The Burning Court

John Dickson Carr

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INDICTMENT

"Here we supped ,very merry, and late to bed; Sir William telling me that old Edgeborrow,-his predecessor, did die and walk in my chamber, did make me somewhat afraid---but not so much as, for mirth sake, I did seem,"

-SAMUEL PEPYS, April 8th, 1663

THERE was a man lived by a churchyard---" is an intriguing beginning for a story left unfinished, Edward Stevens also lived by a churchyard, in more senses than one: which is the soberest possible statement of the fact. There was a miniature of the sort next door, of course, and the reputation of Despard Park had always been unusual; but that was not the most important churchyard.

Edward Stevens, who was not much different from you or me, sat in a smoking-car of a train which would reach Broad Street station at 6:48. He was thirty-two years old, and he had a tolerably important position in the editorial department of the publishing house of Herald & Sons, Fourth Avenue. He rented an apartment in the East Seventies, and owned a cottage at Crispen outside Philadelphia, where he spent many week-ends because he and his wife were fond of that countryside, He was going there to join Marie on this Friday evening (which was in the far off days of sing. 1929) and his briefcase was the manuscript of Gaudan Cross's new book of murder trials. Such, baldly stated, are the facts. Stevens himself now admits that it is a relief to state facts, to deal with matters that can be tabulated or arranged,,

It must be emphasized, too, that there was nothing unusual about the day or the evening. He was not stepping across a borderland, any more than you or I step across it; he was simply going home. And he was a robustly happy man with a profession, a wife, and an existence which suited him.

The train was on time at Broad Street. He stretched his legs round. the station, and saw on one of the black number-boxes over the gates that he could get a train for Crispen in seven minutes: an express, first stop Ardmore, Crispen is some thirtyodd minutes out on the Main Line, the next stop after Haverford: Nobody has ever pet discovered why there should be a stop or a separate division there at all, between Haverford and Bryn Mawr. There were only half a dozen houses, all set very far apart, on the way up the hill. But it was (in a, way) a community of its own: it had a post-office, a druggist's, and a tearoom almost hidden in the noble copper beeches where King's Avenue curved up to Despard Park. It had even-though this was scarcely either customary or symbolical-an undertaker's shop.

This undertaker's had always surprised and puzzled Stevens. He wondered why it was there, and who patronized it. The name *J.Atkinson* was on the windows, but in letters as discreet as a visiting-card. He had never seen so much as a head or a movement beyond those windows, which displayed a couple of shapeless little marble blocks-presumably you stuck flowers in them--and black velvet curtains run waist-high on brassy rings. Of course, it was not to be presumed that an undertaker's anywhere drove a roaring trade, or that a stream of eager customers would constantly animate its doors. But undertakers, by tradition, are merry men; and he had never seen J. Atkinson. It had even given him the vague germ of an idea for a detective-story. The plot (he thought) should concern a mass-murderer who was an undertaker, and was thus able to explain the presence of inconvenient bodies in his shop.

But, after all, J. Atkinson had probably been called in at the death of old Miles Despard so recently.

If there were any reason why Crispen existed at all, that reason was Despard Park. Crispen had been named after one of the four commissioners who, in the year of grace 1681, had been sent out to prepare the site of a city in the newly ceded territory of Pennsylvania, just before Mr. Penn himself came to make peace with all men in the gracious woods between the Schuylkill and the Delaware. William Crispen, a kinsman of William Penn, had died on the voyage out. But a cousin named Despard (the name, according to Mark Despard, was originally French and had undergone sortie curious changes of spelling) had obtained a grant of land in the country, and there had been Despards at the Park ever since. Old Miles Despard--that stately reprobate, the head of the family-had died less than two weeks ago.

Waiting for his train, Stevens wondered idly whether Mark

Despard - the new head of the family-would drop; in for a chat that night, as he usually did. Stevens's

cottage was not far from the entrance-gates of the Park; they had struck up a friend ship two years ago. But he hardly expected to see either Mark or Lucy, Mark's wife, tonight. True enough, old Miles's passing -(he had died of gastro-enteritis, after reducing the lining of his stomach to a pulp with nearly forty years high living) would be not much lamented: old Miles had lived so much abroad that the rest of the family scarcely knew him. But there would be a great deal of business on the skirts of death. Old Miles had never married; Mark, Edith, and Ogden Despard, were the children of his younger brother. Each should inherit substantially, Stevens thought without great interest.

The entrance-gates to the station platform had rattled open now; Stevens swung aboard the Main Line train and pushed forward to the smoking-car. The spring night had turned from grey to black. But even in the gritty air of the shed, even in the thick air of the car with its pale dispirited roof lights, there was a smell of spring that would stir the blood in the countryside. (This led his thoughts to Marie, who would meet him at Crispen with the car.) The train, less than half full, had its usual somnolent air of people crackling fat newspapers_ and blowing smoke over their shoulders. Stevens settled down with his briefcase across his knees. With the idle curiosity of a contented man, he fell to turning over in his mind two rather puzzling happenings which had been occurring to him all day. It was characteristic of the man that he did not try to reason them out; he only tried to devise imaginative explanations which would fit them.

For instance? Well, for instance, he had in his briefcase the manuscript of Gaudan Cross's new book. He had been looking forward to reading it. Gaudan Cross (which, strangely enough, was the man's real name) was a discovery of Morley, the head of the editorial department. Cross appeared to be a recluse who devoted himself to retelling the histories of murder cases from real life. His great talent lay in a narrative vividness which was like that of an eye-witness; a sort of devilish reportorial ability, in things he had not seen. It was often deceptive. An eminent judge had unwarily written that the man who gave such an account of Neill Cream as that in Gentlemen of the jury had, beyond any doubt, been in the courtroom at the time. "Since Cream was tried in 1892 commented' the New York Times, "and Mr. Cross's age is given as forty, he must indeed have been a precocious infant." But it was no bad advertisement for the book.

However, Cross's popularity did not depend so much on his style as on his selection of materials, He took one or two celebrated cases for each book. But chiefly he devoted his research to unearthing picturesque crimes of which few people seemed to have heard at all, wonders in their own time, unquestionably, but appearing with a shock of novelty to modern readers. Despite photographs and documentary evidence, some of the accounts were so remarkable that one critic accused the whole thing of being an elaborate hoax. After another stir-again no bad advertisement-Cross was proved to have invented nothing. In this case, which was that of an atrocity at Brussels in the eighteenth century, the doubting critic received a furious letter from the Burgomaster of Brussels, who was very proud of the local monster. Thus Gaudan Cross, without being a national best seller or hit-of-the-year, was among the props of the Herald list.

That Friday afternoon Stevens had been called into the editorial head's office. Morley sat behind his desk in the quiet carpeted room, blinking at a neat pile of sheets in a buff container.

"That's the new Cross, he said."Will you take it home with you over the week-end? I'd like to have you talk about it at the May sales conference. You're particularly enthusiastic about that sort of thing."

"You've read it?"

"Yes," said Morley, and hesitated. "It's the best thing he's done, in a way," Morley added, hesitating again. "The title will have to be changed, of course. He's given it some thundering long and technical thing that the sales force will never stand for; but we can worry about that later. It's a gallery of women poisoners, and it's strong stuff."

"Good!" said Stevens, heartily.

Morley remained half abstracted, half puzzled, looking round the room. There was evidently something on his mind. He asked, "Ever meet Cross?"

"No. I think I've seen him in the office' once or twice, that's all' Stevens answered; with a recollection of a broad back ducking round a corner or pushing through a door.

"Well . . . unusual sort of fellow. About his contracts, I mean. There's one clause he insists on having in every contract, and it's not what you could call a common clause. Otherwise he doesn't care ; I don't believe he even bothers to read the contract through. The stipulation is that the back of the jacket on every one of his books must contain a large photograph of himself."

Stevens made a noise in his throat. The wall was lined with shelves of bright-jacketed books; he reached up and flipped down a copy of Gentlemen of the Jury.

"So that's the reason for it," he remarked. "I'd wondered about that, but nobody seemed inclined to mention it. No biographical details; just a large photograph with his name under it-and on a first book." He studied the picture. "Well, it's a strong face; an intellectual face; I should think a good face, But why is he so proud of it that he wants it plastered round?"

Morley shook his head, still immobile in the chair. "No. It isn't that. He's not the sort who would want any personal publicity of the kind; far from it. There's some other reason."

Again Morley looked at him curiously, but dismissed the matter by picking up something from his desk, "Never mind; take the manuscript along with you. Be very careful of it. He's got photographs attached. Oh-and you might crime in and see me first thing Monday morning,"

With that last casual word he had left it. Sitting now in a train that was rattling towards West Philadelphia, Stevens half-opened the catch of the briefcase to have a look at the manuscript. But he hesitated, his mind still full of idle puzzles.

If the business of Gaudan Cross had been neither important nor clear-cut, that of old Miles Despard was even less so. Stevens's thoughts went to Despard Park, to the old stone among the beeches, and the gardens that would be stirring from sleep. He remembered old Miles, the previous summer, walking in the sunken garden behind the house. "Old" Miles had not been really old, as time went; he had been only fifty-six when they screwed down his coffin, But his punctilious bearing, his scrawny neck emerging from, shiny white knives of collars, his curled grey moustache and air of far-off hilarity had always seemed to put him in a different age. Stevens remembered him in the warm sun, formally raising his rakish hat. His eyes looked puffed and troubled.

Gastro-enteritis gives no easy passing; Miles Despard, returned to his home after wandering the earth, had found a slow and cruel death which he bore with a stoicism that had roused the blubbering admiration of the cook. Mrs. Henderson - cook, general housekeeper, and tyrant said that sometimes he had screamed, but not often. They buried him in the crypt under the private chapel, where nine generations of Despards had been set away in tiers like outworn books, and the stone slab which sealed the crypt had been put back into place again. But one thing seemed to have impressed Mrs. Henderson very deeply. Before he died, Miles Despard had in his hands an ordinary piece of string, tied at equal spacings into nine small knots, They found it under his pillow afterwards.

"I thought it was so nice," Mrs. Henderson had confided to the Stevenses' cook. "I suppose he thought it was a rosary, or something like that. Of course the family aren't Catholics, but all the same I thought it was so nice."

One other thing had induced in Mrs. Henderson a kind of hysteria, so that nobody had been able to straighten out the matter even yet. It was Mark Despard, the nephew, who had mentioned the matter to Stevens, with annoyed amusement.

Stevens had seen Mark only once since Miles's death. The old man had died on the night of April 12th, a Wednesday: Stevens remembered the date particularly because he and Marie had spent that night at Crispen, and it was not usual for them to visit the cottage except at week-ends. They had driven back to New York next morning without hearing anything of the tragedy, and only learned of it through the newspapers. When they visited Crispen again on the week-end of the 15th, they had paid formal condolences at the house, but had not attended the funeral: Marie had an almost shuddering horror of death or the sights of death. And on the evening after the funeral Stevens had met Mark striding along in the gloom and emptiness of King's Avenue.

"Our Mrs. Henderson," Mark had said, abruptly, "has been seeing things.'

It was a raw and windy twilight, with the buds barely opening in the woodland through which King`s Avenue, curved up to Despard Park. Nevertheless, the great trees seemed to shake and move over Mark's head like shadows. Mark's hook-nosed face was pale if boisterous under the light of a street lamp; he leaned against the lamp-post with his hands in his pockets.

"Our Mrs. Henderson," he repeated, "has been seeing things. I'm not even quite certain what it was that she didn't see, because she's kept it to hints and prayers. But it would appear that on the night Uncle Miles died there was a woman in his room, talking to him."

"A woman?"

"No, not what you're thinking," said Mark; formally. mean merely that a woman-in what Mrs. Henderson describes as `queer old-fashioned clothes'-was in his room, talking to him. Now that's possible, of course. On that night several of us, Lucy and Edith and myself as well, went to a masquerade ball at St. Davids, Lucy was dressed as Madame de Montespan, Louis XIV's favorite. Edith was somebody in bonnet and hoopskirts; Florence Nightingale, I believe. With my wife as a great courtesan and my sister as a great nurse, I was well protected.

"However," he added, scowling, "it's rather improbable. You didn't know Miles very well, did you? He was an amiable old devil. He kept by himself in his own room, and wouldn't let anybody go into it - you knew that - although he was always polite. He even had his meals sent up to him. When he was taken bad, of course, I had a trained nurse brought in. He kicked up a hell of a polite row about that. We put the nurse in the room next to his, and we had a lot of trouble preventing him from locking the communicating door so that she couldn't come in whenever she liked. . . Consequently, Mrs. Henderson's vision of a woman in 'queer old-fashioned clothes, though it's possible "

Stevens could not understand what was bothering him.

"Well, I don't see anything particularly strange about, he said. "Have you asked Lucy or Edith about it? And, anyway, if nobody was allowed in the room, how did Mrs. Henderson see the woman at all?"

"Mrs. Henderson claims to have seen her through a window, which Miles usually kept curtained, giving on an upper sun porch. No; I haven't mentioned it to Lucy or Edith." He hesitated, and then laughed boisterously. "For a very good reason. That doesn't bother me; I'm not trying to make any mystery of it. It's the other part of Mrs. Henderson's tale that puzzles me. According to her story, this woman in the old-fashioned clothes - now attend to me carefully - first had a little talk with Miles, and then turned round and went out of the room by a door which does not exist."

Stevens looked at him. Mark Despard's thin hook-nosed face: wore a gravity which may or may not have been satirical.

"You don't say so," Stevens observed, with a noncommittal noise. "Ghosts?"

"I mean," said Mark, frowning over a careful definition of terms, "a door which has been bricked up and panelled over for two hundred years. Mysterious visitor simply opens it and walks out. Ghosts? No; I doubt it very much. We've managed to struggle along for a very long time without producing any ghosts. We've been too cursed respectable. You can't imagine a respectable ghost; it may be a credit to the family, but it's an insult to guests. More likely it's something wrong with .Mrs. Henderson, if you ask me."

Abruptly he had strode off down the avenue.

That was a week ago; and Stevens, thinking over the interview in the train that was carrying him to Crispen now, touched the puzzle-bits without much attention. He was considering merely isolated instances the talk with Morley at the office, the talk with Mark Despard in the road-and wondering not how they could be explained, but how they could be fitted together in the form of a story. Granted that they bore no relation to each other, any more than separate newspaper items. But here they were: a recluse of an author, Gaudan Cross, who had a passion for seeing his own photograph, not from motives of vanity; a recluse of a millionaire, Miles Despard, dying of stomach inflammation, and under his pillow a piece of string tied into nine knots; finally, a woman in old-fashioned clothes (date not specified) who was alleged to have walked out of a room through a door that had been bricked up for two hundred years. Now, how would a skilled story-teller tie together those unrelated facts or fancies into one pattern?

Stevens gave it up. But, still curious about Cross, he opened the briefcase and drew out the manuscript in its container. It was fairly bulky; it could run, he estimate about a hundred thousand words; and, like all Cross's manuscripts, it was neat with an almost finicky preciseness. The chapters were punched together with brass fasteners; the prints, photographs, and drawings affixed with paper-clips. After running his eye down the table of contents, he glanced at the heading of the first chapter - but that was not what made his grip on the manuscript loosen, so that it almost slid off his knee.

Fastened to the page was an old but still very clear photograph of a woman. Under it in small neat letters had been printed

Marie D'Aubray: Guillotined for Murder, 1861,

He was looking at a photograph of his own wife:

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FOR a time he sat quiet, insistently examining the name, insistently examining the features. All the while that he went over and over them, he was hazily conscious that he still sat in the smoking-car of the 7:35 train for Crispen. But he still seemed to be in a great void.

Presently he looked up, settled the manuscript more firmly in his lap, and looked out of the window, His feeling was a commonplace one) was something like that of sitting up in a dentist's chair after an extraction: a little light-headed, conscious of a little quicker heartbeat; nothing more. He was not even conscious of being startled now. He saw that they were flashing through Overbrook, with a clackety-roar of rails, and a few street lamps shining on asphalt below.

There was no possibility of coincidence or mistake. 'The name was hers: Marie D'Aubray. The features were hers, even to an expression he knew, The woman in tike picture, the woman who had gone to the guillotine seventy years ago, had been a relation of his wife's - say her great.-grandmother, which would make the dates about right, But the throwback to her features was uncanny, when the great-grand-daughter even caught a, shade of expression,

It did not matter a tinkers damn, of course, It would not have mattered if her fathers or mothers or uncles had themselves been tipped under that evil plank. And in this age seventy year-old devilry has already a flavor of the historic;, we are apt to take it with a sort of casual and indulgent approval, as unrelated to the business of ordinary life as a papier-mache skull on a desk. Nevertheless, it was startling; because in the picture there was even indicated the very tiny mole just below the angle of the jaw, and the antique bracelet he had seen Marie wear a hundred times. Furthermore, it was not going to be very funny if his own publishing firm issued a book with his wife's photograph plastered opposite the title-page in a gallery of poisoners. Was that what Morley had meant, "You might come in and see me first thing Monday morning?"

No, it was of no consequence. All the same

Turning back to study the picture again, he detached it, from the page to get a better look. Now, why should he have a queer feeling when he touched it? Actually, though he could not have analyzed it, the realization that came over him in such a rush was the realization of how thoroughly and violently he remained in love with her. The photograph was of very thick cardboard, its grey stiplings touched in places with brown. On the back, with letters indented in the cardboard, was the photographer's name, "Perrichet et Fils, 12 rue Jean Goujean, Paris vii." Sprawled across this in curly handwriting, the ink now faded to brown, someone had written, "Ma tres, tres chere Marie; Louis Dinard, le 6`me janvier, 1858," Lover? Husband?

But what really came up as though in a wave from this picture, what grotesquely mingled the old-fashioned and the modem, was the woman's expression. It survived even the stilted photography. The picture was a large half-length, having for its background a landscape with trees-and doves. The woman stood unnaturally, as though she were about to wobble over to one side, and her left hand rested on the top of a little round table which was chastely draped with an antimacassar. Her high-necked dress was of some darkish taffeta material, which gleamed in bunches. And from this high collar the head was carried a little back.

Even though the dark-golden hair seemed somewhat differently arranged (there were a couple of curls which gave it a stiff archaic look), still it was Marie's. She faced the camera, but looked slightly past it. Her grey eyes, with the somewhat heavy lids, large pupils, and dead-black irises, wore what he had often called her "spiritual" expression. The lips were open and faintly smiling. The eyes fixed on you before you noticed

like a painter's trick. Framed in these surroundings, of doves and trees and antimacassars, it had an almost unpleasantly sugary appearance. Yet to the senses it conveyed something altogether different. The thing was alive. It had become a sort of Monkey's Paw in Stevens's hand, and he found his wrist joggling.

His eyes went back to the words, guillotined for murder." Women were very rarely guillotined for murder. If they were, it was because - what they had done was such that no other course could be taken.

Stevens said to himself: This whole business is a joke or a hoax of some kind, Damn it, this is Marie. Somebody is putting something over on me,

He said this to himself, although he knew quite well it was not true, After all, these startling resemblances

of descendants to their forebears did crop up sometimes; there was nothing strange in that; it was a fact, Her great-grandmother had been executed, but what of it?

After all, he knew very little about her, although they had been married for three years. He had not been particularly curious. He knew that she came from Canada, out of a moldering house rather like Despard Park. They had met in Paris and had been married in a fortnight. They had met (with a sort of accidental romance) in the courtyard off an old empty hotel near the cabbage-stalls of the rue St. Antoine. What he could not remember was the name of the street, or why he had strayed there during some explorations through Old Paris. It was the Rue , the Rue, Hold on ! He associated it somehow with a suggestion made by his friend Welden, who held a chair in English at the College, and was also a murder-trial fancier. Over three years ago Welden had said:

"You'll be in Paris this summer? Then, if you're interested in scenes of violence, look up number blank in the rue Blank."

"What's there?"

See," said Welden, "if anyone in the neighborhood can tell you. Or there's a puzzle; work it out."

He had never found out, and lie had forgotten to ask Welden since; but he had met Marie there, apparently roving like himself. She said that she did not know what the place was. She said that she had seen doors half open into a curious Old World court, and she had gone in. When he first saw her, she, was sitting on the rim of a dead fountain in the centre of the court, where rank grass grew. Round her on three sides were the railings of the galleries, and the chipped stone faces carved on the walls. Though she did not look French, still he was surprised to hear her address him in vigorous and ordinary English, and to see how her rather "spiritual" good looks were made suddenly vigorous by her own smile. It was, in a way, an allure of sheer health.

But why hadn't she ever told him? Why the unnecessary secrecy? That house, probably, was where the Marie D'Aubray of 1858 had lived. Afterwards the family must have gone out to Canada; and now Marie, a descendant, was revisiting evil scenes with a natural curiosity about the elder Marie. Her life had been humdrum enough, to judge by the occasional letter she received from Cousin This or Aunt That. She sometimes supplied an anecdote of her family; but, to tell the truth, he had never very much thought about it, There were odd corners and unexpected ideas in her nature: why, for instance, could she never bear the sight of a funnel, an ordinary kitchen funnel? Then again

This would not do. All the while he had been aware that the picture of Marie D'Aubray the First was looking up at him, with something like a jeer behind its ethereal smile. Why didn't he get down and read what this first Marie D'Aubray had done, and not be half afraid of an Easter-card angel whose head had dropped into the guillotine basket? Why put it off? He picked up the manuscript again, thrusting the photograph behind the first chapter. Cross's genius, he reflected, was assuredly not for titles. After giving the whole book some ponderous title, this writer had attempted to freshen it up with more sensational story-heads. Each was called "The Affair of the-Something"; and in this instance he had called it, "The Affair of the Non Dead Mistress," which gave a nasty jar.

It began abruptly, with one of Cross's hand-grenades flung into the camp of fiction:

"Arsenic has been called the fool's poison; never was anything less aptly named."

This is the pronouncement of Mr. Henry Rhodes, editor of The Chemical Practitioner, and Dr. Edmond Locard, director of the Police Laboratory at Lyons, agrees with him. Mr. Rhodes goes on:

"Arsenic is not the fool's poison, nor is it true that its popularity: is due to the uniimaginativeness of the criminal. The poisoner is seldom stupid or unimaginative. On the contrary, the evidence is all the other way. As a poison, arsenic is still used for the reason that it is still the safest poison to use.

In the first place, a physician has the greatest difficulty in diagnosing arsenical poisoning unless he has some reason to suspect it. If carefully graduated doses are administered, the symptoms almost exactly resemble those of gastro-enteritis.

Stevens's eyes stopped there. The type grew to a meaningless blur, because his brain was suddenly full of other things. You couldn't help the thoughts that came into your mind. You might sneer at yourself; call

yourself insane or plain disloyal; but who can keep out a random thought? Gastro-enteritis, of which Miles Despard had died two weeks ago. What he was thinking was a joke, a not-very-funny joke....

"Evening, Stevens," said a voice just behind his should and he became aware that he had jumped a little.

He looked round. The train was slowing down for its first express stop at Ardmore. Dr. Welden of the College was standing in the aisle, his hand on the back of the seat, and looking down with an expression as near curiosity as his solid well-trained face would permit. The lean face had a high framework of bones, like an ascetic's; the jaws were sharp-angled; he wore a clipped moustache and a rimless pince-nez; he remained expressionless except for an occasional chuckle or roar when he told a story. At such times he would open his eyes wide, and point with the cigar he was usually smoking. Welden was a New Englander, a brilliant man at his job, and friendly behind his reserve. He was always soberly well dressed, and carried, like Stevens, a briefcase. '

"I didn't know you were in the train," he observed. "Everyone keeping well? Mrs. Stevens?"

"Sit down,'.' said the other, glad that he had pushed the, photograph out of sight. Welden was getting out at the next stop, but he compromised by sitting down gingerly on the arm of the seat. "Oh fine, thanks," added. Stevens, somewhat vaguely. "And your family?"

"Pretty well. The girl's had a touch of flu; but we've all had it in, this, weather,", replied Welden, complacently. During this exchange of the usual Stevens was concentrated on wondering what Welden would have said if he had opened this manuscript and found a picture of his own wife,

"By the way, Stevens said, with some abruptness, "about your hobby of noted murders: did you ever hear of a poisoner named Marie D'Aubray?"

Welden took the cigar out of his mouth. "Marie D'Aubray? Marie D'Aubray? Ah! I see. That was her maiden name, of course." He turned round and began to grin, throwing into higher relief the bony framework of his face. "Now you mention it, I've always forgotten to ask you…'

"She was guillotined in 1861."

Welden stopped. "Then we can't be thinking of the same person." He seemed a little ruffled that the conversation had gone so suddenly from influenza to murder. "In 1861? Are you sure of that?"

Well, it's in here. I only wondered, that's all. This is Gaudan Cross's new book. You remember there was a rumpus a couple of years ago, about whether or not he was inventing his facts. Just out of curiosity"

"If Cross says it's so," declared Welden, looking out of the window as the train gathered speed again, "I should take his word for it; but it's a new one on me. The only `Marie D'Aubray' I've ever heard of is much better known under her married name. In fact, she's a classic. You must have read the case somewhere. Don't you remember, I sent you to see her house in Paris?"

"Never mind. Go on."

Though he did not ask a question, Welden was puzzled. "She was the celebrated Marquise de Brinvilliers, a fleshly charmer who will probably remain the outstanding example of fascination allied to gentle murder. Read the report of her trial; it's sensational enough. In her age, the word `Frenchman was almost synonymous with the word 'poisoner'; there came to be so much of it that a special court had to be - " He stopped. "Look it up, and read about the teakwood box and the glass mask and the rest of it. Anyhow, she disposed of a pretty large number of people, including her own family, and used to get her hand in by practising on the patients in the hospital at the Hotel Dieu. Arsenic, I believe it was. Her confession, read at the trial, would be a curious piece of hysteria for psychologists to study nowadays it contains, among other things, some remarkable sexual statements. So you are warned."

"Yes," said Stevens; "yes, I remember something about it. What were her dates?"

"She was beheaded and burnt in 1676." Welden got up, brushing ash off his coat, as the train slowed down again. "Here's my station. If you've got nothing better to do over the week-end, you might ring us up: My wife instructs me to tell you that she's got hold of that cake recipe Mrs. Stevens wanted. Good night."

His own station was only two minutes farther on. Automatically Stevens put the manuscript into its container, and then into the briefcase. This was all wrong, and nonsensical. This unnecessary confusion with the Marquise de Brinvilliers, he thought, only threw him off and had nothing to do with the case. He

kept thinking of only one sentence: "If carefully graduated doses are administered, the symptoms almost exactly resemble those of gastro-enteritis."

A spectral voice bawled, "Crispen !" somewhere at the head of the train, and they pulled to a stop with a clanking sigh. When he got out on the platform he found that this nonsense was blown away by the high, cool night. He went down a flight of concrete steps, and out into the little street. It was rather dim there, for the druggist's was some way down; but he saw the lights of the familiar Chrysler roadster waiting by the curb.

Marie was inside, holding the door open for him. The moment he saw her, values shrank and altered ; there had been some sort of infernal spell about that photograph, which distorted even ordinary flesh. And it was gone now; so much so that he merely put one foot on the running-board, looked at her, and was amused. She was wearing a brown skirt and a sweater, with a light coat thrown over her shoulders like a cloak. Through a shop window near by, a very faint glow fell on her dark-gold hair. She stared back at him, puzzled. Her voice, a contralto despite her apparent slenderness, made the world practical again.

"What on earth," she said, with a sort of annoyed amusement, "are you standing there grinning for? Stop it! Have you been having some dri - " She struggled, and then joined the inane mirth. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Here you are disgustingly drunk, and I've been dying for a cocktail, but I wouldn't have one until you got here, so that we could get disgustingly drunk together.

"I am not drunk," he said, with dignity, "disgustingly or otherwise. It was only something I was thinking. You here!"

He glanced past her shoulder to see the origin of the very faint glow which was touching her hair and which stood out with such pallor in the dark street. Then he stopped. It came from a shop window. He could see a few small and rather shapeless marble blocks, and black shapeless curtains hung waist-high on brass rings from an iron rail. The pallor appeared to issue from beyond these curtains; it emphasized the iron rather than the brass. Just beyond the curtains, in silhouette, a man was standing motionless. He appeared to be looking out into the street.

"Good Lord!" Stevens said. "It's J Atkinson at last."

"I don't suppose you're really drunk," she observed, 'but you seem to have got light-headed. Jump in! Ellen has got something special in the way of dinners." She glanced over her shoulder at the motionless figure in the window. "Atkinson? What about him?"

"Nothing at all. It's only that this is the first time I've ever seen hide or hair of anyone inside that place. I suppose, Stevens added, "he's waiting for somebody."

She turned the car round, with her own broad style of driving. They went down under the elms and copper beeches, across the Lancaster Highway, and beyond into the gloom where King's Avenue curved up the hill for half a mile to the gates of the Park. The thought occurred to Stevens that this ought to be Halloween instead of the end of April, for, as they moved away, he could have sworn he heard someone in the street calling his name. But the exhaust of the car was sputtering rather loudly, because Marie had begun to race the engine when they turned round, and he could not be sure. He stuck his head out to look behind, but he did not mention the matter to Marie - especially since the street was empty. She was so completely normal, so delightedly glad to see him, that his notions began to wake self-distrust. He wondered whether over-tiredness could produce such things as he appeared to be seeing and even hearing. Which was nonsense, for he was as strong as an ox, and, Marie sometimes complained, as dense-minded as one.

"It's nice, it's nice," she was saying. "Don't you feel the way it's in the air? There's a lovely show of crocuses by that big tree out by the fence. You remember? And I noticed some primroses this afternoon. Oh, it's all lovely!" She breathed deeply, and flexed her muscles, and threw back her head. Then she turned round, smiling. "Tired?" "Not a bit."

"Sure?"

"No, I tell you",

She looked puzzled. "Ted dear, you needn't snap my head off. You do need a cocktail. Ted -- we're not going out tonight, are we?"

"I hope not. Why?"

Marie kept her eyes fixed intently on the road, frowning a little.

"Well, Mark Despard has been calling up all evening and asking to speak with you. He wants to see you.

He says it's terribly important, but he wouldn't tell me what it was. Then he made some kind of slip, and I thought it must be about his uncle Miles, He sounded very queer."

She turned round on him that same "spiritual" look h knew so well, and which, with her eyes wide open in the flash of a street lamp-stating straight at him-gave to her face a complete sugary loveliness.

"Ted, whatever it is he wants, you won't pay any attention to it, will you?"

3

'DOES he" said Stevens, mechanically. "You know I won't go out if I can help it. It depends on whether he's. really got something on his mind, or - "

He stopped, because he did not know what he meant himself. There were times when Marie's expression retreated from him; he touched fog. That look had doubtless been an illusion of light from the street lamp. For she dismissed the matter of Mark Despard from her mind, and went on talking about some slipcovers she was having made for the living-room furniture in the New York apartment. After he had had a cocktail, h thought, he would bring the matter up, and make a joke of and then they could forget it.

He tried to remember whether she had read any of Cross's books. She might have seen the manuscripts, since she did a great deal of reading for him. Her own reading had apparently been surprisingly large, though sketchy: it was concerned mostly 'with details of places and people. He glanced at her, and saw that the sleeve of her coat had fallen back. On her left wrist she wore the bracelet-it was a wrought bracelet, having a clasp like a cat's head with a ruby in the mouth-which he had seen in that accursed photograph.

"By the way," he said, "did you ever, meet up with any of Cross's work?"

"Cross? Who's that?"

"He writes those accounts of murder cases."

"Oh! That! No; but then I haven't got a morbid mind like some people." She seemed to grow serious. "You know, I've often thought that you-you and Mark Despard and Dr. Welden - being interested in those murders and ugly things--don't you think it's a little unhealthy?"

Stevens was flabbergasted. Even in what he called her Elsie Dinsmore moods, he had never heard her talk quite like this; it struck a wrong note; it was all wrong. He looked at her again, and saw that the plump face was quite serious.

"It has been stated by a high authority, he said, "that, so long as the American people preserve their wholesome interest in murder and adultery, the country's safe. And if you should happen to feel morbid"-he tapped the briefcase-"here's Cross's new one. It's a book of women poisoners. I believe there's a 'Marie' in it, too."

"Oh? Have you read it?

'Just glanced into it."

She showed not even any mild curiosity; she dismissed the matter with a frown of concentration as she maneuvered the car into the drive beside their house. He got out, feeling suddenly very hungry and very tired. The frame cottage, built after the New England fashion, and painted white with green shutters, was cheerful with lights through fresh curtains. There was a smell of new grass and lilac; a hill of trees tumbled away behind it, and up the hill, a hundred yards or so, the great wall of Despard Park ran at the end of the avenue which had been named for King Charles the Second,

Inside the house, he would have liked to sit down in a chair and stay there. To the right of the hall was the living-room: with the sofa and deep chairs covered in some reddish-orange material, the fat-bowled lamps on the tables, the shelves of bright-jacketed books let into white panelling, the one good. copy of the Rembrandt over the fireplace--even the cocktailshaker, which has become a part of our lares and penates - in short, typical of a hundred thousand homes. Through the glass doors to the dining-room across the hall he could see fat Ellen creaking about, setting the table.

Marie, taking his hat and briefcase, shooed him upstairs to wash, which was better. He came downstairs, whistling; but he stopped before he got to the lowest step. He could see his briefcase lying on the telephone table in the hall, the silvered catch gleaming; and the catch was unfastened.