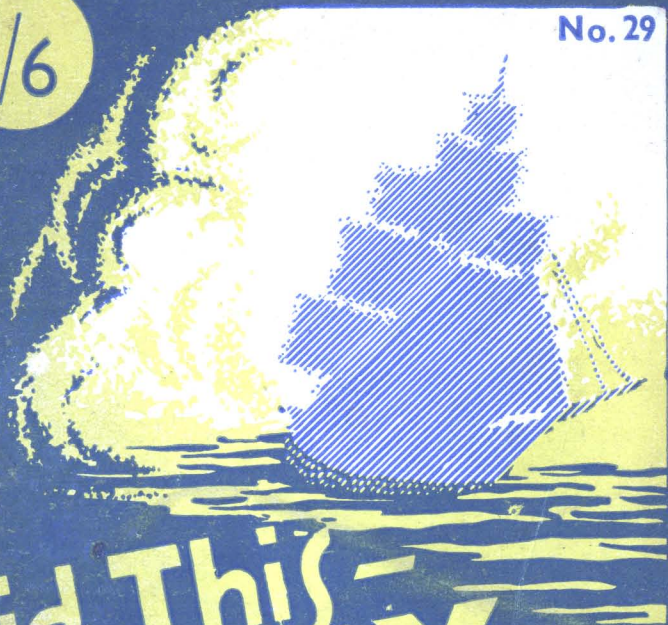


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No. 29



Did This
**REALLY
HAPPEN?**

By Sidney Gainsley



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To
FAY, JUDITH & BRUCE,
Nearest and Dearest.

Did This Really Happen?

by
SIDNEY GAINSLEY

Strange happenings and unravelled mysteries have always been a localism of the oceans. Times without number, especially before the days of the wireless, events have taken place upon the high seas which have defied the imagination and the ingenuity of man to unravel or elucidate. How many ships, seaworthy and well manned, have sailed from the harbours of the world, and failed to arrive at their destinations? Occasionally a piece of wreckage, a spar, an empty lifeboat, washed ashore, or discovered floating in the restless wastes of water, have been the only clue to the fate of a once noble ship. But it is only on rare occasions that the sea gives up even the most slender clue to its secrets, and, in the majority of cases, the ship disappears, the mystery remains a mystery, and the fate of the ship's company merely a matter for presumption.

But a wreck is an act of God, and is an understandable thing. We are all, at all times, but the playthings of God, now caressed and smiled upon, now crushed and broken. Yet, what theory can we advance, when we hear the tale of a ship discovered on the high seas, intact, without damage, every sail set, with the hatches battened down, the decks uncluttered and ship-shape and the captain's log still on his cabin table, yet without a living thing left on board, either man or beast—a derelict. And, such a ship has been found, and although many theories have been put forward, any of which may be true, what actually occurred on that ship has never really been established, and the mystery has remained unsolved to this day, and probably will be for all time.

Late in the year 1873, a British ship, the *Dei Gratia*, sighted around latitude 38deg., longitude 17deg., which is about 75 nautical miles N.E. of the Azores, in the eastern Atlantic, a brigantine of about 170 tons, sailing in a peculiar fashion. With all canvas set, the ship was moving in a jerking, unbridled manner, as though the helmsman was drunk, or the helm was altogether untended. The *Dei Gratia* made signals which were unanswered. She sailed closer to speak to the ship, but all her attempts at claiming attention failed. A boat was lowered, and a few of the ship's company rowed across, and still receiving no replies to their shouts, made fast their longboat, and boarded. The decks were deserted. The wheel revolved to and fro, as every variance in the wind swung the ship, now to port, now to starboard. On the deck stood a ladies' sewing machine, with a piece of material clamped under the needle. It was evidence of the clemency of the weather, that a reel of scarlet sewing cotton,

still stood on the flap of the sewing machine. Obviously, the least suspicion of a swell, would have thrown it to the deck; but apart from this, the vessel's cordage and paint bore no signs of a stormy passage. All the boats were seaworthy and slung upon the davits. After exploring the deserted decks, the men went below. Everything was found in perfect order. From the number of ladies' dresses and several articles of children's clothing, it was apparent that a female and a child had been on board. An examination of the holds revealed that the cargo was intact, and that the ship was completely watertight. A cask, that might have contained brandy, was found, broached and empty in the galley. Not a sign of struggle or of violence was apparent anywhere. In the captain's cabin, everything was as though the master of the ship had just left on a summons from the deck. The ship's log was found on the table, but several of the latest pages had been roughly torn out. On deck again, the searchers found a roughened groove on the gunwale, on the port side of the bow, such as might have been made by a steel rope running itself, taut under pressure, against the wood. Not a living soul was found on board.

The *Dei Gratia* subsequently made fast to the derelict, and towed her into Gibraltar. The brigantine was the *Marie Celeste*, owned by a firm of shippers of Boston, Massachusetts. She had left that port in October, 1873, bound for Lisbon. The captain had been accompanied by his wife and their child and several passengers, which, together with the crew, had numbered about 13 or 14 souls.

So the facts end, but the mystery has never been solved. What happened to those sailing on the *Marie Celeste*? What was it that caught them in the net of circumstance, and plucked them bodily from their ship. No signs of hasty departure were evident. No signs of fire or explosion or storm were found. Not one of the ship's boats was missing. Not a living thing trod the planks of the deck, or reposed in the narrow bunks. Yet living things cannot disappear, but the company of the *Marie Celeste* did disappear. How? Why? When?

* * * *

It is a blazing June day in Barcelona, in the opening years of the present century. It is afternoon. The city slumbers, taking its after-lunch siesta. A few lazy trams clang their way along the broad, sun-baked roads, yet not disturbing the rest of the populace. The balconies and the gardens are festooned with flowers. The Mediterranean shimmers in the heat, its wavelets breaking on the shore. The docks are crowded with shipping, a veritable maze of masts and funnels. A few dirty children—no dirt can hide their dark beauty—play noisily in the sequestered, shadowed corners of the streets. The sun bakes the city to a blinding whiteness. The citizens sleep.

In the cool wards of the Hospital of the Convent of our Lady, the sick lie, some tossing in uneasy pain, some smiling for the blessedness of convalescence, some just lying in that motionless posture, with which Death is often received. Smooth faced nuns flit silently to and fro, ministering to the wants of the sick. There is the subdued murmur of many voices, punctured with the cries of those in pain, and the heavy breathing of those that slumber.

Far from the sun-baked pavements, in a corner of a ward, a man, with beard and hair heavily shot with grey, lies tossing and muttering in a delirium. The hand which plucks at the coverlet is thin and wasted, but gives the impression that in health it possessed great strength. Spatulate in shape, with a broad palm and short, square-tipped fingers, it is now so thin as to be almost transparent, and waxen in colour. The face is arresting. A broad forehead, surmounted by a shock of iron-grey hair, now matted with sweat, high cheekbones, deep-sunk tightly closed eyes, and the mouth, a red gash in the greyness of the beard, hanging loosely open, the lips moving from time to time, muttering the senseless words of delirium, now in Spanish, now in a strange foreign tongue. Little rivulets of sweat run from the forehead into the ears and on to the pillow. The man is in a high fever. His end is close. His name is given on his chart as John Sebastian Brown, his age, as sixty years.

A black robed nun moves near him, and ministers to his wants. She notes that his pulse is slow and unsteady, that his breathing is laboured, and his colour waxen. She takes a white towel from the locker and gently wipes the perspiration from the forehead. The man opens his eyes; they are brown eyes, slightly filmed, but intelligent. "A priest," he mutters weakly. "A priest for the love of Heaven, for I'm going fast."

"You are a Catholic?" she asks, showing some surprise.

"Yes!" With an effort, the dying man raises himself on his elbow. "I am, mother," he says earnestly and distinctly. "A priest, in the name of the Virgin, before it is too late, and I die with this sin unconfessed and unshriven."

The man falls back exhausted, breathing heavily. The nun crosses herself and moves silently and swiftly away. A silver-toned bell begins tolling. It is four o'clock. The city stirs.

Father Constantino is a short rubicund man, with black, shoe buttoned eyes, and an ever ready smile. Kindly, pious and tolerant, he is loved by all who come into contact with him. In times of trouble he is a tower of strength, giving comfort to disturbed souls, with kindly words, and often positive action. He frowns upon sinners, and endeavours, with forceful argument, to make them see the error of their ways, and repent. Religion is his life, and the furtherance of charity his work. God has given him a robust body, and an eloquent tongue, and he uses both to good effect.

To him the nun goes, with a summons from the dying. Father Constantino picks up his rosary and his book, and accompanies her.

"Mother," he asks, "Who is this person?"

"I do not know. He was admitted four days ago. I think that he is an American!"

"An American, eh?" Father Constantino purses his lips. "How long has he?"

"Possibly a few hours, possibly less. It is in God's hands. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be His name!"

"Amen," he mutters, fervently.

They approach the patient's bed. He lies with eyes closed. He seems more composed now. Father Constantino approaches him, motioning the nun away with a gentle wave of his hand. His shrewd black eyes appraise the patient, as he stands at the bedside.

The sufferer opens his eyes, recognises the visitor, and grasps his hand, pulling him nearer the bed.

"Father, come closer."

The priest moves noiselessly nearer the head of the bed.

"Father, my time is short, but before I die, listen to the story of a sinner, and give me absolution, if you can." The words are spoken rapidly, as though the speaker realises that he is talking against time.

"Lie peacefully, my son, and tell me of that which troubles your spirit."

The patient's head falls back on to the pillow. The short conversation had exhausted him. He asks for a drink. Father Constantino supports his head, and helps him to drink a draught of water. Refreshed, the patient lies for a moment, as though trying to marshal his thoughts in their proper order. The priest seats himself at the side of the bed, and waits patiently, his eyes never leaving the sick man's face. The latter commences to speak, weakly, earnestly.

"I am," he begins, "an American. I was born in 1840 in New Orleans, the son, the only child, of a cotton merchant. My father was a very wealthy man, and my mother dying in bearing me, he lavished all his love and attention upon me. I was brought up in luxury, with slaves to carry out my every wish. My father denied me nothing, and I grew up self-willed and indolent, my only interest being the invention of new pastimes for my enjoyment. At the age of sixteen, just as my schooling was completed, my father died, leaving me a vast fortune, and I completely inequipped to manage it. At the age of sixteen a lad needs a father's guidance, and, deprived of it, I took the wrong road. I knew little about the business and the estates, and cared less. The money was there for the taking, and I used it on the pleasures of the flesh. I gambled, I drank, I became a libertine. Women existed only to satisfy the appetite of my lust. By the time I had reached my twentieth year, my name had become a byword in the city. I was surrounded by a circle of so-called friends, all like myself, whom I knew would desert me as soon as my money ran out. Decent people shunned me. I turned night into day, and rushed headlong to damnation.

"And then in 1861, the Civil War broke out. The wranglings on emancipation, that had been going on for years, burst into open combat. Thousands flocked to the standards of the rival factions: brother killed brother, and fathers their sons. Fire and sword, wielded by maddened men, laid waste the countryside. And I was numbered amongst those that fought for the retention of the old order of things. I was a Southerner, free labour was the source of my wealth, there was no tolerance in my blood. I took up the cry of "Slavery or perish" and fought under General Jackson, the old Stonewall himself. He was a great soldier, and a greater man. It was he who taught me the real meaning of life, and made me realise the pettiness and the shallowness of my youth. As I began to see things from a different angle, I vowed that when the war was over and won, I would go back to my estates, and recommence my life on a new footing. I would be a man like my father before me, and try to recapture and rebuild the old tradition. But apparently, the sins of my earlier years lay too heavily upon me, and my punish-

ment was yet to come. God soon disposed of my propositions and my plans.—Father, give me water, for I am faint."

The priest proffered the glass, and helped the sick man to drink. A short pause, either of exhaustion or reflection, and then the tale was continued.

"Father," the patient asked, "are you familiar with the various campaigns of the Civil War?"

"No, my son,"—the priest shook his head. "My time has been engaged on other things."

"Well, do you know how General Jackson met his death?"

"Yes,"—the priest appeared puzzled. "I think I remember. Did he not die by accident, a shot in the camp or in the field?"

"Yes,"—a heavy sigh—"and I killed him!"

"You, my son?"

"Yes, I! It was in 1863, in the Spring. We had been campaigning hard for over two years. We had met the enemy at Chancellorville, and given him a sound trouncing. I shall always remember the date, the tenth of May. It was evening, the beautiful evening of the early summer. The camp was stirring with the preparations for the evening meal. Here and there, parties of men were burying the dead and counting the booty. Under the trees, the horses were cropping the short new grass, snorting and neighing. The slaughter was over; those that lived sought to satisfy their cravings for food.

"I was on sentry go that evening. I stood in a clearing on the fringe of a wood that surrounded the camping ground, watching the blazing camp fires, and listening to the preparations for supper. The sun had set about half an hour before, and night was coming on fast. After the heavy roar of the guns and the jarring noises of battle, the quietness of the evening was like a sweet drug, calming the senses, and filling the veins with renewed urge for life and its pleasures. I remember I was standing there in the half light, thinking generally of New Orleans, and particularly of a bewitching Southern beauty, whom I had once courted, when the snapping of a twig cut short my reverie, and brought me back alert to the present. I called out a challenge, but received no answer. I then noticed, about thirty paces away, a figure, its white knee breeches grey in the fast gathering darkness, moving in what I thought to be a suspicious way, towards the camp. I repeated my challenge. There was still no reply; the figure still moved towards the camp. I challenged it for the third time, and the person not acknowledging, I raised my carbine to my shoulder and fired. The figure staggered and fell. I was running towards it, when, of a sudden, another figure stepped out of the bushes between me and the fallen person, and waiting until I had almost come abreast of it, turned and approached the body, now lying motionless on the grass, and dropped on one knee beside it. I ran up. The kneeling person looked up at me. The glow of the fires reflected both his face and mine. The body was lying in the shadow. I noticed that he wore the same uniform as myself. I challenged him, and he gave me the password. I turned to examine the shot man, but the kneeling figure rose as though impelled by a steel spring, and took me by the throat. His wild eyes glared down at me, his height was enormous. "Fool!" he hissed. "thrice accursed fool, do you know who it is?" I was

taken aback by his onslaught. "Release me," I cried. But his grip tightened. "Idiot, madman!" he yelled. "you have killed our commander. Jackson lies dead at our feet!"

"The world spun before my eyes. I tore myself from his grasp, and threw myself on my knees. The body was lying with its face to the sky, my bullet had pierced its neck. My companion was right, it was General Jackson. I regained my feet slowly. We stared at each other."

The patient drank again. The priest said nothing.

"I was in a panic. The man just stood and stared at me. "But I don't understand," I stammered at last, "I challenged him, three times. Why didn't he answer. It was an accident, I tell you, an accident. Why didn't he answer my challenge?" Fear gripped me in its cold fingers. Discipline and level headedness, both taught by war, deserted me. Both had been omitted from my youthful education. I was a spineless creature, a prey to unknown fears. This was murder. They would lynch me, hang me like a dog. My teeth chattered.

"My companion said nothing. He obviously diagnosed my symptoms correctly. Then he began speaking in a Southern drawl, scornfully. "Answer your challenge, you idiot. Haven't you heard of gun deafness. Jackson was temporarily deafened by the noise of artillery. If you shouted in his ear, he couldn't hear you! Besides," he pointed, "that is the outer confines of the camp; here, where Jackson walked was within the camp area. If he walked over there, I can understand you shooting, but not over here." He looked at me more closely. "You're not drunk, are you?"

"I recoiled from him in horror. Gun deafness! That could be the only reason why Jackson had ignored my challenge. As for the position of the camp confines, the man was also right. The semi-darkness, and my dreams at the time that I heard the twig snap, had confused me. My position was hopeless. I prepared to hand him my carbine.

"My companion peered at me. "You're Brown, aren't you?" he asked. "Yes," I said, wondering how he knew me. "John Sebastian Brown, from New Orleans?" he pressed. I told him that he was correct. "Ah," he said, and then, as though speaking to himself, "I had a sister once." A pause. I wondered what was coming. "Well," he said, in a surprising mildness of tone, "accidents do happen, you know, and I'm the only witness of this one. Of course," he added significantly, "it may not have been an accident. Jackson's not popular with all the men, and it's but one step from a libertine to a murderer."

"What do you mean?"

"You're rich," he said meaningly, "and I'm poor. Let's level it up. My tongue will always serve money. Otherwise," he hissed fiercely, "it's straight to the camp we go. I'll leave the rest to your imagination."

"And so, father, I arranged to pay him a large sum, to buy his silence. I was a fool, but panic makes men do silly things, and I was in a palsy. Besides, his reference to his sister smote my conscience. There had been many women in my life. We arranged a story, that he had passed and was standing near me, when we heard a shot. We searched, and found Jackson dead. His killer was

never found. History has attributed his death to an accident. But the truth is that I killed him, and my father's money bought my freedom."

There was a long pause, so long, that Father Constantino leaned forward and asked gently, "And is that all, my son?"

The patient opened his eyes. "No father, that is but half. I bought my freedom only temporarily. Actually, I also bought a ticket to a Purgatory in this life. Blackmail is moral murder. I was the victim.

"The death of Jackson created a tremendous stir. General Lee himself took charge of the investigations. On all sides the men could be heard muttering threats against the person who was responsible for the death. And the threats were very bloodthirsty, and only the silence of a blackmailer shielded me. But he kept his silence, and the death was put down to an accident, and gradually I began to breathe a little more freely. But Jackson was very popular, and the men, having lost the inspiration of his leadership, were very demoralised, and defeat followed defeat. I do not say, that because I killed Jackson, the North beat the South, for the former had stronger forces, and I realise now that before God, their cause was just, but as defeat piled upon defeat, I felt that I was responsible. It was a terrible feeling, the future of a whole nation depending upon the thoughtless action of one man.

"And my tormentor never left my side. At the first available opportunity, I obtained leave, on plea of urgent business, and accompanied by him, travelled south to my home. There I transferred the sum we had agreed upon to his credit. It was a tidy amount, and I, in my ignorance, thought that I had seen the last of him. How I was wrong!

"We rejoined our force, and went from campaign to campaign, falling back all the time. I hardly knew my real shadow from the person of my tormentor. At all times, in the heat of battle or the quiet of the night, he was ever at my side. He even saved my life once, for my death would mean the end of his "pension" as he so sarcastically termed it. And never for a moment did he leave me, and although I often debated with myself, calling myself a coward and a fool, I could never muster up sufficient courage to confess to the authorities, and throwing myself on their mercy, get the matter over, once and for all.

"Eventually, almost two years after the death of Jackson, the war came to an end, and I returned to New Orleans, determined to plunge myself into business, and endeavour to repair the gaps torn in my fortunes by the ravages of war, the wastings of my youth, and the price of silence. For eight years I tried, but it was a bitter struggle. Labour was difficult, as feelings between the negroes and their old masters ran high, the job of reconstruction was slow and painful, and every month I was paid a visit by the holder of my secret, and forced to part up with his "pension." Dozens of schemes flitted through my mind to rid myself of this pest. I hired desperadoes to waylay him, but he eluded them. He seemed to bear a charmed life. Each month he arrived like an emissary of the Devil. He even forced me to change my will, leaving him a large legacy. After all, as he put it with that accursed smile on his face, "accidents happen to the best of us."

The sick man stopped speaking, breathing heavily. His long narration was obviously weakening him, but he seemed determined to complete his tale before the end. The priest wiped his forehead, helped him to sip some water, and sat back in his chair, saying nothing, but idly playing with his beads.

"One day in 1873, I determined to finish the thing. I secretly sold my business, collected all the ready money I could lay my hands on, changed it into notes of large denomination, and giving out that I was going North on a business trip, left my home for the last time. I had made up my mind to go to Europe, and perhaps start my life anew, free from anxiety, and unshackled for ever from that fiend in human form who was sucking me dry. I travelled to Boston, and made enquiries about a ship that was leaving for Europe. I was directed to a firm of shippers who informed me that one of their vessels was sailing in a few days' time. By a coincidence, I was introduced in the office, to the wife of the same ship's captain, who told me that she kept a small hotel near the docks, and that if I would like to avail myself of any accommodation she had to offer for the few days, I would be more than welcome. This suited me perfectly. I wanted to keep myself to myself, and was afraid that if I put up at any of the larger hotels, I might be recognised, and all my plans would come to naught. I had my bags carried round to the lady's house and made myself comfortable.

"At dinner that evening, I made the acquaintance of the captain and his charming daughter, a bright child of about six years of age. The captain told me that this was going to be his final trip, as he was settling in Portugal, having arranged to buy a vineyard there, and go into the wine industry. He had sold all his effects, including the boarding house—you could hardly call it an hotel—and his wife and child were sailing with him. This interested me considerably. I made up my mind that as our acquaintanceship grew during the voyage, to broach the subject of a partnership, or an interest in his business. My meeting with the captain's wife had proved a very fortunate coincidence, and I began to throw off my feeling of gloom. The future looked rosy; I was still a young man then, and youth is prone to optimism.

"But my feeling of elation was short-lived. The next morning, there came a knock on my door. Yes, it was he, my shadow, with the cold smile on his face, and his eyes glinting mercilessly. I could only sit and gape at him. Eventually, I found my tongue.

"You!"

"Yes, it's me all right."

"But how —?"

"How did I find you, eh? I have my methods," he said mysteriously. "You wouldn't desert an old pal, would you now? —Where are you going,"—fiercely.

"My feeling of elation was not quite dissipated. I answered boldly. "That's no business of yours!"

"Oh, it isn't, eh?" He seized my by the wrist. "You'll tell me, or else—. You may remember you're a murderer, or have you forgotten. There's no Statute of Limitations as far as murder's concerned. Are you going to tell me, or do I tell all that I know?"

"Father, I was a fool. I did not realise, as I realise now, now that it is too late, that if it came to the issue, my word was as good

as his. What proof did they have that I had killed Jackson? None, not a shred of evidence. They would have as much chance of convicting me of Jackson's murder, as they would have of convicting you. And also, eight years had gone past, and—well, if I had only thought for a few moments clearly then, a different sequence of events might have been recorded as the history of my life."

The priest nodded and said, "Calm yourself, my son."

"My father, all my old fears came back in an overwhelming rush. I blurted out my destination, I even told him about the captain going over to Europe to settle down. Would that my tongue had been cut out first. He listened carefully, saying nothing. Then he left me as abruptly as he had come, and I was left suffering the tortures of indecision.

"That evening, he sat at my side at the dinner table. The captain's wife introduced him as a fellow passenger. Poor woman, little did she know! During dinner, my companion plied the captain with questions about the sea, and about the proposed route of his vessel. The captain explained that with the prevailing wind coming from the south-west at that time of the year, his probable course would be approximately along the fortieth parallel, due eastwards for the whole voyage. After dinner, I returned to my room, a prey to unknown fears. I noticed that that blackmailing fiend had left the house, for, as he said, a short walk, before turning in. The next day we sailed. The vessel was a brigantine of about 170 tons. She was named the *Marie Celeste*. The ship's company, including the captain's wife and child numbered 14 persons."

For the first time, the priest allowed a look of surprise to cross to his face. The name of the ship seemed to have touched a chord in his memory. The sick man paused to gather his thoughts and his strength, and then went on:

"From the beginning, the weather was perfect, and only the presence of my fellow passenger marred the pleasantness of the voyage. We had a third passenger with us, a young man whom the captain had engaged as an overseer for his vineyard, but even the boisterous spirits of this person, and the fresh charm of his conversation, failed to dispel the gloom that had descended upon me. I had a feeling that the presence of my companion boded ill, not only for myself, but for the whole company and the vessel itself. I could easily understand his reason for making the voyage with us—it was me he wanted to keep track of, but when I saw him, day after day, staring into the creamy wake astern, I felt that he was not just lost in a reverie, but was definitely looking for something. What could it be?

"For the first three weeks of the voyage all went well. A stiff breeze followed us all the way, and the weather was glorious. In the afternoons the captain's wife used to bring her sewing machine up on deck, and make garments for her daughter and for herself, the whirr of the machine, mingling with the creaking of the timbers and the cordage, and the dull thud of the waves as they dashed against our hull. As day followed day and nothing happened, my gloom lifted, and under the influence of the sun, the sea and the clean air, my spirits rose. I grew bold. I began thinking of my companion, and how his demise would lighten my future. A sudden push in the dark, a splash, a cry unheeded, and all would be well. His removal

was justifiable, and yet I shrank from the deed. I was still a coward, and years of persecution had not increased my boldness. I felt that once we arrived in Europe, I would do all that I could to escape from his clutches, and breathe freely for the rest of my days. My feelings came to naught: I should have killed him while I had the courage and the opportunity.

Then, one morning, one of the crew was reported missing. The night watch deposed of having heard a scuffle aft, but no cries, or sounds of a struggle. Hurrying aft, he could see nobody and nothing. The night was dark, and his lamp cast but a feeble glow. He decided that it had been just imagination on his part, and determined to say nothing. But when, in the morning, the man was posted as missing, he told the captain of the occurrences in the night. Nothing could be done. The captain entered the details in his log, and the matter was left at that.

But the next morning, another man was gone, and the morning after that, yet another. We were all nonplussed; the men went about their tasks with sullen looks, always peering over their shoulders, and extreme difficulties were experienced in persuading the crew to take the night watches. Only my companion was undismayed by these occurrences. He continued to stare westwards, and said nothing. A vague suspicion began forming itself in my mind.

On the morning of the sixth day, when only three of the original eight of the crew remained, a sail was sighted astern to the west. It remained at a distance of about ten miles until mid-morning, when it began overhauling us rapidly. By about three o'clock in the afternoon it had gained on us and stood about two miles off, a rakish looking schooner. At half-past three, being quite close to us, it suddenly ran up distress signals. The captain gave orders to put the ship about, and this was done with great difficulty owing to the shortness of assistance. When we came within hailing distance, the captain gave her a call, but there was no answer. Nobody could be seen on her decks, and her helm appeared to be lashed. After hailing several times, the captain decided to investigate. Asking me to hold the wheel, he ordered the jolly boat out, and she was lowered, not without difficulty. Then he, and the three men of the crew rowed over. We saw them approach the side of the schooner, tie up and clamber aboard. They spread out on deck, but met again at the point where they had landed. We saw them apparently holding council, when they marched in a body to the companionway, and disappeared, one by one, the red woollen cap of the mate bobbing down in the rear.

Nothing happened for fifteen minutes. The captain's wife sat tense at her machine, staring like the rest of us, at the strangely deserted craft. Only her little daughter played undisturbed, with her toys in the scuppers. Then the mate's red cap suddenly bobbed out of the companionway, followed by the three other men. They walked over to the gunwale, slid down the rope, and began rowing back to us. I saw my companion's eyes glint in the sunlight, he whistled softly through tightly clenched teeth, and walked to the side of the ship where the returning boat would tie up. We watched the frail cockle-shell bobbing up and down across the strip of water that divided the two ships, when it was suddenly shut from my sight, and a rope came snaking up, and being caught by my companion,

was made fast to a spike. I saw the rope strain over the gunwale as a weight was put upon it, and then over the side clambered a strange, villainous looking man, dressed in the red cap and other clothes of the mate, followed by three other men, as evil looking as the first, in the clothes of our captain and the other members of his crew, who had left us not more than fifteen minutes before. Each one menaced us with a pistol, and all looked as though they would use their weapon at the slightest provocation. We all recoiled in horror. The captain's wife gave a faint scream, and cupped her face in her hands. Her daughter began crying. One of the ruffians gave her a blow with the back of his hand, and she fell senseless on the deck. Her mother ran to her and picked her up in her arms, crooning to her and stroking her hair and her face.

"My companion approached the man in the mate's red cap.

"So you got here Collins, eh? he said, with a note of authority.

"Yes sir!"

"Right; keep them covered, and be prepared to abandon ship. You know what to do with them. But take that one,"—he indicated me—"first. I'm going below, I know where it is." He disappeared down the companionway. I had a shrewd idea where he was going, and what 'it' was.

I then noticed that a boat was pulling away from the side of the schooner, and approaching us. But they never boarded us, just making fast to our side, apparently waiting.

The man addressed as Collins then shouted, 'Tow their boat round to starboard, men, and make her fast to the davits,' and then in a louder tone, through cupped hands, 'Ahoy, Casey, bring her to.'

The schooner began drifting towards us. When only a few yards separated the ships, a slender steel rope was thrown from her deck, and neatly caught by one of the ruffians, who made its end fast to a stanchion on our deck. I heard the wood of the gunwale rasp, as the steel bit into it. The port side of our hull, gently bumped their starboard. Both ships floated on the bosom of the Atlantic, their bows nuzzling each other, aloft, their spars entwining.

At that moment, my evil companion stepped back on deck, carrying a leather bag which I recognised as my own. The bag was passed over to the deck of the other ship, and then I was seized roughly, my wrists were pinioned behind my back, and an evil smelling rag was bound around my eyes. The last thing I saw was our decks with the ruffians in complete charge, the captain's wife still crouching in the scuppers crooning to her child, a reel of red cotton glowing brightly on the flap of the sewing machine, and the man who had haunted me for ten years standing with arms folded by the mainmast, an evil smile of triumph on his lips. I heard the creak of the davits, as our jolly boat was hauled aboard, and a voice shouting, 'Pass a cask, Jonas, they've some good brandy aboard which they won't miss ———,' followed by raucous laughter, and then rough hands gripped me, I was lifted up, I felt a strange deck beneath my feet, I stumbled down a narrow companionway, and was locked in a tiny cabin. The whole affair had taken about twenty minutes. I never saw my companions of the Marie Celeste again. God and that black hearted monster know their fate.

"That evening the villain visited me. 'Well,' he sneered, 'I've got all your money at last, and the captain's too, for good measure. We left everything ship-shape on the Marie Celeste, they'll have a pretty problem to solve when they find her derelict. And I've got the last few pages of the log. It's nobody's business if seamen disappear.' The door slammed, and I heard him laughing as he stumbled away. I cried with mortification."

"Some days later, I don't remember how many, I had lost count of time, I was blindfolded again, and felt myself being hauled up on deck, and lowered into a boat. We hit the water with a splash, and I heard the creak of the oars as the boat bounced on the swell, and the grinding noise as the keel grounded in the shallows. I was hustled ashore and left wandering. My hands were free. I tore the bandage from my eyes. It was night, and I was in strange surroundings, ragged and penniless. I wandered all night and came to a cottage in the morning. They looked at me with surprise. I could not understand what they said, but they fed me and let me sleep. I was in Portugal, landed in the dead of night by that thrice-cursed thief, who had stolen my money and was responsible for so much misery. He knew the arts of mental torture: the fact that he had let me live proved that. But, as the months went by, and I saw him no longer, a new happiness came into my soul, and working as a common labourer, I knew a quietness of spirit that I had never known with all the so-called advantages of wealth."

The sufferer paused. He was obviously quite spent.

"Father, the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. How true are these words. The great wealth my father left me was won by him from the blood and the sweat of his slaves. That wealth made me lazy and spineless, a man without courage, without fortitude. That wealth brought only sorrow and pain, and the deaths of many innocent people. I have never told my story before, for who would believe me, but Father, you believe me, don't you?"

Father Constantino nodded. "I believe you," he said quietly.

John Sebastian Brown sighed. His eyes closed. A shudder shook his frame. He had gone to meet Jackson—and others. The waxen cheeks were wet with his tears.

A silver toned bell chimed five o'clock.

THE DIARY

Professor James Norden put down his pen and stared moodily out of the window. The afternoon sun cast its warm rays across the neat lawns, and the beds of flowers, arranged both with mechanical precision and artistic tastefulness. Through the open window, the lazy noises of the late June day floated drowsily. The river gurgled invitingly at the bottom of the garden, and Norden's boat rubbed its nose gently against the tiny landing stage, as though impatient to be released, and impelled by its owner's vigorous arms, to explore the shadowy backwaters upstream.

Norden tore his gaze reluctantly from the enchanting scene, and tried to focus his mind back to his work. February the 15th! What had happened on that day? Where had he been, what work had he done, what results were achieved? He impatiently shuffled the various papers on his desk, and not finding what he wanted, opened the drawers and rummaged through their contents. Eventually he discovered a piece of paper marked "February the 15th," and perused it thoughtfully. Ah, yes! Lecture on the Quantity Theory in the morning, lunch with the Provost, visit to the library in the afternoon. How much had he received for giving the lecture? The Lord only knew! He would have to search his bank book and find out. It was all very irregular and unsatisfactory, these bits of paper were mislaid so easily. He would have to get a diary, collect all the information he could from the scraps of paper, provided that he could find them all, and enter the thing up properly. Then he would have a permanent record for all time, and could see at a glance the whole of his activities day by day, year by year.

The rest of that afternoon Norden laboriously collected all the scraps of paper, on which he had jotted his daily activities over the past five months, and put them into chronological order. Then, placing a paper weight on them carefully, he ate a leisurely dinner, and lighting his pipe took a reflective stroll in the cool of the evening along the banks of the river, pearly in the sunset mist, and resonant with the murmuring of the waters and the cries of the water-fowl.

Early next morning (it was the Long Vacation, and the College activities were at a standstill) he cycled into the town, and bought a diary. The year was already almost half spent, and the diaries were marked up at reduced prices in the shop windows. After walking round the town Norden rode home, and luncheon over, he set to work. Following the usual conglomeration of miscellaneous information regarding Public Holidays and phases of the moon the diary

proper commenced, consisting of a page for each day, duly printed at the head with not only the date, but any special information actually applicable to such day.

Taking the first slip, marked "January the 1st" from his pile, Norden turned the pages of the diary to that day, and began copying the particulars from the slip into the book. Ah yes, he remembered! 11 a.m. Lecture on the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility. 2.30 p.m. Lecture on Foreign Exchanges. 4.30 p.m. Meeting of the Debating Society—he remembered that debate, it had been interesting. From his meagre notes, he entered all the particulars he could remember into the diary, and then he destroyed the slip of January the 1st, and began on January the 2nd.

It was a lazy, hot day, and the cool shade of the trees on the water's edge looked inviting, but Norden ignored their invitation, and, engrossed in his work, filled page after page with his fine scrawl, recording the efforts of his life, and the fees he had received for his endeavours.

Just as he was finishing entering the particulars of January the 16th, his housekeeper brought in his tea tray, and he pushed his work aside, and busied himself with the crockery and the scones. The repast ended, he carried the tray to a little side table, lit his pipe, and taking a fleeting glance out of the window, returned to work.

The garden slept in the bright sunshine. A fat, furry bumble bee buzzed its way from flower to flower, stealing their heavy fragrance. Beyond, the dancing wavelets of the river gleamed like the spears of an army moving in a solid phalanx. Here in the room the panelling of the walls reflected dully the brilliance of the garden. Norden sighed, relit his pipe and settled down. He turned over the page of the diary mechanically and drew the rough slip of January the 17th towards him from the top of the pile by his left elbow. He glanced rapidly through his notes, then, having sorted the various information in his mind, he turned to the page of the diary, his pen poised in mid-air. But the point of the nib never touched the page; it just hung there motionless. Norden's jaw dropped. He put down his pen, removed his spectacles, polished them carefully, and re-adjusted them on his nose. He took another careful look at the page of the diary before him. Yes, it was still there. It was very peculiar. It was a sentence in the form of a question, typed in green right across the page, and it asked:

"DID SHE GO TO THE CINEMA LAST NIGHT?"

This was very peculiar indeed. Apart from the total irrelevance of the question, how could anyone type in a bound book? And even if the typing was done before the book was bound, what did the sentence mean? Norden sat, and stared reflectively, reading the typed question over and over again. He decided that someone employed by the makers of the diary had played a joke of some kind. Very carefully he drew his pen through the typing and recorded his activities for January the 17th, and then, having completed that day, he tore up his rough notes, put a marker into the page, and closing the diary, went out for a walk before dinner.

The next morning he found in his post a letter from his solicitors urgently requesting his attention to some important matters regarding his mother's estate. He decided to run up to London for the

day and dispose of the queries immediately. Looking up the trains he found that there was a fast one leaving in just under an hour, so he finished his breakfast, cycled into town, and leaving his machine in the care of the luggage man, caught his train.

The day in London was unaccustomed and exhausting, and Norden arrived back home late that evening very tired, fit for nothing, save a bath and bed. His last thoughts as he lay snugly between the sheets watching the moon shaping strange patterns on the wall opposite, was that he would have to spend the whole of the next day writing up that confounded diary, a day that would never return, snatched from his vacation. Then he fell asleep.

When morning came, Norden, refreshed from his long sleep, and fortified by a good breakfast, continued his labours. He extracted the marker, opened the diary at January the 18th, sought for and found his rough slip, and copied the particulars. Having finished that day he suddenly remembered the typewritten note on January the 17th, and turned back to have another look at it. He could do nothing but stare. The thing was incredible. The typewriting had disappeared. There were the lines he had drawn through the message two days ago, with his notes written all round them, but of the letters he had scrawled through there was no trace. Norden began to have doubts of his own sanity. He timed his pulse: it was normal. He rose, and walking over to the mirror above the mantelpiece, stared at himself earnestly. He looked healthy enough. He took his spectacles off, examined them, and put them back again. They seemed perfect. He took another look at the page of January the 17th. There was no trace of typing at all.

Norden went out and used the telephone.

Half an hour later his housekeeper announced "Doctor Hawkins, sir," and in strode the Doctor, bluff, healthy and matter-of-fact. They shook hands, lit their pipes, and having made themselves comfortable, the doctor asked:

"Now, Norden, what's this all about?"

Norden gave him a detailed account of the purchase of the diary, of the reason for the purchase, of the discovery of the typewritten note, and of the subsequent disappearance thereof.

The doctor listened and said nothing, but examined the page of January the 17th in the diary, very carefully.

"What I want to know, doc.," finished Norden, "is whether I'm sane, and if I am, whether hallucinations are the first signs of insanity?"

Doctor Hawkins smoked in silence for a while, and then, the diary still in his hand, he asked:

"Have you searched the whole book for any further traces of messages or notes?"

"No, it never occurred to me. When first I saw the typewritten message, I was a bit surprised, but decided that it was a mistake or a joke or something. When, two days later, I found that the message had disappeared, I rang you up immediately. Quite frankly"—with a wry smile—"I didn't quite trust myself, and felt that if my reason was rocky, you would be the best pillar that I could lean it against."

"Yes, quite! Are you game to look right through, page by page?"

"Well, if you assure me that I'm sane, I'm quite game. But what is going to happen if I see messages, and you don't?"

"We will take that chance," smiled the doctor.

Norden took the diary from the doctor and began turning the blank pages.

"Just a moment," said the doctor. "I don't know quite how to express myself, but I would prefer that we steal up on the thing, so to speak, gradually. How about doing it day by day, slowly, filling in the time by writing the thing up?"

"You are talking in riddles, but anything you say is all right. You haven't a theory, or anything, have you?"

The doctor smiled. "We'll soon see. Now, what's the next day? January the 19th? Good, start writing, and I'll call to you. Ready? 11.30. Lecture on—what's this?—ah, yes, Bank Rate. Lecture on Bank Rate. What a confoundedly terrible hand you have, Norden. 2.30. Meeting of the Association—"

His voice droned on. Norden's nib scratched vigorously. Hawkins had been his friend since their student days. Good, level-headed chap. At least, *he* had believed him. Other men would have just laughed, and told him to keep away from alcohol for a few weeks. He was feeling better already. The thing had shocked him more than he had realised.

The doctor read on monotonously, hesitating now and then over a badly written word. The pages filled up, day followed day. The little screws of paper mounted up in the waste basket. Suddenly, Norden's breath hissed through his teeth. The doctor looked up, frowning, then, with one bound, was behind Norden's chair, staring over his shoulder at the page of January the 25th. Typewritten right across the page in green was the sentence:

"SHE DID NOT GO, AFTER ALL. BROWN TOLD ME TO-DAY THAT HE SAW HER WITH A MAN IN THE CAFE THAT EVENING. I MUST WATCH HER."

Both men stared at the message. Norden was the first to move. He looked up at the doctor and said:

"You see it, don't you? You were right. This is getting interesting. What shall I do, cross it out, as I did the first one?"

"Yes, and carry on just as you did before, write round it. I say, you're a bit pale, old man. Pull yourself together." He went to the sideboard and tinkered with glasses. "Here, drink this. I think I need one, too!"

They drank, and both felt better. "You'll stay to lunch, of course?" Norden rang the bell and gave the necessary order. They resumed work. "Outside, the day was very hot, not a zephyr disturbing the foliage, or ruffling the silver surface of the river. Through the open window, the garden looked like a beautiful stage setting. Every minute detail was visible in the brilliant sunshine.

Doctor Hawkins kept on dictating. Norden wrote industrially, turning over each page with ill-concealed expectation, wondering what lay in store for them. Occasionally, he turned back to January the 25th, but the typewritten message was still plainly visible, and showing no signs of fading. And then, on January the 31st, another message, typed in the same uncommon colour, spread itself neatly across the page. Both men read it. It said:

"I HAVE TAXED HER; SHE ADMITS NOTHING. SHE IS INSOLENT. I AM BESIDE MYSELF WITH RAGE; SHE IS ROTTEN ALL THROUGH; I MUST KILL HER."

"This is getting quite interesting," commented the doctor. "A very pretty plot unfolds itself before our eyes. I suspect there is more to come."

"Well, let's look now," said Norden.

"I doubt whether you will find any more, if you look all at once. These messages will only appear to those whose minds are receptive. Search hastily, and you'll find nothing. Record your daily activities, and they will appear."

"I'd like to prove that!"

"Go on, then!"

Norden turned the pages from February the 1st, right through to the end of the year. Each page was blank. The only foreign things that they found were an advertisement for blotting paper, and, near the end of the year a re-ordering form, inserted by the publishers for the convenience of those users of the diary, who wanted the same binding for the next year.

"You're right," admitted Norden, "there is nothing here. It's very peculiar."

"You may think that there is nothing there," said the doctor, "but let's go slowly and see what happens. As a matter of fact," he said tantalisingly, "I believe that my original theory is correct."

"I suppose that I had better compose myself to patience," smiled Norden, who was quite reconciled to the messages by now, "but it's darned exasperating!"

"Quite! Score the message through, and start writing."

They began on the details of January the 31st.

They wrote up a week of information. Norden turned back to January the 25th, but the typewriting was still there, and as plain as if the sheet had just been taken out of the machine. And so it was with the message on the 31st. He carried on, turning each page with eagerness. He was quite disappointed now when each fresh page revealed nothing. But, on February the 8th, he was rewarded. The same green ribbon, the same neatness. The message was startling, unnerving. It read:—

"I HAVE DONE IT, AND I AM GLAD. SHE WAS DIRT, AND WRAPPED IN DIRT SHE LIES UNDER THE FLAG-STONES. MAY HER SOUL WRITHE IN EVERLASTING TORMENT."

They were contemplating this message, when lunch was announced. They took the book with them into the dining room, swallowed their food, and returned hastily to their labours. On the way to the library, Doctor Hawkins telephoned his home, and issued some precise instructions.

• All through the hot summer afternoon they worked assiduously, bringing the diary right up to the date of the commencement of the Long Vacation, but no further messages appeared. Pleased as he was to have completed his work, Norden was very disappointed that the messages had finished so abruptly on February the 8th. The doctor and he examined the previous pages, and found the typewriting as clear as ever. They had begun discussing the matter once again, when there came a knock at the door, and Doctor Jeffries,

Hawkins' assistant, was announced, and walked in carrying a large suitcase. Norden shook his hand, pulled forward a chair, and un-stopped the tobacco jar. The doctor explained the whole matter and Jeffries was very interested.

"Have you brought everything, as instructed?" asked Hawkins.
"Yes, sir. The camera with the very fast lens, and the developing gear."

"Right, get busy. I want some prints before it is too late. Mind you, I rather imagine that it is a waste of time, but we can only try. Even if it is a failure, it's not going to hurt, in fact, it should strengthen my theory. Proceed, Jeffries. Meanwhile I'll make a few notes."

Doctor Jeffries opened the suitcase, extracted his paraphernalia, and made three very careful exposures of each of the pages of the diary, January the 25th and the 31st, and February the 8th. The first entry on January the 17th had, of course, completely disappeared. Then, he went up to the bathroom and developed them. The results amazed Norden. He saw before him three perfect reproductions of the pages of the diary, covered with his own handwriting, but without any typewritten messages at all. The lines were there, where he had scored the messages through, but the typewriting had not impressed the sensitized plate at all. He looked back at the relevant pages in the diary. The messages were still there.

Doctor Hawkins noted the amazed expression on his face, and smiled. "Pack up the stuff, Jeffries," he said, "and stay. We would like you in on this. The more the witnesses, the stronger the case." Then, turning to Norden, "Well, and what are you staring at?"

Norden roused himself. "Have you seen these photographs?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, they are valueless. The typewriting is not on them."

"I know. I suspected as much before the pictures were taken. But it was worth making the experiment in case my theory was wrong, and the typewriting did come out in the pictures. The fact that they did not come out leads me to believe that my theory of the whole matter is correct."

"Oh, and why be so mysterious? How about doing a bit of explaining? I don't think that I can stand very much more mystery, if you will pardon the alliteration."

"Gently, gently. I think that we have done enough for to-day. Lock the diary up in your safe, and come round to my place for dinner. We can go into the matter more fully to-morrow."

Norden reluctantly agreed. The day had been full of unaccustomed excitement and he was feeling exhausted. The doctor's advice was good. He locked the diary in his safe, and they all drove off.

The next morning, at ten precisely, the two doctors presented themselves at Norden's house, and were shown into the library. The diary was on the desk. Doctor Hawkins smiled.

"So you could not restrain yourself?" he asked.

"No —"

"And —?"

"The typewriting has disappeared in all three cases."

"Ah!" The ejaculation was expressive. "And what would you suggest, Norden, as the next step?"

"I must confess that I am completely at a loss."

"How about you, Jeffries?"

"Well, sir, in view of the theory that you expounded to me last night, and of which Professor Norden is completely ignorant, I would suggest that we get in touch with the publishers, or rather, the binders."

"I agree," said Hawkins. "Let's see now," he picked up the diary and examined it. "This looks an expensive binding, something made to last for a long time."

"Yes," agreed Norden. "I thought the same when I saw it in the shop, and I bought it for just that reason, as I needed something fairly permanent."

"In which case," went on Hawkins, "the binding was probably done by hand—now—" he turned the flyleaf, "yes, here it is, a firm at Reading. Can you go to-day, Norden?"

"The sooner, the better. All this mystery is getting on my nerves!" He rose, placed the diary carefully in his brief-case, and they trooped out to Hawkins' car.

A ninety minute run through the glowing summer landscape brought them to their destination. They enquired for the manager at the works, and were shown into his office after a short delay. They introduced themselves and he drew forward chairs, handed round cigarettes and asked them their pleasure.

Doctor Hawkins acted as spokesman. "I understand," he said, "that you produce this diary."

The manager looked at the diary and agreed that such was the case.

"Is it hand bound?" asked Hawkins.

"Yes. We produce a small number for the better end of the market."

"Would it be possible to find out which one of your workmen bound this particular volume?"

"Why, is there anything wrong with it?"

"No, that is, not in the sense that you mean."

"Then may I ask why—"

"You may, but at the moment I cannot guarantee that I would give a satisfactory answer. As a matter of fact," Hawkins dropped his half-humorous tone and became grimly serious, "a great deal—a very great deal, may depend upon your reply."

The manager looked alarmed, then picked up his telephone. "Bring me the production records for last August and September—yes, ten months ago," he ordered into the instrument, and replaced it on its cradle.

A short pause, while they waited. Then Hawkins asked, "So you make these diaries quite a few months before the beginning of the year to which they relate?"

"Oh yes, we have to. We have started work on next year's batch already—ah, here's my records. Thank you, Miss Smith."

The clerk withdrew. The manager took another look at the flyleaf of the diary, and began examining his files.

"Yes," he said, after a pause, "according to this there were three men working on the bindings of the batch to which this diary

belongs. But I can't tell you which particular man bound this particular volume."

"That's a shame," said Hawkins, "but we are achieving our ends. Can you tell me whether all these three men were married? Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous, but it is very important."

The manager shrugged his shoulders. "Two of the three are not married."

"That's fine," said Hawkins, rubbing his hands. "Can we see the married man, or, if it inconveniences you, can we have his address?"

"It won't inconvenience me and you can't see him."

They looked surprised.

The manager seemed pleased at his own cleverness, especially as his visitors consisted of two doctors and one professor.

"The fact is," he went on, "that he is no longer with us."

"Oh, when did he leave?"

The man looked up his book. "Around the middle of last February."

"Can you give us the reason—I mean, did you dismiss him or what?"

"No, he just gave us notice and left. I did understand, though vaguely, mind you, that he had had some domestic trouble or something."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No, I am afraid not, but I can give you his address when he was working here." He gave it. "Can't you give me some sort of inkling of what this is all about?"

"Not at the moment, we can't. But I believe that you will hear all about it in a very short time."

"Ah well!" The manager shrugged his shoulders. "If that is all you want, gentlemen, I trust that you will excuse me—"

They rose. Both doctors appeared jubilant. Norden began to see a faint glimmer in the darkness of the mystery. They thanked the man and withdrew, adding the name of the ex-employee to the address already in their possession.

When they were outside, Hawkins said, "I think that we will go round to this address. It can't be very far."

They consulted a passer-by, who directed them with many waves of his hand, and set off. After taking one wrong turning, they eventually found the house, one of many in a terrace, smugly and respectably Victorian. They rang the bell, and a girl of about fourteen answered the door.

"May we see Mr. Jackson?" Hawkins was still the spokesman. The girl stared. "No such name here," she said.

"Oh, and has there never been?"

"Can't say. We've only been here since last April. Come to think of it, though, when we first moved in, letters came here addressed to a Mr. Jackson, and we just marked them 'not known,' and put them back into the box."

"I'm very much obliged to you. Good-day!"

"And now," he said, as they regained the pavement, "I propose lunch, and then a visit to the police."

"I am inclined to agree with you," said Norden. "It is all

very clear to me now, though I'm blessed if I understand the diary part of it. But," as an afterthought, "won't we look fools if there is nothing in it after all. I believe it's a crime to waste the time of the officers of the law."

"Don't worry, old man, we won't waste their time, and the occupants of the house that we have just visited will get a good dose of limelight. In fact," he added, "if the rest of the occupants may be judged from the girl who answered the door, they will have a topic of gruesome conversation for the rest of their lives. This looks a decent place, let's go in and feed!"

Luncheon over, they made their way to the police station and asked to see the officer in charge. Their cards gained them entry, and the gentleman in question put aside his work, and settled back to listen. They had arranged their piece over lunch. Norden commenced the tale at the buying of the diary, of his discovery of the typewritten message on January the 17th, of the subsequent disappearance of the message, and his consultation with Doctor Hawkins. The latter then took up the story, telling just the plain facts, and omitting any theories and frills. When he reached the end of his narrative, the officer smiled, and taking up their cards, studied them thoughtfully.

"Were you gentlemen not such important personages," he said—they all smiled and bowed, seated as they were—"I would send you all away with a flea in your respective ears. But as you are all respected members of the learned side of the community, I appreciate that you must have a good reason for coming here. May I hear the reason?"

"I doubt," said Hawkins, "whether you would believe all the reasons, even if I told them to you, but I am prepared to advance my theories, after you have investigated the matter. I will add, that we all appreciate your listening to us, and Doctor Jeffries and I are convinced that there is something in it. And, if I may say so, the agency is not human, in fact something which, although existing within the bounds of scientific knowledge, is not yet accepted as such, although, believe me, sufficient demonstrations of its actual existence have been made many times."

"Ghosts and hobgoblins, eh?" The officer smiled. "All right, just read me the messages again, will you please?"

Hawkins consulted his notes, and read aloud. The officer scribbled hastily. "I see," he said, reading over the few lines of writing, "She was dirt, and wrapped in dirt she lies under the flagstones." Yes. Thank you gentlemen, and if there is nothing there, we'll all face the music together, eh? I'll let you know."

He smiled and shook hands. Ten minutes later a police van shot out of the station yard. Norden, Hawkins and Jeffries were already well on their way homeward.

Three weeks later, Norden gave a little dinner party. His guests were the two doctors and the policeman. They ate and drank and exchanged banter, and the policeman was secretly amazed, that such learned men could be so young and frivolous. When I was young, he thought, professors never wore sports jackets and flannel-trousers. We live in an enlightened age.

The meal over, they returned to the library, and sat round the open window, staring at the summer evening, smoking reflective pipes. The policeman opened the conversation.

"Yes," he said, "we found her all right, under the flagstones in the back garden. I've had years of experience, but the sight even shocked me. It was pretty messy, I can tell you. After all, she had been there about four months, and I doubt if there was very much left of her head when he buried her. The attack must have been fiendish, and it bore all the marks of a person acting under the stress of some animal emotion."

Norden, the only one present without experience of dead bodies, shivered, despite the warmth of the evening.

"And now, doctor," went on the policeman, turning to Hawkins, "now that you have been proved correct, how about trotting out your theory?"

Hawkins relit his pipe, puffed reflectively for a moment, and then said:

"Mesmerism, hypnotism, are merely words, which, in our ignorance, we use to describe one of the most powerful forces which exist. There was a time when these things were looked upon as the tricks of charlatans, but we have travelled a long way since then, and mesmerism is used to-day in certain branches of curative medicine. I once read a story in which a man was supposed to have such a powerful hypnotic influence, that he could make inanimate things move of their own volition. I do not for one moment suggest that this is possible, at least not at our present stage of knowledge, but I do not say that, as knowledge accumulates, the feat will be impossible. One hundred years ago, the idea of man flying was laughed at; to-day—well, we fly, and at incredible speeds."

"Getting back to the diary, I believe that it is possible for a person to put his influence—I know no other word which will give a layman a true picture—on inanimate things. Women put their stamp on houses, a bachelor's house is, well, always a bachelor's house, the absence of a woman is felt, rather than seen. We appreciate it with all our senses, very often before our sense of sight tells us that it is so. Clothes reflect the characteristics of their wearer. Our influence is on everything we come into contact with. I think you will grant me that."

"Now, I believe that everything is fore-ordained, that the whole of each of our lives is mapped out beforehand. Shakespeare wrote, 'There is a destiny which shapes our ends, rough hew it as we will'—and he was right, as he so often is. And, if this theory is accepted, what is to prevent the influence of the future course of our lives attaching itself to the inanimate things that we handle. Take the case of the diary. The leaves of the book, fresh from the printer, were handed to Jackson, seven to eight months before he killed his wife. At that time he had no more idea of killing her than of flying to the moon. Yet, he had to kill his wife, it was pre-ordained, and the aura, shall we say, surrounding him, he transferred it to the diary he was binding, wherein it lay dormant. I am trying to choose my words with care; you will appreciate that this is a difficult thing to explain.

The others grunted, but smoked on and said nothing.

"We will now pass forward to the crime. Jackson killed his wife, buried her at night, and disappeared. We know now that he went abroad. People talked a bit at their sudden disappearance, but nothing came of it. They owed no money, and were answerable to no one. No kith or kin existed to enquire for them. They were forgotten. But a murder had been committed, and the diary did not forget. Some force, not yet located by us, some potent energy which still eludes our search, reproduced the thoughts of Jackson, during the important period, that is, the planting of the seed of suspicion, and its fruition in the murder of the suspected person. I admit that I cannot understand the typewriting, but I believe that it appeared only for the sake of clarity, and, mark this, only long enough to create an impression. It then disappeared. It would seem that the influence on inanimate things weakens with the absence of the owner or user. It is a crime to murder, and I have little doubt that the personality of the murdered woman somehow forced the impression of her husband into lucid characters in the diary. She was seeking justice, and she found it.

"I know that the explanation I have given you sounds very lame, but you found your corpse and traced your murderer, so there is quite a lot in it after all. Science is making rapid strides these days and a corner of the curtain has already been lifted. Who knows what lies beyond?"

THE EXPIATOR

I was glad that I had met Hawley on the train, not only because of the fact that we had been school fellows and hadn't run across each other in the intervening twelve years between leaving school and now, but also because a long train journey, in the black-out, in dimly illuminated carriages, is not my idea of solitary enjoyment. One must have friendly conversation to make the tedious hours fly past. Alone, particularly if sleep refuses to be wooed and won, one can almost die of ennui.

Five minutes before the train was due to pull out—it was now 4.30 a.m.—and that was three hours ago—I had found a nice empty compartment, had deposited my gear on the rack thankfully, for, after all the average soldier carries sufficient packs to stagger a normal cart-horse, and had sunk wearily into the upholstery of the corner seat, facing the direction of travel and furthest away from the corridor. I had just lighted a cigarette, and taken out my yellow backed novel, when I decided that for reading purposes I had chosen the wrong seat. The compartment was illuminated by two lamps, one a dim blue one, under which I was seated, and the other a normal lamp, effectively screened by a long, black shade. It threw a beam of light on the two corner seats at the other end of the compartment. Just as I was debating with myself whether to change seats or not, I heard the clump of soldiers' boots in the corridor, the connecting door was slid back, and a huge soldier, with a huge pack, blocked the doorway. The brighter light was directly above his head, and although the compartment was empty save for myself, I noticed that he hesitated before coming in, and subjected me to a most intense scrutiny. Eventually, after about thirty seconds staring, he perceptibly shrugged his laden shoulders and took the plunge. Something in the bearing of the man touched a chord of my memory. My mind swiftly reviewed the many people that I had met, and endeavoured to place this man. I was sure that I knew him, and—yes, it was Hawley, Hawley who had left St. Stephens on the same day that I had left, twelve years back.

When he was well settled, I leaned forward, and although I could not see his face clearly (that confounded blue light above was very efficient for its purpose), he seemed to shrink as though his intuition told him that I was about to address him. I introduced

myself, and asked if he was Hawley. He remembered me immediately, and seemed very glad to see me, *too* glad, if you know what I mean. You may meet a bosom chum after twelve years, and expect him to be glad to see you, but not to jump all over you like a boisterous puppy.

Well, we yarned and yarned, but all the time I seemed to feel that Hawley was not exactly at his ease. Not that he had said anything up till then, but, well I just felt it, that's all. I can't put the thing into words. Eventually, after about an hour of pow-wow, the conversation flagged. The train was hurtling on, there were no stops for the first three hours, and I wondered if I could see anything outside. I pushed the blind away from the window with the tip of my finger and peered out. Nothing could be distinguished, only a wall of blackness, impenetrable and complete.

"It's a black night," I said to Hawley.

He jumped like a startled buck. "It's a funny thing you should say that," he commenced, "but I was just about to tell you about something that happened to me on a train in the black-out, and the whole thing commenced with those four words 'It's a black night.'"

I settled more comfortably in my corner, offered cigarettes, and told him to fire away.

"I'm not exactly a person who gets frightened quickly, but this thing that I am going to tell you had me beaten. I must admit that ever since it happened I am very careful with whom I travel on train journeys at night."

This sounded interesting. I remembered that he had had a good look at me before deciding to join me in the compartment.

"You may remember," went on Hawley, "that I told you that I was working for a firm in the city before being called up. Well, one day we had a terrific job which had to be finished, as the report was being submitted to some Ministry or other the next morning. I worked at the office till 9.15 p.m., locked up, and reached the terminus at about 9.40. I had to walk, as the buses had stopped, and I caught the 9.52 comfortably. I was living in a riverside town then, just outside London, and the journey would take me about thirty minutes. There was but a handful of passengers on the platform, and I got into an empty compartment, took out my paper and became engrossed in the news. I didn't notice the train start, but I was interrupted, I don't know exactly how much later, by a voice which said 'It's a black night to-night, mister, and no mistake.'"

"I must confess that I was a bit startled. The train had stopped at one station since we left (it was an 'All Stations' train) but as far as I knew, no one had got in, and I was positive that when we left the terminus I was the only occupant of the compartment. There was, of course, no corridor in the train, it was one of those local affairs. I decided that the person who had addressed me had got in at the first stop, and that I had been so engrossed in my paper that I had not noticed him."

"I replied 'Yes, it is,' and had a look at the speaker. The compartment was dimly lit, as this one is, and it was not easy to see his face. The broad brim of his hat cast a shadow over his face and shoulders. He was not the type of man one would notice in a crowd, or even take notice of if he was alone—just nondescript. He was sitting in the corner diagonally opposite from me, and his posture

was, to say the least, peculiar. I can't say that I noticed anything particular about him, but he was sitting in his corner, or rather, huddling in a loose kind of way. Rather like a stuffed doll, when the stuffing gets loose. I got the impression that he was—well, *broken*, if you know what I mean."

I said that I did. This was getting interesting.

"Well," continued Hawley, "I considered that the conversation was finished there, and rustled my paper, preparing to resume my reading. But no, I was not to be left alone."

"In fact," said my companion, "it's dark enough for a murder"—and he chuckled in a rather horrible way

"This was fast becoming too much of a good thing. I wasn't exactly nervous of the chap, I have grown up quite a big lad, as you can see, and can look after myself, and my fellow traveller was only an under-sized shrimp, but a little man can kill a big man with a gun. I made up my mind to change compartments at the next stop, and seek more congenial company for the rest of the journey. In the meantime, if he persisted, I'd humour him.

"His voice broke my reverie again. 'Point of fact,' he began, 'I well remember somebody committing a murder on a night like this, I knew the chap very well, and he got away with it—almost. I'll tell you about it.'"

There was no asking my permission, no query even if I would like to hear it. I resigned myself to my fate, and said, "Go on," in as interested a voice as I could muster. I was determined to humour him until I could make my escape.

"Well," said the man, "it all started many years ago, twenty-two years ago in fact. This chap, who later did the murder, met a nice girl and got married. He was in a good job, and everything was fine and dandy. The only trouble was that his job—he was a traveller for a firm—took him away from home quite a bit, and his young wife, and a very pretty young woman she was too, was left a lot to her own resources. When they had been married a year, the chap came home from up North one day—they were living in London—and he found a note from his wife saying that she had gone off with some other man. It was the old story, a young and attractive woman, getting the idea into her head that she was neglected, and yielding to the temptations of a stranger.

"All this," said Hawley, "was old stuff to me, and I can't say that at this stage I was very interested. The train rumbled on, and I felt that we could not be very far from the next station, when I would say 'Good-night,' and make my escape. The stranger went on.

"The young, deserted husband, however, took it very badly. He had been a good husband, he considered, and he couldn't see her point of view. He knew that she was pretty and easily prevailed upon by flattery, and there and then he made up his mind to get even with this wife-stealer, who had, by the way, taken not only his wife, but also all his savings, amounting to a few hundred pounds.

By dint of careful enquiries, and the questioning of all her friends and acquaintances, he eventually got hold of the name, and a full description of the man, and he bided his time. He was sure that in due course he would run across him, and then would come

the reckoning. Time went on, the years rolled by, and still there was no sign or trace of the pursued. The pursuer, fired with but one idea, drifted from place to place, and from job to job, without powers of concentration on the mundane things of life, with one fixed purpose with one idea. Time changed him, worry creased his forehead with wrinkles, and whitened his hair. He lost flesh, he shrank, until it was doubtful if any of the acquaintances of his youth, coming face to face with him in the street, would recognise him as the same tall, smart, go-ahead young fellow that they had known.

"And then, nineteen years almost to the day that his wife had left him, he was looking through the advertisement columns of a national newspaper, searching for a job. The war had been on about a couple of months, all the young chaps were joining up, and the gaps they left would have to be filled by the older men. He noticed that a firm of financiers, money-lenders they really were, were advertising for a clerk. He took the address, presented himself for an interview, and was taken on. He was glad that he was taken on, but he wouldn't have cared if they had refused him, because—well I suppose you've guessed it, the head of the firm was the man he was looking for. Simple, wasn't it? Just like a jig-saw puzzle whose pieces fall into place at the word of command. You might say, coincidence, but I would call it fate. The meeting was fore-ordained. It just had to come off."

"This," said Hawley, "was becoming a bit more interesting, but it was still old stuff. The train stuttered on, and my companion continued."

"Before doing anything drastic, the new employee had to be quite sure of his ground. He made very careful enquiries about the antecedents of his employer, and, as an employee, he had the run of the place, and could find out much more than he could if he was a stranger. Gradually, piece by piece, the evidence was forthcoming, and eventually he was positive that his present employer was the wife-stealer of nineteen years ago. Of course, you must realise that the two had never met, that the employer had the advantage over the employee, as he had probably seen a photograph of the husband, while visiting the wife and planning to take her away, whereas the husband had never seen the man who stole his wife, and could only go on hearsay. But the employee relied on the great change that time had worked on his appearance, and his employer, whose name had changed in the meantime, never even suspected him. But no further evidence was necessary when the employee, rummaging in a drawer of his master's desk during the latter's absence, found a bundle of letters in his wife's handwriting, the latest one of which was dated some sixteen years ago, was written from a hospital, and bore the unmistakable ramblings of a dying woman. There are many people like that. They will never throw away a scrap of paper, even though it bears sufficient evidence to hang them.

"The employee then, making nobody his confidant, began to lay his plans with care, and he took a whole year over them, a year during which he worked hard, and endeavoured to give every satisfaction. After all, he was making his plans on the basis of being an employee of the firm, and he didn't want to do anything

which would make him lose his job, and upset the whole bunch of tricks. He was servile and patient, punctilious and obliging. His employer was very pleased with him. It would have been a different story if mind could read mind, but men were given tongues to cloak their thoughts."

"I was quite interested now," said Hawley. "The man was obviously harmless, and his tale was getting interesting." He went on:

"After he had been working for the firm for about eleven months, he learned that something big in the way of business was in the wind. His employer was busy on the proposed merger of two large companies, and his arrangements would take about a month to complete. Three weeks went by and the employee learned that a meeting was to be held in a week's time, but that his employer's report could not be completed, until he had the report of his consulting engineer. This report arrived with the afternoon post two days before the meeting. The employee did not open the envelope, he did not have to, the engineer's name and address was printed on the flap, and the bulky nature of the contents assured him that this was not just an ordinary letter, but the awaited report. The employee extracted this letter from the rest of the mail, and put it in his pocket. The rest of the mail he delivered to his employer with the usual smile. It was then Wednesday; the meeting was scheduled for Friday morning.

The employee went home that night with a confident smile. Everything was ready. His almost twenty years of search and patience were rewarded. Another twenty-four hours, and revenge, sweet revenge, would be his. At that time, he was living in a furnished room on the north side of the city. He had lived in this room for about six months, having moved from the south side, about eight miles away. On the way home, he stopped at a public telephone box, and put a call through to his former landlady. Much depended on this call. He introduced himself, she remembered him, and he told her that he was not satisfied with his present lodgings, and was his old room empty, and, if so, could he have it? She said that it was and that he could. If she had said that she had no room available, he would have chatted for a little while, and arranged to go over and see her for an hour or two the next evening and chat over old times. But the journey had to be made, it was all part of the plan. He asked her if he could move in the next evening, and she replied that she would be glad to have him, and would get the room ready. She asked what time he would be over, and he said about 10.30—rather late, but it was the best he could do, as he had to pack his things and settle up at his present place, but that he was determined not to stay there longer than he could help. She agreed, and saying that she would see him the next evening, rang off."

"The man was telling the tale very well," said Hawley. "He was obviously a stickler for detail. He went on:"

"Arriving home that evening, he told his landlady that he had decided to move away the next evening, would collect his things straight from the office, and then go. He explained that he did not want to take his possessions to the office the next morning, and go to his new place straight from there, as his bag was rather

bulky, and would be awkward to manoeuvre on the crowded bus in the busy morning.

"The next day, Thursday, everything went on as usual. His employer fumed about the non-arrival of the report, and telephoned the engineers, who stated that they had put it in the post on Tuesday evening, and that it must have been delayed. His employer had at least five hours work on it, incorporating the data into his own report, for presentation to the meeting the next morning. At 4.30, the afternoon post arrived. The employee put the engineers' report together with the other letters, and took them into his employer. The latter pounced on the report, muttered something about the unreliability of the post, and that he would now have to work till the early hours, and started into it.

At 6 o'clock, the employee went home. The employer was still very busy. The employee reached home at 6.30, had a meal, packed his belongings, settled his bill with his landlady, giving her his new address for the forwarding of any letters, not that he received any, but just in case, and left the house. It was a very dark night, no moon, no stars, with an overcast sky. A journey by bus brought him back to the centre of the city. He reached his office building at exactly 9 p.m. He could not see a yard in front of his face, and he used no torch. But the daily visits of a year had made him familiar with every foot of his route, and he did not stumble. He had attended to the matter of the keys some time back, and was soon inside the building. Relocking the front door, and leaving his case at the foot of the stairs, he started to ascend, one hand on the handrail and the other tightly gripping the life-preserver in his pocket. He wore no gloves; he had no need to; his finger prints were everywhere. A life-preserver is a good thing. Guns are too noisy, and knives too messy. One hard blow in the correct place and—

At 9.10 he emerged noiselessly, his case in his hand, the lethal weapon, its work finished, reposing in his pocket. No mood of exultation gripped him, only the feeling of a job well done. He walked to the terminus, and, crossing the river on his way, dropped the life-preserver into the black waters beneath. He took the chance of it falling on to a passing boat or barge, but he did not care anyway. He had seen to it that its purchase, in another city, many years ago, could not be traced to him. He arrived at the terminus at 9.40, took a ticket to the station nearest his new lodgings, and entered the train, which left punctually at 9.52.

"This," said Hawley, "struck a familiar note." The man went on:

"Between the terminus and his destination, the train did not stop then. There is one station in between at which the trains do call now. The man had not travelled by train in the black-out before, and did not know that when a train enters a station, the bright lights in the compartment are turned out, leaving only the blue ones burning. He had asked the collector at the barrier if the train stopped at his particular station (all unseasoned travellers do), and the man had told him that it was the first stop. On the route, the line is carried over another set of rails, operating on another system, by a viaduct one hundred and fifty feet high. The train this night was held up on the viaduct by a signal, and

the man, thinking that he was at his station, stepped out—
excuse me, this is where I leave you—”

“And with these words,” said Hawley, “the man opened the door next to him, and walked out, leaving the door open and me with one burning question left unanswered.

“I had been so engrossed in the tale, that I had not realised that the train had stopped. I had no idea which station we had reached, but knew that it was not the one I wanted, as my watch said 10.12, and I was due to arrive at 10.22. I rose, and was reaching over to close the door, when I heard a distant voice, presumably a porter's, shouting ‘Close that door!’ But the train closed it for me. It started with a sudden jerk, and the door swung to.

“We ran on for about three or four minutes, and the train stopped again. This time the bright light went out, leaving the blue one burning. Suddenly I realised that when we had stopped previously, when my companion had alighted, the bright light had not been switched off. Realisation came to me in a flash. The man had stepped out on to the line!

“I shot out of the compartment like a rabbit from a burrow and ran towards the rear of the train, where a yellow light, suspended about thirty inches from the ground, betokened the presence of the guard. I had not far to go. I had been in the first compartment of the last coach, and in spite of the intense blackness soon covered the distance. I explained what had happened to a black smudge in the intense gloom. His voice, when he spoke, was very dubious.

“Oho,” he said “so you're the person who opened the door!”

“I asked him what the devil he meant.

“He said that, frankly, he didn't believe my tale that somebody had left the compartment. The train had been held up on the viaduct by a signal, and he had leaned from his window and watched the whole length of the train on the left-hand side, in the direction of travel (my companion had been sitting on that side and had left from that side), during the whole of the halt. He saw the door open. It was an oblong of yellow in the black length of the train. If anybody had passed through the doorway he could not have missed them; they would be framed in the light of the compartment. He had shouted for the door to be closed, as *nobody had come through*. But to satisfy everybody he would report the matter and have the line searched. Meanwhile, I was delaying the train. Would I mind continuing my journey, if I was going further, in his van? Thank you, sir. He wouldn't be a minute; he had to report to the station-master.

“This took the wind out of my sails, but I still did not get the significance of the thing. Either I had been dreaming, or the guard was drunk. He probably thought that I was. He looked at me queerly in his van as he took my name and address, and practically convinced me that I *was* drunk, and proceeded to breathe fire and slaughter about Railway Regulations, and the holding up of trains by frivolous people.

“But the whole thing became as plain as a pikestaff to me a couple of days later, when I read in my paper that a passenger (that was me) had reported that a person had left his compartment,

when a train was held up on such and such viaduct, that the line was searched, and that nothing was found. The account went on to recall that exactly one year ago the same thing had happened at the same place and that the body of a man, crushed and broken, had been found on the metals one hundred and fifty feet below. The corpse had, from the identity card found, been identified as clerk to (here followed a well-known name), the financier, who had been murdered at his office desk the same night. No solutions to these crimes had yet been found, but the police considered that the murderer had claimed two victims that night, the clerk having met his doom, as possessor of the name of his master's killer.

“I now had the answer to the question I was burning to ask when my fellow traveller so abruptly left me. As the murderer's alibi was so perfect, how could he, telling me the tale, know what had happened, unless he was one of the two characters in the drama. *He* was the murderer, and he had come back to confess, and probably would keep on coming back to confess, on that particular night, on that particular train, year after year. Now I understood his peculiarly broken appearance. I thanked the Lord that the lights in the compartment were dim. Can you imagine what he would look like under a bright light? One hundred and fifty feet is a long way to fall, and the train lines at the end of his fall must have smashed him to bits. He may have been my fellow traveller that night, but I hope that I don't have to travel his road for many a year.

“So now you understand,” finished Hawley, “why I had a good look at you before joining you in this compartment. I never made a night journey in the black-out by train again until to-night. Any dimly-lighted, confined space still gives me the willies. I shall always hear him making his confession after he had been rotting for twelve months in his grave. I presume he was rotting in his grave. He wasn't alive, anyway!”

DOUBLING THE BILL

Some years ago, I was investigating the affairs of a man who had done some fairly shady things in his time and whose past had caught up with him, just as he had decided to mend his ways and go straight. I have good reason to believe that all the persons who figured in the episode are dead now, so that I can tell you all the facts without betraying anyone's confidence.

I am, as you know, an accountant, and my work consists of a large amount of income tax practice, a subject in which I am supposed to be an expert. The events which I am about to describe occurred when I had been in practice about three or four years, when things were coming along nicely, and I had every reason to be satisfied with my progress. I was looking through my correspondence one cold January morning, when my secretary announced that a gentleman—we'll call him Jones—had called and wished to see me. I asked her to show him in, and she presently ushered in a corpulent red-faced man, who shook hands with me and seated himself heavily in the clients' chair. He looked like the popular conception of a bookmaker. I have found that popular conceptions are usually inaccurate. He asked me whether I knew anything about income tax, and upon my reassuring him, with no modesty (I was a youngster then), that it was one of my specialist subjects, he promptly fished out a paper and handed it over to me. It was an ordinary demand note for property tax. I asked him whether he owed the property, and he said that he did. I told him that if he wanted me to act for him he would have to give me all the information that I required on the principle that you can't make bricks without straw. He expressed his willingness to tell me all that I wanted to know, so I drew my scribbling block before me and began taking notes.

● I started by putting all the stock questions to him, such as details of his business, his deposits, his family affairs as affecting income tax, and so on. He told me that he was a jeweller by trade, married but childless. He demurred when I mentioned savings, and vowed that he had none; they all do, until you increase the pressure, when the truth is always squeezed out of them eventually. I asked him if his house was mortgaged, and he replied that such was not the case, volunteering the information that it was a freehold property. So far everything was going well. I then examined the amount demanded, and hazarded a guess as to the value of the house. I

worked it out on the basis of the assessment raised. The figure that I quoted was three thousand pounds. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, grinned somewhat ruefully I imagined, but neither confirmed or denied the figure. I asked him if my guess had been accurate, or, if not, would he tell me the figure. He hedged a bit, cleared his throat, surveyed the crease in his trousers, but still said nothing. I recognised the symptoms and told him point blank that if he was not prepared to give me all the information that I required, I could not act for him. I explained that everything that he told me was in strict confidence, and that I wanted the information, not because I was nosing into his affairs, but that obviously I had to have the full facts of every case before I started work. Otherwise I could not give my best services. I was quite young in my profession in those days, and I took things very seriously.

Eventually, after some moments of thought, Mr. Jones made up his mind to unburden himself, and he started talking, slowly at first, and then, as he warmed to his work, at an ever-increasing speed, until the words came tumbling from his lips, making his speech almost incoherent.

"You ask me," he began, "how much my house cost. Well, it may sound strange to you, but the price asked was three thousand pounds, as you estimated, but I paid six thousand for it."

This certainly sounded a peculiar statement. Only a lunatic would pay double the price asked for something. Still, I presented an unruffled countenance, and asked him to proceed.

"You are probably thinking that I must have been mad or something, to pay twice the price asked" (was the man a thought reader) "but I'm not. I'm just a victim of fate, or whatever it is that comes along and interferes with people's comforts and the peace of their minds. Yes, sir, I paid through the nose for the house, and all because somebody didn't look both ways when crossing the road."

The mystery deepened rapidly. This really did sound like the ravings of a lunatic. I said nothing, but listened intently as my client went on.

"I must admit that up to a short time ago my shop was not everything that it appeared to be, to the casual observer. It is not a high-class jeweller's shop and the trinkets that I sold legitimately were cheap and showed very small profits. But the shop had a convenient back entrance, and I am an expert diamond cutter, and—well, you can understand that I did not have to rely on the shop for my living. You told me that everything that I tell you is in confidence, and so I'm going to tell you everything. The fact of the matter is that I was a receiver of stolen goods, particularly precious stones, a fence, as we call it—called it,"—Mr. Jones corrected himself hastily—"but I was never suspected, and never caught, at least not by the police. Fate, or whatever it is, caught me to the tune of three thousand pounds, but it still left me my freedom.

"Yes, although I say it myself, I was clever. No banking accounts for me, no motor cars, no furs for my wife, no smart houses. Nothing to give anybody the least idea that I was worth, well, a fair amount of money. Each year when my income tax

papers came in, I put down that I earned about five pounds a week, and they assessed me on that figure and asked no questions. Everything went smoothly for years. Thousands of pounds worth of diamonds were passed to me, and left my premises so heavily disguised, that nobody would dream that they were the original ones stolen. And all the proceeds of my—skill, shall we say—went into the tin box under my bed, accumulating for the day when I finally decided to close my shop and depart for foreign parts. But then, I hadn't taken the female character into consideration, and if anything led to trouble, that omission on my part did. My wife is a jewel"—he gave a toothy smile—"but the only kind of jewel that I don't understand, and certainly can't manipulate. All of a sudden, after many years of patient work, she came home one day from her shopping, and announced that she was sick to death of the way that we lived, and considered that it was about time that we spent a bit of our savings and saw the other side of life. In vain I asked her to be patient. Only a little more time, and off we would go, and she could have everything that her heart desired. She just wouldn't listen. She was sick, she said, of living in two rooms over the shop, and wanted a nice house to live in, and a servant, and a car. 'If we couldn't afford it, Joe,' she said, 'it would be a different thing, but you've got stacks of it tucked away, and it's about time we spent some of it. After all,' she added, truthfully, 'you can't take it with you, and time's getting on fast.'

"The more I resisted her demand, the more insistent she became, until it almost came to a battle between us. Then one day she walked in and said that she had seen the very house that she had always wanted, and had gone to the trouble of finding out all about it. Three thousand pounds they wanted for it, and it was a bargain at the price. I still said that I wasn't interested. She said that it was the house or her. If I didn't buy the house, she would just leave me, and that would be that. I pointed out to her that if I bought a house the income tax man would want to know where I had got hold of the money. It takes a long time to save up three thousand pounds if you are only supposed to be earning five pounds a week. She said, with the unreasonableness of all women, that that was my funeral; that she had been working like a horse, and living like a pig, for all these years, and that she was determined to change things for the few years still left to her. What was it going to be, the house or a separation?"

Mr. Jones paused, and reached for his pocket handkerchief. I must say that his vocabulary was, to say the least, peculiar. The word "unreasonableness" amused me. As for Mrs. Jones, I had little experience of women in those days, but I reflected that apparently Mr. Shakespeare had had plenty. "Uncertain, coy and hard to please" was but a mild description.

My client prepared to resume his narrative.

"The position was fast becoming dangerous. Obviously, the wife meant what she said, and I had to think fast. All of a sudden, I had, what I thought then, was a brilliant idea. I told the wife that I would see what I could do, at which she eyed me suspiciously, and rang up a friend of mine, asking him if I could see him that evening. It was convenient. I arranged to go over at nine o'clock.

"This friend was a man that I had done a lot of business with some years ago." It was not very difficult to guess what the business was, but I said nothing. "An old aunt of his had died, without leaving a will, and as he was her only relative, he came into the old lady's pile, and a fairly high pile it was too. He had retired from business, and was living the life of a king. I intended to rope in his assistance in the little idea that I had conceived, which would get me out of trouble as far as both the wife and the income tax man were concerned.

"My friend lived in the suburbs, a short tram ride from my place. Punctually at nine o'clock I rang his doorbell and was shown into the library, or what the servants called the library, a room full of books which nobody ever read, but which my friend had taken over with the house when he bought it. I must say that the room was a comfortable one, and my friend's whisky was quite to my liking. We chatted about things in general, and several incidents in the past in particular, until, when the whisky had warmed us both up, I came round to the subject of my visit.

"Sam," I said to him, "the little lady has been getting ideas lately, and things look bad." I explained the general trend of these ideas, and told him that I had decided to chuck up the business and go straight. "But," I said to him, "this house that the wife wants me to buy costs three thousand pounds, and I simply can't produce the money just like that, without some awkward questions being asked, leading straight to trouble. 'Trouble with who?' asked Sam, always slow on the uptake. 'Why, with the income tax man,' I explained. 'According to what I have been telling him, I can't have saved up three thousand pennies, let alone pounds.'" Sam brooded on this for some time. I got the impression that inheriting a large estate wasn't as joyful an experience as people made out. Apparently he had been having a brush with the tax people himself.

"So what I propose to do," I went on, "is to buy the house, and when they ask, tell them that you loaned me the money. They know that you've got plenty, and are in a position to do it.

"That's not a bad idea," mused Sam, after a decent interval had elapsed for the idea to sink in, "except for one thing."

"Yes," I asked, "and what's that?"

"Well, they may not take my word for it. They may want some proof, something in writing to show that you apparently owe me the money."

"This was a snag. Sam was not such a fool, after all. I must confess that I was so taken up with the idea that I had left this point out of my calculations. We both took another finger of whisky, and sat back to think. Would an ordinary receipt do, or would it have to be something more legal? A deed, perhaps? No, that wouldn't be any good, because it would mean going to a solicitor who would draw it up, and take the money from Sam, and formally hand it over to me, deducting his rake-off, when the thing was signed. Of course, I could always hand Sam the money back privately, but it was too much of a rigmarole. Besides, it would mean bringing a third party in, and I wanted it to remain strictly between us. Or would a third party be in the nature of a witness, and help us to establish our case? The tax people were

wily birds, but they wouldn't dream of questioning the confirming statement of a solicitor. Suddenly, the solution flashed into my mind. It was simplicity itself.

"Sam," I said, "have you ever heard of a bill of exchange?"

"Yes, of course, but tell me about it again." Sam still retained the caution of his lawless, youthful days.

"I began explaining: 'Say I owe you some money, but can't pay you right away. You want the money right away. You say to me, Give me a Bill of Exchange.' I agree. So we buy a bill at the Post Office—it's only a bit of paper with a stamp impressed on it, the higher the amount we draw the bill for, the dearer the value of the stamp.

"Yes," mused Sam, "these blighters get a rake-off from everything!"

"And," I went on, ignoring him, "we write on the bill, say, 'six months after date, pay to my order the sum of whatever it is, for value received,' and you sign it. Then I write across it—'accepted payable at wherever it is,' usually my bank, if I've got one, and then we date it, and that's that, and you take the bill.

"Now, the bill won't be presented to me for payment for six months, but you want the money now. So you go to your bank, and give them the bill, asking them to discount it for you. They say, 'Not so fast; who is this man?' So they make enquiries about me, and if my credit is good, they hold the bill, and give you the value of it right away, deducting a bit for themselves for the trouble.

"More racketeers," said Sam, "but I follow you. I get almost the whole of the money right away, and you don't have to pay till six months time, or whatever period we write on the bill."

"Right," I said, "but in our case we date the bill for nine months ahead, to give the tax johnnies time to enquire and set their minds at rest, and you keep it. As soon as they've seen it, we tear it up, and that's that. If they want to know how I expected to pay you at the end of nine months, we can say that we agreed that at the end of nine months we intended to make out a fresh bill for the amount that I owe you then, assuming that I had paid you off a bit in the meantime."

"Sam scratched his chin. The scheme sounds all right, but what about interest? Won't they go after me for the income tax on the interest? The man who looks after things for me, was explaining only the other day that interest on money is income, and you've got to pay tax on it. My aunt Clara stuck a lot of her money into mortgages, and the interest I get from them is taxable."

"Interest my foot!" I said with some heat. "We are old pals. You wouldn't charge an old pal interest on a paltry three thousand that you lent him. After all, you're only too pleased to do an old friend a favour. You wouldn't ask him to pay for the favour, would you, Sam?"

"Well, the outcome of it all was that I arranged to buy the bill the following morning, write it out, and bring it over to Sam the next evening, so that he could sign it and keep it, as we had worked out.

"Next morning I said to the wife, 'Kate, you've won. You're quite right about moving and doing things in the grand style. Go and see the estate agent about the house, and fix things up. I'll give you the money to-night. And you had better see about some furniture, too, and everything that goes with it.'

"She looked at me queerly. 'I don't appreciate your jokes at any time, and particularly before lunch time,' she said, in a nasty sort of way. It took me half an hour to convince her, and I had to tell her the details of the plan that I had made with Sam. When she was finally convinced, she gave me a hug and a kiss, just like that, stuck on her hat, and rushed out. She seemed twenty years younger. Women are funny. I don't understand them myself, and I'm an old married man.

"That evening everything went off as arranged. I had no banking account, so I wrote across the bill that it was payable at my home address. We both signed, and Sam stuffed the paper into his pocket, wishing me luck in my new house, and we both drank to it.

"The house was lovely, and I must admit that my wife revealed more taste than I had ever given her credit for. She must have been dreaming and planning for years. At any event, I left the whole thing to her and she certainly made a fine job of it. In the first few weeks after we had moved in I spent all my spare time walking round the house and admiring it from all angles, and then wandering through the rooms touching the furniture and the knick-knacks, and wondering if it were all true. I had really begun to feel happy, when the blow fell. It was too good to last, and I should have anticipated trouble right from the start.

"One morning, about six weeks ago, a letter came from a firm of solicitors. They informed me that their client, Mr. Samuel Snow, had been fatally injured by a motor-bus, and they were administering the estate. Amongst his papers they had found a bill of exchange, drawn on me for three thousand pounds, which was maturing in two weeks time. Would I please inform them the name of my bankers so that the bill could be presented for payment on its due date, as was the usual custom, and thanking me in anticipation they begged to remain my obedient servants.

"So you see," finished my client, "how I paid six thousand pounds for my house, but the price asked was only three thousand. Of course, I had to pay out the three thousand to the solicitors. I had no evidence of the arrangements that Sam and I had made, and they had all the evidence that they wanted in the bill. But what annoyed me was that it was three thousand of my own money, and just as I had decided to go straight, once and for all. But what's worrying me now is, how can I explain to the income tax man how I got hold of the money to pay for the house. How long should it take a man who is supposed to have earned about five pounds a week, to save up three thousand pounds. And don't forget, he's got to eat out of the fiver as well and keep a wife. You're an accountant, mister, you tell me!"

THE VASE

Mrs. Doniton was in a quandary. The vase was beautiful, just the thing she had been looking for to stand on that low, octagonal table in the recess by the window. It was the last thing to complete her lounge and its elegant beauty and fine colouring would match the comfortable tastefulness of the room. But the price! Six guineas was very much more than she had ever wanted to pay and yet she wanted the vase so very much.

She stood under the striped awning, in the hot busy street, gazing through the shop window in a trance of enraptured indecision. The vase, which stood surrounded by a motley collection of china and glass usually to be found in secondhand shops dealing with the finer kinds of effects, was about eighteen inches high and was actually composed of two parts—the base, and resting upon this, the vase itself. The base was a flat disc of black china, upon which stood four golden oxen, their horns pointing to the four cardinal points of the compass, and upon their backs was poised the vase itself, also of a sombre hue, its delicately swelling waist decorated in bas-relief with little golden cherubs chasing each other in an eternal circle. The black and gold of its colouring, the fine shaping of the animals and the angels, and the delicate curves of its body, gave the impression not only of fine workmanship but of decorative appeal.

Mrs. Doniton certainly was in a quandary. Six guineas was a lot of money and she was loath to part with it in exchange for what Harold would call a "flower mug." She was sure he would go off the deep end very much if he had an inkling of what she had paid, assuming that she did buy it. Not that she need tell him how much it had cost, but it was either the vase or the hat, she couldn't afford both, and if she came home with the vase and without the hat she would have to make long, verbose excuses to explain the absence of the hat. After all, she had told Harold that morning that she was going into town expressly to buy a hat and if she came home without one, he was going to ask why. And yet, it was simple. She could tell him that nothing seemed to suit her, and she had decided to leave the hat until her next visit to town when, perhaps, she would be in a less critical mood of her appearance, and would easily find a hat that would show off her type of beauty to its best advantage.

Mrs. Doniton, no longer in a quandary, marched in the shop with an easy conscience and bought the vase. The shopman, a dried

up little man, usually associated with shops of that type, seemed quite upset to part with it, but wrapped it up with tender care, and took the money with a sigh. Mrs. Doniton never knew whether the sigh was uttered because of the extreme heat of the day, or whether it was connected with the regret the man felt at parting with such a treasure at so meagre a price. But at any event she didn't care. She carried her precious burden across to her car, laid it with tender care upon the back seat and started for home.

It was a lovely August day. Here in the town, the heat in the streets was oppressive, and the gay moving colour of the peoples' clothes seemed to increase the heat, but once she had left the town behind her and was swallowed into the greenness of the country, the heat gave way to bright warmth and she drove home with a song on her lips and a joyful heart.

The village drowsed in the afternoon sunshine. Nothing stirred in the narrow street. A black cat basked in a cottage porch and the ducks disported themselves in the parish pond. Even the church, crouching like a huge, grey beetle on the brow of the hill, seemed to have fallen asleep, exhausted by its watch of centuries over the little settlement sprawled at its feet. The little car buzzed through the village like an angry bee and turned into the driveway which led to its hive.

Mr. Doniton was an architect and had built his house himself; it was a fine house, modern, but with an old-world charm, and the carefully tended garden added to its character—the sort of house which makes you feel welcome as soon as it spies you coming up its drive.

Mrs. Doniton entered the house, flung off her floppy hat and rang for tea, employing the few minutes before it was brought to her in the lounge, in removing the wrappings from her precious purchase, flicking a duster over it and standing it lovingly on a small table in the recess by the window. She stood back to admire the effect. Yes, the vase was just right and the corner looked complete.

With a feeling of elation she poured herself a cup of tea and settled back, stealing an occasional happy glance at the recess by the window. The hat was completely forgotten.

Soon after tea her husband came in, cursing the heat, but happily bursting with news. He had received instructions that day to prepare the plans of a new housing estate, something for which he had been angling for a long time, and his talk was of nothing else. She was in the flower garden when he came in, cutting some irises to put into the vase and, as they strolled together into the house, he told her all about it. She was pleased. Amongst other things it would take his mind off the hat. She poured some fresh water into the vase and arranged the flowers in it. In answer to her enquiry, her husband inspected the vase and approved. He never asked her the price. She thanked Providence for the good news he had brought; Harold had always played the game with her, and now that she may have been faced with it, she shrank from practicing any deceit on him. At any event, he agreed that the recess looked lovely and complete, and went on talking technicalities—mentioning a fee that took her breath away. What a happy, beautiful day it was!

About half an hour later Harold, saying that he had one or two urgent letters to write, crossed over to the bureau and, switching on the writing lamp, sat down and began scribbling. His wife, idly turning the pages of a magazine, and lazily wondering whether it was too hot to dress for dinner that evening, suddenly realised that the light was on and looked up quickly to see what effect this would have on the black and gold of the vase. It stood there, a thing of beauty, the golden cherubs winking in the light, the golden oxen phlegmatically bearing their shining burden and the flowers, the beautiful long-stalked irises . . . Mrs. Doniton drew in her breath. The flowers were dead, and not only dead; they were shrivelled brown—withered and wrinkled. They looked as though they had stood in the vase untended for at least six months. She had put them in fresh from the garden not longer than thirty-five minutes before!

With confusion in her mind, Mrs. Doniton rose swiftly and walked over to the recess, touching the corpses of the blooms with the tip of her finger. They fell to dust under her touch and sowed the carpet with a fine, brown ash. Mrs. Doniton just stood and gazed at the shreds falling around her feet, leaving the shrivelled stems standing like brown skeletons in the water. She dipped her fingers into the water. It was cool, and fresh. Not a trace of stagnation or foulness. How could it be? Water doesn't turn brackish in half an hour, even in the hottest weather, at least, not here in England, in the cool lounge of a shaded country house. She half turned. Her husband was getting into his stride and his nib scratched rapidly across the notepaper. She called him, unable to move from the spot. He turned, saw the queer expression on her face and was at her side instantly. She said nothing, just pointing at the vase and the brown dust still falling around her feet. His nearness gave her courage, the puzzled expression on his face gave her confidence. He saw it too; she hadn't been just imagining it. They stared at each other for a long time. The thing was incomprehensible.

Dinner that evening was eaten in a foam of lively discussion. Each was trying to explain to the other the strange phenomenon of the flowers. Civilized or not, we are all frightened of things we cannot understand, and try to drown our fright in the loud noise of explanation and even laughter. But deep down inside both Mr. and Mrs. Doniton were very puzzled people, although they eventually dismissed the subject with a shrug and a jest and turned the conversation to more mundane things. By bedtime, each had convinced the other that the incident was forgotten, but long after her husband had fallen asleep by her side Mrs. Doniton lay awake, watching the lightning flicker on the horizon and listening to the threatening roll of the distant thunder—wondering, wondering . . .

The morning came, cool and moist after the storm of the night. The air was cleansed and heavy with the scent of flowers. Mrs. Doniton woke with a feeling of expectation. What was it? Ah, yes, the vase! She attended to her toilet leisurely, torturing her curiosity with her studied slowness, ate a reflective breakfast and decided on a course of action. She peeped into the lounge. The maid had already paid it her morning visit and everything was clean and dustless. The vase stood on its table in beautiful aloofness, glowing

in the oblique rays of the morning sun. Mrs. Doniton went into the garden, cut a bunch of gladioli and re-entered the house. She rang for the maid, asked her to take the vase from the lounge, fill it with fresh water and bring it back laden to its place. As the girl picked up the vase, her mistress watched her closely. The maid was in the nature of a sacrifice; but nothing happened. The vase acted as any other vase would have acted. It remained passive in the girl's hands, allowed itself to be filled with fresh water and carried back into the lounge. Mrs. Doniton told herself firmly that she was being silly and acting like a school-girl, and placed the gladioli in attractive array in the vase, stepping back, as she always did, to admire the effect. More beautiful than ever! The pink flowers looked far more attractive, their green stems sweeping upwards from the black cylinder that held them, than the blue irises of the previous evening. Mrs. Doniton looked carefully at her watch, stole a final glance at the vase and its contents and stepped firmly into the garden to hold technical discussions with her jobbing gardener.

Exactly thirty minutes later she re-entered the lounge, escorted by the gardener, who had been induced to accompany her on some pretext or other. Outside, the sun had already climbed high, and the motionless foliage gave the promise of yet another scorching day. After the colourful glare of the garden, the coolness of the lounge with its orderly luxury and comfortable appointments, was a relief. A long-faced French clock ticked solemnly in the corner. A buzzing fly sought to dash itself to death on the window pane. Everything was exactly as Mrs. Doniton had left it half an hour before. The vase still bore its burden of stately gladioli, fresh and lovely, charging the air with their scent. Mrs. Doniton stood for a moment, asked the man what he thought of the flowers and the vase that held them and, receiving a pleasing reply, glanced at her watch and left the room, the man trotting at her heels.

And so, every half-hour for the rest of the day, Mrs. Doniton inspected the lounge, always contriving to have somebody accompany her so as to have corroborative evidence of the condition of the flowers. But nothing happened. They were as fresh in the evening, when her husband came home, as they were in the morning when she cut them. To him she poured forth the full details of her experiment and he gazed at the flowers as though expecting them to perform some miracle before his eyes. But still nothing happened. The flowers were just flowers, alive, pleasing to look upon and delightful to smell. Their vase seemed more beautiful than ever.

Seven days later, the gladioli in the vase began to show signs of natural decline and decay. Their death was normal, gradual and complete. On the morning of the eighth day, Mrs. Doniton threw them away, and asked the gardener to cut a spray of red roses. He brought them in from the garden, sparkling with dew, the indescribable beauty of the blooms hiding the merciless thorns which guarded them. Mrs. Doniton arranged them in the vase with her usual care, and went out to call upon the vicar to discuss the arrangements for the forthcoming Harvest Festival. She was away for, perhaps, an hour. On her return, she remembered that she had left a book in the lounge that a neighbour wished to borrow.

She just had time to take it to her before the sounding of the luncheon gong. She walked into the lounge humming a snatch from a popular tune; but of a sudden the song died on her lips with a little catch of her breath. The roses were dead, withered and crumbling to dust. The carpet and the occasional table were littered with brown fragments.

The book forgotten, Mrs. Doniton stood and stared. The thing was inconceivable. How could flowers die like this? First the irises, now the roses. Why had the gladioli been spared to live their natural span? Question after question rushed through her head. Questions without answer. What should she do? What could she do. Harold would know. She would telephone him, go to him, anything. The thing was becoming unbearable. Mrs. Doniton, for the second time in her life, was very frightened indeed.

She telephoned his office and explained things in a hurried, choky voice. He recognised the panic in her voice and told her to come over to him right away, when he would take her somewhere to lunch and they would talk the thing over and decide what to do. In the meantime, she should be careful to say nothing, or betray anything to the servants. The thing was bad enough without the servants getting wind of something and leaving in a body.

They met in the town in a little restaurant five minutes walk from his office. The drive had sobered her up a bit and she was now more puzzled than alarmed. As they ate she told him again what had happened to the roses. He listened and said nothing, eating his food slowly, with a contemplative look in his eye. When their coffee was before them and their cigarette were alight, he asked:

"Where did you buy the vase?" "At the little shop, Jenkins, in the High Street," she replied somewhat puzzled. "Well," he remarked, after a long period of silence, "I think we'll stroll round there now. Ready, dear?" He paid the bill and they left.

A short walk in complete silence brought them to Mr. Jenkins' establishment. He was still deep in thought, she still very puzzled. They pushed open the door, the little bell rang lustily and Mr. Jenkins appeared, walking with the sure-footedness of long practice amongst the china and glass-ware that littered the floor and was piled high to the ceiling. Mr. Jenkins wished them good day and asked their pleasure. Mr. Doniton opened the conversation.

"About a week ago, my wife," he indicated his companion, "bought from you a vase—a black china thing with golden babies round the middle and four bullocks or something at the bottom." For a man who drew definite straight lines all day, Mr. Doniton was singularly indefinite in his speech.

Mr. Jenkins said that he remembered the transaction and the subject thereof, very well.

"Good," went on Mr. Doniton, "I wonder whether you could tell us where you obtained the vase?"

Mr. Jenkins looked somewhat uncomfortable. "Well, sir, I couldn't tell you in the normal course of business. We pick these things up," he indicated his general stock, "at sales and things—trade secrets and all that."

Mr. Jenkins was afraid they might find out that he had been profiteering. "Might I ask," went on Mr. Jenkins, "the reason for the enquiry?"

"Well," said Mr. Doniton, lying like an expert and warming to his work, "when my wife showed me the vase I felt that I had seen it before somewhere. I was wondering whether it had once belonged to a great aunt of mine, a Mrs. Johnson?"

"No," replied Jenkins—a simple soul rising to the bait, "if I remember rightly, that vase was bought at the sale of the effects of the late Mrs. Walsh who died last May. About ninety I heard say she was. Lived in a big house, 'Green Gables,' on the North Road. Sale was held on the premises."

"Oh," said Doniton. "I must have been mistaken. Thanks very much. Sorry I have troubled you." "Not at all," said Jenkins, wondering if he had given too much away after all. "Good day. Weather looks like holding."

Together the Donitons left the shop, collected Mr. Doniton's car from the parking place and drove along the North Road until they came to "Green Gables"—a large mansion, just visible from the road, surrounded by extensive gardens already showing signs of neglect. The greenhouse to the right of the house had many of its panes broken and cracked. The owner of the house had died and the house looked, in the bright sunlight, as though it was dying of sorrow. A large board, nailed to the gates, announced that the desirable residence was for sale and that a certain firm of estate agents would be only too pleased to sell it.

"I know them," said Doniton. "Let's go and see them."

He turned the nose of the car and they went back into the town.

The estate agent was pleased to see him. Any estate agent would be if he received a call from the town's leading architect.

"It's about 'Green Gables,'" began Doniton. "Oh, yes," said the estate agent.

"Can you tell me who the present owner is?"

"Oh, yes" (a short consultation of a file). "Why? Are you thinking of buying?"

"No, but if you give me some idea of the owner I might get somebody interested."

Doniton was lying well to-day.

"Yes, it's a Miss Walsh—grand-daughter of the late owner. Lives in London." He gave the address. "Anything else I can do? No? Right! Contact me if you can place anything. Thanks. Good-bye, old man. Good-bye, Mrs. Doniton. Glad to have met you."

"The time," said Doniton to his wife when they reached the pavement, "is exactly 2.35; by 3.15 we can be in London and can call upon Miss Walsh. I hope she's in. I would like to clear the thing up to-day. Hop in, my love!"

Miss Walsh lived in a block of modern flats. A large commissionaire escorted them to a diminutive lift-boy who shot them up to the sixth floor at a tremendous rate. Miss Walsh, a pleasant girl of middle twenties, was puzzled when they explained that they had come about "Green Gables," but invited them in graciously.

It was a fine flat, beautifully furnished in the modern style, but the most arresting feature of which was the masses and masses of gladioli that stood in pots and vases of every description in every conceivable place—on the window ledges, on the piano, on

the table, on the sideboard. The air was heavy with their perfume. Their colour and presence both gladdened and confused the eye.

"I thought," said Miss Walsh, still puzzled, "that the estate agents look after the question of the house. Isn't it somewhat unusual to approach the owner direct?" Miss Walsh was obviously a girl of business. Mr. Doniton decided to ignore the query; at least for a moment.

"My wife and I," he began, "are both enthusiastic gardeners. These flowers are beautiful. Gladioli are one of our own special favourites. They appear to be your only favourite, Miss Walsh."

The method of attack succeeded. Miss Walsh was still puzzled, but her visitors appeared to be gentlefolk of some breeding.

"Well," she said, "as a matter of fact they are not my favourite, but they were the ruling passion of my late grandmother's life. She grew them in her garden and her hot-house, they and no others. They became an obsession with her. Every time I visited her all I heard, saw or smelled were gladioli. The place simply swarmed with them. In fact, she became so absorbed with them, that in her will (she left all her estate to me) she expressed a desire that for one year after her death I was to decorate my place of abode—I quote the exact words—with gladioli as a mark of remembrance. The lawyer explained to me that I had no legal necessity to do this, but I was very fond of my grandmother and, although they are not my favourite flower, I am very happy to fall in with her wish. It was, perhaps, a peculiar wish, but she was quite old when she drew up her will and very old when she died. At that age, people are apt to become somewhat childish."

Miss Walsh stopped as though realising she was telling perfect strangers too much of her own affairs, but after some conversation, and explaining that, as an architect, the estate agent had asked him to look over the house and report (another lie), Mr. Doniton collected his wife, upon whom the truth was beginning to dawn, and drove home in the cool of the summer evening.

"You see," said Doniton to his wife, after dinner that night, "I knew that there could be nothing wrong with the flowers, and so began to wonder if there was anything wrong with the vase. I examined it carefully the morning after the first incident—you remember the irises?—and found nothing wrong. When nothing happened to the gladioli, the matter passed from my mind, as I suspect it did from yours, but when the event of the roses transpired I had to start on a completely new tack. I asked myself, 'Why were the irises and roses smitten and not the gladioli?' If you hadn't lost your nerve I would have experimented further—say with dahlias, but I think it is as well that we cleared the matter up to-day. The old lady of blessed memory was mad about gladioli and couldn't bear the thought of any other flowers. Her intensity has outlived her or perhaps (is it possible?) is still controlled by her from the grave. What are you going to do, my love, keep the vase reserved for gladioli only, or sell the vase and decorate your room as your fancy takes you?"

Mrs. Doniton shivered and then smiled.

"As a mark of respect," she said, "from one enthusiastic gardener to another, now raising blooms in the Elysian fields, I think we will keep the vase. Come, dear, let us go to bed!"

To Steal Away His Brains

"Oh God, that man should put an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains."

—OTHELLO, Act II, Scene III.

Intoxication in itself is no crime—in fact, many people believe that in times of stress it can be a boon to the sufferer. Personally, I cannot say that I hold with this view. The cloak of alcohol is but a temporary shelter from the raging storm of grief, worry or remorse. Allow it to loosen its hold upon you and the storm or remorse. Allow the slightest loosening of its fastenings, and the storm descends with redoubled fury.

We were discussing the peculiar wave of shop-lifting and petty crime that had swept over the country recently and someone had remarked that the law can only deal with those that it caught, while the others, probably eight out of ten, equally as guilty get away with it. This led to a discussion on crime in general, when somebody, reverting to the question of punishment, remarked that in his opinion, if an ordinary law-abiding citizen breaks the law and is not brought to task by the legal authorities, he is always punished by his conscience and the fear of exposure. Look, he went on, at the number of people who drive motor cars whilst drunk. They know that they are breaking the law, they know that a motor car out of control can be as lethal as a bullet or a knife in the hands of a desperado. Yet they do it and in their befuddled minds they know that if anything happens they are for it. And, say something does happen—something serious—and nobody sees it happen and the law cannot touch them, do you think that the whole matter stops there? Never! Night and day the culprit is haunted by the spectre of being caught and being charged not only for the crime itself, but for the additional felony of not owning up to it. Gone is the ease of a clear conscience and the joy of meeting the light of day. For him the sun is no longer a source of warmth and life but the torch that will reveal him to his seekers. His daily companions are no more fellows of his own camp—they are spies sent by the enemy to search out his hiding places and reveal his plans. The welcome smile of a friend becomes the smile of triumph and the outstretched hand of greeting the clutch of the law. Even sleep that "balm

of hurt minds," when it eventually comes, only continues in dreams of horror the torture of the day. Conscience is the master of us all. You smile, you are incredulous—well, listen to this.

Some years ago there lived in a village a few miles outside a prosperous northern manufacturing town a man, an ordinary law-abiding, God-fearing man, married, and with two children. The man was of the professional classes, about forty years old, clean living and hard working, and in that financial position that society knows as "comfortable." His habits, as can be imagined, were regular. Every working day he would rise at 8 o'clock, breakfast with his children (his wife was a late riser) and, taking his car from its garage adjoining his house, would drive to the town and continue his business until 6 o'clock in the evening, when he would drive straight home, dine with his wife, listen to the wireless or read a book, take the dog for a run and turn in. Occasionally during the week-end he might take his wife to the town to a theatre or out to dinner. He was not exactly a teetotaler but his consumption of alcohol was limited to Christmas time and such festive occasions. He was often heard to remark that he "didn't like the stuff" or that he "couldn't see anything in it." Give a man like that two tots of whiskey and he would be well away. A teaspoonful of absinthe would probably kill him.

And so this very respectable man's irreproachable life went on. There are many such men—in fact, they make up the bulk of the population, doing their share, bringing up their children in the same pattern of life as themselves, always grumbling at the Government or the rates, but always doing everything with one eye on the impression that they give their neighbours, and always trying to be one step higher than the Jones or the Smiths who reside in the immediate vicinity. Men are not naturally like that—their wives usually make them so.

One dismal February evening at 6 o'clock precisely the man, muffled to the ears, left his office. It was, of course, quite dark and the intense cold was accentuated by a few flakes of snow that dropped with silent fitfulness on to the grey pavements. The man walked across the way to the park where he kept his car during the day, hoping that he would not have much difficulty in starting it. He had felt pretty awful all day; he was sure it was a cold coming on, and the over-heated office had not helped at all. One of his colleagues, a hearty bachelor, had noticed his peaky appearance and had advised him, in an objectionably hale and hearty manner, to have a good dose of whiskey and turn in—assuring him that he would be as right as rain in the morning. It was all very well for him to talk that way; he was always so confoundedly healthy.

The car started eventually, not without some coaxing, including the use of the starting handle, and the man drove off feeling exhausted after his tussle with the recalcitrant engine, and looking forward to the pleasures of his dinner and his cheery, comfortable fireside.

The tickling sensation in his throat had now increased, and he was continually forced to the uncomfortable procedure of sneezing whilst trying to hold the car on a straight course on the freezing road. The snow-flakes were thicker now and it looked as though

he was going to have a very uncomfortable twenty miles drive home.

Anybody who has had the experience of driving in a snow-storm will appreciate how difficult it is. The flakes fly towards you in a continuous network of white, blocking your vision and forcing you to a snail's pace. The continuous spears of white rushing towards you seem to have a mesmeric effect, sapping your concentration and dulling the mind. Great difficulty is experienced in distinguishing the line of the road, as the snow-drifts fill the gutters and make the footpath and roadway into one unbroken expanse of glittering white, throwing back with blinding reflection the hot whiteness of the head-lamps. It is difficult enough for a man in good condition to drive in a snow-storm. If you are exhausted from work and running a temperature it becomes maddening.

Slowly the man left the outer fringes of the town and ran into the country. Here, without the cover of buildings, the storm vent its full fury upon him. Near his right foot, gently caressing the accelerator, for he was down to walking pace, a cold draught of air played with his ankle with icy fingers. He had not noticed this draught before—it must come through a hole in the carpet—he would have to see to it first thing in the morning. He became colder and colder. The car padded along on the carpet of snow, the monotonous throbbing of its engine and the crunching of its tyres setting his nerves jangling. Skidding, slipping and sliding, he covered the first ten miles in just under forty minutes, frozen to the marrow and with his temper kept under control with the greatest possible effort.

About half-way between the town and the village in which the man lived there stands, on a bend of the road, a little inn—a relic of the old days when the coaches from the north used to call for breakfast before making the last ten-mile run to the town. There are scattered farms about here, with labourers' cottages and a general store. Not what you might call a village, the settlement was too small for that, but perhaps a hamlet. The man, in his daily journeys to and from town barely noticed the inn, usually sweeping past it at forty miles an hour, but this evening as he crawled round the corner, a shaft of ruddy light struck across the snow-covered road as some farm labourer opened the door of the inn and was swallowed into its hospitable interior. This sight was too much for our frozen traveller. Perhaps there was something in his colleague's tip about the drop of whiskey; in any event it would give him a chance to thaw a bit before the bar fire, and put him in a better frame of mind to continue the rest of his journey. He swung the car over and pulling up before the white mantled sign, shut off his engine and entered the hostelry.

As soon as the door was between him and the stormy world, he felt better. The bar was clean as a new pin, with sand-strewn floor and high-backed settles. A fire of logs crackled in the open hearth, hissing, as from time to time, melted snow dripped down the wide chimney. Behind the tiny bar, surrounded by bright pewter and winking bottles containing potent coloured liquids, stood one of those old-fashioned barmaids—all peroxide and bosom

—talking in urgent whispers to a man dressed in a flowery waist-coat with "old soldier" written all over him.

The air hung thick with rings of perfumed tobacco smoke and apple-cheeked labourers in their soil-sodden clothes, sat or leaned against the bar, drinking and talking in their slow deliberate way. The scene was one to gladden any heart and the man was no exception. His irritability fell from him like a cloak. He was his old self again. Pushing his way through the throng he advanced to the bar and asked the barmaid for a whiskey.

Very few of us realise how dependent we are on the actions of our fellows. Nobody realises, sipping their early morning cup of tea with relish, the amount of labour required and the trials that are gone through before the ingredients of that cup of tea are wrested from nature and are brought to the larder. We take too much for granted, accepting things as they are, without caring an iota for their rhyme or reason. The thoughtless action of the barmaid that evening changed the whole course of one of her customers' lives. She had troubles of her own and she did not know him anyway, so what did it matter to her?

Until recently the barmaid had enjoyed perfect health. A little indigestion, perhaps, from time to time, but otherwise nothing to upset the even tenor of her way. A widow of uncertain age, she had all the bright alertness of her class, stood no nonsense, and was popular in her own little circle. But recently she had not been feeling quite up to the mark and a visit to the hospital in the town only that afternoon had upset her completely. They had told her that she would have to go in for an operation—nothing serious—but it had to be done right away before the trouble became chronic. An operation to any person is normally something to worry about. To the barmaid, whose health had never been impaired before, it was a major calamity. No wonder she was distracted. No wonder when the man asked for whiskey she gave him brandy—and a double measure at that. And what brandy! Thirty years old if it was a day, a veritable measure of liquid fire.

The man, who, as you know, was no drinker, poured the stuff down his throat, coughed, wiped his lips, and stood back to await results. Good stuff, burns the throat, but what warmth, what comfort!! Another such a measure would see him right home and keep him warm all the way. He called for another, quaffed it at one gulp, looked at his watch, muttered something about his wife awaiting dinner for him, took one last lingering look at the cheerful hearth, and went out into the snow.

It was still very cold, but he only felt it at his extremities. Inside he was burning as though someone had thrust a hot poker into his vitals. The stuff was running through his veins and he felt as though he had been connected to an electric current and was receiving the full charge straight through his body. The fumes were rising to his head and his former feeling of depression had given way to one of complete elation. He drove, with what was, in those weather conditions, criminal abandon, with complete disregard to his or anybody else's safety.

That hellish draught that had come through the floor of the car had either stopped or was no longer noticed. Curious thoughts were running through his mind—what a jolly snowstorm—hope

it lasts until Christmas—nothing like driving in a snow-storm—wish he had a passenger, though—comfort and companionship and all that. His typist, for instance—what was her name? Ah, yes, Thompson—nice girl, Miss Thompson. Nice legs—got what they call "class"—bit fast-looking, perhaps, but he liked them that way. He would like Miss Thompson with him now, bet she would like to be here, too. She would like him suggesting things to her—she would probably agree, too—never mind his wife, narrow-minded prig, very cold natured, rejects all his advances, he would divorce her and marry Miss Thompson. No, why bother with divorce?—he would take Miss Thompson—Eva, away and to the devil with his wife. He must remember to do it in the morning. Easy, now, cross-roads, turn right—right—right. . . .

The man was drunk, very drunk, and for the first time in his life. And being drunk, and not because of the weather, for he knew every inch of his route and the island in the middle of the road was ablaze with light, he turned left and not right and continued his journey in the same mood of drunken elation.

Before accompanying him on his journey home, it would be best if the geography of the route from here be explained. Imagine a huge figure of eight with the curve on the lower half of the figure cut away. You have then, roughly, an inverted "U"—its apex joined to a circle. The left-hand arm of the "U" was the road leading to the town along which the man had been travelling. The left-hand curve of the upper figure was called "Bridle Lane," the right-hand one "Caulter Road." The village in which the man lived, spread along the upper curve and about half-way along each road in the form of an arc—almost a semi-circle. The man's house was near the top end of Caulter Road, practically at the end of the village, so that, when arriving at the cross-roads he should have taken the right-hand fork, which would have brought him into the road where he lived. By taking the left-hand fork and running along Bridle Lane he lengthened his journey by about a quarter of a mile. He could not miss his way, as Bridle Lane ran into the village, became Caulter Road at the post office and came back again to the cross-roads.

Continuing his journey, the thoughts, imprisoned all his life by his suppressed and rigid up-bringing, released by the fumes of the brandy and running with free abandon through his mind, the man suddenly felt a bump. His near side front wheel rose in the air and then fell to level again, the same thing being immediately copied by his near side rear wheel. This was funny—must have run over something. Or was it somebody? This latter thought had a sobering effect on him. Slacking his pace only slightly he peered into the driving mirror. He could see nothing and nobody. The snow had ceased falling and a dark blur marred its pristine whiteness about 100 yards behind him. Could it be a man or a woman. Perhaps a child. Good God! Not that; but then, what else? He had seen nobody in the head-lights, but then pedestrians always acted queerly. Should he stop and go back? If he did somebody might see him and the game would be up. If he went on and somebody had witnessed the accident, perhaps they had taken his number, so the fat would be in the fire just the same. Anyhow, what did it matter—serve them right. They should be more careful. Or

was it his fault? Was he drunk? Drunk! Intoxicated in charge of a motor car. That was manslaughter. They would give him at least five years, or was it ten? God, what was a man to do—and in this agony of indecision the man realised that he was outside his house, and, turning the car into the drive, drove into the garage.

Completely sober now, he examined his car with care. There was blood on his bumper and blood and snow on his wheel rims. With infinite care he hosed the car down and, white to the lips, went into the house. He had killed a human being, had poached on God's preserves and had run away like a coward. Perhaps his victim was a man, a man with a wife and family like himself. What would they do, now that their breadwinner had been taken from them. He had killed one man and was responsible for the poverty of his dependants. It may have been a woman with tiny children depending on her, perhaps with a baby deprived of its mother's milk. Perhaps a young wife snatched from the arms of her husband, perhaps a child—the darling of its parents, cut off in the spring greenness of its life. In a fever of apprehension and with all the effects of intoxication wiped from his mind, he ignored his dinner, and, pleading sickness, left his wife to her solitary meal and took to his bed.

All that night he tossed in indecision, going over the happenings of the evening again and again. He was a fool, he should have reported the matter, he should have stopped to investigate. Perhaps his victim was even now lying in agony—dying in the snow. The road was little used, and he might lie there all night, denied human assistance. But if he had gone to the police they would soon have diagnosed his condition and he would have received a very severe sentence. Hang it all, they couldn't kill him; he would go and face it in the morning. But then they might ask why he had not come the previous night, why he had washed his car? Well, he was ill and did not know what he was doing. Then why had he not sent somebody or telephoned or something? The grey, heavy dawn saw him still tossing and turning but determined to say nothing.

He went down to breakfast that morning as usual but with an unusually heavy heart and troubled mind. He could hardly pull himself together sufficiently to travel along Caulter Road—fearing what he would find, but there was nothing in the roadway. A fresh fall of snow during the night had obliterated any traces that there may have been. His work that day was bad, very bad indeed, and about four o'clock he pleaded illness and left for home, fearful of the reception he would get. Perhaps the police had visited his wife. Perhaps they were lying in wait for him ready to pounce as soon as he reached home. But no, everything was as usual, his dinner ready and the evening paper laid by his plate. He opened it with ill-disguised impatience. Yes, there it was. A short paragraph—funny, only a short paragraph, stating that a man had been found in Caulter Road and that the inquest was to be held shortly. Meanwhile, the police, who were in possession of nearly all the facts, had practically completed their inquiries.

For the sake of appearances and to keep his wife quiet he forced his dinner down his throat and retired to the fireside, still thinking,

still planning. Should he go to the police or had he left it too late? Questions, questions! Who was his victim? Had he died outright? Did he suffer for hours, covered with his frozen blood? Questions, questions—all the evening, all the night, a night that ticked on second by second, minute by minute, crawling on its leaden belly to eternity.

At six o'clock he fell into a fitful slumber and awoke with a start from out of a troubled dream. He looked at his watch, it was 9.30 a.m.; he would be late for the office, or should he go to the office? He did not feel up to it. What was the news? Had anybody called? Were they waiting for him downstairs even now? He listened, but all was quiet. He heard the maid singing at her work in the kitchen. He crossed to the window and drew the blinds.

A dismal sky, a snowy landscape, so dreary, so depressing. He glanced down into the roadway. Who was that unlatching the front gate with a blue official-looking envelope under his arm? Thatcher, the village policeman! So they had found him at last?

No future for him now but the cold bareness of a cell and the uninviting monotony of prison life. What would happen to his wife and children? By God! they wouldn't get him yet.

The man sprang across to the dressing-table, wrenched open a drawer with the fury of a madman, fumbled inside until he found what he was looking for, and placing its muzzle in his mouth, blew off the top of his head.

At the inquest that day, a verdict of death from natural causes was passed on the tramp who had been found dead in the snow in Caulter Road.

What the man had run over in Bridle Lane was a dead sheep that had strayed from its fold.

And a puzzled policeman, who had come to sell some tickets for a police dance, stayed to survey a messy corpse and an inexplicable suicide.

CHINESE DRAGON

Silas Jones had kept the pawnbroker's shop at the corner of the shabby street in London's dockland for many years. His father had kept it before him, and his grandfather, too—in fact the shop had as permanent a place in the history of the district as the Parish records.

It was a dingy, uninviting shop, with a beetling front, and small begrimed windows, displaying a tremendous assortment of cheap jewellery, knick-knacks and trifles, lying jumbled up higgledy-piggledy, without the slightest pretence of order or form. Inside, the shop fairly burst with old clothes, clocks, cooking utensils and every sort and condition of personal effects it is possible for the mind to conceive. You know the kind of shop; they are fast disappearing now.

Silas himself had, with the passing of the years, grown like his shop, wizened, untidy of dress and slovenly of habit. He had seen the seamy side of life too much to accept things at their face value, but once he was convinced of the truth of matters, and he took some convincing, his staunchness and help were of a most sympathetic and practical nature. He was only forty-five years old, but looked twenty years older.

One bleak Saturday night in November, some twenty years ago, when Silas was shutting his books, and preparing to put up the shutters, the rusty bell fixed to the shop door jangled the entry of a possible "client." Silas polished his glasses and subjected the person standing hesitatingly on the other side of the counter to an apparently hasty, but actually searching, scrutiny. He saw a tall man, of indeterminate age, shabbily dressed, but cleanly in appearance. On the little finger of his left hand Silas noticed a ring of strange workmanship. The stranger slipped the ring off his finger and said:

"How much for this?"

Silas took the ring and examined it slowly. It appeared to be of gold, fashioned in the form of a dragon, with horny tail held in a mouth ridged with fangs. Its eyes were two tiny emeralds, winking in the yellow lights of the hissing gas lamp hanging above, and each claw was three curved hooks of gold surrounding a palm of rubies. Intrinsically, it was worth perhaps

thirty pounds, to a collector, obviously very much more. On its shank were engraved the words, "Good fortune follows me."

"I'll give you fifteen pounds," said Silas.

"Look," said the stranger, "my name is Simpson, John Simpson. I have recently completed, after many years of hard work, a mechanical contrivance that is going to be of great public appeal and usefulness. Its possibilities as a money-maker is prodigious, and its success, certain. But I need money to put the thing on a practical basis. I have approached three people who were very interested in the idea, but whose greediness was apparent from the beginning. They would advance me the money, and altogether it is a small sum, but they desire to buy up my very soul for the advancement of a miserable pittance. But, no; I soon saw through their thieving, scheming minds. I determined to do the thing myself. By dint of scraping and selling I have collected together a sum of money. I am now twenty-five pounds short. Advance me the twenty-five pounds on the security of the ring. It's the last thing of value I have, and you'll help a man to realise the ambition of a lifetime."

The earnestness with which the words were spoken, the scholarly tones in which they were delivered, and the difference of this stranger from the usual motley collection of slatternly housewives, unshaven drunkards and impoverished sailormen, with their rough voices and menacing manners, which formed the entire collection of his customers, touched a chord of memory in the pawnbroker's mind. He himself, many years ago, had had an idea, an idea of opening a shop in the High Street, and slowly developing it to an emporium. He could see the name emblazoned across the huge fascia, "Jones' Emporium," and the crowds of eager, satisfied shoppers thronging his aisles, buying his merchandise, with his name a household word and his goods a guarantee of satisfaction. But his father had laughed, and the capital was not forthcoming, and the idea had become a dream, and the dream an almost forgotten phantasy of his mind. For the sake of ten pounds, should he stand between this man and the realisation of his dreams? If his own dreams never came true, why should he not help the dreams of others to materialise? Besides—and the practical streak rose again, the ring was worth thirty pounds, so that he would still be five pounds in pocket if the worst came to the worst, as, in his experience, it so often did.

"All right," said Silas, in a very hesitating tone nevertheless, "I'll give you twenty-five pounds, Mr.—"

"Simpson," said the man, "John Simpson. Remember the name carefully—John Simpson!"

Silas slowly counted out twenty-five greasy one pound notes, made out a ticket; the ring and the money changed hands; the stranger left the shop with a light step and a confident smile, and Silas was left contemplating the Dragon Ring.

"I'll never sell this," murmured Silas to himself. "If he comes back, well, he comes back; but until he does I'll wear the ring myself."

The golden dragon curled itself around the little finger of the left hand of Silas Jones. The left hand and its companion put up the shutters and busied themselves preparing their owner's supper.

Ten years went by—ten slow, unchanging, monotonous years. John Simpson never came back, and the dragon still slept curled round Mr. Jones' little finger. Then, one day in the early spring, Silas fell ill, and the neighbours, seeing that the shutters on the little shop remained in position the whole of one day, called the police, who forced an entry and found Silas in mortal agony.

The doctor, who diagnosed swiftly, ordered an immediate operation. Silas mended slowly, and when discharged from the hospital was told, with the total disregard that all doctors seem to have of practical things, that work of any sort would be harmful to him and bring about a recurrence of the malady and an untimely end. Silas began negotiations, and the shop, so long in the family, passed into other hands and soon lost its identity as just an East End branch of a multiple store.

With the proceeds of the scores of years of labour of Silas, his father, and his father before him, Silas bought a cottage in the country and entrusted the balance with one, Pettit, a solicitor, to invest for him. In this way, five happy, healthy years rolled swiftly by, and Silas was at peace with the world. He found it difficult at first to live unsurrounded by the castaways of human consumption and ornament, but gradually the quiet absorbing life of the country endeared itself to him, and he enjoyed living as never before. Then, one day, a cheque sent to him by Pettit, the solicitor, was returned marked "No Account." Silas went post haste to London, but Pettit had left for an unknown destination, and his clients' monies had decided to accompany him.

After the initial shock, and the disappointment of realising that after all these years, he was still no judge of human nature, Silas sold his cottage, and returned to his old London haunts, to eke out his remaining years. He worked as a jeweller's assistant, as a clerk, as a help to a Chinese ship-chandler, but his failing eyesight, ill-suited him for these jobs. But he carried on as best he could, and the Dragon on his little finger accompanied him wherever he went.

But the old malady gradually returned—at first in small twinges, and then in bouts of agony that left him weak and sick. The hospital claimed him yet again, and when he came out he was reduced to his last resources. Thinking, always thinking of what was and what might have been, he turned wearily into a dock-side inn to sit and rest, and perhaps pick up a few hours work from any customer who needed a handy man. Sipping his beer, and munching his bread and cheese, he entered into conversation with a sailor, brown from the wind and the salt-spray, with many a yarn rolling off his tongue, and many an experience to relate of foreign parts and foreign things.

"That ring, now," said the sailor, pointing to the Dragon, still curled round Silas' finger, "that's a bit of Chinese workmanship, as sure as my name is Bob Crawford. And very pretty, too. I'd give twenty pounds for a ring like that."

Twenty pounds, thought Silas. It's a fortune. It will help to keep away the pangs of hunger and will pay the rent of my room till I find work again. I've kept it all these years, and its mocked me with its inscription. Good fortune, indeed. Misery and starvation. Twenty pounds!

"Do you really mean that?" said Silas, trying not to appear too eager.

"You bet, chum," said the sailor in the familiar manner sailors have. "If you want to sell it, come up to my ship at the wharf over there, and I'll get the money from my kit."

The sailor and Silas rose. A short walk took them to the quayside, and the sailor, asking Silas to wait, ran up the gang-plank of a ship which bore in large white letters on its bow the legend, "Chinese Dragon." The sailor returned, the money and the ring exchanged owners, and the dragon curled itself rather tightly round the horny finger of the seafarer.

Two weeks later, Silas went to see the doctor again. "I'll be frank," said the doctor, "a nice quiet existence, without worry or fatigue will keep you going. Carry on as you are, and I'm afraid—" the sentence was left unfinished; the inference was obvious.

After leaving the doctor, and on his way to his tiny room, Silas bought an evening paper at the street corner. Arriving home, he unwrapped his purchase of fish and chips, and began eating his supper, deeply engrossed in the news. Two paragraphs, tucked away in the corner of a column, read as follows:

"Messrs. Robertson (here followed the address), solicitors, are seeking to trace the whereabouts of one Silas Jones, a pawnbroker, who is the sole legatee of the late John Simpson, the engineering magnate, who was killed recently, leaving a considerable fortune. In his will, Mr. Simpson states that this person, Jones, was the real founder of his fortune, having believed in him and assisted him to commence the business, now grown to such greatness, with world-wide ramifications. A curious feature of the will is that the deceased states that he endeavoured to trace Mr. Jones, without success, and that the legacy will become void, and the entire estate will go to charities if Mr. Jones cannot produce a certain ring, fashioned in the form of a dragon, an exact description of which was given, including certain words engraved on the shank."

and—

"The Portuguese steamer, "Lisbon," reports that she has picked up in mid-Atlantic, the survivors of the s.s. "Chinese Dragon," which collided with an unknown vessel in a thick fog, and sank immediately. All hands of the foundered vessel have been accounted for, save one whose name is stated to have been Robert Crawford."

LETHAL WATERS

Somewhere, in the swirling wastes of the South Atlantic, four men lay, in a heaving cockleshell of a boat, dying from thirst. Four men, who, three weeks before, had been strong, capable beings, full of the glow of life and the urge of endeavour, but who now were but parodies of humanity, skeletons with distended bellies and blackened tongues, devoid of the smallest spark of energy, sprawling in the foul bilge of the boat, waiting for their death.

The intense heat of the midday sun poured mercilessly on to the boat and its occupants, blistering the paint, glistening on the encrustations of salt, and torturing the cracked and raw skins of the men. The stench from the bilge and from the tormented bodies, was revolting, but not a breath of air moved to freshen the atmosphere, and the dying men were past caring, anyway. The sea was smooth like molten lead, the sky a pale blue, cloudless and brilliant. Nothing could be heard save the clacking of the water against the sides of the boat, and the faint, irregular breathing of the men. Nothing could be seen save the sea and the sky. But Death was present, and was stretching out his ever greedy fingers slowly; haste was unnecessary, the victims were secure.

Of the four men in the boat, two were related. The grizzled man, with hollow cheeks and bloodshot eyes, the tatters of a bandage still clinging to his head, was the father of the young lad, whose blond hair, bleached to whiteness from exposure, hung matted over his face. The others were a Chinaman, an impassive yellow skeleton, and a negro, huge boned, once muscular, now but a black skin drawn tightly over a bony framework, his swollen tongue gripped tightly between dazzling white teeth. All slept, save the old man, who lolled against an empty water container, and gnawed his finger nails, thinking the aimless thoughts of those for whom hope is at long last finally dead, and physical death the only salvation.

The old man gnawed his fingers and thought of home, of England, of green fields and flowered hedgerows, of trees at night standing black against the sky, of rivers, of streams, of water, fresh water, cool and sparkling life-giving water. He thought of cargoes and convoys, and meals in the messroom, and drinks in his cabin, in the heat of the afternoons in the tropics. His mind wandered to the Arctic journeys, to the decks covered with tons of ice, to the music of the melting ice during the warmer spells,

and the water dripping along the scuppers and trickling to waste into the sea. Water just running to waste—drip, drip—always water. Just one can of water, and the Presence he felt would be cheated of its victims, and renew their hopes of life and health.

The old man stopped biting his fingers. He stretched out his hand, and picking up a wooden stick, began sucking it. It was wet with sea water. With an imprecation he threw it away; his stomach heaved. The paroxysm over, he leaned back again, thinking—

Twenty-one days—three weeks ago, he had been the master of his ship, a ten-thousand-ton merchantman, with a reputation for speed. He had been in his cabin when the torpedo struck, sleeping deeply, dreamlessly, the slumber of physical exhaustion. The next moment he had been jerked into bewildered wakefulness, sitting amongst the tangled bedclothes on the floor of his cabin. The roar of the explosion was still in his ears, the shrill hiss of escaping steam, the screams of those in mortal agony, the rush of boots along the iron gangways. The ship listed at an alarming angle, and was obviously settling rapidly. He remembered the difficulty he had had of forcing open his cabin door, the speed with which he had made his way on deck, the barking of orders, the quiet discipline of his crew. He recalled the jamming of the life-boat gear, the hurtling of many bodies into the boiling waters, now rising, like a trap-door on a hinge, directly towards him. The ship was turning over on to her side. A hasty glance round, a flash view of littered decks, bare of human beings, the instinctive feeling that he was the last to leave, a deep breath, and the jump. The water was cold, intensely cold, and he came to the surface almost devoid of feeling, his tortured lungs pleading for air. A few moments of icy, wet confusion, and then a huge black arm encircled his neck, and eager hands hauled him into a boat. He had a distinct recollection of the white teeth of the negro grinning at him from the waist of the boat, of a sudden roar as the ship's boilers burst, and of the last violent plunge of her death agony. The next thing he could remember was the brightness of the sun, as he regained his senses next morning. They had been in the lifeboat for eight hours.

His head pained him considerably. He put his hand up, and found that it was bandaged. They told him that he had a nasty head wound, and that he must take it easy. They rebandaged it, and made him comfortable. He suddenly remembered his boy. Was he safe? The lad's own voice gave him his answer. He had been sitting by his side all the time. The old man remembered uttering a fervent "Thank God." He regained his strength during that first day and took stock of their position. Eighteen men were in the boat, with provisions and water for sixteen days; with care they could eke it out for twenty days. But it would require care and discipline and no accidents. He then tried to plot their position. He had no instruments save a pocket compass, but he estimated that they were about four hundred miles due east of the coast of Brazil. There was every hope that, being in the regular trade routes, they would soon be picked up, but he was taking no chances. Better ration the food carefully from the beginning, than rely on the hope of a quick rescue. Of the remaining boats, there was no sign.

The other men must have perished, or were in the same predicament as themselves.

The stringy muscles in the throat of the black jerked and twitched. He moaned and rolled over. The Chinaman and the boy remained motionless. The boy's jaw had dropped. His breathing was shallow and irregular, the air whistling in his throat.

The old man looked at him as though not comprehending that his son's life was ebbing fast. He continued to gnaw his fingers, thinking, thinking— With the forefinger of his right hand he counted, laboriously as a child, the notches cut in the gunwale, each notch represented a day in the boat. 18—19—20, 21, 21 days. His mind became blank for a time, and then he resumed his reverie.

For seven days all went well. A shower of rain had fallen on the fourth day, and they had caught some and replenished their supplies. In spite of the cramped conditions, the men's spirits were high, and there were no signs of moroseness or disease. On the morning of the eighth day, two men were missing. Nobody could account for their absence. He had set two watches that night, and both men swore that they had heard nothing. A few splashes perhaps, but then the water was splashing around them continuously, and they had taken no especial notice. No cries or scuffles were heard. The men had just vanished.

A gloom descended on the boat. Nothing was said, but obviously each man was wondering what it was that took their comrades from them so silently and efficiently. The old man remembered that secretly he had rejoiced. With two less men to feed, there would be more for his son. The boy must live.

By the tenth day the two missing men were forgotten. Other things had occurred to occupy the men's minds. Apart from the shower of rain that had fallen six days previous, the weather had been all unbroken sunshine. The intense, unshaded heat and the shortness of the rations were beginning to take their toll. Four men were already lying in a fever in the bottom of the boat, and the others were listless and sullen. That evening the old man had discovered that one of the water tanks, as yet unbroached, was empty. He was quite sure that it had been full when he had first taken stock of his provisions, but further examination showed that the tank was damaged, and its precious contents had just run away. They had, all the time in fact, been baling fresh water as well as salt water, out of the bottom of the boat. Owing to the strictness of the rationing, the food stocks were still fairly good; they had ten days supply for sixteen men, but there was barely seven days supply of water left, and that, only provided that the men were given the barest minimum.

And so, day followed day, with monotonous regularity. The heat of the sun seemed to increase, as the liquid they absorbed grew less and less. On the twelfth day, the four stricken men died. The old man gabbled what he could remember of the Burial Service over the bodies, before they were thrown overboard. But three other men had already taken their places in the bottom of the boat, and the next day, they followed their mates into a watery grave. Two weeks after they had taken to the boat, nine men remained out of the original company of eighteen.

The old man cut the water supply to three spoonfuls daily, barely sufficient to moisten their cracked lips and swollen tongues. The men tore the buttons from their clothing and sucked them. They devised the most ingenious methods to keep themselves alive. They gnawed wood. They splashed themselves with sea water, so that their dried up bodies might absorb the moisture. Some drank sea water, and died raving. One attacked another, and they vanished into the sea, tearing and clawing at each other's throats. But, one by one, they died. On the twenty-first day, four men still lived.

The old man stirred and sighed deeply. He rasped his tongue over his leathern gums. Thirty hours before they had drunk the last drop of water. There were still a few hard biscuits in the locker, but their stomachs revolted at the thought of them. He crawled over and examined his son. The boy was dying slowly, muttering snatches of gibberish from time to time, twitching his limbs and groaning. The Chinaman was dead. The old man had not the strength to move him. Rigor mortis was already setting in. His limbs were becoming fixed in a grotesque position, an upflung arm, a leg bent double under the stomach. The old man dragged himself back to his place and recommenced sucking his fingers, mechanically thinking. His end was very near.

What evil have I done to die like this? What crime has my son committed to deserve this terrible punishment. Is there a God, and does He think that this is right? No, there can be no God! He is but a figment of man's imagination, something invented by our savage ancestors to explain their fear of things they did not understand, and passed on from generation to generation. Because, if there is a God, and He is merciful as they say He is, surely He would not let us die like this, in agony and horror. Or is this our punishment for a sin we have committed so long ago, that we have forgotten all about it? What sin could be so bad as to deserve punishment like this? Surely, only murder! But my son has murdered nobody, and neither have I. But I would murder anyone for water—if only I had water—just a drop—Merciful God, water—! Water?—There is plenty of water. The boat is floating in it. The seas are full of it. Why didn't I think of it before? Why dole it out in teaspoonfuls from those tiny tanks, when there are gallons of it, millions of gallons of it, all round me, ready for me to take, without payment, for nothing, free?—

The old man was in a delirium. He half rose, muttering to himself, then sank back exhausted. After a few moments, a frenzy seemed to shake him. Crawling on his stomach, his hands clawing, he dragged himself to the stern, and rummaging amongst the litter of odds and ends, he found a drinking mug. Inch by inch, he worked his way to the side of the boat, and slid his hand and arm over, until the gunwale pressed into his armpit. The surface of the water was still several inches from the mug, clenched in his fast weakening fingers. With a sudden surge of frenzied strength, he lifted himself on to his knees, filled the mug to the brim, and lifting it to his lips, drank the contents at one gulp.

He fell back exhausted into his old position, his back against the lockers, a peculiar look in his eyes. Something was wrong with the water. What was it? He could not quite make it out. Of a

sudden, a terrible nausea gripped him. A burning pain tore at his vitals. He lolled, dying, on his side. And the last flash of thought, before his mind ceased functioning for ever, was that the water was not salt water, and that the large amount that he had drunk, after so long an abstinence, instead of reviving him, had hastened his end.

But what he could not know was that the boat had drifted into the mouth of the Amazon, which is fifty miles wide at its mouth, and which impregnates a vast area, where it joins the sea, with fresh water.

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