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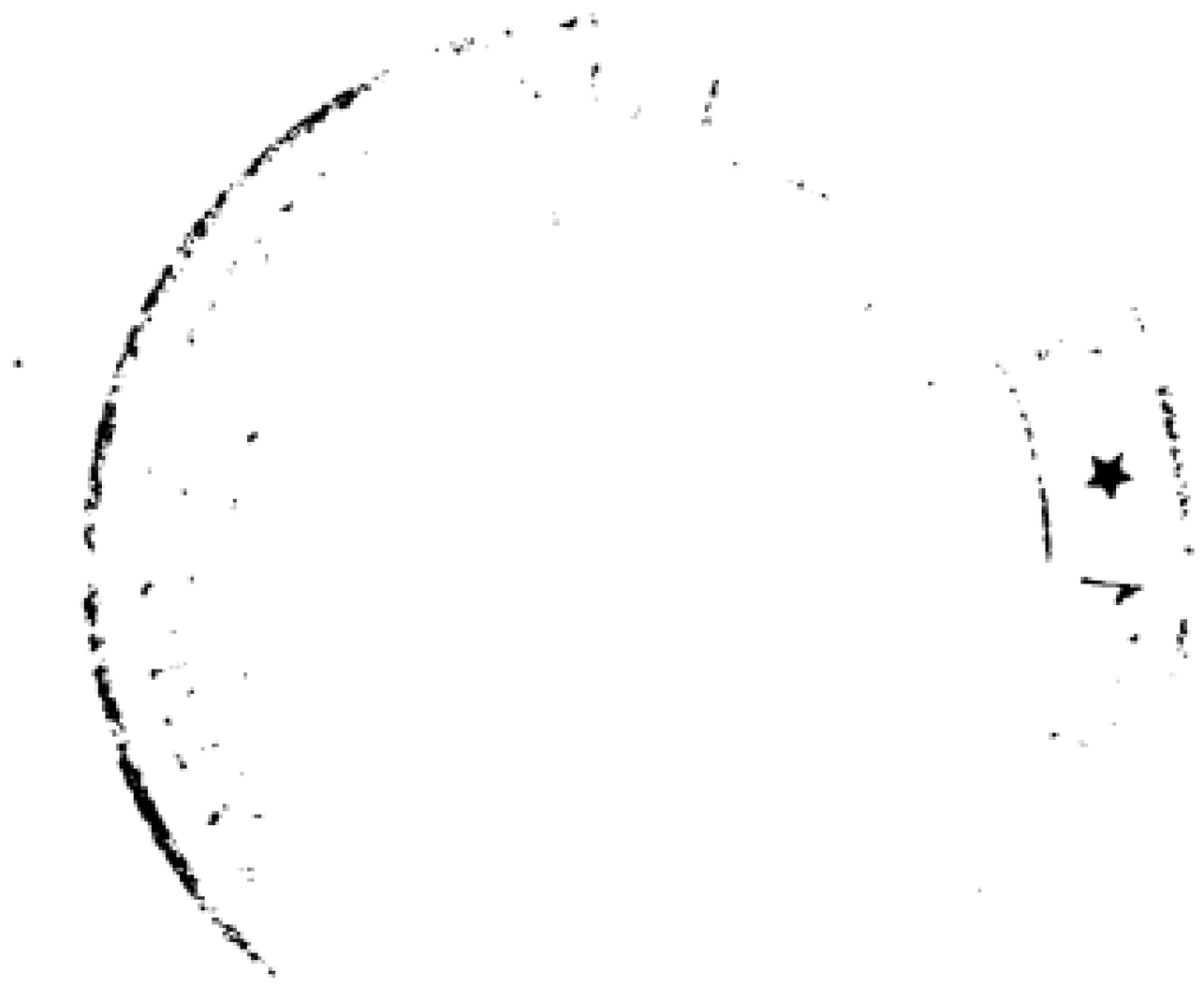

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**On the very day that the Rev. Samuel Wykeham complained, *"Nothing ever happens in Little Whippering"* the gentleman whom the villagers grew to call "the invisible man" moved into the Wilderness. This mysterious gentleman was to live indoors for two years, except at night, only to make his first public appearance with a sunburned face. And when he was so poor that he was starving he could still wash his hands in gold dust. Even in death he was mysterious, for he was found with his throat cut, his head shaved, and all the blood drained from his body. After that, the Vicar ceased mumbling about the dullness of Little Whippering.**

**Then George Crumbles was found hanged. Mr. Neptune Jones descended on the village and called the vicar's wife "a cow hippopotamus." Another murder occurred. And someone took to stealing hens with amazing regularity.**

**As far as Inspector Archibald Campbell of the C.I.D. was concerned, Whippering had developed into a minor Bedlam. But eventually the inspector was able to fit the gold bracelet, the dyed hair in the basin, the assassination of a dog, and the mystery of the beating drum, into a logical chain of events that led him unerringly in the direction of the murderer. And when he learned why O'Leary began tearing down the walls of the Wilderness a few days before the end of his sojourn there the inspector knew definitely that the final answer to his problem lay in Africa. Finally, in the Nigerian back-country, in one of the most dramatic and amazing scenes in mystery fiction, he brought to an end this startling case.**

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# THE CORPSE WITH THE SUNBURNED FACE

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## Books by

# C. ST. JOHN SPRIGG

THE CORPSE WITH THE SUNBURNED FACE

DEATH OF AN AIRMAN

THE PERFECT ALIBI

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SO POOR HE WAS STARVING
YET HE WASHED HIS HANDS IN GOLD DUST.
HE LIVED INDOORS FOR TWO YEARS
YET WHEN MURDERED HE WAS

# THE CORPSE WITH THE SUNBURNED FACE

BY C. ST. JOHN SPRIGG

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O. F. Butler
Bequest
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## *NOTE*

**Although the customs, history, and beliefs of the kingdom of Ashanti have been largely drawn on in depicting the kingdom of Balooma in the latter part of this book, the characters in this as in all other parts of the book are entirely fictitious, and their actions have no relation to the real history of that picturesque Confederacy.**

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# I

# LITTLE WHIPPERING

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# CHAPTER ONE

## *Miser Into Wilderness*

"I OUGHT to have been a Polar explorer," murmured the Rev. Samuel Wykeham, vicar of Little Whippering, in the County of Berkshire, as he slowly climbed the road that led to the Downs.

"Or an African missionary," he added as he breasted the slope, puffing a little. The vicar was a man of about fifty, with firm bronzed features, a scholar's stoop, and a short-sighted forward projection of his head.

"Nothing ever happens in Little Whippering," he finished irritably, murdering a dandelion with the thick end of his knobbly stick. He had an uneasy sensation that he had heard the complaint, or one like it before, but the occasion evaded his always unreliable memory.

At that moment the vicar was startled to hear screams of terror. A small boy shot down the hill, his head held low. Seeing the vicar's black legs in front of him, the child made a detour, without pausing to raise his head. But the Rev. Samuel's long arm shot out and arrested him. Then the vicar turned up the child's face. It was one of the Bundling boys, freckled little imps, but now the freckles had a peculiar mottled effect on the boy's pale face.

"Compose yourself, William! What is all this fuss about?"



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"The Invisible Man's come," panted the boy. "I seen him." He was trembling in the vicar's grasp.

"Now, now, William," said the vicar kindly. "Your story shows a complete lack of logic from its inception. If the man in question was invisible, how could you have seen him?" The vicar patted his curly head soothingly.

"All the same I seen him," insisted William. "Just like I saw him on the pickshers in Wantage, with great gloves on, and a cloth thing over his face."

"And where did you see this remarkable phenomenon?" asked the vicar, realizing now that the child had certainly been frightened by something concrete.

"It's the new chap at '*Wilderness*'," answered the boy. "I saw him getting out of Harry Thompson's car. All smuvvered up!"

The vicar laughed. "Really, William, I'm surprised at you! A boy of your age frightened because a gentleman wears a muffler. Perhaps he's got a bad cold; in any case it is quite chilly today, and I would blame no man for taking precautions if he had a catarrhal tendency!"

William wriggled sulkily at this rebuke. Feeling that he must somehow justify his terror, he added: "Oo. He had a great nose on him like an elephant, a foot long!"

The Rev. Samuel looked reprovingly at William, and the boy reddened under the look. "I fear you depart from veracity, William! You know what happens to little boys who are mendacious. Not—" went on the vicar dreamily, following the current of his thoughts, "that I believe in threatening children with hell-fire for comparatively innocent fibs. After all——" The vicar

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was recalled to reality again by the wriggles of his captive.

"I were hiding in the bushes," William blurted out, "and the chap saw me, and twisted my arm, and he said he'd split my belly up if he cotched me round there again!"

"Ha, ha! William Bundling!" said the vicar, "*Now* we feel solid ground beneath our feet. The truth was that you were detected in the act of espionage, and were very properly rebuked. Evidently the new tenant is a person with a sense of humour. But he did not allow for the literalness of the Bundling temperament. Well, well, the warning was perhaps all the more salutary for being taken in earnest. You can accept my word for it, William, that you are in no immediate peril of life or limb. But all the same, take the lesson to heart! Never be inquisitive, my dear boy. Never. Never!" The vicar released the boy, who was now grinning. The vicar always spoke to children in precisely the same tone and manner as he did to grown-ups. As a result they all liked him, but had only the vaguest idea of what he said to them. In this case William understood in a general sense that there was nothing to be alarmed about, and, soothed by the vicar's gentle murmur, he trotted quietly home. Meanwhile the vicar resumed his walk up the hill.

So the new tenant of the Wilderness had arrived! The Wilderness was an eyesore of a cottage, with a violent pink asbestos roof, standing a mile from the village itself, on the edge of the Downs. Little Whippering itself was a charming old-world village without a jarring note, carefully kept so by the Marions, who had owned—and lived in—Little Whippering, ever since written record ran.

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The Wilderness, however, had been built on land outside the Marion property by a crotchety old retired sailor, and its hideousness had always been a sad grief to the old squire, and equally of course to his son, the new squire. Since the sailor's death six years previously the cottage had been empty, but now, apparently, the executors, a firm of London solicitors, had found a tenant. A man with a liking for solitude.

"Though if he thinks a few threats will cure the inquisitiveness of Little Whippering villagers, he's sadly in error," thought the vicar, shaking his head and remembering the many sermons he had preached against this vice, "for when it is carried beyond certain bounds it becomes a vice."

"All the same," the vicar admitted to himself a moment later, "I think I will turn to the left here and go past the Wilderness. After all, he is a new parishioner. I owe him a call sooner or later."

Presently the Rev. Samuel arrived outside the front gate of the Wilderness. The cottage was built in a clearing in a copse, and so could hardly be seen from the gate. From the Downs its abominable salmon pink roof showed up all too plainly. The vicar hesitated with his hand on the gate, stopped; and then peered. There was no sign of occupation. The windows were still shuttered.

"Odd," thought the vicar, "very odd!"

"After all," he told himself, "now I am here, I ought to call. It will give the man, whoever he may be, a favourable impression of the zeal of our rural clergy."

With which comforting thought the vicar opened the squeaky gate, strode up the weedgrown path, and tapped smartly with his stick on the oaken door. Then,

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to his surprise, he saw that a kind of square hole had been cut in the door. The edges of the wood were still new. A grating and a little flap had been nailed in the hole. The vicar remembered that a builder had come in from Abingdon to do the place up. Evidently one of his duties had been to fix up this contraption.

"Quite like a monastery grille," thought the vicar examining it. "Dear me, I hope this person is not religious."

This hope, at first surprising as coming from a clergyman, was explained by a recent experience, when the Orchard had been tenanted by a self-styled "Master Nostrodomus." It had been rechristened "The Abode of Love," and turned into a nudist colony, to the dreadful scandal of Little Whippering, and the perplexity of Police Constable Collop. The vicar had got up one morning recently to be told that "Master Nostrodomus" had fled, leaving behind him several unpaid bills. And now this——

The vicar's reflections were cut short by a furious barking, and what appeared to be a large dog began to scrabble with its paws on the other side of the door. The vicar was fond of dogs. All the same he hoped that the tenant would not open the door wide and give this animal a chance to do what it evidently wanted to do, namely tear the vicar to fragments.

Then he heard approaching steps, and the grille in the door rattled. The vicar saw two eyes glimmering behind it, and realized that he was being scrutinized.

"What the blankety hell do you want?" said a rough uneducated voice.

"I want nothing," said the vicar with Christian meekness, "except—in a metaphorical sense—the pleas-

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ure of your company. I am the incumbent of this parish, and I came to call on you, as you have just arrived here. However, if the moment is inconvenient —no doubt you are unpacking your household gods——"

The vicar heard the new tenant muttering behind the grille, and realized that, whatever he might be, there was not the least fear that he was religious.

Suddenly there was a click, the grille was swung back and the vicar saw before him the barrel of a gun—or rifle, in his consternation he did not notice which. Its muzzle actually touched the vicar's chest. He stepped back hastily.

"I'll give you twenty seconds to get off my property," roared the voice, "and then I'll blast your blankety head off, devil-dodger or no devil-dodger! And that goes for any other blankety nosey-parker in this blankety village! so put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

The vicar's hand closed on his knobbled stick. He felt a sudden unchristian desire to be able to bang the owner of the voice over the head with it. Indeed the wish was taking the form of a prayer when he repressed it forcibly, heedless of what dire damage it might do in the realms of his unconscious. He bowed his head meekly.

"Very well, my good man." He walked slowly away down the gravel path, with the uncomfortable feeling the bravest man has if he knows that a firearm of some kind is levelled by a lunatic at his back. When he gained the gate, the vicar found to his surprise that he was quivering, and the palms of his hands were damp with sweat. He wiped them thoughtfully.

"Dear me!" he said to himself. "There must be some-

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thing peculiarly alarming about that man! First William and then myself!"

By the time the vicar reached the foot of the hill again—for he had now given up his project of having a blow on the Downs, Little Whippering was already well informed about the new arrival. William Bundling was one source of information. Another, and more authoritative, was Harry Thomson, a youth with a lobster-red face and large hands. Harry Thomson ran the local garage and hire car, which he drove rather as if it were a plough, encouraging it with an occasional "Giddap!"

He had three days before received a curt note, signed "S. O'Leary," ordering him to meet the 4.15 from Abingdon, and asking for the number of his car. Mr. O'Leary had darted out of the 4:15, his face completely muffled up, and had shot straight into the waiting car.

"And it's my belief," said Harry Thomson weightily, "that he doesn't want his face to be seen."

"Why?" asked old Mr. Padding, who was sitting on an upturned oil-drum.

"Ar," answered Harry. "Ar," according to Little Whippering convention, is a sufficient answer to any question. It is impolite to press further.

"He's a murderer, that's what he is," said Mr. Padding, now revealing that his original question had only been a trap, which Harry had however evaded.

They were interrupted by young Herbert, Harry's assistant. Herbert was educated on twopenny bloods, and felt a simple murder to be rather flat.

"He's a leper, that's what he is!" said Herbert.

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"A leopard, hark at the boy!" exclaimed Mr. Padding, spitting contemptuously. "Do you think he's escaped from the circus?"

"Not a leperd, a leper!" exclaimed Herbert. "One of those people with 'orrible diseases, like I read about, what they have to shut up."

"You can do a bit of shutting up yourself, young Herbert," said Harry severely, "we don't want no nastiness. You cut along and finish washing Mr. Horace's Austin."

Mr. Padding rumbled obscurely for a few minutes after young Herbert's departure.

"Him with his lepers. . . ."

Then he hoisted himself to his feet, and with a mumbled farewell, departed to make sure that the village was not deluded by an absurd invention of young Herbert's morbid mind.

"Lepers indeed," he muttered as he walked past the Marion Arms to Mr. Gudgeon the baker's. Gudgeon himself was behind the counter, and Mr. Padding went in.

Gudgeon was one of the personages of Little Whippering, a large genial man with a walrus moustache and red arms, who held positive views about the equality of man, a Radical surviving in the backwaters of Little Whippering. Gudgeon prided himself on his independence, which meant being genially rude to everyone in the village, however rich or important, except the Marions. He was always ready to threaten people with the Law, that obscure menace about which he was believed by the judicious to have a knowledge rivalling that of old Fotherthwaite of Abingdon, with the added advantage that Gudgeon was always prepared to advise without charge.

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Mr. Padding briefly told Gudgeon the story of the new arrival, and aired his theory.

"What I say is, Gudgeon, you ought to go up there and have a look at that murderer. You could pretend to have come about an order."

"You think that, do you?" said Mr. Gudgeon.

"It might be that there was a reward out of him," suggested Padding.

"Ar, it *might* be," admitted Mr. Gudgeon slowly.

There was a silence, during which Mr. Padding filled his pipe.

"On the other hand it might not," went on Mr. Gudgeon. "And as it happens I've already got my order from him, so I should look a precious fool going up there asking for one."

"What, has he been in here?"

"He has not, Silas Padding."

The two men were silent. Padding did not show any interest. When Gudgeon was ready to tell the story he would. Meanwhile there was plenty of time. He lowered himself gently on to a sack of flour, and his knee-joints cracked. "Rain," he muttered dolefully.

"Yes, I got a letter from him," said Mr. Gudgeon at last. "Just, '*Deliver a small loaf to me daily, S. O'Leary,*' that's all it said!"

Mr. Gudgeon fumbled beneath his apron and at last produced a floury piece of paper. He unrolled it.

"Deliver a small loaf to me daily," he read out slowly.

Mr. Padding took the note, smoothed it, and spread it on his knee. Then he put on his spectacles.

"*Deliver a small loaf to me daily,*" he read out with

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an air of surprise. "Well, there's a proper caution for you!"

Mr. Gudgeon reflectively dribbled a handful of brown sugar through his large red fingers.

"Well, Silas Padding, I sent young Dick up there with a small loaf, and I'm blest if this chap didn't stick his hand out of a hole in the front door when Dick knocked, and took that loaf from him. You could have knocked Dick down with a feather, he was that startled!"

"Ar," said Mr. Padding. "Didn't want his face to be seen, see?"

"That's as maybe. But he's not a murderer!"

"So you say," said Mr. Padding, a little wounded by this defection. However, Gudgeon always was one to take up an independent line.

"He's a miser, that's what old Small-Loaf is," pronounced Mr. Gudgeon. "You mark my words; he'll bury his money in the floor of the Wilderness and just live there like a pig. I mind the time when they had a miser at my cousin's, beyond the town. Miser they calls 'em, but I say misery. And certainly he come to a miserable end, for they found him with his throat cut from ear to ear, bleeding like a pig."

"Well, now, and who might have done that? Or did'n do it hisself?"

"Oh, some tramp did it," answered Mr. Gudgeon, "and took all the money. Leastways they never found it."

Mr. Padding sucked his teeth in silent contemplation of this pleasant prospect. Then, after getting painfully to his feet, he tottered out of the shop, without another word, and set off to Miss Tipton's, the village Post

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Office and "grocery." Mr. Padding had a shrewd knowledge of village psychology and he recognized at once that the Miser theory would triumph over the Murderer theory. The throat cut from ear to ear would do that. There was still time to change. . . .

"Have you heard about the new miser they've got up at Wilderness?" he asked, without preamble, as soon as he was inside Miss Tipton's.

"What, him a miser? Well, I never. But then what did I say? I had a letter from him this morning," she fumbled. Mr. Padding waited, but Miss Tipton's fumbling was without result. "There! I must have wrapped some lollipops in it."

Mr. Padding's bleared eyes showed no surprise. What else could you expect of a woman? Hens all of them!

"Anyways," went on Miss Tipton, "he's ordered butter and whatnot, and I sent Elsie up with it, poor child, and he stretched out a great arm from a hole for all the world like an ogre. The poor child's still a-shivering and shaking. He's no Christian, I said it at once."

"Christian! I'll lay he isn't!" exclaimed Mr. Padding. He sat down for roughly ten minutes, staring vacantly into space, and then moved on. The Marion Arms was now opening, and his story ought to be worth a bitter.

Meanwhile the vicar had, as he felt in duty bound, spoken a friendly word of warning to Police Constable Collop. "Not that I think he means what he says, Collop, but it might be as well to keep an eye on him. You might even go up and see him. After all the sight of the blue uniform of the law is not without its sobering effect."

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P.C. Collop nodded and placed a broad toe on his bicycle pedal. "I'll go up and see him this moment, sir. A gun you say? Ho! We'll give him guns."

Collop swung a huge blue-swathed haunch over his ancient bike, and pedalled off with quiet dignity. The vicar looked after him. The broad and massive beam of the policeman seen from behind, supported by a narrow pedestal of steel and rubber, with the huge feet slowly reciprocating each side, gave him a feeling of reassurance. Collop lowered his head as if about to butt, rang his bell authoritatively, and swayed round the corner. The vicar turned and went on, past the low stone wall of the Marion's Park, with a feeling of relief. Collop would settle him!

Had Mr. Padding been beside the policeman when he knocked loudly on the door of the Wilderness he would have seen confirmation of his wisdom in abandoning his original theory. So far from showing the terror of a hunted murderer, Mr. O'Leary gave no sign of alarm at seeing, on opening his grille, the tall helmet and imposing grey whiskers of Collop. On the contrary, above the wild barking of his dog: "God, is this village crazy?" he shouted. "First a devil-dodger and now a slop! What do you want, you blasted bluebottle? An Englishman's home is his castle, ain't it?"

P. C. Collop took off his helmet and wiped the inside carefully—it had been a stiff pedal up the hill—while he reflected on this. The insult he would pass, but he was not prepared to agree lightly to any legal maxim, without first looking in his book.

"That's as may be," said P.C. Collop.

"What's as may be, you blankety b——" said the mystery man, evidently unfamiliar with local idiom.

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"That will do, sir!" said P.C. Collop, feeling that the time had come to assert himself. "Not so much of the blankety, *if* you please. There's no call to be personal. Two can play at that game, without getting much further, and I has my duty to do, which I must remind you of, sir."

He was visited with a flash of inspiration. "Have you got a licence for this animal?"

O'Leary made no direct answer, but he was heard stumping away into the interior. Meanwhile P.C. Collop cautiously applied his face to the hole in the door. There was a snap as a pair of canine jaws closed within an inch of the policeman's nose and he drew back hastily.

The footsteps returned and an arm, thrust through the door, extended two slips of paper. "There you are, nosey. And my gun licence, see? Any come-back?"

Collop examined them with care. "They *appears* to be in order," he admitted, "but I'm not sure that I didn't ought to inspect the articles in question."

"Well, take a look at this," said the other, suddenly projecting a barrel from the grille. It was a shotgun, of large bore; "for shooting flocks of elephants I reckon," explained Collop afterwards, with stolid humour.

"As for the dog, I'll open the door and let him out if you like, but don't blame me if he 'as the guts out of you."

"Well, I won't insist," said Collop handsomely.

"Oh, thank you so much, officer dear," said the voice with sarcastic gratitude, and then abruptly, "And now clear off quick, you bastard."

"Bastard or no bastard, that's as may be," Collop was not the man to be hurried. He lifted his bicycle

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slowly away from the porch, watched by the unseen eyes behind the grille.

"I take it then," said Collop blandly before going, "that I can tell the village you don't want callers."

"Callers!" screamed the other, in a sudden burst of apparently uncontrollable rage. "You can tell your blankety village that if any parson, copper, district nurse, meddling old lady, snuffling brat, or any mortal soul but an errand boy or postman comes up this drive, they'll get the seat torn out of his or her pants by my dog, and a charge of buckshot in their gizzards to help them on their way as well."

Feeling that he had done his duty, and secured an interesting entry for his notebook, Collop left the Wilderness.

"There's a pleasant spoken chap!" he muttered as he shot down the hill. "Something fishy about him if you ask me. Just let him start letting off his buckshot, whatever that may be. You can't do that kind of thing in Little Whippering!"

However the new resident's message of goodwill was duly spread abroad, and was taken as proof of Mr. Padding's hypothesis. "Afraid someone will get his money, the old miser!" Heads were wagged in the Marion Arms and the Fox and Fancy. The miser legend began to grow.

. . . . . .

Secluded in its fold of the Berkshire Downs, Little Whippering thereafter equably endured the changes of two twelve-months. The Miser had arrived, and though legend grew round him, so that any villager could have described to you his hook nose, his lean clutching fingers

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dribbling their hoard of notes and gold, he became accepted as a matter of course in his isolation, out there on the Downs, outside the kindly circle of the village, beyond the utmost pub.

The winds of winter howled cruelly round the pink asbestos roof of the Wilderness. Down below the villagers were snug and warm, but looking out of their windows, they could see the lights glimmering in the Wilderness windows, and could picture the strange demented creature huddled over his fire, stoking it stingily with the wood he had gathered from his copse at dead of night.

Well, there he was; but meanwhile there were more important things than the existence of a miser in Little Whippering. Old Mrs. Cabney swallowed her false teeth and asphyxiated herself. Farmer Bunn was swindled at Abingdon Market by a Londoner. The Misses Tibble had a telegram telling them they had come into money. The young Bundlings got chicken pox. Young Squire Marion sold all his father's hunters. Pom Hand got a cold from falling into a ditch while tipsy. As long as Little Whippering was full—and was it not always full?—of such a ferment of events, fresh every day, events with a poignancy and excitement unknown to towns, it was natural that the Miser should be neglected, except by a few daring and shuddering boys peeping through the fence. Perhaps he might have mouldered away to death, years and years later and become only a dim legend—an ancient grey-bearded corpse found by a tradesman one winter's day, his emaciated arms clasped round his chest of treasure.

But——

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Tuffy Samson Dead*

IT WAS a cold spring morning. A black-bearded man, with a battered felt hat pulled down low over his forehead, and his coat collar turned up, trudged into Little Whippering. As he wandered from street to street, staring thoughtfully into shops, he was taken by the inhabitants for one of those cranky bodies who come to the village from time to time, generally with a guide-book in their hands. They peer vaguely at the church, and the disgraceful old tumbledown cottages in Cat and Dog Lane, and then depart again, ignoring the real glories of the village—for instance the fine new parish hall, the rebuilt "public" down by the common, and Harry Thomson's new petrol pump.

After wandering helplessly for an hour, the black-bearded man stopped diffidently near the vicar, who was talking to Mr. Jennings, the artist, at the corner of Telegraph Hill. The vicar was persuading Mr. Jennings to give his aid in the scenic decoration of the "Mikado" at the Church Hall. To the stranger, Mr. Jennings doubtless looked like a local farmer; at least that was the impression the artist always tried to give. He had a round red face with sidewhiskers, wore gaiters, and cultivated a slightly bowlegged walk. He was recognized in Little Whippering as a reliable source of free



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drinks, if properly handled, that is to say encouraged to give his strange views on rural topics. Mr. Jennings was at his happiest however on Market Day in Abingdon, when he could be seen walking round with a wise air and knowledgeably prodding cattle with his stick.

As for Mr. Jennings' art, it was touchingly faithful to life. No one except a few cynical horse-copers had ever been able to "fault" Mr. Jennings' horses. This was hardly surprising as he always worked from photographs. Indeed he considered the invention of the instantaneous camera had done more for painters of hunting scenes than any other product of the human mind.

Mr. Jennings never talked about his art. Indeed he seemed a little ashamed of it, practising it furtively in a bedroom in his house. At dinner parties of hunt breakfasts (he rode to hounds of course) when paintings were mentioned, he would start, as if something in his remote past had been mentioned. "Oh, *that*," he would say vaguely. "Well . . ."

However Mr. Jennings was successful. An interminable succession of his notabilities, mounted on sleek bloodstock, had ambled, trotted, cantered, and galloped their amiable way through Exhibitions of the Royal Academy.

Mr. Jennings' reluctance to help with the "Mikado" scenery was a part of his affectation of robustiousness. If the vicar had asked him to slaughter a pig at the Harvest Festival or help plough his glebe he would have consented with alacrity, but painting—in public.

"Why not ask the squire to do it?" he said at last, with a heavy wink. Young Marion was known to be an amateur of painting. Incidentally he was a bitter enemy

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of Jennings who, for some reason best known to himself, was fond of referring to him as "The Sweet-smelling Flower."

The vicar, in his innocence, considered the proposition carefully.

"No," he said at last. "I don't think the squire's painting would quite do for Little Whippering. We are a little old-fashioned here, you know."

The Rev. Samuel remembered too clearly some of the paintings shown him by young Marion. They had quite shocked him. He knew the nude was necessary to art but still was it necessary to *emphasize* . . .

It was at this moment that the black-bearded man interrupted them with an "Excuse me, sirs." The vicar nodded amiably.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine," explained the stranger in a slow uneducated voice. "An old shipmate.

"I believe he's come to this here place. I haven't seen him around, but he's a queer cuss, the sort that keeps himself to himself."

"What's his name?" asked the vicar reasonably enough.

The black-bearded man shifted uneasily from one leg to the other.

"Well, there's no knowing, you see. He got into a bit o' trouble a while back. Nothing to be ashamed of, you understand, just the kind of accident that might happen to any man. Except you, of course, sir, having your job to consider." The vicar bowed. "But it made him a mite standoffish. I could describe him of course, but he's an ordinary sort of fellow. He isn't short, and he isn't long. He's darkish but not exactly black——"

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"Good Lord!" interrupted Jennings, "I wonder if it's our old miser up at the Wilderness?"

"Miser, eh? Why should it be him?"

"Well, we call him the Miser," explained Jennings, "but that's only a village nickname. His name's O'Leary and he certainly keeps himself to himself. He arrived here with his face hidden behind a scarf and nobody's seen him by daylight. If he's your friend, all I can say is, we don't like his manners. The vicar here went to call on him and the brute actually threatened him with a gun."

"His pejorative range," remarked the vicar thoughtfully, "argues a life spent entirely in low company, or else a remarkable facility in picking up undesirable locutions and metaphors."

"He swears like a trooper," translated Jennings.

"Ah, that would be my pal, then," said the black-bearded man, nodding.

"But you don't want to be frightened by his little ways," he said to the vicar. "It's all bark and no bite with him. He's got the 'eart of a child really, but he covers it up by swearing and blinding. You just want to kick him in the pants when he starts his games, and he'll calm down as quiet as a little lamb."

"Upon my word, I felt strongly tempted to try something of the sort," confessed the vicar, "but my kicking days are over. In any case rugger was my game, not soccer."

"Well, many's the time I've broken a bottle over Spike's head," said the stranger reminiscently, "and afterwards butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Now where would this Wilderness be?"

"If you like," said Jennings, "I'll put you on your

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way. I'm going up to the Downs, and I can as well go past the Wilderness as any other way."

"That's uncommonly kind of you, sir," said the stranger without much enthusiasm. "But I don't want to trouble you."

"No trouble at all," Jennings assured him heartily. "Good-bye, Vicar! I'll let you know about that scenery when I've thought it over, but Marion's your man, not a doubt about it!"

The two tramped side by side up the hill leading out of the village, while Jennings gave a brief sketch of the Miser's arrival and subsequent history. He attempted to draw out the black-bearded stranger. But he was not to be drawn. In spite of his genial loquacity, he evaded all leading questions with a skill which showed a shrewd brain beneath his stolid exterior. Jennings soon realized that it was useless to press him farther. They turned off the main road to the Downs down the track that led past the cottage and when they reached the gate, the stranger hesitated.

"Well," he said uneasily, "I dunno as I'll look in on my pal just now. He's an odd cuss, sleeps most of the day, you know. I think I'll wait till the evening. Maybe I can get a bit to eat and a can of beer at a pub, where?"

Jennings felt irritated, for he had accompanied the stranger on the tramp up hill solely to witness the encounter. He might even, he had thought, see the famous charge of buckshot loosed at the presumptuous intruder. In the normal course, walks on the Downs were not at all in the artist's line. He preferred to hack picturesquely about the countryside, distributing hearty salutations to yokels as he trotted past them.

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"Well, thanks for showing me the way," went on the stranger, "I'll be able to find it myself this evening. Is there a pub near here?"

"There's the Fox and Fancy at the bottom of the hill," said Jennings curtly. "Turn left before you reach the village."

Repeating his thanks, the bearded stranger turned back. Mr. Jennings went on to the Downs. As he had got so far, he might as well make a walk of it. Presently his feet were on the springy turf, and he quickened his pace. It was early for the full spate of flowers or butterflies which in late summer would liven the drab curves with an evanescent efflorescence. For mile after mile the hills undulated monotonously with an occasional copse like some vegetable waif abandoned in a great arboreal migration. Up above, the clouds scudded, hurried by the east wind. Towards all this familiar landscape Mr. Jennings felt the same proprietorial air that a tailor might feel towards a roll of material lying on his shelves. How many yards of this knobbly hill-land, with its soft depressions like marks of a giant modeller's fingers, he had snipped neatly off to put between the legs of horses! How often he had fitted an acre or two of this thin cloudy sky behind the haughty faces of M.F.H.'s, their pink coats carefully contrasted with the cold grey clouds behind them!

Sound stuff all of it, he thought. It seemed peculiarly appropriate that, on the brow of the Devil's Knoll across there, he could see a string from Mr. Billock's Hinton stables, cantering down a track marked out with gorse.

Then Mr. Jennings gave an exclamation of disgust. There, right in the foreground, was a young man seated

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languidly in front of an easel—young Marion! Painting!

Impelled by a contemptuous curiosity, Mr. Jennings strode on until he reached the amateur artist. Claude Marion looked round at the approaching steps and greeted him politely enough. The landowner was thin, with a sallow oval face and dark brown eyes inherited from his Italian grandmother, and fine arched eyebrows and a sensitive mouth coming from Heaven knows where, for all the Marion ancestors had been hard-riding, hard-drinking gentlemen. Today their portraits, all painted by the Jennings of their periods —looked down in disapproval from the walls of Marion Hall, on the strange parties of communists, poets, biologists, and other persons ignorant of horses, port, and farming, invited by their descendant.

"Good morning, *cher mâitre!*" said Claude Marion, continuing to paint. Mr. Jennings snorted. It was part of young Marion's sarcasm always to address the elder man in the tones of a humble disciple.

Then Mr. Jennings looked over his shoulder, and paled. It was positively outrageous! He felt all the indignation of the tailor already referred to, as if some young urchin had seized his most useful roll of material and dragged it through the mud. Marion was painting the Downs, but good Heavens! what was he doing with them? Those pleasant green undulations had become jagged brown rocks. They glittered with a morbid steel-blue light. Great chasms cleft the skyline, and the sky itself, that clear spring sky, looked like a bowlful of melted thunder and lightning poured indiscriminately upon the scene.

"And what," asked Mr. Jennings stung beyond

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endurance, "if I may venture to ask, are those apples doing in the foreground?" He pointed with his stick. "Here, this huge bunch hanging down from the top left-hand corner. I don't see any apples!"

"It's my signature tune, *cher maître*," said Claude Marion, rising and wiping his hands on a rag. "You always have a horse in your pictures, why shouldn't I—in my humbler way—have an apple in mine?"

"Well, I know I'm one of the Old Guard," began Jennings, "but I can't see the necessity for deliberate distortion, all this Neolithic business . . ."

"But you're a little Neolithic yourself, dear man," cooed Claude, slowly packing up his painting apparatus, "with your smelly tweeds and your beer-drinking, positively *primitive*."

"You know," he went on, as, his folding easel tucked under his arm, he stood beside Jennings, "I believe the stage is set for the revival of your school of Art. If you like to pay me a percentage on sales, I'm quite prepared to lead the Reaction. We might issue a little magazine 'jenningsart' with a small J and start an artistic colony here, all wearing smelly tweeds and gaiters."

"Unfortunately I happen to take my art seriously," said Mr. Jennings austerely.

"Really?" giggled Marion. "Lady Brutell said you told her you painted as other people played bridge, to occupy the time between the end and the beginning of the hunting season. Frightful liar, isn't she?"

Mr. Jennings blushed. Although Marion and he disliked each other cordially, Marion had an infuriating habit of seizing every opportunity of talking to him. Now for instance he had evidently resolved to accompany him all the way back to the village.

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Jennings decided to change the subject. "Sorry to see you've sold your hunters, Marion," he said brusquely, "death duties, I suppose."

"Something of the sort. And one has one's duties to oneself. If you were forced to choose, Jennings (which Heaven forefend), would you give up your hunter or your mistress?"

Mr. Jennings coughed. "The eventuality has never arisen, so I can't say."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, I was only suggesting a hypothetical case. Dear me, what a lovely dandelion!" Claude Marion bent down to pick the flower. "Now, really, Jennings, I ask you, as a fellow artist, is there a more effective flower? And we call it a weed! When one thinks of the cheap vulgarity of roses, and those frightfully Fascist tulips, all standing in rows, one wants to simply denude one's garden and plant nothing but masses and masses of dandelions. Only my tenderness for old Bundling's feelings prevents my doing so. He'd probably resign his job, and then what would become of his hordes of children? Really, I often tell him it's time he thinned out his family." Marion bent his head confidentially towards Jennings. "Do you know, I'm thinking of doing a Venus in the Dandelions. Can't you see it? Perfect masses of dandelions in unbroken chrome with a very plastic nude, a Bushman nude, with just the subtlest suggestion of pure English womanhood about her, to offset the enormous haunches. Rather cynical, don't you think? Or don't you?"

Mr. Jennings, as always after an artistic conversation with Marion, felt his head swimming away from him. He evaded the question by waving his stick to Farmer Bunn, who was leaning against some wire fenc-

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ing contemplating a herd of young bulls, a pipe in his mouth. Farmer Bunn gave a brief salutation to Jennings, whom he thought a well-meaning idiot, and a heartier one to Claude Marion, about whom he did not think at all, for a Marion was a Marion in Little Whippering, and always had been, whatever he might say or do.

Claude Marion put down his painting tackle for a moment and leaning on the wire, looked at the bulls.

"What very *farouche* creatures, Bunn! Do look at that one over there with the black muzzle and the Clark Gable eyes! I really shudder to imagine what he can be thinking of. Don't you ever feel your personality *wilting* among all these primitive souls, with their dark mysterious lives?"

"I can't say I do, sir," said Farmer Bunn.

Mr. Jennings snorted. Fancy talking to a farmer like that! He prided himself he knew the tone of agricultural conversation.

Unfortunately he could not prod these animals with his stick, as the nearest was ten feet away, but he waved his thick stick in their direction. Then he gave an appraising grunt. "Fine beasts these, Bunn!"

Bunn removed his pipe from his mouth, and stared at Jennings, remaining dumb for two or three minutes from sheer astonishment. Then he spat reflectively.

"Fine beasts, Mr. Jennings? Why, they ain't worth a damn! I only keeps 'em for their manure and their company."

Marion giggled, and dug Jennings in the ribs.

"Remember that, Jennings! If we could say only half as much for some of the people in this world, it would be something."

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Jennings did not reply, and at the cross-roads he took the first opportunity of shaking off his companion.

"And that's the younger generation. My God!" he exclaimed stumping viciously towards the Fox and Fancy.

Humming gently to himself, Claude Marion walked on his way alone. It was already getting dark, and as he neared the village, he saw a stranger, a black-bearded man, quietly seated on a railing, apparently waiting, though for what, it was difficult to imagine. Perhaps he had a sweetheart among one of the village girls, and was keeping a tryst. In any case Claude Marion did not bother his head further about him, for his Venus among the Dandelions was taking shape already in his mind. Later he was to regret that lack of incuriosity.

What is more, he must have been the last person in the village to see the black-bearded stranger there, for after that he appears to have faded out of Little Whippering's ken. But not out of their minds. For it was, as it was later discovered, through his action that the village next day was set in a minor turmoil. The vicar detected the excitement in Miss Tipton's eyes as she hurried down the main street. "Whither away, so fast and so free?" he asked her. "Has anything untoward occurred?"

"Yes, sir, there's a telegram for the Miser from someone in Abingdon. Such a funny telegram, sir, it's put us all in a flutter. I'm taking it up myself for if I send the child goodness knows what he may say, something she oughtn't to hear, I'm sure! Mr. Gudgeon thinks there's something queer about the telegram, sir, but Mr. Padding says it's just what he always expected."

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The vicar was not surprised at this committee meeting's report on the telegram. He knew it was a Little Whippering custom to save time by making public the contents of wires on their receipt. After all, they argued, if the matter were private, it would not be discussed in a telegram which, as everyone knows, is seen by the Post Office people. However, the vicar felt it his duty to make some remonstrance, however feeble, against the practice.

"I really don't think you should hand round a telegram in this way, Miss Tipton."

"But it's only among friends, sir. And it's that queer, sir. It says——"

The vicar raised his hand. "No, really, I don't think I should become a party to this." He hesitated. "Yet, on the other hand, as everyone seems to have heard it, and no doubt my wife will have heard it by now . . ." He lowered his hand.

Miss Tipton produced the envelope magically from her voluminous skirts.

"Yes, sir, you just have a peep at it. The flap's been pulled up once or twice, so it comes off easy enough."

"Dear, dear, this is making me a party to crime with a vengeance," said the vicar as Miss Tipton handed him the slip. Then suddenly the word "*dying*" caught his eye. If anyone was dying, thought the vicar, he had a professional interest in it. He took the telegram.

O'LEARY,

THE WILDERNESS, SOUTH FANCIFELL.

AM DYING. COME AT ONCE TO 5, ETHELRED STREET, ABINGDON. HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU. TUFFY SAMSON WAS KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT

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IN KADUNA SIX WEEKS AGO. WILL TELL YOU ALL ON ARRIVAL. COME QUICKLY—GEORGE CRUMBLES.

"Well, upon my soul," said the vicar. "This smacks of violence, or at least a strange lack of charity. 'Good news for you—Tuffy Samson killed.' "

He returned the slip, and Miss Tipton replaced it in its envelope with hands that quivered with excitement.

"Er—lick it well," said the vicar. "At present, it looks unconvincing even to a simpleton like myself. I trust he will not be violent, Miss Tipton. And if he is profane, well, you must be like the sailors of Odysseus; stop thine ears and make all haste from thence. I will wait at the bottom of the hill in case you want any assistance."

The vicar waited, and presently Miss Tipton came hurrying down the hill.

"Well, what did he say?"

"I'd not bemean myself by repeating it, sir," said Miss Tipton. "All the same, I oughter have stuck that flap down more carefully. To be called a nosey-parker at my age! I gave him a piece of my mind, sir, you can be sure, and then he calmed down a bit. Apologized in fact!"

"Apologized!" exclaimed the vicar. "You must have the tongue of Charity herself."

"Well, he had to soothe me down a bit, seeing as how he wanted me to take a message," answered Miss Tipton triumphantly. "He wants Harry Thompson to take him into Abingdon at once!"

"Well, well, upon my soul, this *is* exciting. It is not often our simple daily round is disturbed in this

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fashion. I don't know why it is, Miss Tipton, but somehow Tuffy Samson and George Crumbles—the very names suggest violence and crime. I see swarthy pirate faces with gleaming rings in their ears."

"Goodness me, sir, but you have got an imagination!"

"I have, Miss Tipton, I have. I sometimes think I ought to have had a more glamorous existence. Violence and adventure have a strange appeal to me. An Arctic explorer, now there's a life! Or a missionary riding through a dense jungle, with lions snapping at one's heels."

"Well, sir, I don't mind confessing I sometimes want a bit of romance myself. But I see it as cowboys, with six-shooters, tearing up and down mountains, with me on a great white horse, and the villain pounding away behind. And then just as he comes up to lay hands on me——"

"The hero leans down from a branch and snatches you out of the saddle," said the vicar, his eyes resting thoughtfully on Miss Tipton's eighteen stone or so. "Well, nothing is impossible to Providence.

"And we may be wronging Messrs. Tuffy and Crumbles. Let me see now, what other perfectly harmless explanations might there be? Suppose they were officials of some charity, and Tuffy was a philanthropist who had left the society a bequest in his will. I think even a Christian could describe that, in a telegram, without qualification, as good news."

Miss Tipton sniffed. "I hope I know Christian language when I hear it. He ain't no Christian. Well, I must be leaving you in case that dratted phone bell starts buzzing. Old Major Fawcett gets that annoyed

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you wouldn't believe, if he doesn't get his number directly he lifts his receiver. 'I'm not a Jack-in-a-Box,' I often feel like telling him, but it never pays to be rude."

"It doesn't," agreed the vicar, lifting his hat in farewell.

He walked back slowly muttering to himself: "*Am dying—Tuffy Samson killed.*"

Then he stopped in the road and apostrophized himself sternly. "Samuel Wykeham, Clerk in Holy Orders, you have given way to a most degrading curiosity. As a penance you will dismiss the subject altogether from your thoughts."

He forced himself to decide there and then the vexed question of who should fill the rôle of the Executioner in the "Mikado."

But somehow it suggested nothing but George Crumbles.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### *George Crumbles Dead*

IT WAS getting dark when Harry Thompson drew up outside the Wilderness. There was a scrunch of tires on the gravel as he lugged back the hand brake with a sinewy right arm. His brick-red face beneath the battered uniform cap looked stolid enough, but behind it Harry Thompson's mind was seething with the parting injunctions of Gudgeon, Padding, Miss Tipton, and even, in a humble way, young Herbert.

Harry Thompson knew that he would be expected to bring back a detailed account of every incident on his drive to Abingdon and back, of every word said to him, and his replies, and any gestures or meaningful actions. Above all, they relied on him for a preciser description of the Miser's person than had been so far available to Little Whippering.

His report, he knew, would be the basis of all discussions in Little Whippering for at least a month. His accuracy was the more essential in that it was generally felt without being actually said that Harry Thompson had been unobservant on the previous occasion. He had recalled nothing of the drive from Abingdon Station to the Wilderness except the vague impression that the Miser was a middle-aged man, muffled up like.

Most people pictured the Miser in outdoor garb as



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a kind of mummy, with a head completely swathed in bandages except for two sinister eye-holes. In fact, however, the mystery man went no farther than wearing a muffler to cover the lower part of his face, as might any sufferer from asthma, and in addition, perhaps his hat was pulled unusually low down over his eyes. It was in this guise that Mr. O'Leary, amid furious barking from his dog, stepped out from the front door of the Wilderness.

"Good evening, sir!" said Harry Thompson, politely. He had turned on the roof light, and now stood holding the door of the landaulet open.

Mr. O'Leary gave an ill-tempered mumble. He stumbled into the car past Thompson with his head down and, with his back to him, switched off the roof light. Then he sat down.

Harry Thompson remained with the door open for a moment, debating whether to venture a further word of conversation, but something about the posture and impatient twitching of Mr. O'Leary decided him against this. He closed the door and jumped into the driver's seat, which was separated from Mr. O'Leary by a partition of glass.

"Come on, old girl," said Harry, as he reversed the car in jerks round the tricky drive.

"None of that, dang you!" he added, as the offside front wing scraped the gate. Then he bumped out along the track, turned down the hill, and once clear of the village, rushed along the white dusty road to Abingdon. No sound came from the passenger huddled in the centre of the seat in the back. A melancholy whistle emerged from Harry's pursed lips as the ancient vehicle swayed and bumped along the rutty road.

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Harry had expected No. 5, Ethelred Road to be a nursing home of some kind. To his surprise he found that Nos. 4, 5 and 6, Ethelred Road were all represented by the Ethelreda Hotel, and it was before the hotel therefore that he stopped.

"Wait till I come out!" mumbled O'Leary, his words muffled by his scarf. He hurried up the hotel steps.

Ten minutes passed. Then a porter flung himself down the steps. He ran up to Harry Thompson.

"Drive round to the police station as quick as you can," he cried, "and put a snap in it, son! Tell them a man's just done himself in."

"Crumbs!" said Harry, staggered at the dreadful possibilities this opened up.

Then he pressed the starter button, let in the clutch with a jerk, and leaped forward with a convulsive roar. As the car swayed round the corner awful visions suggested themselves. He imagined Mr. O'Leary prevailed upon to remove his muffler. At the sight of that ghastly face—for Little Whippering had long agreed it must be ghastly—the beholder had been driven mad and incontinently shot himself. By the time Harry Thompson reached the police station he was perspiring with excitement.

Sergeant Jobling heard his story without showing any emotion. Leaving a message for Inspector Gregson and the police surgeon to be rung up, he jumped into the car beside Harry Thompson and was whirled to the Ethelreda Hotel.

Harry accompanied him up the steps and into the reception hall. Here they were met by the manager, a thin man with large horn-rimmed spectacles whose eyes blinked nervously as he fussed round the sergeant.

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"Absolutely inexplicable. The man had only just come . . ."

Sergeant Jobling did not make any comment or comforting remark, did not in fact commit himself in any way, but asked to be taken at once to the dead man. The manager led the way to the first floor, still talking nervously, and flung open the door of a large bedroom. Thompson pressed behind the policeman.

Sergeant Jobling stood on the threshold and stroked his large black moustache with one vast hand as he looked round the room. On the bed was stretched the body of a man, a black-bearded man. The livid and distorted features, and the deep red marks round the neck, showed that he had been strangled. In the chair facing them sat a figure which made Sergeant Jobling's eyebrows rise.

Only his eyes and the bridge of his nose were visible. The rest of his face was hidden by a silk scarf. He was wearing a hat, pulled well down on his forehead.

For the moment, however, the sergeant did not comment on this remarkable phenomenon. With Harry's frightened aid, he took the body off the bed, placed it prone on the floor, and began to apply artificial respiration.

"Not much hope," he explained to the manager, "but if he's only just been cut down I ought to try it till the doctor arrives."

The man in the muffler got up and went towards the door.

"Now then, sir," barked the sergeant, who in spite of his task, had apparently been keeping a wary eye on him. "Stay till the inspector comes, *if* you please!"

"Certainly," answered the other, in the indistinct

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tones, smothered by the muffler, to which Thompson was used, but which made Jobling look at him sharply. "I was only going to shut the door. We don't want the whole ruddy hotel staff watching us." Having closed the door, he sat down again.

Time passed. The sergeant's efforts with the Schäffer method were without result. Harry stood contemplating him with ox-like calm, but the manager, a bundle of nerves, prowled incessantly round the room.

The sinister person in the muffler was sitting in the most comfortable chair, apparently perfectly calm. But perhaps the veiling of his features masked his perturbation. Only once did he make a remark. When the sergeant rolled over the body to inspect the face for any signs of life, he gazed for a moment at the ghastly mask.

"Poor old George!" he murmured. "He's caught it proper."

The inspector and the police surgeon arrived together. Dr. Harringay gave a brief preliminary survey of the victim. "No hope, I'm afraid, sergeant. Quite right to try, of course. Well, the spinal column is twisted but the cord can't have been severed for he has obviously died of asphyxiation. Died fairly recently, too, I should imagine. Lift him on to the bed, and I'll make a more detailed examination."

Inspector Gregson and Sergeant Jobling went outside the room for a moment, no doubt to confer. Directly they came back Gregson looked sharply at the person in the muffler. Inspector Gregson was an elderly man with a shapeless red face which seemed to puff out in strange places on his chin, at the sides of his nose, and above his eyes. In the middle of these volcanic

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contortions was set a pair of small hard, blue eyes. These hard blue eyes were fixed sharply on the stranger's face for about a minute. Then: "Before we talk together, sir," he said, "may I ask you to have the goodness to remove your hat and muffler?"

The stranger sat there without answering for a little. During that time the eyes of everyone in the room—even of the doctor—with one accord fastened themselves on that face, on that white silk muffler surmounted by an indistinct nose-bridge and two eyes deep in shadow. His chair, as the inspector had at once noticed, had its back to the light.

"I don't see what right you've got to ask me to do that," answered the man at last.

"Don't you?" said the inspector, his blue eyes glittering. "You don't, eh?"

"No. I don't."

"I see. Well, sir, I shouldn't take that attitude if I was you. It's true I can't here and now order you to take that scarf off your face. But the circumstances are rather suspicious, and it might be necessary to arrest you, and charge you with the murder of this person. Well, people don't wear mufflers in prison. Again, if we find that no suspicion attaches, you'll still be summoned to the Coroner's Court as a witness, and he'll order you to take that muffler off before you give evidence. If you refuse, it will be contempt of court. So unless you've some special reason, in which case you must state it, you'll kindly take off that disguise. You'll have to, sooner or later."

The man got up from the chair slowly. "Disguise! Come, that's a bit strong, isn't it? Still, if you insist!"

His hand went up to his head.

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Harry Thompson gasped. Even Sergeant Jobling and Inspector Gregson showed signs of excitement.

With a twitch of his fingers, the man sent muffler and hat flying on the chair.

Before them stood a man with a bronzed sunburnt face, open and genial, but its thick lips and heavy jowls gave a brutal emphasis to what otherwise would have been a normal enough countenance. He was middle aged and cleanshaven, and his red hair was cropped, emphasizing the squareness of the skull. His eyes had a humorous twinkle in them, but at the moment they were wary.

The inspector let his breath out with a little hiss.

"Thank you, sir!" he said.

Then he turned to Harry Thompson and the manager. "Will you please wait for me downstairs?"

The two left the room, Harry Thompson with a final unbelieving backward glance at the stranger. Meanwhile the inspector sat down on the arm of a chair and swung one leg easily.

"Your name, if you please?"

"Sam O'Leary," said the other. "At present tenant of the Wilderness, Little Whippering."

"Did you know the dead man?"

"I did. Poor old George, I've known him ever since we was lads."

"Why are you here? And what happened?"

"Well, it's like this, inspector. I got a telegram from George saying he was dying, but had good news for me." The man unfolded a telegram, and handed it over. The inspector looked at it, and without any comment put it in his pocket.

"Well," went on O'Leary, "I reckoned George was

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in a hospital here, or something, so I was surprised to find he was at a hotel. But anyway they told me in the hall that he'd left a message for me to go straight up to his room. I went straight in and found no one here."

"No one here?"

"No, not a soul. That's funny, I thought, he's supposed to be a-dying and here he is slipped out for a quick one! But George was always one for a joke, so I made myself comfortable in a chair and waited. Well, after ten minutes I began to have a queer feeling, I dunno quite how to describe it, a sort of creepy-crawly feeling. Imagination, I tells myself. All the same I started to poke round cautious-like, and blessed if I didn't feel sure there was someone else in the room. It struck me that George was hiding and was going to pop out of a cupboard sudden-like. So I shouts, 'Hi, are you in here, George, you old . . .?' There weren't no answer, so I looked in the cupboard. But there weren't nothing in there but a few clothes and a half-empty bottle of whisky. Then I pulled back the curtain in front of the wash basin there, and God strike me dead but there was poor old George, staring me in the face, hanging on a rope with his tongue stuck out, looking something awful, with his body just a-swinging gently to and fro, like as if he were doing it for a game. I whipped out my knife and cut him down and hollered for help, but it was too late."

"Only just too late," said the doctor looking up. "He can't have been dead long when you came in."

"Ay, that's the pity of it! If only I'd a-known at once! If only I'd guessed poor George was hanging there! Hang me if I know why he killed himself though!

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It's my belief that it was some confounded joke of his that went too far, if you understand me. He only meant to pretend to hang himself like."

"I see. Well, that's possible." The inspector rubbed his chin thoughtfully. At present he wished to know a good deal more before he questioned O'Leary further. For all the man's sudden affectation of candour, the contrast to his previous furtiveness was too great. He felt sure there was something more behind the affair than the miscarriage of a practical joke.

"Well, Mr. O'Leary, that is all I want to know at the present, but I must ask you to be good enough to call tomorrow at the police station to answer a few more questions. As you will realize, I shall want to enquire into the things mentioned in this telegram."

"At your service, Inspector," said the man, with a wave of his hand. "Anything that will help to clear up poor old George's memory. He certainly acted a bit strange sometimes, but I never expected to see this."

Mr. O'Leary left the room, and it was noticeable that his muffler was now tied in a normal manner, beneath his chin.

As he passed out, he told Harry Thompson to meet him in the Brown Cow round the corner as soon as the inspector had finished with him.

Meanwhile, at a word from the inspector, Sergeant Jobling had slipped down after O'Leary, to see that he did not try to leave the district. Having seen him safely into the Brown Cow, the sergeant rang up the station from a call-office opposite the public house and ordered two plain-clothes men to be sent to take over his task. When they arrived he returned to his superior.

Meanwhile the inspector was questioning Harry.

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From him he got a lurid account of the Miser's arrival at Little Whippering two years before and his subsequent seclusion. He also ascertained that the period of Harry's wait outside the hotel agreed with O'Leary's own statement of the time he had been sitting in the dead man's room.

From the manager, Gregson learned that the dead man had turned up the previous night and had taken a room. He had had his meals sent up and had apparently spent most of his time gazing dreamily out of the window. He had only tasted the food, sending it away uneaten. He had signed the Register as George Crumbles, but for address had written "None."

He had given everyone the impression of being depressed or disagreeable. Thus, when Jim the boy who brought up his meal, had set it down on the table, he had heard the bearded man remark, in tones of abysmal melancholy, still gazing out of the window: "Gawd, what a town! What a climate!" And then, turning to the table: "And what a bleeding meal!"

"What do you make of it, Doctor?" said the inspector when his interrogation was finished. "Is it suicide?"

Dr. Harringay tapped his nose thoughtfully. "I don't really see how I can say. He was strangled with this cord, and violently too. Judging from the length of the rope, and the fact that he piled one stool on another, he took a fairly long drop, and he's not a lightweight. So the suicide hypothesis is reasonable enough, though I must say one suspects our sinister friend instinctively. If it was a suicide it was a neat job. The knot right under the left ear, you see, to jerk his head over. The jerk would have compressed his

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spinal cord so that he probably never struggled, but just hung limp and was soon asphyxiated."

"I see." The inspector began to make a careful tour of the room. "We'll check up on the fingerprints, of course, but a hotel bedroom is a pretty hopeless proposition from that point of view."

He turned out the contents of the wardrobe and ran through them. "Ready-made clothes. London tailor. G.C. in marking ink on the lining."

He examined the fatal rope carefully, and then sent for the manager.

"Take this around among the servants and see if any of them identify it!"

Presently the manager returned.

"Yes, sir, the porter says the gentleman asked him last night to buy a length of stout cord to tie up his suitcase as the lock had broken, and this was it."

"Right!" The inspector fingered the cord thoughtfully, and then examined the man's empty suitcase. The lock was in perfect condition. Prowling round the room: "It does look like suicide, doesn't it?" he said. Then he stopped at the wash basin, of the built-in variety, and looked carefully into it.

"The taps ought to be good for fingerprints," he murmured. With a quick movement he put his two fingers down the plug hole, fingers which, the manager noticed, were surprisingly thin and long. They came up holding what looked like a bunch of wet fluff.

The inspector brought it to the light.

"Odd," he remarked, "a tuft of black hair!"

He went up to the corpse, and ran an exploratory finger through its beard and neatly brushed and parted hair.

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"Doesn't look as if it's off *him*, but of course it may be," said the inspector doubtfully. "Trimming his hair perhaps."

"Perhaps the hair is from a previous occupant of the room," suggested the doctor.

"I expect so," answered the inspector. "However, you never know. It's dark at any rate."

He folded the hair up carefully in a piece of paper. Then he began to go through the dead man's pockets. In the trousers pocket he found a handkerchief marked G.C.; and in the outer pockets of the coat a driving licence and a map of Abingdon and its environs. In the hip pocket of the trousers he found a revolver.

"Fully loaded," said the inspector with a whistle as he peered into the cylinder. "That's odd! You'd have thought he'd have shot himself since he had a revolver."

Then he put his hand into the breast pocket and drew out a wallet. As he opened it two envelopes slipped out.

"Ah-h," said the inspector slowly. "Here's something addressed to the Coroner." The inspector took out the letter and read it.

"*Dear Sir,—Being depressed and ill I have decided to make away with myself. I haven't been myself since I came back from Africa, what with the rain and the thoughts racing round and round in my head. I came here to give my old pal Spike O'Leary some good news and all I ask is that he should see me buried proper.*"

"Well, that seems clear enough!" The inspector examined the letter closely. "Do you see he wrote some

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other name instead of 'Spike O'Leary' and then carefully crossed it out?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "If they were such old pals it's odd he shouldn't be sure of the name. Overwrought, perhaps!"

"Perhaps," commented the inspector meaningly. "Ah, and now the other letter. Addressed to Spike O'Leary. He seems surer of the name this time."

*"Good-bye, old man, I just can't stand it with the thoughts going round and round in my head. You'll understand. You'll be glad to hear Tuffy Samson was killed in a car accident as soon as he came out of jail. I saw his body myself. See I'm buried proper, that's all I ask."*

"It certainly seems suicide," mused the inspector, "though there's a good deal to investigate between now and the inquest. This Tuffy Samson for instance. I think I'll just make sure these letters are genuine too."

The manager was sent to fetch the register and it also turned out that he had luckily kept a note which the visitor had pinned to his door, asking to be called early. The inspector compared the handwritings on these with the letters.

"Genuine all right," he pronounced. "All the same . . ."

He walked to the window, turned, and gazed thoughtfully at the dead man, his eyes pinpoints of distrust.

"All the same?" prompted the doctor.

"All the same," replied the inspector, and now his puffy face looked tense and energetic, "I should like

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to know why friend O'Leary, who's lived for two years indoors and never come out except at night, has a face as sunburnt as a man who's lived in the sun for months!"

Dr. Harringay gave a whistle. "By jove, you're right! It's odd, damned odd!"

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Miser Much Alive*

NEXT morning Mr. O'Leary without hat or muffler, and exhaling good humour, walked into Inspector Gregson's office in Wantage. He was prompt to time.

"Now, Inspector," he said heartily, "what can I do for you? Say the word, and O'Leary's your man."

Inspector Gregson leaned back in his chair and looked at Mr. O'Leary. There was no answering smile on his face. If the corners of his mouth twitched at all, it was in a grimace of contempt.

After a moment of this quiet scrutiny, the burly red-headed man seemed to lose something of his jollity. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"Sit down, Mr. O'Leary," said the inspector at last. "And the first question I'm going to ask you is, *are* you Mr. O'Leary?"

Mr. O'Leary's eyes transferred themselves warily from the inspector's face to the wall above his right shoulder.

"What makes you think I wouldn't be?" he asked cautiously.

The inspector took out Crumbles' letter to the coroner. "Your pal didn't seem sure of your name himself. You see he's crossed out the name he put first, and then written 'Spike O'Leary' over the top. More-



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over I have learned that George Crumbles was in Little Whippering making inquiries about you a day or two previous to his death, and the name O'Leary meant nothing to him. He recognized you only by your manner of life. The deduction's obvious."

"I can see you're quick in the uptake, Inspector. That's a bit of what I call Sherlock Holmes. Well, between you and me and the gate-post, O'Leary *ain't* my name. Leastways George Crumbles always knew me as Spike Galloway, though I'm not saying I was born that."

"And why did you change your name, Mr. O'Leary?"

"Well, that'd be a long story."

"All the same I should like to hear it. Particularly if it has something to do with this Tuffy Samson. We want to know why George Crumbles thought you would be pleased at Tuffy Samson's death. Is it a part of your story?"

Mr. O'Leary slapped the desk in front of him with his open palm.

"You're a corker, Inspector. Right on the nail each time! Yes, it's all one story. And it's a long one. But you know all of us, except you coppers of course, have got a thing or two in our pasts we don't like making a palaver about. Well this story's about something of the kind. Just a bit of adventure, really, but folk in England mightn't understand it that way."

The inspector grunted understandingly.

"That isn't exactly a new experience for a policeman, Mr. O'Leary, and I don't think you will find us easily shocked. If you make a clean breast of everything you know of Crumbles, I promise in return to divulge

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nothing that isn't absolutely essential to clearing up the cause of death. At present it seems a clear case of suicide. All we require is further light on the motive for Crumbles' action, and then no doubt we'll let the matter drop."

The inspector offered O'Leary a cigarette. He took it, made himself comfortable in his chair, and cocking his head back stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"Well, there were three of us, down on our luck at Kano—that's in Nigeria—more'n twelve years ago—Tuffy Samson, George Crumbles, and myself. We got talking about how to make money, having met Tuffy casual like, and he told us he was in on a good thing. He'd learned from some drunken native where the treasure of the nigger kingdom of Balooma had been buried during a British punitive expedition. We'd continued to occupy the country, so the Royal family, who were in exile, had left the treasure hidden. Only the Guardian of the treasure knew where it was. Well, this drunk was one of the Guardians, only he'd got kicked out for making trouble, and there in Kano he'd sunk lower and lower the way a black can when he's cut off from his tribe and fetiches and so forth. Now Balooma wasn't far down the coast and Tuffy Samson's idea was that we should lift the treasure. Of course it was a risky business. First of all the local blacks would have it in for us if they knew. We reckoned we could make rings round them all night, but the Administration had been trying to find the treasure too. If they caught us pinching it we should be in for a term of gaol under some damnation law of theirs. If there wasn't one, they'd invent it.

"Any way Tuffy Samson knew where this treasure

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was buried. Of course he didn't tell us where it was at first. As it happened it was about fifty yards out from the shore of a sacred lake in Balooma, in the shallows. He'd have tried to go after it alone, only he was fairly new to Africa, and anyway couldn't raise the wind to hire bearers and so forth. Crumbles and I had a little cash between us, and so we agreed to fit out the expedition. The treasure was to be split four ways, George and I taking a part each, and Tuffy two parts.

"Then came the job of getting into Balooma, for of course we had to get permission from the Administration. Finally I got hold of some moth-eaten professor in Kano belonging to a German learned society, and kidded him we were great hunters who could bring him back some new beasts and bugs. We told him we'd seen the Devil Pig, which all the natives round that part of the world believe in, in Balooma and that it was a kind of pigmy rhinoceros. He got quite excited and soon got permission for a Zoölogical Expedition from the Administration. They stipulated that he must lead the Expedition, but that suited us, for we knew we could jolly the old fool along, and get him to go wherever we wanted.

"And so we started off. The Society paid part of our expenses and our bearers were all hung round with killing bottles, and snares, and cages, and butterfly nets, and God knows what. We told old mossyface we had seen the Devil Pig on the shores of the Sacred Lake.

"When we got there we stole out at night, pulled up the treasure—all thick gold and ivory and stuff—and filled eight boxes with it. The next day when the professor was out with half the carriers, browsing among

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the orchids and what-not, we loaded up the rest of the carriers with our treasure and beat it like stink out of Balooma.

"But somehow or other we were spotted. I don't know to this day how it happened. I don't see how anyone can have guessed what was in our loads, for they were all corded and sealed. But the bush telegraph started going when we were hopping as fast as we could drive our carriers through the swamps at the mouth of the Nwama River. We'd arranged for an Arab fishing boat to hang round in the harbour there, to pick us up if we were successful. But those bloody drums! They're eerie enough when you don't understand them —*pink boom! pink-boom pink-boom pinkety-pinkety, boom boom!* that's the way they go all the time. When you know that they're sending a message calling for your blood it makes the sweat come out all over you. I saw those blasted blacks' lips moving as they tried to read the message. Presently one of them got it, then they all started jabbering together.

"I thought they'd turn on us at once, so we all got out our rifles and stood by. But they didn't even make an attempt to attack us. They just dropped their loads where they stood and beat it into the swamp as if they'd been carrying snakes. I tried to stop one, and he went as white as a black can go—and I tell you it's a nasty mouldy colour. You'd have thought he was afraid one touch of my hands would strike him dead. And so we were left alone, like three fools, and those bloody drums still going.

"Well, it was twenty miles still to the harbour, and we knew we couldn't hoick the loads all that way. We should have to run like hell to get away with our skins.

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So we dumped the treasure in a spot where no one would think of looking for it, and then started to make ourselves scarce.

"We managed to get to the shore and be picked up by our Arab friend but when he found we hadn't got the treasure he threatened to put us ashore again. Then he said he would take us only on condition we told him where the treasure was. We knew what *that* meant. He'd come back and pinch it himself. We had a hell of an argument, and then stuck a gun in his stomach and told him to order the crew to up with the sail and shut up. So we got going, but two or three hours afterwards, on purpose I reckon, he ran us practically under the bows of a Balooma Administration gunboat. The johnny in charge spotted three white men on board and ordered us to heave to. Then we knew the game was up."

Up to this point O'Leary had been telling his narrative with a fire and a freedom which argued either that it was the plain truth, or else had been frequently rehearsed. Now he hesitated visibly.

"It gets a bit complicated at this point," he said awkwardly. "You see we were tried and Crumbles and I had a bit of a quarrel with Tuffy. Crumbles and I were in favour of telling the Administration where the treasure was, so as to get away with a light sentence. Tuffy wasn't, like an obstinate fool. So he got sentenced to ten year's imprisonment while George and I got off with three months."

"And the Administration got the treasure?" asked Inspector Gregson.

"Yes, the Administration got the treasure," said O'Leary, an evasive look in his eyes. "Well, while

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we were in prison, we saw Tuffy. He was feeling sore. He tried to get us once with an iron bar when we were exercising. Traitors, he called us, and you wouldn't believe how wild the man was. You'd have thought he blamed it on to us that he was in prison at all. As they dragged him away he swore that directly he got out of prison he'd do us in even if he had to drag us out of hell. And the trouble was we knew Tuffy would keep his word. We knew one or two things in his past, you see. He used to boast when he was drunk that he'd shot a man who'd been rude to him once, and knifed another who'd been a bit too sharp for him in business. Tuffy was a pleasant-spoken sort of man to meet, but if you ever irritated him and saw the nasty look in his eyes, well, you took good care to keep out of his way in future.

"Of course a gust of temper is all right, it's soon over, but if a man has ten years to brood over it, a man like Tuffy, it's a different thing. So we were a bit nervous, George and I when we came out. I went back to England, but George hung around the West Coast, partly because he liked it, partly to keep an eye open for when Tuffy came out.

"There was the difference between our temperments, you see George couldn't abear to think of a danger hanging around somewhere coming goodness knows when. He wanted to rush up to it and get it over, whatever happened. Contrariwise I reckon myself a prudent chap. I keep out of the way of trouble.

"Well, two years ago, Tuffy was due to come out of prison. And I started to take precautions. I changed my name, went to live in Little Whippering, which seemed about as peaceful a place as I could find, and

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kept my weather eye lifting for trouble. I was reckoning on his getting tired of looking for me, you see. With the trouble I'd taken to cover up my tracks it stood to reason that he'd never find me. I reckoned he'd try to bump off George first, I hoped George would get him first—for he was pretty smart—else if he got George first that he'd get hung for George's murder. And I was right. He must have gone after George, for you see two years passed and he must have been out on the West Coast all the time looking for George until he got killed in that car accident."

Mr. O'Leary looked at the inspector and winked confidentially. "Now that George's dead, I don't mind saying I'd be surprised if it *was* an accident. It was altogether too lucky from George's point of view. And happening in the same town as George too!"

"Your idea is that Crumbles murdered Samson?" asked Gregson quietly. "And afterward killed himself out of remorse?"

O'Leary shifted uneasily. "Well, I wouldn't say murdered exactly. I mean it ain't a nice word to use of a pal. But after all George was entitled to protect himself. Self-defence is legal, ain't it? And I reckon he attended to Tuffy. He was a clever little devil, George was, to give him his due. But he was moody, never contented with what he'd got, and it's just like him to worry hisself silly with a thing like that, which an ordinary man takes in his stride, as you might say."

"Well, I wouldn't have said it," said Inspector Gregson. "Not in this country at any rate. It may be different on the West Coast of Africa. However, thank you for your frankness, Mr. O'Leary. It is a very interest-

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ing story in itself, and certainly throws light on the deceased.

"I don't think I shall need to trouble you again, but it will be necessary to repeat a portion of your story at the inquest. How much I cannot say. That will depend on the coroner. You will find him very reasonable. As you doubtless know you need to say nothing that would tend to incriminate yourself. However that hardly arises, for your old offence in Balooma has been purged by your trial and imprisonment. Meanwhile you must not change your address without letting us know."

"That's all right, Inspector, I'm not proposing to leave Little Whippering for a bit. Now that I know Tuffy's dead I feel a sight more cheerful. Bless you, you might say I'm a new man."

After Mr. O'Leary's departure, Inspector Gregson remained lost in thought, studying his copious notes of O'Leary's strange and somewhat glamorous story.

Then he put a trunk call through to the Colonial Office. As a result of that telephone conversation (as the inspector would no doubt have expressed it in a court of law) he sent a telegram to an official in Nigeria. . . .

. . . . . .

That evening the public bar of the Marion Arms was exhaustively discussing the sensation provided by Harry Thompson who, for the moment, was the most important man in the village. There was not, of course, the slightest doubt of what had actually happened.

"He done him in," said Mr. Gudgeon, "the foul-mouthed old curmudgeon! There can't be a doubt of

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it. An' I'd like to know what the inspector means letting him come back here. Why any of us might be asflixeated in our beds."

"'E's a murderer," quavered Mr. Padding from the corner, "and I always knowed it."

He reflected with some annoyance that this had been his original theory, out of which he had been argued by Gudgeon. If only he had stuck to it he might now have been basking in all the glory of a successful prophet. As it was he did his best.

"I always knowed it, but naterly I didn't want to skeer the wimmen."

"Well, tell us what he's like, Harry," asked Mr. Bundling, wiping the froth off his beard. "I can't somehow picture un. Is he fierce-like?"

Harry scratched his head. "Well, he ain't anything particular, he looks ordinary enough, just like you or me."

"Who does?" said a voice.

Mr. O'Leary was standing in the doorway, a tanned square-jawed man in flannel trousers, a hat stuck on the back of his cropped head, and a disarming smile on his face.

"Good-evening, Harry! Good-evening, gentlemen."

No one in the room had looked on the countenance of Mr. O'Leary except Harry Thompson. Consequently they all, except Harry, returned the stranger's good-evening with an equable murmur, and prepared to continue their discussion. Harry himself was for a moment stricken dumb by the sudden appearance of the recluse. But he pulled himself together with an effort. At all costs the community must be warned of the murderer in their midst.

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"Why, good-evening, Mr. O'Leary!" he said loudly. "We didn't think to see you here, Mr. O'Leary!"

There was a sudden awe-struck silence, then a volley of clinks as glasses and cans were hurriedly put down. Jaws opened in horror or surprise. Even Mr. O'Leary felt the sudden change in the social temperature.

"Surprised to see me, were you, gentlemen?" Mr. O'Leary laughed loudly and carelessly. "Well, I admit I've been a bit of a hermit as you might say. But I had my reasons. I had my reasons! It's all over now. And I'm going to make up for lost time. You watch me! I'm going to celebrate, and when Spike O'Leary says *celebrate* he means it. Yes, you sons of guns, I'll show you what we mean by celebration where *I* come from!"

"Where do you come from?" said Mr. Gudgeon argumentatively.

"Where do I come from? That's a good 'un." Mr. O'Leary laughed again. "I come from a place where it's as hot as hell, as thirsty as the Sahara, and as smelly as the bilge of an Arab dhow."

Without waiting for comment on this cryptic remark Mr. O'Leary flung a handful of silver on the counter.

"Drinks all round!" he exclaimed to Mrs. Hipple, a little white-haired old lady dressed in rusty black. Mrs. Hipple looked at Mr. O'Leary, looked at the silver, and sniffed.

"Anything wrong with it, darling?" asked Mr. O'Leary, leaning one elbow on the counter with an expansive smile.

Mrs. Hipple jerked her head back indignantly.

"That's as may be, and my name's Mrs. Hipple."

"Lor', you don't half shrivel a man up, do you?"

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said Mr. O'Leary, the focus of a tense silence, which, however, he showed no signs of noticing. "Well, I ain't easily 'urt. Don't forget to include one for yourself in the drinks, with my respecks!"

The company in the Marion Arms waited for someone to voice their sentiments. The duty clearly fell on Mr. Padding, as the oldest. He piped up bravely:

"Thanking you, but I don't want no drink!"

Mr. O'Leary swung round abruptly, causing the ancient nearly to topple off his seat. Mr. Padding supported his quivering hands on his stick, and stared up at the stranger defiantly.

"You don't want no drink!" repeated Mr. O'Leary slowly, and his voice was cold and tense. "Are you ill?"

"No, I ain't ill."

"Are you T.T.?"

At any other time this ludicrous question would have provided laughter from the assembled company. But as it was they gazed silently at Mr. Padding's trembling lips. His eyes still fixed by the reptilian gaze of the stranger, he answered in a strangled voice:

"No, I ain't T.T."

"Then is it because you object to my company?" roared Mr. O'Leary, suddenly seeming to expand to twice his normal size. "Say so, if it is! Say so by all means! Then we'll know where we are. Go on, it's quite simple. Just say, *I don't like your company!*"

Mr. O'Leary towered over the awestruck yokel, his fists swinging gently by his side, their freckled backs turned towards the other, who stared fascinated at the dense growth of red hair running up to the knuckles. Blue fire seemed to shoot out of Mr. O'Leary's eyes. Mr. Padding, justifying himself to his cronies after-

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wards, explained, "He 'ipnertized me, that's what 'appened. I meaned to tell un to get out of a respectable public, but something went clickety in my throat."

"Do you object to my company?" thundered Mr. O'Leary again.

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Padding at last, with a kind of squeak.

"Then you'll have a drink with me?"

"Yes."

"Here's what I call a pal," roared Mr. O'Leary patting him on the back with a wolfish grin. "Hearty! Matey! Up-and-coming! Forward with the beer for Old Jollywhiskers here, Mrs. Hipple, darling! And here's yours, Harry! Help yourself, everyone."

The rest of the company did not feel it incumbent on them to stand where Mr. Padding had given way. The drinks were accepted, but if they thought they were going to finish with Mr. O'Leary so simply, they were mistaken in their man.

"Hey, drink up, lads! What are you, a lot of sissies? Bless my soul, I thought Little Whippering had a name for beer drinking. Down with the stuff. Come on, I'll show you. Mrs. Hipple, a quart of beer!"

"A quart?" said Mrs. Hipple incredulously.

"Yes, a quart, dearie."

"We ain't got a quart tankard."

"Don't be awkward, angel-face. Shove it in anything. Bowl, basin, jug, flowerpot, or," with a wink, "even 'umbler utensils!"

Mrs. Hipple eventually returned with a brimming Toby Jug, which she placed on the counter with an expression as who should say, "I won't be answerable for the consequences."

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"Now watch me, lads," said Mr. O'Leary. Taking a deep breath, he threw his head back, applied his mouth to the jug, and began to drink. He was watched in an awestruck silence until he waved the jug triumphantly upside down in the air to prove its emptiness, at the same time expelling his breath in a long sigh.

"That's the way to lap it up, lads, bless my soul! A quart between breaths. It's good for the lungs."

He banged the jug on the bar. "That's some good beer you've got there, sweetest. Bring me another pint, and a pint all round. Damnation take it, make it a quart all round! And a bottle of Scotch for the man who can drink his off without taking a breath!"

The bottle of Scotch was won by Harry. Panting, with popping eyes, he staggered slightly, when Mr. O'Leary clapped him on the back.

"There's a man for you! We could do with more lads like him in Britain today!"

It is impossible to drink beer continuously at a man's expense and continue to preserve a frigid attitude towards him, particularly a man with a dominating personality like Mr. O'Leary.

Mr. O'Leary, moreover, was assiduous in his attentions to the company. With Harry he was patronizing. To Mr. Gudgeon he was respectful. With Mr. Bundling he was matey. With Mr. Snugg courteous. Even Mrs. Hipple thawed after the fifth gin, and smiled when Mr. O'Leary asserted that she had the most fetching dimple he had ever seen, it made him feel young again.

Then Mr. O'Leary jumped up on the bar. "Come on, lads, a song," he said, waving a siphon, "I'll lead you."

Little Whippering had always been proud of its

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glees, and it seemed that Mr. O'Leary, sojourning in heathen lands, had learned a number of songs, some of them with strangely attractive catches. Presently even Mr. Padding was opening his toothless gums and joining in the ditties, gently waving his mug, while Mr. O'Leary roared encouragement and from time to time bestowed smacking kisses on Mrs. Hipple's hand or any other available portion of her venerable person.

One song in particular appealed to Little Whippering, and it was only next morning that it struck them, in the circumstances, as peculiarly ill-chosen. It recited the sufferings of one Ted, a parson's son, condemned to live in a tropical port. The ending was sung with tremendous gusto and imitative gesture by O'Leary:

He said: "I've missed the bleeding boat!"
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*
He tied a rope around his throat.
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*

He jumped upon the nearest chair,
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*
He swung his feet into the air.
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*

He waved his ankles to and fro!
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*
He kicked and jerked like billyo!
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*

When Mrs. Hipple for the last time called beseechingly, "Time, gentlemen, please," Mr. O'Leary appeared to be the only person in full possession of his

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faculties. It was a dark moonless night, and for more than an hour afterwards figures wavered uncertainly among the lanes, making encouraging noises to each other, seeking their dwelling places. Once there was an appalling objurgation, when Mr. Bundling was caught by the ditch as it pounced on him for the second time. He tripped headlong into it. He was helped out by Harry Thompson, who, by some extraordinary freak of nature, suddenly found himself in the ditch, being helped out by Mr. Bundling. This gave him a horrible uncertain feeling, as if he were not quite sure whether he were Harry Thompson or Mr. Bundling. One person, believed to be young Bunn, made no attempt to go home, but remained huddled up outside the Marion Arms.

Meanwhile the steps of Mr. O'Leary could be heard tapping loudly on the macadam surface of the hill, and then suddenly dying away as he turned off on the long track which led towards the Wilderness. Even when his footsteps had become inaudible, and for long afterwards, the strains of his loud melodious voice could be heard, floating over the thatched roofs of Little Whippering:

He waved his ankles to and fro!
*(Poor old Ted, the parson's son!)*
He kicked and jerked, like billyo!
(*Poor old Ted, the parson's son!*)

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