

His Brother's Keeper

By W. W. Jacobs

Anthony Keller, white and dazed, came stumbling out into the small hall and closed the door of his study noiselessly behind him. Only half an hour ago he had entered the room with Henry Martle, and now Martle would never leave it again until he was carried out of it.

He took out his watch and put it back again without looking at it. He sank into a chair and, trying to still his quivering legs, strove to think. The clock behind the closed door struck nine. He had ten hours; ten hours before the woman who attended to his small house came to start the next day's work.

Ten hours! His mind refused to act. There was so much to be done, so much to be thought of. God! If only he could have the last ten minutes over again and live it differently. If only Martle had not happened to say that it was a sudden visit and that nobody knew of it.

He went into the back room and, going to the sideboard, gulped down half a tumbler of raw whisky. It seemed to him inconceivable that the room should look the same. This pleasant room, with etchings on the walls, and his book, face downwards, just as he had left it to answer Martle's knock. He could hear the knock now, and—

The empty tumbler smashed in his hand, and he caught his breath in a sob. Somebody else was knocking. He stood for a moment quivering, and then, wiping some of the blood from his hand, kicked the pieces of glass aside and stood irresolute. The knocking came again, so loud and insistent that for one horrible moment he fancied it might arouse the thing in the next room. Then he walked to the door and opened it. A short, sturdy man, greeting him noisily, stepped into the hall.

"Thought you were dead," he said breezily. "Hallo!"

"Cut myself with a broken glass," said Keller, in a constrained voice.

"Look here, that wants binding up," said his friend. "Got a clean handkerchief?"

He moved towards the door, and was about to turn the handle when Keller flung himself upon him and dragged him back. "Not there," he said thickly. "Not there."

"What the devil's the matter?" inquired the visitor, staring.

Keller's mouth worked. "Somebody in there," he muttered; "somebody in there. Come here."

He pushed him into the back room and in a dazed fashion motioned him to a chair.

"Thanks, rather not," said the other stiffly. "I just came in to smoke a pipe. I didn't know you had visitors. Anyway, I shouldn't eat them. Good night."

Keller stood staring at him. His friend stared back, then suddenly his eyes twinkled and he smiled roguishly.

"What have you got in there?" he demanded, jerking his thumb towards the study.

Keller shrank back. "Nothing," he stammered. "Nothing no—"

"Ho, ho!" said the other. "All right. Don't worry. Mum's the word. You quiet ones are always the worst. Be good."

He gave him a playful dig in the ribs, and went out chuckling. Keller, hardly breathing, watched him to the gate and, closing the door softly, bolted it and returned to the back room.

He steadied his nerves with some more whisky, and strove to steel himself to the task before him. He had got to conquer his horror and remorse, to overcome his dread of the thing in the next

room, and put it where no man should ever see it. He, Anthony Keller, a quiet, ordinary citizen, had got to do this thing.

The little clock in the next room struck ten. Nine hours left. With a soft tread he went out at the back door and, unlocking the bicycle-shed, peered in. Plenty of room.

He left the door open and, returning to the house, went to the door of the study. Twice he turned the handle—and softly closed the door again. Suppose when he looked in at Martle, Martle should turn and look at him? He turned the handle suddenly and threw the door open.

Martle was quiet enough. Quiet and peaceful, and, perhaps, a little pitiful. Keller's fear passed, but envy took its place. Martle had got the best of it, after all. No honor-haunted life for him; no unavailing despair and fear of the unknown. Keller, looking down at the white face and battered head, thought of the years before himself. Or would it be weeks? With a gasp he came back to the need for action, and taking Martle by the shoulders drew him, with heels dragging and scraping, to the shed.

He locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then he drew a bucket of water from the scullery-tap and found some towels. His injured hand was still bleeding, but he regarded it with a sort of cunning satisfaction. It would account for much.

It was a long job, but it was finished at last. He sat down and thought, and then searched round and round the room for the overlooked thing which might be his undoing.

It was nearly midnight, and necessary, unless he wanted to attract the attention of any passing constable, to extinguish or lower the companionable lights. He turned them out swiftly, and, with trembling haste, passed upstairs to his room.

The thought of bed was impossible. He lowered the gas and, dropping into a chair, sat down to wait for day. Erect in the chair, his hands gripping the arms, he sat tense and listening. The quiet house was full of faint sounds, odd creakings, and stealthy rustlings. Suppose the suddenly released spirit of Martle was wandering around the house!

He rose and paced up and down the room, pausing every now and then to listen. He could have sworn that there was something fumbling blindly at the other side of the door, and once, turning sharply, thought that he saw the handle move. Sometimes sitting and sometimes walking, the hours passed until in the distance a cock smelt the dawn, and a little later the occasional note of a bird announced the approach of day.

II

In the bright light of day his courage returned, and, dismissing all else from his mind, he thought only of how to escape the consequences of his crime. Inch by inch he examined the room and the hall. Then he went into the garden, and, going round the shed, satisfied himself that no crack or hole existed that might reveal his secret. He walked the length of the garden and looked about him. The nearest house was a hundred yards away, and the bottom of the garden screened by trees. Near the angle of the fence he would dig a shallow trench and over it pile up a rockery of bricks and stones and earth. Once started he could take his time about it, and every day would make him more and more secure. There was an air of solidity and permanency about a rockery that nothing else could give.

He was back in the house when the charwoman arrived, and in a few words told her of his accident of the night before. "I cleaned up the—the mess as well as I could," he concluded.

Mrs Howe nodded. "I'll have a go at it while you're having your breakfast," she remarked. "Good job for you, sir, that you ain't one o' them as faints at the sight of blood."

She brought coffee and bacon into the little back dining-room, and Keller, as he sat drinking his coffee and trying to eat, heard her at work in the study. He pushed away his plate at last, and, filling a pipe from which all flavour had departed, sat smoking and thinking.

He was interrupted by Mrs Howe. She stood in the doorway with a question which numbed his brain, and for a time arrested speech.

“Eh?” he said at last.

“Key of the bicycle-shed,” repeated the woman, staring at him. “You had a couple o’ my dusters to clean your bicycle with.”

Keller felt in his pockets, thinking, thinking. “H’m!” he said at last, “I’m afraid I’ve mislaid it. I’ll look for it presently.”

Mrs Howe nodded. “You do look bad,” she said, with an air of concern. “P’r’aps you hurt yourself more than what you think.”

Keller forced a smile and shook his head, sinking back in his chair as she vanished, and trying to control his quivering limbs.

For a long time he sat inert, listening dully to the movements of Mrs Howe as she bustled to and fro. He heard her washing the step at the back door, and, after that, a rasping, grating noise to which at first he paid but little heed. Then there was a faint, musical chinking as of keys knocking together. *Keys!*

He sprang from his chair like a madman, and dashed to the door. Mrs Howe, with a bunch of odd keys tied on a string, had inserted one in the lock of the bicycle-shed, and was striving to turn it.

“Stop!” cried Keller, in a dreadful voice. “STOP!”

He snatched the keys from her, and, flinging them from him, stood mouthing dumbly at her. The fear in her eyes recalled him to his senses.

“Spoil the lock,” he muttered, “spoil the lock. Sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. No sleep all night. Neuralgia; ’fraid my nerves are wrong.”

The woman’s face relaxed and her eyes softened. “I saw you weren’t yourself as soon as I saw you this morning,” she exclaimed.

She went back into the house, but he thought she eyed him curiously as she passed. She resumed her work, but in a subdued fashion, and, two or three times that morning meeting his eyes, nervously turned away her own. He realized at last, that he was behaving in an unusual fashion altogether. In and out of the house, and, in the garden, never far from the shed.

By lunch-time he had regained control of himself. He opened a bottle of beer, and, congratulating Mrs Howe upon the grilling of the chops, went on to speak of her husband and the search for work which had been his only occupation since his marriage ten years before. Some of the fear went out of the woman’s eyes—but not all, and it was with obvious relief that she left the room.

For some time after lunch Keller stayed in the dining-room, and that in itself was unusual. Two or three times he got up and resolved, for the sake of appearances, to take a short walk, but the shed held him. He dare not leave it unguarded. With a great effort he summoned up sufficient resolution to take him to the bottom of the garden and start his gruesome task.

He dug roughly, avoiding the shape which might have aroused comment from any chance visitor. The ground was soft and, in spite of his injured hand, he made good progress, breaking off at frequent intervals to listen or to move aside and obtain an unobstructed view of the shed.

With a short break for tea he went on with his task until he was called in to his simple meal at seven. The manual labour had done him good and his appearance was almost normal. To Mrs

Howe he made a casual reference to his afternoon's work and questioned where to obtain the best rock-plants.

With her departure after she had cleared away, fear descended upon him again. The house became uncanny, and the shed a place of unspeakable horror. Suppose his nerve failed and he found himself unable to open it! For an hour he paced up and down in the long twilight, waiting for the dark.

It came at last, and, fighting down his fears and nausea, he drew the garden-barrow up to the shed, and took the key from his pocket. He walked to the front gate and looked up and down the silent road. Then he came back and, inserting the key in the lock, opened the door, and, in the light of an electric torch, stood looking down at what he had placed there the night before.

With his ears alert for the slightest sound, he took the inhabitant of the shed by the shoulders, and, dragging it outside, strove to lift it into the barrow. He succeeded at last, and, with the rigid body balanced precariously and the dead face looking up into his, seized the handles and slowly and silently took Martle to the place prepared for him.

He did not leave him for a long time. Not until the earth was piled high above him in a circular mound and a score or two of bricks formed the first beginnings of a rockery. Then he walked slowly up the garden, and, after attending to the shed, locked it up and went indoors.

The disposal of the body gave a certain measure of relief. He would live, with time for repentance and, perhaps, for forgetting. He washed in the scullery, and then, fearing the shadows upstairs, drew the heavy curtains in the dining-room to shut in the light and settled himself in an easy chair. He drank until his senses were deadened; his nerves quietened, his aching limbs relaxed, and he fell into a heavy sleep.

III

He awoke at six, and, staggering to his feet, drew back the curtains and turned out the gas. Then he went upstairs, and after disarranging his bed, went to the bathroom. The cold water and a shave, together with a change of linen, did him good. He opened doors and windows, and let the clean sweet air blow through the house. The house which he must continue to inhabit because he dare not leave it. Other people might not share his taste for rockeries.

To the watchful eye of Mrs Howe he appeared to be almost himself again. The key of the shed had turned up, and he smiled as he presented her with her "precious dusters." Then he rode off on his bicycle to order slabs of stone and plants from the nearest nurseryman.

He worked more and more leisurely as the days passed, and the rockery grew larger and more solid. Every added stone and plant seemed to increase his security. He ate well, and, to his surprise, slept well; but every morning misery opened his eyes for him.

The garden was no longer a place of quiet recreation; the house, which was part of the legacy that had so delighted him only a year before, was a prison in which he must serve a lifelong sentence. He could neither let it nor sell it; other people might alter the garden and dig. Since the fatal evening he had not looked at a newspaper for fear of reading of Martle's disappearance, and in all that time had not spoken to a friend.

Martle was very quiet. There were no shadows in the house, no furtive noises, no dim shape pattering about the garden by night. Memory was the only thing that assailed him; but it sufficed.

Then the dream came. A dream confused and grotesque, as most dreams are. He dreamt that he was standing by the rockery, in the twilight, when he thought he saw one of the stones move. Other stones followed suit. A big slab near the top came slithering down, and it was apparent that

the whole pile of earth and stone was being shaken by some internal force. Something was trying to get out. Then he remembered that he was buried there, and had no business to be standing outside. He must get back. Martle had put him there, and for some reason which he was quite unable to remember he was afraid of Martle. He procured his tools and set to work. It was a long and tedious job and made more difficult by the fact that he was not allowed to make a noise. He dug and dug, but the grave had disappeared. Then suddenly something took hold of him and held him down; down. He could neither move nor cry out.

He awoke with a scream and for a minute or two lay trembling and shaking. Thank God, it was only a dream. The room was full of sunlight, and he could hear Mrs Howe moving about downstairs. Life was good and might yet hold something in store for him.

He lay still for ten minutes, and was about to rise when he heard Mrs Howe running upstairs. Even before her sudden and heavy rapping on the door he scented disaster.

“Mr Keller! Mr Keller!”

“Well?” he said heavily.

“Your rockery!” gasped the charwoman. “Your beautiful rockery! All gone!”

“Gone?” shouted Keller, springing out of bed and snatching his dressing-gown from the door.

“Pulled all to pieces,” said Mrs Howe, as he opened the door. “You never see such a mess. All over the place, as if a madman had done it.”

In a mechanical fashion he thrust his feet into slippers and went downstairs. He hurried down the garden, and, waving the woman back, stood looking at the ruin. Stones and earth were indeed all over the place, but the spot that mattered was untouched. He stood gazing and trembling. Who could have done it? Why was it done?

He thought of his dream and the truth burst upon him. No need for his aching back and limbs to remind him. No need to remember the sleep-walking feats of his youth. He knew the culprit now.

“Shall I go for the police?” inquired the voice of Mrs Howe.

Keller turned a stony face upon her. “No,” he said slowly. “I—I’ll speak to them about it myself.”

He took up the spade and began the task of reconstruction. He worked for an hour, and then went in to dress and breakfast. For the rest of the day he worked slowly and steadily, so that by evening most of the damage had been repaired. Then he went indoors to face the long night.

Sleep, man’s best friend, had become his unrelenting enemy. He made himself coffee on the gas-stove and fought his drowsiness cup by cup. He read and smoked and walked about the room. Bits of his dream that he had forgotten came back to him and stayed with him. And ever at the back of his mind was the certainty that he was doomed.

There was only one hope left to him. He would go away for a time. Far enough away to render a visit home in his sleep impossible. And perhaps the change of scene would strengthen him and help his frayed nerves. Afterwards it might be possible to let the house for a time on condition that the garden was not interfered with. It was one risk against another.

He went down the garden as soon as it was light and completed his work. Then he went indoors to breakfast and to announce his plans for sudden departure to Mrs Howe, his white and twitching face amply corroborating his tale of neuralgia and want of sleep.

“Things’ll be all right,” said the woman. “I’ll ask the police to keep an eye on the house of a night. I did speak to one last night about them brutes as destroyed the rockery. If they try it again they may get a surprise.”

Keller quivered but made no sign. He went upstairs and packed his bag, and two hours later was in the train on his way to Exeter, where he proposed to stay the night. After that, Cornwall, perhaps.

He secured a room at an hotel and went for a stroll to pass the time before dinner. How happy the people in the streets seemed to be, even the poorest! All free and all sure of their freedom. They could eat and sleep and enjoy the countless trivial things that make up life. Of battle and murder and sudden death they had no thought.

The light and bustle of the dining-room gave him a little comfort. After his lonely nights it was good to know that there were people all around him, that the house would be full of them whilst he slept. He felt that he was beginning a fresh existence. In future he would live amongst a crowd.

It was late when he went upstairs, but he lay awake for a few minutes. A faint sound or two reached him from downstairs, and the movements of somebody in the next room gave him a comfortable feeling of security. With a sigh of content he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a knocking; a knocking which sounded just above the head of his bed and died away almost before he had brushed the sleep from his eyes. He looked around fearfully, and then, lighting his candle, lay listening. The noise was not repeated. He had been dreaming, but he could not remember the substance of his dream. It had been unpleasant, but vague. More than unpleasant, terrifying. Somebody had been shouting at him. *Shouting!*

He fell back with a groan. The faint hopes of the night before died within him. *He* had been shouting and the strange noise came from the occupant of the next room. What had he said? and what had his neighbour heard?

He slept no more. From somewhere below he heard a clock toll the hours, and, tossing in his bed, wondered how many more remained to him.

Day came at last and he descended to breakfast. The hour was early and only two other tables were occupied, from one of which, between mouthfuls, a bluff-looking, elderly man eyed him curiously. He caught Keller's eye at last and spoke.

"Better?" he inquired.

Keller tried to force his quivering lips to a smile.

"Stood it as long as I could," said the other; "then I knocked. I thought perhaps you were delirious. Same words over and over again; sounded like 'Mockery' and 'Mortal,' 'Mockery' and 'Mortal.' You must have used them a hundred times."

Keller finished his coffee, and, lighting a cigarette, went and sat in the lounge. He had made his bid for freedom and failed. He looked up the times of the trains to town and rang for his bill.

IV

He was back in the silent house, upon which, in the fading light of the summer evening, a great stillness seemed to have descended. The atmosphere of horror had gone and left only a sense of abiding peace. All fear had left him, and pain and remorse had gone with it. Serene and tranquil he went into the fatal room, and, opening the window, sat by it, watching the succession of shadowy tableaux that had been his life. Some of it good and some of it bad, but most of it neither good nor bad. A very ordinary life until fate had linked it for all time with that of Martle's. He was a living man bound to a corpse with bonds that could never be severed.

It grew dark and he lit the gas and took a volume of poems from the shelves. Never before had he read with such insight and appreciation. In some odd fashion all his senses seemed to have been sharpened and refined.

He read for an hour, and then, replacing the book, went slowly upstairs. For a long time he lay in bed thinking and trying to analyse the calm and indifference which had overtaken him and, with the problem still unsolved, fell asleep.

For a time he dreamt, but of pleasant, happy things. He seemed to be filled with a greater content than he had ever known before, a content which did not leave him even when these dreams faded and he found himself back in the old one.

This time, however, it was different. He was still digging, but not in a state of frenzy and horror. He dug because something told him it was his duty to dig, and only by digging could he make reparation. And it was a matter of no surprise to him that Martie stood close by looking on. Not the Martie he had known, nor a bloody and decaying Martie, but one of grave and noble aspect. And there was a look of understanding on his face that nearly made Keller weep.

He went on digging with a sense of companionship such as he had never known before. Then suddenly, without warning, the sun blazed out of the darkness and struck him full in the face. The light was unbearable, and with a wild cry he dropped his spade and clapped his hands over his eyes. The light went, and a voice spoke to him out of the darkness.

He opened his eyes on a dim figure standing a yard or two away.

"Hope I didn't frighten you, sir," said the voice. "I called to you once or twice and then I guessed you were doing this in your sleep."

"In my sleep," repeated Keller. "Yes."

"And a pretty mess you've made of it," said the constable, with a genial chuckle. "Lord! to think of you working at it every day and then pulling it down every night. Shouted at you I did, but you wouldn't wake."

He turned on the flashlight that had dazzled Keller, and surveyed the ruins. Keller stood by, motionless and waiting.

"Looks like an earthquake," muttered the constable. He paused, and kept the light directed upon one spot. Then he stooped down and scratched away the earth with his fingers, and tugged. He stood up suddenly and turned the light on Keller, while with the other he fumbled in his pocket. He spoke in a voice cold and official.

"Are you coming quietly?" he asked.

Keller stepped towards him with both hands outstretched.

"I am coming quietly," he said, in a low voice. "Thank God!"