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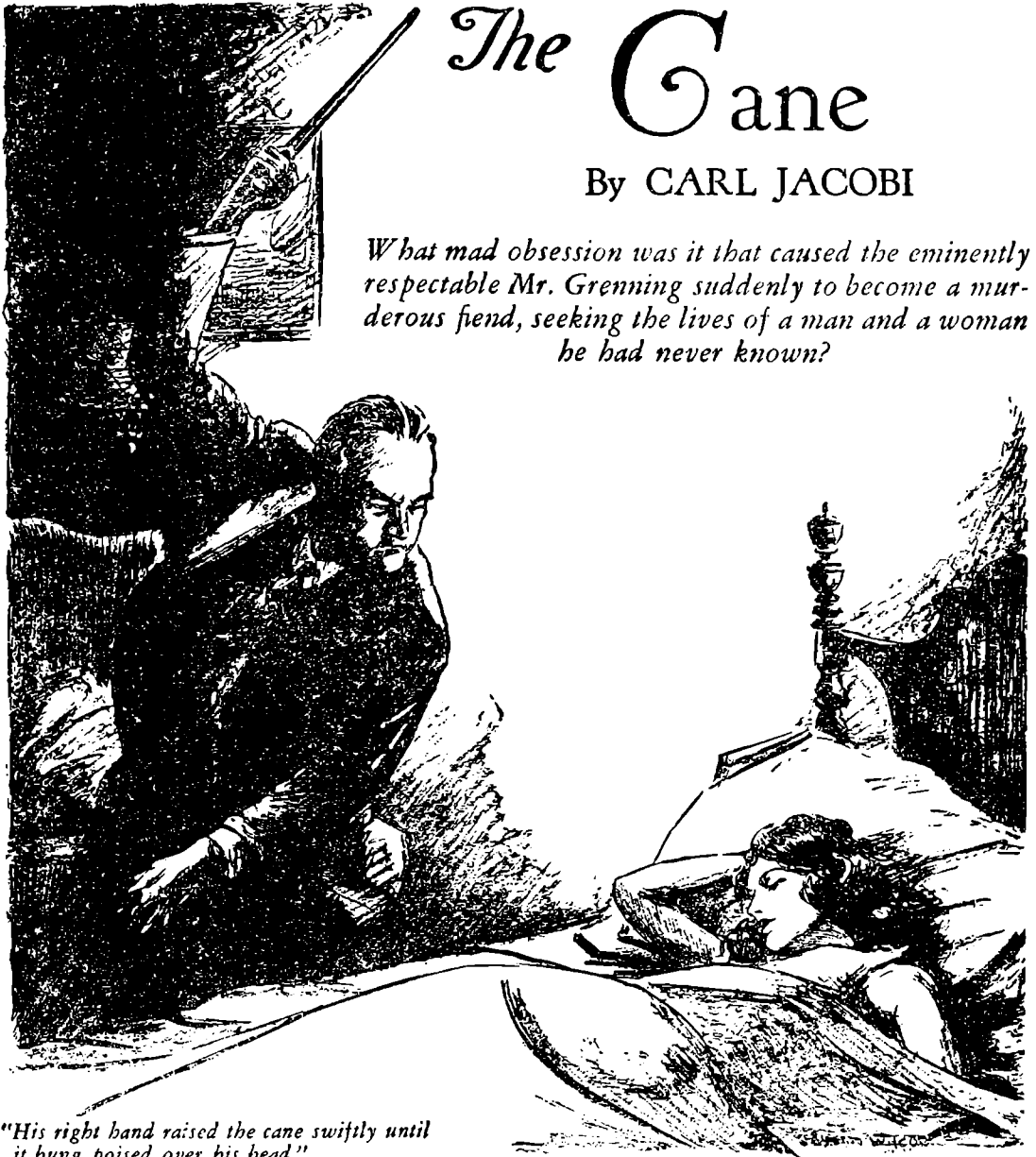


WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Cane

By CARL JACOBI

*What mad obsession was it that caused the eminently respectable Mr. Grenning suddenly to become a murderous fiend, seeking the lives of a man and a woman he had never known?*



*"His right hand raised the cane swiftly until it hung poised over his head."*

**M**R. JAMES GRENNING, retired senior partner in the firm of Bay, Halstead & Grenning, Lincoln's Inn Fields, was a most punctual person. It was his custom to leave his residence in Bloomsbury each morning save Sunday, walk past High Holborn, down Kingsway as far as Great Queen Street and return by way of Drury Lane. He left at precisely ten o'clock. At eleven he stopped in a small tobacconist's shop to purchase a Rosa Trofero cigar. And

his steps were so regulated as to bring him back to his door just as the hands of the hallway clock pointed to the hour of noon.

During these morning promenades, which were undertaken with the advice of a physician, Mr. Grenning always carried a cane. He neither needed the wooden support nor cared for the traditional modish effect it added to a masculine costume. He merely liked canes.

The odd part of it was, however, that

each day was carefully observed with a different stick. Monday, he carried a black Malacca. Tuesday, it was a thin shaft of rosewood. Wednesday, a heavier length of oak. Thursday, ebony. Friday, a strip of mahogany topped with an ivory handle. And Saturday, a delicately formed piece of walnut, very plain and very simple.

Apart from canes, Mr. Grenning was not in the slightest given to shows of temperament. And absurd though it may sound, his only reason for this one discrepancy was to remind him in his rather drab existence, of the exact day of the week.

It was on Thursday, a gray morning which had been preceded by a night of chilling rain, that Mr. Grenning left his residence as usual promptly at ten o'clock. At twelve o'clock the tobacconist was quite surprized that his regular customer had not appeared. And at one Mr. Grenning's housekeeper stood astounded in the hallway when she observed by the vacant hat-tree that her lodger had not yet returned.

Obviously only an incident distinctly apart from the commonplace could have caused Mr. Grenning to interrupt his careful routine in such a manner. For no other reason would he have taken it upon himself to dash wildly down Clarges Street and enter without knocking the luxurious apartment of his old friend, Sir Hugh Stanway.

Sir Hugh sat slumped in a huge, overstuffed chair and gazed with curious eyes at the ashen face of his unexpected visitor.

"Now, Grenning," he said firmly but soothingly, "stop all this wild babbling and start from the beginning. I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

With shaking hands Mr. Grenning

helped himself to the decanter on the table, poured out a stiff portion of brandy and drank it at a swallow.

"Do you see anything wrong with this cane?" he asked tremulously, handing the stick across.

Sir Hugh reached for the smooth shaft, turned it over and over in his thin, graceful hands, balanced it on one knee and squinted down its wooden length to see if it were warped. Then he held it out before him, gripped at each end in the manner of a swordsman testing the strength of a blade.

IT WAS not an unusual cane. Fashioned of a heavy, grainless wood, topped with a small cap of gold, and weathered and battered from long use, it looked the typical walking-stick of an unassuming gentleman of the middle class. Sir Hugh handed it back to its owner and raised his eyes inquiringly.

"It isn't one of the six you usually carry," he said. "Other than that, I see nothing wrong with it. Why?"

"Stanway," said Mr. Grenning, swallowing hard, "that cane is haunted! Haunted, I say! And if I don't get rid of it, I'll go mad. I'd have broken it into kindling hours ago if something, some inner force, hadn't prevented me."

"Ghosts?" asked Sir Hugh dryly, a suggestion of a smile at his lips.

"I've had it only since yesterday," continued Grenning, unmindful of the interruption. "Bought it at an auction for eight shillings to replace the one I broke last week. Today I carried it for the first time on my usual morning walk.

"It happened on Great Queen Street, shortly before eleven o'clock. There are several oldish houses in the block, you may remember. Freemason's Hall is just beyond. Well, a funeral was leaving from one of the buildings, and I had to

stop a moment before I could go on. Six pall-bearers were carrying the casket out of the doorway to the waiting hearse just as I came up.

"Curious how the sight of a funeral immediately sobers one. I stood there, trying hard not to stare. And yet I remember casually noticing the pall-bearer nearest me, the man who supported the right rear corner of the casket. He was a tall, dark-haired individual of about thirty years of age; his profile stood forth strikingly handsome, but as he turned, I couldn't help musing over the expression that twisted the line of his lips. Almost a smirk, it was, as if he were enjoying the whole affair.

"From then on, Stanway, I can't be sure what happened. It was horrible, revolting, and to my dying day I'll never forget it. My cane—this cane—was propped at an angle at my side, slightly supporting me as I stood waiting for the procession to pass. Suddenly I felt a distinct tremor pass up the wood through the handle. It was a vibration, a shock as if . . . well, as if the metal cap at the bottom had come into contact with an electric current.

"For a moment I thought the aged wood must be breaking. Then that tremor changed to a violent jerk. I felt the cane pull my hand upward, high over my head, poise there for an instant, and then lash back and forth through the air like a whip.

"With that stick raised above me, something seemed to snap in my brain. I felt as if my head were clamped in a vise, as if some power other than my own were controlling my thoughts. I believe I shouted some terrible oath, something at any rate that turned the surrounding crowd around to stare at me. Then I ran forward like a beast, seized that last pall-bearer by the shoulder,

spun him around and—God help me!—brought the cane crashing down full upon his head.

"Oh, I know it sounds common enough in these modern times of ours, simply beating a man on the head. But it was hellish to do, hellish to realize that I couldn't help myself. It was like some damned Juggernaut striking the first thing in its path. And coupled with the fact that the man was part of a funeral procession, which is macabre even in itself, the effect was hideous.

"I had one look at him as he fell away from the coffin and collapsed on the sidewalk, blood streaming down his forehead. Then I turned and ran."

Mr. Grenning slumped back in his chair and stared helplessly across the table. "Since then I've been wandering the streets with the fear and desperation of a hunted animal. I didn't kill the man, Stanway. I saw him stumble to his feet—thank Heaven!—just as I raced around the corner. But the stark horror lies in the fact that I'm not responsible, that I can't explain why I did it. My will was controlled by some power from without, and absurd as it may sound, that power came unmistakably from—this cane!"

The clock on the mantel ticked off a minute before Sir Hugh broke the silence.

"The man you struck, you're quite sure he was a stranger?"

Mr. Grenning nodded vehemently. "I never saw him in my life before."

"And your health during, say the last few weeks, it has been quite all right?"

"Health?" Mr. Grenning bristled. "Damme, Stanway, are you trying to—"

"I'm merely asking questions," interposed Sir Hugh. "You can answer them or not as you see fit. You say you bought this cane at an auction?"

"Yes, at Carter's, yesterday. I paid eight shillings for it."

"Any idea who was its former owner?"

"No. Hold on. Yes, I believe I do. The last part of the auction dealt entirely with the property of a man by the name of Wells, Stephen Wells. I remember reading of his death in the *Times*. I don't know *him* either."

Sir Hugh nodded. "One thing more," he said, choosing his words with care. "Were there any queer circumstances surrounding the sale?"

Mr. Grenning hesitated a moment in retrospection. When he looked up, there was a frown of puzzlement lined across his brow. "Now that you speak of it," he replied, "there was. I wasn't the highest bidder. The bidding started at three shillings. It worked up to six. I offered eight. But the man behind me called out ten almost immediately after I had spoken. I thought it odd that the auctioneer accepted my price instead of the higher amount, which he most certainly had heard; odd, too, that the man behind me made no objection when I moved forward to complete the sale."

Into Sir Hugh's eyes there was slowly creeping a gleam of interest. He rose to his feet, strode across to the window and stood staring out into the gray, cheerless street. Absently he drew a pipe from his pocket and rattled the stem against his teeth.

"Grenning," he said suddenly, returning to the table, "if anyone but you had told me this story I'd say he was a crazy fool. But I've known you for a good many years, and I know you're telling the truth. Have I your permission to look into this?"

Mr. Grenning looked up dully. "Yes, of course," he said. "That's why I came here. But how——"

"There's something wrong here, be-

lieve me, something decidedly wrong. I'm going out—going to see if I can unearth a few facts. Wait here for me, Grenning. It would be better you didn't appear on the streets for a while. Your room is first along the right hall."

"But haven't you anything to say at all?" snapped Mr. Grenning. "Haven't you any ideas?"

"Not now," replied Sir Hugh, reaching for his hat and gloves. The gleam in his eyes had increased to an excited glitter. "I want to look around a bit before I make any comments. Only this I can tell you quite positively: the funeral you interrupted so rudely was that of Stephen Wells, the former owner of the cane."

THE afternoon passed for Mr. Grenning with maddening slowness. Again and again he attempted to thrust himself in the pages of a book and forget his thoughts. But each time the print blurred and a vision of the afternoon's horrible experience formed like an optic scar before his eyes. Evening came, and still Sir Hugh did not return. Mr. Grenning barely tasted the food served by Stanway's man-servant. He continued to pace back and forth the length of the library until a nervous drowsiness slowly settled over him. At length, brain in a whirl, he went to his bed and stared at the designs on the wallpaper until the very concentration threw him into a fitful sleep.

He dreamed wild dreams of running through the streets of London, caning every pedestrian within reach and leaving a trail of horribly mutilated dead behind him. At two o'clock by the radium clock on the bureau he awoke abruptly, sat up in bed, trembling in every nerve and muscle.

The room was hot and suffocating.

The wind had died down, and the whole world seemed steeped in a great ringing silence. For a moment Mr. Grenning was puzzled as to what had happened. After all, he reasoned sleepily, it was foolish to let such a small incident bother him. He hadn't killed the man, had merely struck him a blow on the head, and by tomorrow the few who had chanced to see the action would have forgotten. The daily history of London must be filled with such things.

Yet as he sat there, now fully awake, he realized his brain was slowly giving way to an overpowering sensation. It was an urge, a definite, irresistible urge, that he dress, go out and walk once again those same streets down which he passed every morning.

Mr. Grenning had long been a man of habit, but he gave in to routine only through the process of time. To submit to a mere mental suggestion, especially a wild one like this, seemed the act of a weakling. He called to arm every ounce of will-power he possessed to fight it.

As the clock ticked on and on, however, the sensation grew stronger. He felt as if his entire body were encased in a suit of iron, and outside his window some powerful magnet had swept him into its field.

At length he could stand it no longer, and with a little whimper of submission, he leaped from bed, turned on the light, and proceeded to don his clothes. Dressed, he moved to the door, only to hesitate on the sill, staring back over his shoulder.

His cane! It stood there, propped up against the chair where he had left it. Slowly Mr. Grenning paced back the length of the room and halted a few feet away, staring down at the heavy stick. He clenched his fists, tried to turn in his tracks and swayed weakly. When a mo-

ment later he slipped out the front door and made his way to the street, the cane was clenched hard under one arm.

A late cab cruising along Piccadilly carried him down Coventry, Cranburn, Long Acre and finally to Great Queen Street. He realized now, as he paid the driver, that the unexplainable psychic urge which had forced him on this mad adventure was sweeping him not only into the general district of his afternoon walks, but toward one house in particular, the Wells residence from which he had seen Mr. Wells' funeral leave.

And presently he stood before it, a once-fashionable residence, made gaunt and somber by the passing years, set flush with the sidewalk. Up to this point, Mr. Grenning had been a man puzzled and bewildered, responding to something he didn't understand. Now as he glanced down the silent thoroughfare and then at the brooding mass of gables at his side, he suddenly changed.

The look of bewilderment gave way to one of craft. His head shrank lower into the protecting collar of his coat, and he moved cautiously into the shadows as if afraid of being seen. Five minutes he waited while the bobby on the opposite side of the street whistled his way around the corner. Then he stole silently up the steps of the dark house, fumbled at the latch, inserted one of his own keys in the antiquated lock, and after a moment of twisting, slipped inside.

A long hallway, dimly illuminated by a single night-light, confronted him. Without hesitation, Mr. Grenning crept to the first door on his right, opened it, and passed into a room that was a pit of darkness. He was moving forward steadily now, deliberately, treading unfamiliar ground, yet avoiding table, desk, and chairs with an uncanny sense of direction.

At the farther wall a third door barred

his passage, and he halted momentarily to get a firmer grip on the cane. Then he pushed open this last barrier and stared within. A shaft of yellow light from the street lamp outside filtered through the huge bay window of the room and disclosed directly before him the heavy bulk of an old-fashioned canopied bed.

For a moment Mr. Grenning stood there, head erect, shoulders thrown stiffly back like some strange automaton. Then slowly in measured pace he stepped forward, advancing on his shadow.

A young woman lay sleeping in the bed, a woman whose tousled black hair and closed eyes did not conceal the fine molding and delicate beauty of her features. She was breathing deeply and regularly, one arm folded above her head, covers drawn slightly away from her throat.

Not a line of expression found its way into Mr. Grenning's face. He surveyed the woman coldly as the silence of the old house hung like a pall about him. He continued to stand motionless as hollowly from a distant street came the roar and clatter of a far-away tram-car.

Then with the relentless motion of a machine his right hand raised his cane swiftly until it hung poised high over his head. Deliberately he moved closer, estimated his aim, and brought the heavy stick crashing down upon the head of his victim.

A single, penetrating scream came from the woman's lips as she rose up, clawed wildly at the bedclothes and then with a low gurgle slumped back against the pillow.

Mr. Grenning looked down at her. A tremor swept through his frame as he stared at the silent, bloody form. A short dry gasp slid through his clenched teeth. Then with a smothered sob he turned and moved slowly toward the door.

A voice from an upper room called down fearfully: "Mrs. Wells! Are you all right?"

With machine-like pace Mr. Grenning continued his way through an adjoining room. Not until he reached the outer hallway and a rush of feet sounded behind him, did he alter his speed. Then with a hideous cry of defiance, which seemed to come from another throat than his own, he lurched into a run, threw open the door and staggered forth into the dark street.

SIR HUGH STANWAY flung the latest edition of the *Friday Times* on his library table and looked across at the silent figure opposite him. If Grenning had been frightened and bewildered when he appeared at the door of Sir Hugh's rooms the night before, he presented a picture of absolute despair now. His gray hair was clawed into wild disarray, his eyes gleamed hard and feverish, and his hands as he gripped the arms of his chair opened and closed convulsively.

"I'm a murderer!" he moaned aloud for the tenth time.

Sir Hugh frowned perplexedly. "How many times must I tell you, Grenning, that you're nothing of the sort? The paper here gives a full account of last night's happenings. Mrs. Wells suffered only lacerations of the scalp. The pillow, it seems, partly protected her. It is very strange though that you should choose as your second victim the widow of the man whose funeral you interrupted the day before."

"Stanway," said Mr. Grenning, "if you don't do something to help me, I'll go mad. Realize—can't you?—that during the entire event, from the moment I entered the house, I absolutely couldn't help myself. Another will was controlling me, and yet I was horribly conscious of

everything that was done. Beating that defenseless woman as she lay there—God, it was terrible!”

For a moment Sir Hugh studied his friend in silence. Then he settled back in his chair.

“I went to considerable trouble to unearth facts,” he said. “But the information I have gathered offers nothing in the way of explanation that a sane brain can understand.

“You bought this cane at an auction. It was formerly the property of a Stephen Wells, now deceased. So much, you know already. Wells was a very rich man, Grenning. He was sole owner of the Wells East Indies Products Company, and when he died he left a considerable fortune to his wife. But whereas he had been a success financially, his marriage had been a complete failure. I’ve heard of antipathy between man and wife before, but never anything like this. That woman was so relieved at her husband’s death that she had the unparalleled audacity to dispose of his possessions at public auction even before he was decently buried.”

Mr. Grenning looked up slowly. “What has all that to do with my cane?” he queried.

“Very much. Those articles of Wells’ that were offered for sale included some of his most personal possessions, and among them was your cane. Now the cane has quite a story connected with it that is rather generally known among Wells’ friends.

“Wells, it seems, was in the yearly habit of taking business trips through the East Indies to look over some of his company’s property. It was in North Borneo, inland from Sandakan, that he saved a Dyak witch-doctor from death. He shot a king cobra only a few inches from the native’s foot. The witch-doctor

was so filled with gratitude he presented Wells with a strange gift.

“It was a shaft of wood, fashioned from the branch of a death-tree. If you are at all acquainted with the customs of those natives of Borneo, Grenning, you will know that some tribes have a most peculiar practise in the burying of their dead. They choose a large tree, hollow out an aperture in the trunk, insert the corpse in an erect position and then seal the opening. The tree continues to grow, a living tomb, and is from then on an object of religious veneration.

“This particular piece of wood came from the branch of a tree in which had been buried the body of the witch-doctor’s predecessor, a Dyak priest. The wood was therefore supposed to be endowed with the power of protecting one in case of danger and working revenge on one’s enemies.

“Two days later, while Wells was returning down-river in a native dugout, his party was attacked from ambush. Poisonous darts from *sumpitan* blow-guns killed three native guides and one other white man. Wells experienced a marvelous escape. The piece of wood given him by the witch-doctor happened to be propped up against his equipment before him. One of the darts, which would have found its mark in his throat, struck the wood and was deflected to the side.

“Arriving at the coast, Wells had the shaft made into a cane and vowed it would never leave his side. He seemed to have kept this promise, for wherever he went, that cane was always with him.”

The narration ceased for a moment, and Mr. Grenning stirred restlessly. “I still don’t see——” he began.

“There are just a few things more,” interrupted Sir Hugh. “The man you struck yesterday while he carried the coffin of Stephen Wells was Philip Garn,



a well-known idler in gambling circles, and he represents the third part of the triangle in Wells' unhappy marriage. It is open gossip that Mrs. Wells was in love with him, wanted to marry him, and sought by every means to force her husband to grant a divorce, an action which he refused to take. It seems a cruel gesture on her part to have chosen Garn as one of the pall-bearers.

"Now then"—Sir Hugh drummed his fingers reflectively on the arm of the chair—"I offer no conclusions. The whole thing looks impossible from start to finish. All I can say is that it would seem by your recounting of the odd way in which you purchased the cane at the auction, it was foreordained that you, who are known always to carry a cane and to walk daily past that Wells house on Great Queen Street, should be its new owner."

CURIOUSLY enough, Mr. Grenning had almost the same dreams that night as he had the night before. But there was one vision in addition, a most vivid one that so stayed by him, he couldn't refrain from telling it in detail to Sir Hugh over the breakfast table.

"It seemed that the ringing of the door-bell roused me in the middle of the night," he began. "I could have sworn that I was awake, that I got out of bed, put on the dressing-gown you loaned me, and hurried down the hall to answer it.

"When I opened the door and stood shivering on the threshold, two men confronted me. And they were the strangest pair I had ever seen. The one on the right was a tall, spare-looking Englishman, a common enough fellow, I suppose, if he had worn regular clothes. But what did he have on but a suit of white duck and a pith helmet! There wasn't a trace of color in his face. It was white

as lime. And his eyes! God, Stanway, they seemed nothing more than two black holes. I started backward and stared. The other looked even more like a page out of a book. He was a native of some kind, stark naked save for a loin-cloth and a cap of queer-looking feathers on his head. Over his left arm he carried the dried and stiffened body of a dead snake.

"They stepped in, and the white man said, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world: 'We've come for the cane!'"

Sir Hugh laid down his tea-cup sharply. His gray eyes slowly widened.

"And in this dream," he asked, "did you see yourself giving the men the cane?"

"Yes, I——"

With a start Sir Hugh kicked back his chair, jumped to his feet and ran to the umbrella cabinet in the outer room. He thrust the little door open and peered inside. The rack, which the night before had held the cane, was now empty!

Whirling, Sir Hugh leaped across the room and made his way quickly to the hallway. Here he bent down on his knees, examined the rug and the uncovered floor before the door. And an instant later, a smothered exclamation burst from his lips.

Clearly outlined on the maple parquet was the muddy outline of a naked human foot!

"Quick, Grenning!" Sir Hugh turned on his stupefied guest who stood staring at the mark on the floor. "There's not a moment to lose. Come on."

As their cab sped down Piccadilly, Stanway sat silently, unrelaxed, staring with impatient eyes at the flying streets. Only once did he break his silence, and that was to urge the driver to greater speed.

Along Great Queen Street through a maze of traffic they raced. Then, framed like a photograph in the windshield, their destination loomed up before them. It was the Wells house, and before it was collected a milling crowd.

**S**IR HUGH looked out before him, took in the scene at a glance and struck his fist sharply on the leather upholstery.

"Too late, Grenning," he said.

They left the cab and began shouldering their way through the crowd, Stanway opening up a lane for Grenning to follow. And abruptly a moment later at a point half-way between the curb and the steps they reached the inner edge of the silent crowd and stood staring at the gruesome spectacle before them. Mr. Grenning felt suddenly faint.

Lying on the sidewalk were two blood-spattered figures, a man and a woman. The man was Philip Garn, whom Mr. Grenning had struck during the funeral procession. The woman was Mrs. Wells. It did not need a medical examiner to see that both had been instantly killed. Their heads were horribly crushed and battered.

Stanway turned away to a tall, lean man who was standing to one side, a notebook in his hand.

"Good morning, Inspector Melton, do you remember me?"

The man looked up and then stared in recognition. "I should say I do. I——"

"Tell me," Stanway broke in hurriedly, "how did this dreadful thing happen?"

Inspector Melton frowned. "Double murder," he said shortly, "and it's the strangest case I've ever come upon, if we can believe everything we've heard."

"Murder?"

"Yes. The man is Philip Garn, you know. He was Mrs. Wells' lover, I guess, now that Mr. Wells is dead. The two of them were just returning to London from a day out in Sussex. Somebody had a score to settle apparently and waited for them. A moment after they stepped out of the cab they were both struck over the head from behind with a cane. We've got the cane inside. But the queer part is that the cabby swears he didn't see a soul on the street. Says he had driven the cab only a few yards after leaving when he heard two screams and turned just in time to see them fall to the sidewalk. Nobody else, he claims, was anywhere in sight. It's mighty strange."

Stanway nodded slowly. "Thank you, Inspector," he said. "Come, Grenning, we may as well go."

**O**N MONDAY, October the 12th, the evening edition of the *London News-Chronicle* carried the following small account on the bottom of its third page:

A strange and ironic sidelight was added by officials of Scotland Yard today to the yet unsolved tragedy which occurred on Great Queen Street. The victims, it will be remembered, were Mrs. Stephen Wells and Mr. Philip Garn, both of whom were killed by heavy blows from a cane wielded by an unknown assailant.

Mrs. Wells was the recent widow of the late Stephen W. Wells, owner of the Wells East Indies Products Company, who died early last week. Since his death rumors have been current among Mr. Wells' friends that there must have been a grave mistake in the report that he died from carditis, as he was known to enjoy perfect health. So far-reaching were these rumors that officials of Scotland Yard had the body of Mr. Wells exhumed and a complete autopsy performed. The result, made public for the first time today, was that Mr. Wells had died of poison.

After a thorough search it was found that a vial of strychnin had been purchased by Mrs. Wells at a neighboring apothecary shop. Mrs. Wells was to have been called for legal questioning when her sudden death occurred.

