

ANTHONY BERKELEY

JUMPING JENNY

HE COULD HARDLY BELIEVE
THAT, TECHNICALLY, HE HAD
COMMITTED A MURDER; YET
PRESUMABLY HE HAD.

JUMPING JENNY

Born in 1893, Anthony Berkeley (Anthony Berkeley Cox) was a British crime writer and a leading member of the genre's Golden Age. Educated at Sherborne School and University College London, Berkeley served in the British army during WWI before becoming a journalist. His first novel, *The Layton Court Murders*, was published anonymously in 1925. It introduced Roger Sheringham, the amateur detective who features in many of the author's novels including the classic *Poisoned Chocolates Case*. In 1930, Berkeley founded the legendary Detection Club in London along with Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Crofts and other established mystery writers. It was in 1938, under the pseudonym Francis Iles (which Berkeley also used for novels) that he took up work as a book reviewer for *John O'London's Weekly* and *The Daily Telegraph*. He later wrote for *The Sunday Times* in the mid 1940s, and then for *The Guardian* from the mid 1950s until 1970. A key figure in the development of crime fiction, he died in 1971.

JUMPING JENNY

ANTHONY BERKELEY

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TO

W. N. ROUGHEAD

“Souvenir—very interesting”

THE GALLOWS TREE

I

From the triple gallows three figures swung lazily, one woman and two men.

Only a gentle creaking of their ropes sounded in the quiet night. A horn lantern, perched above the triangle of the cross-pieces, swayed in the slight wind, causing the three shadows to leap and prance on the ground in a grotesque dance of death, like some macabre travesty of a slow-motion film silhouette.

“Very nice,” said Roger Sheringham.

“It is rather charming, isn’t it?” agreed his host.

“Two jumping jacks, I see, and one jumping jenny.”

“Jumping jenny?”

“Doesn’t Stevenson in ‘Catriona’ call them jumping jacks! And I suppose the feminine would be jumping jenny.”

“I suppose it would.”

“Morbid devil, Ronald,” Roger said curiously. “Aren’t you?”

Ronald Stratton laughed. “Well, I thought at a murderer-and-victim party the least one could have was a gallows. It took me quite a long time to stuff those chaps with straw. Two of my suits, and an old dress dug up from goodness knows where. I may be morbid, but I am conscientious.”

“It’s extremely effective,” Roger said politely.

“It is, rather, isn’t it? You know, I should hate to be hanged. So very ignominious, to say the least. Really, Roger, I don’t think murder’s worth it. Well, let’s go down and have a drink.”

The two men went towards the door, in a little gable of its own, which led from the big flat roof of which the gallows had been erected into the house. The little gable carrying the door projected at right angles from a larger one, and almost in the angle was a short flight of iron steps leading over the tiles and ending apparently in nothing. The glint of the bright moonlight on the metal caught Roger’s eye and he jerked his head towards it.

“What’s up there? Not another flat?”

“Yes, a small one. I ran a flat across the top of those two parallel gables. They used to be an awful nuisance when there was any snow or stormy weather. I thought the flat roof would be rather pleasant as an observation point; one gets a big view from it. But I don’t suppose I go up there once a year.”

Roger nodded, and the two passed through the doorway and down the flight of stairs which led from the roof. They crossed the top landing of an ancient well-staircase, passed the open door of a very large room full of oak beams and dim corners in the gabled ceiling, where a dozen murderers and murderesses were dancing on a parquet floor to a very modern radio-gramophone, and walked in

another room, scarcely less large, at the end of the landing.

As they stepped into the lighted area, it could be seen that Roger's companion was picturesque dressed in a black velvet suit and knee-breeches; he and his younger brother, David Stratton represented the Princes in the Tower. Roger himself, clinging, like most of the men present, to the conventional dinner-jacket and black tie, had announced that he was Gentleman George Joseph Smith of Brides in the Bath fame, who did not know that he ought to have come in a white tie and tails.

Stratton looked hospitable with bottles. "What will you have?"

"What have you got?" asked his guest cautiously.

Roger having been furnished with a tankard of old ale, and his host with a whisky-and-soda, the two men leaned their backs against the heavy oak cross-beam of the wide, open fire-place and, warming themselves pleasantly in the traditional masculine regions, continued to chat lightly upon sudden death.

Roger did not know Ronald Stratton particularly well. Stratton was something of a dilettante: a man in young middle-age, comparatively wealthy, who wrote detective stories because it amused him to do so. His detective stories were efficient, imaginative, and full of a rather gruesome humour. The idea of this party exactly carried out the light-handed treatment of death in his books. There were about a couple of dozen guests, certainly not more, and each one was supposed to represent a well-known murderer or his victim. The idea was not strictly original, but the embellishment of a gallows on the flat roof was, typically so.

The party was nominally in honour of Roger, who, with half a dozen others, was staying in the house for the weekend; but Roger himself was not at all sure that he was not an excuse rather than a cause.

Still, he was not disposed to worry about that. He liked Stratton, who amused him; and the party, not yet an hour old, promised to be a good one. His eye wandered across the room to a far corner where an exquisitely polished sofa-table, loaded with decanters and glasses, was doing somewhat vulgar duty as a bar. Most of the other guests were dancing to the wireless in the adjoining ballroom, but by the bar Mrs. Pearcey was telling Dr. Crippen the story of her life.

It was not the first time that Roger's eye had lingered on Mrs. Pearcey. Mrs. Pearcey seemed to invite the eyes of others to linger upon her; not, indeed, through her good looks, for she had few, not through anything so coarse as ogling, but simply because she appeared determined that, wherever she might be, she should be noticed. Roger, always on the look-out for types, was interested. He felt, too, that it was probably significant that the lady should have chosen the dowdy but undoubtedly striking role of Mrs. Pearcey rather than the showier costume-part of Mary Blandy. There was a Mary Blandy and undoubtedly Mrs. Pearcey was the more effective.

He turned to Stratton. "Mrs. Pearcey over there ... I don't believe I've met her yet ... it is your sister-in-law; isn't it?"

"It is." Ronald Stratton's voice had lost its usual humorous tone and become flat and expressionless.

"I thought so," Roger said carelessly, and wondered why Stratton's voice should have changed like that. It was plain that he did not very much like his sister-in-law, but Roger thought that was hardly sufficient reason for such a very blank tone. However, it was obviously impossible to probe further.

Stratton began to ask questions about the cases with which his guest had been connected. Roger replied without his customary enthusiasm. His ears were directed towards the low conversation on the other side of the room, which was not so much a conversation as a monologue. It was impossible

hear the words through the music which came from the ballroom, but the tone was eloquent; ~~meandered on and on, and Roger thought he could detect in it a note of noble endeavour thwarted~~ mingled with a deeper undercurrent of Christian resignation. He wondered what on earth the woman was talking about so interminably. Whatever it was, Dr. Crippen was plainly bored by it. Roger wished unblushingly that he could hear what it was all about.

The dance came to an end, and some of the dancers drifted in to the bar. A large man, with one of those pleasant, nobbly faces, strolled up to Stratton and Roger.

“Well, Ronald, my man ...”

“Hullo, Philip. Been doing your duty?”

“No, yours. I’ve been dancing with your young woman. Perfectly charming, my dear fellow,” said the newcomer, with an air of naive sincerity which was in itself charming.

“That’s rather what I think,” Ronald grinned. “By the way, have you met Sheringham? This is Dr. Chalmers, Sheringham.”

“How do you do?” said the doctor, shaking hands with obvious pleasure. “Your name’s very familiar to me.”

“Is it?” said Roger. “Good. It all helps sales.”

“Oh, I didn’t say I’d gone so far as to buy one of your books. But I have read them.”

“Better and better,” Roger grinned. Dr. Chalmers stayed for a few moments, and then moved off to the bar to get his late partner a drink.

Roger turned to Stratton. “That’s a particularly nice man, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Stratton agreed. “His family and mine, and his wife’s family, were all more or less brought up together; so the Chalmerses are really about my oldest friends. Philip’s elder brother was my contemporary, and Philip is really a closer friend of my brother’s than mine, but I like him immensely. He’s absolutely genuine, nearly always says just what he thinks, and is the only man I’ve ever met called Philip who isn’t a prig. And more I can’t say for any man.”

“Hear, hear,” Roger agreed. “Hullo, is that the music? I suppose I’d better go and do a bit of duty. Introduce me to somebody I’d like to dance with, will you?”

“I’ll introduce you to my young woman,” Stratton said finishing off his drink.

“Odd,” Roger remarked idly. “I always used to think you were married.”

“I always used to be. Then we had a divorce. Now I’m going to do it again. You must meet my ex-wife some time. She’s quite a nice person. She’s here to-night, with her fiancé. We’re the best friends in the world.”

“Very sensible,” Roger approved. “If I ever got married so that I could be divorced, I’m sure I should be so grateful to my wife that I’d want to be the best friends in the world with her.”

They walked together towards the ballroom.

Roger noticed with interest that Mrs. Pearcey was just in front of them, with an unknown man. Evidently she had torn herself away from Dr. Crippen.

“I say, Ronald!”

A low, guarded voice had assailed them from behind. Turning about, they beheld Dr. Crippen clinging, as it were desperately, to a large whisky-and-soda. No one else remained at the bar.

“Hullo, Osbert!” said Stratton.

“I say ...” Dr. Crippen sidled towards them with a surreptitious air, as one not quite sure whether he is standing on solid ground again or not. “I say ...”

“Yes?”

“I say,” said Dr. Crippen with a confidential, guilty grin, “is your sister-in-law quite mad, Ronald? Eh? Is she?”

“Quite,” said Stratton equably. “Come on, Sheringham.”

II

Ronald Stratton’s young woman proved to be a charming lady of about his own age, with very fair hair and a delightful smile, who admitted to two children of her own and the name of Mrs. Lefroy. She wore a seventeenth-century dress of white satin brocade, with hooped skirt, which admirably set off her fair colouring.

“You’ve been married before, then?” Roger asked conversationally, as they began to dance.

“I still am,” replied Mrs. Lefroy surprisingly. “At least, I think I am.”

Roger made an apologetic noise. “I somehow thought you were engaged to Ronald,” he said lamely.

“Oh, yes, I am,” said Mrs. Lefroy brightly.

Roger gave it up.

“I’ve got my *nisi*,” Mrs. Lefroy explained, “but not my absolute.”

“This seems to be quite a modern party,” Roger observed mildly, swerving somewhat violently to avoid another couple who did not seem to know what they were doing. As they passed, he saw that the couple was composed as to its feminine half of Mrs. Pearcey, who was talking so earnestly to her partner that he was able to devote little attention to the steering of her.

“Modern?” echoed Mrs. Lefroy. “Is it? Only as regards the Strattons and me, I think—if by ‘modern’ you mean not only readiness to recognise that you’ve made a mistake in your marriage, which is what most married couples always have done, but readiness to rectify it, which is what most of them still haven’t the courage to do.”

“And yet you’re ready to try again?”

“Oh, yes. One mistake doesn’t make a series. Besides, I never think a first marriage ought to count against you? One’s so busy learning how to be married at all that one can hardly help acquiring a kind of resentment against one’s partner in error. And once resentment has crept in, the thing’s finished. Anyhow, there one is, all nice and trained to the house, the complete article for the next comer. After all, one’s got to cut one’s teeth on something, but one doesn’t cherish the dummy for the rest of one’s life, does one?”

She laughed, and Roger laughed too. “But nature provides a second set of teeth. Haven’t they to be cut on another dummy?”

“Oh no, they just come already cut. But I’m quite serious, Mr. Sheringham. One isn’t the same person at thirty-four as one was at twenty-four, so why should one be expected to be suitable to the human being who fitted ten years earlier? Probably both of you have developed, on completely different lines. I think one should change partners when one’s development is complete, except of course in the rare cases where the two do happen to have developed together.”

“You needn’t apologise for your divorce, you know,” Roger murmured.

Mrs. Lefroy laughed again. "I wouldn't dream of doing any such thing. It just happens to be a subject I feel rather strongly about. What I think is that our marriage-laws are all on the wrong line. Marriage oughtn't to be easy and divorce difficult; it ought to be just the other way about. A couple ought to have to go up before a judge and say, 'Please, we've lived together for two years now and we're quite certain we're suited to each other. We've got our witnesses here to swear that we're terribly fond of each other and hardly ever quarrel, and we like the same things; and we're both quite healthy. We're certain we know our own minds, so *please*, can't we get married now?' And then they'd get their marriage *nisi*. And if by the end of six months the King's Proctor couldn't prove that they were unsuited after all, or didn't really love each other, or would be better apart, their marriage could be made absolute. Don't you think that's a very good idea?"

"It's the best idea I've ever heard about marriage yet," said Roger with conviction, "and I've produced a few myself."

"Oh, yes, I know. Your idea is that the best thing to do is not to get married at all. Well, there's something to be said for that. At least, I'm sure my poor brother-in-law-to-be would agree with you."

"Ronald's brother, you mean?"

"Yes. You know him, I suppose? That tall, good-looking fair young man over there, dancing with the woman in the leg-of-mutton sleeves—Mrs. Maybrick."

"No, I don't know him. Why would he agree with me?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Lefroy looked a little guilty. "Perhaps I oughtn't to have said anything. After all, I only know what Ronald's told me."

"Is it a secret?" Roger pleaded, with unabashed curiosity.

"Well, I suppose so, in a way. Anyhow, I don't think I'd better say anything. But I shouldn't think," added Mrs. Lefroy with a smile, "that it will be a secret for long. You've only got to watch her."

"I'll watch her," said Roger. "In the meantime, do you mind telling me who you're supposed to be?"

"Haven't you guessed? I thought you were a criminologist." Mrs. Lefroy looked down, not without pride, at her billowing white skirts.

"So I am, not a costumier."

"Well, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, then. Didn't you recognise the arsenic-green of my necklace? I thought that was rather a subtle touch." She picked up her bag and white velvet gloves from the top of the grand piano and glanced round the room.

"I can see that Ronald's infecting you," Roger regretted.

He was sorry when Ronald came up, as if in response to the glance, and claimed his young woman. Mrs. Lefroy seemed to him a woman of ideas, and women of ideas are rare. So, for that matter, are men.

III

Roger drifted, as a man will, to the bar.

His feeling that the party was going to be an interesting one was confirmed. It pleased him that even Mrs. Stratton should be present as well as future Mrs. Stratton, both of them all smiles and friendliness and completely unembarrassed. That is how things should be done in an enlightened age.

At the bar were Dr. Chalmers and another local doctor, who had once played rigger for England and was broad in proportion; he wore a red-and-white bandanna handkerchief round his neck and a black mask pushed up on his forehead, and his hands were splashed with red. The two were discussing, the way of doctors, some obscene innard belonging to one of their less fortunate patients, which Dr. Mitchell had been engaged that afternoon in yanking out. Beside them stood, angrily, a thin, dark lady Roger recognised her as the Mrs. Maybrick with the leg-of-mutton sleeves who had been dancing with David Stratton.

“Ah, Sheringham,” Dr. Chalmers greeted him. “We’re talking shop, I’m afraid.”

“Do you ever talk anything else?” observed the thin, dark lady acidly.

“Mr. Sheringham, my wife,” said Dr. Chalmers, with the greatest cheerfulness. “And this is Frank Mitchell; another of our local medicos.”

Roger professed himself enchanted to meet Mrs. Chalmers and Dr. Mitchell.

“But whom,” he added, scrutinising the latter’s bandanna and mask, “are you supposed to represent? I thought I had them all at my finger-tips, but I can’t place you. Are the two of you Brown and Kennedy?”

“No, Jack the Ripper,” said Dr. Mitchell proudly. He displayed his red-splotched hands. “This is blood.”

“Disgusting,” said Mrs. Chalmers-Maybrick.

“I quite agree,” Roger said politely. “I much preferred your methods. You used arsenic, didn’t you? Or never used it, according to another school of thought.”

“If I did, it’s a pity I used it all,” said Mrs. Chalmers, with a short laugh. “I might have saved some up, for a better purpose.”

A little mystified, Roger produced a polite smile. The smile died away as he observed a significant glance pass between the two doctors: a glance which he could not quite interpret, but which seemed to convey a kind of mutual warning. In any case, both doctors immediately began to speak at once.

“I suppose you don’t know many— Sorry, Frank.”

“Talking of arsenic, I wonder if— Sorry, Phil.”

There was an awkward pause.

This is odd, thought Roger. What the devil is going on in this place?

To fill up the pause he said: “And you still baffle me completely, Chalmers. You don’t seem to be made up as anyone at all.”

“Phil never will dress up,” remarked Mrs. Chalmers resentfully.

Dr. Chalmers, who appeared to have remarkable powers of blandly ignoring the observations of his wife, replied heartily:

“I’m an undiscovered murderer. That’s out of compliment to you. I know it’s a theory of yours that the world’s full of them.”

Roger laughed. “I don’t call that quite fair.”

“And anyhow,” put in Mrs. Chalmers, “Philip couldn’t murder anyone to save his life.” She spoke as if this was an old grievance of hers.

“Well, I’ll be an undiscovered doctor-murderer if you like,” said Dr. Chalmers, with complete equanimity. “I expect there are plenty of them about. Eh, Frank, my man?”

“Sure to be,” agreed Dr. Mitchell with candour. “Hullo, is that the music stopping? I think I’ll ..”
He finished off his drink and strolled towards the ball room.

“He’s only been married four months,” remarked Mrs. Chalmers tolerantly.

“Ah,” said Roger. The three exchanged smiles, and Roger wondered why it should be amusing when a man has only been married four months. He could not quite see why, but undoubtedly it was. Roger decided that almost anything to do with marriage was either comedy or tragedy. It depended whether one was looking at it from the outside or the in.

“Good gracious,” exclaimed Dr. Chalmers, “you haven’t got a drink, Sheringham. Ronald will never forgive me. What can I get you?”

“Thanks,” Roger said. “I’ve been drinking beer.”

He stood hopefully by, as one does when someone else is manipulating a bottle for our benefit. Watching, he could not help noticing the unhandy way in which Dr. Chalmers carried out that same manipulation. Instead of holding both bottle and tankard on a level with his chest in the usual way, he held them much lower; and after he had filled the latter, Roger noticed that he put down the tankard which he had been holding in his right hand, and gave his left arm a jerk upwards with that hand before he could lift the bottle over the edge of the table. The disability was so obvious that Roger remarked on it.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the tankard. “Got a bad arm?”

“Yes. A bit of trouble from the war, you know.”

“Philip had the whole of his left shoulder shot away,” said Philip’s wife, in an annoyed way.

“Did you? That must be rather a nuisance to you, isn’t it? I suppose you can’t operate?”

“Oh, yes,” Dr. Chalmers said cheerfully. “It doesn’t bother me much, really. I can drive a car, and sail a yacht, and do a bit of flying when I can get off; and operate, of course. It’s only the shoulder that’s gone, you see. I can’t raise my upper arm from the shoulder, but I can lift my forearm from the elbow. It might have been a lot worse.” He spoke quite naturally, and without any of the false embarrassment which seems to overtake most men when forced to speak of their war-wounds.

“Rotten luck,” said Roger sincerely. “Well, here’s the best. Mrs. Chalmers, aren’t you drinking anything?”

“Not just yet, thank you. I don’t want to make an exhibition of *myself*.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t do that,” said Roger, a little taken aback. The remark had seemed so pointed that it could only have been directed at himself, but he could not understand why Mrs. Chalmers should have thought it necessary to be so rude.

“No, and I don’t intend to,” said Mrs. Chalmers grimly, and looked fixedly in his direction.

The next moment Roger saw that she was not looking at him at all, but over his right shoulder. He turned round and followed her eyes.

Several people had drifted in from the ballroom, and among them was Ronald Stratton’s sister-in-law, the woman dressed as Mrs. Pearcey. It was on her that Mrs. Chalmers’s gaze was fixed.

She was standing by the bar, in company with a youngish, tall man whom Roger had not yet met, and he was evidently asking her what she would like.

“I’ll have a whisky-and-soda, thanks,” she said, in a voice which was just loud enough to be a shade ostentatious. “A large one. I feel like getting drunk to-night. After all, it’s the only thing worth doing, really, isn’t it?”

This time Roger joined in the significant glance which passed between Dr. and Mrs. Chalmers. He finished up his beer, made his excuses to the Chalmers, and went off to look for Ronald Stratton. "I must meet that woman," he said to himself, "drunk or sober."

IV

Ronald was in the ballroom, twiddling with the wireless. The music to which they had been dancing had been provided by Königswusterhausen, and Ronald had decided it was too heavy; something French was indicated.

Three persons were remonstrating with him, for no particular reason beyond the strange prejudice most people have against seeing the owner of a large wireless set twiddling its knobs. One of them Roger knew to be Ronald's sister, Celia Stratton, a tall girl, picturesquely dressed as eighteenth century Mary Blandy; the other two were Crippen, and a small woman dressed as a boy who was not difficult to recognise as Miss Le Neve.

A piercing soprano voice shot out from the wireless in one momentary shriek, instantly cut off, but not quickly enough for the manipulator's critics.

"Leave it alone, Ronald," begged Miss Stratton.

"It was perfectly all right as it was," reinforced Miss Le Neve.

"It's a funny thing," pronounced Dr. Crippen with some weight, as one who has given considerable thought to the point, "that people who have a wireless can't leave it alone for more than two seconds at a time."

"Blah," said Ronald, and continued to twiddle the knob.

A burst of jazz music rewarded him.

"There!" he said with pride. "That's a great deal better."

"It isn't a bit better," his sister contradicted.

"It's worse," opined Miss Le Neve.

"It's rotten," Dr. Crippen supported her. "Where is it?"

"Königswusterhausen," replied Ronald blandly, and with a wink at Roger walked quickly away.

Before the latter could follow him a question from Celia Stratton took his opportunity away. Did he know Mr. and Mrs. Williamson? Roger had to admit that he did not know Mr. and Mrs. Williamson. Dr. Crippen and Miss Le Neve were made acquainted with him under that title. Roger politely expressed admiration of their disguises.

"Osbert only had to put on a pair of gold-rimmed glasses," volunteered Mrs. Williamson. "He's just like Crippen, isn't he, Mr. Sheringham?"

"How unsafe you must feel, Lilian," said Celia Stratton.

"Can you wonder I want to leave the studio and get a place with a few more rooms? If the fit came on him there, I could never get away in time."

"You know perfectly well, Lilian," remonstrated her husband, "that you only wanted me to be like Crippen so that you could be Miss Le Neve. Lilian never loses a chance of getting into trousers." He explained Mr. Williamson with candour to the group in general.

"Why shouldn't I get into trousers if I want to?" demanded Mrs. Williamson, and sniffed.

"I hope you've got them fastened with a safety-pin at the back," said Roger fatuously.

Everyone looked at him inquiringly, and he wished he had not spoken.

"Miss Le Neve's trousers were too large for her," he had to explain, "and she took a tuck in them the back with a safety-pin. The captain of the liner noticed it, and thought it rather odd."

"Lilian's certainly aren't too large for her," said Mr. Williamson, with a rude, husbandly laugh "though they may be quite as odd. Eh, Lilian? What?"

"I like my trousers tight," said Mrs. Williamson, and sniffed again.

Roger, who was not so interested in these garments as the others appeared to be, turned the conversation with a jerk.

"I haven't met your sister-in-law yet, Miss Stratton," he said, in a blandly conversational tone. "wonder if you'd introduce me?"

"David's wife? Yes, of course. Where is she?"

"She was at the bar a minute ago."

"She's mad," observed Mr. Williamson, with some interest.

"Really, Osbert!" expostulated his wife, with a glance at Celia Stratton.

"Oh, don't mind me," said Miss Stratton kindly.

Roger could not let this promising opening pass. "Mad? Is she? I like mad people. What particular form does your sister-in-law's madness take, Miss Stratton?"

"Oh, I don't know," Celia Stratton said lightly. "She's just generally mad, I expect, if Osbert says so." Roger noticed that, in spite of the lightness of her tone, there was an undercurrent of caution in Miss Stratton's voice. It was almost as if she had been glad to accept the idea of her sister-in-law's madness, in order to hide something worse.

"She wants to talk about her soul," explained Osbert Williamson with some gloom.

"Osbert isn't interested in souls," Mrs. Williamson explained. "Not having one of his own, he can't be very well be."

"I'm not interested in her soul," pronounced Mr. Williamson. "But I'd keep an eye on her, Celia, if I were you. When I was with her she was swigging down double whiskies nineteen to the dozen and saying she wanted to get tight because it was the only thing worth while, or some nonsense."

"Oh, dear," sighed Miss Stratton, "is she in that mood? Perhaps I'd better go and look after her then."

"Why does she want to get tight?" Mr. Williamson asked her as she moved away.

"She thinks it clever. Mr. Sheringham, you'd better come with me if you want to meet her."

Roger went, with alacrity.

NOT A NICE LADY

I

It was Ronald Stratton's custom to enliven his parties with charades. As he candidly explained, this was solely because he happened to like charades, and as the party was his, he did not see why he should not play them. Unfortunately for Roger, Ronald had decided upon charades at just the moment, and before the introduction could be effected Celia Stratton had been called in to search the sitting-out places for unwilling players. Meanwhile sides were chosen out of those who were present, and since Mrs. David Stratton and Roger were on opposite sides, the acquaintanceship had again to be postponed. Roger was interested, however, to find that the lady's husband was on his side.

Although he had known Ronald Stratton slightly for some years, Roger had never before met David. As with so many brothers, the two were utterly unlike. Ronald was not particularly tall, David was quite six feet; Ronald was broad, David was slight; Ronald was dark, David fair; Ronald had a snub nose, David an aquiline one; Ronald was enthusiastic and, sometimes, rather childish in his amusements, David had a wearily disillusioned air, and his wit (for he was witty) had a cynical tinge. One would have said that Ronald was the younger and David the elder, instead of the other way about.

Celia Stratton, who had been appointed captain of the side, took her duties seriously. It was the turn to perform first, and shepherding her flock out of the ballroom, she called firmly upon Roger for an actable word of two syllables. Roger instantly found his mind an utter and complete blank, and he could only eye the bar with distant longing. In the end it was David Stratton who produced the word, and a neat little three-act drama to fit it, which, as an impromptu, impressed Roger considerably.

"Your brother's very much on the spot to-night," he remarked casually to Celia as they looked on the props suitable to the inhabitants of Nineveh prior to the engulfment of Jonah by the whale.

"Oh, David can usually be relied on for something like that," said Miss Stratton.

"Can he? I wonder he doesn't try his hand at writing."

"David? He used to do a little before he married. *Punch*, you know, and some of the weeklies. We thought at one time that he might do something quite good. He began a book which promised very well."

"Why didn't he finish it?"

Celia Stratton bent a little lower over the drawer into which she was delving. "Oh, he got married," she said; and once again Roger felt that she was hiding something under the apparent indifference of her tone.

He looked at her curiously, but did not pursue the topic. Of two things, however, he felt quite sure, that somehow David Stratton's marriage had spoilt what might have been a successful career, and that Celia Stratton was not nearly so indifferent about it as she pretended.

More mystery, he thought.

Under cover of the general badinage he observed David Stratton more closely. At a first glance the latter looked animated enough, as he laughingly tried to persuade a pretty, plump woman whom everyone called Margot, to impersonate the whale; but it needed little more than a casual look to see that underneath the temporary excitement was an immense weariness. Indeed, the man looked tired to death, and not only tired, but positively ill; and yet Roger knew that his job of acting as his brother's estate agent was not at all an exacting one. Why, then, did he look as if he had hardly slept for a month?

Roger wondered if he were making mountains out of molehills.

The charades pursued their usual and hilarious course, and Roger found himself enjoying them absurdly. The Williamsons were on his side, and so was Dr. Mitchell and his pretty young bride, to whom her groom was as patently and as unselfconsciously devoted as any wife could have hoped. Roger found himself becoming quite sentimental in contemplation of the two of them. Jean Mitchell was dressed as Madeleine Smith, in crinoline and poke-bonnet, and looked quite charming enough to deserve all the attentions that were being poured out on her.

It was not until their own turn of activity was ended and they were sitting on a row of chairs at one end of the ballroom, waiting to deride the efforts of the other side, that a hint of drama underneath the froth began to show itself.

Roger found himself rather marooned.

On his left sat Celia Stratton, with Dr. Mitchell and his wife beyond her; on his right the plump lady called Margot, whom Roger had now discovered to be Ronald Stratton's late wife, with David Stratton separating her from her fiancé, a large and somewhat silent young man, whose name Roger had gathered to be Mike Armstrong. And almost immediately Celia Stratton had begun to engage in a low-toned and extremely earnest conversation with Dr. Mitchell, while ex-Mrs. Margot Stratton at the same time embarked on an exactly similar one with David Stratton. Roger hid his yawns, and wished that the other side would be a little quicker.

Then, willy-nilly, scraps of the two conversations began to reach him.

"But are you sure it was Ena who was responsible for it?" he heard Celia Stratton ask, in a worried voice.

"Positive," Dr. Mitchell replied grimly. "I went straight round to Mrs. Farebrother as soon as Jean told me, and she said that Ena had told her. In the strictest confidence, of course. Confidence! I told Mrs. Farebrother it was an infernal lie, of course, and I think I've stopped it going any farther in that direction, but how many other ..." Dr. Mitchell lowered his voice.

Ena, observed Roger pensively to himself, is Mrs. David Stratton.

He became aware of David Stratton's voice, unguardedly loud, on his other side.

"I tell you, Margot, I can't stand it much longer. I'm about at the end of my tether."

"It's a damned shame, David," his late sister-in-law replied warmly. "You know what I thought about her. Ronald used to say I made things very awkward for him, but I couldn't help that. After the Eaves business I swore I'd never have her in any house of mine again, and I never did."

"I know," David Stratton rejoined gloomily. "It was a bit awkward, for me as well as Ronald, but I couldn't blame you. After all, as I pointed out to her, you might have done a good deal more than refuse to receive her here if you'd been really vindictive."

"That's what I told Ronald."

Roger shifted in his chair.

“I wouldn’t mind if there was an atom of truth in any of it,” said Dr. Mitchell, with sudden violence

“But these damnable lies ...”

“I know. It’s the way it takes her.”

“Personally,” broke in Jean Mitchell’s small, clear voice, “I don’t see that it matters. Everyone must know they’re lies. “What I can’t understand is why she wants to do it.”

“Oh, she’s a pathological case, darling. There’s no doubt about that. But really, Celia, something ought to be done about her. She’s a danger to the community.”

“Yes. But what? That’s the trouble.”

“I don’t know, yet.” Dr. Mitchell folded his arms and looked, for a pleasant man, quite formidable. “But I can promise you, she’s going to be sorry she started monkeying with Jean. That’s a little bit too much.”

Roger took a notebook out of his pocket and began jotting down names. Among so many strangers with so many different relationships, he found it difficult to keep his head clear.

Still the other side did not appear. Only suppressed gigglings, and an occasional hoot of laughter outside the door, testified to their continued existence.

“But why don’t you *leave* her, David?”

“Money, of course. If only I could afford to keep her apart from me, I’d do it like a shot.”

“Can’t Ronald help at all?”

“No.” David Stratton was firm enough about that.

“It’s damnable.” Margot Stratton stared ahead as if racking her brains for something that would help.

Celia Stratton turned to Roger.

“I quite forgot to ask you, Mr. Sheringham. Did you find everything in your room that you wanted?”

“Everything, thank you,” said Roger politely.

II

Roger’s list of his fellow-guests and hosts ran as follows:

Ronald Stratton	. . .	(<i>Prince in Tower</i>)
David Stratton	. . .	<i>Ditto</i>
Ena (Mrs. David) Stratton	. .	(<i>Mrs. Pearcey</i>)
Celia Stratton	. . .	(<i>Mary Blandy</i>)
Margot (ex-Mrs. Ronald) Stratton		(?)
Mike Armstrong	. . .	(?)
Dr. Chalmers	. . .	(<i>Undiscovered murderer</i>)
Mrs. Chalmers	. . .	(<i>Mrs. Maybrick</i>)
Dr. Mitchell	. . .	(<i>Jack the Ripper</i>)
Mrs. Mitchell	. . .	(<i>Madeleine Smith</i>)

Mr. Williamson	. . .	(Crippen)
Mrs. Williamson	. . .	(Miss Le Neve)
Mrs. Lefroy	. . .	(Marquise de Brinvilliers)
Colin Nicolson	. . .	(Palmer)

These, Roger considered, comprised all Ronald Stratton's intimates, and seemed to fall into a group of their own. There were a dozen or so more people present, all from the neighbourhood, but they kept more or less to themselves, and Stratton did not try to mingle the two groups. The doctors, of course, were local men, and they formed something in the nature of a connecting link between the two localities. Roger had been told by Stratton that the local group would probably leave early, and the house-party would then keep it up.

There were about half a dozen of the latter. The Williamsons, who lived in London, were staying the night, and so was Colin Nicolson, who was the assistant editor of a weekly paper for which Stratton did a good deal of work, and whom Roger had known and liked for some years. Mrs. Lefroy was staying, too, and Celia Stratton had come down to act as hostess for her brother. Roger himself had also been asked for the night.

When the charades were over at last, Roger once more tried to effect contact between himself and Ena Stratton, and once again he was foiled. Ronald himself had swung his sister-in-law on to the floor to set the dancing in train again. Glancing round in a baffled way, Roger saw that Agatha Lefroy was sitting alone on a couch at one end of the room, and joined her.

"Do you mind if we don't dance?" he said. "I used to be considered rather good before the war, but somehow the old zest seems to have gone."

"Of course not," Mrs. Lefroy smiled. "Let's stop here. Anyhow, I'd much rather talk than dance. What shall we talk about?"

"Ena Stratton," Roger said promptly.

He was hardly surprised when even Mrs. Lefroy reacted in the usual way to that name. Her smile did not waver, she did not start or turn pale, but precisely the same guarded air showed itself in Roger's observation as she replied, brightly enough:

"She interests you?"

"She does. Decidedly. And I haven't even met her yet. Tell me about her."

"I don't know that there's much to tell you, is there? In what way, particularly?"

"Any way. I won't ask about her marriage, because you said that was a secret. Just tell me what you're afraid of her."

"Afraid of her?" Mrs. Lefroy echoed indignantly. "I'm not in the least afraid of her."

"Yes, you are," Roger said calmly. "Why?—or shall I ask Ronald?"

"No, don't ask Ronald," Mrs. Lefroy said quickly, and added, rather inconsequently: "Anyhow, he wouldn't tell you."

"Nor will you?" said Roger, half lightly and half seriously.

"You're really rather inquisitive, Mr. Sheringham, aren't you?"

"Intolerably. I can't help it. You see, I scent a mystery, and I can't bear mysteries."

"Oh," said Mrs. Lefroy slowly, "there's no *mystery* about Ena."

“And yet,” Roger hazarded, “quite a number of people in this room cordially detest her.”

“I can quite believe it,” Mrs. Lefroy smiled. “She’s really rather a dangerous woman.”

“How can such a totally unimportant person be dangerous?” Roger asked, following the young woman in question round the room with his eyes. “And yet you’re the second person within the last half-hour whom I’ve heard call her that. I suppose I ought not to ask you what she’s been doing to David Mitchell, and yet I wish I could.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you that. She’s been spreading a ridiculous lie about his wife.”

“Why?”

Mrs. Lefroy shrugged her shoulders. “She seems to enjoy doing that sort of thing.”

“Which sort of thing? Lying for lying’s sake, or doing an inoffensive person a bad turn?”

“Neither, exactly. I think it’s really an opportunity to make herself appear important. That’s her *idée fixe*. She must be the centre of things, the wonder of all beholders. Philip Chalmers—Ronald’s great friend, you know—says she’s a pronounced ego-maniac. No doubt that’s as good a term for her as any.”

“Williamson has a better one. He just says simply that she’s mad.”

Mrs. Lefroy laughed. “In a way, I suppose, she is. Anyhow, is that all you wanted to know?”

“Not quite. What’s your own private trouble with her? Don’t tell me, of course,” Roger added kindly, “if you don’t want to.”

“I shouldn’t dream of it. But I really don’t mind, as it seems to worry you so much. I don’t trust her that’s all.”

“Don’t trust her?”

“Ronald’s been rather indiscreet in calling us engaged,” Mrs. Lefroy explained. “It’s all right, of course, in the family and so on, or should be, but, as I told you, I haven’t got my absolute yet. Well, David warned Ronald this afternoon that Ena’s been hinting that she could make trouble with the King’s Proctor if she wanted to.”

Roger whistled.

“Why should she want to?”

Mrs. Lefroy looked a little uncomfortable. “Oh, there are reasons, no doubt, from her point of view.”

“Reasons for making trouble?”

“Reasons why she might be sorry to see Ronald marry again.”

“Oh! Yes, I see.”

It did not need very much perspicacity on Roger’s part to guess something of what those reasons might be. Ronald and Margot Stratton had had no children. David and Ena had a small boy. As Roger knew, the boy was Ronald’s godson. Ronald, who had a *flair* for business as well as for writing detective-stories, had made his money, not inherited it. It seemed likely that, as things had been, he might have made his godson his heir, with perhaps a life-interest for David. If he married again another heir might present itself. It was decidedly in Ena Stratton’s interests that her brother-in-law should not marry again.

“Yes, I see,” Roger repeated. “Quite like a plot for one of Ronald’s own detective-stories, isn’t it?”

By Mrs. Lefroy’s smile he knew that his guess had been right. “So Ronald says himself. He looks o

it as a joke," she added, "but it might be quite serious. An unscrupulous woman would do things that an equally unscrupulous man might boggle at."

"Yes that's quite true. Is she unscrupulous?"

"Perfectly, I should think," said Mrs. Lefroy with resignation.

There was a short silence.

Then Roger looked puzzled. "I don't know much about these things, but would it really worry the King's Proctor to know that you were going to marry Ronald when you're free? I know the King's Proctor is very easily worried, but that does seem almost hypersensitive."

Mrs. Lefroy looked at the tip of her neat slipper. "Once he begins making special inquiries, what does he know about you? What does he know about what might happen to him?" she said cryptically.

"Collusion, like a worm in the bud, might feed on his damask cheek, as my friend, Lord Peter Wimsey, might say," Roger nodded, with sympathetic understanding. "Shall I strangle the woman for you?"

"I wish to heaven someone would," said Mrs. Lefroy, with sudden bitterness. "We all do."

Roger examined his fingernails. "If I were Mistress Ena Stratton," he thought to himself, "I'd watch my step."

III

In the end the introduction was effected with complete ease.

"Oh, Ena," said Ronald Stratton, "I don't think you've met Roger Sheringham yet, have you? My sister-in-law, Mrs. Sheringham, my sister-in-law."

Ena Stratton looked at Roger with large eyes swimming with discipleship, *weltschmerz*, humble pride, and all the other things with which a high-souled young woman's eyes should swim when confronted with a successful author. Roger saw that these proper emotions were being registered for him almost automatically.

"How do you do?" he said, without any *weltschmerz* at all.

Ena Stratton was a young woman of about twenty-seven. She was moderately tall, of good, athletic-looking figure, with dark, almost black hair, which she wore cut in a straight fringe across her already rather low forehead; her hands and feet were on the large side. Her face was neither exactly ugly, nor exactly pretty. It was a hag-ridden face, Roger thought, with big grey eyes whose promise was counteracted by the wide, thin-lipped cruelty of her mouth. When she smiled, the corners of her mouth seemed in some curious way to be drawn downwards rather than up. There were innumerable wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and two deeply graven lines running down from her nostrils. Her complexion was sallow.

Judging by appearances, Roger thought, not a nice person. He wondered why David Stratton had married her. Presumably she had looked nicer then. That neurotic type stamps its own face very early.

"Shall we dance?" said Roger.

"I'd rather have a drink. I haven't had one for at least half an hour." She spoke slowly, and her voice was not unpleasant, rather deep and with a particularly clear enunciation. She managed to convey that for a woman of her sophistication not to have had a drink for at least half an hour was quite to be expected, not ridiculous.

Roger piloted her to the bar, and asked what she would have.

“A whisky, please. And don’t drown it.”

Roger gave her a stiff whisky-and-soda, and she tasted it.

“I think I’ll have a little more whisky in this, please. I like it almost neat, you know.”

“Ass of a woman !” thought Roger. “Why does she imagine it’s clever to like her whisky neat, and good deal too much of it at that?” He handed her the amended drink.

“Thanks. Yes, that’s better. I feel like getting drunk to-night.”

“Do you?” said Roger lamely.

“Yes. I don’t often feel like that, but I do to-night. Really, sometimes getting drunk seems the only thing worthwhile in life. Don’t you ever feel like that?”

“Only in private,” said Roger, rather prudishly. He noticed that she was repeating a set of remarks which he had overheard earlier, almost word for word. Evidently Mrs. Stratton was extremely proud of her own appreciation of intemperance.

“Oh,” she expostulated, “there’s no point in getting drunk in private.”

In other words, thought Roger, she admits to being an exhibitionist. Well, that was probably exactly what she was: an exhibitionist. And rather a crude one at that.

Aloud he said:

“By the way, I really must congratulate you on your dress, Mrs. Stratton. It’s extremely good. Just like Mrs. Pearcey’s in Madame Tussaud’s. I recognised her at once. How very brave of you to come as a charwoman, hat and all, against such competition.”

“Competition? Oh, you mean Celia, and Mrs. Lefroy. But you see, I’m a character-actress. Costume parts don’t interest me at all. Anyone can do a costume part, don’t you think?”

“Can they?”

“Oh, yes, I think so. Of course one of my best parts actually was a costume one. Did you see ‘Sweet Nell of Old Drury’? No? It was a wonderful part; but of course it was character, not just being able to wear the dresses, that I got it on.”

“I didn’t know you’d been on the stage.”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Stratton sighed dramatically. “I was on the stage for a time.”

“Before you were married, of course?”

“No, since. But I’d studied for it before. I didn’t find,” said Mrs. Stratton earnestly, “that marriage gave me the fulfilment I expected from it.”

“And the stage did?”

“For a time. But even that didn’t satisfy me altogether. But I managed to find fulfilment in the end. Can you imagine what it was that brought it? I expect *you* can, Mr. Sheringham.”

“I can’t think.”

“Oh, and I did think you’d understand. The women in your books are always so very true. Whether having a baby. It’s the only possible way really to fulfil oneself, Mr. Sheringham,” said Mrs. Stratton with much intensity.

“Then I look like remaining unfulfilled,” said Roger ribaldly.

Mrs. Stratton smiled tolerantly. “For a woman, I meant. A man can fulfil himself in so many ways.”

of course; can't he?"

"Oh, yes," Roger agreed. He was wondering what people like Mrs. Stratton really meant by the can't word, if indeed they meant anything at all. In any case, he had felt as yet no urge to be fulfilled in any of the many ways.

"Your writing, for instance," Mrs. Stratton added, rather helpfully.

"Yes, yes, of course. That fulfils me all right. Shall I put your glass down?"

"That would be rather wasting an opportunity, wouldn't it?" said Mrs. Stratton, with ponderous kittenishness.

As Roger poured out the drink he pondered on the determination with which Mrs. Stratton had dragged into the conversation, within three minutes, what were evidently the two most important achievements of her life: that she had been on the stage, and that she had had a baby. It was plain, too, that in Ena Stratton's opinion these two events reflected the greatest possible credit on Ena Stratton.

What Roger himself thought reflected credit on Ena Stratton was that in spite of the amount of whisky she had apparently absorbed during the evening, she showed no sign at all of approaching the only thing really worth while in life.

"Thank you," she said, as he gave her the replenished glass. "Let's go up on the roof, shall we? I feel stifled here, in this crowd. I want to look at the stars. Would you mind frightfully?"

"I should love to look at the stars," said Roger.

Carrying their glasses, they went up the little staircase that led to the big flat roof. In the middle of it the three straw figures still dangled from their heavy gallows. Mrs. Stratton gave them a tolerable smile.

"Ronald is really rather childish sometimes, isn't he, Mr. Sheringham?"

"It's a great thing to be able to be childish sometimes," Roger maintained.

"Oh, yes, I know. I can be absurdly childish when the fit takes me, of course."

The edge of the roof was bounded by a stout railing. The two leaned their elbows on it and gazed down into the blackness that shrouded the back kitchens below. Mrs. Stratton had apparently forgotten that she wanted to gaze upwards, at the stars.

The April night was mild and fine.

"Oh dear," sighed Mrs. Stratton, "I'm an awful fool, I expect."

Roger deliberated between a polite "Oh, no," a blunt "Why?" or a not very tactful but encouraging "Yes?"

"I feel so terribly introspective to-night," pursued his companion, before he could decide on any of these choices.

"Do you?" he said feebly.

"Yes. Do you often feel introspective, Mr. Sheringham?"

"Not very often. At least, I try not to encourage it."

"It's terrible," said Mrs. Stratton, with gloomy relish.

"It must be."

There was a pause, for contemplation of the terribleness of Mrs. Stratton's introspection.

"One can't help asking oneself, is there really any use in life?"

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