

# THE MOLE

By GERALD BULLETT

## I

CONVERSATION turned inevitably to the local tragedy that was agitating all the village. The little general store, the only shop the place boasted and a poor thing at that, had been burned down in the night, and nothing remained but the heap of ruins from which, not many hours since, two charred corpses had been removed. Our chessmen stood in battle array, ready for action, but unnoticed by either of us. Something in Saunders's manner held my attention. Sceptic though I am, I have always found him interesting. He pays me the compliment of divesting himself of his rectorship when he visits me, and it has flattered my vanity to believe that I see a side of him that is for ever hidden from those of his parishioners who assemble Sunday by Sunday to receive from him their spiritual ration. And I was the more intrigued because I divined depths in him still to be explored.

Perhaps I am over-fanciful, said Saunders, edging his chair nearer to the fire ; but it had always seemed to me that there was more in their marriage than the mere female domination so obvious to everyone. And when poor Gubbins came to me last winter, with the story that I'm going to tell you, my guess was confirmed. Mrs. Gubbins wore the breeches—a vulgar phrase for a vulgar thing—but that wasn't all. I shall never forget my first visit to her shop. You've seen the woman scores of times, but I'll tell you the impression she made on me. Her face was leather ; her nose was pinched and pitiless ; her eyes—did you ever notice her eyes ? You'd expect her to possess the malignant dominating eyes of the shrew. No such thing. Mrs. Gubbins's eyes resembled those of a mask, or of a corpse ; they were fixed, so it seemed to me, in a cold, everlasting, fishy scrutiny of a drab world. If they were the windows of her soul, they were windows made of frosted glass. Looking at those eyes, I seemed to see vacuity behind them. Looking again, I surmised a soul indeed, but a damned soul. A professional prejudice, perhaps, that you won't sympathise with. But it was not her eyes that most disturbed me. I have seen a variety of unpleasant eyes. But I have never seen on any human being so ugly a mole as was on that woman's chin. It was about the size of a pea, and growing from it were three longish black whiskers. The thing looked positively feline. It became for me, as soon as I caught sight of it, her most significant feature. And that, too, proved a good guess.

I had gone to the shop ostensibly to buy a cake of soap, but really in the hope of catching a glimpse of a human soul, of two human souls. I had heard queer accounts of this couple, and I was curious.

"A cake of soap, please, Mrs. Gubbins." I was then a stranger to her, as to most of the village, but my use of her name evoked no sign of life in those glassy eyes of hers. She turned to her husband, that mild little man with dreaming eyes and a trim beard who looked just what he was, a lay preacher with a touch of fanaticism and a taste for fantastic prophecy. He was sitting at the back of the shop on a case of sugar, or something of the kind, engrossed in reading his pocket Bible.

"Run along," said Mrs. Gubbins, in her flat expressionless voice. "Soap, George! You know where it is!"

The little man looked up with the air of one dragged unwillingly from a dream. In his small rabbit-eyes Christian patience did battle with resentment. I seemed to scent a crisis. Had the woman nagged him for his idleness I couldn't have blamed her. But what interested me was not the rights and wrongs of the quarrel, but its method.

He blinked at her defiantly. There was a pregnant silence during which they stared at each other. Then the woman, protruding her chin, elongating her thin neck, bent a little towards him. I was dumbfounded with astonishment, breathless with a kind of morbid curiosity. For the moment it seemed to me that she must be mutely demanding a kiss in token of his submission; but while I watched, fascinated out of my good manners, she lifted her hand slowly and placed her index finger upon the point of her chin. It flashed on me that she was directing his attention to that mole of hers.

Gubbins, averting his eyes, slid off the seat. "Yes, dear!" he muttered, and disappeared into the bowels of the shop.

## II

Secrets of the confessional? Yes, in a sense. But Gubbins wouldn't grudge you the story now. It was during that phenomenally cold spell in November, fifteen months ago, that he came to me. That he came to me at all should tell you something of his anguish of spirit, if you knew the man. Everybody knew him to be a deeply religious person, of the Bible-punching kind, but not everybody guessed how his particular conception of reality had eaten into his mind. He could prove to you by an elaborate system of Scriptural cross-references that the Day of Judgment was due to occur in the summer of 1950; and the geography of heaven was more familiar to him, and more concrete, than the chairs and tables in his own house or the streets of this village. Two-thirds of him lived among these precise humorless dreams of his, dreams that were the fruit not of mystical experience but of laborious investigations, with rule and compass and a table of logarithms, extended over fifteen years. Two-thirds of him—that means he was more than a little unbalanced. He was a preposterous combination of arrogance and humility; we had many a friendly argument together, though the friendliness, I fancy, was rather on my side. Blandly certain of being the

custodian of divine truth, he was yet pitifully dubious about his own chance of salvation and almost crazy in his forlorn pursuit of the love of God. Almost, but not quite ; in the medical sense he was undoubtedly as sane as you or I. Me and all my kind he disliked because we receive payment for preaching Christ. That is what makes his appeal to me so remarkable an event.

Well, he came to the rectory and was admitted by the maid. She was loyal to her orders to exclude no one, but scared by his appearance. I found him standing on my study hearthrug, his face ashen, his lean, hairy hands clutching a cloth cap as though it were his only hold on safety. The white knuckles gleamed like polished ivory. I saw the fear that flared in his tiny eyes and guessed that he had come as a suppliant, that in some way his faith in himself had been broken. And, knowing of old the obstinate strength of that faith, I shuddered.

"In trouble, Mr. Gubbins?"

He appeared not to see my outstretched hand. "I've had an escape from hell," he squeaked. "It's that damned monkey-spot, Mr. Saunders."

The mild expletive, coming from Gubbins, astonished me no less than his statement. I asked him to sit down and tell me all about it, but he remained standing and his fingers twitched so violently that presently his cap fell to the ground unheeded. "It nearly got me, sir, that monkey-spot." A local expression, no doubt ; but what did it mean? Gubbins saw at last that I didn't understand him. "That monkey-spot on her chin. My wife's chin. You must have seen it."

Can you imagine two human beings, tied by marriage, devoting all their emotional energy to hating each other? Perhaps not ; but that is, as near as I can tell it to you, the truth about the Gubbinses. Twenty years ago she was an unremarkable woman, and he, no doubt, a very ordinary youth. Mere propinquity, I imagine, threw them at each other. He, with little or nothing of the genuine affection that might have excused the act, took advantage of her, as the phrase is. Sin number one, the first link in the chain that was to bind him, the first grievance for her to cherish in her ungenerous heart. They were married three months before the birth of the child. It died within an hour. She chose to see in this event the punishment of the sin into which he, as she contended, had betrayed her. From that moment Gubbins was her thrall ; not by virtue of love, or the legal tie, but by virtue of the hideous moral ascendancy that the woman had been cunning enough, and pitiless enough, to establish over him. Carefully she kept alive the memory of his offence. It was a whip ready to her hand. And when, seeking distraction from his domestic misery, he turned to that intricate game of guesswork which was for him religion, what he learned there of the significance of sin only served to increase his wretchedness.

He was evidently a man weak both in spirit and intelligence, or he would have realised at once that he was no more guilty than she was. Once she had succeeded in imposing her view upon him he could not

shake it off. It remained, to poison his self-respect. Side by side with his conviction of unworthiness there grew up a hatred of the woman he was supposed to have wronged. And, being itself sinful, this very hatred provided a further occasion for remorse. It was a race between loathing and repentance, and loathing won. Never a personable woman, Mrs. Gubbins became daily more repellent, until at last the wretched husband found her mere presence a discomfort, like an ill-fitting shoe or a bad smell. In particular, he detested—as well he might—that mole on her chin, with its three feline hairs. And she, fiendishly acute, found it all out. She caught his sidelong glances of distaste, and pondered them long; and that distaste became another weapon to her hand. She accused him of harbouring cruel thoughts; taunted him with first robbing her of youth and then despising her for lacking it; flung out wild and baseless charges of infidelity. To propitiate her he made the most fantastic concessions; allowed her to turn him out of the shop, and consented to do all the housework in her stead. It became patent to the world that she was master.

You'll ask why he was fool enough to put up with this treatment? But, given his weakness, the explanation is credible enough. She attacked him at his most vulnerable point, his conscience. Religion, as he conceived it, taught him to submit to circumstances, not to master them. In his darkest hour he could still kneel at his bedside and say, "Thy will, not mine, be done." And he really believed for a while that God's will and Mrs. Gubbins's were in mystical accord, that she, in fine, was the rod with which, for his own soul's good, heaven was scourging him. To aid this grotesque delusion there was the spectacle of her formal piety. For she was a prayerful woman, scrupulous in her speech, and of unquestioned honesty in her commercial transactions.

If only he could have cursed her and stood by his words, she might have mended. But he, arrogant enough to believe he had unravelled the ultimate secrets of destiny, dared not pit his moral judgment against hers. He was ever ready to sit on the stool of repentance. A day came when hatred rose to a frenzy in him. He cut short her complaints with an oath, poured out the gall of his heart upon her. She seemed quelled, and in his triumph he added a taunt, banal and indeed puerile: "You whiskered old cat!" It was a fatal mistake. She stared at him mutely for a moment, no doubt in sheer astonishment. Then her eyes narrowed and something like a smile twisted her lips. "Cat and mouse," she remarked coldly. And—call the man a fool, if you like—that reply terrified Gubbins as nothing else could have done.

He had betrayed himself once more into the hands of the enemy. He had provided her with a new and a bitter grievance. Worst of all, she knew his secret, knew that his loathing centred on that monkey-spot of hers, as he called it. From that moment I imagine her cherishing her precious mole with the solicitude that Samson, had he been a wiser man, would have lavished upon his hair. It was the source and the instrument

of her power. So far as I understood Gubbins, it was as much nausea as hatred that the thing inspired in him. His soul sickened at the sight of it. It became a poison, a torture. All this she knew and exulted in. Curious that an æsthetic sense, together with a weak stomach, should suffice to work a man's downfall.

And so I come back to that night of fear, the events of which drove Gubbins, twenty hours' later, and still electric with terror, to the refuge of my study.

## III

Saunders paused to relight his pipe. One disconcerting thing about the affair, he resumed after a while, is that in Gubbins's account of his wife I can discover no human qualities at all. I fancy he himself had begun to regard her as an agent, not of God this time, but of the devil. Characteristic of him to jump from one pole to the other. And that theological fantasia, his imagination, may have coloured everything. That is as it may be. I can only tell you what he told me.

You know how quickly some noxious weed will over-run a flower-bed. Well, something of the kind happened in the ill-disciplined mind of Gubbins. He was pitifully susceptible to suggestion. An idle fancy presented itself to him: "Many a woman has been murdered for less than that monkey-spot." And the fancy became a fear which walked with him night and day, a fear lest he should be betrayed by sheer force of suggestion into murdering his wife. You realise what that would mean: it would mean damnation for his soul, or so he believed. The gallows had but few terrors for him. I think he would have welcomed death, could he have been sure of his salvation hereafter.

The seed was sown. The idea took root. And the more passionately he struggled against it, the more persistently his imagination envisaged the crime. At last one night, after a hundred sleepless hours, he reached the end of his tether.

He jumped noiselessly out of bed. Moonlight flooded the room, imparting a ghastly pallor to the face of the supine Mrs. Gubbins. In sleep she had something of the chill dignity of a corpse lying in state. The thin lips curled back a little on one side of the mouth, and in the gap gleamed a gold-crowned tooth, a tiny yellow fang. On the point of her chin was that at which the wretched man tried not to look; itself not very offensive, but rendered hideous by the three black jealously guarded hairs depending from it. Gubbins swears that as he stood staring at his wife's face those hairs were moving to and fro like the long legs of a spider, or the antennæ of an insect seeking prey.

Having gazed long, he forced his fascinated eyes away, and padded across the room. The door clicked, in spite of him, as he opened it. He experienced all the terrors of a guilty man. Yet his intention was innocent enough; it was even, in its grotesque fashion, comical. He had determined to shear this female Samson of her power by cutting off those three hairs.

But when he returned to the bedside, and stood again by the sleeping body of his wife, he was overcome by nausea. Distaste for the task paralysed his will. He felt as a sensitive man would feel if he were forced to crush a beetle with his naked finger. As an excuse for delay he began examining the instrument in his hand, which was a perfectly ordinary pair of household scissors having, as all scissors have, one end sharp and one blunted. The sharp end interested him most. He scrutinised its point and pressed it against the ball of his thumb; and the thought flashed to him, as though the devil himself had whispered it: "This is sharp enough—one thrust under the left ear!" He shuddered, recoiled from the idea, and burned with shame and fear for having ever had it. And, while still suffocating with the sense of his own guiltiness, there crept into his consciousness the nightmare conviction that he was being watched. He could not see his wife, his gaze being fixed on the scissors, but he knew that she had opened her eyes.

Gubbins couldn't explain to me the horror of that moment. He merely bowed his head on my mantelpiece and closed his eyes as if to shut out an evil vision. For when, after an age of immobility and silence, he forced himself to look at the face on the bed, he saw the cruel lips curled in a smile of final triumph; and even the opaque eyes seemed for once to shine. And what, for Gubbins, gave the last turn to the screw of terror was that the woman was not looking at him at all. Her gaze, full of evil beatitude, was fixed on the ceiling. For several minutes, minutes that throbbed with his agony, she neither moved nor spoke; and at last, very slowly, she moved a little higher on to the pillow and, still smiling insanely, bared her throat for him to strike. Gubbins was convinced that she ardently desired him to stain his soul with her blood.

Well, as you know, he didn't murder her: not that time, at any rate. He escaped, as he said, from hell. But I think I would as soon go to hell as have to live through those last fifteen months of his. For now she had completed his enslavement; now she had got his miserable little soul between her finger and thumb. Added to all her old grievances, those daggers with which to stab at his conscience, she had another and a more sensational one: this terrible sin, this attempt upon her life . . . . Spiritual blackmail prolonged for twenty years. No wonder he set fire to the place.