



First of
the famous
Dr. Gideon Fell
mysteries

JOHN DICKSON

GARRR

Hag's Nook



MILTON GLASER

How he reached the heart of the Hag's Nook he could never afterwards remember. A steep slippery meadow, grass that twisted the feet like wires, then brambles and underbrush tearing through his shirt; he could see nothing except that he was bumping into fir trees with a gutted precipice looming up ahead. Breath hurt his lungs, and he stumbled against sodden bark to clear the water from his eyes. But he knew he was there. All around in the dark was a sort of unholy stirring and buzzing, muffled splashes, a sense of things that crawled or crept, but, worst of all, an odour. . . .

He started groping in the dark, so numb that he groped with hideous care. He felt a chilly face, open eyes, and wet hair, but the neck seemed as loose as rubber, because it was broken.

Hag's Nook

JOHN DICKSON CARR

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ANTHONY BOUCHER

GENERAL EDITOR, *Collier Mystery Classics*



COLLIER BOOKS

NEW YORK

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Fourth Printing 1970

This Collier Books edition is published by arrangement with Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated.

The Macmillan Company, 866 Third Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10022. Collier-Macmillan Canada Ltd., Toronto, Ontario. Printed in the United States of America.

The detective story in the grand manner demands a Great Detective; and Carr experimented with several possibilities (among whom the saturnine Bencolin of the Surete deserves to be better remembered than he is) before discovering the behemoth who was to galumph his way through so many splendidly memorable cases: Gideon Fell, M.A. (Oxon.), Ph.D. (Harvard), F.R.H.S., etc., introduced to us here as a lexicographer (though his official biography makes no mention of that science).

Hag's Nook is Dr. Fell's first recorded case, and thirty years later it still seems to rank among his best. He himself seems a little muffled here, not quite so ready to take center stage and dominate as he was to later; but few of his cases have had such a chill and haunted setting as the ruined prison of Chatterham, and few of his antagonists have managed so adroitly to put themselves beyond all apparent possibility of suspicion until

Until, as a matter of fact, a point surprisingly early in the book; and therein lies further evidence of the consummate technical skill of young Mr. Carr. For he gives us the breathtaking answer to the question: Whodunit? almost 10,000 words before the novel is over, and still manages to sustain interest and suspense until the end. For even when we know who, the how still baffles us; and once that mystery is solved, there remains a deeper mystery of character which can be resolved only by the murderer's absorbing account of himself and his deeds.

It's an unlikely mixture of influences that combine to make up the youthful Carr manner. G. K. Chesterton (ingenuity and paradox), Montague Rhodes James (antiquarian scholarship and eerie chills), P. G. Wodehouse (a healthy relish for a touch of low comedy) ... One can dissect the influences; but they blend perfectly into a quality that is nothing but Carrian.

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And how happy a reader's (or a reviewer's) life would be today if he could count on four books a year like this.

— Anthony Boucher September 1962

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abo | oak mausoleums of bookshelves, and in this

room, you felt, all the K ere friendly. There was a

smell of dusty leather and old paper, as though all those old-time books had hung up their tall hats and prepared i

Dr. Fell wheezed a little, even with the exertion of filling his pipe. FL cry stout, and walked, as a rule with I

came as the light from the front windows his big mop

dark hair, streaked with a white plume, waved like a war-banner. Immense and aggressive, it went blowing before him through life. His face and round and ruddy, and had a twitching smile somewhere above several chins. But what you noticed there was the twinkle in his eyes: glances on a broad black ribbon and the small eyes twinkled over them as he bent his big head forward—could be fiercely combative or slyly chuckling, and somehow he contrived to be both at the same time.

"You've got to pay Fell a visit," Professor Melson had told Rampole. "First, because he's my oldest friend, and, second, because he's one of the great institutions of England. The man has more obscure, useless, and fascinating information than any person I ever met. He'll ply you with food and whisky until your head reels; he'll talk interminably—whatever, but particularly on the glories and sports of old-time England. He likes band music, melodrama, and slapstick comedies; he's a great old boy, and you'll like him."

There was no denying this. There was a heartening naivete, an absence of affectation about his host which made Rampole at home five minutes after he had met him. Even before, the American had to admit. Professor Melson had already written to Gideon Fell before Rampole sailed—and received an almost indecipherable reply decorated with little drawings of a hilarious nature and concluding with some verses about prohibition. Then there had been the chance meeting on the train, before Rampole arrived at Chatterham. Chatterham, in Lincolnshire, some hundred and twenty-odd miles from London, and only a short distance away from Lincoln itself. When Rampole boarded the train at dusk he had been more than a

little depressed. This great dun-coloured London, with its smoke and its heavy-footed traffic, was lonely even there. There was loneliness in wandering through the grinning, full of grit and the iron coughing of it and

blurred by streams of hurrying commuters. The waiting-rooms looked dingy, and the commuters, snatching a drink at the wet-smelling bar before train time, looked dingier still. Frayed and patched, they seemed, under dull lights as uninteresting as themselves.

Tap Rampole was just out of college, and he was, therefore, desperately afraid of being provincial. He had done a great deal of travelling in Europe, but only under careful parental supervision on the value received plan, and told when to look. It had consisted in a sort of living peep-show at the things you see on post cards, with lectures. Alone he found himself bewildered, depressed, and rather resentful. To his horror, he found himself comparing this station unfavourably with Grand Central—such comparisons, according to the Better American Novelists, being a sin.

Oh, well, damn it! . . .

He grinned, buying a thriller at the bookstall and wandering towards his train. There was always the difficulty in juggling that money; it seemed to consist of a bewildering variety of coins, all of inordinate dimensions. Computing the right sum was like putting together a picture puzzle; it couldn't be done in a hurry. And, since any delay seemed to him to savour of the awkward or loutish, he usually handed over a bank note for the smallest purchase, and let the other person do the thinking. As a

result, he was so laden with change that he jingled audibly at every step.

That was when he ran into the girl in grey.

He literally ran into her. It was due to his discomfort at sounding so much like an itinerant cash-register. He had tried jamming his hands into his pockets, holding them up from underneath, walking with a sort of crab-like motion, and becoming generally so preoccupied that he failed to notice where he was going. He bumped into somebody with a startling thud; he heard somebody gasp, and an "Oh!" beneath his shoulder.

His pockets overflowed. Dimly he heard a shower of

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coins tinkle on the wooden platform. Fiery with embarrassment, he found himself holding to two small arms and looking down into a face. If he had been able to say anything, it would have been, "Gug!" Then he recovered himself to notice the face. Light from the first-class carriage beside which they stood shone down upon it—a small face, with eyebrows raised quizzically. It was as though she were looking at him from a distance, mockingly, but with a sympathetic pout of her lips. A hat was pulled down anyhow, in a sort of rakish good-humour, on her very black, very glossy hair; and her eyes were of so dark a blue that they seemed almost black, too. The collar of her rough grey coat was drawn up, but it did not hide the expression of her lips. She hesitated a moment. Then she spoke, with a laugh running under it: "I say! You are wealthy. . . . Would you mind letting go my arms?"

Acutely conscious of the spilled coins, he stepped back hastily.

"Good Lord! I'm sorry! I'm a clumsy ox; I— Did you drop anything?"

"My purse, I think, and a book."

He stooped down to pick them up. Even afterwards, when the train was rushing through the scented darkness of a night just cool enough, he could not remember how they had begun talking. A dim train shed, misted with soot and echoing to the rumble of baggage trucks, should not have been the place for it; yet it seemed, somehow, to be absolutely right. Nothing brilliant was said. Rather the opposite. They just stood there and spoke words, and Ram-pole's head began to sing. He made the discovery that both the book he had just bought and the book he had knocked out of her hands had been written by the same author. As the author was Mr. Edgar Wallace, this coincidence was hardly stupefying enough to have impressed an outsider, but Rampole made much of it. He was conscious of trying desperately to hold to this subject. Each moment, he felt, she might break away. He had heard how aloof and unapproachable Englishwomen were supposed to be; he wondered whether she were just being polite. But there was something—possibly in the dark-blue eyes, which

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were wrinkled up at him—of a different nature. She was leaning against the side of the carriage, as carelessly as a man, her hands shoved into the pockets of the fuzzy coat: a swaggering little figure, with a crinkly smile. And he suddenly got the impression that she was as lonely as himself. . . .

Mentioning his destination as Chatterham, he inquired after her luggage. She straightened. There was a shadow somewhere. The light throaty voice, with its clipped and slurred accent, grew hesitant; she spoke low:

"My brother has the bags." Another hesitation. "He— he'll miss the train, I expect. There goes the horn now. You'd better get aboard."

That horn, tooting thinly through the shed, sounded inane. It was as though something were being torn away. A toy engine began to puff and stammer; the bumping shed winked with lights.

"Look here," he said, loudly, "if you're taking another train—"

"You'd better hurry!"

Then Rampole grew as inane as the horn. He cried in a rush: "To hell with the train! I can take another. I'm not going anywhere, as it is. I—"

She had to raise her voice. He got the impression of a smile, bright and swashbuckling and pleased. "Silly!—I'm going to Chatterham, too. I shall probably see you there. Off you go!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Well, that's all right, then. You see—"

She gestured at the train, and he swung aboard just as it got under way. He was craning out of one corridor window, trying to get a glimpse of her, when he heard the throaty voice call something after him, very distinctly. The voice said an extraordinary thing. It called:

"If you see any ghosts, save them for me."

What the devil! Rampole stared at the dark lines of idle carriages sweeping past, the murky station lights which seemed to shake to the vibration of the train, and tried to understand that last sentence. The words were not exactly

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disturbing, but they were a little—well, cockeyed. That was the only way to express it. Had the whole business been a joke? Was this the English version of the needles, the raspberry, or any similar picturesque and delicate term? For a moment his neckband grew warm. No, damn it! You could always tell. A train guard, passing through the corridor at this moment, perceived an obviously American Young Gen'lman thrusting his face blindly out of the window into a hurricane of cinders, and breathing them with deep joyous breaths, like mountain air.

The depressed feeling had vanished. This little, swaying train, almost empty of passengers, made him feel like a man in a speedboat. London was not big and powerful now, nor the countryside a lonely place. He had drunk strong liqueur in a strange land, and he felt suddenly close to somebody.

Luggage? He froze for a moment before remembering that a porter had already stowed it into a compartment somewhere along here. That was all right. Under his feet he could feel the floor—vibrating; the train jerked and whirled with a clackety roar, and a long blast of the whistle was torn backwards as it gathered speed. This was the way to begin adventure. "If you see any ghosts, save them for me." A husky voice—which somehow suggested a person standing on tiptoe—drifting down the platform. . . .

If she had been an American, now, he could have asked her name. If she had been an American . . . but, he suddenly realized, he didn't want her to be an American. The wide-set blue eyes, the face which was just a trifle too square for complete beauty, the red and crinky-smiling mouth; all were at once exotic and yet as honestly Anglo-Saxon as the brick staunchness of Whitehall. He liked the way she pronounced her words, as though with a half mockery. She seemed cool and clean, like a person swinging through the countryside. Turning from the window, Rampole had a strong desire to chin himself on the top of one of the compartment doors. He would have done so but for the presence of a very glum and very rigid man with a large pipe, who was staring glassily out of a near-by

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window, with the top of his travelling-cap pulled over one ear like a beret. This person looked so exactly like a comic-strip Englishman that Rampole would have expected him to exclaim, "What, what, what, what?" and go pulling and stumping down the corridor, had he seen any such athletic activity indulged in here.

The American was to remember this person presently. For the moment, he knew only that he felt hilarious, hungry, and in need of a drink. There was, he remembered, a restaurant-car ahead. Locating his luggage in a smoking-compartment, he groped his way along narrow corridors in search of food. The train was clattering through suburbs now, creaking and plunging and swaying under the shrillness of its whistle, and lighted walls streamed past on either side. To Rampole's surprise, the restaurant-car was almost full; it was somewhat cramped, and smelt heavily of beer and salad oil. Sliding into a chair opposite another diner, he thought that there were rather more crumbs and blotches than were necessary; whereupon he again damned himself for provincialism. The table shook to the swaying of the train, lights jolted on nickel and woodwork, and he watched the man opposite skilfully introduce a large glass of Guinness under a corresponding moustache. After a healthy pull, the other set down the glass and spoke.

"Good evening," he said, affably. "You're young Rampole, aren't you?"

If the stranger had added, "You come from Afghanistan, I perceive," Rampole could not have been more startled. A capacious chuckle enlivened the other man's several chins. He had a way of genially chuckling, "Heh-heh-heh," precisely like a burlesque villain on the stage. Small eyes beamed on the American over eyeglasses on a broad black ribbon. His big face grew more ruddy; his great mop of hair danced to the chuckles, or the motion of the train, or both; and he thrust out his hand.

"I'm Gideon Fell, d'ye see? Bob Melson wrote me about you, and I knew you must be the person as soon as you walked in the car. We must have a bottle of wine on this. We must have two bottles of wine. One for you, and one for me, d'ye see? Heh-heh-heh. Waiter!"

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He rolled in his chair like a feudal baron, beckoning imperiously.

"My wife," continued Dr. Fell, after he had given a Gargantuan order—"my wife would never have forgiven me if Pd missed you. She's in a stew as it is, what with plaster falling off in the best bedroom and the new revolving sprinkler for the lawn, which wouldn't work until the rector came to call, and then it doused him like a shower-bath. Heh-heh. Have a drink. I don't know what kind of wine it is, and I never ask; it's wine, and that's enough for me."

"Your health, sir."

"Thank'c, my boy. Permit me," said Dr. Fell, apparently with some vague recollections of his stay in America, "to jump the gutter. Nunc bibendum est. Heh.—So you're Bob Melson's senior wrangler, eh? English history, I think he said. You're thinking of a Ph.D., and then teaching?"

Rampole suddenly felt very young and very foolish, despite the doctor's amiable eye. He mumbled something noncommittal.

"That's fine," said the other. "Bob praised you, but he said, Too imaginative by half; that's what he said. Bah! give 'em the glory, / say; give 'em the glory. Now when I lectured at your Haverford, they may not have learned much about English history, but they cheered, my boy, they cheered when I described battles. I remember," continued the doctor, his vast face glowing as with a joyous sunset, and puffing beneath it—"I remember teaching 'em the Drinking Song of Godfrey of Bouillon's men of the First Crusade in 1187, leading the chorus myself. Then they all got to singing and stamping on the floor, as it were; and a maniacal professor of mathematics came stamping up with his hands entangled in his hair—as it were—and said (admirably restrained chap) would we kindly stop shaking the blackboards off the wall in the room below? 'It is unseemly,' says he; 'burpf, burpf, ahem, very unseemly.' w Not at all,' says I. 'It is the "Laus Vini Exercitus Crucis," It is, like hell,' says he. k Do you think I don't know "We Won't Be Home until Morning" when I hear it?' And then I had to explain the classic derivation.

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... Hallo, Payne!" the doctor boomed, breaking off to flourish his napkin at the aisle.

Turning, Rampole saw the exceedingly glum and rigid man with the pipe, whom he had noticed before in the corridor of the train. The cap was off now, to show a <J shaven skull of wiry white hair, a long brown face, and a general air of doddering down the aisle, looking for a place to fall. He grumbled something, not very civilly, and paused by the table.

"Mr. Payne, Mr. Rampole," said Dr. Fell. Payne's eyes turned on the American with a startling flash of their whites; they seemed suspicious. "Mr. Payne is Chatter-ham's legal adviser," the doctor explained. "I say, Payne, where are your charges? I wanted young Starberth to have a glass of wine with us."

A thin hand fluttered to Payne's brown chin, and stroked it. His voice was dry, with a premonitory rasp and difficulty, as though he were winding himself up.

"Didn't arrive," replied the lawyer, shortly.

"Humf. Heh. Didn't arrive?"

The rattle of the train, Rampole thought, must shake Payne's bones apart. He blinked, and continued to massage his chin.

"No. I expect," said the lawyer, suddenly pointing to the wine-bottle, "he's had too much of that already. Perhaps Mr.—ah—Rampole can tell us more about it. I knew he didn't fancy his little hour in the Hag's Nook, but I hardly thought any prison superstitions would keep him away. There's still time of course."

This, Rampole thought, was undoubtedly the most bewildering gibberish he had ever heard. "His little hour in the Hag's Nook." "Prison superstitions." And here was this loose-jointed brown man, with the deep wrinkles round his nose, turning the whites of his eyes round and fixing Rampole with the same pale-blue, glassy stare he had fixed on the corridor window awhile ago. The American was already beginning to feel flushed with wine. What the devil was all this, anyhow?

He said, "I—I beg your pardon?" and pushed his glass away.

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Although he was no critic in the matter of mixing chinks, he was nevertheless a triile appalled at the way Dr. Fell poured down wine on top of stout, and followed both with beer towards the close of the meal; but he kept up valiantly with every glass. "As for this beverage, sir," said the doctor, his great voice rumbling down the car, "as for this drink, witness what the Alvismal says: 'Called ale among men; but by the gods called beer/ Hah!'"

His face fiery, spilling cigar-ashes down the front of his necktie, rolling and chuckling in his seat, he talked. It was only when the waiters began to hover and cough discreetly round the table that he could be persuaded to leave. Growling on his two canes, he lumbered out ahead of Ram-pole. Presently they were established facing each other in corner seats of an empty compartment. Ghostly in the dim light this small place seemed darker than the landscape outside. Dr. Fell, piled into his dusky corner, was a great goblin figure against the faded red upholstery and the indistinguishable pictures above the seats. He had fallen silent; he felt this unreal quality, too. A cool wind had freshened from the north and there was a moon. Beyond the flying click of the wheels, the hills were tired and thick-grown and old and the trees were mourning bouquets. Then Rampole spoke at last. He could not keep it back. They had chugged in to a stop at the platform of a village. Now there was absolute silence but for a long expiring sigh from the engine. . . .

"Would you mind telling me, sir," said the American, "what Mr. Payne meant by all that talk about 'a little hour at the Hag's Nook,' and—and all the rest of it?"

Dr. Fell, roused out of a reverie, seemed startled. He bent forward, the moon on his eyeglasses. In the stillness they could hear the engine panting in hoarse breaths, and a wiry hum of insects. Something clanked and shivered through the train. A lantern swamg and winked.

"Eh?—Why, Good Lord, boy! I thought you knew Dorothy Starberth. I didn't like to ask. . . ."

The sister, apparently. Handle with care. Rampole said:

"I just met her today. I scarcely know her at all."

"Then you've never heard of Chatterham prison?"

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"Never."

The doctor clucked his tongue. "You've got something out of Payne, then. He took you for an old friend. . . . Chatterham isn't a prison now, you know. It hasn't been in use since 1837, and it's falling to ruin."

A baggage truck rumbled. There was a brief glare in the darkness, and Rampole saw a curious expression on the doctor's big face, momentarily.

"Do you know why they abandoned it?" he asked. "It was the cholera, of course; cholera—and something else. But they said the other thing was worse."

Rampole got out a cigarette and lighted it. He could not analyse his feeling then, though it was sharp and constricting; he thought afterwards that it was as though something had gone wrong with his lungs. In the dark he drew a deep breath of the cool, moist air.

"Prison/" continued the doctor, "particularly prisons of that day, were hellish places. And they built this one round the Hag's Nook."

"The Hag's Nook?"

"That was where they used to hang witches. All the common malefactors were hanged there, of course. H'mf." Dr. Fell cleared his throat, a long rumble. "I say witches because that fact made the most impression on the popular mind. . . ."

"Lincolnshire's the fen country, you know. The old British called Lincoln Llyn-dune, the fen town; the Romans made it Lindwn-Colonia. Chatterham is some distance from Lincoln, but then Lincoln's modern nowadays. We're not. We have the rich soil, the bogs and marshes, the waterfowl, and the so thick air—where people see things, after sunset. Eh"

The train was rumbling out again. Rampole managed a little laugh. In the restaurant-car this swilling chuckling fat man had seemed as hearty as an animated side of beef; now he seemed subdued and a trifle sinister.

"See things, sir?" the other repeated.

"They built the prison/" Fell went on, "round a gallows. . . . Two generations of the Starberth family were governors there. In your country you'd call 'em wardens."

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It's traditional that the Starberths die of broken necks. Which isn't a very pleasant thing to look forward to. M

Fell struck a match for his cigar, and Rampole saw that he was smiling.

"I'm not trying to scare you with ghost stories," he added, after he had sucked wheezingly on the cigar for a time. "I'm only trying to prepare you. We haven't your American briskness. It's in the air; the whole countryside is full of belief. So don't laugh if you hear about Peggy-with-the-Lantern, or the imp on Lincoln cathedral, or, more particularly, anything concerned with the prison."

There was a silence. Then Rampole said: "I'm not apt to laugh. All my life I've been wanting to see a haunted house. I don't believe, of course, but that doesn't detract from my interest. . . . What is the story concerned with the prison?"

"Too imaginative by half," the doctor muttered, staring at the ash on his cigar. "That was what Bob Melson said. —You shall have the full story tomorrow. I've kept copies of the papers. But young Martin has got to spend his hour in the Governor's Room, and open the safe and look at what's in there. You see, for about two hundred years the Starberths have owned the land on which Chat-terham prison was built. They still own it; the borough never took it over, and it's held in what the lawyer chaps call 'entail' by the eldest son—can't be sold. On the evening of his twenty-fifth birthday, the eldest Starberth has got to go to the prison, open the safe in the Governor's Room, and take his chances. . . ."

"On what, sir?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows what's inside. It's not to be mentioned by the heir himself, until the keys are handed over to his son."

Rampole shifted. His brain pictured a grey ruin, an iron door, and a man with a lamp in his hand turning a rusty key. He said: "Good Lord! it sounds like—" but he could not find words, and he found himself wryly smiling.

"It's England. What's the matter?"

"I was only thinking that if this were America, there

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would be reporters, news-reel cameras, and a crowd tea deep round the prison to see what happened."

He knew that he had said something wrong. He was always finding it out. Being with these English was like shaking hands with a friend whom you thought you knew, and suddenly finding the hand turned to a wisp of fog. There was a place where thoughts never met, and no similarity of* language could cover the gap. He saw Dr. Fell looking at him with eyes screwed up behind his glasses; then, to his relief, the lexicographer laughed.

"I told you it was England," he replied. "Nobody will bother him. It's too much concerned with the belief that the Starberths die of broken necks."

"Well, sir?"

"That's the odd part of it," said Dr. Fell, inclining his big head. "They generally do."

No more was said on the subject. The wine at dinner seemed to have dulled the doctor's rolling spirit; or else he was occupied with some meditations which were to be only in the slow, steady pulsing and dimming of his cigar from the corner. Over his shoulders he pulled a brayed plaid shawl; the great mop of hair nodded forward. Rampole might have thought him asleep but for the gleam under his eyelids, the bright shrewd steadiness behind those eyeglasses on the black ribbon. . . .

The American's sense of unreality had closed in fully by the time they reached Chatterham. Now the red lights of the train were sinking away down the tracks; a whistle fluttered and sank with it, and the air of the station platform was chill. A dog barked distantly at the passage of the train, followed by a chorus which sullenly died. Their footsteps crunched with startling loudness on gravel as Rampole followed his host up from the platform.

A white road, winding between trees and flat meadows. Marshy ground, with a mist rising from it, and a gleam of black water under the moon. Then hedgerows, odorous with hawthorn; the pale green of corn stretching across rolling fields; crickets pulsing; the fragrance of dew on grass. Here was Dr. Fell, in a rakish slouch-hat, and the plaid shawl over his shoulders, stumping along on two

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canes. He had been up to London just for the day, he explained, and he had no luggage. Swinging a heavy valise, Rampole strode beside him. He had been startled, momentarily, to see a figure ahead of them—a figure in a nondescript coat and a travelling-cap, beating along the road, with sparks from a pipe living out behind. Then he realized it was Payne. Despite his doddering walk, the lawyer covered ground with speed. Unsociable dog! Rampole could almost hear him growling to himself as he walked along. Yet there was small time to think of Payne; here he was, singing with adventure under a great alien sky, where not even the stars were familiar. He was very small and lost in this ancient England.

"There's the prison," said Dr. Fell.

They had topped a slight rise, and both of them stopped. The country sloped down and out, in flat fields intersected by hedgerows. Some distance ahead, muffled in trees, Rampole could see the church spire of the village; and farmhouses slept, with silver windows, in the rich night-fragrance of the soil. Near them and to the left stood a tall house of red brick, with white window-frames, austere in its clipped park beyond an avenue of oaks. ("The Hall," Dr. Fell said over his shoulder.) But the American was staring at the promontory to the right. Incongruous in this place, crude and powerful as Stonehenge, the stone walls of Chatterham prison humped against the sky.

They were large enough, though they seemed much bigger in the distortion of moonlight. And "humped," Rampole thought, was the word; there was one place where they seemed to surge and buckle over the crest of a hill. Through rents in the masonry vines were crooking fingers against the moon. A teeth of spikes ran along the top, and you could see tumbled chimneys. The place looked damp and slime-painted, from occupation by lizards; it was as though the marshes had crept inside and turned stagnant.

Rampole said suddenly: "I can almost feel insects beating against my face. Does it get you that way?"

His voice seemed very loud. Frogs were croaking somewhere, like querulous invalids. Dr. Fell pointed with one cane.

"Do you sec that"—queer how he used the same word—"that hump up there, on the side where there the fringe of Scotch firs? It's built out over a gully, and that's the Hag's Nook. In the old days, when the gallows used to stand on the edge of the hill, they'd give the spectators a show by attaching a very long rope to the condemned man's neck and chucking him over the brink with a sporting chance to tear his head off. There was no such thing as a drop-trap, you know, in those days."

Rampole shivered, his brain full of images. A hot day, with the lush countryside burning dark green, the white roads smoking, and the poppies at the roadside. A mumbling concourse of people in pigtail and knee-breeches, the dark-clad group in the cart creaking up the hill, and then somebody swinging like an unholy pendulum above the Hag's Nook. For the first time the countryside really Died to be full of those mumbling voices. He turned, to find the doctor's eyes fixed on him.

"What did they do when they built the prison?"

"Kept it. But it was too easy to escape that way, they thought; walls built low, and several doors. So they made a kind of well below the gallows. The ground was marshy anyhow, and it filled easily. If somebody got loose and tried a jump he'd land in the well, and—they didn't pull him out. It wouldn't have been pleasant, dying with the things down there."

The doctor was scuffling his feet on the ground, and Rampole picked up the valise to go on. It was not pleasant, talking here. Voices boomed too loudly; and, besides, you had an uncomfortable sensation that you were being overheard. . . .

"That," added Dr. Fell, after a few wheezing steps, "was what did for the prison."

"How so?"

"When they cut down a person after they'd hanged him, they just let him drop into the well. Once the cholera got started . . ."

Rampole felt a qualm in his stomach, almost a physical nausea. He knew that he was warm despite the cool air. A whispering ran among the trees, lightly.

"I live not far from here," the other continued, though he had mentioned nothing out of the way. He even spoke comfortably, like one pointing out the beauties of a city. "We're on the outskirts of the village. You can see the gallows side of the prison very well from there—and the window of the Governor's Room too."

Half a mile on, they turned off the road and struck up through a lane. Here was a crooked, sleepy old house, with plaster and oak beams above, and ivy-grown stone below. The moon was pale on its diamond-paned windows; evergreens grew close about its door, and the unkempt lawn showed white with daisies. Some sort of night bird complained in its sleep, twittering in the ivy.

"We won't wake my wife/" said Dr. Fell. "She'll have left a cold supper in the kitchen, with plenty of beer. I— What's the matter?"

He started. He wheezed, and gave an almost convulsive jump, because Rampole could hear the slither

of one cane in the wet grass. The American was staring out across the meadows to where—less than a quarter of a mile away—the side of Chatterham prison rose above the Scotch firs round Hag's Nook.

Rampole felt a damp heat prickling out on his body.

"Nothing," he said, loudly. And then he began to talk with great vigour. "Look here, sir, I don't want to inconvenience you. I'd have taken a different train, except there isn't any that gets here at a reasonable hour. I could easily go to Chatterham and find a hotel or an inn or—"

The old lexicographer chuckled. It was a reassuring sound in that place. He boomed, "Nonsense!" and thumped Rampole on the shoulder. Then Rampole thought, "He'll think I've got a scare," and hastily agreed. While Dr. Fell searched after a latch-key, he glanced again at the prison.

These old woman's tales might have influenced his outlook. But, just for a moment, he could have sworn that he had seen something looking over the wall of Chatterham prison. And he had a horrible impression that the something was wet. . . .

Chapter 3

Sitting now in Dr. Fell's study, on the afternoon of his first day at Yew Cottage, he was inclined to question everything in the nature of the fanciful. This solid little house, with its oil-lamps and its primitive plumbing, made him feel as though he were on a vacation in some hunting-lodge in the Adirondacks, say; that presently they would all go back to New York, and that a car door would slam to be opened only by the doorman of his own apartment house.

But here it was—the bees astir in a sunlit garden, the sun-dial and bird-houses, the smell of old wood and fresh curtains; not like anything except England. Bacon and s had a savour here that he had never fully appreciated before. So had pipe tobacco. The countryside here didn't look artificial, as country has a habit of looking when you live in it only during the summer; nor did it at all resemble the shrub on the roof of a penthouse.

And here was Dr. Fell, pottering about his domain in a broad-brimmed white hat, looking sleepily amiable and doing nothing with an engrossed thoroughness. Here was Mrs. Fell, a very small and bustling and cheerful woman who !ways knocking things over. Twenty times in a

morning you would hear a small crash, whereupon she would cry, "Bother!" and go whisking on with her cleaning until the ensuing mishap. She had, moreover, a habit of sticking her head out of window all over the house, one after the other, to address some question to her husband. You would just place her at the front of the house when out she would pop at a rear window, like a cuckoo out of a clock, to wave cheerfully at Rampole and ask her husband where something was. He always looked mildly surprised, and never knew. So back she would go, previous to her reappearance at a side window with a pillow or a dust-cloth in her hand. To Rampole, lounging in a deck-chair under a lime tree and smoking his pipe, it suggested one of

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those Swiss barometers where the revolving figures aft ever going in and coming out of a chalet to indicate the weather.

The mornings and a part of the afternoons Dr. Fell usually devoted to the composition of his great work, ~~The Drinking Customs of England from the Earliest Days~~, a monumental labour into which he had put six years of scholarly research. He loved to trace out the origin of such quaint terms as drinking supernaugulum; carouse the hunter's hoop; quaff upse jreez crosse; and with health, gloves, mumpes, frolickes, and other curious terms of the tankard. Even in speaking of it to Rampole, he took violent issue with the treatises of such authors as Tom Nash (Pierce Pennilesse, 1595) and George Gascoigne (A delicate Diet for daintie mouthed Dronkardes, wherein the fowle Abuse of common carowsing and quaffing with hartie Draughtes is honestlie admonished, 1576).

The morning passed, with the blackbirds piping from the meadow and drowsy sunlight drawing all suggestion of evil from Chatterham prison. But the mellowness of afternoon brought him to the doctor's study, where his host was tapping tobacco into a pipe. Dr. Fell wore an old shooting-jacket, and his white hat was hung on a corner of the stone mantelpiece. On the table before him were papers at which he kept stealing furtive glances.

"There will be guests to tea," said the doctor. "The rector is coming, and young Martin Starberth and his sister—they live at the Hall, you know; the postman tells me they got in this morning. Perhaps Starberth's cousin, too, though he's a sullen sort of dog for your money. I suppose you'll want to know more about the prison?"

"Well, if it's not—"

"Violating any confidence? Oh no. Everybody knows about it. I'm rather curious to see young Martin myself. He's been in America for two years, and his sister has run the Hall since their father died. A great girl, that. Old Timothy died in rather a curious way."

"A broken neck?" Rampole inquired, as the other hesitated.

Dr. Fell grunted. "If he didn't break his neck, he broke

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most of the rest of him. The man was fearfully smashed up. He was out riding just after sunset, and his horse threw him—apparently while he was coming down Chatterham prison hill near the Hag's Nook. They found him late that night, lying in the underbrush. The horse was near by, whinnying in a kind of terror. Old Jenkins—that's one of his tenants—found him, and Jenkins said the noises his horse was making were one of the worst things he'd ever heard. He died the next day. He was fully conscious, too, up to the end."

Several times during his stay Rampole had the suspicion that his host might have been making game of him as an American. But he knew differently now. Dr. Fell was plodding through these gruesome anecdotes because something worried him. He talked to relieve himself. Behind the shiftings of his eyes, and his uneasy rollings in the chair, there was a doubt—a suspicion—even a dread. His asthmatic breaths were loud in the quiet room, turning dusky against the afternoon sun.

Rampole said, "I suppose it revived the old superstition."

"It did. But then we've always had superstitions hereabouts. No, this business suggested something

worse than that."

"You mean—"

"Murder," said Dr. Fell.

He was bending forward. His eyes had grown large behind the glasses, and his ruddy face looked hard. He began to speak rapidly:

4k Mind! I say nothing. It may be fancy, and it's no concern of mine. H'mf. But Dr. Markley, the coroner, said he'd got a blow across the base of the skull which might have been caused by the fall, and then again might not. He looked, it seemed to me, less as though he'd had a fall than that somebody had trampled on him. I don't mean by a horse, either. Another thing: it was a damp evening in October, and he was lying in marshy ground, but that didn't seem to account wholly for the fact that the body was wet. 91

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Rampole looked steadily at his host. He found that his fingers had closed on the arms of his chair.

"But you say he was conscious, sir. Didn't he Speak?" kk I wasn't there, of course. I got the story from the rector, and from Payne, too; you remember Payne? Yes, he spoke. He not only spoke, but he seemed to be in a sort of ghoulish high spirits. Just at daybreak they knew he was dying. He had been writing, Dr. Markley said, on a board propped across him; they tried to prevent it, but he just showed his teeth. 'Instructions for my son,' he said—Martin was in America, as I told you—'there's the ordeal to be gone through, isn't there?' "

Dr. Fell stopped to light his pipe. He pulled the flame down fiercely into the bowl, as though it might give him clearer sight.

"They hesitated in calling Mr. Saunders, the rector, because Timothy was an old sinner and a furious hater of the Church. But he always said Saunders was an honest man, even if he didn't agree with him, so they brought him out at dawn to see whether the old man would agree to prayers for the dying. He went in to see old Timothy alone, and after a while he came out wiping the sweat off his forehead. 'My God!' says the rector, as though he were praying, 'the man's not in his right mind. Somebody go in there with me.' 'Will he hear the commitment?' says Timothy's nephew, who was looking queer. 'Yes, yes,' says the rector, 'but it isn't that. It's the way he's talking.' 'What did he say?' asks the nephew. 'I'm not allowed to tell you that,' says the rector, 'but I wish I could.'

"In the bedroom they could hear Timothy croaking gleefully, though he couldn't move for the splints. He called out to see Dorothy next, alone, and after that Payne, his lawyer. It was Payne who called out that he was going fast. So just as daylight was growing outside the windows, they all went into the big oak room with the canopied bedstead. Timothy was nearly speechless now, but he said one clear word which was, 'Handkerchief,' and he seemed to be grinning. The rest of them knelt down while the rector said the prayers, and just as Saunders was making the sign of

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the cross, some froth came out of Timothy's mouth, and he jerked once and died."

During a long silence, Rampole could hear the blackbirds piping outside. The sun was growing long and wan in the branches of the yew.

"It's odd enough," the American assented at length, "But if he said nothing, you've hardly any ground to suspect murder."

"Haven't I?" said Dr. Fell, musingly. "Well, maybe not . . . The same night—of the day he died, I mean—the same night there was a light in the window of the Governor's Room."

"Did anybody investigate?"

"No. You couldn't get any of the villagers near there after dark for a hundred pounds."

"Oh, well! A superstitious imagination—"

"It wasn't a superstitious imagination," the doctor affirmed, shaking his head. "At least, I don't think so. I saw the light myself."

Rampole said, slowly, "And tonight your Martin Starberth spends an hour in the Governor's Room."

"Yes. If he doesn't funk it. He's always been a nervous chap, one of the dreamy kind, and he was always a little ticklish about the prison. The last time he was in Chatterham was about a year ago, when he came home for the reading of Timothy's will. One of the specifications of the inheritance, of course, was that he should pass the customary 'ordeal.' Then he left his sister and his cousin Herbert in charge of the Hall, and returned to America. He's in England only for the—the merry festivities."

Rampole shook his head.

"You've told me a lot about it," he said; "all but the origin. What I don't see is the reason behind these traditions."

Dr. Fell took off his eyeglasses and put on a pair of owlish reading-spectacles. For a moment he bent over the sheets of paper on his desk, his hands at his temples.

"I have here copies of the official journals, made from day to day like a ship's log, of Anthony Starberth, Esquire, Governor of Chatterham Prison 1797-1820, and of Martin

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Starberth, Esquire, Governor 1821-1837. The originals are kept at the Hall; old Timothy gave me permission to copy them. They ought to be published in book form, one as a sidelight on the penal methods of that day.* I remained for a time with his head down, drawing slowly his pipe and staring with brooding eyes at the inkwell. "Previous to the latter part of the eighteenth century, you see, there were very few detention prisons in Europe. Criminals were either hanged outright, or branded and mutilated and turned loose, or deported to the colonies. There were exceptions, like the debtors, but in general no distinction was made between those who had been tried and those who were awaiting trial; they were flung in willy-nilly, under a vicious system.

"A man named John Howard started an agitation for detention prisons. Chatterham prison was begun even before Milbank, which is generally supposed to be the oldest. It was built by the convicts who were to occupy it, of stone quarried from the Starberth lands, under the muskets of a redcoat troop commissioned by George III for that purpose. The cat was freely used, and sluggards were hung up by their thumbs or otherwise tortured. Every stone, you see, has meant blood."

As he paused, old words came unbidden to Rampole's mind, and he repeated them: " 'There was a great crying in the land

"Yes. A great and bitter one. The governorship, of course, was given to Anthony Starberth. His family had been active in such interests for a long time; Anthony's father, I believe, had been deputy sheriff of Lincoln Bourough. It has been recorded," said Dr. Fell, a long sniff rumbling up in his nose, "that every day during the building, light or dark, sun or sleet, Anthony would come riding out on a dapple mare to oversee the work. The convicts grew to know him, and to hate him. They would always see him sitting on his horse, up against the sky and the black line of the marshes, in his three-cornered hat and his blue camlet cloak.

"Anthony had one eye put out in a duel. He was a bit of a dandy, though very miserly except where his person

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was concerned; he was stingy and cruel; he wrote bad verses by the hour, and hated his family for ridiculing them. I believe he used to say they would pay for making fun of his vera

"They finished the prison in 1797, and Anthony moved in. He was the one who instituted the rule that the eldest son must look at what he'd left in the safe of the Governor's Room. His governorship, I needn't tell you, was a trifle worse than hellish; I'm deliberately toning down the whole recital. His one eye and his grin ... it was a good job," Dr. Fell said, putting his palm down flat on the papers as though he were trying to blot out the writing—"it was a good job, my boy, that he made his arrangements for death when he did."

"What happened to him?"

"Gideon!" cried a reproachful voice, followed by a fusillade of knocks on the study door which made Rampole jump. "Gideon! Tea!"

"Eh?" said Dr. Fell, looking up blankly.

Mrs. Fell stated a grievance. "Tea, Gideon! And I wish you'd let that horrible beer alone, though goodness knows the butter-cakes are bad enough, and it's so stuffy in there, and I see the rector and Miss Starberth coming up the road as it is." There was the sound of a deep breath being drawn, whereupon Mrs. Fell summed it up saying, "Tea!"

The doctor rose with a sigh, and they heard her fluttering down the passage, repeating, "Bother, bother, bother!" like the exhaust of an automobile.

"We'll save it," said Dr. Fell.

Dorothy Starberth was coming up the lane, moving with her free stride beside a large and bald-headed man who was fanning himself with his hat. Rampole felt a momentary qualm. Easy!— Don't act like kid, now! He could hear her light, mocking voice. She was wearing a yellow jumper with a high neck and some sort of brown skirt and coat into whose pockets her hands were thrust. The sun glimmered on her rich black hair, caught carelessly round her head; and as she turned her head from side to side you could see a clear profile, somehow as poised as a bird's wing. Then they were coming across the lawn, and

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the dark-blue eyes were fixed on him un< ties. , . .

"I think you know Miss Starberth," Dr. FeD \

"Mr. Saunders, this is Mr. Rampole, from America. He's staying with us."

Rampole found his hand grasped with the vigour of muscular Christianity by the large and bald-headed man. Mr. Thomas Saunders was smiling professionally, his shaven jowls gleaming; he was one of those clergymen whom people praise by saying that they are not at all like clergymen. His forehead was steaming, but his bland blue eyes were as alert as a scoutmaster's. Mr. Saunders was forty years old, and looked much younger. He served his creed, you felt, as clearly and unthinkingly as he had served Eton (or Harrow, or Winchester, or whatever it was) on the playing-fields. Round his pink skin a fringe of fair hair fluffed like a tonsure, and he wore an enormous watch-chain.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," the rector boomed, heartily. "I—ah—was pleased to know many of your countrymen during the war. Cousins over the sea, you know; cousins over the sea!"

He laughed, lightly and professionally. This air of professional smoothness and ease irritated the American; he murmured something and turned towards Dorothy Star-berth. . . .

"How do you do?" she said, extending a cool hand. "It's jolly seeing you again!— How did you leave our mutual friends, the Harrises?"

Rampole was about to demand, "Who?" when he caught the expectant innocence of her glance and the half-smile which animated it.

"Ah, the Harrises," he said. "Splendid, thank you, splendid." With a startling burst of inspiration he added. "Muriel is cutting a tooth."

As nobody seemed impressed by this intelligence, and he was a trifle nervous about the ring of authenticity he had put into it, he was about to add further intimate details of the Harris household when Mrs. Fell suddenly shot out of the front door in another of her cuckoo-like appearances, to take charge of them all. She made a variety of

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unintelligible remarks which seemed to be chiefly concerned with beer, butter-cakes, and the dear thoughtfulness of the rector; and had he quite recovered from being drenched by that horrible water-

sprinkler; and was he sure he hadn't got pneumonia? Mr. Saunders coughed experimentally, and said he hadn't.

"Dear me . . . bother!" said Mrs. Fell, walking into some plants. "So near-sighted, blind as a bat, dear Mr. Saunders. . . . And my dear," whirling on the girl, "where is your brother? You said he'd be here."

Momentarily the shade was back on Dorothy Starberth's face, as Rampole had seen it last night. She hesitated, putting a hand to her wrist as though she would like to look at her watch; but taking it away instantly.

"Oh, he'll be here," she said. "He's in the village—buying some things. He'll be along directly."

The tea table was set out in the garden behind the house; it was shaded by a large lime tree, and a singing stream ran a few yards away. Rampole and the girl lagged behind the other three on the way.

"Baby Eadwig," said Rampole, "is down with mumps—"

"Smallpox. Ugh, you beast! I thought you were going to give me away. And in a community like this—I say, how did they know we'd met?"

"Some old fool of a lawyer saw us talking on the platform. But I thought you were going to give me away."

At this extraordinary coincidence they both turned to look at each other, and he saw her eyes shining again. He felt exhilarated, but prickly. He said, "Ha!" rather like Dr. Fell, and noticed the dappling of shadows that trembled on the grass, and they both laughed. She went on in a low voice:

"I can't tell you—I was feeling desperately low last night, what with one thing and another. And London is so big, and everything was wrong. I wanted to talk to somebody. And then you bumped into me and you looked nice, so I did."

Rampole felt a desire to give somebody a joyous poke in the jaw. In imagination he lashed out triumphantly. He had

sensation as though somebody were pumping air into his chest.

He said, not wittily, but—be honest with yourself, sneering peruser!—very naturally:

"I'm glad you did."

"So am I."

"Glad?"

"Glad."

"Hah!" said Rampole, exhaling the air in triumph.

prom ahead of them rose Mrs. Fell's thin voice. "— Azaleas, petunias, geraniums, hollyhocks,

honeysuckle, and eglantine!" she shrilled, as though she were calling trains. "I can't see 'em, on account of being so nearsighted, but I know they're there." With a beaming if somewhat vague smile she grasped the newcomers and urged them into chairs. "Oh, Gideon, my love, you're not going after that horrible beer, are you?"

Dr. Fell was already bending over the stream. Puffing laboriously, he extracted several beaded bottles and hauled himself up on one cane.

"Notice, Mr. Rampole," said the rector, with an air of comfortable tolerance. "I often think," he continued, as though he were launching a terrible accusation but slyly smiling to mitigate it—"I often think that the good doctor can't be English at all. This barbarous habit of drinking beer at tea-time—my dear sir! It isn't—well, it isn't English, you know!"

Dr. Fell raised a fiery face.

"Sir," he said, "it's tea that isn't English, let me inform you. I want you to look at the appendix of my book, Note 86, Chapter 9, devoted to such tilings as tea, cocoa, and that unmentionably awful beverage known as the ice-cream soda. Tea, you will find, came into England from Holland in 1666. From Holland, her bitter enemy; and in Holland they contemptuously called it hay-water. Even the French couldn't stand it. Patin calls tea 'Vimpertinente nouveaute du siecle,' and Dr. Duncan, in his Treatise on Hot Liquors — "

"And in front of the rector, too!" said Mrs. Fell, wailing.

"Eh?" said the doctor, breaking off with some vague

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idea that she thought he was swearing. "What, my dear?"

"Beer," said Mrs. Fell.

"Oh, hell!" said the doctor, violently. "Excuse me, excuse me." He turned to Rampole. "Will you have some beer with me, my boy?"

"Why, yes," the other answered, with gratitude. "Thanks, I will."

"—and coming out of that cold water, it'll probably give you both pneumonia," Mrs. Fell said, darkly. She seemed to have an idee fixe on the subject of pneumonia. "What it's coming to I don't know—more tea, Mr. Saunders, and there are the cakes beside you—with everybody catching pneumonia the way they are, and that poor young man having to sit up in that draughty governor's place tonight; he'll probably have pneu—"

There was an abrupt silence. Then Saunders began talking very smoothly and easily about the flowers, pointing to a bed of geraniums; he seemed to be trying to alter their minds by altering the direction of their gaze. Dr. Fell joined in the discussion, glowering at his wife. She was quite unconscious of having opened that forbidden subject. But constraint had come upon the party under the lime tree, and would not go away.

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