

## TERROR

'A story of mounting terror about a room which is not quite what it seems.'

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### The Cosy Room

by ARTHUR MACHEN

And he found to his astonishment that he came to the appointed place with a sense of profound relief. It was true that the window was somewhat high up in the wall and that, in case of fire, it might be difficult, for many reasons to get out that way; it was barred like the basement windows that one sees now and then in London houses, but as for the rest it was an extremely snug room.

There was a gay flowering paper on the walls, a hanging bookshelf – his stomach sickened for an instant – a little table under the window with a board and checkers on it, two or three good pictures, religious and ordinary, and the man who looked after him was arranging the tea-things on the table in the middle of the room. And there was a nice wicker chair by a bright fire.

It was a thoroughly pleasant room; snug you would call it.

And, thank God, it was all over, anyhow . . .

It had been a horrible time for the last three months, up to an hour ago. First of all, there was the trouble; all over in a minute, that was, and couldn't be helped, though it was a pity, and the girl wasn't worth it. But then there was the getting out of the town.

He thought at first of just going about his ordinary business

and knowing nothing about it; he didn't think that anybody had seen him following Joe down to the river. Why not loaf about as usual, and say nothing, and go into the Ringland Arms for a pint?

It might be days before they found the body under the alders; and there would be an inquest, and all that. Would it be the best plan just to stick it out, and hold his tongue if the police came asking him questions?

But then, how could he account for himself and his doings that evening? He might say he went for a stroll in Bleadon Woods and home again without meeting anybody. There was nobody who could contradict him that he could think of.

And now, sitting in the snug room with the bright wallpaper, sitting in the cosy chair by the fire – all so different from the tales they told of such places – he wished he had stuck it out and faced it out, and let them come on and find out what they could.

But, then, he had got frightened. Lots of men had heard him swearing it would be 'outing dos' for Joe if he didn't leave the girl alone. And he had shown his revolver to Dick Haddon, and 'Lobster' Carey, and Finniman, and others, and then they would be fitting the bullet into the revolver, and it would be all up.

He got into a panic and shook with terror, and knew he could never stay in Ledham, not another hour.

Mrs Evans, his landlady, was spending the evening with her married sister at the other side of the town, and would not be back till eleven. He shaved off his stubbly black beard and moustache, and slunk out of town in the dark and walked all through the night by a lonely byroad, and got to Darnley, twenty miles away, in the morning in time to catch the London excursion.

There was a great crowd of people, and so far as he could see, nobody that he knew, and the carriages packed full of Darnleyites and Lockwood weavers all in high spirits and taking no notice of him. They all got out at Kings Cross, and he strolled about with the rest, and looked round here and there as they did and had a glass of beer at a crowded bar. He didn't see how anybody was to find out where he had gone.

He got a back room in a quiet street off the Caledonian Road, and waited. There was something in the evening paper that night, something that you couldn't very well make out. By the next day Joe's body was found, and they got to Murder – the doctor said it couldn't be suicide.

Then his own name came in, and he was missing and was

asked to come forward. And then he read that he was supposed to have gone to London, and he went sick with fear. He went hot and he went cold. Something rose in his throat and choked him. His hands shook as he held the paper; his head whirled with terror.

He was afraid to go home to his room because he knew he could not stay still in it; he would be tramping up and down, like a wild beast, and the landlady would wonder. And he was afraid to be in the streets, for fear a policeman would come behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

There was a kind of small square round the corner and he sat down on one of the benches there and held up the paper before his face, with the children yelling and howling and playing all about him on the asphalt paths. They took no notice of him, and yet they were company of a sort; it was not like being all alone in that quiet little room. But it soon got dark and the man came to shut the gates.

And after that night: nights and days of horror and sick terrors that he never had known a man could suffer and live.

He had brought enough money to keep him for a while, but every time he changed a note he shook with fear, wondering whether it would be traced. What could he do? Where could he go? Could he get out of the country? But there were passports and papers of all sorts; that would never do.

He read that the police held a clue to the Ledham Murder Mystery; and he trembled to his lodgings and locked himself in and moaned in his agony, and then found himself chattering words and phrases at random, without meaning or relevance; strings of gibbering words: 'all right, all right, all right . . . yes, yes, yes, yes . . . there, there, there . . . well, well, well, well . . . ' just because he could not bear to sit still and silent, with that anguish tearing his heart, with that sick horror choking him, with that weight of terror pressing on his breast.

And then nothing happened; and a little, faint, trembling hope fluttered in his breast for a while, and for a day or two he felt he might have a chance after all.

One night he was in such a happy state that he ventured round to the little pub at the corner, and drank a bottle of Old Brown Ale with some enjoyment, and began to think of what life might be again, if by a miracle – he recognised, even then, that it would be a miracle – all this horror passed away, and he was once more just like other men, with nothing to be afraid of.

He was relishing the Brown Ale, and quite plucking up a spirit, when a chance phrase from the bar caught him: 'Looking for him not far from here, so they say.'

He left the glass of beer half full, and went out wondering whether he had the courage to kill himself that night. As a matter of fact, the men at the bar were talking about a recent and sensational cat burglar; but every such word was doom to this wretch.

And ever and again he would check himself in his horrors, in his mutterings and gibberings, and wonder with amazement that the heart of a man could suffer such bitter agony, such rending torment. It was as if he had found out and discovered — he alone of all men living — a new world of which no man before had ever dreamed, in which no man could believe, if he were told the story of it.

He had awakened in the past from such nightmares, now and again, as most men suffer. They were terrible, so terrible that he remembered two or three of them had oppressed him years before; but they were pure delight to what he now endured. Not endured, but writhed under as a worm twisting amid red, burning coals.

He went out into the streets, some noisy, some dull and empty, and considered in his panic-stricken confusion which he should choose. They were looking for him in that part of London; there was deadly peril in every step. The streets where people went to and fro and laughed and chattered might be the safer; he could walk with the others and seem to be one of them, and so be less likely to be noticed by those who were on his track.

But then, on the other hand, the great electric lamps made these streets almost as bright as day, and every feature of the passers-by was clearly seen. True, he was clean-shaven now, and the pictures of him in the papers showed a bearded man, and his own face in the glass still looked strange to him. Still, there were sharp eyes that could penetrate such disguises; and they might have brought down some man from Ledham who knew him well.

He was turning aside, making for a very quiet street close by, when he hesitated. This street, indeed, was still enough after dark, and not well lighted. It was a street of low, two-storied houses of grey brick that had grinned with three or four families in each house.

Tired men came home here after working hard all day, and people drew their blinds early and stirred very little abroad, and went early to bed; footsteps were rare in this street and in other streets into which it led, and the lamps were few and dim compared with those in the big thoroughfares.

And yet, the very fact that few people were about made such as were all the more noticeable and conspicuous. And the

police went slowly on their beats in the dark streets as in the bright, and with few people to look at, no doubt they looked more keenly at such as passed on the pavement.

In his world, that dreadful world that he had discovered and dwelt in alone, the darkness was brighter than the daylight, and solitude more dangerous than a multitude of men. He dared not go into the light; he feared the shadows, and went trembling to his room and shuddered there as the hours of the night went by; shuddered and gabbled to himself his infernal rosary; 'All right, all right, all right . . . splendid, splendid . . . that's the way, that's the way, that's the way . . . yes, yes, yes . . . first-rate, first-rate - ' gabbled in a low mutter to keep from howling like a wild beast.

It was somewhat in the manner of a wild beast that he beat and tore against the cage of his fate. Now and again it struck him as incredible. He would not believe that it was so. It was something that he would wake from, as he had waked from those nightmares that he remembered, for things did not really happen so. He could not believe it, he would not believe it.

Or, if it were so indeed, then all these horrors must be happening to some other man into whose torments he had mysteriously entered.

Or he had got into a book, into a tale which one read and shuddered at, but did not for one moment credit; all make-believe, it must be, and presumably everything would be all right again. And then the truth came down on him like a heavy hammer, and beat him down.

Now and then he tried to reason with himself. He forced himself to be sensible, as he put it; not to give way, to think of his chances. After all, it was three weeks since he had got into the excursion train at Darnley, and every day of freedom made his chances better.

These things often die down. There were lots of cases in which the police never got the man they were after. He lit his pipe and began to think things over quietly. It might be a good plan to give his landlady notice, and leave at the end of the week, and make for somewhere in South London, and try to get a job of some sort: that would help to put them off his track. He got up and looked thoughtfully out of the window; and caught his breath.

There outside the little newspaper shop opposite, was the bill of the evening paper; New Clue in Ledham Murder Mystery.

The moment came at last. He never knew the exact means by

which he was hunted down. As a matter of fact, a woman who knew him well happened to be standing outside Darnley station on the Excursion Day morning, and she had recognised him, in spite of his beardless chin.

And then, at the other end, his landlady, on her way upstairs, had heard his mutterings and gabblings, though the voice was low. She was interested, and curious, and a little frightened, and wondered if her lodger might be dangerous, and naturally she talked to her friends.

So the story trickled down to the ears of the police, and the police asked about the date of the lodger's arrival. And there you were. And there was our nameless friend, drinking a good, hot cup of tea, and polishing off the bacon and eggs with rare appetite; in the cosy room with the cheerful paper; otherwise the Condemned Cell.