

The Goblin's Collection

By Algernon Blackwood

Dutton accepted the invitation for the feeble reason that he was not quick enough at the moment to find a graceful excuse. He had none of that facile brilliance which is so useful at week-end parties; he was a big, shy, awkward man. Moreover, he disliked these great houses. They swallowed him. The solemn, formidable butlers oppressed him. He left on Sunday night when possible. This time, arriving with an hour to dress, he went upstairs to an enormous room, so full of precious things that he felt like an insignificant item in a museum corridor. He smiled disconsolately as the underling who brought up his bag began to fumble with the lock. But, instead of the sepulchral utterance he dreaded, a delicious human voice with an unmistakable brogue proceeded from the stooping figure. It was positively comforting. "It 'ull be locked, sorr, but maybe ye have the key?" And they bent together over the disreputable kit-bag, looking like a pair of ants knitting antennæ on the floor of some great cave.

The giant four-poster watched them contemptuously; mahogany cupboards wore an air of grave surprise; the gaping, open fireplace a lone could have swallowed all his easels—almost, indeed, his little studio. This human, Irish presence was distinctly consoling—some extra hand or other, thought Dutton, probably.

He talked a little with the lad; then, lighting a cigarette, he watched him put the clothes away in the capacious cupboards, noticing in particular how neat and careful he was with the little things. Nail-scissors, silver stud-box, metal shoe-horn, and safety razor, even the bright cigar-cutter and pencil-sharpener collected loose from the bottom of the bag—all these he placed in a row upon the dressing-table with the glass top, and seemed never to have done with it. He kept coming back to rearrange and put a final touch, lingering over them absurdly. Dutton watched him with amusement, then surprise, finally with exasperation. Would he never go? "Thank you," he said at last; "that will do. I'll dress now. What time is dinner?" The lad told him, but still lingered, evidently anxious to say more. "Everything's out, I think," repeated Dutton impatiently; "all the loose things, I mean?"

The face at once turned eagerly. What mischievous Irish eyes he had, to be sure! "I've put thim all together in a row, sorr, so that ye'll not be missing anny-thing at all," was the quick reply, as he pointed to the ridiculous collection of little articles, and even darted back to finger them again. He counted them one by one. And then suddenly he added, with a touch of personal interest that was *not* familiarity, "It's so easy, ye see, sorr, to lose thim small bright things in this great room." And he was gone.

Smiling a little to himself, Dutton began to dress, wondering how the lad had left the impression that his words meant more than they said. He almost wished he had encouraged him to talk. "The small bright things in this great room"—what an admirable description, almost a criticism! He felt like a prisoner of state in the Tower. He stared about him into the alcoves, recesses, deep embrasured windows; the tapestries and huge curtains oppressed him; next he fell to wondering who the other guests would be, whom he would take in to dinner, how early he could make an excuse and slip off to bed; then, midway in these desultory thoughts, became suddenly aware of a curiously sharp impression—that he was being watched. Somebody, quite close, was looking at him. He dismissed the fancy as soon as it was born, putting it down to the size and mystery of the old-world chamber; but in spite of himself the idea persisted teasingly,

and several times he caught himself turning nervously to look over his shoulder. It was not a ghostly feeling; his nature was not accessible to ghostly things. The strange idea, lodged securely in his brain, was traceable, he thought, to something the Irish lad had said—grew out, rather, of what he had left unsaid. He idly allowed his imagination to encourage it. Someone, friendly but curious, with inquisitive, peeping eyes, was watching him. Someone very tiny was hiding in the enormous room. He laughed about it; but he felt different. A certain big, protective feeling came over him that he must go gently lest he tread on some diminutive living thing that was soft as a kitten and elusive as a baby mouse. Once, indeed, out of the corner of his eye, he fancied he saw a little thing with wings go fluttering past the great purple curtains at the other end. It was by a window. “A bird, or something, outside,” he told himself with a laugh, yet moved thenceforth more often than not on tiptoe. This cost him a certain effort: his proportions were elephantine. He felt a more friendly interest now in the stately, imposing chamber.

The dressing-gong brought him back to reality and stopped the flow of his imagining. He shaved, and laboriously went on dressing then; he was slow and leisurely in his movements, like many big men; very orderly, too. But when he was ready to put in his collar stud it was nowhere to be found. It was a worthless bit of brass, but most important; he had only one. Five minutes ago it had been standing inside the ring of his collar on the marble slab; he had carefully placed it there. Now it had disappeared and left no trail. He grew warm and untidy in the search. It was something of a business for Dutton to go on all fours. “Malicious little beast!” he grunted, rising from his knees, his hand sore where he had scraped it beneath the cupboard. His trouser-crease was ruined, his hair was tumbled. He knew too well the elusive activity of similar small objects. “It will turn up again,” he tried to laugh, “if I pay it no attention. Mal—” he abruptly changed the adjective, as though he had nearly said a dangerous thing—“naughty little imp!” He went on dressing, leaving the collar to the last. He fastened the cigar-cutter to his chain, but the nail-scissors, he noticed now, had also gone. “Odd,” he reflected, “very odd!” He looked at the place where they had been a few minutes ago. “Odd!” he repeated. And finally, in desperation, he rang the bell. The heavy curtains swung inwards as he said, “Come in,” in answer to the knock, and the Irish boy, with the merry, dancing eyes, stood in the room. He glanced half nervously, half expectantly, about him. “It’ll be something ye have lost, sorr?” he said at once, as though he knew.

“I rang,” said Dutton, resenting it a little, “to ask you if you could get me a collar stud—for this evening. Anything will do.” He did not say he had lost his own. Someone, he felt, who was listening, would chuckle and be pleased. It was an absurd position.

“And will it be a shtud like this, sorr, that yez wanting?” asked the boy, picking up the lost object from inside the collar on the marble slab.

“Like that, yes,” stammered the other, utterly amazed. He had overlooked it, of course, yet it was in the identical place where he had left it. He felt mortified and foolish. It was so obvious that the boy grasped the situation—more, had expected it. It was as if the stud had been taken and replaced deliberately. “Thank you,” he added, turning away to hide his face as the lad backed out—with a grin, he imagined, though he did not see it. Almost immediately, it seemed, then he was back again, holding out a little cardboard box containing an assortment of ugly bone studs. Dutton felt as if the whole thing had been prepared beforehand. How foolish it was! Yet behind it lay something real and true and—utterly incredible!

“*They* won’t get taken, sorr,” he heard the lad say from the doorway. “*They*’re not nearly bright enough.”

The other decided not to hear. “Thanks,” he said curtly; “*they*’ll do nicely.”

There was a pause, but the boy did not go. Taking a deep breath, he said very quickly, as though greatly daring, "It's only the bright and little lovely things he takes, sorr, if ye plaze. He takes thim for his collection, and there's no stoppin' him at all." It came out with a rush, and Dutton, hearing it, let the human thing rise up in him. He turned and smiled.

"Oh, he takes these things for his collection, does he?" he asked more gently.

The boy looked dreadfully shame-faced, confession hanging on his lips. "The little bright and lovely things, sorr, yes. I've done me best, but there's things he can't resist at all. The bone ones is safe, though. He won't look at thim."

"I suppose he followed you across from Ireland, eh?" the other inquired.

The lad hung his head. "I told Father Madden," he said in a lower voice, "but it's not the least bit of good in the wurld." He looked as though he had been convicted of stealing and 'feared to lose his place. Suddenly, lifting his blue eyes, he added, "But if ye take no notice at all he ginrelly puts everything back in its place agin. He only borrows thim, just for a little bit of toime. Pretend ye're not wantin' thim at all, sorr, and back they'll come prisintly again, brighter than before maybe."

"I see," answered Dutton slowly. "All right, then," he dismissed him, "and I won't say a word downstairs. You needn't be afraid," as the lad looked his gratitude and vanished like a flash, leaving the other with a queer and eerie feeling, staring at the ugly bone studs. He finished dressing hurriedly and went downstairs. He went on tiptoe out of the great room, moving delicately and with care, lest he might tread on something very soft and tiny, almost wounded, like a butterfly with a broken wing. And from the corners, he felt positive, something watched him go.

The ordeal of dinner passed off well enough; the rather heavy evening too. He found the opportunity to slip off early to bed. The nail-scissors were in their place again. He read till midnight; nothing happened. His hostess had told him the history of his room, inquiring kindly after his comfort. "Some people feel rather lost in it," she said; "I hope you found all you want," and, tempted by her choice of words—the "lost" and "found"—he nearly told the story of the Irish lad whose goblin had followed him across the sea and "borrowed little bright and lovely things for his collection." But he kept his word; he told nothing; she would only have stared, for one thing. For another, he was bored, and therefore uncommunicative. He smiled inwardly. All that this giant mansion could produce for his comfort and amusement were ugly bone studs, a thieving goblin, and a vast bedroom where dead royalty had slept. Next day, at intervals, when changing for tennis or back again for lunch, the "borrowing" continued; the little things he needed at the moment had disappeared. They turned up later. To ignore their disappearance was the recipe for their recovery—invariably, too, just where he had seen them last. There was the lost object shining in his face, propped impishly on its end, just ready to fall upon the carpet, and ever with a quizzical, malicious air of innocence that was truly goblin. His collar stud was the favourite; next came the scissors and the silver pencil-sharpener.

Trains and motors combined to keep him Sunday night, but he arranged to leave on Monday before the other guests were up, and so got early to bed. He meant to watch. There was a merry, jolly feeling in him that he had established quasi-friendly relations with the little Borrower. He might even see an object go—catch it in the act of disappearing! He arranged the bright objects in a row upon the glass-topped dressing-table opposite the bed, and while reading kept an eye slyly on the array of tempting bait. But nothing happened. "It's the wrong way," he realised suddenly. "What a blunderer I am!" He turned the light out then. Drowsiness crept over him. . . . Next day, of course, he told himself it was a dream. . . .

The night was very still, and through the latticed windows stole faintly the summer moonlight. Outside the foliage rustled a little in the wind. A night-jar called from the fields, and a secret, furry owl made answer from the copse beyond. The body of the chamber lay in thick darkness, but a slanting ray of moonlight caught the dressing-table and shone temptingly upon the silver objects. "It's like setting a nightline," was the last definite thought he remembered—when the laughter that followed stopped suddenly, and his nerves gave a jerk that turned him keenly alert.

From the enormous open fireplace, gaping in darkness at the end of the room, issued a thread of delicate sound that was softer than a feather. A tiny flurry of excitement, furtive, tentative, passed shivering across the air. An exquisite, dainty flutter stirred the night, and through the heavy human brain upon the great four-poster fled this picture, as from very far away, picked out in black and silver—of a wee knight-errant crossing the frontiers of fairyland, high mischief in his tiny, beating heart. Pricking along over the big, thick carpet, he came towards the bed, towards the dressing-table, intent upon bold plunder. Dutton lay motionless as a stone, and watched and listened. The blood in his ears smothered the sound a little, but he never lost it altogether. The flicking of a mouse's tail or whiskers could hardly have been more gentle than this sound, more wary, circumspect, discreet, certainly not half so artful. Yet the human being in the bed, so heavily breathing, heard it well. Closer it came, and closer, oh, so elegant and tender, this bold attack of a wee Adventurer from another world. It shot swiftly past the bed. With a little flutter, delicious, almost musical, it rose in the air before his very face and entered the pool of moonlight on the dressing-table. Something blurred it then; the human sight grew troubled and confused a moment; a mingling of moonlight with the reflections from the mirror, slab of glass, and shining objects obscured clear vision somehow. For a second Dutton lost the proper focus. There was a tiny rattle and a tiny click. He saw that the pencil-sharpener stood balanced on the table's very edge. It was in the act of vanishing.

But for his stupid blunder then, he might have witnessed more. He simply could not restrain himself, it seems. He sprang, and at the same instant the silver object fell upon the carpet. Of course his elephantine leap made the entire table shake. But, anyhow, he was not quick enough. He saw the reflection of a slim and tiny hand slide down into the mirrored depths of the reflecting sheet of glass—deep, deep down, and swift as a flash of light. This he thinks he saw, though the light, he admits, was oddly confusing in that moment of violent and clumsy movement.

One thing, at any rate, was beyond all question: the pencil-sharpener had disappeared. He turned the light up; he searched for a dozen minutes, then gave it up in despair and went back to bed.

Next morning he searched again. But, having overslept himself, he did not search as thoroughly as he might have done, for half-way through the tiresome operation the Irish lad came in to take his bag for the train.

"Will ut be something ye've lost, sorr?" he asked gravely.

"Oh, it's all right," Dutton answered from the floor. "You can take the bag—and my overcoat." And in town that day he bought another pencil-sharpener and hung it on his chain.