering out of cracks; and he said, in his quiet, soft voice:

"Do you know of a man named Jacques Dupont, m'sieu?"

Joe Delesse tried to peer through the cloud of smoke at Reese Beaudin's face.

"Yes, I know him. Does he happen to be a friend of yours?"

Reese laughed softly.

"I have heard of him. They say that he is a devil. To the west I was told that he can whip any man between Hudson's Bay and the Great Bear, that he is a beast in man-shape, and that he will surely be at the big sale at Lac Bain."

On his knees the huge hands of Joe Delesse clenched slowly, gripping in their imaginary clutch a hated thing.

"Oui, I know him," he said. "I know also— Elise— his wife. See!"

He thrust suddenly his two huge knotted hands through the smoke that drifted between him and the stranger who had sought the shelter of his cabin that night.

"See— I am a man full-grown, m'sieu— a man— and yet I am afraid of him! That is how much of a devil and a beast in man-shape he is."

Again Reese Beaudin laughed in his low, soft voice.

"And his wife, mon ami? Is she afraid of him?"

He had stopped smoking. Joe Delesse saw his face. The stranger's eyes made him look twice and think twice.

"You have known her— sometime?"

"Yes, a long time ago. "We were children together. And I have heard all has not gone well with her. Is it so?"

"Does it go well when a dove is mated to a vulture, m'sieu?"

"I have also heard that she grew up to be very beautiful," said Reese Beaudin, "and that Jacques Dupont killed a man for her. If that is so—"

"It is not so," interrupted Delesse. "He drove another man away— no, not a man, but a yellow-livered coward who had no more fight in him than a porcupine without quills! And yet she says he was not a coward. She has always said, even to Dupont, that it was the way le Bon Dieu made him, and that because he was made that way he was greater than all other men in the North Country. How do I know? Because, m'sieu, I am Elise Dupont's cousin."

Delesse wondered why Reese Beaudin's eyes were glowing like living coals.

"And yet— again, it is only rumor I have heard— they say this man, whoever he was, did actually run away, like a dog that had been whipped and was afraid to return to its kennel."

"Pst!" Joe Delesse flung his great arms wide. "Like that— he was gone. And no one ever saw him again, or heard of him again. But I know that she knew— my cousin, Elise. What word it was he left for her at the last she has always kept in her own heart, mon Dieu, and what a wonderful thing he had to fight for! You knew the child. But the woman— non? She was like an angel. Her eyes, when you looked into them— hat can I say, m'sieu? They made you forget. And I have seen her hair, unbound, black and glossy as the velvet side of a sable, covering her to the hips. And two years ago I saw Jacques Dupont's hands in that hair, and he was dragging her by it—"

Something snapped. It was a muscle in Reese Beaudin's arm. He had stiffened like iron.

"And you let him do that!"

Joe Delesse shrugged his shoulders. It was a shrug of hopelessness, of disgust.

"For the third time I interfered, and for the third time Jacques Dupont beat me until I was nearer dead than alive. And since then I have made it none of my business. It was, after all, the fault of the man who ran away. You see, m'sieu, it was like this: Dupont was mad for her, and this man who ran away— the Yellow-back— wanted her, and Elise loved the Yellow-back. This Yellow-back was twenty-three or four, and he read books, and played a fiddle and drew strange pictures— and was weak in the heart when it came to a fight. But Elise loved him. She loved him for those very things that made him a fool and a weakling, m'sieu, the books and the fiddle and the pictures; and she stood up with the courage for them both. And she would have married him, too, and would have fought for him with a club if it had come to that, when the thing

happened that made him run away. It was at the midsummer carnival, when all the trappers and their wives and children were at Lac Bain. And Dupont followed the Yellow-back about like a dog. He taunted him, he insulted him, he got down on his knees and offered to fight him without getting on his feet; and there, before the very eyes of Elise, he washed the Yellow-back's face in the grease of one of the roasted caribou! And the Yellow-back was a man! Yes, a grown man! And it was then that Jacques Dupont shouted out his challenge to all that crowd. He would fight the Yellow-back. He would fight him with his right arm tied behind his back! And before Elise and the Yellow-back, and all that crowd, friends tied his arm so that it was like a piece of wood behind him, and it was his right arm, his fighting arm, the better half of him that was gone. And even then the Yellow-back was as white as the paper he drew pictures on. Ventre saint gris, but then was his chance to have killed Jacques Dupont! Half a man could have done it. Did he, m'sieu? No, he did not. With his one arm and his one hand Jacques Dupont whipped that Yellow-back, and he would have killed him if Elise had not rushed in to sav e the Yellow-back's purple face from going dead black. And that night the Yellow-back slunk away. Shame? Yes. From that night he was ashamed to show his face ever again at Lac Bain. And no one knows where he went. No one— except Elise. And her secret is in her own breast."

"And after that?" questioned Reese Beaudin, in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper.

"I cannot understand," said Joe Delesse. "It was strange, m'sieu, very strange. I know that Elise, even after that coward ran away, still loved him. And yet— well, something happened. I overheard a terrible quarrel one day between Jan Thiebout, father of Elise, and Jacques Dupont. After that Thiebout was very much afraid of Dupont. I have my own suspicion. Now that Thiebout is dead it is not wrong for me to say what it is. I think Thiebout killed the halfbreed Bedore who was found dead on his trap-line five years ago. There was a feud between them. And Dupont, discovering Thiebout's secret— well, you can understand how easy it would be after that, m'sieu. Thiebout's winter trapping was in that Burntwood country, fifty miles from neighbor to neighbor, and very soon after Bedore's death Jacques Dupont became Thiebout's partner. I know that Elise was forced to marry him. That was four years ago. The next year old Thiebout died, and in all that time not once has Elise been to Post Lac Bain!"

"Like the Yellow-back— she never returned," breathed Reese Beaudin.

"Never. And now— it is strange—"

"What is strange, Joe Delesse?"

"That for the first time in all these years she is going to Lac Bain— to the dog sale."

Reese Beaudin's face was again hidden in the smoke of his pipe. Through it his voice came.

"It is a cold night, M'sieu Delesse. Hear the wind howl!"

"Yes, it is cold— so cold the foxes will not run. My traps and poison-baits will need no tending tomorrow."

"Unless you dig them out of the drifts."

"I will stay in the cabin."

"What! You are not going to Lac Bain!"

"I doubt it."

"Even though Elise, your cousin, is to be there?"

"I have no stomach for it, m'sieu. Nor would you were you in my boots, and did you know why he is going. Par les mille cornes d'u diable, I cannot whip him but I can kill him— and if I went— and the thing happens which I guess is going to happen—"

"Qui? Surely you will tell me—"

"Yes, I will tell you. Jacques Dupont knows that Elise has never stopped loving the Yellow-back. I do not believe she has ever tried to hide it from him. Why should she? And there is a rumor, m'sieu, that the Yellow-back will be at the Lac Bain dog sale."

Reese Beaudin rose slowly to his feet, and yawned in that smoke-filled cabin.

"And if the Yellow-back should turn the tables, Joe Delesse, think of what a fine thing you will miss," he said.

Joe Delesse also rose, with a contemptuous laugh.

"That fiddler, that picture-drawer, that book-reader— Pouff! You are tired, m'sieu, that is your bunk."

Reese Beaudin held out a hand. The bulk of the two stood out in the lamp-glow, and Joe Delesse was so much the bigger man that his hand was half again the size of Reese Beaudin's. They gripped. And then a strange look went over the face of Joe Delesse. A cry came from out of his beard. His mouth grew twisted. His knees doubled slowly under him, and in the space of ten seconds his huge bulk was kneeling on the floor, while Reese Beaudin looked at him, smiling.

"Has Jacques Dupont a greater grip than that, Joe Delesse?" he asked in a voice that was so soft it was almost a woman's.

"*Mon Dieu*!" gasped Delesse. He staggered to his feet, clutching his crushed hand. "M'sieu—"

Reese Beaudin put his hands to the other's shoulders, smiling, friendly.

"I will apologize, I will explain, *mon ami*," he said. "But first, you must tell me the name of that Yellow-back who ran away years ago. Do you remember it?"

"Oui, but what has that to do with my crushed hand? The Yellow-back's name was Reese Beaudin—"

"And I am Reese Beaudin," laughed the other gently.

ON THAT day— the day of Wakoa, the dog sale— seven fat caribou were roasting on great spits at Post Lac Bain, and under them were seven fires burning red and hot of seasoned birch, and around the seven fires were seven groups of men who slowly turned the roasting carcasses.

It was the Big Day of the mid-winter festival, and Post Lac Bain, with a population of twenty in times of quiet, was a seething wilderness metropolis of two hundred excited souls and twice as many dogs. From all directions they had come, from north and south and east and west; from near and from far, from the Barrens, from the swamps, from the farther forests, from river and lake and hidden trail— a few white men, mostly French; half-breeds and 'breeds, Chippewans, and Crees, and here and there a strange, dark-visaged little interloper from the north with his strain of Eskimo blood. Foregathered were all the breeds and creeds and fashions of the wilderness.

Over all this, pervading the air like an incense, stirring the desire of man and beast, floated the aroma of the roasting caribou. The feast-hour was at hand. With cries that rose above the last words of a wild song the seven groups of men rushed to seven pairs of props and tore them away. The great carcasses swayed in mid-air, bent slowly over their spits, and then crashed into the snow fifteen feet from the fire. About each carcass five men with razor-sharp knives ripped off hunks of the roasted flesh and passed them into eager hands of the hungry multitude. First came the women and children, and last the men.

On this there peered forth from a window in the factor's house the darkly bearded, smiling face of Reese Beaudin.

"I have seen him three times, wandering about in the crowd, seeking someone," he said. "Bien, he shall find that someone very soon!"

In the face of McDougall, the factor, was a strange look. For he had listened to a strange story, and there was still something of shock and amazement and disbelief in his eyes.

"Reese Beaudin, it is hard for me to believe."

"And yet you shall find that it is true," smiled Reese.

"He will kill you. He is a monster— a giant!"

"I shall die hard," replied Reese.

He turned from the window again, and took from the table a violin wrapped in buckskin, and softly he played one of their old love songs. It was not much more than a whisper, and yet it was filled with a joyous exultation. He laid the violin down when he was finished, and laughed, and filled his pipe, and lighted it.

"It is good for a man's soul to know that a woman loves him, and has been true," he said. "*Mon pere*, will you tell me again what she said? It is strength for me— and I must soon be going."

McDougall repeated, as if under a strain from which he could not free himself:

"She came to me late last night, unknown to Dupont. She had received your message, and knew you were coming. And I tell you again that I saw something in her eyes which makes me afraid! She told me, then, that her father killed Bedore in a quarrel, and that she married Dupont to save him from the law— and kneeling there, with her hand on the cross at her breast, she swore that each day of her life she has let Dupont know that she hates him, and that she loves you, and that some day Reese Beaudin would return to avenge her. Yes, she told him that— I know it by what I saw in her eyes. With that cross clutched in her fingers she swore that she had suffered torture and shame, and that never a word of it had she whispered to a living soul, that she might turn the passion of Jacques Dupont's black heart into a great hatred. And today— Jacques Dupont will kill you!"

"I shall die hard," Reese repeated again.

He tucked the violin in its buckskin covering under his arm. From the table he took his cap and placed it on his head.

In a last effort McDougall sprang from his chair and caught the other's arm.

"Reese Beaudin— you are going to your death! As factor of Lac Bain— agent of justice under power of the Police— I forbid it!"

"So-o-o-o," spoke Reese Beaudin gently. "*Mon pere*—"

He unbuttoned his coat, which had remained buttoned. Under the coat was a heavy shirt; and the shirt he opened, smiling into the factor's eyes, and McDougall's face froze, and the breath was cut short on his lips.

"That!" he gasped.

Reese Beaudin nodded.

Then he opened the door and went out.

Joe Delesse had been watching the factor's house, and he worked his way slowly along the edge of the feasters so that he might casually come into the path of Reese Beaudin. And there was one other man who also had watched, and who came in the same direction. He was a stranger, tall, closely hooded, his mustached face an Indian bronze. No one had ever seen him at Lac Bain

before, yet in the excitement of the carnival the fact passed without conjecture or significance. And from the cabin of Henri Paquette another pair of eyes saw Reese Beaudin, and Mother Paquette heard a sob that in itself was a prayer.

In and out among the devourers of caribou-flesh, scanning the groups and the ones and the twos and the threes, passed Jacques Dupont, and with him walked his friend, one-eyed Layonne. Layonne was a big man, but Dupont was taller by half a head. The brutishness of his face was hidden under a coarse red beard; but the devil in him glowered from his deep-set, inhuman eyes; it walked in his gait, in the hulk of his great shoulders, in the gorilla-like slouch of his hips. His huge hands hung partly clenched at his sides. His breath was heavy with whisky that Layonne himself had smuggled in, and in his heart was black murder.

"He has not come!" he cried for the twentieth time. "He has not come!"

He moved on, and Reese Beaudin— ten feet away— turned and smiled at Joe Delesse with triumph in his eyes. He moved nearer.

"Did I not tell you he would not find in me that narrow-shouldered, smooth-faced stripling of five years ago?" he asked. "*N'est-ce pas*, friend Delesse?"

The face of Joe Delesse was heavy with a somber fear.

"His fist is like a wood-sledge, m'sieu."

"So it was years ago."

"His forearm is as big as the calf of your leg."

"Oui, friend Delesse, it is the forearm of a giant."

"He is half again your weight."

"Or more, friend Delesse."

"He will kill you! As the great God lives, he will kill you!"

"I shall die hard," repeated Reese Beaudin for the third time that day.

Joe Delesse turned slowly, doggedly. His voice rumbled.

"The sale is about to begin, m'sieu. See!"

A man had mounted the log platform raised to the height of a man's shoulders at the far end of the clearing. It was Henri Paquette, master of the day's ceremonies, and appointed auctioneer of the great wakao. A man of many tongues was Paquette. To his lips he raised a great megaphone of birchbark, and sonorously his call rang out— in French, in Cree, in Chippewan, and the packed throng about the caribou-fires heaved like a living billow, and to a man and a woman and a child it moved toward the appointed place.

"The time has come," said Reese Beaudin. "And all Lac Bain shall see!"

Behind them— watching, always watching— followed the bronze-faced stranger in his close-drawn hood.

For an hour the men of Lac Bain gathered close-wedged about the log platform on which stood Henri Paquette and his Indian helper. Behind the men were the women and children, and through the cordon there ran a babiche-roped pathway along which the dogs were brought.

The platform was twenty feet square, with the floor side of the logs hewn flat, and there was no lack of space for the gesticulation and wild pantomime of Paquette. In one hand he held a notebook, and in the other a pencil. In the notebook the sales of twenty dogs were already tabulated, and the prices paid.

Anxiously, Reese Beaudin was waiting. Each time that a new dog came up he looked at Joe Delesse, but, as yet Joe had failed to give the signal.

On the platform the Indian was holding two malamutes in leash now and Paquette was crying, in a well simulated fit of great fury:

"What, you cheap kimootisks, will you let this pair of malamutes go for seven mink and a cross fox. Are you men? Are you poverty-stricken? Are you blind? A breed dog and a male giant for seven mink and a cross fox? Non, I will buy them myself first, and kill them, and use their flesh for dog-feed, and their hides for fools' caps! I will—"

"Twelve mink and a Number Two Cross," came a voice out of the crowd.

"Twelve mink and a Number One," shouted another.

"A little better— a little better!" wailed Paquette. "You are waking up, but slowly— *mon Dieu*, so slowly! Twelve mink and—"

A voice rose in Cree:

"*Nesi-tu-now-unisk*!"

Paquette gave a triumphant yell.

"The Indian beats you! The Indian from Little Neck Lake— an Indian beats the white man! He offers twenty beaver— prime skins! And beaver are wanted in Paris now. They're wanted in London. Beaver and gold— they are the same! But they are the price of one dog alone. Shall they both go at that? Shall the Indian have them for twenty beaver— twenty beaver that may be taken from a single house in a day— while it has taken these malamutes two and a half years to grow? I say, you cheap kimootisks—"

And then an amazing thing happened. It was like a bomb falling in that crowded throng of wondering and amazed forest people.

It was the closely hooded stranger who spoke.

"I will give a hundred dollars cash," he said.

A look of annoyance crossed Reese Beaudin's face.

He was close to the bronze-faced stranger, and edged nearer.

"Let the Indian have them," he said in a low voice. "It is Meewe. I knew him years ago. He has carried me on his back. He taught me first to draw pictures."

"But they are powerful dogs," objected the stranger. "My team needs them."

The Cree had risen higher out of the crowd. One arm rose above his head. He was an Indian who had seen fifty years of the forests, and his face was the face of an Egyptian.

"*Nesi-tu-now Nesoo-sap umisk*!" he proclaimed.

Henri Paquette hopped excitedly, and faced the stranger.

"Twenty-two beaver," he challenged. "Twenty-two—"

"Let Meewe have them," replied the hooded stranger.

Three minutes later a single dog was pulled up on the log platform. He was a magnificent beast, and a rumble of approval ran through the crowd.

The face of Joe Delesse was gray. He wet his lips. Reese Beaudin, watching him, knew that the time had come. And Joe Delesse, seeing no way of escape, whispered:

"It is her dog, m'sieu. It is Parka— and Dupont sells him today to show her that he is master."

Already Paquette was advertising the virtues of Parka when Reese Beaudin, in a single leap, mounted the log platform, and stood beside him.

"Wait!" he cried.

There fell a silence, and Reese said, loud enough for all to hear:

"M'sieu Paquette, I ask the privilege of examining this dog that I want to buy."

At last he straightened, and all who faced him saw the smiling sneer on his lips.

"Who is it that offers this worthless cur for sale?" Lac Bain heard him say. "P-s-s-st— it is a woman's dog! It is not worth bidding for!"

"You lie!" Dupont's voice rose in a savage roar. His huge shoulders bulked over those about him. He crowded to the edge of the platform. "You lie!"

"He is a woman's dog," repeated Reese Beaudin without excitement, yet so clearly that every ear heard. "He is a woman's pet, and M'sieu Dupont most surely does lie if he denies it!"

So far as memory went back no man at Lac Bain that day had ever heard another man give Jacques Dupont the lie. A thrill swept those who heard and understood. There was a great silence, in that silence men near him heard the choking rage in Dupont's great chest. He was staring up— straight up into the smiling face of Reese Beaudin; and in that moment he saw beyond the glossy black beard, and amazement and unbelief held him still. In the next, Reese Beaudin had the violin in his hands. He flung off the buckskin, and in a flash the instrument was at his shoulder.

"See! I will play, and the woman's pet shall sing!"

And once more, after five years, Lac Bain listened to the magic of Reese Beaudin's violin. And it was Elise's old love song that he played. He played it, smiling down into the eyes of a monster whose face was turning from red to black; yet he did not play it to the end, nor a quarter of it, for suddenly a voice shouted:

"It is Reese Beaudin— come back!"

Joe Delesse, paralyzed, speechless, could have sworn it was the hooded stranger who shouted; and then he remembered, and flung up his great arms, and bellowed:

"*Oui*— by the Saints, it is Reese Beaudin— Reese Beaudin come back!"

Suddenly as it had begun the playing ceased, and Henri Paquette found himself with the violin in his hands. Reese Beaudin turned, facing them all, the wintry sun glowing in his beard, his eyes smiling, his head high— unfraid now, more fearless than any other man that had ever set foot in Lac Bain. And McDougall, with his arm touching Elise's hair, felt the wild and throbbing pulse of her body. This day— this hour— this minute in which she stood still, inbreathing— had confirmed her belief in Reese Beaudin. As she had dreamed, so had he risen. First of all the men in the world he stood there now, just as he had been first in the days when she had loved his dreams, his music, and his pictures. To her he was the old god, more splendid,— for he had risen above fear, and he was facing Dupont now with that strange quiet smile on his lips. And then, all at once, her soul broke its fetters, and over the women's heads she reached out her arms, and all there heard her voice in its triumph, its joy, its fear.

"Reese! Reese— my *sakeakun*!"

Over the heads of all the forest people she called him beloved! Like the fang of an adder the word stung Dupont's brain. And like fire touched to powder, swiftly as lightning illumines the sky, the glory of it blazed in Reese Beaudin's face. And all that were there heard him clearly:

"I am Reese Beaudin. I am the Yellow-back. I have returned to meet a man you all know— Jacques Dupont. He is a monkey-man— a whipper of boys, a stealer of women, a cheat, a coward, a thing so foul the crows will not touch him when he dies—"

There was a roar. It was not the roar of a man, but of a beast— and Jacques Dupont was on the platform!

Quick as Dupont's movement had been it was no swifter than that of the closely-hooded stranger. He was as tall as Dupont, and about him there was an air of authority and command.

"Wait," he said, and placed a hand on Dupont's heaving chest. His smile was cold as ice. Never had Dupont seen eyes so like the pale blue of steel.

"M'sieu Dupont, you are about to avenge a great insult. It must be done fairly. If you have weapons, throw them away. I will search this— this Reese Beaudin, as he calls himself! And if there is to be a fight, let it be a good one. Strip yourself to that great garment you have on, friend Dupont. See, our friend— this Reese Beaudin— is already stripping!"

He was unbuttoning the giant's heavy Hudson's Bay coat. He pulled it off, and drew Dupont's knife from its sheath. Paquette, like a stunned cat that had recovered its ninth life, was scrambling from the platform. The Indian was already gone. And Reese Beaudin had tossed his coat to Joe Delesse, and with it his cap. His heavy shirt was closely buttoned; and not only was it buttoned, Delesse observed, but also was it carefully pinned. And even now, facing that monster who would soon be at him, Reese Beaudin was smiling.

For a moment the closely hooded stranger stood between them, and Jacques Dupont crouched himself for his vengeance. Never to the people of Lac Bain had he looked more terrible. He was the gorilla-fighter, the beast fighter, the fighter who fights as the wolf, the bear and the cat— crushing out life, breaking bones, twisting, snapping, inundating and destroying with his great weight and his monstrous strength. He was a hundred pounds heavier than Reese Beaudin. On his stooping shoulders he could carry a tree. With his giant hands he could snap a two-inch sapling. With one hand alone he had set a bear-trap. And with that mighty strength he fought as the cave-man fought. It was his boast there was no trick of the Chippewan, the Cree, the Eskimo or the forest man that he did not know. And yet Reese Beaudin stood calmly, waiting for him, and smiling!

In another moment the hooded stranger was gone, and there was none between them.

"A long time I have waited for this, m'sieu," said Reese, for Dupont's ears alone. "Five years is a long time. And my Elise still loves me."

Still more like a gorilla Jacques Dupont crept upon him. His face was twisted by a rage to which he could no longer give voice. Hatred and jealousy robbed his eyes of the last spark of the thing that was human. His great hands were hooked, like an eagle's talons. His lips were drawn back, like a beast's. Through his red beard yellow fangs were bared.

And Reese Beaudin no longer smiled. He laughed!

"Until I went away and met real men, I never knew what a pig of a man you were, M'sieu Dupont," he taunted amiably, as though speaking in jest to a friend. "You remind me of an aged and over-fat porcupine with his big paunch and crooked arms. What horror must it have been for my Elise to have lived in sight of such a beast as you!"

With a bellow Dupont was at him. And swifter than eyes had ever seen man move at Lac Bain before, Reese Beaudin was out of his way, and behind him; and then, as the giant caught himself at the edge of the platform, and turned, he received a blow that sounded like the broadside of a paddle striking water. Reese Beaudin had struck him with the flat of his unclenched hand!

A murmur of incredulity rose out of the crowd. To the forest man such a blow was the deadliest of insults. It was calling him an Iskwao— a woman— a weakling— a thing too contemptible to harden one's fist against. But the murmur died in an instant. For Reese Beaudin, making as if to step back, shot suddenly forward— straight through the giant's crooked arms— and it was his fist this time that landed squarely between the eyes of Dupont. The monster's head went back, his great body wavered, and then suddenly he plunged backward off the platform and fell with a crash to the ground.

A yell went up from the hooded stranger. Joe Delesse split his throat. The crowd drowned Reese Beaudin's voice. But above it all rose a woman's voice shrieking forth a name.

And then Jacques Dupont was on the platform again. In the moments that followed one could almost hear his neighbor's heart beat. Nearer and still nearer to each other drew the two men. And now Dupont crouched still more, and Joe Delesse held his breath. He noticed that Reese Beaudin was standing almost on the tips of his toes— that each instant he seemed prepared, like a runner, for sudden flight. Five feet— four— and Dupont leapt in, his huge arms swinging like the limb of a tree, and his weight following with crushing force behind his blow. For an instant it seemed as though Reese Beaudin had stood to meet that fatal rush, but in that same instant— so swiftly that only the hooded stranger knew what had happened— he was out of the way, and his left arm seemed to shoot downward, and then up, and then his right straight out, and then again his left arm downward, and up— and it was the third blow, all swift as lightning, that brought a yell from the hooded stranger. For though none but the stranger had seen it, Jacques Dupont's head snapped back— and all saw the fourth blow that sent him reeling like a man struck by a club.

There was no sound now. A mental and a vocal paralysis seized upon the inhabitants of Lac Bain. Never had they seen fighting like this fighting of Reese Beaudin. Until now had they lived to see the science of the sawdust ring pitted against the brute force of Brobdingnagian, of Antaeus and Goliath. For Reese Beaudin's fighting was a fighting without tricks that they could see. He used his fists, and his fists alone. He was like a dancing man. And suddenly, in the midst of the miracle, they saw Jacques Dupont go down. And the second miracle was that Reese Beaudin did not leap on him when he had fallen. He stood back a little, balancing himself in that queer fashion on the balls and toes of his feet.

But no sooner was Dupont up than Reese Beaudin was in again, with the swiftness of a cat, and they could hear the blows, like solid shots, and Dupont's arms waved like tree-tops, and a second time he was off the platform.

He was staggering when he rose. The blood ran in streams from his mouth and nose. His beard dripped with it. His yellow teeth were caved in.

This time he did not leap upon the platform— he clambered back to it, and the hooded stranger gave him a lift which a few minutes before Dupont would have resented as an insult.

"Ah, it has come," said the stranger to Delesse.

"He is the best close-in fighter in all—"

He did not finish.

"I could kill you now— kill you with a single blow," said Reese Beaudin in a moment when the giant stood swaying. "But there is a greater punishment in store for you, and so I shall let you live!"

And now Reese Beaudin was facing that part of the crowd where the woman he loved was standing. He was breathing deeply. But he was not winded. His eyes were black as night, his hair wind-blown. He looked straight over the heads between him and she whom Dupont had stolen from him.

Reese Beaudin raised his arms, and where there had been a murmur of voices there was now silence.

For the first time the stranger threw back his hood. He was unbuttoning his heavy coat.

And Joe Delesse, looking up, saw that Reese Beaudin was making a mighty effort to quiet a strange excitement within his breast. And then there was a rending of cloth and of buttons and of pins as in one swift movement he tore the shirt from his own breast— exposing to the eyes of Lac Bain blood-red in the glow of the winter sun, the crimson badge of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police!

And above the gasp that swept the multitude, above the strange cry of the woman, his voice rose:

"I am Reese Beaudin, the Yellow-back. I am Reese Beaudin, who ran away. I am Reese Beaudin,— Sergeant in His Majesty's Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and in the name of the law I arrest Jacques Dupont for the murder of Francois Bedore, who was killed on his trap-line five years ago! Fitzgerald—"

The hooded stranger leaped upon the platform. His heavy coat fell off. Tall and grim he stood in the scarlet jacket of the Police. Steel clinked in his hands. And Jacques Dupont, terror in his heart, was trying to see as he groped to his knees. The steel snapped over his wrists.

And then he heard a voice close over him. It was the voice of Reese Beaudin.

"And this is your final punishment, Jacques Dupont— to be hanged by the neck until you are dead. For Bedore was not dead when Elise's father left him after their fight on the trap-line. It was you who saw the fight, and finished the killing, and laid the crime on Elise's father. Mukoki, the Indian, saw you. It is my day, Dupont, and I have waited long—"

The rest Dupont did not hear. For up from the crowd there went a mighty roar. And through it a woman was making her way with outreaching arms— and behind her followed the factor of Lac Bain.

———————————

10: Antonio's Englishman

W. L. Alden

1837-1908

Short Stories, Aug 1894.

ANTONIO WAS YOUNG, handsome, and a gondolier. He lacked but two things: a gondola of his own, and an Englishman. He was too poor to buy a gondola, and though he occasionally hired an old and extremely dilapidated one, and trusted to his handsome face to enable him to capture a party of foreign ladies, his profits had to be divided with the owner of the gondola, and were thus painfully small. The *traghetto* brought him in a few francs per month, and he picked up other small sums by serving as second oar, whenever tourists could be convinced that a second oar was necessary. Still, Antonio was desperately poor, and he and his young wife were often uncomfortably hungry.

Now, if the Madonna would only send him an Englishman, even if it were only for a single year, Antonio could easily save enough money to buy himself a beautiful gondola, besides living in the lap of luxury. His brother Spiro had owned an Englishman for only seven months and a half, and already he was a capitalist, with his own gondola, and, figure it to yourself!— with four hundred francs in the savings bank! And Spiro had done nothing to deserve this blessing, for he was notoriously an unbeliever, and never went inside a church except when he was escorting English ladies, when, of course, he prayed with fervor at the most conspicuous shrine, which was worth at least ten extra soldi of *buona mano*. Whereas, Antonio was deeply religious, and at least once a year gave a wax candle to the Blessed Virgin of Santa Maria Zobenigo. "But patience!" said Antonio daily to himself. "Some day the Madonna will grow weary, and will say, 'Give that Antonio an Englishman, so that I can have a little peace and quiet.' And then the Englishman will appear, and Antonio's fortune will be made."

Of course Antonio knew of every foreigner who came to Venice with the intention of making a prolonged stay. There is no detective police in the world that can be compared with the Venetian gondolier in learning the ways and purposes of tourists. To know all about the foreigner is at once his business and his capital. The Englishman who comes to Venice and determines to spend six months or a year in that enchanted city, may reach this decision on a Saturday night and mention it to no living soul. Yet by the following Monday morning all the gondoliers in Venice know that there is an Englishman to be striven for, and they have even settled in their own minds precisely what apartment he will probably hire. How they arrive at this knowledge it is not for me to say. There are mysteries in the Venice of today, as there were in the Venice of the Ten and of the Three.

Now, it fell out that one day Antonio learned that an Englishman and his wife, a young couple, who had every appearance of sweet temper and scant knowledge of the world, had arrived at the Albergo Luna, and had told the porter that they intended to take a house and live forever in Venice. The porter was an intimate friend of Antonio, and had been promised a handsome commission on any foreigner whom he might place in Antonio's hands. Within an hour after receiving the precious information, Antonio had put on his best shirt, had said ten *Aves* at lightning speed, had promised the Blessed Virgin two half-pound wax candles in case he should land this desirable Englishman, and was back again at the Luna and waiting to waylay his prey.

The porter presented Antonio, and asserted that, as a combination of professional skill and moral beauty, Antonio was simply unique. Mr. Mildmay, the Englishman in question, was pleased with Antonio's clean shirt, and Mrs. Mildmay was captivated by his chestnut curls, and the frank, innocent expression of the young fellow's face. He was hired on the spot, with the new gondola which he professed to own, for 150 francs per month, including his board. He was to bring his gondola and his recommendations to the hotel to be inspected that afternoon, and was to begin his duties on the following day, the Mildmays having already secured an apartment in advance of their arrival in Venice.

The long-hoped-for fortune had arrived at last. "He is a man of excellent heart, the *paron*," said Antonio to the porter. "He will be as wax in my hands; already I love him and the sweet *parona*. You shall have your share of him, my Zuane. No one can say that I am not a just man."

Antonio hurried at once from the hotel with a note from the porter to a dealer in gondolas, certifying that the bearer had secured a most eligible Englishman. He had to pay a heavy price for the hire by the month of a nearly new gondola, but the payments were to form part of the purchase-money, and Antonio did not grudge the price. Then he stopped at his house to show the new gondola to his wife, and tell her the blessed news, and then, armed with his baptismal certificate, and an old letter from a notary, informing him that the funeral expenses of his father must be paid or serious consequences would follow, he returned to the hotel.

The Mildmays were satisfied with the gondola, and with Antonio's recommendations; for they could not read Italian handwriting, and when Antonio informed them that the notary's letter was a certificate that he was the most honest man in Venice, and that it had been given him by a German Prince whom he had served ten years, they were not in a position to contradict the assertion. Moreover, they were already half in love with the handsome and happy face of their gondolier, and would have taken him without any

recommendation at all, sooner than have taken an old and ugly gondolier with the recommendation of the British Consul and the resident chaplain. The next day Antonio entered upon his duties, and began the joyous task of making hay while the sun of the Englishman shone on him.

The gondolier in private service in Venice does many things wholly unconnected with his boat. He usually waits on his master's table ; he polishes the concrete floors, and he is sent on every variety of errand. Antonio was tireless, respectful, and cheerful, and the Mildmays agreed that he was an ideal servant. Of course they responded to his suggestion that he needed a livery, and he was soon furnished at their expense with a handsome suit of heavy blue cloth, a picturesque hat, a silk sash, and an overcoat. He looked very handsome in his new dress, and the difference between what he paid the tailor and what he charged his master provided his wife and his little boy with their entire wardrobe for the coming winter.

Venice is a cold city after the winter fogs begin, and when Antonio advised the Mildmays to lay in their entire stock of firewood in September instead of waiting until the price should be higher, they said to one another what a comfort it was to have a servant who really looked after their interests. So Antonio was commissioned to buy the wood, and he bought it. He made a handsome commission on the transaction, and, in addition, he had about one-fifth of the whole amount of wood delivered at his own residence. It is true that this was not quite enough to provide him fuel for the entire winter, but the deficiency could easily be remedied by simply carrying home three or four sticks under his coat every night, and Antonio was not a man who shrank from any honest labor when the good of his family was in view.

About ten days after the arrival of his Englishman, Antonio informed him that the gondola needed to go to the *squero* to have its bottom cleaned, at a cost of ten francs. This, however, he insisted upon paying out of his own pocket, because the foulness of the bottom had been incurred before he entered Mr. Mildmay's service. This scrupulous display of honesty still further convinced the Englishman that he had the pearl of gondoliers, and when the next day Antonio asked him to give him as a loan, to be deducted from his future wages, fifty francs, wherewith to make certain essential but wholly unintelligible repairs to the gondola, Mr. Mildmay was of his wife's opinion that it would be a shame to require the poor man ever to repay it.

The first thing that shook the Mildmays' confidence in Antonio was a little incident in connection with a chicken. They had had a pair of roast fowls for dinner and had eaten only one, intending to have the other served cold for luncheon the next day. When late in the evening Mrs. Mildmay accidentally discovered Antonio in the act of going out of the house with the cold fowl

stuffed under his coat, she demanded an explanation. "It is true, *parona*" said Antonio, "that I took the fowl. And why? Because all the evening I had seen you and the *paron* sitting together in such love and happiness that my heart bled for poor Antonio, who has no happy fireside at which to sit. And so I said to myself, 'Antonio! surely you deserve a little happiness as well as these good and noble people! Take the cold fowl, and eat it with love and gratitude in your heart!'"

Mrs. Mildmay could not scold him after this defense, and she simply contented herself with telling him that he might keep the fowl for this time, but that such a method of equalizing the benefits of fortune must not occur again. Antonio promised both her and himself that it should not, and though he continued to keep his wife's table fully supplied from that of the Mildmays, the latter never again found him in possession of surreptitious chickens.

One day Antonio found a gold piece, twenty francs in fact, on the floor of his gondola. He knew it must have been dropped by the *paron*, and he promptly brought it to him. "How wrong I was," said Mrs. Mildmay, "to doubt the poor fellow because of that affair of the chicken. No one would ever have been the wiser if he had kept that twenty-franc piece, but he brought it to us like an honest man." For once she was right in believing Antonio to be honest. Nothing could have induced him to sully his soul and hands by unlawfully detaining his master's money. He was determined to make all the money out of his providential Englishman that he could make in ways that every gondolier knows to be perfectly legitimate, but he was no thief, and Mr. Mildmay could fearlessly have trusted him with all the money in his purse.

Antonio was now one of the happiest men in Venice, but one morning he came to Mr. Mildmay with a face of pathetic sadness, and asked for a day's holiday. "It is not for pleasure that I ask it," he said; "my only pleasure is to serve the best of masters. But my little boy is dead, and is to be buried to-day. I should like to go with the coffin to San Michele."

Mr. Mildmay was unspeakably touched by the man's sorrow and the quiet heroism with which he bore it. He gave him the day's holiday and fifty francs towards the funeral expenses of his child. When Antonio appeared in the morning, quiet, sad, but scrupulously anxious to do his whole duty, the Mildmays felt that they really loved the silent and stricken man.

Misfortune seemed suddenly to have run amuck at Antonio. A week after the death of his child, he announced in his usual quiet way that his wife was dead. It was very sudden, so he said. He did not know exactly what was the disease, but he thought it was rheumatism. The Mildmays thought it strange that rheumatism should have carried off a woman only twenty-two years old, but strange things happen in Venice, and the climate is unquestionably damp.

Antonio only asked for a half-holiday to attend the funeral, and he added that unless the *paron* could advance him two hundred francs of his wages, he should be unable to save his wife from being buried in the common ditch. Of course, this could never be permitted, and Antonio received the two hundred francs, and Mrs. Mildmay told her husband that if he should think of deducting it from the unhappy man's wages, she could never respect him again.

For a time the darts of death spared the household of Antonio. The gondola made its alleged monthly visit to the *squero* to have its bottom cleaned at Mr. Mildmay's expense, and the amount of repairs and paint which it needed did seem unexpectedly large. But Antonio was not foolishly grasping. So long as he doubled his wages by tradesmen's commissions, and by little devices connected with the keeping of the gondola, he felt that he was combining thrift with prudence. He made, however, one serious mistake, of which he afterwards repented when it was too late. Instead of giving the Madonna the two wax candles which he had promised her, he gave her two stearine candles, trusting that she would not notice the difference. It was not in keeping with his honest and religious character, and there were times when the recollection of it made him feel uneasy.

As the winter wore on, Antonio's devotion to his employers never slackened. Beyond the commissions which it is but just and right that the faithful gondolier should exact from those dogs of tradesmen, even if they did charge the same commissions in his master's bills, he was tireless in protecting the Mildmays from imposition. He was never too tired to do anything that he was asked to do, and although, when his brother Spiro was temporarily out of employment, Antonio discovered that there was nearly always too much wind to render it safe to take the gondola out with a single oarsman, and that he would therefore furnish a second oarsman in the person of Spiro at his master's expense, he never intimated that he was not ready to row hour after hour while the Mildmays explored the city and the lagoon. Mr. Mildmay was fascinated by the narrow Venetian streets, and spent hours exploring alone every part of the city. He was probably perfectly safe in so doing, for highway robbery and crimes of violence are almost unknown in Venice; but, for all that, he was always, though without his knowledge, accompanied on his walking excursions by the stealthy and unsuspected Antonio, who kept out of sight, but in readiness to come to his assistance should the necessity arise.

Toward Spring Antonio thought it best to have his wife's mother die, but to his surprise Mr. Mildmay did not offer to pay the old lady's funeral expenses. He drew the line at mothers-in-law, and Antonio received only his half-holiday to accompany the corpse to the cemetery. This miscarriage made Antonio think more than ever of that failure to keep his promise to the Madonna in the

matter of the wax candles, and he sometimes wondered if she were capable of carrying her resentment so far as to take his Englishman from him.

There is gas in Venice, but the judicious householder does not use it, save when he desires to enshroud his rooms in a twilight gloom. If he wishes a light strong enough to read by, he burns petroleum. It was, of course, Antonio who supplied the petroleum to the Mildmay household, and equally, of course, he bought the poorest quality and charged for the dearest. Now, in spite of all the care which a timid person may lavish on a lamp burning cheap petroleum, it is nearly certain sooner or later to accomplish its mission of setting somebody or something on fire, and Antonio's petroleum, which was rather more explosive than gunpowder, unaccountably spared the inmates of the *casa* Mildmay until the month of March, when it suddenly asserted itself.

It happened in this way. One evening Mrs. Mildmay took a lamp in her hand and started to cross the wide and slippery floor of her drawing-room. The rug on which she trod moved under her, and in the effort to save herself she dropped the lamp. It broke, and in an instant she was in a blaze.

Antonio was in the ante-room. The door was open and he saw the accident. He sprang to Mrs. Mildmay's assistance. He did not attempt to avoid the flames, but rushed directly through the pool of blazing oil, burning his feet and ankles horribly. He seized Mrs. Mildmay and tore away her dress with his bare hands. He had nothing to wrap around her, for he was wearing no coat at the time, but he clasped her close in his arms, and smothered the flames that had caught her petticoat by pressing her against his bosom. She escaped with nothing worse than a slightly burned finger, but Antonio's hands, arms, feet, and ankles were burned to the bone. By this time Mr. Mildmay, who had been in his study, heard his wife calling for help, and made his appearance.

Antonio asked the *parona's* permission to sit down for a moment, and then fainted away. The cook was called and sent for the doctor. She met Antonio's brother in the *calle*, close to the house, and sent him upstairs. With his help Antonio was carried to Mrs. Mildmay's bedroom and laid on the bed, and before the doctor came the wounded man regained consciousness and thanked the Mildmays for their care of him.

The doctor, after dressing the wounds, said that the man might very probably recover. But Antonio announced that he was about to die, on hearing which decision the doctor changed his mind.

"When a Venetian of the lower class gives up, and says he is going to die," said the doctor, "no medical science can save him. Your man will die before morning, if he has really lost all hope. There! he says he wants a priest; you might as well order his coffin at once. I can do nothing to save him."

"*Paron,*" said Antonio, presently, "would you, in your great goodness, permit my wife to come to see me for the last time?"

"You shall have anything you want, my brave fellow," replied Mr. Mildmay, "but I thought your wife was dead."

"I was mistaken about it," said Antonio. "It was her twin sister who died, and they were so much alike that their own mother could not tell them apart. No, my poor wife is still alive. May she bring my little boy with her?"

"Tell her to bring anybody you may want to see," replied his master, "but I certainly thought your little boy was buried last January."

"The *paron* is mistaken, if he will pardon me for saying so. It was my little girl who died. Was it not so, Spiro?"

Spiro confirmed Antonio's statement, like a loyal brother who is afraid of no fraternal lie, and Mr. Mildmay had not the heart to trouble the sufferer with any more doubts of his veracity.

Antonio was duly confessed, and received absolution. "Did you tell the father about the candles?" whispered Spiro after the priest had gone.

"I thought," answered Antonio, "that perhaps the Madonna had not yet noticed that they were not wax, and that it would not be wise to tell her of it, just as one is going where she is."

In the early morning Antonio died with the smile of an innocent little child on his face. "I have served the dear *paron* faithfully," he said, just as he died. "I know he will take care of my wife and child. And he will take Spiro as his gondolier."

Mr. Mildmay religiously carried out Antonio's dying, request. He installed Spiro in the place of the dead man, and he settled an annuity on Zanze, the disconsolate widow. He gave Antonio a grave all to himself in San Michele, and a beautiful white marble tombstone, with the epitaph, "Brave, Faithful, and Honest." He came to know somewhat later how Antonio had enriched himself at his expense, but he said to his wife: "After all, my dear, Antonio was strictly honest according to his own code. I think I have known some Englishmen of unblemished reputation, whose honesty, according to the English code, could not be compared with that of the poor boy who gave his life for yours."

11: Little White Frock

Stacy Aumonier

1877-1928

The Story-teller, Nov 1920

WHEN their careers are finished, the painter, the author, the architect, the sculptor, may point to this or that, and say, "Lo, this is my handiwork. Future generations shall rejoice in me."

But to the actor and the executive musician there is nothing left but—memories.

Their permanence lies in the memories of the people who loved them. They cannot pass it on. Some one may say to you, "Ah, my boy, you should have heard Jean de Reszke," or, "You should have seen Macready play that part!" And you are bound in all politeness to accept this verdict, but if you have not heard Jean de Reszke, nor seen Macready, it leaves no definite impression on you at all. Indeed, the actor is in worse case than the musician. For at the present time there are ingenious mechanical devices for caging the performance of a musician with varying degrees of success, but no mechanism could ever imprison the electric thrill of Joseph Jefferson or Henry Irving on their great nights of triumph. They are gone forever, cast away among the limbo of the myths.

These melancholy reflections occurred to me on the first occasion when I visited Colin Brancker. I met the old chap first of all in the public library. He had a fine, distinguished head, with long, snow-white hair. He was slim, and in spite of a pronounced stoop, he carried himself with a certain distinction and alertness. I was a fairly regular visitor to the library, and I always found him devouring the magazines and news- papers which I particularly wanted to read myself. A misunderstanding about a copy of the *Saturday Review* led to a few formal expressions of courtesy, on the following day to a casual nod, later on to a few words about the weather; then to a profound bow on his part and an inquiry after his health from mo. Once we happened to be going out at the same time, and I walked to the end of the road with him.

He interested me at once. His clear, precise diction, with its warm timbre of restrained emotion, was very arresting. His sympathy about the merest trifles stirred you to the depths. If he said, "What a glorious day it is to-day!" it was not merely a conventional expression, but a kind of paean of all the joy and ecstasy of spring life, sunshine and young lambs frisking in the green meadows.

If he said, "Oh! I'm so sorry," in reply to your announcement that you had lost your 'bus ticket coming along and had had to pay twice, the whole dread incident appeared to you envisaged through a mist of tears. The grief of

Agamemnon weeping over the infidelity of Clytemnestra seemed but a trite affair in comparison.

One day, with infinite tact, he invited me to his "humble abode." He occupied the upper part of a small house in Talbot Road. He lived alone, but was apparently tended by a gaunt, middle-aged woman who glided about the place in felt slippers.

The rooms were, as he expressed it, "humble," but not by any means poverty-stricken. He had several pieces of old furniture and bric-a-brac, innumerable mementoes and photographs. It was then that I realized the peculiar position of the actor. If he had been a painter I could have looked at some of his work and have "placed" him; but what could you do with an old actor who lived so much in the past! The position seemed to me pitiable.

Doubtless in his day he had been a fine and distinguished actor, and here was I, who knew nothing about him, and did not like to ask what parts he had played because I felt that I ought to know. Neither was he very informing. Not that he was diffident in speech — he talked well and volubly— but I had to gather what he had done by his various implications. There was a signed photograph of himself in the character of Malvolio, and in many other Shakespearean parts. There were also signed photographs of J. L. Toole and Henry Irving, and innumerable actors, some of whom were famous and others whose names were unfamiliar to me. By slow degrees I patched together some of the romantic tissues of his life. Whatever position he may have held in the theatrical world, he certainly still had the faculty of moving one person profoundly— myself. Everything in that little room seemed to vibrate with romance. One of Irving's photographs was inscribed "To my dear old friend, Colin Brancker." On the circular table was an enamel snuff- box given him by Nellie Farren.

When he spoke of his mother his voice sounded like some distant organ with the *vox Humana* stop pulled out. I gathered that his mother had been a famous French actress. On the piano was a fan given her by the Empress Eugenie. He never spoke of his father. Nearly everything had some intimate association.

I formed a habit of calling on old Brancker on Thursday evenings, when my wife usually visited an invalid aunt. The experience was always a complete entertainment. He knew nothing of my world and I knew nothing of his. I came completely under the spell of his imagery. I had only to touch some trinket on the mantelpiece to set the whole machinery of retrospection on the move. He came haltingly to his Bubject as though he were feeling for it through the lavender-scented contents of some old drawer. But when the subject was discovered, he brought the whole picture vividly before my mind. I could see

those people strutting before the footlights, hear them laugh and joke in their stuffy lodgings and their green-rooms, follow their hard life upon the road, their struggles, and adversities, and successes, and above all the moving throb of their passions and romances.

And then the picture would die out It had no beginning and no end. It was just an impression. The angle of vision would alter. Something else would appear upon the scene.

After a time, touched with pity for this lonely and derelict old actor, my wife and I occasionally sent him little presents of game and port wine, when such things came our way. I would like to explain, at this point, that my wife is younger than I, Her outlook is less critical and introspective. To use her own expression, she is out to have a good time. She enjoys dances and theatres and gay parties. And, after all, why shouldn't she? She is young and beautiful and full of life. Her hair— but I digress! In spite of the pheasants and the port, she had never met old Brancker. But one day we all happened to meet at the corner of the Talbot Road. I then enjoyed an entirely novel vision of my hero. He was magnificent. The bow he made, the long sweep of the hat, would have put d'Artagnan to shame. When I introduced them, he held her hand for a moment, and said :

"It is indeed a great pleasure."

It doesn't sound very much in print, but Alice completely went under. She blushed with pleasure, and told me afterwards that she thought he was " a perfect old dear." The affair lapsed for several weeks. I still continued to call upon him, and we nearly exhausted the whole gamut of his belongings. We even routed through old drawers where faded remnants of ancient fustian would recall some moving episode of the past. I became greedy for these visionary adventures.

One night, rather late, I found the little white frock. So familiar had I become with my old friend that I was allowed to poke about his room on my own, and ask him questions. It was a child's frock, and it lay neatly folded on the top of a cheat in the passage. I brought it into the room, where he was sipping his rum- and-water, and said :

"What's this, Mr. Branckert?"

He fixed his eyes upon the frock, and instantly I was aware that he was strangely moved. At first an expression of surprise and bewilderment crept over his face; then I observed a look of utter dejection and remorse. He did not speak, and rather confusedly I went up to him and touched him on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Doubtless there is some story.... I ought not to have..."

Instantly he patted my arm in return, and muttered:

"No, no. It's all right, old boy. I will tell you. Only, not to-night. No, not to-night."

He stood up and took one or two turns up and down the room in silence. I did not dare to intrude into the secret chamber of his memories. Suddenly he turned to me, and putting his arm round my shoulder, he exclaimed:

"Old boy, come in tomorrow. Come to dinner. Bring the wife. Yes, you must both come. Come to dinner at seven-thirty. And then — I will tell you the story of that little white frock."

It happened that a dance my wife had intended going to the following night had fallen through. To my surprise, she jumped at Mr. Brancker's invitation. She said that she thought it would be extremely interesting. I felt a little nervous at taking her. An invitation to dinner for the first time is always a doubtful number.

The social equation varies so alarmingly and unexpectedly. My wife frequently dined at what she called "smart" houses. How could old Brancker possibly manage a dinner in his poky rooms? I warned her to wear her oldest and shabbiest, and to have a sandwich before we started. Needless to say, my advice was ignored. She appeared in a wonderful gown of pearl-gray. Experience told me it was useless to pro- test, and I jogged along the street by her side in my tweed suit. And then I had my second surprise. Old Brancker was in immaculate evening-dress. Cunningly-modulated lights revealed a table glittering with silver and glass. I mumbled some apology for my negligence, but in his most courtly way he expressed his pleasure that I had treated him with such friendly lack of ceremony. Nevertheless this question of dress— as so often happens— exercised a very definite effect upon my whole evening. I felt a little out of it. My wife and old Brancker seemed to belong to one world and I to another. Moreover, their conversation flowed easily and naturally. The old actor was in his most brilliant mood, and Alice sparkled and gurgled in response. Although she was younger and Brancker older than I, I felt at times that I was the oldest of the three, and that they were just children playing an absorbing game. And the dinner was the third surprise.

The gaunt woman served it, gliding in and out of the room with a quiet assurance. It was no lodging-house dinner, but the artful succession of little dishes which symbolizes the established creed of superior-living creatures. Wine, too, flowed from long-necked bottles, and coffee was served in diminutive cups. At length, Mrs. Windsor collected the last vestiges of this remarkable feast, but left on the table a silver tray on which were set four liqueur glasses and a decanter of green Chartreuse.

"Let us all sit round the fire," said our host. " But, first, let me press you to have a little of this excellent beverage. It was given me by a holy brother, a man who led a varied life, but who, alas! died in disgrace,"

He passed his hand across his brow as though the memory were too sacred to be discussed. I sighed involuntarily, and my wife said brightly :

"Not for me, Mr. Brancker; but you help yourself. And now you're going to tell us the story of the white frock."

He raised his fine head and looked at her. Then he stretched out his long arm across the table and gently pressed her hand.

"I beg of you, dear lady," he said gently, "just one drop in memory of my friend."

The implied sanctity of the appeal could not be denied. Both my wife and I partook of half a glass, and though I am by nature an abstainer, I must acknowledge that it tasted very good. Old Brancker's hand trembled as he poured out the Chartreuse. He drank his at a gulp, and as though the emotion were not yet stilled, he had another one. Then he rose, and, taking my wife's arm, he led her to the easy chair by the fire. I was rather proud of my intimate knowledge of the old actor's possessions, and I pointed oat the snuff-box which Nellie Farren had given him, and the photograph of Irving, with its inscription " To my dear old friend."

Brancker sighed and shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps one does not boast of these associations. Perhaps it is vulgar, but I knew how interested Alice would be. When we had done a round of the rooms, whither in his fatherly way he had conducted my wife by the arm, and occasionally rested his hand ever so lightly on her shoulder, we returned to the dining-room, and Alice said:

"Now show me this little white frock!"

He bowed, and without a word went out into the hall, and returned with the frock, which he spread reverently over the back of a chair.

"How perfectly sweet I " said my wife.

For a few moments he buried his head in his hands, and Alice and I were silent. I could not but observe the interesting *mise-en-scene* in which I found myself. The dim recesses of the room, heavy with memories. My wife cosily curled up in the high arm-chair, the firelight playing on her fresh, almost childlike, face, a simple ring sparkling on her finger, and on the pearly glint of her diaphanous gown. On the other side of the table where the little glasses stood, the clear-cut features and long snow-white hair of the old actor, silhouetted against a dark cabinet. And then, like some fragile ghost recalled to bear witness to its tragic past, the dim outline of the child's white frock.

"It was before your time, *mes enfants*, long, long before your time," he said suddenly. "You would not remember the famous Charles Carside Company

who starred the provinces. We became known as the Capacity Company. The title was doubly-earned. We always played to full houses, and in those days—"

He turned to me with a penetrating, almost challenging look, and added:

"There were actors. Comedy, and tragedy, history, everything worth doing, in the legitimate, was in our repertoire. We changed our bill every night, and sometimes twice a day. Ay, and we changed our parts, sir. I remember Terry O'Bane and I reversing the parts of Othello and Iago on alternate nights for two weeks at a stretch. I played Lord Stamford to his Puttick in 'The Golden Dawn.' He played Shylock to my Bassanio. I will not bore you with these details. Ah! poor old Terry! Poor dear old Terry!"

He stopped and looked down at his hands, and neither of us spoke.

"When I say that Terry O'Bane and I were friends, I want to tell you that we were friends as only artiste can be friends. We loved each other. For three years we worked together side by side— never a suspicion of envy, never a suspicion of jealousy. I remember one night, after Terry's delivery of Jaques' speech on the fool, he did not get a hand. I found him weeping in the wings. 'Old fellow!' I said, but he gripped me by the arm. 'Colly boy,' he answered, 'I was thinking of you. I knew how distressed you would be!'

Think of that! His only concern was that I should be distressed. Ah! in those days..."

He stretched his long white fingers and examined them; then, turning suddenly to my wife, he said :

"I want to ask you, mademoiselle" (he persisted in calling her 'mademoiselle' all the evening), "to make allowances in what I am about to tell you for the *tempora et mores*. In my young days love had a different significance to what it has now. In this modern world I observe nothing but expediency and opportunism. No one is prepared to sacrifice, to run risks. The love between O'Bane and me was an epic of self-sacrifice, and it ran its full course. It found its acid test on the day when Sophie Wiles joined our company at Leeds."

He stood up, and his voice trembled in a low whisper. Looking at Alice, he said:

"She was as beautiful, as fragile, as adorable as you are, mademoiselle. Strange how these great secrets are conveyed imperceptibly. O'Bane and I looked at each other, and instinctively we understood. We said nothing. We made no comment about her. We were entirely solicitous of each other's feelings. We referred to her as 'Miss Wiles' and we addressed her as 'Miss Wiles.' Before we had been three weeks on the road I knew that if I had not known O'Bane's feelings I should have gone to her and said, 'Sophie, my darling, my angel, I love you, I adore you. Will you marry me? 'But would it

have been chivalrous to do this, knowing O'Bane's sentiments ? We were two months on the road before the matter reached its climax. And during that time— under an unspoken compact— neither of us made love to Sophie. And then, one night, I could bear it no longer. I saw the drawn and hungry look in my colleague's ere as he watched her from the wings. I went up to him and whispered, 'Old fellow, go in and win. She's worthy of you.' He understood me at once, and he pressed my hand. 'Colly,' he said, 'you're right, This can't go on. Meet me after the show and come round to my rooms.' "

The old actor's lips were trembling. He drew his chair nearer to my wife's. "I cannot tell you of the heart-burning interview I had with my old friend that night. Each tried to give way to the other. It was very terrible, very moving. At length we decided that the only solution would be to put the matter to a hazard. We could not cut cards or throw dice. It seemed profane. We decided to play a game of chess. We set out the pieces and began. But at the end of a few moments it was apparent that each was trying to let the other win. 'Stay,' I said;' we must leave the verdict to impartial destiny, after all,' and I rose. On the sideboard— as it might be here — was a large bowl of Gloire-de-Dijon roses. I took the largest bloom and said, 'Terry, old boy, if there are an odd number of petals in this rose, she is yours. If an even number, I will pay her court.' He agreed. Slowly and deliberately, petal by petal, I destroyed the beautiful bloom. There were fifty-eight petals. When Terry saw the last petal fall he turned white and swayed. I helped him to the easy-chair and handed him a little grog. It was nearly dawn. Already the birds were twittering on the window-Bill."

He turned and gazed at the window as though even now the magic of that early morning was upon him.

"The dawn was clear for me, but for my friend how dark and foreboding! Or so it seemed to both of us at that hour. But, as Mahomet said, 'With women, life is a condition of flux.' At eleven o'clock that morning I was on my bended knees to Sophie. I poured out all my pent-up feelings of the two months. There are some things too sacred to repeat even to those who are— dear to us."

He gasped and, stretching out his arm, poured out another glass of the Chartreuse.

"She refused me, or if she did not actually refuse me— indeed, she did not; she was sympathetic, almost loving, but so— indeterminate that I was almost driven to a frenzy of despair. When one is young, one is like that. One must have all, and at once, or go crazy with despair. For a week I courted her day and night, and I could not make her decide. She liked me, but she did not love me. At the end of that time, I went to O'Bane, and I said, 'Old man, it is your

call. My part is played.' Under great pressure from me he consented to enter the lists, and I withheld my hand as he had done. Even now the memory of that week of anguish when I knew that my greatest friend was making love to my adored is almost unbearable. At the end of the week be came to me and said, 'Old boy, I don't know how I stand. She likes me, but I hardly think she loves me.' I will not burden you with the chronicle of our strange actions which followed. We decided that as the question was identical it should be an open fight in a fair field, otherwise, between us, we should lose her altogether. We would both pay court to her wherever and whenever the opportunity occurred. And we would do so without animosity or ill-will. The tour lasted three months, and I knew that O'Bane was winning. There was no question about it. He was the favourite. Every minute I was expecting to hear the dread glad tidings. And then a strange thing happened."

He leant back in his chair and passed his hands through his hair with a graceful gesture.

"An uncle in Australia died and left O'Bane an enormous fortune. He was rich beyond the dreams of avarice. The company all knew of it, and were delighted, all— all except one person."

He glanced towards my wife, and sighed.

"I have lived a good many years, and yet I seem to find the heart of woman as unfathomable, as unexplorable as ever. They are to me the magic casements opening on the night. There is no limit... every subtle human experience is capable of endless variation. Sophie refused to marry O'Bane because people would think she married him for his money. The anguish of those last weeks I shall never forget. She definitely refused him, and I was torn between my love for O'Bane and my love for Sophie. I can say with perfect truth— literal truth— that the fortune killed O'Bane. When we arrived in London, he began to squander. He drank, gambled, and led a depraved life, all because the woman he loved would not many him. In the spring he left the company and took a house in town. It became the happy hunting-ground of loose characters. It is needless to say that if Sophie wouldn't marry him, there were plenty of other women willing to marry a young millionaire. He became entangled with a fast and pretty creature called Annabel Peacock. He married her, and in the following year they had a child."

The fire crackled on the hearth; my wife did not take her eyes from the old actor's face A black cat strolled leisurely across the room and stretched itself before the fire. He continued:

"It was then that I experienced an entirely novel vision of woman's character. Sophie, who would not marry O'Bane because he was rich, and who shivered with disgust in the presence of Annabel Peacock, developed an

amazing affection and interest for their child. We were out again in the Capacity Company. I had her all to myself. I laid siege to her heart. I was patient, tactful, importunate, imploring, passionate. But it was all no good, my boy... no good at all. Heigho! would you believe it?— for ten years of my life from that date I was that woman's slave, and she was the slave of Terry's child. Company after company I joined in order to be with her. I gave up good parts. I sacrificed leads, and in fact I even accepted a walk-on— anything to be with Sophie. Sophie, who would not listen to me, who treated me like a little pet, to run hither and thither, and who spent all her money and time on toys and clothes for Terry's child. Would you believe it?"

To my surprise, my wife spoke for the first time. She said: "Yes."

Brancker looked at her keenly, and nodded.

"Yes. In any affair between a man and a woman, a man finds himself at a disadvantage. Mademoiselle, you see, understands. Women have all kinds of mysterious intuitions and senses which we wot not of. She is armed at every point She has more resources. She is better-equipped than man. Sophie even made a friend of Annabel. She wrote her loving letters and called her 'my dearest'. For you must know that two years after his marriage my old friend Terry O'Bane went under. He awakened one night feeling ill; he groped in a chest where he usually kept a flask of brandy. He took a gulp. The liquid he drew into his throat was pure liquid ammonia which Annabel had been using for photographic work. She was a keen amateur photographer. He rushed out into the street in his pyjamas, and died in the arms of a policeman at the corner."

The horror of this episode was written plainly in the old man's face. He delivered it with a kind of dramatic despair, as though he knew it had to be told and he could not control himself. Then he seemed to fall to pieces, and lay huddled at the back of his chair. I looked at Alice furtively, and I could see a tear swimming on the brink of her eye. It was some moments before he could continue.

"These were all the best years of my life, *mes enfants*, when my powers were at their highest My old friend Toole offered me a good part in London. He said to me, 'Brancker, old man, you're wasting yourself in the provinces. Come to town and take a lead.' I could only press his hand and thank him. In another week or two I was on the road again with Sophie. As the years went by she became more and more absorbed by Terry's unattractive child, and more and more distressed concerning it. For you must know that in spite of his profligate life, Terry still had left a considerable fortune, and Annabel continued to live in the same way. And it was the worst possible atmosphere to bring a child up in. Annabel was kind to the child in a spasmodic way, passionate and unreliable.

She would pet it and coax it, and buy it expensive toys and dresses, and then suddenly neglect or scold it. Sophie knew this, and all the time she could spare she went to London and tried to help the situation. She humoured and flattered Annabel, who was quite manageable if you treated her like this, and she did what she could to influence the early training of the child for good. But, as you may imagine, the little minx grew up the spit and image of her mother. She was vain, fickle, and spoilt By the time she was ten she thought of nothing but her looks and her frocks; and she was indeed a very pretty child. She had all the prettiness of her mother, with something of her father's grace and charm. She was encouraged to amuse the vulgar people who came to the house, and she was allowed to listen to all the loose talk, and to sit up to any hour she liked, unless Annabel happened to be in a contrary mood, when she would slap the child and lock her in her room.

" 'Aunt Sophie,' as she called her, was a favourite with Lucy, but only, I'm afraid, because,' Aunt Sophie' gave her expensive toys, and lavished her love persistently upon the child. She wrote to her nearly every day, wherever she happened to be, and sent her little gifts."

The old man mopped his forehead. He was evidently labouring under the severe strain which the invoking of these memories put upon him. He walked to the sideboard and poured himself out a glass of water, into which he poured— an as after-thought— a tiny drop of rum. After taking two long, meditative gulps, he resumed his seat: He seemed to have forgotten all about our presence. He was living in the past. But suddenly he turned to my wife and said:

"I have many of the beautiful frocks which Sophie made for little Lucy. They have come down to me. If it would not bore you to call one afternoon, mademoiselle, I could show you some that might interest you." There was a strange, eager appeal in his voice. It seemed a matter of tremendous moment that Alice should go and inspect the frocks. My heart bled for him. "Of course she will go," I thought, but to my surprise, she said nothing. She just looked at him with that queer, watchful expression that women alone are capable of. Perhaps it is part of what the old chap referred to— their equipment. She toyed with the chain on her frock, and his eye meditated her movements. He hesitated, and then rather nervously proceeded, as though talking to himself.

"Frocks! What a part they play in our lives. Carlyle was right. Sophie was extraordinarily clever with her needle. She had a genius for combining materials. Her theatrical experience helped her. She made the most alluring frocks. The child adored 'Aunt Sophie's' frocks. They always looked so striking and so professional. The crisis in my life, and which I am about to tell you of,

was indeed occasioned by one of the frocks which Sophie made for Lucy. It came about in this way."

He paused again, and tapped the top of the table with his beautiful white hands.

"That last year— that year when Lucy reached her tenth birthday— the excesses in Annabel's house reached their zenith. The place became notorious. Annabel had taken to herself a drunken lord, Lord Starborough. He was a dissipated young *roué*. He rather took a fancy to Lucy, and he spoilt her in the same way that Annabel did. We heard stories of the goings on. The child was taken to houses to dance. I believe she was even taught to put on rouge. There was a rich family called the Arkwrights, who also had children, and who lived a similar life. These children were Lucy's great friends. They vied with each other in their infantile snobbery. The parents gave elaborate parties and tried to outshine each other in the lavishness of their entertainment, and the overdressing of the children. It was very, very painful. Even I, whose life was being wrecked by Sophie's adulation of this child, felt sorry. My heart bled for my old friend's daughter.

"We had a long tour that autumn, Sophie and I. We were out in *'The Woman Who Failed*.' Sophie had a lead, but I was only playing the part of a butler. It was a long and trying tour up North. The weather was very bitter. There was a good deal of sickness, and our chief was a hard man. Early in December Sophie caught a cold which rapidly developed into bronchitis. She had a narrow escape. She was, however, only out of the bill for ten days. She insisted on returning and struggling on. The tour was to end on Christmas Eve. One day she had a letter from Lucy. I remember the exact words to this day. 'Dear Aunt Sophie, do make me a lovely frock for Christmas Eve. The Arkwrights are having a lovely ball, and I know Irene is having a gold and green, with a sparkling veil. Your loving Lucy.'

"When Sophie got this letter she smiled. She was happy. She was always happy when doing a service. Ah I me.... For nearly a week she thought and dreamt about the frock she was going to make for Lucy for the Arkwrights , party. She knew what the child wanted — a frock to outshine all the others. Then another story reached us. I have forgotten what it was: some distressing record of these Arkwright people. One night after the show she sent for me I could tell she was very agitated. She clutched my arm, and said, ' Old man, I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to make Lucy a frock which will outshine all the others. And it will he just a plain white frock, with no adornment of any sort Just think of it,— amongst all those vulgar, overdressed children, one little girl, as pretty as Lucy,— in plain white. And they will be bound to appreciate it. It will tell. And perhaps she will realize— what it means. Good taste and

refinement will always tell against vulgarity.' I applauded Sophie's idea, and I went with her to get the material. But she fainted in the shop. During those last few days I began to realize that Sophie was very ill. She was simply living on her nervous force, keeping herself going in order to complete the tour, and to deliver Lucy's frock in time for the ball.

"Our last journey back was from Nottingham. We arrived in London at five o'clock on Christmas Eva I was in a fever of dread. I believed that Sophie was dying. She kept swaying in the train as though she was going to drop. Her face was deadly-white, her eyes unnaturally bright, and her fingers were still busy on the frock. So absorbed had I been in Sophie's affairs, I had made no arrangements about lodgings in town. Neither had she. But my old friend, Joe Gadgers, seeing my distress, said, 'Old boy, leave it to me. I know a snug little place where they'll take you in. I'm not stopping. I'm going straight through to Hastings.' I thanked my old friend and embraced him. When we got to Euston, we got Sophie into a four- wheeled cab, and Joe Cadgers came with us to arrange the introduction. I hardly noticed where the lodgings were—somewhere in Clapham, I think. We arrived there, and a good lady took us in without hesitation. We put Sophie to bed. She was almost delirious, but still the frock was not quite finished. Joe left us, and I sat by her bedside, watching her busy fingers. I knew it was useless to protest The clock on the mantelpiece ticked, and outside the snow was beginning to fall."

Colin Brancker stood up, and suddenly picked up the little white frock from the back of the chair. He held it in his arms reverently and tenderly. His voice was strong and resonant. He stood there, and acted the scene vividly before our eyes.

"At ten minutes to seven I left the house, holding the frock in my arms. I rushed out without a hat, with- out a coat. I flew along the street, calling out for a cab like a madman.... At last I got one. I told die driver to drive like the furies to the address I gave him in Kensington. In the cab I stamped my feet and rocked the dress in my arms as though it were a fevered child. I don't know how we got there. It seemed an eternity. I flung into the house, calling out, 'Lucy! Lucy!' I found her in the drawing-room. She was dressed in a flaming orange and silver dress, with a sparkling tiara in her hair. She was looking in a mirror and putting finishing touches to her hair.

She cried out when she saw me: 'Hullo! I thought Aunt Sophie had forgotten me. I've hired a frock from Roco's.' 'Child,' I said, 'your Aunt Sophie has been working out her life's blood for you. Here is the frock.' She grabbed it and examined it. 'Frock!' she said. ' It looks more like a nightdress. I don't want the beastly old thing'; and she threw it across the room. I believe at that moment I could have struck the child. I was blind with fury. Fortunately, I

remembered in time that she was my old friend Terry O'Fane's daughter. I picked up the frock. 'Ungrateful child!' I exclaimed. 'You don't know what you're doing. You're murdering an ideal. You're killing your aunt.' She tossed her insolent head and actually pressed the bell for the butler to see me out. Just like a grown-up person. Dazed and baffled, I clutched the little white frock and staggered out into the street. The night was dark, and the snow was still falling. Christmas bells were beginning to peal. ... I plunged on and on, my heart beating against my ribs. People stared at me, but I was too distressed to care. How could I go back to Sophie with the insulting message? Suddenly, at the corner of Hyde Park, a most appalling realization flashed through my mind. I had made no note of the address of the lodgings where Sophie and I were staying!... God in heaven! "What was I to do? The only man who could help me, my old friend, Joe Gadgers, had gone to Hastings. What could I do ? Could I go to the police and say, 'Will you help me to find the address of some lodgings where an actress is staying ? I think it's somewhere round about Clapham. I don't know the name of the landlady, or the name of the street, or the number?' They would have thought I was mad. Perhaps I was mad. Should I go back to Lucy? The child wouldn't know.... And all this time Sophie was dying. Ah! merciful God! perhaps she would die. If she died before I found her, she would die in the happy belief that the frock had been worn. Her last hours would be blessed with dreams, visions of purity and joy... whilst I... I should have no place in them, perhaps... but I, too, after all, I'd suffered for her sake. Who knows?... Who knows...?"

His voice broke off in a low sob. I leant forward watching his face, racked with anguish. The room was extraordinarily still.... I dared not look at Alice, but I was conscious of the pearly sheen of her frock under the lamp. Away in the distance one could hear the rumble of the traffic on the High-road. The remorseless tick of the clock was the only sound in the room. Once I thought it ticked louder, and then. I realized that it was some one tapping gently at the door. The door opened a little way, and against the dim light in the passage appeared the gaunt face of the old serving- woman, phantom-like, unreal....

"Excuse me, sir." She peered into the room. The old actor gazed at her with unseeing eyes. He stood with one hand on the back of the chair, and across the other arm lay the white frock; a dignified and pathetic figure.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir."

"Tea, Mrs. Windsor?"

"My little niece 'as just called. I can't find it any- where— that little frock I made for 'er last week. I put it in the chest. I thought perhaps you might 'ave... Oh I there it is, sir. Do you mind—? Thank you very much, sir. I'm sorry to have disturbed the company."

IN THE SANCTUARY of our bedroom that night, my wife said:

"Did you really believe that that writing on the photograph was by Henry Irving t "

"My dear," I answered, " when their careers are finished, the painter, the author, the architect or the sculptor may point to this or that, and say, 'Lo! this is my handiwork.' But to the actor nothing remains but — memories. Their permanence lies in the memories of those who loved them. Are we to begrudge them all the riches of imagination? After all, what is the line of demarcation between what we call reality and what we call imagination ? Is not the imagery invoked by Shelley when he sings of dubious myths as real a fact as the steel rivets in the Forth Bridge! What is reality? Indeed, what is life?"

"I don't know what life is," answered my wife, switching off the light. " But I know what you are. You're a dear old— perfect old — BOOB!"

"Alice, what do you mean?" I said.

She laughed softly.

"Women are equipped, you know," she replied enigmatically, and insisted on going to sleep.

_____

12: Midnight At The Grand Babylon

Arnold Bennett

1867-1931

In: *The Loot of Cities*, 1917

WELL, said the doctor, you say I've been very secretive lately. Perhaps I have. However, I don't mind telling you— just you fellows— the whole history of the affair that has preoccupied me. I shan't assert that it's the most curious case in all my experience. My experience has been pretty varied, and pretty lively, as you know, and cases are curious in such different ways. Still, a poisoning business is always a bit curious, and this one was extremely so. It isn't often that a person who means to commit murder by poison calls in a physician to assist him and deliberately uses the unconscious medico as his tool. Yet that is exactly what happened. It isn't often that a poisoner contrives to hit on a poison which is at once original, almost untraceable, and to be obtained from any chemist without a doctor's prescription. Yet that, too, is exactly what happened. I can assure you that the entire episode was a lesson to me. It opened my eyes to the possibilities which lie ready to the hand of a really intelligent murderer in this twentieth century. People talk about the masterpieces of poisoning in the middle ages. Pooh! Second-rate! They didn't know enough in the middle ages to achieve anything which a modern poisoner with genius would deem first-rate; they simply didn't know enough. Another point in the matter which forcibly struck me was the singular usefulness of a big London hotel to a talented criminal. You can do precisely what you please in a big hotel, and nobody takes the least notice. You wander in, you wander out, and who cares? You are only an item in a crowd. And when you have reached the upper corridors you are as lost to pursuit and observation as a needle in a haystack.

You may take two rooms, one after the other, in different names, and in different parts of the hotel; the servants and officials will be none the wiser, because the second floor knows not the third, nor the third the fourth; you may oscillate between those two rooms in a manner to puzzle Inspector Anderson himself. And you are just as secure in your apartments as a mediaeval baron in his castle— yes, and more! On that night there were over a thousand guests in the Grand Babylon Hotel (there was a ball in the Gold Rooms, and a couple of banquets); and in the midst of all that diverse humanity, unperceived, unsuspected, a poignant and terrible drama was going on, and things sc occurred that I tumbled right into it. Well, I'll tell you.

I WAS CALLED in to the Grand Babylon about nine p.m.; suite No. 63, second floor, name of Russell. The outer door of the suite was opened for me by a well-dressed woman of thirty or so, slim, with a face expressive and intelligent rather than handsome. I liked her face— I was attracted by its look of honesty and alert good-nature.

"Good evening, doctor,'' she said. She had a charming low voice, as she led me into a highly-luxurious drawing-room. " My name is Russell, and I wish you to see a young friend of mine who is not well." She hesitated and turned to an old bald-headed man, who stood looking out of the window at the twilight panorama of the Thames. "My friend's solicitor, Mr. Dancer," she explained. We bowed, Mr. Dancer and I.

"Nothing serious, I hope," I remarked.

"No, no! " said Miss Russell.

Nevertheless, she seemed to me to be extremely nervous and anxious, as she preceded me into the bedroom, a chamber quite as magnificent as the drawing-room.

On the bed lay a beautiful young girl. Yes, you may laugh, you fellows, but she was genuinely beautiful. She smiled faintly as we entered. Her features had an ashy tint, and tiny drops of cold perspiration stood on the forehead. However, she certainly wasn't very ill— I could see that in a moment, and I fixed my conversational tone accordingly.

"Do you feel as if you could breathe freely, but that if you did it would kill you?" I inquired, after I had examined her. And she nodded, smiling again. Miss Russell also smiled, evidently pleased that I had diagnosed the case so quickly.

My patient was suffering from a mild attack of pseudo-angina, nothing worse. Not angina pectoris, you know— that's usually associated with old age. Pseudo-angina is a different thing. With a weak heart, it may be caused by indigestion. The symptoms are cardiac spasms, acute pain in the chest, a strong disinclination to make even the smallest movement, and a state of mental depression, together with that queer fancy about breathing. The girl had these symptoms, and she also had a headache and a dicrotism of the pulse— two pulsations instead of one, not unusual. I found that she had been eating a too hearty dinner, and that she had suffered from several similar attacks in the immediate past.

"You had a doctor in before?" I asked.

"Yes," said Miss Russell. "But he was unable to come to-night, and as your house is so near we sent for you."

"There is no danger whatever— no real cause for anxiety," I summed up. "I will have some medicine made up instantly."

"Trinitrin?" demanded Miss Russell.

"Yes," I answered, a little astonished at this readiness. "Your regular physician prescribed it?"

(I should explain to you that trinitrin is nothing but nitro-glycerine in a non-explosive form.)

"I think it was trinitrin," Miss Russell replied, with an appearance of doubtfulness. "Perhaps you will write the prescription and I will despatch a messenger at once. I should be obliged, doctor, if you would remain with us until— if you would remain with us."

"Decidedly! " I said. "I will remain with pleasure. But do accept my assurance," I added, gazing at her face, so anxious and apprehensive, "that there is no cause for alarm."

She smiled and concurred. But I could see that I had not convinced her. And I began to suspect that she was not after all so intelligent as I had imagined. My patient, who was not now in any pain, lay calmly, with closed eyes.

iii

DO NOT FORGET the old bald-headed lawyer in the drawing-room.

"I suppose you are often summoned to the Grand Babylon, sir, living, as you do, just round the corner," he remarked to me somewhat pompously. He had a big nose and a habit of staring at you over his eye-glasses with his mouth wide-open, after having spoken. We were alone together in the drawing-room. I was waiting for the arrival of the medicine, and he was waiting for— I didn't know what he was waiting for.

"Occasionally. Not often," I responded. "I am called more frequently to the Majestic, over the way."

"Ah, just so, just so," he murmured.

I could see that he meant to be polite in his high and dry antique legal style; and I could see also that he was very bored in that hotel drawing-room. So I proceeded to explain the case to him, and to question him discreetly about my patient and Miss Russell.

"You are, of course, aware, sir, that the young lady is Miss Spanton, Miss Adelaide Spanton?" he said.

"What? Not 'the' Spanton?"

"Precisely, sir. The daughter of Edgar Spanton, my late client, the great newspaper proprietor."

"And this Miss Russell?"

"Miss Russell was formerly Miss Adelaide's governess. She is now her friend, and profoundly attached to the young lady; a disinterested attachment,

so far as I can judge, though naturally many people will think otherwise. Miss Adelaide is of a very shy and retiring disposition; she has no other friends, and she has no near relatives. Save for Miss Russell she is, sir, if I may so phrase it, alone in the world."

"But Miss Spanton is surely very wealthy?"

"You come to the point, sir. If my young client reaches her twenty-first birthday she will be the absolute mistress of the whole of her father's fortune. You may have noticed in the public press that I swore his estate at more than three millions."

"And how far is Miss Spanton from her twenty-first birthday?" I demanded.

The old lawyer glanced at his watch.

"Something less than three hours. At midnight she will have legally entered on her 22nd year."

"I see," I said. "Now I can understand Miss Russell's anxiety, which refuses to be relieved even by my positive assurance. No doubt Miss Russell has worked herself up into a highly nervous condition. And may I inquire what will happen— I mean, what would have happened, if Miss Spanton had not reached her majority?"

"The entire estate would have passed to a cousin, a Mr. Samuel Grist, of Melbourne. I daresay you know the name. Mr. Grist is understood to be the leading theatrical manager in Australia. Speaking as one professional man to another, sir, I may venture to remark that Mr. Grist's reputation is more than a little doubtful— you may have heard— many transactions and adventures. Ha, ha! Still, he is my late client's sole surviving relative, except Miss Adelaide. I have never had the pleasure of meeting him; he confines himself exclusively to Australia."

"This night then," I laughed, "will see the end of any hopes which Mr. Grist may have entertained."

"Exactly, sir," the lawyer agreed. "It will also see the end of Miss Russell's immediate anxieties. Upon my word, since Mr. Spanton's regrettable death, she has been both father and mother to my lonely young client. A practical woman, sir, Miss Russell! And the excessiveness of her apprehensions, if I may so phrase it, must be excused. She has begged me to remain here till midnight, in order that I may witness to Miss Spanton's— er— vitality, and also in order to obtain Miss Spanton's signature to certain necessary documents. I should not be surprised, sir, if she requested you also to remain. She is not a woman to omit precautions."

"I'm afraid I can't stop till twelve," I said. The conversation ceased, and I fell into meditation.

I do not mind admitting that I was deeply impressed by what I will call the romantic quality of the situation. I thought of old Spanton, who had begun with something less than nothing and died virtually the owner of three daily papers and twenty-five weeklies and monthlies. I thought of Spantons, Ltd., and their colossal offices spreading half round Salisbury Square. Why, I even had a copy of the extra special edition of the *Evening Gazette* in my pocket! Do any of you fellows remember Spanton starting the *Evening Gazette*? He sold three hundred thousand the first day. And now old Spanton was dead— you know he died of drink, and there was nothing left of the Spanton blood except this girl lying there on the bed, and the man in Australia. And all the Spanton editors, and the Spanton sub-editors, and the Spanton artists, and the Spanton reporters and compositors, and the Spanton rotary presses, and the Spanton paper mills, and the Spanton cyclists, were slaving and toiling to put eighty thousand a year into this girl's purse. And there she was, feeble and depressed, and solitary, except for Miss Russell, and the man in Australia perhaps hoping she would die; and there was Miss Russell, worrying and fussing and apprehending and fearing. And the entire hotel oblivious of the romantic, I could almost say the pathetic, situation. And then I thought of Miss Spanton's future, burdened with those three millions, and I wondered if those three millions would buy her happiness.

"Here is the medicine, doctor," said Miss Russell, entering the drawing-room hurriedly, and handing me the bottle with the chemist's label on it. I went with her into the bedroom. The beautiful Adelaide Spanton was already better, and she admitted as much when I administered the medicine— two minims of a one per cent solution of trinitrin, otherwise nitro-glycerine, the usual remedy for pseudo-angina.

Miss Russell took the bottle from my hand, corked it and placed it on the dressing-table. Shortly afterwards I left the hotel. The lawyer had been right in supposing that Miss Russell would ask me to stay, but I was unable to do so. I promised, however, to return in an hour, all the while insisting that there was not the slightest danger for the patient.

iv

IT WAS 10.30 when I came back.

"Second floor!" I said carelessly to the lift boy, and he whirled me upwards; the Grand Babylon lifts travel very fast.

"Here you are, sir," he murmured respectfully, and I stepped out.

"Is this the second floor? " I asked suddenly.

"Beg pardon! I thought you said seventh, sir."

"It's time you were in bed, my lad!" was my retort, and I was just re-entering the lift when I caught sight of Miss Russell in the corridor. I called to her, thinking she would perhaps descend with me, but she did not hear, and so I followed her down the corridor, wondering what was her business on the seventh floor. She opened a door and disappeared into a room.

"Well?" I heard a sinister voice exclaim within the room, and then the door was pushed to; it was not latched,

"I did say the seventh!" I called to the lift-boy, and he vanished with his machine.

The voice within the room startled me. It gave me furiously to think, as the French say. With a sort of instinctive unpremeditated action I pressed gently against the door till it stood ajar about an inch. And I listened.

"It's a confounded mysterious case to me!" the voice was saying, " that that dose the other day didn't finish her. We're running it a dashed sight too close! Here, take this— it's all ready, label and everything. Substitute the bottles. I'll run no risks this time. One dose will do the trick inside half an hour, and on that I'll bet my boots!"

"Very well," said Miss Russell, quite calmly.

"It's pure trinitrin, is it?"

"You're the coolest customer that I ever struck! " the voice exclaimed, in an admiring tone. "Yes, it's pure trinitrin— beautiful, convenient stuff! Looks like water, no taste, very little smell, and so volatile that all the doctors on the Medical Council couldn't trace it at a post-mortem. Besides the doctor prescribed a solution of trinitrin, and you got it from the chemist, and in case there's a rumpus we can shove the mistake on to the chemist's dispenser, and a fine old row he'll get into. By the way, what's the new doctor like?"

"Oh! So-so! " said Miss Russell, in her even tones.

"It's a good thing on the whole, perhaps, that I arranged that carriage accident for the first one! " the hard, sinister voice remarked. "One never knows. Get along now at once, and don't look so anxious. Your face belies your voice. Give us a kiss!"

"To-morrow!" said Miss Russell.

I hurried away, as it were drunk, overwhelmed with horror and amazement, and turning a corner so as to avoid discovery, reached the second floor by the staircase. I did not wish to meet Miss Russell in the lift.

My first thought was not one of alarm for Adelaide Spanton— of course, I knew I could prevent the murder— but of profound sorrow that Miss Russell should have proved to be a woman so unspeakably wicked. I swore never to trust a woman's face again. I had liked her face. Then I dwelt on the chance, the mere chance, my careless pronunciation, a lift-boy's error, which had saved

the life of the poor millionaire girl. And lastly I marvelled at the combined simplicity and ingenuity of the plot. The scoundrel upstairs— possibly Samuel Grist himself— had taken the cleverest advantage of Miss Spanton's tendency to pseudo-angina. What could be more clever than to poison with the physician's own medicine? Very probably the girl's present attack had been induced by an artful appeal to her appetite; young women afflicted as she was are frequently just a little greedy. And I perceived that the villain was correct in assuming that nitro-glycerine would never be traced at a post-mortem save in the smallest possible quantity— just such a quantity as I had myself prescribed. He was also right in his assumption that the pure drug would infallibly kill in half an hour.

I pulled myself together, and having surrepitiously watched Miss Russell into Suite No. 63, I followed her. When I arrived at the bedroom she was pouring medicine from a bottle; a maid stood at the foot of the bed .

"I am just giving the second dose," said Miss Russell easily to me.

"What a nerve!" I said to myself, and aloud: "By all means!"

She measured the dose, and approached the bed without a tremor. Adelaide Spanton opened her mouth.

"Stop!" I cried firmly. "We'll delay that dose for half an hour. Kindly give me the glass! " I took the glass from Miss Russell's passive fingers. "And I would like to have a word with you now, Miss Russell !"I added.

The maid went swiftly from the room.

v

THE OLD bald-headed lawyer had gone down to the hotel smoking-saloon for a little diversion, and we faced each other in the drawing-room— Miss Russell and I. The glass was still in my hand.

"And the new doctor is so-so, eh—?" I remarked.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"I think you know what I mean," I retorted. "I need only tell you that by a sheer chance I stumbled upon your atrocious plot— the plot of that scoundrel upstairs. All you had to do was to exchange the bottles, and administer pure trinitrin instead of my prescribed solution of it, and Miss Spanton would be dead in half an hour. The three millions would go to the Australian cousin, and you would doubtless have your reward— say, a cool hundred thousand, or perhaps marriage. And you' were about to give the poison when I stopped you."

"I was not!" she cried. And she fell into a chair, and hid her face in her hands, and then looked, as it were longingly, towards the bed-room.

"Miss Spanton is in no danger," I said sneeringly. "She will be quite well to-morrow. So you were not going to give the poison, after all?" I laughed.

"I beg you to listen, doctor," she said at length, standing up. "I am in a most invidious position. Nevertheless, I think I can convince you that your suspicions against me are unfounded."

I laughed again. But secretly I admired her for acting the part so well.

"Doubtless!" I interjected sarcastically, in the pause.

"The man upstairs is Samuel Grist, supposed to be in Australia. It is four months ago since I, who am Adelaide Spanton's sole friend, discovered that he was scheming her death. The skill of his methods appalled me. There was nothing to put before the police, and yet I had a horrible fear of the worst. I felt that he would stop at nothing— absolutely at nothing. I felt that, if we ran away, he would follow us. I had a presentiment that he would infallibly succeed, and I was haunted by it day and night. Then an idea occurred to me— I would pretend to be his accomplice. And I saw suddenly that that was the surest way— the sole way, of defeating him. I approached him and he accepted the bait. I carried out all his instructions, except the fatal instructions. It is by his orders, and for his purposes, that we are staying in this hotel. Heavens! To make certain of saving my darling Adelaide, I have even gone through the farce of promising to many him!"

"And do you seriously expect me to believe this ? " I asked coldly.

"Should I have had the solicitor here?" she demanded, "if I had really meant— meant to—"

She sobbed momentarily, and then regained control of herself.

"I don't know," I said, "but it occurs to me that the brain that was capable of deliberately arranging a murder to take place in the presence of the doctor might have some hidden purpose in securing also the presence of the solicitor at the performance."

"Mr. Grist is unaware that the solicitor is here. He has been informed that Mr. Dancer is my uncle, and favourable to the— to the—" she stopped, apparently overcome.

"Oh, indeed! " I ejaculated, adding: " And after all you did not mean to administer this poison! I suppose you meant to withdraw the glass at the last instant?"

"It is not poison," she replied.

"Not poison?"

"No. I did not exchange the bottles. I only pretended to."

"There seems to have been a good deal of pretending," I observed. "By the way, may I ask why you were giving this stuff, whether it is poison or not, to my patient? I do not recollect that I ordered a second dose."

"For the same reason that I pretended to change the bottle. For the benefit of the maid whom we saw just now in the bedroom."

"And why for the benefit of the maid?"

"Because I found out this morning that she is in the pay of Grist. That discovery accounts for my nervousness to-night about Adelaide. By this time the maid has probably told Mr. Grist what has taken place, and, and— I shall rely on your help if anything should happen, doctor. Surely, surely, you believe me?"

"I regret to say, madam," I answered, " that I find myself unable to believe you at present. But there is a simple way of giving credence to your story. You state that you did not exchange the bottles. This liquid, then, is the medicine prescribed by me, and it is harmless. Oblige me by drinking it."

And I held the glass towards her.

She took it.

"Fool!" I said to myself, as soon as her fingers had grasped it. "She will drop it on the floor, and an invaluable piece of evidence will be destroyed."

But she did not drop it on the floor. She drank it at one gulp, and looked me in the eyes, and murmured, "Now do you believe me?"

"Yes," I said. And I did.

At the same moment her face changed colour, and she sank to the ground. "What have I drunk?" she moaned. The glass rolled on the carpet, unbroken.

Miss Russell had in fact drunk a full dose of pure trinitrin. I recognised all the symptoms at once. I rang for assistance. I got a stomach pump. I got ice, and sent for ergot and for atropine. I injected six minims of the Injectis Ergotini Hypodermica. I despaired of saving her; but I saved her, after four injections. I need not describe to you all the details. Let it suffice that she recovered.

"Then you did exchange the bottles?" I could not help putting this question to her as soon as she was in a fit state to hear it.

"I swear to you that I had not meant to," she whispered. " In my nervousness I must have confused them. You have saved Adelaide's life."

"I have saved yours, anyway," I said.

"But you believe me?"

"Yes," I said; and the curious thing is that I did believe her. I was convinced, and I am convinced, that she did not mean to exchange the bottles.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. We could hear Big Ben striking twelve.

"Midnight,"I said.

She clutched my hand with a swift movement. " Go and see that my Adelaide lives," she cried almost hysterically.

I opened the door between the two rooms and went into the sleeping chamber.

"Miss Spanton is dozing quietly," I said, on my return.

"Thank God!" Miss Russell murmured. And then old bald-headed Mr. Dancer came into the room, blandly unconscious of all that had passed during his sojourn in the smoking saloon.

When I left the precincts of the Grand Babylon at one o'clock, the guests were beginning to leave the Gold Rooms, and the great courtyard was a scene of flashing lights, and champing horses, and pretty laughing women.

"What a queer place a hotel is!" I thought.

NEITHER MR. GRIST nor the mysterious maid was seen again in London. Possibly they consoled each other. The beautiful Adelaide Spanton— under my care, ahem!— is completely restored to health.

Yes, I am going to marry her. No, not the beautiful Adelaide, you duffers— besides she is too young for my middle age— but Miss Russell. Her Christian name is Ethel. Do you not like it? As for the beautiful Adelaide, there is now a viscount in the case.

13: The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe

1809-1849

The Pioneer Jan 1843

Like most of Poe's tales, this one has been reprinted, collected and anthologized hundreds of times, so one more time won't hurt.

TRUE!— nervous— very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses— not destroyed— not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily— how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture— a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees— very gradually— I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded— with what caution— with what foresight— with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it— oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly— very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!— would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously— oh, so cautiously— cautiously (for the hinges creaked)— I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights— every night just at midnight— but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the

night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers— of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back— but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out— "Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening;— just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief— oh, no!— it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself— "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney— it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel— although he neither saw nor heard— to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little— a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it— you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily— until, at length a

simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open— wide, wide open— and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness— all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?— now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!— do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me— the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once— once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye— not even his— could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out— no stain of any kind— no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all— ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock— still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart,— for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled,— for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search— search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:— it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness— until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew *very* pale;— but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased— and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound— much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath— and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly— more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men— but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed— I raved— I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder— louder— louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!— no, no! They heard!— they suspected!— they knew!— they were making a mockery of my horror!— this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no

longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now— again!— hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed!— tear up the planks!— here, here!— It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

———————

14: For the Sake of Toodleums

H. D. Umbstaetter

(as by "Harold Kinsabby")

1851-1913

The Black Cat, Nov 1910

"NOW, Bert, listen," said Mrs. Rodney, taking her brother into full confidence. "I want to talk to you. Tom is really the best husband that ever was. Of course I've never had another husband, but just think how he adores our baby— our Toodleums!"

Bert Loring glanced at his sister's face to gather that the last remark was as a gold seal on her husband's virtues. She was young, pretty, and winsome. She was also Loring 's only sister. Nevertheless he rubbed his chin a trifle doubtfully, for Rodney was a sad failure in a business sense.

" Oh, well," he returned at last. "Since you say so, I presume that settles the matter. You ought to know, Mary. Personally, I've nothing against Tom."

"No," she affirmed decisively. "No one could help liking Tom. He's just the most lovable fellow imaginable, so generous and kind-hearted toward every one."

"Um— er— Oh yes! " nodded the brother. "There's no question about Tom's generosity."

He was thinking of the last occasion when he chanced upon Tom downtown. With great cordiality Tom invited him to lunch. It was a capital lunch, too, nothing wanting, only— somehow Tom found it was imfortunately necessary to borrow five dollars to pay for it. He had forgotten to drop in at his bankers, By Golly! That was a joke on Tom, at which he laughed in the utmost good nature. His wife was quite right when she spoke of his kindly disposition toward every one. The waiter's smile bore witness to it, when helping to adjust Tom's overcoat. Loring went out with his overcoat collar bracing his ears. So much for the waiter's discernment.

"But, you see, Bert," explained Mrs. Rodney, "Tom's only drawback is that he has never been given a chance to prove what he is really worth. He's wonderfully bright."

"As bright as a new five dollar gold piece," subconsciously acquiesced the brother. He was still thinking of the lunch.

"And ambitious for bigger things," added Mrs. Rodney.

"I don't doubt it," nodded her brother. It occurred to him that Tom was capable of *ordering* a mighty fine dinner.

"Then, Bert, why don't you get him a good position in your insurance office?"

"What!" he cried. "Pardon me, Mary, I didn't quite—"

"Hush! " she laid a finger on her lips. "Don't be so noisy, Bert. You'll wake Toodleums. Yes," she went on in an undertone, "a good position in your insurance office. One in which Tom could shine and Toodleums feel proud of his Dada. You know how attached you are to Toodleums— the precious!"

"Yes, but you see, Mary," her brother began to protest, "the shining positions in our office are pretty well all occupied. I don't glitter much yet, and I've been years climbing up from the bottom."

"But Tom is so brilliant— such a fine talker," declared Mrs. Rodney enthusiastically. "If he were once given the chance he would jump right up to the top. Everybody likes him."

" Well, our president has been pretty good to me, "he remarked. "I'd really hate to see him lose his job— I mean within the next few weeks— even on Tom's account."

"Bert, don't be ridiculous and sarcastic. Toodleums— the love— does not like people who are sarcastic."

"No, probably not. But honestly, Mary, you must see what I mean. If I got Tom a position in our office, he would have to take his chance with the rest. But, as you say, he is a good talker, and might do pretty well in outside work."

"Then you will introduce him to your president? "

Her face lit up with pride at the success of her plan to obtain a position for her husband.

"I'll put him in line to show what he's made of. That's all I can promise at present."

"Then you may kiss Toodleiuns," she added by way of great reward.

She rose and moved softly toward a lace ruffled and beribboned shrine.

"And be careful, Bert," she enjoined, " you don't stumble over something and wake the sweetest. You are so clumsy in comparison with Tom."

Loring faithfully kept the promise to his sister. He first spoke with Tom, pointing out the excellent chances for a good talker in the insurance business, and the agreeable nature of outside work. For the right man it might lead to the confidence of millionaires, and the friendship of United States Senators. Tom was quite enthusiastic.

"Just the thing," he cried, slapping Loring on the shoulder. "The very position I've been looking for. Don't worry about the beginning at the bottom of the ladder idea. I'll climb up hand over fist. You watch me."

So Loring introduced his brother-in-law to the chief of the proper department, and with him Tom talked with much enthusiasm of purpose. He was finally told to report the next morning, when full instructions would be given. He was in such high feather on the way home that he bought a silver rattle for Toodleums— on credit.

His conference with the chief of his department the next morning was satisfactory in all respects. He appeared to grasp quickly the details of the various insurance policies, and spoke confidently of what he intended to do with the list of prominent citizens he was instructed to call upon.

"Mr. Vandermorgan. Sure! I'll touch him for a one hundred thousand dollar policy right away. If I clean him up before lunch, I guess that would be doing something."

"I guess it would," agreed the chief, who knew how for many months they had fished unsuccessfully for Mr. Vandermorgan.

So Tom gathered up his papers and strode briskly out of the office. He took the elevator with the air of a man who talked in nothing less than six figures. Then he went out and walked around the block. When he came back to the majestic portals of the Long Life Building he paused to reflect. An idea seemed to occur to him. That it was a corking idea, the pleased expression on his face indicated. He again took the elevator, and was shot up to the floor on which his brother-in-law's office was located.

"Hello, Bert! " he greeted, looking in at the door.

"Hello, Tom! How's business? How are you getting along?"

"Fine! Just going out to tackle Vandermorgan."

"Good! Hope you'll land him."

"Yes," Tom proceeded, drawing a chair up to his brother-in-law's desk, and spreading out his papers. " But I thought I'd have a talk with you first."

"Well, go ahead. Glad to help out in any way possible."

"Yes, that's just what I thought. Now, see here, Bert, how about your taking out one of our ten-thousand-dollar policies? "

"What!" cried Loring, falling back in his chair. "Man alive! What on earth do I want with a ten-thousand-dollar policy?"

"That's the point. That's just what I want to talk to you about," argued Tom complacently. "Every man ought to provide for the comfort and happiness of his wife after his death. That's about how the chief said I might begin."

"But you know I haven't got a wife, "protested Loring.

"Well, that doesn't alter the case. Those near and dear to you will do as well," went on Tom sympathetically. "Those attached to you by the strongest ties."

"By the strongest ties?" questioned Loring.

"Sure! There are Mary and little Toodleums. As you are going to be Toodleums' godfather do it for the sake of Toodleums. I'll just fill out an application in his favor. Of course we'd hate for anything unfortunate to happen to you, but every man should make a suitable provision for those who are dear to him. The chief said that phrase usually catches on."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" ejaculated Loring.

"I sincerely hope not," fervently added Tom, as he prepared to fill out an application blank. "Shall we make it twenty or thirty thousand dollars?" he asked, looking up calmly.

"Make it five and then go and chase Vandermorgan," retorted Loring, fearful that worse might happen.

"All right. Five thousand dollars in favor of Toodleums. See you later, Bert," and with a smile Tom strolled out of Loring 's office to deposit the signed application with the proper clerk. Suddenly he stopped, drew a pad and pencil from his pocket, and began figuring.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "not a bad beginning! My commission on that policy is just forty-one dollars and I landed it in less than an hour. That's three hundred and twenty-eight dollars a day, one thousand nine hundred and sixty-eight dollars a week, and—"

His calculations were interrupted by Dick Willman, who grasped his hand and inquired: "How 're you getting on, Tom, and where are you bound for? Bert tells me you've taken up life insurance."

"Congratulate me, old fellow. This very morning I dropped into a berth that pays me a hundred thousand a year. I'm through for to-day and am off for home to tell my wife. So long "— and Tom was gone.

He had not yet reached the elevator when he turned, called back to his friend, and going up to him, his face still wreathed in smiles, confided: "Dick, in my hurry to get down to business this morning I came away without even car fare. Loan me a five. Ah, thank you. And come have a bird and a bottle with me at the club to-morrow. Bye-bye," and once more Tom was on his way to carry the news to Mary.

"I knew it and always told people you would make good if you only had half a chance," interrupted his wife, as Tom triumphantly related his morning's success to her.

"Oh, yes," agreed the husband. "I know how to get there all right. By the way, how's Toodleums and how does he like his new rattle?"

———————————

15: Jen for Joe

William O. Grenolds

(Courtney Ryley Cooper, 1886-1940
The Blue Book Magazine, Oct 1920

From the series, "The Exploits of an Honest Grafter", telling the adventures of "Honest John" Barker.

SATURDAY on a circus means long lines in front of the treasury-wagon. The Mighty Maxwell was like other circuses: Saturday meant pay-day. Maxwell sat at the window which faced the razorbacks, the roughnecks, the animals and "punks," while at the other, paying off the performers, was Honest John Barker, "fixer" and stockholder. It was the first pay-day of the spring, following the opening of the circus a week before, and the index-cards showed many entries. Finally Honest John smiled down at the boyish, grinning young man who awaited his pay-envelope.

"Joe," he said cordially, "I knew when I signed you up that you were the world's worst clown. But I didn't know you were this bad. Three fines in one week. That's going some!"

The young man chuckled.

"Not bad for a poor boy trying to get along. But then—"

Whereupon he closed one eye and nodded toward the back of old man Maxwell at the other side of the cage. Honest John grinned and passed him out the remainder of his salary. Joe Bainter, the clown, went whistling away, giving evidence that the infliction of three fines during the first week of his engagement had not affected him in the slightest. Honest John continued at his work of doling out the cash.

Card after card passed through his hands

as the performers came and went. Ther, John blinked again and leaned out of his window to stare down into the pretty face of Jennie Maxwell, of the high wire— the old man's daughter.

"What have you been doing?" he whispered as a smile twitched at the comer of his lips.

"I?" She looked at him curiously. "Nothing. Why?"

"Your dad's marked three fines against you."

A small foot stamped angrily.

"Yes! The mean old thing!"

Honest John wagged a finger.

"Look out, there, Jen! He's your dad!"

"I don't care. He's a mean old thing and—"

"What's that?" It was a voice from behind. The fixer turned hurriedly, with a stage grin.

"Just making Jen apologize. She got mad at me yesterday, and I wouldn't give her any money today until she told me she didn't mean a thing."

"Oughtn't to have it, anyhow, the way she's been carrying on!" The paternal growl carried the piqued displeasure that only a parent can know. Honest John leaned far out the window and whispered: "Beat it!"

The girl departed hastily. The disbursing of the pay-roll went wearily on, finally to cease. Honest John leaned back in his chair and dusted a few cigar-ashes from his otherwise immaculate clothing.

"Ross," he inquired casually, as Maxwell turned at last from his window and reached for his dead cigar, "I've figured up that account."

"What account?"

"My expense money for last year: entertainment of officials, new hats for sheriffs, dresses for constables' wives and so forth. It runs just nine thousand, four hundred dollars."

"Huh?" The old man turned all the way in his chair and shifted the cigar-stub to a corner of his mouth. "You don't expect me to pay that, do you?"

"I sure do."

"Well, you ain't going to get it!"

"I spent it, didn't I?" Honest John, toying with his lion's-claw watchcharm, was staring at the paneled ceiling.

"I didn't tell you to."

"Sure not. I'm supposed to use my own judgment to make money for the show."

"Yeh, and money for yourself. You own thirty per cent of the stock."

"That's right."

"Then shut up. I suppose I'm going to take money out of my own pocket to—"

"Wait a minute!" Honest John waved a hand over his head. "Don't get excited about it. I just thought I'd ask."

Maxwell growled.

"You found out."

"I sure did."

THE fixer grinned and shrugged his shoulders. Downtown he went, to a complacent dinner. Two hours later, just as the shadows were deepening about the circus lot and its spreading tents, he picked his way over the ropes and stakes surrounding the big top, and stopped a few feet from the pad-room entrance. He called softly, and a figure, headed toward the dressing-tent,

changed its course. A moment later Honest John Barker and Joe Bainter, the clown, had ducked under the sidewall of the big top and stood grinning at each other in the dim light beneath the reserved seats.

"What's the big excitement?" Honest John asked the question, and Joe Bainter grinned.

"He caught us talking together."

"And fined you each time?"

"That isn't all. The first time he fired me cold, told me to get off the show and never show up again— that he'd suspected something of the kind all the time. That brought on the fireworks from Jen, and she said she'd never speak to him again, that he was a cruel, unkind father and other warranted remarks of that kind, and he shut up. Then, in a very paternal way, he pulled the rules of the show on us about girls and men from the troupe going out together, and informed us with tears in his eyes that he'd have to fine us both."

"Going to run you off the show, by fining you to death, huh?"

"Yep." Joe Bainter grinned again. Then suddenly he became serious. "Look here, Mr. Barker," he said quietly, "I've put myself in your hands. I love Jen, and I love her with all the sincerity in the world. What's more, she'll marry me— she's told me so. And I don't see why I shouldn't go to Maxwell and—"

"Listen, kid. The minute you go to Maxwell, you kill your little game as dead as a doornail. Not that there's anything objectionable about you— as far as I know, you're as fine a kid as I ever saw. But you've got to admit that even I don't know anything about you— except that you've got a million and want to marry the old man's little girl. You could talk to him until you were black in the face, and it would only get you into trouble. He doesn't want Jen to marry anybody How much do you love Jen?"

"As much as any man possibly could."

"That's easy to say. Somehow or other, after you've been in the fixing game awhile, you get so you don't pay much attention to words. The real thing that counts is action. Do you love her enough to—lose her?"

The young man gasped. "To—to what?"

"To lose her." Honest John laid a kindly hand on the other man's shoulder. "Look here, Joe; Jennie's only a girl yet. This is the first real love-affair she's ever had. And a girl sometimes lets infatuation get the better of her judgment. It's all been very romantic and story-booky— you with your millions, and me fixing things so you could come on the show as a clown and not telling Papa and all that sort of thing— and it may have hit harder than we supposed. So, isn't it fair to her, and fair to her father and fair to yourself, to give her a chance to wake up? You've intimated to me that you are a regular he-man. Now prove it!"

THERE was silence for a moment; then: "How?"

"I think Jen ought to go away."

"Away?" There was a note of sudden fright in the voice. "For how long?"

"Until I decide that it's time for her to come back."

"But I can write to her?"

"Nope. Not a line."

"Nor she to me?"

"That's a different matter. I can't prevent her doing that—if she wants to." "But I can't write to her?"

"No. And you can't explain why you're not writing. It's a real test— are you game for it?" The sound of breath whistling through clenched teeth was the only answer. Honest John tightened his grip on the young man's shoulder. "Listen, Joe: she's only a little kid— remember that. We're never sorry for a little anguish if it leads to the right sort of thing. Suppose you should argue Jen into running away some night and marrying you— and suppose she should find out a few months later that she didn't really love you? That'd be fine, wouldn't it? Or suppose you should come to the same conclusion yourself? How'd you like it? Nope. Joe, you're the right sort of a fellow— at least, I think you are. And if you really are, you'll pick a quarrel with Jen tomorrow! "

"But—"

"That's the whole story, Joe. The rest of it's got to be up to me—and to yourselves. I don't know how it's going to turn out, and I can't promise one solitary thing. But I know this: I'm a fixer by trade, and if the love's still there and the faith's still there, some way, somehow, I'll live up to my reputation. Are you game?"

The silence this time was longer than ever, but at last came the young man's voice, husky and strained:

"I guess I love her— even enough to do that, Mr. Barker."

"Fine! See that you do it—and good luck!"

A slap on the back, a clasp of the hand; then Honest John shoved the clown out under the sidewall and turned in the opposite direction. Late that night, just as the second section was pulling out for the long run to the next town, he came casually into Maxwell's office in the managerial car, a bundle of magazines under one arm, and slumped into a wicker chair. The old man looked over his shoulder and grunted. Honest John grinned cheerily.

"Haven't changed your mind yet about that expense-account?"

"Nope."

"Oh, all right. Just thought I'd ask." He leaned back in his chair and turned to the advertising pages. Magazine after magazine he consumed, while the

train thumped along on its twenty-mile-an-hour pace over a rough roadbed. At last, the final periodical poised in one hand, he looked quizzically up at Maxwell.

"Boss," he asked casually, "which do you think is the best school for young women, Briarlake or Westercote?"

"For what?"

"For a sort of finishing touch, you know, the final polish and all that sort of thing?"

The old man, his cigar jammed tight in a corner of his mouth, turned peevishly.

"How in— what're you asking me about it for?"

"Well, I just thought you'd be interested."

"Me?" A heavy hand fanned aimlessly. "What've I got to do with girls' schools?" Honest John regarded his lion's claw.

"Nothing, I guess. Only, I know, if I was a father, I'd at least be interested in the school my daughter was going to."

"Huh? What's that? Is she—"

"There's been some talk about it," Honest John agreed truthfully, "and since she's been kind of interested in this pet clown of mine, I rather thought— "

A banging fist on the desk interrupted. Maxwell whirled in his chair.

"Gad! I'll give a hundred to the bird who can work it!"

"Couldn't O. K. that little expense-account?"

"Shut up!"

Honest John shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if that's the case, I wont fool around with a measly hundred. I'd rather work it for nothing. But listen— not a cheep out of you until she springs it herself. Get me? Then you're the surprised but indulgent father."

"I'm anything just so—"

"You don't have to pay me that expenseaccount. Meanwhile—I'm going to bed."

TROUBLE was distinctly present, bag, bird-cage and baggage, when Honest John strolled on to the circus lot just after the arrival of the parade the next morning, to find a nervous Joe Bainter pacing the sawdust in front of the marquee. His face was white, his hands clenched tight behind his back. Honest John blocked his path, and stared genially down at him.

"Well, have you pulled it already?"

"Me?" the millionaire clown gasped. "I didn't have a chance! She beat me to it!"

"She?" It was Honest John's turn to blink now. Bainter went on.

"Jealousy! Just plain jealousy! She wanted to know who I met under the reserved seats last night! Can you beat it?"

"Saw us go under, eh?"

"She said she saw me turn away when somebody called to me and thought she saw a woman in the shadows!"

"Gosh!" Honest John grinned. "They sure mult have been deep shadows— if I looked like a woman. What'd you say?"

"Me? I told her the truth— that is, not all of it; but I said I was talking to you, and that I could prove it!"

"Foolish boy! Because I'm going to tell her another story!"

"What?"

Then Honest John's tone changed.

"You promised, Joe!"

The young man's lips went grim. His hands clenched tighter than ever.

"I didn't think then that it'd be a real quarrel."

"You're not going to play the quitter?"

"I— I don't think I'm built that way. I gave you my promise. I'll keep it."

"Thanks, kid. I'm almost tempted to— but I wont. You're off for today. Go down to the cars, or a picture-show, anywhere, just so you don't stay around this circus lot playing tag with temptation. It'll be a different story tomorrow. We'll be a hundred miles away, and she'll be gone. I'll see to that. Be game, kid. So long until later."

Honest John gripped the clown's arm and purposely didnot hear the stumbling words which came from his lips. Then for a moment he stood watching the dejected figure as it moved from the lot. He sighed, then straightened.

"The bitterest medicine's usually the best," he mused as he started for the dressing tent. There old Molly, the wardrobe woman, who had always taken a motherly interest in Jennie, signaled him.

" 'Tis a divil's own time I'm havin'," she confided, "wit' little Jinnie. She's in there crying out her hearrt, and if her fayther finds it out—"

"Forget it." Honest John patted her shoulder. "Forget it, Molly, and lead me to her."

A MOMENT later Honest John and Jennie Maxwell were sitting in close conversation within the wardrobe woman's little partition of the dressing-tent. And Honest John was exceedingly busy with his watch charm.

"Yep," came in answer to the inevitable question, "I've seen Joe. He asked me to tell you something."

"About last night?" There was hope in the voice. Honest John nodded very seriously.

"Yes— something about us being together."

"Well—"

"Listen, Jennie: don't you think you ought to take a little trip— somewhere?"

"But I tvant to know about last night. Were you with him— was that you who called to him?"

Honest John still twirled his watchcharm.

"Look here, Jennie," he said at last, "I'm a truthful man. But I wouldn't tell you now— if I'd been with him. Honest I wouldn't. I'm not going to say either way. If I was with him, then you're all to blame, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself for being jealous. And if I wasn't with him, it might have been some other man, and— well, so I'm not going to say anything, except that— you're going away."

"I?" she gasped slightly. "Where— why?"

"Because I think it best."

"You mean— it's something about Joe?"

Honest John nodded. A new outburst of tears streamed down the girl's cheeks. Honest John gritted his teeth and inwardly called himself names. But he persisted.

"Yes, it's about Joe. I guess you two had better try the climate away from each other."

"Then there was something wrong?" The girlish anger returned. -"I knew it all the time. I knew—"

"I told you before," the quiet voice of Honest John interrupted, "that I wouldn't be the one to break the news, no matter what it was. I'm just giving you a little suggestion. Your father and you are going to take a little trip tonight. .When he comes back, you're going to stay behind. I'm thinking, Jen, that you've never had quite enough schooling— you know, the finishing touches. And about a year down at Briarlake ought to work wonders. And who can tell? This other thing may turn out all right. Then, of course, it may turn out all wrong— but if it is going to do anything like that, it's better to have it over with as quickly as possible.

"And listen,—" he poked a finger at her,— "I'm the fixer for all this. I'll handle your father, understand? I'm going to make him believe that this is something that you and I've been cooking up for some timeC See? That'll take all the unpleasantness away from it— he wont know you've had a quarrel with Joe or that there's anything disagreeable at all. Get me? So put a cold cloth or a hot cloth, or whatever you use, on those eyes, and take the swelling out of

'em. I never liked to see a pretty girl cry, anyway. And look for your dad and myself back here in a couple of hours."

BUT if Honest John had figured that to be the end of the conversation, he was mistaken. It was only the beginning; and it was not until a long hour later that he emerged from the dressing-tent, to hunt up Maxwell and tell him that his daughter had taken a sudden resolution toward schooling. Nor was it until the train pulled out that night, bearing Maxwell and a lipbiting daughter away to Briarlake, that Honest John felt at all comfortable. Had he overplayed his hand?

The next day Joe Bainter sought him out.

"Have you heard anything?" Joe's face was slightly paler than usual.

Honest John shook his head. "Sorry, old kid, but I can't give you any information."

"But you Can at least tell me where you took her?"

"No. You might let temptation get away from you. I don't want any letters going there."

The young man turned and walked slowly away. And Honest John again called himself names.

Three days went by and Maxwell came back grinning and happy. A certain little eventuality which had been troubling him seemed far in the distance now. He was even civil— which was saying a great deal for the old man. Honest John sought the circus postman.

"Anything for Joe Bainter?"

The postman pulled out a fat letter. Honest John looked at the writing and smiled, then whispered to the postman. The postman grinned understandingly.

"It isn't exactly according to rules, but if it's for the best—" he wavered.

"You can take my word for that." Honest John dropped the letter into his pocket and went to the cars. There he again took it forth, looked at the writing on the envelope and smiled in a quizzical way. "I hope I'm playing the right cards," he reflected as he laid the letter carefully away.

THE next day Honest John met the postman again, but the man shook his head. And again the next— and for days afterward. Honest John squinted, then ambled in the direction of Clown Alley. There he singled out Joe Bainter and sidled to him. His eyes became accusing.

"You've been hearing from Jen!"

The man stared.

"If I only had! But I haven't! I hoped— honestly, I thought that she'd write to me and tell me she was sorry, but nothing came! I guess she meant it when she said she'd never have anything to do with me again. I—"

"How about you?"

"Me? There's nothing, except that I'm sorry— for everything, if that'll do any good. It wasn't my fault, but— I'm sorry. I'm—"

"But I'm afraid that wont help. Nope, Joe, you've got to wait. And if waiting wont help, then it's better all the way round to find it out now and to have your suffering before the real trouble sets in."

Following which Honest John walked away—but there was a little look of worriment in his eyes as he did so, a look which intensified as a week passed, a week in which Honest John met the mail-carrier each morning, only to receive a negative reply.

TWO months passed by. Honest John developed a glorious case of insomnia. Then one afternoon, as he sought vainly to nap, there came a knock on his door, and the admission call brought in Joe Bainter. Joe was thin now; his cheeks were sunken. There was something about the man which caused Honest John to turn his head and to grit his teeth. For Honest John knew in his heart that he had been the cause. The fixer extended a hapd.

"Bainter," he said slowly, "I'm sorry. I thought things would turn out differently; honest, I did."

"Then you've not heard anything, either?"

"Not a word. She was spunkier than I thought she was. I fully believed, Joe, that there would be a deluge of letters for both of us and that everything would be lovely. But it's better as it is, kid— if this thing was going to develop later. She's only a child, you might say—nineteen's not so very old. You've never had a line— on your word of honor?"

"Not a line."

"Did you ever get any telegrams?"

"Not one, Mr. Barker. I— I don't think I'd be looking like this if I had."

Honest John rose and laid a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"You've at least got the satisfaction of knowing that you've played a man's game and that you've made a friend who'll never forget you—if that'll do any good."

"Well," and Joe Bainter's voice was husky, "that isn't exactly what I've been wishing for. I appreciate it just the same."

"And you still love her, Joe?"

"More than ever."

Honest John paced the small confines of his stateroom.

"I— I thought it was going to be different. Joe, I— I—" He looked toward the desk which sheltered that lone letter, received shortly after Jen's departure, and his lips almost framed a confession. "No. I was going to tell you something— but I wont now. It wouldn't do much good, and it might do a lot of harm." For the thought had come suddenly into Honest John's brain that the.envelope in his desk might contain something far different from what he had believed when he had taken it from the postman. "I'm afraid, Joe, that she woke up."

"You mean that she decided that she didn't love me, after all?"

"Just about, Joe."

"Well," the young man sighed, "I guess you were right— that it's better to know it now than after we'd done something foolish, that we couldn't undo without a lot more heartaches. My business at home has been running pretty much tc seed, Mr. Barker. I guess—"

"That you'd better go back?"

"Yes."

"It's beginning to look that way, Joe. But we'll wait a while longer, and see what turns up. I thought she'd write to me,"— he was talking in the jerky sentences of a disappointed man,— "but she's never even written a line, not a—"

He stopped suddenly. Outside the car some one was calling his name excitedly. A moment more, and a workman had hurried into the room.

"Mr. Barker! The old man wants you up at the lot right away. The chariot turned over in the races and jimmed up three men!"

"Badly hurt?"

"One of 'em is. The other two are just skinned up. The old man says to get up there and square up their accounts for them so that they can either be left behind or sent home."

Honest John reached for his memorandum book.

"Got their names?"

"Yes sir. Bill Edward, Harry Layton and Joe Masters."

"Thanks." Honest John was scribbling. "Tell Mr. Maxwell I'll be up there in a few minutes."

TWO hours later Honest John stood at the marquee of the circus tent, breathing easy after his work of "squaring." A messenger-boy scrambled through the small crowd in front of the side-show and handed him a message. Quietly Honest John read it, then walked into the menagerie.

"Seen Joe Bainter?" he queried of a fellow-clown.

"Yes sir. Just left him."

"Get him and tell him I want to see him."

A wait of five minutes, then a whispered conversation. Joe Bainter hurried away. Honest John strolled through the menagerie, stood watching for a moment as the chandelier men adjusted the lights for the night, then turned toward the cars. Fifteen minutes later he roamed into Maxwell's office and easing himself into a chair, puffed contentedly at his cigar. At last he yawned and leaned forward.

"Going to be minus a good clown tomorrow."

"Who?" The old man was busy at his books.

"Joe Bainter."

"So? Where's he going?"

"Leaving the show tonight. Paid him off an hour or so ago. He was in a hurry, so I gave him money out of my own pocket. He's going to get married."

"Who to?"

"Your daughter."

"What the— who the— how the— where do you get that stuff?" The old man had turned and was making a double windmill of his arms. "He's not going to do any such thing! Where's a timetable around here? I've got ten thousand dollars that says he isn't going to marry my daughter! Found that timetable yet?"

"What'd you say about ten thousand?" Honest John continued to puff amiably.

"Where's that timetable?"

"I'd be pretty near willing to bet that he's going to pull it off. I—"

"What're you trying to do? Stall me? Gi' me that timetable. Where's—"

"Looking for the time of a train to Briarlake? It leaves at eight o'clock. I heard Joe say so."

"Is he taking it?"

"Couldn't prove it by me!"

"Well, I'll be on it! I'll—" The old man was fussing about the office, talking to himself. "Ten thousand dollars says that he doesn't marry any daughter of mine. Get me a telegraph blank so I can wire to the chief of police at Briarlake to choke off the marriage license and to tip off everybody. Ten thousand dollars—"

"Well, put up or shut up!" exclaimed Honest John in an exasperated voice as he shoved the telegraph-pad into Maxwell's hands. "I'd lose ten thousand just to know you'd stopped raving!"

The old man was scribbling hastily.

"It's up!" he snapped. "My word's good. Now tear out and get me a ticket and berth to Briarlake. And make it snappy! I haven't got much time."

"Just forty-five minutes," said Honest John as he looked at his watch. "Want me to send that telegram too?"

"Yeh. And give the operator a five dollar bill for rushing it! Now put on the speed!"

OUT went Honest John. Thirty minutes later the old man followed. They met on the station platform. The train pulled in. A form hurried forward and boarded it almost before it stopped—Joe Bainter. The old man gave one look, then jabbed forth a hand excitedly.

"So long, John. Watch after things for me while I'm gone. I'm going to stop that marriage if I—"

"Board-d-d-d-d!"

A wild scramble forward, and the old man crawled up the steps of the train, entirely failing to notice that a young man dropped off the back end and moved hurriedly away. Honest John waved a hand.

"Good luck!" he shouted.

The train moved on. So did Honest John— back to his work of the circus lot, back to the task of getting the show out of town and on its journey to the next stand. Next morning he was at a railroad station again. To its roaring stop came a passenger train, while Honest John, suddenly craning his neck, waved a welcoming hand and ran forward.

"Hello, Jen! Bless you!" he exclaimed as a white-faced girl came out of a vestibule. "Let's hurry. Look here! Why didn't you write that boy?"

"Write?" She straightened proudly. "I did— the first thing, and asked him to forgive me. And he didn't answer. He couldn't expect me to write after that, could he? No matter how much I loved him!" Then with a sudden anxiety:

"How is he? Is he seriously injured?"

"Injured?" Honest John stared. "Who said he was injured?"

"Well, isn't he?"

"Of course not."

"But— but" she fished in her bag— "didn't you send me this telegram?"

Honest John looked at the piece of paper and read the word aloud:

"Joe very much hurt. Needs you. Wire if you can come at once— but don't come unless you still love him and are willing to marry him. John Barker!"

Carefully the fixer folded the message and handed it back to her.

"Sure, I sent the telegram. But I always was bad about using ambiguous words. I didn't mean he was injured, but just what I said— that he was hurt. His feelings, you know. See? Now, here— come back here— I'll explain the whole thing. Jen, do you hear me? Come back here this minute. That boy's all

right, and—" He beamed as she came again to his side, smiling and happy. "That's a good girl!"

Thirty-six hours later, Honest John again sat in Maxwell's office, looking at a check for ten thousand dollars.

"Reconciled yet?" he asked of the grumpy individual at the desk.

"Nope!"

"Not even with a millionaire son-in-law and a personal guarantee from your fixer that he's the best of the best?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Not even with a clear conscience about paying your principal stockholder an amount of money you really owed him?"

"Get out of here!"

But the old man smiled when he said it.

———————

16: The Corpse Factory

Arthur Leo Zagat

1895-1949

Dime Mystery Magazine, May 1934

Zagat was a specialist in the "Weird Menace" sub-genre, and in the novella length.

1. The Knife From Nowhere

THE road was wide and well-surfaced, as it would have to be for the trucks I had seen back there in Roton, the huge green tank trucks that brought their loads of Neosite fifty miles to the nearest railroad. But on either side the light of my headlamps sprayed out into a blank nothingness, and when the way curved their beam swept over flat swampland, vacant and desolate. The humid air, too, was heavy with a rank miasma, an odor of putrescence. I felt seeping away from me the elation with which I had started toward the biggest job of my career, the superintendency, no less, of the plant whose cheap and super-efficient product was driving other motor fuels from the market. I tried to shrug off my growing depression, but it weighed on me more and more heavily as the car that had been waiting for me at the shipping point bored on into the night.

The highway lifted in a gradual rise whose crest was sharply defined against the pale glimmer of an overcast sky. A chemical engineer should have no imagination, but I had to fight off an eerie feeling that there, just ahead, was the end of the world; that beyond was sheer emptiness. My skin prickled as I saw a formless black excrescence on that ominous skyline, a black and brooding blob of too solid shadow... Then I neared and the anomalous bulk took on human contour. Almost involuntarily my foot lifted from the gas pedal, shifted to the brake and slowed the car to a stop. I leaned out.

The fellow my headlight revealed was seated on the ground at the roadside, his long thin arms clasped around gangling, up-bent knees. I judged him to be young, about eighteen, but there was ageless vapidity in his leathery, hollow-cheeked face, dull incuriousness that was not youthful in the lackluster eyes with which he met my own. I could read not even the intelligence of an animal in his countenance; somehow it was flat and featureless as the very swamp from which he appeared to have sprung.

"How far to Newville, buddy?" I called to explain my halt.

He looked at me, unblinking. He didn't reply, but the narrow rim of his forehead wrinkled under his stringy, unkempt black hair. I repeated my question in a louder voice, as if mere noise could penetrate his stupidity.

"Five er ten mile." His husky voice was quite inflectionless and his lips scarcely moved.

"Thanks." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my tone. "That tells me a lot." I might as well have spared the effort; he seemed already to have forgotten my presence, was staring unseeingly through my car. I trod on the starter button...

Then, from somewhere beyond, a moaning wail sounded— low, muffled, but vibrant with an agony that was somehow uncomprehending. Like the plaint of a hurt cat it welled in a crescendo of suffering.

"Good Lord!" I gritted. "What's that?"

"Mom."

The youth showed not the slightest flicker of interest.

I tried to peer into the blank wall of darkness past my headlights. "What's the matter with her?" I asked.

"Nothin'. It's 'Lije. He's dyin'."

" 'Lije?"

"M' brother." There was a slight tinge of expression in his tone this time, of exasperation at my continued questioning.

I switched the car lights off. The wail came again— unutterably sorrowful. The blackness faded. I saw a bulk of darker shadow, ahead and to the left of the road, and a pale rectangle of flickering yellow luminance that might be a window. "Maybe she needs help," I said sharply. "A doctor."

"Ain't no doctor kin stop the Peelin's. Ain't no doctor nigher'n Roton anyways." He sat like a clod, motionless, uncaring.

I slid to the ground and made for what was now defined as a crazily leaning hut. Maybe I wouldn't do any good, but I couldn't go on without finding out. I'm not built that way.

My feet sank into soft, sucking mire, found a narrow path of muddy but firmer ground. There was no lock on the drab door of unpainted rough boards and I pulled it open. A stench of decayed food, human filth, was febrilely warm around me. There was another scent, pungent and foul, that I could not identify. I stepped into a cluttered, grimy room where one feeble candle flickered on a debris strewn table. The beastlike wailing twisted me to a corner.

The woman was on her knees, crouched over what was at my first glance a flat pile of dirt-colored rags. The garment she wore was pulled tight over the abject curve of her back and I could trace the humped line of her spine showing through. Her hair was scraggly, streaked black and gray; and broken, black-rimmed fingertips curved claw-like over the thin lines of her shoulders.

Apparently she had not heard my entrance. I moved toward her, my lips parting to speak. And froze as I glimpsed that over which she moaned.

It wasn't a face on that pallet of rags, not such a face as even the foulest of nightmares could present. Nor was it a skull. That at least is bone, clean and dead. This was stripped clear of flesh, except where some blackened shreds still clung, but the bared muscles were there, and white threadings of nerves, and there was a quivering of agonized life over the blurred surface. The eyelids were gone. From the dark pits they should have covered, sightless balls stared a chalky, translucent white. Seared lip edges were eaten raggedly away from a yellow, rotted grin. And the head had neither nose nor ears. The rest, mercifully, was hidden from sight by a dirt-crusted, tattered blanket.

I must have made some sound, though I was not aware of it, for the woman turned. Had it not been for the other, her countenance might have inspired horror in me, so lined with suffering, so emaciated it was. Strands of bedraggled, grimy hair fell across her brow, and from behind them her eyes glittered, rat-like. Something like a rat, too, there was in the furtive startlement of her expression, in the snarling lift of her thin lips.

"What d'yer want?" she squeaked.

"Your son told me you were in trouble," I managed to speak— steadily, I hoped. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Who're you?"

"Thorndal's new superintendent. I was—" The blaze of hate in her face cut me off. She leaped to her feet and shrieked:

"Thorndal! Git out! Thet's whut yer kin do. Git out o' here. He's done ernough ter me, he an' his devils!" She snatched up a carving knife from the table. "Git out 'fore I fergit I'm a God-fearin' woman an' use this on yer."

I dodged to the door. "But— but—"

"But nothin'. Ye'll git th' other too— Zeke'll be thar tomorrer! But he ain't yers yit. Not ternight." She lunged at me, the knife sweeping in a long arc, and I dived out, slamming the ramshackle panel behind me. I missed the path, and as I floundered through the patch of swamp between hovel and road the door flung open behind me. "I hope yer mother has to look at yer," the virago shrilled after me, "a month from terday." Cackling, obscene laughter rattled in the dark.

I lurched into my car, kicked blindly at the starter. The roadside watcher, Zeke, had not moved, had not even turned his head to the clamor. But he spoke now, above the roar of my motor, and I throttled down to listen to him.

"Thar wuz a nut loose on yer license plate," he said. "I fixed it."

Gears rasped and I hurtled away from there as if ten thousand devils from Hell pursued me.

2. Eyes of Pity

THE road along which I fled curved in a long line, dipped, and rose again. The land to the left rose with it, and here and there a tree showed, gaunt and somehow solitary against the brooding quarter-light of the horizon. I realized that the ground must be firmer here, firm enough to support the stills and gigantic retorts shown on the blueprints Andrew Thorndal had displayed to me.

He hadn't told me much about the process in the interview at which I had been engaged, at a salary startling in these days of slow recovery. There were non-patentable steps, he had explained, in the manufacture of Neosite that his competitors would pay hugely to purloin. "I'll go over the whole thing thoroughly when you get out to Newville," he had rumbled. "Where I can make sure the secrets won't be blabbered."

There had been a challenge, and a threat, in his steely eyes when he had said that across our luncheon table at the Chemist's Club in New York. I had met the challenge frankly. "My first principle is loyalty to my employers, Mr. Thorndal," I had responded. "Through self-interest if nothing else. A man in my profession who does not adhere to that policy finds his career ended very quickly."

The full lips had hardened grimly under his close-clipped gray mustache. "Stick to that, Sutton," he said, "and we'll get along. Otherwise— we're pretty well cut off from the world at Newville and I have my own methods of dealing with— traitors."

Cut off was right! I had asked him why there was no railroad spur to the plant. Even then it seemed to me his reply was evasive. Newville was surrounded by a thirty-five mile stretch of bottomless swamp land; there were no other factories or towns in the region. But the tremendous production of his own industry would have rendered a one-track branch line profitable, and the well-built highway along which I was now journeying could not have presented any lesser engineering difficulties than the building of a railroad. I wondered now whether his isolation was not deliberate.

And my thoughts returned to the scene I had just left. The flesh-stripped face of the dying man had not vanished from my inward vision; it will, I am afraid, never entirely disappear. What disease could have produced that condition? I am somewhat of an amateur physician— one has to be in the outlands to which my work takes me— but I could think of none. It wasn't leprosy— that turns the sloughing tissue an unholy white. Cold rippled along my backbone. Was it a disease at all?

A cluster of lights came into view ahead. This must be Newville, the small town Thorndal had built for his truck-drivers and skilled mechanics. My

headlight picked up a barrier across the road, striped black and white for visibility, a tall, green-uniformed figure standing in front of it. I skidded to a stop, and the guard came alongside my running-board. There was a revolver in the hand he lifted to the sill of the open window to my left, and his heavy-jowled visage glowered forbiddingly.

"Who are yuh, and what do yuh want?" he demanded.

I flushed at his overbearing manner, but one doesn't argue with a man whose gun snouts at one's diaphragm. "Stanley Sutton, officer," I answered. "I'm the new superintendent at the works."

"Where's yuhr pass?"

I remembered a card Thorndal had handed me at our parting and which I had inattentively stuffed into my wallet. I got it out. The man scrutinized it, handed it back. "That looks okay," he muttered. "Yuh're to park yuhr car in the garage an' wait there for orders."

"I thought I was to put up in the town. Why—?"

"I don't know nothin'." A secretive veil appeared to drop across his face. "That's what I was told to tell yuh, an' that's all I know about it." He didn't seem to be much impressed by my new dignity. "The garage is straight on, 'bout a quarter mile. All right, Joe."

He stepped back and a dim-seen figure to one side bent and seemed to be operating a lever of some kind. The barrier lifted jerkily, and I let my clutch in. Surely the guarding of a secret process did not require an armed road patrol a mile or more from the plant where it was being carried on. What was I getting into? I fought down a sudden impulse to turn the car around and make for Roton and civilization.

Would God I had obeyed that impulse!

I had no difficulty finding the garage to which I had been directed. It was the first building I reached, stretching about five hundred feet beside the highway and correspondingly deep. As I rolled up to it I glimpsed rank upon rank of vehicles within— tanks like those I had seen at Roton, enclosed vans, platform trucks, six- and eight-wheeled trailers, all painted a distinctive, vivid green. A number of green-uniformed guards lounged in front of the structure; hard-faced individuals whose big hands were never far from their holstered guns. There was an electric feeling of tensity about the place, a brooding expectancy. But it left untouched the overalled attendant who slouched up to meet me.

He seemed of a different race. He was painfully thin, lax-jawed and dull-eyed, cut from the same pattern as the lout whose sodden indifference to his brother's terrible fate had appalled me more than his mother's agony. They were typical of the natives of this region, I found— an inbred, moronic species

hardly fit for the most unexacting of common labor, dregs of humanity. The man regarded me bovinely.

"I'm Stanley Sutton," I said. "I was told to bring this car here."

"Yeh. Yer ter wait."

"For whom? How long?"

"Dunno." The infinitesimal motion of his knife-blade shoulders might have been a shrug. "Mister Mowrer 'phoned ter tell yer ter wait."

"Who's Mowrer?"

"Unh?"

"Who is this Mowrer?" I repeated, slowly and distinctly.

"Boss's secatary."

There was evidently nothing to be gotten out of the creature. I slid out of the car to stretch my legs. The guards had clotted in a knot, were pretending elaborate unconcern, but I knew, as one does know those things, that I was the subject of their low talk, their furtive inspection. This was natural enough; I was destined to assume a rather important place in the community. Yet there was something other than appraisement in the one or two glances I managed to intercept, something very like compassion, it seemed to me. Nonsense! Why should anyone pity me when I had just been given a position men of twice my age might well envy?

A distant thrumming came to my ears, rose swiftly to a booming roar. From a side road a long-hooded, black Lancia thundered up, halted in a cloud of dust. Its door flung open and Thorndal popped out.

"Sutton!" he bellowed. "Glad you're here!" His big hand engulfed mine. "Waiting long?"

"Just arrived." I am no mean height, yet his massive, iron-gray head loomed above me. There was physical power in the spread of his shoulders, the hugeness of his frame; and his face, sculptured in broad, powerful strokes, was eloquent of a mental strength that explained in some part his swift conquest of an industry that was the stamping-ground of financial giants. Just now his countenance was lined with weariness, the hard glitter of his brown eyes was somewhat dulled, but the dominant virility of the man still showed through like the luminance of an inward blaze. Somehow, other men faded in Andrew Thorndal's presence like a candle in the glare of a thousand-watt airport lamp.

"Get your bag and get in!" The moment of greeting past, he was brusque, commanding. "Snap into it."

His big car was filmed with the dust and mud of a long journey. Thorndal slid under the wheel. I evinced no surprise at this; one didn't expect this man to be driven by a chauffeur. The Lancia leaped into motion.

"Pleasant trip?" asked Thorndal.

"Good enough." We were purring along Newville's Main Street; as we passed there was a perceptible tightening in the bearing of the few men on the narrow sidewalk, even of the shambling, vacant-faced natives. I could see no women.

"Can't say the same. Roads were rotten from Akron. Had to straighten something out there and the damn fools kept me longer that I expected. But this car's good for a hundred or more when she's pushed, so I was able to meet you as I planned."

"I rather imagined I was to put up in town," I said.

"No. You'll stay at the house."

Newville's trim houses dropped behind and the road was bordered by trees that arched overhead and made our path a tunnel of blackness.

"I want you where I can watch you," he added. "You might get notions."

He smiled without humor, and once again I felt as if the coils of a web were tightening around me. All these elaborate precautions must be intended to conceal something more than a mere secret process...

And then an uneasy question obtruded itself. Jimmy Haynes, my classmate at Tech and my predecessor here, was of course acquainted with all I was about to learn, all that Thorndal was going to such elaborate lengths to prevent me from communicating to the outside world. How had the manufacturer made certain of Haynes' silence? I realized now that no one had heard from the little man since he had gone, as I was going, to assume charge of the plant at Newville. Where was he now?

Something nicked the outer edge of the Lancia's beam, was revealed as a man in the center of the road, waving in a signal to stop. Thorndal grunted, but did not slow. The car hurtled at the figure.

"Look out!" I yelled. "You'll hit— " But at the last instant of catastrophe the man leaped aside; we flicked by. Something thudded against the tonneau side and glass crashed. "Good God," I jerked out. "You almost killed him!"

My employer's mouth was a straight, cruel slash. "His fault," he said. "No business getting in my way."

"But you can't—" I caught myself.

Thorndal's voice was a low growl. "Can't what?"

"You can't kill a man for getting in your path."

"I can't, eh? I wouldn't advise you to try it." His eyes were smoldering. "You might as well learn right now, young man, that getting in Andrew Thorndal's way is dangerous. Especially in Newville."

I didn't answer that. What could I say? I didn't want to talk anyway. Something beside the callous ruthlessness of my chief was making the pit of my stomach squirm.

For the second time in an hour I had seen a man from whose face the blackened flesh was sloughing in rotten decay, baring the quivering, raw muscles beneath. And there had been no covering at all on his waving hand, only gray sinews lacing skeleton fingers!

A red light showed ahead; the Lancia skidded, stopped. I saw two guards advancing, and behind them a high fence of copper wire in parallel strands. It came out from the right, crossed the road and disappeared to the left. But it was the square white sign hanging from it, man-high, that caught my eye. The letters on it were a staring red:

DANGER
THIS FENCE IS
ELECTRICALLY CHARGED
IT IS
DEATH
TO TOUCH IT

"Evening, Mr. Thorndal," one of the uniformed men was saying. "I'll have the current off in a minute. Had any trouble on the way up?"

The magnate's voice was sharp. "Why? Expect any?"

The fellow shuffled his feet uneasily. "No, sir. Only there's been someone hangin' around in the woods off there, and a couple of stones were thrown at Miss Thorndal's car when she came in last night."

"What? What's that? Nan here?" There was no doubt about it, consternation was vibrant in his tones. "How did she pass the outer lines?"

"I— I dunno. Guess they didn't dare stop her."

"Look here," snapped Thorndal, "the orders are that no one gets in without a pass. No one, do you understand, my daughter or the devil himself. Tell Captain Daley that. No! Tell him to call me at once. I'll flay the hide off him."

The man saluted, awkwardly. "Yes sir. I'll pass the word." The tiny red light at the top of the fence blinked out. "Power's off, sir." I thought there was resentment in the guard's eyes, but his swarthy face was masklike. A panel opened in the fence, gate-like, and gears clashed.

"The brat," Thorndal muttered to himself. "I told her to stay away from here! Well, she'll go back in the morning or I'll know the reason why."

3: God Of Vengeance

GRAVEL crunched under our wheels. I was aware of a house ahead, of windows warmly lighted. We rolled to a stop, a door opened at the head of a

short flight of stone steps, and a man came out. Despite his livery he shambled down the stairs, his long arms lax at his side, and there was something queerly robot-like in his movements.

"Take Mr. Sutton's bag to the room Haynes had," Thorndal snapped. Then he turned to me. "Come on in, Sutton, and I'll introduce you to your new quarters." I thought the weariness in his face had deepened in the last few minutes. Certainly there was a hint of worry in his eyes.

There was a priceless Ispahan on the floor of the entrance hall, something baronial in the lift of the curving staircase toward the rear. I thought of the hovel back on the road, where a faceless man lay dying. A door to one side opened and someone came out, peering through thick spectacles.

"Hah, Mowrer!" Thorndal rumbled. "Got those papers ready?"

The secretary was a gray little man, bent and shriveled. "Yes, Mr. Thorndal," he answered. "They are on your desk. Glad to see you back safely. Were you...Did they..."

"No. I couldn't do anything with those imbeciles. They insist there has been absolutely no change in the composition they're using on the suits. By the way, this is Stanley Sutton, our new superintendent. My secretary, Carl Mowrer."

Mowrer mumbled some sort of acknowledgment of the introduction, turned back to his superior. "Johnson reports ten additional laborers incapacitated, sir," he said. "And there's three died today."

Thorndal's face hardened. "The devil! That means more slowing up of production while they break in new hands."

"It is annoying, sir." Was I mistaken, or was there a faint hint of irony in the little man's bland voice? "Hampden is waiting in the study to see you. I told him you would be too tired for business tonight, but he insisted. Said he had something you would want to hear about immediately. Shall I tell him to come back in the morning?"

"No. I'll talk to him now. Take care of Sutton for a minute." The manufacturer wheeled eagerly to the door from which Mowrer had come, slammed it shut behind him.

The secretary sighed, and turned to me. His jaw jerked sidewise. "So you've come to take Jim Haynes' place, eh...You're not afraid?"

"Afraid?" I echoed wonderingly. "Of what?"

"Of him and his devil's brew. Hasn't he told you how Neosite is made?"

"No. He's told me nothing."

The fellow's gnarled fingers twined nervously with one another. He moved closer to me and peered up into my face. "You're young," he muttered. "Too young. Go away. Go away before he tells you. He'll let you go now. He won't after you know. You'll want to run to the end of the world. But it will be too

late then. Too late!" Suddenly he was laughing, soundlessly but horrible. "Too late!"

I grabbed his thin arm, dug my fingers into it. "For the love of Peter," I gritted. "What's this all about? What's going on here?"

"Mowrer!" It was Thorndal's voice from the study door, but brittle, menacing as I had never hear it. "Come here." He had an opened letter in his hand and his face was livid with repressed rage.

"Yes sir." The old man's eyes were fixed on the letter Thorndal held. Suddenly his cheeks were the color of death. "What is it, sir?"

"Did you write this?" He thrust it at Mowrer. "Did you?"

"Where— how—"

"How did I get it? What do you think I pay Hampden for? Did you think he wouldn't know that you gave it to a truck-driver to mail in Roton?"

"Yes— yes sir."

"Well, you have another think coming. So it was you, not Haynes, that Tri-State Oil was dickering with!"

The man made a little helpless gesture.

"You were going to sell me out for a hundred thousand, and they were willing. But they balked at sending a plane in to get you out." Thorndal's voice rumbled lower and lower, till it was like nothing so much as a volcano about to erupt. Mowrer was almost groveling before him. "Speak up! I want you to admit it with your own lips."

"It— it was the only way I could escape from here. And I had to get away— " his voice rose shrilly— "before I went completely mad. I had to get away from this hell..."

Did Thorndal flinch, infinitesimally? You couldn't tell it from the deep, deadly murmur of his tone, as he said: "You'll taste real hell, Mowrer, now. They need men in the nitration room. Go to Johnson and tell him I said you were to work there."

I felt let down. All this to-do, and then a mere demotion! What...

Then Mowrer shrieked, "Not that! Oh God! Not that! Jail me! Kill me! But don't send me there!" His lips were absolutely colorless, his eyes stared horror. He dropped to the floor and squirmed to Thorndal's feet. "Don't make me work in there!"

The tycoon shoved him away with a heavy shoe. "You should have thought of that before you tried to double-cross me." His face was granite, his eyes contemptuous. "You'll go into that room tonight, and if you make any more fuss you'll go without a suit."

"Without a suit..." Suddenly, so quickly I did not see how he managed it, Mowrer surged to his feet, was swarming, an infuriated midget, over

Thorndal's huge frame, his clawed hands scoring scarlet furrows across the magnate's cheek. The big man staggered under the unexpectedness of the onslaught, tore blindly at the whirlpool of mad fury the other had become. I heard a maniacal, snarling whimper, saw Mowrer's nails go for the big man's eyes. I saw a knife flash in his other hand. And sprang.

I grabbed, caught the knife wrist, jerked it back till the little man screamed in agony, got an arm around his neck and clamped it tight. Mowrer's feet lashed out, struck Thorndal square in the belly— and then I had ripped the maddened man away from his astounded victim. I tripped, stumbled backward, crashed to the floor with the mewling, screaming fellow atop me.

A whistle shrilled, and I was threshing about the floor, scarcely able to hold the armful of explosive energy terror had made of the meek, near-sighted clerk, fighting to keep the gleaming knife out of my flesh, the clashing teeth from my skin. The tramp of heavy feet was all about me. I saw green uniforms, felt Mowrer ripped from my hold, and I lay gasping, exhausted.

Thorndal was dabbing a white handkerchief at his scratched face. Little lights crawled in his dark eyes, but there was no expression on his countenance save two white spots that came and went on either side of his nostrils. The secretary was limp in the grasp of two burly guards.

"Take him to the nitration room," Thorndal said grimly. "And tell Johnson he is to work without a suit."

Mowrer lifted his head. He had lost his glasses in the struggle, his pupils were tiny, the whites of his eyes bloodshot. But there was no fear in those blurred orbs. Hate peered from them, hate and an awful threat. Words dripped from his twisted mouth...

"There is a God, Thorndal, a God of Vengeance," he said. "He knows what you do, and prepares His punishment. Even the least of His creatures may be His instrument to that end. Even I." Then his look dropped to me.

"And you, poor fool," he said. "You have made your choice. I shall not forget you when the time comes. Pray, if you can, for you are doubly doomed."

"Take him away," Thorndal gestured imperatively. Mowrer went steadily toward the door, proudly erect between his captors. Torn, bleeding, disheveled, he dwarfted us all in that moment. The hatchet-faced manservant let them out.

I got to my feet, painfully. Thorndal stared at me, for a moment, as if he were seeing me for the first time. Then he spoke:

"I'm glad you saw that, Sutton. You'll know better than to try to fool me now."

Footsteps sounded overhead.

"Dad. Daddy! What's happened?" I twisted to the flute-like voice from the stair head. "What was all that noise?" The girl came running down the stairs, filmy draperies streaming out behind her, white face anxious. I saw full-curved, red lips, great lustrous eyes, a coif of ebony hair. "Ohhh, you're bleeding!"

"Nan!" There was a throaty tenderness in his ejaculation. He held his arms out to her and she nestled within them.

"But Dad— that's an awful scratch—"

"Never mind that." He pushed her away from him but still held a tight grip on both her arms, just above the elbow. It seemed to me his glance drank her in thirstily. Then suddenly his face was granite once more, his eyes hard. "Why did you come here, Nan? You know I forbade you to."

It was the gruffness of his tone, rather than the words, I thought, that brought the hurt look to her face. "I know. But I was lonesome for you, and Bill Lannon was motoring up this way. So I came along. He's upstairs. You'll like him."

The white spots of rage were visible again, at the outcurve of his nostrils. "You brought someone here." He said it slowly, icily.

She was petulant now, in the way girls have when trying to avoid the consequences of a transgression. "But Daddy, he's swell," she said. She half-turned, and called, "Billy...oh, Billy. Come down and meet my father."

"Coming."

He was a typical playboy, the fellow who rattled down the staircase, meticulously dressed, his little blond mustache waxed, his hair slicked back. His round face was insipid, his blue eyes insolent. He reached the lower floor, halted.

"This is Bill Lannon, Dad," said the girl. "Isn't he nice?"

Thorndal grunted. Lannon bowed. "I have been very anxious to make your acquaintance, sir," he said. "Nan's father, I was sure, must be exceptional."

That to the man who had swept like a meteor across industry's sky! Could the chap possibly be so arrant an ass? He looked at the girl fatuously, and I knew I disliked him heartily. But I didn't realize, then, why I did.

"Thanks." Dryly. "I hope you find the sight worth a long trip for a short stay. A very short stay...Nan is leaving here at once, and you also."

The chap looked bewildered. But Nan flashed around to her father with something of his own spirit. "Dad," she said. "You can't do that! You can't chase us out the minute we've gotten here."

Thorndal's mouth was grim, but I fancied there was anxiety mixed with the smouldering wrath in his eyes, as he answered. "I can't have you stay here, Nan, not even one night. There's something— I am too busy. And you know I don't allow visitors in Newville."

"I know. I shouldn't have come. But you're not going to send me right away. Without even a chance for one little chat with you, Daddy..."

He weakened. "All right. You may stay overnight, with the understanding that neither of you is to set foot outside this house."

The girl's lips firmed, but she knew when not to press an advantage. "All right, Dad. I won't go outside tonight and I won't let Bill." I noticed she said nothing about the morning. "We'll just sit around the fire in my sitting-room and talk. Come on up."

"Not now," he said. "I must go over matters with Mr. Sutton, my new superintendent." She looked at me for the first time, coolly. My heart skipped a beat. "We have lots to do before I can rest."

"I'm Nan Thorndal, Mr. Sutton," she said then. "I was wondering how soon Dad would see fit to introduce us."

I muttered something, I'll be hanged if I know what. She rattled on. "You must join us after you're through. Mr. Haynes and I were great pals till dad exiled me to Florida a month ago."

"We were classmates at Tech," I told her. "But he kept away from the rest of us. Sensitive about his appearance, I imagine."

"He did look rather like a queer old gnome, with his tremendous head and shriveled-up little body. But how could he have been your classmate? He must have been forty-five at least."

"No. He was no older than thirty."

"Come on, Sutton," Thorndal interrupted. "Let's get to work. You two run along."

He watched them scurry up the stairs, and his mouth twisted. I don't think he realized that he spoke aloud. "I'd give ten years of my life if she weren't here."

From somewhere outside there was a shriek, muffled shouts, the dull thud of a shot. Thorndal hurtled to the outer door, slammed it open and lunged out into the night. I followed.

A hundred yards away, across a sloping lawn, a line of red lights marked the fence, and I could see slumped forms in a dark knot just beneath one of them. As I dashed after my employer's running form an excited murmur came from the group, a shocked oath.

There was something hanging from the wire, a quivering shape outlined by a faint blue haze of electricity. My scalp tightened and my throat was dry. The shredded face seemed to be grinning at me through black lips, and the hand that was clamped to an upper wire was nothing but muscles and bones. It was the man Thorndal had tried to run down. Fire smoldered in the tattered jacket

that covered the twisted torso of the tortured corpse. I sickened, then looked again. The man had an enormous head, and his body was shriveled, tiny.

I moved further away from the lethal barrier as the ground seemed to heave-under my feet. Could there be anyone else with precisely the deformity that Jim Hayne's had? Anyone else with that gnome-like shape?

My employer's voice was devoid of emotion. "What happened here, Lansio?"

One of the men in green uniforms who stood on the other side of the fence answered him: "I see him come out from the woods. He got knife in hand. I holler. He no answer. Holler 'gain. He start running. I shoot, get him in leg. He fall 'gainst wire. That all."

The red lights were gone, suddenly, and the body slumped to the ground, horribly. Someone pulled it away and the lights came on again. Thorndal turned on his heel. "We'll never get through at this rate," he grumbled. It seemed to me he was watching my face, speculatively.

What was it the woman had shrieked after me, back on the road to Newville? "I hope yer mother has to look at yer a month from terday."

I tried to say something, but the words stuck in my throat. I wanted to tell him I was going away from there. He could have his job. But that would mean I should never see Nan Thorndal again.

I followed Andrew Thorndal into the house, into his study, sat down in the chair he indicated and watched while he got paper from a drawer, adjusted an automatic pencil. And all the time I was thinking of Mowrer's warning: "After he tells you it will be too late."

4: "I Am The Law!"

I LISTENED to Thorndal's voice, flowing on and on, and watched his busy pencil jot down chemical equation after equation. There seemed nothing particularly intricate about the synthesis of Neosite so far, nothing that any ordinarily skilled chemist might not deduce from an analysis of the product itself. What was the dread secret?

"From here," he rumbled, "the liquid is piped to the nitration room. This is where my new technique comes in. As the nitric acid is poured in I also add one-tenth of a per cent of— " He named a certain organic compound. "The resultant reaction is this, rather unexpectedly." Letters and symbols formed a new line on the scribbled sheet.

I emitted a low whistle and pointed to a cabalistic inscription. "I've never run across this gas." It was a by-product. "But from its formula I should judge it to be extremely caustic."

"It is. The fumes that fill the nitration room dissolve flesh like water does salt."

"You take no chances, of course. The nitration is performed in an autoclave."

He looked at me rather queerly, I thought. "No," he answered.

My skin crawled. "Then how do you guard your laborers?"

"By suits and masks made from a special rubber compound I have devised. They are fairly efficient."

"Fairly!" I was trying to match the unemotional steadiness of his tone. "Not perfectly!"

"No. We have had occasional failures. In the past two weeks they have grown in number, inexplicably. That's why I went to Akron. I thought the trouble lay in the manufacture of the suits. But it isn't there." There was just the slightest trace of cloudiness in his eyes. "We've lost twenty men from the nitration room in the past fortnight. Breaking in new ones is hampering production."

"Twenty men!" I couldn't keep the horror out of my voice any longer. "Good God— they must die horribly!"

"They do." He said it with an utter lack of expression, but his eyes were smouldering coals. "I'm afraid that stupid as are the people around here they will soon refuse to work for us, even with increased pay."

I pushed against the tabletop with my hands, pushed myself to my feet. "Look here, Mr. Thorndal," I gritted through cold lips, "I may need the money and the job you've offered me. But I can't be mixed up in this. I'm resigning."

His mouth twisted. "Not any more, young fellow. You know too much. You're going to stay here and work for me— as superintendent or in the nitration room alongside Mowrer."

There was sodden, brooding silence in the somber room. His head lifted slightly, so that his agate eyes held mine, and his mouth was a hard, straight line. I thought of the armed guards outside, the death-dealing wires.

"All right," I said. "I'll continue as superintendent." After a while his vigilance might relax, I might see a chance to get away. "But I shall try to find a way to protect the workers."

The corners of his lips lifted in a satiric smile. "Try. But make damn sure you don't make it cost more than the expense of the labor turnover if you want me to adopt it. I won't raise the price of Neosite, and I won't cut my profit."

I shrugged. "After all, there isn't a bridge or a skyscraper built without a couple of deaths. There are fatal accidents in every factory." I must make him believe I had capitulated without reservations. "It is the price of progress."

"Now you're talking," Thorndal exclaimed, and there was satisfaction in his tone. "Sit down and we'll go on with our work."

I was searching for a weak point in the defenses, a loophole through which I might escape. And I found it!

The basic material of Neosite was crude oil, brought into the plant by pipeline from Pennsylvania fields. The huge underground tube was indicated clearly on the maps. But there was another similar but fainter tracing, angling off to the south.

"Another pipeline," he explained. "For emergencies. It connects up with the Texas tube. It's empty, never been used."

I talked about something else, disinterestedly. But my pulses throbbed. There was the road to freedom! I noted carefully that its entrance was just below a window of the nitration room.

At last we were finished. Thorndal looked at his watch. "Three a.m., by George!" he said. "I'll show you your room." Upstairs, he added: "If you get any ideas during the night, remember Mowrer." He opened a door at the other end of the hall and disappeared.

Enough illumination came in from outside for me to undress, and I didn't switch on the light in the room. My pajamas were folded across the pillow; I got into them mechanically and stretched out. I was dog-tired, physically and mentally, but I could not sleep.

I closed my eyes, and Nan Thorndal drifted across my imagining, her white grace in poignant contrast to all the horrors I had seen, gayety and fervor for living dancing in her eyes.

The loathsome triangle of a snake's head rose behind her, peered over her shoulder. I saw its forked tongue darting, saw that it was poised to strike. It hissed warningly. Its eyes were like Thorndal's, glittering hard...The hissing grew louder— I tried to yell a warning to the girl— and woke trembling.

But the hissing continued, low, insistent. It was somewhere in the room. There was a faint odor too, rank, pungent, like the unfamiliar stench in the hut where 'Lije lay dying. It had grown darker; the ceiling was only a faint, pale glimmer. I forced my head around, against the paralysis of inexplicable fear that held me— forced it around to the seeming source of the sibilant noise. And saw a green-glowing mist billowing along the floor!

It came from the gloom of the further corner, a thin veil of iridescence rolling ominously; its advancing edge sharply defined. It was coming swiftly toward my bed. Before I could gather my sleep-bemused faculties and guess its

meaning, the ominous tide was lapping at the legs of my couch, was reaching tenuous, hungry filaments up toward me.

A sound at my door— someone breathing heavily— snapped the spell that gripped me. I gathered myself— launched myself in a flying leap that sent me almost to the exit. In the instant it took for me to grasp the doorknob and get the portal open, my bare feet were immersed ankle-deep in the green vapor. Then I was through, had crashed the door behind me and leaned, gasping, against the wall. Agony seared my feet where they had dipped into the gas, the excruciating torture of a burn from boiling acid.

Something scattered to my right. I twisted, saw someone flick down the curving stairs. I had only a glimpse of him in the wan light of the single burning lamp. I shouted something unintelligible, started after him— and whirled to the boom of Thorndal's voice. "Sutton!"

He was gigantic in the dimness, and he was much too near to have come all the way from his room since I had slammed the door! Red rage exploded in my skull.

"You devil," I squeezed out through a tightened throat. "What are you trying to do— kill me in my sleep?" I took a step toward him, my hands fisting, and stopped as pain shot up my legs from my scorched feet. The pain was growing worse.

His face was a frozen mask, but there was a red glow in his eyes. "What do you mean?" he rumbled, speaking low. "What's going on here?"

Doors were opening along the hall. "You know damn well what I mean," I snapped. "The gas in my room— if I hadn't wakened in time I'd be dead!"

Behind him Nan came out into the hall, a pastel-shaded negligee tightly clasped around her exquisite form. She was sleepy-eyed, pale.

"Gas in your room." There was no surprise in his calm voice.

"Yes. The green hell-gas. Look!" I lifted one foot. Already the skin was black. It was like a skin-tight shoe.

"Get in there and wash it off!" He jerked a thumb at a bathroom door, just across from my bedchamber. "Use plenty of soap. If you've had only a touch that will stop it. Hurry!" The impact of his authoritative command, my terror that in moments the flesh would peel from my extremities, drove anger from me. I dove into the room he indicated, snapped on the light and twisted bathtub spigots in frantic haste. But I left the door open, listened and watched as I flinched from the sting of the soap I had snatched up.

"Dad." Nan asked. "What...?"

"Nothing, dear. Just an accident. Sutton was fooling with something Haynes left in there and burned himself. Go back."

"But— but I'm frightened, Dad. I want to stay with you."

"Please go to your room." His voice was commanding, but his eyes devoured her. The outer skin was peeling from my feet and ankles as I rubbed the lather in, and the soap burned like fire. "You will be in the way here," he said. "I'll come to you later. Go, please."

She sighed, vanished. Lannon came into sight, in orchid pajamas. Not a hair was out of place on his head or fix that tiny, pointed mustache of his. But his insipid face was colorless, and he clutched a pearl-handled pistol in one white hand. "Is anything wrong?"

The big man ignored him. He was looking at the floor, at the threshold of the room I had quitted in such haste. I swung my legs out of the tub, reached for a jar of cold-cream. The burning was gone from my feet and ankles, but they were raw, tender. The salve relieved the pain somewhat, and I stood up gingerly, peered to see what it was Thorndal watched.

Along the lower edge of the door green smoke was seeping out.

Thorndal's head lifted. "That's got to be shut off or it will fill the home. Here you—" He turned to address someone beyond my vision, "Go in and see what you can do."

I hobbled out of the bathroom and looked to see whom he was ordering into that death-filled room, that chamber of horror. It was the robot-like servant, uniform trousers hastily pulled on over a drab, grimy union-suit in which he evidently slept. The man shambled forward as I came out, his vacuous eyes fixed on his master's. Was it ignorance or mechanical obedience that was sending him un-protesting to terrible death?

"My God!" I ripped out. "You can't let him go in there. The room must be filled with the stuff by now. Why, it's murder!"

Lannon's jaw was dropped, his mouth gaped stupidly. Thorndal looked at me and his gaze was basilisk. "Keep out of this, Sutton," he said icily.

The man's hand was on the door-knob, but my cry seemed to have penetrated his dull intellect. He said, fumblingly: "Is it the Peelin' gas, boss? I don't know as I want ter go in." There was something pathetic in his irresolution. Evidently defiance of Thorndal's orders was quite beyond his conception.

"Go in and turn it off," the latter snarled, and jerked the door open. The ominous hissing flashed out, and the room was fogged with the green haze of death. "See it?" Thorndal shouted. "A drum in the corner." His big hand struck Jever's back, thrust him in. The door slammed behind the man, and a muffled scream sounded from within— a scream of anguish. I thought I heard stumbling footsteps going across the floor. Then there was the thud of a falling body.

Thorndal's ear was against the panel. "The hissing's stopped," he said. "He shut it off before he dropped."

"Good Lord," I yammered. "It's murder. Murder!"

The other's eyes were bleak. "Not murder, Sutton. Justice. Someone had to cut the gas off or we'd all be killed. Jevers could be spared the best. And besides he had it coming to him. He helped Mowrer get his double-crossing messages out."

My pulses hammered. "You have no right to take the law into your hands!" If it meant that I would meet the same fate I had to say it. "You— "

"I am the law in Newville. Get that fixed in your mind, young man. I am the law."

With an effort I shrugged and turned away. If I ever got out of here alive I would show him there was another law, stronger than his.

Thorndal's voice broke in upon my thoughts. "Where's that nincompoop Lannon?" he asked.

"He was here a minute ago," I answered heavily. "Right here."

"I want to tell him—"

A room door had opened; the playboy bustled out. He had gotten into clothes, and he had a heavy bag in his fist. His cheeks were the color of putty.

"Hey, you! Where do you think you're going?" growled Thorndal.

"Away. I'm going away from here."

Thorndal moved toward him ominously. "Oh, no, you're not," he said grimly. "You're staying right here. You've seen too much."

Hysteria leaped into Lannon's voice; I swear there were tears in his eyes. "Don't touch me," he quavered. "Keep your hands off me!"

"I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. But if you're looking for trouble just put a foot outside this house. You'll get it."

"Good Heavens!" The bag dropped from his nerveless fingers. "I should never have come here."

"That's the first sensible thing you've said," Thorndal commented dryly. "Now, get back in your room and stay there."

5: The Living Dead

THROBBING pain rendered sleep impossible, and I sat in the new room I had been given, my feet on a pillow and my chin cupped in a hand whose elbow rested on the windowsill. The sky had cleared, and below my vantage point the lawn sloped, moonlit, to the circling line of red pin-points marking the electrically-charged fence that had already taken a life that night.

Somewhere a clock struck four. Two hours to daylight yet. Three hours till I should have to go into that factory where horror stalked— till I should have to face Andrew Thorndal again.

For I knew now that it was a battle to the death between us. I must smash him, smash his fiendish mill— or die. As long as his power remained I was a prisoner, a slave, sending other helpless slaves to incredible tortures.

What kind of man was he? Incredibly hard, ruthless, murderous. And yet he was sane. In all his long exposition of the intricate manufacture of Neosite, in the hours that I had studied him, there had been no hint of anything to the contrary. He was no madman, but merely one utterly without human feeling, driving straight to his objective of the production of his motor fuel cheaply and in quantity, without regard to what sacrifice that objective entailed.

And when he discovered a spy, a traitor, he sent him to death as spies and traitors are sent to death in war— utterly without compunction.

My brow knitted. All this seemed logical— devilishly logical. But why had he tried to kill me with gas hidden in my room? That was not like him. If he trusted me, there was no reason for such an attempt. If he did not, he would not hesitate to shoot me down like a dog— or send me to the nitration room. I was utterly in his power. There was no need for deception, for the planting of an opened drum where it would take me in my sleep.

He had not bothered to deny my accusation. But somehow I could not believe him guilty of that abomination. Someone else had tried to kill me! Who, and why? Would he try again?

My scalp tightened. The struggle against Thorndal that had been forced on me was alone a titanic task. What could I do against another enemy, unknown, striking at me invisibly from the night?

At this unpleasant point in the whirligig of my tired mind I became conscious of a furtive murmur, voices too low to be intelligible. This was curious!

I looked along the house-side, and saw that someone was squatted on the slanting verandah roof, two windows away.

Could it be that the secret enemy was lurking in that chamber, unknown even to Thorndal? It would have been easy enough to steal along the slanting boards and slip a tank of gas into the room where I had been sleeping. Holy Moses! Maybe it had not been intended for me at all; perhaps it had been meant for Thorndal himself. No— he slept at the end of the hall; no possibility of a mistake. For Nan, then! My blood curdled. Perhaps the plotters were planning even now to rectify their error!

The man on the roof moved, just then, and slid over its edge. He was a shadow flitting across the lawn. A patch of moonlight caught him,

momentarily, and I saw that he was tall, painfully thin, his hatless head a high, hairless dome. He went into shadow again, and vanished.

And then I saw something that drove the puzzle from my mind. The long arc of red lights blinked out! Dim forms appeared suddenly from the black cluster of the bordering woods, all along the fence, and suddenly there were silent, shadowy struggles everywhere. Not one of the surprised guards had time to shout or shoot. Even at this distance I sensed the venomous quality of those struggles.

Almost before I realized they had begun they were over, and a swarm of dark, distorted forms were climbing the wire barrier that was no longer impregnable. They were running across the lawn, queer distorted shapes, more fearful for the silence of their coming. The foremost reached the swath of moonlight and I saw that he was Mowrer, had Mowrer's slight figure at least, though the face I glimpsed was as black as coal, black as my feet had been after an instant's contact with the green gas.

Thorndal's victims had risen at last, were coming to take their vengeance. Let them come! Swift elation rose in me, then vanished. Nan! What would they do to her if they won into the house? Nan!

I plunged for the door, slammed it open, and yelled, "Thorndal! Thorndal! They're coming!"

He must have slept lightly or not at all, for he was out of his room almost before I could turn towards it. "What is it?" he snapped. "Who's coming?"

"Mowrer and a gang from the plant! They've killed the guards and— "

He had popped back through his door, was out again instantly with guns in his hands. Nan appeared, and Lannon, his blue eyes popping from his head. There was a crash from below and through the upper windows came a shrill tumult of cries, the arid yells of a bloodthirsty mob.

"Here, Sutton, take this," Thorndal shouted, and tossed a gun to me. "Watch the stair head."

He twisted to Lannon, handed a revolver to him. "Get back in your room and guard the porch roof."

"Give me one, Dad. You know how well I can shoot." Nan was pale but calm. There was something of her father in the set of her little jaw. He looked at her, and obeyed.

"God bless you, girl! You watch the porch, too; I don't trust that milksop."

She smiled bravely, jerked open the door of her bedroom and disappeared within. The bedlam from below was terrific now; something was thudding against the entrance door in great crashes that shook the building, and there was the smash of breaking glass.

Behind me there was the sound of moving furniture. "Here, help me with this," came Thorndal's voice. He was hauling a huge chifforobe out of a room close by. I sprang to his aid and got it across the stair head. It filled the space, would shield us well enough, while at either flank there was just sufficient space for us to see past and shoot I crouched at one side, Thorndal at the other. And the entrance portal crashed in!

They poured through and filled the lower hall, a howling, shrieking mob. It was dark down there and I could see them only dimly, but the foul stench of their putrescence swept up to me, and the pungent aroma of the green gas. A black shadow leaped for the stairs and my gun spat. He fell— crashed down, and sprawled in the dimness.

"Too dark," I grunted. "Too dark down there," Gun-flash answered my shot and bullets thudded into our barricade. "I can't see to shoot."

"There's a switch here," my companion growled. "Wait."

A click, and light flooded the milling crowd. It was greeted by a volley of shots and shrill, weird yelpings that made a madhouse chorus. Thorndal's weapon thudded, but for a horrified instant I could not fire.

Down there, in that luxuriously furnished lobby, some grotesque nightmare had spilled its creatures in an affrighting, obscene throng. Not one of them was human-looking. Not one. They ranged from some who were merely blackened by the first touch of the gas, through gibbering, mad-eyed beings whose cheekbones protruded and whose lips were frayed, to the incarnate horror of the dead-alive from whom all flesh had vanished. Cheekless, noseless, earless corpses, they still jerked about in a simulation of life, with a shimmering play of exposed muscles and flickering nerves whose agony was horribly visible.

If it had not been for the thought of Nan, in that moment, I should have thrust the barricade aside and thrown down to them the man who had made them what they were, thrown him down to them and plunged after. But she was there, somewhere behind, and I could not abandon her to their vengeance. I dared not think what her fate would be.

The chifforobe was jerking under the impact of their shots. They surged on.

My finger squeezed trigger and I felt the gun jump in my hand. Flayed figures fell, twitching, on the steps. Thorndal's weapon thundered beside me, took its deadly toll. But still they came on; mouthing, grimacing figures from Hell! They came slowly because they had to clamber over the contorted bodies of the fallen. Slowly, because my lead and Thorndal's was hurtling into them, driving them back. I saw one gaunt skeleton topple, his open mouth gurgling a scream, his tongue only a blackened stump in the dark cavity of his throat.

Where was Mowrer? He had led the charge across the lawn, but I could see him nowhere now. The question flicked across my horror-numbed brain, and

then the hammer of my gun clicked on an empty shell. A raw, featureless face stared through my firing slit, its eyes twin pits of damnation. The chest rocked under the impact of the attackers, toppled. I sprang backward...

And from somewhere behind a shriek ripped high above the triumphant clamor of the mob. A woman's shriek. Nan!

I whirled, and hurtled down the long corridor, Thorndal's berserk roar ringing in my ears. I was conscious of Lannon's white face, his open mouth shouting something I did not hear, and then I was hurling myself into the room where I had seen the girl go.

The window framed struggling figures. I glimpsed Nan's flailing arms, the ex-secretary's face, black save where mad eyes rolled whitely under lashless lids. I leaped to them. Someone loomed at my side. I dodged— felt the breeze of a club that just missed my head— flung a fist at the dim-seen form. It thudded sickeningly against moist flesh. I heard weakened bone crunch, and twisted again to the window. It was open, empty. I lunged to it, thrust head and shoulders out.

"Help," Nan screamed from the roof-edge. "Dad! Bill! Help!" She was still fighting at the roof-edge, against Mowrer and another dark, tall form. I shouted something unintelligible, lifted a leg to the sill. A shot barked— to my right. Something crashed against my skull— crashed me into oblivion.

6: Free?

I THINK the first thing of which I was conscious was the pain in my feet. It seemed as if they had been rasped with sharp files and salt rubbed into the wounds. Then the racking pain at the back of my skull obtruded itself, and the weight that lay across my chest. I opened my eyes. My sensations were still purely physical— I recall that. Thought was not yet functioning at all. There was a roar in my ears and a lurid red light was all around me. I felt warm, although I was clothed only in pajamas, and I hurt all over.

Something was digging into my back and I tried to turn over. I could not move! The blow that had knocked me out had paralyzed me. I realized that I was still on the porch roof, that something lay across me, pinning me down, that I could not stir. And that the roaring I heard, the dancing red light, and the unnatural warmth could mean only one thing. Fire! The house was on fire and I could not move!

Flames licked along the upper window-sash, just within my vision, tiny jets of yellow, and red, and lucent green. Acrid sting of smoke was in my nostrils, and heat beat at me. Glass crashed somewhere and the voice of the blaze was deafening. I smelled hair burning. My own? I turned my head toward the

window and saw a red face on the sill, black flesh peeling away from it, its scant hair frizzling in the heat. Soon my hair would frizzle like that, and the fire lick across my body. What a way to die!

I had turned my head! Did that mean the paralysis was gone? I heaved up, throwing off the body that lay over me. Something clattered on the roof, a cudgel. There was a bullet wound in the back of the corpse's neck and blood still seeped from it. I was on my feet, the hot tin roofing doubling my agony. A flame licked out from the window, almost caught me. I leaped from the porch-roof, doubling my feet under me, ducking my head between my shoulders, taking the fall on my back and rolling as I had been taught in gym-class at Tech. But the impact knocked the breath from me.

I struggled erect. Every move I made was painful, the grassy stubble was a torment, my head was a gigantic, whirling globe on my shoulders. I limped toward the fence where the danger lights no longer glowed, trying to gather my incoherent thoughts. Someone had shot the fellow who had stunned me just as the cudgel fell. I had been left for dead, I was free to escape from this infernal place, from this Hell on Earth. I was free to escape!

I reached the fence, crawled between copper strands. A mound in the road attracted my attention and I bent to it. Shredded bits of green cloth told me what lay there had been a uniformed guard two hours ago, filled with life. I looked away quickly to save my sanity.

I stood there, swaying. I was free to escape, I told myself; but something inside me denied it. I couldn't go away from here. There was something I must do. What was it? I put out a hand to the wire to steady myself— and remembered.

Nan! Nan Thorndal! Mowrer had her, he whose eyes had glared with such hate at her father, at me. He who had led the ravening throng of the green gas's victims to their long overdue uprising, he who had proclaimed himself God's instrument for vengeance! Would his crazed mind extend that vengeance to her? Had he not left the direct attack to the others while he stole behind our defenses and snatched her from her room?

I groaned, and shuddered with cold, despite the heat-blast that rolled across the lawn from the blazing house. What was he doing to her, what unimaginable torture was he inflicting on that lissome, slender, dreamy-eyed girl? What had he done to her, where had he taken her? I looked around wildly, and saw the looming bulk of the plant, saw that most of the windows were darkened, but that four were alight, near the ground. And against their staring oblongs, dark figures moved.

I cudgeled my brain for the plans Thorndal had shown me. And cursed as I got a glimmer of what Mowrer's scheme must be. That was the nitration room,

the place where the gas was born that stripped men's flesh from them and killed them too slowly. Good Lord! Had he taken her there?

I dove across the road, was swallowed up in the shadow, and started toward those yellow windows, calming myself to coherent thought as I forced my way through underbrush that tore at my scantily covered body and slashed my already lacerated feet. I must have traced a trail of blood through those woods, but I did not feel it then. I was racked by a greater torture, hag-ridden by the vision of Nan Thorndal in Mowrer's power, in the power of his fiendish horde. Nan Thorndal— whom I knew at last that I loved, had loved from the moment I had seen her.

What could I hope to accomplish, weaponless, almost naked, weakened by all that I had passed through? I did not know, knew only that I must get to her, get to Nan, help her or share her fate.

Dread hammered at me for speed, but I could not go fast. I was too weak, the brush too thick. So I moved slowly, and had time to think.

Mowrer might be insane, but his attack had been well worked out. The stealthy gathering of his forces in the woods, their sudden silent onslaught the instant the power was off in the wires...

Hold on! How had that come about? The master switch was on the lower floor of the blazing building. That I knew from the blueprints. Someone in the house had cut the current! Jevers was the only servant who slept in— Thorndal had told me that— and Jevers, I realized grimly, could not have been the one. There was left, as far as I knew, myself, Thorndal and Nan, and Lannon.

Was there someone else, someone unknown even to the manufacturer? The same one, perhaps, who had planted the gas in my room? The one who had engaged in that midnight conversation with the prowler of the high-domed, bald head? Where had the latter gone, anyway— of which party was he? What had that furtive talk been about, and with whom?

A vast roaring twisted me toward the burning home, a tremendous crash. The roof had fallen in, the walls were toppling, crashed even as I looked, and the triumphant flames soared heavenward in a furious outburst, a geysering of lurid, blazing gases, of great beams exploding upward, of cascading sparks and fluttering, whirling embers. Through the split open building-side, I saw the curving staircase shatter and drop into the roaring lake of avid light, saw a body wrapped in flame swirl in that inferno, a human torch. I shuddered to think that if my coma had lasted a bare ten minutes longer my corpse too, or my still-living body, would have been enveloped in a fiery shroud.

There was an open space between the edge of the woods and the long low building that was my goal, a space shielded from the fading glow of the ashes so that sightless dark lay there.

A grotesque, twisted shadow flitted across one luminous aperture; thin shoulders, and a profile that showed no irregularity marking nose or chin. I crouched, shivering a little in the before-dawn chill.

One advantage alone I had— Mowrer's ignorance of my continued existence, his belief that I was dead.

An oath, deep-voiced, came faintly to me from within, and the intonations of a protesting feminine voice. The pall of dread lifted from me ever so slightly as I realized that Nan was still alive. But the sounds stirred me into action. I started across the clearing, moving gingerly to spare my feet and avoid untoward noise. The footing here was soft earth, a blessed relief after the torture of grassy stubble and twig-covered forest ground. My burning soles felt cool iron, and I bent to it.

Groping blindly, I felt that a metal disk was embedded in the ground, some three feet in diameter. By sheer luck I had blundered across the manhole cover to the unused pipeline, the steel-lined tunnel I had forgotten— but that now, I realized, must make an essential part of my plan.

Weakened as I was, blinded by darkness and hampered by the necessity for avoiding noise, it was a gigantic task to move the iron plate. But at last I managed it. Then I turned once more to the nitration room windows, just beyond.

They were frosted, as I have mentioned, blocking vision. But I could hear sounds, the padding of many feet, someone speaking in a high shrill voice, the noise of pouring liquid. A hairline of brighter light along the sill showed that the window was not quite tightly shut. I bent to see if I could peer through.

And someone leaped on me from behind! An arm slid around my neck, clamped tight. A knee dug into the small of my back. "Got you!" the garrotter grunted, and I could not breathe. I twisted desperately, flailing fists backward at empty air. But his grip was iron, the dig of his knee into my kidneys excruciating. "Mowrer!" he shouted. "Mowrer!"

My eyes were popping from their sockets, my lungs bursting. Dimly I knew that dark figures were crowding about me; the secretary's blackened face danced dizzily before me in the window-glow. The choking arm relaxed, but hands gripped my arms, my legs. I was lifted from the ground.

"Two birds at one throw," I heard Mowrer's gloating voice. "Grab Johnson, too, and bring him in."

"But I'm on your side." It was my captor's voice, thin-edged with hysteria, "I'm on your side, Mowrer. I caught the fellow for you."

Johnson! Where had I heard that name? Oh, yes. The one in charge of the nitration room, of Thorndal's hellhole!

"On my side!" said Mowrer. "Only because you can't help yourself...You can't get past my watchers where the road bottle-necks into the swamp and you think you can escape punishment this way. Nothing doing, friend Johnson. You have a long roll of misdeeds for which to answer."

There was no way out then— except through the pipeline! Good thing I had opened that manhole! Much good it would do me now. I was done for.

"I couldn't help myself," Johnson protested. "I only obeyed orders."

"You'll obey my orders now. Mine, and His whose instrument I am." There was the exaltation of the religious fanatic in Mowrer's voice, and the cold cruelty of the triumphant oppressed! No hope for mercy there, or justice. "Take him, men."

I couldn't see what was happening in the dark, but there was the sound of a scuffle, and the wordless wail of one in mortal fear. A nightmare sound! "Gag him!" Mowrer ordered implacably. Then those holding me started to move, and I saw the dark wall of the building drifting by.

Up steps, through a huge door, a vast space, shadowy, eerie with towering tanks and weird machines, half-seen. I closed my eyes to shut out the sight of my bearers, to shut out the unholy vision of those horrible faces; more horrible now for the flare of triumph, the little crawling lights of sadistic anticipation in their lidless eyes. A door opened. They lifted me over a threshold, and I heard the door shut again. Heard Nan scream, "Mr. Sutton. Oh God! They've caught you, too!" I forced myself to look, then.

I was in a long room, ablaze with the uncanny blue of spluttering mercury lamps. A line of iron pillars marched down the center of the loft, and there were three forms bound to the columns: Nan, her fear-distorted face staring white in the luxuriant frame of her Stygian hair; Lannon, his mustache still ludicrously pointed and immaculate against the fish-belly gray of his cheeks; and Thorndal! Lashed immovably to an iron post, helpless, his clothing was half-ripped from his great frame, there were angry red weals on his hairy torso, and blood dripped from a cut over one ear. But he was poised, defiant, his massive head was proudly erect and his rough-sculptured features were overlaid by a brooding thunder-cloud of wrath. Lightning flickered in his eyes as he saw me.

"Tie them up!" Mowrer's command crackled in the sudden silence that followed Nan's outburst.

Skinless, dreadful hands fumbled ropes around me, pulled them ungently tight, and I sagged, unable any longer to stand, supported against the metal stake by those ropes alone. A knot of gargoylesque figures about the next column to mine disintegrated, and I had my first view of the man who had taken me and had in his turn been nabbed. Johnson, foreman of the nitration

room, was the tall, high-domed individual who had crouched on the porch roof and whispered secretively to someone within the house!

7: Jury of the Damned!

THERE were perhaps a score of them in the long room, chattering among themselves like so many apes.

Now and then one would laugh, a cackling, lascivious laugh that sent new tremors of detestation through me. Mowrer was bent over a huge rectangular vat that spread along the farther wall of the loft, watching a great pipe gurgitate into it a flood of viscous black liquid. He was talking to someone whom I could not make out. Above him there hung from the beamed ceiling a smaller glass tank, and it was filled with an iridescent fluid that I knew to be Thorndal's secret reagent. From it a pipe dipped down and ended just over the larger tank, and the corrugated wheel of a valve was within easy hand reach.

My eyes clung to that wheel and my blood curdled, for I knew that when it was turned the contents of the tank above would pour into the black fluid—and the green gas of death would boil up to dissolve the flesh, the muscles and very bones, of any who might be in that room and unprotected! In an hour anyone immersed would be tracelessly dissolved!

My eyes sought Nan's, a wordless message passed between us. My pulse leaped, the blood hammered in my veins, and emotion surged within me—wonder that the miracle I read in her veiled glance could have occurred. Then a grinning, lipless skull passed between us and our peril was recalled to me full force. My brain raced. Was there any way in which I could kill her, swiftly, before the gas seared that young beauty?

"Enough," Mowrer spoke crisply. Someone grimaced with bared facial muscles and pulled a lever over. The stream of oil cut off with a sucking sound. I could just see the surface of the black pool, two feet below the level of the floor. It heaved like some foul prehistoric monster, and noisome colors rippled over it. Mowrer turned slowly, and the man with him. My throat contorted in a soundless shriek.

His body was shriveled, tiny; the skull, all that remained of his head, gigantic. God Almighty! I had seen him dead, hours before, clamped rigid to wires vibrant with lethal lightning, seen that deformed body alight with a blue aurora that was blasting every cell within it! And now Jimmy Haynes walked across the floor, his skeleton hand on Mowrer's arm, his sightless eyes deep pits wherein white marbles rolled!

Was the little old man, whom Thorndal had condemned, indeed the instrument of God's vengeance? Had he been infused with power to raise the

dead? Was this concourse of inhuman figures a gathering of the damned, raised from the grave to visit retribution upon their slayer? The solid walls rocked around me and the floor, heaved beneath my feet...

There was a desk on the dais near the entrance to this corner of Hades, and two chairs had been placed behind it. Those two went directly there, Mowrer guiding the other with infinite tenderness. They sat down. There was something appalling in their slow progress, an awful threat in their grim, still faces. To my tortured vision Haynes was Beelzebub himself, the ebony-skinned Mowrer his chief disciple.

In response to a motion of the secretary's hand the others ranged themselves to one side, intent, listening. Utter silence clotted in the room. The foul odor of rotting bodies was stench in my nostrils, and the mercury lamps added the last touch of horror with their ghastly light and the huge shadows they cast across the floor. It seemed to me that vast black wings beat overhead...

"Andrew Thorndal!" Mowrer's tones had lost their shrillness, the thinness that had spoken of age and pain. They had a husky quality, were hushed, though clear and penetrating, as if he were himself appalled by that which he was about to do. "Andrew Thorndal! That you may not hereafter complain you were unjustly condemned, a jury of those you have wronged will hear you. Have you anything to say?"

An instant Thorndal's nostrils flared, then he was speaking, calmly, steadily: "With what am I charged?"

"With exploiting for your private profit the people of a countryside. With condemning to torture and death men too dulled and stupid to withstand you."

"They were starving when I came, were clothed in rags. I gave them work, money with which to buy food and clothing."

The voice of the accuser was implacable. "You lured them into your power," he said. "You gave them suits that at first protected them, but when you had set up your fences of death and your cordons of armed guards so they could not escape, the suits failed. You cheapened them, to save a few paltry cents in the cost of the only defense they had against the hell-gas you devised."

"No!" The syllable blasted into the room. "No! The suits failed, but that was not my fault. They were the same. I swear to you they were the same. I do not know why they failed." I felt that he was not answering Mowrer then. He was answering something within himself, some question that had robbed him of sleep, that had clouded his eyes even when I brought the subject up in our first talk an eternity before.

Mowrer returned to the attack. "If that were so," he demanded, "why did you not shut the plant till you had determined the reason and remedied it?"

Thorndal looked at him unbelievingly. "Shut down! Why I could not do that. We could not meet the demand as it was. Tri-State Oil had their backs against the wall. Another month and they would have folded up. Neosite would have been in every car and airplane tank in America. Close and give them a chance to say the supply of Neosite was unreliable, could not be depended upon! That's what they wanted; that's why I had armed guards on the road, so they could not send their agents in to shut me down. They tried it, persistently. I had to go ahead. Had to!"

Good Lord! This general of industry, this master of men, was himself a slave, a Frankenstein to the monster of his own creation! In a flash I saw it. He had given himself to the service of Neosite, and Neosite had become a Juggernaut riding down and crushing out every atom of humanity in him! He would sacrifice himself to Neosite as he had sacrificed the poor, maddened creatures around us, without the least hesitation. Somewhere deep within me was born a tiny spark of pity for the man.

But not so with Mowrer and the others. The prosecutor broke the silence with, "That is your only excuse?"

"That is all." Thorndal's brown eyes had retreated again into lethargy. Something like contempt hovered about his lip corners. "I have nothing more to say."

Mowrer half-turned to the hulk in whom I had recognized Haynes. "Andrew Thorndal has condemned himself from his own mouth. Need I say more?"

The gigantic head moved slowly in negation. Then a whisper came from its mouth, an awful sibilance of sound that was like nothing save one's imagining of a voice from beyond the grave, a voice from the fleshless lips of a skeleton dead so long that even the worms had lost interest in it. Yet the words were clear: "You have heard charge and defense. What is your will?"

And that jury of the dying, those who still could talk among that jury of the damned, roared their answer: "Guilty!" Like the yapping of wild dogs it was, like a fiends' chorus from Hell.

Haynes nodded. "Andrew Thorndal," he whispered. "You will die as they died. It is my regret that you will die more quickly."

Mowrer stopped, spoke again: "Nancy Thorndal! You have danced while men died that you might clothe yourself in silks, have given yourself to pleasure while mothers' hearts were wrung with despair that you might drink fine wines..."

I shouted something, and Thorndal's voice thundered: "She knew nothing about it. Let her go, you devils!"

" 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children...' "

"Jury," said Haynes. "What is your will?"

"Guilty!"

God! Even they could have spared her. I ripped curses at them, but I might have been crying in a desert for all the attention anyone paid to me.

And the inexorable voice of the judge came back from the dead, husked the sentence, "You shall die in the gas."

"Stanley Sutton!" The farcical trial went on. "You were warned and persisted. You aided Andrew Thorndal and defended him from me and from his other victims. You shot down the messengers of vengeance."

"Go to hell," I snarled. "What's the use of my saying anything?"

"—Die in the gas."

I didn't care. If Nan were to go that way I was satisfied to go with her...

"Randall Johnson! You were foreman of the nitration room and sent men to their death without compunction. You sat at this desk in the only suit that functioned and watched them labor in the shadow of their doom."

The tall man turned to his accuser. "I helped you in your plot," he said. "When nobody could get through the fence I told the guard something was wrong in here and I must see Thorndal at once. They passed me through and I shut off the current that would have held you back."

So it was he who had done that! But that did not tell why he had been engaged in a covert confab with someone else on the bedroom floor. Nor could it have been he who planted the tank of gas in my room. I wished now that I had not awakened then. At least I should not have had to watch Nan die.

Mowrer was pondering Johnson's plea. He raised his head now. "No!" he said. "We used you, but that did not win for you absolution from your sins." There was a murmur of approbation from the macabre group of listeners. "You were in our power and you thought to bribe us with your offer of aid. Your guilt is too black to be washed white by one act of repentance, if repentance there was."

Thorndal was looking at the bald man with burning eyes. If he were free, I thought, he would tear him to pieces with his bare hands.

Again the ritual of reference to the jury, the chorused "Guilty," and Haynes' eerie voice pronouncing sentence: "You will die in the gas."

Johnson sagged against his lashings, and his eyes were the orbs of death. "No," he whimpered. "I can't face it." He surged up as far as his lashings would permit and screamed, "Oh, God! Don't let them do it!"

A lank creature whose face was a red blob yelled, "Shut up, yuh rat. Yuh held a gun on me when I wanted ter git out o' here."

Mowrer, ignoring Johnson's screams, peered near-sightedly past the four of us who had been condemned. "You, there," he said. "What is your name?"

"Wuh— William Lannon." The popinjay's jaw shook visibly as he answered.

The little man who had brought about this holocaust turned to Haynes. "I know nothing against this man," he said. "His presence here is pure accident, and he did not fire at us when we attacked the house. But he must die that God's work that we do may go unpunished by man's blundering law. We dare leave no witness."

"Gentlemen!" Lannon's voice rang out. "I won't say anything. I swear it by everything that is holy to me. I won't say anything if you let me go."

There was a momentary pause. Then Haynes projected toneless words into the room: "You swear silence as to all that has passed?"

"I swear by my dead mother's name, by my only hope of salvation." He was cringing, pleading. "No one knows that I came to Newville. No one will ever know if you will only let me out of here." He slavered at the mouth in his eagerness.

Someone called, "Let the poor fool go! He ain't done nothrn'."

Haynes considered a moment, then nodded. Mowrer pointed to one who was less burnt than the rest. "Release him," he ordered.

"No!" It was a squeal so shrill that for an instant I could not locate its source. "Stop! I'll be damned if he'll go free and leave me to suffer." Johnson was yammering those words, straining at his ropes, his bound hands clawing at his sides. "Listen to me! Listen."

"What is it?" Mowrer clipped.

"Johnson! Don't tell them!" Lannon screamed, wild-eyed. "For God's sake, don't."

"Silence!" Haynes husked. "Silence. We shall hear him."

That voice from the dead struck Lannon dumb. But his mouth remained open in a soundless scream, and the terror in his eyes was an awful thing to witness. Yes, even in that chamber of horrors there could be a greater horror: his naked soul revealed in those staring orbs. My scalp tightened as I guessed what Johnson had to tell.

That one was speaking, malevolence vibrant in his now steady tones: "His name ain't Lannon. It's Rand, Morton Rand, and he's a vice-president of Tri-State Oil."

An inarticulate roar from Thorndal blasted the man's next words, a thunder-sound of fury.

"Silence," came the command of the judge who had been dead and was now alive. "Silence!"

"He got me, no matter how," Johnson went on. "A hundred grand they paid me— to put Neosite on the fritz. A hundred grand. For that I smeared oil on the rubber safety suits, so that they'd be porous an' let the gas through. I didn't put it on my own..."

"You lie, damn you. You lie!"

Lannon's shriek set off a cataclysmic tumult of noise. Thorndal's boom, "You dogs! You cowardly dogs!" Johnson: "It's the truth. I can prove it." Mowrer mouthing: "God's vengeance. God's wrath upon him." And the agonizing screams of the victims of the gas: "Kill! Kill! KILL!!!"

Only I was silent, horror-stricken at the lengths to which greed could go— I, and Nan. I saw that she had fainted, her head lolling, her silk-clad body erect only by virtue of the lashings that held it to the steel column next to mine.

They surged down the long room toward Lannon, those men whose tortures of the damned had been his procuring— a wave of maddened fiends. I saw one, faster moving than the rest, clutch a fleshless hand in the man's blond hair, and closed my eyes lest I see him ripped limb from limb. Someone scattered by me, and I heard Mowrer's voice: "Stop! Stop men! That death's too good for him! I claim him for the vengeance appointed by God!"

There was a scream, the spat of blows, and the sounds died away. When I looked again they were going back to their places, and Lannon— or Rand— was still bound to his post, still alive. Alive, but his face was a raw, bleeding mass, one side of his mustache had been literally torn out by its roots, his torso was bare and scored with deep, gory furrows.

The blind Haynes had not moved from his seat. He waited till they were quiet again, and then rasped out: "Go on!"

Johnson's features were twisted now with bitterness. He looked odd with that towering, hairless head of his, his long neck with the Adam's apple moving up and down as he talked. "I thought the first touch of the gas would scare the men out, or make the boss quit," he was saying. "But things went right on, an' I had to obey orders and keep on making Neosite. Last night I caught sight o' Rand drivin' up to the house, an' knew he'd come to see what was what. Afterwards he told me he'd gone to the beach where Miss Nan was and kidded her into bringing him to Newville."

"Afterwards! Then you talked to him?"

"Sure. Three times. The first was through the fence, right after the boss got home. Rand told me Thorndal had brung a new super that looked smart, wanted me to fetch him a tank o' gas so's he could scare Sutton off..."

Scare me off? Murder me! Rage was cold within me as I realized the viciousness of the man...

"...I brung it to him the second time, when the current was cut off so's they could take Jim Haynes' corpse off the wire, an' the third was when you made me go. I wanted to tip Rand off, to tell him not to fight you an' he'd be all right." Johnson had been pouring out his amazing confession in a rush of hurried words, but suddenly his voice broke into a high, venomous shrillness. "I risked my neck for the devil, but I'll be damned if I'll let him get scot-free while I die for what I've done. He's the cause of it all. He— "

"Enough! We've heard enough." Mowrer's voice was surcharged with pent fury; it was the voice of doom. "He shall not escape. 'Vengeance is mine! saith the Lord.' "

And in a dread antiphony Haynes husked the sentence, "He shall die in the gas."

If ever a man deserved death Morton Rand did. But we others... Nan...

"Men!" I twisted to the sudden bellow from Thorndal. "Men! Listen to me!" His eyes were blazing, his face alight with inspiration. "Listen!"

There was a rustle. Someone shrilled, "No! We've heard enough from you!" But Thorndal went on, roaring down all opposition: "Listen! The suits are good! You know it now— I knew it all the time. The suits are good and we can make Neosite safely. We can make Neosite and sweep Tri-State off the map. I'll raise your wages, I'll treble production. I'll give you pensions— build schools— Newville will be the wonder, industrial city of the world!"

A hissing started, venomous. High-pitched cries from blackened lips: "No!— Stop talking.— We've had enough!— Murderer!— Torturer!— The gas— Turn on the gas!"

Thorndal roared on, unhearing, uncomprehending. He was mad with renewed hope, not for his safety, not for his daughter's, but for his Neosite...

"Hell! I don't want to make any money out of this. I'll give all the profits to the workers, run the thing for nothing! Just let me go on making it. You can't kill it! You can't kill Neosite, the best damn fuel that was ever invented, the fuel of the future. It will revolutionize transportation if you give it a chance. Listen to me..."

"Silence, Thorndal." The impact of Haynes' awful voice got through him. "Silence!"

Thorndal stopped, and for the first time there was consternation in his face, realization of defeat. Not make Neosite! He just couldn't understand it.

The whisper of doom from the dead man's lips came again. "No, Andrew Thorndal," he said. "Though it was not your fault that the suits failed, yet when they did fail you drove on despite that failure, despite the black death it brought on those over whom you cracked the whip of your will, the dumb,

helpless creatures you enslaved. For this you merit the death you gave them, you and yours, you and all your works. The sentence of the court stands."

And Mowrer's harsh accents put a period to hope: " 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord Jehovah. Vengeance is mine!' "

8: The Death-Wheel Turns

I WAS watching Nan with anxious eyes, praying that she would not revive till the gas had done its foul work. The room was clear now of that awful company. We five were alone, bound to the steel columns that were to be our stakes of martyrdom, alone save for one ghastly figure. Haynes stood with his skeleton hand on the fateful valve-wheel, Haynes who was dead already and so was not afraid to die again. He stood there, the muscles that criss-crossed his skinned head taut with some inner tension, his grotesque skull canted as though he were listening through the tiny orifices where ears had once been. What sound was he listening for, what awful sound heralding our doom?

Somehow I could not believe that this was the end. There was no hope, and yet my brain still struggled for some way out. And...inspiration flashed on me! Perhaps— now that he was alone...

"Haynes!" I cried. "I'm Sutton, Stan Sutton, from Tech. Your classmate. You can't kill me, Jim Haynes!"

The figure there at the wheel started, turned toward me his black sockets wherein sightless white orbs rolled. "Who calls Jim Haynes?" he asked.

"Stanley Sutton! We've studied together. Remember Prof. Carlon and the campus songs? Remember the night we licked Yale? Remember commencement and the two cum laudes, you and I?" Was I getting it across? Tech has a strong hold on her grads; was it strong enough to stop him? "You wouldn't blast Stan Sutton with the green gas, Jim."

His rotted teeth moved in signal that he was about to speak, and I stopped, held my breath. His voice came, that hushed, spectral voice of his that had pronounced sentence of death in the court of the damned.

"Jim Haynes is dead," it said...Then the awful thing was true..."Thorndal killed my brother Jim and I watched him die." I rocked back against the pillar. Once, once only, I had heard Haynes speak of a twin brother, Sam. "Now Thorndal dies, and his child, and his minions who have done his will."

Haynes— Sam Haynes— turned, and twisted the valve-wheel! The iridescent fluid gushed from the pipe-mouth in a six-inch stream, struck the black pool and spattered. Some of it reached me, wet my clothing and the rope

that was wound around me. A drop hit my hand, stung. It was an organic acid, I recalled, caustic almost as the green gas it produced.

"I'm coming," Haynes squalled. "I'm coming, Jim," and plunged into the black pool, disappeared beneath its surface! He shrieked as the acid burned him, and his struggles mixed the reagent with the processed oil it would change to Neosite. As by magic the fluid cleared, turned pink, then a milky-white. I stared at the faint green mist that formed on its surface, that spread rapidly, that boiled up in manifold tiny bubbles from the depths below. The green gas was rising in a lifting tide of death.

God! It rose so slowly, so deathly slow. It would be hours, hours before it reached the level of our heads. I had shuddered at the thought of swift, searing extinction by that burning mist, but I had not envisioned the dragged out torture that was in store for us. Now the awfulness of our fate burst upon me full force. Tied, helpless to move, the green gas would creep up on our tormented frames, inch by slow inch, corroding our flesh, searing deep to bone as it rose, while still we lived, while still we were conscious of every agony, every torture of that slow advance!

The tendrils spread, coalesced, formed a thin pool on the stone floor, a pool that rolled nearer, gradually nearer with its terrible threat. I pulled my eyes away from it, sought Nan again. She was awake! She was staring at the green gas and her eyes were pits of terror.

"Nan," I called. "Nan!" And, forgetting they were bound, I tried to raise my arms to her.

Tried to! Almighty God! They came up! The rope snapped, and my arms lifted!

I gazed at my hands unbelievingly, saw white marks of acid burns on them. The reagent that had splashed on me— the iridescent acid...I glanced at the frayed rope-ends, moist and blackened... The acid that had spattered on them had eaten through the thongs binding me— had freed me!

"Nan," I gibbered, laughing hysterically. "Nan, it's all right. I'm loose! Heads up, Nan!" I worked frantically at my lashings and got them off, leaped to her and liberated her. There was a long shelf under the windows, a shelf on which bottles were arrayed. I lifted her to that. "Stay there till I get the others untied," I said. She should be safe there, safe for thirty minutes at least, so slowly was the gas coming.

Thorndal was exultant as I plucked at his ropes. "Good work, Sutton," he said. "Good work! We'll get out of here and start all over again. We'll build another Neosite factory somewhere else and you shall be my partner. You'll run the plant and I'll attend to distribution."

My hands dropped away from the knots. "Nothing doing, Thorndal. Swear to me there will be no more Neosite or I'll leave you here."

"No more Neosite! Man! You're crazy!"

"I will be crazy if I let you start making that hell's brew again."

"Hurry, Stan. Oh, hurry!" Nan called to me from her perch. "Look, the gas is near you. It will burn you and dad!"

I twisted. There it was, inches away from my feet, the burned feet whose pain I had forgotten in the blazing excitement of all that had happened. It was spreading all through the long room, but there was time yet. I turned back to Thorndal. "Well, what do you say?"

"No! I'll never promise that. If I did there would be no reason for me to continue living." He was honest, at least. He could have given me the promise I demanded, and broken it later.

"Then you'll stay here."

I turned away. And Nan screamed, "Stanley! Stanley Sutton! What are you doing? You're not going to leave my father. You're not!" She started to scramble down from her refuge.

"Get back there! Get back, I say!"

"Not unless you untie dad. If you don't, I shall."

I stared at her determined little face, so like Thorndal's now, and weakened. "All right, Nan," I answered. "Get back." I don't know whether I would have gone through with my bluff, but I had been determined to extort the promise from him. The first touch of the gas would have— But she had settled that. It took me seconds to complete the job.

"Fine," Thorndal grunted, stretching. "Get Nan away. I'll take care of the others."

"All right," I snapped. I was beginning to fear someone would come back to see why Haynes had not emerged, for surely they could not have known of his contemplated suicide. "We're going out the window..." I rattled my plan, then leaped for the shelving, thrust up the window. It screeched in its disused grooves.

It was broad daylight now. I saw the round black hole from which I had removed the cover...My eyes lifted, and far beyond the woods I saw figures turning to the sound of the window's opening. They started to run back, but one remained behind. I saw a rifle lift to his shoulder, saw the flash of its firing. "Come on, Nan," I gasped. "Quick."

She clung to me, frightened. "We can't get away, Stan," she said. "They'll catch us."

"Come on!" I got an arm around her, thrilling even in that instant to the warm softness of her body, and jumped. It was only a step to the opening to

the oil pipe, but a bullet whistled uncomfortably close to my head as I took it, half-dragging Nan with me. Then I was kneeling, peering down into the pit. It looked dry, clean. "Down here, Nan," I said. "It's our only chance."

She hung back. "Dad. He isn't..."

"He's freeing the others. He'll be right along. Hurry!" Another bullet spat dust a foot from us. "Slide in and I'll lift you down. Quick!"

She was sitting on the well-curb, her feet within. I took her hands, swung her down. Her face lifted to me, a pale oval in the dimness of the shaft. "I can't reach bottom with my feet," she told me.

"I'll drop you. It's only a foot or two." I let go, and heard her thud to the bottom. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. It's a tunnel, Stan. I can stand almost straight in it."

"I know." I looked up. The running men were nearer, and the one with the rifle was aiming more carefully.

"Is dad coming?"

I glanced back. Thorndal was heaving through the window and something metallic gleamed in his hand. I slid into the bore, hung from its rim by my hands. "Look out, Nan!" I cried, and let go.

The hole was deeper than I thought, ten feet at least, its sides smooth. The shock of my landing sent pain shooting up my legs. The light-disc above darkened and I ducked back into the conduit. Distant shouts came to me, and Thorndal dropped down the well.

"I have a gun, Sutton," he said. "It was in the lab and I knew we'd need it. Cartridges, too, this time. We can stand them off indefinitely here."

"Johnson! Lannon! Are they coming?"

"Coming?" he snarled. "Hell! That double-crosser and the hound who bought him? They won't bother us any more. They're stewing in the tank."

My mouth opened, closed. I couldn't say anything. They deserved it, but only Thorndal could have done that. My mind flashed back to the scene in the lobby when Mowrer had been dragged off to the nitration room at his command. He hadn't changed. All he had endured was powerless to change him!

Sunlight streamed down the shaft, and dust motes danced in it. Then a shadow fell blackly down.

"Keep back," Thorndal shouted. "Keep back or I'll shoot!" He backed away from the bottom of the well, crouching, the bulldog revolver snouting...

There was a muffled clamor above, the shrill voices of the gas-blasted men whose doom we had escaped. The shadow flickered away, returned. And suddenly a twisted shape thudded down!

The thunder of Thorndal's gun deafened me. Nan screamed, and her father's full-chested bellow echoed in the pipe behind: "One down! Any more coming?" There was a note of triumph in his tones, the exultant lift of a fighting man at the smell of battle. I moved back to where Nan knelt, got an arm around her. The man Thorndal had shot was a crumpled heap in the light. He rolled his flayed face toward us, the ligaments quivering. His eyes glazed, and he didn't move again. We waited, but nothing happened.

"They're licked, Sutton," Thorndal growled. "They don't dare come down. We've got them licked!"

I could distinguish Mowrer's high-pitched voice, crisp with command, and doubted Thorndal's statement. They couldn't come down to pursue us, but he would find a way to get at us. He was indomitable, implacable. He would not allow us to escape his revenge so easily. Thus my thoughts, but to Nan I whispered, "We've won, darling. We've won! They can't touch us now." The term of endearment came naturally; I had not forgotten the message of her eyes.

"That horrible face!" She shuddered. "I can't stand it. Stan, it's driving me mad."

"Here. Hide your eyes against my shoulder."

9: Nightmare Flight

MINUTES dragged. The huge pipe in which we had found refuge stretched back behind us into blackness, its steel walls rusty. I knew that it stretched so for miles, till it met the pipeline from the Texas oilfields.

"Sutton," Thorndal called, without turning his head. "About two miles back this pipe comes to the surface and lies along the top of the swamps. There's another manhole there, for cleaning purposes. You and Nan make for it, and get help from Roton. I'll hold the fort here."

"That will take hours. You can't keep vigilant forever. They'll catch you napping and grab you again; come after us. I'll stay here with you, and Nan will go for help."

She stirred in my arms, pulled away. "No!" she said. "No! I couldn't go through all that long dark alone. And besides, I won't leave dad and— and you, Stan."

"Good God, girl!" I burst out. "You must. It's the only way, the only way we'll ever get out of here."

"You go, dear." Ineffably sweet, that word on her lips. "You go. I'll watch here with dad. I can shoot."

"Ridiculous! I—"

There were ominous clinkings at the surface. "Sutton!" Thorndal exclaimed. "They're sticking a big pipe down the manhole, one of the conveyor tubes from the processing room. What do you think they're up to?"

My scalp prickled. "It's some devilment...Mowrer isn't beaten yet!"

"By God! He'll be beaten before I'm through with him! Beaten to a pulp!" Thorndal banged his free hand against the steel side of the pipe in an ecstasy of defiance. "Beaten to a pulp."

"Shhh!" Nan hushed him. "What's that sound?" We fell silent, listening intently. I heard a dull throb, throb; thought it was the sound of blood in my ears. Then I was certain it was not.

"Sounds like a pump," I whispered. "But it can't be! What would they be doing with a pump?"

"I'm frightened," the girl breathed in my ear. "Stan, I'm— "

"Great Jupiter!...Look!"

There was a green glow, suddenly, in the aperture. We watched Thorndal's bulking frame silhouetted against it. He leaped back, cursing. I smelled an unmistakable odor. A trickle of the emerald vapor crept lazily into the thin cylinder of sunlight that still came down from the world above.

"Run!" I shouted, choking. "Run!" And even as we turned to flee the first great gush of the death-gas billowed forth to follow us! Mowrer had found a way indeed! Bullets were of no avail against the weapon he had devised to confound us!

We ran into the pitch blackness of that long tube, and the green glow of horror rolled after us, aided by the down-pitch of the tube, spurred by the throb, throb of the pump, the echoing thud of which followed us mercilessly.

I can't remember much of that nightmare flight, except that the steel was sharply curved, and its roof so close down that I was half-stooped over as I ran, that the soles of my feet were torn once more by rust and my scalp bruised again and again by some inequality overhead. Nan was somewhere in front, I next, then Thorndal— cursing, cursing in a rumbling monotone as he ran. His voice thundered as it echoed through that long tube, the pump throbbed, the green gas followed us with its deadly luminance. We stumbled onward through an infinity of lightless constricted space, an eternity of time.

How long, I thought, how long can we last? We may go on and on, but finally we must drop, and the gas will roll over us, over Nan, and Thorndal and me, and blacken our bodies as had been intended from the first.

It seemed to me I could hear Mowrer intoning his awful refrain: " 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' "

Under my tortured feet the pipe curved, slanted upward. The ascent slowed us, but it slowed the gas still more. We drew ahead of the threatening

glow, and I began to hope that perhaps we should beat it. If only we were far enough ahead when we reached the manhole of which Thorndal had spoken, that we might have time to get it open before the misty death caught us!

"Faster," I gasped. "Faster, Nan!" I could barely make out the pale glimmer of her, ahead.

And suddenly she was gone! Her shrill scream echoed back to me, but I could not see her. "Stop, Stan," she cried. "Oh, stop!"

I skidded to a halt. "Nan! What's happened? Where are you?"

"Here!" Her voice came from my feet, from below me! "Here. There's a deep hole here; I slid into it. The other side's vertical. I can't get out."

"A sump hole." Thorndal was right behind me. I could feel his hot breath on my neck. "A depression to clear the oil of sediment."

I threw a fearful look over my shoulder. The gas was distant, but it rolled toward us implacably. "Watch out, Nan," I said. "I'm coming down for you."

"No, Stan. It's not far across. You and dad can jump over. Don't come down here."

I took a cautious step, another. The conduit floor flattened out, slanted steeply downward. I pushed my feet over the edge, skidded, bumped into Nan's soft body. I must have fallen ten feet, at least.

"Oh, Stan! You did come! Now you can't get out, either. Feel here..." She seized my hands, placed them against the opposite wall of the sump-hole. It was straight up and down, slick.

"All right," I grunted. "I'll lift you out."

"And you?"

"Don't worry about me. I can climb like a fly. I'll follow you."

Of course, I lied. I could get her up, but I would have to stay behind. The gas would reach here in moments, would pour over the lip of the depression and swallow me.

"I'll be all right," I assured her. "Hurry! Up on my shoulders, then grab the top and pull yourself up. Quick!" I must not give her time to think, to argue! "Up with you!" I got hands around her waist, swung her to my shoulders. She scrambled erect, I felt her heels digging into me. Then they were gone.

"I'm up, Stan. Come on."

"Go ahead, Nan; I'll be with you in a minute. Go ahead, Thorndal, jump across. It's only three feet."

"Stan! You can't get out. Oh, my dear!"

"Run, Nan, run. If you love me, run."

She was safe...And Thorndal could save himself. It was an easy leap.

"Watch it, Sutton," Thorndal said. Good Lord! What was he doing? Why didn't he jump? The question had scarcely framed itself in my mind when he was at my side. "Up with you, boy."

"Mr. Thorndal, you—"

"Shut up. She's my daughter and you saved her life. It should have been I...It will be. Up with you— quick!"

No time for futile argument. Perhaps it was just that he should be the one to go. Rand and Johnson had paid the penalty of their crimes; why should Thorndal escape? Protesting nevertheless, I let him hoist me to his shoulders, lifted myself erect and pulled myself out of the death-trap!

I glanced back. The awful glare of the gas was close— terribly close. In seconds now it would pour down into the hole where Thorndal was.

"Nan's away," I told him. "She's safe! Maybe I can find something to help you out, maybe I can save you yet!"

"Good-bye, boy. Take good care of her. Good-bye!"

I twisted to start off.

"Stan!" It was Nan, only yards ahead. "Stan! There's something queer here. Hurry!"

I was at her side. The roof of the pipe lifted here; I could stand up straight. I felt overhead— felt a flat plate. My pulse hammered.

"It's the manhole, Nan!" I cried. "The manhole in the swamp. We're saved! We can get out!"

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

I got the flats of both hands against the cover, heaved. Superhuman strength must have flowed into me then; the heavy disc lifted at once, slid sidewise. Blessed sunlight struck down!

"Up with you, Nan— up!"

I grabbed her, literally threw her out of that damned pipe. And just as I did so a scream shrilled to me, a strong man's scream. I looked back. The gas had reached the pit where Thorndal was, was folding over its edge in a lazy, slow settling of doom.

I got my hands on the manhole rim, chinned, scrambled out. The oozy, scummed surface of the swamp was Eden to my eyes. Nan had slid down the tube's surface, was ankle-deep in mud.

"Father!" Her eyes widened in sudden realization. "Where's father?"

How could I tell her? I pretended breathlessness, pretended I could not speak. The great pipe was covered with wooden slats here— bound to it by wires that were rusted by the moisture of the morass. One was right at hand.

Perhaps— my brain was working lightning fast— perhaps I could get the wire off. I jerked at it— it snapped. And I was down again in the pipe, the wire coiling after me.

The sump-hole was half-filled with green vapor when I reached it. But Thorndal— a shrieking, fear-gibbering wretch— was still alive. The wire held, I got him out, just as the gas filled the pit and eddied over its edge.

I had to guide him to the manhole, to lift his hands to the rim. I thought it was because he was numbed with fear. But when he was in the light again I saw that the eyes in his blackened face were burned white. He was blind!

SOAP and hot water saved his skin. But he is a sightless, doddering old man in our home now, Nan's and mine. Our children love their grandfather, he plays with them so gently, tells such nice stories in this thin, quavering voice.

_____

17: Too American

Don Marquis

1878-1937

In: *The Revolt of the Oyster*, 1922

"IS IT a real English cottage?" we asked the agent suspiciously, "or is it one that has been hastily aged to rent to Americans?"

It was the real thing: he vouched for it. It was right in the middle of England. The children could walk for miles in any direction without falling off the edge of England and getting wet.

"See here!" I said. "How many blocks from Scotland is it?"

"Blocks from Scotland?" He didn't understand.

"Yes," I said, "blocks from Scotland." I explained. My wife and I had been trying to get a real English accent. That was one of the things we had come to England for. We wanted to take it back with us and use it in Brooklyn, and we didn't want to get too near Scotland and get any Scottish dialect mixed up with it. It seemed that the cottage was quite a piece from Scotland. There was a castle not far away— the fifteenth castle on the right side as you go into England. When there wasn't any wind you didn't get a raw sea breeze or hear the ocean vessels whistle.

"Is it overgrown with ivy," asked Marian, my wife.

Yes, it was ivy-covered. You could scarcely see it for ivy— ivy that was pulling the wall down, ivy as deep-rooted as the hereditary idea.

"Are the drains bad?" I asked.

They were. There would be no trouble on that score. What plumbing there was, was leaky. The roof leaked.

There was neither gas nor electricity, nor hot and cold water, nor anything else.

"I suppose the place is rather damp?" I said to the agent. "Is it chilly most of the time? Are the flues defective? Are the floors uneven? Is the place thoroughly uncomfortable and unsanitary and unhabitable in every particular?"

Yes, it had all these advantages. I was about to sign the lease when my wife plucked me by the sleeve in her impulsive American way. "Is there a bathroom?" she asked.

"My dear Mrs. Minever," said the agent with dignity, "there is not. I can assure you that there are no conveniences of any kind. It is a real English cottage."

I took the place. It was evening of the third day after we took possession that I discovered that we had been taken in. All the other Americans in that part of England were sitting out in front of their cottages trying to look as if

they were accustomed to them, and we— my wife and Uncle Bainbridge and I— were sitting in front of ours trying to act as English as we knew how, when a voice hailed me.

"You are Americans, aren't you, sir?" said the voice.

The voice was anyhow; so we shamefacedly confessed.

"I thought you looked like it," said the voice, and its owner came wavering toward us through the twilight.

"What makes you think we look like it?" I said, a trifle annoyed; for it had been my delusion that we had got ourselves to looking quite English—English enough, at least, so that no one could tell us in the faint light.

"Our clothes don't fit us, do they?" asked my wife nervously.

"They can't fit us," said I; "they were made in London."

I spoke rather sharply, I suppose. And as I was speaking, a most astonishing thing happened— the person I had been speaking to suddenly disappeared. He was, and then he was not! I sprang up, and I could tell from my wife's exclamation that she was startled, too. As for Uncle Bainbridge, he seldom gives way to emotion not directly connected with his meals or his money.

"Here, you!" I called out loudly, looking about me.

The figure came waveringly into view again.

"Where did you go to?" I demanded. "What do you mean by acting like that? Who are you, anyhow?"

"Please, sir," said the wavery person, "don't speak so crosslike. It always makes me vanish. I can't help it, sir."

He continued timidly:

"I heard a new American family had moved here and I dropped by to ask you, sir, do you need a ghost?"

"A ghost! Are you—"

"Yes, sir," with a deprecating smile. "Only an American ghost; but one who would appreciate a situation all the more, sir, for that reason. I don't mind telling you that there's a feeling against us American ghosts here in England, and I've been out of a place for some time. Maybe you have noticed a similar feeling toward Americans? I'm sure, sir, you must have noticed a discrimination, and—"

"Don't say 'sir' all the time," I told him.

"Beg pardon, sir," he rejoined: "but it's a habit. I've tried very hard to fit myself to English ways and it's got to be second nature, sir. My voice I can't change; but my class— I was a barber in America, sir— my class I have learned. And," he repeated rather vacantly, "I just dropped by to see if you wanted a ghost. Being fellow Americans, you know, I thought—" His voice trailed off into

humble silence, and he stood twisting a shadowy hat round and round in his fingers.

"See here!" I said. "Should we have a ghost?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but how much rent do you pay?" I told him.

He answered politely but with decision, "Then, sir, in all fairness, you are entitled to a ghost with the place. It gives a certain tone, sir."

"Why weren't we given one, then?" I asked

"Well—" he said, and paused. If a ghost can blush with embarrassment, he blushed. "You see," he went on, making it as easy for me as he could, "English ghosts mostly object to haunting Americans, just as American ghosts find it difficult to get places in English houses and cottages. You see, sir, we are—"

He halted lamely, and then finished, "We're so *American* somehow, sir."

"But we've been cheated!" I said.

"Yes, sir," said the American ghost, "regularly *had*" He said it in quite an English manner, and I complimented him on his achievement. He smiled with a child's delight.

"Would I do?" he urged again, with a kind of timid insistence.

My sympathies were with him. "You don't mind children?" I said. "We have two."

"No," he replied; "leastways, if they aren't very rough, I am not much frightened of them."

"I guess," I began, "that—" I was about to say that he would do, when my wife interrupted me.

"We do not want a ghost at all," she said firmly.

"But, my dear—"

She raised her eyebrows at me, and I was silent. After looking from one to the other of us wistfully for a moment, the applicant turned and drifted away, vanishing dejectedly when he reached the gate.

"You heard what he said, Henry?" said my wife as he disappeared. "It is lucky that you have me by you! Do you want to saddle yourself with an American ghost? For my part, I will have an English ghost or none!"

I realized that Marian was right; but I felt sorry for the ghost.

"What did— the fellow— want?" roared Uncle Bain-bridge, who is deaf, and brings out his words two or three at a time.

"Wanted to know—if we wanted—a ghost!" I roared in reply.

"Goat? Goat? Huh-huh!" shouted Uncle Bainbridge. "No, sir! Get 'em a pony— and a cart— little cart! That's the best— thing—for the kids!"

Uncle Bainbridge is, in fact, so deaf that he is never bothered by the noises he makes when he eats. As a rule when you speak to him he first says, "How?" Then he produces a kind of telephone arrangement. He plugs one end into his

ear, and shoves a black rubber disk at you. You talk against the disk, and when he disagrees with you he pulls the plug out of his ear to stop your foolish chatter, and snorts contemptuously. Once my wife remarked to me that Uncle Bainbridge's hearing might be better if he would only cut those bunches of long gray hair out of his ears. They annoy every one except Uncle Bainbridge a great deal. But the plug was in, after all, and he heard her, and asked one of the children in a terrible voice to fetch him the tin box he keeps his will in.

Uncle Bainbridge is *my* uncle. My wife reminds me of that every now and then. And he is rather hard to live with. But Marian, in spite of his little idiosyncrasies, has always been generous enough to wish to protect him from designing females only too ready to marry him for his money. So she encourages him to make his home with us. If he married at all, she preferred that he should marry her cousin, Miss Sophia Calderwod. That was also Miss Sophia's preference.

We did get a ghost, however, and a real English ghost. The discovery was mine. I was sitting in the room we called the library one night, alone with my pipe, when I heard a couple of raps in, on, about, or behind a large bookcase that stood diagonally across one corner. It was several days after we had refused the American applicant, and I had been thinking of him more or less, and wondering what sort of existence he led. One half the world doesn't know how the other half lives. I suppose my reflections had disposed my mind to psychic receptivity; for when I heard raps I said at once:

"Are there any good spirits in the room?" It is a formula I remembered from the days when I had been greatly interested in psychic research.

Rap! rap! came the answer from behind the bookcase.

I made a tour of the room, and satisfied myself that it was not a flapping curtain, or anything like that.

"Do you have a message for me?" I asked.

The answer was in the affirmative.

"What is it?"

There was a confused and rapid jumble of raps. I repeated the question with the same result.

"Can you materialize?"

The ghost rapped no.

Then it occurred to me that probably this was a ghost of the sort that can communicate with the visible world only through replying to such questions as can be answered by yes or no. There are a great many of these ghosts. Indeed, my experience in psychic research has led me to the conclusion that they are in the majority.

"Were you sent down by the agent to take this place?" I asked.

"No!" It is impossible to convey in print the suggestion of hauteur and offended dignity and righteous anger that the ghost managed to get into that single rap. I have never felt more rebuked in my life; I have never been made to feel more American.

"Sir or madam," I said, letting the regret I felt be apparent in my voice, "I beg your pardon. If you please, I should like to know whose ghost you are. I will repeat the alphabet. You may rap when you wish me to stop at a letter. In that way you can spell out your information. Is that satisfactory?"

It was.

"Who are you?"

Slowly, and with the assured raps of one whose social position is defined, fixed, and secure in whatever state of existence she may chance to find herself, the ghost spelled out, "Lady Agatha Pelham."

I hope I am not snobbish. Indeed, I think I have proved over and over again that I am not, by frankly confessing that I am an American. But at the same time I could not repress a little exclamation of pleasure at the fact that we were haunted by the ghost of a member of the English aristocracy. You may say what you will, but there is a certain something— a manner— an air— I scarcely know how to describe it, but it is there; it exists. In England, one meets it so often— I hope you take me.

My gratification must have revealed itself in my manner. Lady Agatha rapped out, if anything with more haughtiness than she had previously employed— yes, even with a touch of defiance:

"I was at one time a governess."

I gradually learned that while her own family was as good as the Pelham family, Lady Agatha's parents had been in very reduced circumstances, and she had had to become a governess. When Sir Arthur Pelham had married her, his people acted very nasty. He hadn't any money, and they had wanted him to marry some. He got to treating her very badly before he died. And during his lifetime, and after it, Lady Agatha had had a very sad life indeed. Still, you know, she was an aristocrat. She made one feel that as she told her story bit by bit. For all this came very gradually, as the result of many conversations, and not at once. We speedily agreed upon a code, very similar to the Morse telegraphic code, and we still further abbreviated this, until our conversations, after a couple of weeks, got to be as rapid as that of a couple of telegraph operators chatting over the wires. I intimated that it must be rather rough on her to be haunting Americans, and she said that she had once lived in our cottage and liked it.

In spite of her aristocracy, I don't suppose there ever was a more domestic sort of ghost than Lady Agatha. We all got quite fond of her, and I think she did

of us, too, in spite of our being American. Even the children got into the habit of taking their little troubles and perplexities to her. And Marian used to say that with Lady Agatha in the house, when Uncle Bainbridge and I happened to be away, she felt so *safe* somehow.

I imagine the fact that she had once been a governess would have made it rather difficult for Lady Agatha in the house of an English family of rank. On the other hand, her inherent aristocratic feeling made it quite impossible for her to haunt any one belonging to the middle or lower classes. She could haunt us, as Americans, and not feel that the social question mattered so much, in spite of what the American ghost had hinted. We Americans are so unclassified that the English often take chances with individuals, quite regardless of what each individual's class would naturally be if he had a class. Even while they do this they make us feel very often that we are hopelessly American; but they do it, and I, for one, am grateful. Lady Agatha sympathized with our desire to become as English as possible, she could quite understand that. I find that many Englishmen approve the effort, although remaining confident that it will end in failure.

Lady Agatha helped us a great deal. We used to have lessons in the evenings in the library. For instance, the children would stand at attention in front of the bookcase, and repeat a bit of typical English slang, trying to do it in an absolutely English way. They would do it over and over and over, until finally Lady Agatha would give a rap of approval. Or I would pretend that I was an Englishman in a railway carriage, and that an American had just entered and I was afraid he would speak to me. I got rather good at this, and made two or three trips to London to try it out. I found that Americans were imposed on, and actually in one instance I made one Englishman think that I was an Englishman who thought he was an American. He was a nobody, however, and didn't really count. And then, I am afraid, I spoiled it all. We Americans so often spoil it all! I enjoyed it so that I told him. He looked startled and said, "But how American!" He was the only Englishman I ever fooled.

But Lady Agatha's night classes were of great benefit to us. We used to practise how to behave toward English servants at country houses, and how to act when presented at court, and dozens of things like that: not that we had been asked to a country house, or expected to be presented at court soon. Marian and I had agreed that the greater part of this information would be quite useless while Uncle Bainbridge was still spared to us. Even in Brooklyn Uncle Bainbridge had been something of a problem at times. But we thought it just as well to prepare ourselves for the sad certainty that Uncle Bainbridge would pass into a better world before many years.

Uncle Bainbridge, who is very wealthy indeed, affects more informality than the usual self-made man. He used to attend our evening classes with a contemptuous expression upon his face, and snort at intervals. Once he even called me "Puppy!" Then he thrust his telephone arrangement before my face and insisted that I tell him whether I was sane or not.

"Puppy!" he bellowed. "Quit apin' the English! I get along with 'em myself— without any nonsense! Treat 'em white! Always treat me white! No foolishness! Puppy!"

My wife and I soon discovered that Lady Agatha and Uncle Bainbridge were on the most friendly terms. He would sit for hours in the library, with his telephone receiver held patiently near the bookcase, shouting questions and smiling and nodding over the answers. Marian and I were afraid that Uncle Bainbridge, by his lack of polish, might offend Lady Agatha. And at first it was her custom to hover about anxiously while they were talking to each other. But Uncle Bainbridge discovered this, and resented it to such an extent that she had to be cautious indeed.

His talks with Lady Agatha became longer and longer, and more and more frequent, until finally he received more of her attention than all the rest of us put together. Indeed, we need not have worried about Uncle Bainbridge's offending Lady Agatha: the friendship grew closer and closer. We were certain finally that it was taking on a strong tinge of sentimentality. One day my wife stopped me just outside the library door and said in a whisper, indicating the general direction of Lady Agatha's bookcase with a wave of her hand:

"Henry, those two old things in there are calling each other Hiram and Agatha!"

I listened, and it was so. A week later I heard Uncle Bainbridge seated by the bookcase, bellowing out a sentimental song. He was having a great deal of difficulty with it, and in order that he might hear himself he was singing with the black disk arrangement held directly in front of his own mouth.

I cannot say that Uncle Bainbridge became etherealized by the state of his feelings toward Lady Agatha, whatever the exact state of his feeling may have been. But he did change a little, and the change was for the better. He cut out the bunches of gray hair from his ears, and he began to take care of his fingernails. Lady Agatha was having a good influence upon him.

One day, as he and I were standing by the front gate, he suddenly connected himself for speech and roared at me, with a jerk of his thumb toward the house.

"Fine woman!"

"Who?" I shouted back.

"Aggie."

"Why, yes. I suppose she— was."

"No nonsense!" he yelled. "Husband was a brute! Marry her myself! In a minute— if possible. Ain't possible! Shame! Bet she could make— good dumplings— apple dumplings! Huh!"

Uncle Bainbridge is very fond of apple dumplings. His final test of a woman is her ability to make good apple dumplings. Several women might have married him had they been able to pass that examination. He can pay no higher compliment to a woman than to be willing to believe her able to make good dumplings.

"Aggie, in there!" he roared again, impatient because I was slow in answering. "Dumplings! That kind of woman— could have made— good dumplings!"

I felt, somehow, that it was going a bit too far to imagine Lady Agatha at so plebeian a task as making apple dumplings.

"Uncle Bainbridge," I shouted, "the upper classes— in England— can't make— apple dumplings!"

Even as I shouted I was aware that some bypasser, startled at our loud voices, was pausing just outside the gate. I turned to encounter for a moment the haughty glare of the most English-looking elderly woman I have ever seen. She had a large, high nose, and she was a large, high-looking handsome woman generally. She said no word to me; but as she stared her lips moved ever so slightly. I fancied that to herself she said, "Indeed!" I have never felt more utterly superfluous, more abjectly American. She turned from me with an air that denied my existence, a manner that indicated that such things as I *could not* exist, and it would be foolish to try to make her believe they did exist. She bowed to Uncle Bainbridge, smiled as he returned her bow, and passed on. Uncle Bainbridge's eyes followed her admiringly.

"'Mother fine woman!" he thundered, so that she must have heard him. "Friend of mine! Sensible woman! No frills!"

I tried to ask him who she was, when and where he had become acquainted with her, and a dozen other questions; but Uncle Bainbridge unplugged himself, cutting off all communication with the outer world, and resolutely refused any information. That he should know the lady did not surprise me, however. It had happened several times since we had been in England that Uncle Bainbridge had become friendly with people whom we did not know. We never got from him any exact idea as to the social status of these persons, and indeed we always found that he had no really definite ideas on that subject to communicate.

Our dear Lady Agatha was almost the only English friend my wife and I had made.

My wife and I were very well contented that Uncle Bainbridge's feeling for Lady Agatha should grow stronger and stronger. We argued that while he was so intimately friendly with dear Lady Agatha he would not be so likely to fall a prey to any person who might want to marry him for his wealth. So we decided to encourage the friendship in every way possible, and would have been only too glad to have it go on indefinitely.

"I feel so at peace about Uncle Bainbridge now," was the way my wife expressed it, "with him and dear Lady Agatha so wrapped up in each other."

But this cheerful condition of affairs was not destined to last many weeks. One day my wife received a letter from her cousin, Miss Sophia Calderwood. Cousin Sophia was in London, and would be with us on the coming Saturday. She had spoken of the possibility of paying us a visit while we were in England, and of course we had urged her to do so; although at the time the possibility had seemed rather remote to us.

Miss Sophia was past her first youth, but still very girlish at times. Under her girlishness there was a grim determination. She had made up her mind to marry Uncle Bainbridge. My wife, as I have already said, had been inclined to favour the idea, since it would keep strangers from getting hold of Uncle Bainbridge's money. But now that Uncle Bainbridge and Lady Agatha were getting along so well together my wife had begun to hope that Uncle Bainbridge would never marry anybody. We both thought the friendship might become an ideal, but none the less overmastering, passion; one of those sacred things, you know, of the sort that keeps a man single all his life. If Uncle Bainbridge remained unmarried out of regard for Lady Agatha, we agreed, it would be much better for him at his time of life than to wed Miss Sophia.

So we both considered Miss Sophia's visit rather inopportune. Not that we felt that Uncle Bainbridge was predisposed toward her. On the contrary, he had always manifested more fear than affection for her. But, I repeat, she was a determined woman. The quality of her determination needed no better evidence than the fact that she had, to put it vulgarly, pursued her quarry across the seas. It was evident that the citadel of Uncle Bainbridge's heart was to undergo a terrible assault. As for him, when he heard she was coming, he only emitted a noncommittal snort.

Miss Sophia, when she arrived, had apparently put in the months since we had seen her in resolute attempts at rejuvenation. She was more girlish than I had known her in fifteen years. And she had set up a lisp. She greeted Uncle Bainbridge impulsively, effusively.

"You dear man," she shrilled into his telephone, "you don't detherve it, but gueth what I've brought you all the way acroth the ocean! A new rethipe for apple dumplings!"

"How?" said Uncle Bainbridge. "What say?" And when she repeated it he said "Umph!" disconnected himself, and blew his nose loudly. He rarely said anything to her but "Umph!" walking away afterward with now and then a worried backward glance.

When we told Miss Sophia about Lady Agatha, and she finally understood the intimacy that had grown up between Lady Agatha and Uncle Bainbridge, she looked reproachfully at my wife, as if to say, "You have been a traitor to my cause!" And then she announced very primly, quite forgetting her lisp, "I am quite sure that I, for one, do not care to make the acquaintance of this person!"

"Cousin Sophia," said my wife sharply, "what do you mean by that?"

"I think, Cousin Marian, that my meaning is sufficiently clear."

"You forget," rejoined my wife icily, "that dear Lady Agatha is our guest."

Miss Sophia sniffed, and was silent.

"Besides," continued Marian, "what can you possibly have against her?"

"Marian," said Miss Sophia, "will you answer me one question?"

"Perhaps, Cousin Sophia."

"Cousin Marian, where, I ask you, *where* is Sir Arthur Pelham?"

"Why, how should I know, Cousin Sophia?" My wife was genuinely puzzled by the question, and so was I.

"Exactly!" And Miss Sophia's voice was acid. "How should you know? I imagine it is a point upon which Lady Agatha Pelham, under the circumstances, has not been very communicative."

"But, Cousin Sophia—" I began.

She interrupted me. "Cousin Henry," she said, "do you mean to say that you approve of these goings-on in your house? The idea of a married woman entering into a perfectly open flirtation with a man, as this Lady Agatha Pelham has done! Not that I blame Hiram Bainbridge; for men are susceptible when skillfully practised upon— especially with arts which I have never stooped to employ. It is shameless, Cousin Henry, shameless! If Cousin Marian's mother were alive, she would at least see that the children were sent back to America before they become contaminated by this atmosphere. Cousin Henry, to think that you have been so corrupted by European ways already that you acquiesce in this anomalous relationship!"

"I should hardly call it that, Cousin Sophia," I ventured, "and for the life of me I cannot see anything wrong."

It took me a little while to catch Miss Sophia's point of view. I am bound to say that she presented it rather convincingly. If Sir Arthur had been alive, she said, she would have seen nothing wrong in Lady Agatha forming any ties she might choose in the spirit world. Or if Sir Arthur had been in the spirit world

and Lady Agatha in the earth life, she would have exonerated Lady Agatha from any indelicacy in forming a close friendship with Uncle Bainbridge. But since both Sir Arthur and Lady Agatha were in the spirit life, Lady Agatha's place was with Sir Arthur.

"Aristocrat or not," she said, "she is indelicate, she is unladylike, she is coarse, or she would not carry on in this fashion with a man to whom she is not married."

"I will not have dear Lady Agatha insulted!" said my wife, white with anger, rising from the chair in which she had been sitting.

"It is I who have been insulted, by being asked to a house where such a brazen and indecent affair is accepted as a matter of course," said Cousin Sophia.

I hastily interposed. I saw that my wife was about to cast prudence to the winds and tell Miss Sophia that if she felt that way about it she might as well leave. Miss Sophia is very well-to-do herself, and my wife is her only near relation. I did not fear that the rupture would be permanent; for I had known Marian and Cousin Sophia to go quite this far many times before, and, indeed, in an hour they had both apparently got over their temper.

Miss Sophia, although certain now that she would receive no assistance from my wife in her siege of Uncle Bainbridge, did not swerve from her determination to subjugate him. I imagine it is rather difficult to give battle when your rival is a ghost: the very intangibility of the tie makes it hard to attack. Yet the person who is in the earth life has certain advantages also. I do not know whether I have mentioned it or not, but Miss Sophia could scarcely be called beautiful. One after another, all her life, she had seen men upon whom she had set her affection become the husbands of other women, and in her duel with the ghost there was a quality of desperation that made the struggle, every move of which I watched, extremely interesting. In spite of her announcement that she did not care to meet Lady Agatha, she learned the code by which she communicated with us, and did not absent herself from our gatherings in the library.

Miss Sophia must have been desperate indeed, or she would not have resorted to the trick she used. About a week after Miss Sophia's arrival Lady Agatha suddenly ceased to communicate with us. We grew alarmed, wondering what could have happened to her, as the days passed and the friendly rappings were not resumed. In the light of what happened later I am sure that Miss Sophia deliberately drove Lady Agatha away. What method she used I do not know. But if she had said to Lady Agatha directly the things that she had said to us about her, the insult would have been quite sufficient to make that proud and gentle spirit take her departure. Likely Miss Sophia got

into communication with Lady Agatha and hurled at her the bitter question, "Where is Sir Arthur Pelham?" Lady Agatha was not the person to enter into any vulgar quarrel, nor yet to vouchsafe explanations concerning her personal affairs.

Several days after Lady Agatha fell silent I heard Uncle Bainbridge bellowing forth questions in the library. I was outside the house near the library window, which was open. Thinking joyously that Lady Agatha had returned to us, I stepped nearer to the window to make sure. I saw at once, as I peeped in, that the bookcase, which set very near the window, had been slightly moved. Miss Sophia, who was very thin, had managed to introduce herself into the triangular space behind it—I had mentioned that it set diagonally across one corner. She was crouched upon the floor rapping out a conversation with Uncle Bainbridge— impersonating Lady Agatha! Uncle Bainbridge, in front of the bookcase, was apparently unsuspicious; nor did Miss Sophia suspect that I saw her through the half-inch of window that commanded her hiding place.

"You must marry!" rapped Miss Sophia, in the character of Lady Agatha.

"Who?" bellowed Uncle Bainbridge.

"Miss Sophia Calderwood," said the fake ghost.

"Aggie, I'm hanged if I do!" yelled Uncle Bainbridge. "Ask me— something— easy!"

"Hiram, listen carefully," began the false Lady Agatha. Then she told him that this would be their last interview. Circumstances over which she had no control compelled her to depart. She was to assume another phase of existence upon another plane. She could not explain to him so that he would understand. But her interest in him would never flag. And she knew that he would be happier wedded to some good woman. It was apparent to her that Miss Sophia would make him the ideal wife. He would soon learn to love Miss Sophia. She had considerable difficulty in getting the promise; but finally Uncle Bainbridge snorted out a pledge that he would marry, and stumped away.

That night he went to London. It was a week before he returned. I did not communicate what I had seen and heard to Marion. The truth was, I felt rather sorry for Miss Sophia. To resort to such a trick she must have been desperate indeed. I tried to imagine what her life had been, and not condemn her too harshly. And besides, if she was to marry Uncle Bainbridge, which seemed settled now, I did not care to have her aware that I knew her secret.

During the absence of Uncle Bainbridge she became quietly radiant, as befits one who knows that the battle is won. She was evidently certain that he would speak definitely upon his return.

The night that he came back he gathered us all about him in the library. "Something to say! Important!" he shouted.

We all assumed attitudes of attention.

"Thinking maybe— get married!" said Uncle Bainbridge. It was just like Uncle Bainbridge to announce the matter in the lady's presence before having formally asked her; but I felt that it was a trifle hard on Miss Sophia. But a glance at her reassured me on that score. She was flushed; but it was the flush of triumph rather than the flush of embarrassment.

"Bought a brewery!" said Uncle Bainbridge. "Good brewery! Good beer! Like English beer! Like English people!"

I felt that this was a little irrelevant, and I am sure that Miss Sophia felt the same way.

"Bought a castle!" said Uncle Bainbridge, warming to the work. "Fine castle! Like castles! Fix it up! Live in it! Settle here! Like England! Fine country."

"A castle! Oh, how lovely!" shrilled Miss Sophia, clapping her hands girlishly. "How lovely for all of us!"

"Not invited!" roared Uncle Bainbridge, taking us all in with one sweeping gesture. "None of you!"

There was silence for a moment.

"Going to get married!" said Uncle Bainbridge, rising to his feet. "Not Sophia! Caught Sophia— behind bookcase! Knew all the time! Sneaky trick! Marry fine woman! Henry saw her— over the fence that day! Fine woman! Curate's mother here! Dumplings! Fine dumplings! Learned to make 'em for me! She don't want— to get too thick— with any my relations! She says— all of you— are too American!"

And as Uncle Bainbridge blew his nose loudly and sat down there was a sudden rattle of rapping from the bookcase: nothing so articulate as a remark in the code, but a sound more like a ripple of well-bred laughter. This was the last we ever heard from Lady Agatha, and I have sometimes wondered just what she meant by it. It is so hard, sometimes, to understand just what the English are laughing at.

18: The Christmas Princess

Edgar Wallace

1875-1932

The Windsor Magazine, Dec 1923

THERE were times when John Bennett Watson (abbreviated for office purposes to "J.B.") wished he were not the Managing Director of the Western Commercial Corporation; moments when he envied the manager of the Broad Street branch of the Southern & Eastern Bank. This in spite of the fact that he was a normal man of thirty-something, without any business worries whatever, enjoying the best of health and an income which, at a moderate estimate, was twenty times larger than the hard-worked bank manager.

J.B. was a man who in no circumstances interfered in other people's affairs; meddlers, he loathed; outside folks who knew how things could be done better, he abominated, and yet there were certain domestic arrangements of the Southern Bank that he would alter.

Gray, the manager, a harassed little man with a straggling beard, came over to see him about a draft, and John made an awkward dive to the matter that at once intrigued and irritated him.

"You are very busy at the bank, Mr. Gray?"

"Yes," sighed Gray, rising and gathering up his documents, "too busy! With the annual audit coming on, the slump in industrials, the heavy cash balances I must carry to meet end-of-the-quarter demands, I look like having a happy New Year! Good morning!"

"I was working late in my office the other night," said John hastily, arresting the official's departure, "and, looking across the road, I saw a girl working at eleven o'clock— she was still working when I left, and the next morning I saw her at her desk when I arrived."

The manager scratched his beard.

"Who can that be, now?" he asked absently. "Oh yes, that is Miss Welford. She was secretary to our late accountant. Poor fellow! He died leaving things in a terrible muddle, and if it wasn't for the fact that she has an instinct for banking and has got his department work at her finger-tips, I should be in a fearful muddle. She is the only member of my staff that I would leave on the premises by herself, I assure you!"

"I thought I'd met her somewhere," said John carelessly and most untruthfully.

"I dare say," said the bank manager. "She is the sort of girl who has moved in a very good set. Her father lost his money in the rubber slump. By the way, rubber is a market that looks like reviving, Mr. Watson."

"I dare say," said John, to whom the fluctuations of the rubber market meant less than nothing. "I think I remember her— *Annie* Welford, isn't it?"

The manager shook his head.

"I don't know— 'F. G.,' her initials are." He frowned. "I never trouble about the names of people. Oh yes, it's Frances; that's the name. I've often thought she's quite a good-looking girl."

"You've often thought that, have you?" said John scornfully.

The man was scarcely human, and yet he was loath to let him go, and searched around in his mind for some excuse for detaining him.

"Where do you go for Christmas, Mr. Gray?"

"Home," said the other, showing the first sign of animation. "The two days in the year I look forward to are Good Friday and Christmas Day. Christmas is the one day I can't work and can be really a perfectly happy man! I sit in front of a fire, and my children read to me or tell me Christmas stories, and that's my idea of a perfectly happy day."

"Great heavens!" said John, aghast. "You *are* human, after all! Though I confess that, if anybody tried to tell me a Christmas story on Christmas Day, I should go and look for a hatchet. And your staff— do they work?"

"I'm sorry to say that headquarters won't allow that," said the manager regretfully. "It would add to my enjoyment considerably if I knew that somebody else was working."

John took an instant dislike to him, had thoughts of changing his bank.

"Do you mean to tell me you would let her— them, I mean— work on Christmas Day? Why, it would be disgraceful!" he said hotly.

When the bank manager had gone, John strode over the carpeted floor of his office and stood, staring across at the trim figure visible— more visible than he had hoped— from the window.

"Quite a good-looking girl!"

He smiled at the impertinence of the man. She was beautiful, the complete satisfaction of all his uncatalogued requirements. If he could only hear her speak! He shrank from the possibility of disillusionment. What would she do on Christmas Day? he wondered. Hold revel in her suburban home, possibly in the company of her sweetheart. He made a little grimace at the thought.

Yet it was perfectly ridiculous to suppose that such a girl would be without admirers, and that from their hosts she should not have given preference to one over all the rest.

If Gray had been just a little more human, it would have been possible to secure an introduction, though he shrank even from that prospect.

He was staring at her when the girl looked up, saw his dim figure behind the window-pane, and, as though conscious that she had been the object of his

scrutiny, got up quickly from the table, switched on the light, and pulled down the shade. It was the first time she had ever noticed him, he reflected glumly, and it was not very pleasing that her acknowledgment of his admiration should be so emphatically resentful.

John Watson went back to his bachelor flat in St. James's with a feeling that the day had not been well spent, and that something in this one-sided intimacy had gone out of his life. He could no longer picture himself speaking to her, could weave no more dreams in which she played a complacent and agreeable part. Drawing the blind seemed to shut out even the visions that a pipe and a fire and a sprawling terrier bring to the most unimaginative. He must needs fall back upon the Princess.

Her Serene Highness had been a figure of speculation from the day when old Nurse Crawley, who attended his infant needs, and was locally credited with being possessed of the devil, predicted that he would inherit a great fortune and marry a princess— a faith from which she never wavered all the days of her life. Fortune had come unexpectedly and vastly, and had been doubled and trebled by his own peculiar genius. But the Princess remained amongst the glowing and shadowy shapes of the fire, less tangible than the blue smoke that curled from his pipe.

And now the Princess bored him. He wanted to meet "F. G. Welford." He wanted badly to meet her: first, to apologize for his rudeness, and then to ask her... well, just to ask her if life held any greater attraction than the balancing of a late accountant's books.

The blind was drawn the next morning when he looked out. It was drawn on the morning of Christmas Eve. He had brought his bag to the office and lost two trains in the hope that she might relent. She was inexorable. He always traveled to Tatterdown by train because the cottage (it had been his father's before him) had no accommodation for a car, and somehow his big limousine did not attune with the atmosphere of that faded and fragrant place.

The taxi-cab that took him to the station was half-way up Broad Street when he saw her. She was walking toward the office; had evidently been out to tea; and his cab was near enough to the sidewalk to give him the nearest view of her face he had yet had. He drew his breath at the sight of her, and for a second was seized with an insane desire to stop the cab, get out, and, on some desperate excuse or other, speak to her. But before he could commit that folly, she was gone.

Gray was a slave-driver, he decided, a sweater, a man of no sensibility or feeling. Christmas Eve! And to allow a girl to work.... Perhaps the cunning devil had lied to him, and she was working on Christmas Day. He hated the unhappy Mr. Gray, hated his baldness, his beard, and all that was of him. Such a man

had no soul, no proper appreciation of values. He was a cold-blooded exploiter of all that was best and noblest in humanity.

By the time he had reached Bullham Junction, John Bennett Watson was better balanced in mind, could chuckle at his own extravagances without wondering at them, which was ominous.

There was no conveyance at the station, and he walked through the one street of Bullham to the Red Lion.

"Excuse me, Mr. Watson."

He turned, to see the rubicund countenance and the blue coat of a policeman.

"Happy Christmas, Mr. Watson. You going out to Tatterdown?"

"Why, yes, sergeant, as soon as I can get a cab."

"Likely you'll see my dog Mowser round about the village; he's a rare fellow for Tatterdown. There's a dog there he's always fighting. Will you send him home with a flea in his ear? Give him a whack and he'll go. Getting into bad habits, that dog. Comes home in the middle of the night and scratches the door till I let him in."

J.B. smiled and promised.

Mowser, a bedraggled wire-haired terrier, he found literally on the doorstep of the cottage, and Mowser's feud had evidently found expression in violence, for he was slightly tattered.

John took him in and fed him. The hour was late, and he decided to send him back in the morning— an arrangement wholly agreeable to Mowser, who finished his scrap and went to sleep under the kitchen table.

So small was Tatterdown Cottage that the man and his wife who acted as caretakers had no accommodation and slept at the village— a risky proceeding, as an insurance company had told him, but one which he preferred, for there were memories about this little house with its thatched roof and Elizabethan chimneys which were very pleasant, and the presence of strangers was insufferable. Here, for ten years, John Watson had wakened to hail the Christmas morn and listen to the silvery bells of the parish church, and had spent the morning in the sheltered garden, tending those hardy plants that reveal their treasures in bleak December. For ten Christmas Eves he had sat, huddled up in the big, chintz-covered chair, with a pipe and a book and his pleasant thoughts, listening to the drip of rain or the thin whine of the wind, or watching, on one never-to-be-forgotten Christmas Eve, the snowflakes building white cobwebs in the corner of every pane.

It was half-past eleven, and he had risen with a yawn to stretch himself preparatory to going upstairs to bed, when there came to him from outside a

sound which was familiar. He passed down the little passage, unbolted the front door, and stepped into the garden.

Out of the darkness came the peculiar and distinctive sound of an aeroplane's engines that were not running sweetly, and presently, peering overhead, he saw the shadow of great wings. Suddenly a blinding white light showed in the skies, illuminating fields and road, so brilliant that Tatterdown Parish Church, a mile away, was visible. The light swooped in a circle, coming lower and lower, and finally vanished behind the privet fence of the Hermitage field, its radiance throwing the trim boundary hedge into silhouette.

Going back into the cottage for his coat, Watson ran through the garden, across the road, and, vaulting the gate, stumbled over the frozen plough-land to the place where the landing lights of the big machine were flickering to extinction.

"Hello!" called a voice, and John answered the hail, and presently came up with the two men who were standing by the under-carriage. One was lighting a cigarette, and the newcomer caught a momentary glimpse of his face, long, white, and blackly bearded. The other he could not see, but it was he who spoke.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Tatterdown, six miles from Pelworth," Watson answered. "You got down without accident?"

There was no reply for a few seconds, and then the bearded man laughed softly.

"We got down, but not without accident," he said, a dry note in his voice. "Is there a house where...."

Here he stopped and said something to his companion in an undertone. The short man grunted an inquiry in the same tone, and:

"I'll ask," he said. "Are we near to a village?"

"No— not nearer than a mile," said Watson. "I have a cottage, but it is rather isolated."

"Wife and family?"

John laughed quietly.

"No," he said; "I am all alone."

Again the whispered colloquy.

"It may sound a little— unusual and impertinent, these questions," said the tall man at last, "but we have a passenger who, for State reasons, is traveling incognito. I must take you this much into my confidence and tell you that she ought not to be within a thousand miles of England. May I therefore rely upon your discretion?"

Dumbfounded, John Watson listened, his sense of adventure piqued.

"Certainly, you may rely upon me," he said. "I am a bachelor and live alone— I usually come to Tatterdown to spend Christmas— and I haven't even a servant in the house. I was born here, and have a certain sentimental feeling towards the place. I am giving you confidence for confidence. My name is Watson, by the way."

"Thank you," said the other simply. "My name is James— Colonel Alfred James."

He walked towards the machine, and John heard him speak.

"You may descend, Highness," he said.

His eyes now accustomed to the darkness, J.B. saw a slim figure descend, and waited whilst the two men and the woman spoke together in a whisper. So far as he could gather, the lady said little, but the conversation continued for so long that John began to feel the cold.

"Will you come this way?" he called.

"Lead on," said the gruff voice of the smaller man, and the owner of Tatterdown Cottage led the way to the gate, and, after some delay, opened it and ushered them across the road into the cottage.

The tall Colonel James followed, carrying two heavy bags; then came the girl; and thirdly, the shorter of the two, a round, red-faced man with a slight moustache and a pair of small eyes that were set a trifle too close together.

The big man deposited the bags on the floor of the sitting-room.

"I present you, Mr. Watson, to Her Serene Highness, Princess Marie of Thurgen," he said. "Her Highness has a very dear friend in London, but owing to the War and the restrictions which have been placed upon Germans visiting England, it has been necessary for Her Highness to make a surreptitious and in some ways unauthorized trip to London. Whilst we realize that to land in England without a passport and without the necessary authority from the Home Office constitutes a technical offense, my friend and I have gladly undertaken the risk to serve one to whose father we are under a heavy debt of obligation."

All the time he had been speaking, John's wondering gaze had never left the girl's pale face. She stood with eyes downcast, hands lightly clasped in front of her, and only once during the interview did she look up. Presently John found his voice, though he spoke with extraordinary difficulty.

"I shall be happy to place my room at the disposal of Her Highness," he said.

"You have no telephone here?" asked the little man suddenly.

John shook his head.

"No," he said, with a half-smile, "we have nothing quite so modern at Tatterdown Cottage except a very modern bathroom leading from my room. May I show Your Highness the way?"

The tall man inclined his head gravely.

"Will you go first, please?" he said.

Lighting a candle, John went up the narrow stairs, opened the door of his chamber, a cozy room with its old four-poster and its log fire smouldering in the grate.

"This will do very well," said the tall man, who had followed him. "In here, Your Highness."

He put his hand on the girl's arm and led her into the room. Then, coming out quickly, he closed the door behind him. At the foot of the stairs stood the little fat man, grotesquely huge in his leather coat and as grotesquely ridiculous in his leather headgear.

"Her Highness is comfortable," said the bearded man. "You can go to work on the machine. Do you think you can get it right by the morning?"

"I ought to have it right in two hours," said the other, "but we couldn't possibly take off in the dark. I don't know the size of the field. It's plough-land, too, and that'll make it a bit more difficult, but I'll certainly be ready for you at daybreak."

With that he was gone, leaving John alone with the colonel.

"Will you come into the sitting-room?" asked John.

"I think not," replied James. "You see, Mr. Watson, my responsibility is a great one. Certain things have happened in London which have reduced Her Highness to the verge of despair. She has enemies— personal enemies, you understand?— who would not hesitate to take her life."

He pulled up his leather coat, and from his pocket slipped out a long-barrelled Browning and snapped back the jacket.

"I will not detain you any longer, Mr. Watson. You may go to bed with the full assurance that you have rendered an inestimable service to what was once the greatest ruling house in Germany."

John laughed softly.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I have no bed, and if you mean that you are going to sit up all night, you have relieved me of a great embarrassment, for I should have had no place to offer you but the settee in my sitting-room. You are welcome to that."

James shook his head.

"I will remain here," he said, and sat on the lower stair. Suddenly he got up. "Is your sitting-room beneath your bedroom?"

John nodded.

"Should I hear any— any noise above?"

"Undoubtedly," said John. "Every floor in this old house creaks."

"Then I will join you. It is inclined to be draughty here."

He accompanied his host into the sitting-room and stripped the leather coat he was wearing, pulled off his helmet, and sank, with a luxurious sigh, into the deep arm-chair that John had vacated when the sound of the aeroplane's engines had come to his ears.

"Christmas Eve, eh?" said the colonel. He extracted a cigarette from the case and tapped it thoughtfully on his thumbnail. Then, seeing John's eyes resting on the pistol that lay on the table by his elbow, he asked: "Looks a little theatrical, don't you think? I suppose firearms are not in your line, Mr. Watson?"

"I have an automatic at my London flat," said John, with a smile, "but I can't say that I get a great deal of pistol practice. Do you seriously mean that you would use that in certain extremities?"

The big man blew a cloud of smoke to the ceiling and nodded.

"I mean that," he said curtly.

"How fascinating!" said J.B. "And how un-Christmaslike!"

The other smiled broadly.

"There are one or two things about you that puzzle me," J.B. went on slowly.

"Such as—?"

"Well," he hesitated, "did the Princess come to where the aeroplane was? I presume it was somewhere outside of London?"

"We picked her up in a car," said the other shortly.

"I see," said J.B. "How queer!"

"What is queer?" frowned James.

"The whole thing," said J.B. Watson. "You can't say that it is a usual experience for a bachelor to have a princess drop on to him from the clouds. And, for a reason which you won't want me to explain, I am especially interested in princesses. It goes back to a very old prophecy that was made by my nurse."

There was a slight movement above their heads.

"Excuse me," said James, and, rising quickly, ran up the stairs.

The sound of a low-voiced conversation floated down to John Watson, and, after a while, the footsteps of James upon the stairs. When he came in he was looking a little worried.

"Did Her Highness require anything?"

"Nothing." This time the man's voice was curt. "She wanted to know when the machine would be ready, that is all."

They sat in complete silence for half an hour till John rose.

"I'll make some coffee, or I shall go to sleep. And you would like some coffee too?"

James hesitated.

"Yes, I think I should. I'll come with you and see you make it," he said.

A sleeping Mowser lifted his wiry head inquiringly as the two men came into the kitchen, and watched them with unconcern, till, realizing that nothing in the shape of food was imminent, he tucked his head between his paws and went to sleep again.

James took a chair and watched the percolator working without comment, and J.B. could not escape a feeling that he stood in relationship to the man as a convict stands to a prison guard, and this impression was strengthened when, the coffee made, his guest walked behind him to the sitting-room again. It was some time before the steaming cups had cooled sufficiently to drink, and John took a sip and made a wry face.

"Do you take sugar?" he asked. "Because I do."

He went back to the kitchen, but this time the man did not accompany him. But he was standing in the doorway when J.B. returned.

"You took some time to find it," he said gruffly, and saw that his tone was a mistake, for he went on, with a laugh and a return to his old suavity: "Forgive my infernal cheek, but this little adventure of ours has got on my nerves."

"I couldn't find it," said John. "My caretaker discovers a new place to hide her stores every visit I make to the cottage."

He dropped two lumps into his coffee and stirred it, and, finding that the bearded colonel desired to do nothing more than to smoke an endless chain of cigarettes, he took down a book from the shelf and began to read.

Presently the heavy boots of the smaller man sounded on the paved pathway outside the cottage, and John jumped up.

"That must be your friend," he said, and went to admit him.

The pilot, for such he seemed to be, came in, grimy of face and black of hands.

"I've put it right," he said. "You can be ready to move as soon as you like. I have explored the field, and there's plenty of room to take her off."

"Go back to the machine and stand by," said the other sharply. And then, to John: "I am extremely obliged to you for courtesy, and I'm glad we have not had to trespass longer on your hospitality than was necessary. And may I add the thanks of the Princess to mine?"

"You may," said John.

James ran up the stairs and knocked at the bedroom door.

"I am ready, Your Highness."

There was a pause, and then the key was turned and the door opened. It closed again upon the man, and all that John Watson could hear was the murmur of voices through the ceiling.

He laughed softly, pure joy in every note. So old Nurse Crawley had been right, after all, and a princess had come into his life, and the prophecy might yet be fulfilled.

The door was opened, two pairs of feet descended the stairs, and presently James stood in the light of the table-lamp, which flowed through the open door of the sitting-room into the passage. In each hand he carried a bag, and behind him was a muffled figure in a fur coat, who kept her face steadily averted from John's eyes.

"I thank you again, Mr. Watson. If I have put you to any expense—"

"None whatever," said John politely.

He stood with his back to the fire and watched. He heard James put down his bag and turn the handle of the door, but it did not move. He tried again, feeling for the bolts, and finding that the door was of stout oak and the lock of ancient solidity, he came back to the sitting-room.

"I can't open your door, Mr. Watson."

"Very true," said John pleasantly, "very true!"

The man's brows gathered in a frown of suspicion.

"What do you mean— very true?" he asked harshly.

"You can't open it because I've locked it, and the key is in my pocket," said John.

Instantly the automatic appeared in James's hand.

"Give me that key," he said coldly, "or there'll be a village tragedy that will mystify the reporters. I ought to have shot you anyway," he said, "and, by God, if you don't— give me that key!"

John shook his head. His hands were still behind him, and, with a smothered exclamation of rage, the man pressed the trigger. There was a dull click.

"I took the precaution of unloading your pistol when you went upstairs an hour or two ago, Mr. James, or Colonel James, as the case may be," said John in his conversational tone. "I have also sent, attached— via the back door— to the collar of a small and intelligent dog, an urgent message to the Bullham police to put in as early an appearance as possible. I've been expecting them for the last five minutes."

With a roar of rage the big man sprang at him, and, as he did so, John withdrew his right hand and struck at his assailant with the poker, which it had held throughout the interview. Quick as a cat, the man dodged the blow, and in another instant he had gripped the other in his powerful hand. John

wrenched his left arm free and struck twice at the man, but his padded coat softened the blows, and it was not until a lucky blow caught Colonel James under the jaw that he went floundering to the ground. There was the sound of voices outside. John took the key from his pocket and flung it at the foot of the terrified girl.

"Open the door, quick, Miss Welford!" he hissed, and turned to leap on his half-maddened adversary, who had thrown open his coat and was groping for a second pistol. Before it could be drawn, the room was full of people, and he went down under the weight of two policemen and the local blacksmith.

"THIS is the real miracle-play," said John. "But to make the miracle complete, you've got to stay here and have dinner, Miss Welford."

"But what I can't understand is, how you recognized me?" asked the puzzled girl.

"I not only know your name, but I know the whole story," said John. "You were working at the bank late, and these two gentlemen, who must have long planned the coup, broke into the vault to secure the very large sum in ready cash which would be on the bank premises on Christmas Eve. They then discovered that you were among the treasures that the bank contained—"

"I heard the noise and went down. They took me away with them in the car because they were afraid that I should identify them. I had no idea that, when the machine came down, they swore that, if I betrayed them, they would not only kill me but kill you also. They had to explain me, so I became a princess. But how *did* you know that I was not?"

"I knew you were a princess all right," said John. "I've known you were a princess ever since I started peeping into your palace window."

She drew a long breath.

"Oh, were *you* the man?" she said. "I've often wondered since. I never knew you."

"You know me now, and you will know me much better. Will you stay and have Christmas dinner with me?"

She looked at him quickly, then dropped her eyes.

"I think I will," she said. "I owe you so much, Mr.—"

"On Christmas Day," he interrupted, "I am 'John,' even to my enemies," and she smiled.

"I don't feel like an enemy," she said.

19: "Back in Ten Minutes"

Ernest Favenc

1845-1908

Evening News (Sydney) 1 Feb 1896

'THERE are no flies on me,' said Jim, 'when ghosts are around. I don't know why I should have been especially picked out for this sort of thing, but somehow I seem to have come across more adventures of this kind than most men. Did I ever tell you about the ghost who was always "back in ten minutes"?'

'No, he must have been a punctual sort of ghost.'

'That's just what he wasn't, and that's just what made him so fidgety and restless. Did you ever know a man who wrote up on a card on his office door, "Back in ten minutes", who was back under half an hour? No, the most unpunctual man in the world is the man who is coming back in ten minutes.

'This ghost adventure did not happen to me, but to a kind of distant relation of my brother's.'

'How was it he was not a distant relation of yours as well?'

'This way. This fellow's name was Withers, and my brother married a second cousin of his; so, although I cannot quite fix the relationship, it can have nothing to do with me, unless,' mused Jim, 'it comes through old Bowles, he being stepfather to Withers, and having once known my father well. I remember old Bowles as a boy, because he never used to speak without clearing his throat first?'

'Here, Jim. Back in ten minutes.'

'Right. Withers was in a bank or the Lands Office, or somewhere or other, and he had a great chum called Lomley, who was an accountant and general kind of agent. One day he went up to see Lomley, as was his custom when he got out at half past 4, and there was a card with the legend on it, "Back in ten minutes," so Withers waited the ten minutes, but deuce a sign of Lomley. Just as he was turning away up came a nice-looking, elderly lady, and stopped at Lomley's door and read the card.

' "Have you been waiting long, sir?" she asked Withers.

' "Neatly a quarter of an hour, madam."

' "Then its no good my waiting," she said, and taking out her card, case, she wrote something on a card and pushed it underneath the door.

She'd scarcely gone before up came a red-faced man, and he asked Withers the same question. Then the man swore, and he too wrote something on a card, pushed it under the door, gave the door a terrific kick, and stumped off. Thinking it no good waiting, Withers followed his example.

'Next afternoon Withers, having in vain waited at his diggings all the evening expecting Lomley to turn up, went once more to the office. There was the card still, "Back in ten minutes," and there was the elderly lady and the red-faced man, and the latter was more furious than ever.

'He banged at the door, and shouted through the keyhole, "Hie! Lomley, you're in there all the time. You know you are. I can see your coat tail through the keyhole quite plain. I wouldn't skulk in a corner if I were you. Come out and show yourself. It's more than ten minutes since yesterday afternoon."

'Just then Withers noticed that the old lady was crying nervously, so he got the red-faced man to desist, and took the old lady downstairs and put her in a cab, for she was quite hysterics.

' "Oh, sir," she said, "do you think that Mr. Lomley has run away, for if he has I'm ruined," and she began to cry, and Withers, who was very soft-hearted, assured her that Lomley must be sick with typhoid, and had forgotten to send in, or he had been run over by a tram and had both legs cut off, or been bitten by a shark, which would account for it all. He had a happy knack of cheering people up had Withers.

'When he got back he found the red-faced man dancing a combination of a can-can and a war-dance on the landing.

' "Look here, sir!" he snouted, "if you come across that scoundrel Lomley, just you tell him that I've gone to get a warrant out for him. You know me?"

' "I'm hanged if I do," replied Withers.

' "Well, he does, at any rate. Tell him that Jonas Thresher has taken a warrant out for him," and he went down three stairs at a time.

' "Lomley seems to have got into a mess somehow, but I hope he has not made away with any of that poor old lady's money."

So thought Withers, as he waited on the landing, and he determined to wait for a bit, as, if Lomley had been up to any hanky panky tricks, he would probably come in when he saw the coast clear.

'It was winter time, and dusk soon after 5, and Withers was just thinking what a fool he was hanging round there in the cold, when, sure enough, he saw Lomley coming along the corridor.

' "You're a pretty fellow," he said when he got close, "there's been half Sydney up here looking for you."

' "Couldn't help it," returned Lomley in a queer, hoarse whisper. "Had an important engagement on; bound to keep it."

He took the latchkey out of his pocket: and opened the office door. It was much lighter inside the office, and Withers noticed that his friend's neck was discolored.

' "What's up with your throat,' he asked.

'Lomley pulled out his handkerchief and fastened it round his neck. "Got bad cold,' he said in the same hoarse whisper, "had mustard plaster on."

Now it didn't look a bit like the back of a mustard plaster, even if it was usual to put one round one's throat, but Withers said nothing about it.

' "Look here, old man," he went on, "there's been two people here, wanting to see you badly. One, a very nice old lady, and the other, a regular firebrand, who has gone to get out a warrant for you, said his name was Jonas Thresher."

'Lomley laughed somewhere down the pit of his stomach.

' "That's just what I came back for,' he said. "If you see the old lady, her name is Mrs. Bransher, you tell her that her money is all right— or nearly so. It was paid into her account yesterday in the Bank of New South Wales. As for Jonas Thresher, just you tell him to serve his warrant on me halfway between Manly and Narrabeen, on the left hand side of the road. Remember!"

'And he leaned over and stared hard at Withers.

' "Here," cried Withers, jumping up, "don't make such horrid faces at me!" for Lomley's eyes were bulging out of his head, and his tongue was lolling out all swollen.

'Withers stepped back in alarm, and found himself in the cold, dark corridor again, and the door of the office was fast shut and locked. You may be sure that Withers lost no time in getting home.

'Next morning he informed the police, and they searched the bush and found Lomley hanging from a tree, having been dead two days. His affairs we're all abroad, and it was either suicide or bolt with him. Withers did not know what to do about the old lady, as he didn't want his experience to be made known. So he wrote her an anonymous letter, telling her where her money was; but he feels quite certain in his own mind that it was the red-faced man's money Lomley had paid in to make up the old lady's that he had embezzled.

'The worst of it was that the room was haunted ever after. No matter who took it, it was always the same. Every one who came on business always saw a card up, "Back in ten minutes."

'Now this was outrageous. A lawyer took the rooms, his clients came, saw the notice "Back in ten minutes," went away, came back, same old notice, left in disgust for another lawyer— just the same with everybody else. Could do no business, no matter what time people came; always they saw "Back in ten minutes" written on a card in beautiful round hand, for Lomley wrote a splendid hand. So there was nothing left but to let the room as a storeroom at half price.'

'There's a moral in that story, Jim,' I said, 'that Sydney people might take home. If you stick up "Back in ten minutes," mind—'

'You come back in ten minutes, or it might end in you hanging yourself,' interrupted Jim.

20: Costs

Harold Mercer

1882-1952

Bulletin, 23 Sep 1915

For the unitiated, in this story a "quid" is slang for £1 Australian, roughly equal to $4 US back in 1915.

THE ordinary crowd which gathers in front of the Central Court littered the steps as I mounted them. There were the excited groups of people who make the occasion of even a remote connection with "a case in court" a memorable day's excitement. There were the seedy men with anxious, strained faces, half ashamed of being seen, and fearfully anxious about the ordeals they had to face— most of them there about summonses, which, had they known it, need not have troubled them. There were people who fidgeted uneasily; others who stoically waited, used to the surroundings, for judgment on possibly serious matters; all sorts and conditions of men. Police-court solicitors and solicitors' clerks, on the lookout for old clients for the purpose of introductions to other clients, dodged in and out.

I was a little ahead of the time when there would be a sudden shuffling towards the various courts on the stroke of 10 o'clock and self-important officers of the law would call "Silence!" in the court-rooms.

At the top of the steps I met Lane.

"I say, old chap," he said, hurriedly, "could you oblige me with a couple of quid till later? I came down with just a little silver because of a 'phone message from a country friend, and I find that what he wants is this cash, and I can't get it unless I go back to Balmain. A friend and fellow-townsman of his wants it to help a friend's son through some trouble; and he wants it quick and lively."

"I'm sorry, I haven't got two quid," I said. "I would gladly—"

"You see, the money's wanted to pay some solicitor's costs, and if it's not forthcoming he won't act. It means business to me if I can fix up my friend: I'll get his friend's business, anyway, and some others. I don't know a soul here. You know some of these lawyer-johnnies, don't you?"

I admitted I did; and then, seeing Dan Riley, the solicitor, told Lane to hang on for a minute. I wanted to oblige Lane just as badly as he wanted to oblige his friends.

"I'd let you have the couple in a second, if I had it," said Riley, heartily, when I asked him. "Wait a bit, though ; I'll have some money in a minute or two, and then you can have it. Look out for me."

"How long?" I asked.

"Oh, only a few minutes— not more than five, certainly," said Riley, as he bustled away.

I went back and told Lane that he could have the cash within five minutes; and Lane took me over and introduced me to two obviously "financial" countrymen, Green and Falconer.

"It's lucky we met you, then," said Green. "I didn't like to mention the particulars on the 'phone to Lane, making sure that he'd have a couple of notes about him. I had no need to bring any coin with me when I came in this morning; so when I met Falconer here I couldn't fix him up."

"They cleared me out at the races yesterday," said young Falconer. "I've wired home for some dough, but I can't expect it for an hour or two. The chap who wants the money is a fellow I'd like to oblige, if I can— it's a son of a great friend of his who's in the mess. If the lawyer doesn't get his four guineas he won't appear."

"Oh, it's four guineas!" I cried in dismay.

"Oh, two quid has been fixed up already," he answered. He looked, at Green. "We'd better tell them it's arranged," he added.

Lane and I remained talking together for a while, until Green and Falconer returned with another man. They signalled Lane. Presently he came back to me, perturbed.

"See if you can get the cash straight away," he said. "The sharks are waiting for it."

In turn I pursued the benevolent Riley, catching him just as he was entering the door of No. 1 Court.

"Can't do it just now," he said. "But I will in a jiffy. Wait somewhere about here for me."

I hurried away with my news to Lane, and then returned. The jiffy was a fairly long one; but finally Riley appeared, quite suddenly, in a desperate hurry.

"I've got a cheque here for a couple of quid you can have. It's not my own, but it's good enough," he explained swiftly.

I duly handed the slip of paper to Lane, and then drifted away to attend to my own affairs, which kept 'me till lunch-time. I met Riley as I passed out.

"Come and have a taste," he said; and while we took our ease in the lounge-bar he passed a scrap of paper over to me. "Seen that before?" he asked.

"Why, it's the cheque you handed me this morning," I exclaimed. "How the—"

"Exactly," returned Riley, laughing. "That little piece of paper for a couple of quid has paid me four quids' worth of costs this morning."

"Then you were the skinflint solicitor who wouldn't appear till he had received his four guineas costs?"

"Precisely. The same who accepted a cheque for two quid to go on with, then passed on the cheque to a friend, and duly received the same two quid back as payment for the balance. The nett result, by the way, seems to be that you owe me two pounds:"

"And somebody else, who is owed the money by somebody else, who also has someone else to collect from, owes me two pounds," I added.

But the nett result was worse than that. Riley still waits, good-naturedly, for his money. Lane hasn't paid me yet— he says he hasn't been reimbursed himself. And the father of the young man about whom all the trouble was taken, was mad that anyone should have taken any trouble at all, and won't part a cent.

As for the two-pound cheque itself, that very interesting document proved to be worth nothing at all when presented at the bank.

The cheque being worthless, Riley did not lend me anything, nor did I let Lane have anything. Riley was innocently guilty of passing valueless paper, and I repeated his offence.

Riley admits that the case is a peculiar one. He suggests "a quid" as a compromise.

End