

KABARA GOYA

A Short Story written for "The Listener" by MARY STEWART

AS Mrs. Abbott stepped into the taxi, it occurred to her that she had seldom encountered a man of more unassuming aspect than the driver. It was not that he was particularly ugly, in the popular sense. On the contrary, to a casual glance his appearance was not unpleasant. He had the substantial shoulders, shapely head, and, she judged, the height of the conventionally handsome man. His hair was black, glossy, and robustly curling, and his attitude, as he lounged before the wheel in his suit of greenish tweed, was one of quite extraordinary grace. It was his eyes that startled her.

Mrs. Abbott was not an excessively sensitive woman, nor was her imagination easily kindled. But for an instant, as those eyes glanced into hers, she experienced a piercing sense of shock, of psychological recoil, as unpleasant and disconcerting as an extra step taken at the top of a dark staircase. Nerves, perhaps? Was she becoming morbid, hysterical, given to imagining things, with living so much by herself? Solitude, she had discovered after nearly 18 months of it, could soon corrode the bright hard

surface of commonsense, could nibble subtly at the established contours of personality, producing by this means in time the eccentric and the freak. She knew this, and feared the knowledge, having sometimes looked inwards on herself as she went about the motions of her solitary life, and having seen with shock her image blurred, as if thrown back by unstill water.

But even as she reflected thus, there swam up from the depths of memory an image, an impression, which matched with such precision the one of a few moments ago that Mrs. Abbott suddenly sat up straight, and on her face appeared a smile of naive triumph, the childlike smile of wonder and delight with which some people greet the solution of a problem or the final capture of an elusive *déjà vu*.

Among his other pursuits, the late Mr. Abbott had numbered a lively interest in natural history. From the time when, as a solitary child in spectacles, he had grovelled for snails among the cranberry bushes or spied upon the mating habits of the mantis, he had maintained a brisk and enterprising connection with the animal kingdom. His horizon had narrowed with the years, and in later life

he had become something of a specialist in reptiles. Of these he kept around the house a large collection, stuffed, labelled, and artistically bedded down in glass cases, amid natural surroundings very creditably reproduced by Mr. Abbott, in plasticine and crepe paper. His attitude had nothing of scientific detachment—he regarded each of his specimens with a steady affection, and would pause to glow for a moment through the glass at a newly arrived iguana much as a father views his first-born in a public nursery.

THE pride, the centre-piece as it were, of his collection, was a kabara goya, imported at considerable expense from Ceylon. Large, scaly, implacable, it dominated the entrance hall with a gaze of unrelenting malevolence, petrifying the set speeches on the lips of commercial travellers, casting a chill of horror over all who came on it unawares. It was of this creature that Mrs. Abbott was thinking now; its image that had ranged itself beside the driver's, like two snapshots of the same face. For the look that had startled her in the eyes of the man was the look in the eyes of the kabara goya: freezing, non-human,

empty of all expression save that of a sapient and timeless evil. She had not imagined it, then; she had seen it before.

A curious fantasy, something less than a conviction, something more than a daydream, now began to take shape in her mind. For a while she played with it, elaborating it, busily inventing and retouching, finding in it the macabre entertainment afforded her by nightmares; for Mrs. Abbott was one of those people who, even as they dream, recognise their dreams for what they are, and know that at any moment they can transport themselves from unimaginable terrors to the dim familiar furniture of waking life. A week-old murder, still unsolved, of which she had read extensively in the last day or two, provided just that bare allowance of possibility without which her fantasy would have been flat and pointless.

This man, she thought, this driver with his kabara goya eyes, is the murderer in the Slade case. Observe his silence, he is planning further mischief; observe his hands . . . they were of length above the average, and gripped the wheel with a kind of nervous predatory strength . . . they are the hands



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