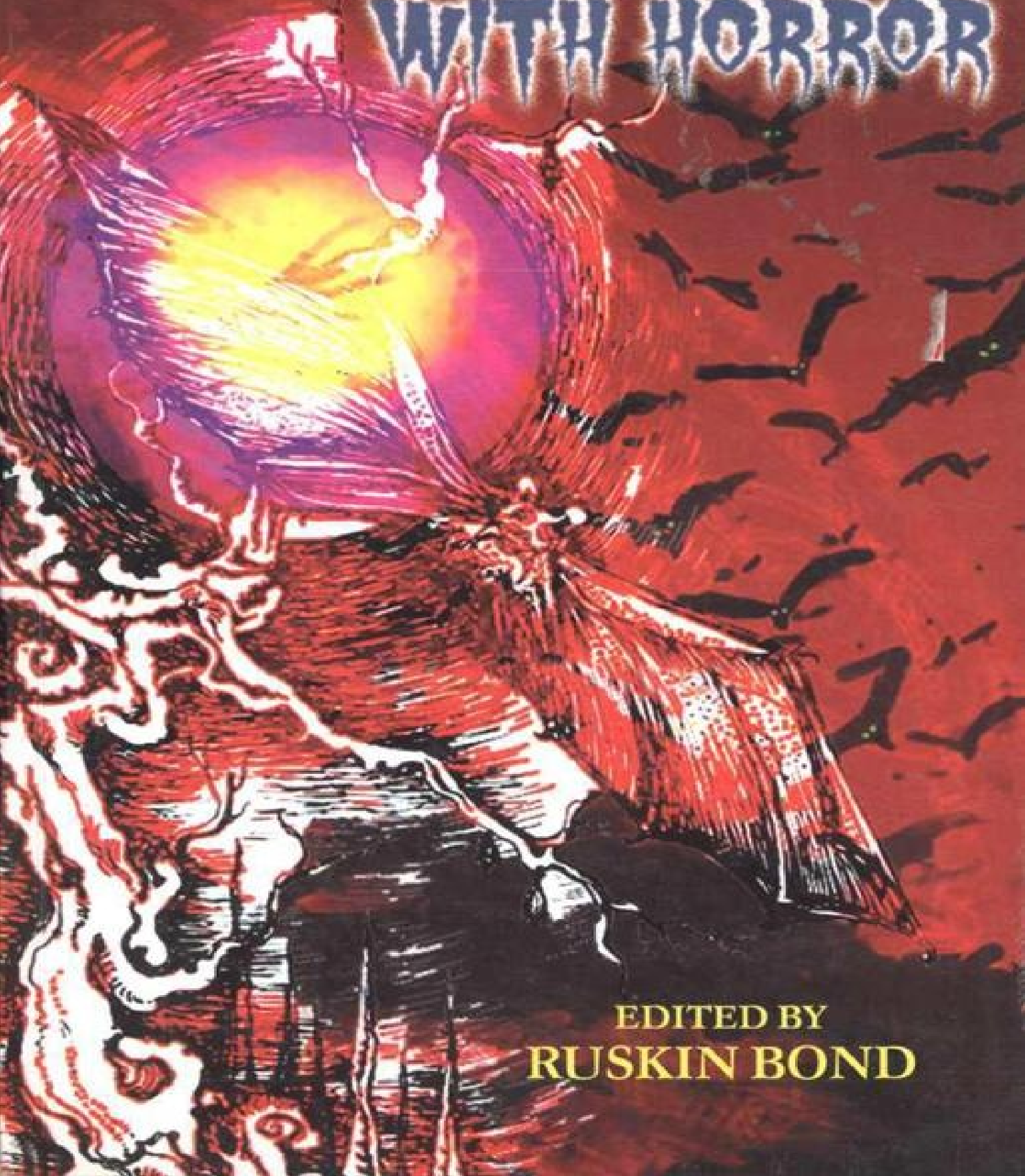


RENDEZVOUS WITH HORROR



EDITED BY
RUSKIN BOND

Rendezvous with Horror

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Rendezvous with Horror

Edited by
Ruskin Bond

Rupa & Co

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Introduction

There are some incidents in our lives which break the humdrum and leave behind some lucid footprints on our minds. Some of these flow out of fear, thrill, horror or terror. Others, just as a result of coincidence or adventure. In this collection of short stories, I have tried to traverse through the mindscape of men in strange or unfamiliar surroundings. Each story has been picked carefully and marks a unique blend of the quaint and the realistic. Living in a foreign land, adjusting to the unfamiliar environs sometimes brings with it not only a physical churning but also a psychological turbulence. At the same time, sometimes familiar surroundings suddenly appear alien and spooky, and shake us out of our cocooned existence. In this collection, I've tried to bring together all these facets of our lives.

As Edmund Burke says, 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.'

It is this state of the human mind which is brought to the fore in these tales of suspense. The stories are diverse and set in different backdrops. 'The Face of Bronze' brings to the fore the pull of the Orient, manifested in Sanderson as he instinctively holds on to the bronze face and the strange life-like dreams that follow. The sudden disappearance of the statue only heightens the suspense, leaving us craving for more. On the other hand, 'When Glister Walked' is more action-packed and encapsulates the culture and customs totally alien to the logical, scientific mind of the coloniser. With its highly graphic imagery, it takes us on a rare trip to the land of the occult. In 'All Souls', we travel across the globe to North America and get a taste of their brand of chilling moments.

It is unnerving to think what I would do if caught up in such a situation, but that is exactly what I feel adds spice to our lives—the thrill of the unexpected. It has been

delightful to bring together this collection, and I hope it brings as much pleasure to my readers.

Ruskin Bond
April 2007

The Face of Bronze

By John Eyton

John Sanderson belonged to the Survey Department of the Government of India. At the time of this history he was thirty years of age—a sallow young man, with untidy light hair, a long, clever, clean-shaven face, and the earnest grey eyes of a dreamer. He was a member of a solitary service, which suited his character, and though for months he went without sight of another white face, the deprivation did not worry him. He loved his work, with all the spirit of an explorer, had plenty of imagination, a quiet love of adventure, and a great stock of sleepy dreams. It was a lonely temperament—with just a latent strain of morbidity. He had made few men friends at Cambridge, and it was said of him that he would run a mile to avoid a woman.

In India his habitual abstraction intensified. He grew to depend entirely on himself for companionship. He had a few book friends and loved beautiful things, so long as they were inanimate. He had only been home on leave once, and had spent the whole time intervening between two visits to his mother in walking about the North of Scotland by himself. He always loved hills.

On his return from leave, he was given a job after his own heart; he was sent to make certain verifications on the Durand Line. It was ticklish work, and he was more than once sniped at, because he would insist on avoiding his escort. Nevertheless, he was extremely happy in those barren hills. Moreover, he was just the very man to find what he did find there.

It happened quite by accident. He had been out late, and had only an hour in

which to walk back to his little camp. The obvious course was to call up his escort, which was playing a game of chance on the top of a hill, and to take the rough path by which he had come. Being Sanderson, however, he completely forgot the existence of his escort, and decided to take a short cut.

His way led down the steep, stony bed of a dry nullah. He scrambled down with difficulty, using one or two stunted bushes to help him, until he got half-way down. Then, a bush came bodily away, and he fell heavily about ten feet, dislodging a small avalanche of stones. The fall was very sudden and it gave him a considerable shock, so that he sat for some time, looking vaguely round him. Then, among the stones, his eye noted an object whose texture was not that of a stone. It was smooth, of a greenish colour, and had a metallic look—whereas the stones were rough and red. He shifted his position and picked the thing up. Then, he had a surprise.

He looked at it for a long time, turning it over and over. It was a very perfect thing—the head of a woman in bronze. True, it had been broken or twisted off at the neck, but the face was uninjured. The features were beautiful—straight eyebrows, straight nose, finely moulded chin; but he did not stare at the features. The extraordinary impression of life in the face held him. Cast in bronze as it was, and coated over with the green of age, he had a feeling that it lived. He could see the bloom on the cheeks, which were soft and rounded; he could look into the eyes; and the soft sweet lips were just about to smile. Sanderson sat there an hour, forgetful of everything—a lonely figure among the rocks, in the shadow made by the setting sun. Yet, it was only a little bronze face—half life-size.

He took it home, carefully wrapped in his handkerchief. At the very outset, he risked his life for it, since it was unhealthy to be out after dark in those parts without an escort. He merely toyed with his roast chakor at dinner. Instead of recording the results of the day, he sat in a deck-chair in the ill-lit tent, an empty pipe twirling in his mouth, and gazed and dreamed. It would not be too much to say that he fell in love with his prize. For him the face lived; he saw it in dreams—alive.

Thereafter, Sanderson abandoned himself completely to the face of bronze. His work he got through automatically, nor did he shirk any of it. For the rest, he concentrated the whole of his dreamy and somewhat morbid nature on the face. He would sit looking at it for hours on end—imbuing it with life, making stories about it, worshipping it. It seemed to mesmerise him; he did not doubt its power over him, nor did he try to fight the influence, but surrendered his mind to it.

He knew it was Greek; no other nation could have produced so magical a thing. Greek coins had been found from time to time in the ruins of Akra, and little Greek statues around Peshawar and the Khyber—relics of the days of Alexander and his generals. But this was a thing apart; he looked on it as a treasure reserved for him—the most beautiful face in the world.

He revisited the spot where he had found it, and made a very careful search; but

he could not find the missing portion. There was not a trace of a ruin—just a brown, bare hill-top, a slash of a nullah in the side, and a trickling stream below. He soon gave up looking for the history of the face; it was sufficient in itself—more than sufficient. A friend might have laughed him out of his intense concentration, inducing a tardy sense of proportion. But he was entirely on his own—a day's march from the nearest outpost.

It was after he had returned from the search in the nullah that the first dream came—rather, the first connected dream—for the face itself had appeared to him nightly. It is not proposed to explain the dream; psychology may hint that it was a figment born of an overworked imagination. It is simply given as a fact—for what it is worth.

He saw the interior of a rough tent—an affair of two uprights, cross-pole, and sloping sides. It was but dimly lit by a wick floating in a saucer of earthenware. On one side was some sort of a rough couch, with tumbled rugs and skins on it; there were skins on the floor, too, which otherwise was bare. Behind the couch, in the corner, was a pile of indistinct objects, in which metal glinted. The flap of the tent was down.

There was a man in the tent—a man with curly, dark hair, clad in a tunic of some dark material. His legs were bare almost to the hips, and they looked long and shapely. His face was invisible because he was lying at full length on the ground, with his head between his hands, looking down as if he were reading. Altogether, Sanderson had an impression of a handsome, well-built youth. More he could not gather because he never saw the face. The youth was lying between the entrance and the light—face to the light and back to the entrance. He never moved. A long time passed before the tent-flap stirred and someone came silently in, and stood in the shadow, looking down on the youth as he lay. Sanderson knew, rather than saw, that the figure was a woman, wrapped in a dark cloak. ... Then he awoke.

He had the impression of an actual experience rather than of a dream. This experience was consecutive and intensely vivid. It actually happened. He saw exactly the same thing several nights running, and brooded over it all day. The scene never altered; the youth never moved nor showed his face. Sanderson always awoke with the shadowy figure of the visitor before his eyes, and with a sense of some cruel thing impending. Then, one night he knew more.

The beginning was the same—the dark tent and its shadowy corners; the lissom figure on the ground; the stirring of the tent-flap; the soundless entrance; the waiting figure. But this time the figure moved, as if gathering strength. The right arm was raised, throwing a great bar of shadow across the tent. But the youth never looked up. Then came a swooping movement; something glittered in the hand of the woman, and she stooped and struck the youth between the shoulders. His head fell forward and lay still; his hands dropped; he was dead.

The woman glided swiftly forward and picked up what lay between the youth and the light. It was a head and shoulders of bronze—half Hfe-size. She raised it above her head and fled from the tent into the darkness. Then she threw it far away... down ...and herself fell huddled to the ground.

Sanderson awoke in terror—a wild fear which was akin to madness. He had only one idea—to get away; back to men and women and the sound of laughter and the welcome of little lighted shops in busy streets. He could not be alone again, nor chance seeing again what he had seen. In that last act he had been no mere spectator. In some strange way he had lived the scene, powerless to avert the horror which he felt. His face of bronze—he could never look upon it again. He dare not see it again. It would bring back the silence—the waiting—the knowledge. He would cover it up and bury it in the place whence it came. Then he might have peace.

With eyes averted, he opened the box in which he had put his treasure. His hand felt for it. Then, he gave a cry of surprise—the head of bronze was not there.

When Glister Walked

By Oscar Cook

Dennis, district officer of the Labuk district in British North Borneo, had been spending a few days' 'local leave' on Tingling Estate, for, Walkely, the manager, and he were great friends. The night before his departure the two men had sat together in the latter's mosquito-room, fitted up like a 'den', and with pipes well-lit had roamed in a desultory manner over many fields of conversation.

For the last ten minutes or so there had been silence between them—the silence of friends in complete accord. Dennis broke it.

'Throw me a match, Walley,' he said.

Walkely moved as though to comply, then stopped as his 'boy' entered, carrying a tray containing whisky and soda, which he placed on a table near his master. He was about to depart when Walkely spoke.

'The *Tuan* is leaving to-morrow before breakfast, Amat. Tell Cookie to make some sandwiches and see the thermos flask is filled with hot tea.'

'*Tuan.*'

'And, hand these to the *Tuan.*' Walkely pointed to the matches.

Amat obeyed and went out.

Walkely rose from his long chair, mixed the drinks and held out a glass to Dennis.

'To our next meeting,' he said, and raised his glass. Dennis followed suit.

Then, yawning, Dennis rose, and stretching his arms well above his head, looked sleepily in the direction of his bedroom.

Walkely nodded assent and held open the mosquito-door.

A few minutes later the house was in darkness, save for the lights that shone through the open windows of the two bedrooms.

The rooms were on either side of a large dining-room, which in turn opened out from the main verandah, off one side of which was built the mosquito-room. At the far end of the dining room were two folding doors that led to a passage and pantry, and thence down some steps to the kitchen and "boys" quarters at the rear of the house.

As Dennis undressed, he sleepily hummed the latest foxtrot record received from England. Then, dimming the light, he got into bed.

From where he lay he could hear Walkely moving about his room, and could see the reflection his light cast on the exposed *attap* roof of the house. As he idly watched, speculating dreamily on Walley's success as a manager, Walkely's lamp in turn was lowered. Followed the creaking noise of a body turning on a spring mattress—then silence.

Dennis rolled from his left to right side preparatory to sleep.

'Nighty-night, Old Thing,' he grunted.

'Night,' came back the sleepy reply.

Then, all was quiet save for the gentle rustling of the rubber trees and the occasional hoot of an owl.

Presently, Dennis awoke to full alertness. He was not strung up; no sound nor fear nor nightmare had aroused him. He was simply and quietly awake. Turning on his side he looked at his watch. The hands pointed to 2 a.m. He closed his eyes, but sleep would not be wooed.

For a long time Dennis lay in the nearly darkened room, watching the waving branch of a rubber tree outside the window, that moved gently to the sighing of the breeze.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of feet ascending the steps that led from the garden to the verandah doors.

But half-awake, he listened.

Slowly, the footsteps mounted the stairs; then came the lifting of the latch that fastened the low wooden gates, and the creaking of moving hinges. The footsteps entered, continued the full length of the verandah, to pass into the dining-room beyond. Here, for a moment they halted. Then they moved again, shuffling uncertainly—forward, backward, sideways—as those of a person trying to locate something in the dark.

Again, they moved with steady tread and reached the intervening doors that shut off the passage.

Dennis listened and waited. What the devil is old Walley doing? he sleepily wondered.

A sudden rush of cool air struck on him over the top of the bedroom wall, billowing out his mosquito net.

Creak—creak—creak—the doors were opening. The footsteps went along the passage and came to a standstill at the end.

'Boy!'

The call was clear and decisive, but Dennis failed to quite recognise the voice, though he realised it was a European's.

There came no answer.

'Boy!'

This time the call was sharper, and impatience was in its tone. Still, no reply.

In the silence Dennis, wondering greatly, waited, for he was still uncertain whether the voice was Walkely's or another's.

The footsteps sounded again as they descended the stairs that led to the servants' quarters. On the bottom step they halted.

'Boy!'

The call was long, loud, and angry. Yet still, no answer came.

Up the stairs the footsteps returned. They strode along the passage, paused as the doors were closed and the latch clicked, then swiftly moved through the dining-room out on to the wide verandah. Here, for a moment they rested.

Sounded the fumbling for a latch, the squeak of a faulty hinge, and from the sharp banging of a door Dennis knew the footsteps had entered the mosquito-room.

He sprang out of bed, and, sitting on its edge, hurriedly pushed his feet into slippers. Then, as he was about to move, the lamp in the room went out.

'Damn!' he muttered, and fumbled for his matches, but before he found them he was listening to the opening and shutting of drawers.

He struck a match, and by its light crossed to the lamp, the wick of which, however, refused to burn, though he wasted many matches upon it.

In the gathering darkness, for the moon was setting, he moved toward the door, but, with his hand upon the knob, stood still, for the footsteps were shuffling again and the sharp banging to of the mosquito-door made him jump.

Through the verandah the footsteps went, gaining sureness with every stride. The gates creaked and the latch fell to. Down the stairs the footsteps clumped, the sound growing fainter till it became lost in the night.

Three deep-toned notes from the officer gong boomed on the air. Dennis shivered, kicked off his slippers and returned to bed. The air was cold, so he drew his blanket well around him.

'Old Walley's walking in his sleep or else indulging in a midnight prowl,' he muttered. Half a minute later, he was sound asleep.

As Dennis's eyes opened to the beauties of a tropic dawn, the clink of silver spoons against china reached his ears and the scent of a cigarette crept into the

room. He plunged his head into a basin of cold water, brushed his hair, and still in his *sarong* and *kabaiab*, went out on to the verandah, where Walkely paused in the act of conveying a cup to his mouth.

'Morning, Dennis,' he grunted, and continued drinking his tea.

He was never very talkative the first thing in the morning.

Dennis answered and busied himself with the teapot. Then, under cover of meticulously choosing a piece of toast, he studied Walkely, who showed no signs of having spent a sleepless night.

Suddenly, Walkely looked up and caught Dennis's eye upon him.

'Well,' he asked, 'What is it?'

'Nothing,' Dennis curtly replied.

'Then, why look at me like that?'

'Sorry, Old Thing,' Dennis stammered. 'I was only wondering——'

'Yes?'

'What the devil were you up to last night—walking all over the house and shouting for your boy?'

'Then you heard it, too?' Walkely asked the question with relief.

'It! What's *it*?' Dennis retorted. 'Didn't I hear *you* come up the verandah steps, open the gates and walk to the back? You called "Boy" three times, but got no answer. Then, you walked back through the house and down the steps. What was wrong, Walley?'

Walkely looked Dennis full in the eyes as he slowly answered:

'Nothing! Nothing was wrong, and I never moved from my room till this morning.'

'But—then who the——?'

'I never moved,' Walkely repeated. 'What you heard was Glister.'

'Glister! What on earth do you mean? Who's Glister?'

'You know. The chap who was manager here before Bellamy. He shot himself. Died in your room—on your bed. He's buried in the garden at the foot of the hill below your window. Great pity, but—drink and a native woman—nice chap, too.'

Walkely ceased as the light of recollection shone on Dennis's face.

'Yes, I remember,' he spoke almost to himself. 'I met him once at a Jesselton Race Meeting. A tall, good-looking fellow?'

Walkely nodded, and Dennis continued:

'He was awfully keen on a beautiful native woman—a Dusun named Jebbee.'

'Yes. She was lured away from Glister by another man. It was a dirty thing to do.'

'The swine! I only hope——'

'You needn't worry,' Walkely interrupted. 'He rues the day all right, I'll bet, for she's got him body and soul—doped to the eyes—and her temper is that of a fiend

incarnate. She is priestess, too, of the *Gusi*, and he daren't call his soul his own.'

'So, poor old Glister's loss was really his gain, if only he'd known!' Dennis's words were gently spoken.

'Yes. But he felt her absence, and in the loneliness that followed, the drink got him again.'

For nearly a minute there was silence between the two. It was as if their memories had recalled Glister's spirit to his old home, almost as if he were sitting at the table with them, while the tinkling of Jebee's anklets sounded from an adjoining room.

Dennis broke the silence.

'And, you mean that—that was he, last night?' he asked.

'Yes.' The word seemed drawn reluctantly from Walkely's lips.

'But, good lord, man!—you don't mean?—you can't—it's preposterous.'

'I know.' Walkely spoke slowly. 'It sounds absurd, doesn't it? But Old Bellamy went through it, saw him and spoke to him, and once even shot at him.'

'Bellamy! Bellamy shot him?'

'Yes. And, there isn't much mysticism about him—he's as much imagination as a turnip.'

'But——'

'All the "buts" in the world won't alter matters. Bellamy's seen him. I've seen him, and you've heard him. He's there—and it happens, and it's always the same—only——'

'What?' The word was wrung from Dennis.

'He's never entered the mosquito-room before.'

'You think——'

'I don't know! How can I? I'm only wondering why he went there—what he was searching for.'

'Drink, perhaps?'

Walkely shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'The room wasn't built in his days. No; there's something worrying him, something that's caused this variation of his usual walk.'

His eyes met Dennis's and he gave a short, half-ashamed laugh. Then:

'Get on with your tea. When you've finished we'll go and look at his grave. I always inspect it twice a month and put a coolie on cleaning it up and looking after the flowers. We'll have a look today.'

As Dennis dressed with unusual slowness his mind was full of the tragedy so strangely recalled. 'Poor old Glister!' he muttered. 'What an end!'

An impatient call roused Dennis from his reverie and he hastened to the verandah, to find Walkely already on the garden steps conversing with Gaga, the head *mandor* of many years' standing.

The three at once set off. Down well-laid cement steps, along a broad path that wound among a profusion of bright-coloured flowers they went. Overhead a flaming sun rode in an azure sky, and a faint breeze fanned their faces with its cooling breath, perfumed with the scent of dew and the fragrant, elusive blossoms of the rubber trees.

At the foot of the hill they turned and went in a single file along a narrow path that followed the winding contour of the hill.

The three walked in silence, for speech was difficult along that narrow track. Suddenly the path, dipping down, turned sharply, and Walkely, who was leading, became for an instant lost to view. Dennis, humming a Dusun love song, followed close behind, but as he reached the turn the tune died abruptly on his lips and he stood stone-still.

'Good lord! What can it mean?'

The words were gasped by Walkely, who stood transfixed, staring with horror-struck eyes straight before him.

Instinctively, Walkely turned to Dennis, who, like himself, stood with gaze fixed and staring eyes.

'What can it mean?' he gasped a second time.

For, they had reached the grave, and *it was open*. Heaped under the railings surrounding it, which were intact, were piles of fresh-dug earth, and all round lay the scattered flowers, withered and trampled into twisted shapes.

The eyes of Dennis and Walkely met. In each there lurked a question that neither dared to ask. Each heard again the shuffling footsteps of the previous night, and the opening and shutting of the drawers in the mosquito-room.

A shadow fell across them as they stood. There came a startled cry, the quick pattering of bare feet, and Gaga flung himself upon his knees, burying his hands in the earth.

'Gaga!'

The word was a sharp command of outraged wrath. But the man did not heed, and his hands continued fumbling, fingering, searching.

Walkely stooped down to seize the kneeling *mandor* by the shoulder, then straightened up as the latter rose and, turning, showed a face pallid under the yellow of his skin, from which stark horror shone.

'The *pandang*, Tuan,' he gasped. 'The *pandang*! It has gone!'

Walkely looked at him in stupefaction.

'Gaga——' he began, but got no further, for the man, heedless of Walkely's upraised hand, broke in:

'The *pandang*, Tuan, the silver *pandang* that Jebee used to wear as token of her priesthood of the *Gusi*, has gone. The silver *pandang* is no more!'

He ceased, and for a moment there was silence among the three.

On Walkely's face there showed a blank amazement, but Dennis's brows had gathered in a frown and his lips had closed in a deep, straight line. He was the first to speak.

'Walkely,' he said, 'may I ask Gaga questions?'

Walkely nodded his assent, and Dennis turned to Gaga.

'Gaga, tell me, what makes you say the silver *pandang* is no more?'

'Because,' Gaga stammered in his emotion, 'because—when *Tuan* Glistar was buried the *pandang* was buried, too—and—now...'

His gaze sought for the coffin for a moment, and he fingered a charm of monkeys' teeth that hung around his neck.

'Tell me, Gaga,' Dennis's voice was very gentle, 'all you know. Begin at the beginning.'

Gaga looked relieved, for a native resents questioning and loves to tell a story in his own way.

'The *Tuans* know,' he began, 'that *Tuan* Glistar had a *myai* named Jebee. She came to him when she was very young, but vowed by the oaths of her parents to the priesthood of the *Gusi*, the sacred jars we Dusuns worship, which only our womenkind may tend. But she was young and beautiful and full of life. Her beauty was unmatched in all this land of Sabah; her form was lithe, her footsteps light; her waist was small; yet she was vowed in wifedom to a jar, the sacred *Gusi*! Her lips and eyes, though warring with her blood, were innocent of love till *Tuan* Glistar visited the village in search of coolies for the estate.

'Then'—Gaga paused, seeming for a moment at a loss to find his words—'then—the *Tuan* was tall and handsome, and possessed golden hair. He had a laughing, winning way and eyes that darted here and there and made the warm blood race within your veins when once his glance had rested on you. His eyes discovered Jebee, and——'

Gaga looked nervously from Dennis and Walkely as he shuffled his feet, frightened of saying too much concerning a white man before others of his race.

Dennis read the meaning of his glance.

'Yes, Gaga. You may speak,' he said, 'for the *Tuan Besar* and I are friends and we would give *Tuan* Glistar's wandering spirit peace. Say all that is in your heart. We understand.'

'*Tuan*!' Gaga's tone conveyed a depth of grateful meaning. 'That night there was dancing and feasting in the village, and pitcher after pitcher of *tapai* was consumed. The *Tuan* drank, too, but none could stand against him, and one by one they sank into a heavy sleep. Only the *Tuan* remained. He left the headman's house, and going through the village reached Jebee's home.

'It was that darkest hour before dawn when the chill wind blows, yet she was seated on the topmost step. The light of the dying moon seemed focused on the

silver buckle that she wore, hung from a rotan girdle around her waist.

'Their eyes met. No word was said. The *Tuan* stretched out his arms and Jebbee went to him, and the Tuan's arms enfolded her.'

Gaga ceased. The silence lengthened till the office gong, booming eight deep notes, shattered the spell.

'How do you know all this, Gaga?' Walkely asked at length. 'You never mentioned it before!'

A look of surprise flitted over the *mandor's* face, then he quietly replied:

'The *Tuan* never asked me my story before, nor is it customary for the white man to discuss others of his race with natives. How do I know? Why, *Tuan Besar*, was I not present on that night, and is not Jebbee my sister, though of a different mother?

'The *Tuan* had saved my life, and Jebbee was young. The warm blood danced in her veins, and her heart cried out for a mate. And so ... The river, *Tuan*, flowed far from the village. The *Tuan's* boat was there. All in the village slept. The *Tuan* led her to the boat, while I stole up the steps, entered the house and made a bundle of her clothes. Then, to the waiting boat I followed. The *Tuan* had covered Jebbee with his coat and she was sleeping, but the silver buckle hung round his neck. And, from that day it never left him. We three were alone in the boat. The *Tuan* and I picked up the paddles, and as their blades in silence touched the water the moon slipped beneath the earth and the *Burong bantu* hooted thrice. An evil omen, which the *Tuan* heeded not and Jebbee did not hear.

'Till the sun was high we paddled and by noon were far beyond pursuit, for the river flowed very swiftly and one does not wake early from such a sleep as those in the village were sleeping.'

Gaga paused, then he added:

'The rest of the story the *Tuans* know. For a little while the *Tuan* and Jebbee were happy. But the omen of the *Burong bantu* and the dying moon would not be denied.

'And, the shadow of the *Gusi* lay between them. So, though the *Tuan* loved her he drank too deeply, and she found favour in another's sight and went away. But the *Tuans* know the rest. I buried him—there was no white man on the estate—and as he died he made me promise to bury the buckle with him, hanging round his neck. It was the only thing of Jebbee's that he kept.'

'And, now?'

Dennis put the question sharply, and his eyes held Gaga's gaze.

'I am afraid, *Tuan*—sore afraid.'

'Of what?'

'I do not know; and the silver *pandang* has been stolen, though its hiding-place was unknown. To none has it value, save to my people, and for years now they have let it rest. But, *Tuan*, they never forget, and the *Gusi* is most sacred. In the great blue

jar that Jebee used to tend, and should have wedded, Maboga, the bad Spirit, dwells. Of late evil has befallen my people: the buffaloes bring forth no young, and the crops refuse to ripen; so, *Tuan*, I am afraid.'

Gaga ceased, and once again silence fell upon the three.

Suddenly, it was broken by the hurrying footsteps and laboured breathing of a man who ran, and round the bend appeared an *opas*.

All three looked up at his approach and saw stark fear upon his face.

'*Tuan! Tuan!*' he gasped. '*Tuan* Glister cannot be found. His house is empty, and his bedroom disarranged, and on the floor is a pool of blood——'

His eyes caught sight of the open grave. The words faltered on his tongue, then ceased, and he stood silent, trembling like a leaf.

At the mention of that name Dennis started, but before he could speak Walkely answered the question hovering on his lips.

'Young Glister's my new assistant, Dennis,' he spoke in a queer, strained voice; 'he came only last month; you haven't met him yet.'

'But——'

'He's a younger brother of ...' Walkely looked toward the grave. 'It's horrible!' he muttered.

In a flash the meaning of the rifled grave and Glister's disappearance grew plain, and the frown on Dennis's face grew deeper and his lips grew more compressed. Heedless of Walkely's questionings of the jibbering *opas* he turned to Gaga.

'Gaga,' he said, 'I see the hand of Maboga stretching out, seeking revenge for the insult of years ago. His arm is long. It stretches from the *Tuan's* grave to a village in the hills. Is it not so?'

'*Tuan?*' Gaga answered.

'It stretches,' Dennis continued, 'from the village to the new *Tuan's* house as well, for what the white man took must be repaid with interest. What think you, Gaga?'

'That the *Tuan* is wise and reads the Dusun as a book.'

'Dennis!' Walkely had dismissed the *opas*, and putting out his hand, grasped Dennis's arm. 'Dennis,' he cried, 'what do you mean? Glister has disappeared, there's blood upon his floor and we stand here while heaven knows what devil's work is being done! What do you mean—with interest?'

'Listen, Walley.' Dennis weighed his words and spoke with slow conviction. 'I'm in the dark almost as much as you—but I know the Dusuns and the fetish of their *Gusi* worship. When Glister took Jebee from her people, she broke their vows and outraged the sacred jars; but while the years were plentiful and their calves were strong they did not worry; when, as now, the inevitable lean year comes they seek a reason for their troubles.'

'You men...?' asked Walkely, still perplexed.

'That reason is Maboga. They think he will not be appeased unless...'

Dennis did not finish, but his glance wandered to the open grave and back to Walkely's strained white face, on which the dawning light of comprehension showed.

'Good heavens!' he muttered. 'You really think...?'

Dennis nodded, then turned to Gaga.

'Gaga,' he said, 'tell me exactly what happens at the Feast.'

'The silver buckles of the priestesses, *Tuan*, are hung upon the *Gusis*' lips. Then, when the dying moon is half-way set, the mateless wives say prayers and wash the sacred jars, and call upon the spirits to come forth and give their judgment on the village for the year. This year I think Maboga's jar will once again be decked. But who will cleanse the sacred lips I cannot think, for while Jebee lives the *pandang* may be worn by no one else. *Tuan* Glister dared, and paid the price.'

'And, Maboga?' Dennis's voice was low, almost a whisper.

For a moment Gaga hesitated, then he replied: 'The *Tuan* himself has said: "What the white man took must be repaid—with interest."'

He paused; then he added: 'A white man's head has never yet hung in a Dusuan house, but three days hence Maboga will decide.'

The eyes of Dennis and Walkely met. Both seemed to hear again the shufflings in the night, the opening and the shutting of the drawers. Both understood the object of that search.

'I'll borrow Glister's revolver, Walley, for we'll go alone with only Gaga as our guide, and attend this Feast,' said Dennis.

For hours the booming of gongs had been borne upon the breeze, yet though the three had been steadily ascending, the deep-toned notes still sounded far away.

On the crest of a hill Dennis and his companion halted for a brief rest, and then onward and upward the trio climbed, while the track grew narrower and stonier and the jungle pressed closer on every side, and long trailing thorn-edged creepers, hanging from the trees, whipped their faces and tore their clothes.

The leading beast stopped and Gaga raised his hand. Without a word the two white men drew level, for the path had widened out, and they stood upon the border of a glade, dissected by a muddy stream, whose banks were scored with a myriad hoof-marks.

Gaga slipped from his animal and softly spoke.

'We are nearly there, *Tuan*. This is their grazing-ground, but all the animals are at the village, for all have ridden to the Feast.'

Dennis nodded and proceeded, like the others, to tether his beast.

Then, on foot the three moved forward, but with a quicker pace, for the gongs were loudly booming with a beat that would not be denied. Even as they crossed the

muddy stream, the swaying, rhythmic time, rising and falling with the cadence of a dance, gave place to an insistent note that rose and rose, till only one intense vibration, one single throbbing note, beat on the heavy air with a malignant strength sapping all kindly thoughts and fanning to flame the primal lusts of hate and vengeance.

A little farther and the path rose with a sudden precipitousness that forced them to mount the well-worn stones as though they climbed a stair. They reached the top, to stand upon a tiny plain, on which the shadows of the encircling trees were slowly lengthening.

Even as they rested to regain their breath that one insistent note ceased, and for an instant silence reigned.

Then, from the glade's farther end arose a cry, faint at first, then slowly louder, harsher, stronger, swelling to a might pæan, to a tumultuous cry: 'Maboga; Maboga! Aki Maboga!' And, stillness once again, save for the hurried padding of running feet as the three raced across the shadow-flecked glade.

Panting, they reached a wall of jungle, pierced by a sunken path that twined its short length through the heart of a moss-clad hill, whose riven sides were lit with weird, fantastic lights, thrown from countless torches that burned upon a plateau at its end.

In the shadow of a belt of trees they paused to take stock of their surroundings.

The plateau formed a horseshoe, and at its apex stood a native house built eight feet off the ground, whose length stretched three hundred feet. At either end, leading to the only doors, were rough-hewn steps, carved from solid logs of timber, and from these steps arose two poles, six feet in height, between which was stretched a length of knotted rotan. From this, like a gruesome necklace, hung two rows of ghastly human heads—blackened and dried from the smoke of years—save at each end. And, there hung two heads with staring, sightless eyes, and bared lips exposing whitened teeth; and from them the red blood dripped.

Upon the ground, placed in a semi-circle, stood the jars—the sacred *Gusi*—ranged in accordance with their height and rank. From either end they tapered up toward the central spot, where, side by side, rose two of flaming blue that reached the height of a man's shoulder.

The rim, or lip, of each was of a different hue—one black, one white—while from the neck of those whose lip was black grew four large ears, and in the lobes of each was placed a human skull.

Behind each jar, save one, a woman stood; her thick black hair piled high upon her head, framing her lime-washed face from which her dark eyes shone; her figure swathed from chin to toe in shrouded black, girt at the waist with a girdle of mice and monkeys' teeth.

A silver *pandang* hung under the lip of every jar but one, and resting on its

swelling shoulder shimmered and winked in the torches' fantastic light.

Facing the jars, the Dusuns sat in rows, immobile and intent. There shone upon the face of everyone a strained expectancy, showing in the taut muscles of the back and the restless, twining fingers of the hands. Thus, they waited—in that strange, uncanny silence—for the answer to their cry, 'Maboga, Maboga, Aki Maboga!'

Almost forgetful of the purpose of their errand, Dennis and Walkely watched, fascinated by the scene before them, lit by the waning moon and the lurid, flickering torches. Something of its primaeval instincts and the tension of the squatting natives crept into their veins and held them spellbound as they gazed upon the coloured jars, with their glittering, shining buckles, each with its dumb, attendant white-faced woman, backed by the long, unbroken shadow of the palm-roofed house.

While the moon sank slowly in the west, until its lower rim began to kiss the topmost ridge of the roof, the silence lengthened, till it seemed as if nature slept and those rows of squatting natives were graven images devoid of breath.

But all at once there came a creaking sound, and the tension snapped. A long, rippling murmur, half-sigh, half-gasp, filled the air, and Gaga's hand gripped Dennis's arm.

'Look, *Tuan*, look!' he whispered, and pointed to a hut which stood alone and almost hidden in the shade of a mighty billian tree.

The two men obeyed, following the line of Gaga's pointing finger.

The hut door opened slowly as the noise increased. But though no light burned within, a shadowy form was faintly visible, moving towards the glade. Slowly, silently, though still half-hidden by the shade, the form drew near. Then, as all eyes were turned upon it a glinting speck of light winked in the gloom. And, as the figure moved the winking light moved, too.

Slowly, steadily from the shade into the flickering fringe of torches; from the fringe into the full lurid glare moved the figure and the light.

A quick intake of many breaths; a long, loud gasp of terrified surprise. Then silence—and a woman, with a silver buckle hanging from a girdle round her waist, stood before the great blue sacred jar, from under whose deep black lip no silver buckle hung.

Over the silence, that like a living spirit lay upon the glade, Gaga's excited whisper just reached Dennis's and Walkely's ears.

'*Tuan*, it is Jebee, and she wears the silver *pandang* that I buried in *Tuan* Glister's grave! *Tuan*, *Tuan*, I am afraid!'

Even as he spoke the woman raised her rounded arms, on which no gleaming bangles shone, and with a single gesture unloosed the coils of her high-wound hair. The long, thick tresses fell around her like a black cloak.

Again, she raised her arms, this time in supplication, and her low, clear voice went chanting through the glade.

'Aki Maboga of the Sacred *Gusi*, Spirit of Evil who dwelleth in the great blue jar, hear now thy erring daughter, thy forsworn priestess, and forgive. Here, in my shame I stand before thee and the assembled people, bearing the silver *pandang*, symbol of thy might and power, which in my youth and wilful love I disgraced.

'Thou, who for long has been neglected, till thy just wrath burst into flame, so that the crops no longer ripen and the herds cease to bring forth young, lift, I beseech thee, Aki Maboga, the shadow of thy anger from off my race.

'Through me and for my sin my people have been punished; through me, O Aki, pronounce the penance thou dost claim.'

She ceased, and as a wailing cry rose from the assembled natives, slipped slowly to her knees, and flinging her arms round the great jar's neck, rested her lips upon its blackened rim.

Walkely stirred, but Dennis's warning hand bade him keep still. Gaga, speechless and with bulging eyes, stared at the kneeling figure.

A wind was stirring in the trees. The moon had sunk completely out of sight, and here and there a flickering torch gutted and burnt out.

Thus, in the creeping darkness they waited, while the moments grew to minutes burdened with suspense—waited for Maboga's answer that his deep black lips would whisper in Jebee's listening ear.

At length, with infinite grace, she rose, and stood clothed in her long black hair behind the great blue jar; for on its swelling shoulders, glinting against its deep black lip, the silver *pandang* lay.

The wind was sighing in the trees. The rustling leaves made soft accompaniment to her voice, which trembled with emotion.

'My lips have kissed the sacred *Gusi*—my tears have washed its deep black lip. The silver *pandang* has returned to deck the shrine of the Great Spirit, who has spoken, for my ears have caught his whispering breath.'

A murmur rose, then faded, and she continued:

'Rejoice, O people, for I see the crops on all the hillsides ripening and herds with their young. But for his clemency Maboga asks a price.'

She paused; then stretching out her arms cried in a ringing voice: 'What will you give, my people, to allay your desperate plight?'

Quick as the summer lightning, swift as an adder's tongue came the answer from those rows of waiting natives.

'What the white man took, let him repay with interest. The head of the white man's brother we will give as a make-peace to Maboga, and as thy wedding gift.'

She raised her hand, and there was silence.

'Thy words are good; thy offering acceptable unto——'

Her words were drowned in a great shout of fear, as a lighted torch fell from its bamboo socket on to the palm-roofed house.

Like running water fanned by the rising breeze, the flames spread rapidly, till in the twinkling of an eye the wooden house was nothing but three hundred feet of sheeted flame.

Then, pandemonium reigned and terror stalked the glade.

But to the watching three the fire was providential, for the burning house lit up a hut, till now hidden in the gloom, and at its single window they beheld young Glister's bloodstained face.

Under the shadow of the trees, skirting the edge of the tiny plain, they raced. A few more yards and they would reach the door; another second—out of the shadows by the hut a naked figure sprang, her long black hair streaming in the breeze, a glittering, sharp-edged sword in her hand.

With an oath, Walkely forged ahead, but, missing his footing on a twisted root, stumbled and fell.

The sudden, instinctive tightening of his fingers, a flare and a sharp report; a cry of pain, a sagging, drooping form—and Jebbee lay a crumpled figure across the threshold of the hut.

Adventure of the Speckled Band

By Arthur Conan Doyle

On glancing over my notes of the seventy-odd cases in which I have, during the last eight years, studied the methods of my friend Sherlock Holmes, I find many tragic, some comic, a large number merely strange, but none commonplace; for, working as he did rather for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth, he refused to associate himself with any investigation which did not tend towards the unusual, and even the fantastic. Of all these varied cases, however, I cannot recall any which presented more singular features than that which was associated with the well-known Surrey family of the Roylotts of Stoke Moran. The events in question occurred in the early days of my association with Holmes, when we were sharing rooms as bachelors in Baker Street. It is possible that I might have placed them upon record before, but a promise of secrecy was made at the time, from which I have only been freed during the last month by the untimely death of the lady to whom the pledge was given. It is perhaps as well that the facts should now come to light, for I have reasons to know that there are wide-spread rumours as to the death of Dr Grimesby Roylott, which tend to make the matter even more terrible than the truth.

It was early in April in the year '83 that I woke one morning to find Sherlock Holmes standing, fully dressed, by the side of my bed. He was a late riser as a rule, and as the clock on the mantelpiece showed me that it was only a quarter past seven, I blinked up at him in some surprise, and perhaps just a little resentment, for I was myself regular in my habits.

'Very sorry to knock you up, Watson,' said he, 'but it's the common lot this morning. Mrs Hudson has been knocked up; she retorted upon me, and I on you.'

'What is it, then—a fire?'

'No, a client. It seems that a young lady has arrived in a considerable state of excitement, who insists upon seeing me. She is waiting now in the sitting-room. Now, when young ladies wander about the metropolis at this hour of the morning, and knock sleepy people up out of their beds, I presume that it is something very pressing which they have to communicate. Should it prove to be an interesting case, you would, I am sure, wish to follow it from the outset. I thought, at any rate, that I should call you and give you the chance.'

'My dear fellow, I would not miss it for anything.'

I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him. I rapidly threw on my clothes, and was ready in a few minutes to accompany my friend down to the sitting-room. A lady dressed in black and heavily veiled, who had been sitting in the window, rose as we entered.

'Good-morning, madam,' said Holmes, cheerily. 'My name is Sherlock Holmes. This is my intimate friend and associate, Dr Watson, before whom you can speak as freely as before myself. Ha! I am glad to see that Mrs Hudson has had the good sense to light the fire. Pray draw up to it, and I shall order you a cup of hot coffee, for I observed that you are shivering.'

'It is not cold which makes me shiver,' said the woman, in a low voice, changing her seat as requested.

'What, then?'

'It is fear, Mr Holmes. It is terror.' She raised her veil as she spoke, and we could see that she was indeed in a pitiable state of agitation, her face all drawn and gray, with restless, frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal. Her features and figure were those of a woman of thirty, but her hair was shot with premature gray, and her expression was weary and haggard. Sherlock Holmes ran her over with one of his quick, all-comprehensive glances.

'You must not fear,' said he, soothingly, bending forward and patting her forearm. 'We shall soon set matters right, I have no doubt. You have come in by train this morning, I see.'

'You know me, then?'

'No, but I observe the second half of a return ticket in the palm of your left glove. You must have started early, and yet you had a good drive in a dog-cart, along heavy roads, before you reached the station.'

The lady gave a violent start, and stared in bewilderment at my companion.

'There is no mystery, my dear madam,' said he, smiling, 'the left arm of your

jacket is spattered with mud in no less than seven places. The marks are perfectly fresh. There is no vehicle save a dog-cart which throws up mud in that way, and then only when you sit on the left-hand side of the driver.'

'Whatever your reasons may be, you are perfectly correct,' said she. 'I started from home before six, reached Leatherhead at twenty past, and came in by the first train to Waterloo. Sir, I can stand this strain no longer; I shall go mad if it continues. I have no one to turn to—none, save only one, who cares for me, and he, poor fellow, can be of little aid. I have heard of you, Mr Holmes: I have heard of you from Mrs Farintosh, whom you helped in the hour of her sore need. It was from her that I had your address. Oh, sir, do you not think that you could help me, too, and at least throw a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds me? At present it is out of my power to reward you for your services, but in a month or six weeks I shall be married, with the control of my own income, and then at least you shall not find me ungrateful.'

Holmes turned to his desk, and unlocking it, drew out a small case-book, which he consulted.

'Farintosh,' said he. 'Ah yes, I recall the case; it was concerned with an opal tiara. I think it was before your time, Watson. I can only say, madam, that I shall be happy to devote the same care to your case as I did to that of your friend. As to reward, my profession is its own reward; but you are at liberty to defray whatever expenses I may be put to, at the time which suits you best. And now, I beg that you will lay before us everything that may help us in forming an opinion upon the matter.'

'Alas!' replied our visitor, 'the very horror of my situation lies in the fact that my fears are so vague, and my suspicions depend so entirely upon small points, which might seem trivial to another, that even he to whom of all others I have a right to look for help and advice looks upon all that I tell him about it as the fancies of a nervous woman. He does not say so, but I can read it from his soothing answers and averted eyes. But I have heard, Mr Holmes, that you can see deeply into the manifold wickedness of the human heart. You may advise me how to walk amid the dangers which encompass me.'

'I am all attention, madam.'

'My name is Helen Stoner, and I am living with my stepfather, who is the last survivor of one of the oldest Saxon families in England, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran, on the western border of Surrey.'

Holmes nodded his head. 'The name is familiar to me,' said he.

'The family was at one time among the richest in England, and the estates extended over the borders into Berkshire in the north, and Hampshire in the west. In the last century, however, four successive heirs were of a dissolute and wasteful disposition, and the family ruin was eventually completed by a gambler in the days

of the Regency. Nothing was left save a few acres of ground, and the two-hundred-year-old house, which is itself crushed under a heavy mortgage. The last squire dragged out his existence there, living the horrible life of an aristocratic pauper: but his only son, my stepfather, seeing that he must adapt himself to the new conditions, obtained an advance from a relative, which enabled him to take a medical degree, and went out to Calcutta, where, by his professional skill and his force of character, he established a large practice. In a fit of anger, however, caused by some robberies which had been perpetrated in the house, he beat his native butler to death, and narrowly escaped a capital sentence. As it was, he suffered a long term of imprisonment, and afterwards returned to England, a morose and disappointed man.

'When Dr Royslott was in India he married my mother, Mrs Stoner, the young widow of Major-general Stoner, of the Bengal Artillery. My sister Julia and I were twins, and we were only two years old at the time of my mother's re-marriage. She had a considerable sum of money—not less than £1,000 a year—and this she bequeathed to Dr Royslott entirely while we resided with him, with a provision that a certain annual sum should be allowed to each of us in the event of our marriage. Shortly after our return to England my mother died—she was killed eight years ago in a railway accident near Crewe. Dr Royslott then abandoned his attempts to establish himself in practice in London, and took us to live with him in the old ancestral house at Stoke Moran. The money which my mother had left was enough for all our wants, and there seemed to be no obstacle to our happiness.

'But a terrible change came over our stepfather about this time. Instead of making friends and exchanging visits with our neighbours, who had at first been overjoyed to see a Royslott of Stoke Moran back in the old family seat, he shut himself up in his house, and seldom came out save to indulge in ferocious quarrels with whoever might cross his path. Violence of temper approaching to mania has been hereditary in the men of the family, and in my stepfather's case it had, I believe, been intensified by his long residence in the tropics. A series of disgraceful brawls took place, two of which ended in the police-court, until at last he became the terror of the village, and the folks would fly at his approach, for he is a man of immense strength, and absolutely uncontrollable in his anger.

'Last week he hurled the local blacksmith over a parapet into a stream, and it was only by paying over all the money which I could gather together that I was able to avert another public exposure. He had no friends at all save the wandering gypsies, and he would give these vagabonds leave to encamp upon the few acres of bramble-covered land, which represent the family estate, and would accept in return the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end. He has a passion also for Indian animals, which are sent over to him by a correspondent, and he has at this moment a cheetah and a baboon, which wander freely over his grounds, and are feared by the villagers almost as much as their

master.

'You can imagine from what I say that my poor sister Julia and I had no great pleasure in our lives. No servant would stay with us, and for a long time we did all the work of the house. She was but thirty at the time of her death, and yet her hair had already begun to whiten, even as mine has.'

'Your sister is dead, then?'

'She died just two years ago, and it is of her death that I wish to speak to you. You can understand that, living the life which I have described, we were little likely to see any one of our own age and position. We had, however, an aunt, my mother's maiden sister, Miss Honoria Westphail, who lives near Harrow, and we were occasionally allowed to pay short visits at this lady's house. Julia went there at Christmas two years ago, and met there a half-pay major of marines, to whom she became engaged. My stepfather learned of the engagement when my sister returned, and offered no objection to the marriage; but within a fortnight of the day which had been fixed for the wedding, the terrible event occurred which has deprived me of my only companion.'

Sherlock Holmes had been leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed and his head sunk in a cushion, but he half-opened his lids now and glanced across at his visitor.

'Pray be precise as to details,' said he.

'It is easy for me to be so, for every event of that dreadful time is seared into my memory. The manor-house is, as I have already said, very old, and only one wing is now inhabited. The bedrooms in this wing are on the ground floor, the sitting-room being in the central block of the buildings. Of these bedrooms the first is Dr Roylott's, the second my sister's, and the third my own. There is no communication between them, but they all open out into the same corridor. Do I make myself plain?'

'Perfectly so.'

'The windows of the three rooms open out upon the lawn. That fatal night Dr Roylott had gone to his room early, though we knew that he had not retired to rest, for my sister was troubled by the smell of the strong Indian cigars which it was his custom to smoke. She left her room, therefore, and came into mine, where she sat for some time chatting about her approaching wedding. At eleven o'clock she rose to leave me but she paused at the door and looked back.

' "Tell me, Helen," said she, "have you ever heard anyone whistle in the dead of the night?"

' "Never," said I.

' "I suppose that you could not possibly whistle, yourself, in your sleep?"

' "Certainly not. But why?"

' "Because during the last few nights I have always, about three in the morning,

heard a low, clear whistle. I am a light sleeper, and it has awakened me. I cannot tell where it came from—perhaps from the next room, perhaps from the lawn. I thought that I would just ask you whether you had heard it."

' "No, I have not. It must be those wretched gypsies in the plantation."

' "Very likely. And yet, if it were on the lawn, I wonder that you did not hear it also."

' "Ah, but I sleep more heavily than you."

' "Well, it is of no great consequence, at any rate." She smiled back at me, closed my door, and a few minutes later I heard her key turn in the lock.'

'Indeed,' said Holmes. 'Was it your custom always to lock yourselves in at night?'

'Always.'

'And why?'

'I think that I mentioned to you that the doctor kept a cheetah and a baboon. We had no feeling of security unless our doors were locked.'

'Quite so. Pray proceed with your statement.'

'I could not sleep that night. A vague feeling of impending misfortune impressed me. My sister and I, you will recollect, were twins, and you know how subtle are the links which bind two souls which are so closely allied. It was a wild night. The wind was howling outside, and the rain was beating and splashing against the windows. Suddenly, amid all the hubbub of the gale, there burst forth the wild scream of a terrified woman. I knew that it was my sister's voice. I sprang from my bed, wrapped a shawl round me, and rushed into the corridor. As I opened my door I seemed to hear a low whistle, such as my sister described, and a few moments later a clanging sound, as if a mass of metal had fallen. As I ran down the passage, my sister's door was unlocked, and revolved slowly upon its hinges. I stared at it horror-stricken, not knowing what was about to issue from it. By the light of the corridor-lamp I saw my sister appear at the opening, her face blanched with terror, her hands groping for help, her whole figure swaying to and fro like that of a drunkard. I ran to her and threw my arms round her, but at that moment her knees seemed to give way and she fell to the ground. She writhed as one who is in terrible pain, and her limbs were dreadfully convulsed. At first I thought that she had not recognised me, but as I bent over her she suddenly shrieked out in a voice which I shall never forget, "Oh, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band!" There was something else which she would fain have said, and she stabbed with her finger into the air in the direction of the doctor's room, but a fresh convulsion seized her and choked her words. I rushed out, calling loudly for my stepfather, and I met him hastening from his room in his dressing-gown. When he reached my sister's side she was unconscious, and though he poured brandy down her throat and sent for medical aid from the village, all efforts were in vain, for she slowly sank and died

without having recovered her consciousness. Such was the dreadful end of my beloved sister.'

'One moment,' said Holmes: 'are you sure about this whistle and metallic sound? Could you swear to it?'

'That was what the county coroner asked me at the inquiry. It is my strong impression that I heard it, and yet, among the crash of the gale and the creaking of an old house, I may possibly have been deceived.'

'Was your sister dressed?'

'No, she was in her night-dress. In her right hand was found the charred stump of a match, and in her left a matchbox.'

'Showing that she had struck a light and looked about her when the alarm took place. That is important. And, what conclusions did the coroner come to?'

'He investigated the case with great care, for Dr Roylott's conduct had long been notorious in the county, but he was unable to find any satisfactory cause of death. My evidence showed that the door had been fastened upon the inner side, and the windows were blocked by old-fashioned shutters with broad iron bars, which were secured every night. The walls were carefully sounded, and were shown to be quite solid all round, and the flooring was also thoroughly examined, with the same result. The chimney is wide, but is barred up by four large staples. It is certain, therefore, that my sister was quite alone when she met her end. Besides, there were no marks of any violence upon her.'

'How about poison?'

'The doctors examined her for it, but without success.'

'What do you think that this unfortunate lady died of, then?'

'It is my belief that she died of pure fear and nervous shock, though what it was that frightened her I cannot imagine.'

'Were there gypsies in the plantation at the time?'

'Yes, there are nearly always some there.'

'Ah, and what did you gather from this allusion to a band—a speckled band?'

'Sometimes I have thought that it was merely the wild talk of delirium, sometimes that it may have referred to some band of people, perhaps to those very gypsies in the plantation. I do not know whether the spotted handkerchiefs which so many of them wear over their heads might have suggested the strange adjective which she used.'

Holmes shook his head like a man who is far from being satisfied.

'These are very deep waters,' said he; 'pray go on with your narrative.'

'Two years have passed since then, and my life has been until lately lonelier than ever. A month ago, however, a dear friend, whom I have known for many years, has done me the honour to ask my hand in marriage. His name is Armitage—Percy Armitage—the second son of Mr Armitage, of Crane Water, near Reading.'

My stepfather has offered no opposition to the match, and we are to be married in the course of the spring. Two days ago some repairs were started in the west wing of the building, and my bed-room wall has been pierced, so that I have had to move into the chamber in which my sister died, and to sleep in the very bed in which she slept. Imagine, then, my thrill of terror when last night, as I lay awake, thinking over her terrible fate, I suddenly heard in the silence of the night the low whistle which had been the herald of her own death. I sprang up and lit the lamp, but nothing was to be seen in the room. I was too shaken to go to bed again, however, so I dressed, and as soon as it was daylight, I slipped down, got a dog-cart at the "Crown Inn", which is opposite, and drove to Leatherhead, from whence I have come on this morning with the one object of seeing you and asking your advice.'

'You have done wisely,' said my friend. 'But have you told me all?'

'Yes, all.'

'Miss Roylott, you have not. You are screening your stepfather.'

'Why, what do you mean?'

For answer Holmes pushed back the frill of black lace which fringed the hand that lay upon our visitor's knee. Five little livid spots, the marks of four fingers and a thumb, were printed upon the white wrist.

'You have been cruelly used,' said Holmes.

The lady coloured deeply and covered over her injured wrist. 'He is a hard man,' she said, 'and perhaps he hardly knows his own strength.'

There was a long silence, during which Holmes leaned his chin upon his hands and stared into the crackling fire.

'This is a very deep business,' he said, at last. 'There are a thousand details which I should have desired to know before I decide upon our course of action. Yet, we have not a moment to lose. If we were to come to Stoke Moran to-day, would it be possible for us to see over these rooms without the knowledge of your stepfather?'

'As it happens, he spoke of coming into town to-day upon some most important business. It is probable that he will be away all day, and that there would be nothing to disturb you. We have a housekeeper now, but she is old and foolish, and I could easily get her out of the way.'

'Excellent. You are not averse to this trip, Watson?'

'By no means.'

'Then we shall both come. What are you going to do yourself?'

'I have one or two things which I would wish to do now that I am in town. But I shall return by the twelve o'clock train, so as to be there in time for your coming.'

'And you may expect us early in the afternoon. I have myself some small business matters to attend to. Will you not wait and breakfast?'

'No, I must go. My heart is lightened already since I have confided my trouble

to you. I shall look forward to seeing you again this afternoon.' She dropped her thick black veil over her face and glided from the room.

'And what do you think of it all, Watson?' asked Sherlock Holmes, leaning back in his chair.

'It seems to me to be a most dark and sinister business.'

'Dark enough and sinister enough.'

'Yet, if the lady is correct in saying that the flooring and walls are sound, and that the door, window, and chimney are impassable, then her sister must have been undoubtedly alone when she met her mysterious end.'

'What becomes, then, of these nocturnal whistles, and what of the very peculiar words of the dying woman?'

'I cannot think.'

'When you combine the ideas of whistles at night, the presence of a band of gypsies who are on intimate terms with this old doctor, the fact that we have every reason to believe that the doctor has an interest in preventing his step-daughter's marriage, the dying allusion to a band, and, finally, the fact that Miss Helen Stoner heard a metallic clang, which might have been caused by one of those metal bars which secured the shutters falling back into their place, I think that there is good ground to think that the mystery may be cleared along those lines.'

'But what, then, did the gypsies do?'

'I cannot imagine.'

'I see many objections to any such theory.'

'And so do I. It is precisely for that reason that we are going to Stoke Moran this day. I want to see whether the objections are fatal, or if they may be explained away. But what in the name of the devil!'

The ejaculation had been drawn from my companion by the fact that our door had been suddenly dashed open, and that a huge man had framed himself in the aperture. His costume was a peculiar mixture of the professional and of the agricultural, having a black top-hat, a long frock-coat, and a pair of high gaiters, with a hunting-crop swinging in his hand. So tall was he that his hat actually brushed the cross bar of the doorway, and his breadth seemed to span it across from side to side. A large face, seared with a thousand wrinkles, burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion, was turned from one to the other of us, while his deep-set, bile-shot eyes, and his high, thin, fleshless nose, gave him somewhat the resemblance to a fierce old bird of prey.

'Which of you is Holmes?' asked this apparition.

'My name, sir; but you have the advantage of me,' said my companion, quietly.

'I am Dr Grimesby Roylott, of Stoke Moran.'

'Indeed, doctor,' said Holmes, blandly. 'Pray take a seat.'

'I will do nothing of the kind. My step-daughter has been here. I have traced her.'

What has she been saying to you?'

'It is a little cold for the time of the year,' said Holmes.

'What has she been saying to you?' screamed the old man, furiously.

'But I have heard that the crocuses promise well,' continued my companion, imperturbably.

'Ha! You put me off, do you?' said our new visitor, taking a step forward and shaking his hunting-crop. 'I know you, you scoundrel! I have heard of you before. You are Holmes, the meddler.'

My friend smiled.

'Holmes, the busybody!'

His smile broadened.

'Holmes, the Scotland-Yard Jack-in-office!'

Holmes chuckled heartily. 'Your conversation is most entertaining,' said he. 'When you go out close the door, for there is a decided draught.'

'I will go when I have said my say. Don't you dare to meddle with my affairs. I know that Miss Stoner has been here. I traced her! I am a dangerous man to fall foul of! See here.' He stepped swiftly forward, seized the poker, and bent it into a curve with his huge brown hands.

'See that you keep yourself out of my grip,' he snarled, and hurling the twisted poker into the fireplace, he strode out of the room.

'He seems a very amiable person,' said Holmes, laughing. 'I am not quite so bulky, but if he had remained I might have shown him that my grip was not much more feeble than his own.' As he spoke he picked up the steel poker, and with a sudden effort straightened it out again.

'Fancy his having the insolence to confound me with the official detective force! This incident gives zest to our investigation, however, and I only trust that our little friend will not suffer from her impudence in allowing this brute to trace her. And now, Watson, we shall order breakfast, and afterwards I shall walk down to Doctors' Commons, where I hope to get some data which may help us in this matter.'

It was nearly one o'clock when Sherlock Holmes returned from his excursion. He held in his hand a sheet of blue paper, scrawled over with notes and figures.

'I have seen the will of the deceased wife,' said he. 'To determine its exact meaning I have been obliged to work out the present prices of the investments with which it is concerned. The total income, which at the time of the wife's death was little short of £1,100, is now, through the fall in agricultural prices, not more than £750. Each daughter can claim an income of £250, in case of marriage. It is evident, therefore, that if both girls had married, this beauty would have had a mere pittance, while even one of them would cripple him to a very serious extent. My morning's work has not been wasted, since it has proved that he has the very strongest motives for standing in the way of anything of the sort. And now, Watson, this is too serious

for dawdling, especially as the old man is aware that we are interesting ourselves in his affairs; so if you are ready, we shall call a cab and drive to Waterloo. I should be very much obliged if you would slip your revolver into your pocket. An Eley's No. 2 is an excellent argument with gentlemen who can twist steel pokers into knots. That and a toothbrush are, I think, all that we need.'

At Waterloo we were fortunate in catching a train for Leatherhead, where we hired a trap at the station inn, and drove for four or five miles through the lovely Surrey lanes. It was a perfect day, with a bright sun and a few fleecy clouds in the heavens. The trees and way-side hedges were just throwing out their first green shoots, and the air was full of the pleasant smell of the moist earth. To me at least there was a strange contrast between the sweet promise of the spring and this sinister quest upon which we were engaged. My companion sat in the front of the trap, his arms folded, his hat pulled down over his eyes, and his chin sunk upon his breast, buried in the deepest thought. Suddenly, however, he started, tapped me on the shoulder, and pointed over the meadows.

'Look there!' said he.

A heavily-timbered park stretched up in a gentle slope, thickening into a grove at the highest point. From amid the branches there jutted out the gray gables and high roof-tree of a very old mansion.

'Stoke Moran?' said he.

'Yes, sir, that be the house of Dr Grimesby Roylott,' remarked the driver.

'There is some building gong on there,' said Holmes; 'that is where we are going.'

'There's the village,' said the driver, pointing to a cluster of roofs some distance to the left; 'but if you want to get to the house, you'll find it shorter to get over this stile, and so by the foot-path over the fields. There it is, where the lady is walking.'

'And the lady, I fancy, is Miss Stoner,' observed Holmes, shading his eyes. 'Yes, I think we had better do as you suggest.'

We got off, paid our fare, and the trap rattled back on its way to Leatherhead.

'I thought it as well,' said Holmes, as we climbed the stile, 'that this fellow should think we had come here as architects, or on some definite business. It may stop his gossip. Good-afternoon, Miss Stoner. You see that we have been as good as our word.'

Our client of the morning had hurried forward to meet us with a face which spoke her joy. 'I have been waiting so eagerly for you,' she cried, shaking hands with us warmly. 'All has turned out splendidly. Dr Roylott has gone to town, and it is unlikely that he will be back before evening.'

'We have had the pleasure of making the doctor's acquaintance,' said Holmes, and in a few words he sketched out what had occurred. Miss Stoner turned white to

the lips as she listened.

'Good heavens!' she cried, 'he has followed me, then.'

'So it appears.'

'He is so cunning that I never know when I am safe from him. What will he say when he returns?'

'He must guard himself, for he may find that there is someone more cunning than himself upon his track. You must lock yourself up from him to-night. If he is violent, we shall take you away to your aunt's at Harrow. Now, we must make the best use of our time, so kindly take us at once to the rooms which we are to examine.'

The building was of gray, lichen-blotched stone, with a high central portion, and two curving wings, like the claws of a crab, thrown out on each side. In one of these wings the windows were broken, and blocked with wooden boards, while the roof was partly caved in, a picture of ruin. The central portion was in little better repair, but the right-hand block was comparatively modern, and the blinds in the windows, with the blue smoke curling up from the chimneys, showed that this was where the family resided. Some scaffolding had been erected against the end wall, and the stonework had been broken into, but there were no signs of any workmen at the moment of our visit. Holmes walked slowly up and down the ill-trimmed lawn, and examined with deep attention the outsides of the windows.

'This, I take it, belongs to the room in which you used to sleep, the centre one to your sister's, and the one next to the man building to Dr Roylott's chamber?'

'Exactly so. But I am now sleeping in the middle one.'

'Pending the alterations, as I understand. By-the-way, there does not seem to be any very pressing need for repairs at that end wall.'

'There were none. I believe that it was an excuse to move me from my room.'

'Ah! that is suggestive. Now, on the other side of this narrow wing runs the corridor from which these three rooms open. There are windows in it, of course?'

'Yes, but very small ones. Too narrow for anyone to pass through.'

'As you both locked your doors at night, your rooms were unapproachable from that side. Now, would you have the kindness to go into your room and bar your shutters.'

Miss Stoner did so, and Holmes, after a careful examination through the open window, endeavoured in every way to force the shutter open, but without success. There was no slit through which a knife could be passed to raise the bar. Then with his lens he tested the hinges, but they were of solid iron, built firmly into the massive masonry. 'Hum!' said he, scratching his chin in some perplexity; 'my theory certainly presents some difficulties. No one could pass these shutters if they were bolted. Well, we shall see if the inside throws any light upon the matter.'

A small side door led into the whitewashed corridor from which the three

bedrooms opened. Holmes refused to examine the third chamber, so we passed at once to the second, that in which Miss Stoner was now sleeping, and in which her sister had met with her fate. It was a homely little room, with a low ceiling and a gaping fireplace, after the fashion of old country-houses. A brown chest of drawers stood in one corner, a narrow white-counterpaned bed in another, and a dressing-table on the left-hand side of the window. These articles, with two small wicker-work chairs, made up all the furniture in the room, save for a square of Wilton carpet in the centre. The boards round and the panelling of the walls were of brown, worm-eaten oak, so old and discoloured that it may have dated from the original building of the house. Holmes drew one of the chairs into a corner and sat silent, while his eyes travelled round and round and up and down, taking in every detail of the apartment.

'Where does that bell communicate with?' he asked, at last, pointing to a thick bell-rope which hung down beside the bed, the tassel actually lying upon the pillow.

'It goes to the house-keeper's room.'

'It looks newer than the other things?'

'Yes, it was only put there a couple of years ago.'

'Your sister asked for it, I suppose?'

'No, I never heard of her using it. We used always to get what we wanted for ourselves.'

'Indeed, it seemed unnecessary to put so nice a bell-pull there. You will excuse me for a few minutes while I satisfy myself as to this floor.' He threw himself down upon his face with his lens in his hand, and crawled swiftly backward and forward, examining minutely the cracks between the boards. Then he did the same with the wood-work with which the chamber was panelled. He walked over to the bed, and spent some time in staring at it, and in running his eye up and down the wall. Finally, he took the bell-rope in his hand and gave it a brisk tug.

'Why, it's a dummy,' said he.

'Won't it ring?'

'No, it is not even attached to a wire. This is very interesting. You can see now that it is fastened to a hook just above where the little opening for the ventilator is.'

'How very absurd! I never noticed that before.'

'Very strange!' muttered Holmes, pulling at the rope. 'There are one or two very singular points about this room. For example, what a fool a builder must be to open a ventilator into another room, when, with the same trouble, he might have communicated with the outside air!'

'That is also quite modern,' said the lady.

'Done about the same time as the bell-rope?' remarked Holmes.

'Yes, there were several little changes carried out about that time.'

'They seem to have been of a most interesting character—dummy bell-ropes,

and ventilators which do not ventilate. With your permission, Miss Stoner, we shall now carry our researches into the inner apartment.'

Dr Grimesby Roylott's chamber was larger than that of his step-daughter, but was as plainly furnished. A camp-bed, a small wooden shelf full of books, mostly of a technical character, an arm-chair beside the bed, a plain wooden chair against the wall, a round table, and a large iron safe were the principal things which met the eye. Holmes walked slowly round and examined each and all of them with the keenest interest.

'What's in here?' he asked tapping the safe.

'My stepfather's business papers.'

'Oh! you have seen inside, then?'

'Only once, some years ago. I remember that it was full of papers.'

'There isn't a cat in it, for example?'

'No. What a strange idea!'

'Well, look at this!' He took up a small saucer of milk which stood on the top of it.

'No; we don't keep a cat. But there is a cheetah and a baboon.'

'Ah, yes, of course! Well, a cheetah is just a big cat, and yet a saucer of milk does not go very far in satisfying its wants, I dare say. There is one point which I should wish to determine.' He squatted down in front of the wooden chair, and examined the seat of it with the greatest attention.

'Thank you. That is quite settled,' said he, rising and putting his lens in his pocket. 'Hello! Here is something interesting!'

The object which had caught his eye was a small dog-lash hung on one corner of the bed. The lash, however, was curled upon itself, and tied so as to make a loop of whip-cord.

'What do you make of that, Watson?'

'It's a common enough lash. But I don't know why it should be tied.'

'That is not quite so common, is it? Ah, me! it's a wicked world, and when a clever man turns his brains to crime, it is the worst of all. I think that I have seen enough now, Miss Stoner, and with your permission we shall walk out upon the lawn.'

I had never seen my friend's face so grim or his brow so dark as it was when we turned from the scene of this investigation. We had walked several times up and down the lawn, neither Miss Stoner nor myself liking to break in upon his thoughts before he roused himself from his reverie.

'It is very essential, Miss Stoner,' said he, 'that you should absolutely follow my advice in every respect.'

'I shall most certainly do so.'

'The matter is too serious for any hesitation. Your life may depend upon your

compliance.'

'I assure you that I am in your hands.'

'In the first place, both my friend and I must spend the night in your room.'

Both Miss Stoner and I gazed at him in astonishment.

'Yes, it must be so. Let me explain. I believe that that is the village inn over there?'

'Yes, that is the "Crown".'

'Very good. Your windows would be visible from there?'

'Certainly.'

'You must confine yourself to your room, on pretence of a headache, when your stepfather comes back. Then when you hear him retire for the night, you must open the shutters of your window, undo the hasp, put your lamp there as a signal to us, and then withdraw quietly with everything which you are likely to want into the room which you used to occupy. I have no doubt that, in spite of the repairs, you could manage there for one night.'

'Oh yes, easily.'

'The rest you will leave in our hands.'

'But what will you do?'

'We shall spend the night in your room, and we shall investigate the cause of this noise which has disturbed you.'

'I believe, Mr Holmes, that you have already made up your mind,' said Miss Stoner, laying her hand upon my companion's sleeve.

'Perhaps, I have.'

'Then for pity's sake tell me what was the cause of my sister's death.'

'I should prefer to have clearer proofs before I speak.'

'You can at least tell me whether my own thought is correct, and if she died from some sudden fright.'

'No, I do not think so. I think that there was probably some more tangible cause. And now, Miss Stoner, we must leave you, for if Dr Roylott returned and saw us, our journey would be in vain. Good-bye, and be brave, for if you will do what I have told you, you may rest assured that we shall soon drive away the dangers that threaten you.'

Sherlock Holmes and I had no difficulty in engaging a bed-room and sitting-room at the 'Crown Inn'. They were on the upper floor, and from our window we could command a view of the avenue gate, and of the inhabited wing of Stoke Moran Manor House. At dusk we saw Dr Grimesby Roylott drive past, his huge form looming up beside the little figure of the lad who drove him. The boy had some difficulty in undoing the heavy iron gates, and we heard the hoarse roar of the doctor's voice, and saw the fury with which he shook his clenched fists at him. The trap drove on, and a few minutes later we saw a sudden light spring up among the

trees as the lamp was lit in one of the sitting-rooms.

'Do you know, Watson,' said Holmes, as we sat together in the gathering darkness, 'I have really some scruples as to taking you tonight. There is a distinct element of danger.'

'Can I be of assistance?'

'Your presence might be invaluable.'

'Then I shall certainly come.'

'It is very kind of you.'

'You speak of danger. You have evidently seen more in these rooms than was visible to me.'

'No, but I fancy that I may have deduced a little more. I imagine that you saw all that I did.'

'I saw nothing remarkable save the bell-rope, and what purpose that could answer I confess is more than I can imagine.'

'You saw the ventilator, too?'

'Yes, but I do not think it is such a very unusual thing to have a small opening between two rooms. It was so small that a rat could hardly pass through.'

'I knew that we should find a ventilator before ever we came to Stoke Moran.'

'My dear Holmes!'

'Oh yes, I did. You remember in her statement she said that her sister could smell Dr Roylott's cigar. Now, of course, that suggested at once that there must be a communication between the two rooms. It could only be a small one, or it would have been remarked upon at the coroner's inquiry. I deduced a ventilator.'

'But what harm can there be in that?'

'Well, there is at least a curious coincidence of dates. A ventilator is made, a cord is hung, and a lady who sleeps in the bed dies. Does not that strike you?'

'I cannot as yet see any connection.'

'Did you observe anything very peculiar about that bed?'

'No.'

'It was clamped to the floor. Did you ever see a bed fastened like that before?'

'I cannot say that I have.'

'The lady could not move her bed. It must always be in the same relative position to the ventilator and to the rope—for so we may call it, since it was clearly never meant for a bell-pull.'

'Holmes,' I cried, 'I seem to see dimly what you are hinting at. We are only just in time to prevent some subtle and horrible crime.'

'Subtle enough and horrible enough. When a doctor does go wrong, he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge. Palmer and Pritchard were among the heads of their profession. This man strikes even deeper, but I think, Watson, that we shall be able to strike deeper still. But we shall have horrors enough

before the night is over; for goodness' sake let us have a quiet pipe, and turn our minds for a few hours to something more cheerful.'

About nine o'clock the light among the trees was extinguished, and all was dark in the direction of the Manor House. Two hours passed slowly away, and then, suddenly, just at the stroke of eleven, a single bright light shone out right in front of us.

'That is our signal,' said Holmes, springing to his feet; 'it comes from the middle window.'

As we passed out he exchanged a few words with the landlord, explaining that we were going on a late visit to an acquaintance, and that it was possible that we might spend the night there. A moment later we were out on the dark road, a chill wind blowing in our faces, and one yellow light twinkling in front of us through the gloom to guide us on our sombre errand.

There was little difficulty in entering the grounds, for unrepaired breaches gaped in the old park wall. Making our way among the trees, we reached the lawn, crossed it, and were about to enter through the window, when out from a clump of laurel bushes there darted what seemed to be a hideous and distorted child, who threw itself upon the grass with writhing limbs, and then ran swiftly across the lawn into the darkness.

'My God!' I whispered; 'did you see it?'

Holmes was for the moment as startled as I. His hand closed like a vise upon my wrist in his agitation. Then he broke into a low laugh, and put his lips to my ear.

'It is a nice household,' he murmured. 'That is the baboon.'

I had forgotten the strange pets which the doctor affected. There was a cheetah, too; perhaps we might find it upon our shoulders at any moment. I confess that I felt easier in my mind when, after following Holmes's example and slipping off my shoes, I found myself inside the bedroom. My companion noiselessly closed the shutters, moved the lamp onto the table, and cast his eyes round the room. All was as we had seen it in the daytime. Then creeping up to me and making a trumpet of his hand, he whispered into my ear again so gently that it was all that I could do to distinguish the words:

'The least sound would be fatal to our plans.'

I nodded to show that I had heard.

'We must sit without light. He would see it through the ventilator.'

I nodded again.

'Do not go asleep; your very life may depend upon it. Have your pistol ready in case we should need it. I will sit on the side of the bed, and you in that chair.' I took out my revolver and laid it on the corner of the table.

Holmes had brought up a long thin cane, and this he placed upon the bed beside him. By it he laid the box of matches and the stump of a candle. Then he turned

down the lamp, and we were left in darkness.

How shall I ever forget that dreadful vigil? I could not hear a sound, not even the drawing of a breath, and yet I knew that my companion sat open-eyed, within a few feet of me, in the same state of nervous tension in which I was myself. The shutters cut off the least ray of light, and we waited in absolute darkness. From outside came the occasional cry of a night-bird, and once at our very window a long drawn cat-like whine, which told us that the cheetah was indeed at liberty. Far away we could hear the deep tones of the parish clock, which boomed out every quarter of an hour. How long they seemed, those quarters! Twelve struck, and one and two and three, and still we sat waiting silently for whatever might befall.

Suddenly, there was a momentary gleam of a light up in the direction of the ventilator, which vanished immediately, but was succeeded by a strong smell of burning oil and heated metal. Someone in the next room had lit a dark-lantern: I heard a gentle sound of movement, and then all was silent once more, though the smell grew stronger. For half an hour I sat with straining ears. Then suddenly another sound became audible—a very gentle, soothing sound, like that of a small jet of steam escaping continually from a kettle. The instant that we heard it, Holmes sprang from the bed, struck a match, and lashed furiously with his cane at the bell-pull.

'You see it, Watson?' he yelled. 'You see it?'

But I saw nothing. At the moment when Holmes struck the light I heard a low clear whistle, but the sudden glare flashing into my weary eyes made it impossible for me to tell what it was at which my friend lashed so savagely. I could however, see that his face was deadly pale, and filled with horror and loathing.

He had ceased to strike, and was gazing up at the ventilator, when suddenly there broke from the silence of the night the most horrible cry to which I have ever listened. It swelled up louder and louder, a hoarse yell of pain and fear and anger all mingled in the one dreadful shriek. They say that away in the village, and even in the distant parsonage, that cry raised the sleepers from their beds. It struck cold to our hearts, and I stood gazing at Holmes, and he at me, until the last echoes of it had died away into the silence from which it rose.

'What can it mean?' I gasped.

'It means that it is all over,' Holmes answered. 'And perhaps, after all, it is for the best. Take your pistol, and we will enter Dr Roylott's room.'

With a grave face he lit the lamp and led the way down the corridor. Twice he struck at the chamber door without any reply from within. Then he turned the handle and entered, I at his heels, with the cocked pistol in my hand.

It was a singular sight which met our eyes. On the table stood a dark-lantern with the shutter half-open, throwing a brilliant beam of light upon the iron safe, the door of which was ajar. Beside this table, on the wooden chair, sat Dr Grimesby

Roylott, clad in a long gray dressing-gown, his bare ankles protruding beneath, and his feet thrust into red heel-less Turkish slippers. Across his lap lay the short stock with the long lash which we had noticed during the day. His chin was cocked upward and his eyes were fixed in a dreadful, rigid stare at the corner of the ceiling. Round his brow he had a peculiar yellow band, with brownish speckles, which seemed to be bound tightly round his head. As we entered he made neither sound nor motion.

'The band! The speckled band!' whispered Holmes.

I took a step forward. In an instant his strange head-gear began to move, and there reared itself from among his hair the squat diamond-shaped head and puffed neck of a loathsome serpent.

'It is a swamp adder!' cried Holmes; 'the deadliest snake in India. He has died within ten seconds of being bitten. Violence does, in truth, recoil upon the violent, and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another. Let us thrust this creature back into its den, and we can then remove Miss Stoner to some place of shelter, and let the county police know what has happened.'

As he spoke he drew the dog-whip swiftly from the dead man's lap, and throwing the noose round the reptile's neck, he drew it from its horrid perch, and carrying it at arm's length, threw it into the iron safe, which he closed upon it.

Such are the true facts of the death of Dr Grimesby Roylott, of Stoke Moran. It is not necessary that I should prolong a narrative, which has already run to too great a length, by telling how we broke the sad news to the terrified girl, how we conveyed her by the morning train to the care of her good aunt at Harrow, of how the slow process of official inquiry came to the conclusion that the doctor met his fate while indiscreetly playing with a dangerous pet. The little which I had yet to learn of the case was told me by Sherlock Holmes as we travelled back next day.

'I had,' said he, 'come to an entirely erroneous conclusion, which shows, my dear Watson, how dangerous it always is to reason from insufficient data. The presence of the gypsies, and the use of the word "band", which was used by the poor girl, no doubt to explain the appearance which she had caught a hurried glimpse of by the light of her match, were sufficient to put me upon an entirely wrong scent. I can only claim the merit that I instantly reconsidered my position when, however, it became clear to me that whatever danger threatened an occupant of the room could not come either from the window or the door. My attention was speedily drawn, as I have already remarked to you, to this ventilator, and to the bell-rope which hung down to the bed. The discovery that this was a dummy, and that the bed was clamped to the floor, gave rise to the suspicion that the rope was there as a bridge for something passing through the hole, and coming to the bed. The idea of a snake instantly occurred to me, and when I coupled it with my knowledge that the doctor was furnished with a supply of creatures from India, I felt that I was probably on the right track. The idea of using a form of poison which could not possibly be

discovered by any chemical test was just such a one as would occur to a clever and ruthless man who had had an Eastern training. The rapidity with which such a poison would take effect would also, from his point of view, be an advantage. It would be a sharp-eyed coroner, indeed, who could distinguish the two little dark punctures which would show where the poison fangs had done their work. Then I thought of the whistle. Of course, he must recall the snake before the morning light revealed it to the victim. He had trained it, probably by the use of the milk which we saw, to return to him when summoned. He would put it through this ventilator at the hour that he thought best, with the certainty that it would crawl down the rope, and land on the bed. It might or might not bite the occupant, perhaps she might escape every night for a week, but sooner or later she must fall a victim.

'I had come to these conclusions before ever I had entered his room. An inspection of his chair showed me that he had been in the habit of standing on it, which of course would be necessary in order that he should reach the ventilator. The sight of the safe, the saucer of milk, and the loop of whipcord were enough to finally dispel any doubts which may have remained. The metallic clang heard by Miss Stoner was obviously caused by her stepfather hastily closing the door of his safe upon its terrible occupant. Having once made up my mind, you know the steps which I took in order to put the matter to the proof. I heard the creature hiss, as I have no doubt that you did also, and I instantly lit the light and attacked it.'

'With the result of driving it through the ventilator.'

'And also, with the result of causing it to turn upon its master at the other side. Some of the blows of my cane came home, and roused its snakish temper, so that it flew upon the first person it saw. In this way I am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr Grimesby Roylott's death, and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience.'

The Phantom Coach

By Amelia B. Edwards

The circumstances I am about to relate to you have truth to recommend them. They happened to myself, and my recollection of them is as vivid as if they had taken place only yesterday. Twenty years, however, have gone by since that night. During those twenty years I have told the story to one other person. I tell it now with a reluctance which I find difficult to overcome. All I entreat, meanwhile, is that you will abstain from forcing your own conclusions upon me. I want nothing explained away. I desire no arguments. My mind on this subject is quite made up, and, having the testimony of my own senses to rely upon, I prefer to abide by it.

Well! It was just twenty years ago, and within a day or two of the end of the grouse season. I had been out all day with my gun, and had had no sport to speak of. The wind was due east; the month, December; the place, a bleak wide moor in the far north of England. And I had lost my way. It was not a pleasant place in which to lose one's way, with the first feathery flakes of a coming snowstorm just fluttering down upon the heather, and the leaden evening closing in all around. I shaded my eyes with my hand, and stared anxiously into the gathering darkness, where the purple moorland melted into a range of low hills, some ten or twelve miles distant. Not the faintest smoke-wreath, not the tiniest cultivated patch, or fence, or sheep-track, met my eyes in any direction. There was nothing to do but to walk on, and take my chance of finding what shelter I could, by the way. So I shouldered my gun again, and pushed wearily forward; for I had been on foot since an hour after daybreak, and had eaten nothing since breakfast.

Meanwhile, the snow began to come down with ominous steadiness, and the wind fell. After this, the cold became more intense, and the night came rapidly up. As for me, my prospects darkened with the darkening sky, and my heart grew heavy as I thought how my young wife was already watching for me through the window of our little inn parlour, and thought of all the suffering in store for her throughout this weary night. We had been married four months, and, having spent our autumn in the Highlands, were now lodging in a remote little village situated just on the verge of the great English moorlands. We were very much in love, and, of course, very happy. This morning, when we parted, she had implored me to return before dusk, and I had promised her that I would. What would I not have given to have kept my word!

Even now, weary as I was, I felt that with a supper, an hour's rest, and a guide, I might still get back to her before midnight, if only guide and shelter could be found.

And all this time the snow fell and the night thickened. I stopped and shouted every now and then, but my shouts seemed only to make the silence deeper. Then a vague sense of uneasiness came upon me, and I began to remember stories of travellers who had walked on and on in the falling snow until, wearied out, they were fain to lie down and sleep their lives away. Would it be possible, I asked myself, to keep on thus through all the long, dark night? Would there not come a time when my limbs must fail, and my resolution give way? When I, too, must sleep the sleep of death. Death! I shuddered. How hard now, when life lay all so bright before me! How hard for my darling, whose whole loving heart — but that thought was not to be borne! To banish it, I shouted again, louder and longer, and then listened eagerly. Was my shout answered, or did I only fancy that I heard a far-off cry? I halloed again, and again the echo followed. Then a wavering speck of light came suddenly out of the dark, shifting, disappearing, growing momentarily nearer and brighter. Running towards it at full speed, I found myself, to my great joy, face to face with an old man and a lantern.

'Thank God!' was the exclamation that burst involuntarily from my lips.

Blinking and frowning, he lifted his lantern and peered into my face.

'What for?' growled he, sulkily.

'Well—for you. I began to fear I should be lost in the snow.'

'Eh, then, folks do get cast away hereabouts fra' time to time, an' what's to hinder you from bein' cast away likewise, if the Lord's so minded?' 'If the Lord is so minded that you and I shall be lost together, friend, we must submit,' I replied; 'but I don't mean to be lost without you. How far am I now from Dwolding?'

'A gude twenty mile, more or less.'

'And the nearest village?'

'The nearest village is Wyke, an' that's twelve mile t'other side.'

'Where do you live, then?'

'Out yonder,' said he, with a vague jerk of the lantern.

'You're going home, I presume?'

'Maybe I am.'

'Then I'm going with you.'

The old man shook his head, and rubbed his nose reflectively with the handle of the lantern.

'It ain't no use,' growled he. 'He 'on't let you in — not he.'

'We'll see about that,' I replied, briskly. 'Who is He?'

'The master.'

'Who is the master?'

'That's nothin' to you,' was the unceremonious reply.

'Well, well; you lead the way, and I'll engage that the master shall give me shelter and a supper tonight.'

'Eh, you can try him!' muttered my reluctant guide; and, still shaking his head, he hobbled, gnome-like, away through the falling snow. A large mass loomed up presently out of the darkness, and a huge dog rushed out, barking furiously.

'Is this the house?' I asked.

'Ay, it's the house. Down, Bey!' And he fumbled in his pocket for the key.

I drew up close behind him, prepared to lose no chance of entrance, and saw in the little circle of light shed by the lantern that the door was heavily studded with iron nails, like the door of a prison. In another minute he had turned the key and I had pushed past him into the house.

Once inside, I looked round with curiosity, and found myself in a great rafted hall, which served, apparently, a variety of uses. One end was piled to the roof with corn, like a barn. The other was stored with flour-sacks, agricultural implements, casks, and all kinds of miscellaneous lumber; while from the beams overhead hung rows of hams, flitches, and bunches of dried herbs for winter use. In the centre of the floor stood some huge object gauntly dressed in a dingy wrapping-cloth, and reaching half-way to the rafters. Lifting a corner of this cloth, I saw, to my surprise, a telescope of very considerable size, mounted on a rude movable platform, with four small wheels. The tube was made of painted wood, bound round with bands of metal, rudely fashioned; the speculum, so far as I could estimate its size in the dim light, measured at least fifteen inches in diameter. While I was yet examining the instrument, and asking myself whether it was not the work of some self-taught optician, a bell rang sharply.

'That's for you,' said my guide, with a malicious grin. 'Yonder's his room.'

He pointed to a low black door at the opposite side of the hall. I crossed over, rapped somewhat loudly, and went in, without waiting for an invitation. A huge, white-haired old man rose from a table covered with books and papers, and confronted me sternly.

'Who are you?' said he. 'How came you here? What do you want?'

'James Murray, barrister-at-law. On foot across the moor. Meat, drink, and sleep.'

He bent his bushy brows into a portentous frown.

'Mine is not a house of entertainment,' he said, haughtily. 'Jacob, how dared you admit this stranger?'

'I didn't admit him,' grumbled the old man. 'He followed me over the moor, and shouldered his way in before me. I'm no match for six foot two.'

'And pray, sir, by what right have you forced an entrance into my house?'

'The same by which I should have clung to your boat, if I were drowning. The right of self-preservation.'

'Self-preservation?'

'There's an inch of snow on the ground already,' I replied, briefly; 'and it would be deep enough to cover my body before daybreak.'

He strode to the window, pulled aside a heavy black curtain, and looked out.

'It is true,' he said. 'You can stay, if you choose, until morning. Jacob, serve the supper.'

With this he waved me to a seat, resumed his own, and became at once absorbed in the studies from which I had disturbed him.

I placed my gun in a corner, drew a chair to the hearth, and examined my quarters at leisure. Smaller and less incongruous in its arrangements than the hall, this room contained, nevertheless, much to awaken my curiosity. The floor was carpetless. The whitewashed walls were in parts scrawled over with strange diagrams, and in others covered with shelves crowded with philosophical instruments, the uses of many of which were unknown to me. Every chair had its burden. Every corner was heaped high with books. The very floor was littered over with maps, casts, papers, tracings, and learned lumber of all conceivable kinds.

I stared about me with an amazement increased by every fresh object upon which my eyes chanced to rest. So strange a room I had never seen; yet seemed it stranger still, to find such a room in a lone farmhouse amid those wild and solitary moors! I looked from my host to his surroundings, and from his surroundings back to my host, asking myself who and what he could be? His head was singularly fine; but it was more the head of a poet than of a philosopher. While I was yet observing him, the door opened, and Jacob brought in the supper. His master then closed his book, rose, and with more courtesy of manner than he had yet shown, invited me to the table.

A dish of ham and eggs, a loaf of brown bread, and a bottle of admirable sherry, were placed before me.

'I have but the homeliest farmhouse fare to offer you, sir,' said my entertainer. 'Your appetite, I trust, will make up for the deficiencies of our larder.'

I had already fallen upon the viands, and now protested, with the enthusiasm of a starving sportsman, that I had never eaten anything so delicious.

He bowed stiffly, and sat down to his own supper, which consisted, primitively, of a jug of milk and a basin of porridge. We ate in silence and, when we had done, Jacob removed the tray. I then drew my chair back to the fireside. My host, somewhat to my surprise, did the same, and turning abruptly towards me, said:

'Sir, I have lived here in strict retirement for three-and-twenty years. During that time, I have not seen as many strange faces, and I have not read a single newspaper. You are the first stranger who has crossed my threshold for more than four years. Will you favour me with a few words of information respecting that outer world from which I have parted company so long?'

'Pray interrogate me,' I replied. 'I am heartily at your service.'

He bent his head in acknowledgment; leaned forward, and proceeded to question me.

His inquiries related chiefly to scientific matters, with the later progress of which, as applied to the practical purposes of life, he was almost wholly unacquainted. No student of science myself, I replied as well as my slight information permitted; but the task was far from easy, and I was much relieved when, passing from interrogation to discussion, he began pouring forth his own conclusions upon the facts which I had been attempting to place before him. He talked, and I listened spellbound. He talked until I believe he almost forgot my presence, and only thought aloud. I had never heard anything like it then; I have never heard anything like it since. By-and-by he passed on to that field which lies beyond the boundary line of even conjectural philosophy, and reaches no man knows whither. He spoke of the soul and its aspirations; of the spirit and its powers; of second sight; of prophecy; of those phenomena which, under the names of ghosts, spectres, and supernatural appearances, have been denied by the sceptics and attested by the credulous, of all ages.

'The world,' he said, 'grows hourly more and more sceptical of all that lies beyond its own narrow radius; and our men of science foster the fatal tendency. They reject as false all that cannot be brought to the test of the laboratory or the dissecting-room. Against what superstition have they waged so long and obstinate a war as against the belief in apparitions? And yet what superstition has maintained its hold upon the minds of men so long and so firmly? Show me any fact in physics, in history, in archaeology, which is supported by testimony so wide and so various. Attested by all races of men, in all ages, and in all climates, by the soberest sages of antiquity, by the rudest savage of today, this phenomenon is treated as a nursery tale by the philosophers of our century. Circumstantial evidence weighs with them as a feather in the balance.

The comparison of causes with effects, however valuable in physical science,

is put aside as worthless and unreliable. The evidence of competent witnesses, however conclusive in a court of justice, counts for nothing. He who pauses before he pronounces is condemned as a trifler. He who believes is a dreamer or a fool.'

He spoke with bitterness, and, having said this, relapsed for some minutes into silence. Presently he raised his head from his hands and added, with an altered voice and manner :

'I, sir, paused, investigated, believed, and was not ashamed to state my convictions to the world. I, too, was branded as a visionary, held up to ridicule by my contemporaries, and hooted from that field of science in which I had laboured with honour during all the best years of my life. These things happened just three-and-twenty years ago. Since then I have lived as you see me living now, and the world has forgotten me, as I have forgotten the world. You have my history.'

'It is a very sad one,' I murmured, scarcely knowing what to answer.

'It is a very common one,' he replied. 'I have only suffered for the truth, as many a better and wiser man has suffered before me.'

He rose, as if desirous of ending the conversation, and went over to the window.

'It has ceased snowing,' he observed, as he dropped the curtain and came back to the fireside.

'Ceased!' I exclaimed, starting eagerly to my feet. 'Oh, if it were only possible—but no! it is hopeless. Even if I could find my way across the moor, I could not walk twenty miles tonight.'

'Walk twenty miles tonight!' repeated my host. 'What are you thinking of?'

'Of my wife,' I replied impatiently. 'Of my young wife, who does not know that I have lost my way, and who is at this moment breaking her heart with suspense and terror.'

'Where is she?'

'At Dwolding, twenty miles away.'

'At Dwolding,' he echoed, thoughtfully. 'Yes, the distance, it is true, is twenty miles; but—are you so very anxious to save the next six or eight hours?'

'So very, very anxious that I would give ten guineas at this moment for a guide and a horse.'

'Your wish can be gratified at a less costly rate,' said he, smiling. 'The night mail from the north, which changes horses at Dwolding, passes within five miles of this spot, and will be due at a certain cross-road in about an hour and a quarter. If Jacob were to go with you across the moor, and put you into the old coach-road, you could find your way, I suppose, to where it joins the new one?' 'Easily—gladly.'

He smiled again, rang the bell, gave the old servant his directions, and, taking a bottle of whisky and a wineglass from the cupboard in which he kept his chemicals, said:

'The snow lies deep, and it will be difficult walking to-night on the moor. A glass of *usquebaugh* before you start?'

I would have declined the spirit, but he pressed it on me, and I drank it. It went down my throat like liquid flame, and almost took my breath away.

'It is strong,' he said; but it will help to keep out the cold. And now you have no moments to spare. Goodnight!'

I thanked him for his hospitality, and would have shaken hands, but he had turned away before I could finish my sentence. In another minute I had traversed the hall, Jacob had locked the outer door behind me, and we were out on the wide white moor.

Although the wind had fallen, it was still bitterly cold. Not a star glimmered in the black vault overhead. Not a sound, save the rapid crunching of the snow beneath our feet, disturbed the heavy stillness of the night. Jacob, not too pleased with his mission, shambled on before in sullen silence, his lantern in his hand, and his shadow at his feet. I followed, with my gun over my shoulder, as little inclined for conversation as himself. My thoughts were full of my late host. His voice yet rang in my ears. His eloquence yet held my imagination captive. I remember to this day, with surprise, how my over-excited brain retained whole sentences and parts of sentences, troops of brilliant images, and fragments of splendid reasoning, in the very words in which he had uttered them. Musing thus over what I had heard, and striving to recall a lost link here and there, I strode on at the heels of my guide, absorbed and unobservant. Presently—at the end, as it seemed to me, of only a few minutes—he came to a sudden halt, and said:

'Yon's your road. Keep the stone fence to your right hand, and you can't fail of the way.'

'This, then, is the old coach-road?'

'Ay, 'tis the old coach-road.'

'And how far do I go, before I reach the cross-roads?'

'Nigh upon three mile.'

I pulled out my purse, and he became more communicative.

'The road's a fair road enough,' said he, 'for foot passengers; but 'twas over steep and narrow for the northern traffic. You'll mind where the parapet's broken away, close again the sign-post. It's never been mended since the accident.'

'What accident?'

'Eh, the night mail pitched right over into the valley below — a gude fifty feet an' more—just at the worst bit o' road in the whole county.'

'Horrible! Were many lives lost?'

'All. Four were found dead, and t'other two died next morning.'

'How long is it since this happened?'

'Just nine year.'

'Near the sign-post, you say? I will bear it in mind. Goodnight.'

'Gude-Night, sir, and thankee.' Jacob pocketed his half-crown, made a faint pretence of touching his hat, and trudged back by the way he had come.

I watched the light of his lantern until it quite disappeared, and then turned to pursue my way alone. This was no longer a matter of the slightest difficulty, for, despite the dead darkness overhead, the line of stone fence showed distinctly enough against the pale gleam of the snow. How silent it seemed now with only my footsteps to listen to; how silent and how solitary! A strange disagreeable sense of loneliness stole over me. I walked faster. I hummed a fragment of a tune. I cast up enormous sums in my head, and accumulated them at compound interest. I did my best, in short, to forget the startling speculations to which I had but just been listening, and, to some extent, I succeeded.

Meanwhile the night air seemed to become colder and colder, and though I walked fast I found it impossible to keep myself warm. My feet were like ice. I lost sensation in my hands, and grasped my gun mechanically. I even breathed with difficulty, as though, instead of traversing a quiet north country highway, I were scaling the uppermost heights of some gigantic Alp. This last symptom became presently so distressing, that I was forced to stop for a few minutes and lean against the stone fence. As I did so, I chanced to look back up the road, and there, to my infinite relief, I saw a distant point of light, like the gleam of an approaching lantern. I, at first concluded that Jacob had retraced his steps and followed me; but even as the conjecture presented itself, a second light flashed into sight—a light evidently parallel with the first, and approaching at the same rate of motion. It needed no second thought to show me that these must be the carriage-lamps of some private vehicle, though it seemed strange that it should take a road professedly disused and dangerous.

There could be no doubt, however, of the fact, for the lamps grew larger and brighter every moment, and I even fancied I could already see the dark outline of the carriage between them. It was coming up very fast, and quite noiselessly, the snow being nearly a foot deep under the wheels.

And now the body of the vehicle became distinctly visible behind the lamps. It looked strangely lofty. A sudden suspicion flashed upon me. Was it possible that I had passed the cross-roads in the dark without observing the sign-post, and could this be the very coach which I had come to meet?

No need to ask myself that question a second time, for here it came round the bend of the road, guard and driver, one outside passenger, and four steaming greys, all wrapped in a soft haze of light, through which the lamps blazed out, like a pair of fiery meteors.

I jumped forward, waved my hat, and shouted. The mail came down at full speed, and passed me. For a moment I feared that I had not been seen or heard, but it

was only for a moment. The coachman pulled up; the guard, muffled to the eyes in capes and comforters, and apparently sound asleep in the rumble, neither answered my hail nor made the slightest effort to dismount; the outside passenger did not even turn his head. I opened the door for myself, and looked in. There were but three travellers inside, so I stepped in, shut the door, slipped into the vacant corner, and congratulated myself on my good fortune.

The atmosphere of the coach seemed, if possible, colder than that of the outer air, and was pervaded by a singularly damp and disagreeable smell. I looked round at my fellow-passengers. They were all three men and all silent. They did not seem to be asleep, but each leaned back in his corner of the vehicle, as if absorbed in his own reflections. I attempted to open a conversation.

'How intensely cold it is to-night,' I said, addressing my opposite neighbour.

He lifted his head, looked at me, but made no reply.

'The winter,' I added, 'seems to have begun in earnest.'

Although the corner in which he sat was so dim that I could distinguish none of his features very clearly, I saw that his eyes were still turned full upon me. And yet he answered never a word.

At any other time I should have felt, and perhaps expressed, some annoyance, but at the moment I felt too ill to do either. The icy coldness of the night air had struck a chill to my very marrow, and the strange smell inside the coach was affecting me with an intolerable nausea. I shivered from head to foot, and, turning to my left-hand neighbour, asked if he had any objection to an open window?

He neither spoke nor stirred.

I repeated the question somewhat more loudly, but with the same result. Then I lost patience, and let the sash down. As I did so, the leather strap broke in my hand, and I observed that the glass was covered with a thick coat of mildew, the accumulation, apparently, of years. My attention being thus drawn to the condition of the coach, I examined it more narrowly, and saw by the uncertain light of the outer lamps that it was in the last stage of dilapidation. Every part of it was not only out of repair, but in a condition of decay. The sashes splintered at a touch. The leather fittings were crusted over with mould, and literally rotting from the woodwork. The floor was almost breaking away beneath my feet. The whole machine, in short, was foul with damp, and had evidently been dragged from some outhouse in which it had been mouldering away for years, to do another day or two of duty on the road.

I turned to the third passenger, whom I had not yet addressed, and hazarded one more remark.

'This coach,' I said, 'is in a deplorable condition. The regular mail, I suppose, is under repair?'

He moved his head slowly, and looked me in the face, without speaking a word.

I shall never forget that look while I live. I turned cold at heart under it. I turn cold at heart even now when I recall it. His eyes glowed with a fiery, unnatural lustre. His face was livid as the face of a corpse. His bloodless lips were drawn back as if in the agony of death, and showed the gleaming teeth between.

The words that I was about to utter died upon my lips, and a strange horror—a dreadful horror—came upon me. My sight had by this time become used to the gloom of the coach, and I could see with tolerable distinctness. I turned to my opposite neighbour. He, too, was looking at me, with the same startling pallor in his face, and the same stony glitter in his eyes. I passed my hand across my brow. I turned to the passenger on the seat beside my own, and saw—oh Heaven! how shall I describe what I saw? I saw that he was no living man—that none of them were living men, like myself! A pale phosphorescent light—the light of putrefaction—played upon their awful faces; upon their hair, dank with the dew of the grave; upon their clothes, earth-stained and dropping to pieces; upon their hands, which were as the hands of corpses long buried. Only their eyes, their terrible eyes, were living; and those eyes were all turned menacingly upon me!

A shriek of terror, a wild unintelligible cry for help and mercy, burst from my lips as I flung myself against the door, and strove in vain to open it.

In that single instant, brief and vivid as a landscape beheld in the flash of summer lightning, I saw the moon shining down through a rift of stormy cloud—the ghastly sign-post rearing its warning finger by the wayside—the broken parapet—the plunging horses—the black gulf below. Then, the coach reeled like a ship at sea. There came a mighty crash—a sense of crushing pain—and then darkness....

It seemed as if years had gone by when I awoke one morning from a deep sleep, and found my wife watching by my bedside. I will pass over the scene that ensued, and give you, in half a dozen words, the tale she told me with tears of thanksgiving. I had fallen over a precipice, close against the junction of the old coach-road and the new, and had only been saved from certain death by lighting upon a deep snowdrift that had accumulated at the foot of the rock beneath. In this snowdrift I was discovered at daybreak, by a couple of shepherds, who carried me to the nearest shelter, and brought a surgeon to my aid. The surgeon found me in a state of raving delirium, with a broken arm and a compound fracture of the skull. The letters in my pocket-book showed my name and address; my wife was summoned to nurse me; and, thanks to youth and a fine constitution, I came out of danger at last. The place of my fall, I need scarcely say, was precisely that at which the north mail had a frightful accident nine years before.

I never told my wife the fearful events which I have just related to you. I told the surgeon who attended me; but he treated the whole adventure as a mere dream born of the fever in my brain. We discussed the question over and over again, until we found that we could discuss it with temper no longer, and then we dropped it.

Others may form what conclusions they please—I *know* that twenty years ago I was the fourth passenger in that Phantom Coach.

All Souls'

By Edith Wharton

Queer and inexplicable as the business was, on the surface it appeared fairly simple—at the time, at least; but with the passing of years, and owing to there not having been a single witness of what happened except Sara Clayburn herself, the stories about it have become so exaggerated, and often so ridiculously inaccurate, that it seems necessary that someone connected with the affair, though not actually present—I repeat that when it happened my cousin was (or thought she was) quite alone in her house—should record the few facts actually known.

In those days I was often at Whitegates (as the place had always been called)—I was there, in fact not long before, and almost immediately after, the strange happenings of those thirty-six hours; Jim Clayburn and his widow were both my cousins, and because of that, and of my intimacy with them, both families think I am more likely than anybody else to be able to get at the facts, as far as they can be called facts. So I have written down, as clearly as I could, the gist of the various talks I had with cousin Sara, when she could be got to talk—it wasn't often—about what occurred during that mysterious weekend.



I read the other day in a book by a fashionable essayist that ghosts went out when electric light came in. What nonsense! The writer, though he is fond of dabbling in a literary way, in the supernatural, hasn't even reached the threshold of his subject. As

between turreted castles patrolled by headless victims with clanking chains, and the comfortable suburban house with a refrigerator and central heating where you feel, as soon as you're in it, *that there's something wrong*, give me the latter for sending a chill down the spine! And, by the way, haven't you noticed that it's generally not the high-strung and imaginative who see ghosts, but the calm matter-of-fact people who don't believe in them, and are sure they wouldn't mind if they did see one? Well, that was the case with Sara Clayburn and her house. The house, in spite of its age—it was built, I believe, about 1780—was open, airy, high-ceilinged, with electricity, central heating and all the modern appliances: and its mistress was—well, very much like her house. And, anyhow, this isn't exactly a ghost story and I've dragged in the analogy only as a way of showing you what kind of woman my cousin was, and how unlikely it would have seemed that what happened at Whitegates should have happened just there—or to her.



When Jim Clayburn died, the family all thought that, as the couple had no children, his widow would give up Whitegates and move either to New York or Boston—for being of good Colonial stock, with many relatives and friends, she would have found a place ready for her in either. But Sally Clayburn seldom did what other people expected, and in this case she did exactly the contrary; she stayed at Whitegates.

'What, turn my back on the old house—tear up all the family roots, and go and hang myself up in a bird-cage flat in one of those new skyscrapers in Lexington Avenue, with a bunch of chickweed and a cuttlefish to replace my good Connecticut mutton? No, thank you. Here I belong, and here I stay until my executors hand the place over to Jim's next of kin—that stupid fat Presley boy ... Well, don't let's talk about him. But I tell you what—I'll keep him out of here as long as I can.' And she did—for being still in the early fifties when her husband died, and a muscular, resolute figure of a woman, she was more than a match for the fat Presley boy, and attended his funeral a few years ago, in correct mourning, with a faint smile under her veil.

Whitegates was a pleasant, hospitable-looking house, on a height overlooking the stately windings of the Connecticut River; but it was five or six miles from Norrington, the nearest town, and its situation would certainly have seemed remote and lonely to modern servants. Luckily, however, Sara Clayburn had inherited from her mother-in-law two or three old stand-bys who seemed as much a part of the family tradition as the roof they lived under; and I never heard of her having any trouble in her domestic arrangements.

The house, in the Colonial days, had been foursquare, with four spacious

rooms on the ground floor, an oak-floored hall dividing them, the usual kitchen extension at the back, and a good attic under the roof. But Jim's grandparents, when interest in the 'Colonial' began to revive, in the early eighties, had added two wings, at right angles to the south front, so that the old 'circle' before the front door became a grassy court, enclosed on three sides, with a big elm in the middle. Thus the house was turned into a roomy dwelling, in which the last three generations of Clayburns had exercised a large hospitality; but the architect had respected the character of the old house, and the enlargement made it more comfortable without lessening its simplicity. There was a lot of land about it, and Jim Clayburn, like his fathers before him, farmed it, not without profit, and played a considerable and respected part in state politics. The Clayburns were always spoken of as a 'good influence' in the country, and the townspeople were glad when they learned that Sara did not mean to desert the place—'though it must be lonesome, living all alone up there atop of that hill'—they remarked as the days shortened, and the first snow began to pile up under the quadruple row of elms along the common.

Well, if I've given you a sufficiently clear idea of Whitegates and the Clayburns—who shared with their old house a sort of reassuring orderliness and dignity—I'll efface myself, and tell the tale, not in my cousin's words, for they were too confused and fragmentary, but as I built it up gradually out of her half-avowals and nervous reticences. If the thing happened at all—and I must leave you to be the judge of that—I think it must have happened in this way...



The morning had been bitter, with a driving sleet—though it was only the last day of October—but after lunch a watery sun showed for a while through banked-up woolly clouds, and tempted Sara Clayburn out. She was an energetic walker, and given, at that season, to tramping three or four miles along the valley road, and coming back by way of Shaker's wood. She had made her usual round, and was following the main drive to the house when she overtook a plainly-dressed women walking in the same direction. If the scene had not been so lonely—the way to Whitegates at the end of an autumn day was not a frequented one—Mrs Clayburn might not have paid any attention to the woman, for she was in no way noticeable, but when she caught up with the intruder, my cousin was surprised to find that she was a stranger—for the mistress of Whitegates prided herself on knowing, at least by sight, most of her country neighbours. It was almost dark, and the woman's face was hardly visible, but Mrs Clayburn told me she recalled her as middle-aged, plain and rather pale.

Mrs Clayburn greeted her, and then added: 'You're going to the house?'

'Yes, ma'am,' the woman answered, in a voice that the Connecticut Valley in old

days would have called 'foreign', but that would have been unnoticed by ears used to the modern multiplicity of tongues. 'No, I couldn't say where she came from,' Sara always said, 'What struck me as queer was that I didn't know her.'

She asked the woman politely what she wanted, and the woman answered: 'Only to see one of the girls.' The answer was natural enough, and Mrs Clayburn nodded and turned off from the drive to the lower part of the garden, so that she saw no more of the visitor then or afterwards. And, in fact, a half hour later something happened which put the stranger entirely out of her mind. The brisk and light-footed Mrs Clayburn, as she approached the house, slipped on a frozen puddle, twisted her ankle and lay suddenly helpless.



Price, the butler, and Agnes, the dour old Scottish maid whom Sara had inherited from her mother-in-law, of course knew exactly what to do. In no time they had their mistress stretched out on a lounge, and Dr Selgrove had been called up from Norrington. When he arrived, he ordered Mrs Clayburn to bed, did the necessary examining and bandaging, and shook his head over her ankle, which he feared was fractured. He thought, however, that if she would swear not to get up, or even shift the position of her leg, he could spare her the discomfort of putting it in plaster. Mrs Clayburn agreed, the more promptly as the doctor warned her that any rash movement would prolong her immobility. Her quick imperious nature made the prospect trying, and she was annoyed with herself for having been so clumsy. But the mischief was done, and she immediately thought what an opportunity it would be for going over her accounts and catching up with her correspondence. So she settled down resignedly in her bed.

'And you won't miss much, you know, if you have to stay there a few days. It's beginning to snow, and it looks as if we are in for a good spell of it,' the doctor remarked, glancing through the window as he gathered up his implements. 'Well, we don't often get snow here as early as this; but winter's got to begin some time,' he concluded philosophically. At the door he stopped to add: 'You don't want me to send up a nurse from Norrington? Not to nurse you, you know; there's nothing much to do until I see you again. But this is a pretty lonely place when the snow begins, and I thought maybe—'

Sara Clayburn laughed. 'Lonely? With my old servants? You forget how many winters I've spent here along with them. Two of them were with me in my mother-in-law's time.'

'That's so,' Dr Selgrove agreed. 'You're a good deal luckier than most people, that way. Well, let me see; this is Saturday. We'll have to let the inflammation go down before we can X-ray you. Monday morning, first thing, I'll be here with the X-

ray man. If you want me sooner, call me up.' And he was gone.



The foot, at first, had not been very painful; but towards the small hours Mrs Clayburn began to suffer. She was a bad patient, like most healthy and active people. Not being used to pain she did not know how to bear it, and the hours of wakefulness and immobility seemed endless. Agnes, before leaving her, had made everything as comfortable as possible. She had put a jug of lemonade within reach, and had even (Mrs Clayburn thought it odd afterwards) insisted on bringing in a tray with sandwiches and a thermos of tea. 'In case you're hungry in the night, madam.'

'Thank you; but I'm never hungry in the night. And I certainly shan't be tonight—only thirsty. I think I'm feverish.'

'Well, there's the lemonade, madam.'

'That will do. Take the other things away, please.' (Sara had always hated the sight of unwanted food 'messing about' in her room.)

'Very well, madam. Only you might——'

'Please take it away,' Mrs Clayburn repeated irritably.

'Very good, madam.' But as Agnes went out, her mistress heard her set the tray down softly on a table behind the screen which shut off the door.

'Obstinate old goose!' she thought, rather touched by the old woman's insistence.

Sleep, once it had gone, would not return, and the long black hours moved more and more slowly. How late the dawn came in November! 'If only I could move my leg,' she grumbled.

She lay still and strained her ears for the first steps of the servants. Whitegates was an early house, its mistress setting the example; it would surely not be long now before one of the women came. She was tempted to ring for Agnes, but refrained. She had been up late, and this was Sunday morning, when the household was always allowed a little extra time. Mrs Clayburn reflected restlessly: 'I was a fool not to let her leave the tea beside the bed, as she wanted to. I wonder if I could get up and get it?' But she remembered the doctor's warning, and dared not move. Anything rather than risk prolonging her imprisonment...

Ah, there was the stable clock striking. How loud it sounded in the snowy stillness! One—two—three—four—five...

What? Only five? Three hours and a quarter more before she could hope to hear the door handle turned... After a while she dozed off again, uncomfortably.

Another sound aroused her. Again the stable clock. She listened. But the room was still in deep darkness, and only six strokes fell ... She thought of reciting something to put her to sleep; but she seldom read poetry, and being naturally a

good sleeper, she could not remember any of the usual devices against insomnia. The whole of her leg felt like lead now. The bandages had grown terribly tight—her ankle must have swollen... She lay staring at the dark windows, watching for the first glimmer of dawn. At last she saw a pale filter of daylight through the shutters. One by one the objects between the bed and the window recovered first their outline, then their bulk, and seemed to be stealthily regrouping themselves, after secret displacements during the night. Who that has lived in an old house could possibly believe that the furniture in it stays still all night? Mrs Clayburn almost fancied she saw one little slender-legged table slipping hastily back into its place.

'It knows Agnes is coming, and it's afraid,' she thought whimsically. Her bad night must have made her imaginative for such nonsense as that about the furniture had never occurred to her before...

At length, after hours more, as it seemed, the stable clock struck eight. Only another quarter of an hour. She watched the hand moving slowly across the face of the little clock beside her bed...ten minutes...five...only five! Agnes was as punctual as destiny...in two minutes now she would come. The two minutes passed, and she did not come. Poor Agnes—she had looked pale and tired the night before. She had overslept herself, no doubt—or perhaps she felt ill, and would send the housemaid to replace her. Mrs Clayburn waited.

She waited half an hour; then she reached up to the bell at the head of the bed. Poor old Agnes—her mistress felt guilty about waking her. But Agnes did not appear—and after a considerable interval Mrs Clayburn, now with a certain impatience, rang again. She rang once; twice; three times—but still no one came.

Once more she waited; then she said to herself: 'There must be something wrong with the electricity.' Well—she could find out by switching on the bed lamp at her elbow (how admirably the room was equipped with every practical appliance!). She switched it on—but no light came. Electric current off; and it was Sunday, and nothing could be done about it until the next morning. Unless it turned out to be just a burnt-out fuse, which Price could remedy. Well, in a moment now someone would surely come to her door.

It was nine o'clock before she admitted to herself that something uncommonly strange must have happened in the house. She began to feel a nervous apprehension; but she was not a woman to encourage it. If only she had had the telephone put in her room, instead of out on the landing! She measured mentally the distance to be travelled, remembered Dr Selgrove's admonition, and wondered if her broken ankle would carry her there. She dreaded the prospect of being put in plaster, but she had to get to the telephone, whatever happened.

She wrapped herself in her dressing-gown, found a walking-stick, and, resting heavily on it, dragged herself to the door. In her bedroom the careful Agnes had closed and fastened the shutters, so that it was not much lighter there than at dawn;

but outside in the corridor the cold whiteness of the snowy morning seemed almost reassuring. Mysterious things—dreadful things—were associated with darkness; and here was the wholesome prosaic daylight come again to banish them. Mrs Clayburn looked about her and listened. A deep nocturnal silence lay in that day-lit house, in which five people were presumably coming and going about their work. It was certainly strange...She looked out of the window, hoping to see someone crossing the court or coming along the drive. But no one was in sight, and the snow seemed to have the place to itself: a quiet steady snow. It was still falling, with a business-like regularity, muffling the outer world in layers on layers of thick white velvet, and intensifying the silence within. A noiseless world—were people so sure that absence of noise was what they wanted? Let them first try a lonely country house in a November snowstorm!

She dragged herself along the passage to the telephone. When she unhooked the receiver she noticed that her hand trembled.

She rang up the pantry—no answer. She rang again. Silence—more silence! It seemed to be piling itself up like the snow on the roof and in the gutters. Silence. How many people that she knew had any idea what silence was—and how loud it sounded when you really listened to it?

Again she waited: then she rang up 'Central'. No answer. She tried three times. After that she tried the pantry again... The telephone was cut off, then; like the electric current. Who was at work downstairs, isolating her thus from the world? Her heart began to hammer. Luckily there was a chair near the telephone, and she sat down to recover her strength—or was it her courage?

Agnes and the housemaid slept in the nearest wing. She would certainly get as far as that when she had pulled herself together. Had she the courage——? Yes, of course she had. She had always been regarded as a plucky woman; and had so regarded herself. But this silence—

It occurred to her that by looking from the window of a neighbouring bathroom, she could see the kitchen chimney. There ought to be smoke coming from it at that hour; and if there were, she thought, she would be less afraid to go on. She got as far as the bathroom, and looking through the window saw that no smoke came from the chimney. Her sense of loneliness grew more acute. Whatever had happened downstairs must have happened before the morning's work had begun. The cook had not had time to light the fire, the other servants had not yet begun their rounds. She sank into the nearest chair, struggling against her fears. What next would she discover if she carried on her investigations?

The pain in her ankle made progress difficult; but she was aware of it now only as an obstacle to haste. No matter what it cost her in physical suffering, she must find out what was happening downstairs—or had happened. But first she would go to the maid's room. And if that were empty—well, somehow she would have to

get herself downstairs.

She limped along the passage, and on the way steadied herself by resting her hand on a radiator. It was stone-cold. Yet in that well-ordered house in winter the central heating, though damped down at night, was never allowed to go out, and by eight in the morning a mellow warmth pervaded the rooms. The icy chill of the pipes startled her. It was the chauffeur who looked after the heating—so he too was involved in the mystery, whatever it was, as well as the house-servants. But this only deepened the problem.



At Agnes' door Mrs Clayburn paused and knocked. She expected no-answer, and there was none. She opened the door and went in. The room was dark and very cold. She went to the window and flung back the shutters; then she looked around slowly, vaguely apprehensive of what she might see. The room was empty but what frightened her was not so much its emptiness as its air of scrupulous and undisturbed order. There was no sign of anyone having lately dressed in it—or undressed the night before. And the bed had not been slept in.

Mrs Clayburn leaned against the wall for a moment; then she crossed the floor and opened the cupboard. That was where Agnes kept her dresses; and the dresses were there, neatly hanging in a row. On the shelf above were Agnes' few and unfashionable hats, rearrangements of her mistress's old ones. Mrs Clayburn, who knew them all, looked at the shelf, and saw that one was missing. And so also was the warm winter coat she had given Agnes the previous winter.

She was out, then; had gone out, no doubt, the night before, since the bed was unslept in, the dressing and washing appliances untouched. Agnes, who never set foot out of the house after dark, who despised the movies as much as she did the wireless, and could never be persuaded that a little innocent amusement was a necessary element in life, had deserted the house on a snowy winter night, while her mistress lay upstairs, suffering and helpless! Why had she gone, and where had she gone? When she was undressing Mrs Clayburn the night before, taking her orders, trying to make her more comfortable, was she already planning this mysterious nocturnal escape? Or had something—the mysterious and dreadful something, the clue of which Mrs Clayburn was still groping—occurred later in the evening, sending the maid downstairs and out of doors into the bitter night? Perhaps one of the men at the garage—where the chauffeur and gardener lived—had been suddenly taken ill, and someone had run up to the house for Agnes. Yes—that must be the explanation... Yet how much it left unexplained.

Next to Agnes's room was the linen room; beyond that was the housemaid's door. Mrs Clayburn went to it and knocked. 'Mary!' No one answered, and she went

in. The room was in the same immaculate order as her maid's, and here too the bed was unslept in, and there were no signs of dressing or undressing. The two women had no doubt gone out together—gone where?

More and more the cold unanswering silence of the house weighed down on Mrs Clayburn. She had never thought of it as a big house, but now, in this snowy winter light, it seemed immense, and full of ominous corners around which one dared not look.

Beyond the housemaid's room were the back stairs. It was the nearest way down, and every step that Mrs Clayburn took was increasingly painful; but she decided to walk slowly back, the whole length of the passage, and go down by the front stairs. She did not know why she did this; but she felt that at the moment she was past reasoning, and had better obey her instinct.

More than once she had explored the ground floor alone in the small hours, in search of unwonted midnight noises; but now it was not the idea of noises that frightened her, but that inexorable and hostile silence, the sense that the house had retained in full daylight its nocturnal mystery, and was watching her as she was watching it; that in entering those empty orderly rooms she might be disturbing some unseen confabulation on which beings of flesh and blood had better not intrude.

The broad oak stairs were beautifully polished, and so slippery that she had to cling to the rail and let herself down tread by tread. And as she descended, the silence descended with her—heavier, denser, more absolute. She seemed to feel its steps just behind her, softly keeping time with hers. It had a quality she had never been aware of in any other silence, as though it were not merely an absence of sound, a thin barrier between the ear and the surging murmur of life just beyond but an impenetrable substance made out of the world-wide cessation of all life and all movement.

Yes, that was what laid a chill on her: the feeling that there was no limit to this silence, no outer margin, nothing beyond it. By this time she had reached the foot of the stairs and was limping across the hall to the drawing-room. Whatever she found there, she was sure, would be mute and lifeless; but what would it be? The bodies of her dead servants, mown down by some homicidal maniac? And what if it were her turn next—if he were waiting for her behind the heavy curtains of the room she was about to enter? Well, she must find out—she must face whatever lay in wait. Not impelled by bravery—the last drop of courage had oozed out of her—but because anything, anything was better than to remain shut up in that snowbound house without knowing whether she was alone in it or not. 'I must find that out, I must find that out,' she repeated to herself in a sort of meaningless sing-song.

The cold outer light flooded the drawing-room. The shutters had not been closed, nor the curtains drawn. She looked about her. The room was empty, and

every chair in its usual place. Her armchair was pushed up by the chimney, and the cold hearth was piled with the ashes of the fire at which she had warmed herself before starting on her ill-fated walk. Even her empty coffee cup stood on a table near the armchair. It was evident that the servant had not been in the room since she had left it the day before after luncheon. And suddenly the conviction entered into her that, as she found the drawing-room, so she would find the rest of the house—cold, orderly, and empty. She would find nothing, she would find no one. She no longer felt any dread of ordinary human danger lurking in those dumb spaces ahead of her. She knew she was utterly alone under her own roof. She sat down to rest her aching ankle, and looked slowly about her.

There were the other rooms to be visited, and she was determined to go through them all—but she knew in advance that they would give no answer to her question. She knew it, seemingly, from the quality of the silence which enveloped her. There was no break, no thinnest crack in it anywhere. It had the cold continuity of the snow which was still falling steadily outside.

She had no idea how long she waited before nerving herself to continue her inspection. She no longer felt the pain in her ankle, but was only conscious that she must not bear her weight on it, and therefore moved very slowly, supporting herself on each piece of furniture in her path. On the ground floor no shutter had been closed, no curtain drawn, and she progressed without much difficulty from room to room: the library, her morning-room, the dining-room. In each of them, every piece of furniture was in its usual place. In the dining-room, that table had been laid for the dinner of the previous evening, and the candelabra, with candles unlit, stood reflected in the dark mahogany. She was not the kind of woman to nibble a poached egg on a tray when she was alone, but always came down to the dining-room, and had what she called a civilised meal.

The back premises remained to be visited. From the dining-room she entered the pantry, and there too everything was in irreproachable order. She opened the door and looked down the back passage with its neat linoleum floor-covering. The deep silence accompanied her; she still felt it moving watchfully at her side, as though she were its prisoner and it might throw itself upon her if she attempted to escape. She limped on towards the kitchen. That of course would be empty too, and immaculate. But she must see it.

She leaned a minute in the embrasure of a window in the passage. 'It's like the *Marie Celeste*—a *Marie Celeste* on terra firma,' she thought, recalling the unsolved sea mystery of her childhood. 'No one ever knew what happened on board the *Marie Celeste*. And perhaps no one will ever know what happened here. Even I shan't know.'

At the thought her latent fear seemed to take on a new quality. It was like an icy liquid running through every vein, and lying in a pool about her heart. She

understood now that she had never before known what fear was, and that most of the people she had met had probably never known it either. For this sensation was something quite different...

It absorbed her so completely that she was not aware how long she remained leaning there. But suddenly a new impulse pushed her forward, and she walked on towards the scullery. She went there first because there was a service slide in the wall, through which she might peep into the kitchen without being seen; and some indefinable instinct told her that the kitchen held the clue to the mystery. She still felt strongly that whatever had happened in the house must have its source and centre in the kitchen.

In the scullery, as she had expected, everything was clean and tidy. Whatever had happened, no one in the house appeared to have been taken by surprise; there was nowhere any sign of confusion or disorder. 'It looks as if they'd known beforehand, and put everything straight,' she thought. She glanced at the wall facing the door, and saw that the slide was open. And then, as she was approaching it, the silence was broken. A voice was speaking in the kitchen—a man's voice, low but emphatic, and which she had never heard before.

She stood still, cold with fear. But this fear was again a different one. Her previous terror had been speculative, conjectured, a ghostly emanation of the surrounding silence. This was a plain everyday dread of evil-doers. Oh, God, why had she not remembered her husband's revolver, which ever since his death had lain in a drawer in her room?

She turned to retreat across the smooth slippery floor but halfway her stick slipped from her, and crashed on the tiles. The noise seemed to echo on and on through the emptiness, and she stood still, aghast. Now that she had betrayed her presence, flight was useless. Whoever was beyond the kitchen door would be upon her in a second...

But to her astonishment the voice went on speaking. It was as though neither the speaker nor his listeners had heard her. The invisible stranger spoke so low that she could not make out what he was saying, but the tone was passionately earnest, almost threatening. The next moment she realised that he was speaking in a foreign language, a language unknown to her. Once more her terror was surmounted by the urgent desire to know what was going on, so close to her yet unseen. She crept to the slide, peered cautiously through into the kitchen, and saw that it was as orderly and empty as the other rooms. But in the middle of the carefully scoured table stood a portable wireless, and the voice she heard came out of it...

She must have fainted then, she supposed; at any rate she felt so weak and dizzy that her memory of what happened next remained indistinct. But in the course of time she groped her way back to pantry, and there found a bottle of spirits—brandy or whisky, she could not remember which. She found a glass, poured herself a stiff

drink, and while it was flushing through her veins, managed, she never knew with how many shuddering delays, to drag herself through the deserted ground floor, up the stairs and down the corridor to her own room. There, apparently, she fell across the threshold, again unconscious...

When she came to, she remembered her first care had been to lock herself in; then to recover her husband's revolver. It was not loaded, but she found some cartridges, and succeeded in loading it. Then she remembered that Agnes, on leaving her the evening before, had refused to carry away the tray with the tea and sandwiches, and she fell on them with a sudden hunger. She recalled also noticing that a flask of brandy had been put beside the thermos, and being vaguely surprised. Agnes's departure, then, had been deliberately planned, and she had known that her mistress, who never touched spirits, might have need of a stimulant before she returned. Mrs Clayburn poured some of the brandy into her tea, and swallowed it greedily.

After that (she told me later) she remembered that she had managed to start a fire in her grate, and after warming herself, had got back into her bed, piling on it all the coverings she could find. The afternoon passed in a haze of pain, out of which there emerged now and then a dim shape of fear—the fear that she might lie there alone and untended until she died of cold, and of the terror of her solitude. For she was sure by this time that the house was empty—completely empty, from garret to cellar. She knew it was so, she could not tell why; but again she felt that it must be because of the peculiar quality of the silence—the silence which had dogged her steps wherever she went, and was now folded down on her like a pall. She was sure that the nearness of any other human being, however dumb and secret, would have made a faint crack in the texture of that silence, flawed it as a sheet of glass is flawed by a pebble thrown against it...



'Is that easier?' the doctor asked, lifting himself from bending over her ankle. He shook his head disapprovingly. 'Looks to me as if you'd disobeyed orders—eh? Been moving about, haven't you? And I guess Dr Selgrove told you to keep quiet until he saw you again, didn't he?'

The speaker was a stranger, whom Mrs Clayburn knew only by name. Her own doctor had been called away that morning to the bedside of an old patient in Baltimore, and had asked this young man, who was beginning to be known at Norrington, to replace him. The newcomer was shy, and somewhat familiar, as the shy often are, and Mrs Clayburn decided that she did not much like him. But before she could convey this by the tone of her reply, she heard Agnes speaking—yes, Agnes, the same, the usual Agnes, standing behind the doctor, neat and stern-looking

as ever. 'Mrs Clayburn must have got up and walked about in the night instead of ringing for me, as she'd ought to.' Agnes intervened severely.

This was too much! In spite of the pain, which was now exquisite, Mrs Clayburn laughed. 'Ringing for you? How could I, with the electricity cut off?'

'The electricity cut off?' Agnes's surprise was masterly. 'Why, when was it cut off?' She pressed her finger on the bell beside the bed, and the call tinkled through the quiet room. 'I tried that bell before I left you last night, madam, because if there'd been anything wrong with it I'd have come and slept in the dressing-room sooner than leave you here alone.'

Mrs Clayburn lay speechless, staring up at her. 'Last night? But last night I was all alone in the house.'

Agnes's firm features did not alter. She folded her hands resignedly across her trim apron. 'Perhaps the pain's made you a little confused, madam.' She looked at the doctor, who nodded.

'The pain in your foot must have been pretty bad,' he said.

'It was,' Mrs Clayburn replied. 'But it was nothing compared to the horror of being left alone in this empty house since the day before yesterday, with the heat and the electricity cut off, and the telephone not working.'

The doctor was looking at her in evident wonder. Agnes's sallow face flushed slightly, but only as if in indignation at an unjust charge. 'But, madam, I made up your fire with my own hands last night—and look, it's smouldering still. I was getting ready to start it again just now, when the doctor came.'

'That's so. She was down on her knees before it,' the doctor corroborated.

Again Mrs Clayburn laughed. Ingeniously as the tissue of lies was being woven about her, she felt she could still break through it. 'I made up the fire myself yesterday—there was no one else to do it,' she said, addressing the doctor, but keeping her eyes on her maid. 'I got up twice to put on more coal, because the house was like a sepulchre. The central heating must have been out since Saturday afternoon.'

At this incredible statement Agnes's face expressed only a polite distress; but the new doctor was evidently embarrassed at being drawn into an unintelligible controversy with which he had no time to deal. He said he had brought the X-ray photographer with him, but the ankle was much too swollen to be photographed at present. He asked Mrs Clayburn to excuse his haste, as he had all Dr Selgrove's patients to visit besides his own, and promised to come back that evening to decide whether she could be X-rayed then, and whether, as he evidently feared, the ankle would have to be put in plaster. Then, handing his prescriptions to Agnes, he departed.

Mrs Clayburn spent a feverish and suffering day. She did not feel well enough to carry on the discussion with Agnes; she did not ask to see the other servants. She

grew drowsy, and understood that her mind was confused with fever. Agnes and the housemaid waited on her as attentively as usual, and by the time the doctor returned in the evening her temperature had fallen; but she decided not to speak of what was on her mind until Dr Selgrove reappeared. He was to be back the following evening, and the new doctor preferred to wait for him before deciding to put the ankle in plaster—though he feared this was now inevitable.



That afternoon Mrs Clayburn had me summoned by telephone, and I arrived at Whitegates the following day. My cousin, who looked pale and nervous, merely pointed to her foot, which had been put in plaster, and thanked me for coming to keep her company. She explained that Dr Selgrove had been taken suddenly ill in Baltimore, and would not be back for several days, but that the young man who replaced him seemed fairly competent. She made no allusion to the strange incidents I have set down, but I felt at once that she had received a shock which her accident, however painful, could not explain.

Finally, one evening, she told me the story of her strange weekend, as it had presented itself to her unusually clear and accurate mind, and as I have recorded it above. She did not tell me this until several weeks after my arrival; but she was still upstairs at the time, and obliged to divide her days between her bed and a lounge. During those endless intervening weeks, she told me she had thought the whole matter over: and though the events of the mysterious thirty-six hours were still vivid to her, they had already lost something of their haunting terror, and she had finally decided not to reopen the question with Agnes, or to touch on it in speaking to the other servants. Dr Selgrove's illness had been not only serious but prolonged. He had not yet returned, and it was reported that as soon as he was well enough he would go on a West Indian cruise, and not resume his practice at Norrington until the spring. Dr Selgrove, as my cousin was perfectly aware, was the only person who could prove that thirty-six hours had elapsed between his visit and that of his successor; and the latter, a shy young man, burdened by the heavy additional practice suddenly thrown on his shoulders, told me (when I risked a little private talk with him) that in the haste of Dr Selgrove's departure the only instructions he had given Mrs Clayton were summed up in the brief memorandum: 'Broken ankle. Have X-rayed.'

Knowing my cousin's authoritative character, I was surprised at her decision not to speak to the servants of what had happened; but on thinking it over I concluded she was right. They were all exactly as they had been before that unexplained episode: efficient, devoted, respectful and respectable. She was dependent on them and felt at home with them, and she evidently preferred to put the

whole matter out of her mind, as far as she could. She was absolutely certain that something strange had happened in her house, and I was more than ever convinced that she had received a shock which the accident of a broken ankle was not sufficient to account for; but in the end I agreed that nothing was to be gained by cross-questioning the servants or the new doctor.

I was at Whitegates off and on that winter and during the following summer, and when I went home to New York for good early in October I left my cousin in her old health and spirits. Dr Selgrove had been ordered to Switzerland for the summer, and this further postponement of his return to his practice seemed to have put the happenings of the strange weekend out of her mind. Her life was going on as peacefully and normally as usual, and I left her without anxiety, and indeed without a thought of the mystery, which was now nearly a year old.

I was living then in a small flat in New York by myself, and I had hardly settled into it when, very late one evening—on the last day of October—I heard my bell ring. As it was my maid's evening out, and I was alone, I went to the door myself, and on the threshold, to my amazement, I saw Sara Clayburn. She was wrapped in a fur cloak, with a hat drawn down over her forehead, and a face so pale and haggard that I saw something dreadful must have happened to her. 'Sara,' I gasped, not knowing what I was saying, 'where in the world have you come from at this hour?'

'From Whitegates. I missed the last train and came by car.' She came in and sat on the bench near the door. I saw that she could hardly stand, and sat down beside her, putting my arm about her. 'For heaven's sake, tell me what happened.'

She looked at me without seeming to see me. 'I telephoned Nixon's and hired a car. It took me five hours and a quarter to get here.' She looked about her. 'Can you take me in for the night? I've left my luggage downstairs.'

'For as many nights as you like. But you look so ill——'

She shook her head. 'No; I'm not ill. I'm only frightened—deathly frightened,' she repeated in a whisper.

Her voice was so strange, and the hands I was pressing between mine were so cold, that I drew her to her feet and led her straight to my little guest-room. My flat was in an old-fashioned building, not many stories high, and I was on more human terms with the staff than is possible in one of the modern Babels. I telephoned down to have my cousin's bags brought up, and meanwhile I filled a hot water bottle, warmed the bed, and got her into it as quickly as I could. I had never seen her as unquestioning and submissive, and that alarmed me even more than her pallor. She was not a woman to let herself be undressed and put to bed like a baby; but she submitted without a word, as though aware that she had reached the end of her tether.

'It's good to be here,' she said in a quieter tone, as I tucked her up and smoothed the pillows. 'Don't leave me yet, will you—not just yet.'

'I'm not going to leave you for more than a minute—just to get you a cup of

tea,' I reassured her; and she lay still. I left the door open, so that she could hear me stirring about in the little pantry across the passage, and when I brought her the tea she swallowed it gratefully, and a little colour came into her face. I sat with her in silence for some time; but at last she began: 'You see it's exactly a year——'

I should have preferred to have her put off until the next morning whatever she had to tell me; but I saw from her burning eyes that she was determined to rid her mind of what was burdening it, and that until she had done so it would be useless to proffer the sleeping draft I had ready.

'A year since what?' I asked stupidly, not yet associating her precipitate arrival with the mysterious occurrences of the previous year at Whitegates.

She looked at me in surprise. 'A year since I met that woman. Don't you remember—the strange woman who was coming up the drive the afternoon when I broke my ankle? I didn't think of it at the time, but it was on All Souls' eve that I met her.'

Yes, I said, I remembered that it was.

'Well—this is All Souls' eve, isn't it? I'm not as good as you are on Church dates, but I thought it was.'

'Yes. This is All Souls' eve.'

'I thought so ... Well, this afternoon I went out for my usual walk, I'd been writing letters, and paying bills, and didn't start until late; not until it was nearly dusk. But it was a lovely, clear evening. And as I got near the gate, there was the woman coming in—the same woman ... going towards the house...'

I pressed my cousin's hand, which was hot and feverish now. 'If it was dusk, could you be perfectly sure it was the same woman?' I asked.

'Oh, perfectly sure, the evening was so clear. I knew her and she knew me; and I could see she was angry at meeting me. I stopped her and asked: "Where are you going?" just as I had asked her last year. And she said, in the same queer, half-foreign voice. "Only to see one of the girls", as she had before. Then I felt angry all of a sudden, and I said: "You shan't set foot in my house again. Do you hear me? I order you to leave." And she laughed: yes, she laughed—very low, but distinctly. By that time it had got quite dark, as if a sudden storm was sweeping up over the sky, so that though she was so near me, I could hardly see her. We were standing by the clump of hemlocks at the turn of the drive, and as I went up to her, furious at her impertinence, she passed behind the hemlocks, and when I followed her she wasn't there ... No; I swear to you she wasn't there ... And in the darkness I hurried back to the house, afraid that she would slip by me and get there first. And the queer thing was that as I reached the door the black cloud vanished, and there was the transparent twilight again. In the house everything seemed as usual, and the servants were busy about their work; but I couldn't get it out of my head that the woman, under the shadow of that cloud, had somehow got there before me.' She paused for

breath, and began again. 'In the hall I stopped at the telephone and rang up Nixon, and told him to send me a car at once to go to New York, with a man he knew to drive me. And Nixon came with the car himself...'

Her head sank back on the pillow and she looked at me like a frightened child. 'It was good of Nixon,' she said.

'Yes; it was very good of him. But when they saw you leaving—the servants, I mean...'

'Yes. Well, when I got upstairs to my room I rang for Agnes. She came, looking just as cool and quiet as usual. And when I told her I was starting for New York in half an hour—I said it was on account of a sudden business call—well, then her presence of mind failed her for the first time. She forgot to look surprised, she even forgot to make an objection—and you know what an objector Agnes is. And as I watched her I could see a little secret spark of relief in her eyes, though she was so on her guard. And she just said: "Very well, madam," and asked me what I wanted to take with me. Just as if I were in the habit of dashing off to New York after dark on an autumn night to meet a business engagement! No, she made a mistake not to show any surprise—and not even to ask me why I didn't take my own car. And her losing her head in that way frightened me more than anything else. For I saw she was so thankful I was going that she hardly dared speak, for fear she should betray herself, or I should change my mind.

After that Mrs Clayburn lay a long while silent, breathing less unrestfully; and at last she closed her eyes, as though she felt more at ease now that she had spoken, and wanted to sleep. As I got up quietly to leave her, she turned her head a little and murmured: 'I shall never go back to Whitegates again.' Then she shut her eyes and I saw that she was falling asleep.



I have set down above, I hope without omitting anything essential, the record of my cousin's strange experience as she told it to me. Of what happened at Whitegates that is all I can personally vouch for. The rest—and of course there is a rest—is pure conjecture; and I give it only as such.

My cousin's maid, Agnes, was from the Isle of Skye, and the Hebrides, as everyone knows, are full of the supernatural—whether in the shape of ghostly presences, or the almost ghostlier sense of unseen watchers peopling the long nights of those stormy solitudes. My cousin, at any rate, always regarded Agnes as the—perhaps unconscious, at any rate irresponsible—channel through which communications from the other side of the veil reached the submissive household at Whitegates. Though Agnes had been with Mrs Clayburn for a long time without any peculiar incident revealing this affinity with the unknown forces, the power to

communicate with them may all the while have been latent in her, only awaiting a kindred touch; and that touch may have been given by the unknown visitor whom my cousin, two years in succession, had met coming up the drive at Whitegates on the eve of All Souls'. Certainly the date bears out my hypothesis; for I suppose that, even in this unimaginative age, a few people still remember that All Souls' eve is the night when the dead can walk—and when, by the same token, other spirits, piteous or malevolent, are also freed from the restrictions which secure the earth to the living on the other days of the year.

If the recurrence of this date is more than a coincidence—and for my part I think it is—then I take it that the strange woman who twice came up the drive at Whitegates on All Souls' eve was either a 'fetch', or else, more probably, and more alarmingly, a living woman inhabited by a witch. The history of witchcraft, as is well known, abounds in such cases, and such a messenger might well have been delegated by the powers who rule in these matters to summon Agnes and her fellow servants to a midnight 'Coven' in some neighbouring solitude. To learn what happens at Covens, and the reason of the irresistible fascination they exercise over the timorous and superstitious, one need only address oneself to the immense body of literature dealing with these mysterious rites. Anyone who has once felt the faintest curiosity to assist at a Coven apparently soon finds the curiosity increase to desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, which, when the opportunity presents itself, breaks down all inhibitions; for those who have once taken part in a Coven will move heaven and earth to take part again.



Such is my—conjectural—explanation of the strange happenings at Whitegates. My cousin always said she could not believe that incidents which might fit into the desolate landscape of the Hebrides could occur in the cheerful and populous Connecticut Valley; but if she did not believe, she at least feared—such moral paradoxes are not uncommon—and though she insisted that there must be some natural explanation of the mystery, she never returned to investigate it.

'No, no,' she said with a little shiver, whenever I touched on the subject of her going back to Whitegates, 'I don't want ever to risk seeing that woman again...' And she never went back.

Query

By Seamark

Thomas Masterick looked dully at the little square of grey sky behind his cell window. He had come to regard it as something of an entity, something almost possessing life. It had a unique talent. It was the only thing in his cell that ever changed. It was a tiny, slow-moving picture in a world that was fixed and motionless. He talked to it in a low, uncomplaining monotone that was cow-like in its contemplative absence of expression. For fifteen years he had been talking to various objects in his cell, reasoning with them vaguely on his one cankering grievance against life.

Not that it was a grievance in the ordinary sense of the word, for there was not a scrap of resentment in the soul of Thomas Masterick. Only a dim perplexity, a puzzlement that refused to submit to elucidation no matter how earnestly he tried to think it out. All he asked of life was an explanation, a reason for the rather unfair thing life had done to him. And, he could never quite get down to that explanation. It eluded him persistently. A thousand times he had tried to think down to the real reason. And, he had overdone it. Later he came to realise that that was probably why he could no longer think as easily as he used to.

'The trouble is,' he admitted to the grey square, 'I've been thinking too much. I've had too many thinks. A lot too many thinks. I know I have; because now when I try to have a real good think all I get is a bad dizzy. And, these dizzies make my head ache. I've too many of them dizzies lately.

'But They can say what They like,' he added moodily. 'They can say what They

like, but They can't say I killed Fred Smith. They can say and say and say. But that don't make out I killed him.'

He sat on the edge of his stool and fretfully fingered the leaves of the Bible on the white-scrubbed table.

'Of course, the other trouble is,' he said. 'They think I did. And, that's where They've got me. That's what makes it more awkward. It's not much use me saying I didn't, if all the time They tell me I did. They don't believe me any more than I believe Them. They're the most awful crowd of liars I ever met.

'That long, lanky chap in the black gown—he was the worst of the lot. And, he was the start of it. Never heard such a lying devil in all my life. Stood up in the middle of the court he did—in the middle of the court, mind you—and deliberately argued that I killed Fred Smith. And, there was a hell of a crowd of people there. All listening. They must have heard it. Couldn't have done otherwise.

'And, how could *he* know?' he asked with placid wonderment. 'Eh? How *could* he know. He wasn't there. He admitted he'd never seen Fred Smith in his life. And, he laughed when I asked him. I didn't like that laugh. So stinkin' cocky it was. He admitted he'd never seen me, not till that day They put me in court. So how could *he* know. Yet, he stood in the very middle of that court and deliberately made out to the judge how I did it. Stuck at it for four days he did. He was a marvel of a chap. He proved I did do it! Actually proved it. He was a marvel of a chap. Proved it as plain as plain. An absolute marvel of a chap. But the most God-forsaken liar I ever came across in my life.

'And, the questions he asked! Couh! You'd have thought he'd known Smithy all his life. Long, lanky devil, he had me tied up all ways. Couldn't move a hand's turn. A fair knockout. He proved me a liar. And, a perjurer. And, a thief. And then, he went and proved I killed Fred Smith. And that was where I had him. Because I never killed Fred Smith. I never saw Fred Smith that day. And, if ever I get out of this I'll tell him so too. Never such a chap in all my born days. Simply wouldn't listen to reason. And now, it's raining like the very devil.

'I never told him any lies. I never told him any perjury. And, I never nicked anything in my life. Well, not since I left school, anyway. And then, for him to stand up in the middle of that court and say the things he did—well! It beats me. Beats me flat.

'And then, the judge told me he was going to hang me. I wish to God he had now. I wouldn't have been stuck here all this time. Can't make out why he didn't. They was so damn cocksure I'd done it. If I did, why didn't he hang me? If I'd done it, he ought to have hung me, and none of these half-larks. If I didn't do it, then They got no right to have me hung. And, They haven't hung me. Looks precious much to me as if They ain't sure I did do it, after all.

'I knew it was going to rain. I knew it this morning. And, I said so to Four-

eighty-four out in the exercise. "Ginger," I said, "it's going to rain." "I don't care a damn," says Ginger. "Before dinner," I said. "Will it," says Ginger. "I will bet you three hundred thousand pounds it don't."

'Well, I've got that to come, anyway. That ought to set me up a bit when I get outside. But I don't suppose I'll get it. He won't pay up. He never does. I don't believe he's got three hundred thousand pounds. He's a fly devil is Ginger. Different as anything from Southampton Jack. Southampton Jack betted me a bread ration that I couldn't get him the result of the Derby before supper-time. Of course, I could get him the result of the Derby before supper-time. I know the ropes. After all the years I've been here I ought to know the ropes. People who don't know how to get hold of the ropes never ought to go to prison.

'But Ginger don't even pay up on a bread ration. He betted me a bread ration last Sunday that the chaplain would give out hymn number four-eight-four in the evening. And, he didn't. The biggest number he gave out was three hundred and eight. But that only shows how much Ginger knows about religion. Hymn number four-eighty-four is a Christmas hymn. And, this ain't Christmas. Not by a long chalk. But he never paid up.

'Southampton Jack paid up next morning. Chucked it in my cell as he was passin' through to the exercise. That's the best of sailors. They're only fly devils sometimes. Mostly they're all right. He's here because he sold a lot of cargo. He says he'd go dotty if they put him in prison without him selling some cargo first. I'm here because I never killed Fred Smith. If I had killed Fred Smith They'd have hung me.

'Southampton Jack don't believe I killed Fred Smith. Don't believe a word of it. "What? You?" he said. "You killed Fred Smith? Not you, my cocker," he said. "You ain't got the guts to kill Fred Smith." Which was quite right then. But ain't now. I wouldn't think twice about having a lam at that long, lanky devil who stood up in the middle of that court and spouted about me the way he did. It was him that got me lagged, I reckon.

'Sometimes I used to think I'd go dotty when They put me in here without me first killing Fred Smith. But I don't get that way now. All I get is the dizzies. And, only when I'm having too many thinks.

'It's funny old Ginger letting himself get caught over his own hymn number. You'd reckon they'd all know their own hymn numbers by the time they've been here a lot of years. When all you've got to read is that Bible and hymn-book, it makes you study 'em a bit. I must have read that Bible down a hundred times. And, I'm hanged if I can see what there is in it for people to go raving crazy about. A finer pack of lies I never did see. Nor, a bigger lot of twaddle. Unless it was the lot that long lanky devil said about me in that court.

'Most of us know where we are in the hymn-book. Joe Bennett is a Holy Baptism and Tim Cheyne is a 'Piphany. There's a couple of Trinity Sundays down

there past the wash-house and all of 'em up there on the top landing are Lents. Me and the lags either side is Ember Days. I've been here years and years and I've never been sung yet. Dan Rafferty gets sung most. He's a Times of Trouble. But the best one is old Three-fifty-one. He's a Matrimony and he's in for a lot of bigamy. I reckon that's damn funny. Thinking about that has got me out a dizzy many a time. Southampton Jack is a Harvest Festival and Tom Earle, who used to be a warder here once, is the only Rogation Day in this block. The other Rogation cells are full of scrubbing gear.

'In my honest opinion I don't believe Fred Smith ever was killed. I believe he took ship that day. It's just the sort of thing he would do. It would be just his delight to land me in the soup. He always said he would. And, my God, he did! Not half he didn't. He always went on sailing ships. And, if he suddenly went off on one of those damn long Melbourne cruises of his, he wouldn't be heard of for months and months. More especially if he got bad winds. It would have been all over before he made land. All over and done with. And, I'd have been put away prop'ly.

'Southampton Jack might know. He's been to sea long enough. Running east, too. He would tell me if he's heard anything about Smithy since I've been here. If he has, then all I've got to do is to wait till my time's up and go and find him. If I did find him I wouldn't half be able to take the mike out of that cocksure crowd in that court. I'd give 'em a shock all right. I'd make 'em think a bit, too, I'll lay.

'And, I don't believe that body they had up on that slab was old Freddy Smith at all. Smithy never wore a wristwatch. He was a sailor. A blue water sailor. And I doubt, if his eyesight was good enough to see the time by a wristwatch. And, I'm dead sure he never wore brown boots in his life. I've told the Governor that. And, the Chaplain. And the Visiting Justices. But, you see, they didn't know Fred Smith. So they couldn't say. And they wouldn't believe me much, anyway—not after what that long, lanky devil said about me.

Rubber-shod feet and a jingle of steel went past his door and up the stairs of the main hall.

'That's old Neversweat,' he observed. 'Going up to start opening all the doors for dinner. Mutton broth and jackety spuds it'll be to-day. And no duff. Because there's bread. That ought to be all right. And after that we'll all have a bath. And after that Six-thirty-one will scrape the hide off our faces with that razor of his. And then we'll all be all right for Sunday. Six-thirty-one tries to make out he was a real barber before he came here. Couh! I pity his customers. Southampton Jack reckons his customers must have got him put away—if he really was a barber outside. Jack only let him shave him once. Then he put in to be allowed to grow a beard. The Governor laughed like hell when old Neversweat told him why.'

The wards of the lock clanged solidly back to the thrust of a ponderous key.

'Basins,' said the cookhouse orderly in front of an adequate warder.

Thomas Masterick received his dinner, and the warder poked his head into his cell.

'Number Three-five-four,' he said, 'you won't go through to exercise after dinner. You'll remain in your cell till the chaplain comes. He will see you this afternoon.'

'Will he, sir? All right. Thank you.'

The warder looked at him oddly. 'You feeling unwell?' he snapped.

'No sir. I'm all right. Only I think I've got one of my dizzies coming on. I'll be all right, sir, after this bit of broth.'

'Well, take my tip when the chaplain comes, and look better than you do now. Or, he will be having you trotted along to the infirmary. And you don't want that, do you?'

Masterick looked at him with a childlike incredulity. Of all the desirable heavens in the world of the penal prison the infirmary was the sweetest and best.

'I wouldn't mind going to the infirmary, sir,' he said bleakly. 'It's very nice in the infirmary.'

Regardless of the din of impatient basins and spoons lower down the corridor, the warder stepped right into the cell.

'Say, Three-fifty-four, don't you know what he is going to see you for?' he asked.

Masterick looked up with a spot of fear in his eyes.

'You're going out to-morrow, Three-fifty-four. Didn't you know? Oh, you poor devil!'

That last was because Thomas Masterick had trembled a little, grinned a little, and slid down to the floor with the mutton broth spreading all over his chest.

'My Gawd!' said the warder in the mess-room half an hour later. 'Now what the devil was that Number Three-fifty-four living for? Eh? What was he looking forward to? He wasn't even keeping tally of his time. He's the first one I've ever known who couldn't tell you to a second how many hours he still had to do—at any time of the day or night.'

'Well, you see,' Thomas Masterick was informing his basin at that moment, 'when I was a Feast and Thanks giving down there by the doctor's shop, I had it all written up in the whitewash. Got a splinter off the floor boards, I did. And scratched 'em all up in the whitewash. All in bundles of ten. And I scratched one out at each breakfast. Five thousand four hundred and eighty days. That's what they give you for a lifer. And I had 'em all written up.'

'The first time I lost count was years and years ago. While we were out in the exercise, the maintenance party came round and put fresh whitewash up in the cells. And when I tried to think down to how many I'd done and how many I still had to do, I got a dizzy. And then, just when I had it nearly all put to rights again by licking off

a lot of the new whitewash, they went and changed my cell and made me an Ember Day.'



When the chaplain came he found Masterick very quiet and subdued.

'How are you, Number Three-fifty-four?' he asked with kindly austerity. 'Well, I hope?—and prepared for your big adventure tomorrow?—I really and sincerely trust we shall never see you again?'

Masterick turned his eyes to the window-patch.

'Well, sir, that all depends on how They look at it,' he said, a little distantly. 'I never quite know what They're going to do with me next. You never ought to have seen me to start with. Not really. Because I never killed Fred Smith. But you know that, don't you? I told you.'

'You; but I want to know what you are going to do. I can probably help you with your arrangements and help you to get settled down again. Have you any people living to whom you can definitely go?'

'That I can't say, sir. You see, I've been here a tidy long while. And most likely all the people I used to know have died. Perhaps, even Fred Smith has died, too. A tidy long while I've been here. There's been a war finished and done with since I've been here. And you see that little flag-pole against my bit of window? Well, I always thought that was a flag-pole from the day it first went up, five months back. But that ain't a flag-pole. It's a wireless. So Southampton Jack tells me. I'll have to step very quiet till I pick up that lot of ropes outside again.'

'Yes, quite. H'm! A great pity you haven't somewhere definite to go—something definite to do. Perhaps I may be able to exert——'

'Oh, I've got something definite to do all right, sir.'

'Oh, you have. Oh, well, of course, that's splendid. Regular employment is it?'

'Pretty regular, maybe. I want to take the mike out of that cocksure crowd in the court. Because, you see, sir, I never killed Fred Smith.'



The chaplain who had heard that curiously uncomplaining fact reiterated with such steady persistence that he had almost come to believe it himself, made a mental note that Thomas Masterick was a case which would have to be watched pretty closely when he got clear of the prison.

But he needn't have worried. The authorities admitted two months later that their suspicions about Masterick were groundless, and They called off the System. He had harboured no dark animosity against those connected with his trial—a trial

which, except for the fact that Thomas Masterick did not kill Fred Smith, was perfectly honest and fair. In fact, he made what they called 'quite a good recovery'. He picked into the old ruts with deliberate, if painful, endeavour. He got a job down about the docks and set about his task of climbing back into civilisation again with calm stolidity. In his case They did not fear for the recidivist.

And yet, a month after that, they freely admitted that it would have been far better for them and for the pomp and vanity of all the legal world if Thomas Masterick had gone straight out, bought a gun and kicked up ten different hells according to his own half-burned-out lights. For the problem that Thomas Masterick flung at them with cold and calculated deliberation when the time was ripe shook the law-officers of the Crown to their finger-tips. He knocked the Law clean out. He left it flat and gasping. He sent every legal mind in the country hectically scampering through old and ancient tomes for light and guidance. But there was no light and guidance. Thomas Masterick had floored them utterly and completely, ludicrously and horribly.

For, three months after his release from prison, and quite by accident, he met the long, lanky devil in the black gown. Counsel for the Crown was also wearing a Knighthood and a K.C. Thomas Masterick was not to know that. Not that it would have mattered to that numb, pulseless soul, even if he had known it.

It was by the 'Griffin', where Fleet Street melts into the Strand, and he walked up to him, and he said:

'Hey, mister—you know all that lot of stuff you said about me?'

The K.C. looked down at him shrewdly, and paused for a moment.

'No,' he said evenly. 'I don't think I do.'

'Yes, you remember—that lot of stuff you said about me in the court. To the judge.'

The K.C.'s eyes contracted ever so slightly. Somewhere, right away in the back blocks of memory there came a tiny, fleeting picture—a glimpse.

'Oh, yes—I believe I do,' he said. 'Let me see, now—er—wasn't it—er—'

'Yes, mister; that's what it was. And it was all wrong. All the whole lot of it. I said so at the time, didn't I? And I'm saying so again. I never killed Fred Smith. Not in spite of all what you said. Honest I didn't. And one of these days I'll prove it to you. I'll give you the surprise of your life. And that surprise of everybody else's life who was in that court.'

The K.C. drew in a long breath, slowly.

'Ye gods!' he breathed, almost too low to be heard. 'So you—you have only just come out, have you?'

'Yes, mister. A couple of months ago.'

'Are you working? I mean, have you got anything to do?'

'Yes, mister. Got a regular job. Wapping to Convent Garden. I'm often along

here.'

'That's a good man.' The K.C. slipped a fiver into his hand. 'Get yourself a nice new Sunday suit,' he said, with a pat on his shoulder.

'Thank you very much, mister.' Thomas Masterick pocketed the fiver and hung around. After a moment he said:

'Could you—would you give me a word of advice, too, sir?'

'Certainly, certainly. What's the trouble?'

'Well, supposing I ever found that Fred Smith you said I killed. See, just supposing. How would I have to go about it?'

The K.C. whistled under his breath. 'Well!' he said, 'that would be a poser. Perhaps the best thing you could do would be to come along and see me—here in my chambers. Any of the bobbies here will show you—just here in the Inner Temple.'

'Because down in my lodging-house there's a White Star man says he's seen Fred Smith—that's since you said I killed him. It was in 'Frisco, he said Fred was running grain in the hog-backs. Got tired o' sail, he did.'

'Well, look here, old man, if ever you do manage to get hold of him, you come along and see me. I'll do all I can to help you.'

'I wouldn't half be able to take the mike out of that cocky lot of devils, wouldn't I?'

'You would what?'

'Prove 'em a lot of unholy liars.'

'You certainly would.'

'Not 'arf, I wouldn't,' said Thomas Masterick tonelessly. 'I'd do more than that, too!'

The K.C. nodded genially and went off with a little pity and a lot of amusement in his heart. He was a good soul in his way, was the K.C, but the acid of the Law ran tart in his veins. His perceptions were too subservient to the dictates of logic.

But it happened that he heard from Thomas Masterick again. On a most propitious day, too. The K.C. was lunching a few legal friends in his chambers. There were three other K.C.'s, a former Chancellor, and two judges of the High Court among them.

The K.C.'s secretary entered and slipped behind his chair. 'There's a very persistent fellow outside, sir—a man who calls himself Thomas Masterick. He says you wouldn't turn him away for anything. That it's very important. And that he's got Fred Smith with him!'

'Good God!' said the K.C, swinging round. 'Here? He's got Smith here.'

'There is another man with him, sir, yes—frightened-looking man.'

'Goodness gracious me!' The K.C. turned to his lunch-party with wild excitement in his eyes.

'Well, if that isn't the most amazing thing!' he cried. 'Listen here, you fellows. I've got the most unique course just coming in you've ever sampled in your lives. This is a lunch you'll remember and talk about for years. A real tit-bit. Do you—do you remember that dock murder fifteen years or so ago? Feller named Masterick killed a chap called Fred Smith. I was conducting for the Crown. You, Rumbold, you were judge at the time. He got the black cap—obvious from the first; but the Home Sec. Commuted. That, too, was obvious. He——'

Rumbold nodded and the others all intimated their precise memory of the case.

'Well, Masterick is here and Smith is here!' cut in the K.C. with a rush. In a few words he outlined the details of the case to them and the history of his last meeting with Thomas Masterick in Fleet-street.

'Show them in, Plender,' he said. And the two men came in—Masterick calm and a little bit suspicious; Fred Smith openly scared.

'Who's all this lot?' demanded Masterick, nodding once at the guests.

'Friends of mine, old chap. Friends who are, I am sure, quite as eager to hear you and help you as I am myself. I doubt if any man in the world ever had such an array of legal talent—ha, ha, that's one for you, Rumbold—to help him as you.'

'I don't want any help,' said Masterick flatly. He dragged Smith farther into the room. 'I've had a hell of a hunt to find him,' he announced. 'And when I did find him he wouldn't come along—not till I told him about you, mister. I ain't got much to say—I'm afraid I've got a dizzy coming on; that's what comes of trying to think too hard. But the way I look at it is this. You were a cocksure crowd of devils in that court, weren't you? Wouldn't listen to reason, no ways. I told you a hundred times I never killed Fred Smith, but you wouldn't have it; you was that damned cocky about it. You lagged me for fifteen years for murdering that swipe there. And I hadn't done it. But I've done the punishment for it, blast you!

'And now'—he suddenly pulled out a gun and shot Fred Smith clean through the heart where he stood— 'now I've done the murder for which I've already been punished.' He thundered. 'And what the hell are you going to do about it?'

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