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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Contents for November, 1929

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

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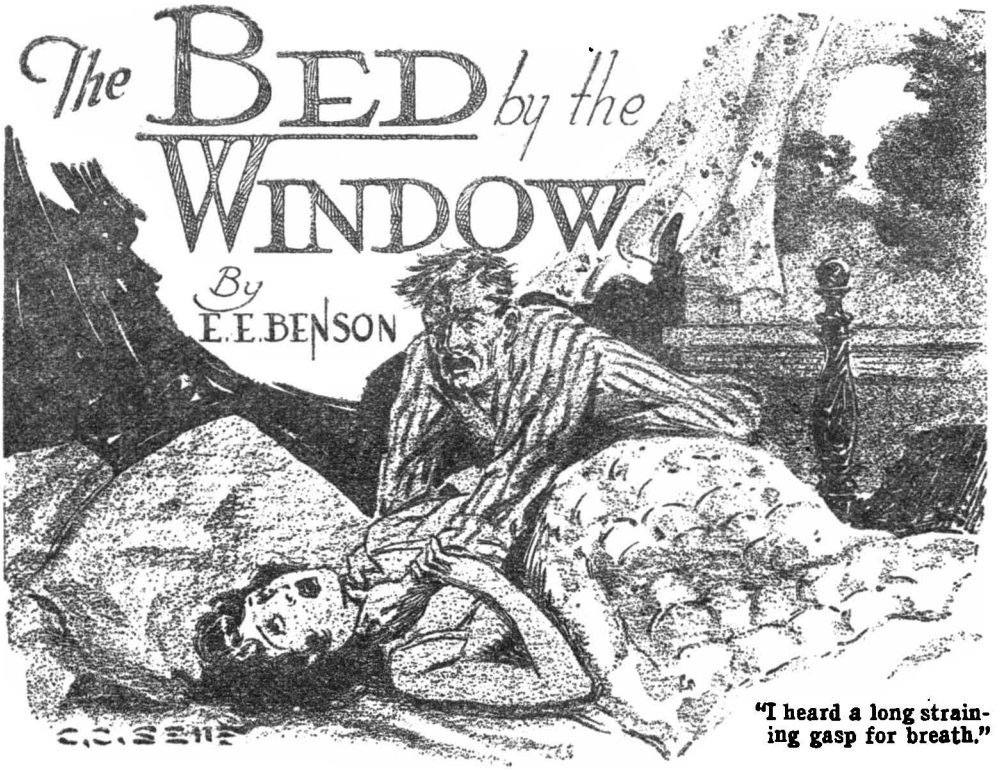
The BED by the WINDOW

By E. F. BENSON



"I heard a long straining gasp for breath."

PROLOGUE

MY FRIEND Lionel Bailey understands the works of Mr. Einstein, and he reads them with the rapt thrilled attention that more ordinary people give to detective stories. He says they are so exciting that he can not put them down: they make him late for dinner. It may be owing to this unusual mental conformation of his that he talks about time and space in a manner that is occasionally puzzling, for he thinks of them as something quite different from our accepted notions of them, and tonight as we sat over my fire hearing a spring-gale of March bugling outside, and dashing solid sheets of rain against my window, I had found him very difficult to follow. But though he thinks in terms which the average man finds unintelligible, he is always ready (though with an effort) to quit the austere heights on which he naturally roams, and explain. And his explanations are often so lucid that the average man (I allude to myself) can generally get some idea of what he means. Just now he had made some extremely cryptic remark about the real dimensions of time, and of the palpable incorrectness of our conception of it: but rightly interpreting the moaning sound with which I received this, he very kindly came to my aid.

"You see, time, as we think of it," he said, "is a most meaningless convention. We talk of the future and the past as if they were opposite poles, whereas they are really the same. What we thought of as the future a minute ago or a century ago, we now see to be the past: the future is always in process of becoming the past. The two are the same, as I said just now, looked at from different points."

"But they aren't the same," said I, rather incautiously. "The future may become the past, but the past never becomes the future."

Lionel sighed.

"A most unfortunate remark," he said. "Why, the whole of the future is made up of the past: it entirely depends on it; the future consists of nothing else but the past."

I did see what he meant. There was no denying it, so I tried something else.

"A slippery slidy affair altogether," I said. "The future becomes the past, and the past the future. But luckily there's one firm spot in this welter, and that's the present. That's solid: there's nothing wrong with the present, is there?"

Lionel moved slightly in his chair: an indulgent, patient movement.

"Oh, dear; oh dear," he said. "You've chosen as your firm solid point the most shifting and unstable of all. What is the present? By the time you've said 'This is the present,' it has slid away into the past. The past has got some sort of real existence, and we know that the future will blossom out of it. But the present hardly can be said to exist at all, for the moment you say that it is here it has changed. It is far the most elusive part of the phantom which we call Time. It is the door, that is the most that can be said for it, through which the future passes into the past. Yet somehow, though it scarcely exists, we can see from it into the past and into the future."

I felt I could venture to contradict that.

"Thank heaven we can't," I said. "It would be the ultimate terror to be able to see into the future. It's bad enough sometimes to be able to remember the past."

He shook his head.

"But we can see into the future," he said. "The future is entirely evolved out of the past, and if we knew everything about the past, we should equally know everything about the future. Everything that happens is merely a fresh link in the chain of unalterable consequences. The little we know about the solar system, for instance, makes it a certainty that the sun will rise tomorrow."

"Oh, that kind of thing," said I. "Just material, mathematical deductions."

"No, all kinds of things. For instance, I'm sure you know the certainty that we all have now and then, that somebody present is about to say some particular definite sentence. A few seconds pass, and then out it comes precisely as we had known it would. That's not so material and mathematical. It's a little instance of a very big thing called clairvoyance."

"I know what you mean," I said. "But it may be some trick of the brain. It isn't a normal experience."

"Everything is normal," said Lionel. "Everything depends on some rule. We only call things abnormal when we don't know what the rule is. Then there are mediums: mediums constantly see into the future, and to some extent everyone is a medium; we've all had glimpses."

He paused a moment.

"And there is such a simple explanation," he said. "You see, we're all existing in eternity, though, just for the span of our life-time, we're also existing in Time. But there's eternity outside Time, though the mist of material things usually obscures it from our vision. Now and then the mist clears, and then—how shall I express anything so simple?—then we look down on Time, like a little speck of an island below us, quite clear, future and past and present, and awfully small. We get just a glimpse, no more, and then the mist closes round us again. But on these occasions we can see into the future just as clearly as we can look into the past, and we can see not only those who have passed outside the mist of material phenomena, whom we call ghosts,

but the future or the past of those who are still inside it. They all appear to us then as they are in eternity, where there is neither past nor future."

I suddenly found that my grip on what he was saying was beginning to give way.

"That's enough for one night," said I flippantly. "The future is the past, and the past is the future, and there isn't any present, and ghosts may come from what has happened or what will happen. I should like to see a ghost out of the future. . . . And as you've had a whisky and soda in the immediate past, I feel sure you will have one in the immediate future, as it's the same thing. Say when."

* * * * *

I WAS off into the country next day in order to make amends for a couple of months of wilful idleness in London by hermitizing myself in a small village on the coast of Norfolk, where I knew nobody, and where, I was credibly informed, there was nothing to do: I should thus have to work in order to get through the hours of the day. There was a house there, kept by a man and his wife who took in lodgers, and there I proposed to plant myself till I had got through these criminal arrears. Mr. Hopkins had been a butler, and his wife a cook, and, so I was told by a friend who had made trial of their ministrations, they made their inmates extremely comfortable. There were a couple of other folk, Mr. Hopkins had written to me, now staying in the house, and he regretted he could not give me a sitting-room to myself. But he could provide me with a big double bedroom, where there was ample room for a writing-table and my books. That was good enough.

Hopkins had ordered a car to convey me from the nearest railway station, six miles distant, to Faringham, and a little before sunset, on a bright windy day of March, I came to the village. Though I had certainly never been here before I had some odd sense of remote familiarity with it, and I suppose I must have seen and forgotten some hamlet which was like it. There was just one street lined with fishermen's houses, built of rounded flints, with nets hung up to dry on the walls of small plots in front, and a few miscellaneous shops. We passed through the length of this, and came at the end to a much bigger, three-storied house, at the gate of which we stopped. A spacious square of garden separated it from the road, with espaliered pear-trees bordering the path that led to the front door: beyond flat open country stretched away to the horizon, intersected with big dikes and ditches, across which I could see, a mile distant, a line of white shingle where lay the sea. My arrival was hooted on the motor-horn, and Hopkins, a prim dark spare man, came out to see to my luggage. His wife was waiting inside, and she took me up to my room.

Certainly it would do very well: there were two windows commanding a view of the marsh eastward, in one of which was set a big writing-table. A fire sparkled on the hearth; two beds stood in opposite angles of the room, one near the second window, the other by the fireplace in front of which was a large armchair. This armchair had a footstool, under the table was a waste-paper basket, and on it one of those old-fashioned but convenient contrivances which show the day of the month and the day of the week, with pegs to adjust them. Everything had been thought out for comfort, everything looked spotlessly clean and cared-for, and at once I felt myself at home here.

"But what a charming room, Mrs. Hopkins," I said. "It's just what I want."

She moved away from the door as I spoke, to let her husband enter with my bags. She gave him one swift ugly look and I found myself thinking "How she dislikes him!" But the im-

pression was momentary, and having elected to sleep in the bed by the fireplace, I went downstairs with her for a cup of tea, while her husband unpacked for me.

When I came up again, the unpacking was over, and all my effects dispersed, clothes laid in drawers and cupboards, and my books and papers neatly stacked on the table. There was no settling down to be done: I had stepped into possession of this pleasant room, as if I had long lived and worked in it. Then my eye fell on the little adjustable contrivance on the table for displaying the current date, and I saw that this one detail had escaped the vigilance of my hosts, for it marked Tuesday, May 8th, instead of the true date, Thursday, March 22nd. I was rather pleased to observe that the Hopkinses were not too perfect, and after twisting the record back to the correct date, I instantly settled down to work, for there was nothing to get used to before I felt at home.

A plain and excellent dinner was served some three hours later, and I found that one of my fellow-guests was an elderly sepulchral lady with a genteel voice who spoke but rarely and then about the weather. She had by her on the table a case of Patience cards and a bottle of medicine. She took a dose of the latter before and after her meal, and at once retired to the common sitting-room where that night and every other she played long sad games of Patience. The other was a ruddy young man who confided to me that he was making a study of the minute fresh-water fleas that infest fresh-water snails, for which daily he dragged the dikes. He had been so fortunate as to find a new species which would undoubtedly be called *Pulex Dodsoniana* in his honor.

Hopkins waited on us with soft velvet-footed attention, and his wife brought in the admirable fruits of her kitchen. Once there was some slight collision of crockery in her tray, and happening to look up I saw the glance he gave her. It was not mere dislike that inspired it, but some quiet deadly hatred.

Dinner over, I went in for a few minutes to the sitting-room where the sepulchral lady was sitting down to her Patience and Mr. Dodson to his microscope, and very soon betook myself upstairs to resume my work.

The room was pleasantly warm, my things laid out for the night, and for a couple of hours I busied and buried myself. Then the door of the room, without any inquiry of knocking, silently opened, and Mrs. Hopkins stood there. She gave a little gasp of dismay as she saw me.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," she said. "I quite forgot: so stupid of me. But this is the room my husband and I usually occupy, if it is not being used. So forgetful of me."

I AWOKE next morning after long traffic with troubled nonsensical dreams to find the sun pouring in at the windows as Hopkins drew up the blinds. I thought that Mr. Dodson had come in to show me a collection of huge fleas that battened on Patience cards, or rather that would be abundant there on Tuesday, May 8th, for, as he pointed out, there were none there now since the present had no existence. And then Hopkins, who had been bending over the bed by the window, apologized for being in my room, and explained that he could hate his wife more intensely here: he hoped that I had not been disturbed by him. Then there was the crack of some explosion, which resolved itself into the rattle of the up-going blind, and there indeed he was. . . .

I was soon out of bed and dressing, but somehow that farrago of dream-stuff concocted out of actual experience, hung about me. I could not help feeling that there was significance in it, if I could only find the clue, and it did not, as is usual with dreams, fade and evaporate with my

waking: it seemed to retreat into hidden caves and recesses of my brain and wait in ambush there till it was called out.

Then my eye fell on the date-recorder on my table, and I saw with surprize that it still registered Tuesday, May 8th, though I would have been willing to swear that last night I had adjusted it to the correct date. And with that surprize was mingled a faint and rather uncomfortable misgiving, and involuntarily I asked myself *what* Tuesday, *what* May 8th was indicated there. Was it some day in past years, or in years yet to come? I knew that such a question was an outrage on common sense; probably I imagined that I had screwed the cylinder back to the present, but had not actually done so. But now I felt that this date referred to some event that had happened or was to happen. It was a record or some mysterious presage out of the future—like a railway-signal suddenly hoisted at night at some wayside station. The line lay empty, but presently out of the darkness would come a yell and a roar from the approaching train. . . . This time, anyhow, there should be no mistake, and I knew that I moved the date back again.

THE days passed slowly at first, as is their wont in new surroundings, and then began to move with ever-accelerating speed as I settled into an industrious routine. I worked all morning, turned myself unwillingly out of doors for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and worked again after tea and once more till round about midnight. My task prospered, I was well, and the house most comfortable, but all the time there was some instinct bidding me leave the place, or, since I successfully resisted that, to get through with my work as soon as might be and be gone. That strong tonic air of the coast often made me drowsy when I came in, and I would slip from my desk into the big armchair and sleep for a little. But always after these short recuperative naps, I would wake with a start, feeling that Hopkins had come silently into the room as I slept, and in some inexplicable panic of mind I would wheel round, dreading to see him. Yet it was not, if I may so express it, his bodily presence which I feared, but some psychical phantom of him, which had sinister business on hand in this room. His thoughts were here—was that it?—something in him that hated and schemed. That business was not concerned with me; I seemed to be but a spectator waiting for the curtain to rise on some grim drama. Then, as this confused and fearful moment of waking passed, the horror slipped away, not dispersing exactly, but concealing itself and ready to emerge again.

Yet all the time the routine of the well-ordered house went smoothly on. Hopkins was busy with his jobs, doing much of the house-work, and valetting and waiting at table: his wife continued to ply her admirable skill in the kitchen. Sometimes its door would be open, as I went upstairs after dinner, and I had a glimpse of them as I passed, sitting friendly at their supper. Indeed I began to wonder whether that gleam of dislike on the one side and of sheer hate on the other, which I fancied I had seen, was not some fiction of my own mind, for if it was real there would surely be some betrayal of the truth, a voice raised in anger, and a sudden shrill answer. But there was none: quietly and efficiently the two went about their work, and sometimes late at night I could hear them pass to the attic-floor above, where they slept. A few footsteps would sound muffled overhead, and then there was silence, till in the morning I, waking early, heard the discreet movements begin again, and soft footfalls pass my door on their way downstairs.

This room of mine, where for three weeks now I had been so prosperously at work, was growing a haunted and

terrible place to me. Never once had I seen in it anything outside the ordinary, nor heard any sound that betokened another presence except my own and that of the flapping flames on the hearth, and I told myself that it was I, or, more exactly, some fanciful sense of the unseen and the unheard that was troubling me and causing this ghostly invasion. Yet the room itself had a share in it too, for downstairs, or out in the windy April day, or even just outside the door of the room, I was wholly free of this increasing obsession. Something had happened here which had left its mark not on material things, and which was imperceptible to the organ of sight and hearing, the effect of which was trickling not merely into my brain, but filtering through it into the very source of life. Yet the explanation that a phantom was arising out of the past would not wholly fit, for whatever this haunting was, it was getting nearer, and though its lineaments were not yet visible, they were forming with greater distinctness below the veil that hid them. It was establishing touch with me, as if it was some denizen of a remote world that reached across time and space, and was already laying its fingers on me, and it took advantage of small physical happenings in that room to encompass me with its influence. For instance, when one evening I was brushing my hair before dinner, a white featureless face peered over my shoulder, and then with an arrested shudder I saw that this was only the reflection of the oval looking-glass on the ceiling. Or, as I lay in bed, before putting out my light, a puff of wind came in through the open sash, making the striped curtain to belly, and before I could realize the physical cause of it, there was a man in striped pajamas bending over the bed by the window. Or a wheeze of escaping gas came from the coals on the hearth, and to my ears it sounded like a strangled gasp of someone in the room. Something was at work, using the trivial sounds and sights for its own ends, kneading away in my brain to make it ready and receptive for the revelation it was preparing for it. It worked very cleverly, for the morning after the curtain had shaped itself into the pajamaed figure bending over the other bed, Hopkins, when he called me, apologized for his attire. He had overslept himself, and in order not to delay further, had come down in a coat over his striped pajamas. Another night the wind lifted the cretonne covering that lay over the bed by the window, inflating it into the shape of a body there. It stirred and turned before it was deflated again, and it was just then that the coal on the hearth gasped and choked.

But by now my work was completed: I had determined not to yield to the fear of any strange and troubling fancies until that was done, and tonight, very late, I scrawled a dash across the page below the final words, and added the date. I sat back in my chair, yawning and tired and pleased that I was now free to go back to London next day. For nearly a week now I had been alone in the house, and I reflected how natural it was that, diving into myself all day over my work, and seeing nobody, I had been creating phantoms to keep me company. Idly enough, my glance lighted on the record of the day of the week and the month, and I saw that once more it showed Tuesday, May 8th. . . . Next moment I perceived that my eyes had played me false; they had visualized something that was inside my brain, for a second glance told me that the day indicated there was indeed Tuesday, but April 24th.

"Certainly it's time I went away," I said to myself.

The fire was out, and the room rather cold. Feeling very sleepy, and also very content that I had finished

my task, I undressed quickly, leaving shut the window by the other bed. But the curtains were undrawn and the blind was up, and the last thing I saw before I went to sleep was a narrow slip of moonlight on the floor.

I AWOKE. The moonlight had broadened to a thick oblong patch, very bright. The bed beyond it was in shadow, but clearly visible, and I saw that there was someone sleeping there. And there was someone standing at the foot of the bed, a man in striped pajamas. He took a couple of steps across the patch of moonlight, and then swiftly thrusting his arms forward, he bent over the bed. The figure that lay there moved: the knees shot up, and an arm came out from beneath the coverlet. The bed creaked and shuddered with the struggle that was going on, but the man held tight to what he was grasping. He jumped on to the bed, crushing the knees flat again, and over his shoulder I saw and recognized the face of the woman who lay there. Once she got her neck free from the strangle-hold, and I heard a long straining gasp for breath. Then the man's fingers found their place again: once more the bed shook as with the quivering of leaves in a wind, and after that all was still.

The man got up: he stood for a moment in the patch of moonlight, wiping the sweat from his face, and I could see him clearly. And then I knew that I was sitting up in bed, looking out into the familiar room. It was bright with the big patch of moonlight that lay on the floor, and empty and quiet. There was the other bed with its cretonne covering, flat and tidy.

THE sequel is probably familiar to most people as the Faringham murder. On the morning of May 8th, according to the account given by Hopkins to the police, he came downstairs as usual from the attic where he had slept about half-past seven, and found that the lock of the front door of his house had been forced, and the door was open. His wife was not yet down, and he went upstairs to the room on the first floor where they often slept together, when it was not being used by their guests, and found her lying strangled in her bed. He instantly rang up the police and also the doctor, though he felt sure she was dead, and while waiting for them observed that a drawer of the table, in which she was accustomed to keep the money she had in the house, had been broken open. She had been to the bank the day before and cashed a check for fifty pounds, in order to pay the bills of last month, and the notes were missing. He had seen her place them in the drawer when she brought them back. Questioned as to his having slept in the attic, while his wife had slept alone below, he said that this room had been lately occupied, and would be occupied again in a few days: he had not therefore thought it worth while to move down, though his wife had done so.

But there were two weak points in this story. The first was that the woman had been strangled as she lay in bed, full length, with the blankets and sheet over her. But if the supposed burglar had throttled her, because she had been awakened by his entrance, and threatened to raise the alarm, it seemed incredible that she should have remained lying there with the bedclothes up to her chin. It looked as if the murder was a wanton one, and had nothing to do with the burglary. Again, though the drawer into which she had put her money had been forced, it had not been locked. The burglar had only to pull the handle of it, and it would have opened. It looked as if the murderer had wanted to convey the impression that he was a burglar.

Hopkins was detained, and the house searched, and the missing roll of notes was found in the lining of an old greatcoat of his in the attic.

Before he suffered the extreme penalty, he confessed his crime and told the manner of its execution. He had come down from his bedroom, entered his wife's room and strangled her. He had then forced the front door, and, unnecessarily, the drawer where she had put her money. . . .

Reading it, I thought of Lionel Bailey's theory, and my own experience in the room where the murder was committed.