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DELL
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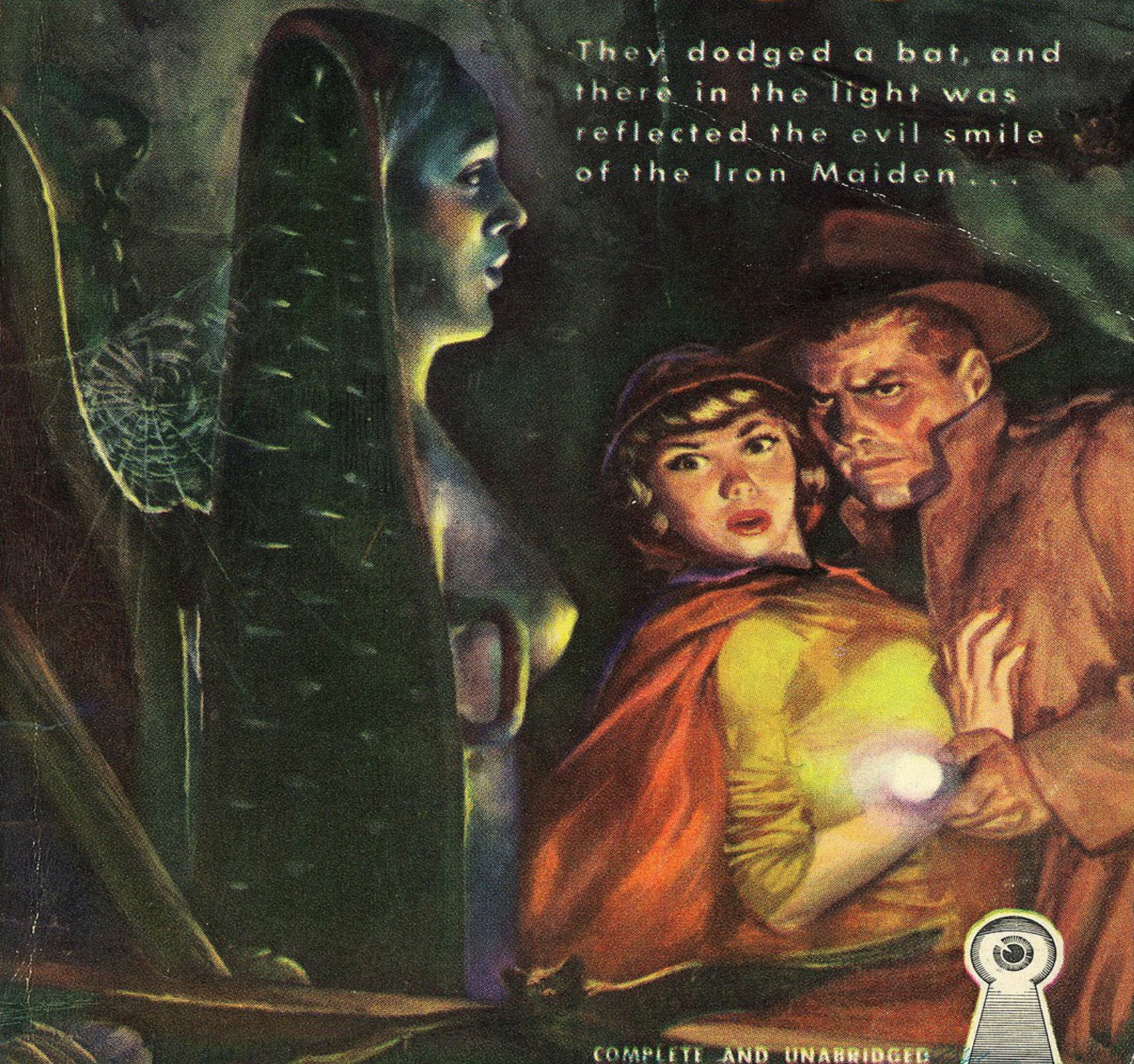
JOHN DICKSON CARR

A Gideon Fell Mystery

HAG'S NOOK

They dodged a bat, and there in the light was reflected the evil smile of the Iron Maiden...



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

JOHN DICKSON CARR

HAG’S

NOOK

INTERNATIONAL POLYGONICS, LTD. NEW YORK CITY

NOOK

HAG'S NOOK

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HAG'S NOOK

DR. GIDEON FELL, DETECTIVE

He comes striding towards us now, beaming like Old King Cole. You can probably hear him chuckle. If he wheezes a little, that's due to his weighing more than three hundred pounds.You notice the three chins, and the bandit's mustache, and the eyeglasses on the black ribbon. He removes his hat with old-school courtesy. Don't try to bow, doctor! He is Gideon Fell, doctor of philosophy and expert on crime.

In these words, the narrator of one of John Dickson Carr's radio-plays introduced Dr. Gideon Fell. As Anthony Boucher remarked, "the detective story in the grand manner demands a Great Detective," and Dr. Fell is a memorable sleuth. He is larger-than-life both in his appearance and in his actions. Although he is not fiction's most gargantuan crime-solver-that prize

belongs to the four hundred pounds of Paul McGuire's Superintendent Fillinger - he puts most detectives literally in the shade. But, to be fair, Carr may have exaggerated Fell's weight for radio audiences; normally he is described as being a relatively svelte twenty stone. It is, however, more than his size which allows Fell to dominate his cases: "A huge joy of life, a piratical swagger merely to be hearing and seeing and thinking, glowed from him like steam from a furnace. It was like meeting Father Christmas." Everything about Fell is in large proportions. He smokes a meerschaum which he fills from an obese pouch. He consumes countless tankards of beer and is fond of whisky ("It would be very interesting to find any whisky that could take the top of my head off'), and he has a tremendous fund of miscellaneous knowledge about obscure subjects.

At the time of HAG'S NOOK, Dr. Fell has been working for six years on his magnum opus, The Drinking Customs of England From The Earliest Days. It was eventually published in 1946, Carr said, by a publishing house with the evocative name of Crippen & Wainwright. Fell is also the author of Romances of the Seventeenth Century and a book on the supernatural in English fiction. He spends his spare time, he explains on several occasions, improving his mind with sensational fiction.

Dr. Fell's name came from the seventeenth-century bishop and dean of Christ Church, Oxford, who was immortalized in Thomas Brown's famous doggerel:

I do not like thee, Doctor Fell.

The reason why I cannot tell,

But this I know, and know full well,

I do not like thee, Doctor Fell.

Fell himself sometimes quotes this verse, and so do the murderers he tracks down, but otherwise he does not take after his rather stern namesake. His appearance and personality were based on Carr's literary idol, G. K. Chesterton, the essayist and author of the Father Brown detective stories. The

formality of Fell's speech was borrowed from Dr. Samuel Johnson, a fact which probably explains why Fell is described in HAG'S NOOK as a lexicographer. Fell is, as students of his cases know, a historian, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society with degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and Edinburgh. He has occasionally lectured at American universities on such topics as "The Effects of King's Mistresses on Constitutional Government.'

In the Mystery Writers of America Anthology, Four-and-Twenty Bloodhounds (1950), Carr contributed a "Detective's Who's Who entry about Dr. Fell. We learn that he was born in Lincolnshire in 1884 the second son of Sir Digby and Lady Fell; his aristocratic connections help us to understand why he never seems to be earning a living during his cases and why he was able to afford several different residences. Besides Yew Cottage in Lincolnshire, where Fell is living during the events of HAG'S NOOK, he resides at Number 1 Adelphi Terrace in London and, later at 12 Round Pond Place, Hampstead. In one short story, he has a house in Chelsea. Carr added a few more details: Fell is the recipient of the French Grand Cross Legion of Honor, and he is a member of the Garrick, Savage, and Detection Clubs - organizations, incidentally, to which Carr also belonged. (The Detection Club is a society of detective-story writers; Carr was the only American member.)

But what is most noteworthy about the "Detective's Who's Who" is how much Carr left unsaid. We hear nothing about his wife, who plays a subsidiary role in HAG'S NOOK and is mentioned in passing in three or four other cases. Nothing is revealed about Sir Digby Fell's first son or, indeed, of Dr. Fell's other relatives. Like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (but unlike many modern Holmesians), Carr realized that much of a detective's life should be left vague. A larger-than-life character can be part of this world, but he should not be limited by it. It is insignificant that Hercule Poirot must have been as old as Methuselah in his final cases. Poirot, like Holmes and Fell, has gained an immortality that is unaffected by mere chronological considerations. Glimpses of a detective's background are more effective than elaborate biographical details. Thus Doyle referred to Holmes's unrecorded cases, and Carr mentioned that Fell was involved in such matters as the "Weatherby Grange affair;" the "six blue coins which hanged Paulton of Regent Street, and "the still more curious problem of the inverted room at

Waterfall Manor." Tolkien understood in LORD OF THE RINGS the importance of referring to other events which are not detailed in the narrative. Such hints contribute a feeling of depth and timelessness, what Tolkien called "a large history in the background, an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island."

Carr was only twenty-six years old when he wrote HAG'S NOOK, the first Gideon Fell story. He was born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, on November 30, 1906. Beginning in preparatory school and continuing through his studies at Haverford College, he wrote detective stories and historical romances along with occasional poems and comic tales. After living in Paris in the late 1920s, he returned to the United States and published his first novel, It Walks by Night, featuring the French detective Henri Bencolin. But Carr believed that England - the land of Holmes and Watson, of Fu Manchu and Nayland Smith, of Dr. Thorndyke and Reggie Fortune and the transplanted Belgian Hercule Poirot - was the natural home for a detective-story writer. In 1932, he married an Englishwoman, Clarice Cleaves, moved to England, and began a regimen of writing four or five detective novels a year featuring English sleuths. Under the pseudonym "Carter Dickson" he wrote a series of books about Sir Henry Merrivale, and under his own name he wrote about Gideon Fell, who eventually appeared in twenty-three novels, four short stories, and four radio-plays.

HAG'S NOOK is told from the viewpoint of Tad Rampole, a young American visiting England who clearly represents Carr's own feelings, and it is filled with Anglophilic warmth. I know of no writing that conveys so sensitively the love of England and of the past than the second paragraph of HAG'S NOOK. Rampole will appear in two other Fell cases, The Mad Hatter Mystery, and The Three Coffins, in which his name is unaccountably altered to "Ted." It is the feeling for the past and how it influences the present that dominate HAG'S NOOK. Carr believed that "to write good history is the noblest work of man;" and like Fell he loved the romance of the past. In 1936, he wrote the finest true-crime book, The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey, about an unsolved murder of 1678, and later in his career he became the master of the historical detective novel. According to Dr. Fell "the talent for deduction developed by judicious historical research can just as well be

applied to detective work."

HAG'S NOOK also reflects Carr's affection for the works of G. K. Chesterton. Dorothy Sayers wrote of Carr's novels: "Chestertonian ...are the touches of extravagance in character and plot, and the sensitiveness to symbolism, to historical association, to the shapes and colours of material things, to the crazy terror of the incongruous." Not only Dr. Fell's appearance but his love of paradoxes come directly from Chesterton.

John Dickson Carr was famed for the "miracle crime" the impossible disappearance and the locked-room murder; indeed he found so many ways to explain tricks and impossibilities that as Anthony Boucher remarked, "his own career seems a miraculous event demanding some rational explanation." The seeming impossibilities in HAG'S NOOK are handled subtly, more hinted at than proclaimed. Few tales

so perfectly combine atmosphere, mystery, ingenuity, and an extraordinarily well-concealed murderer.

Douglas G. Greene

Norfolk, Virginia April, 1985

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Dr. James E. Keirans and to the late Larry L. French for material on Dr. Fell which appears in this introduction.

Series Consultant Douglas G. Greene is Director of the Institute of Humanities at Old Dominion University. Dr. Greene is working on a multi-volume history of the detective story. He has edited two anthologies of John Dickson Carr's work, and is widely recognized as the authority on that writer.

Chapter 1

THE old lexicographer's study ran the length of his small house. It was a raftered room, sunk a few feet below the level of the door; the latticed windows at the rear were shaded by a yew tree, through which the late afternoon sun was striking now.

There is something spectral about the deep and drowsy beauty of the English countryside; in the lush dark grass, the evergreens, the grey church-spire and the meandering white road. To an American, who remembers his own brisk concrete highways clogged with red filling-stations and the fumes of traffic, it is particularly pleasant. It suggests a place where people really can walk without seeming incongruous, even in the middle of the road. Tad Rampole watched the sun through the latticed windows, and the dull red berries glistening in the yew tree, with a feeling which can haunt the traveller only in the British Isles. A feeling that the earth is old and enchanted; a sense of reality in all the flashing images which are conjured up by that one word "merrie." For France changes, like a fashion, and seems no older than last season's hat. In Germany even the legends have a bustling clockwork freshness, like a walking toy from Nuremberg. But this English earth seems (incredibly) even older than its ivy-bearded towers. The bells at twilight seem to be bells across the centuries; there is a great stillness, through which ghosts step, and Robin Hood has not strayed from it even yet.

Tad Rampole glanced across at his host. Filling a deep leather chair with his bulk, Dr. Gideon Fell was tapping tobacco into a pipe and seemed to be musing genially over something the pipe had just told him. Dr. Fell was not too old, but he was indubitably a part of this room. A room - his guest thought - like an illustration out of Dickens. Under the oak rafters, with smoke-blackened plaster between, it was large and dusky; there were diamond-paned windows above great oak mausoleums of bookshelves, and in this room, you felt, all the books were friendly. There was a smell of dusty leather and old paper, as though all those stately old-time books had hung up their tall hats and prepared to stay.

Dr. Fell wheezed a little, even with the exertion of filling his pipe. He was very stout, and walked, as a rule, with two canes. Against the light from the front windows his big mop of dark hair, streaked with a white plume, waved like a war-banner. Immense and aggressive, it went blowing before him through life. His face was large and round and ruddy, and had a twitching smile somewhere above several chins. But what you noticed there was the twinkle in his eye. He wore eyeglasses on a broad black ribbon, and the small eyes twinkled over them as he bent his big head forward; he 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, on any subject whatever, but particularly on the glories and sports of old-time England. He likes band music, melodrama, beer, and slapstick comedies; he's a great old boy, and you'll like him."

There was no denying this. There was a heartiness, a naivete, an absolute 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, is 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 enough. There was loneliness in wandering through the grimy station, full of grit and the iron coughing of engines, and blurred by streams of hurrying commuters. The waitingrooms 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 coins tinkle on the wooden platform. Fiery with embarrassment, he found himself holding to two small aims 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 Rampole'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 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 grey 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.