THE HOCUS ROOT

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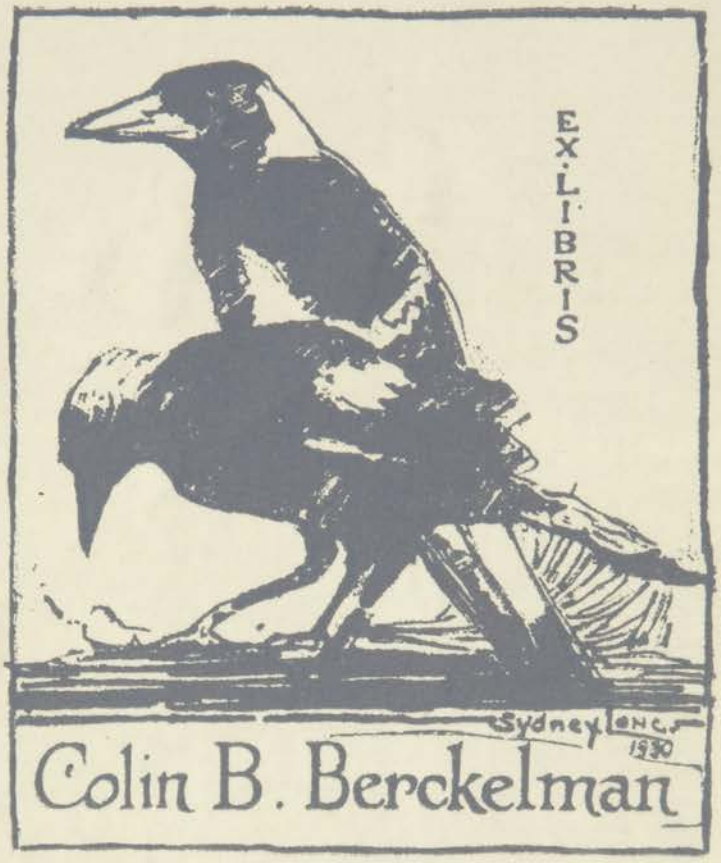
L. B. FOSTER



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The characters in this book are purely fictitious and bear no conscious resemblance to any known living person.

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By

L. B. FOSTER

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Fond man! the vision of a moment made!
Dream of a dream! and shadow of a shade!

—Young.

FOREWORD.

In setting down these adventures of Professor Ernest Everhard Shrimpton, it has been necessary, here and there, to draw a little upon the imagination, since there are no means of complete documentation. The professor's own notes, forwarded to the Chancellor of Sydney University just before his final disappearance, are in themselves sensational enough. However, I have sought to preserve some continuity in the extraordinary exploits of the diligent little professor of botany following his discovery of the now famous Hocus root in Papua in July, 1942.

This has meant a study of the man through his books, papers, notes and field work; a careful check of a great many newspaper reports, affidavits of Court witnesses—including a Judge of the Divorce Court—and a number of personal interviews with those who had made contact with Professor Shrimpton at various times and places.

In fairness to the professor, it should be stated that he had no hankering whatever after fame. Indeed, he rather feared it, although he was extremely proud of the fact that a well-known orchid* justifiably bore his name. It is, I hope, not doing him an injustice to say that he was a somewhat frail but kindly little man, although wiry enough to essay the most hazardous journeys for botanic enlightenment and study. He wrote a great many books on economic botany, plant life and orchids. His home life was far from happy, but, since a domestic angle necessarily comes prominently into his strange adventures, it must be formally recorded and left to the impartial judgment of other people.

AUTHOR.

* "The Speckled Shrimtonica" orchid, discovered by Professor Shrimpton on his first expedition into Nyasaland in 1928 (vide "Famous Orchids and their Discoverers").

I.

PROFESSOR Ernest Shrimpton went to Papua in May, 1942. It was his eighth excursion to little explored parts of the world to study botany generally and the orchis genus of monocotyledonons plants, in particular. His University research grant was subsidised by the Commonwealth Government, with additional contributions from eight noted orchidists. War in the South-West Pacific at that time made the professor's venture doubly dangerous, but he was resolutely determined to set out. If the movements of the Japanese, who had taken Rabaul four months before, were unpredictable, surely Nature herself was always unpredictable? Against the hazards of war he staked the true prospector's hope of rich discovery. He selected his native guides and carriers at Port Moresby, mainly because he himself had a smattering of Motu. Orders not understood in times of emergency or crisis could mean the failure of a mission or death in these strange, uncivilised regions.

He took his party by lugger to Daru, 300 miles west of Port Moresby and, on this low, mangrove-fringed island near the estuary of the Fly River, he chartered a launch. He felt that, by following the Fly River to its junction with the Strickland River, he would at least be moving away from the danger of the brown hordes of Nippon. His plan was not rigid, but he hoped to follow the Strickland and

even, eventually, traverse Mount Blucher (4,920 feet), work towards the Sepik River, thence, with luck, to the sea of the Bismarck Archipelago.

Completion of such a journey would of course involve tremendous hazards and hardships in unknown country, and often against hostile natives, but the botanic prize would be worth it. Principally, he sought one rare orchid*, but in such country he might find unimagined wonders, as indeed he did. As we now know, Professor Shrimpton had not found his orchid raris when he made a discovery unbelievably greater. He found the amazing Hocus root.

Perhaps no better account of the actual discovery could be given than that of the professor himself. This was contained in the notes forwarded by him to the Chancellor of Sydney University and quite recently published. In the following relevant extracts from these notes any ponderous passages can perhaps be forgiven, as it was considered inadvisable to interfere with the true narrative form of the diarist.

* * * *

". . . The journey by launch up the Fly River was both pleasant and comparatively uneventful," wrote the professor. "My 'boys' were cheerful and quite prepared for hard and exacting tasks. During the first 300 miles I collected some very beautiful butterflies and did a little research on the Lotus, the flower of which covers the lagoons. The Lotus root is unquestionably good food. Although there are no mosquitoes on the Fly in the daytime, they are a great menace at night, in spite of the nets and oily repellents which I always carry in mosquito areas. Before reaching the junction of the Fly and Strickland Rivers I took some colour film pictures of the rich

* "The Devil's Face," so named because of its Mephistophelian appearance and red "horns." It was first reported by natives and confirmed by a gold fossicker named James Edward Forbes in 1939.

and brilliant D'Albertis creeper* which in places adorns the forest. These beautiful scarlet garlands overhead and the red carpet of fallen blooms are an artistic delight. My boss 'boy,' Kuku, killed a large tree python at this spot just after the reptile had killed a flying-fox and was dining upon it. . . .

". . . As we came at last to the junction of the Strickland, I noticed the intelligent Kuku casting a last look down the Fly. I put my hand on his shoulder understandingly and he turned and smiled most eloquently. He doubtless was wondering what hazards lay before him before he returned home where, I believe, he had a young wife. 'Kuku' is a partly adapted name, as the boy came from the Ku Ku Ku Ku country. He was of nomadic clan, of which there are several types. Our adventures seemed really to be starting when we passed Everill Junction and at last ran into the strong current of the Strickland River.

". . . After several days of travelling, we came to the entrance of Lake Murray, where there are extensive areas of lagoons and giant bamboo swamps. I was almost tempted to explore fully this region, but yielded to the lure of the Strickland's upper reaches, where I believed the 'Devil's Face' might be found. Just past Iungazim I gave my 'boys' each a blanket and a loin cloth. We had a fairly good supply of rice, as well as sago, coconut and sugar cane, as we intended making contact very soon with friendly natives. Kuku was a splendid rifle shot and, at this stage, we were able to vary our diet with wild pig, cassowary, wallaby, cus-cus, pigeons and even crustaceans and Lotus root.

"Two days after leaving Iungazim we made contact with natives. These were rather Jewish-looking men, who received us with formal friendliness, but not at all with

* D'Albertis, the Italian Naturalist and Explorer who made so many botanic discoveries in Papua in 1876, found the exotic scarlet creeper which bears his name to-day.

any show of enthusiasm. They sent their young women into the bush, but when we made further friendly approaches with gifts of pieces of cloth, steel and inexpensive mirrors, they sent their older women forward with small bundles of sago. The men later came along with paradise plumes and decorated arrows. As this was the region I particularly desired as a base for preliminary studies, I got Kuku to make overtures to the native chief. This dignitary regarded the request with suspicion at first, but, after a solemn conference with his people, he advanced and stamped his feet on the ground, signifying that we could camp there. In the scientific sense it was just as well we did, for it was here that I discovered the Hocus root on July 14, 1942. . . .

". . . Up to this stage I had discovered an entirely new fly-catching plant (subject of a separate paper), and had noted other phenomena in growth. My discovery of the Hocus root, however, like so many other discoveries in the field of Nature and Science, was purely accidental. . . .

". . . I was seated in my larger tent, cleaning the magnifying glass of one of my small field microscopes, when I felt what seemed to be an insect run up my leg. This was an unmistakable sensation, yet, on seeking to identify the species before killing the insect, I was amazed to find nothing there. Almost simultaneously I felt similar sensations on my other bare leg, but again discovered absolutely nothing that would account for this. In spite of the lack of what I might call evidence, it seemed to me that I was undoubtedly being bitten by something. It was simply not possible, in the circumstances, to imagine any tropical blood condition setting up such irritation and, in fact, pain.

". . . Was it possible that I was suffering a delayed reaction to an earlier bite or sting? This seemed improbable. I did not remember having been stung by bee, wasp or ant earlier in the day. I had certainly not encountered a stinging tree which is notoriously worse than nettle

in these parts. Yet, even while I painfully speculated on the cause, I was being almost agonised by the effect. Something seemed to crawl up the leg of my short pants and bite me very seriously indeed. It was so bad that I did not have time to remove my pants, but literally tore them off. It was then clear to me that I had been bitten by bull-dog ants just below the knee of the right leg, on the thigh of the left leg, and in other very tender parts of the body. Again feeling another insect crawling, this time over my left hand, I struck sharply at the seat of its activity with the other hand. To my amazement, I saw blood. . . .

". . . As I continued to regard this phenomenon I was surprised to see a crushed bull-dog ant slowly materialising on the hand I had struck. First the head and mandibles, then the body and legs, took form. It became clear that I had severely, if not mortally, wounded this objectionable insect. My first impulse was to rub my eyes and wipe my glasses. I felt absolutely normal and organically well, except for the sharp, throbbing pain of the bites. While still in a state of puzzled curiosity, I noticed on the floor of my tent a number of large ants, or rather what appeared to be living sections of ants, if I might use such an inadequate term. As they moved and as I watched they gradually took the form of complete ants and, in their habitual hurrying way, left my tent by way of a well-worn little trail. As the pain from the bites was now most intense, I had to apply palliatives and was obliged to rest all the next day, still pondering over the riddle of my invisible ants.

". . . Had I been in poor health or a victim of eye-trouble I should perhaps have been less inclined to pursue the subject. But I am healthy, though by no means robust, and, according to my medical friends, I have what they call 'six-six optics,' which is supposed to be good vision. My glasses are only to eliminate glare. It did occur to me, however, that the injection of formic acid from the ants might have in some way temporarily impaired my sight

or even set up a momentary mental disturbance. . . .

". . . The next morning I set out to make a closer study of these strangely behaving ants. Indeed, it turned out to be the most amazing discovery of my life. It was not difficult to trace the ant colony to a piece of high ground about twenty yards from my tent. The ants had colonised near the root of a hardy but very unusual flowering shrub which I had not come across on any other occasion (special paper). I could not remotely place this botanic oddity, which furthermore seemed to be growing and actually flourishing in the centre of a fairly extensive stratum of granite-like rock*. Drawing its sustenance from soil within and possibly beneath this flinty structure, the tree root itself was countersunk. Into this kind of basin thousands of ants sped towards the root of the shrub. I wanted to disturb the ant colony as little as possible, but succeeded in carefully uncovering a section of the root. This was candle-shaped. The flower itself was red and very like a neatly-made miniature drum. Watching the ants scurry into the basin and surge towards the root, I quickly realised that for some reason or other it was one-way traffic. Although thousands of ants were going into the colony, none, so far as I could see, was coming out. And then, a very curious thing happened. A small stick, about as thick as a wooden match, moved, rolled over, moved again, and finally began travelling away from the settlement as if absolutely by itself. This at least confirmed a growing feeling in my mind that ants were leaving as well as entering, but, on their departure, they were invisible. It followed, therefore, that between the time of the ants' arrival and their departure occurred the undoubted phenomenon of invisibility. . . .

* The report on Professor Shrimpton's samples of the rock, made public through the courtesy of the University authorities subsequent to the professor's disappearance, showed it to be very closely resembled to pitchblende (or Uranite), the essential constituent being uranium oxide. This usually occurs as a primary constituent of granites and pegmatites or in the veins of lead, tin and copper minerals.

". . . Frankly, I was thunderstruck and greatly regretted that I had not an entomologist with me. A closer study of the colony revealed that the ants, before going out and sometimes immediately on arrival, fed from the dark, wax-like pith of the root in which could be seen minute particles resembling mineral dust like very small hundreds-and-thousands. The ants' mandibles had made a number of holes in the outer husks and through these a viscous fluid had apparently flowed and then coagulated fairly quickly on contact with the outside atmosphere. Here, indeed, was something to ponder over. On checking the time as likely to be important in later observations and comparative analysis, I found that my usually reliable chronometer wristwatch had stopped. My pocket compass also had been made useless apparently by strong magnetic action. Fortunately I had another wristwatch back in my tent, although I did not possess and did not greatly need another compass.

". . . I searched for a similar shrub and at last found one about 450 yards away, in a very similar setting of granite. Nowhere else, however, did I find another of these shrubs in granite or any other setting, although I searched diligently for miles. To the best of my belief, now, there is no other such shrub in Papua. . . .

". . . After so many years of botanic study, this discovery, so unexpected and remote from my original plan, was electrifying. It completely overwhelmed, for the moment, my interest in orchids or the major aim of my quest for the 'Devil's Face.' Here before me, in a comparatively unexplored part of the world, were conditions and factors that strongly invited experiment on the spot. What was the name of this quaint shrub? None of my 'boys' could tell me. They shook their heads sadly because, in this world of theirs, they derived great joy in being able to enlighten outsiders such as myself. They had never seen such a tree before. Why had my watch stopped and my compass been thrown out of order? Was the root

edible? Did the ants eat it for nourishment or stimulant? Kuku examined the sample I had brought to my tent. He squeezed it, sniffed it cautiously, even ventured to taste it. He rolled his eyes and licked his lips approvingly. 'Him plenty nice kai-kai,' he said. On that testimonial I then tasted some of the more-or-less coagulated paste from the root. It was not unpleasant at all and rather like candied honey, although for some unknown reason my eyes watered a good deal and my heart's action seemed to quicken a little. I wanted to test, as far as possible, the chemical reaction of the ants to the root extract, and late that day, with the aid of my 'boys,' I collected some thousands of ants and crushed them for their formic acid*. I had begun to believe that it must have been some chemical element in the ant, in action with the root gum, that had caused their temporary invisibility. I realise now, however, that possibly some agency or ray within the mineral particles contributed to the phenomenon. It is very unfortunate that, in being compelled to write these notes under great difficulties, I am not able to tender a complete scientific analysis of my discovery. Working on a rough formula and having at least elementarily proved that the alkali of the root partly neutralised the formic acid taken from the ants, I compounded six little test bottles of various strengths and proportions and made a careful record of these.

". . . At 3.58 p.m. on July 16, 1942, I called my 'boys' into my larger tent, explained as best I could that I was experimenting and that, if the doses I was about to administer in the interests of science tasted unpleasant, it would, nevertheless, do them good. I shall never forget how they regarded me with the ingenuous eyes of the trusting and faithful. I explained that in some parts of the world heaps of crushed ants were sometimes placed in the baths of acute rheumatic sufferers, the formic acid

* Formic acid is a colourless, corrosive acid consisting of oxygen, hydrogen and carbon, usually obtained from oxalic acid and glycerine.

giving great relief. I admitted that it was a slightly taller order to ask my loyal natives to take this kind of dose inwardly, even though the formic acid had been to my satisfaction demonstrably neutralised. They, nevertheless, smiled, not quite understanding my inadequate method of elaboration.

". . . I gave each 'boy' a present before asking him to open his mouth and receive the dose directly on the tongue from an aluminium spoon. The first effects were disturbing, as apparently the medicine was not as palatable as I had imagined it to be when made up. The 'boys' made exceptionally wry faces and began to utter what I thought were strangely hostile native sounds. It was very much like a scene in which I myself had figured in childhood when my mother had produced the castor oil bottle and assured me that, no matter how unpleasant it was to take, it would do me good. I reassured the natives, with pats and encouraging smiles, that they would be all right and began to take notes on each individual reaction to the dose I had prescribed. . . .

". . . The first and strongest dose went to Kuku. After a slight paroxysm had subsided, he seemed quite well and undisturbed. Within two minutes of his taking the dose, however, I noticed his face go very red, slowly merging into pink, and then to what I can only describe as opalescence. It was not at all unlike looking at your hand when held closely against an exceptionally strong light.

". . . This condition remained for 32 seconds, when I noticed that his face was slowly fading from sight; first the fleshy parts, then the hair, and lastly the eyes, which had a moment before begun to roll at me a little distrustingly. This was an eerie sensation for me and I became alarmed. Indeed, I find it quite impossible, in writing these notes, to set down my emotions at witnessing this truly remarkable spectacle. It was awesome. I had serious misgivings at having undertaken such a foolhardy experiment and broke out in a cold perspiration. I suddenly

realised the tremendous responsibility I had so rashly undertaken in a field of research where I was really an amateur.

". . . Both botanist and naturalist are accustomed to many so-called phenomena in nature and to many marvellous transitions peculiar to natural evolution. But there was no parallel in nature for the change which had just taken place in Kuku. The nearest instance I could recall at the moment was the chameleon, which assumed the colour of its environs. There were also some of the Coleoptera species which sometimes developed a protective camouflage against attack and even resembled the physical character of leaves, sticks and pieces of bark.

". . . As I noticed Kuku's neck becoming invisible, and then his chest, I had the presence of mind to take his hand.

" 'You feel'm good, Kuku?' I asked. 'You talky-talk all'm right?'

"He held my hand tightly.

" 'Feel'm happy, Taubada. Me bin go longa walky-walk plenty soon,' was all he replied.

"By this time he was to appearances headless, neckless, chestless and, to my incredulous eyes, even his loin cloth had disappeared! By this time I, too, was shaking violently. I was holding a hand I could not see, belonging to an apparently headless, trunkless native.

". . . Even more was added to this nightmarish experience by the bedlam which was now breaking out among my other 'boys' who had taken doses progressively weaker than that administered to Kuku. Doubtless, sensing some danger likely to be no part of the original contract to 'carry food and scientific equipment' for 15/- a month, they began to file out of the larger tent. I must admit that they presented the strangest sight I had ever seen, or am perhaps ever likely to see. One native, Gubo, was almost as bad as Kuku. Only his legs and his large splay feet tottered towards me. Another 'boy' named Wonga was

visible to the shoulders; another was completely without a face; and still another 'boy' advanced fearsomely as a man with eyes and eyebrows but no face! The whole fantastic scene was like a moving picture in which the film had developed great blemishes.

". . . Then began the weirdest moaning imaginable as the human circus moved about me. Knowing the fear of these people of the supernatural, I hoped and felt that they were animated by fear and not pain. Suddenly, however, Kuku's hand was violently wrenched from mine. He was completely invisible and I heard him running and crying. He was soon followed by the others, some of whom were partially visible to me. As they retained the power of sight and speech, the impact on their minds must have been terrific. They crashed into the bamboo thicket, sometimes colliding with one another, as their jabbering and exclamations grew fainter and fainter. I knew instinctively that they would never return to the scene of this black, or should I say 'white,' magic. My grand and loyal 'boys' had deserted me. I was in remote Papua alone! Fortunately, I had a flask of medicinal brandy with me and took a stiff draught to steady my nerves. In doing so, I had an uneasy fear that I might be cheating myself. Now, more than ever, I wanted a clear head. With the association of ideas I remembered that it was once a practice among sailors to drug a man's liquor in order to cheat him. This was called hocussing*. As I virtually had done that to my poor native 'boys'—although with the best of intentions—I decided to name the root I had discovered the Hocus Root. . . ."

* * * *

* Hocus (hō-kus) v.t.; pret. and p.p. hocussed, p. pr. hocussing, to cheat or trick; put drugs into liquor to stupefy a person in order to cheat him; drug liquor; n. a trick, to juggle; drugged liquor. Hocus-Pocus (hō-kus, pō-kus), n. knavery, trickery, deception (said to be, in origin, a derisive distortion of "hoc est corpus," the formula of consecration in the Mass): v.i. to juggle; cheat; v.t. to play tricks on.

(Professor Shrimpton's Notes—Conclusion.)

". . . I had one further unpleasant experience before abandoning my original quest. This, however, was not without scientific benefit. Two nights after the perhaps understandable desertion of my native carriers and guides, I awoke with an uneasy feeling about midnight. I had been very greatly perturbed at the turn things had taken and had slept restlessly. I thought I could detect sounds quite foreign to the usual nocturnal noises of birds and insects to which the ear becomes attuned in these places. Whilst I felt certain that my own 'boys' would not return, I had to remember that there were other natives in a nearby settlement. I was here only on sufferance.

". . . News travels extremely fast in this mysterious, uncivilised country. I had no reason to believe that I could continue to enjoy the privilege of a 'squatter' simply because I had done a little trade with cloth and mirrors for sago and paradise plumes. The Papuan native in some parts is enigmatic. The chief had seen my very considerable stock of barter goods. And undoubtedly I was now alone. I became certain that my sleeping tent was being surrounded. After calling out and receiving no response, I flashed my pocket torch on the surrounding bamboo thicket and nearby trees. I saw the bamboo move in a number of places and fired three shots from my old Great War Mauser. The echo in the night was rather startling. It was not a pleasant experience to feel that an attack was likely at any moment, or, more probably, towards dawn, when human resistance to sleep was lowest. I fought desperately against sleep. . . .

". . . Just as dawn was breaking, a spear ripped through my tent. I was shocked to see that it was bone tipped, suggesting poison. It was very plain now that they wanted to kill me. I dropped beneath my bed, although this offered little extra protection, being simply stout sticks crossed like trestles and upon which rested the poles of my canvas 'mattress.' From here, however, I was able

to peer out. The whole place was teeming with natives. Even as I looked, one native, more venturesome than the rest, stood erect and sent another spear unerringly towards the tent. It went right through. They were closing in on me. I really felt that my last hour had come.

". . . I had no hesitation, therefore, in reaching up for the little jar containing the Hocus root compound. I could not, in the circumstances, be too scientifically exact, but calculated a dose as nearly as possible to that which I had given Kuku. My view, in that moment of crisis, was that retention of life, in any case, was at very long odds. I hastily swallowed the stuff. It was not quite as bad as I had imagined, although my mouth and throat burned sharply and my eyes watered. It was not unlike the honey-and-vinegar compound used to ease sore throats in the days of my childhood, although the 'vinegar' was most predominant. I also gave an involuntary shudder, as if a much stronger man had wrenched me by the shoulders and jerked my head back. . . .

". . . . Another spear tore through the tent fly, missing me by inches, after glancing off my Contax camera dangling on a pole. I thought of those lovely pictures of the D'Albertis creeper which I had intended sending to the 'National Geographic Magazine.' I now began to feel a little dizzy, but certainly had full possession of my faculties. I became a little more acutely conscious of the burning sensation behind my eyes and a sharp tingling sensation, something like pins-and-needles, in my feet and hands. In spite of this, I found that I could use my hands without restriction and, by waggling my toes, knew I had the same control over my feet. I took two or three deep breaths and had no difficulty with respiration. Presently, however, I noticed with a sense of shock that my feet were slowly vanishing, and it was only a few seconds before my hands could not be seen, either. I concluded that in a few more moments I should be completely invisible.

". . . Even knowing that had I remained visible I

should certainly have been killed, I observed the phenomenon of my own change with very mingled feelings. Would I ever return to my normal visible condition? Would I suffer any serious effects if I survived? These were thoughts that sped through my mind, and of course only time could answer them. This was not a moment to be academic. I first had to save my life. There was at least some consolation in knowing that my 'boys' had suffered no pain or other physical handicap. Their mental shock at seeing one another as I had seen them—as living portions of men!—can very well be imagined. Knowing their acute sensitivity to anything regarded as supernatural, I really had grave fears that they might lose their reason. And it was not very comforting to know that I had been the instrument of their undoing. I looked at my spare watch, gave myself a little longer for safety's sake, then stepped boldly into the open.

". . . I was greatly relieved and gratified to realise that my appearance—or perhaps I should say non-appearance—caused no additional concern. As I walked towards the bamboo I saw several very ugly-looking natives squirm through quite close to me, but quite unaware of my presence. They completely surrounded the living tent. In the face of such obvious designs on my life I was pleased to realise for certain that I was invisible. I had advanced 20 or 30 yards when a native with several curious weals on his chest and arms stood up almost directly in front of me and poised a spear to throw at the tent. I calmly advanced and wrenched it from his hand. He spun around several times in amazed terror, had no answer, even in native language, for the violent miracle and dashed for cover, uttering wild shrieks and a kind of yodel.

". . . A few yards away another very evil-looking fellow was inching towards my tent, alternately crouching and lying flat. I studiously awaited until he rose to a crouching position preparatory to making a further slight, stealthy advance. Then, walking up behind him, I care-

fully 'measured' him for a drop-kick and put every ounce of energy into the operation. It was a very interesting spectacle because, almost simultaneously with the impact of my heavy jungle boot on his buttocks, he had begun to rise volitionally. His action, thus stimulated by sudden shock, made him practically fly. He soared eight to ten feet into the air. For a moment the numbness in my right foot made me think I had broken my big toe, so perhaps the unfortunate native's feelings can be imagined. I think I should say here that I am no lover of violence and had no sadistic impulses. And yet I derived no little satisfaction from my first enforced excursion into the realm of invisibility. It must be remembered that a few moments before I had despaired of my life. To the excitement born of crisis I was also suffering some inward reaction to the Hocus root drug. I felt rather stimulated, and my perceptive powers seemed sharper.

". . . I went up to another native who stood, obviously uncertain as to what was happening and doubtless a little unnerved by the strange yodelling of his colleagues in the bamboo. He was fitting a poison bone-tipped arrow into a bow when I suddenly and unblushingly ripped off his loin cloth. My attack was even better than a blow, for he uttered one wild shriek and, turning, tore madly towards a swamp. Swinging round, I found myself beside a native who was standing in a state of bewilderment with his large mouth open. I had no desire to injure this man, so, picking up a large well-rounded stone that lay at my feet, I jabbed it unceremoniously into his mouth. It must have nearly choked him, for he fell backwards, gasping and uttering strange sounds. As soon as he could scramble to his feet, he dashed away shrieking and with his eyes bulging as if the very devil himself were at his heels.

". . . The departure of this man, at the height of the commotion I had caused, marked the complete and providential rout of my enemy. I felt that now I should be safe from further attack, as indeed I was. When I got back

into my tent I found, with a great feeling of relief, that I was beginning to become visible again. I could see my face quite clearly in the mirror. It was, indeed, rather like watching the image of a photographic print slowly strengthening in the developer until fully and clearly visible. I saw my hands and feet also slowly restored to sight in this way. My watch told me that the period of invisibility had lasted a little short of 15 minutes. I felt no ill effects, except a great thirst, which I slaked with care, for I was frightened of the water in these parts, preferring to chlorinate my drinking water.

". . . The problem now before me was to get back to civilisation with my discovery. Without carriers, I naturally had to jettison most of my gear, but I carefully tapped the only two Hocus roots I was able to discover. I also took a number of cuttings from the shrub, together with samples of the surrounding earth and pieces of the granite-like rock peculiar to the region of growth. Altogether, I calculated that I had sufficient of the Hocus root extract for 385 full doses, which would be more than sufficient to take back to Australia for tests and experiments.

". . . Two days later, I broke camp. It seemed useless to hope now that my fear-stricken 'boys' would come back to me. They doubtless would return to the nomadic habits of their fathers, roaming this wide and wild domain of Nature, where food was abundant but life eternally a hazard. At least the intelligent Kuku would have more than a sporting chance of survival if he had retained his reason. I shall always consider I owe him an apology and gratitude for his help and guidance. I had the greatest feeling of sadness at having to go back without the natives. I packed as much food as I could possibly carry for the return journey, and with a good deal of difficulty I eventually reached the launch. Here again, however, I encountered trouble, and it took the whole of one day to get the engine going. Once under way, the return trip was comparatively uneventful, although I realised time and time

again how much an explorer in these parts is dependent on good native guides and helpers.

". . . I frankly did not know what explanation to give for the non-return of my 'boys' with me. To say that I had made them, even temporarily, invisible and that they had been so fear stricken that they had run away, would appear to be utterly fantastic until and unless I had proved the extraordinary power of the Hocus root. Indeed, until my discovery was thoroughly tested by the fullest experiment, I could not proclaim my find anywhere. I finally resolved, therefore, to say as little as possible about the natives' departure until I could make a full and adequate explanation with the announcement of the discovery. I decided to adhere to a literal truth and say that the 'boys' had run away.

". . . I made the journey down the Fly quite safely, although I was very pleased to reach Daru. This island, which juts out between the Gulf of Papua and Torres Strait, was the main point from which I had set out, but I had no qualms about returning prematurely after the failure of my original mission." . . (Rough maps appended.)

II.

PROFESSOR Shrimpton intended to return immediately to Australia. He wanted to proclaim his find to science and to launch a series of careful experiments. Nothing but a crisis of the first magnitude could possibly have thwarted this urgent ambition. Yet, that crisis occurred. The professor had waited at Daru for many weeks before he secured a trip by lugger to Port Moresby, but misfortune befell him there. On its way back to pick him up to take him to the Australian mainland, the auxiliary schooner "Little Tich" was bombed and sunk by the Japanese off Keppel Point.

The war position in the South-West Pacific was growing extremely tense. It was observed that the Japanese were actually attempting what was hitherto thought impossible—the crossing of the formidable Owen Stanley Ranges for an assault on Port Moresby. This, of course, would threaten the safety of Australia. The evacuation of white women and children became necessary and Port Moresby came under very rigid military control. Friends of the professor had offered him a seat in a plane bound for Australia, but he had not flown before and preferred to wait. Furthermore, he felt that he dare not risk the loss of his precious Hocus root.

Moresby was bombed several times by the Japanese and the professor spent many anxious moments in an inadequate bomb shelter. Once he was caught while in the open and spent 35 minutes in a slit-trench watching bombs drop from the very high-flying Japanese raiders.

His aversion from flying and the danger of slower sea transport made him begin to doubt whether he would be able to escape alive. In these circumstances, however, he was relieved to find that few people in Moresby were very interested in the possible fate of the 'boys' who had set out with him on his voyage of discovery. Their own imperative concern was how much nearer the Japs were likely to get to Moresby over the great mountain obstacle.

He accepted the hospitality of Mr. Gilbert Graham, well-known New Guinea planter and nature-lover. This gentleman kindly gave him a room in which to sort up and label his botanic specimens. He was thus able to compound 50 or 60 reasonably exact doses of Hocus root, leaving a carefully-sealed bottle of the concentrate for later use and experiment. It was at Mr. Graham's home, virtually an open house to military officers in those days, that he met General Browsing, who was in charge of the Australian Garrison. This meeting changed the whole life of Professor Shrimpton.

"The very man I wanted to meet, professor," said the General, briskly and genially. "As an explorer you can tell us about the flora and fauna here. There's a hell of a lot we don't know much about and I think we can improve the natural camouflage possibilities. We want details about the rivers, mountains and the water in these regions. Our men need more adequate instruction on local conditions."

The professor looked a little frightened.

"I shall be pleased to help all I can, of course, General, but I am more of a theoretical than a practical naturalist. I am only a botanist."

The General poured himself a double-header whisky and drank it neat with one gulp.

"Nonsense!" he said robustly, slapping the glass on the table. "I'll enlist you in the morning."

The professor cleared his throat uneasily. Vigorous people unnerved him. He was married to a very vigorous

woman. Her actions of positive, uncompromising finality were exactly like those of the General.

"Enlist? Heavens, I don't want to be a soldier," he said, timorously.

The General was glowering at him. It was something like a bull lowering his head before he charged.

"Rubbish, Sir! We need you. Your country needs you! It's your duty, man!"

The professor swallowed, a little awkwardly.

"Of course, I shall help all I possibly can, seeing that we are at war, but—but—"

"We'll give you Captain's rank, professor," interrupted the General, disregarding all other considerations.

The professor gulped.

"Thank you, but—I—think I should explain that I was taking most important botanic specimens from Papua to Australia."

The General scowled as he dashed himself off another whisky. He paused before drinking it.

"They can wait! Besides, if the Japs get over the Owen Stanleys at us, specimens of anything won't count a damn. They are creeping up on the other side and they are lumping 25-pounders and mortars with them. We've *got* to stop them!"

Again the professor showed nervous embarrassment. He had never been a good bargainer. At home, decisions had always been made for him. The General seemed to be doing the same thing. He had no resistance. He had always preferred the uncertainties of botanic adventure to the certainties of domestic subjection. His wife would have made a truly magnificent general. Here, it seemed, was a typical domestic set-up. He was being directed. He fired his last small cartridge at the General, but not with the easy indifference he imagined. It was, in fact, a blank.

"It's very kind of you, General, to offer me a commission, but I feel obliged to report back to the financial

sponsors of my orchid expedition before joining you in any capacity in which I can be of service."

General Browsing again slammed his whisky glass on the table and sent it skidding towards the decanter.

"Damn it all, man, that's balderdash and rubbish! An enemy doesn't wait for the niceties of conduct or professional ethics. He's doing his infernal best to exterminate us—"

He paused, sensing a soft spot in the professor's psychological armour.

"—And your precious specimens wouldn't be worth a thimble full of cold water. On the other hand, the Japs might have good use for them."

It worked like a charm. Capture of the Hocus root was absolutely unthinkable. To be on the verge of proclaiming the most startling scientific find of the century and to be thwarted by enemy action, just could not be remotely entertained. Here was something that had to be fought for. He made up his mind at once.

"Very well, General; I shall join you in the morning. I shall cable my wife as soon as I am attested."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the General, pumping the professor's hand until he visibly winced. "You can do a damn fine job with us. The sooner the better."

The professor smiled, a little wryly.

Next morning he cabled his wife:—

"HAVE ENLISTED A.I.F. RANK CAPTAIN STOP NO LEAVE AT LEAST SIX MONTHS IMPORTANT WAR JOB LOVE—ERNEST."

He received a reply the next day. It said:—

"NOTHING SURPRISES ME STOP DON'T FORGET ALLOTMENT—MABEL."

The Army doctor who examined the professor told the General at lunch that he had passed Shrimpton "Fit 'A'—Botanically." He was not expected to be in the

front-line warrior class with much younger men. He had, as a matter of fact, cut a rather forlorn picture, standing before the M.O. in singlet and underpants. There was no uniform quite small enough to fit him at Q.M. stores, the nearest size in tropical shorts being three sizes too large. He was only 5 feet 1 inch in height and, naturally, caused a little amusement among the hardy Australian troops when he first moved amongst them.

During his first week or so as instructor he told them a great deal that would be useful when it came to living as well as fighting in the jungle. He was not particularly impressive to the Diggers as a lecturer, but they were keen to know all about local trees, grasses and plant life; what species were best to tap for water and how to live, if necessary, on such food as snakes, grubs, snails and frogs. He told them something about natural camouflage and the dangers of movement in the long lalang or sword grass. The Diggers called him "Atom." They thought he wasn't a bad little guy, though comic as a circus.

History can tell us freely now how the Japanese did cross the Owen Stanleys, reaching their farthest point in mid-September, 1942. The Australians, however, struck first from the Port Moresby side. That fine adventurous manœuvre must always be associated with Captain Ernest Shrimpton. At his own request, he had gone out with an advanced scouting patrol of six, mainly as their advisor on local conditions in the forward area. It was not long before the patrol came upon evidence of the wily, enigmatic Jap, and they had to move more cautiously.

Around the roots of trees the Japs had burrowed holes and built up the sides of these natural fortresses with earth and gravel. The spaces between the uncovered roots were used as windows. Fortunately, these crude but effective "pill-boxes" had been hastily evacuated, although there could be no mistaking the ingenuity of their more recent occupiers. A number of Australian mortar bombs had made life untenable for the Japanese here. Evidence

of hasty retreat was to be found in the accumulation of abandoned gear, small arms ammunition, steel helmets, lewd postcards, empty wine and whisky bottles, and freshly-cooked rice.

Most surprising to the patrol were the maze of holes and tunnels, all ingeniously interconnected. The enemy must have lived like animals in fox holes. Several dead Japanese were sprawled in the ridiculous attitudes that war sometimes decrees. The patrol was caught by a fierce tropical downpour which left them as clammy and sodden as the steaming jungle itself. They sloshed through mud for more than an hour and were grateful, a little later, to reach a fairly extensive area of sword grass. With several feet of this dense grass above them, they were afforded effective concealment, although movement was very quickly signalled to the enemy in this vegetation. Now, more than ever, they were obliged to go forward with the greatest care, and it was not long before they heard voices. The jabbering in Japanese was unmistakable. Edging closer, they were able to see the busy but ugly little men hastily building dug-outs and other advance fortifications with felled tree trunks. One or two of the enemy could be plainly seen pedalling frantically from one point to another on their inevitable black bicycles which bore white Japanese characters on the mudguards.

Sergeant Dorset, next in rank to Captain Shrimpton and a very good jungle soldier, crawled closer to the party and whispered to the men:

"We daren't go any closer. They'll swipe the lot of us."

Captain Shrimpton retrieved his glasses, which had toppled off his nose.

"Why not, Sergeant?" he asked.

The Sergeant and his men muttered almost unintelligible oaths, the right of the soldier in tight places.

"Gawd! We're not a bloomin' suicide squad. I reckon it's our duty to get back to the next line and pass

on the good oil. The batteries will want the range."

With annoying calm, Captain Shrimpton compressed the pores of his left hand to entrap a mosquito which had dared to bite him in daylight. When he spoke he seemed a little under the influence of this preoccupation. He wondered if the mosquito was malarial, as he had forgotten to study its tell-tale tilt.

"We distinctly saw a Japanese officer with a very important-looking map, Sergeant."

"What about it, Captain?"

"I want that map, that's all."

The combined splutter of the little patrol nearly gave their position away to the enemy. Crouching together, the men gazed at each other with eloquent inaudibility.

"The 'Atom's' gone troppo," said one of the men out of the corner of his mouth. "He's nuts. He's gone haywire. They shouldn't have let him muscle in on this outfit."

The Sergeant clenched his teeth, but spoke ominously through parted lips.

"There's hundreds of them Japs over there within a spit of us, and they're prob'ly all around us," he said. "How can we attack them?" adding "Sir" as an obligatory afterthought. He was feeling the awful frustration of inferior rank when he was quite certain he knew best. An insignificant little botanist in a soldier's uniform could become a damn menace. Galling indeed were those three commanding pips on Shrimpton's shoulders.

Captain Shrimpton seemed to be thinking for an eternity. His men would very much like to have strangled him during this suspense.

"I don't intend to attack the enemy," he said, presently. "But I think we should have that Japanese officer's map and any other evidence that might reveal the enemy's strength, equipment or intentions."

Not one of his men made any remark. What they thought of him, in the good Digger way of thinking about

these things, would probably infringe the Indecent Publications Act, anyway. A speechless Digger is a pretty annoyed person, for he has inherited no inhibitions or vocal restraints. Sergeant Dorset's eyes narrowed as he looked at the small, nature-loving professor of botany, wearing the tantalising uniform of a Captain. But Sergeant Dorset did not speak either.

"Mind you, Sergeant," continued the Captain, "I do not wish to place this patrol in any further danger. This is purely an advance mission. I want you to go back."

The patrol men's sigh was audible, like air escaping from a suddenly punctured tyre.

"Yes, I think we should all go back and report," said the Sergeant, a little more eagerly than he had intended.

"No, no, not *we*, Sergeant—*YOU*. I myself am going to get the Japanese officer's map and any other military —er—bric-a-brac."

Again the exchange of questioning glances among the men. Again the narrowing of Sergeant Dorset's expressive eyes.

"I can't question *you*, Sir, but I think that would be suicide."

"Oh, I don't think it will be as drastic as that, Sergeant."

"I hope not, Sir. Do you order us back and are you determined to go through with this skirmish alone?"

"Most assuredly, Sergeant Dorset. I order you to return, and I do hope you get back safely," said the strange little Captain.

"O.K. If that's the way you want it, that's how it's going to be, Sir."

Even Sergeant Dorset, tough warrior that he was, felt he was shaking the hand of a dead man as he farewelled the Captain and, with his quite willing colleagues of the advance patrol, squirmed away through the lalang.

"And I do hope you get back safely," mimicked one of the men when they had reached safety.

"Perhaps he wants to say behind and pick some jungle daisies," suggested another.

"I don't know about that," said Dorset, shaking his head, "but it won't be long, if he goes any further, before he's pushing them up."

* * * *

When the patrol was safely out of sight, Captain Shrimpton calmly unbuttoned his tunic pocket, took one of the doses of Hocus which he had prepared and swallowed it without the slightest hesitation. This time, he thought, it was something like swallowing an A.P.C. powder without the benefit of a glass of water to wash it down. As he timed its action by his watch and waited for the tingling sensations he had felt when he made his first rather daring experiment on the Strickland, he resolved to make up any later doses in some pill or capsule form if possible. All things considered, it was an extremely risky thing to do, to place oneself so readily under the potent drug when so little was known about it.

As on the previous occasion, he presently felt the burning sensation behind his eyes and the rather rapid tingling in his feet and hands. This time, however, he saw his hands disappear first. Producing his pocket mirror, he saw that his face was fading rapidly from his own sight. His feet, on this occasion, were the last to fade out. It was at least interesting to know that the drug did not always act in precisely the same way. That would be important when it came to laboratory tests. Satisfied beyond doubt that he was completely invisible, he stood up, a little gingerly at first, and ambled towards the Japanese.

Under a very ugly and bandy little officer not much bigger than himself, Shrimpton saw about 30 or 40 Japanese soldiers of the peasant or worker type frantically digging a trench, along the top of which they had felled a tree. The frenzied speed of this work would have shocked any good unionist. They were making a sapling

roof and doubtless intended to cover this with earth as another jungle fortress. Walking a little more boldly now, Shrimpton was pleased to realise that his presence was undetected by the enemy. He calmly took complete mental stock of their activities, noted the exact location of all their strongposts and made a hasty survey of the local conditions and terrain. This was truly an excellent beginning. He was engrossed in the ant-like haste and method of the Japanese, when an officer, hurrying to direct more Japanese soldiers who were dragging a tree trunk, bumped heavily into the professor.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Shrimpton absentmindedly, although he quickly realised his mistake.

The Japanese recoiled as if struck and turned round a number of times to see if anyone was behind him. Seeing no one, he made certain strange, excited sounds and a dozen soldiers, jabbering excitedly, scrambled towards him. Shrimpton left them clustered around the officer, who appeared to be holding some kind of Grand Inquisition. They examined the ground about where he had stood and then paid great attention to a tree near where the unfortunate collision with the professor had occurred. They examined this also with great interest, walked around it several times, tapped and scratched it, and even scanned the top to see if there was any answer to the mystery there. Finally they vigorously chopped it down. Even then the officer who had bumped into Shrimpton seemed to be continually uneasy and constantly looked behind him.

Shrimpton then noticed the officer he had seen with the map and decided at once to annexe this military treasure. There was no more to it than that. He approached the unsuspecting Japanese and snatched the map from his hands. This also produced quite an exciting and amazing scene. The officer made a grab at it as it left his hands and the professor fumbled and dropped it. Both stooped to pick it up, but the Japanese retrieved it first. He was shocked, however, when it was once again violently

snatched from his possession. Then, to his further embarrassment, he saw this map folding itself into smaller sections and finally disappear as the professor popped it into his pocket. The sound he uttered was something between an exclamation, a command and hysteria, if one can judge hysteria in a Japanese. He apparently ordered all the soldiers from the trench, but, as they promptly lined up in front of it, Shrimpton went briskly forward and pushed each man backwards into it again, like a row of skittles. He finished this highly successful manœuvre with a well-timed kick at the rear of the commanding officer. Humiliated beyond endurance by the mad fantasy of disobedience and chaos, the officer cast one long look at the heavens, then, lifting his tunic, produced a sheath-knife and committed hari kari. This act was not a pretty sight at any time, and Captain Shrimpton was horrified at the ugly thoroughness of the Japanese in his desire to get away from the scene of his failure and meet his forefathers and brothers at the Shinto shrine.

The whole jungle now became alive with shrieks, commands, exclamations and, which was dangerous for Shrimpton, haphazard gun-fire. Somebody was bound to get hurt. Completely panicked, they fired indiscriminately at the ground and into the air. Twice bullets whanged past Shrimpton's ears. Many Japanese fell dead and wounded at their own hands. It was much nicer, thought the professor, to have the enemy killing themselves than to be under the painful necessity of doing it for them.

At the height of the confusion another high Japanese officer arrived on a bicycle and stopped a few feet from Shrimpton. Dismounting, he let his cycle fall against the professor, who had no option but to hold it erect for a moment or two. The Japanese was about to bark an order to his excited officers, N.C.O.'s and men when he suddenly realised that his cycle had not fallen over but, miraculously, had remained standing as if against a wall! He blinked

and started perceptibly. Shrimpton calmly wheeled the machine to a nearby tree and leaned it against this, while the officer simply gaped in amazement at the almost human behaviour of his very ordinary mass-produced cycle.

Captain Shrimpton now deemed it advisable to retire because, although the weird and tragic pantomime which he had caused did not take long, he was threatened with a return to visibility. He correctly adjudged that the renewed tingling sensations in his feet, hands and eyes which had presaged the onset of invisibility also signalised a return to the normal. This would mean death. He ransacked a few pockets of the dead for Japanese diaries, took a very fine two-edged sword from another officer who rushed up brandishing it, but dashed away even more quickly when it was grabbed from his hands. He selected a couple of cameras, two haversacks, a leather despatch case, and as many helmets as he could conveniently carry. The enemy was undoubtedly in full retreat at this stage, and Captain Shrimpton nonchalantly set out to find the nearest patrol.

After a couple of hours of heavy going, in which he slipped and fell into the mud a dozen times, gathering up his trophies of war each time, he came across another patrol just setting out on a flanking excursion. He was able to pass on some very useful information and obtained a lift by military truck back to Port Moresby.

Looking more like a small, harried pedlar weighed down with household odds and ends, than a commissioned officer of the Australian Imperial Forces, he shuffled into headquarters to find that he had been mourned for dead. His name was on the list "Posted Missing." Sergeant Dorset had given a faithful and accurate account of Captain Shrimpton's self-sacrificing decision to make the last dangerous sortie into the enemy lines alone. His report concluded ". . . Captain Shrimpton is, or rather was, the bravest man I ever met as a soldier."

General Browsing, no less than his officers and N.C.O.'s, gaped as Captain Shrimpton calmly dumped his assortment of war trophies with a jangle on the map-room table. The General's eloquence was confined to two very expressive words.

"Bloody magnificent!" was all he said, as he ran a quickly-appraising eye over the booty and then surveyed the diminutive Shrimpton incredulously.

Relieved of his burden, Shrimpton hitched the belt of his oversize trousers and shifted a little from one foot to the other.

"I rather thought the *map* was necessary," he said ingenuously, a little embarrassed at the beaming gaze that all were now bestowing on him. "It required a bit of careful scouting and—er—scuffling. A few Japanese were shot in the excitement—"

He was interrupted by a smack on the back from the General. This caused him to cough, gasp for breath, and stumble, during which the glasses fell from his nose.

"*Major* Shrimpton," said the General cryptically, when the hero had retrieved his spectacles. "You have saved Moresby. By that, I mean you have also probably saved Australia. You will be recommended for a suitable decoration."

Shrimpton smiled nervously and not without a little, quite understandable embarrassment.

"Surely it's not *that* important, General," he said simply.

The General waved aside the question.

"Your actions and my actions speak louder than words, Shrimpton. I don't mince matters. You've done a great job."

Shrimpton had wanted desperately to explain about the Hocus root, but found that he simply could not bring himself to do so. He feared ridicule at any time, but in this tense setting of war, with an overpoweringly robust

general ready for searching inquisition, he felt it better to keep his secret until a more convenient occasion. At the moment it was essentially a personal matter, and there was much experimenting to be done. Had there been great known quantities of the Hocus root available, the whole New Guinea Army could have swept through the enemy lines like an army of ghosts. He would have been glad, indeed, to introduce such a "Secret Weapon." But, with the small quantity of Hocus in his possession, and even this necessary for tests, the only reasonable thing to do was to say nothing.

Although over age for these stirring front-line operations, Major Shrimpton insisted on continuing his work in the New Guinea war areas. On two other occasions he distinguished himself by lone, courageous excursions right into the enemy lines. He never returned empty-handed. Always he brought information and invariably a few trophies, as he said, "to mark the occasion."

Time after time, solely on Major Shrimpton's uncannily-accurate information, the enemy was beaten, sometimes by direct bayonet charge, sometimes by mortar fire, and not infrequently by rapid encirclement. Once, he came across two Japanese soldiers playing cards with their curious, oblong packs. Approaching from behind, he would make a funny little sound. When the Japanese jumped up and turned in the direction of the sound, he would dart round the other way and alter the cards they had played. When they sat down to play again, they apparently accused each other of cheating and very nearly came to blows. Finally, Shrimpton gave each soldier a resounding smack on the face. They were at each other's throats in no time and rolled over and over as they fought, bit and scratched each other. He developed another form of interest for his invisible, war-like moments. He would take a whole bag-full of grenades and idly toss one into any pill-box opening that presented itself or amongst Japanese

soldiers wherever he found them congregated. Military records, of course, show how effective these attacks really were, but Major Shrimpton declared that as many of the enemy died of shock as were "disposed of" (the Major's own words).

For his continued daring and unparalleled bravery Shrimpton received his Colonelcy and the Victoria Cross. According to the citation he ". . . showed great gallantry, coolness and daring in penetrating the enemy lines single-handed, gaining invaluable information and causing death, havoc and panic among the Japanese . . ."

III.

NATURE exacted a price for Colonel Shrimpton's epic jungle adventures. He came out of New Guinea not only with a V.C., but also with malaria, from which, being a man of very poor physique, he very nearly died. Double pneumonia supervened and, but for the blessing of the new sulphanilamide drugs, he would almost certainly have perished. At his own request he secured his discharge from the Army. Never had such a little man done so much for so many. He was a jungle tradition, truly a mighty "Atom." Among the Diggers he was a front-line synonym for "Guts." He had set a heart-breaking standard for advance patrol work. He was by general consent and in literal truth "out on his own." He eventually reached Australia in November, 1942.

The previous six months had undoubtedly been the most eventful period in an otherwise fairly serene professional life. His home life had never been exactly serene. It seemed almost nightmarish, he reflected, to realise that from being a somewhat obscure personality, always fearful of the limelight, he had become, almost overnight, an Empire figure through his very simple military exploits. He held the highest possible award for bravery and yet he felt very far from brave as he returned home.

Actually, Colonel Shrimpton needed bravery. He and his wife practically ran a war of their own. They were incompatibles. She was a big, dominating, round-faced woman, with a strident manner and a rude tongue. Shrimpton, of course, was much below average height and likely to be very upset by rudeness in any form. At home he flew a truce. He was a peace-at-any-price man.

He liked to weigh the full value of each word before uttering it, but his wife shot them out like pom-pom bursts.

Only a few weeks before he set out for Papua on the orchid expedition, which his wife called "gallivanting among buttercups," she had unblushingly called him "a puny, good-for-nothing little prawn" and, as her uncontrollable temper rose, "a rat-faced weasel" simply because he broke a cup when washing up.

"My dear," he said, "I wish you would try to curb that language. It doesn't become you."

"Bah!" she exploded and sloshed the soap into the sink. "I'll say exactly what I like. You're just a buttery-fingered little wart!"

He felt intensely shocked and annoyed, but was thankful that he, at least, had mastery over himself, if not over his wife.

"It's your choice of words, Mabel," he said quietly, as he carefully wiped the cutlery and slipped each piece into the drawer. "If you choose to call me a prawn and a weasel and a wart in the same breath you show a poor regard for metaphor and a grammatical and factual looseness which does not become you at all."

She spun round with a rush of air like a suction pump which threatened to draw him in.

"Well, put it any way you like, but you're all of those things to me, so shut up!"

He removed his apron and quietly retired to his study. Before the war, that was the way they usually lived and that was the way he usually escaped to his study after wiping the dishes.

On his return to Australia as Colonel Shrimpton, V.C., with a Press loud in praise of him and a permanent place in military history, he found his wife almost friendly, if not affable. A little of the reflected glory momentarily softened her. It was quite pleasant to be known at the bridge club as "the wife of Colonel Shrimpton." She often heard women friends whispering among themselves.

"He's a V.C., you know. Frightfully brave and all that." She was often referred to obliquely but quite unmistakably as "that brave Colonel Shrimpton's wife" when attending meetings of the Feminist Society. This was all very nice indeed and quite flattering really, especially when the Colonel was not actually present to disturb her inherent complexes about him. Shrimpton, to her, brave or cowardly, military or botanic, was undoubtedly a "complex."

The meeting of her warrior, fresh from his jungle exploits, placed her in a very difficult position. Measured by current social standards, it was her duty to meet him just after winning the Victoria Cross for bravery in action. But she was shocked to see how much weight he had lost as the result of illness. He was one man in the world who positively could not afford to lose any weight. He was wearing tropical shorts, an ill-fitting tunic and slightly oversize pith helmet. To add to her embarrassment, he tripped over his dangling camera case as he came forward to kiss her. He knocked his own as well as his wife's hat off, just as half a dozen press cameras recorded the touching return of a hero to his loved one. He stammered his apologies and kissed her on the forehead. She managed to smile indulgently because she could do nothing else, but the unfortunate incident had not been unharmful to poise, dignity and moral fibre. Fame, like the polish on a front door-step, wears off in time.

Within six weeks of his discharge Colonel Shrimpton returned to professorial duties and to the former inconspicuous place in his own home. He decided to forsake the courtesy title of Colonel, which he could have retained in civil life. He preferred to be known again as Professor Shrimpton. That was the name on his door at the University.

Through all the vicissitudes of New Guinea he had kept the secret of the Hocus root well. He kept his diary and other notes under lock and key, but, unfortunately,

his cuttings from the Hocus plant, and some of the samples of rock and earth, were lost in transit from New Guinea. The remaining Hocus root compound he had made up into exact doses in easily soluble gelatine capsules. He decided to keep at least eight of these always in his cigar case. It would be unwise, he thought, to proclaim his discovery now, without sufficient data upon which to base experiments, so he set about writing the simple facts with the aid of his diary. This meant two or three hours of very painstaking work each night. As soon as he had done the dishes after the evening meal he went straight to his study.

Unfortunately, his wife did not always leave him the solitude of his own room. Lately, she had been using his old leather chair when she wanted to read the paper each night. In normal circumstances this was endurable, but he felt that his work on the Hocus root paper merited his close, undivided attention. His wife's vigorous rustling of the newspaper and her unsolicited commentaries on the news were unsettling, especially as she went briskly from one topic to the other without dwelling seriously on anything she read.

"What are you writing now?" she would ask, while her face was buried in the paper. "Oh, about pretty flowers, I suppose. Mrs. Tilbury had a lovely bunch of roses given to her by Mr. George Lawson yesterday. He grows them at Chatswood. I think there's a bit of a romance developing there if you ask me."

The professor was going to speak, when his wife followed up her wordy ramble.

"They're talking far too much about this New Order. We've got to win the war first, haven't we? Let's talk about the New Order then. Mrs. Crawford is going to have another baby. Serves her right. I hope it's triplets. She deliberately snubbed me in the tram last week. Not that *she* has anything to be stuck up about, although she has a very nice husband; big, square-shouldered, manly; far too good for the likes of her. Another baby will keep

her quiet for a while . . ."

The professor sighed audibly. Then he picked up his pen and began to write.

"The environs of our first camp on the Strickland River," he wrote.

"I always did like *big* men," his wife continued cynically.

He continued to write—

". . . were mostly swamp, with an abundance of bamboo and oak . . ."

She said "Particularly *manly* men."

He wrote "particularly manly bamboo," glared at his mistake and then at his wife. She was behind her paper. Presently he put down his pen.

"Mabel, I do wish you would let me write without interruption in my own study. This work of mine is important. It *could* be quite the most important thing in our lives."

She came out from behind the paper rather like a white hippopotamus as interested in the spectators as they were in it. She was surprised at his daring.

"Really."

"Well, I made very important discoveries on the Strickland and I want to write them up."

She sniffed, as many women do as a register of contempt.

"The love life of a fuchsia, I suppose."

"That's an absurd remark, Mabel. It has nothing to do with the love life of anything."

"I don't suppose so," she said scornfully.

He saw that to continue the argument he would, as usual, be addressing a blank wall. She had gone down again, like a disappearing gun, behind the paper and was rustling it most annoyingly. Thoughtfully, he removed his glasses and began polishing them and thinking.

Without a certain amount of solitude it was going to be extremely difficult to present the wonders of the Hocus

root to an even more wondering world. He was not quite himself to-night. The more he endeavoured to control his feelings the more he was annoyed by his wife's heavy breathing, her rustling of the paper, and her wholly inadequate comments on worldly affairs. Army life had probably brought more botany than brute out of him, but the atmosphere of manly tradition had left a useful imprint on his character. The Army had a way of getting things done and to hell with obstacles. The General's mess jest used to be "War's dying down a bit, send Shrimpton out for half a dozen Japs!" Well, here, biting the end of a pen, was the same Shrimpton. He had felt rather than proclaimed lately, that sooner or later there would have to be an "understanding." That was a better word than "showdown," for practically the same result as he was thinking about. He most desperately, at this moment, wanted to be alone. He had, in the purely professional sense, always wanted to be alone. Now it was plainly his duty to be alone. He was, however, not without some capacity for self-analysis. He knew that his discovery tended to become an obsession until it was properly set down, documented and acknowledged by science. He needed a confidante as an outlet for the surge of inquiry stemmed within him. But now, lacking this outlet, the subject was introverted. He wanted to keep the whole thing to himself. The time was not ripe. It threatened to become over-ripe if he should have to suffer the frustrations caused by a nagging wife, wantonly trespassing on the privacy of his own study.

Probably fewer words had been spoken by him in this study than by any other man in Australia. This was essentially the domain of the mind. His wife's presence, in these circumstances, was almost a physical assault. The worm had at least a legal right to turn. He came out of this soliloquy with a decision quietly but determinedly made. Though purely a defensive strategy, it had offensive objectivity. His cigar case was in his inside pocket. In

that case there were eight very precious gelatine capsules. He tapped his pocket to make quite sure they were there and then cleared his throat.

"Mabel, did it ever occur to you, I wonder, that you are a rather self-centred and selfish woman?"

There was almost a paroxysm behind the wall of wrinkled newspaper.

"What!"

The paper crumpled on to the floor as if it, too, had gone limp after a mauling. Instinctively Shrimpton steeled himself for some kind of impact. If there had been any seconds in the ring, this was the time for them to get out. He, nevertheless, remained looking at her as she sat, rigid-backed, with the glint of war in her eyes. His own rather thin, colourless lips were compressed purposefully but not belligerently.

"I said you were a selfish woman, Mabel," he resumed, bravely.

Although sitting, her clenched fists came at once to the "ready" on her ample hips. Her lower lip, now protruding, signalled that she accepted the challenge.

"You little twirp! For two pins I'd put you across my knee and smack your bottom. *You*, to tell *me*, that I'm self-centred and selfish—"

He was actually smiling. His face showed a little of the bravado of laugh-clown-laugh, a little of the spirit of in-for-a-penny-in-for-a-pound. Nevertheless, he was plainly and imperturbably smiling.

"Well, that is what I said, my dear. And I want to tell you something else while I am about it. Your selfishness and your apathetic attitude towards me will probably bring their own reward. It would serve you right if I were suddenly spirited away from you, until you came to your senses."

She stood up, slowly, deliberately. Her heavy arms hung menacingly from her large, well-rounded shoulders.

"You—you—you drumstick! If I thought you *could* be

spirited away I'd never want possession of my senses again. You *dare* to speak to me like that."

He stood up, facing her across the no-man's land of his study desk. After smiling at her serenely, he calmly walked towards the door. As he did so, with his back to her, he extracted a capsule from his cigar case and popped it into his mouth. Although he felt that her gaze was almost burning into his back with its intensity of antagonism, he deliberately locked his study door and threw the key on the desk in front of her.

"What's wrong? Are you completely mad?"

"On the contrary, I'm very sane."

"What's the idiotic idea of locking the door?"

"I am going to spend a quiet night, writing, that's all."

With narrowed eyes, she tried to read his real intentions in his face.

"That's what *you* think! You have forgotten to lock me outside and I'd like to see you try."

He smiled. It was becoming a very provocative smile.

"I intend, henceforth, to spend my time in my study in my own way, and without any interruption."

She sneered.

"I'll come into this study as often as I like."

She went towards the desk to pick up the key, but suddenly stopped and gasped.

"Your face! It's—it's not all there!"

"Nonsense, Mabel. You must be seeing things. Whatever have you been eating—or drinking!"

She blinked as she fearfully regarded him and ran the back of her hands over her eyes and forehead.

"Your face, I tell you! I can't see it at all!" she cried hysterically. "You've lost your hands, too!"

She began to sway.

"Quickly! I feel faint!"

He was beside her in a moment, genuinely solicitous, a little guilty and yet not without a certain distant sense

of satisfaction. He eased her back into the very chair from which she had earlier launched her wordy barrage against his solitude and peace of mind. He loosened the large cameo brooch at her neck, took the key of the study, unlocked the door and quickly obtained a glass of water and her smelling salts. She was like a boxer recovering more from a knock-down than a knock-out when he returned. She heard the busy patter of well-meaning slippered feet, yet all she saw as the footsteps approached from the kitchen was a glass of water most obligingly travelling towards her through space. She shook her head and blinked. She actually cried out when a tender, invisible arm encircled her neck while the glass was held to her lips. She spluttered into the glass and spilt some of the cold water down her neck.

"Ernest! Ernest! Can *you* see me?" she gasped as soon as she regained her breath after drinking.

"Certainly, Mabel. There is nothing to be alarmed about."

His voice was reassuringly calm.

"But you *can* see me?" she insisted on knowing again.

"Perfectly," he replied sympathetically.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she said, breaking into hysterical sobs. "I'm blind! Ernest, I'm stone blind!"

She broke down completely as he escorted her to bed.

"You definitely are *not* blind, Mabel, and you will be quite all right in the morning," he assured her. "The atmosphere of my study must have affected you."

"No, Ernest, I'm blind. I shall never see again."

"Nonsense. You saw other things in my study, didn't you? You can see your dressing-table and the things on it?"

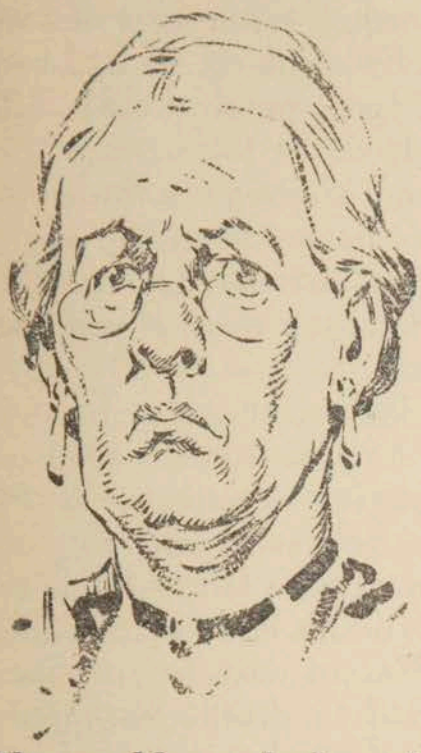
"Only partially," she said, taking one swift look and burying her face in her hands. "I'm going blind. I couldn't even see *you* at all."

"Probably an unknown pollen or dust on the samples from New Guinea in my study," suggested the professor.

"You doubtless have an acute allergy, reacting through the nasal passages on the optic nerves. Until we can identify the disturbing element it might be safer to keep away from my study."

She tottered like a tipsy woman onto her bed and moaned herself to sleep. Even then, there had been no evidence that she took her fancied blindness as poetic justice; or that she recalled, in her moment of anguish, that her husband had warned her of some such punishment for the invasion of his privacy. Perhaps, in her waking moments, she would give some thought to this and its significance in the domestic sense. She awoke, beholding again the miracle of sight, a little bit shaken, but with a normal appetite for breakfast.

It took four specialists to assure her that she was practically in perfect health. She believed that she had merely fainted at the unexpectedly resistant attitude of her husband; the savage bite of a turning worm. She developed a fear complex about the professor's study. She had a woman in to clean it out once a week; even held her breath when passing the closed door, lest she inhale the deadly Papuan dust of blindness to which she was so pathetically allergic.



IV.

THE near crisis in Professor Shrimpton's life disturbed him a good deal. Even with his study now entirely to himself he felt that he was developing a kind of claustrophobia. He was being hemmed in. The trouble might have been due to his wife, but he no longer liked his house. It was too small. He wanted space. He wanted more freedom. He was writing up the history of the Hocus root discovery and felt that, all things considered, it was going well. Against the outflowing tide of scientific knowledge, however, there was a stronger current running against him. He could not specifically isolate this as discontent. He was not exactly unhappy. He was emotionally a neutral. Very definitely, however, he wanted a change of residence. Some people, after living in one house for years, found a mere change of home, even in the same street or suburb, as good as a holiday.

The nature-lover within him sought the harmony of trees and the music of birds. He wanted a house in a setting like that. Since the quarrel with his wife he wanted such a house and grounds more urgently. It became almost an obsession. He day-dreamed frequently, imagining that he was being awakened by the chirping of birds and the rich, throaty laugh of the kookaburra. It had always been a kind of ideal, never within sight of fulfilment.

And yet, in his own more-or-less seven ages of man, he reminded himself that, generally speaking, he had been able to realise most ambitions. Neatly pigeon-holed in his mind was the memory of an early desire to own a pair of roller skates. He obtained them, although a little dishonestly, by doing a duller boy's home lessons for nearly a month. He broke his leg on his first skating lesson. It just went to show how, in some fatalistic way, he had been made to pay for his dishonesty.

Then he clearly recollected cherishing the hope of possessing a microscope when he was sixteen. He cut lawns and coached other boys for examinations. He collected bottles and ran messages. He eventually obtained his microscope. Only then, however, he found fulfilment not nearly as stimulating as the desire had been. Young Shrimpton found so many unpleasant microscopic things about him that he nearly starved to death, fearing the menace of wogs in the food he ate and in the air he so humbly but gratefully breathed.

"Success is very fine," he said later, when offered the Chair of Botany at the University, "but it always leaves a rather sour taste in my mouth. Whenever I obtain the things I want they seem to bring mishap in their wake."

At thirty-two he wanted a wife. To a boy who had wanted roller skates at ten and a microscope at sixteen, it seemed perfectly natural to want a wife at thirty-two. It was not exactly that he really wanted a wife, but nearly every other man of his age and practically all of his ex-school and collegiate friends had wives. Mabel Wakelin at that time was buxom and friendly and had just been jilted by the man she loved. Annoyance at having been turned down, plus a little vindictiveness towards her former fiance, exercised a strong influence on Mabel Wakelin at that time. Professor Shrimpton was nice, quiet, studious and not too possessive. She agreed to become his wife, or rather, she consented to let him become her husband. Her rather ample figure, even then,

had something of the quality of the full-blown rose. At the time he was studying roses. He had called her "Shrimpton's Rover" and perpetuated their name in the current catalogue of roses.

Thus, once again, he had secured what he wanted, only to experience the "sour taste." He had married a budding virago and not a budding rose.

However, there could be no sour taste about wanting a bigger home, plumb in the centre of growing trees, which, after all, were very much part of his life. He took to spending his Saturday afternoons in hatless excursions through the more picturesque suburban residential areas. He preferred to go alone. To Mabel, these sojourns were "bush walks for nature study," and gave him protection behind a perfect truth.

During one of these rambles he came across a magnificent place at Turramurra, near Sydney. Over the gate of the drive was the sign "For Sale." There was a long pine-carpeted drive, twisting among beautiful trees, to an old but well-preserved house. He knew at once, without a second's thought, that he wanted that house. There was subtle salesmanship in the fragrant eucalypts and blue gums alone. He lingered about the gate like an urchin at a confectioner's window. Gingerly he lifted the big latch, wandered up the drive, and walked admiringly around the big old house. A sun verandah practically encircled the place, built of ivy-covered sandstone. It had a low roof and gothic square chimneys, from which dark blue wood smoke curled lazily. And you could just smell that clean, almost astringent smoke. He was about to knock at the door when he heard footsteps and turned to see an old man with a rake approaching.

"Good afternoon," said the professor.

The man with the rake took no notice of the courteous approach.

"They's nobuddy 'ome," he said quite abruptly.

Professor Shrimpton coughed apologetically.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I saw the notice on the gate and thought—"

"Thet there sign shouldn't a bin thayr," said the other firmly.

"Is the place not for sale then?"

"They ain't goin' through with it. They's bin trouble o' some sort. They ain't sellin'. I'm th' gardener."

"Could I see the owner, perhaps?" queried the professor, more than ever in love with the house and grounds.

"No. You better get goin'. Miss Glendenning will be back. She 'as th' dogs with 'er. Fierce 'uns, Alsatians."

With exasperating finality he proceeded to take no further notice of the professor and began raking leaves and pine needles from the driveway.

Shrimpton saw that it would be no good trying to continue the conversation, so lingeringly sauntered to the gate. Born, then, was another ambition: the desire to own this house and grounds. There was a name on the gate, though this was barely distinguishable. The name was Birdwood. Shrimpton jotted this down, together with the address of the house agent and, with a deep sigh, went home to tea.

Where nice houses and grounds were concerned he was rather inclined to "window shop." He would explore a place, knowing quite well that it was beyond his financial resources to obtain. He was not unlike some idle women who would unblushingly spend a wet day in a big city store inspecting carpets, napery or millinery without the slightest intention of making a purchase.

About Birdwood, however, he dreamed all through the week-end. During the following week he got in touch with the agent, Walter Grimbsy, of Grimbsy and Gollan. He just wanted to know if such a place came remotely within the scope of his ability to buy. He learned that the owner, Miss Glendenning, was a trifle eccentric. She had placed Birdwood in the hands of the agents several

times, but had always withdrawn it from sale.

"I don't quite know what's behind it all," he said, "but I feel certain that if I went along with £5,000 cash I could get that lovely old place for you, professor."

Shrimpton's heart sank.

"Five thousand!"

"Believe me, sir, it would be a snip at that. You could make Birdwood a paradise on earth."

Shrimpton very much desired a paradise on earth.

"Yes, no doubt, but that's a great deal of money," he said with a sigh. He did not have even one thousand pounds in the bank. Of course, he could raise a mortgage, but he doubted if his earnings would let him pay for such a place.

"Not interested?" asked Grimbsy.

"Too interested, I am afraid, Mr. Grimbsy. I shall have to think this matter over very seriously."

And he left, very disconsolately. He had seen paradise on earth from the outside. He would dearly love to have been able to cross the threshold. Before he wrestled with the problem of finance, it would, of course, be necessary to see inside Birdwood. Lots of paradises on earth looked all right from the outside. Even if he could arrange a mortgage with a hope of purchase, there was no guarantee that Miss Glendenning would sell. The thing to do, according to the agent, was to produce the money and hope for an immediate, favourable reaction in the rather eccentric owner. You had to catch her at the right time. That, again, might be an agent's bluff. There might be something wrong with the place inside. He resolved to go again to the scene of his desire the following Saturday and, if necessary, to approach Miss Glendenning and ask her to let him see the house.

He was just going down the drive when he met the gardener who held up a large, weather-worn and wrinkled hand.

"Wait a minit! *You* agen? Well, it ain't convenient

Besides, Miss Glendenning is 'ome with th' dogs. An' she don't want to see no one."

The professor was exasperated. He was beginning to dislike the gardener very much, standing there like Satan with a pitchfork and barring the way to Desire. It was almost intolerable.

"Very well, my good man," he said, trying to mask his annoyance and, after a despairing look at the house, more serene than ever, he turned on his heel. He hated this retreat, step by step, towards the road, the train and the smoky city. He reached the big old gate of Birdwood when an impulse seized him. He was surprised at the quickness of his own decision. Calmly, he took out his cigar case, selected a capsule and swallowed it. Here was a chance to inspect the house without let or hindrance. He felt confident, almost elated, as he watched the second hand of his watch make three or four complete revolutions and felt the onset of all the symptoms of invisibility. Giving himself plenty of time, he braced his shoulders and stepped out along the drive, again in the direction of the house.

The gardener was busy raking leaves from the centre of the drive as he passed. He stopped once or twice, however, apparently perplexed by the sound of the professor's soft footsteps approaching and passing. Shrimpton noticed that the old man once actually stood bolt upright, looked up at the trees and then both up and down the drive. Then he pushed his hat to the back of his head and, leaning on his rake, stroked his chin reflectively. He doubtless felt a little mystified, thought the professor, understandingly, as he pushed the front door open and walked into the fine wide hall.

There was a wild and frenzied barking of dogs from somewhere beyond the hall, followed by a shrill command.

"Be quiet! Who's there?"

The dogs still snarled suspiciously.

"Is that you, John?" called the voice again. "What-

ever made you use the front door? Are your boots clean?"

The professor did not answer. He did not want any embarrassment and set out to explore that part of the house farthest from the dogs and, presumably, Miss Glendenning. Her voice, now more distant, was raised again in mystified inquiry, although he could not hear what she said. He found the interior of the house beautiful in its quiet, lofty, unornamental way. Each room was big and dignified. The room he tentatively marked in his mind as a study was almost as perfect as if he had planned it himself. It had a bay window which opened on to a piece of the estate that was almost virgin forest. Looking from this window there was not one suggestion that it was within hundreds of miles of civilisation. The bedrooms were equally roomy and restful.

This unlawful exploration now led him back to the growling dogs and their mistress and, as he approached the living room, the barking was frenziedly renewed. He went on tip toe. Coming to the doorway he saw three Alsatian dogs baring their teeth at his invisible intrusion. Behind them, beside a great open fireplace, sat a middle-aged woman with very sharp features. She was knitting jerkily, as she addressed the dogs and kept glancing suspiciously at the doorway—right at Professor Shrimpton.

"That fool man," she was saying half to herself, half to her dogs, "he's not only getting careless, but he is also getting extremely deaf."

Detecting Shrimpton's movement the dogs sprang towards the door, their neck fur bristling into ridges. This rather frightened the professor who did not want to speak for fear of frightening Miss Glendenning. He did, however, take fairly good stock of the room. Then, foolishly, while the dogs stood braced against the unknown danger they sensed and were snarling, he bent down and patted one of the dogs. It leaped back as if struck and barked more furiously than before, causing the others to join in. Miss Glendenning put down her knitting purposefully.

"Be quiet, Cæsar!" she commanded imperiously. "Be quiet, Plato. What *is* the matter! I think you are extremely naughty dogs."

She was a little unnerved herself at the strange conduct of her dogs. Fortunately the professor, in a little more than a few minutes, had seen quite enough. He knew that this was the house he wanted, perhaps more than anything he had ever wanted before. To allay Miss Glendenning's fears, he sought to give the dogs an actual motive for their excited barking. Going towards the biggest of the dogs he gave a sudden tug at its tail. It yelped and snapped at the invisible hand. He then tweaked the other dogs' tails and the performance was repeated. The animals then became suspicious of each other like the Japanese card players in New Guinea. In no time they were involved in a barking, biting, yelping free-for-all among themselves. At the height of this commotion Miss Glendenning could be heard calling frantically to the dogs to "behave at once," under all sorts of threats of penalties. Shrimpton decided it was time to go in any case and walked out quite unmolested and undetected.

The whole exploration had taken little more than five minutes. He was waiting beside the outer gate near the roadway for the customary sensations of returning visibility, when he saw a little girl, about two years old, leave the gate of the house opposite and start to cross the road. Simultaneously, he saw a motor truck, travelling at great speed, about half a mile away. Intuitively, he sensed the growing danger to the child who had now crossed the gutter and was toddling towards the centre of the road. The distant tooting of the motor horn had a note of urgent irritability. Shrimpton had an uneasy feeling that all was not well with this oncoming driver. The truck showed no signs of slowing as it approached and the professor made a bold decision.

He tore across the road to the child, picked her up,

practically as he ran, and took her to the safety of the pavement from which she had wandered. The motor lorry, braking suddenly, screeched and skidded ten feet, missing the professor and the child by a few inches.

A red headed driver popped his head out of the cabin and solemnly regarded the little girl for several doubt-ridden seconds. The child, unperturbed and now sucking a dirty little thumb, returned his gaze. The driver shook his head, then got down from the lorry, carefully inspected the roadway in front of the vehicle and, scratching his head, went over to the child.

"Hello, kid," he said, solicitously patting her head. "How did you get over there, eh?"

His voice was unintentionally but naturally gruff and the child drew away and began to cry.

He still regarded her in puzzled wonderment. He had a lot to think about.

"It's a real kid all right, Bluey," he said, addressing his mate on the blue-metal laden lorry.

"Maybe we ought not to have had that rum at Bailey's pub," the other called back. "It was supposed to be 'over-proof,' but the stuff they dish up to you now isn't dinkum. I reckon it's doped."

That didn't seem to supply the answer and the driver still regarded the child who had retreated a few steps and turned round to look at the lorry again.

"I never saw the kid on the road coming along but just as I yell, 'look-out!' and steps on the brake, she seems to rise up like a bloomin' spirit and floats over to the pavement."

"That's how it struck me, too, Ginger. She glided away from the lorry like she was riding on a swing that wasn't there."

Ginger wagged his head slowly.

"Beats me, son. Two rums couldn't do that. Not to *both* of us."

An elderly, angular woman fussed out of the gate to claim her grand-child. Picking her up, she came over to the lorry angrily.

"It's no credit to you men that this child is alive," she scolded, giving each man a fixed stare in turn. "If you saw what *I* saw from my window a moment ago, you would feel much more pious, gentlemen. A miracle, that's what it was. A blessed miracle!"

She turned and kissed the child in her arms.

Both Ginger and Bluey regarded woman and child with silent respect for some awkward seconds.

"We saw it too, ma'am," said Ginger, wiping his moist hands on the sides of his working trousers. "That is, we kind of thought the little kid here floated out of danger."

The woman gave a knowing and rather scornful nod of the head.

"I saw what you saw," she said with a reverent tone. "This road, at this hallowed spot a moment ago, was sanctified by a—Presence!"

"I never saw anything like it, lady, honest I—"

"Let that be a lesson to you nevertheless," she said, feeling that she held them in such power that she could almost have induced them to sing "Abide with me." "Never, never drive these wretched juggernauts when you have had any strong drink or the Lord will surely punish you. He might not always be there to gather innocent ones from the danger of your lethal wheels."

"Yes, ma'am," said Ginger contritely.

"And a little child shall lead them," she said, turning and kissing the child again.

Ginger awkwardly backed away and climbed respectfully into the driver's cabin.

"I don't feel too bloomin' good, Bluey," he said, declutching gingerly and handling the gears as though they had been sprinkled with holy water. "I'm not accus-

tomed to seeing things, but that gave me a bit of a shiver."

"Me too. It's uncanny. A couple of rums never affects me. Even if it did, I'll bet the old—(he was going to use another name)—lady is President of the Temperance League."

"I wouldn't talk like that, Bluey," said his mate quite seriously, tooting vigorously at the next intersection and crossing at a snail's pace.

The "Presence" himself, had of course, slipped away as soon as he deposited the child safely on the footpath. He went back through the gateway of Birdwood to await in obscurity his return to visibility.

* * * *

The incident of saving the child did not leave much of an impression on the professor. He was glad to have been of service, but it was just an impulse, like picking up an article which someone had dropped. The story, however, swept through the district like a bushfire and became so garnished with each fervent telling over back fences and at corner stores, that no one believed so fanciful a yarn. The grandmother of the child was ageing, rather talkative and over imaginative, they said. She was inclined to be positively queer about the way her two-year-old grandchild had been "borne to safety" by the invisible hand of Providence.

Ginger and Bluey, the only likely source of corroboration, were suspect anyhow. How could you believe men who had just left Bailey's pub after admittedly drinking O.P. rum (wartime brew)? And didn't it just show you how dangerous local gossip could be? Nevertheless, a local preacher based a sermon on the possibility of Divine intervention and the Press allowed their imaginative descriptive writers to have a little fun at the expense of the eye-witnesses.

Professor Shrimpton was much more concerned with the results and hopes of his furtive, but quite necessary,

inspection of the Birdwood interior. This visit fed his obsession. To own Birdwood would, if necessary, be a life's aim. Even Mabel agreed with him, after a good deal of persuasion, that "perhaps a little suburban house, set among trees would be nice," especially since her amazing, but fortunately, transient blackout in the professor's study. Their present house would never be the same while the bogey of blindness haunted the study. She was also a little more tolerant towards him since that unnerving experience, although she still, most unfairly, held him in contempt. She inspected Birdwood from the outside and liked it, until she heard the price.

"Utterly absurd!" she exploded. "Just a waste of time! Five thousand pounds? Even if we had it, we'd be crazy."

Shrimpton blinked.

"But a mortgage, Mabel. We could easily arrange that at quite reasonable interest."

"Of course," she said, with unusually sweet cynicism. "I can't imagine anything easier, but what do you propose using for money—birds' eggs?"

"Money?" he echoed, as if it were one of life's inconsequentials. "I can supplement my income with private coaching fees. I can write special articles on botany —"

"Yes?" she interrupted. "Your country mansion is still five thousand pounds and you'd just about have to flood the bookstalls of the world with botany books, to wipe off the mortgage in *our* time."

They were just leaving when Mr. Grimbsy arrived.

"Trying to make up your minds about Birdwood, professor?" he said, breezily.

Mrs. Shrimpton elected to reply.

"No. I've made up our minds. The property is too dear. Far too dear."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you, Mrs. Shrimpton. At five thousand it could have been a good spec. There

are eight acres of land in trees and lawns. The city is bound to expand out this way some day and you'd have a gilt edge asset. Besides, you could never be built out. You could always have this—this—(he groped for some advertising phrases he had once committed to memory)—beautiful little wilderness, serene, silent and unspoiled, even if the city developed all around you."

He was grinding rock salt into the raw soul wounds of the professor.

"However," continued Mr. Grimbsy, nonchalantly, "I don't think you *could* buy the place now. It is supposed to be haunted."

The professor looked startled. Mrs. Shrimpton sneered and sniffed.

"Well, thank goodness, that settles it," she said, with relief.

"I don't believe in haunted houses," said the professor defensively.

Mr. Grimbsy appraised him with slightly contracting eyes.

"No more do I, professor. Personally, I think there is some jiggery-pokery business going on. Miss Glendenning gets some queer ideas. Funny things have been about the grounds at night, lately. Some kids and some old lady residents claim to have seen white shrouded figures and heard strange sounds. They've even got Miss Glendenning thinking she saw a white ethereal figure float past her window. On top of that, now there's a yarn going about that a child, about to be run over by a lorry nearly opposite Birdwood, was wafted to safety by an invisible agency or something."

Professor Shrimpton smiled.

"If I might be permitted to use a current expression, I think it's all 'buncombe'," he said.

"Well, it's causing plenty of fun and excitement in the neighbourhood," said Grimbsy, "Miss Glendenning might be losing her nerve."

With that, and no attempt at high pressure salesmanship, he left them with a polite farewell.

"Well, I certainly should not like to live in Birdwood after *that*," said Mrs. Shrimpton, just to trump the card of disapproval she had played a little earlier. "Family skeletons in all the cupboards and eerie sounds at night don't appeal to me a bit. Besides! I'm not quite over my last illness in your study."

The professor, a little more preoccupied than he probably had a right to be, smiled thoughtfully.

"I still think it is a very desirable residence," he said, longingly, "ghosts or no ghosts."

He was thinking that, to some extent, he was practically a ghost himself.

V.

At about this time a great, consequential change came into the life of Professor Shrimpton. It must always be remembered that he was an eminently respectable man. His life was most exemplary in every respect. In the ordinary course of events his Papuan discovery would have made little difference to his way of life. He would have been hailed as a modern discoverer and would have attracted the white, perhaps rather blinding light of Fame. Even then, the man and his way of life would have remained unaffected. He read the local Conservative press and had once written an article on "The Australian Bush" for the London "Times." Doubtless because of this, he had remained a permanent postal subscriber. What is more, he actually read "The Times," and this, in itself, illustrates a certain mild, undemonstrative doggedness in pursuit of truth. He liked Gilbert and Sullivan and had a fondness, amounting to an obsession, for "good" music. He had a splendid gramophone record library of Gilbert and Sullivan, oratorio, famous tenors and bird calls of many lands.

Thus, with a background of behaviour and taste he never expected to find himself in the front row of the Bijou Theatre, gazing up at "LUSCOMBE'S LUSCIOUS LOVELIES," or to take a quotation from the programme, the "Alluring Lasses with the Lyrical Legs." These were one of the main current reasons for popularity of the "Vaudevillains." Professor Shrimpton had never heard of them; scarcely knew of the Bijou Theatre and certainly saw nothing as good as Cantata in the so-called lyrical legs of the so-called lovelies.

Yet, there he was, with his umbrella, his old-fashioned bowler hat on his knees and his glasses (used mainly to counteract glare), perched on an expectant nose. He had inadvertently purchased a ticket for the Bijou Theatre, believing he was attending the Biltmore Theatre for the full Orchestral Recital, "A Night of Russian Music." Of course, it was unthinkable, but there he was.

When the clash of cymbals, double-bass and trombone had jolted him to a fearful realisation of his mistake, he grabbed his hat and umbrella and made at once for the door. He did not reach it. The incoming tide of late arrivals, including celebrant sailors and soldiers, bore him back to his seat in the front row. Right in the very front row! He shifted uncomfortably, awaiting an opportunity of a clear passage to the door, but the tide was still flowing strongly in.

"Be in it, brother!" said a soldier, taking his arm in a friendly grip. "Got yer binoculars?"

"Yes, dad, enjoy yerself," said the sailor. "Nobody's goin' ter tell yer old woman. This is a good little show."

The professor smiled, an experienced lover of "peace," a hater of "scenes" of any sort. He eased himself awkwardly back into his seat as a wave of upswinging young and shapely legs moved metronomically to the music of "Why Don't We Do This More Often?" Very different, he reflected, from the music of Tschaikowsky; very, very different! He squirmed, a prisoner of his own stupidity. He was, as the soldier had urged, "in it." He would now have to remain in it until the interval. While lovely, lithe limbs flashed and nimble, tap-plated shoes clicked to the popular tune, he read the programme and felt that his face must have been red. A funny man (rather vulgar), a European saxophonist, an athletic trio (two men and a girl in tights) on a trapeze, more ballet, show girls, three of whom figured in a transient scene lasting ten breath-taking seconds, in which they wore absolutely nothing. This was certainly getting away from

classical music; was none too close to the field of experimental botany.

And then, there was Professor Didlum—Magician. There, of course, had to be a magician to complete this untented circus. Shrimpton was mildly interested in the magician as not being so calculated to embarrass a mind attuned to the concordances of classical music. But why, in the name of goodness, call a mere magician a professor? Professor of what? Tricks, perhaps. The thing was ridiculous. The term "professor" was far too loosely used. It should be stopped. A vagrant thought which darted into his mind somewhat softened his annoyance and caused him to smile to himself. True, he was a professor of botany, but he could also perhaps make some claim to the professorial title of magic. He could disappear, ad libitum. He was not serious, of course, but the thought, unchecked by anything so sobering as, say, "Chanson Triste" or "The Nutcracker Suite," had caused the smile. He would wait until the interval and slip out. He would still be able to go to the Biltmore and enjoy the second half of the orchestral concert.

Professor Didlum came on. He made his dramatic appearance in a cloud of smoke following a report and a clash of cymbals and drums. He stepped forward and produced a bowl of live gold fish, two turkeys and a pair of doves. "Obviously," reflected Shrimpton, "he has had those concealed on his person, in the folds of his cloak. Nothing *very* remarkable about that."

The magician then began producing lighted cigarettes from nowhere, puffing each once or twice, stamping it out on the stage, and immediately producing another from the air. He went through an interesting range of card tricks and sleight-of-hand, and came at last to "The Great Eastern Cabinet Trick." This was the big moment. For this the music stopped. Dressed as the devil, the magician stepped towards the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said theatrically. "I have

now very much pleasure in introducing my great Eastern cabinet trick, which I have called 'a journey through space.' That is precisely what it is, ladies and gentlemen, and I am sure this great, new mystery, obtained from India at great expense, will intrigue and baffle you, as it has audiences all over the world. If someone from the audience will kindly step on to the stage I assure you that he or she will have a pleasant journey through the ether without the slightest risk of injury."

He wheeled a garish-looking cabinet on wheels to the centre of the stage, opened the door, tapped it inside with a stick and spun the cabinet round for general inspection.

"No trap-doors whatever. Now, will someone kindly step on to the stage?"

There was a murmur of interest and expectancy and a shuffling of feet as the audience moved to see if there were any volunteers. No one came forward.

"Come, ladies and gentlemen! Everything is fair and above board. Any number of you may come up on to the stage and inspect the cabinets. Ah! I see the Navy advancing. Good. This way, please, boys."

Two sailors from the front row of the stalls were advancing. So was Professor Shrimpton, looking mortified between the two breezy men in navy blue, who each had an arm. Applause greeted the oddly-matched trio as they stepped up to the stage, the sailors laughing, the professor doing his poor best to smile off his chagrin.

"How do you do?" said the magician, warmly shaking a hand of each. "Which of you takes the 'journey through space'?"

"Dad," said one of the sailors. "Let him see the world. We've been around, plenty. We just want to see that the cabinets are fair dinkum."

Professor Shrimpton, embarrassed beyond words, stood awkwardly with his umbrella and bowler hat at which he had desperately clutched when convoyed by the

Navy. The magician regarded him with a little studied amusement.

"Nice to see you so well equipped for the journey, sir. But it will not be necessary to have either hat or umbrella."

There was a roar of laughter as Shrimpton, smiling sheepishly, surrendered this impedimenta, which was placed on the magician's table near the centre of the stage. Having nothing to do with his hands, he put them behind his back, although he was not aware at the time where he put them. He had stage-fright. The sailors were briskly spinning the cabinet round and round, and one of them sat inside to test it. They asked that the other cabinet, suspended by a rope at the other side of the stage, be lowered for inspection.

"By all means, boys. By all means," said the magician, giving them an approving bow for their determination to be thorough.

The cabinet was immediately lowered and the sailors rigorously inspected this one also.

"She's okey doke, doctor," said one of the sailors who smelt a little of whisky. "If you can shoot a man from one cabinet to the other without killing him, you can shoot better than we can—and we're gun-layers!"

Professor Didlum bowed.

"I'll do my best, boys. One can only do one's best. This way, sir, if you please."

He led Shrimpton to one of the cabinets while the other was hoisted about ten feet from the ground.

"Step in and take a seat, sir. We're on our way!"

The professor felt as if he were almost being led into an open lift well. He had never imagined one could have been so helplessly embarrassed, with that sea of white, indistinguishable faces below, and to feel that each pair of eyes was resolutely fixed on him, apparently about to make a fool of himself. At all events, he was pleased to escape from them momentarily. He stepped in and the cabinet

snapped shut behind him. The orchestra began softly playing "Hearts and Flowers" and the magician made strange Eastern gestures and muttered the unintelligible formula appropriate to the occasion.

In the darkness of the cabinet, the professor felt grateful for the relief. He was still numb with the totally unexpected and certainly unwanted notoriety. A hand suddenly touched him.

"Step this way, mate, quick!" commanded a gruff voice. "Part of the trick, see?"

He was guided to some steps and bundled down them by very strong arms. As he did so, he heard the castors of the cabinet he had just left being pushed over the stage. He was led along a dark passage and had to mount some more steps. There were about eight more going up than when going down. The strong arm still guided him.

"This part's done by mirrors, mister. Don't give the show away. You can't be seen. You are now getting into the cabinet that's hanging up. Mirrors and black velvet tricks them. Get in and sit down. In a few minutes they'll lower you to the ground and you'll be back on the stage. O.K., boss, thanks a lot. Bye-bye!"

The professor was again alone in darkness and greatly fearing light. The shock of the whole incident had dumbfounded him. It was almost like an induced hypnosis. But now he was beginning to come out of it. He was coming round with a growing awareness of fresh humilities, new indignities. He realised at once, fleeting as these newly-found thoughts were, that he could never go through with this comedy or tragedy of errors, could never face recognition.

He dived for his inside pocket and, with shaking hands, extracted a Hocus root capsule, which he popped into his mouth and swallowed. It seemed to him that he waited ages for the burning behind the eyes and the tingling sensations that this time were to save him from a situation which he knew he could not face. Only distantly

he heard the magician faintly talking against a very subdued orchestral background of soothing music. Then, quite suddenly, as the music swelled back into a crescendo for the startling finale, he felt himself being lowered to stage level. The door clicked open and a spotlight nearly blinded him. He immediately stepped out of the cabinet into which the professor of magic was peering as he called "Congratulations on a safe arrival after your journey through space!" He paused. "Step out, please."

Seeing no one step out and satisfying himself that no one was in the cabinet, he tried to hide a sense of great shock behind a sickly smile.

"He *should* be there, ladies and gentlemen. You saw the other cabinet. He had gone—"

He stood, facing a bewildered audience, beaten for the first time in his 26 years of magic.

"I put him in myself," called the magician's assistant huskily and fearfully from the left prompt. "I put him in and locked him in, but he's *really* disappeared!"

There was a murmur of irritation from the audience. They didn't like a prolonged climax. Many seemed to sense that the trick had gone astray.

"Garn back to th' small-town circus!" called a voice from the gallery. "Give us our money back, robber!"

Professor Didlum, a harried-looking Mephistopheles, braced himself for his first public apology for failure. He cleared his throat nervously.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am very sorry to say that something has gone wrong—"

Professor Shrimpton, who had been standing awkwardly just behind him, coughed lightly.

"Don't apologise. It's not *your* fault, my good man. It couldn't be helped in the circumstances."

The magician swung round, gazed at the little table of harmless card tricks, then at the wings and again at the audience. He felt queer. He gulped.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I repeat that something has

gone wrong. I—"

The murmuring in the audience now took on a louder tone, swelled almost into a commotion. It grew louder and louder, until it was now a mighty roar, punctuated with shrieks of laughter and gasps of astonishment. Strangely enough, at the point of apology, the house was with him.

This flattering demonstration of approval was caused by Professor Shrimpton's simple and natural desire to repossess his own property. The audience saw first the umbrella rise from the card table behind the magician and go from a horizontal to a vertical position. Then the bowler hat slowly joined it. These two objects then began to float away from the table, down the steps from the stage and along the aisle, absolutely unaided. Most of the audience stood up at the spectacle. Two young boys nearly fell over the gallery rail. Seeing the phenomenon approaching, the doorkeeper, more out of fear than politeness, opened the door and allowed the hat and umbrella to sail majestically through.

"Good-night!" said the professor, as he passed an usherette.

She gasped and staggered against the doorway. A hat and an umbrella bidding good-night to a girl who had never taken intoxicating liquor in her life!

Professor Didlum swayed on the stage and felt that he might even faint. True to the old tradition, he knew "the show must go on," but he never thought he would survive the night. His throat was parched. He had the presence of mind to make a last gallant stand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, although his voice was scarcely audible, "that—is—my—journey—through—space."

He bowed.

The applause was without precedent. It came in wave after wave as Professor Didlum, pale and surprisingly modest, took curtain after curtain. It was accompanied

by calls and whistles and strident "Encores." Undoubtedly and unquestionably it was the act of the century.

Backstage, he stumbled towards his dressing room. He felt very ill. He had never believed in spirits, but this might be some kind of "visitation." It was spooky in the extreme, unnerving.

Mr. Grigson, the manager, burst into the dressing-room, giving him another dreadful start.

"Boy, that was terrific! Why didn't you tell me you had that star trick up your sleeve? It's amazing! I'm going to put you top on the bill. You're *It*. You're 'the goods.' You're stupendous, colossal! I've never seen anything like it in my life!"

Didlum had his head in his hands.

"Neither have I, boss."

Grigson laughed exuberantly and slapped him on the back.

"Come on. Don't be so modest. You don't have to tell me how it's done, you know."

Didlum sighed.

"Thank heavens for that," he moaned. "But if you don't mind, I feel rather ill."

Grigson was affable and understanding. A great act like that probably would make anyone a bit tired after the performance.

"Certainly, old son, I won't bother you. Can I send for a bottle of champagne?"

"No thanks. Nothing."

"Or spirits?"

Didlum shuddered.

"*Particularly* no spirits, thanks."

"O.K., old man," said the manager, feeling that perhaps the other was developing a cold and wanted to be alone. "But I'm thinking of a new contract for you. The terms will be doubled. Good-night!"

Didlum groaned "Good-night—thanks," and wearily pulled off his pronged tail.

VI.

In the blackout, outside the theatre, Shrimpton shuffled along the street, regained visibility, and bought himself a couple of hot waffles. He was vexed at having become so foolishly involved in the mix-up at the theatre, but, of course, it had been absolutely unavoidable. In taking the Hocus dose while in the cabinet he had acted in defence of a sensitive spirit. He hoped the whole business would soon be forgotten. He was more distressed at having missed the Russian music recital, but he had no mind to go to the Biltmore now. As in the case of a very late meal, he had lost his appetite for it. Mabel was in bed when he got home. She was asleep and snoring, so he made himself a cup of tea and ate both waffles.

The next morning he read in the amusements section of "The Courier" a very interesting item.

> "After producing one of the most sensational feats of 'magic' at the Bijou Theatre last night, Mr. Fred. Hampton, known theatrically as 'Professor Didlum,' took ill in his dressing-room and was later removed to hospital.
>
> "This was most unfortunate, as Hampton had presumably been working on his experiment for many years and chose the Bijou Theatre last night for his world premiere.
>
> "His trick is a remarkable improvement on the usual cabinet trick. A subject sitter is completely spirited away and, when he does not return, his umbrella and hat calmly remove themselves before the eyes of the astonished audience and float from the stage, down the aisle and through the door as though they were, in fact, carried by their owner.
>
> "Naturally, this is a well-kept stage secret, but many will wish Hampton a speedy return to health so that he can continue to prove his professional claim to be 'Greater than Houdini.' "

He read it again and thought deeply. He was rather upset to learn that his own expedient in avoiding the embarrassment of identification might have brought on, or at least contributed to, "Professor Didlum's" reported illness. After all, Mr. Hampton's impressive little stage tricks were his bread and butter, just as botany was the sole source of sustenance for Professor Shrimpton. If there was any little thing he could do for the unfortunate man, it was undoubtedly his duty to do it. He owed it to the man. Coming to think of it, with a little of the detachment of other people, it was quite natural to suppose that Hampton *had* been concerned at the sudden turn things had taken. Shrimpton thought he might have been a little too close to his subject to appreciate fully the reactions of other people. It was very simple to swallow a gelatine capsule and then act quite naturally as though you hadn't.

As he did not have to be at the University until 11 a.m., he decided to locate Professor Didlum, or Mr. Fred. Hampton, and explain the circumstances of the night before. At the stage door of the Bijou Theatre he did not look like making much progress. A man with a broom and wearing a red striped jersey barred the way.

"Th' magic professor's crook," he told Shrimpton.

"I am sorry to hear that he is really ill."

"He's more than that. He's damn crook. They told us this mornin' 'e's kinda delirious. Torkin' to 'imself."

"Dear, dear. I'm very sorry. I really must see him."

"No go. Doctor won't let no one see 'im. 'E ain't bin di-ag-on-ised yet. They're goin' to di-ag—they're goin' to find out wot's bitin' 'im—"

Professor Shrimpton was really concerned. He felt sure that his explanation would help Mr. Hampton and could certainly do him no harm.

"Where may I find him, please?"

"Can't tell yer. Them's orders. Relative?"

"No. But I think I can help him."

"Doctor?"

"No. I am a professor. I am from the University."

The man regarded Shrimpton suspiciously and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before deigning to reply.

"So *you're* a professor, too, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I dunno, but I reckon this is a case for the manager. Foller me."

Shrimpton dutifully followed along dark passages of dusty scenery, ropes and all manner of props. His picturesquely crude guide at last rapped on a door marked "Andrew Grigson—Manager." A hard, crisp voice commanded "Come in!"

As the door of his office was opened, Shrimpton received a whiff of stale cigar smoke, grease paint, whisky, cheap scent and the fusty dampness of back-stage.

"Gent. to see yer 'bout Professor Didlum. 'E's a professor himself, he ses."

Shrimpton advanced and cleared his throat.

"I've come about the gentleman who conducted the disappearing trick last night."

Mr. Grigson, wheezy, red-faced, critical, showed by the narrowing of his eyes that the newcomer was at once suspect.

"What about him?"

"I read that he was ill."

"Maybe he is a little indisposed, but what's *your* line, mister?"

"My name is Shrimpton—Professor Shrimpton. I was the man who got into Professor Didlum's cabinet and—and—disappeared."

The manager lit a cheap cigar without removing the band.

"Well, didn't he pay you a fee for your trouble? We usually give free seats for stooges."

"Fee? No. I did not expect and, indeed, did not want a fee *or* a free seat."

The manager showed a little scornful annoyance in the way he bit into his cigar.

"Look, sir, you're not a legal man with a possible interest on behalf of any other party in Professor Didlum's contract by any chance? We get some funny approaches in show business and this new act of Didlum's is good."

He leered a little at Shrimpton.

"No. I read that Professor Didlum was ill and thought that as I possibly had been the cause of his illness to some degree I should see him."

Grigson puffed out smoke explosively.

"I don't get it. How could *you*, a stooge, cause Didlum to become sick?"

Shrimpton cleared his throat, as he so often did. He was embarrassed.

"Well, I don't think he knows how I disappeared."

The manager laughed.

"No kidding! That was the best turn ever put on at the Bijou and make no mistake. I think it's going to rock Australia and the rest of the world when we take it round. Fred. Hampton probably knocked himself up a bit. A new act like that is a big strain. He must have been working on it a lot. But, for goodness sake, don't stand there telling *me*, his manager, that *he* didn't know what he was doing. That'll only make me tired."

"Oh, I don't say for a moment that Professor Didlum didn't know what *he* was doing. But he did not know what *I* was doing—"

Grigson's eyes were beginning to widen.

"—You see," continued Shrimpton mildly, "I disappear."

The manager blinked, gulped and nearly swallowed the remaining portion of his cigar.

"You what? Say that again!"

"Disappear."

"How? When? Why?—"

"At will or fancy," said the professor with a little shrug.

"Holy Jehosaphat! Please don't tell me that. I'll be in a border-line mental hospital like poor old Fred. Hampton."

"I'm only stating a simple fact."

Grigson regarded Shrimpton for a second or two more quizzically, with his head tilted on one side. Presently he clicked his tongue.

"Now I get it. You're a 'professor,' too, eh? O.K. You stole Hampton's show, huh? You got the master act, isn't that it? Well, come clean, buddy. I'm in this business for profit. What's exactly on your mind? Curtains for Freddy Hampton or are you figuring on a double turn?"

Professor Shrimpton braved a half smile, amused by the pictorial vocabulary of show business.

"I myself happen to be in—botany for profit, my good man."

Grigson looked at the ceiling, holding his hands over his eyes.

"You're a professor. You're a botanist. You incidentally disappear and reappear whenever you like. That's swell. Now, look!—"

He pressed a bell on his desk.

"—For heaven's sake, *disappear now!* You are wasting my time and I think you're nuts. I'll get my doorkeeper to help you—*vanish!*"

He spat out the last word.

Shrimpton was a little shocked at this unnecessarily brusque change of mood.

"I don't need the aid of your doorkeeper or of yourself, sir," he said, feeling in his inside coat pocket for his cigar case.

The doorkeeper came in.

"Yes, boss?"

"Sam, this gentleman disappears. Get me?" He winked. "I want you to help him vanish from this office.

Understand?" He winked again.

Sam's face showed all over that he understood. He was "a wake-up." He took Shrimpton by the arm.

"Come on, old boy. Abracadabra! Vamoose! Imshee! This way."

As they moved into the dark maze of back-stage passages Shrimpton swallowed a Hocus capsule and felt that he had already swallowed an insult.

"Are you in a great hurry, my man?" he asked Sam.

"No. What's th' big idea?"

"I thought I should like to look at some of the stage scenery. This, for instance."

He had stopped before a badly-painted forest scene with a white path winding up from the foreground to infinity.

"That? Oh, that's th' scene for 'Babes in the Wood,' modern vershun. An' you want to see them babes! Th' Flotsam Sisters dance in this scene, too." He rolled his eyes. "Hot stuff! But yer better come along. You 'eard what th' boss said."

"Sam," said the professor a little tensely and feeling that the time had come for retributive action. "I don't need an escort, thank you."

"That's all right by me, so long as you foller, as told. It's a bit dark round about 'ere. I'll go first."

But Shrimpton's footsteps had stopped.

"I am going back to see your manager," he said calmly.

Sam swore.

"Oh, no yer don't, professor. You're comin' along with me. Come on, no funny business."

As he stood perplexed, unable now to see the professor, he distinctly heard steps returning to Mr. Grigson's office and felt obliged to race after them. He had lost the professor completely. He knocked at the manager's door and, not waiting for the usual curt "Come in!", entered rather excitedly.

"He's gorn, boss. He broke away. Said 'e was comin' back to see you. Cripes, 'e might be dangerous. He's probably from a lunatic asylum."

Grigson put down his pen with irritation.

"Sam, is this whole darn outfit balmy? Why can't you do a simple job like showing a man to the door? How could a feeble old bloke about the size of an undernourished peanut get away from *you*, an ex-footballer and boxer? If he's gone, that's all I wanted. It's good riddance, but why pester me when I'm so darn busy?"

The door opened by itself. Footsteps shuffled through the doorway. Sam, at the point of speech, drew back and the manager stood up, his face ashen. The door then politely shut itself.

"How do you do?" said Professor Shrimpton.

The other two looked at each other in silent amazement. Neither felt capable of speech. Shrimpton walked a little closer to the desk so that, when he spoke again, his voice was uncomfortably, uncannily nearer.

"There is nothing to be unduly alarmed about, gentlemen. I just wanted to demonstrate the truth of my claim. You see, I *am* invisible, whether you care to admit it or not. I have, you might like to agree, disappeared. If I were a violent man I should have rather an advantage over you, should I not?"

Sam recovered first.

"Cert'n'ly, professor. Cert'n'ly. We're mighty glad you ain't interested in rough stuff, too. You could be all set for a 'king 'it' if you felt like it."

The manager also found at least something of his original voice.

"Are you alive — or — dead?" he said, with grave seriousness and apprehension.

"I am undoubtedly alive and in good health."

He walked around the desk, leaving Sam and his manager still gaping, open-mouthed and tense, at the spot from where his voice had last come. They were

shocked once again to find him still closer when he resumed speaking.

"I merely wanted to help Professor Didlum, who, like yourselves, has apparently been unnerved by my talent for disappearance. Is that quite clear, now, gentlemen?"

"Very clear indeed, professor," said the manager respectfully, easing an overtight collar with his index finger.

"Very well, if it will not upset you I shall soon begin to reappear before you. Don't be alarmed if you momentarily see my legs and arms or my body and face take form independently. It is always a little uncertain which order my limbs will take, but, believe me, I shall be completely visible and tangible to you in ten or eleven more minutes."

He walked slowly over to a chair in the corner of the office. Easing himself into this, he sat back and rather amusedly watched the awed, tense surprise and the changing expressions of the two men as he slowly regained his normal appearance. The manager was this time first to speak, although his voice was not very loud.

"Would you mind, professor, if I have a whisky?"

"Certainly not! It's *your* whisky—I hope."

"Will *you* have one?"

"No thank you. I rarely touch fermented liquors, except medicinally."

Grigson's hand shook a little as he almost filled two glasses with neat whisky from the decanter on his desk. He handed one to Sam and tossed the other off at a gulp. This seemed to steady him and a little colour returned to his face.

"I do hope you will forgive me for being so rude and for doubting you."

"Certainly. It's probably only natural that you would be a little sceptical."

"I suppose you know, professor, that you have the greatest act this world has ever seen?"

The professor smiled and began toying with his hat.

Now that he was visible again, he had lost the strategic advantage.

"Oh, it's not an 'act,' as you call it. I accidentally discovered the secret of invisibility when on a botanic expedition not very long ago."

Grigson arched his eyebrows thoughtfully.

"Does anyone know?"

"Not yet. I have not completed documenting my discovery and I still have a number of advanced experiments to make."

Grigson was amazed at his nonchalance. The showman within him exulted, dreamed.

"I suppose you know you're a millionaire if you want to be?"

The professor looked sheepishly disbelieving.

"A millionaire? Oh, come, that's nonsense. How could *I* be a millionaire?"

"You could practically write your own ticket. You're the greatest man on earth to-day!" said Grigson eagerly, little pin-points of moisture showing up on his forehead. Here, with this strange little man, was like having a dead cert. for the Melbourne Cup right in the bag.

Shrimpton laughed outright. To Grigson's concern, the professor was not a realist. Not even an opportunist!

"Don't think me impertinent, professor, but I suppose your University salary wouldn't be much more than, say, a thousand a year—about twenty pounds a week?"

The professor thought for a moment.

"It is in the region of the figure you have mentioned. I have certain tutorial and literary perquisites."

"Look, sir, I'll give you a hundred pounds a week and a contract for two years for your act, exclusively!"

It was the professor's turn to be a little dazed.

"One hundred pounds a week! Oh, I couldn't really," he gasped, being more alarmed at the possibility of stage appearances than the wealth it could mean.

"Make it two hundred a week and a three-year contract! Come on, you need money, don't you?" urged the manager.

"Two hundred pounds a week! I must admit I am rather bewildered, Mr. Grigson. Money, as money, doesn't interest me very much. I like my botanic studies and quiet places where nature flourishes—"

"Look, professor," said Grigson, becoming an earnest salesman. "I'll give you five hundred pounds a week—*a week*—and a contract for as long as you like! Why not sign up? You're the goods. You know you are. You'd never make such money picking the petals off flowers and ring-barking trees. Come on, think of all the things you can buy; a car, a house—"

A house! A *house!!* Unwittingly he had launched a shaft at the professor's reserve. A house! That was his vulnerable Achilles' heel. A house, of course, with birds and trees and everlasting summer. And a study; *the* study; Domus Botanicus Perfectus—Birdwood!

"What do you say, professor? Come on, what do you say?"

Shrimpton sighed and looked very thoughtful.

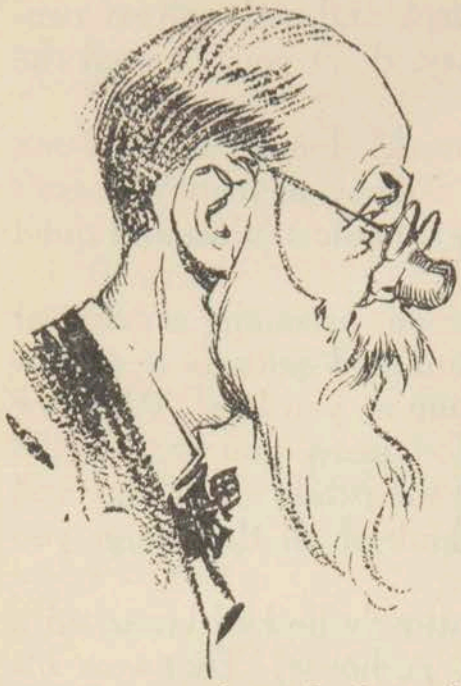
"I am bound to admit, Mr. Grigson, that I am trifling with the idea," he said with exasperating slowness.

"Swell!"

Grigson's hand, which had not so long before shaken with fear, whammed down on his desk.

"It's a deal! We'll call you—let me see—we'll call you 'Dissolvo' — 'Dissolvo, the Invisible Man!' — disappearing and reappearing nightly without the aid of trapdoors, props., clap-trap or ballyhoo. Man, you'll be terrific! You'll be stupendous—*Impossible!*"

"Sounds a little terrifying, the high-sounding way you deal with such a simple affair," said Shrimpton nervously, yet not displeased with his morning's work when he came to think it all out.



VII.

After signing the contract, he had qualms. He wondered how he could explain to the world outside the theatre his strange change of vocation if it became necessary to give up University pursuits. How was he going to broach the subject to Mabel? What was to happen to poor Fred. Hampton, alias Professor Didlum? There was also some doubt about the ultimate effect on the system of the repeated doses of the Hocus concentrate. Was it likely to impair his health in any way? It might have been only his imagination, but he felt that with the taking of each capsule he was undergoing some barely perceptible form of change. There was no way of confirming this, but he imagined that he was not quite so sensitive as previously. He fancied he was becoming a trifle aggressive.

He could assure himself, however, that his decision to go on the stage was not solely prompted by the acquisitive instinct, that deadly resort of fascists and capitalists. Not solely, although he wanted that five hundred pounds a week pretty badly. Behind it, of course, lay no desire for accumulated wealth; no urge for investment; no longing to become a rentier; merely an impulse, if you like, born perhaps a little of escapism, to own a lovely old house and grounds nearer to his spiritual, if not material, self.

He had one rather disturbing experience with Fred. Hampton, on whom he felt obliged to call with the manager, Mr. Grigson. The manager had already explained to Hampton that there was nothing supernatural about the cabinet trick which nearly sent him off his head the night things had gone wrong. He had explained, as nicely as he could, that Professor Shrimpton had merely produced a better act. At the same time, he had not worried very much about Hampton's reaction. Fortunately, he had not reached the formalities of signing Hampton up for a new contract after the amazing cabinet trick in which Shrimpton stole the show. Even in normal circumstances, Hampton's contract term had just about expired.

The magician was seated in an invalid's chair when Shrimpton and Grigson called.

"Four-flusher!" he exploded, without waiting for an introduction. "I recognise you now, Professor Shrimpton. You pulled a neat one—double-crosser!"

Shrimpton was hurt.

"My dear man, I—"

"Don't 'dear man' me, you four-eyed chiseller! Look at *me*, a physical wreck and very nearly a head case. Don't worry. You won't get away with it! This is going to Actors' Equity. Using another man to put over a new act."

He was trembling with rage and his lips quivered.

"Fred., you've got the whole thing wrong. Professor Shrimpton didn't put anything over you at all," said Grigson earnestly.

"Oh, that's what *you* think! A man, pretending to be an innocent member of the audience, gets into your cabinet. Then, presto!—he just doesn't come out again. What do you call that?"

"I only disappeared, Mr. Hampton," mildly submitted Shrimpton. "It was important to me at that stage that I should. You see, I had got into the Bijou Theatre

by mistake. I did not want to be embarrassed, as I have certain University obligations."

Hampton made a mocking face, imitating a petulant child.

"So—you—just—disappeared?" he said, drawling out each word sarcastically.

"I think you will agree with me that I did."

"Sure! Sure! I'll admit everything. What trapdoors were you working without my knowledge? And who was stooging with you to ruin my act and discredit me professionally? Or was it plain mesmerism, or mass hypnosis, like the Indian rope trick?"

"I don't understand," said Shrimpton simply.

"Well, you play the best 'dumb' part I have ever seen in show business. You ought to be in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'! Anyhow, you win. Now, leave me alone. I'm through."

"You needn't be, Mr. Hampton," said the professor solicitously.

"Why not!" snapped the original master of the great Eastern Cabinet trick, studying the professor with sarcastic insolence.

"Well, I shall need someone to do the—the ordinary stage tricks and the—er—patter, I suppose. Is not that so, Mr. Grigson?" Grigson looked embarrassed. He would rather not have been addressed like that. He felt Hampton's professional reaction to this rather patronising remark coming.

"Yes—er—to a certain extent, I suppose you will."

Hampton struggled to his feet, his lips formulating phrases he was incapable of expressing and looking like a man who might easily come to blows.

"You're a pair of double-crossing rats! You want *me* to stand around—in tinselled tights, I suppose—and hand you cards and silk handkerchiefs while *you* produce the rabbits. Not damn likely. I'd see you both in hell first!"

The professor had a brain wave.

"Might I be permited to know the terms of your current contract, Mr. Hampton?" he asked respectfully.

"No! You know too damn much already."

"I think we could tell Professor Shrimpton, Fred, that your salary did not exceed twenty-five pounds a week," volunteered Grigson.

"Well, then, supposing we gave Mr. Hampton a hundred pounds a week. Would he be satisfied?"

"*He* would, but *I* wouldn't," said Grigson abruptly. "Treasury just wouldn't stand it. I'm generous, but I have to live myself."

"I meant to offer him a hundred pounds a week out of *my* money," said Shrimpton. "My contract with you would stand, only it would be a double act, because I think Mr. Hampton is indispensable to success. I couldn't do my part without him, and I would gladly pay him a hundred pounds weekly."

Hampton shook his head from side to side as if he were suffering from neuralgia, or was trying to shake a leech from his forehead.

"A week! A hundred pounds a *week*? What sort of talk is this?"

"That's what the professor said, Fred, and in the circumstances I heartily concur."

Hampton shut his eyes and breathed deeply, exhaling loudly.

"Look, fellers," he said finally, after wrestling with his thoughts. "You've *got* to get me out of here. I'm 'cuckoo' —completely 'cuckoo.' I've a wife and kids in the States, and I want to see them before I go too far. My contract had just about ended, anyway."

"You're no more 'cuckoo' than I am Fred," Grigson assured him. "The whole trouble is, we have both failed to progress with the theatre and its evolutionary trends. Rabbits from hats are finished! The old haunted cabinet tricks and the headless lady stunts belong to yesterday.

To-day they want *real* magic! Professor Shrimpton is a new master in the realm of legerdemain."

Hampton was looking at them both through rather sleepy eyes, his lips slightly compressed with the mild vinegar of cynicism.

"Right-o," he said wearily. "I'll have a little holiday in the country first and then—" he shrugged—"I might even find you are both real and accept your terms as a sleeping partner in the great double act."

He watched them go back along the hospital path, Grigson striding purposefully and Shrimpton, with his old-fashioned bowler hat and umbrella, almost trotting to keep up with the other's pace.

* * * *

"Dissolvo, the Invisible Man," became famous over night. It was absolutely inevitable that he should. Grigson offered a thousand pounds to any member of the public who could prove that Dissolvo used trapdoors or any other deceptive props. or appurtenances whatever. The challenge hit the public on hoardings, in tram, train and ferry advertising, on theatre screens and over the radio. So many people wanted to make a thousand pounds that the Bijou Theatre was packed nightly.

Before finally signing the contract, the professor had made two important stipulations. He insisted on limiting the term of engagement to twelve months, owing to his limited supply of Hocus concentrate; and he demanded anonymity. He agreed to make his nightly stage appearances in disguise and this was effected by a false nose and rather long, drooping moustaches. These completely altered his appearance, giving him rather a comical, instead of a serious, look. He felt he was just there to disappear and reappear. He had realised, also, that he could not, in the nature of things, forsake the University and decided to carry on. It would mean only a little discomfort, perhaps a certain tiredness, for twelve months. There was no reason why anyone should know the real identity of

Dissolvo. It would mean deception as far as Mabel was concerned, too, but he would be adding appreciably to the family income and the end would entirely justify the means.

Hampton made a quicker and better recovery in the country than was expected and he returned to the stage with all the old gusto of the former Professor Didlum. His illness, he said, had just been like a nasty dream, and financially he was better off than he had ever been in his life. He did a number of clever illusions and sleight-of-hand and finally, amid a hush as the orchestra faded, he made his dramatic announcement nightly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it now gives me very great pleasure, on behalf of the Bijou management, to introduce the wonder man of the age—Dissolvo!"

At a hundred pounds a week he had no venom, no professional jealousy whatever, against the clever little subject of his nightly introduction. He continued:

"Without the use of backdrop curtains, wires, deceptive lighting, or trapdoors, you will see him slowly disappear before your eyes. While out of sight he will walk from the stage down among the audience. He might tap one of you on the shoulder, take your hat from your lap and place it on your head. He is full of tricks. You need not be alarmed. Don't suspect your neighbour. Dissolvo might sit on your knee—if you are lucky. You might even see him begin to reappear while he is moving among the audience. Dissolvo has spent a lifetime perfecting this amazing act and defies you to say how it is done. The Bijou management will give a thousand pounds to anyone proving that Dissolvo uses wires, artificial lighting, mirrors, curtains or trapdoors. Furthermore, any member or members of the audience may come on to the stage and stand within three feet of Dissolvo while he vanishes. Ladies and gentlemen, we are happy and proud to introduce—

DISSOLVO!"

While the orchestral kettledrum rolled, the spotlight focussed on the left wing. Then, with a clash of cymbals, Dissolvo appeared, stepping smartly, though a little inconspicuously after such a portentous build-up. He made a low bow and, as he did so, popped the Hocus capsule into his mouth and swallowed. There was a slight hitch on the first night when Shrimpton, suffering a little from stage-fright, tripped over a piece of carpet when coming onto the stage. He measured his full length on the floor and, in the scramble, lost his moustache and his precious capsule. The audience roared with laughter as he grovelled on the floor for his gelatine pill and his whiskers. They thought he was a comic introduction to the act. Fortunately, he was not recognised and was able to retrieve his indispensables, stick the moustache on—a little out of place—and swallow the capsule as he bowed low. It was not long before he had regained any lost prestige by slowly and unmistakably fading from human sight. He well could have said to them, "Laugh *that* off!" There he was one moment; the next moment—gone! Even the sceptics were beaten.

They heard his feet stepping down from the stage, step by step, as clearly as anyone could wish it. In a breathless hush they heard those steps go along the aisle. They heard them begin to shuffle between certain rows of seats and, being small and slight, he adroitly accomplished this without brushing against the knees of the spell-bound audience. He stopped once beside a very buxom blonde of some vintage. Calmly taking the handbag from her lap, he dropped it onto the knees of a soldier in the seat next to her.

"Thief!" she yelled. "This man's trying to steal my bag!" Then, addressing the soldier vehemently, she added, as she snatched her bag back, "I've a good mind to give you in charge, you nasty, hateful, grabbing thing!"

The soldier swung round.

"Go and have a bath. You slung your bag at me!"

Dissolvo bent down and spoke softly into her ear.

"Don't blame the soldier, my dear lady. It's Dissolvo speaking. No offence was intended."

She cast a quick, frightened glance at the soldier and then at the woman on the other side of her and, with a gasp, fainted.

Once, when walking between the rows, Shrimpton tripped over a man's foot and fell to the floor. He apologised profusely as he regained his feet, but bumped a few more knees of the audience.

An excited man jumped up.

"He's here!" he called out wildly. "Dissolvo is coming up through a trapdoor at our feet! I claim the thousand pounds reward!"

Hampton held up a hand and came towards the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that is quite in order. If the gentleman can prove that there is a trapdoor where he is sitting, or even within ten yards of it, we will gladly pay over the thousand pounds. We want to be quite fair. He will be able to inspect the theatre with any number of witnesses he likes after the show."

There was a murmur among the audience and a good deal of hand-clapping.

"I'll have that on!" called the claimant.

While he was standing, however, Shrimpton quietly tipped his seat so that when he went to sit down again he crashed on to the floor. While he was spluttering and cursing, Shrimpton politely edged past, again brushing him lightly.

"Excuse me," he said. "But I must get back to the stage now. I am due to reappear there shortly."

There was a gale of laughter as the fallen man struggled to a kneeling position beside his seat. He was in no mood to treat the matter as a joke.

"There's *something* here all right, and it *isn't* a man! It brushed past me and I heard it breathing!"

* * * *

These incidents were, of course, largely the experimental sessions at the theatre, although even these were exceptionally well received. Dissolvo improved considerably on his act and also stepped up the patter.

His "Do you mind if I sit on your knee?" caused shrieks among the audience as he flopped on some unsuspecting person's lap. His "May I borrow your programme?" caused gasps as a programme was whisked from someone's hand or knee, fluttered overhead for a while and was returned with a polite "thank you, very much."

Another of his little jokes when among the audience was to say "Excuse me, but isn't this your hat?" as he took a hat from under a seat and popped it on the owner's head—or even on the head of someone else for variety. Sometimes he deftly exchanged what was on one knee for that which was on another. It was easy and always effective to call "Look out!" and flick, say, a box of chocolates from a girl's lap onto that of her partner and transfer a man's hat to her knee. It sometimes caused a good deal of consternation, although in this trick most of the audience usually suspected the person on the next seat as trying to be funny. However, it was all good, exciting and amusing mystery.

Within a week of his first appearance it was impossible to obtain a seat at the Bijou. Booking was actually eight weeks ahead. Even a black market developed around the sale of booked seats. "Scalpers" were buying whole rows of seats and selling them on the night of Dissolvo's shows for as much as two pounds for front stalls.

Shrimpton was interviewed by the Press. As carefully instructed, he said simply, "I cannot be expected to give away such an important stage secret." He made the headlines. One sensation paper gave him an eight-column streamer. Song parodists wrote "Dissolvo will get you if you don't look out!" set to the tune of "Love Bug." In two months he obtained two thousand four hundred pounds for the use of his name in commercial advertising.

He found himself in slogans such as "DISSOLVO DIDDLES THE DIRT"; "DISSOLVO DEODORANT —YOU DON'T KNOW IT'S THERE, BUT IT DOES A NICE, QUIET JOB."

He told the persistent Press that he had no favourite film star, although he greatly respected Mary Pickford, whom he remembered quite well in "Tess of the Storm Country." He ate no special foods, did not play games, was rather fond of paw-paw, and his only hobby was gardening. True, the reporters found him difficult "copy." He was a pretty hard little nut to crack for news, and for some absurd reason insisted on wearing his false nose and whiskers when being interviewed. Indeed, he gathered even more fame from this natural avoidance of personal publicity. He shared with Greta Garbo the desire to be alone. He mostly was.

He was considered the master magician of our time, and, by reason of his real or assumed modesty, was considered also the master showman. And all he did, he reflected, was to make himself scarce. The job was almost too easy when you knew how. It was so simple that he found it easier than he had expected to attend the University in the day time, except on Wednesdays, when there was a matinee performance. He felt justified in his little white lie to Mabel about his nightly absences. These, he said simply, were "unavoidable work of a quite remunerative character which could not very well be done at home."

Not that Mabel cared very much. She had quite a lot to do with her own time.

* * * *

In search of perfection, now that he had these regular theatrical obligations, the professor decided to indulge in a little experimental work on the effects of the Hocus root and, as he subsequently put it, "the range of the Hocus emanations causing invisibility." Having the house to himself one morning, he had an orgy of experiment. He

was able to satisfy himself positively that clothing, being close to the body, became quite invisible after taking a Hocus capsule. Articles in his pockets were also invisible and even his hat faded from sight if he was wearing it at the time of taking the Hocus. Articles picked up after he had taken the capsule did not become readily invisible unless and until they were placed in a pocket, when they apparently came within the influence of the as yet unidentified ray.

VIII.

With the great wealth he was now rapidly acquiring, Professor Shrimpton again began to think covetously of Birdwood. Money, it had quite truthfully been said, had no real meaning for him. The more he stored away the more it was like static electricity. It needed a transmission line, a use for so much latent purchasing energy. He knew he could have bought a wooded allotment and built a beautiful place on it. That wasn't the point. A dyspeptic millionaire could buy everything an epicure could desire except a good, robust digestion. There could be no substitute for Birdwood. It was now not a question of money. Any other house would be like a Louis XVI table turned out in a box factory.

And yet, if money meant anything at all, it should, in some measure, represent a useful power. If the things you ardently wanted were not procurable by money, how else, short of utter lawlessness, were they to be obtained? Here he was, willing and able to buy Birdwood, and told now that it was just simply not for sale. The local belief that the place was haunted was surely just a cock-and-bull story. He was certainly not going to give it credence. And yet, coming to think about this matter, there was the germ of an idea in it. He tarried a little with conscience. Why not really haunt the place? Why not add something to the legendary atmosphere? If it was already haunted, nobody could object to a little more suburban spine-chilling. If it was not haunted, then it was high time it lived up to its

local reputation. The professor had never before thought of carrying the fight to the enemy. His whole life had been built upon a purely defensive strategy. It might have been that, with the repeated doses of Hocus, his personality *was* changing! It might have been that he was losing his inferiority complex. Perhaps a little real, genuine haunting, not too heavily overplayed, would help Miss Glendenning make up her mind to sell. She could also make a considerable profit on the deal were she so minded. He brooded in this way for two or three days and finally decided to visit Birdwood; something like a criminal revisiting the scene of the crime, so drawn was he to this grand old house and grounds. He would go out late at night, take a Hocus capsule, and then, for the rest, act as a regular inhabitant of the place. Naturally, it could not be expected that this would improve Miss Glendenning's blood pressure, but it should do her no permanent harm.

At 10 o'clock the following Sunday night he scaled the big double gate at Birdwood and walked calmly up the drive. As expected, as soon as he had gone a few yards he heard the distant barking of the dogs, which had sensed his approach. To enjoy the maximum period of invisibility he deliberately delayed taking his capsule. He heard the rattle of chains as the dogs barked, and wondered if they were always kept outside at night and why they were apparently leashed. He felt reasonably safe, therefore, and went straight up to the house and peered in the window of the big living room.

To his utter amazement, a scene of horror confronted him. Miss Glendenning lay squirming on the floor, her tawny hair awry, her legs, with the long pointed shoes on her feet, moving convulsively. She was foaming at the mouth. A man, presumably a servant, was holding a glass to her lips in an effort to halt the paroxysms and induce her to take a restorative. Unaccustomed to violence, the professor withdrew, a little in fear, a little in extreme sympathy for the unfortunate woman. There was obviously nothing

he could do and he was pleased that he had not gone ahead with his absurd and impulsive plan. Indeed, he now felt very ashamed of himself at having allowed a cheap sense of bravado to force him to launch a scheme which he felt certain he would never have been able to carry out. Undoubtedly, he thought, the Hocus root must have been having some effect on him.

He was about to retrace his steps when he was surprised to see the front door open and a tall, ghostly apparition appear. As he watched, spellbound, it moved silently towards the garden. As he had no fears whatever of the supernatural and had never believed in spirits any more than he had entertained the idea of hobgoblins, witches or gnomes and fairies, he felt impelled to follow the shrouded figure at a respectful distance. At the tool shed the ghost turned down a seldom-used path and Shrimpton was interested to hear the mundane crackle of dried leaves. The pace of the white figure quickened and the professor followed, using the narrow grass border to deaden the sound of his footsteps.

About 150 yards along this path the ghost suddenly stopped. So did the professor, and at the same time took a capsule. It was plain, even in the light of the full moon, that the ghost had been joined by someone else. The shroud was being removed. The professor edged closer and closer until he was within a few feet of the conspirators, whom he could hear whispering.

"Nearly killed the old buzzard with fright to-night. She went out like a light!"

"Nice work!" the other whispered back. "I hope she comes round, though."

"Blimey! I crept up right behind her and 'whooed' like a damn owl. She turned around, gave a shriek and flopped for the full count."

"Good-oh! She'll probably sell now. I won't forget you, either."

The two men stooped over what looked like a small tap well which concealed the water-cocks for the garden hosing system. They carefully and quietly lifted the wooden top and, rolling up the white sheet, placed it in the well for hiding. The professor, who had been deeply engrossed in this perfidy, thought that the time had come to give some evidence of his own unsuspected presence. Although he was hurt, it was not a case of professional jealousy. Extreme sympathy for Miss Glendenning in her shock and concern over the fact that these two callous plotters were, in fact, endeavouring to cheat him out of Birdwood gave him quite a little heart for the job. He spoke commandingly in the most sepulchral voice he could assume.

"Good evening—brother ghosts!"

The two men seemed to freeze together as if suddenly made cataleptic by a hypnotist. The professor resumed.

"As you two unpleasant people have been *playing* ghosts, to the great harm of Miss Glendenning and the fears of the whole neighbourhood, how would you like to become *real* ghosts?"

The two figures still stood, immovable and inarticulate, breathing noisily as their hearts pounded with fear and the roots of their hair tingled.

"Well?" he pursued, in a tone still menacing.

One of the pair at last, with a great effort, found his tongue.

"D-d-don't sh-shoot, mister! We'll come along quietly."

"Oh, you'll both come along *quietly* enough," insisted the professor. "There is nothing so quiet as the grave, surely!"

The other conspirator then managed to find a shaky, inadequate apology for a voice.

"We can explain, only don't shoot!"

"Shoot!" exclaimed the professor tersely. "Shoot? Why you talk as if I were a visible mortal such as your

miserable selves. That's a preposterous supposition! Preposterous!"

They gasped. One man sagged at the knees and had to clutch the other to save himself from falling.

"Wh-who a-are you, th-then, mister, please?" asked one of the men in a quavering, frightened voice.

"That is not for you to question, but I shall favour you with a reply which you do not deserve. To-night I am the spirit of the Glendennings."

Again the two men, rendered speechless, huddled closer together in paralysing fear. The professor went on, quite calmly, almost as if he were on the stage.

"Were I an *ordinary* mortal, carrying a gun, as you so unsportingly suggest, I should be as visible to you as you are visible to me this moonlight night, should I not?"

"Y-yes, s-sir."

"Yes, mister."

"—As it is," the professor continued, rather enjoying his own confidence, "I walk around you like this. You cannot challenge me or attack me because you cannot see me."

As he spoke, he strolled right up behind them and, remembering his earlier New Guinea experiences, bellowed "BOO!" in their ears.

They gasped, ducked and huddled together again, breathing noisily and quickly.

The professor stooped down, pulled up the lid of the tap well and fished out the sheet. He knew very well that his terrified moonlight watchers saw only the well lid opening of its own accord and the tell-tale sheet flutter their own disgrace.

"Shame upon you, scoundrels!" he said dramatically. "And what, might I ask, was your fell purpose in frightening poor Miss Glendenning? Come, speak up!"

They babbled together, like guilty children, in their eagerness to tell the truth and feeling the cold breath of death on their cheeks.

"We wanted to force her to sell. We want the property cheap."

It was the professor's turn to recoil. This was a dagger thrust at himself. These wretched creatures wanted *his*—or practically his—Birdwood! This was monstrous. When he spoke again he found it difficult to maintain the false pitch his voice had first assumed. He thought it better to dally no longer as he had been really appalled to confirm the real intentions of the two ghostly rogues.

"Very well, if you bid, you die!" he said with telling bluntness. "This house *is* haunted. It is mine! Mine, do you understand! I have had enough of your—your feeble amateurism! Playing ghosts, indeed, while all the time I have had to hover behind and above, watching you trying to out-haunt me."

They were trembling now. The cold clammy fear of their first shock had subsided.

"Please, sir, have mercy and we promise —"

"Begone!" suddenly commanded their invisible accuser. "If you are not off these grounds within five minutes you will be ghosts in truth. Go!"

He made a funny little sucking noise with his mouth as the two men turned, started to amble, broke into a trot and finally rushed in the mad fear that children have when told in darkness that a bogey man is after them. They tore down the side paths like demons possessed and the professor heard them crash several times into trees, shrubs and hedges in their frenzied desire to quit the ghostly borders. They might be bleeding, bruised and breathless, but they took no risks of becoming "ghosts in truth." Given minutes they practically completed their evacuation in as many seconds.

He tried to imagine the impact on the minds of these men for the rest of their lives; how they would react when asked by their children for a bedtime ghost story; how soberly knowing and silent they would be when someone spoke seriously or lightheartedly about spirits.

Carefully, he replaced the sheets where the men had hidden them and went down the main Birdwood drive. The big gates were open to admit a P.D. car which had apparently been summoned after Miss Glendenning's collapse. The professor walked out in quite leisurely fashion and not displeased with his adventure after all.

* * * *

Miss Glendenning made a satisfactory recovery in hospital, but vowed never to return to Birdwood. Professor Shrimpton could have purchased the estate at that stage for £4,250, but, like the exacting and fair dealing man he was, he absolutely insisted on paying the full purchase price of £5,000. He also contributed £200 towards Miss Glendenning's hospital and convalescent expenses. "Just a little goodwill gesture," he said.

Within a month he had taken full possession of the estate, laughed at the absurd ghost stories which were still bandied about the neighbourhood and said it must have been the old white horse which used to pull the mower on some of the greens.

The gardener left with Miss Glendenning. The circumstances were a little peculiar. He developed a great fear of side paths. He and a friend recently "had a great shock in these parts," he said. He believed emphatically in ghosts. Nobody would ever tell *him* there were no such things as ghosts. And the quaint little professor seemed to understand.

IX.

MABEL, of course, came to Birdwood a little reluctantly at first, but with a growing satisfaction that she was in fact, and in name, the mistress of Birdwood. She never knew, far less realised, how the professor acquired the money to buy the estate outright. Her husband, she reasoned when she had time to think about him at all, was a naturally studious and eminently successful man in his own profession. His work was apparently becoming internationally known and this was bound to bring him cash as well as credit. Since, too, he was spending nearly every night in town tutoring, lecturing and writing, as she thought, there was no reason to suppose that he was not now doing very well indeed.

Personally, the arrangement suited her admirably. She had never been the type to let grass, or anything else, grow under her feet. There was, for instance, old Colonel Phizackerley, "a really charming and entertaining six-footer of a man." He, too, developed a deep attachment for Birdwood, although his interest in botany was extremely limited. With the professor away so much it was only natural that his wife should have some relief from boredom, especially now that she was further out of town and was unable to pop into a news theatrette for an hour or so or take a friend for a cup of coffee and a bit of scandal.

Once, on coming home from the Bijou at midnight, the professor was interested to find the Colonel's hat on the chesterfield and to hear unrestrained laughter coming

from the glassed-in verandah. More perplexed than concerned, he was of half a mind to investigate with the aid of a Hocus capsule, but immediately rebuked himself for having thought of such a caddish device. Definitely, it would not have been cricket. To the pure all things were pure, and besides, it would be foolish to rush to his pills of anonymity on the slightest provocation or suspicion. He was already, by reason of stage obligations, perhaps too much of an habitual consumer of the remarkable drug. He coughed politely to attract attention, but the laughter still went on. He called out, "Mabel, is that you?"

There was immediate silence, followed by some whispering and a rustle of pot-plant leaves. Presently, Mrs. Shrimpton and the Colonel appeared, blinking in the brighter light of the large living room.

"Ah! How do you do, professor? Awfully nice to see you," said the colonel affably, shooting out a disarming hand.

"Good evening, colonel."

"I'm so glad you're home, Ernest. I managed to persuade the colonel to keep me company. And, of course, he's been telling me ghost stories."

The professor seemed surprised.

"Ghost stories?"

"Yes. We started talking about the recent local scares and one thing led to another and before long I was really frightened."

"I quite understand, Mabel. But of course, we know there are no ghosts and I feel sure that all the recent talk about Birdwood being haunted was deliberately done to frighten Miss Glendenning.

The colonel laughed, boisterously.

"Well *you* must be the ghost, professor, since you bought Birdwood!"

The professor's smile was rather more sickly than wan. He did not like being considered a ghost, in the circumstances. Furthermore, he had noticed a firm, oblique

lipstick line running across Colonel Phizackerley's lips like a knife wound.

"If I could lay claim to ghostliness I should doubtless know a great deal more than I do," he said, ingenuously unmindful of the sting in his words.

He did not even see the glance that flashed between his wife and the colonel.

"Just as well there are no ghosts," said Mabel, rallying boldly. "And, Ernest, would you please put on the kettle? We simply can't let the colonel go without supper. With this dreadful war on, we can't even get any spirits now."

Obediently the professor excused himself to the colonel and went through to the kitchen. When he returned the strange rash had gone from the colonel's lips.

"I am exceedingly sorry I was not home earlier, colonel," the professor said as the visitor was leaving after supper. "Please do come again. I am anxious to know something about the herbaceous roots of India and of course, the Peepul tree*."

The colonel goggled over the pipe he was just about to light.

"Most assuredly, my good chap. I don't know much about Indian roots and things, but if I can be of help I shall be charmed."

"And very many thanks for taking care of my wife and allaying her fears of ghosts."

"Not at all. Not at all. Good night, old chap."

Getting into the nightshirt which he always preferred to pyjamas, the professor was a little puzzled. It was probably very unfair to have left Mabel at home so much at night. And yet, despite her strong and dominant personality, she had never once complained about these absences. It might almost be said that she approved of them, since silence implies consent. When he gave up the stage, as he inevitably must, a more settling influence would come

* There is a tradition in India that in the shade of the Peepul tree only truth can be told. To tell a lie kills the liar.

over their lives. He would not be sorry. He was already wealthy. Royalties were pouring in from the commercial use of his stage name. Against these credits, however, were certain disturbing debits. He was almost certain his personality was changing. True, it was not particularly marked at present, but he was a little haunted by the fear that it might become serious. It would have been poor solace to have achieved one of your greatest desires only to find yourself too broken in health to enjoy it. Before him was the parallel of the grasping hoarder. Too often, death interrupted a life time of saving, denying the fruits of accumulation. Life was far too short to want to risk the enjoyments of maturity. He had therefore done a very wise thing in reducing the term of his contract. The regular doses of Hocus were threatening to break down his resistance to invisibility. Like the tides and sunsets, there was a slight variation each day he took the capsules.

He was now "under" for his act each night more than 15½ minutes. Only two nights ago, however, probably due to a slightly miscalculated dose when they were being prepared, he was under the spell of invisibility for 21 minutes and 7 seconds.

"You've got the greatest act in the world, pro.," Grigson assured him, "but I'd keep it to 15 minutes. I always believe in rationing my good stuff. Keeps the mug public wanting it all the more."

The professor laughed, nervously.

"I'm afraid I must have just been a little over-zealous, Mr. Grigson."

"Don't worry. It's a good way to be. But I had a tight-rope walker like that once. He got over-zealous when he was on the wire over the heads of the audience. Lost his nerve after a bit of over-confident stunting. They took him and two ambulance loads of audience to the hospital. Just as well you're not a tight-rope walker, professor."

There was a little moral there and even Shrimpton was not slow to appreciate the homily. At the same time

he felt that he was very much like a tight-rope walker. It was becoming mighty hard to balance. He was, in a way, like a diabetic who walked the whole rope of life with the balancing umbrella of insulin.

A week after the manager's reminder that a star act should not be overtimed, he nearly wrecked the show. He had made his customary bow and swallowed his capsule. He had gone grandly through his turn; had terrified, amused and thrilled one of the biggest audiences ever packed into the Bijou. In the dress circle they were actually sitting on the aisle steps and standing at the back. The professor was of course usually able to sense through plainly recognisable sensations, when visibility was returning. From the time the tingling began in his extremities, he knew exactly how long he had to spare and usually made his way back to the stage for a more dramatic reappearance there. As he began to undergo the amazing transformation, he was always greeted with the unstinted applause that follows tension. This grew to an absolute din, often accompanied by cheers as he made his last material and visible bow.

But on this particular night, there was no applause following an announcement that he was about to return. He realised, with an uneasy sense of fear, that the effect of the Hocus had not worn off. He was actually six minutes overdue. Fortunately, the tell-tale reminder of returning normality occurred in time to avoid any panic. He was able to complete his turn although greatly shaken by the ordeal. Grigson was also very annoyed, feeling that the professor might be becoming a trifle exhibitionist. He was frightened to mention this again, lest he lost the little goose that was laying so many golden eggs.

To this disturbance of mind, came still more trouble for Shrimpton. This was the hint of more "sour taste" in the grapes that should have sweetened his life. And it happened quite suddenly. Returning from the theatre one night, he found his wife actually sitting up for him. The

smell of a good cigar still hung like a cloud of destiny in the air between the living room and the glassed-in verandah. He had been thinking, as he strolled up the drive and inhaled deeply of the bushy night fragrance, that he would soon be able to take final leave of his career of convenience and become more a living part of Birdwood. He would also be able to make Mabel a little more contented, since life was short and struggle often vain.

When he got in, however, he found her seated on a satin-covered settee in her rather flamboyant negligée. She was smoking, rather quickly and nervously, and he immediately sensed something untoward.

"I didn't think you would be up so late, Mabel," he said, trying to read the mystery of this new mood.

She threw her head back and half closed her eyes as she puffed smoke towards the ceiling.

"I was waiting for you," she said, her voice strange, distant. "Ernest, I want a divorce!"

It was exactly as if she had said "Ernest, here's the dish cloth!" or "I should like a cup of tea!" She had always lived richly in the imperative mood.

The professor was taken aback, but probed the blunt remark almost professorially.

"A divorce, Mabel? Why, what have I done?"

She seemed a little easier now that she had delivered the first broadside and noted its effect on the target. She felt it was not so hard to qualify her request, philosophically.

"Nothing. You've *always* done nothing. I am a positive person, Ernest. I must have a positive husband and positive friends. That is my nature. Frankly, you are a negative. We don't blend."

The professor was shocked and confused. He found it impossible, for the moment, to gather and marshal his thoughts. He would never deny that Mabel and he were incompatibles. He had no illusions about the platonic nature of their married life. But this way of life had been

a mutual acceptance, for better or for worse. Life lost meaning without the spirit of give-and-take; without a colloquially termed "pal-ship." But divorce! Divorce, with its necessary publicity and the washing of dirty linen in court, seemed almost unholy. It was just unthinkable. She spoke again while he was in this daze.

"So you'll have to do something about it. You will have to get yourself compromised, or something. It's no good protracting these matters."

He looked at her steadily, his eyes a little watery and uncomprehending.

"Mabel," he said at last, "I know we haven't always been spontaneously happy, but you've always had my—my respect."

She puffed another smoke ring towards the ceiling as if it carried a tangible thought.

"Now, it's no good being sentimental, Ernest. I can't honestly say the feeling was ever mutual. We grew apart and that's all there is to it. It's no good having a scene."

He knew that, only too truly.

"So you want to divorce me and you want me to—"

She interrupted, quite lightly now that the air, she felt, had been cleared.

"Oh, we can easily arrange that. I can get a nice little girl to call on you one night. Then we can arrange a raid. The colonel will attend to all the details."

"Colonel Phizackerley?"

"Of course! I thought you knew. I'm really frightfully in love with him. We're going to Canada."

This stunning news left him at a loss for words. Her remarks were so final, her mood so resolute and uncompromising. What could he say or do?

"Very well, Mabel," he said after a pause, "as this business seems to be so obviously final, I can only wish you every happiness." And then he mused a little. "It's a funny thing, but as I came up the drive to-night, I had

resolved to retire at the end of the year and try to make conditions more congenial for you."

She sighed.

"Thanks, Ernest. I appreciate that, but I'll be much happier taking the step I intend taking with the colonel. I'm so glad you understand."

He was looking down at her as she sprawled elegantly and a little boldly on the settee, flicking cigarette ash from her long, black ebony holder on to the carpet. The look in his eyes, even then, was not unkindly.

An hour after they had gone to bed he awakened her.

"Mabel, are you awake?"

There was movement and an annoyed yawn from the other bed.

"What on earth's the matter?"

"Mabel, I've been thinking. I couldn't possibly go through with that business."

She sounded as if she were more awake now.

"The divorce?"

"No. The other business connected with it."

"You mean getting compromised? Oh, there's nothing to that, really. It's quite fashionable. You don't have to *do* anything. We want evidence, that's all."

"Mabel, I shan't do it!"

His voice was tense and urgent.

"What are you frightened of—the publicity?"

"No. Well, in a way, yes. But I should be more frightened of such—such—tactics."

"Tact, Ernest, not tactics. Anyhow, let's talk about it in the morning. You can unduly magnify these things, brooding over them in darkness."

"No, Mabel, I must talk about it now. I can't do it!"

She sighed deeply with tired boredom.

"Perhaps we could arrange cruelty. We could easily get evidence of you knocking me about. How would that do?"

"But I *don't* knock you about!"

That was one thing she did know. She was growing sleepy again.

"Oh, it's only for the Court," she assured him, stifling a yawn. "We shall have to see my solicitor. Mental cruelty might be too hard to prove. Desertion isn't easy either, but we will be guided by legal advice."

"Listen, Mabel, I think I have it!"

She heard his bed creak as though he were resting on one elbow.

"Supposing I disappeared frequently. Wouldn't that be evidence?"

"If you never came back it would. I suppose that would be evidence of desertion, but I should probably have to prove it. It would mean waiting too long."

"Mabel!" His voice was more tense and arresting than she had ever heard it. "I can disappear whenever I like!"

She did not seem to be very concerned about that.

"What? Take a trip to Manly or spend a day at the Zoo?"

"No. I can vanish before your eyes while I am talking to you."

She sighed, this time wearily.

"Are you quite well, Ernest?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, why not go to sleep and let us go into silly little details to-morrow. I'm tired."

He did not reply at once. He got out of bed, groped in his coat pocket for his cigar case and extracted a capsule with fumbling fingers. This he swallowed.

"Mabel, I don't want to alarm you, but I insist on your understanding what I mean when I say I disappear. I shall presently put the light on and although I shall be in bed you will not be able to see me."

She was now wide awake with annoyance.

"Are you going to hide under the bed and play hide and seek or something foolish at this unearthly hour?

Whatever *are* you mumbling about?"

By way of answer, he reached out to the bedside lamp and switched on the light. Mabel screwed up her eyes and blinked until she became accustomed to the light and then glanced at his bed. Not seeing him there, she glanced under the bed and then up at the wardrobes.

"Don't be so utterly foolish, Ernest. Come out from wherever you are hiding or I shall begin to fear for your sanity. There is no need to take my divorce decision so seriously."

His voice, quite rationally pitched, came from his bed beside hers and it quite startled her.

"Since getting back into bed, I haven't moved an inch. See?"

She saw the bed clothes rise as he lifted his knees.

"Now. I have two pillows but I need only one. So I throw the other on to *your* bed. Watch! Here it comes!"

The pillow politely left the professor's bed, described a little arc as it floated over towards his wife and plopped beside her. She drew back with a startled cry.

"Satisfied?"

She was astounded. It was some time before she was able to speak.

"Where are you?"

"In my bed beside yours."

There was another awkward silence before she spoke again.

"Is that the mean trick you played on me that night in your study, when you made me think I had gone blind. The night you talked about allergies?"

"It was not a trick, Mabel."

Her eyes were still angrily searching his bed in the hope of being able to fix him with a gaze. It was most disconcerting not to be able to locate him.

"Oh, yes it was, Mr. Jekyll and Hyde. It was a trick all right. A mean despicable trick. I can't imagine what diabolical method you use, but it only strengthens my

desire to be rid of you. How could any woman live with a man like that?"

"It was a discovery I made in Papua. I found a root which had unusual properties and which I tentatively named the Hocus root. I am still writing up my notes on this subject. I had to have solitude and freedom from interruption to complete such an important scientific task."

She made no answer for a very long time. He watched her brow furrow in thought and knew that her mind must have been working very quickly. Her eyes, perplexed and angry, were still trying to locate him. Sometimes, she unwittingly looked right into his own eyes.

"How long do you remain like that?" she asked, after a time.

"Roughly, more than a quarter of an hour. I am rather concerned about the specific periods of my invisibility. They are becoming a little difficult to control."

"You might find it harmful," she suggested, now more calmly and as though she were thinking of something entirely unconnected with his state of health.

"I don't think so."

"Of course, it will make very good evidence. I shall only have to tell the judge that my husband disappears whenever I talk to him. You won't defend the case, anyway."

"There is one more thing I think I should tell you, Mabel."

"As if what you've already told me isn't enough," she sneered. "What is it?"

He switched off the light, in case he should begin to materialise in the rather unpleasant piecemeal stage way and because it was somewhat easier to confess in darkness.

"I have a—a—theatrical engagement for twelve months. I am known as Dissolvo."

"You what?"

Her voice was high pitched, incredulous, startled.

"I said I am known at the Bijou Theatre as Dissolvo the invisible man."

She sat bolt upright in bed.

"Ernest, that's incredible! The whole town is talking about this—this—invisible person!"

She sounded almost as if she was praising his clever deception.

"Is that where you have been when I thought you were at the University each night?"

"Yes. That is also how I acquired the money to buy Birdwood. I am really very wealthy, and should hate any demonstrative Court proceedings."

She fell again into another of her stunned silences. When she spoke it was more to herself than to him.

"My husband! After all these years, the disappearing man, Dissolvo! I can hardly believe it. Is this—this trick of yours based on your discovery?"

"Certainly. But it is *not* a trick. It will not go on forever."

"No, but it will be very handy for divorce purposes."

"I think that would be most inadvisable, Mabel," he said, apprehensively. "I hope I shan't have to appear in Court in any circumstances. I daresay the revelations made by yourself will wreck my own professional life, in any case, but anything would be better than being—er—compromised."

In the darkness she seemed to have regained some of her old confidence, in spite of the extraordinary things she had just seen and heard.

"One way is as good as another, legally speaking, but personally, I should prefer to be compromised a hundred times if it were a question of obtaining evidence. You probably will not need to give evidence or even appear at Court if you don't want to."

"I don't think you should refer in Court to my stage work," he said, anxiously.

"Why not?"

"I think it might be legally construed as my main means of livelihood —"

"Well, isn't it?"

"Yes. But the Court might take the view that there is nothing very unusual about a mere magician, who would have to be at the theatre each night without being a domestic deserter. It might weaken your case."

She was shrewdly estimating his remarks, realising that they had some point. Too much publicity on this angle of his life might affect his income and she still hoped for a tidy settlement with her divorce.

"Yes," she said slowly, "it might be better if nothing was said about the theatrical side of your life."

He was greatly relieved.

She fell asleep at last, subconsciously linking the unexpected powers of her husband with the large tin of excellent sink and bath cleaner in her kitchen, bearing the printed words, "DISSOLVO DIDDLES THE DIRT."

X.

THE undefended divorce case, "Shrimpton v. Shrimpton," gave no promise of sensation when listed in the Law Notices. Conning the list for newsy or spicy tit-bits, court reporters just did not give "Shrimpton v. Shrimpton" a second glance, beyond noticing that the grounds cited in the petition were alleged desertion.

And there, among other matrimonial shipwrecks, sat the confident, well-dressed petitioner beside Colonel Phizackerley. Third row back in the Public Gallery downstairs was Professor Shrimpton, merely as an unnecessary spectator of his own marital dissolution. He had not filed a defence and sat inconspicuously nursing his bowler hat and his umbrella. No trouble was anticipated, but he wanted to be handy in case he was required to discuss the question of alimony or a settlement with his wife's counsel.

He was a little awed by the cold dignity of the Court and its rather baffling procedure. He noticed, with satisfaction, that the Judge's Associate had a very lovely red carnation in his buttonhole and this peeped from behind his robe as he sorted his papers on the bench below the Judge.

Several cases were called and, as there was no defence or appearance, it simply amounted to a tedious and formal recital of misdeeds, neglect, cruelty and desertion. Professor Shrimpton found the evidence excessively boring. He produced a pocket copy of "Economic Botany" and became very absorbed in a chapter on the climatic control of vegetation. He was aroused from this pleasant study by a

stentorian voice calling "Shrimpton v. Shrimpton." Someone said that it was "a petition for divorce on the grounds of desertion and there is no appearance of the respondent."

Before the professor had quite realised it, counsel for Mrs. Mabel Enid Shrimpton, married woman of Turramurra, was on his feet to tell His Honour that he appeared for the petitioner.

He waited while the Judge formally recorded this impressive fact and then, flicking the tails of his wig from under his robe where they had caught at the neck, announced loftily that it was "a very simple case," respondent not contesting the issue. He then launched into the essential facts of place and date of marriage, the more-or-less contented, if not happy early married life of the petitioner and respondent and then led up to Shrimpton's long and seldom explained absences from home.

"This, in itself, was bad enough, Your Honour, but recently the respondent took to disappearing altogether, causing his wife considerable shock, pain and alarm . . ."

The Judge coughed and removed his glasses to wipe them.

"Mr. Webster, do you wish me to draw some distinction in law between what you term the respondent's 'long absences from home' and what you call 'disappearing altogether'?"

"Yes, Your Honour. There *is* a very great distinction."

The Judge pursed his lips doubtingly and replaced his glasses.

"If we must presume that the respondent invariably returned to his wife after the unique feat of 'disappearing altogether' I fail utterly to see how that could be different from a 'prolonged absence.' I *do* wish you would endeavour to save the time of this Court by avoiding redundant phrases and keeping strictly to relevant issues."

"Thank you, Your Honour," said Mr. Webster, with a rather obviously deep sigh. "But, with the Court's indulgence I wish to submit that the respondent was not

only guilty of desertion by reason of long, unexplained absences from his wife and home, but was also guilty of a great deal of mental cruelty on account of his disappearances."

The Judge bristled.

"Absences, you mean, Mr. Webster. Please do not so confuse your terms."

"I respectfully submit, Your Honour, that I use the term 'disappearance' with a full knowledge of its dictionary meaning. It is literally true that the respondent, at times, actually *disappeared.*"

The Judge was getting very edgy and annoyed. Divorce Judges were already grievously overworked.

"Nonsense! Who *is* the husband of your client? Houdini, come back to life?"

The laughter in Court survived by several seconds the orderly's demand for "Silence in the Court!"

"No, Your Honour, but I do seriously submit that the respondent completely disappeared, sometimes while quietly talking to his wife."

There was another howl of laughter, in which even the Judge in Divorce joined unrestrainedly before he was able to regain self-control. The professor, seeing no cause whatever to warrant laughter, shuffled his feet and began to toy a little awkwardly with the rim of his bowler hat.

"Maybe," said counsel, a little hurt, "Your Honour will receive a better impression of my meaning when my client goes into the box."

The Judge had laughed himself into better humour and tolerance.

"I *do* hope so, Mr. Webster," he said, with a touch of Castilian courtesy as he made a little bow to counsel and unwittingly caused another wave of sibilant mirth, "But I am afraid I should also see this—this—er—superman husband of hers—the respondent, to be entirely convinced."

"It probably can be arranged, Your Honour, for I believe the respondent is in the Court at this moment."

There was a shuffling of feet and a rustling of papers as well as a good deal of murmuring as spectators, clerks, litigants and witnesses looked around and even regarded each other as likely to be the human phenomenon.

"Um," mused the Judge, serenely, playing a little to the gallery himself, "that *should* be interesting; very interesting indeed. You had better call your client first, Mr. Webster."

Mrs. Mabel Enid Shrimpton mounted the witness box quite confidently. She was severely corsetted, but stylishly dressed and made a good, forthright, straight-to-the-point witness. She promptly and accurately gave the date of her marriage to Ernest Everhard Shrimpton, spoke well of their early married life and then came, without any leading, to the contentious period of his staying away from home. Then her counsel led her a little.

"Now, about these disappearances, Mrs. Shrimpton. Just tell the Court in your own words what happened."

Mrs. Shrimpton moistened her lips and, with a glance first at the Judge as though she expected a "Go" signal from him, she spoke crisply.

"Well, Your Honour, he just wasn't there!"

The Judge had his elbows on the Bench and was softly tapping the tips of his fingers together with an expression of amused interest.

"Vanished!" he suggested, lifting his eyebrows, loftily.

"Yes, Your Honour."

The Judge snapped his fingers twice.

"Now-you-see-me-now-you-don't sort of business?"

"Exactly, sir."

"Dropped through the floor, perhaps?"

"No, sir. He didn't go through the floor. I could hear him talking from the other bed."

"Perhaps your husband was invisible, like most other people, because the lights were out?"

"No, Your Honour. My husband was gone when the lights were on!"

"You don't think, Mrs. Shrimpton, that you were the victim of a practical joke of some kind?"

"No, sir. My husband is a most serious man. He has never played a joke on anyone in his life as far as I know."

"Well then, have you any theory about these truly remarkable disappearances?"

"Only what he told me, Your Honour. He said he had found a tree in New Guinea and that prescribed doses from the root of this tree made him invisible."

There was more laughter. By now the previously unoccupied Press table was crowded with amused reporters. A good "story" gets around very quickly. The case was making a very amusing afternoon newspaper item.

His Honour still questioned the witness with subtle politeness and charm.

"Did he tell you the name of this very wonderful and, I may say, weird tree, Mrs. Shrimpton?"

"I think he said he had named it 'the Hocus tree' or something." (Laughter.)

"Well now, didn't that suggest by its very nature, some appeal to a sense of humour? That it was, in other words, all hocus-pocus?"

Mrs. Shrimpton pondered and then sniffed.

"I see nothing funny in my husband suddenly disappearing while I am talking to him." (Laughter.)

Mr. Webster's instructing counsel left his place at the Bar table and went over to Professor Shrimpton, with whom he whispered for some time. Presently, he returned and whispered something confidentially to Mr. Webster.

"If I may interrupt, Your Honour, I have just learned that the respondent, Professor Shrimpton, who is in Court, is quite willing to go into the witness box to clear the whole matter up."

"To help his wife obtain her freedom and without defending the case?" asked His Honour significantly.

"He admits his disappearances, Your Honour. Actually, he does not even intend to contest the amount

of alimony which we will suggest if and when we obtain a decree in the wife's favour."

The Judge sat forward a little eagerly.

"It might be irregular, Mr. Webster, and such questions as alimony are premature and out of order at this stage. But I am bound to say, you have whetted my appetite for mystery and I am keen to hear what the non-contesting and very accommodating respondent has to say. Will you call him now, please?"

"Yes, Your Honour. Step down please, Mrs. Shrimpton. Call Ernest Everhard Shrimpton!"

The innocuous little man who answered to that name rose in the body of the Court.

"Here, sir," he called out meekly. "I am Ernest Everhard Shrimpton."

Counsel beckoned him.

"Thank you, professor. Will you go into the box, please?"

"Certainly."

A little shyly, being the object of everyone's gaze, he made his way to the front of the Court and seemed a little nervous and hesitant, as he mounted the steps of the witness box. He took the Bible and solemnly swore that the evidence he was about to give the Court was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help him God. His name was Ernest Everhard Shrimpton, he was a professor of botany at the University of Sydney, resided at Birdwood, Turramurra, and was indeed the husband of the petitioner, Mabel Enid Shrimpton. It was a parallel recital of his wife's evidence, none of which was in dispute.

"Now," said Mr. Webster, "please tell the Court about your disappearances."

The professor looked from his wife's counsel to the Judge, shifted awkwardly for a moment and cleared his throat. He nearly made the unfortunate mistake of bowing, thinking for a moment that he was on the stage at the Bijou.

"Your Honour, there isn't much to tell. I can, as has been stated, disappear at will."

The laughter at this stage was so loud and sustained that the orderly had to call vainly and repeatedly for order. Court officials and the public had begun to imagine that both husband and wife in this divorce case had taken leave of their senses. The Judge had himself ceased taking notes on the evidence and sat back resignedly, merely as a spectator. Once, he leaned over to the Court shorthand reporter and whispered, "You need not take any more notes of this witness's evidence." He had intended, very soon, to end the case.

Professor Shrimpton modestly resumed.

"I could tell Your Honour how I came to discover the amazing Hocus root on the Strickland River and my experiments with invisibility—"

The Judge leaned forward.

"Please do, professor," he said, sweetly.

"But I thought it would be better if I actually demonstrated," continued Shrimpton.

His Honour's eyes lit up, quite brightly.

"Ah! That would be *much* better, professor, and I am quite sure it would be *most* convincing."

"Yes, I thought it would, sir."

As he spoke, the professor reached in his inside pocket for his cigar case and laid it open on the ledge of the witness box. There were a number of capsules in the case and he took one of these and placed it in his mouth.

The Judge was regarding him very closely. Even the reporters half stood up to witness what they thought would be a first-rate farce. While the professor stood waiting for the capsule to take effect the Judge leaned forward again.

"My Associate tells me, professor, that there is a current illusion at a city theatre just now in which a man allegedly disappears—nightly."

The professor was startled.

"Yes, indeed, Your Honour, I do. In fact—"

"You don't think, witness, that you have—er—how shall I put it?—been a little influenced by this doubtless popular stage trick?"

The professor reeled. The cloak of anonymity was about to drop from his shoulders.

"I am afraid I have been *very much* influenced by it, sir."

"Well, you are candid, professor."

"Thank you, Your Honour. You see, I *am* that man now performing at the Bijou Theatre!"

And there it was! The whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help him God! Before he had finished the words he felt the onset of the symptoms of invisibility; the pronounced tingling. He knew from this that his feet, legs and right arm were disappearing first.

His remark that he was, in fact, Dissolvo of stage fame, while giving his vocation as Professor of Botany, caused a commotion in Court that had never been previously witnessed. The sound came to the professor in the witness box as a great wave breaking on a shore. It was really laughter and exclamation, blending with those other sounds that come from people endeavouring to restrain themselves from laughing. But then it took on a more deeply significant tone of shocked surprise. In his great confusion the professor unconsciously extracted another Hocus capsule and promptly swallowed it. This, of course, was an unwise and foolish thing to do, and, if he had had full possession of his faculties and self-control, he would never have dreamed of doing such a revolutionary thing.

There began a din in his ears which he had never before experienced. He remembered seeing the Judge's mouth wide open and his eyes bulging as he gazed at the apparently empty witness box. He heard wild shouts and scuffling and somewhere a woman screamed, hysterically. He was, indeed, very frightened, but tried to speak and

reassure the Court that everything was all right. No sound came. His throat was dry and burning with the overdose. He made an unwitnessed gesture of despair.

There was nothing else to do but leave the box. He at least had the law on his side, since His Honour had given permission for the demonstration. He turned and calmly unfastened the latch and stepped down from the box. There was an immediate renewal of the bedlam which had been caused by his startling disappearance. They heard the click of the latch and his footsteps. As he made his way back to his seat to get his hat and umbrella he heard someone shout above the din.

"Arrest that man!"

"Contempt of Court!"

"Orderly, have that man arrested at once!"

Orderlies and officials ran everywhere. They peered under seats, under the Press table and even into corners that would hardly have given shelter to a mouse.

The Judge's face, a little more normal, was still very flushed.

"Orderly! Have the doors in the upstairs gallery locked. Witness might have somehow got up there! This thing is preposterous. This man, trifling with Justice, *must* be apprehended."

The doors upstairs were duly locked. Those of the court-room downstairs, however, were left open so that anyone leaving could be closely scrutinised.

The professor by this time was greatly unnerved. It seemed a terrible thing to be wanted for Contempt of Court. He was also very upset as he realised for the first time, that in his excitement, he had taken not one, but two of the potent capsules!

As he picked up his hat and umbrella there was another spontaneous shout from half a dozen voices and this echoed fearfully in the acoustically poor court-room.

"There he goes! Look at the hat and umbrella!"

"Arrest that man for Contempt of Court!"

He saw an orderly charging at him like an onrushing train and acted defensively by sheer impulse. A newspaper reporter was just standing up from the Press table, apparently on his way to 'phone his story from the reporters' room, when the professor hooked the handle of his umbrella in the other's handkerchief pocket, at the same time jamming his bowler hat on the larger head of the astonished pressman. There had been nothing else for the professor to do. In the language of the underworld, the umbrella and the bowler were "hot" since they were all that could be seen of the professor or his belongings. To be caught with "the goods" even though his own, was an unthinkable circumstance. His quick action, however, had deflected the attack very creditably for one not always notable for quick decisions.

There was a crash and grunts and groans as the orderly brought the journalist down with a body tackle worthy of a Rugby final.

"Got you!" he said, panting, but holding on to his quarry with fierce strength.

"Like hell you have, Tarzan," said the reporter, struggling to free himself sufficiently to avoid being strangled. "Try again, Big Boy!"

The professor began to feel that his presence, undetected as it was, was only adding fuel to the fire of this unheard-of confusion. He was dreadfully upset to see the reporter so manhandled as a result of his own thoughtlessly impulsive action. There, near the Press table, was his bowler hat, badly dented and dusty, and his umbrella, through which two steel ribs showed as evidence of the unseemly affray. They were very sentimental possessions but he knew that it would be foolish to endeavour to retrieve them. Standing over them, like a cat watching a mouse, was the orderly. His own trousers were torn and dusty and he wore a very ugly scowl. He was doubtless thinking "One move out of either of you and I'll pounce!"

Very unhappy and alarmed, the professor made his way without any further difficulty to the door through which he passed without any sort of challenge by the two unsuspecting guardians who had been placed there. He needed fresh air and walked, a little unsteadily, over to Hyde Park, where he was grateful for a seat. He sat for some time, with his head in his hands, endeavouring to straighten out the amazing events of the last few hours.

XI.

For the second time that day, misfortune dogged him. He waited on the seat in the park for two hours, expecting the tingling sensations of returning visibility. But nothing happened. Once a girl, about to take her lunch, sat at the other end of his seat and very nearly placed her fruit and sandwiches on his lap. He remembered that he had not had any breakfast and was very hungry. The smell that came from her unfolded luncheon packet was most tempting. He could smell ham, mustard, gherkins, pickled onions and fruit. Mixed sandwiches! He saw with a side glance that she was preoccupied watching the passers by and munching thoughtfully. He did not know what came over him, but impulsively he reached over for a sandwich, extracted the ham, and returned the two pieces of bread where he had found them. He found the ham most enjoyable and repeated the act several times, until nearly every sandwich of her neat little pile had been robbed of its essential centre.

He immediately felt sorry for what he had done, but felt incapable of making apology or recompense. Maintaining a discreet silence, he carefully edged away to the farthest end of the seat to avoid any embarrassment. He saw her take one of her denuded sandwiches, bite it, and, investigating the reason for its tastelessness, prise the two sides open and eye it closely. She threw it in disgust to some nearby dogs who devoured it gratefully. Then she tried another, and discovered with concern that she had been the victim of a fraud. Rather tearing each remaining

sandwich apart and discovering again that the inner layer of ham, cheese and gherkin was not there, she scooped up the lot and, neglecting even to eat the fruit, hurried away to give the sandwich shop people a piece of her mind.

Uneasy as he felt about all this, the professor was too tired, after his exhausting morning, to apologise and cause more trouble. He was too much concerned at the turn things had taken in his own life. His mind rang with those terribly incriminating words, "Arrest that man! Contempt of Court!" Although an unwanted husband, he was clearly now a very much wanted man. This thought alone, set his heart pounding, for he was, he knew, a lover of justice and a champion of citizen rights.

Perhaps worst of all his sensations at present, however, was the knowledge that the effects of the Hocus drug had not worn off and gave no hint of doing so. He gained enough strength to take a walk in the park, keeping on the grassy slopes and dodging people who unconcernedly and unknowingly walked towards him. This itself was very tiring and kept him very alert. He was like a motor driver, feeling that he had to try and anticipate what the "other fellow" was going to do. The afternoon was well advanced and it was three or four hours since he had taken his double dose of Hocus. Yet he was still completely invisible! He stopped, in the hope that he would feel the welcome tingle. It did not come and his fears brought on a kind of agitation. There was just nothing he or anyone else could do about it.

Moving on again he became a little careless and absentmindedly trod on a collie dog's foot. The animal let out a fearful yelp and darted away from its invisible tormentor, whining. Several men on a nearby seat roared with laughter at the animal's antics when no one had apparently attacked it.

"Even animals must be living on their nerves now," suggested one of the men.

"Probably a war neurosis through getting around so much in the blackout," said his companion, laughingly. "I've never seen a dog do that before, although they sometimes whine a little in their sleep, proving that they do dream."

The professor hurried on and resolved to be more careful. He was ravenously hungry as there had not been much sustaining substance in his stolen sandwich centres. However, in his present condition, he required something more than a mere decision to eat, which was man's elemental right, anyhow. He needed tact. He crossed nimbly and watchfully from Hyde Park to Elizabeth Street, dodging several trams and half a dozen motor cars. In his anxious state it seemed that the drivers of each were doing their level best to run over him. Walking along the shopping area was absolutely nightmarish in the amount of dodging one had to do, but he stopped at last in front of a large cake shop. The very odour from the doorway impelled him to debate the possibility of obtaining something to eat. There seemed to be no suggestion of any immediate likelihood of his returning to his normal condition, and food, even in its chemical relationship to the drug itself, might precipitate helpful reaction. Yes, no matter what else he did, he would have to eat.

He dodged into the shop behind a large woman who unwittingly shepherded him most effectively. The savoury smell of home-made cooking, pasties and pies and the yeasty sweetness of sponge cakes, were almost overpowering. The fat woman in front of him ordered a shillings worth of cakes and a shillings worth of sandwiches. The professor edged between the buyer and another fairly thin woman. As his original human shield turned to open her hand bag and obtain her purse to pay for her purchases, Shrimpton promptly placed two shillings on the counter and picked up the paper bag containing the sandwiches and cakes. He then stepped smartly back behind her.

When the stout woman who had ordered the goods turned to receive the cakes and sandwiches they were of course not there. It just did not make sense. She eyed the thin woman beside her with belligerent suspicion. The thin woman, accustomed like most Australians to standing up for her rights and-be-damned-to-you-if-you-don't-like-it, eyed her back with a snooty sniff.

"I ordered cakes and sandwiches; a shillings worth of each," the stout woman said to the assistant behind the counter, but not without a veiled hint in the glance she gave towards the thin woman.

"Yes, I heard you," said the girl, "and I placed them beside you. Here's the two shillings."

"It's not mine!" said Fatty with a toss of her head.

"And it's not mine, neither!" said Skinny. "Besides, I don't eat sandwiches, and cake is bad for me gall bladder: or rather the one I 'ad taken out when I had me last operation."

"That's all very well about your gall bladder," pursued Fatty, "but where's my cakes and sandwiches, which I distinctly ordered and which the young lady says she placed on the counter here?"

Skinny bristled and her mouth contracted with indignation.

"Of course, if you have any suspicions don't be afraid to say so. Perhaps you would like to look in me bag, or search me in the ladies' toilet, perhaps."

"I'm not one to cast any—any—slurs," said Fatty. "All I know is I ordered sandwiches and cakes, perfectly legitimate, and when I turn to get my purse, they're gone, and *you* happen to be beside me, that's all!"

"That's a dirty crack, Missus Nobody. And I don't like it, neither!"

"No?"

"No!"

Customers were beginning to queue up and the shop assistant took quick resort to tact. The customer had to be right.

"Somebody paid for cakes and sandwiches and somebody got them. If you (addressing Fatty) want a shillings worth of each, here they are (she popped them into bags as she spoke). And if you (addressing Skinny) want a sponge cake (popping it into a bag), here it is. That ought to make everybody satisfied."

Both women paid with tight lips and an icy head-to-foot survey of each other. They left the shop like two dogs disputing the rights over the only lamp post in a long street.

Pained but impotent at witnessing the clash at arms in the shop and knowing that he alone had been responsible for it all, the professor still had to avail himself of the cover of the more generously proportioned disputant to get out of the shop. Even then, it was a most difficult task to make very much headway with his dishonestly obtained, but honestly paid for goods. He decided to set out for the Domain, where, given the solace of a quiet, unfrequented place, he could eat and ruminate in peace. And how keen he was now to eat!

To avoid the suggestion that the two paper bags were merrily floating along the street by themselves, he had to keep very closely behind pedestrians who were going in the same direction. This was a harassing procedure, because just when the professor thought he was good for two or three hundred yards behind a steady walker, the protective pedestrian might go into a shop or suddenly decide to cross the road. You have only to walk behind someone down the whole length of a street to realise the variety of human idiosyncrasies, or to share the view of Euripides, that "the wavering mind is a base property." The unexpected things that average people do when walking along the street showed how fleeting were the thoughts in each mind, the professor told himself as he dodged, stopped abruptly and side-stepped.

Once, when following an elderly man whom he had picked to be an excellent cover by the fixed look on his face and his slow steady gait, the man stopped quite suddenly. The professor, carrying his precious bags, ran slap into him but had the presence of mind to side-step as he turned round and addressed a young man quite close to him.

"You want to be more careful, young man! Tapping people on the back like that might get you into trouble," said the elderly pedestrian grumpily.

"Tapping people like what?" said the younger man indignantly in his own defence.

"Now, none of your sauce, or I'll have you arrested for assault!"

"What's biting *you*, grandad? I never touched you. Go home to bed!"

Although upset, the professor realised he could not stay. He saw a most likely-looking back going his way and promptly followed. Life now was like being a chronic traveller waiting, always waiting, for a bus going his way. As he left the scene of the sharp exchange between Age and Youth, a crowd was collecting around the pair. All this was very upsetting. He seemed to be creating trouble everywhere and could not escape this feeling. Troubles, like babies, grew larger with nursing.

At last, by the painful process of transit as an artful dodger, he reached the Botanical Gardens and only then, free from the city bustle, did he find the going easier. If the streets were the swift currents of his life, here in the Gardens, was the stiller, more restful water. The people here were the strollers, the slow movers, the philosophers, the flower lovers and the love-lorn. This meant that the tension was not so great when seeking cover, although exceedingly annoying when one was hungry. Had anyone told him, when he left home that morning, that by the afternoon he would be dodging furtively behind citizens, he would have laughed indeed. He remembered something Lord Byron had written:

"Ships, wealth, general confidence—
All were his;
He counted them at break of day,
And when the sun set, where were they?"

It almost seemed to him that these dawdlers and idling lovers of nature were deliberately preventing him from eating. Never in all his life had he seen people move so slowly. They set this ridiculous funereal pace and he had no option but to follow, a prisoner in the girdle of their whims. Furthermore, he had a very guilty feeling that he was eavesdropping. He was obliged, whether he liked it or not, to listen to the most intimate conversations about love, divorce, bankruptcy, politics, racketeering and, of course, the war. This in itself was disturbing, but more so when one was hungry.

He dogged a couple who were apparently visitors to the city and, after strolling through the Gardens, made their way to the National Art Gallery in the Domain. There being nobody else to whom he could switch for cover, he followed them into the Art Gallery and managed to break away without causing suspicion when they went through to one of the exhibition rooms. Fortunately, there were only half a dozen persons in the Gallery and they were all intent, or pretending to be intent, in studying the pictures.

Noticing a small, unlighted lumber room opening off a corridor, he dodged in and, sitting on the floor, greedily devoured his sandwiches and cakes. His feet were aching and his head was throbbing, although there was not the slightest symptom of returning visibility. He was physically and mentally tired, but knew that the food would do him good.

He fell asleep and awakened in darkness and silence. This was an eerie sensation and it was some time before he could take stock of his surroundings or predicament. Clearly he had been locked in the National Art Gallery. Still dazed, he groped forward, but stumbled over an

obstacle and fell heavily. There was a rending of canvas as he pulled his foot from the obstruction. He had no matches or light of any kind and had entirely lost his sense of direction.

Feeling his way along a wall which he thought was a passage-way or corridor, he brushed against more obstructions. He instinctively drew back, but was too late to avoid the crash of two giant pictures which he had dislodged. Again he had to disentangle a foot from canvas. He felt that it might even have been a Rembrandt, a Titian or a Van Gogh and that he had sullied the culture of a world since dead. He found himself too frightened to move and panting like a cornered animal. While trying to decide what was the best thing to do, his eyes became accustomed to a dim light some distance away. Gingerly he set out again to explore, keeping clear of all walls, and presently found that the light filtered through a window, apparently from a light standard outside. There was a catalogue table nearby and he attempted to drag this over to the window. He found this to be heavier than he had imagined and while tugging at it with hands now moist with the perspiration of excitement and fear, he missed his grip. He went reeling backwards and fell against another picture, which came down with a shattering crash of glass and gold frame.

At last he managed to get the table over to the window and, mounting it, saw that the pale light of his salvation came from a lamp-post in a quiet part of the Domain at the rear of the Art Gallery. Using all his efforts, however, he could not lift the window. It was bolted and, as he fumbled to see the exact manner in which these bolts had been made fast, his fingers encountered little wires. A burglar alarm! Already a wanted man, he now was staggered at the possibility of apprehension on an additional charge of breaking and entering. He snapped the wires without hesitation as any professional burglar might. He was not sure at the moment whether or not he was still under the protective

influence of the Hocus. It was possible that the warning sensations had come on while he slept the sleep of an exhausted man after eating his sandwiches and cakes. If he were visible and found thus at the scene of chaos and destruction of his own doing, he was indeed undone. Since he had left his cigar case on the ledge of the witness box in that moment of tense drama of the forenoon, his last line of defence had gone. He felt sure, however, that he was still invisible. There was, nevertheless, not a moment to lose. Wrapping his handkerchief round his right hand, he smashed the two bottom panes and carefully broke any dangerous and jagged edges free. He then cautiously crawled through, saw that the ground was about ten feet below, and jumped. Coming to earth like a winded parachutist, he was pleased in one sense to observe under the light that his hands and feet, therefore the rest of his body, were still invisible. He brushed his invisible clothes out of habit and hastened from the Domain.

To the adventures of a remarkable day he thus added the grim adventure of night. He made his way to the railway station, where he calmly waited for a late train, slipped through the turnstile and boarded the guard's van for an uninterrupted run to Turramurra.

Fortunately no one was home, his wife now having a city hotel address. He made himself a cup of tea and, being thoroughly exhausted, went to bed. He knew, of course, that he would have been too late to attend the theatre, but his Court revelations would in a measure explain his absence. All he wanted to do at the moment, come what may, was sleep. And sleep he did.

He was awakened next morning by the sound of kookaburras chortling in the trees near his window. These little free tenants of earth and air were something to envy. He felt refreshed but rather frightened. The need of sleep is a great duller of emotions and sensations. New fears had come with wakefulness. His mirror told him everything, confirmed his worst beliefs. He could not see him-

self, although, again the creature of habit, he shaved awkwardly by touch. It was perhaps fortunate that Mabel had left Birdwood. Through the window came the rich, overpowering scent of magnolia. He would have been content to stay within the confines of Birdwood for the rest of his life, since all his dreams and hopes had centred on such a place as this. With Wordsworth, he liked in times of friendlessness "the brotherhod of venerable trees." Perhaps he would yet be able to remain here.

He intended to see the Chancellor of the University and also the manager of the Bijou Theatre. He would, of course, now resign his University post and most certainly give up the stage. He had enough money to cover his humble needs for life. Saying farewell to the University would be very difficult. His professional life had been born and nurtured there. His character and his deep love of nature had taken root there. It would be very hard, indeed, to say farewell to all that. Taking leave of the stage would cause him no qualms whatever. He hated the foolish and clownish act he had to go through each night. Still, it had been the means to an end. Through the travail of the jester he had reached the majestic portals of Birdwood. He could retire there as the monarch of all he surveyed. As these thoughts went through his mind he boiled himself an egg and made some toast. It should not be so hard to straighten out the little tangles that had come recently into his life. A frank, forthright statement on his discovery and he felt that tolerant and understanding minds would fairly and accurately assess the attendant circumstances.

He ate his egg in thoughtful silence and then, still nibbling a piece of toast, he went through to his study and collected his manuscript on "The Hocus root and other botanic discoveries in Papua, 1942." After glancing through a few of the last pages he had written, he carefully rolled the sheets up and placed them in his pocket. He intended to leave this at the University, knowing that it

had not only an important scientific message but, in a way, was a documentary justification of his conduct.

Acting on another impulse, he went to his study safe and took all the ready money that was there. Mostly in notes and a fair amount of silver, it amounted to £380. If visibility returned he could bank this when in the city. Now, a little more reassured and more confident of the outcome of his explanations, he set out for the city.

XII.

THE professor received the shock of his life when he reached the railway station at Turramurra. In the largest type he had ever seen on a newspaper billboard were the four terrifying words—

INVISIBLE
MAN AT
LARGE!

He reeled before the almost accusative spectacle. He was absolutely dumbfounded. A newsboy was shouting, "All about the invisible man! Sensation in Sydney!"

Towngoers on the station were buying papers, hastily scanning the headlines, laughing for a moment and then appearing to be a little more serious. Surely the whole city was being magnificently hoaxed by the sensational Press. Even the staid, old "Granny" carried the story as a piece of serious and accurate reporting.

The professor instinctively dived for small change to buy a paper, but realised in time that he could not possibly make the purchase. It placed him in maddening suspense. He tried to read over a few jostling shoulders, but found it impossible in a mounting nine o'clock workaday crowd. Reluctantly he retraced his steps towards home, in a state of growing alarm. To be involved in a virtual scandal was bad enough, but to see the essence of your wrong-doing blazoned forth in gigantic headlines was terrible. On the front doorstep of a house in the same quiet street he saw a folded newspaper which had not yet been collected by

the householder. Unable to contain himself, he went boldly through the gate, regardless of the trespass. Making certain that nobody was coming, he picked up the paper and half ran from the house to his own gate, where he arrived quite out of breath. He walked quickly up the drive and, in his eager excitement, almost lunged through his own door. He opened the paper with trembling though still invisible hands. Then, scanning the headlines, he felt sick and dizzy at what he saw. Here, too, he had never seen type in a newspaper so distressingly large. It swam stereoscopically in a field of white, like an embossed challenge. This big event, with himself as the central character, had even knocked the war news off the front page.

INVISIBLE MAN!

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR DISAPPEARS IN COURT.

AMAZING HUMAN PHENOMENON STAGGERS CITY.

LED DOUBLE LIFE AS ILLUSIONIST AND BOTANY TUTOR.

WANTED FOR ALLEGED CONTEMPT OF COURT.

£1,000 REWARD FOR ARREST.

Then followed, in column after column, the whole incredible story of his dignified appearance and sudden disappearance at the Divorce Court, the discovery of his masquerade as Dissolvo at the Bijou Theatre, and the revelation of his real identity as Professor Ernest Everhard Shrimpton.

Circumstantial colour to the amazing story was given by the fact that he did not arrive at the University for scheduled lectures or at the Bijou for his turn as Dissolvo. Police had been at both places, hoping to apprehend him

on a Contempt of Court charge which would enable them to hold him until other charges could be framed.

There were scientific explanations, strong suggestions of fraud, theories and interviews with all sorts of people, including, of course, his own wife. She was able dramatically to recall her first unnerving experience in his study. This was when he disappeared, leaving her believing that she had suffered a temporary blindness. Thus, relieved by the current publicity about him of her promise to say nothing about his stage appearances, she gave her imagination full play. She said he was a wolf in sheep's clothing and undoubtedly was a living counterpart of the fictional Jekyll and Hyde.

The newspaper report ended with a long biography of Professor Shrimpton. It mentioned his academic life, botanic studies and writings, and his field activities as an orchidist. Even his bravery at New Guinea and his military promotion and decoration were reviewed and the complete wording of the citation quoted. The writer of a signed article subtly wondered "if Professor Shrimpton's peculiar talents as a camoufleur had played a more than ordinary part in his exceptional exploits in the New Guinea jungle."

The war news went on to page three, beside a soap advertisement inviting the public to keep their hands clean and buy war bonds. "Letters to the Editor" were given two full columns, mostly about Shrimpton, in spite of the appalling shortage of newsprint. The Invisible Man was God's gift to journalism, and adventurous journalism knew what to do with such a gift.

The professor read the story, with all its embellishments, through twice. He was no longer bewildered. He was awe-stricken. The whole thing, snowballing from a flake of chance, had rolled on and on, getting bigger and bigger, until it threatened an avalanche in his mind. He had become a criminal! He was "wanted by the police!" There was, as though he were an outlaw, a price on his

head, and he supposed they did not care whether he was dead or alive so long as they got him. He had been frightened that he would not regain normal visible form again. Now, he was terrified lest he should! The newspapers had also reported that he had left his cigar case on the ledge of the witness box, together with its few remaining capsules. The police had eagerly seized these for expert analysis and had "positively identified the cigar case as belonging to Professor Shrimpton." There was a reference to fingerprints as though he were already known to the police, which was manifestly unjust to the professor.

Under a less spectacular heading, "Sidelights On The Invisible Man Case," was a story of a detective who, waiting outside the hotel where Mrs. Shrimpton was staying, had pounced on a man going into her apartment. Just as they fell into each other's arms, the detective had folded his own strong arms around both.

"Got you, professor!" he exclaimed, making certain that another vanishing trick would be physically impossible.

It was a very unsettling and embarrassing experience for Colonel Phizackerley, who threatened the detective with proceedings for assault and wrongful arrest, after submitting to the indignity of being obliged to prove that he was not Professor Shrimpton.

Another item in the same issue added to the professor's agonised concern. Although in no way connected by the newspaper with the circumstances of his disappearance and appearing in a different section of the paper from the invisible man story, it was like a knife thrust. The news item was headed:—

VANDALS IN NATIONAL ART GALLERY.
FAMOUS MASTERPIECES MUTILATED.
GANG GAINED ENTRY BY PARK WINDOW.

BURGLAR ALARMS DISCONNECTED.
"WANTON AND SAVAGE DESTRUCTION,"
SAYS DIRECTOR.
THEFT NOT THE MOTIVE.

This story, too, told of the finding of crumbs and paper bags, bearing unmistakable fingerprints, in the small storage room. Fortunately, the destruction was put down to a gang of hoodlums, although some of the persons interviewed had suggested that it was the work of a disgusted artist or a mentally deranged moralist. The professor had accidentally put his foot through the stomach of C. B. Walther's "Reclining Nude."

He was sick in the stomach himself at the risk he had run in actually going home to Birdwood after electrifying the city and escaping from the Art Gallery. The only reason he could think of for the fact that the detectives had not called that night and caught him at home, was that they had called earlier before he got home, or had imagined that his wife's city hotel address was also his address. This was partly confirmed by the incident between the detective and Colonel Phizackerley. The police must have been acting on insufficient information, hoping to catch him when visiting his wife.

Immunity from capture now, however, was gone. If the police had not thought of watching Birdwood last night, it would not be long before they gave the place a search and set a watch over it. He knew, now, that he had little or no chance of delivering his notes personally to the University. He hastily decided to write a short covering note and then, putting this with his botanic notes into a large envelope, he went to the corner letter-box and posted it.

He had just done this when he saw three big black sedan cars pull up with a screech of brakes at his gate. Uniformed and plain clothes men went briskly up the drive

and a police superintendent told some of his men to "Fan Out!" as they approached the house. The chief drew an automatic. Watching this drama from a position only a few feet from some of the men, the professor's fear now took the form of acute resentment at the unwarranted intrusion on the peaceful beauty of Birdwood. On top of all the other anxieties and confusion, this was very much like rubbing salt into an open wound. It was not enough, apparently, that they should want to build a false case against him, but should now be hunting him like they would have rounded up a savage animal.

Quite undetected, he walked up the drive, carefully using the wide grass border to deaden the sound of his footsteps. Looking through the different windows of the house in turn he saw the police solemnly regarding the remains of his light breakfast, even poking at the empty egg-shell and putting their fingers into the water of the pot to estimate how long it might have been since the egg was boiled and eaten. He saw them, with great annoyance, peer into cupboards, stroke serious chins when regarding his unmade bed, pull out drawers in his study and sniff dubiously at one of his fine collections of pressed leaves. Sadly, indeed, he saw this unholy invasion of his last stronghold, this material realisation of a life-long dream. Here again, with fatalistic certainty, was the "sour taste," destroying all the sweetness of achievement. He could never live at Birdwood now. They would never let him. These men had defiled it.

As the police were leaving by the front door, the professor stood, with a great air of detachment, behind a favourite cream rose bush, not quite ten yards away. Their clumsy, heavy-footed arrogance annoyed him intensely. These invaders!

"Are you quite satisfied, gentlemen?" asked the professor, unable to let them go without some sort of challenge.

The police stopped as if petrified.

"That's him!" called the superintendent, then looking from one to the other. "Or did one of you chaps speak?"

They all shook their heads and regarded each other solemnly.

"Yes, it is I, Professor Ernest Everhard Shrimpton, who addresses you, and I object most vehemently to your clumsy and destructive invasion of my private property—"

"*Quick!*" interrupted the superintendent, making a quick guess at the direction from whence the challenging sound had come. "That rose bush! By heaven! Rush it! He's there!"

His men charged headlong at the rose bush as Shrimpton deftly side-stepped. There were exclamations and a torrent of curses from the cream rose bush as the men came out of their unusual scrum with bleeding faces and badly torn hands.

"This is a bloomin' job for commandos, not police," complained a stalwart, using his handkerchief to dab a bloody hand.

"Grab him! Quick!" called the superintendent again excitedly, but only adding to their bewilderment. "Get hold of him and hang on to him!"

"Where?" they answered in an exasperated chorus.

"Anywhere! Everywhere! Grab him, that's all!"

From a protective tree some distance away the professor watched the strange and, in the circumstances, not unamusing scene. He knew how the searchers felt at being urged on by such vague directions of the superintendent.

Robust men of the police and detective force were stalking cautiously around trees and shrubs, arms out in a bent, groping attitude like blind men in a wrestling ring. Sometimes a slight sound would cause one of them to swing round and fiercely grab—nothing. Sometimes a man would hurl himself on the ground to grapple with a quarry he thought he detected there. Finding nothing and realising that these antics must look foolish in the extreme, he would get up sheepishly and begin dusting his clothes and

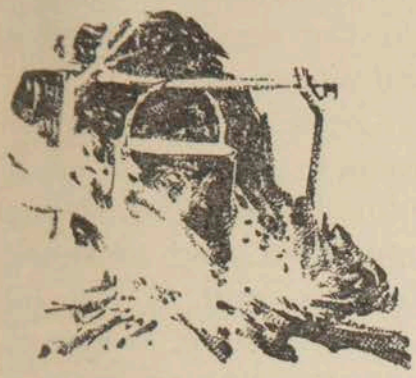
mentally consigning the superintendent and the invisible man to hotter places, if there *were* any!

One man, a sturdy ex-international footballer, took a flying leap at a hedge, confident that the wanted man had crawled there for safety. He overshot the mark, however, and crumpled up on a gravel path like a sack of potatoes. He, too, arose after this tilt at the invisible with torn clothes, skin abrasions and a free use of the great Australian adjective.

"Beggar must have got away from me," he said for appearance's sake, after his spectacular feat.

"If you *had* him, sergeant, he sure did," naively taunted a mate.

XIII.



AFTER the attempt to capture him on his own estate, the professor lost no time in going to town. He travelled by the guard's van, finding it quite easy to stand behind bits of baggage without being molested or detected. Indeed, if there was one thing he was grateful for, even in his acute predicament, it was the freedom from contact with regular tram and train travellers. As Voltaire had observed, the character of the common people changed in a single day. How they traded on the naturally reserved and polite! How unsmiling, how grudging, how aggressive in their desire to get a seat and reluctant to move up for others! He had always been appalled at this boorishness of most city and suburban travellers, their lack of manners and Christian regard for the comfort of others. Parents and the schools were probably to blame in the first place, but until that happy day of education for culture and good taste, as well as for simple academic principles, the professor felt relieved at having such freedom on the essential transport services that carried the hustling, bustling, workaday world to and from its place of employment.

Reaching the city, he made straight for the University, although the journey through the streets, with its constant dodging and side-stepping, was wearying in the extreme. The door of his own room at the University was locked. Over the name, "PROFESSOR ERNEST SHRIMPTON—BOTANY," was a little, neatly typed notice. "ABSENT," was all it said. "ALL INQUIRIES AT THE OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR."

He pulled his key chain from his pocket and selected the key which had so often opened the door on happier

occasions. But he never opened the door. He noticed a policeman comfortably seated in the doorway opposite. Again the police! That never-ending pursuit!

With a sigh that would have been audible to anyone except such a fat, drowsy policeman, he turned on his heels and went slowly down the familiar corridor, through the quadrangle, where he had so often read or sunned himself while chatting with students, and at last into University Park. Tired and a little footsore, wondering what to do next, he leaned against a tree as the most unlikely place to be pestered. A fox terrier sniffed at his invisible legs with an obviously natural design in mind. Recoiling violently from the prospect, the professor kicked the terrier three feet into the air. Nothing quite like that had ever happened to this little dog before. When a tree kicks a dog—*that's* news!—and the animal sped away yelping, its mission of relief unfulfilled. The professor was profoundly sorry at the results of his own spasmodic reflexes. The last thing he wanted to do, as a confirmed animal lover, was to frighten an innocent dog and thwart him of a natural function.

It could not be helped. Indeed, this was becoming almost his own philosophy now. *Nothing* could be helped! He was merely an instrument of a rather perverse fate. He strolled from the park over to a nearby hotel. It seemed quiet there, so he went in.

Few Australians like beer before lunch, but the man who does generally likes beer very much. One of this variety was in the bar. He was a solitary, rugged man in working clothes and he was sprawled across the counter, back-chatting the barmaid as she polished her chromium pump handles. Beside him was a magnificent monument to the brewer's art—a mug of rich amber beer—and its owner had his back half turned from it.

After the exertions of the morning and the other disappointments of the day, the professor was very thirsty and instantly developed a longing for the beer he saw

practically unguarded. As this was on the side farthest from the barmaid, he had no scruples in lifting the mug to his lips and half emptying it of its stimulating contents. He had never known that beer could taste so nice. Just as he replaced the mug on the bar its owner reached out for the handle and drew it towards him. As he was about to drink, however, he blinked at the half empty mug, looked underneath it to see if it had developed a leak and then at the floor, wondering if it could possibly have spilt. There was absolutely no evidence of either misfortune.

"Struth, Gert! Tide's right out. Fill 'er up! What's the good of a half empty glass?"

The girl looked over at him, sharply suspicious.

"I *did* fill it up, Ben. You've drunk it! You can't pull that swifty over me. Not when you're the only customer in the bar! I have to account for all the beer pulled nowadays. There's a war on, in case you don't know."

He regarded her quizzically.

"Honest, Gert, I don't *think* I drunk it, fair dinkum, I don't."

She made an impatient snatch at the glass which he was still examining and very grudgingly filled it until it overflowed.

"How's that?"

"Bonzer, kid. You'll do me."

He fished in his pocket for his tobacco and tissue papers and began rolling a cigarette. He was still a little puzzled all the same. The girl, also a little thoughtful, continued polishing. When the customer had lit his stringy, home-made cigarette and half turned his back on his beer, the professor had no compunction in lifting the mug again. This time he finished the lot in two generous, thirst-quenching gulps and left the bar.

He had not gone 100 yards, however, when he heard a terrific crash of glass. Looking back, he saw that a window of the bar he had just left had been broken in fragments all over the footpath. In the centre of the debris

was a broken beer mug. He heard a woman's voice raised stridently and hysterically and a man cursing loudly. The professor accurately concluded that his own thirst, not that of the other man, had been the cause of it all.

Still, it was only too evident now that he would have to eat to live. This also meant that he should have to drink. He had yet to perfect a technique that would make it as easy as possible for all concerned, but it was not going to be simple.

He went back across the park into George Street and again began dodging his way to the Bijou. He intended appealing to Grigson's loyalty in not giving him away and explaining all the circumstances. After seeing the billboard in the foyer, however, he decided against an interview even with Grigson. A shrewd and unconscionable publicity man — probably Grigson himself — had sought to commercialise the professor's misfortune. Under the Dissolvo showcase of pictures, showing him standing in clouds with arms calmly folded, someone had printed in unduly large letters—

'E CAMOUFLAGED 'ISSELF AWAY!

ACT SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Most uncharitable and unfair, he thought, and quite unworthy. If it was the last thing he did, he would not call on Mr. Grigson now. *Let* the act be suspended until further notice, by all means.

To read the afternoon papers he had to go to the Public Library and peer awkwardly over other men's shoulders. This was undignified and hazardous but necessary since he himself was still the top news of the day. He had to be extremely alert in the library to dodge those sudden arm movements to which so many people are addicted through involuntary habit. One man, who suddenly decided to massage or scratch his ear, struck

the professor full in the face as he was peering intently over his shoulder.

"Sorry," said the stranger, when the professor groaned with pain.

Still holding his ear and looking round to see to whom he had apologised, the man was very surprised to see nobody within ten yards of him. He looked each side of the paper-file at which he alone was standing, then under it, and finally up at the ceiling. To add to his confusion, a young woman library assistant came over from her desk.

"No talking—or grunting—please! Silence must be observed here."

His eyes, widening, showed that he was a little startled, but he nodded agreement.

"That's what I thought, miss. *I* didn't groan, though. I apologised because I thought I had smacked a man in the face."

"You *thought* you did! That will do, please. I've been watching and there has been no one near you since you came to the evening paper file."

"I'm beginning to think you are right," he said reflectively.

As the assistant went back to her desk the man again looked all around him, deeply puzzled. He had lost interest in reading and, after a few more moments, left hurriedly, muttering to himself and shaking his head.

Still smarting from the unexpected blow, the professor edged over to the now vacated file and read another of his daily infamies. He had now, by popular belief, become the original "ghost" of Birdwood. Litigation to rescind the sale was pending. It was quite openly stated that Miss Glendenning had been the victim of fraud and violence to induce the sale of Birdwood. The only trouble was that they could not find Professor Shrimpton to serve him with the necessary papers.

It was hinted that a move might be made to have him presumed dead. Questions were being asked why the professor had suddenly become so charitable as to give Miss Glendenning what was virtually a consolatory bonus on completion of the sale. They could find no evidence of any previous benefactions.

The reward for the arrest of Professor Ernest Everhard Shrimpton was increased to £5,000—a record for Australia!

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He was now really a hunted man. Everywhere he turned were obstacles. Life itself was one huge, ever-heightening hurdle. To live by stealth was harder than to live by tooth and claw. Indeed, his life now needed a little of each. Forbidden the sanctuary of Birdwood, the University or other familiar places he loved, he felt he was an outcast in every sense of the word. Still, even now, he was no defeatist. If the mind is attuned to adversity one can go a long way on hope. He had to live, but more than that he wanted to live, although there seemed no prospect of returning to his normal condition and the ways of man. Having to eat and drink as other people was the bane of his shadowy existence.

Each day had exactly twenty-four hours of adventure, drama and, sometimes, near-tragedy. People in city food shops were constantly shocked at the disappearance of the very food they had ordered for themselves. True, the professor always paid, but never waited for change. In that way he overpaid for his requirements. There would be a tinkle of coins on the counter beside some unsuspecting customer and the bag or parcel would be whisked away in most alarming fashion. There would be shrieks, often fainting women, and the cry "Invisible Man!" would sweep the city like a rumour of a society woman's unwanted baby.

The professor kept the front page. The war still only made page three, in spite of the momentous events that were shaping the destiny of mankind. Millions of men were dying to save civilisation for more wars later on, but

Australia's one and only "Invisible Man" was still at large, gaining notoriety and said to be as dangerous as a floating mine.

War correspondents came from South-West Pacific battle fronts to "do" the newer, bigger story of the little man with such a big and ugly reputation. Practically all the crime of the big city was now pinned on him—robberies, car and tyre thefts, "snow-dropping."

The city developed "nerves." There was nothing quite like it in medical text-books, though doctors contrived to give it a Latin name and did excellent business. Just about every complaint of the intricate nervous system which could not be readily diagnosed, and a great many that could, became, in common parlance, "Invisible Man Jitters." This complaint required at least one X-ray photograph (in case it might be something else), short-wave frequency treatment and violet ray, vitamin B tablets, massage and medicines. That will just show how serious the complaint was. Even strong men became nervy, irritable and developed an anxiety complex.

Sometimes the mere fluttering of a piece of paper caught by the wind would cause a sensation. Someone would jump aside and call "Invisible Man!" and a crowd would at once muster forces, under the direction of a policeman if possible, and surround the paper as it settled on the ground. They would then slowly advance on the imaginary £5,000 prize, someone finally making a dive on the paper.

Women were afraid to go home from the city at night without protection. Volunteers, with a fine sense of public spirit, formed an Emergency Escort Service with eight city and a number of suburban depots. Women, girls or old men, going home at night, could apply at an E.E.S. depot and be assured of safe conduct home.

The National Emergency authorities weighed the risks of war against the risks in a city of chaos caused by the

Invisible Man and completely lifted the blackout. Sydney Hospital opened an up-to-date Jitter Clinic, but had to change the title to Neurology Clinic because so many American servicemen turned up with their girls to jitterbug.

All this time the professor moved furtively through the turmoil, unwittingly terrifying people, having narrow escapes as he, perforce, snatched food or stole a man's beer in broad daylight, in this strange war of survival.

And then a very unusual thing happened. The morning "Courier" published on the front page in very big type, "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE INVISIBLE MAN." This was an appeal to him to realise that he was doing a great disservice to a nation at war, causing chaos in the city and wrecking the nerves of the people. His depredations were bad for morale in these critical times, might even be misconstrued as a Fifth Column. It concluded:—

> ". . . And so, if Professor Shrimpton has a shred of regard for his fellow man, fighting on the home front no less than in the front line for the Four Freedoms, the 'Courier' feels he will do the decent thing and leave us to carry on our war effort to defeat the common enemy. . . ."

* * * *

The professor read this appeal while looking over a man's shoulder in the Public Library. Far from being annoyed, he was deeply touched. He had just come from King's Cross, where he had been obliged to steal a glass of beer from an unsuspecting soldier in an hotel. Waiting for the right moment to do these things was always an agony of despair, sometimes desperation. He had never wanted to do it. The urge had been merely one of human necessity.

This article in "The Courier" had a peculiar effect on him. It got under the skin. He was moved by a ready acquiescence with everything the newspaper had said. As much as any other man alive, he had no wish to impede the war effort; no wish to hurt man, animal, bird, fish,

insect or tree. The enormity of his crimes, which seemed to be increasing every day, bore down upon him like a great, oppressive hand. He remembered the words of Burke of his student days, "A speculative despair is unpardonable where it is our duty to act."

He left the library and found a seat in a very quiet part of the Domain, within sight of the National Art Gallery, where he had so signally disgraced himself. The day was warm, the trees pregnant with life. Some small boys were playing cricket, regardless of his presence. Soldiers and their girls strolled by and birds chirped merrily in the big Moreton Bay fig trees.

"I'll just have to disappear," he told himself, not quite realising the literal absurdity of the thought. And then he made a quiet but firm decision.

He ended the day of new sensations and stealth by finding himself outside the office of the Commissioner of Police. He waited patiently and with resolute calm until the Commissioner was about to leave his office for the night. When at last he opened his door and went along the corridor with a towel to the wash basins, the professor slipped into the room and waited in a safe position at the other side of the Commissioner's desk. Presently the police chief returned, picked up his phone, got a number, and said, "Leaving now, darling." Then, putting on his coat and hat, he went out, pulling the door behind him. The professor heard the heavy footsteps fade out along the corridor and waited until most of the other noises in nearby offices had died away. He was in no hurry. Time, ultimate time, was endless. After a while he switched on the Commissioner's desk lamp, took a piece of official, embossed stationery and, after a moment or two's thought, began to write boldly—

> "Sir,—It has never been my wish to harm anyone or to cause damage or destruction to property. In many ways I have been misjudged, but, in my present condition, it would take too long to explain. The papers, partially dealing with my discovery of the Hocus root, should now be in the hands of the Chancellor of the University.

The facts therein might be taken as mitigation of some of my offences. All great discoveries, it has been said, are made by men whose feelings run ahead of their thinking. I was, it is true, Dissolvo at the Bijou Theatre, but I was not the original ghost of Birdwood. I surprised two men who were endeavouring to induce Miss Glendenning by fear to sell the house. Their shroud is in a little tap well ten paces from the tool shed, near a side path off the main drive. I must freely confess, on the other hand, that it was I, not vandals, who caused the damage in the National Art Gallery. I went there to eat, but fell asleep and in my efforts to get out in the darkness inadvertently caused the damage in question. I am also the man who saved the little girl from under the wheels of a motor lorry in the roadway opposite Birdwood—the man who many thought was God. In taking my final leave of you I wish to apologise for all the harm and all the inconvenience I have caused through what I fear is destined to be a permanent invisibility.

I am, sir,

Yours apologetically and regretfully,

ERNEST SHRIMPTON

(Erstwhile Professor of Botany, Sydney University)."

He read the note through carefully, dotted a few "i's" and crossed a few forgotten "t's." Then he carefully folded the letter, placed it in an official envelope, addressed it to the Commissioner, with the word "Personal" in the left-hand corner, and propped it on the ink-stand. With a heavy sigh he switched off the light, unfastened the Yale lock, and went out, letting the door snap shut behind him.

As he went past an open door along the corridor a powerful voice called out "Good night, Chief!"

The professor had no heart to ignore so blusteringly cheerful a salutation.

"Good night, my good man—and good-bye!" he called back, his voice a little feeble and reedy.

He heard the other man, whoever he was, splutter and make some kind of exclamation, but did not wait for any other reactions.

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Beyond the last exciting flare of headlines publicising Professor Shrimpton's "Confession and Farewell," the war news at last got back to its rightful place on the front page. Page two, this time, carried speculations as to what

had happened to the professor. The weight of conjecture placed his end as that of suicide, but no one accused him, in absentia, with premeditated malice or violence. They took the more charitable view that he had chosen "the only way out" to spare the nation and the city any further inconvenience, pain and annoyance. All the E.E.S. depots were disbanded, the Neurology Clinic was closed and a successor was appointed to the Chair of Botany at the University. The case of the "Invisible Man" was closed.

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A few months ago a strange story was told to the New Guinea Administrator by a very reliable native from the upper reaches of the Strickland River. Beyond Iungazim, he said, was a deserted camp of a solitary white man, haunted by a spirit. Natives from a nearby village had testified that the white man's tent erected itself, but when they advanced to make friendly overtures and do trade, they found nobody there.

One native, Bongo-Bongo, who was more venturesome than the rest, had gone into the tent and helped himself to a piece of coloured cloth, only to feel it wrenched from his hands by some invisible force. Fire and smoke were seen at the white man's camp night and morning, and sometimes a rifle shot cracked like a whip in the dawn, startling the heavy-winged cockatoos and disturbing the lovely early morning music of the waikiki wais. Always, following this sharply-shattered silence, there was evidence of food at the white man's camp: cassowary, wild pig, wallaby or even wild geese.

Nature was kind and abundant to that ghost of the Strickland, who never showed himself and never made friends, but apparently lived in harmony with whole colonies of birds in a setting of blooming acacias and frangipanis, scented with oleander and moringu blossom.

END.