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CLOSE BEHIND HIM

from THE BEST OF JOHN WYNDHAM

John Wyndham

SPHERE BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

AT a very tender age my latent passion for all forms of fantasy stories, having been sparked by the Brothers Grimm and the more unusual offerings in the children's comics and later the boy's adventure papers, was encouraged in the early 1930s by the occasional exciting find on the shelves of the public library with Burroughs and Thorne Smith varying the staple diet of Wells and Verne.

But the decisive factor in establishing that exhilarating 'sense of wonder' in my youthful imagination was the discovery about that time of back numbers of American science fiction magazines to be bought quite cheaply in stores like Woolworths. The happy chain of economic circumstances by which American newstand returns, sometimes sadly with the magic cover removed or mutilated, ballasted cargo ships returning to English ports and the colonies, must have been the mainspring of many an enthusiastic hobby devoted to reading, discussing, perhaps collecting and even writing, science fiction – or 'scientifiction' as Hugo Gernsback coined the tag in his early *Amazing Stories* magazine.

Gernsback was a great believer in reader participation; in 1936 I became a teenage member of the Science Fiction League sponsored by his *Wonder Stories*. Earlier he had run a competition in its fore-runner *Air Wonder Stories* to find a suitable banner slogan, offering the prize of 'One Hundred Dollars in Gold' with true yankee braggadocio. Discovering the result some years later in, I think, the September 1930 issue of *Wonder Stories* seized upon from the bargain-bin of a chain store, was akin to finding a message in a bottle cast adrift by some distant Robinson Crusoe, and I well remember the surge of jingoistic pride (an educational trait well-nurtured in pre-war Britain) in noting that the winner was an Englishman, John Beynon Harris.

I had not the slightest anticipation then that I would later meet, and acknowledge as a good friend and mentor, this contest winner who, as John Wyndham, was to become one of the greatest English story-tellers in the idiom. The fact that he never actually got paid in gold was a disappointment, he once told me, that must have accounted for the element of philosophical dubiety in some of his work.

Certainly his winning slogan '*Future Flying Fiction*', although too late to save the magazine from foundering on the rock of economic depression (it had already been amalgamated with its stable-mate *Science Wonder Stories* to become just plain, if that is the right word, *Wonder Stories*), presaged the firm stamp of credibility combined with imaginative flair that characterized JBH's writings.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (the abundance of fore-names conveniently supplied his various aliases) emerged in the 1950s as an important contemporary influence on speculative fiction, particularly in the exploration of the theme of realistic global catastrophe, with books such as *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes*, and enjoyed a popularity, which continued after his sad death in 1969, comparable to that of his illustrious predecessor as master of the scientific romance, H. G. Wells.

However, he was to serve his writing apprenticeship in those same pulp magazines of the thirties, competing successfully with their native American contributors, and it is the purpose of this present collection to highlight the chronological development of his short stories from those early beginnings to the later urbane and polished style of John Wyndham.

'The Lost Machine' was his second published story, appearing in *Amazing Stories*, and was possibly the proto-type of the sentient robot later developed by such writers as Isaac Asimov. He used a variety of plots during this early American period particularly favouring time travel, and the best of these was undoubtedly 'The Man From Beyond' in which the poignancy of a man's realisation, caged in a zoo on Venus, that far from being abandoned by his fellow-explorers, he is the victim of a far stranger fate, is remarkably outlined for its time. Some themes had dealt with war, such as 'The Trojan Beam', and he had strong views to express on its futility. Soon his own induction into the Army in 1940 produced a period of creative inactivity corresponding to World War II. He had, however, previously established himself in England as a prominent science fiction writer with serials in major periodicals, subsequently reprinted in hard covers, and he even had a detective novel published. He had been well represented too – 'Perfect Creature' is an amusing example – in the various magazines stemming from fan activity, despite the vicissitudes of their pre- and immediate post-war publishing insecurity.

But after the war and into the fifties the level of science fiction writing in general had increased considerably, and John rose to the challenge by selling successfully to the American market again. In England his polished style proved popular and a predilection for the paradoxes of time travel as a source of private amusement was perfectly exemplified in 'Pawley's Peepholes', in which the gawping tourists from the future are routed by vulgar tactics. This story was later successfully adapted for radio and broadcast by the B.B.C.

About this time his first post-war novel burst upon an unsuspecting world, and by utilizing a couple of unoriginal ideas with his Gernsback-trained attention to logically based explanatory detail and realistic background, together with his now strongly developed narrative style, 'The Day of the Triffids' became one of the classics of modern speculative fiction, surviving even a mediocre movie treatment. It was the fore-runner of a series of equally impressive and enjoyable novels including 'The Chrysalids' and 'The Midwich Cuckoos' which was successfully filmed as 'Village of the Damned'. (A sequel 'Children of the Damned' was markedly inferior, and John was careful to disclaim any responsibility for the writing.)

I was soon to begin an enjoyable association with John Wyndham that had its origins in the early days of the *New Worlds* magazine-publishing venture, and was later to result in much kindly and essential assistance enabling me to become a specialist dealer in the genre. This was at the Fantasy Book Centre in Bloomsbury, an area of suitably associated literary activities where John lived for many years, and which provided many pleasurable meetings at a renowned local coffee establishment, Cawardine's,

where we were often joined by such personalities as John Carnell, John Christopher and Arthur C. Clarke.

In between the novels two collections of his now widely published short stories were issued as 'The Seeds of Time' and 'Consider Her Ways'; others are re-printed here for the first time. He was never too grand to refuse material for our own *New Worlds* and in 1958 wrote a series of four novellas about the Troon family's contribution to space exploration – a kind of Forsyte saga of the solar system later collected under the title 'The Outward Urge'. His fictitious collaborator 'Lucas Parkes' was a subtle ploy in the book version to explain Wyndham's apparent deviation into solid science-based fiction. The last story in this collection 'The Emptiness of Space' was written as a kind of post-script to that series, especially for the 100th anniversary issue of *New Worlds*.

John Wyndham's last novel was *Chocky*, published in 1968. It was an expansion of a short story following a theme similar to *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*. It was a theme peculiarly appropriate for him in his advancing maturity. When, with characteristic reticence and modesty, he announced to a few of his friends that he was marrying his beloved Grace and moving to the country-side, we all felt that this was a well-deserved retirement for them both.

But ironically time – always a fascinating subject for speculation by him – was running out for this typical English gentleman. Amiable, erudite, astri-gently humorous on occasion, he was, in the same way that the gentle Boris Karloff portrayed his film monsters, able to depict the night-mares of humanity with frightening realism, made the more deadly by his masterly precision of detail. To his great gift for story-telling he brought a lively intellect and a fertile imagination.

I am glad to be numbered among the many, many thousands of his readers whose 'sense of wonder' has been satisfactorily indulged by a writer whose gift to posterity is the compulsive readability of his stories of which this present volume is an essential part.

— LESLIE FLOOD

## **CLOSE BEHIND HIM (1953)**

"You didn't ought to of croaked him," Smudger said resentfully. "What in hell did you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

Spotty turned to look at the house, a black spectre against the night sky. He shuddered.

"It was him or me," he muttered. "I wouldn't of done it if he didn't come for me — and I wouldn't even then, not if he'd come ordinary..."

"What do you mean ordinary?"

"Like anybody else. But he was queer ... He wasn't — well, I guess he was crazy — dangerous crazy..."

"All he needed was a tap to keep him quiet," Smudger persisted. "There wasn't no call to bash his loaf in."

"You didn't see him. I tell you, he didn't act human." Spotty shuddered again at the recollection, and bent down to rub the calf of his right leg tenderly.

The man had come into the room while Spotty was sifting rapidly through the contents of a desk. He'd made no sound. It had been just a feeling, a natural alert-ness, that had brought Spotty round to see him standing there. In that very first glimpse Spotty had felt there was some-thing queer about him. The expression on his face — his attitude — they were wrong. In his biscuit-coloured pyjamas, he should have looked just an ordinary citizen awakened from sleep, too anxious to have delayed with dressing-gown and slippers. But some way he didn't. An ordinary citizen would have shown nervous-ness, at least wari-ness; he would most likely have picked up some-thing to use as a weapon. This man stood crouching, arms a little raised, as though he were about to spring.

Moreover, any citizen whose lips curled back as this man's did to show his tongue licking hungrily between his teeth, should have been considered suffi-ciently unordinary to be locked away safely. In the course of his profes-sion Spotty had developed reliable nerves, but the look of this man rocked them. Nobody should be pleased by the discovery of a burglar at large in his house. Yet, there could be no doubt that this victim was looking at Spotty with satis-faction. An unpleasant gloating kind of satis-faction, like that which might appear on a fox's face at the sight of a plump chicken. Spotty hadn't liked the look of him at all, so he had pulled out the convenient piece of pipe that he carried for emergencies.

Far from showing alarm, the man took a step closer. He poised, sprung on his toes like a wrestler.

“You keep off me, mate,” said Spotty, holding up his nine inches of lead pipe as a warning.

Either the man did not hear — or the words held no interest for him. His long, bony face snarled. He shifted a little closer. Spotty backed against the edge of the desk. “I don't want no trouble. You just keep off me,” he said again.

The man crouched a little lower. Spotty watched him through narrowed eyes. An extra tensing of the man's muscles gave him a frac-tional warning before the attack.

The man came without fainting or rushing: he simply sprang, like an animal.

In mid-leap he encountered Spotty's boot suddenly erected like a stanchion in his way. It took him in the middle and felled him. He sprawled on the floor doubled up, with one arm hugging his belly. The other hand threat-ened, with fingers bent into hooks. His head turned in jerks, his jaws with their curiously sharp teeth were apart, like a dog's about to snap.

Spotty knew just as well as Smudger that what was required was a quiet-ening tap. He had been about to deliver it with profes-sional skill and quality when the man by an extra-ordinary wriggle, had succeeded in fastening his teeth into Spotty's leg. It was unexpected, excru-ciating enough to ruin Spotty's aim and make the blow ineffec-tual. So he had to hit it again: harder this time. Too hard. And even then he had more or less had to pry the man's teeth out of his leg...

But it was not so much his aching leg — nor even the fact that he had killed the man — that was the chief cause of Spotty's concern. It was the kind of man he had killed:

“Like an animal he was,” he said, and the recollection made him sweat. “Like a bloody wild animal. And the way he looked! His eyes! Christ, they wasn't human.”

That aspect of the affair held little interest for Smudger. He'd not seen the man until he was already dead and looking like any other corpse. His present concern was that a mere matter of burglary had been

abruptly transferred to the murder category — a class of work he had always kept clear of until now.

The job had looked easy enough. There shouldn't have been any trouble. A man living alone in a large house — a pretty queer customer with a pretty queer temper. On Fridays, Sundays and some-times on Wednes-days, there were meetings at which about twenty people came to the house and did not leave until the small hours of the follow-ing morning. All this infor-mation was according to Smudger's sister, who learned it third hand from the woman who cleaned the house. The woman was darkly specu-lative, but unspecific, about what went on at these gatherings. But from Smudger's point of view the important thing was that on other nights the man was alone in the house.

He seemed to be a dealer of some kind. People brought odd curios to the house to sell to him. Smudger had been greatly interested to hear that they were paid for — and paid for well — in cash. That was a solid, practical con-sider-ation. Beside it, the vaguely ill repu-tation of the place, the queer-ness of its fur-nish-ings, and the rumours of strange goings-on at the gatherings, were unim-portant. The only thing worthy of attention were the facts that the man lived alone and had items of value in his possession.

Smudger had thought of it as a one-man job at first, and with a little more infor-mation he might have tackled it on his own. He had discovered that there was a tele-phon, but no dog. He was fairly sure of the room in which the money must be kept, but unfortu-nately his sister's source of infor-ma-tion had its limit-ations. He did not know whether there were burglar alarms or similar pre-cautions, and he was too uncertain of the cleaning woman to attempt to get into the house by a sub-terfuge for a pre-limi-nary investi-gation. So he had taken Spotty in with him on a fifty-fifty basis.

The reluctance with which he had taken that step had now become an active regret — not only because Spotty had been foolish enough to kill the man, but because the way things had been he could easily have made a hundred per cent haul on his own — and not be fool enough to kill the man had he been detected.

The attaché case which he carried was now well-filled with bundles of notes, along with an assort-ment of precious-looking objects in gold and silver, probably eminently trace-able, but useful if melted down. It was irri-tating to think that the whole load, instead of merely half of it, might have been his.

The two men stood quietly in the bushes for some minutes and listened. Satisfied, they pushed through a hole in the hedge, then moved cautiously down the length of the neigh-bouring field in its shadow.

Spotty's chief sensation was relief at being out of the house. He hadn't liked the place from the moment they had entered. For one thing, the furnish-ings weren't like those he was used to. Unpleasant idols or carved figures of some kind stood about unexpected places, looming suddenly out of the dark-ness into his flash-light's beam with hideous expres-sions on their faces. There were pictures and pieces of tapestry that were macabre and shocking to a simple burglar. Spotty was not parti-cularly sensitive, but these seemed to him highly unsuit-able to have about the home.

The same quality extended to more practical objects. The legs of a large oak table had been carved into mythical mis-cege-nates of repul-sive appear-ance. The two bowls which stood upon the table were either genuine or extremely good represen-tations of polished human skulls. Spotty could not imagine why, in one room, anybody should want to mount a crucifix on the wall upside down and place on a shelf beneath it a row of sconces holding nine black candles — then Sank the whole with two pictures of an indecency so revolting it almost took his breath away. All these things had some-how combined to rattle his usual hard-headed-ness.

But even though he was out of the place now, he didn't feel quite free of its influence. He decided he

wouldn't feel properly him-self again until they were in the car and several miles away.

After working around two fields they came to the dusty white lane off which they had parked the car. They prospected care-fully. By now the sky had cleared of clouds and the moon-light showed the road empty in both directions. Spotty scrambled through the hedge, across the ditch, and stood on the road in a quiet-ness broken only by Smudger's progress through the hedge. Then he started to walk towards the car.

He had gone about a dozen paces when Smudger's voice stopped him: "Hey, Spotty. What've you got on your feet?"

Spotty stopped and looked down. There was nothing remark-able about his feet; his boots looked just as they had always looked.

"What—?" he began.

"No! Behind you!"

Spotty looked back. From the point where he had stepped on to the road to another some five feet behind where he now stood was a series of foot-prints, dark in the white dust. He lifted his foot and exa-mined the sole of his boot; the dust was clinging to it. He turned his eyes back to the foot-marks once more. They looked black, and seemed to glisten.

Smudger bent down to peer more closely. When he looked up again there was a bewildered expression on his face. He gazed at Spotty's boots, and then back to the glistening marks. The prints of bare feet...

"There's some-thing funny going on here," he said in-ade-quatly.

Spotty, looking back over his shoulder, took another step for-ward. Five feet behind him a new mark of a bare foot appeared from now-here.

A watery feeling swept over Spotty. He took another experi-mental step. As mys-teriously as before, another foot-mark appeared. He turned widened eyes on Smudger. Smudger looked back at him. Neither said any-thing for a moment. Then Smudger bent down, touched one of the marks with his finger, then shone his flash-light on the finger.

"Red," he said. "Like blood..."

The words broke the trance that had settled on Spotty.

Panic seized him. He stared around wildly, then began to run. After him followed the foot-prints. Smudger ran too. He noticed that the marks were no longer the prints of a full foot but only its fore-part, as if what-ever made them were also running.

Spotty was frightened, but not badly enough to forget the turn where they had parked the car beneath some trees. He made for it, and clam-bered in. Smudger, breathing heavily, got in on the other side and dropped the attaché case in the back.

"Going to get out of this lot quick," Spotty said, pressing the starter.

"Take it easy," advised Smudger. "We got to think."

But Spotty was in no thinking mood. He got into gear, jolted out of hiding and turned down the lane.

A mile or so farther on Smudger turned back from craning out of the window.

“Not a sign,” he said, relieved. “Reckon we've ditched it —whatever it was.” He thought for some moments, then he said: “Look here, if those marks were behind us all the way from the house, they'll be able to follow them by day-light to where we parked the car.”

“They'd've found the car marks any-way,” Spotty replied.

“But what if they're *still* follow-ing?” Smudger suggested.

“You just said they weren't.”

“Maybe they couldn't keep up with us. But suppose they're coming along somewhere behind us, leaving a trail?”

Spotty had greatly recovered, he was almost his old practical self again. He stopped the car. “All right. We'll see,” he said grimly. “And if they are — what then ?”

He lit a cigarette with a hand that was almost steady. Then he leaned out of the car, studying the road behind them. The moon-light was strong enough to show up any dark marks.

“What do you reckon it was?” he said, over his shoulder. “We can't both've been seeing things.”

“They were real enough.” Smudger looked at the stain still on his finger.

On a sudden idea, Spotty pulled up his right trouser leg. The marks of the teeth were there, and there was a little blood, too, soaked into his sock, but he couldn't make that account for anything.

The minutes passed. Still there was no manifes-tation of foot-prints. Smudger got out and walked a few yards back long the road to make sure. After a moment's hesi-tation Spotty followed him.

“Not a sign,” Smudger said. “I reckon — hey!” He broke off, looking beyond Spotty.

Spotty turned around. Behind him was a trail of dark, naked foot-prints leading *from* the car.

Spotty stared. He walked back to the car; the foot-marks followed. It was a chastened Spotty who sat down in the car.

“Well?”

Smudger had nothing to offer. Smudger, in fact, was con-sider-ably confused. Several aspects of the situation were com-peting for his atten-tion. The foot-steps were not follow-ing *him*, so he found himself less afraid of them than of their possible conse-quences. They were laying a notice-able trail for anyone to follow to Spotty, and the trouble was that the trail would lead to him, too, if he and Spotty kept together.

The immediate solution that occurred to him was that they split up, and Spotty take care of his own troubles. The best way would be to divide the haul right here and now. If Spotty could succeed in

shaking off the foot-prints, good for him. After all, the killing was none of Smudger's affair.

He was about to make the suggestion when another aspect occurred to him. If Spotty were picked up with part of the stuff on him, the case would be clinched. It was also possible that Spotty, in a bad jam with nothing to lose, might spill. A far safer way would be for him to hold the stuff. Then Spotty could come for his share when, and if, he succeeded in losing the tell-tale prints.

It was obviously the only safe and reasonable course. The trouble was that Spotty, when it was suggested to him, did not see it that way.

They drove a few more miles, each occupied with his own thoughts. In a quiet lane they stopped once more. Again Spotty got out of the car and walked a few yards away from it. The moon was lower, but it still gave enough light to show the foot-prints following him. He came back looking more worried than frightened. Smudger decided to cut a possible loss and go back to his former plan.

“Look here,” he suggested, “what say we share out the takings now, and you drop me off a bit up the road?”

Spotty looked doubtful, but Smudger pressed: “If you can shake that trail off, well and good. If you can't — well, there's no sense in us both getting pinched, is there? Any-way, it is you as croaked him. And one has a better chance of getting away than two.”

Spotty was still not keen, but he had no alternative to offer.

Smudger pulled the attaché case out of the back and opened it between them. Spotty began to separate the bundles of notes into two piles. It had been a good haul. As Smudger watched, he felt a great sadness that half of it was going to benefit nobody when Spotty was picked up. Sheer waste, it seemed to him.

Spotty, with his head bent over his work, did not notice Smudger draw the piece of lead pipe out of his pocket.

Smudger brought it down on the back of his head with such force and neatness that it is doubtful whether Spotty ever knew anything about it.

Smudger stopped the car at the next bridge and pushed Spotty's body over the low wall. He watched as the ripples widened out across the canal below. Then he drove on.

It was three days later that Smudger got home. He arrived in the kitchen soaked to the skin, and clutching his attaché case. He was looking worn, white and ready to drop. He dragged a chair away from the table and slumped into it.

“Bill!” his wife whispered. “What is it? Are they after you?”

“No, Liz — at least, it ain't the cops. But some-thing is.”

He pointed to a mark close inside the door. At first she thought it was his own wet footprint.

“Get a wet cloth, Liz, and clean up the front step and the passage before anyone sees it,” he said.

She hesitated, puzzled.



“For God's sake, do it quick, Liz,” he urged her.

Still half bewildered, she went through the dark passage and opened the door. The rain was pelting down, seeming to bounce up from the road as it hit. The gutters were running like torrents. Every-thing streamed with wetness save the door-step protected by the small jutting porch. And on the step was the blood-red print of a naked foot...

In a kind of trance she went down on her knees and swabbed it clean with the wet cloth. Closing the door, she switched on the lights and saw the prints leading towards the kitchen. When she had cleaned them up, she went back to her hus-band.

“You been hit, Bill?”

He looked at her, elbows on the table, his head supported between his hands.

“No,” he said. “It ain't me what's making them marks, Liz — it's what's followin’ me.”

“Following you? You mean they been following you all the way from the job?” she said incredu-lously. “How did you get back?”

Smudger explained. His imme-diate anxiety, after pitching Spotty into the canal, had been to rid himself of the car. It had been a pinch for the job, and the number description would have been circulated. He had parked it in a quiet spot and gotten out to walk, maybe pick up a lift. When he had gone a few yards he had looked back and seen the line of prints behind him. They had frightened him a good deal more than he now admitted. Until that moment he had assumed that since they had been following Spotty they would have followed him into the canal. Now, it seemed, they had trans-ferred their attentions to him-self. He tried a few more steps: they followed. With a great effort he got a grip on himself, and refrained from running. He perceived that unless he wanted to leave a clear trail he must go back to the car. He did.

Farther on he tried again, and with a sinking, hope-less feeling observed the same result. Back in the car, he lit a cigarette and considered plans with as much calm-ness as he could collect.

The thing to do was to find some-thing that would not show tracks — or would not hold them. A flash of inspi-ration came to him, and he headed the car towards the river.

The sky was barely grey yet. He fancied that he managed to get the car down to the tow-path with-out being seen. At any rate, no one had hailed him as he cut through the long grass to the water's edge. From there he had made his way down-stream, plodding along through a few inches of water until he found a rowboat. It was a venerable and decrepit affair, but it served his purpose.

From then on his journey had been unexciting, but also un-com-fortable. During the day he had become extremely hungry, but he did not dare to leave the boat until after dark, and then he moved only in the darkest streets where the marks might not be seen. Both that day and the next two he had spent hoping for rain. This morning, in a drenching down-pour that looked like it might continue for hours, he had sunk the boat and made his way home, trusting that the trail would be washed away. As far as he knew, it had been.

Liz was less impressed than she ought to have been.

“I reckon it must be something on your boots,” she said practically. “Why didn't you buy some new ones?”

He looked at her with a dull resentment. “It ain't nothing on my boots,” he said. “Didn't I tell you it was follow-ing me? You seen the marks. How could they come off my boots? Use your head.”

“But it don't make sense. Not the way you say it. *What's* following you?”

“How do I know?” he said bitterly. “All I know is that it makes them marks — and they're getting closer, too.”

“How do you mean closer?”

“Just what I say. The first day they was about five feet behind me. Now they're between three and four.”

It was not the kind of thing that Liz could take in too easily.

“It don't make sense,” she repeated.

It made no more sense during the days that followed, but she ceased to doubt. Smudger stayed in the house; what-ever was follow-ing stayed with him. The marks of it were every-where: on the stairs, upstairs, down-stairs. Half Liz's time was spent in cleaning them up lest som-eone should come in and see them. They got on her nerves. But not as badly as they got on Smudger's...

Even Liz could not deny that the feet were stepping a little more closely behind him — a little more closely each day.

“And what happens when they catch up?” Smudger demanded fear-fully. “Tell me that. What can I do? What the hell can I do?”

But Liz had no suggestions. Nor was there anyone else they dared ask about it.

Smudger began to dream nights. He'd whimper and she'd wake him up asking what was the matter. The first time he could not remember, but the dream was repeated, growing a little clearer with each recurrence. A black shape appeared to hang over him as he lay. It was vaguely man-like in form, but it hovered in the air as if suspended. Gradually it sank lower and lower until it rested upon him — but weight-lessly, like a pattern of fog. It seemed to flow up towards his head, and he was in panic lest it should cover his face and smother him, but at his throat it stopped. There was a prick-ling at the side of his neck. He felt strangely weak, as though tired-ness suddenly invaded him. At the same time the shadow appeared to grow denser. He could feel, too, that there began to be some weight in it as it lay upon him. Then, merci-fully, Liz would wake him.

So real was the sensation that he inspected his neck carefully in the mirror when he shaved. But there was no mark there.

Gradually the glistening red prints closed in behind him. A foot behind his heels, six inches, three inches...

Then came a morning when he woke tired and listless. He had to force himself to get up, and when he looked in the mirror, there *was* a mark on his throat. He called Liz, in a panic. But it was only a very small mark, and she made nothing of it.

But the next morning his lassitude was greater. It needed all his will-power to drag himself up. The pallor of his face shocked Liz — and himself, too, when he saw it in the shaving mirror. The red mark on his neck stood out more vividly ... The next day he did not get up.

Two days later Liz became frightened enough to call in the doctor. It was a confession of desperation. Neither of them cared for the doctor, who knew or guessed uncomfortably much about the occupations of his patients. One called a doctor for remedies, not for homilies on one's way of life

He came, he hummed, he ha'ed. He prescribed a tonic, and had a talk with Liz.

"He's seriously anaemic," he said. "But there's more to it than that. Something on his mind." He looked at her. "Have you any idea what it is?"

Liz's denial was unconvincing. He did not even pretend to believe it.

"I'm no magician," he said. "If you don't help me, I can't help him. Some kinds of worry can go on pressing and nagging like an abscess."

Liz continued to deny. For a moment she had been tempted to tell about the footmarks, but caution warned her that once she began she would likely be trapped into saying more than was healthy.

"Think it over," the doctor advised. "And let me know tomorrow how he is."

The next morning there was no doubt that Smudger was doing very badly. The tonic had done him no good at all. He lay in bed with his eyes, when they were open, looking unnaturally large in a drawn white face. He was so weak that she had to feed him with a spoon. He was frightened, too, that he was going to die. So was Liz. The alarm in her voice when she telephoned the doctor was unmistakably genuine.

"All right, I'll be round within an hour," he told her. "Have you found out what's on his mind yet?" he added.

"N-no," Liz told him.

When he came he told her to stay downstairs while he went up to see the patient. It seemed to her that an intolerably long time passed before she heard his feet on the stairs and she went out to meet him in the hall. She looked up into his face with mute anxiety. His expression was serious, and puzzled, so that she was afraid to hear him speak.

But at last she asked: "Is — is he going to die, Doctor?"

"He's very weak — very weak indeed," the doctor said. After a pause, he added: "Why didn't you tell me about those foot-prints he thought were following him?"

She looked up at him in alarm.

"It's all right. He's told me all about it now. I knew there was something on his mind. It's not very surprising, either."

Liz stared at him. "Not—?"

"In the circumstances, no," the doctor said. "A mind oppressed by a sense of sin can play a lot of nasty

tricks. Now-adays they talk of guilt com-plexes and inhi-bi-tions. Names change: when I was a boy the same thing was known as a bad con-science...

“These things,” he went on, “are usually sus-cept-ible of fairly clear expla-nation once one knows the facts — the trouble, as a rule, is that one is not given the facts; or gets only part of them. In this case it's all obvious enough to any-one of experience. Your husband was engaged in — well, to put it bluntly — burgling the house of a man whose interests were mystic and occult. Naturally, he would be under con-sider-able mental strain at the time and there-fore likely to be unusually influenced by what he saw there.

There was then a — shall we call it an unfor-tunate inci-dent? That, on top of his current strain, gave him a shock which – er – unbalanced his judge-ment. Under the double pressure he was unable to disting-uish between imagi-nation and reality. The sur-roun-dings suggested things he had read about, and perhaps super-ficially forgotten, were really happen-ing.

“Possibly, for instance, there still lurked at the back of his mind those lines from *The Ancient Mariner* :

'Because he knows, a frightful fiend  
'Doth close behind him tread.’”

“You see, his fears, his guilty con-science would easily manu-fac-ture for him the idea that he was being dogged by the foot-steps of that unfortu-nate man from the house — and, too, he seems to have developed a primi-tive vampiric type of fear.

“Now, once we are able to help him dispel this obsession, he...”

He paused, abruptly aware of the look on his hearer's face.

“What is it?” he asked.

“But, Doctor,” Liz said, “those foot-marks...”

She broke off suddenly at a sound that was half a groan and half a scream from above.

The doctor was out of the door and up the stairs before she could move. When she did follow him it was slowly and dully, with a heavy certainty in her heart.

She stood in the doorway, watching him at the bed-side. In a moment he turned grave-eyed, and with a slight shake of his head. He put Ms hand on her shoulder and then went quietly past her out of the room.

For some seconds Liz stood without moving. Then her eyes dropped from the bed to the floor. She trembled.

Laughter, a high-pitched, fright-ening laughter shook her as she looked at the red, naked foot-prints which led away from the bed-side, across the floor and down the stairs, after the doctor.

## **BOOK INFORMATION**

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