

To some of you, this will be a farrago of fustian futtock shrouds; to others—those of you with whom they have had at least brushwing contact—there may be offered here a grain of hope: you are not, after all, alone . . .

FOUR DAYS IN THE CORNER

by Winona McClintic

MCDERMOTT HAD DREAMED that he was a child again, and they had told him to stand in the corner. He was always bad in these dreams, and spilled ink on the manuscript. He could not bear to put himself in the corner because of the hole in it. It was such a bad dream that he woke himself up. He was sweating and his heart was pounding, so Grania woke up, too.

"Which one was it?" she asked. Grania never dreamed.

"The corner one," McDermott said; "I'll have to go and move the car. They don't like it to be left in the middle of the garage."

"We were in a hurry last night," Grania reminded him, "otherwise, we wouldn't have parked it there. They ought to know that."

"They don't care," McDermott said. He went down in his bathrobe to the garage. There was a vacancy in the corner now, so he moved the car into it. The garage

sighed with relief when the corners stopped tickling. The doors opened as McDermott stepped into the lift and went up again to his apartment.

"It's quiet now," he told Grania. She sighed, too, and they went back to sleep. The building breathed freely during the rest of the night. They did not make the structure nervous when they were pleased. In spite of that, McDermott had to spend the rest of the night in the corner. "Discipline," they said, "and Revenge! It was Waldeyer's Ring!"

It was a gray day, raining heavily. McDermott took the streetcar, which was only slightly haunted, to the office. He sat in the corner of the smoking section where the wind blew the rain on his hat and trenchcoat all the way.

"Good morning, Miss Bliss," he said to his secretary, who was having her first cup of coffee. She had a pot of ivy on her desk.

"Good morning, Mr McDermott," said Miss Bliss. "Would you like a cup?" She followed him into the inner office, carrying his coffee.

"You look tired, Mr McDermott," Miss Bliss said, politely.

"Thank you, Miss Bliss," McDermott said, taking the cup, knowing what it would taste like. She closed the door behind her, and he sipped the studge. Same taste as food and cigarettes. They had made him stop smoking his pipe.

McDermott had moved his desk to the first corner of the office, as a precaution. The racks of pipes were left on the bookcase, and he watched them, sometimes for minutes at a time, but they never moved. Work had become such an automatic routine that he no longer thought about what he was doing. Business seemed to be much as usual. Miss Bliss's casualness was proof that his "trouble" did not show too much. That afternoon he sold the car to a dealer whose smile was so wide his tonsils showed. The contents of the glove compartment went too.

When McDermott got home that night Grania was worried.

"They left some of their old bones in the corner today," she said; "mouldy ones."

"They're getting restless," McDermott said. "It's a bad sign. They will probably send an agent around, soon."

"Would he look like them?" Grania asked. "I don't think they'd dare. They don't like to come out of the corners, anyway. It's too open."

"There's no telling what sort of agent they could get," McDermott said, smoking studge. "Probably someone who looks like us. To fool us."

"There would be something slightly wrong about him, like a floppy hat," Grania said, "Because people like us wouldn't be their agents. We must be careful."

They read books in bed until they were too sleepy to stay awake. Grania did not know what his dreams were, but she felt him stirring and heard him groaning in the night and it woke her up.

They had sent him back to high school to make up the term of physical education he had missed the year he had the lymphoid tissue in his throat. So they started him at the top of the ivy-covered building, ten stories up and about a mile long, and made him walk down each flight and along the corridor to the stairway at the other end. Carrying the manuscript in question, he passed miles of lockers in rows, gray and gleaming, in a silent building. No one else was there until he was halfway through his pilgrimage to the class he had missed. Suddenly, the rooms he passed were peopled with low voices and the sounds of forced learning. Grania woke him

up as he walked on the third or second floor—he had lost count.

"They have no right to make you take the whole four years over again, just because of one gym class," she said, outraged; "it wasn't that important."

"They'll take away my bachelor's degree if I don't do it," McDermott said.

"It wouldn't matter any more," Grania said. "You own the business and you're married. Why do you need the degree?"

"I don't need it," McDermott said, "but they wouldn't remove it without humiliating me publicly. Just four months of this and I'll have made up the course. If I get an "A" in it, I'll have a "C" average."

They finally went back to sleep. Whatever McDermott dreamed the rest of the night, he remembered nothing of it except the voices from the corner informing him, "Miss Thea Phlebom will call tomorrow."

He mentioned this to Grania in the morning.

"Sounds like a lady exterminator," she said. "I'll be ready."

McDermott had to go without lunch because the restaurant, crowded with refugees from the rain, had no vacant table except along the second side of the room. There was no place to sit in the corners. He walked back through the rain to the office and to the horror of Miss Bliss's message.

"A Miss Thea Phlebom called and will call again," she told him, as she put on her hat to go.

"What did she look like?" McDermott asked, hoping for a clue.

"She was wearing a floppy hat," Miss Bliss said, "she was very genteel."

"Hah," thought McDermott. He went into his office and sat in the chair in the second corner, staring at the rain-streaked window. He heard Miss Bliss return, and a moment later, a strange, genteel voice making inquiries. Miss Bliss knocked at his door.

"Miss Thea Phlebom to see you, Mr McDermott," she said musically. McDermott hid in the closet. The door opened, he heard Miss Bliss's astonishment pouring out of her eyes, and the door closed again. He decided to go home early, and walked past the baffled Miss Bliss, who told him that a lady had come upon business.

"Thank you, Miss Bliss," McDermott said, closing the door. He might have known Miss Bliss once before; she could have changed her name.

"Goodnight, Mr McDermott," she said, putting her hat on. No point staying in an empty office.

McDermott was hungry even for stodge when he got home.

"Phlebom show up here today?" he asked Grania, as he hung his wet trenchcoat on the rack, "wearing a floppy hat?"

"I wasn't here," she said, "I went apartment-hunting and found a nice one, on the other side of town. We can move in tomorrow, if we like."

"Wait until day after," McDermott said, "I'll stay home and help you. The van can come in the morning and we'll be completely gone by nightfall."

"Roget," Grania said, "I burned your letters today, in case they could be used against you." They ate stodge and went to bed to read until they could not keep their eyes open. He read Wodehouse and she read Simenon.

He was sitting in a room with stone walls. Light came in from a long window set deep into the stones of the west wall. He always worked in the third corner in the late afternoon. Grania knocked on the door and came in. They sat together in the fading sunlight, reading together the manuscript he had been writing. That was the first description of Waldeyer's Ring, glowing red in the darkness. Their voices were low as they spoke of his work, as if she had come in secrecy. They did not sit close together, but they were aware of the dimensions of the space between them. When it was time for her to go, he knew that he must not attempt to keep her there any longer. When the door closed behind her, he felt the life going out of the day; the sun had

set and the shadows were closing in. He sat alone in the twilight for a while.

"I don't understand it," McDermott said the next morning. "we didn't do anything. We were just sitting and talking and reading the manuscript together."

"Maybe I wasn't supposed to be there at all," Grania said, "maybe that was the sin. What was I wearing?"

"One of those things," McDermott said, "something green. It might be a sack. I think that was the first time I knew you."

"What did you wear?"

"I don't remember," McDermott said, "a mantle. I wrote in the manuscript where Waldeyer's Ring was hidden—a thing I shouldn't have done, and now they are out to get us."

"That was a long time ago, by the clothes," Grania said, "How many times have they tried? Did they ever get the manuscript back?"

"I don't remember," McDermott said, "I haven't dreamed it yet. It might be dangerous if you start to dream."

"I think we were not supposed to be friends," Grania said, "and now here we are, married, and they think it's wrong."

"I think we must get married every time," McDermott said, picking up his trenchcoat; "over and over, we meet and get mar-

ried and they can't stop it. But how does it end? That's what worries me."

"I'll see the people about the new apartment today," Grania said, "I'll tell them we'll take it. I'll call the moving van, too."

"Roget," McDermott said, taking his hat from the rack.

"Thesaurus," said Grania.

When he arrived at the office he found that Miss Bliss had girdled her loins and was determined to satisfy her curiosity.

"Good morning, Mr McDermott," she said with a glint.

"Good morning, Miss Bliss," he said, going into his office. She followed him to the door and put her feet inside so that he could not shut it without crushing her. He hung up his trenchcoat and waited for her to begin it.

"Who is Miss Thea Phlebom?" asked Miss Bliss, ready to take notes.

"I do not know, Miss Bliss," McDermott replied, sitting down at his desk and beginning to shuffle papers. "She came on business, I suppose. And now, you must excuse me. I am not to be disturbed this morning."

"Very well, Mr McDermott," Miss Bliss said, "I have never be-draggled anyone in my life, no matter what the cost!" She closed the door firmly and sniffed. He had heard that sniff before.

McDermott was able to take a table in the third corner for lunch.

He stayed there for two hours, hoping to avoid Phlebom. The ruse was successful. Miss Bliss had left a memo on his desk and taken herself off to salad. The message said that Miss Phlebom would return in the P.M.

"Damn!" said McDermott. He clutched at his coat and was hurrying off, just as Miss Bliss walked in wearing her draggletailed hat.

"Does Mrs McDermott know Miss Phlebom?" she asked nastily.

"No, Mrs McDermott does not know Miss Phlebom," he replied, "Mrs McDermott does not pry into my business affairs. I have an appointment, Miss Bliss, and I will be gone for the rest of the day."

"She said she'd be back," Miss Bliss told him; "she said you'd be sorry."

"Good afternoon, Miss Bliss," McDermott said, going anyway.

"Good afternoon, Mr McDermott," she said, and sniffed as the door closed.

Home across the ivy-grown park would be the best way. As he came out of the park and started to cross the street, he saw a slender, genteel figure wearing a floppy hat, quite unsuitable for the rain, walk up the steps to the door. He knew that she could not get in without a key.

McDermott ran to the drug-store, hoping that he could call in time.

"Don't answer the doorbell," he

cried when Grania answered, "it's her, it's Phlebom!"

"Where are you? How do you know?" Grania said softly.

"I'm at the drugstore on the corner," McDermott whispered back. "I saw her go up the steps. She couldn't catch me at the office, so now she's after you." He peered out of the glass door of the booth; the coast was clear.

"Call me back," Grania said as the doorbell rang, "don't try to come in until she's gone."

"Roget," McDermott said. "You watch, too, from the window. She's wearing a dress of poinsetta crinkle."

For some reason, they both fell asleep early that night.

He was a second time in the stone room, but this time he was alone in it. He knew that Grania would not come to knock on the door. He went out along the corridor in the twilight and came to another small room. There was a pair of sandals lying on a table in the fourth corner. As he stared at them and knew that they had been worn by Grania, he heard the funeral bells in the tower. He was not allowed to go up there. He went back to his own room and picked up the manuscript, but his eyes looked out of the narrow window into the twilight, into the silent garden.

When he woke up, Grania was crying.

"It was my funeral, wasn't it?" she asked, "I was there, I saw it too. How sad you looked!" It was the first time she had remembered a dream.

McDermott got out of bed and poured a shot of studge for each of them. They sat up in bed in the dark, listening to the rain pouring down beyond the windows.

"What did they mean by that?" Grania asked, "what do you think they are going to do?"

"They want to separate us," McDermott said, "they want to destroy us." They tried to sleep again.

"Feet in sandals," McDermott thought, closing his eyes against the dark, "prince's daughter."

"King's child, sandalwise," Grania thought, and remembered that they would move tomorrow.

It would be a relief not to see Miss Bliss today. Grania called and said that her husband was sick, but not seriously so.

"What a terrible thing, Mrs. McDermott!" exclaimed Miss Bliss; "is there anything I can do? Shall I come to help you nurse him?"

"No, for heaven's sake, Miss Bliss," said Grania, "you must stay to take care of the office!"

"Business as usual?" Miss Bliss asked bravely.

"As usual!" Grania replied with a stiff upper lip. They drank another pot of studge to celebrate the little victory.

McDermott went to the address Grania had given him, took the key from the caretaker, and went up to wait for the movers to bring the first load. Grania came with the second, and they spent the afternoon settling in. The new apartment had painted walls instead of wallpaper, except for one section of the hall, which had a design of ivy from the floor to the ceiling. Here they put the narrow, marble-topped table, an old family piece. It is more difficult to pass marble.

That night a cold rain fell over the city and over the cars parked in the street in front of the building. They were tired from the moving and went to sleep without reading, which they had never done before.

McDermott dreamed that the hole in the fourth corner was slowly opening, framing a red glow, and filling him with such horror that Grania screamed in her sleep. She sat up in the dark, but McDermott's eyes did not open to stop the dream. Grania dressed quietly and went out into the rain, which was coming down steadily with a cold malevolence.

Wearing a sack dress, a pilgrim hat, Grania walked barefooted to Palmer's Pharmacy; it was open "night and day." Inside the Palmer himself was keeping vigil. His name was Harry Nevus and he wore a tweed suit of Harris flush.

"If you had not come to me, I

would have come to you," he said.

"Have you a mixture called 'Phlebom Be-Gone'?" Grania asked.

"Yes, I have it. I can give you a year's supply, if you will pay the price," the Palmer answered, tying his beard into a true love-knot.

"Anything reasonable," said Grania.

"The price is three-fold, because of the folk, you know," he said, anxious that she should understand. "First, McDermott must give up the manuscript. It was never his, really, you know; they want it back."

"It was his," Grania said; "he wrote it."

"No, he transcribed it," the Palmer said, "and, unfortunately, he also transliterated, transmuted, and transported it on the transcendental railroad."

"That's nonsense," said Grania.

"It really happened, once," said the Palmer. "The second fold is that McDermott must drink a pint of the 'be-gone' every night before going to bed. It will keep him from dreaming."

"Is it vile-tasting?" asked Grania.

"Tolerably vile," said the Palmer, "it's the only way to decontaminate the Ring."

"What's the third fold?" asked Grania.

"It involves a matter of some delicacy, Lady," answered the Palmer looking at the floor.

"Frankly, your sandals aggravate the condition. The red ones. They knew the trail once in the early legends of the Ring." There was something sly about his manner.

"Thank you," said Grania; "may I have the 'be-gone' recipe now?" She took the tin with the proper label, and turned back toward the dreams.

McDermott did not wake up until she was back in bed. He did not know that she had been out; he began to tell her the dream. "A prince's daughter," he said, "in sandals."

"I know," Grania said, "I dreamed it, too."

"They say I have no right to the manuscript," McDermott argued, "but I remember writing it, so why shouldn't I keep it?"

"I think they're lying about it for reasons of their own," Grania said. "I'll make some Phlebom Be-Gone in the morning—I have the recipe."

She dreamed again, not seeing but hearing them say, "Give us Waldeyer's Ring for reasons of our own!"

McDermott woke up in the morning to find Grania staring at the fourth corner where the chair

had been placed as a barrier. She had put her red leather sandals on it, and one was partly chewed.

"I thought I'd better," she said; "it kept them from coming out."

"We'll hold out a few nights longer," McDermott said at breakfast. "If they keep on, I'll give back the manuscript. But only in a dream, not to Phlebom. The coffee tastes better," he said, swallowing erp-p-p; "did you do something different?"

"New brand," Grania said. McDermott left for the streetcar, feeling more cheerful than in the past. He did not know why. Alone, like a puss in a corner, Grania began to read the recipe.

"Take two retorts of salt, squared to the ultimate degree, and place in saucepan with a pinch of distilled water, etc. Add shreds of last dream, mixed with be-gone in equal parts. Sic."

The saucepan boiled and bubbled and squeaked, and Grania looked out of the window. In the dim, drizzling street below, Miss Thea Phlebom walked in her floppy hat, wet and waiting.

