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The Postman of Otford

How His Office Fell Vacant at Otford-Under-the-Wold

By LORD DUNSANY

THE duties of postman at Otford-under-the-Wold carried Amuel Sleggins further afield than the village, further afield than the last house in the lane, right up to the big bare wold and the house where no one went, no one that is but the three grim men that dwelt there, and the secretive wife of one, and, once a year when the queer green letter came, Amuel Sleggins the postman.

The green letter always came just as the leaves were turning, addressed to the eldest one of the three grim men, with a wonderful Chinese stamp and the Otford postmark, and Amuel Sleggins carried it up to the house.

He was not afraid to go, for he always took the letter, had done for seven years; yet whenever summer began to draw to a close Amuel Sleggins was ill at ease and, if there was a touch of autumn about shivered unduly so that all folk wondered.

AND then one day a wind would blow from the East, and the wild geese would appear, having left the sea, flying high and crying strangely, and pass till they were no more than a thin black line in the sky, like a magical stick flung up by a doer of magic, twisting and twirling away; and the leaves would turn on the trees and the mists be white on the marshes and the sun set large and red, and autumn would step down quietly that night from the wold: and next day the strange green letter would come from China.

His fear of the three grim men and that secretive woman and their lonely, secluded house, or else the cadaverous cold of the dying season, rather braced Amuel when the time was come, and he would step out bolder upon the day that he feared than he had perhaps for weeks. He longed on that day for a letter for the last house in the lane; there he would dally and talk awhile, and look on church-going faces, before his long tramp over the lonely wold to end at the dreaded door of the queer grey house called wold-hut.

When he came to the door of wold-hut he would give the postman's knock, as though he came on ordinary rounds to a house of every day, although no path led up to it, although the skins of weasels hung thickly from upper windows.

And scarcely had his postman's knock rung through the dark of the house when the eldest of the three grim men would always run to the door. Oh what a face had he! There was more slyness in it than ever his beard could hide. He would put out a gristly hand; and into it Amuel Sleggins would put that letter from China, and rejoice that his duty was done, and would turn and stride away. And the fields lit up before him; but, ominous, eager and low murmuring arose in the wold-hut.

For seven years this was so, and no harm had come to Sleggins: seven times he had

gone to wold-hut and as often come safely away: and then he needs must marry. Perhaps because she was young, perhaps because she was fair, or because she had shapely ankles as she came one day through the marshes, among the milkmaid flowers shoeless in spring. Less things than these have brought men to their

know, that it was not right that he should know; he lectured her on the sin of inquisitiveness, he quoted Parson; and in the end she said that she *must* know. They argued concerning this for many days, days of the ending of summer, of shortening evenings; and as they argued autumn grew nearer and nearer and the green letter from China.

And at last he promised that when the green letter came he would take it as usual to the lonely house, and then hide somewhere near and creep to the window at nightfall and hear what the grim folk said; perhaps they might read aloud the letter from China. And before he had time to repent of that promise a cold wind came one night and the woods turned golden, the plover went in bands at evening over the marshes, the year had turned, and there came the letter from China.

NEVER before had Amuel felt such misgivings as he went his postman's rounds, never before had he so much feared the day that took him up to the wold and the lonely house, while snug by the fire his wife looked pleasurable forward to curiosity's gratification and hoped to have news ere nightfall that all the gossips of the village would envy. One consolation only had Amuel as he set out with a shiver, there was a letter that day for the last house in the lane. Long did he tarry there to look at their cheery faces, to hear the sound of their laughter,—you did not hear laughter in wold-hut,—and when the last topic had been utterly talked out, and no excuse for lingering remained, he heaved a heavy sigh and plodded grimly away, and so came late to wold-hut.

He gave his postman's knock on the shut oak door, heard it reverberate through the silent house, saw the grim elder man and his gristly hand, gave up the green letter from China, and strode away. There is a clump of trees growing all alone in the wold, desolate, mournful, by day, by night full of ill omen, far off from all other trees as wold-hut from other houses. Near it stands wold-hut. Not to-day did Amuel stride briskly on with all the new winds of autumn blowing cheerily past him till he saw the village before him and broke into song; but as soon as he was out of sight of the house he turned, and stooping behind a fold of the ground, ran back to the desolate wood. There he waited, watching the evil house, just too far to hear voices.

THE sun was low already. He chose the window at which he meant to eavesdrop, a little barred one at the back, close to the ground. And then the pigeons came in: for a great distance there was no other wood, so numbers shelter there, though the clump is small and of so evil a look (if they notice that): the first one frightened Amuel, he (*Continued on page 126*)



COURTESY OF MITCHELL KENNEDY

LORD DUNSANY

He is the eighteenth member of his family to hold the title, created in 1489, and belongs to the notable Irish family of Plunkett. He is a nephew of Sir Horace Plunkett, who invented, for American use, the theory of the "conservation of national resources." Before he took to writing plays and short stories Lord Dunsany was in the Coldstream Guards. When the war came he went back into the service. The present story was written at the barracks in Londonderry, while he was at home, recovering from illness contracted at the front and just prior to his return to France. Speaking of his own methods, he writes, "I very seldom write allegory. In fact, even when I do set out to write an allegory, it always turns into a descriptive tale." Lord Dunsany defines the present story "How the office of Postman fell vacant in Otford under the Wold" as a "plain tale"

ends and been the nooses with which Fate snared them running. With marriage curiosity entered his house, and one day as they walked with evening through the meadows, one summer evening, she asked him of wold-hut where he only went, and what the folks were like that no one else had seen. All this he told her; and then she asked him of the green letter from China, that came with autumn, and what the letter contained. He read to her all the rules of the Inland Revenue, he told her he did not

Postman of Otford

(Continued from page 49)

felt that it might be a spirit escaped from torture in some dim parlor or the house that he watched; his nerves were strained and he feared foolish fears. Then he grew used to them, and the sun set then, and the aspect of everything altered, and he felt strange fears again.

HE waited for them to light their lamps, so that they could not see, when he would steal up softly and crouch by the little back window. But though every bird was home, though the night grew chilly as tombs, though a star was out, still there shone no yellow light from any window. Amuel waited and shuddered.

It grew so dark that he decided to move and make his way to the window, in spite of the stillness and though the house was dark. He rose, and while standing arrested by pains that cramped his limbs, he heard the door swing open on the far side of the house. He just had time to hide behind the trunk of a pine when the three grim men approached him and the woman hobbled behind.

RIGHT to the ominous clump of trees they came as though they loved their blackness, passed through within a yard or two of the postman and squatted down on their haunches in a ring in the hollow behind the trees. They lit a fire in the hollow and laid a kid on the fire, and by the light of it Amuel saw, brought forth from an untanned pouch, the letter that came from China. The elder opened it with his gristly hand and, intoning words that Amuel did not know, drew out from it a green powder and sprinkled it on the fire. At once a flame arose and a wonderful savour, the flame rose higher and flickered, turning the trees all green; and Amuel saw the gods coming to snuff the savour.

WHILE the three grim men prostrated themselves by their fire, and the horrible woman that was the spouse of one, he saw the gods coming gauntly over the wold; beheld the gods of old England hungrily snuffing the savour, Odin, Balder and Thor, the gods of the ancient people. He beheld them eye to eye clear and close standing there in the twilight,—and the office of postman fell vacant at Otford-under-the-Wold.