

Weird Tales



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The Man Who Lived

By RAYMOND F. O'KELLEY

He stepped from his Pimlico lodging house—into a London as dead as Babylon.

HUNGER and the sight of plenty drove Edward Penderby from the streets at 9 o'clock the night of that September 10. London's heat, pulsing at wall and roof all afternoon and evening, had made the Lupus Street attic oven-

hot. He opened the window, and the effort left him panting.

Penderby was tired in body and mind, tired as only the workless on his futile quest can be. His underwear clung. The soles of his feet seered burning. The hun-

ger-pain had given way to an ache that throbbled between his eyes and the top of his head.

Picture this Penderby. Picture him as he lay, while the room darkened, on the soiled coverlet of the truckle-bed. Lanky, ill-shaven, black hair in need of cutting, eyes quick even in defeat, suit now so ragged that any employer would have been repelled; and in dubious control a clever, savage brain scheming ever to no purpose.

And ask why he was chosen.

Whatever the quality of Penderby's faculties, worry and fatigue had numbed his mind beyond the power of directed thought that night, and he stared as unthinkingly as a human being can at the lamp-thrown window-pattern taking shape on the slanted ceiling.

When that pattern was sharpest, he had fallen asleep, one leg still hanging over the side of the bed, and it was three hours after the automatic extinguishing of the street-lights wiped the design away that he awoke.

"If it weren't so infernally hot," he said, "I'd stay in bed."

Then he saw that he had slept in his clothes, and cursed. They would stick to his sweating skin more than ever. As he swung onto the edge of the bed, he felt the clamminess of them already.

But he washed, tiptoed down through the fetid lodging-house air, and stepped into the freshness of the street. He turned toward London's heart, and walked slowly.

What impelled him, what had caused him to leave his room so early and make a miserable day longer than it normally would have been, he did not know.

THE first body was outside a store at the corner. It was an old newspaper-seller's, in a greasy blue suit that shone. Copies of the *Evening Standard* and the *Star* had fallen from his arms to the sidewalk, Pen-

derby, determined not to be an inquest witness, hurried past.

But beyond the corner was another body, a girl who had been standing in a doorway. Her body had folded into the attitude of a sleeper on the step, and her cigarette had burned away in the palm of one hand. There was no blood, so far as Penderby could see. But she might have been murdered; so might the old man, only a few feet away; and Penderby turned and ran.

He stopped short to avoid a bundle of rags and what had been a slum harridan. He was frightened, now. He retreated to the middle of the street, and looked swiftly up and down. Two more bodies were about fifty yards away. And one was that of a policeman.

"What in thunder is this?" Penderby asked aloud. "Am I awake, anyway?"

He undeniably was, and the bodies still were there.

"They can't be asleep, all together," he said. "Nor drunk—look at that cop."

But he went back to the sidewalk, and touched the two bodies on it gingerly. He said, "Hey, wake up!"—and felt a little sacrilegious, as he tried to shake what had been the girl. They were corpses, without a doubt. So, he found, were the bodies of the policeman and the well-dressed youth nearby.

Five bodies! And not noticed, apparently till now.

"I don't give a damn," Penderby muttered. "Let someone else be a witness. I'd get no thanks for it, I'll bet."

On he went. A pair of cats had died on the steps of a house. What he assumed to be the body of a man lay on the other side of the street. "Let him lie there!"

He found himself counting the dead on Warwick Way. They seemed natural after a time; most, at a distance, were dark bundles that matched the drab street. His

astonishment gradually receded; it did not grow; it became a curtain in his awareness, a new background that gave a new proportion. But he stopped now and then to ponder the astounding fact once more, and his thinking did not lessen the fact that these streets in the center of London were filled with dead.

To one he did give heed. A girl, seventeen or eighteen, had been leaning out of a first-story window, face cupped in hands. Her elbows had spread on the sill, and her fingers had slid into her yellow hair. Chin and part of one cheek rested on the stone slab.

He ran to the door of the house. He pressed the bell, wielded the knocker till the street echoed. No one was aroused.

"It's a plague!" Penderby shouted. His voice was shrill. A sickly, light sweat stood on his forehead. "It's a plague! It's got all the town and it'll get me!"

But he began to reason, with the surprising coolness that marked most of what he did that day. He walked from one to another of six or seven bodies on the street. The expressions of the faces were those of persons who had tried to prevent themselves from slipping, from tripping, from being struck. There was no sign of panic. And there was no sign that anyone had run to aid anyone else.

"No," he concluded. "If it was a plague, it killed everyone at once. But a plague couldn't do that; and anyway how comes it that I'm here, after sleeping beside an open window all night?" Then, "But *am* I awake?"

He pinched the soft skin on the backs of his hands, in turn, several times, stamped, shook himself as if to fling a burden away.

He was awake. These others had died, Edward Penderby was alive.

He went on, his bearing less hesitant than before.

SIXTEEN or seventeen busses, passengers in all of them, drivers and conductors in a few, stood in the Victoria railroad-depot yard. Penderby did not enter any of them. He noted a blue-uniformed group in a corner, and remembered that drivers, conductors, and inspectors had gathered at the spot.

There was no sound of trains. One, bearing travelers from the Continent who had landed the evening before, had drawn in. Some doors were open, but the cars still were full.

Outside were taxi-men dead, newsboys dead, policemen dead. Two bodies in German-cut clothes had fallen into a gutter; they were those of refugees, probably.

Horror and alarm gained brief mastery, and Penderby fled the place. As he fled, Big Ben and Cathedral bells began to peal the useless hour, and made a clangor in his ears.

He stopped only when his lungs seemed about to burst and his aching legs could not carry him farther.

An automobile stood six feet from him. It was the first he had noticed. He stepped onto the running-board. But he had had to respect property, and he paused.

"Is there anyone alive here?" he shouted. Then he bawled the question.

There was no reply, and he slipped in. But the ignition had been locked and the key removed. He cursed in impatience already different from the vexations of his months of struggle, and jumped out. A bigger automobile was ahead, and the driver had slumped onto the wheel. He opened the nearest door, turned the body off balance and guided it to the ground, seated himself at the wheel, and started the engine. The key had been lying on the floor.

Bicycles, cars and bodies blocked the way every few yards; so Penderby traveled slowly. He passed the houses of Parlia-

ment and Government buildings in Whitehall.

Trafalgar Square contained more dead than even the space outside the depot. He spared them only a glance. The air was chill, and the hunger that sleep had held off had returned. He drove to a big restaurant three hundred yards away, and, somewhat timidly despite all he had seen, walked in.

The restaurant had been full. He halted at a table at which a middle-aged man had sat. On it were beef, ham, cakes, bread and butter, a pot of tea. Standing, he snatched food in both hands, and as he ate wolfishly from one, the other was stretched for still more. But he could not eat as much as he had expected; his stomach had been used to little.

He was thirsty. The long-cold tea cut the saliva from his tongue; still, it was bitter, and he set the pot, from which he had gulped, back with a crash. He remembered that he was in the less-expensive section. He returned to the entrance-hall, stepped over bodies of waiters and others, and went up the broad stairs.

Bottles and glasses stood on a table near the cashier's desk in the second dining-room. He poured a glass of wine. He swallowed it in a second, poured and drank another; and, a little less quickly, another. His body began to tingle; he lost awareness of blistered feet and sticky clothes.

"This is something like it!" said Penderby.

Bottle and glass on knees, he sat on a chair he had drawn a little apart, and mused in a mingling of contentment and glee.

His mind suddenly seized on the fact that the dead he faced had been more than well-to-do. He leaped onto the chair, waved bottle and glass aloft, and cried:

"Silence!"

His voice mounted to a singsong screech:

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! You simply cannot know the pleasure it gives me to be with you this morning! There's a slight difference, to be sure, between your standing and mine just now, but you're big enough to overlook it, aren't you?"

"Well, ladies and gentlemen of the upper crust, I give you——"

There Penderby paused.

"What *do* I give you?"

He rubbed his forehead with the wet bottle-spout.

"I've got it! I give you discontent, disappointment, starvation, clothes the dogs bark at—and a happy death!"

He drank the toast, sent bottle and glass sliding and spinning along the waxed floor, and ran down the stairs. He was exhilarated as never before; he was triumphant.

THE Strand, London's most famous thoroughfare, which leads from Trafalgar Square to Fleet Street, was strewn with dead. They had fallen at bus stops, in late-shutting stores (lights in some of these burned still), on pedestrian crossings, in busses and automobiles that had crashed against one another and in places formed a barrier from wall to wall. Here and there, wheels had squeezed blood into oozy patches.

A bus had shattered a café window, and spilled cakes and pastries onto the sidewalk. Another had snapped an electric-light post, and wires lay in curls and tangles for sixty yards.

One wing of a Rolls-Royce, a white-haired woman in the back, had littered a section of pavement with the plate glass of a clothing-store.

Penderby climbed in, and in ten minutes was wearing a tweed jacket, flannel trousers, a gray shirt, light underwear, clean socks, and a yellow belt. He took a pair

of brown shoes from a store nearly opposite, and then sought the effect in a mirror in the dim rear.

"I don't look too bad," he commented, "considering everything."

He went back to the street.

"And now to see what's become of the rest of the eight million."

Penderby had begun to utter his thoughts.

But it was not in fear—so far as he knew, at least. Nor was he lonely after this inexplicable departure of his fellow-creatures.

He picked his way among the dead for about half a mile. The number decreased as he neared Fleet Street, and he took a bicycle from the doorway of a store and rode, with little difficulty, into London's Newspaper Row.

The stare of what had been a policeman at a lamppost near the court buildings brought him up with a jerk that nearly threw him off the machine. For a moment, he thought that another had been spared. But the eyes did not move. Only for a wastepaper-bin, shoulder-high, on the pole, and his straddling legs, the policeman would have fallen as he died.

Penderby was slightly hungry when he came to a corner lunch-counter; so he climbed over the bar, mixed a milk-shake as he had seen attendants do, and drank it between bites of a stale ham sandwich.

He rode on, and dismounted at a newspaper office. He walked in. The front office contained twelve or fourteen bodies, three or four those of clerks. He climbed the marble-and-concrete stairs two at a time. He had searched two corridors when he opened a door marked "News Room."

THERE were bodies at nearly half the desks, and one had fallen beside the half-opened door of a telephone booth, in which the instrument hung the full

length of the cord. A head pressed the keys of a typewriter on a desk near, and some of the type-bars were in midair. Penderby pulled a sheet of paper from the machine. The word "Churchill" and the number "3" were in the top left corner.

He read:

"Mr. Churchill declared that he did not favor any 'attitude, policy, or frame of mind' that could be construed as 'containing even the germ of what has been called' encirclement, but that he would oppose any atte—"

No more.

"Good God!" murmured Penderby.

He moved to the desk alongside. A young man had begun a story about a loan-failure. He had typed a line of hyphens through "said," and substituted "asserted."

Penderby went to all the other desks occupied. No one had been writing of death.

"How could they have known, after all?" he reasoned. "It probably got everyone at the same time. It *must* have."

He wandered through the composing-room and down a spiral, metal staircase to the pillared press-room. The remote bulbs still glared. In the light diluted by mud-spattered, wire-netted windows, they did little but bring glints to the shiny parts of the machines.

One press had run off an early edition. It had continued to run, it seemed, long after those who had tended it died. A hill of papers hid the little gate out of which they had come.

A man in dungarees had been leaning against a steel pillar of another machine. A face-high metal button shone on the pillar; it had been handled often. Penderby pressed it, and the machine began to roll. He retreated to the door as the rush of paper merged with a thunderous hammering; then returned, and lifted one of the papers already carried out.

The main story was about Russia and Germany.

"If they could have waited," he said, "they'd have had a bigger story than that. But I suppose they couldn't. They had to go with the rest."

The press still ran, and the concrete floor vibrated. The sight and the sound of it, with the recollection of what he had seen in the news room, stirred something akin to pity in the man. Brains, hands, metal here had been working when death had come, and if ever the product of journalism had been of fleeting value it was now.

Penderby did not know how to stop the press, and the noise irritated him after awhile. He found the rear exit, a grimy, steel-grilled door that opened onto a lane. He turned right, the direction in which a number of trucks had been turned, and found himself on Fleet Street again.

His throat was parched, and he decided to look for more drink. Beer would be best, for the forenoon was hot. He filled two big glasses in a saloon, brought them out, placed them on the curb, and sat beside them in the sunlight.

This time, he drank slowly. He had slipped a newspaper into a jacket pocket, and he idly read and drank for half an hour. The day was serene, and had brought an air purer than London had breathed in a century.

The man to whom all London—if not all Britain—had passed dropped the paper. For he had noted that purity of the air. He wondered how long it would last. The street contained enough corpses to start a plague after another day or so. He could not bury them, not to mention the rest of the eight million in Greater London.

"I suppose," Penderby decided, "I'll have to leave. Well, it wouldn't take long to get out by car."

But whither? The countryside, in all

likelihood, would be as perilous as the city; no district in Britain was thinly-populated.

"Oh, the hell with it!" was his conclusion. Having dismissed the problem for the moment, he went into the saloon for more beer.

He was tired, and it was nearly noon when he stretched himself and decided to explore farther; only a little farther, for the heat was intense. He cycled across Ludgate Circus, at the end of Fleet Street, and up Ludgate Hill. Dead, as he had expected, everywhere; silence complete, save for the faint noise of the bicycle.

He was in the financial center. This region of swarming clerks and dull buildings had interested him little at any other time, and only the coolness of narrow streets between high, gray walls induced him to go in now. The bodies he saw were few; life normally had left the district with the closing of offices at 5 p.m.

Ahead was a bank. He dismounted at the curb in front of it. A gate stood between sidewalk and door. The windows were high, deep, and barred.

"If I weren't so tired," Penderby reflected, "I'd go in—even if it took a month."

The place could tell him nothing, he saw. As he rode back to the Strand, he pondered the fact—the most illuminating so far as his new life was concerned—that the district of money was the least useful in all London.

PENDERBY was sleepy now, though it still was early afternoon. The stimulus of wine and beer had worn off, and the alcohol made him drowsy. He cycled as far as a luxury hotel before which taxis and limousines had been busy the night before, left the machine tilted against one of the glass doors, and walked in.

Some of the well-dressed guests had died

in armchairs, others on divans. More, standing, had fallen in groups that even now, somehow, told of their easy, unvexed lives of conversation and travel. Penderby, glancing round, was glad that the bitterness in him had not died.

The first door he opened after he went upstairs moved only a few inches; something had fallen against it. On the floor of the next room was the body of a man. A woman and a little girl had died in another.

The fourth was empty. A door in it led to a bathroom. He turned the hot water on. It still was at boiling-point, and as he waited till it had cooled he shaved with a good sharp razor someone had left on the dressing-table.

Penderby, despite the luxury of steam and soap and water to his chin, did not linger in the bath. He had begun to hurry. For what? He did not know. But the cool sheets soothed him. The comfort of the bed was so exquisite that, to sense it as long as possible, he tried to stay awake. The sleep into which he soon fell was dreamless, and lasted till 7 p.m.

He made tea in the big kitchen, below street-level, and brought butter and cold roast chicken from a refrigerator and fine bread from a chrome-and-white cupboard. When he left the hotel, he was munching a sandwich made of remnants of the meal.

The Strand was gray and, in corners and gaping store-fronts here and there, black. Rain had made scattered pools that gave the street a shabby, defeated look. The only light they reflected was the little left in the sky. All the street-lamps had failed now, and the store-lights that had outlived the day were few and ineffectual.

It was as Penderby looked round Trafalgar Square, somber and a little frightening, that he felt his first bewilderment, apart from the shocks of surprise, of that day. He sat on a balustrade outside South

Africa House, and tried to plan the suddenly monstrous-appearing future.

He could not stay in the vast charnel-house London had become. A day or two more, as he already had warned himself, and plague would ride every breath of air. But his food was in London; he could not turn farmer at short notice, and the supplies in stores and hotels would last very long.

The Continent? But he hardly could manage a boat even on the short Dover-Calais voyage, could he? Then, he had not heard nor seen aircraft since the afternoon before. If air-liners had come from France and other countries, and landed at a dead airdrome, the pilots, undoubtedly, would have flown from Croydon on to London. Had everyone in France, Germany, Spain, Italy died? Was he the only one spared? Were there French, German, Spanish, Italian Edward Penderbys?

The Square was cold, lonesome. He left his perch stiffly, and turned onto the Strand once more. He stumbled over a body now and then. Clouds that had scudded from the west broke in a short, heavy shower, and it brought a damp smell from the heaps of wet clothes on every side.

The hotel was in darkness, and he leaned against a bronze-encased pillar outside and began to smoke a cigar he had found in the bedroom. The dead he did not fear, but he was uneasy in the midst of so vast a number of them; besides, the excitement of the day had left him a little nervous. And hours of wakefulness would be the price of his evening's sleep.

PENDERBY began to wonder about the Thames. What had happened to the ships on the river, the men who had lived in them? A street near by led to the water, and in five minutes he was leaning over the wall and trying to count the vessels in the dusk. Two were little holiday steamers,

heeled over slightly. One of the four or five motorboats had rubbed along the wall as the tide ebbed, and was held in the angle of the nearer bridge.

Warehouses and other buildings beyond the river were forbidding masses that added to the gloom of the water and hid all but a few mud-gleams, here and there.

Penderby was sorry for having come. The scene was the most mournful the dead city had shown him. But he would not go back to the hotel yet. Approach of night seemed to have sharpened his senses, and the early-afternoon restlessness had returned.

A body lay sixty or seventy yards away, in the direction of Trafalgar Square. It was the only one in sight. The spread-eagled symmetry of it stirred his curiosity, and he walked quickly toward it. But something held him back, and his pace became slow, then very slow. And then he was trembling.

He stooped over the body. Recognition came without a shock. He was looking at Edward Penderby, lanky, ill-shaven, in ragged clothes. But the eyes, wide open, were quiet, and the lines beside the mouth had softened.

The man who had lived dropped on one knee, and touched the angular forehead with an objective pity.

"So you went, too," he said.

• • • • •

THERE still were some traces of what had been London when life came back to the earth; green, creeper-tied heaps of concrete and steel, for instance, and flooded steel vaults beneath banks, and a few big guns in arsenals, and presses, now in rust, under Fleet Street ruins. Rain, wind, heat, and cold had seen to the rest, and the two bodies—one well-dressed, the other shabbily—on a street beside the Thames had been dust many a year.

