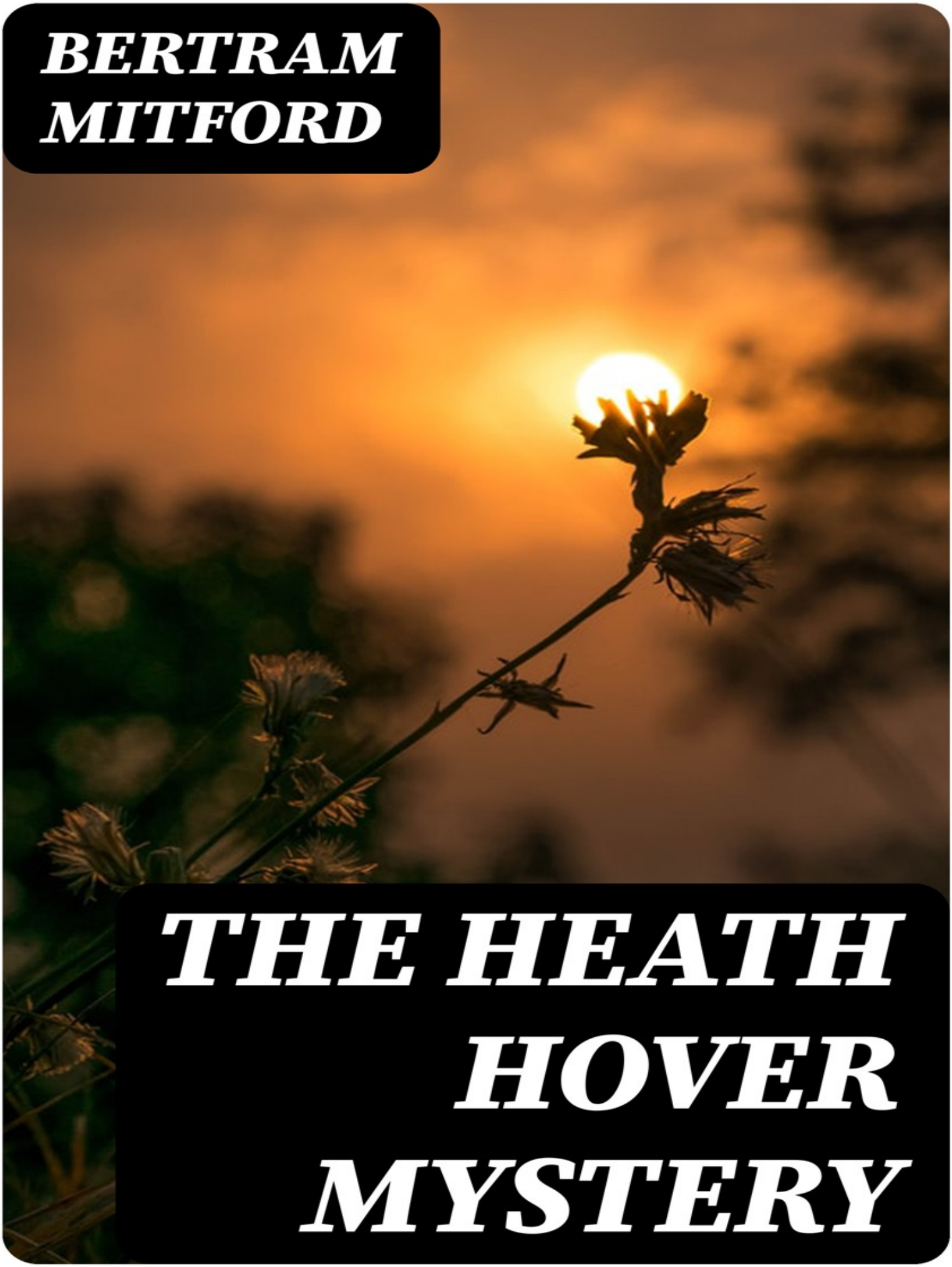
BERTRAM MITFORD



THE HEATH HOVER MYSTERY

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"The Heath Hover Mystery"

Chapter One.

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The Door in the Corner.

John Seward Mervyn lay back in his accustomed armchair, and—looked.

The room was of medium size, partly panelled, and partly hung with dark red papering. It was low ceiled, and the bending beams between the strips of whitewash were almost black. This added to the gloominess of the apartment whether by day or night; and now it was night. To be precise it was the stroke of midnight.

A bright fire glowed and flared in the wide, old-world chimney grate, but even this failed altogether to dispel a certain suggestion of the hauntings of vague, shadowy evil influences that seemed to be in the atmosphere. The lamplight too, was cheerful enough, and yet not. It would have been, anywhere else, but here it seemed that any element of cheerfulness must somehow infallibly miss its way.

The moan of the winter wind surged around the gables of the old house, rising now and then to a most doleful howling, and within, beams and rafters cracked, breaking out loudly in new and unexpected places. Also in a manner somewhat nerve-trying to one who sat there in the ghostly midnight solitude—as this one sat, and he in the full consciousness that for years and years past nobody had been found to inhabit this house even rent free and for the sole consideration of residing within the same. And he was trying the experiment.

John Seward Mervyn was a man who prided himself on being an absolute and cynical sceptic with regard to the supernatural, and he was poor. Dreadful tales were afloat with regard to this particular tenement, but at such he laughed. Nobody had been able to inhabit it even for weeks. Several had made the attempt, allured by the inducement of rent free. They had remained just long enough to begin to congratulate themselves upon such a find—and then—out they had gone, bag and baggage, without so much as a day's notice. Several in succession; and what they had seen—or heard—somehow or other none had been willing—or able—to disclose. But the present occupant had been in possession for some months, to the marvel of the neighbourhood.

Now he sat there at dead midnight in absolute solitude. Not a soul was within call; the nearest habitations were two or three labourers' cottages on the further side of a wooded hill. His thoughts were of the past, and they were not pleasant, those of the past seldom are. A couple of pipes were on the table at his elbow, and a tobacco jar—likewise a square whisky bottle, a syphon and a tumbler, but of this he had partaken but little. But somehow he felt his solitude to-night as he had never felt it since he had entered on possession. To-night he felt he would have given something for human companionship in almost any shape. The winter wind howled without, not loud but inexpressibly dismal. And he sat, and—looked.

Looked! At what?

In a corner of the room was a door—a massive door. It had a curious old-world, wrought-iron handle. And at this he

was looking—gazing, in fact, more than intently. Was it slowly turning?

He could have sworn that it was. Well, what, then? The door was securely locked, the key was in a very safe place. And the door led nowhere and from nowhere. It led, in fact, to a vault-like underground cellar whose solid walls were totally devoid of outlet. When he had entered on possession he had exhaustively verified this, and having thus satisfied himself had laughed all the startling and shadowy possibilities which popular report ascribed to the place to utter scorn. And yet, now to-night, he could have sworn that the handle of this door was slowly turning.

To anybody less sceptical—less unaffectedly and wholesouledly sceptical—there was that in the conviction which would have set up a blood-chilling, hair-raising effect. The utter loneliness of the place, the midnight sounds, the moaning of the doleful winter wind, the crackings and creakings of the ghostly old house, the dreadful legends that centred round that very vault, of which the movement of this very door handle was a preliminary incident—would have been sufficient to have driven out such into the pitiless winter night rather than remain sitting there—on the watch.

On the watch—for what? Could a spectral hand undo that lock? Then the watcher rubbed his eyes and looked again. Certainly the handle had turned. Its broad iron loop had been horizontal before, now it was at an angle of forty-five. Of that he was as sure as that he was alive and sitting there. And then he remembered that—this was the night.

It doesn’t matter what day of the month it was. Manifestations were liable to occur at any time, and

sporadically, but there were two nights in the year when—Well he had obtained a vague inkling as to what might be expected, but the last of these two dates had befallen prior to his occupation. This was the second of them within the year. This was the night.

"Now this is all unutterable bosh," Mervyn said to himself. "I'll have another drink anyhow. Then I'll turn in."

He reached for the whisky bottle, and filled up. Yet he was conscious of a feeling as though a chill were running down him from head to foot, notwithstanding that the fire was glowing with a heat that was almost fierce; and with the hissing squirt of the syphon into the tumbler there mingled a sound as though something or somebody were shuffling or groping behind that heavily locked door. He took a long pull at his tumbler, almost emptying it. Then he looked again at the broad iron loop handle. Its straight lower end, which before had stood at an angle of forty five, was now vertical.

His eyes dilated upon the phenomenon. The cold chill that ran through his system seemed to intensify. Mervyn, though by no means a total abstainer was a temperate man—so it was not that. Well, the obvious thing was to go and get the key, and open the door and satisfy himself. But, for the life of him he—could not.

No. He could not. He sat staring more and more wildly with dilated eyes. He was even horribly conscious of a slow pallor creeping over his face. What did it mean? The whole atmosphere of the room seemed charged with some evil influence. An owl hooted melodiously outside. It was answered by another. This seemed in a measure to break the spell, for he loved birds and bird voices, and the hooting

of owls in the dark woods overhanging the long lake-like pond behind his dwelling was a sound that often drew him forth on moonlight nights to stand on the sluice and listen for an hour at a time. There was to him nothing boding or sinister in the voices of the night birds, any more than there was in the jubilant shout of the cuckoo by day, or the twanging of the nightingale.

He looked again. Certainly that door handle was moving, and it could be moved by no mortal hand. Yet to make sure, he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he called, and as he did so he was conscious of a suspicion of a quake in his voice.

For answer only a soft drive of sleet against the curtained window, and through it he could swear that the door handle slowly creaked. The door itself stood shadowy in the gloom of the corner where the light only half reached.

Then something moved. For the life of him the watcher could not repress a start, a thrill of the nerves. But the sound, the movement, did not come from the corner whereon his tense gaze was fixed. There was a little black kitten curled up asleep in an armchair opposite the one in which he was seated—a tiny ball of woolly fluff, which during its short life had been the regular companion of his lonely evenings, and of which he was almost humanly fond. It, now, was uncurling itself with a sudden celerity totally foreign to the usual deliberation of its kind on awakening from sleep. Its round eyes were wide open, and a crescendo fire of shrill growls were proceeding from its little throat. Its back was arched, and its fur all standing up, and—its gaze too, was fixed upon that door in the shadowy corner. Then it

spat, retreating further and further till it was against the back of the chair, for all the world as though to repel the onslaught of its natural and hereditary enemy—dog.

“The fact is,” thought Mervyn, noting this, “I have been too much shut up with myself, and the utter, infernal loneliness of life here is eating into my nerves.” But the sensible side of this sceptical reflection was undermined by another—that there are occasions when animals can see what we cannot. And this tiny creature was showing unmistakable and increasing signs of perturbation and alarm.

He spoke to it—softly, caressingly—then went over and picked it up. As he returned with it to his own chair it struggled violently as though to escape—a thing it had never done—growling the while with redoubled intensity. And his own chair was nearer to that door.

“Now Poogie, don’t be a little fool,” he apostrophised, holding it tighter. But the tiny creature became almost frantic, striking its claws into his hand. He released it, and it darted like lightning into the far corner of the room, where it crouched, still growling.

For all his scepticism the man was conscious of a chill feeling in the region of the spine. He reached out a hand for the square bottle. The hand shook, and glass clinked against glass more than once as he filled out a liberal measure. This he tossed off, and as he glanced again towards the centre of attention the glass fell from his hand on to the table. *The door had opened*.

Had opened—was opening. As yet but a few inches of dense black slit, but it seemed to be gaining in width.

Mervyn gazed at it with dilated eyes, and as he did so he realised that the blood had receded from his face, leaving it cold—clammy. What on earth—or beyond the earth—could have opened that door, secured as it was with a solid lock, the key of which was at that moment safe within one of the drawers of his writing table? What on earth—or from beyond the earth—was he going to behold when that door should be opened to its full width? Moved by a natural instinct of material defence, he backed towards the fireplace—still without taking his gaze from that slowly opening door—and bent down as though to seize the poker, but refrained, as the conviction flooded his mind that whatever it might be that he was about to meet certainly no material weapon would be available against it. Again he found his voice.

"Any one there?" he repeated, this time conscious of very much more than a suspicion of a quaver in his voice.

As if in answer, the door noiselessly opened further. The black gap now occupied half the doorway. And then, while he was meditating a frantic rush forward to make one desperate effort at clearing up the mystery whatever it might be, something occurred to divert the awful tensity of apprehension which had about reached its climax.

Through the doleful, long drawn howling of the winter wind and the rattle of sleet, came a cry. A cry—ever so faint—distant—but just audible; a cry, as of distress, of utter, dire, and hopeless extremity—and it came from without. And it was clearly and unmistakably human.

Chapter Two.

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The Cry from the Ice.

Every nerve rigid and tense Mervyn listened again. Yes—it was repeated. It echoed forth more distinctly now upon the dismal night, and it came from far up the great pond above. Quickly he rose and threw on a warm cloak, and as quickly reached the front door, turned the key, and went out. Somebody was in imminent peril—and then he remembered. The ice!

He sprang up the path stairway which led to the sluice, and even as he did so the thought flashed through his mind that he had been on the eve of falling asleep in his chair when the phenomenon of the door handle had befallen to start him wide awake. No more thought however did he give to this, as he reached the level of the sluice and looked out.

The long triangle of the pond narrowing away between its overhanging woods, shone in the moonlight a gleaming sheet of ice, whose silver surface the drive of sleet was already whitening, and the firs in the dark woods which flowed down the banks were scintillating with hoarfrost. Now again, from far up that long gleaming triangle, came the raucous, agonised appeal for aid, this time quite distinctly audible.

“Some one’s got stuck there in the ice,” said Mervyn to himself. “But what the devil is he doing there at this time of night? Some poacher I suppose. Well, poaching isn’t a capital crime.” And raising his voice he answered the shout with a vigorous and reassuring halloo.

The sleet had suddenly ceased, and the clouds parting somewhat, showed glimpses of a rushing moon. Far up the frozen surface a dark interruption was just discernible. Here it was that the ice had parted, and from here now came a responsive, but weakening shout of hopeless human extremity.

“Keep up—keep up,” bellowed Mervyn through his hands. “I’m coming.”

He did not stop to think, he did his thinking while he moved. He went quickly down the sluice path to his house, all superstitious midnight imaginings thrown to the winds. To have started straight for the spot would have been to render no earthly service to the submerged man. He would have been powerless for anything save to stand on the bank and encourage him drowning, wherefore the additional few minutes sacrificed to returning to the house and procuring a ladder might mean the difference in any case between life and death.

The ladder was not found quite so easily as he had reckoned on, and when found, it proved a trifle heavier than he had expected. In spite of the biting cold he was streaming with perspiration by the time he had dragged it up the steep path to the level of the sluice again, and by the time he had brought it to the gate which opened into the path through the wood which skirted the length of the long triangle of ice he was wondering if he could get any further with it. But he sent forth a loud, encouraging shout, and without waiting for an answer, held on his way.

Fortunately every inch of the latter was known to him, and shafts of moonlight, darting through the leafless wood

aided him appreciably. Still the way seemed interminable, and his progress, weighted as it was, was perforce slow. He knew exactly where to find the spot, and, lo—there it was.

“Are you there?” he cried, parting some elder stems, to reach the edge, and thrusting out the ladder along the smooth, shining surface. No answer came, but in the glint of moonlight he could see the shattered, heaving ice slabs, and wedged in between these, supported by both arms extended, he made out the head and shoulders of a man.

The latter, obviously, was not more than half conscious, indeed it was little short of a miracle that he had not, in a state of relaxed muscular power, lost all hold and slid down to his frozen death in the black water. Obviously, too, he was in a state of collapse, and incapable of helping himself. The helping would all devolve upon his would-be rescuer. The latter, in cold blood, would not in the least have relished the job.

It is curious how the glow of a life-saving attempt will warm the coldest blood. John Seward Mervyn was a complete and genuine cynic; yet to effect the rescue of this totally unknown stranger, and that at great peril to himself, here in the biting freezing midnight, seemed to him at that moment the one thing worth living for.

"'Now—you're all right,' gasped Mervyn. 'Grab hold with the other hand, and work your way along the rungs of the ladder.'"

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At great peril to himself. Yes, for he knew the water here to be a matter of four fathoms in depth—it might as well

have been four hundred for the result would be the same. It was likely enough that in attempting single-handed to get the stranger out he would share the stranger's fate.

The ice cracked and bent as he pushed out the ladder along its surface; and cautiously, and lying flat in order to distribute his weight, made his way along it. Then it broke, with a glass-like splintering, and jets of water spurted through. Then the moon was again obscured, and a wild drive of sleet whirled down.

"Here, buck up, man, and lay hold of the ladder," he panted, having attained within grasp of his objective. The latter, whose staring eyes and blue lips showed the very last stage of exhaustion, made a wild attempt to comply, but his hand just missed its grasp, and the supporting ice slabs, loosened by the effort, would have let him through and in another moment would have closed over his head, when his wrist was seized in a tolerably firm grip.

"Now—you're all right," gasped Mervyn. "Grab hold with the other hand, and work your way along the rungs of the ladder. Come on. Buck up."

The nearly drowned, and wholly frozen man seemed to understand, for although powerless for speech he did just what he was told. There was a mingling of splashing and glassy splintering as the ice gave way beneath this double weight, but Mervyn's head was clear, and he distributed his own weight while piloting the other along the half submerged ladder. At last slowly and laboriously, foot by foot, they regained the bank.

"Here. You get outside a great toothful of this," said Mervyn, producing the square whisky bottle which he had

shoved hastily into his side pocket with an eye to just such a contingency, and had hurriedly deposited under a tree, when starting to venture upon the ice. “Then we’ll sprint as hard as we can for my diggings. Do as I say,” he added, sharply, as the other hesitated. “It may mean the difference between life and death.”

The stranger, who had seemed to hesitate, now obeyed, and took a liberal pull at the potent spirit. His rescuer followed his example.

“Here, take another pull,” urged the latter. “Nothing like it, on top of a freezing soak. Go ahead. It can’t hurt you under the circumstances.”

The stranger complied, and the effect was nearly instantaneous. His chattering teeth were stilled, and the awful numbness that held his frame, relaxed, as the generous warmth of the spirit ran through his veins. Still he did not speak. Mervyn eyed him critically.

“Come along,” he said. “My crib’s just handy. Sooner we get there the better, for I’m in as risky a state as you are. Man, but I’m just steaming with perspiration, and a chill upon that on an icy night like this—at my age—no thank you! Here—I’ll give you an arm. You must be clean played out.”

“I am,” said the other, speaking for the first time. But that was all he said. No words of thanks, of explanation. Mervyn passed a tolerably strong arm through that of his guest, and piloted him along the path beneath the trees, athwart whose frosted boughs the moon was networking in fitful strands of light. The ladder he did not trouble his head further about. It would be there in the morning. Two owls,

floating over the tree-tops, hooted sepulchrally but melodiously to each other.

“That’s how I heard them when I was in there. They sounded like the voices of devils.”

Mervyn looked at the speaker curiously. They had nearly gained the gate which opened out of the sombre woods on to the sluice. The voice was rather deep, not unpleasing, but strained. Lord! what if a touch of brain fever followed on the strain of the long immersion? What on earth was he going to do with a raving delirious man, in his lonely, haunted abode? thought Mervyn.

“Oh, that’s how they struck you!” he answered, bluffly. “No ‘devil’ about them. They’re jolly beggars and I like to hear them. I dare say, though, when you’re hanging on for dear life in a freezing ice hole at midnight anything strikes you as all distorted—eh? Well, here we are—that’s my crib. Hold up, go easy down this path. It’s really a flight of steps, you know. By the way, as you see, I’m yards below the level of the pond. If that sluice were to give way it’d sweep me and my shack to Kingdom Come before you could say knife. I shouldn’t like to say how many million gallons of water there are in that pond. It’s about half a mile long, and fills what is really the bottom of a valley, so you can imagine it’s astonishingly deep.”

Thus chatting, he had piloted the man he had rescued safely down the staircase-like path and had gained the front door, which had been left half open in his hurried exit. The lamp in the inner room was still burning, and into this he led the stranger.

“Now, peel off all your wet clothes,” he went on. “This is the only decent fire in the house—the one in my bedroom has burnt low. But—lose no time about it. I’ll get you a couple of rough towels for a glowing rub down—then you’ll be none the worse.”

Mervyn stirred up the fire and piled on it several great billets. In a moment they were roaring up the chimney. But as he did so his glance quickly sought the mysterious door in the shadowy corner. It was tight shut—moreover the long loop handle was in its normal position—at the horizontal.

“I must have been dreaming,” he said to himself, as he went upstairs to rummage out the towels aforesaid, and anything else that his new-found guest would be likely to need. “And yet—if that devilish rum optical delusion hadn’t come off—why I should have dozed on comfortably, and never have heard that chump’s shout for help. Well I’ve read of that sort of thing, but here’s a first-class case in point.”

But at this decision his meditations stopped short, and that uncomfortably. For the dread legends that hung around his lonely abode invariably had it that any manifestations within the same boded ill—were productive of ill—to the witness or witnesses thereof; certainly not good, to any living soul. Yet this manifestation—if manifestation it were—had been directly instrumental in the saving of a human life. And with this came another uncomfortable reflection—to wit, the proverb that if you save anybody’s life, he—or she—is bound to do you an injury.

“All bosh,” he decided, next minute, as he proceeded to get out a suit of clothes, in fact a complete outfit, for his guest. Both were tall men, and much of the same build. The

things would fit admirably. But this sudden acquisition of human companionship had made all the difference in Mervyn. An imaginative man when alone, he was as hard-headed and matter of fact as could be in the society of his fellows. He did not disguise from himself that the society of this one, whoever he might be, had come right opportunely just now.

“Here you are,” he cried, flinging the bundle of things down on the table. “Get into these while I go and rummage out some supper. You can do with some I expect after your ‘dip.’ But I warn you it’s all cold, and there’s no kitchen fire. There isn’t a soul on the premises but myself.”

The stranger protested that he really required nothing. His voice was rather a pleasing one, with ever so slight a foreign intonation and accent. He had a well-shaped head, straight features, and a short dark beard trimmed to a point. On the whole, rather a striking looking man.

While he was changing Mervyn made several expeditions to the back premises, and by the time these were completed the table looked alluring by reason of the adornment of a cold silverside, half a Stilton cheese—and the usual appurtenances thereto.

“Rough and ready,” declared Mervyn, “but all good of its kind. I thought we could dispense with laying a cloth.”

The other bowed a smiling assent. If his dark eyes flashed round the room in a quick appraising glance when his host was not, looking he evinced no appreciable curiosity otherwise, either by look or speech. The latter, for his part, was equally contained. He detested being cross-questioned himself, consequently forebore, as second nature, to subject

other people to that process. If his guest chose to volunteer information about himself he would do so, if not—well, he needn't.

A renewed whirl of dismal wind round the gables of the house, and a fine clatter of sleet against the windowpanes as they began their meal. The stranger looked up.

"I am fortunate indeed," he said, "to have fallen upon such hospitality as yours to-night, Mr—?"

"Mervyn," supplied his host. But hardly had he uttered his own name, than a very strange and unaccountable misgiving struck root within his mind. Was it some long-forgotten brain wave that suggested to him that he had seen this man somewhere or other before—and that under circumstances which would in no way render it desirable that he should see him again? Yet, like a long-forgotten dream which locates us in similar place or circumstances, it was an impression to vanish as completely and as bafflingly as recalled.

"Hark! That is not the wind," went on the stranger, looking up.

"No, it isn't," said Mervyn, on whose ears the sound of a scratching on the windowpane and a plaintive little cry at the same time struck.

He raised the sash, admitting a whirl of icy sleet, also the little black kitten, its fur plentifully powdered with the white particles. It had slipped out of the door when he had started upon his rescue quest, and he had been too much occupied with this and the sequel to give it another thought just then.

"Why, Poogie, you little fool, what did you want to leave a snug fire for at all on a night like this?" he apostrophised

as the tiny creature sprang lightly to his shoulder, and sat there purring and rubbing its head against his cheek. He sat down with it at the table, and began feeding it with scraps from his plate. The stranger looked on with a slightly amused smile.

“I see you are a lover of cats, Mr Mervyn,” he remarked.

“Why, rather. They’re such jolly, chummy little beasts. Look at this one,” holding it up. “Isn’t it a picture, with its little tufted ears and round, woolly face?”

But somehow the object of this eulogy did not seem appreciative. It struggled, and half struck its claws into its owner’s hand, which held it up under the armpits. But its said owner realised that its resentment was not directed upon him. It was viewing the stranger with much the same manifestations of disapproval and distrust as when gazing at the weirdly opening door, earlier in the night. And to its owner was borne in the consciousness that it had never displayed hostility towards anybody before—stranger or not. This, however, he kept to himself. He replaced the kitten on his lap, but even then it seemed restive and uneasy.

“Are you fond of dogs too?” said the other. “I suppose you are, but I didn’t see or hear one when we came in.”

“Yes. But I haven’t got one just now. The fact is this is a difficult place to keep a dog in. They get roaming off into the coverts and get trapped or shot. The last one I had disappeared—suddenly.”

There was a curious hesitation about this explanation. Perhaps the stranger noticed it—perhaps not.

“Now we’ll have a smoke,” said Mervyn, when they had finished, producing a cigar box. “These are pretty well

matured—Unless you’d prefer to turn in?”

But the other declared he preferred nothing of the kind. The comfort of this delightful room after the experience he had gone through was idyllic. So Mervyn, by no means averse to this opportunity of conviviality so unexpectedly thrown in his way, fell in, and for upwards of an hour they sat on, before the blazing roaring log-fire, chatting easily, but always on indifferent subjects. And all the time the stranger, while an ideal conversationalist, had vouchsafed no information about himself—not even as to his name.

But when bedtime came he flatly and absolutely refused to avail himself of his host’s bedroom. He could not think of entailing that inconvenience, he declared. Here was a roomy and comfortable couch, and a blazing fire. A couple of pillows and a blanket was all he needed. And Mervyn perforce had to acquiesce. The latter smiled queerly to himself at his own thoughts while doing so. If the mysterious one were a burglar—only he did not look like it—why the most professional of burglars would hardly burgle a man who had just pulled him out of the jaws of death, and—more potent argument still perhaps to the hardened cynic—here was nothing worth burgling.

But—when he was in his own room, and was disposing himself comfortably to sleep, with the little black kitten as usual curled up on his feet outside the counterpane, he reflected complacently that the door of his room owned a very strong lock, and that a Browning pistol reposed beside his watch under his pillow.

But these precautions—especially in this instance—had nothing to do with burglars or burgling.

Chapter Three.

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The House by the Pond.

Heath Hover was a long, two-storeyed house built in the shape of the letter E with the centre bar left out. Nobody knew exactly how it had ever come to be built at all. The property on which it stood had changed hands several times right up to date, and tradition on the subject was obscure. It could never have been intended for a farmstead, if only that it was situated right in the middle of woods, nor were there any traces of yard or outbuildings in the very limited and sloping space immediately behind it. Some were of opinion that it had been built as a dower house to one or other of the succeeding owners of Sotherby Hall, others that it had been a separate demesne altogether.

As we have said, it stood low—the chimneys being below the level of the sluice which regulated the custody of the great mass of water pent within the long triangular pond which was the scene of the midnight incident. It was situated at the open end of the V formed by this and by a sweep of oakwoods on either side, flowing down to the water’s edge. In summer it was a delightfully picturesque and inviting retreat, nestling in the heart of its sylvan surroundings, and never failed to catch the attention of the users of the not very good public road which ran along the sluice, whether motorists or cycle riders. In the darker months, when the cloud-murk hung grey and gloomy, and no sound broke the awful stillness of the moist air but that of the dripping woods, why then the impression conveyed to

the onlookers was dismal and desolate to the last degree. Then it seemed to live up to its sinister reputation, for in the opinion of the countryside Heath Hover was a very badly haunted house indeed.

Its present occupant awoke the next morning later than usual, and feeling by no means best pleased with himself and the world at large. To begin with he had passed a bad night. Whether it was owing to the excitement of the strange midnight adventure which might so easily have culminated in tragedy, or that he had been wrought up by the weird phenomenon of the opening door—which, try as he would, he could not altogether persuade himself was a sheer optical delusion—certain it was that hour followed upon hour before sleep would come. When it did it brought with it strange dreams, or rather imaginings. Once he could have sworn that his own bedroom door was opening, then that the mysterious stranger whom he had so opportunely rescued, was standing by his bedside, bending over him with stealthy enquiring gaze; and his fingers had closed round the butt of the deadly weapon which reposed beneath his pillow. But no; there was nothing. The moon tempered the darkness of the room sufficiently to render visible anything moving within the same. Still, when he did doze off there was always that haunting apprehension of some impending peril and something which he had thought buried, and which had suddenly started to life to dog him down and threaten him in this out-of-the-world retreat. And it, somehow or other, was closely connected with his unexpected guest, sleeping peacefully in the room below.

Stay. As to the latter, was he sleeping so peacefully? Moved by an unaccountable impulse Mervyn decided that he would make sure of that, and was in the act of rising with that intent when a sudden wake of drowsiness swept over him, and he fell back and slept hard until morning.

The late sun was just rising, a red ball above the tree-tops. The ground lay shrouded in whiteness, and the dark firs and naked oak boughs were picked out in snow patterns, and the window panes were crusted with the delicate lacework of a hard frost. Mervyn shivered, and wondered apprehensively if he had caught cold in his undertaking of the night. He dressed quickly and went downstairs.

He opened the door noiselessly and looked in. The room was in semi-darkness, for the blinds were still down. His guest was still asleep apparently, for there on the couch he lay, the rug drawn over his head. Noiselessly still, Mervyn closed the door, and went out. Then, through the back kitchen—for he would not open the front door lest the grating of the bolts should disturb the sleeper—he passed into the open air.

The exhilaration of it in a measure braced him. The sun, mounting higher and higher, had emerged from the red ball stage into radiating beams, which touched the frosty particles on ground and tree alike into myriads of faceted diamonds. Mechanically he mounted the staircase-like path which led up to the sluice. The ice lay, a pure white triangle, narrowing away to the distantly converging woods; the break, now frozen over and newly coated with snow, hardly showing. But to this he took his way.

Heavens! it was a mystery the man had escaped the frozen death—a marvel that he himself should have been aroused just in the very nick of time to rescue him—he now told himself standing on the bank and contemplating the spot in broad daylight. The ladder lay where it had been left, but now frozen fast into the ice. It resisted his efforts to move it. Well, it could stay where it was for the present. When old Joe turned up—by the way, the old rascal was late this morning—they would be able to move it between them, and the ice was thicker for the night's frost, and would bear easily.

He retraced his steps along the woodland path. The leaves crackled crisply under his tread, and hungry blackbirds shot out swiftly from the hollies, uttering alarmed cachinnations. A little red squirrel clawed itself up a tree bole, and squatting in a fork chirked angrily and impudently at him from its place of safety. But as he walked, he was puzzling hard over the strange and sinister impression which the advent of his unknown guest had instilled within his mind. In the cheery and bracing morning light and air, this seemed to strike him as sheer fancy, sheer unreasonable imagining. The man was probably quite all right; his appearance and manner were certainly not unprepossessing. He would persuade him to stay on a few days and relieve his loneliness. Why not? He was becoming altogether too self-centred, as he had told himself the night before.

Thus musing he gained the sluice and looked down at his dwelling. The blinds of the living-room were still down. Clearly his guest was "taking it out," and small blame to

him, after his experiences of the night before. At the bottom of the stair path, the unit previously referred to as old Joe came round the end of the house.

Old Joe, surnamed Sayers, was his outdoor male factotum—gardener—though there wasn't much of a garden—make-himself-generally-useful, and so on. Old Judy—otherwise Christian-named Judith—was his indoor and female factotum; cook, general-do-everything there was to be done. Joe Sayers was an ancient rustic, normally towards crisp surliness inclined, except when full of extra ale—and Joe could carry a great deal of extra ale—and then he would wax confidential, not to say friendly. On him his master now opened.

"Hard morning, Joe?"

"Sure-ly," came the laconic assent.

"Is the gentleman in the sitting-room awake yet?"

"Gemmun in settin' room? I see nought o' he."

"Well, the blinds are still down. I thought Judy might have disturbed him, not knowing he was here."

"She's t'whoäm. Got roomatics. Tarr'ble hard marnin' t'is."

This ancient couple only gave their services during the hours of daylight; no consideration on earth would have availed to keep them within the precincts of Heath Hover during those of darkness. They inhabited one of the labourers' cottages referred to on the other side of the wooded hill and half a mile distant by road.

"Can't she come to-day then, Joe?"

"Not to-day," was the answer, with a very decided shake of the head. "May-be not to-marrer neither."

Mervyn felt vexed. How could he ask the stranger to prolong his stay when there was nobody on the premises to so much as boil a potato. And he had rather reckoned that the other would prolong his stay. In fact he wanted him to, and that, paradoxically, on all fours with that vague, undefinable instinct of apprehension which had been upon him during those sleepless night hours.

“Look up the pond, Joe,” he said. “See that break in the ice, away there, by the two hanging ash trees. Well, I got him out of there in the middle of the night. I had to lug the ladder along to do it—we’ll have to haul it back again presently, by the way. He’d have been drowned but for it.”

“That he would, sure-ly.” Then the intense rustic suspicion of everything and everybody unknown asserted itself—“What be he a doing there—on the ice—middle of the night? Poachin’ may be?” Mervyn laughed.

“No—no. He’s no poacher whatever he is?”

“And what might he be? Tell me that,” and the old countryman’s little eyes blinked with satisfaction over what he considered his own shrewdness.

“Don’t know, I didn’t ask him and he hasn’t told me—yet. It’s a bad habit to get into—asking people questions about themselves and their private affairs, Joe. It’s a thing I don’t do.”

The ancient slowly shook his head—pityingly, contemptuously. He thought his master little removed from a fool.

“Folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pond—middle of the night, and don’t say nothin’ as to how they gets there