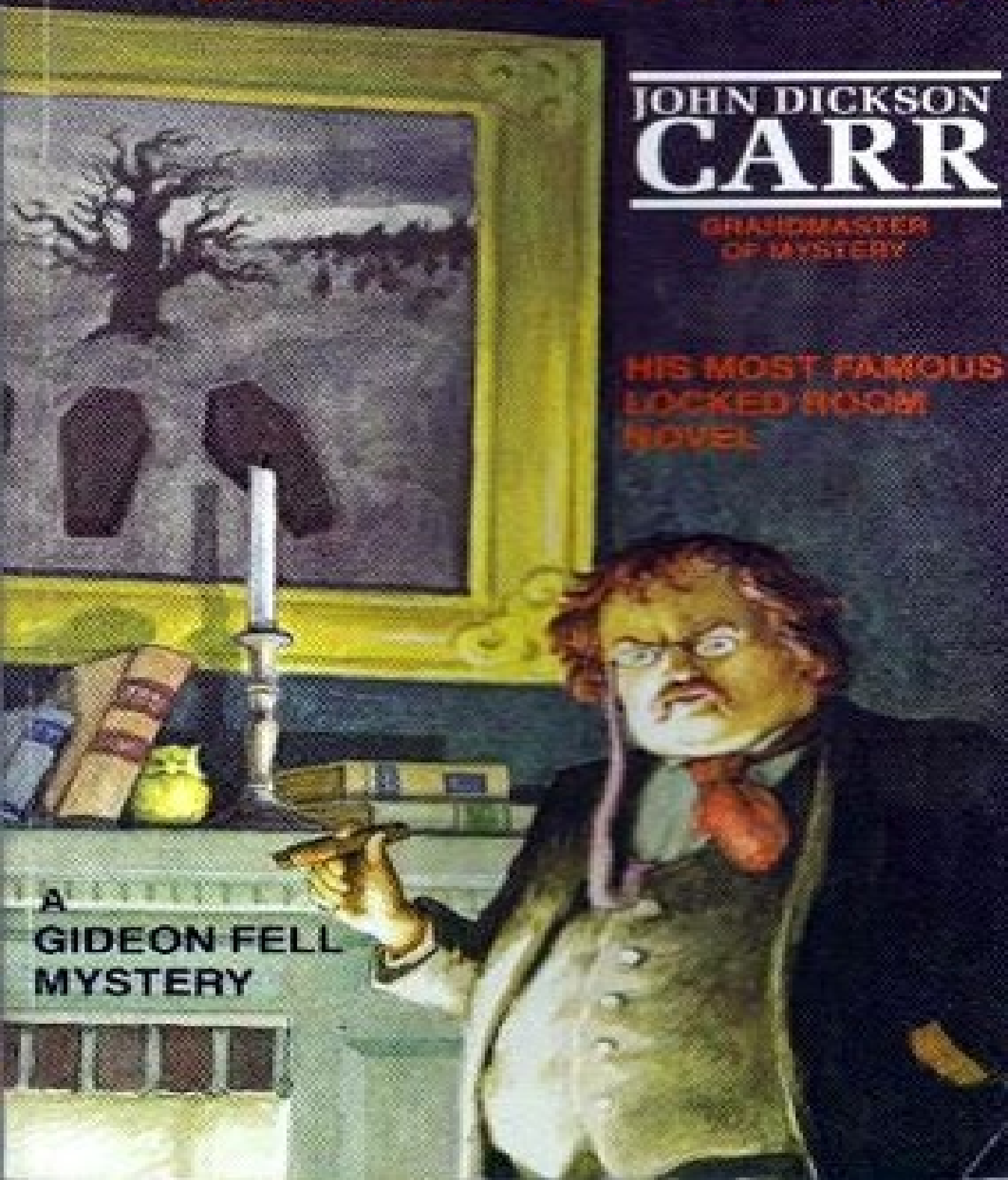
THE THREE COFFINS

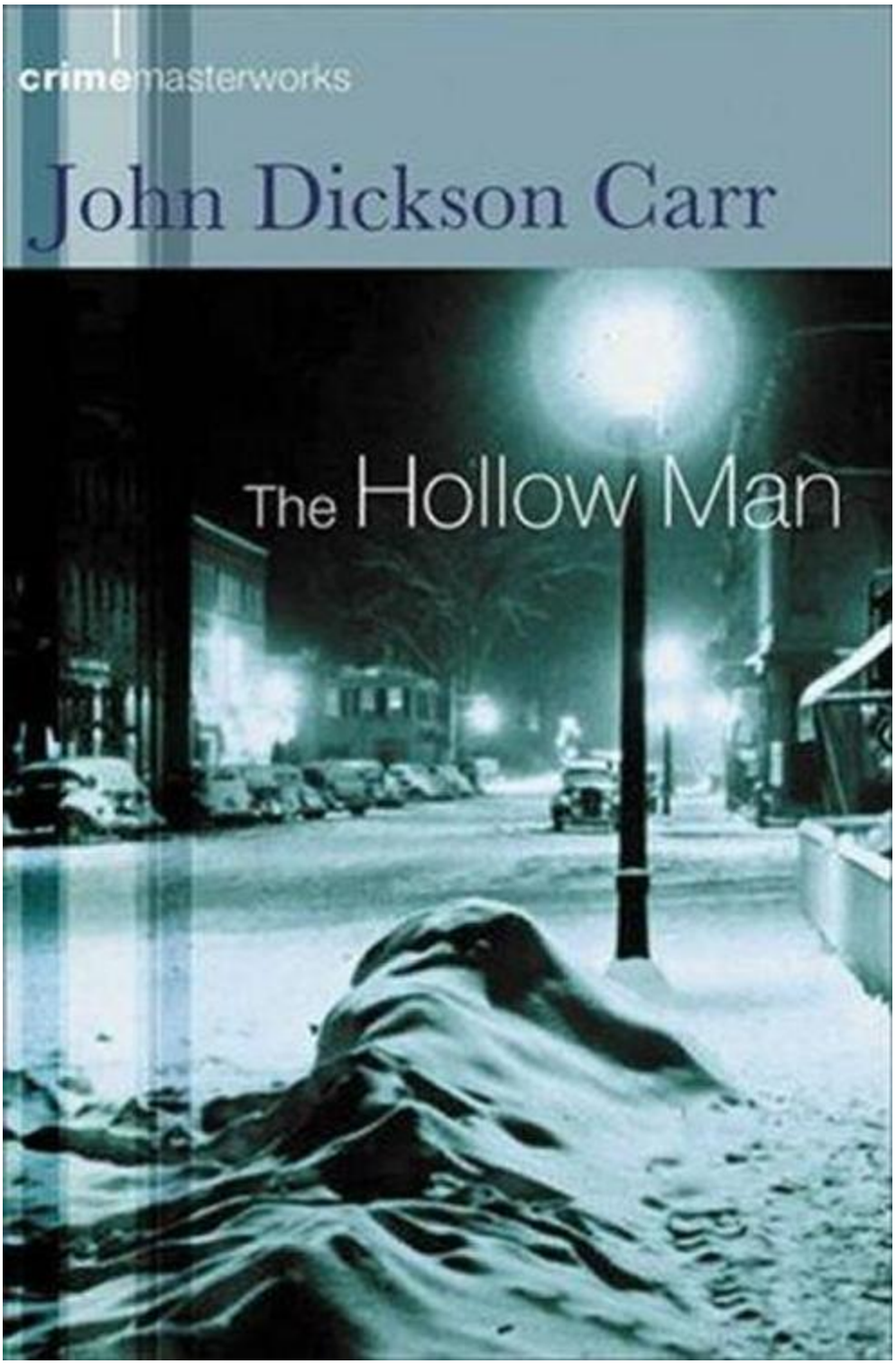
JOHN DICKSON CARR

GRANDMASTER OF MYSTERY

HIS MOST FAMOUS LOCKED ROOM NOVEL



A GIDEON FELL MYSTERY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John Dickson Carr
The Hollow Man

THE HOLLOW MAN (THE THREE COFFINS)

JON DICKSON CARR, 1935

CHAPTER 1

THE THREAT

To the murder of Professor Grimaud, and later the equally incredible crime in Cagliostro Street, many fantastic terms could be applied - with reason. Those of Dr Fell's friends who like impossible situations will not find in his case - book any puzzle more baffling or more terrifying. Thus: two murders were committed, in such fashion that the murderer must have been not only invisible, but lighter than air. According to the evidence, this person killed his first victim and literally disappeared. Again according to the evidence, he killed his second victim in the middle of an empty street, with watchers at either end; yet not a soul saw him, and no footprint appeared in the snow.

Naturally, Superintendent Hadley never for a moment believed in goblins or wizardry. And he was quite right - unless you believe in a magic that will be explained naturally in this narrative at the proper time. But several people began to wonder whether the figure which stalked through the case might not be a hollow shell. They began to wonder whether, if you took away the cap and the black coat and the child's false - face, you might not reveal nothing inside, like the man in a certain famous romance by Mr H. G. Wells. The figure was grisly enough anyhow.

The words 'according to the evidence' have been used. We must be very careful about the evidence when it is not given at first hand. And in this case the reader must be told at the outset, to avoid useless confusion, on whose evidence he can absolutely rely. That is to say, it must be assumed that somebody is telling the truth - else, there is no legitimate mystery and, in fact, no story at all.

Therefore it must be stated that Mr Stuart Mills at Professor Grimaud's house was not lying, was not omitting or adding anything, but telling the whole business exactly as he saw it in every case. Also it must be stated that the three independent witnesses of Cagliostro Street (Messrs Short and Blackwin, and Police - constable Withers) were telling the exact truth.

Under these circumstances, one of the events which led up to the crime must be outlined more fully than is possible in retrospect. It was the key - note, the whip - lash, the challenge. And it is retold - from Dr Fell's notes, in essential details exactly as Stuart Mills later told it to Dr Fell and Superintendent Hadley. It occurred on the night of Wednesday, February 6th, three days before the murder, in the back parlour of the Warwick Tavern in Museum Street.

Dr Charles Vernet Grimaud had lived in England for nearly thirty years, and spoke English without accent. Except for a few curt mannerisms when he was excited, and his habit of wearing an old - fashioned square - topped bowler - hat and black string tie, he was even more British than his friends. Nobody knew much about his earlier years. He was of independent means, but he had chosen to be 'occupied' and made a good thing of it financially. Professor Grimaud had been a teacher, a popular lecturer and writer. But he had done little of late, and occupied some vague unsalaried post at the British Museum, which gave him access to what he called the low - magic manuscripts. Low magic was the hobby of which he had made capital: any form of picturesque supernatural devilry from vampirism to the Black Mass, over which he nodded and chuckled with childlike amusement - and got a bullet through the lung for his pains.

A sound common - sense fellow, Grimaud, with a quizzical twinkle in his eye. He spoke in rapid, gruff bursts, from deep down in his throat; and he had a trick of chuckling behind closed teeth. He was of middle size, but he had a powerful chest and enormous physical stamina. Everybody in the

neighbourhood of the Museum knew his black beard, trimmed so closely that it looked only like greying stubble, his shells of eye - glasses, his upright walk as he moved along in quick short steps, raising his hat curtly or making a semaphore gesture with his umbrella.

He lived, in fact, just round the corner at a solid old house on the west side of Russell Square. The other occupants of the house were his daughter Rosette, his housekeeper, Mme Dumont, his secretary, Stuart Mills, and a broken - down ex - teacher named Drayman, whom he kept as a sort of hanger - on to look after his books.

But his few real cronies were to be found at a sort of club they had instituted at the Warwick Tavern in Museum Street. They met four or five nights in a week, an un - official conclave, in the snug back room reserved for that purpose. Although it was not officially a private room, few outsiders from the bar ever blundered in there, or were made welcome if they did. The most regular attendants of the club were fussy bald - headed little Pettis, the authority on ghost stories; Mangan, the newspaper man; and Burnaby the artist; but Professor Grimaud was its undisputed Dr Johnson.

He ruled. Nearly every night in the year (except Saturdays and Sundays, which he reserved for work), he would set out for the Warwick, accompanied by Stuart Mills. He would sit in his favourite cane arm - chair before a blazing fire, with a glass of hot rum and water, and hold forth autocratically in the fashion he enjoyed. The discussions, Mills says, were often brilliant, although nobody except Pettis or Burnaby ever gave Professor Grimaud serious battle. Despite his affability, he had a violent temper. As a rule they were content to listen to his store - house of knowledge about witchcraft and sham witchcraft, wherein trickery hoaxed the credulous; his childlike love of mystification and drama, wherein he would tell a story of medieval sorcery and, at the end, abruptly explain all the puzzles in the fashion of a detective story. They were amusing evenings, with something of the rural - inn flavour - about them, though they were tucked away behind the gas - lamps of Bloomsbury. They were amusing evenings - until the night of February 6th, when the premonition of terror entered as suddenly as the wind blowing open a door.

The wind was blowing shrewdly that night, Mills says, with a threat of snow in the air. Besides himself and Grimaud, there were present at the fireside only Pettis and Mangan and Burnaby. Professor Grimaud had been speaking, with pointed gestures of his cigar, about the legend of vampirism.

'Frankly, what puzzles me,' said Pettis, ' is your attitude towards the whole business. Now, I study only fiction; only ghost stories that never happened. Yet in a way I believe in ghosts. But you're an authority on attested happenings - things that we're forced to call facts unless we can refute 'em. Yet you don't believe a word of what you've made the most important thing in your life. It's as though Bradshaw wrote a treatise to prove that steam - locomotion was impossible, or the editor of the Encyclopedia Britannica inserted a preface saying that there wasn't a reliable article in the whole edition.'

'Well, and why not?' said Grimaud, with that quick gruff bark of his wherein he hardly seemed to open his mouth. 'You see the moral, don't you?'

'"Much study hath made him mad," perhaps?' suggested Burnaby.

Grimaud continued to stare at the fire. Mills says that he seemed more angry than the casual gibe would have warranted. He sat with the cigar exactly in the middle of his mouth, drawing at it in the manner of a child sucking a peppermint - stick.

'I am the man who knew too much,' he said, after a pause. 'And it is not recorded that the temple priest was ever a very devout believer. However, that is beside the point. I am interested in the causes

behind these superstitions. How did the superstition start? What gave it impetus, so that the gullible could believe? For example! We are speaking of the vampire legend. Now that is a belief which prevails in Slavonic lands. Agreed? It got its firm grip on Europe when it swept in a blast out of Hungary between 1730 and 1735. Well, how did Hungary get its proof that dead men could leave their coffins and float in the air in - the form of straw or fluff until they took human shape for an attack?'

'Was there proof?' asked Burnaby. Grimaud lifted his shoulders in a broad gesture. 'They exhumed bodies from the churchyards. They found some corpses in twisted positions, with blood on their: faces and hands and shrouds. That was their proof... But why not? Those were plague years. Think of all the poor devils who were buried alive though believed to be dead. Think how they struggled to get out of the coffin before they really died. You see, gentlemen? That's what I mean by the causes behind superstitions. That's what I am interested in.'

'I also,' said a new voice, 'am interested in it.'

Mills says that he had not heard the man come in, though he thought he felt a current of air from the opened door. Possibly they were startled by the mere intrusion of a stranger in a room where a stranger seldom intruded and never spoke. Or it may have been the man's voice, which was harsh, husky, and faintly foreign, with a sly triumph croaking in it. Anyhow, the suddenness of it made them all switch round.

There was nothing remarkable about him. Milk says. He stood back from the fire - light, with the collar of his shabby black overcoat turned up and the brim of his shabby soft hat pulled down. And what little they could see of his face was shaded by the gloved hand with which he was stroking his chin. Beyond the fact that he was tall and shabby and of gaunt build, Mills could tell nothing. But in his voice or bearing, or maybe a trick of gesture, there was something vaguely familiar while it remained foreign.

He spoke again. And his speech had a stiff, pedantic quality, as though it were a burlesque of Grimaud.

'You must forgive me, gentlemen,' he said, and the triumph grew, 'for intruding into your conversation. But I should like to ask the famous Professor Grimaud a question.'

Nobody thought of snubbing him, Mills says. They were all intent; there was a kind of wintry power about the man, which disturbed the snug fire - lit room. Even Grimaud, who sat dark and solid and ugly as an Epstein figure, with his cigar half - way to his mouth and his eyes glittering behind the thin glasses, was intent. He only barked:

'Well?'

'You do not believe, then,' the other went on, turning his gloved hand round from his chin only far enough to point with one finger, ' that a man can get up out of his coffin; that he can move anywhere invisibly; that four walls are nothing to him; and that he is as dangerous as anything out of hell?'

'I do not,' Grimaud answered harshly. ' Do you?'

'Yes, I have done it. But more! I have a brother who can do much more than I can, and is very dangerous to you. I don't want your life; he does. But if he calls on you -'

The climax of this wild talk snapped like a piece of slate exploding in the fire. Young Mangan, an ex - footballer, jumped to his feet. Little Pettis peered round nervously.

'Look here, Grimaud', said Pettis,' this fellow's stark mad. Shall I -' He made an uneasy gesture in the direction of the bell, but the stranger interposed.

'Look at Professor Grimaud,' he said,' before you decide.'

Grimaud was regarding him with a heavy, graven contempt. 'No, no, no! You hear me? Let him alone. Let him talk about his brother and his coffins - '

'Three coffins,' interposed the stranger.

'Three coffins,' agreed Grimaud, with bristling suavity, 'if you like. As many as you like, in God's name! Now perhaps you'll tell us who you are?'

The stranger's left hand came out of his pocket and laid a grubby card on the table. Somehow the sight of that prosaic visiting - card seemed to restore sane values; to whirl the whole delusion up the chimney as a joke; and to make of this harsh - voiced visitor nothing but a scarecrow of an actor with a bee under his shabby hat. For Mills saw that the card read: Pierre Fley, Illusionist. In one corner was printed 2B Cagliostro Street, WC1, and over it was scribbled Or c,o Academy Theatre. Grimaud laughed. Pettis swore and rang the bell for the waiter.

'So,' remarked Grimaud, and ticked the card against his thumb. 'I thought we should come to something like that. You are a conjurer, then?'

'Does the card say so?'

'Well, well, if it's a lower professional grade, I beg your pardon,' nodded Grimaud. A sort of asthmatic mirth whistled in his nostrils. 'I don't suppose we might see one of your illusions?'

'With pleasure,' said Fley unexpectedly.

His movement was so quick that nobody anticipated it. It looked like an attack, and was nothing of the kind - in a physical sense. He bent across the table towards Grimaud, his gloved hands twitching down the collar of his coat, and twitching it back up again before anybody else could get a glimpse of him. But Mills had an impression that he was grinning. Grimaud remained motionless and hard. Only his jaw seemed to jut and rise, so that the mouth was like a contemptuous arc in the clipped beard. And his colour was a little darker, though he continued to tick the card quietly against his thumb.

'And now, before I go,' said Fley curtly, ' I have a last question for the famous professor. Someone will call on you one evening soon. I also am in danger when I associate with my brother, but I am prepared to run that risk. Someone, I repeat, will call on you. Would you rather I did - or shall I send my brother?'

'Send your brother,' snarled Grimaud, getting up suddenly, 'and be damned!'

The door had closed behind Fley before anybody moved or spoke. And the door also closed on the only clear view we have of the events leading up to the night of Saturday, February 9th. The rest lies in flashes and glimpses, to be interpreted in jig - saw fashion as Dr Fell later fitted together the charred fragments between the sheets of glass. The first deadly walking of the hollow man took place on that last - named night when the side streets of London were quiet with snow and the three coffins of the prophecy were filled at last.

CHAPTER 2

THE DOOR

There was roaring good humour that night round the fire in Dr Fell's library at Number I Adelphi Terrace. The doctor sat ruddy-faced and enthroned in his largest, most comfortable and decrepit chair, which had sagged and cracked across the padding in the only way a chair can be made comfortable, but which for some reason makes wives go frantic. Dr Fell beamed with all his vastness behind the eye-glasses on the black ribbon, and hammered his cane on the hearth-rug as he chuckled. He was celebrating. Dr Fell likes to celebrate the arrival of his friends; or, in fact, anything else. And to-night there was double cause for revelry.

For one thing, his young friends, Ted and Dorothy Rampole, had arrived from America in the most exuberant of good spirits. For another his friend Hadley - now Superintendent Hadley of the C.I.D., remember - had just concluded a brilliant piece of work on the Bayswater forgery case, and was relaxing. Ted Rampole sat at one side of the hearth, and Hadley at the other, with the doctor presiding between over a steaming bowl of punch. Upstairs the Mesdames Fell, Hadley, and Rampole were conferring about something, and down here the Messieurs Fell and Hadley were already engaged in a violent argument about something else, so Ted Rampole felt at home.

Sitting back lazily in the deep chair, he remembered old days. Across from him Superintendent Hadley, with his clipped moustache and his hair the colour of dull steel, was smiling and making satiric remarks to his pipe. Dr Fell flourished the punch ladle in thunder.

They seemed to be arguing about scientific criminology, and photography in particular. Rampole remembered hearing echoes of this, which had roused the ribald mirth of the C.I.D. During one of his absent-minded intervals of pottering about after a hobby, Dr Fell had been snared by his friend the Bishop of Mappleham into reading Gross, Jesserich, and Mitchell. He had been bitten. Now Dr Fell has not, it may be thankfully stated, what is called the scientific brain. But his chemical researches left the roof on the house, since, fortunately, he always managed to smash the apparatus before the experiment had begun; and, beyond setting fire to the curtains with a Bunsen burner, he did little damage. His photographic work the said) had been very successful. He had bought a Davontel microscopic camera, with an achromatic lens, and littered the place with what resembled X-ray prints of a particularly dyspeptic stomach. Also, he claimed to have perfected Dr Gross's method of deciphering the writing on burnt paper.

Listening to Hadley jeer at this, Rampole let his mind drift drowsily. He could see the fire-light moving on crooked walls of books, and hear fine snow ticking the window panes behind drawn curtains. He grinned to himself in sheer amiability. He had nothing in the excellent world to irk him - or had he? Shifting, he stared at the fire. Little things popped up like a jack-in-the-box to jab you when you were most comfortable.

Criminal cases! Of course there was nothing to it. It had been Mangan's ghoulish eagerness to enrich a good story. All the same -

'I don't give a hoot what Gross says,' Hadley was declaring, with a flap of his hand on the chair-arm. 'You people always seem to think a man is accurate just because he's thorough. In most cases the letters against burnt paper don't show up at all ...'

Rampole cleared his throat pacifically. 'By the way,' he said, 'do the words "three coffins" mean anything to you?'

There was an abrupt silence, as he had hoped there would be. Hadley regarded him suspiciously. Dr Fell blinked over the ladle with a puzzled air, as though he vaguely associated the words with a cigarette or a pub. Then a twinkle appeared in his eye.

'Heh,' he said, and rubbed his hands. 'Heh, heh, heh! Making peace, hey? Or do you by any chance mean it? What coffins?'

'Well,' said Rampole, 'I shouldn't exactly call it a criminal case - '

Hadley whistled.

'- but it's a queer business, unless Mangan was stretching things. I know Boyd Mangan quite well; he lived on the other side for a couple of years. He's a damned good fellow who's knocked about the world a lot and has a too - Celtic imagination.' He paused, remembering Mangan's dark, slovenly, rather dissipated good looks; his slow - moving ways despite his excitable temperament; his quick generosity and homely grin. 'Anyhow, he's here in London working for the Evening Banner now. I ran into him this morning in the Haymarket. He dragged me into a bar and poured out the whole story. Then,' said Rampole, laying it on with a trowel, 'when he learned I knew the great Dr Fell -'

'Rats,' said Hadley, looking at him in that sharp, watchful way of his. 'Get down to cases.'

'Heh - heh - heh' said Dr Fell, highly delighted. 'Shut up, will you, Hadley? This sounds interesting, my boy. Well?'

'Well, it seems that he's a great admirer of a lecturer or writer named Grimaud. Also he had fallen hard for Grimaud's daughter, and that makes him a still greater admirer of the old man. The old man and some of his friends have a habit of visiting a pub near the British Museum, and a few nights ago something happened which seems to have shaken up Mangan more than the antics of a casual lunatic would warrant. While the old man was talking about corpses getting up out of their graves, or some such cheerful subject, in walked a tall queer - looking bird who began babbling some nonsense about himself and his brother really being able to leave their graves and float in the air like straw.' (Here Hadley made a disgusted noise and relaxed his attention, but Dr Fell continued to look curiously at Rampole.) 'Actually, it seems to have been some sort of threat against this Professor Grimaud. At the end this stranger made a threat that his brother would call on Grimaud before long. The odd part was that, though Grimaud didn't turn a hair, Mangan swears he was actually scared green.'

Hadley grunted. 'That's Bloomsbury for you. But what of it? Somebody with a scary old - womanish mind -'

'That's the point,' growled Dr Fell, scowling. 'He isn't. I know Grimaud quite well. I say, Hadley, you don't know how queer it is unless you know Grimaud. H'mf. Ha. Go (on, son. How did it end?'

'Grimaud didn't say anything. In fact he turned it into a joke and an anticlimax that punctured the lunacy pretty well. Just after this stranger had gone, a street musician came up against the door of the pub and struck up "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze". The whole crowd of them burst out laughing, and sanity was restored. Grimaud smiled and said, "Well, gentlemen, our revived corpse will have to be even nimbler than that if he expects to float down from my study window."

'They dismissed it at that. But Mangan was curious to find out who this visitor, this "Pierre Fley", was. Fley had given Grimaud a card with the name of a theatre on it. So the next day Mangan followed it up in the guise of getting a newspaper story. The theatre turned out to be a rather broken - down and disreputable music - hall in the East End, staging nightly variety. Mangan didn't want to run into Fley. He got into talk with the stage - door keeper, who introduced him to an acrobat in the turn before Fley. This acrobat calls himself - Lord knows why - "Pagliacci the Great", although he's actually an Irishman and a shrewd one. He told Mangan what he knew.

'Fley is known at the theatre as "Loony". They know nothing about him; he speaks to nobody and ducks out after every show. But - this is the point - he is good. The acrobat said he didn't understand why some West End manager hadn't tumbled to it long before, unless Fley was simply unambitious. It's a sort of super - conjuring, with a speciality in vanishing - tricks...'

Hadley grunted again, derisively.

'No,' insisted Rampole, 'so far as I can gather it isn't just the old, old stuff. Mangan says he works without an assistant, and that all his props together can go into a box the size of a coffin. If you know anything about magicians, you'll know what a whale of an incredible thing that is. In fact, the man seems hipped on the subject of coffins. Pagliacci the Great once asked him why, and got a jump he didn't expect. Fley turned round with a broad grin and said: "Three of us were once buried alive. Only one escaped!" Pagliacci said: "And how did you escape?" To which Fley answered, calmly, "I didn't, you see. I was one of the two who did not escape."'

Hadley was tugging at the lobe of his ear. He was serious now.

'Look here,' he said, rather uneasily, 'this may be a little more important than I'd thought. The fellow's crazy, right enough. If he's got any imaginary grudge - You say he's an alien? I might give the Home Office a call and have him looked up. Then, if he tries to make trouble for your friend -'

'Has he tried to make trouble?' asked Dr Fell.

Rampole shifted. 'Some sort of letter has come for Professor Grimaud in every post since Wednesday. He has torn 'em up without saying anything, but somebody told his daughter about the affair at the pub, and she has begun to worry. Finally, to cap the whole business, yesterday Grimaud himself began to act queerly.'

'How?' asked Dr Fell. He took away the hand with which he had been shading his eyes. His little eyes blinked at Rampole in startling sharpness.

'He phoned Mangan yesterday, and said: "I want you to be at the house on Saturday evening. Somebody threatens to pay me a visit." Naturally, Mangan advised warning the police, which Grimaud wouldn't hear of. Then Mangan said: "But hang it, sir, this fellow's stark mad and he may be dangerous. Aren't you going to take any precautions to defend yourself?" To which the professor answered: "Oh yes, by all means. I am going to buy a painting."'

'A what?' demanded Hadley, sitting up.

'A painting to hang on the wall. No, I'm not joking. It seems he did buy it: it was a landscape of some sort, weird business showing trees and gravestones, and a devil of a huge landscape that it took two workmen to carry it up - stairs. I say "devil of a landscape" advisedly; I haven't seen it. It was painted by an artist named Burnaby, who's a member of the club and an amateur criminologist ... Anyhow, that's Grimaud's idea of defending himself.'

To Hadley, who was again eyeing him suspiciously, he repeated his words with some violence. They both turned to look at Dr Fell. The doctor sat wheezing over his double chins, his big mop of hair rumpled and his hands folded on his cane. He nodded, stared at the fire. When he spoke, the room seemed to grow less comfortable.

'Have you got the address of the place, my boy?' he asked, in a colourless voice ... 'Good. Better warm up your car, Hadley.'

'Yes, but look here -'

'When an alleged lunatic threatens a sane man,' said Dr Fell, nodding again, 'then you may or may not be disturbed. But when a sane man begins to act exactly like the lunatic, then I know I'm jolly well disturbed. It may be nothing at all. But I don't like it.' Wheezing, he hoisted himself up. 'Come on, Hadley. We'll go and have a look at the place, even if we only cruise past.'

A sharp wind bit through the narrow streets of the Adelphi; the snow had stopped. It lay white and unreal on the terrace, and in the Embankment gardens below. In the Strand, bright and deserted during the theatre hour, it was churned to dirty ruts. A clock said five minutes past ten as they turned up into Aldwych. Hadley sat quiet at the wheel, his collar turned up. At Dr Fell's roar for more speed, Hadley looked first at Rampole and then at the doctor piled into the rear seat.

'This is a lot of nonsense, you know,' he snapped. 'And it's none of our business. Besides, if there has been a visitor, he's probably gone by now.'

'I know,' said Dr Fell. 'That's what I'm afraid of.'

The car shot into Southampton Row. Hadley kept hooting the horn as though to express his own feelings - but they gathered speed. The street was a bleak canyon, opening into the bleaker canyon of Russell Square. On the west side ran few foot - tracks and even fewer wheel - marks. If you know the telephone box at the north end, just after you pass Keppel Street, you will have seen the house opposite even if you have not noticed it. Rampole saw a plain, broad, three - storied front, the ground floor of stone blocks painted dun, and red brick above. Six steps led up to a big front door with a brass - edged letter - slot and brass knob. Except for two windows glowing behind drawn blinds on the ground floor over the areaway, the whole place was dark. It seemed the most prosaic house in a prosaic neighbourhood. But it did not remain so.

A blind was torn aside. One of the lighted windows went up with a bang just as they idled past. A figure climbed on the sill, outlined against the crackling blind, hesitated and leaped. The leap carried him far over beyond the spiked area rails. He struck the pavement on one leg, slipped in the snow, and pitched out across the kerb nearly under the wheels of the car.

Hadley jammed on his brakes. He was out of the car as it skidded against the kerb, and had the man by the arm before the latter had got to his feet. But Rampole had caught a glimpse of the man's face in the headlights.

'Mangan!' he said. 'What the devil -!'

Mangan was without a hat or overcoat. His eyes glittered in the light like the glassy bits of snow streaking his arms and hands.

'Who's that?' he demanded, hoarsely. 'No, no, I'm all right! Let go, damn it!' He yanked loose from Hadley and began to wipe his hands on his coat. 'Who - Ted! Listen. Get somebody. Come along yourself. Hurry! He locked us in - there was a shot upstairs; we just heard it. He'd locked us in, you see ...'

Looking behind him, Rampole could see a woman's figure silhouetted against the window. Hadley cut through these incoherent words.

'Steady on. Who locked you in?'

'He did. Fley. He's still in there. We heard the shot, and the door's too thick to break. Well, are you coming on?'