

NUGENT BARKER

## MRS. SAYCE'S GUY

The November wind had sobbed all night over Hannibal Terrace as though its heart were breaking. But dawn put an end to the monotonous sound, smiling at first, a little wanly, into those squalid windows, and eventually packing the narrow street with mist, and roofing the mist with a sulphur-coloured sky. Later, onto this shadowy daylight, a back door was opened, and Mrs. Sayce stood dimly visible at the head of her yard, clutching at a plaid shawl, and very earnestly passing her tongue over her lips:

‘Ber—tie? Break—fust!’

She could hear the voices of her neighbours on either hand. The dark morning seemed to invest each one of them with a peculiar detachment: the voice of Mrs. Parslow; the voice of Molly Gunn; Lizzy Dixon’s querulous outcry; the measured, mournful tones of Thomas Cooling; Macquisten’s brutal laughter; Nancy Tillit, Tom Tillit’s widow, calling stridently to Lettie and Jack; the united, youthful clamour of the Glydds; Henry Glazer’s mincing, almost gentlemanly accents; the quick, high, frequent giggle of Edie MacKatter.

‘Ber—tie? Break—fust!’

But whenever she opened her mouth, there was Macquisten’s mongrel dog opening his; the whole terrace reeked with the unsavoury yapping. And the voices of the Tufnell children made a high shindy ten houses away. A boy’s head popped out of a window, and called. Closer at hand it was possible to hear an undercurrent of more intimate things. Mrs. Norgate’s baby was choking in a room

next door; somebody had lost, or another had stolen, something, somewhere—it was not to be found—it had fallen under the table—it had gone down the sink; while the everlasting cluck of a hen served to bind the whole conglomeration of near and distant sounds together. It was a heartless chuckle, the voice of this one hen; terrible in its suggestion of eternal squalor; and, with a hand pressed hurriedly over her mouth, suddenly Mrs. Sayce began to cry.

The tears were running down her cheeks. And in the tiny kitchen, where damp clothes sagged between the walls, there was no further necessity to hold back her sobs while she crumbled her stale bread, or lifted, but never as far as her lips, a cup of very weak and flavourless tea. A cat was walking endlessly over the floor. Now it would strut in grotesque fashion, with erect tail, and sidelong glances at the woman at the table, who had buried her face within her hands; now it would squat upon its haunches, hind leg up, and tongue working roughly over the fur; a thin creature, though finely marked, that came to her at last, and rubbed its wasted body against her leg. The action recalled her to her senses; with an impetuous movement she caught up the animal, and carried it in her arms to the bedroom above, where the ceiling was like a black cloud over her head, and the wall-paper showed blue flowers on a faded, saffron ground.

There was a Guy, sitting in an elbow-chair, leering through eye-holes and mouth of its magenta mask into the pale light of the window. Its goblin body was the essence of dislocation. A vast inertia ran through the lolling arms, and its hands were black cotton gloves stuffed with straw.

For a short time, this wild figure was reflected in the eyes of the tabby cat, which presently began to struggle

violently in its mistress's arms, uttered a low whimper, and ran from the room; while Mrs. Sayce, starting out of her reverie, saw a cloth cap lying in a chair—a woollen muffler hanging on the knob of a cupboard door—the bed, tumbled, glimmering palely, pushed up into the angle of two saffron walls. In addition to her other duties, there was the bed to be made. Sitting on the foot of it, she rocked her body a little, looked at her toes, fell at last into complete stillness; then she snatched her clasped hands from between her knees, clicking her tongue, and crying out that she must pull herself together.

Pushed into a rent of the window-pane was a crumpling of old newspaper; this she removed, thereby letting in wreaths of the damp mist, which chilled her lungs, and crept into every conceivable corner of the room. Within a few minutes, the paper was back again in the jagged rent of the window; but her mind had been restored to its accustomed energy, she was working quickly and easily; her duties were not so difficult as she had supposed.

On one occasion, while she was bending low over rough sheets, and thin blankets, to make the tumbled bed, her foot kicked against a pipe, a man's pipe, that had fallen to the floor; and her hand fell upon a boy's firework, a Catherine-wheel, that was to have spun round and round. She threw the pipe straightway across the room, but the other she held for one short moment against her heart; and very soon afterwards, her bed then being made, she was patting, pulling, tying, twisting, and tweaking the embellishments of the Guy.

For no one could have admitted that this Guy was ready to be pushed through the streets. There were lacking those final touches that her son Bertie would have given to the grand thing. Some faded piece of finery,

found in a drawer, and tied, or pinned, or stuck into some part of the beast's anatomy. Anything that might bring a nod of approval, or a shrug of jealousy, from street children. Pat it into shape. Button up the coat. Wind the muffler on. Anything that should lend an air of conspiracy—there's a big knot—and gunpowder to the whole business. And let the long ends of this muffler hang like hooligans over the breast. Presently she stood back, very quiet and still, with her hands pressed to her eyes.

Into the tiny, grotesque body, Mrs. Sayce had pushed, and prodded, and stuffed, and bundled, all the deformity of the world. Beneath a boy's cloth cap, and from the voluminous folds of a muffler, the magenta face shone forth with a fierce, disturbing beauty. Stark and evil, it seemed to glow with a deeper light than that which was coming through the window; and to nod cunningly with every step of the stair when she carried down her precious burden, and sat it in an old perambulator that was covered with the thick dust of a year. She went very carefully, now. There were so many things to be put right; little things that must not be forgotten. The thought occurred to her, that this was the most important moment she had ever known. Tuck it tightly everywhere. Prop the nodding head. Lifting her own, she listened to the voices of far-distant children, chanting the Guy Fawkes song:

Please to remember

The Fifth of November. . . .

The rhythm was both cheeky and inspiring; and after a while it was broken, from somewhere in the terrace, by the quick, high, frequent giggle of Edie MacKatter. Mrs. Sayce wheeled her perambulator to the door; and through the dark November streets, she pushed her little Guy.

## II

She had slipped out of Hannibal Terrace with scarcely a sign from her neighbours. Only once did she hear the voices of people who had recognized her—two voices, that spoke in thick, sudden tones from the morning mist:

'Elf!'

'Yus?'

'Look, Elf! Ain't that Emma Sayce pushin' a guy?'

'Your heyes wants seein' to, Agatha!'

'Ain't that Emma Sayce pushin' a guy?'

'Mebbe,' said Alfred Glydd, thoughtfully; 'mebbe it is. . . . Sayce come 'ome larst night. I could 'ear 'im singin'. . . . Dassay 'e come back for little Bertie. . . .'

' . . . it *were* Emma Sayce. . . .'

'Mebbe . . . too far orf now for a bloke to see. . . .'

. . . And after that, the bend of the road had hidden her, and she had gone on and on, past Durrant and Lowe's, and the shop where she bought her candles. 'Too far orf, now, for a bloke to see.' But not too far for her to hear the buzz of their voices, in every beat of her timorous heart. No, never too far for that! She crossed the Avenue, skirted the High School, and tilted the pram towards Tinker's Heath.

She walked far that day. She was a little woman, pushing a Guy. Beyond Pewter Hill, the road to the Heath was long and lonely; but the length and the loneliness pleased her, for she was an artful one, and asked nothing better than to be left alone with the dark morning and the nodding, magenta face of her goblin Guy. 'Ber—tie? Break—fust!' Lor'! Hadn't she been an artful one? Hadn't she, now? Hadn't she been a cunning one, jest!

Here and there, the fog was lifting; and once, far ahead,

she thought that she could see the figure of a man on that dim road. . . . But he went away, slamming a gate behind him. . . . Near Rington Cemetery, a sad-faced woman called to her; and she received the penny with a queer blend of pride and distraction, thanked the lady kindly, and hurried on. Hurried on, up the road to the Heath that was so long and lonely; and the loneliness sang to her: 'Elfred and Agatha Glydd, why couldn't they understand?' She was a little woman, pushing a Guy; and she was tramping, tramping, until her thin shoes began to blister her thin feet.

Up on the empty Heath a slow wind was moving, catching at the fringe of her shawl, and peopling the wide spaces with chanting voices.

Amongst them, she could hear particularly the voices of children, the buzzing of the Glydds, and the drunken tones of a man whom she hoped never to see again. . . . And suddenly one voice that began to materialize into a face, a face that she had not thought to see there, the thin-lipped, high-cheeked, brutal face of Macquisten. It came towards her out of the pale mist; a thrusting, triumphant face, that followed, and would not leave her, as she drew back trembling on Tinker's Heath:

'Come 'ome drunk, ain't 'e—larst night?' it was saying. 'I 'eard 'im! Went orf agin, drunk—ain't 'e, larst night? Wheer 's Bertie?' It seemed to have no other thought but that. 'Come 'ome drunk, ain't 'e—larst night? I 'eard 'im! Went orf agin, drunk—ain't 'e, larst night? Wheer 's Bertie?' She turned to go; but the face followed her along the Heath: 'Took the kid away wid 'im, ain't 'e—larst night? I 'eard 'em! Left yer alone agin, 'as 'e—Missus? Lor' lumme! Left yer quite alone!' She tried to go from him; but still the face followed; and when at last it

changed its question for another, she answered proudly, standing her full height, and looking at the Guy: 'It's a great day wid the children, Mr. Macquisten. It's Guy Forks day. Yass! And you knows well enough as I'm doin' wot Bertie would of wished.' Poor, dear Bertie. Dear little Bertie. *Why* couldn't they understand? Presently Macquisten's dog came running up, and sniffed and barked at the Guy; and she hurried away, horrified, to the dwindling sound of the barking and Macquisten's brutal laughter—hurried away, and away, across Tinker's Heath, and down Dornford Ditch, and over the old bridge by Fell Junction that spanned the railway-line.

She was a weary woman, pushing a Guy: and the Guy wagged its head when the pram jolted, and the ends of the muffler ran in the wind, while from street and tenement, tower and steeple of the gradually approaching roadway, she thought that she could hear, exalting, echoing, rolling, flying over the darkening landscape, the Guy Fawkes song:

Please to remember  
The Fifth of November. . . .

Would she ever forget it? God in Heaven, would she ever forget it?

### III

The voice of a great crowd was behind her back; it came from beyond the entrance of the steep alley that sloped to the river. Down this dark and narrow by-way, she and her Guy had been approaching the river; but there are few people who do not look back over their shoulders at that inspiring, terrible sound. Mrs. Sayce looked over her shoulder, and beheld a furnace in Heaven.

It might have been some celestial heart that was burning, or a bitter wound gashed by the tapering church-spire whose upper portion rose darkly above the summit of the hill. She had been going to the river, but here was a fire. So she turned her perambulator; and, allowing its handle to drop against her breast, pushed it up into the glaring dusk of this day that never had been very light.

She emerged from the mouth of the alley with her face shining; and walked across the level of the empty Market Square, where sparks drifted and tossed above her head, and shadows of the distant crowd ran over the ground to meet her. Sometimes, she could pick out the shape of a man's hat, ridiculously distorted; or a woman's dancing bonnet. Her mind was bewildered by these things, and without success she strove to follow some particularly anxious train of thought, of something that would have been done by now if she had gone down to the river: that could be done, possibly, when she had come to the scene of the fire. The many units of her thought were like the sparks that tossed above her head: brief visions that came before her eyes, and went out, and made room for more. When, at last, the people were around her, stretching their reddened, eager faces, she was full of the clearest schemes, and there was no time in which to sort and examine them. Carried along by the hurried course of the crowd, presently she was surrounded by rough-toned, indefinite voices that called a thousand questions at the corner of the old church of St. Mary. A child pointed, and he and his companion stared ruefully at their own inferior guy. And suddenly she looked on something that was brighter than a vision, and louder than a voice; that whirled his tortured red arms above and before her, and rocked his



body to and fro, and cracked his crimson fingers, and threaded them through the house.

A burning house. A tall house where the roof and upper windows had already fallen in; it stood upon the corner of a timber-yard, and when she turned her head, Mrs. Sayce could see that certain beams, and spars, and scantlings, stacked in the path of falling debris, were burning too.

The train of thought, which recently had made a little progress since its tentative beginnings in the Market Place, now came fully into flower. Better than the river. Better than the river. It was foolish of her: but she wanted to be able to whisper it to her little Guy. To see some kind of expression crack or wrinkle the stiff surface of the magenta mask. Her wonderful scheme. How would she do it? Artfully; calmly; without any fuss. She would follow the children, who were pushing their prams up the soaring street.

It was a street that rose in a half-circle round the timber-yard, as though a staircase were mounting and circling the hall of a house. When she had come to the top of it, Mrs. Sayce found herself in the grand company of children mustering their guys. Clutching at her plaid shawl, she tried to count the goblin creatures that were passing on every hand. The strong glow of the fire seemed to invest each one of them with a peculiar detachment: guys with pink faces, and guys with green; guys that were yellow, and guys that were red; blue guys, mauve guys, brown guys, violet guys; purple guys, orange guys, black guys and grey guys and snowy guys; sad guys and happy guys; artful guys, simple guys, evil and good guys; guys with fat faces, and guys that were thin as a lath; rich guys, and poor guys, and drab guys, and guys that were

bright as a blessing, and guys that were grim as a curse; and they seemed to talk and laugh with one another, to hold deep conversation, to nod their masked and portentous faces as the wheels of the perambulators went round.

One or two of the bolder children were moving towards the crazy wooden fence that skirted the brink of the yard. Elsewhere, she could hear the hissing of the engines, and could see their columns of stiff, glittering water, steady as beams of moonlight, that might as well have battled with the flame of a sunset sky. Near her, two people were talking. The voices were hushed, and awed, yet tinged with a kind of shocked enjoyment; from them, she learnt that a woman had perished in the fire, whilst her boy had been saved. 'There. Bless 'er 'eart!' 'Pore innercent kid.' Mrs. Sayce tightened her fingers round the handle of the perambulator, and began to cry.

She was still crying two minutes later, standing by the wooden paling, crooking one of her fingers against her teeth.

She did not know that she was crying. She knew only that she was so near her goal. What a wonderful finish to her day's journey! Yes! *He* would have ended it so! Bertie would have come up to this fence, searching . . . searching . . . for some gap through which he could drop his guy. . . .

He would have looked with a child's big gravity on its last goblin hours; he would have joined the solemn procession of guys, that marched to the fires of retribution. . . .

A fierce light shone above the jagged top of the palings. She looked about her, and already the masked gods of Treason were being thrown to the flames. Hollow-eyed, and rigid-necked, the goblin aristocrats rode up in

their tumbril-perambulators and barrows and boxes on wheels, and were hurled—as light as straw, and a few old clothes, were they!—over the wooden fencing, and down into the timber-yard below. A policeman stood near her, watching the children, but he did not seem to care. He stood . . . near them . . . and her . . . and watched. A wind sprang up; a wisp of hair tapped her for a whole minute on the cheek. Then Mrs. Sayce shivered in her shawl. She would go over there—over there—where the crowd was thinner, and the wind, in that sheltered spot, would not ruffle. . . .

Did not ruffle the boy's cloth cap, or the woollen muffler, or snatch at the mask with its rough fingers, as she stooped gently over the perambulator, and lifted her Guy, and carried him towards a crimson gap in the wooden fencing. She tried to approach nearer at that spot, but the heat stopped her. Everywhere she could hear the voices of children; the thump of the axes; men calling, and the fire hissing. In the middle of it all, a heavy footstep came, and Mrs. Sayce turned her head. She was unable for a moment to see the policeman with anything but her eyes.

When the colour of his sharp, red face, and the stillness of his helmet, had reached into her mind, she did not know what to do. She may have been an artful one in her back-yard at home, but now all her cunning deserted her, and she did not know what to do. What could she do? She hugged her arms about the Guy. But the policeman took it from her, and the policeman lifted it up. . . .

He lifted it up, and Bertie's mother cried in her heart: 'If only his eyes could peep through, now! If only Bertie's eyes could peep through the mask, and see me, for one last moment, standing here!'

But there was no one to help her. All her senses were strangely acute. She could see everything very exactly; very crimson in the light of the fire. She could hear the whole world humming, near and far; the clucking of the hen in Hannibal Terrace. Yet everything around her was very still.

Everything except this man who was standing before her; whose slight, slow movements were bringing the day to its appointed end. He lifted it up, the little, delusive, goblin bundle, that surely was too heavy to be stuffed with straw. . . .

‘Oh, Mister! Mister!’

The policeman muttered: ‘Lord o’ mercy, what a heavy Guy!’

‘Mister! Mister!’

‘Lord o’ mercy, what a heavy Guy!’

And as she raised her hands to Heaven, he began to take the mask off Mrs. Sayce’s Guy.

K. T. MASSON

## FEAR AND THE LITTLE GIRL

'Who would like to go to the fête?' says a mid-Victorian papa with moustaches, in grey, with a flower in his button-hole, walking gaily across the lawn called the See-Saw lawn, where four children are playing: a big and a little girl in calico sun-bonnets and strap shoes, and two small boys in sailor suits.

The lawn has a romantic fernery where fritillaries grow—elfin flowers, the little girl thinks, whose spotted bells are rung by the fairies—many shrubs with blue berries to play greengrocer's shop with, and in its centre a triumphantly dangerous see-saw, on which one rides seated, grasping a stake at either end, or standing, legs apart, in the middle. How often does the little girl cry 'Don't let me down bump!' to some cruel cousin, and then feel the devastating yet thrilling bump shake her from stern to stem. 'Go to the fête? Oh! yes, yes!' cry the children, crowding round Papa. Mamma has her hand through his arm—she wears a blue frock spotted with white, and an edge of stiff collar shows at her neck; a row of tiny buttons curves down her bosom. When will the little girl have that admired curve, she thinks, feeling her little straight pinafore? . . .

'Do you think it is a fit place for children, Theo?' says Mamma, placidly. Mamma is always placid. 'They'll love it,' says Papa; 'roundabouts, Aunt Sally, coconut-shies, swinging-boats.' 'Oh! I must go in a boat that swings,' thinks the little girl. 'Yes, yes!' they all shriek, jumping up and down; 'do let us go to the fête'. 'Well, Mary must

take you,' says Mamma, and the little girl is less pleased, for she dislikes Mary the nursemaid, her rough, red hands, the tickling bows she makes of a silk scarf which she ties beneath the chin of the little girl, who abhors silk scarves as she abhors having her hair cropped short as a boy by odious Mr. Davis, or being called Jack Sheppard by silly old Colonel Atkinson. 'Here 's half a crown for each of you to spend,' says Papa, always a radiant presence of Bounty—a Treat-giver—and off they all go down the garden path, under the elder-arch, past the swing, between the gooseberry and currant bushes, through the little green gate. Mary the nursemaid is in front, the red hands hidden in brown cotton gloves—with Clara, aged eleven, solemn and pudgy—her sedate, middle-aged legs looking as if they would never run or dance or jump, as, indeed, they never could, and on Mary's other hand Ronald, jumping, springing, talking, and behind them the little girl and little brother, silently, deeply excited. They go along the familiar road with its homely Middlesex hedges, past the old apple orchard, and the forbidden field where there is a mysterious pond of deep dark green water, pale crowsfoot floating on it, up the hill to the bridge, where the road narrows, and there is a jangling procession of slow coal-carts, with hoarse cries of drivers, and the pert jingling of butchers' carts. Then jog, jog, down the hill the children go, till they come to Atkins's big field; but its aspect is changed since the little girl looked through the bars of the white gate a few weeks ago at the ox-eye daisies and quaking grass and ragged robin. Now, the gate stands wide open, the grass is nothing but a rough stubble, with great ruts made by the wheels of caravans, and a man without a collar sits at a table taking the pennies of many people passing in. Full and harsh on

the little girl's ear strikes the insistent rattle and beat of a jig-tune, a confused din of coarse voices shouting and laughing, neighing of horses, and, above all, the violent high shriek of a whistle. The sky is a fierce, hot blue, the trees are heavy and motionless against the blue, like dark green sponges. The little girl and little brother stumble forward over the rough ground strewn with paper and orange-peel and crushed wild flowers, and bruised, pretty red rose-buds. Mary and the others are just ahead, gaping round them—the little girl keeps them carefully in the tail of her eye while she looks on the lanes of glittering stalls full of brassy things, of gaudy lustre-ware, magenta and yellow—shall she buy a bright mug? She sees behind the stall an old fat woman with an incredibly broad face, black pig's eyes, her handkerchief very white against her coffee-coloured neck, and the little girl thinks of a fat, brown slug, of black treacle, and she turns away, and begins—she begins to feel Fear. 'Let 's buy some sweets,' says little brother; 'look here, what jolly ones!'; and he stops at a stall where there is black hardbake with great white nuts, rich bars of nougat, striped brown peppermints, black sticks of liquorice, pink and white coco-nut, all brilliant and tempting, and he buys hardbake for the little girl and pink coco-nut for himself.

They go on from stall to stall to where the merry-go-round whirls in violent, shrieking circle, the grotesque spotted horses going up and down as well as round and round. The sky is fiercer in its glare—the clamour of the insistent jig-tune—one, two, three, four—one, two, three, four—hits the little girl's head, blow upon blow. She smells people, over-ripe fruit, horses, cooking. Mary and Ronald mount horses, Clara gets in one of the cars reserved for the less bold spirits; they wave their hands,

and away they go, slow, then faster, whirling to the tune of the raucous jig. 'You stop here till we get off,' calls out Mary. But the little brother says, 'We'll just go to find the coco-nut shies and come back here for them—the coco-nut shies are what I want,' and the little girl follows him—as she always does. They go in and out of the stalls, wander here and there in a vain search, till at last they come to an open space where are horses unharnessed, bright yellow caravans daubed with red, some playing gipsy children, tents, clothes hung out. On the steps of a caravan a young woman sits with a baby in her arms. Her great black eyes look out far away at nothing, her lips are thick and red, her hair hangs in oily corkscrew curls round her ears, in which are brass rings, and she feeds her child, her bodice unfastened, and her brown breast quite bare. The universe rocks for the little girl—Fear—Fear increases, and nausea—'Are women made like that?'—She feels her straight little frock—'not yet, not yet'. That ripe, brown globe—the baby's greedy mouth—she turns away in sickened horror. 'This way, this way, brother, we may find the coco-nut shies.' But no! they pull up before an unhorsed, shabby chaise, drawn into a patch of shade, in which lies a man not like the gipsies, with grey face, grey hair, in black clothes, and from head to foot he is shaking, twitching, jerking—head, mouth, eyes, fingers, feet—not a moment's respite. At the sight of him the little girl's Fear reaches its culminating point. The din and merriment of the fête which shriek on while this happens are too brutal a contrast. Each impression she has received—the brown slug of an old woman, harsh rattle of pence in a tin pail, the merry-go-round, the mother suckling her child, smell and press of people, violent, brassy colours, burning sky, strewn, filthy



ground—goes to paint an indelible scene on her brain. A dog comes from the tent and barks, a rough girl steps over to the man and tries to raise his head, and Bernard drags the little girl away. ‘Don’t cry,’ he says, shocked, wiping her face with his pink-bordered handkerchief. ‘Some one will see you—fancy crying—we’ll go and find Mary and the others,’ for he is tired and Fear has him, too.

Mary and the others are not at the roundabout, not at the swinging-boats; oh! cruel, giddy things, one end up, the other down, the whole high, high, in the air, while a rough girl and boy pull at thick, woolly ropes, like woolly-bear caterpillars. Up and down, to and fro they go, to the wild shriek of the merry-go-round, still whirling, whirling. The little girl’s head throbs, and she has a terrible sense of being lost with brother in an alien world of horror, for Mary and the others have disappeared—they are swallowed up in the fête. How are the two to venture home alone, when they have never been allowed without nurse or guardian, on the high road before? And there will be Mary’s anger to face later, for stealing away when she told them to wait for her at the roundabouts. But little brother takes the little girl in charge, and he quietens her, and goes bravely with her out of the horrible fête on to the high road. It is a great adventure. Now they are on the bridge, with its clanging coal-carts and slashing whips, and ‘gee-ups’, now running between the kind, familiar hedges, now crossing—‘There is Mrs. Barwell,’ says the little girl, as a slender, faded lady, her head drooping on her long neck like a flower, waves a surprised kid glove to them from a victoria—‘she’ll tell Mamma’. ‘Oh, not for ages, anyhow,’ says brother, and at last they are through the green gate, in the beautiful green garden world again—the world of butterflies and flowers, and sunshine, of Papa and Mamma.

Still the echo of the fête can be heard there—faint, distant, yet audible. . . .

Now the little girl is a little girl no longer—brother and the green, peaceful garden have long been swept away on Time's stream—but she thinks often of the fête where the first notes of Fear, of Horror, sounded with such strength; Fear of the Animal, the Unknown, of the mysteries of Motherhood and of Pain; Horror at cruelly-wounded senses, at the eternal discord of life.