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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"It moved in violent jerks, as though whatever was imprisoned inside was hurling itself against the stone-like seal."



Fothergill's Jug

By THORP McCLUSKY

A fascinating story about a strange jug that was dug out of the sands of Mesopotamia, and the weird entity that dwelt within the jug

YESTERDAY, in Winsted, Connecticut, a total stranger told me this story. My wife and I live in Hartford; we have friends in Winsted, the Fred T. Winns (the resemblance between the city and family names is pure coincidence), and it was at their home that the narrative which follows was related to me.

It seems significant to me that no one in Winsted knew that we were coming

there yesterday. We ourselves didn't know. Yesterday was a Saturday, a beautiful day, and about ten o'clock in the morning, Ruth, my wife, suggested that we go driving. We drove up along the Farmington River to Collinsville, and there Ruth said, "Well, we've come this far; we might as well continue on and see the Winns." It happened like that, without premeditation.

The Winns live right on the main

road through Winsted, but considerably beyond the center, almost out in the country. Theirs is a large, old house set on a corner lot; there is plenty of land around that house, a big garden and a yard with lawn chairs and swings scattered about, and horseshoe pits staked out in a level spot.

IT WAS about two o'clock in the afternoon when we drove into the Winns' yard. We had purposely taken our time, stopping here and there on our way to smell the flowers—like Ferdinand—and lingering over a leisurely lunch at a small roadside grill. Fred, when we arrived, was pitching horseshoes in the yard with a slender, white-haired gentleman I had never met before; Laura was in the house making deep-fat doughnuts. Laura, smiling broadly, came out on the side porch, and Ruth jumped out of the car and they hugged each other and went into the house together. I climbed more slowly from behind the wheel and went over to the quoits game.

"Go ahead, finish your game," I said; I knew that quoits was a small mania with Fred. "I'll watch." I sat down on a shaded bench, stretched out my legs and relaxed.

Fred and the stranger smiled and nodded, and finished out their game. Then they pulled handkerchiefs from their pockets and, wiping their faces and hands, came over to me.

"So, Mac," Fred grinned, "good to see you again. Pleasant surprise. Can you stay over? Meet Doctor Bowen—Jim Bowen; Thorp McClusky. Shake hands; make yourselves acquainted."

The doctor glanced at me with an odd, wary curiosity as we shook hands. That fleeting expression on his face puzzled me; it was so peculiarly questioning. Then it passed, and we were

tossing genial remarks back and forth. Fred volunteered the information that the doctor owned a camp on Highland Lake—that he spent his summer vacations there.

"Awful lot of cottages at Highland Lake," I blurted. "Not much solitude left up there nowadays."

"Yes, there's little solitude left around Highland Lake," Doctor Bowen admitted, with a dry laugh. "I used to prefer occasional solitude, but no more. Fact is, at one time I owned an old farm up in the hills back of New Hartford, and I used to go up there summers, all alone. I'm a bachelor, you know. But I sold it in 1928, and built the place on the lake. I'm growing more gregarious with the years, I guess."

Right then I knew, with intuitive certainty, that there was a story behind the sale of that farm. But it was just as apparent that Doctor Bowen had no intention of telling us more.

"Why, New Hartford's had quite a cosmopolitan summer colony for years," I persisted, with more doggedness than tact. "Efrem and Alma Gluck Zimbalist are there quite frequently. Didn't you meet them?"

"No, I didn't," he said almost brusquely. "I had only one friend in New Hartford—and he's dead." The muscles of his face smiled quickly, then, but there was no lightening in his eyes. "Shall we have a game of quoits, Mac?—I may call you Mac? Do you play?"

"Mac's a writer," Fred hurriedly explained.

Surprisingly, Doctor Bowen nodded.

"I know he is. I recognized his name when we were introduced." He said directly to me, "I've read some of your more imaginative stories."

It struck me as definitely odd that he hadn't mentioned this before. Every-

one likes to have his name or his work recognized; mere recognition is subtle flattery. . . .

"WEIRD TALES?" I asked.

Again he nodded. "I've been a WEIRD TALES addict since 1928."

He had sold his New Hartford farm in 1928.

"What do you think of H. P. Lovecraft's tales?" I asked him, though that date, 1928, was beginning to whirl around in the back of my brain. Fred said something polite and went and got two lawn chairs, and the three of us sat down in a compact little triangle, Fred and Doctor Bowen in the lawn chairs and I on the bench, and for about half an hour Doctor Bowen and I talked about Lovecraft. But all the time we were talking I felt the peculiar conviction that Doctor Bowen was deliberately withholding information that he knew would interest me, information, moreover, that he desperately wanted to give me.

Finally I asked him, point-blank, "What's on your mind, Doc? Here we are talking about Lovecraft, but you're really not thinking about Lovecraft at all; you're thinking about something entirely different."

He parried that with a nervous little laugh, and a question of his own.

"Tell me, McClusky, do you fellows really believe the stories you write? I'll elaborate on that—of course, I know that fiction is fiction, and that names and dates and places are changed—but do you really have any belief in the plausibility of the basic material you use?"

I LIT a cigarette, thinking my answer out carefully before I replied.

"Here's my own personal conviction," I told him, then. "I don't believe any writer in the world ever

turned out a story without the notion—no matter how faint or obscured—somewhere in his mind that the incidents he relates might somewhere, sometime, somehow, come to pass. That statement is especially difficult to apply to the so-called fantastic type of story. Nevertheless it is true that, in almost every instance, these so implausible-seeming stories have a definite foundation, a definite genesis, either in legend—and remember that wherever there is smoke there is fire—or in the workings of observable phenomena which have not yet been satisfactorily explained, or in imaginative prophecy. Have you read *Lo*, by Charles Fort?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, in *Lo*, Fort collected a tremendous mass of evidence detailing phenomena all of which is beyond mundane explanation. Those events occurred; there's not a doubt of that; they're all well authenticated. And—this may come as a distinct surprise to you—there's plenty of pretty grim historical evidence behind those New England stories Lovecraft wrote. In some instances you can even definitely tell what family legends he was shooting at; he was so certain that what he wrote would be taken for out-and-out fiction that, although he always meticulously altered all names, he left many of the dates as they actually were."

"I didn't know that," he muttered, and I could see that he was surprised.

"Well, it's so," I told him, "and we can take it for what it's worth. Lovecraft worked, more often than not, from meager material—old letters, courthouse records, genealogies, obituary notices. Aware that the mundanely inexplicable had occurred, he tried his hand at explanation. Perhaps some of his explanations are far-fetched; perhaps some of them approach, however

distantly, the truth. Who knows? And who can say that Lovecraft might not—and with good reason—have half-believed those tales he wrote?”

HE MULLED that over for what seemed a long time. Then, in a curiously small, troubled voice, he said, “Listen, McClusky; if I had any assurance that you wouldn’t laugh at me I’d tell you something that’d knock you right off that bench.”

“I won’t laugh at you,” I promised.

He shifted uneasily in his canvas chair. “But I’m telling this as truth,” he insisted. “This isn’t conjecture; it’s real. The little bit that I tell you I saw, I *did* see. It’s had me half mad for years, trying to find the explanation. Fothergill, like Lovecraft, had a theory. But I warn you that it’s beyond our present-day, mundane science.”

“Shoot,” I said. “If you tell me your story as truth I have the privilege of believing you or not, as I please. Anyhow, I won’t laugh.”

He exhaled a tremendous sigh of relief. “All right,” he said. “It’ll take a load off my mind—just the telling; and so long as you won’t laugh—

“I wasn’t always as gregarious as I am now. In fact, I was, for years, quite the reverse of gregarious. Not that I was anti-social; I did have a few tried and true friends, and these I have retained through the years. But I had no instinct for fraternalism, for striking up superficial and meaningless acquaintanceships, for the ‘Hail fellow, well-met’ sort of existence.

“My about-face came in the late summer of 1928. . . .

“I acquired the New Hartford farm in 1925, and my reasons for purchasing it were two. First, although the land itself was poor, the house was one of the most exquisite—and I do not use

that adjective lightly—examples of early Colonial design I have ever seen anywhere—and in a perfect state of preservation; practically all it needed was a coat of paint. Second, the place promised the seclusion I felt that I occasionally needed. The nearest house was more than a hundred yards away—and I carefully ascertained its ownership before I purchased my property. It was owned by a queer duck named Fothergill, an archeologist—the sort of fellow who would be away for months on end and who wouldn’t be likely to bother me even when he was in residence.”

“Fothergill?” Fred Winn asked now. “Fothergill? I place the name now. Wasn’t he killed in an explosion—eight, nine years back? Didn’t his house blow up, or something? There was quite a lot of talk about that.”

“He was killed,” Doctor Bowen said quietly, “at about two-thirty in the morning of August eleventh, 1928. But it wasn’t an explosion that killed him.”

Still speaking in that quiet monotone that carried more conviction than any amount of rhetoric, he went on:

“The New Hartford place suited me ideally. It was not so far from New York that I couldn’t drive the distance in a couple of hours, and stepping into that farmhouse was like going back three hundred years. I furnished only three or four of the downstairs rooms, but I furnished them well—with authentic Colonial pieces; when I’d finished I felt as pleased as though I’d built a castle. . . .

“Well, in the summer of 1926 I met Fothergill. His first name was Robert—Robert Fothergill. I met him by accident; after all, our properties adjoined and fronted on the same road, so I suppose our meeting was inevit-

able. And after we'd run into each other a couple of times I found out, to my surprise, that I liked him. We gradually struck up a friendship.

"I DON'T think I saw him more than a dozen times that summer. I hadn't seen him before because he'd been away for ten months with some expedition to some gosh-awful place—Mesopotamia, I think. He told me that they had a hole out there in the desert; it was over forty feet deep in some places, and they'd already unearthed the ruins of nine distinct civilizations, city piled upon city like the layers of a cake. And they weren't to the bottom yet; they were going back and dig some more. Fothergill sailed for England around the end of August, and that was the last I saw of him that year.

"He was in New Hartford for about two months the next summer. We picked up where we'd left off, without any fuss or feathers; we were both bachelors, remember, up there to rest and get away for a time from the pressure of living. We each did our own cooking, and we got into the habit of taking our evening meals together; he'd come over and have supper with me one night, and I'd return the visit the next. It saved labor.

"He showed me a lot of pictures, that summer, of their camp, their excavations and what-not. They'd done a large amount of digging; they'd plowed up a piece of desert you couldn't put into a forty-acre lot, and, as I told you, in some places they'd gone down pretty deep, forty feet or more. He showed me a lot of photographs of brick walls—those old cities over in Asia Minor were mostly built of brick, you know—and pieces of pottery, and inscribed tiles, and statuary;

oh, they were digging up a tremendous quantity of stuff, all prehistoric; the city down at the bottom of those forty-foot holes was forgotten before the Pyramids were built.

"Well, he went away again that year at about the same time, around the end of August. And he showed up in New Hartford again around the middle of the following July—July, 1928. He was later than usual in getting home that year; he'd had to stop in London and catch up on a lot of desk work.

"He telephoned me on the day he arrived (as much as I disliked the idea of having a telephone at the farm I'd had one installed so that I'd always be accessible in emergency; that's part of the hell of being a doctor) and asked me to come over. I had just finished lunch; it was about one o'clock in the afternoon, and I had planned to get in three or four hours' work on a case history I was writing up, so I suggested meeting for dinner. He was insistent, in a voice so thick and strange that I thought he must be ill. Too, he hadn't dropped in, casually; he had telephoned. That was odd. I went to his house at once.

"Obviously he had called me at almost the moment he'd set foot inside the house. He had not changed from the trousers of the blue serge suit he had worn up from New York; the coat and vest and a battleship-gray necktie lay on the hall table. The place was a mess; he'd had the house opened and cleaned and everything turned on, but the hall was still jammed with trunks and boxes of books and crates of God-knows-what. I noticed that he had already opened one of the crates, and removed its contents—

"'Come into the living-room,' he

said abruptly, as soon as we'd shaken hands. 'I've the Devil's own wine-jug in there, and I want to show it to you.' He grasped my arm and actually tried to pull me along.

"I'd got a whiff of his breath as he greeted me, and it was enough to knock a man down. 'What's the matter with you?' I said, as I followed him into the living-room. 'You smell like a two-legged brewery. You're drunk.'

"He looked me squarely in the eye, and I saw that, though his face was flushed and his eyes were bloodshot, he was actually in complete command of his faculties. The liquor he had drunk—and obviously he had been drinking for days—had merely bolstered him up. Of course, I had no way of knowing, then, why his nerves were so utterly shattered.

"'Drunk?' he repeated. 'Doc, I was never soberer in my life. And I've lapped up a quart of whisky a day ever since we left Bagdad. Sit down.'

"I sat down on a newly polished chair. Fothergill stood before the fireplace looking at me. He seemed too nervous to relax.

"'But why?' I asked, perplexed. 'You never were a boozier——'

"He kicked out his right foot savagely. 'That'—and he swore a stream of indigo, sulphurous profanity—'that _____ thing!'

"MY EYES followed his unorthodox gesture. He'd always had a lot of outlandish bric-à-brac cluttering up his living-room; I suppose that is why I'd missed noticing the object directly I came into the room. I looked at it now.

"It was a crude, vase-shaped vessel, of exceedingly primitive workmanship and made, I assumed from its appear-

ance, of unglazed fire-baked clay. It stood about eighteen inches high, and its greatest circumference was at the throat; it was, in fact, just a jug—a plain, ordinary, though certainly very ancient receptacle for liquids. You've probably seen pictures—most likely in illustrated Bibles—of desert women carrying similar jugs on their heads or on their shoulders. I stared at the thing—and I can't say that I was particularly impressed.

"'Look at the way it's stopped up,' Fothergill said suddenly.

"I got up from my chair and went over to the jug; I saw then that its neck had been sealed with a wax-like plug. I reached down and scratched the stuff with my fingernails; it was as hard as stone and of a yellowish-gray color; it reminded me of petrified beeswax.

"Fothergill understood perfectly what I was thinking. 'Sure,' he nodded, 'there's something inside. That's why I sneaked the damned thing into my tent; I wanted to open it up myself. There were only two native diggers with me at the time; it was easy. I had no intention of stealing the jug then; that notion came later.'

"He paused, then said thickly, 'I stole the _____ jug because there's something alive in it!'

"I looked at him, then at the vessel. 'You're cuckoo,' I said.

"He stared at me with owl-eyed seriousness. 'Listen,' he said, 'I've transported that _____ jug six thousand miles, and I tell you there's something alive in it. I'll tell you how I tried to open the thing.

"'First I dug at that plug with my pocket-knife, but I couldn't even scratch it; it's as hard as stone. Later on I got a brace and bit from the

commissary, and I made a little impression with that, but I had no vise in my tent and I was afraid I'd shatter the thing, so I gave that up. I'm damned glad now that I did.

"Bowen, that plug is some sort of wax, some sort of plastic; you can see how it was put in there: it was poured in there hot. So I decided to try to melt it out. I made a little oven out of bricks, and took the top off my gasoline lamp, and set the lamp inside. Then I lit her up, and put the jug on top, bottom-side up. That brought results, but not the results I'd anticipated.

"Listen; the plug didn't melt any; my flame wasn't hot enough. But whatever's inside didn't like that heat treatment a little bit. About two minutes after I'd set that jug on the fire it began to jump around like a tea-kettle on a stove; I couldn't hold it still. And I tell you I didn't try very hard to hold it still, either, when I saw that; I took it off the fire quick and put my lamp back together again, and in about five minutes it stopped jiggling. And that's the gospel truth, so help me.'

"I thought that over for a minute. 'You haven't necessarily proved that whatever's in there is alive,' I pointed out. 'There have been chemists, of a sort, since time immemorial, haven't there? Maybe you've dug up some ancient alchemist's pet brew. It's a wonder you weren't blown to blazes.'

"He shook his head. 'The thing's alive,' he reiterated stubbornly. 'I'll show you.'

"He walked out into the hall, and I could hear him prying the boards off one of the crates. After a moment he came back with a half-dozen half-inch boards and a bundle of excelsior; he arranged those combustibles in the

fireplace, put the ancient vessel on top, lit a match and touched off the excelsior. A bright, hot flame that quickly singed our faces and drove us back from the fireplace sprang up at once.

"'Watch the jug,' Fothergill grunted.

"I watched, all right. The vessel lay on its side in a bed of fire; as the excelsior burned away from beneath, it sank down between two blazing boards; it was certainly getting hot.

"**T**HEN THAT jug began to move! It moved in violent jerks—as though whatever was imprisoned inside was hurling itself again and again against the stone-like seal. And it moved purposefully—in one direction! Jerk—jerk—jerk—inch by inch it shifted along the trough between the blazing boards, until it slid with a thump down to the hot tiles. Then it began to roll on its circumference—quite swiftly, too—out toward the center of the room. When it was about ten feet from the fire it stopped abruptly and decisively, as though the whole of its enigmatic contents had suddenly thrown their mass into one quick braking movement.

"'My God, Bowen; you never saw water boiling in a pot, or a mess of chemicals, either, act like that!' Fothergill groaned. 'You want a drink? I've got practically a full quart in my bag.'

"I did want a drink, desperately, but I didn't want Fothergill to see how severely his demonstration had shaken me—and I wanted one of us, at least, to retain some semblance of sanity. The hardwood floor was beginning to scorch, so I quickly called Fothergill's attention to that.

"'The thing's burning your floor.'

"He looked at the jug, then at me, then back at the jug. 'I'll fix that,' he said, and got the fire-shovel from the wood-bin and kicked the jug onto it. The floor was charred where the jug had lain.

"FOTHERGILL walked over to the nearest chair, and, slumping into it heavily, sat staring at the charred spot on the floor. 'That's why I've been drinking,' he explained then, simply. 'Living with that —— jug for two months has done things to me.'

"After a while his gaze lifted to my face. Until that moment I would never have believed that a man's eyes could carry such a concentration of mingled horror and fascination in them.

"He began, almost dreamily, to talk, to hazard conjecture upon conjecture, to speculate upon the nature of the thing in the jug.

"'Bowen,' he said, and I could see that look of fascinated horror deepening in his eyes, 'you've read *The Arabian Nights*, of course. You remember those tales of the Jinn?' He laughed jerkily. 'The thought has occurred to me that I might have one of those boys cooped up in that jug. Fantastic notion, eh? The Jinn are supposed to have been both malevolent and benign; let's hope that the fellow over there on the fire-shovel—look at him jump!—is of the latter variety. He might get out of his jug some day, and if I were in the vicinity I'd prefer to have him in an amiable mood.' He paused, and a moody grin twisted across his face. 'I guess I've aggravated him some, with those toastings. He doesn't seem to like them.'

"'My conception of the Jinn has always been that they were flame

demons,' I interrupted. 'It doesn't seem plausible that a little fire like yours could bother such an entity to any extent. Of course—just to keep the record clear—I want you to understand that I think you've got bats in your belfry. You'll probably be able, in time, to explain your Mexican jumping-bean jug without any recourse to Jinn, or afreets, or *The Arabian Nights*, either.'

"His moody grin returned. 'It may interest you to know,' he continued dreamily, and I could see that he really didn't care whether I was there or not, that he would have gone on talking to himself, speculating, advancing and weighing various theories in his own mind were I not there at all, 'that your notion of the Jinn is pure Mohammedan superstition. Of course any conception of flame creatures is nonsense—as untenable as Empedocles' theory of the elements; earth, air, fire, and water. In ancient Arabian belief the Jinn were quite different. True, they were volatile as smoke, but they were corporeal; you remember that they could be confined—even in a jug. The real Jinn were not supernatural; they were merely creatures of such rarity that their purely natural attributes seemed to the Arabs to partake of the supernatural. All the demonology in the world had its origin in fact, Bowen. It's not impossible—just because such creatures don't exist today—that there was on this earth at some time in the remote past a race of creatures possessing the ability to change their shape and distend their beings at will; creatures which the early Arabs knew as the Jinn. Good God! we have plants today that live wholly upon the moisture in the air, and grow with tremendous rapidity, too. Who can

say with absolute certainty that the Jinn did not once live upon this earth, that they could not have been practically ageless, that there is no living Jinni imprisoned in that jug there at this very moment?"

"He was silent, still staring moodily at that charred spot on the floor, and for a moment I thought that he had finished, but then he added softly, 'Of course, there's the probability that the Jinn were of extra-terrestrial origin. There were never many of them, and the Arabs—God knows how—pretty well put the Indian sign on what few there were. Perhaps, if I let that fellow out of his bottle, he'd light out for home so fast he'd make Barney Oldfield look as though he were driving backward.'

"That afternoon's conversation ended just about there. I got up, told him that he was loony, and suggested, with considerable acerbity, 'If you're so damned curious about what's in that jug of yours, why don't you send it to a laboratory and have it opened?'

"'Oh, no,' he said. 'I don't want it opened. I'm afraid of what might happen if whatever's in that jug got out. Besides, if *anybody* opens it, I'm going to open it myself. A good hot fire'd soften up that plug. See?—it began to run a little bit this afternoon——'

"I snorted. 'My advice to you is: either have that thing opened by an expert, or take it out in the lot and bury it and forget about it. In any case, don't try to open it yourself. You might blow yourself up. I'm going back now. Come over for dinner tonight, eh? At seven.'

"His voice followed me out the door. The thing wouldn't explode, Bowen. The Jinn don't explode; they just *grow*——'

"I put both hands over my ears and fled up the road.

"**H**E ARRIVED for dinner at precisely seven o'clock; he'd timed it so perfectly that I was suspicious he'd waited down the road with watch in hand, counting off the seconds. The reason for his meticulous punctuality was immediately clear; he was drunker than any human being I've ever seen still off all fours. He was so drunk that he didn't even think about his precious jug until around ten o'clock—just as he was about to go home.

"'I put *him* in the woodbox by the fireplace,' he told me abruptly—he was wandering around my living-room looking for his hat, which he hadn't worn at all—and is he *mad!*'

"I knew right away what he was talking about. 'Mad?' I asked.

"'Mad.' Fothergill nodded. 'I can tell when he's mad; I can feel the mad boiling all over the room. He's mad because he thought he was going to get a chance to roll his jug around until it fell off some place and broke, maybe. He can't roll it around much, or even tip it over, in the woodbox, though; there's not enough room. Boy, he's sizzling! I guess I woke him up good this afternoon, all right. He's been jiggling his jug ever since. Don't ever tell me again that he's not alive, Bowen. I know!'

"A little later, after I'd managed to persuade him that he really hadn't worn his hat at all, I walked him home.

"During the next three weeks I don't think he drew a sober breath. I saw him every day, sometimes two or three times a day; he kept coming over to my house at unpredictable hours, and we had dinner together every night—how he ever managed to prepare the meals

he did cook is a mystery to me. And yet I never saw him stagger greatly, and his speech, though thick, was always rational.

"Through that time the jug remained in the woodbox in his living-room. Every time I came into his house I looked at it, but it always appeared pretty inanimate to me. I mentioned this several times.

"'He's gone back to sleep,' Fothergill, on these occasions, told me impatiently. 'The only thing that really seems to wake him up is a good scorching. Then he jigs around for five or six hours before he quiets down. I've been leaving him alone.'

"'You'd better leave him alone for good,' I suggested. 'You'd better bury him out in the lot and forget about him.'

"'Yes, I guess I'll do just that,' Fothergill assented. But the days passed, and the jug still remained where it was.

THEN one day—it was the tenth of August—he abruptly announced that he'd decided to return immediately to England. 'If I stay around here any longer I'll degenerate into a common drunkard,' he told me, and I agreed with him. 'Now, look,' he proposed, 'I'm sailing at midnight on the twelfth. I've a case of champagne home—no bootleg stuff; you come over around seven tomorrow night and we'll have a real bang-up farewell party.'

"I accepted, with genuine pleasure and considerable relief. I couldn't resist asking him, though, 'What are you going to do with that jug of yours?'

"He laughed. 'I've already dug a six-foot hole out behind the barn, and tomorrow morning I'm going to plant the damned thing and forget about it.'

"After a little while he went home.

"I never saw him alive again. . . .

"I puttered around until after midnight that night, and after I finally did get to bed I slept like a log. It seemed as though I'd only been asleep an instant when the telephone's ringing woke me. I switched on the bed-lamp and looked at the clock. It was almost half-past two. I came wide awake at once; I was certain that it was New York calling.

"But it wasn't New York; it was Fothergill, drunker than a lord, so drunk that his voice kept alternately roaring in my ears and then fading away as he fumbled with the telephone. He was in a mood of crazy exuberance.

"'Hups!—you old sawbones!' he bellowed—'did I wake y'up? Shorry—Hip!—Hip!—get your clothes on an' come over an' see th' show! I've got ol' typhoon in his jug wired up—urrupp!— Pardon me—in the fireplace, an' I'm toastin' the livin' day-lights out of him! I'll show him who's king! Right now the plug's drippin' out of his jug like maple syrup out of a spigot!'

"'You crazy drunk!' I yelled into the phone—and I was so angry at him that I was practically inarticulate. 'You cut out your monkey business and get into bed before you have an embolism and maybe die right there!'

"The telephone was silent for a moment, and I could picture Fothergill in my mind's eye—sitting swaying back and forth in his big chair before his fireplace (the fire blazing there before his liquor-inflamed eyes) with the telephone held loosely in his fumbling hands. Then he chuckled drunkenly.

"'——drippin' out of his jug like —aahnnnnn!'

"That sob—his sob—came totally

without warning, rose swiftly to a piercing, falsetto shriek, and ended like the snapping off of a radio.

"Immediately afterward the telephone let loose the most fearful uproar I have ever heard. If you have ever torn wooden packing-boxes to pieces with your hands—you know, fruit crates and the like—and if you can imagine those sharp, rending, splitting sounds magnified and multiplied a millionfold, then you have a faint idea of what I heard over those telephone wires that night. Only it wasn't a box I heard being ripped to pieces; it was a house.

"In the midst of that uproar the phone went dead.

"How I got into my clothes and over to Fothergill's house I don't remember. I was half mad with fear—fear of the unknown, I suppose; my brain wasn't really functioning. But I got to what was left of Fothergill's house. . . .

"That house lay—flat on the ground. It had been burst wide apart, outward, in all directions! Great torn slabs of walls and roof lay all around. Just a moment; I've kept the newspaper clipping."

He got quickly to his feet—a tall, racehorse-slim man with prematurely white hair—walked over to his car and came back with a wallet in his hands. He opened the wallet, extracted a worn and yellowing rectangle of newsprint and handed it to me. I took it gingerly—it was brittle, almost, as a long-dried leaf—and read it aloud.

SAVANT DIES IN MYSTERY BLAST

New Hartford, Conn., Aug. 11—Robert B. Fothergill, 41, unmarried, and an archæologist of international repute, met instant death at about 2:30 a. m. today when an explosion of terrific violence and undetermined origin totally demolished his summer

home on the Little River road, two miles from this village.

Fothergill's body was found by Doctor James Bowen of New York City, Fothergill's nearest neighbor and the first person to reach the scene. It had been hurled a distance of over three hundred feet, and examination of the body by Sheriff Ward Donovan and Coroner Arthur White revealed that Fothergill had suffered multiple fractures of the arms and legs, a crushed chest, and a broken neck.

Doctor Bowen revealed that he had been talking on the telephone with Fothergill at the approximate time the blast occurred, that the line abruptly went dead, and that, becoming alarmed, he dressed and walked to Fothergill's home and discovered that the tragedy had already occurred. He states that he heard no explosion, but rather a loud crackling sound. His statement is borne out by neighbors, who declared that the sound resembled "a large box being broken open." Police are inclined to the theory that the blast itself may have been relatively soundless.

Lena Hayes, night telephone operator here, confirmed Doctor Bowen's statement that Fothergill had called him immediately prior to the blast, and that the blast itself terminated the conversation. The telephone, torn from the wall by the force of the explosion, was still clutched in Fothergill's hands when he was found.

State Police are investigating. . . .

THERE was more, but nothing pertinent to this narrative. When I had finished reading the item, Doctor Bowen carefully returned it to his wallet. He had been standing as I read; now he sat down again, and the three of us, oddly evading each other's direct gaze, stared at the triangle of green turf between our feet. Fred Winn began tapping his fingernails on the arm of his lawn-chair.

"The clipping describes it pretty accurately," Doctor Bowen said suddenly. "Fothergill *was* thrown three hundred feet—well over three hundred feet. His body *was* smashed—and hor-

ribly bruised. But that reference to his neck being broken is an understatement. His neck had not only been broken; it had been *wrung* like a chicken's. He was lying flat on his chest when I found him, but his face was looking straight up at me. His eyes were wide open——"

His voice trailed off, then strengthened again as he continued, "Whatever manner of thing burst Fothergill's house that night like a cheesebox deliberately paused to wring his neck. And it did something else, too; it put out the fire. Remember Fothergill said that it hated fire? As it burst out of the house it knocked the fireplace flat, and the walls, too, but before that it crushed out the fire. That's why the wreckage didn't burn."

He stopped, then added heavily, "Funny thing, the jug wasn't even smashed. And it *was* wired in the fireplace, just as Fothergill'd said. The seal had melted out into the ashes, and it was empty."

He sat looking down at the turf at his feet; he was silent for so long that I began to believe he had totally forgotten us. Then he smiled.

"Shall we play quoits?"

My muscles jumped from the sheer casual irrelevance of that question. There was a moment while I did not

think at all. Then, in Ethel Barrymore's literal words, I asked uncertainly, "That's all there is? There isn't any more?"

He seemed to hesitate. He rose slowly to his feet, and Fred and I, mechanically aping him, followed. We started toward the quoit pits.

"Yes, there's one thing more," he said, speaking with studied casualness as we walked toward the pits. "But no one would believe this.

"I told you that I was the first person to reach the wreckage of Fothergill's home. Well, there were two large flower-beds bordering the walk, one on each side. They were pretty well grown over with grass and weeds; Fothergill hadn't bothered, that year, to have them replanted and tended. The soil, however, was still soft and loose.

"As I came up Fothergill's walk I saw that the grass and loam in the right-hand flower-bed had been pressed down in a distinct imprint. I looked at that imprint, and even in my haste I stopped and stamped its vague outlines into unrecognizability—so that none who came later would see what I had seen. And by morning, of course, it had been wholly obliterated.

"It was the imprint of the ball and toes of a three-toed foot, and it was bigger than Fothergill's house!"