











THE BLOOMSBURY WONDER



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## The Bloomsbury Wonder

### I

As that September morning came to birth in trembling silver and took life in the hue of dusty gold, I swore.

I had risen somewhat early and was standing at the bathroom window of my Bloomsbury flat shaving. I first said something like " *Ooch!* " and then I said something more intense. The cause of these ejaculations was that I had given myself the peculiarly nasty kind of cut that you can only get from a safety-razor, and the cause of the cut was a sudden movement of the right elbow, and the cause of *that*



was something I had seen from my window.

Through that gracious gold, which seemed almost like a living presence blessing the continent of London, moved a man I knew. But a man I knew transformed into a man I did not know. He was not hurrying, which was his usual gait. He wasn't even walking. He was sailing. I never saw such a schoolgirl step in a man. I never saw such rapture in the lift of a head. His whole being expressed the sweeping emotion that overwhelms the soul in the moment when time stands still and life and the world are isolated and crystallised in ecstasy. The moment of vision.

He seemed to be the one creature of purpose and understanding in a swarm of futile organisms ; and this was so alien to

the man, so sharply out of character, that it gave my right arm a shock. For really, as I had always known him, he was so much a thing of cobweb and quiver that he belonged to twilight rather than break of day. To see him walking so, in the morning sun, was like seeing one's old boots turn into dancing shoes.

He was not tall, but he was so thin, and his clothes fitted so tightly, that he gave an illusion of height. He wore a black double-breasted overcoat, buttoned at the neck, black trousers and nondescript hat. He held his arms behind him, the right hand clasping the elbow of the left arm. His slender trunk was upright, and his head thrown back and lifted ; and, as I say, he was sailing.

In the dusty sunlight he made a silhouette. I saw him in the flat only.

And I realised then that I always had seen him in the flat ; never all round him. The figure he cut in that sunlight made me *want* to see round him, though what I should find I did not know and could not guess. And to this day I don't know and can't guess.

## II

In conventional society, I suppose, he would have been labelled a queer creature, this Stephen Trink ; but the inner quarters of London hold so many queer creatures, and I have so wide an acquaintance among them, that Trink was just one of my crowd. I forget how I came to know him, but for about two years we had been seeing each other once or twice a week ; sometimes oftener. I liked him almost at once, and the liking grew. Although I was always aware in his company of a slight unease, I took every opportunity of meeting him. He charmed me. The charm was not the open, easy charm of one's intimate friend, for we never reached that full contact. It was more spell than charm ;

the attraction of opposites, perhaps. I never could analyse my unease, for beyond a hint of knowing things that others couldn't know, there was nothing really queer about him. If he was at all odd, it was no more than the conventional oddity of Bloomsbury. His only marked characteristic was a deep melancholy, and now that I try to recall him I find that that is the one clear thing that I can recall. He was one of those men whom nobody ever really knows, and who do not mean to be known. In talk, he appeared to open his heart to me, but I knew very well that he didn't. There were always covered corners ; and I could never say surely that he was this kind of man or that kind.

Without being at all mysterious, he was a mystery. Indeed, I think it was his



very "ordinariness" that made him so baffling. With the man of sudden twists and complexities, or the man of bizarre habits, you know where you are. His foibles and secrecies and explosions are sign-posts to character. But with the ordinary man—a scarce type—you are in a desert ; and when this ordinary man does extraordinary things, you are in a desert of an unmapped country. He would have been passed over in any company, and at my place always was. Only when I directed my friends' attention to him, did they recollect having met him and examine their recollection ; and then they were baffled. I once asked five friends in turn what they thought of him, and I was given pictures of five totally different men, none of whom I had myself seen in Trink. Each of them, I noted, had to hesitate on

my question, and stroke his hair, and say :  
“ 'M . . . Trink. We-el, he's just an  
ordinary sort of chap—I mean—he's a—  
sort of——” Then, although he had been  
with us ten minutes ago, they would go on  
to draw a picture as from hazy memory.  
They seemed to be describing a man whom  
they weren't sure they had seen. Their  
very detail was the fumbling detail of men  
who are uncertain what they did see, and  
try to assure themselves by elaboration  
that they did at any rate see *something*.  
It was as though he had stood before  
the camera for his photograph, and  
the developed plate had come out  
blank.

In appearance, as I say, he was insigni-  
ficant, and, with his lean, questing face  
and frail body, would have passed any-  
where as an insipid clerk. He stressed his

insipidity by certain physical habits. He had a trick of standing in little-girl attitudes—hands behind back, one foot crooked round the other—and of demurely dropping his eyes if you looked suddenly at him ; and, when speaking to you, looking up at you as though you were his headmaster. He had, too, a smile that, though it sounds odd when used of a man, I can only describe as winsome. The mouth was sharp-cut, rather than firm, and drooped at the corners. The lower jaw was drawn back. His hair was honey-coloured and plastered down. His voice was thin, touched with the east wind ; and it was strange to hear him saying the warm, generous things he did say about people in the sleety tone that goes with spite. To everything he said that tone seemed to add the words : *Isn't it*

*disgusting?* If he said of any piece of work of mine that it was quite a good thing, the tone implied that it was disgusting of me to do good things. If he said that it was a glorious morning, one felt that it was disgusting of mornings to be glorious. His eyes, behind spectacles, were mild and pale blue. Only when the spectacles were removed did one perceive character ; then, one could see that the eyes held curious experience and pain.

Wherever he might be, he never seemed to be wholly *there*. He had an air of seeming to be listening to some noise outside the room. He would sit about in attitudes that, since Rodin's *Penseur*, we have come to accept as attitudes of thought ; but if you looked at his face you saw it was empty. He was not thinking ; he was brooding. Though



indoors he was languid and lounge-y, and his movements were the movements of the sleepwalker, in the street his walk was agitated and precipitous. He seemed to be flying from pursuit. One other notable point about him was that, quiet, insignificant, withdrawn as he was, he could be a most disturbing presence. Even when relaxed in an arm-chair he somehow sent spears and waves of discomfort through the air, sucking and drying the spirit of the room and giving me that edge of unease. He "vamped" you.

What his trouble was—if his melancholy arose from a trouble—he never told me. Often, when I urged him, flippantly, to Cheer Up, he spoke of This Awful Burden, but I dismissed it as the usual expression of that intellectual weariness of living which we call "modern," though, like most



“ modern ” ideas, it dates from the middle of last century.

He had private means by which he could have lived in something more than comfort, but he seemed contented with three rooms in the forlorn quarter where Bloomsbury meets Marylebone—well-furnished rooms that one entered with surprise from the dingy of Fitzroy Square. He was a member of two of the more serious clubs, but used them scarcely twice a year. His time he employed in the Bloomsbury and Marylebone fashion—as an aimless intellectual. It is a common type ; the elder Oxford or Cambridge that has never grown out of its third year. In the course of a lifetime they write one novel or one volume of poems or of essays, and for the rest they write appreciations of obscure writers for obscure papers that don't pay. They

are to be recognised by their somewhat pathetic air of superiority and distinction. They have the outward appearance that the popular imagination gives to the great creative artists, only no creative artist is ever half so distinguished in appearance as these translators and reviewers and art critics. Trink had not written a novel, but he did write metallic studies for all sorts of hole-and-corner Reviews ; and all the time he was doing it he affected to despise himself for doing it and to despise the breed with whom he mixed. He attended all their clique and coterie gatherings—teas, dinners, Bloomsbury salons, private views—and took part in all the frugal follies of the Cheyne Walk Bohemia. You saw him, as they say, everywhere. Yet, at all these affairs, though he looked younger than most of the crowd, he had

always the attitude of the amused grown-up overlooking the antics of the nursery. I can't think how even their pallid wits didn't perceive that embodied sneer at them and their doings.

Although not physically strong he had immense vitality, which he exhibited in long night walks through London. This was a habit which I shared with him and which, begun in childhood, gave me my peculiar and comprehensive knowledge of the hinterland of this continent of London. I believe that it was on one of these night wanderings that we first really met, though there must have been a perfunctory introduction in somebody's flat. Knowing that I was an early riser, he would sometimes, at the end of one of these rambles, knock me up at half-past seven for breakfast, and then go to sleep on my settee. Glad

as I always was to have his company, he was a difficult guest. He had a disorderly mind and Japanese ideas of time: both very common traits in Bloomsbury. A promise to call one evening about seven meant an appearance at any time between six and midnight. A "look-in" often meant that he would stay for four or five hours, and an arrangement to dine and spend the evening often meant that he would look-in for ten minutes and then abruptly disappear without a word about dinner. He had a habit of using in casual conversation what is called bad language—a certain sign of uneasy minds—and his talk was constantly agitated with purposeless use of "blasted," and "bloody" and "bastard." In all other matters he was gentle and thoughtful. He would bring charming and unexpected gifts. He



would do tiresome services for us. (Although he was only ten years beyond my age he had come to call us The Children, and we had come, facetiously, to call him Uncle Caractacus.) He would spend days of hunting through second-hand bookshops in distant quarters to find a particular book for me or verify a passage. He would not, as they say, do anything for anybody, but for a few people his time and labour and influence were available in full measure. He was so kind of spirit, so generous of affection, that sometimes I thought that his melancholy arose from a yearning to love and be loved. At other times this would be contradicted by his lofty self-sufficiency.

And that, I think, is all I can tell you about him. He eludes me on paper as he eluded me in life. So with this light



sketch I pass on to the real matter of this story—to his friends, the Roakes ; for it was by his friendship with them that I was brought into contact with horror.

Another of our points in common was a wide range of friendships. Most men find their acquaintance among their own "sort" or their own "set," and never adventure beyond people of like education, like tastes, and like social circumstances. I have never been able to do that, nor had Trink. We made our friends wherever we found them, and we found them in queer places. An assembly of all our friends at one meeting in our rooms would have surprised (and dismayed) those of them who knew us only as writers in such-and-such circumstances. I had, of course, a number of close friends among fellow-authors and among

musicians, but my most intimate friend at that time, who knew more about me than any other creature, was an old fellow who worked as an accountant in some commercial office. Another was a man who kept a little beer-house in Walworth. He was an ardent and vocal disciple of Madame Blavatsky, and devoted his spare time to original research on the lost Atlantis. Another was a music-hall artist of the slap-stick kind. Another was an old seaman of the sailing days who helped me in my curio collection, and gave free and markedly accurate criticism of my books. Trink's closest and peculiar friend was a shop-keeper ; a man who kept what is called a " general " shop at the northern end of Great Talleyrand Street.

Despite my own assorted friendships, I could never quite understand *this* friend-

ship, for the man had no oddities, no character, no corner where he even grazed the amused observation of Trink. It may have been, of course—and this fact explains many ill-assorted friendships—that they liked the same kind of funny story, or walked at the same pace in the streets. I don't know. Friendships *are* bound by slender things like that. Or it may have been—and I think this is what it was—that they were bound by love. I am sure there was more in it than mere liking of each other's talk and company, for Trink, being what he was, could have found no pleasure in the pale copy-book talk of Horace Roake. I thought I could perceive on either side an essence or aura of devotion, and if the devotion were at all stronger on one side, it was on the side of the cultivated man of brains rather than the tired, brainless

shop-keeper. I spent many evenings in their company, either at Trink's flat or in the shop-parlour, and I noted their content in long silences, when they merely sat together and smoked, and their quick, voiceless greeting when they met. Trink seemed to be happier in Roake's shabby room than anywhere. *Why* was one of his mysteries.

Although the public spoke of Roake's shop as a General Shop, he did not himself recognise that style. There are traditions in these matters. In trade-lists there are no drapers, or milkmen, or greengrocers, or ironmongers. The man we style milkman styles himself dairyman, though he may never have seen a dairy. The greengrocer is a pea and potato salesman. The bookmaker is a commission agent. Drapers and ironmongers are haberdashers and



dealers in hardware. The butcher is a purveyor of meat, the publican a licensed victualler. So Mr. Roake, who kept no pastas or Chianti, no Bolognas or garlic, styled himself Italian warehouseman. His shop stood, as I say, at the northern end of Great Talleyrand Street, between Woburn Place and Gray's Inn Road.

This is a district of long, meaningless streets and disinherited houses. Once, these houses were the homes of the prosperous; to-day they have only faded memories, and at night their faces are mournful and evocative. They have had their radiant moments and their moments of dread. They have known love and joy, hate and lust, greed, theft, birth, quiet death or death by midnight murder. But now fashion and prosperity have turned their backs upon them, and their walls

enclose no stronger urge than furtive and shabby commerce. They lie, these streets and houses, in an uneasy coma, oppressed by a miasma of the second-hand and the outmoded—second-hand shops, second-hand goods, second-hand lodgings, filled with second-hand furniture, and used by second-hand people breathing second-hand denatured air. They have not the cheerful acquiescence of the poor who have always been poor, but the craven chill of the "come-down." They live in misery, and even the misery is of meagre quality.

Great Talleyrand Street is one of these many meaningless streets, and when Mr. Roake set up his shop here, he blunderingly chose the apt setting for himself and his family. They belonged there. They were typical of a thousand decent, hard-working, but stagnant families of our cities.



For four generations the family had not moved its social level. A faint desire to rise they may have had, but rising means adventure, and they feared adventure. On the wife's side and the husband's side the strain was the same—luke-warm and lackadaisical. There they had stood, these many years, like rootless twigs in the waste patch between the stones and the pastures ; and there, since the only alternative was risk and struggle, they were content to stand. Roake himself, if I saw him truly, had the instincts of the aristocrat hidden in the habits of the peasant. One of life's misfits. He had the fine feature and clear eye of that type, but though he looked like what is called a gentleman, nobody would have mistaken him for one. His refinement of feature and manner came really, not from the breeding of pure strains,

but from under-nourishment in childhood. He had a mind of wide, if aimless, interests, and a certain rough-and-ready mental culture acquired in middle age by miscellaneous reading.

His wife was largely of his sort, but without the culture. Her life had been a life of pain and trial, and it had taught her nothing. Her large, soft face was expressionless. The thousand experiences of life had left not even a finger-print there, and she still received the disappointments and blows of fortune with indignation and querulous collapse.

There were two boys and a girl. The girl had something of her father's physical refinement. Her head and face were beautiful ; so beautiful that people turned to glance at her as she passed in the streets. Her manners and voice were—well, dread-

ful. She would often respond to those admiring glances by putting out her tongue. She was wholly unconscious of her beauty, not because she was less vain than her sex, but because her beauty was not to her own taste. She admired and envied girls of florid complexion and large blue eyes and masses of hair and dimpled mouths—chocolate-box beauties—and her own beauty was a glorious gift thrown to the dogs. To see that grave dark head and those deep-pool Madonna eyes set against those sprawling manners and graceless talk gave one a shudder. It was like seeing a Sung vase set in the middle of a Woolworth Store.

The two boys were two clods. They lived their lives in a kind of cloud of eating, working and sleeping. They asked no more of the world than one long hebetude. One might say that they saw life as nothing

but a programme of getting up, going to work, working, eating, going to bed. Only it wouldn't be true. They saw life no more than a three-months' old baby sees life. They were like millions of their fellow-organisms, deaf, dumb, torpid and myopic.

These were the people Trink had chosen as friends, and by all of them he was, not adored, for they were incapable of that, but liked to the fullest extent of their liking. He was their honoured guest, and on his side he gave to all of them affection and respect. As citizens they were entitled to respect, and they received it not only from him but from their neighbours. They had the agreeably willing shop-manners that customers like, and they maintained a constant goodwill. The two boys worked together in a boot and shoe factory, and the shop was run by Mr. and



Mrs. Roake and the girl, Olive. Olive knew enough about the business to do her bit without any mental strain, and she had a flow of smiles and empty chatter that in such a shop was useful. Among the younger males of the district she was more than popular, and I believe a number of them, cynical little devils though they liked to appear, had sleepless nights because of her.

These General Shops—often spoken of as “little gold-mines”—are usually set, like this one, in side-streets. It is by their isolated setting that they flourish. The main streets are not their territory, and such a shop in a main street would certainly fail, for these streets hold branches of the multiple stores as well as shops devoted singly to this or that household necessity. Your successful General Shop, then, chooses a situation as far from



competition as possible, but in the centre of a thicket of houses. In that situation it wins its prosperity from the housewife's slips of memory. She arrives home from her High Street shopping, and finds that she has forgotten salt or custard-powder or bacon, and to save a mile walk she sends one of the children to the General Shop. It is for this that it exists ; not for regular supply but as convenience in emergency. An unexpected visitor arrives ; some extra relish is wanted to dress the meal. Again the General Shop, which is a miniature Selfridge, is her resource. Unhampered by other shops and encircled by hundreds of forgetful households, the well-conducted General is certain of success, and many of these shops have a weekly turnover, made up of pennyworths of this and ounces of that, near two hundred pounds.

So the Roakes were doing well. Indeed, they were very comfortable and could have been more than comfortable ; but they were so inept, and knew so little of the art of useful spending, that their profits showed little result in the home. If they could not be given the positive description of a happy family, at least they lived in that sluggish sympathy which characters only faintly aware of themselves give each other ; and that was the feeling of the home—lymphatic and never *quite*. The wireless set worked, but it was never in perfect tone. The sitting-room fire would light, but only after it had been coaxed by those who knew its “ways.” The hot water in the bathroom was never more than very warm. The flowers in the back-garden were never completely and unmistakably blossoms. The shop-door

would shut, but only after three sharp pressures—the third a bad-tempered one. They bought expensive and warranted clocks, and the clocks took the note of the family, and were never “right.” New and better pieces of furniture were frequently bought for the sitting-room, but it never succeeded in looking furnished. The colours of the room did not harmonise, nor did they scream. They made a grievous wail. Going one step beyond a good workman’s dwelling, this home stopped short of even the poorest suburban villa. Just like its owners. If you saw the house, you could imagine the family, and if you met the family, you could imagine the house.

Hardly a family, one would think, marked out for tragedy, or even for disaster ; yet it was upon these lustreless,

half-living people that a blind fury of annihilation rushed from nowhere and fell, whirling them from obscurity and fixing their names and habits in the scarlet immortality of the Talleyrand Street Shop Murder.

It was about the time when those gangs called "The Boys" were getting too cocksure of their invulnerability, and were extending their attentions from rival gangs and publicans to the general public, that the catastrophe came by which Stephen Trink lost his one close friend. Beginning with sub-Post Offices, the gangs passed to the little isolated shops. From all parts of London came reports of raids on these shops. The approach was almost a formula. "Give us a coupler quid. Come on," or "We want a fiver. Quick. Gonna 'and over or gonna 'ave yer place smashed



up?" Given that alternative the little shopkeeper could do nothing but pay. He *might* have refused, and have had his place smashed up, and he might have been lucky enough to get the police along in time to catch two or three of the gang and get them six months or twelve months each. But that wouldn't have hurt *them*, since their brutal and perilous ways of life make them utterly fearless; and he would still be left with a smashed shop, pounds'-worth of damaged and unsaleable goods, the loss of three or four days' custom during repairs, and no hope of compensation from anybody. So, as a matter of common-sense, he first paid up, and then reported the matter to the police; and serious citizens took up his grievance, and wrote to the papers and asked what we supported a police force for, and was this the so-called



twentieth century, and how long would the Home Office tolerate, etc., etc.

Then, sharply on top of a dozen of these shop-raids, came the murder of the Roakes.

### III

Marvellous and impenetrable is the potency of words. By the measure and tone of certain syllables people are moved this way or that, they know not how ; nor can those orators or poets who work upon them through these rhythms analyse the power by which they work. As numbers of illustrious men could not have lived the histories they did live, had they borne other names than those we know them by, so certain ideas press more profoundly upon our minds by the weight of the words in which man has clothed them.

There is a harmony between these words and their master-ideas, as between men's lives and their names : a poetic justice. You have the faint spirit-echo of *Shelley* :

the cold Englishness of *Shakespeare*; the homespun strength of *Bunyan*; the massy crags of *Ludwig van Beethoven*. Speak the word *Mozart* and the word *Wagner*, and you perceive the personal essence of either man's work. Hector Berlioz could not have pursued his high-fevered career under the name of Georges Jourdain. Nathaniel Hawthorne would not have written the spectral prose he did write had his name been Harry Robinson. Frederic Chopin could not have written his Preludes under the name of Jules Burgomaster. Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon Buonaparte, Charlemagne, Chateaubriand—the syllables of those names are steeped in a distillation of essential hues by which the characters and complexions of their bearers were fore-ordained. And so with ideas; and so, particularly, with that idea for which our

sign and sound is MURDER. It could not have been more aptly named. It carries a shade and tone not wholly due to our association of it with the fact for which it is the graph. It could not represent an act of courtesy or a dinner-table or a Spring flower. There is dread and profundity in its very cadence. You may cry aloud ; “ Jones has *killed* John Brown ! ” and the message carries nothing of that echo from the dark corridors of the soul that arises against our inner ears with the utterance of the word MURDER.

Now, by long association, murder is linked in our minds with midnight, or at least, with dark ; and these two conceptions of the cloaked side of nature combine in dreadfulness to make deeper dread. Again, poetic justice. But harmonious combinations of dreadfulness, though they

intensify each other, are dreadfulness only, and are therefore less potent to pluck at the heart than dreadfulness in discord with its setting ; for *there* comes in the monstrous. Rape of womanhood is dreadful but understandable. Rape of childhood goes beyond the dreadful into depths that the mind recoils from sounding. Murder at midnight, though it will shock as it has shocked through centuries of civilisation, is a shock in its apt setting. But murder in sunlight is a thought that freezes and appals. It bares our souls to the satanic shudder of blood on primroses.

One can catch, then, the bitter savour of a certain moment of a sunny afternoon in Great Talleyrand Street. From the few horrified words of a neighbour I am able to reconstruct the whole scene.



## IV

It was just after three o'clock of a September afternoon—a September of unusual heat; hotter than the summer had been. The heat made a blanket over the city, and in the side-streets life was in arrest, bound in slumber and steam and dust. In Great Talleyrand Street carts and cars stood outside shops and houses as though they would never move again. Even the shops had half-closed their eyes. Errand boys and workless labourers lounged or lay near the shops, sharing jealously every yard of the shade afforded by the shop-blinds. The faded Regency houses stewed and threw up a frowst. Through its dun length, from its beginning near Gray's Inn to its nebulous end

somewhere in St. Pancras, the heat played in a fetid shimmer and shrouded either end in an illusion of infinity. The gritty odours of vegetable stalls, mixed with the acrid fumes of the cast-off-clothes shops, were drawn up in the sun's path to float in the air and fret the noses of the loungers. The ice-cream cart, zoned with the Italian colours, made a cool centre for the idle young. A woman was offering chrysanthemums from a barrow piled high with that flower. Her barrow and her apron made a patch of living gold against the parched brown of the street.

Then, into this purring hour, came a figure and a voice. From the upper end of the street it came, crying one word ; and the blunt syllables of that word went through the heat and dust, and struck the ears of those within hearing with the impact

of cold iron. The street did not stir into life. It exploded.

Those nearest scrambled up, crying—not saying ; such is the power of that word that it will always be answered with a cry—crying : “ Where ? Where ? ” “ In there—there—three-ninety-two.” And the man ran on to Tenterden Street, still crying, “ Murder ! ” and those who had heard the word ran in a trail to number 392.

The shop with its battling odours of bacon, cheese, paraffin, spice, biscuits, bread, pickles, was empty. The runners looked beyond it. A small door led from the shop to the back-parlour. The upper half of the door was of glass, and this half was veiled by a soiled lace curtain. Its purpose was to screen the folk in the parlour—where they sat at intervals between trade rushes—from the eyes of

customers, while those in the parlour could, by the greater light of the shop, see all comers. But since the curtain served a purely workaday office—the private sitting-room was upstairs—it had been allowed to over-serve its time, and frequent washings had left it with so many holes that its purpose was defeated. People in the shop could, by those holes, see straight and clearly into the parlour ; could see the little desk with account-books and bills, and could often see the cash-box and hear the rattle of accountancy. It was proved by experiment that a man on the threshold of the shop could, without peering, see what was going on in the shop-parlour.

The leaders of the crowd looked hastily about the shop and behind the two small counters ; then, through those holes, they



had the first glimpse of what they had come to see.

The sun was at the back. It shone through the garden window, and made a blurred shaft of dancing motes across the worn carpet and across the bloody body of Horace Roake. He lay beside his desk. The back of his head was cleanly broken. By the door leading to the inner passage lay the body of Mrs. Roake. She lay with hands up, as though praying. Her head was flung violently back, disjointed. Of the two boys, who had been spending the last day of their holidays at home, the younger, Bert, lay in a corner by the window, almost in a sitting posture. His head hung horridly sideways, showing a dark suffusion under the left ear. The leaders looked and saw ; then someone said "The girl!" They pulled open



the door leading to passage and kitchen. In the sun-flushed passage lay the twisted body of Olive Roake. Her head, too, was thrown back in contortion. One glance at the dark excoriations on her neck told them how she had met her death. Three glances told them of the dreadful group that must have made entrance here : one to kill with a knife, one with a blow, and one to strangle with the hands.

For some seconds those inside could not speak ; but as the crowd from the street pushed into the shop, and those in the shop were pushed into the parlour, those inside turned to push them back ; and one of them, finding voice, cried uselessly, as is the way in dark moments : “ Why ? Why all this—these nice people—just for a pound or two ? It’s—it’s *unnecessary* ! ”

He was right, and this was felt more

strongly when it was found that this thing had not been done for a pound or two. The desk was locked, and the cash-box and the two tills in the shop were intact. Clearly this was not haphazard killing for robbery. There was a grotesquerie about the scene that hinted at more than killing: an afterthought of the devilish. These people, who had led their ignoble but decent lives in ignoble back streets, were made still more ignoble in death. The battered head of Roake, the crumpled bulk of Mrs. Roake, the macabre mutilation of the gracious symmetry of youth and maidenhood, were more than death. Not only were they dead, but the peace that touches the most ugly and malign to dignity, the one moment of majesty that is granted at last to us all, was denied them. The temple of the

Holy Ghost was riven and shamed and left in the derisive aspect of a dead cat in a gutter.

So they lay in the floating sunshine of that afternoon, and so the crowd stood and stared down at them until the police came. Who had done this thing? Where were they? How did they do it in an open shop? How did they get away?

Then someone who knew the family cried, "Where's Artie?" And some went upstairs and some went into the little garden. But all that they found was an open bedroom window and signs of a flight. No Artie.

## V

It was between three o'clock and half-past of the day when I had given myself that nasty cut that Trink made one of his "drop-in" calls. I was accustomed to these calls. He would come in, potter about, turn over any new books or periodicals I had, make a few remarks about nothing, disturb the atmosphere generally, and then slide away. But this afternoon he didn't disturb the atmosphere. He seemed lighter and brighter than usual. Something of that morning mood that I had seen in him seemed to be still with him. Tired and pale he certainly was—the result of his night-walk, I guessed—but there was a serenity about him that was both new and pleasing. For almost the



first time I felt fully at ease with him ; no longer conscious of the something that I had never been able to name. In that quarter of an hour I seemed to be nearer to him and to know him better than I had ever known him. To put it into a crude colloquialism, he seemed *more human*. He stayed but a short time, not fidgeting, but sitting restfully on the settee in that complete ease that one knows after long physical exercise. I remarked on this. I told him that I had seen him from my window, bouncing through the square, and told him that the bouncing and his present mood proved that plenty of exercise was what he needed, and that he would probably find, as George Borrow found, that it was a potent agent for the conquest of accidie—or, I added, liver. He smiled ; dismissed the diagnosis of his trouble, and



soon afterwards went, or, rather, faded away, so that when I resumed work I was barely certain that he had been with me at all.

About an hour later I became aware that I was disturbed, and when, half-consciously and still at work, I tried to analyse the disturbance, I located it as something coming from the street ; a sound that came at first from below the afternoon din, then rose to its level and spilled over it. It was the cry of newspaper boys. Now the ear of the born Londoner is so adjusted that it can isolate street sounds from each other and perceive any dislocation or fine distinction from the normal ; and although I was still concentrated on my work, and could not hear a word the boys were crying, my ear told me of a dire intonation that did not belong to

Winners and S.P. Before I even listened to the intonation I knew that something horrible had happened.

As my flat is three floors up (no lift) I did not send out for a paper, but I rang up a friend on the *Evening Mercury*, and asked what the big story was. He gave me the story so far as it had then come in.

After the first shock, my thought was of what it would mean to Trink. Terrible as the fate of that family was, they meant little to me, and I could only feel for them the detached and fleeting pity that we feel at any reported disaster. For you will have noted, as a kink of human nature, that nobody ever does feel sympathy for a murdered man. All our interest—yes, and a perverse, half-guilty sympathy—is on the murderer. But for Trink, their friend, it would be a blow, and a keener

blow since it came with such ghastly irony on top of his happy, swinging mood of that day. He had just, it seemed, found some respite from his customary gloom, only to be brutally flung back into it, and deeper. I thought at first of going round to him, and then I thought not. He would want no intruders. It is the instinct of those in pain, physical or mental, to hide, for pain is as great a social offence as poverty, and the cruellest insult you can make to the suffering, the crown of thorns on their suffering, is to recognise their suffering and offer them sympathy. So I decided to wait until he came in.

Meantime, the papers were publishing rush extras, and as the news had withdrawn me from work, and I could not return to it, I went out and bought the three evening papers, and sat in a tea-shop reading them.

There was no doubt that the affair, following on the large publicity and discussion given to the shop-raids, had stirred the press and alarmed the public. I saw it on the faces of the home-going crowd and heard it reflected in the casual remarks of stranger to stranger in the tea-shop and around the 'buses. All that evening and night the word Murder beat and fluttered about the streets and alleys and suburban avenues, and wherever it brushed it left a smear of disquiet. Accustomed as London is to murder, and lightly, even flippantly as it takes all disturbances, the details of this one moved them, for clearly it was no ordinary murder of anger or revenge, or for the removal of inconvenient people for gain. How could these little people have offended? Who would want them out of the way? If it was the work



of "The Boys," it might be anybody's turn next. If it wasn't the work of "The Boys," then, said the press, it must have been the work of wandering lunatics of gorilla's strength and ferocity. And if they were loose, nobody would be safe. Private houses and people in the streets would be wholly at the mercy of such fearless and furious creatures as these appeared to be. In the meantime, they *were* loose ; even now, perhaps, prowling about and contemplating another stroke ; sitting by your side in train or 'bus, or marking your home or shop for their next visit. They were loose, and while they were loose they spread their dreadful essence as no artist or prophet can hope to spread *his*. Scores of mothers from the streets about Talleyrand Street, hearing the news and seizing on the Press conjecture of



wandering madmen, ran to schools in the district to meet their children. They were always aware of peril from the filth that hovers about playground gates ; to-day they were made aware of a more material and annihilating peril.

Through all the thousand little streets of the near and far suburbs went the howl of the newsboy, and its virulent accents went tingling through the nerves of happy households. To people sitting late in their gardens, veiled from the world, came at twilight a sudden trembling and sweeping of the veil as the wandering Chorus stained the summer night with : *Shawking Murd' 'n Blooms-bree—' Pur !' London Fam'ly Mur-der—' purr' !* It broke into the bedrooms of wakeful children, and into the study of the scholar, and into the sick-room and across quiet supper-tables

and wherever it fell it left a wound. The Press, having given the wound, went on to probe and exacerbate it with the minutiae of horror ; ending with the disturbing advice to householders to see to their bolts and fastenings that night. It was the " splash " story of the day, and each paper had a narrative from neighbours and from those who were near the shop at the time of the crime's discovery. At late evening the story was this.

Artie Roake had been quickly found and interviewed. He frankly explained his absence by the regrettable fact that he had run away. Some information he was able to give, but none that in any way helped the search for the murderers.

As that day was the last day of his holidays, he had, he said, been taking things easy, and after the mid-day dinner

had gone upstairs to lie down. He left his brother in the garden. His father and sister were in the shop parlour, and his mother was in the shop. From two o'clock to five o'clock was a slack time with them. Most of the business came before twelve or from five o'clock to closing time ; the afternoon brought mere straggles of custom. He remembered lying down on his bed, with coat and waistcoat off, and remembered nothing more until he suddenly awoke, and found himself, he said, all of a sweat. His head and hands were quite wet. He jumped up from the bed and stood uncertainly for a few moments, thinking he was going to be ill. And well he might have been ill, seeing what foul force was then sweeping through the air of that little house. Out of the sunlight something from the neglected corners of hell had

come creeping upon it, to charge its rooms with poison and to fire it with the black lightning of sudden death. At the moment he awoke this creeping corruption must then have been in the house, and in its presence not the thickest and most wooden organism could have slept ; for by some old sense of forest forefathers we are made aware of such presences. We can perceive evil in our neighbourhood through every channel of perception ; can even *see* it through the skin. The potency of its vapours, then, must have worked upon the skin and the senses of this lad, as the potency of the unseen reptile works upon the nerves of birds, and he awoke because an alien and threatening presence had called him to awake. It must have been that, and not a cry or a blow, that awoke him, because



he said that, during the few seconds when he stood half-awake and sweating, he heard his mother's voice in a conversational murmur. It was some seconds after *that* that the sweat froze on his face at the sound of his father's voice in three plodding syllables—"Oh . . . my . . . God!"—and then of a noise such as a coalman makes when he drops an empty sack on the pavement. And then, almost simultaneously with the sack sound, he heard a little squeak that ended in a gurgle; and over-riding the gurgle one "Oh!" of horror—his mother's voice—and another soft thud; and before the thud, an "Oh!" of surprise from his brother, and soft, choking tones of terror saying "No—no—no!" And then silence. And then he heard two sharp clicks, as of opening and shutting a door; and then a moment's pause;



and then swift feet on the stairs. Had he had the courage to go down on his father's first cry, his courage, one may guess, would have been wasted. Hands would have been waiting for him, and he too would have ended on a gurgle. But if he had had the courage to wait before he fled until the figure or figures on the stairs had come high enough to give him one glimpse, he might have had a clue to one of the men that would have helped the police to the others. But he didn't wait. He bolted. He offered the reporters no feeble excuse of going to raise the alarm or get help. He said that those sounds and the sort of feeling in the house so affected him with their hint of some unseen horror that he didn't think of anybody or anything ; only of getting out. Peering from his door, he said, just as the

sound of the feet came, he could see part of the staircase, and the sunlight through the glazed door between shop-passage and garden threw a shadow, or it might have been two shadows, half-way up the stairs. He could hear heavy panting. In the moment of his looking, this shadow began to swell and to move. He saw no more. In awkward phrases (so one of the reports stated) he tried to say that he felt in that shadow something more than assault ending in killing ; he felt something horrible. From later information I understood this. It *was* horrible ; so horrible that even this vegetable soul had responded to it. So, driven by he knew not what, and made, for the first time in his life, to hurry, he turned from that house of dusty sunshine and death to the open world of sky and shops and people. He bolted through the

upper window and over the backyard, and did not stop or call for help until he was four streets away ; at which point the cry of Murder led to a pursuit and capture of him.

He made his confession sadly but without shame. He *knew*, he said, that it was all over ; that he could be of no use ; that they were all dead. But when they pressed him *how* he knew, he relapsed from that moment of assertion into his customary cow-like thickness, and they could get no more from him than a mechanical, " I dunno. I just knew. Like as though I'd seen it."

He was detained by the police for further questioning, and it appeared later that the questioning had been severe. But though there was at first an edge of official and public suspicion of him, he

was able to satisfy the police that he knew nothing, and was allowed to go home to an uncle's.

No weapons were found, no fingerprints, no useful footprints. Nor had any suspicious characters been seen hanging about ; at least, none markedly suspicious to the district ; for in these misty byways queer characters of a sort were a regular feature, and its houses were accustomed at all hours of day and night to receiving furtive strangers. Taking it, at first sight, as gang work, the police, it was said, were pursuing enquiries in that direction, which meant that for the next few days all known members of North London and West End gangs were rounded up and harried out of their wits by detentions, questionings and shadowings. Already, at that early hour, reports had come in of the detention of



unpleasant characters at points on the roads from London—Highgate, Ealing, Tooting. Communication had been made with all lunatic asylums in and near London, but none could report any absentees. All those on the police list who might have been concerned in it—the shop and till specialists—were being visited and questioned, and many, knowing that they would be visited anyway, were voluntarily coming in to give satisfactory accounts of themselves.

One bright "special" had put his mind to the case and lighted the darkness of the police with a possible culprit. He learned that Horace Roake was 55, and from his study of "our medical correspondent" he knew that 55 was the male climacteric, the age when men of formerly sober life—particularly quiet men of

Roake's type—go off the rails into all sorts of jungles of unnamable adventure. Was it not worth asking, he said, whether Mr. Roake might not have been doing badly in business, and being at that age had . . . ? But a rival paper, in a later issue, took this torch and extinguished it by bank evidence that Roake was not doing badly in business, and by private police-surgeon information that neither Roake nor any other of the victims could possibly have died by suicide.

There, that evening, it was left. Next morning there were further details, but nothing pointing towards an arrest. From some of these details it was clear that the affair, if planned at all, had been most cunningly planned and timed, and swiftly done ; for the people were seen alive a minute and a half before the cry of

Murder had been raised. The more likely conjecture, though, was that it was the impulsive act of a wandering gang.

A woman volunteered that she had visited the shop just after three—about ten minutes after—and had been served by Mrs. Roake. Nobody else was in the shop. She left the shop and went a little way down the street to leave a message with a friend, and having left the message she re-passed the Roake's shop, and saw a man whom she did not closely notice standing at the counter rattling some coins and calling "Shop!" Her own home was twelve doors from the shop. She had scarcely opened and closed her door, was, indeed, still on the mat, setting down her shopping basket, when she heard the cry of Murder. In the immediate instant of silence following that cry she

heard a church clock strike the quarter past three, which meant that only three minutes had passed from the time of her being served by Mrs. Roake, and one minute from the time of her seeing the man.

Another statement came from a man whose house backed on to the Roakes.' He was on a night-shift at the docks, and went on at four o'clock. By daily use he knew exactly how to time himself to get there punctually from his home in Frostick Street; the time was fifty minutes; and he left home regularly at ten minutes past three. He was putting on his boots, he said, when, happening to glance through the window, he saw Mr. and Mrs. Roake in the shop-parlour doing—well, as he put it, clearly without any intent of flippancy, carrying-on and



canoodling. They must then have remembered that they were open to curious eyes, for they immediately moved away from the window into the darker part of the room. At half-past four the evening paper came into the docks, and he saw that the family had been discovered dead five minutes after he had seen this little husband-and-wife moment.

One of the morning papers gave me a particular irritation. There was a solemn youth named Osbert Freyne (recently down from Cambridge) who used to come into my place at odd times, though I never made him welcome. He used to sit and blither. Talk one could not call it, for his was not a talking voice. It was a blithering voice ; and he used to blither about " significant " novels that the Gang were talking about, and how Somebody,

who wrote for the *Evening Mercury*, had said that this or that novel came as a portent for the future of the English novel ; that its publication marked the most important moment of this century ; that this novel would change the *trend* of the modern novel and would fix the *hue* of the modern novel—and a lot of nonsense of that sort. Just what you'd expect an Osbert Freyne to blither. Until, in exasperation, I used to open a bottle of beer and tell him bluntly—though I didn't know him very well—that I was an intelligent man and that kind of bunk (but I used a harsher word than “ bunk ”) made me sick. I don't know why he continued to come, because I was always as rude to him as I can allow myself to be to anybody ; but he did come and he did meet Trink, and he knew of Trink's acquaintance with the Roakes.

Well, one of the papers had an appendix to its Talleyrand "story"—an appendix by this solemn youth. Like most of his unbalanced kind, though he affected to despise popular writing, he wasn't above making money out of it when he could. The fellow had had a talk (or blither) with Trink, and had sold it to the paper as an interview with "an intimate friend of the unfortunate family." The result was that Trink had been visited and questioned by the police on the family's history and habits and their friends, and other journalists had followed the police, and altogether the poor fellow's miserable day had been made additionally miserable.

I knew what he must be feeling about it, for I myself began to be moved by it, though quite unwarrantably. As I have said, it meant little more to me than an

item of news ; yet I passed those days in a positive disquiet. Beyond the fact of having known them, I had scarcely any interest in those people, yet whenever I thought about the affair I suffered a distinct chill, as though I personally were in some way touched by it ; an entirely unreasonable chill which I could not shake off because common-sense could not reach it.

Among the first to be examined were the witnesses who were in the street at the time the alarm was given. This again brought nothing useful ; indeed, the result was only confusion on confusion. Seventeen people who had been near the spot were asked—Who was the man who rushed from the shop crying Murder ? None of them knew him. They were then asked—What sort of man was he ? Not one could



make a clear answer. Eleven were so surprised that they didn't look at him. The other six—who, if they had looked at him, hadn't seen him but wouldn't admit it—gave six different descriptions. One saw a tall, firmly-built man with red face. One saw a short man in a mackintosh. One saw a man in shirt and trousers only—obviously a confusion with the fleeing boy, Artie. One saw a fat man in a grey suit and bowler hat. One saw a medium-sized man in cloth cap and the strapped corduroys of the navy. One saw a black man. Corncrake Street, a negro quarter, is quite near to Talleyrand Street, and as there were points in this murder that fitted with the strength and savagery of a drunken or drugged negro, or group of negroes, the police fastened on the last description and wasted hours in harassing

respectable jazz-musicians and dope-traffickers.

It seemed fairly certain, though, that the man who cried Murder could not have been the murderer, for two witnesses had seen members of the family alive within less than two minutes of the murders ; and one man could not have been responsible for that wholesale slaughter in that space of time. The man who ran out must have been the man who had been seen by the woman witness standing there and shouting " Shop ! " and, as that was only one minute before the alarm, clearly *he* could not have been the murderer. He had not come forward, but then, there might be many innocent explanations of that. He might have been a man of nervous type who had received such a shock from what he had seen that he

wished to avoid all association with the matter. Or he might have been a quiet, shy fellow who would hate to be mixed up in any sensational public affair. Having given the alarm, and having no useful information to offer beyond what the crowd saw for themselves, he might consider that he had done his duty.

Generally, it was felt that it must have been the work of a gang—either a gang of thieves who were disturbed by the alarm before they could get at the cash, or, as suggested, a gang of drunken or drugged negroes—and the gang must have entered from the back, or someone in the street would have noted them. It was the negro suggestion that caught the public, chiefly because it seemed obvious and because it afforded a pious opportunity of shaking what they liked to think was an

un-English crime on to those who were un-English. In talk around the streets the police were criticised for not concentrating on the negro quarter. It was all very well to say that all the negroes questioned had accounted for their movements. If the public were in the police's place, the public would know what to do ; and so on.

The evening papers of that day brought more news, but none of it led anywhere. More suspicious characters on the outskirts of London had been detained, and two men—one a soldier at Sheerness, the other a tramp at Gerrard's Cross—had given themselves up for the murder, only to be thrown out an hour later. People in the neighbourhood now began to remember strange and significant happenings centering on the Roakes, which they



hadn't remembered the day before. Queer visitors, letters by every post, sudden outgoings, late home-comings—all the scores of commonplace family happenings which, when isolated and focussed and limelit by tragedy and publicity, assume an air of the sinister and portentous. If Mrs. Roake had gone out in a new hat the day before they would have seen *that* as a possible clue.

Day by day the story mounted, and all fact that was thin was fortified by flagrant conjecture, and by "sidelights" and comparison with similar crimes.

The police were following a clue at Bristol. A broken and stained bicycle pump had been found behind the mangle in the scullery and was being examined by Home Office experts. Three of the leading Yard men had left London for a destination

unknown. The writer of an anonymous letter, received at Bow Street the day after the murders, was asked to communicate with any police-station under a pledge of the fullest protection from all consequences. The Flying Squad had spent a whole day combing the road from Stoke Newington to Waltham Cross. Watch was being kept at Gravesend, Queenboro', Harwich, Grimsby, Hull and Newcastle for two men, believed to be Norwegians. The police were anxious to get in touch with these men. Blandly and hopefully they invited these two men to visit the Yard. But despite these invitations, despite official rewards and newspaper rewards running into many hundreds of pounds, no outside help was secured, no "splits"—those ever-present helps in baffling crimes—came forward to give their pals away.

Then, at the end of the week, the Sunday papers had a plum. All these minor diversions were cancelled and the men called off. The new story was that the District Inspector, with a detachment of officers in an armoured police car, had left for Nottingham ; and the story was given out with such a note of assurance that the thing appeared to be settled. And it was. Press and public waited eagerly on the result of this expedition. And they waited. After two days, as the result of waiting, the Press was proudly silent on Nottingham. There was no report on the Nottingham expedition, but in its place a calm ignoring of it, as though it had never been. Nottingham was still on the map of England but it was out of the news. The public heard nothing. Not a word. Somewhere between London

and Nottingham the Great Talleyrand Murder Mystery faded away ; crept into the valley of undiscovered crimes, and dies as mysteriously as the Roake family had died.

Thereafter public and press interest declined. From being a " splash " story it came to an ordinary column ; then, from the main page it passed to the secondary news page ; then it fell to half a column, and at the end of three weeks it had no space at all. The mystery that had been the subject of talk in offices, shops, trains, restaurants and homes, was forgotten. The best brains had been at work upon it and had failed ; and although I, in common with other amateurs, had my theories about it, not one of them bore steady examination.

To-day I know the solution, but I did



not arrive at it by my own thought or by thought based upon the experts' labours. We were all looking for madmen, or, if we dismissed madmen, then for some possible motive ; and in looking for motives we were looking for the ordinary human motives that we could appreciate, and that appear again and again in murder. None of us thought of inventing a *new* motive ; and that was where the solution lay. It was not the experts, but Stephen Trink, the dabbler, who showed me where to look ; who took my eyes off a gang, and showed me how all this death and disaster and stretching of police wits could have been the work of two hands belonging to one man. He even pointed to the man.

## VI

It was about a month after the affair had died down that I found among the morning mail on my tea-tray a letter from Trink. It was dated from an hotel in the New Forest, and was an unusually long letter from one who scarcely ever addressed more than a post-card. And a queer letter. I read it in bed, and for some long time—an hour, I should think—I could not bring myself to get up and face the day. When at last I did, I found work impossible. All that day and night I was haunted by a spectre of forbidden knowledge, and I went perfunctorily about my occasions with a creeping of the flesh, as when one discovers a baby playing with a boiling kettle, or touches something furry in the

dark. I knew then what it was that the boy Artie was trying to say.

But as the letter requires no editing or pointing, I give it *verbatim*.

“ Dear T.B.,

“ As we haven't met for some time I thought you might like a word from Uncle Caractacus. I've been down here for a week or so among the pines, seeking a little open-air massage for jangled nerves. You understand. It was a dreadful business, and I didn't want to see anybody, especially friends. I'm here doing nothing and seeing nothing—just breathing and drowsing.

“ I suppose they've got no farther with it. Strange that the police, so astonishingly clever in making up really baffling and complicated cases, are so often beaten by a simple case. But you, as an artist, know

how often a subtle piece of work which the public imagine to have been achieved by laborious and delicate process, was in fact done with perfect ease ; and how often the simple piece of work has meant months of planning and revision. I don't know if you've thought about it at all, but it seems to me that they've been misled all along by that matter of time. They assumed that that little time, for such a business, must imply a gang. No sound reason why it should, though. As Samuel Nicks established an alibi by accomplishing the believed impossible—committing a crime at Gad's Hill, Kent, early one morning and being seen at York at seven o'clock the same evening, so this man deceived public opinion. The public of the seventeenth century held that it was not possible for a man to be in Kent in



the morning and at York in the evening ; all the horses in the kingdom couldn't carry him that distance in that time. Therefore, it hadn't been done, and Sam Nicks hadn't been in Kent that day. But it *was* done. And so here. Four murders by different means had been accomplished in a few seconds over a minute. Therefore, say the public (the experts, too), arguing from the general, it must have been the work of a gang. They were satisfied that no one man could do it, and if no one man could do it, then no one man *had* done it. But public opinion is always saying that It Can't Be Done, and is always eating its words. You and I know that what any one man can *conceive*, some other man can *do*. I can imagine that this could be the work of one man, and I'm satisfied that it *was* the work of one man.

It was done by the exception to the rule, and I'll show you how he could have done it, and how he got away. As to getting away, of course he got away by running away. If you say that a running man at such a moment would attract attention, well, we know that he did attract attention. He was clever enough to know that in successfully running away, it depends *how* you run. He covered his appearance and his running by drawing the whole street's attention to himself. He knew enough about things to know that his cry would blind everybody. They might be looking, but they wouldn't be seeing—as we know they weren't. All their senses would gather to reinforce the sense of hearing. As soon as he was round a corner he could slip his hat in his pocket and put on a cap. Nothing makes a sharper edge on the

memory, or more effectually changes a man's appearance, than the hat. Then he could fling his coat over his arm, and go back and join the crowd.

"The affair had to the public, as we know, the air of being the work of a brilliant and invincible gang of schemers, who weren't playing by any means their first stroke: or else of a gang of crafty madmen. It was this that increased its horror. But it was no planned affair, and no gang affair. It was the work of a man momentarily careless of results. Being careless, he made no mistakes. As often happens, he, the inexpert, achieved casually what trained minds arrive at step by step.

"Now as to *how*. Really very simple. The core of the mystery is this: he was a man of unbelievable swiftness of act and motion. That's all.

“ People don't seem to realise that taking human life is a very simple matter. They seem to think that it involves thought, planning, struggle and mess. Nothing of the kind. It can be done as easily as the slaughter of a rabbit—more easily than the slaughter of a hen. A pressure with two fingers on a certain spot, or one sharp flick on a point at the back of the neck, and the business is done. It's part of the irony that plays about the creature, Man, that the neck, which supports his noblest part, should be his weakest part. You could do it without fuss in the club, on top of the 'bus, at Lord's, or at the theatre, or in your own home or your victim's. You remember that morning when you were showing me your collection of Eastern weapons? Among them you had a case of Burmese poison-darts.



You took these out of their cylinder and showed them to me. I was leaning forward with my hands on your desk, and you were turning them about between finger and thumb. One minute movement of a minute muscle of your forefinger, and the point would have touched my hand, and Trink would have been out. Supposing you'd been not feeling very well—liverish—and my face or my voice had irritated you to the point of blind exasperation. A wonderful chance. Accidents often happen when things like that are being shown round. You may have seen the chance. If you did, only common good nature can have restrained you—supposing that you were irritated by me—as nothing but good nature restrains me from slapping a bald head in front of me at the theatre. One second would

have done it, where shooting and throat-cutting not only take time but often cause disorder and fuss, besides involving extravagant use of means. One stroke of a finger directed by a firm wrist achieves the result without any stress or display. Many people are killed by four or five stabs of a knife, or by a piece of lead shot from an instrument that has to be loaded, and in which a lever has to be released, causing a loud bang. Unnecessary, and possibly wasted. Because no result can be achieved unless that piece of lead goes to a certain spot. And there's nothing that that piece of lead can do that four fingers can't do. You could have six friends in your room looking over your curios, and with merely the movement of the arm that an orchestral conductor makes in directing a three-four bar, you

could, holding one of those Burmese darts, touch the hands of those friends. In five minutes you would have changed your warm gossipy room into a sepulchre. And yet people still think of murder as implying revolvers, knives, arsenic ; and murderers still take five minutes over throttling from the front with both hands, when two seconds with the side of one hand will do it from the back. It is because of this that the unintelligent conceive murder as terrific, demanding time and energy ; and still think that all murder must leave obvious traces of murder. Not at all. For every one murder that is known to be a murder, I am certain that six other people, who meet Accidental Death or are Found Drowned, lose their lives by murder.

“ This man, as I say, was swifter than most of us. He strolled into the shop.

Calling 'Shop!' he went to the parlour door. There he met Roake. One movement. Mrs. Roake would turn. Another movement. The girl was coming through the door leading to the passage. Two steps and another movement. The boy comes through the garden to the shop. A fourth movement. One movement with a knife on the back of Roake's head. One pressure with the thumb to Mrs. Roake. One movement with both hands to the girl. One sharp touch on the boy's neck. And the foul thing was done in a matter of seconds. A movement overhead. The other boy stirring. He waits for him to come down. The boy doesn't come. He hears the noise of his flight. Then he makes his own by running full tilt into the faces of a score of people and crying his crime.



“ That’s all.

“ Looking over this, I’m afraid it reads as though I’m writing with levity. But I’m not. I’m just analysing the situation and the probable attitude of the man. The whole thing is too frightful for me to treat it as seriously as I naturally feel about it ; or, rather, in trying to treat it as a problem, I’ve forgotten that these poor people were my friends.

“ Now as to *why* any man not a natural criminal or lunatic should have created this horror of destruction—this isn’t going to be so easy. Here I’m on dangerous and delicate ground, and before I can present what looks to me like a reasonable explanation I must ask you to empty your mind of *your* reason and of all that knowledge of human nature on which people base their judgment of human motive and human

behaviour. It should never be said that 'people don't *do* these things' or that such and such a thing is contrary to human nature; because people do *anything* and are always going contrary to our accepted notions of human nature. You must see it as clearly as one sees a new scientific idea—without reference to past knowledge or belief. It means trespassing into the forbidden, though I think you've peeped into more secret corners of the mind than the ordinary man. Or not peeped, perhaps. I think you've always known without peeping.

"It's difficult to put the presentation of it into assured and assuring phrasing. But I'll try.

"What I offer is this. This man *had* a motive for this wanton slaughter, but not a motive that would pass with common

understanding. Neither hate nor lust nor the morbid vanity that sometimes leads stupid people to the committal of enormous crimes. Nothing of that sort. And he wasn't a madman without responsibility for his actions. He knew fully what he was doing and he did it deliberately. He committed more than a crime ; he committed a sin. And meant to. Most men think that sin is the ultimate depth to which men can sink from his gods ; but this man didn't sink. He rose, by sin, out of something fouler than sin. That something is the spirit of unexpressed, *potential* evil ; something that corrodes not only the soul of the man in whom it dwells, but the souls of men near him and the beautiful world about him. This evil doesn't always—indeed, seldom does—live in what we call wicked people. Almost

always in the good. In comparison with such people the wicked are healthy. For these people, the germ-carriers, are more dangerous to the soul of man than a million criminals or a thousand sinners. They can penetrate everywhere. We have no armour against their miasma. They *do* no evil, but they're little hives of evil. Just as some people can spread an infection without themselves taking the disease, so these good people can, without sinning, spread among the innocent the infection of sin. They lead stainless lives. Their talk is pure. Yet wherever they go they leave a grey trail that pollutes all that is noble and honest. They diffuse evil as some lonely places—themselves beautiful—diffuse evil. You must have met people of this sort—good people—and have been faintly conscious, after an hour of



their company, of some emanation that makes you want to open spiritual windows. Happy for them, poor creatures, if they can discover and prove themselves before death for what they are. Some do. For those who don't, who only discover the foulness of their souls after death, God knows what awaits them.

“There's something in these people. Some awful essence of the world's beginnings. Some possession that can only be cast out in one way—a dreadful way. Where it began one cannot say. Perhaps strange sins, projected in the cold hearts of creatures centuries-dead, projected but never given substance, take on a ghost-essence and wander through the hearts of men as cells of evil. And wander from heart to heart, poisoning as they go, until at last they come to life in a positive

sin, and, having lived, can die. Nobody knows. But that's my explanation of these people—they're possessed. Possessed by some radio-active essence of evil, and before they can be saved they must sin. Just as poison is necessary to some physical natures and, denied it, they die, so sin may be necessary to these spiritual natures. They must express and release that clotted evil, and they can no more be cleansed of it before it's expressed than a man can be cleansed of a fever before it's reached its climacteric. Once expressed, it can be met and punished and pardoned ; but abstract evil can't be met. Even God can't conquer Satan. There's nothing to conquer. Satan lives in these million wandering fragments of potential evil, and until that evil is crystallised in an act, all the powers of good are powerless.

“ Let’s suppose that this man was one of these, consciously possessed of this intangible essence of evil, conscious of it as a blight upon *him* and upon those about him ; tortured by it like a man with a snake in his bosom, and for many years fighting its desire for expression and release until the fight became unbearable. There’s only one way of escape for him—to sin and to sin deeply. Always he’s haunted by the temptation to sin. His whole life’s been clouded by visions and lures of unnamable sins, and by agonising combats to escape them. Always he fights this temptation, and so, continuing to shelter the evil, he gives it time to grow and to make his own emanations stronger. When his only real hope of conquering it lies in giving it life.

“ And then at last he yields. There

comes, one day, the eruptive, whirlwind moment of temptation, stronger than any he has known. All his powers of resistance go down in an avalanche. With a sigh of relief he yields. And suddenly, with the disappearance of resistance, and with the resolve to sin, he would find, I think, the serenity of resignation filling his whole being, and setting his pulse in tune with erring humanity. He would walk the streets with a lighter step than he has known since childhood. All his temptations would have been towards the foulest sin he could conceive, the lowest depth ; and at last, driven by the importunate fiend, it's this sin that he commits. It may be that he was led farther than he meant to go. He may have intended to murder only one, but in committing the one murder, his fiend broke out in full power, and



led him deeper and deeper into maniac slaughter. That's how it looks. But the thing was done, the sin committed, and in the Satanic moment he frees himself for ever from his fiend, not by binding it, but by releasing it. Like a long-embalmed body exposed to the air, it has one minute of life, and the next it crumbles into dust, and he is free.

“That's my theory. This man, without sin, would have died here and hereafter, for his soul didn't belong to him at all. Indeed, he was a man without a soul. Now he's a man with a stained soul which can be purified. The devil can do no more to him. He has seen himself as he is, on *this* earth, in time to prepare himself for his next stage. By that sin he can now, as a fulfilled and erring soul, work out his penance and his redemption.

“ I guess I’ve said enough. You may dismiss this as a far-fetched and ludicrous fancy. But it isn’t a fancy ; it’s a statement. You may say that no man could, under the most overwhelming temptation, do this appalling act of murdering, not an enemy, but a friend ; or, having done it, could live under its burden. I can’t argue with you as to what man can and can’t do. I only see what is done. It’s useless to tell me that this couldn’t have happened. I can only say that it did.

“ Whatever you may know as to the re-actions of humanity to this or that situation, *I* know that, after years of torment, I’m now, for the first time, at peace.

“ Yours,

“ S.T.”

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