

Inexplicable

By L. G. Moberly

The hinges were rusty, the gate swinging to behind me creaked dismally, and as the latch clicked into its socket with a sharp clang I started. That clanging sound drew from the depths of my subconscious self some old stories of prison doors and turnkeys. And I actually glanced nervously over my shoulder at the suburban road which trailed to right and left of the gate I had just entered, although anything less calculated to inspire nervous tremors than that stretch of ordinary road lined by ordinary houses could not be imagined!

I had an order to view 119 Glazebrook Terrace, in the very unromantic suburb of Prillsbury, and I was seeking a house in that unromantic suburb merely because it was a healthy place within convenient distance of the London station to which my husband had to travel every morning. The rent of the house was decidedly low, if the house itself came up to the flowery description of it given by the house-agent; but I had made up my mind that this possibility was almost too good to be true. Nevertheless, I confess I was surprised by the outside appearance of the houses in the terrace. They were solidly built, commodious-looking dwellings, and although the scrap of front garden belonging to No. 119 was in the last stages of neglect and weeds, and there was a generally unkempt air about the whole place, still, I reflected, as I walked up the grass-grown path, these faults could soon be remedied. And it was simply absurd to be obsessed by a feeling of traps or prison-bars just because the gate had creaked on its hinges and then clanged-to with a sharpness which gave me such a feeling of finality.

The house-agent's clerk, who waited for me on the steps with the key of the house, was as ordinary as the rest of the surroundings, and my unaccountable attack of nerves passed off under the influence of his self-assured and cockney accents. Like the generality of his profession, he was profuse in praises of the house I had come to see, and I was fain to confess that in this case the praise was not undeserved. No. 119 was a very delightful house, well arranged, well built, with a nice piece of garden at the back, and plenty of accommodation.

But I only discovered its merits after literally wading through seas of dust, for never in the whole course of my existence have I seen any house so dusty as that house. Our feet sank into a thick powder; the windows were grimy, the walls coated, there must have been inches of dust upon every ledge capable of holding a grain of anything.

'I wonder the house has been allowed to get into this condition,' I remarked to my guide when, having visited all the lower rooms, we stood in the big front bedroom; 'it would surely have paid to put a caretaker into the place to keep it cleaned and aired.'

'We found it—' he began, in his self-confident accents, and then he stopped short, and his very fair face flushed. 'Messrs Dyron did not consider it necessary,' he said, rather hurriedly, and was then proceeding to explain to me how expeditiously the establishment could be put into liveable order, when my eye was attracted to a small table standing against the wall by the fireplace. It was octagonal in shape, set on three twisted legs—just a small occasional table such as one may see in any drawing-room. But the way in which it was carved was entirely out of the common, and I crossed the room to look at it more closely, exclaiming as I did so, 'What a perfectly lovely piece of carving! Of course, this has been left here by mistake.' And I turned the table more to the window to let the light fall upon it. The whole top was a crust of carved leaves and flowers, and in each curve of the octagon there was fashioned a small alligator, his head pointing

outwards, his tail meeting the tails of the other crocodiles in the centre; and as the light fell full on the scaly bodies they had an extraordinary look of life, and the little sinister heads with the small evil eyes almost seemed to move. I shuddered and drew away from the table, and the voice of Messrs Dyron's clerk seemed to come to me from quite a long way off.

'The table goes with the house,' I heard him say; 'it is really like a fixture, it goes with the house.' I don't suppose he really said the words very often, but in the dimness that had temporarily descended upon my brain I thought he went on repeating, like a parrot-cry, 'It goes with the house. It goes with the house.' Then the dimness cleared away, and I heard him say quietly, whilst it struck me that his face was oddly white:

'I am afraid you are tired, madam.'

I passed my hand over my face. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I think the house must be stuffy. Just for a moment I felt quite faint, and there is such a queer smell in here,' I added, becoming all at once conscious of a strange and penetrating odour I had not before noticed. 'The drains—'

'The drains were set in order before the last tenant vacated the house,' my companion put in quickly. 'I have the sanitary people's certificate about them. I fancy the smell you notice is due to the place having been shut up some time, and to the rankness of the creeper outside.'

Well, what he said sounded reasonable, and when he flung the window open the smell disappeared, and I recovered from my momentary faintness. But I made up my mind that, much as I liked the house, I would have every drain carefully inspected again before I urged Hugh to take it. As I was leaving the front bedroom my mind went back to the carved table.

'Do you really mean to say the former tenants wish to leave that beautiful thing?' I asked. 'I suppose they are not going to leave it for nothing?'

'Oh, yes,' the young man answered, airily, as if exquisitely carved tables were usually bestowed by outgoing upon incoming tenants; 'they have simply left it as—as—well, as a fixture, or as lumber— whichever way one likes to look at it.'

'I should prefer to look on it as a fixture,' I said. 'I can only conclude that its owners are most unusual people. Fancy parting with such an artistic piece of work! If we take the house—and I am very much inclined to think we shall—that table will not be left in a bedroom.' The young man bowed acquiescently and looked from me to the table with an oddly sidelong glance.

Although my temporary faintness had passed off, and after the window was opened the queer smell in the room had also vanished, I was not sorry to be outside in the fresh air again, for that faintness had left me oddly shaken. However, I forgot all about it long before I reached home, and I was only anxious to impress upon my husband the many charms and conveniences of 119 Glazebrook Terrace. The more I thought about the house the more sure I was that it would suit us in every particular, and by the end of the evening I had planned out all the rooms and fitted our furniture into them. Hugh paid a hurried visit to the house with me next day, and shared my enthusiasm. The windows were all open, there was no longer any strange smell, the sun was shining on our eager plans for the future; we ignored the present air of neglect and forlornness. And as for the table! My husband fell in love with it as much as I had done, and marvelled, as I had marvelled, how anyone in his senses could leave such a fine piece of work behind.

'So much the better for us,' Hugh exclaimed gaily, his fingers running over the delicately carved crust of flowers and leaves, and resting on the head of one of the alligators, a head fashioned with such skill that its loathsome naturalness made one shudder.

'Good heavens, May, the things look so lifelike I could almost have sworn one of them squirmed.' And Hugh stood back from the table, stared at it with round eyes, and then laughed. 'I shall be seeing rats and snakes next,' he said, and laughed again as we left the room together.

Before we left the house that day we had definitely decided to take it, supposing the drains were all they should be and the lease a satisfactory one; and in a very few weeks we were actually able to move into our new abode. An expert had declared the drains to be entirely above reproach; no terms could have been easier than those of the lease; in every direction our way seemed to be smoothed for us, and Hugh and I agreed that we were most lucky to have got so wholly delightful a house with so little difficulty or expense. We turned in an army of workpeople, and by the middle of May the house was clean and fresh from attic to basement, the garden had lost its neglected appearance; and when at last we took up our abode there on a sunshiny afternoon, when the lilacs were in bloom and the thrushes singing their loudest, we felt that we had come there to stay, probably for the rest of our natural lives.

‘That beautiful table is too good for a bedroom,’ Hugh exclaimed, as we were arranging the disposition of our furniture. ‘I’ll cart it down to the drawing-room.’

‘Yes—do, dear,’ I answered absently, my thoughts busy over vital questions of curtains and carpets, ‘and open the windows wide as you pass—there is still a stuffy smell here. I believe it is those shrubs outside—I shall have them cut back more.’ But Hugh had already picked up the small table and vanished with it through the door, and I returned to my calculations, when a great crash interrupted the current of my thoughts—a crash and a sharp cry.

I rushed to the stairs, to see Hugh lying in the hall, the table standing beside him apparently uninjured. I was at my husband’s side in a second; he pulled himself up with difficulty, but he could not get upon his feet, and his face was drawn with pain.

‘Twisted my ankle or something,’ he said, trying to smile reassuringly; ‘there must have been a piece of carpet loose. Something seemed to slither between my feet, and I lost my balance. Good job I didn’t break my neck,’ he added, philosophically, ‘and, anyhow, the table’s all right.’

Yes—the table was all right. The delicate carving was unbroken, the alligators lay there intact, grinning their sinister, malicious grin.

‘Beastly things,’ Hugh said, looking at them with a queer little shiver, as I helped him to hobble into the drawing-room. ‘The chap who carved them was an artist, if you like.’

Poor old Hugh! He was laid up for days with that bad ankle, and it fretted him to see me setting our house in order whilst he was tied by the leg.

‘We certainly must have those shrubs cut back,’ he said to me the day after his fall, and he sniffed audibly; ‘there’s a sort of smell in here of decaying vegetation. I dare say the shrubs have got a bit rank. Good Lord, what’s that?’ and he pulled himself upright on the couch, as from the small alligator table in the window there came a most prodigious crack. I confess I started too, for, accustomed as one is to the cracking of furniture, the sound did really seem gigantic to come from such a small object as the table.

‘Very funny,’ Hugh said, eyeing the delicate carving and the grinning heads with a certain hostility. ‘I hate things that give one the jumps, and it was such a funny sort of crack, too,’ he added, thoughtfully; ‘more like—more like—what on earth was it like, May? Not exactly like the sound one associates with cracking furniture.’

‘Not quite like anything I ever heard before,’ I answered. ‘Perhaps the wood is some peculiar kind to which we are not accustomed. Now I know the table has tricks and manners of that kind, it won’t startle me so much next time.’

I keep no diary, but I think it must have been on a morning two days later that I found my usually neat cook in a strange state of dishevelment when I went downstairs to order dinner. My heart sank within me. The untidy gown, tousled hair, the general air of having tumbled straight out of bed into the kitchen seemed to tell only one tale, and the horrible conviction that my

hitherto sober Maria had been drinking became something like a certainty when she suddenly flung her apron over her head and began to sob.

'I'm sure I never had a better missus,' she said, incoherently, 'but there's things nobody can bear—nor ain't meant to.' I had no clue to her disjointed remarks, excepting the very obvious one that she had been, if she was not at that moment, royally drunk, and I said, sternly:

'Take your apron off your face, Maria, and explain yourself. I don't know what you are talking about.'

'No—nor anyone else either,' she responded, wildly. 'It isn't right, not in any decent house, nor such as flesh and blood can stand. I'm sure I never had a complaint to make before not since I was in your service, but this—'

'Oh, Maria, do stop talking nonsense and tell me what you mean!' I broke in, impatiently. 'What on earth is the matter?'

'Matter enough!' she said, with a quiver in her voice; and she looked nervously over her shoulder, as though she expected to see someone enter the door. 'If I'd been asleep I should say it was a nightmare after the toasted cheese, but I was as wide awake as I am now.'

'But what happened?' I exclaimed. 'Do tell me what you are talking about.'

'I don't know,' came the extraordinary reply. 'If I knew what it was I could tell you, but I don't know no more than the babe unborn,' and she shuddered—a shudder that was certainly one of genuine fear.

'Maria,' I said, gravely, 'I don't like to think

'Oh, I haven't been drinking, ma'am—if that's what you were going to say,' she answered, quite civilly, and with that odd glance over her shoulder again; 'but I never slept a wink after two, and I daren't stir to call anybody. I thought it might get me.'

'What might get you?' A little chill crept down my own spine on seeing the look in her eyes.

'I don't know,' she repeated. 'I don't know what it was. Only—I lay there awake, and I heard the clock in the hall strike two, and then'—she shrank closer to me and shuddered once more—'then my door opened—I always sleep with it ajar, but it opened wide, and there came—there came—'

'What?' I cried, when she paused.

'I don't know what it was—only I could hear it kind of sliding across the floor—sliding or pattering—there! I can't describe it, but I heard it. And I didn't dare light a candle—I just lay and shivered and shook whilst it went across the floor.'

'Maria, how absurd!' I said, though something in her manner and in her realistic description gave me once more a creeping sensation in my spine. 'Probably the cat got into your room.'

'The cat?' Maria flung back her head and laughed hysterically. 'No cat slides about like that. And there was a great flop, flop. Oh, I couldn't stop here another night, not if you was to pay me twenty thousand pounds!'

It took me an unreasonably long time to argue Maria into common sense, and then she only agreed to stay temporarily and on condition that she might leave her present room and share one with Jane, the housemaid.

'And I wouldn't even do that if you and the master hadn't been so good to me,' was her final remark.

'The woman's dotty,' Hugh said, irritably, when I told him the story, 'but she's a jolly good cook, so freeze on to her, dotty or not. But for Heaven's sake tell all the maids that if we hear any more rubbish about sliding, pattering animals they'll all get such a rowing from me as they won't forget in a hurry.'

The incident gave me a feeling of perturbation—I do not know why—and it was a relief when, that evening, Jack Wilding, an old friend of Hugh's, turned up to dinner. He was a delightful person who had travelled all over the world, and his fund of knowledge, not to mention his stock of good stories, was inexhaustible. At dinner he was in his best vein, and I relegated cook and her terrors into the background of my mind; and in the drawing-room later I prepared to enjoy myself. I sat down to work whilst the two men smoked and chatted.

The windows were wide open. It was a delicious May night, and the air that drifted in brought with it the fragrance of hawthorn and wistaria and fresh-growing things, and I sat enjoying it and giving half an ear to the talk of the two men, when all at once the drifting sweetness from without was tainted by that same strange odour which we had once or twice noticed before. Was I right in thinking it the smell of decaying vegetation, or was it not rather some indescribable smell to which I could give no name? As it drifted across the room our guest suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair, and a curious greyness overspread his naturally bronzed complexion.

'My God!' he said, 'what is that? And why does it smell the same—the same—' His sentence trailed off into silence, and in the intense stillness following his strange words I heard a sound which, for some reason I could not pretend to explain, gave me a feeling of cold fear. I can only describe the sound as like a far-away bellowing—not precisely the bellowing of cattle, but a more sinister, more horrible sound, pregnant with evil.

'You hear it too?' Jack Wilding questioned, under his breath, and as he rose from his chair I saw that his face was ashen and beads of sweat stood upon his forehead. 'You hear it? And the stench is here too! Good God! if I thought I should ever have to cross that swamp again I should go mad!' His words, his tone, his whole appearance were so unlike our usually sane and cheery friend that both Hugh and I stared at him dumbfounded. And there was no doubt that his emotion, to whatever cause it was due, was entirely, even terribly, genuine.

'What's up, old man?' Hugh said, gently. 'There is a most awfully queer smell in here, but it isn't drains, and—'

'Drains!' Jack laughed a harsh laugh with a catch in it, then he passed his hand over his forehead and looked from Hugh to me with an oddly bewildered glance. 'I must have had a nightmare—a waking nightmare,' he said, looking round him. 'I could have sworn that I smelt the alligator swamp in New Guinea, the place where—' He broke off short. 'I heard the loathsome brutes bellowing,' he began again; 'but, of course—of course, it was merely some association of ideas.' His voice was still shaken, the whiteness had not left his face, and Hugh put a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder, whilst I remembered that strange, faint bellowing which I too had heard.

'Simply association of ideas, old man.' My husband's voice penetrated to my understanding. 'As likely as not you had been looking at that beautiful little table bequeathed to us by the former tenants. That put alligators into your head.' Jack turned and glanced at the table, and he recoiled when he saw the grinning heads lying amongst the crusted delicacy of leaves and flowers.

'Loathsome beasts!' he said, and again his voice shook. 'You will both think me an absolute fool,' he went on, recovering his self-control with an effort and sinking back into his chair; 'but I crossed an alligator swamp once with a friend.' He spoke in abrupt jerks and turned his head with a curious uneasy movement. 'It was dark, the place swarmed with those unspeakable devils, their stench was everywhere. It was dark—and poor old Danson—he paused, as if speech were almost impossible—'they dragged him off the path of logs in the darkness.' His voice ended on a sharp high note, and neither Hugh nor I could speak for a minute or two. Somehow his words

brought before me the hideous swamp, the darkness, the loathly monsters waiting for their prey, and the remembrance of just such an incident in a book I had once read flashed into my mind.

'I couldn't stand that table in any house I lived in,' Jack resumed presently, in more ordinary tones, and with a forced laugh. 'I never want to see an alligator again, alive or dead, or even carved.' He pushed back his chair abruptly and rose. 'I think I'll go up to bed now, if you don't mind,' he said; 'I'm not very good company.' And having said 'Good-night' he was moving across the room, when all at once he stumbled, flung out his hands to save himself, and, failing to do so, fell heavily to the ground. Something slid from between his feet—I saw a dark shape, a flash of white, and then it had vanished; and I stood staring vacantly at the place where it had been, whilst Hugh helped our guest to his feet.

'Something tripped me up,' he said, in dazed accents.

'I suppose it's that confounded cat of ours,' Hugh answered, and his voice sounded so cheery and normal through the cloud of uncanny, shuddering sensations that were creeping over me. 'Trust a cat to be just where you wish it wasn't! I'm awfully sorry, old man. It gave you a nasty jar.'

'A nasty jar,' Jack repeated, and his eyes were as dazed as his voice.

'Come on upstairs,' Hugh said, gently. 'I'll help you into bed. You've had a bit of a shaking.'

'Yes—a bit of a shaking,' the words were echoed, and the two men left the room together, whilst I, with one fearful glance behind me towards where I had seen that dark shape glide and vanish, left the room too with more haste than dignity, shutting the door firmly behind me and scurrying upstairs to my own bedroom.

When Jane brought my tea next morning the first thing she did was to drop the tray with a crash just inside my door, and then burst into a flood of tears. Hugh had gone out early to see Jack off at the station. I was alone.

'I can't stop here—I can't stop here!' Jane moaned. 'Cook and me—oh, my gracious goodness, I couldn't stop another minute!'

'Cook has been frightening you,' I said, trying to speak sternly, but not wholly succeeding, because of the memory of that something that had slid away from between Jack's feet last night. 'I should have thought you were too sensible to make a fuss about a trifle.'

'A trifle—oh, my lawks!' And Jane, the irreproachable and excellent servant, dropped into a chair and sobbed afresh.

'What has frightened you?' I said, trying to speak calmly, even though my morning tea was trickling over the carpet, and broken china and bread and butter were mingled in inextricable confusion. 'What is it?'

'We all slept together last night.' Jane lifted a scared face. 'After what cook heard, me and her and Dale all slept together.' I nearly groaned aloud. If Dale, my middle-aged parlourmaid, who had been with me for years, was also infected with panic-fear, what should I do? 'We all slept together,' Jane continued, 'and we locked the door'—here she gave a breathless gulp—'so as nothing couldn't get in. But it got in!' Her voice suddenly rose to a little scream. 'I couldn't stop here another night!'

'What got in, Jane?' I said, quietly, though my heart beat fast.

'It smelt something awful,' Jane went on, heedless of my question, and I expected every moment that she would break into a paroxysm of hysterics. 'It got in!' she ended, in a terrified whisper.

'What got in?' I asked. 'I suppose the cat was shut into the room before you went to bed, and gave you a fright.'

‘It wasn’t no cat,’ she answered, under her breath; and try as I would to argue myself into common sense, the hair rose on my bead. ‘It was bigger than twenty cats, it slipped over the floor—over the floor—and oh!’ And Jane finished with just the hysterical scream I had expected.

‘Did you see this ridiculous thing?’ I asked, sternly, when she was quieter; but, sternly as I spoke, my flesh crept.

‘We dursn’t light a candle,’ she moaned, ‘but the curtains was half drawn, and we saw its shape, and there was a white streak in it, and it slid over the floor—over—’

‘That will do, Jane,’ I said. ‘Your master and I will talk the thing over. Meanwhile—’

‘There’s not one of us will sleep in the house again,’ Jane said, shakily. And to this pleasing resolution our three servants adhered, in spite of anything that Hugh and I could say.

‘Give them a night or two away to recover their nerves,’ Hugh said to me afterwards, with a man’s cheerful disregard of the difficulties of running a house without servants. ‘Get in a char. We shall be all right.’

I acted on his advice, sent the servants off for two days’ holiday, and sought the nearest charwoman. But at four o’clock the good woman came into my sanctum and refused to stay a moment longer. Her face was the colour of ashes, her speech was rambling.

‘Which I can’t stand it no longer,’ she said, ‘never bein’ accustomed to a place where such animals is kep’.’

‘But no animals are kept except a cat,’ I answered, my heart sinking into my boots.

‘Cats is cats, and dogs is dogs, and troubles though they both may be, and I’m not denyin’ they are, still they’re what you might call human,’ Mrs Jenkins said grandly, but I noticed that for all her grandiloquence she was shaking from head to foot. ‘The animals what come slithering in and out o’ the scullery and kitchen—they ain’t human. Runnin’ on their underneaths, with paws as don’t seem a bit o’ use to ’em. Them as likes such pets must keep such pets, but I couldn’t stop, not if it was ever so.’ She had not been drinking. She was as sober as I was myself. I could only pay her her money and let her depart, and I telephoned to Hugh that I would meet him in town and dine there. He listened to my story, laughed at me, said that obviously the maids had put notions into Mrs Jenkins’s head, and that I mustn’t be silly. But when, at ten o’clock, he opened our own front door, and the stench which had startled Jack the day before rushed out at us, I shrank back white and trembling.

‘Oh, Hugh,’ I said, ‘oh, Hugh, it frightens me!’

‘Nonsense, my dear, stuff and nonsense!’ Hugh began, drawing me in and shutting the door with a sharp clang. ‘You mustn’t let—’ And then his sentence ended in a sharp exclamation, and he clutched my arm with a grip that nearly upset my balance.

‘Something slid between my feet,’ he said, using the very words Jack had used; ‘I was almost down. That cat shall—’ He said no more. A frozen horror must have paralysed his speech, as it prevented me from uttering a syllable, and we stood there clutching each other and looking at the stairs, down which in the dusk we could see a huge shape gliding at lightning speed. Another was coming more slowly out of the drawing-room door, and from amongst the dark shadows of the hall came sounds of sliding and pattering—sounds which made my very blood run cold.

‘Hugh!’ I found my voice at last, and shrieked my husband’s name. ‘Come away, Hugh, come away!’ And opening the door behind me I fled out into the night, dragging my husband with me. Nothing would induce him to go to any of our neighbours. He said we should look a pretty pair of fools if we told such a cock-and-bull story as ours to any rational beings. And we made ourselves as comfortable as we could for the night in the cottage at the end of the garden, a cottage we had just furnished for the lady gardener who was coming to us.

When in the bright sunshine of the next day we re-entered our house, we were beginning to tell each other that we must have been suffering the night before from optical delusions, when I saw in the corner of the hall a flat head in which two malicious eyes gleamed, whilst a devilish grin exposed two rows of hideous teeth. Hugh saw it too, and turned white, but before he could reach the corner it had gone. Then he strode on into the drawing-room, and still without uttering a word he picked up the little table with its delicate carving and the gruesome alligators' heads.

'What are you going to do?' I said, fearfully.

'Burn this infernal thing,' was his grim reply.

'But how can a table—just a table—' I began, but Hugh only laughed sternly.

'I don't know,' he said, 'but I am taking no more chances.' He carried the table out to the back garden, surrounded it with straw, and set fire to it. And never another word did he speak until the beautiful work of art was nothing but a heap of ashes.

'So perish all devilry,' he said, when the last spark had died away; 'and now we will go to the house-agent's.'

But from the house-agent's clerk we got as much satisfaction as one is in the habit of getting from gentlemen of that profession. He looked at us with mild surprise, and answered our remarks urbanely and courteously.

'Any unpleasant stories about the house during the last tenancy? Oh, well—there had been a few silly servants' tales, but nothing of importance. The gentleman had left because he wished to reside in another county.'

'And what about the carved table he left behind him?' Hugh asked, sternly. The clerk shrugged his shoulders.

'The gentleman had not cared to take it. It was merely left as part of the house, that was all.'

'Oh, well, it is not a part of the house any more,' was Hugh's grim retort. 'It's not a part of anything, excepting in so far as matter never dies, and the smoke is doing some useful turn elsewhere.' The clerk stared. 'I have burnt that infernal table,' Hugh went on, forgetting his manners for once; 'nobody will ever see it again. You can tell your late client so, with my compliments. To leave it in the house was an abominable and mean thing to do.' With that he marched out of the office, and we went back to our house, a house which, from that day to this, has shown no sign of abnormality.

But it was many a long day before I could live down those weird experiences, and even now they are to me quite inexplicable.

Does any explanation of it all occur to you?