

"The Thirteenth Floor" by FRANK GRUBER

JANUARY

Weird Tales

20¢



**"FOUR
FROM
JEHLAM"**

by

**Allison
Harding**

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1949

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

LONG NOVELETTE

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to a grim doom that was as certain as tomorrow*

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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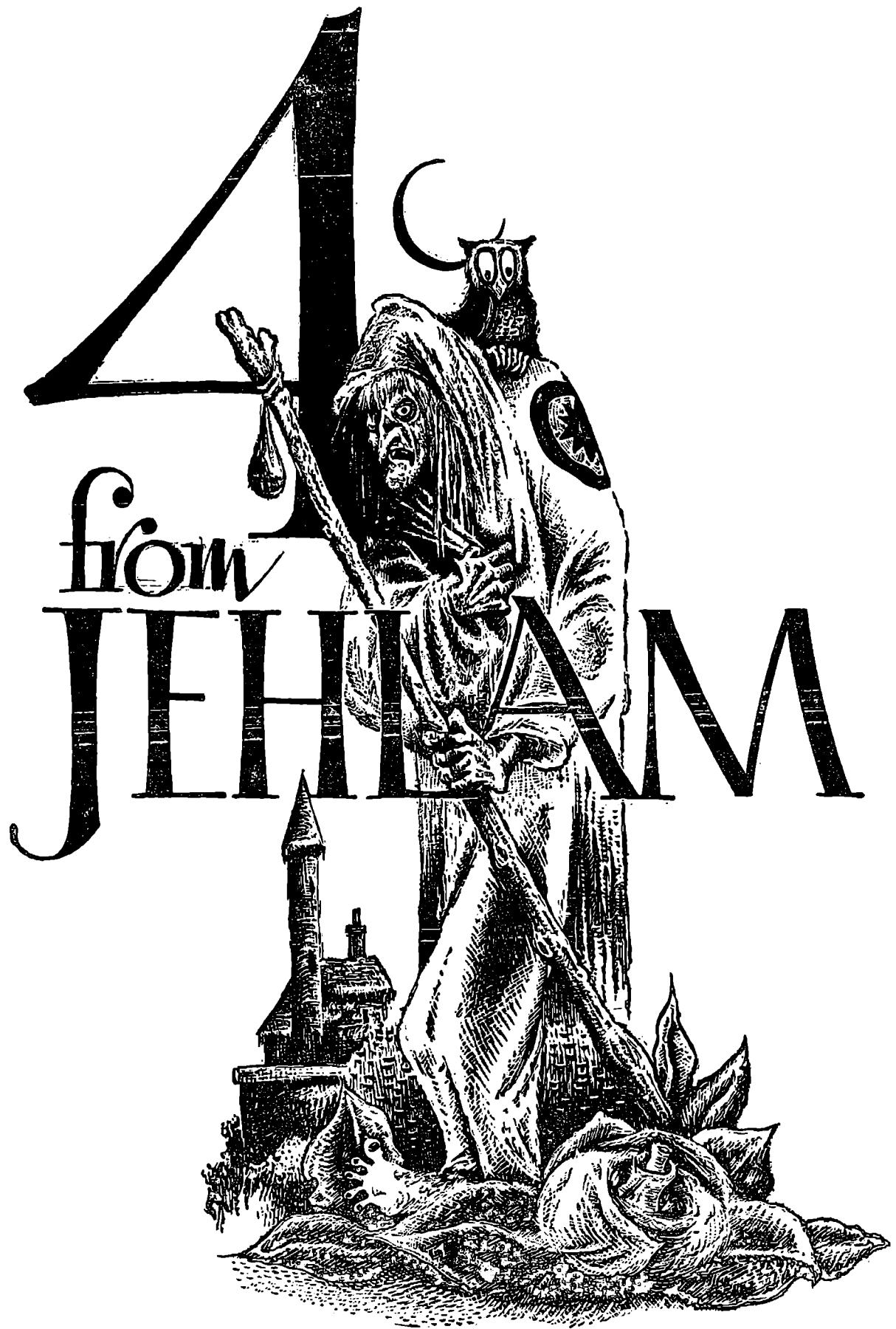
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By Allison V. Harding

THE FROWZY hotel caught the slanting rays of the hot sun, filtered the light through dirty windows and captured a last, golden glow from the west in the ice and sparkle of four highballs perched on a mid-room table. The four men seated around the chipped mahogany table had the look of those about to partake of something pleasurable. And yet withal, there was an air of discontent in the room.

Finally Major Hugh Tavener, a military man from his slightly gray close-cropped hair and neat mustache to the high-polished boots, reached for his glass.

"Damn it, Malcolm!" he expostulated to the rugged, raw-boned companion at his side, "I don't know why we hang around this Godforsaken place! And as for your blaming our coming here on my wanting to see Ronnie Hamilton at Jamrud. . . !"

Malcolm Lysander, explorer, shrugged impatiently, revealing a shoulder stiff from the spear of a maddened native he had encountered on some past exploration. "We all wanted to go through Khyber. Certainly Jehlam isn't worse than Bhera."

There was a reply on Major Tavener's lips when the knock came at the door. Malcolm rose and went to the door. Although the others could not speak it, they heard him conversing with someone in Bengali, the Indo-European tongue of India. The portal was flung wide revealing from behind Malcolm's broad shoulders and gruff face a small, turbaned boy standing in the opening.

He accepted some proffered silver, beckoned and then disappeared. Malcolm waited expectantly, and in a moment, there appeared one of the oldest women the three had ever seen. She shuffled into the room, her dark clothes held tightly around her

spare frame, eyes deep set, the skin of her face yellow and drawn.

"I say!" somebody murmured. It was the third member of the party, Bertie Phillips, a smallish, sandy-haired fellow. His surface frivolity belied the sensitive seriousness underneath that went with his artistic nature.

The fourth, Edmond Milody, sat quietly twirling a pencil, a habit formed from his years as a Fleet Street journalist.

THE aspect of the ancient woman to the four Englishmen was *outre* enough even to those who knew something of many of the strange places of the world, including one of the strangest—India.

But what caught their attention the most—for there were many old-beyond-counting hags who wandered through India, mendicants and itinerant wonder-workers or members of the religious order of Islam—was the bird perched on the woman's shoulder, its talons anchored firmly into the material that swathed her arm. It had the soft plumage, the round head and gray coloring characteristic of an owl, but it was smaller than the tawny species known in England.

It was, as one of the four commented afterward, more like an owlet. Its large, unblinking eyes took in the room, even as did those of its mistress. Malcolm made a small motion towards a chair, but the woman shook her head and sank upon the floor in the center with an ease unexpected for one of her years. The owlet took this change of its mistress' posture with unblinking solemnity.

Malcolm cleared his throat.

"Now, you blokes, this is why I wanted to stay-over a day or so here in this flea bag! This woman. . ." he indicated the

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

To live but to die is the fate of all mankind, but for these four the shadows of doom held a terrifying uncertainty

g^{uest} . . . has been mentioned to me as most remarkable. She has no name as far as I can discover, but is referred to as 'The Gifted One.' All of you know that Yoga is an extreme type of mental discipline, through the application of which some are able to perform near-miracles!"

While he spoke, the old woman's eyes never left his face, but the owlet seemed to scrutinize each of the men in turn.

Malcolm continued: "These dervishes—I believe I am correct in using that term—are presumed by many to have amazing powers. Now, first of all, I want to assure you fellows that I personally have never seen or spoken to 'The Gifted One.' I sent for her, it is true, but she meets us all now for the first time."

He bent his head quizzically and the woman bowed in acknowledgment. Then she began to speak slowly.

"You . . ." she addressed Malcolm are Malcolm Lysander. You have been many places and that is your persuasion. You are an explorer."

She turned to the others: "Bertram Phillips . . ." she pronounced distinctly ". . . are a painter of seascapes." She turned her head. "Major Tavener, you are of the military." And finally, fixing her wise old eyes on the fourth man, "Edmond Milody, you are a journalist!"

Major Tavener snorted and shook his head.

The woman went on: "You four served together in the Dorest Regiment of his Majesty's Own Fusileers, being from 1914 to 1918 under arms."

Tavener protested forcibly, "Connivance! Sheer connivance!"

But Lysander stilled him with a wave of his hand.

"I assure you, my dear Hugh.

THE woman continued. Milody, the writer, listened closely. The timbre of her voice was not particularly pleasing, but what interested him most was that her accent wasn't the usual one expected from the English spoken by Indians. It had more of a Central European flavor. The woman spoke on, and much of what she said was about them.

"But I say!" Bertie Phillips spoke up.

"My dear chap, these are details which *you* know," he addressed himself to Lysander.

Malcolm drew himself up to full height. "I give you my word! I have not spoken to this woman before!"

"I side with Phillips!" Major Tavener put in. "Rank chicanery! What do you call these people? Fakirs?"

"I'd go a little easy," Milody spoke. "Some Afridi tribesman under her spell might sink a spear into you, Hugh."

Lysander shrugged. "Well, I thought we might get a kick out of it, this vacation of ours being in its last month. Truthfully, I'd heard a great deal about her. I'm sorry it fell flat."

He reached into his pocket preparatory to broaching the subject of payment to the old woman. She looked up at him.

"There is some doubt?"

Lysander was plainly embarrassed. This had fallen flat! The time he'd gotten the stuffed snake to put in Bertie Phillips' bunk



—that had worked out considerably more hilariously. He cleared his throat.

"But I know all about you! From here!" The old woman tapped at her head. "And about what will happen to you. All of you, if you would like to hear."

"Cross her palm with a little more coin of the realm!" Milody murmured from his corner of the room.

"No. No." Lysander had resolved now persuaded by the skepticism of Tavener and Phillips. "We don't want any further telling, Old Woman."

"There is doubt!" the woman said positively. "Doubt about my powers!"

Her eyes roamed the room. They lingered at Milody's waist, at the sheathknife he wore on his belt.

"I would borrow that blade," she requested.

Milody shrugged, got up and handed it to her.

"Foolishness! All foolishness!" the Major grumbled.

"Now please to look."

Almost vehemently, the crone pulled back the swathings over one of her skinny arms.

Without hesitation she plunged the point of the weapon viciously into the unhealthy wrinkled skin midway between the elbow and wrist.

"Good Lord!" Bertie Phillips was on his feet. "She's trying to kill herself!"

"Off her top!" Tavener exploded.

THE long blade of the hunting knife passed completely through her arm and protruded out the other side, and the woman sat looking up at the four now-speechless men and then proceeded before the four pairs of eyes to draw the knife back and forth through the tissues of her old arm, grinning all the while as though she were actually enjoying a delicious sensation.

It was Milody who broke the silence, his voice rising with excitement as he stared down at the gruesome sight.

"Get her out of here! Get her out of here, Lysander! She's leprous!"

The others recoiled at the word. Milody was at the door, flinging it open, calling out, his face contorted with emotion and fury. In answer to the hubbub, first the

small, turbanned Indian boy appeared and finally a hotel major domo.

"Get her out of here!" Milody ordered. "Imagine . . ." he turned to Malcolm Lysander, ". . . bringing someone like that in our quarters! She has no 'un-ordinary' powers but she has an unordinary sickness!"

The major domo tried to understand. "What is wrong?"

Behind him two husky native porters appeared ready for anything.

"This woman," Malcolm explained. "She's sick! Leprosy. She should be driven out of town!"

The domo stiffened. He motioned to his porters, babbling to them. One disappeared for a moment and returned with a long pole. The three entered the room, almost on tiptoes. The one with the pole aimed it at the hag still crouched on the floor.

"Get up!" the domo ordered gripping his hands but keeping a safe distance from the black-garbed woman.

One of the porters pointed at the owlet, his face screwed with fear. Lysander turned to his three companions.

"Evil bird, the native is saying. They mean to drive her into the river," he jerked his head in the crone's direction.

"Get up!" the major domo shrilled again, and the pole-bearing native prodded the woman.

SHE rose slowly and stood a silent, tense little figure, the owlet still perched balefully on her shoulder. Her face was dark now with understanding and rage. Her small eyes blinked around the room, and where she looked, the owlet's great orbits also followed.

Milody was explaining to Major Tavener: "I've seen a bit of it before, Hugh. When she rolled up her sleeve, I noticed the nodules and ulcerations. Often too, there's a sort of paralysis or a disturbance of sensation. That was no great mental gift, her being able to plunge the knife in her arm! She has no feeling there any longer, I suspect."

The woman heard and glared at the journalist. But the porter with the pole and his two companions were becoming more insistent. The major domo was jabbering incessantly, his own anger mounting at the

thought that his poor hotel should be so déaled. She would be driven to the river bottom or burned or thrown to tigers! That he promised her!

But still the woman stayed them, ignoring the pole-proddings.

"I came to tell you remarkable things," she spoke, "and I will. Of four tomorrows! You, Bertram Phillips, you love the sea. You know it and paint it. You will drown! The Major Tavener, a military man," her lips curled with the pleasure of saying the thing. "You will be blasted to death! The explorer," she turned to Malcolm Lysander. "You explore dangerous and dark parts of the earth. Beware the venom of a fatal bite! And you, Edmond Milody," she was silent for a moment and her yellow eyes seemed to generate a hell-fire of their own. "You are a writer and will chronicle these things, living to survive your three friends, only at the end to be killed by a tool of your trade.

"And I who have been adjudged unfit for your quarters shall then move into your domicile before you are fairly cold!"

Of the four Englishmen, only Tavener then took a threatening step forward. But it was unnecessary. The chattering porters and the screeching major domo had closed in, not too near but with a vigorous persuasiveness that forced the old woman towards the door and out it.

As she passed from the room, the silent bird upon her shoulder gave vent to a high-pitched scream. It was an eerie sound in the stillness of the late afternoon, and even after the woman disappeared and the noise of the chattering threesome driving her down the dusty road towards the Jehlam River died away, the screeching of the owl could still be heard. And then that too faded in the distance.

After that experience, the four travelers were not in India much longer. Ending their post-World War I vacations, they returned to England and scattered to their various pursuits.

It was strange, Edmond Milody used to think in those first years after the war, that although each of them, including himself, had been considerably affected by that scene in the Jehlam hotel, there was a marked reluctance on any of their parts to speak openly of the episode to the others.

FROM time to time in the early 1920's they had a get-together as old regimental companions do. At the third of these in 1923, Milody noticed that the jocularity seemed somewhat forced. At a propitious moment, Hugh Tavener took the journalist aside.

"Edmond, you know I'm up in the same neck of the woods as Bertie. I don't think things are right with him."

Milody nodded, took the inevitable brown pencil out of his vest pocket, thoughtfully squeezed it in his fingers as he did when preoccupied.

"You spend so much time bobbing around Fleet Street," the major went on, "you probably haven't heard, but I understand . . ." he lowered his voice even more, ". . . that Bertie's income from his painting has dropped down to just about nothing!"

Edmond had noticed the artist's wan expression as they'd hoisted drinks earlier.

"What's the story, Hugh?"

The military man shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, Edmond, as I understand it from a young fellow who knows Bertie through the studio, he won't go near the water anymore!"

There was an uneasy pause.

"I see you remember," Major Tavener went on after a close look at Milody's face. He stiffened and set his own features in hard lines with a conscious effort. "I think it's blasted nonsense, but Bertie's always been kind of flighty. That was his living, though. Painting the water."

"And . . ." Edmond Milody took up, nodding his head, ". . . to paint seascapes, you've got to go on the sea or near it, and he's afraid of . . . being drowned! Is that it?"

The major nodded. "That seems to be the story. Do you think we can do anything, old chap? You've always been a good one with the words."

Milody promised he'd try. Later that evening when the reunion broke up, he saw to it that he left the Essex Bar arm in arm with Phillips. They talked of this and that as they progressed towards the tram station where the artist would catch a conveyance to his home.

Finally Milody took the plunge: "How's everything going, Bertie?"

The other started to frame a conventional reply. But then at the look in the journalist's eyes, he almost broke down.

"Terribly, Edmond!" he admitted. "Terribly! I suppose Major Hugh's been talking to you. Well, I . . . I can't seem to help it!"

"It's that fool woman in Jehlam and her drivel?" Milody asked.

Phillips nodded his head. "I know it's ridiculous, old man. It's like a bit of child's fiction. But I keep dreaming of that afternoon in India. Of that old, old witch, the bird on her shoulder—do you remember how that creature screamed at us, Edmond, when the major domo forced her out of the building—oh, I know it's silly, but I have nightmares about it and a terrible fear of the water! She *said* I would drown, Edmond. And you know, I've come to believe it with a sort of fatalism, and yet in spite of that, self-preservation makes it impossible for me to go near the sea or even a lake or river! My work has suffered. In fact there isn't any work anymore! I try painting other things, but water was really my medium."

Milody put a hand on the other's shabby coat sleeve.

"Have you thought of seeing a doctor, Bertie?"

Phillips shook his head. "Wouldn't do any good. Anyway, I'm counting every penny now."

"If it's that . . ." put in the journalist.

"No, Edmond, thanks a lot. I wouldn't think of it. As to the doctors, you know what they'd say to me: That it was ridiculous!"

THE meetings of the four grew less and less numerous. Milody pursued his trade and heard variously as the years passed that Major Tavener had now retired from the army; that Lysander was coming home from an African exploration, and that Phillips was doing very, very poorly.

But it was a distinct shock when he got the telegram summoning him to a south-of-England town. It was about Phillips. Bertie was dying. Milody hurried to the artist's home. He found the painter living in a small, almost-heatless garret, tended by a young protege and an old landlady who

brought soups and custards to him out of the kindness of her heart.

Milody was shocked at the artist's appearance. He had wasted to a mere nothing and lay in a semi-stupor, his drawn, ravaged face colored only with fever. The journalist had an immediate conference with the village doctor who, sans remuneration, had been treating the painter.

The physician came at once, thumped Bertie's chest and shook his head from side to side.

"It's his lungs, Mister Milody. He's had this for a long time. I've told him repeatedly over the last few years that this climate was no place for him! I suggested he go to the seashore or some better climate, but he would have none of it! His heart's giving out too, Mister Milody."

Edmond turned back to the sickroom, prepared for the vigil, which was unpleasant but at least not long. Bertram regained consciousness once, recognized his friend and put out a thin, palsied hand.

"Good of you, Edmond," he gasped, his breath rattling horribly.

Those were the only coherent words he uttered during the writer's stay. But many times, while Milody sat by the sick bed nervously, fingering the brown pencil from his vest pocket, Phillips would mumble. The mumblings were not comforting. Milody was philosopher enough to know that all men die, but he believed as firmly that, if possible, they should die with untroubled minds.

Phillips was still obsessed with thoughts of Jehlam and the old black-swathed woman and the curse she'd placed on the four. The journalist, who had seen many men die in the course of his work and lifetime, found Bertie's death not an easy one. The arrival of Tavener in those last hours was also trying.

The major was not himself. He was visibly upset. And Milody thought at first, Hugh seemed to have a *perverse* compulsion to question the town doctor about the exact cause of death.

The journalist sat abjectly in the corner looking out the small garret window. It was all over now. Only a part of his mind registered Tavener's voice cross-examining the physician. Then his thoughts came back

to the room. He heard and digested what was being said.

"In a manner of speaking, yes, Major Tavener," the little doctor's voice proclaimed.

"You see, in a condition like your friend's, his weakened lungs and his heart failing, the sacs do fill up with water."

"You hear that, Edmond!" Tavener turned towards the journalist almost triumphantly with a fierce grin on his face. "Water in his lungs! He drowned, Edmond! Just as *she* said he would!"

WITH a clearness of the trained reporter, Milody remembered these scenes with a remarkable clarity. He would consider them in his own mind's eye and try to interpret them different ways. Every memory was as pure as though the actions which had inspired it had occurred only a few days ago. Actually, by the time the journalist moved into a rented room in a boarding-house on the outskirts of London, it was nearly two decades since the affair at Jehlam, and yet he could visualize the face of the hateful old woman as vividly as he could see the prosaic features of his unimaginative landlord, Mr. Philpotts.

Even in the most frightening sequence of events, there are some reassuring aspects. Milody thought again and again of how old the woman had been those years ago. She had looked well along in her eighties as he remembered her in the hotel. She could have been even older. Even if she'd been ten or fifteen years younger, and that was impossible, then he'd estimated she would surely be dead these many years later.

Milody grew tired of Major Tavener's actions after Bertie Phillips' death. Tavener kept "dropping in" to talk of the unpleasant demise of the artist.

"Lungs filled up with water, Edmond! You could hear the slopping and gurgling when he breathed! That's what the medico said too. And *she* said it, Milody, me lad! That he would drown!"

The journalist thought to himself with some distaste for his old friend, why, he actually *enjoyed* talking about this thing. But underneath the grim bravado of the ex-soldier, Edmond saw strain and worry eating at the man.

One night after some beers and a game of darts together, Tavener brought it up.

"Ever think about that woman from Jehlam, Edmond?"

The writer admitted that he did occasionally.

"I was the next! After Bertie, she mentioned me! Said I'd be blown up! Remember? I've often wondered. . . ." The more-than-enough beers made Hugh even more loquacious than usual, ". . . if t'was that she-devil that made me resign my commission in the Fusileers! No man likes to think of himself as a coward, and everybody in the military knows that sooner or later he may be blasted to hell. But I suppose I did leave the service to show that that wicked woman was wrong. Army or navy's the place to get blown up, isn't it, Milody?" He laughed at his own words, and soon the two separated.

Edmond was somewhat out of patience for he'd forgotten to broach a subject that was much on his mind. Milody realized Hugh knew little else but soldiering. Now he was out. His painfully small allowance was inadequate for even many of the necessities of life. Only a few weeks ago he had written his journalist friend that he'd moved to humble quarters in Liverpool. Milody was familiar with the district. It was the poorest of the poor. He suffered to think of his friend there, and he'd thought that on this meeting, he would say:

"Look, Hugh, old fellow. People still seem to be buying my trash, and I know you've run into a little tough luck. Just until you get the fires burning again, why not let me loan you. . . ."

But no, the Major wouldn't have liked it. His character was as stiff-backed and unyielding as his physique, as his formal gray military mustache. But still, Milody came to wish more and more that he'd at least made the gesture that night. For it was the last time he saw Hugh Tavener alive.

IT WAS the papers this time that broke the news with their impersonal black-and-white logic. The headline blazoned: "Blast in Liverpool Flat Kills Ex-Entertainment Queen, Neighbor." The papers, of course, featured the fact that Lily Evans, former toast of English music halls,

had "taken her last bow." She'd been unemployed now for many years, but not so many that those who knew her as a middle-aged, worn-out spinster, failed to remember her triumphs on the stage in another decade.

There was just a small paragraph at the end that mentioned that the force of the explosion from the turned-on gas had blown in the flimsy partition of the next room, also killing its occupant, a "Major Hugh Tavener, formerly of the Dorset Regiment, His Majesty's Own Fusileers."

The journalist made connection with the earliest available train, got to the demolished flat the next day. He had it in his mind to salvage what he could of Tavener's few pitiful remaining possessions for sentiment.

THIS distasteful task done with Milody turned away from the wrecked tenement for the last time to traverse the poverty-stricken byways of Liverpool to the railroad station, he ran squarely into Malcolm Lysander. The other greeted him excitedly, out of breath for he had been running from the nearest depot. He waved a paper under Milody's nose.

"Edmond, isn't it terrible! You know, the first thing I did when I landed at Southampton was to buy some good old English papers and then I see this!" He indicated with his finger the sliver suicide story.

Lysander stared over the journalist's shoulder at the demolished flats. Edmond quietly turned the other around and walked him away from the scene.

"It's been quite a while, Malcolm. I'm glad to see you."

"And I you, Edmond," Lysander replied. "But Hugh! And not so long after poor old Bertie!"

The journalist apportioned Tavener's few belongings between himself and Lysander, gave the explorer his London address and exchanged whatever other news he could think of with the man.

As they parted at the Liverpool station, their handshake was firm and almost fervent.

Lysander said, "We must take care of ourselves, Edmond. We're all that's left, aren't we?"

And then the high-pitched scream of the London train ended that long moment

wherein each looked at the other's face and saw fear there.

Milody had had a hard two days. He tried to rest in the juggling compartment on the way back to London, but total sleep would not come. In his half-awake state, the shriek of the train whistle would somehow become the sound of the old woman's owlet screaming in Jehlam long years ago. The triumphant screaming and shrieking was becoming deafening when Edmond became fully awake and realized the train was hooting for the Essex stop.

The writer got off the express and trudged wearily to his quarters. He lay down, and after many hours during which evening passed into night and the traffic on the cobblestone back street outside his boarding house dwindled and ceased completely, he fell into fitful slumber.

His dreams were hideous, as hideous as the old witch woman of Jehlam, and filled with the shriekings of the owlet sounding like the Liverpool train coming back from his grim duty. He tossed and turned and finally woke up in the wee hours, feverish from the dream and his lack of restful sleep.

THE next day as he went back to work, Milody reassured himself that events of the last few days were hardly conducive to a good night's rest. He had good control of his nerves. He was not used to bad dreams. He told himself he did not expect to get them again. But the nightmares would come again. And again. So much so that he grew tired of staring up at the ceiling with the small pattern of light on it from the lamp across the cobblestone street that ran 'neath his window. Yet the monotonous and gloomy appearance of his room by lamplight was preferable to the dreams.

Milody was relieved, therefore, when he received the message. A small grimy boy brought it from the wireless office. It said simply: "Will you come as soon as possible. Lysander."

Milody's journalistic efforts had not been without success in the last few months. He was correspondent for several reputable weeklies, did a column for the "News," and there was even some possibility that a

small volume of his essays might be brought out by an independent and enthusiastic publisher.

There was this matter of the nightly ordeals, though. The journalist was not one to look with too-great kindness upon psychiatry and psychiatrists. For he felt he applied the science himself in his everyday life, and surely no hocuspocus by some pseudoscientist could open up doors of new insight into his trouble.

As Milody suffered, he had analyzed. Undoubtedly, the aged, witchlike woman years ago in northern India had remained a strong and distasteful memory with the four of them. But there was, of course, no logical reason, in fact it was insanity, to presume that there could be any connection between recent unfortunate events and that long-ago episode in Jehlam. Yes, Milody had the feeling that he was getting the best of his nervousness, but even so, a change up north would be nice.

He wired an acceptance to Lysander's invitation on his way to the publishers. By the end of the week, his affairs were sufficiently in order to allow him to leave London. The day of Milody's departure, it was such a pleasant morning that he allowed time for a rather circuitous route to the Middlesex Station by way of Alexandra Park and Finchley Common. A brilliant April sun can do gentle things even to the stern environs of London. Edmond arrived at the station in better spirits than he'd enjoyed in months.

As the train took him north, he tapped the point of his brown pencil abstractly against the pane and watched the English countryside flow by. The journalist changed trains at Leicester and continued on in a northerly direction through Nottingham and York. From the latter place, the engine shook itself of several cars; the train became smaller and its passengers few.

Perhaps the traditional beauty of the country was here too, but Milody found the scenery less green, less pleasing than the verdant rolling splendor they'd come through. The train wound its way tortuously to Kirkby Moorside, a village marked by a small stone station and a few scattered buildings on either side of the right of way. The express stopped to drop a bundle of

papers and mail on the platform, and the coach cars, now shrunk to two, disgorged a passenger or so and the train chugged on.

At Levisham Milody was joined by an old codger who pointed out, as the train rounded a bend, the brooding Cleveland hills lying like purple shadows against the near horizon. The single track cut a part of the North York moors in half—the hills to the left as they went north and brown-gray moors to the right stretching, the oldster at his elbow explained, almost to the North Sea from whence fog and "that salty smell" came rolling if the wind were right.

Occasionally, under favorable conditions, the musty native averred, a young pair of ears could hear the horn hooting at Hundle Point, and that was about ten miles away on the coast.

The track and train curved inward abruptly then as though the proximity of the spring-cold North Sea was distasteful. The moors slid behind, and here and there some courageous underbrush came into view. The engine slowed, whistled and then hissed to a stop.

They had come upon Wilby so suddenly that the journalist had barely time to gather his gear and leap from the train before it began to move again as though the dilapidated red-board shack that passed as a station were beneath its stopping dignity. The last car slid by, and Milody saw his traveling companion peering intently back at him.

THREE was no good reason, the journalist thought, why anyone ever should get off a train at this spot. The shacklike station presented a door. It squeaked on rusty hinges as he went in. A rude bench ran down one side of the single room. A dismantled potbellied stove stood against one corner. The walls were bare except for a last year's timetable thumbtacked in place and an occasional carved initial in the wood here and there. Under the timetable was a tarnished brass set in, "Northern R. R." Under it the almost illegible slogan, "See London and Liverpool via the Northern."

Milody gave up his inspection of the station inside as a fruitless job. Outside he noticed with quickening interest that the light was beginning to fade.

"A beastly place to spend the night," he censured himself, looking at the ugly land across the tracks with its stunted under-growth suggestive of the nearby moors.

Back of the Wilby station a deeply rutted brown-dirt road took a semi-circle, calculated to deposit prospective Northern R. R. passengers beside a crumbling wooden platform. Then it curled away and disappeared in the distance. In that distance Milody could see what looked like a farmhouse. There was nothing here, he reasoned. Nothing for it but to use Shanks' Mare.

Taking his baggage, he stepped off briskly and made short time of it down the road. It was, as he had observed from track-side, a farmhouse. Some chickens scratched in the front yard and there was a cow around back and a large barn a hundred yards away. He came close to the front door and holloed. On his second try the door opened, and a thickset elderly man came out blinking as though the fading light were too much for his eyes—or he'd just awakened.

"Eh?"

"Hello," greeted the author. "I'm a traveler. I'm trying to get some sort of conveyance to take me out to a Malcolm Lysander's place."

The farmer, for so his dress evidenced him to be, shook his head with alacrity and rubbed big-knuckled hands at his eyes.

"Guess you're the gentleman Mister Lysander was expecting. Last time I saw him, said you were coming in on the afternoon train today and I was to bring you out to his place. But with all the work around my farm here—" he waved a big brown arm, "—I forgot."

Milody quickly assured the man that that part was all right.

"You can take me out then, can you?"

"Sure," said the farmer, "Soon as I hitch up the buggy."

That job was accomplished in due time, and the two were joggling along the lane that led northward.

"Don't you have autos around here?" the journalist queried.

"Some do," the farmer whose name proved to be Orpet nodded his head towards the white-shouldered horse that was pulling them. "This is the best for around

here, though. Good horseflesh doesn't go bad on you. Doctor Simms has a car, though, and some of the others."

"You'll all have them," Milody predicted. "You'll all be having autos. Why, probably in a few more years. By 1940 I'll predict."

"Never!" insisted Orpet. "I'll stick to my horse."

The conversation died until Edmond, after some moments, asked: "How far is it?"

"Mister Lysander is a good bit out."

The journalist shook his shoulders somewhat distastefully.

"You're a South gentleman?"

"I've lived around London a lot of my life, yes."

"Friend of Mister Lysander's?"

"Yes."

"Well, it seems as how he can't have things too lonely. Used to come down around the station and our place a lot. Bought eggs from my wife. And I sold him milk, too. Now we hardly ever see him. Oh, except a few days ago when he told me you were coming and asked me to drive you out to his place. And then, sir, he no sooner gave me the message just like that quick but he drove off—he's got a 'cycle, you know—like all the demons of hell were after him! Didn't even come in and have some crumpets with me and my missus. Acted to me like he was frightened of something!"

"And to look at him—" Orpet shook his head, "—you wouldn't think anything in the world could scare that one!"

They topped a rise, and Orpet gestured with the buggy whip. "There she is. That's Mister Lysander's."

THE house was set by itself in a valley beneath them. The wild beauty should have pleased him, but Milody found that the desolation was depressing. The wagon picked up speed on the downgrade, and the horse fairly galloped to the white-painted gate that fronted on the lane. Milody thanked Orpet and reached into his pocket.

"No, sir," the farmer shook his head, "I'm taken care of."

He held his horse in tight rein as Milody got out of the wagon. The animal stamped

and snorted and was off before the journalist could wave a final thank-you.

Neatly laid flagstones marked the way from the gate to the front door of Lysander's home. To Milody's un-architectural eye it was a pleasing enough domicile. The grounds might have been kept up a bit better, but that was not for him to say or think. He thumped the brass knocker, and he could hear the reverberations through the house. He looked back as he waited for an answer to his summons. He could see Orpet driving the wagon at a great rate down the country lane, a cloud of brown dust helping with the gloom of fading day to finally obscure buggy and man in the distance.

Then he heard a step inside the door. The portal was thrown open and he stared into Lysander's face. And into the muzzle of a heavy hunting rifle! Automatically Edmond took a step backward, but as quickly, the explorer lowered the firearm. The stern lines of his face eased and he extended his right hand.

"Milody, my friend! I hope I didn't frighten you!"

"Hello, Malcolm." The writer stepped inside and took the proffered hand. "I never thought I'd find myself at the muzzle end of a gun held by the famous explorer, Malcolm Lysander!"

His big-boned friend shrugged. He stood his rifle in the corner of the hall.

"Come! Let me take your things."

The house was smallish inside. A stairway led to the upper floor consisting of Lysander's room, a guest chamber, bath, and the big hall.

Later in the downstairs study Milody watched his friend closely. The explorer had aged. Aged years in a few months. His big frame was no longer robust, but gaunt. He toyed with his drink and sipped it slowly as though without taste. Finally Lysander anticipated the question in the journalist's mind.

"I suppose, Edmond, you are wondering about my rather aggressive greeting. Hardly expected to come face to face with an armed man, eh?"

The slow smile was gone almost as it came to the explorer's brooding face. Lysander started to speak, and then it was as

though he interrupted himself. He cocked his head on one side.

"I say, do you hear anything, Milody? No? I have a little terrier. A little brown-and-white chap. Answers to the name of Brownie. Only companion I've got around here, you know. Pretty important to a man. When I first came down to this god forsaken place, I kept him pretty close to me, usually in the house. But you can't do that to a dog. I let him out in the morning, and often he's gone all day.

"Sometimes I'd go with him. You know, Edmond, in time I think I could have made a sort of hunter out of him. He was really fine for flushing up small game. That was before I heard the news. Since then Brownie's gone out alone. I guess he likes his freedom. We all do. But I'd hate to lose the little fellow. He's the only thing I've got to talk to until you came and since I don't go into Wilby the way I used to. Dogs get caught sometimes. I'm always glad to have him come home because if he did get into any trouble out there, I couldn't go out and help him. Did you think you heard a bark outside? No? Well . . . say, I am rambling, Edmond! I apologize."

Malcolm finished the rest of his drink with a resolute gulp and sat silent for a moment, revolving the empty glass and surveying his guest.

"You're looking well, Edmond," he spoke after a moment.

Milody nodded. "Thank you."

The two men were old friends for too long for a sincere compliment to be returned by an insincere one.

"No," Lysander went on, "I'm sure you can't say the same for me. Peace of mind is a wonderful thing, Edmond; the lack of it is very terrible."

"What's eating at you, Malcolm?" Milody had a try at being casual, but despite himself, a knot of tension tightened in him, waiting for the other to go on.

"I don't know exactly. Or perhaps I do and don't want to admit it to myself. But ever since Bertie and dear old Major Hugh, ever since they died, I haven't been the same! As you get older, Edmond, and lose friends, you know as well as I do it's a shock. It's sadness that a man takes around inside himself but you carry on. But with us

four, there's been something different, Edmond. We've been bound together by long ties of friendship—and by something else!" The explorer's lips curled back in a bitter smile. "By something else! I think you know what it is!"

Milody knew. Words were his business, his tools. He searched for some to use now to help and comfort Lysander, to comfort himself. He plucked out the brown pencil from his breast pocket, rolled it in his fingers absently.

And then distinctly from outside, he heard the bark. Lysander was up on his feet looking towards the door.

"You open it, Edmond. You won't mind, will you, there's a good chap! I'm sure that's Brownie!"

"Certainly."

THE journalist went to the hall. He opened the door. It was dark outside, but behind him, Malcolm whistled. There was the patting of feet on flagstones and a small terrier came running in. It was only after he closed the door and turned that Milody saw Lysander putting down the rifle which he must have again picked up.

Malcolm went to the kitchen and prepared a meal for the animal from the meaty remains of their own repast earlier that evening.

"I take good care of him, Edmond," the big man said, placing the platter on the floor and then clucking disapprovingly as the dog sniffed at it and lost interest. "I think sometimes animals are fussier about their food than people. This little fellow's getting sick of venison. I guess he wants a change."

"Well, we could have had more for our own supper," the journalist joked. "Here, pup! What's your name? Brownie? You eat up that good food we've fixed for you!"

The dog was lying beside its full feed bowl, disinterested. Milody reached out a hand to pet the animal and as quickly withdrew it as the dog snapped at him.

"Here, here, Brownie!" Lysander colored up, annoyed. "That's no way to act! He doesn't see many strangers," he apologized, "but I won't have him acting that way."

He put a heavy hand on the terrier's collar and pulled him to his feet, unmind-

ful of the small, sharp teeth that raked his wrist.

"Get temperamental on us, will you, young feller!" He gave the angry dog a stern spanking and took away the food bowl. "Go over into your corner and sleep," Lysander ordered, and the dog slunk to matting laid in the corner of the kitchen and lay down on it.

The two men repaired to the study and sat talking till late, for there were many things to discuss. Old adventures and friends, and before they knew it, it was well past midnight and they went yawning to their respective rooms, Milody noticing, however, that Lysander took his rifle upstairs with him. With goodnights said, the journalist shut his door and was soon in bed.

The night air was good coming through his open window after the soot and suffocation of London. There was the smell of country and greenness and perhaps a faintly discernible smell of ocean, which as his quaint traveling companion on the train had said, "came when the wind was right from the North Sea."

As Milody lay back in his bed aware of the blackness and the soundlessness of the night compared to the all-hours' light and noise of the London environs, he found it hard to stay awake even long enough to mull over his impressions of that evening. It was, of course, the fear about Lysander. And what a strange vessel the raw-boned, gruff explorer was for such an emotion, but it was there. Edmond fell off to sleep fairly in the midst of his thoughts.

HE WOKE to a blasting crescendo of sound. He thought at first it was some explosive quality of his dream, until, wide awake and staring in the darkness, he heard another sharp explosion. He was out of bed, his bare feet stumbling for slippers even as his mind identified and cataloged the sounds as rifle fire. He had a lamp by his bed and took it into the hall. He made his way immediately to Lysander's room.

The abruptness of his waking-up, the shock of noise, and the eerie blackness of the house lent themselves to Milody's mood. He expected anything as he threw open his friend's door. What he found

was the explorer standing by his window, smoking rifle in one hand and a large electric torch in the other. For an instant, the tableau was suggestive of old days in the Fusileers. Lysander was standing off marauders, and near him would be Milody and Bertie Phillips and Major Tavener. The four had never known defeat, but a lot of adventure.

But of course Tavener and Phillips weren't here. With that thought the spell was broken.

"For God's sake, Malcolm, what are you doing! What's wrong!"

The other turned away from the window abruptly. "Take this light, Edmond. There's a good fellow. Look down this trellis that ends just under my window. Follow it down to the ground and tell me if you see anything."

Milody did as he was ordered. The trellis was one of those frail wooden ladders commonly seen in country houses of the type.

Up it twined tentacles of ivy. At the lowest level of his inspection, the writer saw something draped over the last rung.

"I don't see anything, Lysander."

"Nothing? Nothing at all on that trellis that shouldn't be there?"

"Well, there's something like a small piece of rope at the bottom."

"That's it!" the explorer fairly hissed, took the flashlight almost roughly from his friend and peered out of window again. The rifle was still clenched in the other hand. "That isn't a rope, Milody. It's a . . . snake!"

The journalist took hold of his friend by the shoulders.

"Malcolm, you'll be tumbling out that window next. Stop talking foolishly. I don't believe it's a snake. It looks like a length of rope. And anyway, everybody knows there aren't dangerous snakes in this part of England, so what of it?"

"What of it," said Lysander, almost to himself with the same bitter smile.

"Get ahold of yourself, old man!" Milody snapped, although the sudden significance of the other's words crept like icicles into his mind. He shook away his own mounting uneasiness. "Give me that flashlight again. There's only one way to settle

this!" He took the lamp and turned for the stairs.

"Milody! Milody, don't go outside! It may not be safe!"

"Nonsense! What do you think there's here to harm us?"

But his own resoluteness ebbed as he opened the front door and started walking cautiously to make a circle of the house. The dark night pushed around him on all sides, enfeebling the rays of the flashlight. A fog had come in from the sea, sliding stealthily across the moors and into the valley. The cold feeling had spread down the nape of his neck into his spine.

The journalist straightened his shoulders angrily. What was there to be afraid of here in the peaceful English countryside? This kind of fear was in men's minds, and he thought of the terrified figure of Lysander upstairs with his hunting rifle. A veteran, who a thousand times over had faced wild beasts and wild men alike without a qualm.

Edmond turned the corner of the house and was in the black. The end of the trellis showed in the outer rim of his light.

"Milody!" Lysander's voice sounded strained coming from the upstairs window. "Milody, for God's sake, be careful!"

The journalist slowed his pace. He flashed the light this way and that.

"When you spot him, if he's not dead, stand clear! I'll fire another shot into the damned reptile!" Lysander's voice sounded strange.

THE flashlight beam covered every inch and then settled triumphantly on the lower rung of the ivy-covered trellis 'neath the explorer's window. Edmond stepped forward quickly. He plucked the ropelike length up. It was that and no more. A harmless length of rope.

"What did I tell you, Malcolm? It's the funniest-looking snake you ever saw!"

He made fast time retracing his steps around the house and back inside, shutting the door firmly behind him. When he got upstairs with his prize, the length of manila, he realized it would be useless to josh Lysander about it. The explorer was seated in a chair disconsolately, his head in his hands, his great frame shaking with emotion like a small child. Edmond seated himself by

his friend's side, and for a while neither spoke.

Finally Lysander got a grip on himself. "You will think me very strange, Edmond, and not just a little cowardly, I suppose."

"Not you, old friend," Milody soothed. The other shrugged. "Nevertheless, it seems true. But so help me, Edmond, it's the waiting, the suspense." He crossed to a copy of the Leicester "Illustrated" on his bedtable. In it was a cut-out clipping. He handed it woodenly to the journalist.

It concerned, Milody read, the unfortunate occurrence to the Lafabre Circus traveling through England from the Continent. Some miles outside of Scarborough, the axle of one of the wagons had broken. Several cages of precious animals had been damaged allowing them to escape. Marmosets and monkeys had been finally rounded up, but it seems there had been a reptile crate containing three poisonous snakes. Circus attendants and the authorities from Scarborough to the North York moors were continuing the search, but in the meantime, residents of the entire area were warned to be most careful.

Milody handed the clipping back.

"They haven't been recaptured," Lysander added, "because I have an arrangement with Orpet. You see, since I heard about this I never go out if I can help it. Orpet's to come and tell me if the reptiles have been recaptured. I dream of them, Edmond, if I get to sleep. That's what it is. Snakes. Snakes! Tonight I could have sworn I heard a sound on that trellis, and when I looked out . . . well, that piece of rope seemed almost to be moving, and it looked to be . . ."

Milody sat speechless. Here was a man who had hunted some of the most treacherous areas of Africa, who knew the four corners of the world and who had faced most of their worst dangers. Lysander looked up squarely into his friend's eyes and read the thoughts there.

"It's the waiting," he added slowly. "It's a long way and a long wait, Edmond."

"A long way?"

"From Jehlam," Lysander replied simply, the word out between them. The word Milody hated now above all others.

"It's not a decent, clean way for a man like me to go, Milody," the explorer picked up momentum now. "I mean . . . snakes. Oh, I've run into the damn slimy blighters all over the world. But to know that somehow, some force beyond our ken is directing them towards me!"

"You really believe that, Lysander?"

"Yes. What else? What was it she said, Edmond? I was an explorer, so I would suffer a fatal bite. Isn't it more than a coincidence about that circus and the poisonous reptiles? I can see that old witch woman as though it were yesterday and the hotel in Jehlam from which we had her driven!"

That ancient, ancient black-garbed crone with the owlet on her shoulder. How often had the four of them thought of her since that day so long ago in India? By what strange grace had she won this degree of attention from the four men? For no lovers could have paid a finer tribute to their beloved than they four had paid to the witch woman of Jehlam. For was she not still with them after all these years, her face and form and fearful graces and her macabre owlet? And the ultimate tryst with doom she'd predicted for them all?

THE two went to their separate beds soon afterward, but Edmond found sleep elusive for the rest of the night. He passed the hours till daybreak resolving that he would have a stiff talk with Lysander. It was natural after the untimely deaths of their two friends that one should give more than a fleeting thought to the coincidences between that ancient curse and the realities of life. But accepting all that, somewhere a man had to draw the line or go mad.

Milody was deeply worried for his friend. The explorer was not himself. Probably this enforced exile in the lonely countryside explained some of Malcolm's problem. He would, if he could, the writer determined, get his friend to come and visit him in the city, and with that decision reached, Milody turned on his side and stole an hour or so of sleep as the gray light came faintly up out of the east, lifting the harsh black hand of night from the moors and the valley.

Edmond's resolution was harder to fulfill than he had suspected even in the darkest hours of the previous night. Milody

waited no later than breakfast the next morning to deliver his invitation.

"Come on, old chap. It'll do you good. Close up this place, pack what you'll need. We'll leave Brownie with somebody in Wilby and you come into London with me. It would do you ever so much good to go to a music hall or pub. You need people around you, Lysander. Not just an old lonely house and the desolate countryside. Oh, I think it's beautiful here," he hurried lest his host take offense. "But loneliness is definitely *not* what you need right now."

"It's no go, Edmond," the other replied. "I guess I've gone too far down the road."

"Nonsense, man!"

It went on that way for several days, and finally, for several weeks, long past the length of time Milody had expected to spend in the north of England. Their only contact with the outside world was regular visits from Orpet who, generously reimbursed by the explorer, would bring food-stuffs, papers, and whatever post might have collected from the last trip. Lysander's first words to the farmer were always the same, and although he spoke them with a certain diffidence as though not wanting an outsider to see the fear that prompted them, the question always came out:

"Orpet, did they capture those blasted serpents yet?"

"No, not exactly, although there is a piece in the paper that a woman up Moorside away thought she saw one of them." Orpet shrugged distastefully. "Slimy things! I wish they would catch them."

Despite his coaxing, it became apparent to the journalist that Lysander was not prepared to leave his Wilby house; was, in fact, frightened to leave it. The necessary steps were more than the man, in his highly nervous state, could bear. There would be at the very least the walk out to the shed to get his motorbike, or out to the road to climb onto the Orpet carriage. Snakes sometimes hid in sheds or in carriages. No, Lysander felt safer here.

Finally reconciled to the man's stubbornness, Milody found he had to take his leave. He did extract before he left, however, a half-promise from Lysander that the explorer would get Orpet to send out the local doctor, the physician, Simms. Edmond was

uncomfortable about leaving his friend, but the press of business and Lysander's growing impatience with any suggestions calculated to help the situation were decisive.

During the middle of his fourth week at Wilby, Edmond Milody departed, taking the return trip back into town with Orpet, who had first delivered his usual errands of foodstuffs and papers and the laconic reply to the explorer's inevitable question:

"No, Mister Lysander, doesn't look like they'd ever catch up with those snakes."

EDMOND would remember for a long time the scene as he took his leave. Lysander gripped his hand with vice-like strength. The man's stern-lined face was sad, and there was in his eyes a remembrance of the better times that all of them had had together. There was nothing to say. Milody knew any more urging would merely make for a discordant note. He was glad that Brownie, in the last week or so, had experienced something of a change of heart about roaming off for the entire day. The dog seemed more content to lie around the house with Lysander. The animal actually was all he had, and fussing with the canine's diet was at least a source of some, however trivial, outside interest.

And now there had been just this—the shake of the hand. The men looking into each other's eyes. Lysander finally said, "Goodbye, Edmond, and thank you for coming."

The writer bobbed his head, paid the usual compliments on the "pleasure" of his stay. It was difficult anyway, with Orpet standing nearby impatient to be off back to town.

"I'll go down fighting!" Malcolm averred with a grim shake of his head.

But Edmond, as he walked quickly out to the wagon, wondered how much good the dog and the gun and Lysander's kind of fighting would do against the things he feared. On the trip back to Wilby Station, the author took pains to plant in Orpet's mind the importance that the farmer get Dr. Simms out to Lysander's house sometime. He cemented his demand with a large tip. The wagon left him at the station and bumped away on the rude brown lane that went towards the Orpet farm.

There was a chill loneliness in this York moor country that Milody did not like. Even in the daylight, standing with his gear beside him on the broken-down platform, he was conscious of it and glad when the plume of smoke in the distance enlarged into a locomotive, it's tender and his train.

The trip down the length of England did not please him as much as going up. He had Lysander very much on his mind. The poor fellow! It was a case that shou'd be solved, and yet was quite unsolvable. Still, the explorer should be safe there. Why he had a veritable armory of firearms in that building. If the ridiculously far-fetched possibility of a snake appearing around the house should materialize, no one would be more competent to deal with the reptile than Malcolm. But about the other part of Lysander's trouble, the real part, Milody did not know. He resented a bit the re-living of that old episode in Jehlam, as it came to him each time one of the three, Bertie, Major Hugh, or Malcolm had brought that adventure up. He resented having it brought up, but at the same time he appreciated that he alone of the four was balanced enough to see that grisly experience in its proper light. For it had no more future or ominousness than a bad dream.

Back in Middlesex again, Milody settled down to his writing work with new vigor. In a week or two, he'd dispatched a lengthy letter to Lysander, and not so long after that, received a rather gruff and taciturn reply. Yes, Malcolm was fine. The explorer confined that he wished he could say the same for Brownie. He wondered if the animal needed a mate.

It was in his next card that Lysander scrawled a note about Brownie's death. For some reason, a sixth sense perhaps, Milody got in touch, not with Lysander this time but directly with Orpet. He reminded the farmer of their last discussion about their mutual friend, the explorer, and he suggested as strongly as he could without making it an order, that Orpet get Dr. Simms to go out and look things over.

It was three or four weeks later before the Orpet letter arrived. It told of things that widened the journalist's eyes. The farmer admitted he had finally got Simms out to Lysander's home, and the doctor had

found Malcolm a very sick man and "not at all himself."

At this point, Edmond, reading the letter in his little top-floor room overlooking the cobblestone street, had to sit down, and his fingers were all thumbs as he dropped his ever-lasting brown pencil stub on the floor. He realized the only thing to do was to make another hurried trip out to Wilby.

He was laying his plans for this second excursion to the north when the wire came. It was from Orpet. Lysander was dead. With communications north of York as poor as they were—in fact, a look at even a modern gazeteer does not reveal Wilby for it was too small—the details took two days to reach Milody.

Malcolm Lysander had died, of all things, of rabbies. A dead dog had been found in the basement of the house. Upon examination, it too was found to have died of the same malady. The doctor spoke of the little terrier's teeth on Lysander's wrist. This struck a reminiscent chord in Edmond's mind. The whole affair was a shock. It took some days and much concentration on his journalistic activities to make Milody push the episode even partially out of the center of his consciousness.

SUCCESS continued to attend Edmond Milody's writing efforts; nothing of a fabulous nature, but a tidy, warming appreciation on the part of his employers, publishers and the public. That is not so easy to come by in this hardest of all professions. And it was, therefore, possible for the writer to draw a happy comparison between himself and those three others whose untimely endings were variously predicted by the declining circumstances of their lives at the near end. It was a fact, however, that the journalist missed some of the human relations which might otherwise have accompanied one of his comparative charm, years, and professional proficiency. He realized, when he haq them no more, that those three—Phillips, Tavener, and Lysander—were all, or nearly all, of his so-called "circle of friends" since Regiment days together.

In consequence, the journalist spent much of his time taking long walks through the great London area in which he lived,

and much time alone in his top-floor room staring moodily out the window at the rough cobblestone street and those who traversed it.

If he attended a social tea, he found that after the formalities and conventions had been dispensed with, he had little to say, as though he had lost some of the small graces. This did not worry him too much, but it placed something of a burden on Philpotts, the rooming-house landlord, who became the foil and listener to much of Milody's musings.

Philpotts was small and spare, with a distracted manner that came from many years of managing flats and fending off boarders who insisted that "something should be done" about leaking water pipes or faulty fixtures. He had, in other words, the landlord's ability to appear to be listening, when in reality he very probably was not.

This did not worry Edmond Milody. He found himself, as time passed, explaining more and more to the little superintendent. The rest of the building was occupied by plain working people whose hours were more or less regular, and often the two of them, when the journalist came back early from some publishing task, would find themselves alone in the late afternoon.

Milody would supply tea and crumpets, and happily, the superintendent found the invitation to come up to the writer's top-floor room did not stem from a desire to have the peeling plaster of the ceiling redone. It even became safe, Philpotts found after some experience at this ritual, to listen, although landlord-like, his attentive manner was outwardly impressive whether he was concentrating on the author's words or thoughts of the dog races at Essex.

Philpotts was familiar with a considerable portion of Milody's life, as a proprietor is about a long-term tenant. The deaths of both Tavener, calling for as it did the sudden trip to Liverpool, and the summons from Lysander and the explorer's resultant demise, were known to him. Too, Philpotts had certainly not less than the average curiosity about matters of mysterious portent, violence, sudden death, and the like, and it was of these things that Edmond Milody spoke.

For some reason that perhaps the journalist did not recognize himself, his out-loud musings started the narrative trend in England. If he mentioned India and that long-ago post-World War I trip, he mentioned it casually. Jehlam was a name that Philpotts never heard and probably never would hear. There was always a certain restraint about those fate-poignant days following their vacation beyond the Khyber, and it was as though by not mentioning the old black-shrouded woman with her owlet on shoulder, that she would fade from Edmond's memory. But she did not.

THREE was no skimping on details—which was the part that Philpotts' tabloid curiosity was interested in anyway—on the affairs of Milody's three friends. It never occurred to the unimaginative little superintendent, even after the fifth or sixth recital with no appreciable change in the details, that Milody told this most important story of his life, not so much for anyone else's benefit, but for his own.

"It's quite simple, Philpotts," he would aver over tea. "Things like the Indian rope trick, you know, and those witch doctors in Africa. Some men can be *frightened* to death. Others can have the fear of death put down upon them so by suggestion that they are easy prey to circumstances which wouldn't touch the rest of us. Now take the cases of my three friends—"

Philpotts would nod with an enthusiasm brought on now considerably more by the friendly tea and crumpets and the desire to please an old tenant of long-standing.

"—Bertie Phillips. If you ever go to galleries, you can still find his seascapes exhibited prominently. At one time he was considered one of our most promising artists in that genre. And yet I ask you to examine what happened to a man who allowed an idea to take possession of him beyond all reason and beyond the advice of his friends!"

At this point, the author would grow expansive. At times, so much so that the landlord would suspect that perhaps the other's tea was rather liberally spiked against the early evening chill.

"Phillips" the recital would drone on, ". . . was a man without peer in his

line. But he came to have a belief that to go near the water meant deadly peril for him. He came to believe, with the sort of conviction that a small child or an insane person has, that his fate was to drown. His distaste and aversion for the water grew to such an extent that he was unable to associate with the medium that made him his living. Do you follow that, Philpotts? My friend, Phillips, wouldn't go near water! The sea, lakes, anything! And yet he had nothing to sustain him. Painting was all he knew. Painting seascapes was his forte.

"Poor old Bertie. Things went from bad to worse for him. I may have told you before, Philpotts." (Yes, he had, many times!) "For some while before his death, Phillips had barely enough to live on. At times he had insufficient food!" Milody would shrug. "We tried to help him, but he retained his pride even after, shall we say, his courage deserted him. It was very sad."

The landlord would nod lacrimously. It was at this point in the story that the journalist, if there ever was any comment, would mention vaguely something about a "fortune teller."

"Yes," Edmond recounted, "it seems poor old Bertie had been told by one of these fake seeresses that he would meet an untimely end by drowning. Imagine a grown man believing such twaddle! And yet he achieved this fate in a round-about way as the result of his very fear of it. With not enough money, insufficient food and virtually no work, he got sick."

"Lungs, wasn't it?" Philpotts came to fill in at this point, almost as though on cue. After all the fare of tea and crumpet was enjoyable.

Milody nodded. "His lungs and heart gave out. I was there when he died. It was not pleasant, Philpotts. You may know, if you are conversant with medicine, that in such a case a man's lungs actually do fill up with water, and paradoxically, you can say that Bertie Phillips did 'drown'."

This called for a sad shake of Philpotts' head, a half a cup more of tea and another crumpet.

"Now take the case of my good old friend, Major Hugh Tavener. You may even know of the honors he won in the Fusileers. A fine soldier, a fine man and a fine friend.

He was obsessed with a fear as all-powerful as Bertie Phillips'. The fear that he would be blown up. Well, you may say, Philpotts, a man whose life and career has been the army should have thought enough of that idea so that its aspect could no longer terrify him. And yet when you look forward to something unpleasant which has been predicted with a certainty for you, it exorcises a power and diabolical influence on your morale. In other words, the uncertainties of a soldier's life can and could be rationalized, but a certain *outré* prediction like that that you are to be blown up presents not only a threat but a very definite challenge."

ONCE Philpotts asked elucidation on this point: Who or what had made this threat? He understood Milody to reveal that it was a "fortune teller." No more detailed than that.

"Travener, as I have said, a man of many regimental honors, resigned from the army when—and follow this carefully, Philpotts—the army constituted his only way of life. It was all he knew. And yet because of this obsession of fear about avoiding what had been predicted for him and which conceivably could be considered more a part of a soldier's life than a civilian's; namely, the danger of dying in an explosion, he took himself out of an occupation for which he was eminently suited.

"Major Hugh's luck failed him from that time on. I remember when he moved out of his London flat into a very poor and niggardly quarters in the worst section of Liverpool. And it was there, of course, as you know, that he died in the very way that had been predicted! But you may say fairly, solely because of his frantic attempts to foil what he believed to be his destiny!

"Then, of course, and most recently in my mind was this unhappy affair of Malcolm Lysander. There, I assure you, Philpotts, was a man who I firmly believed was not afraid of anything! And yet fear caused him to give up his chosen work, exploration, and at which he had gained some small prominence. Caused him to bury himself away in a moorside cottage in one of the loneliest parts of northern England. And what was this fear? The fear that one of his

profession should have thought of many times—that he would die of a fatal bite.

"Think of it, Philpotts! A man who knew most of the dark places of the world, from the Congo to the Amazon, who'd hunted and explored in regions where poisonous snakes and dangerous animals abounded. But that is a queer commentary, my landlord friend. . ." When this pompous term emerged, Philpotts always was sure Milody's tea had been spiked. . . . "On human nature. That is why the ability to look into the future, as advertised by some psychics, would be such a disastrous thing if it could be proven and developed. A man will go on from day to day suffering all sorts of mental and physical tortures because hope is an innate part of human nature, and despite the unfortunate and perhaps even hopeless circumstances of his life, he will continue, as the saying goes, hope while there is life.

"If, on the other hand, he knows of a certainty that he is going to say, be sent to the gallows on a certain date and hung until he is dead, or if he knows that he will surely be dead in two months' time from an incurable and fatal disease, then his whole psychology changes. Lysander, who faced death many times, as my friend in the Fusileers, and many more times as an explorer, was, nevertheless, cowed by the mystic monstrousness of an evil prediction. The prediction that he would surely die of a fatal bite.

"He gave up his world travels, he gave up his forays into mysterious lands and buried himself away, as you know. Then, as in the two previous cases, Philpotts, an immense set of paradoxes contrived to regulate his life to its end. Far away from any menace from the natural source of his *bete noir*—poisonous serpents, spiders and the like are not found in England except in museums and zoos—he was, nevertheless, thrown into a paroxysm of terror by the simple item concerning an accident to a small touring circus from Europe. This circus, in touring the English countryside, had the misfortune to suffer a slight accident. One phase of that accident touched Lysander's life with a chill stroke of horror. A snake box overturned and three very poisonous species escaped into the moor country not far from Malcolm's home."

THIS part always caused Philpotts to shudder with some distaste; he could well understand any man's revulsion for serpents, and that dated from a childhood visit to the botanical gardens and its snake-house.

"Those snakes," the journalist continued, "made Lysander even more of a prisoner. He would barely go out of the door of his country home even in daylight. He received food, supplies, and word from the village through a well-paid messenger. His only companion, before and after my visit, was a little terrier dog.

"The strangeness in this case, Philpotts, was that his little dog, the only member of the household who roamed the outdoors contracted rabies from some other creature, so that Lysander, fearful of the escaped snakes and imprisoning himself because of them, was, in fact, imprisoning himself with his own doom. His little pet fell ill—I noticed that on my visit; in fact, I think I recall the last occasion when the sick animal bit Malcolm.

"Now you will say and I will agree, Philpotts, that a normal man would have noticed the sickening of his pet and taken some steps about it. But Lysander was concerned with only one thing: his obsession about that 'fatal bite,' and the fact that the poisonous snakes constituted such a menacing medium. At the end when his dog finally died and Lysander, himself, might have suspected the truth and the threat, this time entirely real, to himself, he was still concerned with the intricate workings of a man's mind when it is concerned with avoiding some obessional danger."

Philpotts, as behooved his part, would nod as he crumbled the cake plate and sipped his second or third cup of tea. It mattered not. Edmond Milody was a prompt and punctual first-of-the-month rent payer; he was also good for the largest Yuletide tip given by any of the superintendent's tenants. He did wish though at times with an inner irritation carefully masked, that the writer would not toy so everlastingly with that brown-stub pencil that was in Milody's nervous fingers if it did not adorn the breast pocket of his writing jacket.

The going-over of the story in his mind and the telling of it built Milody's self-con-

fidence concerning the matter up to some considerable height. He no longer even allowed his mind to concern itself with the remembered phrase, "to be killed by a tool of your trade." Imagine his typewriter rearing up and attacking him! Or becoming smothered by the leaves of one of his manuscripts! It was all quite absurd!

The journalist was, by nature, a rather careful man. He did not sprint for trains as a general rule or tear down the stairs to the Underground. He was a steady rather than heavy imbiber.

Time is the greatest healer of all. As the hours become days, the days, weeks, and the weeks, months; yesterday with its sadness or gladness is, after all, but a picture in the album of memory, with no more reality than the corner cinema.

So it was that Edmond Milody was really quite happy when he first heard it. It was early evening and he was lying down in his room with a slight headache, due probably to the close work entailed in correcting some material at the printer's earlier that day. There was a slight lull between the homeward-bound workers and the people yet to go out for an evening's fun, and the streets were resultantly quiet, with only now and then a lorry or cart rumbling along the cobblestones.

These occasional sounds only served to lull the author into a state bordering semi-sleep, and it was probably just then that he first became conscious of the sound. It was a screeching, at first distant but then louder, and the noise turned his sluggish mind back to that fateful trip from Liverpool after he had attended to the Tavener incident. The screeching was a train whistle, or was it something else?

His mind looked further down through the years and the events of those years, and at this, some warning instinct in him struggled to rouse him fully. It was a dreadful fight up through heavy, swirling, green water. His legs and arms were paralyzed, and yet his mind kept ordering him to wake up, to stir, to sit up and so vanquish the rising noise in his ears.

After an eternity of the struggle—don't scientists say these nightmares last but seconds?—he succeeded in gaining his full consciousness. There were no sounds now

but the prosaic end-of-day ones, but the macabre screeching was still in his mind's ear.

Milody rushed to the window. He looked up and down the street for more than just a moment and then withdrew, nettled at his surging fear and resultant actions. After all, a nightmare is a nightmare. Ridiculous for a grown man to act in such a fashion! What in heaven's name was the point in trying to analyze some imaginary sound, and what did he expect to see outside in the street?

Edmond tried to ignore the wetness of his palms, rubbing them abruptly on a towel and scowling at the whitefaced image of himself in the dresser mirror.

AT supper, during which one of the borders remarked on his quietness, Milody took himself out to the corner cinema. The film was slapstick, and on several occasions, Edmond found himself laughing heartily. Still he turned homeward with a hesitant step as though there was something there he feared or a task he disliked. Just as he turned in at his flat, he started at a black shadow across the street. In a feeble cone of yellow light from the opposite streetlamp, the shadow turned into a hurrying laborer still in work clothes.

Milody set his mouth even tighter, thumbed his key into the lock and went upstairs to his room. He dallied with his undressing and preparations for bed, but try as he would, the time came to lie down and put out the light; and finally sleep came, and as he had known, with it the nightmare. He saw her again, the blue-veined, yellow-white skin of her hands, the mottled unhealthiness of the emaciated forearm, the haglike old face, and the owlet clinging tenaciously to her black shoulder as though it had grown there.

In the nightmare, which even his uneasy writhings could not rid himself of, the old witch-woman screamed and shrieked and the owlet spat forth curses—and all of them sounded like the whistle of the Liverpool train bringing him back from Tavener's remains. Or maybe it was the train from the north-of-England moors on his last visit to Lysander.

He woke up with a fearful start, and it

took him minutes to quell his trembling. A glass of cold water helped, but there was no more sleep that night.

The next day the journalist purchased some sleeping powders at the druggist's. He found a double dose of these helped, and he wondered if his nerve was going. The other boarders told him he was looking pale and he took a weekend in Brighton. It might have been longer, but even as he was becoming comfortably accustomed to the sun and sea air of that British south-shore resort, he was suddenly struck with an alarming realization. In the case of each of his other friends, they had run away, retreated for reasons of fear, and in the end, that very attempt to escape had proved their undoing. Was he not now following in their wayward steps?

He was packed and on the London train within the hour, later waving off Philpotts' mild, "Why, you're back sooner than we expected, Mister Milody," with the rejoinder that he had much pressing work to do.

Like all miseries that afflict the body or mind, this one of the hideous dreams reached a climax beyond which its horrors did not penetrate. It was then that Milody knew a strange and soul-satisfying security. It was as he had always believed—a fear-thought planted so deeply within all of them that it was like a cancer. It was like a speck in the eye. The more one fussed with it, the sorrier it got. Without criticism of the other three, Milody objectively reasoned that whereas they had run, he had stood and fought. He freely acknowledged to himself that he had learned from their experiences, but the fact remained that he was more than ever sure that his panacea was the correct one.

It was the crowning triumph when the ugly dreams began to fade in intensity and quantity even when he desisted from use of the sleeping compound.

It was at tea-and-crumpets time with Philpotts one afternoon not much later that Milody heard the sound again. A shrieking that made him lower the cup abruptly to its saucer.

He sat transfixed for a moment, and then at Philpott's "Gracious, Mister Milody, you're white as a ghost! Is anything wrong?"

the journalist got up precipitously and went to the window.

There were the usual prosaic passers-by and nothing else. He regained his composure quickly and chided himself.

"That noise, it startled me."

"What noise?"

"Don't say you didn't notice it! That sound of shrieking a moment ago."

"Can't say I did, but then I've got pretty used to these noises. Probably was a wheel squealing on that turn up at the Northstead Road intersection."

The author nodded.

But it was not more than a day or so later when he heard the sound again, this time even louder as he was seated at the dining table downstairs. He half rose, spilling a plate of broccoli, and the others stared at him.

"Don't you hear that? A a sort of shrieking or calling sound?"

They looked at him wordlessly until one of the women said, "Calm yourself, Mister Milody. It's probably Mister Philpotts' boy-of-all-work down in the basement shaking down the hot-water stove."

Philpotts nodded, and Milody sat down to finish his meal in silence.

IT WAS early nightfall when he heard the sound again and then in the morning a day later as he was dressing to go to the printer's. Both times the noise was unmistakable, but it had now taken on a peculiar hooting, birdlike quality that more than ever chilled Edmond's soul because of its significance. Both times the writer rushed to the window, but there was nothing that he could see.

The last time Edmond Milody was to hear the sound was of a warm, drab, and humid afternoon. He was alone in the flat with Philpotts. The two of them, in fact, were mounting the stairs for the ritual of tea when the noise burst upon the journalist's consciousness. He clutched at his landlord's sleeve.

"There it is! Don't you hear it, man? So loud!"

"Well, now, can't say exactly," the superintendent opined. "There are so many noises in London, Mister Milody. . . ."

But the journalist was off up the stairs,

pounding upward two at a time in his frantic haste. He made his room and put his head and shoulders out the window. With the moist heat of the day, his forehead was perspiring freely. His eyes searched wildly up and down. And then the strength seemed to go out of his hands that were clutching the ledge.

For there—unless he was crazy, unless this was some ghastly hallucination born of the heat and overwork—was the one who had sought him! Or had he sought her through all these years? The same bowed old figure. The same black-ominous coverings. And that feathered blob of something perched on her shoulder as she trudged along the pavement on the opposite side of the cobblestone street towards the flat.

Milody knew then with a surging singleness of purpose that the most important mission of his life was to find that old witch-woman, to confront her on the streets outside, to speak to her, to ask her.

He remembered then with a shock that was almost like a physical impact that she ended her epitaph by mentioning that she would inherit his very quarters. With an energy and fury born of desperation, Milody turned, stumbled across his room, tore through the door of it, brushing past Philpotts as he went, and hurled himself at the stairs.

As he reached their zenith, he felt a sudden lurching change in his footing. A sliding, horrible motion, which in its speed, was tantamount to the flight of a wingless creature. As he slipped on the insignificant round thing, he catapulted down the stairs, having no consciousness in these dreadful fractional seconds but of the screeching and hooting sound in his ears. And then that, thankfully, along with all else, abruptly stopped.

IT WAS the same simple and straightforward tale that the unemotional Philpotts told the police that he also relayed to the newspaper journalists, and they, in turn, pasted it into a one-column item for their periodicals, despite the hardship of putting reader-appeal and glamor into an accidental death.

"He heard some sort of noise in the street," the little landlord satisfactorily relayed to all questioners. "He ran upstairs and in his hurry—you know, he always twiddling a round, brown pencil in his fingers—he dropped it at the head of the steps. He looked out the window and then came racing back in a terribly hurry. I think he saw some acquaintance of his. But anyway, poor Mister Milody tripped on that pencil. There was a dreadful crash. . . ." And at this point, Philpotts would point at the dent in the newel post at the bottom of the flight, which had, at one and the same time, stopped Edmond Milody's head and broken his neck.

Philpotts reflected that it was a most unfortunate thing to have happened in one of his flats, particularly with a faithful paying roomer like Mr. Milody who took one of his hard-to-rent rooms off his hands.

But every cloud has a silver lining as Philpotts was won't to say. Almost before poor Mr. Milody was cold, as you might say, he had rented the upstairs front room again. To be sure, she was very old, and those black robes and things looked dirty. But, pshaw! Ten pounds in advance is a tidy sum and enough to make a landlord forget about a lot of things that he otherwise can't put up with.

Philpotts did hope, however, that he wouldn't have to explain to the other tenants about that "pet bird" that perched on her shoulder. . .

