

VACANT POSSESSION

"SURELY we are entitled to possession," sighed Mamie, her almost transparent hands impatiently pleating and unpleating the dark stuff of her skirt. "I realise, sister, that it is many years since we actually lived there, but our continued absence, through no fault of our own, cannot alter the fact that it is Our Home."

"You were born there," said Agatha gently. Her hands moved like white moths above her knitting. In the half-light it was impossible to see her face. In fact the house was built for you, Your dear mother was far from strong, and the doctor thought the sea air might prove beneficial. I remember John, the coachman, used to drive father and me in the trap every Saturday to view the progress of the work. Father persuaded the carpenters to work sixty hours a week so that it might be ready for your mother's confinement."

"And it was finished in time?"
"Yes, we moved there a month before you were born. Your dear Mama was so happy. She loved the sea. The chaise-longue was drawn right up to the window in the East Room so that she could watch it all day long. At first she seemed so much improved—"

"Yet she died."
"Yes, she died."
"In the East Room. I seem to remember."



— A Short Story by M.B.

"Nonsense, Mamie. You were far too small."

"Last time we passed that way," said Mamie, "there were children riding tricycles in that very room. After all it's our house. Why can't we get these lodgers out? I cannot see what prevents you from instructing Mr. Thrumble to take the necessary steps."

"My dear Mamie, I've tried so often to explain to you. I'm afraid you've been out of touch with these affairs for a long time, longer even than I. We would have to prove greater hardship. Our accommodation here is I suppose adequate—"

"I don't feel at home here even yet," interrupted Mamie, "and I have had a great deal more time to get used to it than you have. Now in our own home—"

"And I don't think we could get possession on the ground that they are undesirable tenants. Mr. Thrumble informs me that they pay very regularly—"

"As if money meant anything to us," scoffed Mamie, "placed as we are!"

"Then there are the children," continued Agatha imperturbably. "It is almost impossible to be granted possession of a house where there are children."

"Well," said Mamie briskly, "I have quite set my heart on returning. If we cannot get possession by legal means we shall have to devise something a little—unofficial."

"Have a care, Mamie. If you had a fault it was that as a child you were given to impulsive action."

"Dear Agatha. If you had a fault it was that you inclined to over-cautiousness."

"What had you in mind, child?"

Mamie rose to her slender height and began to pace silently up and down.

"The Frobishers, sister. Remember the Frobishers. The Frobishers are now in undisputed possession of their old family home. In fact nobody else even covets it."

"How did they achieve this?"

A mischievous smile played round the corners of Mamie's colourless lips. "The Frobishers decided to give the occupiers the impression that the house was haunted. Oh, nothing blatant, you understand. Just a branch tapping on the window where there is no branch to tap, or the moonlight, casting strange shadows on a counterpane when someone lies sleepless. Little things, but enough to remind people that the house isn't really theirs, that they don't belong there."

Agatha thought for a moment. "You forget, my dear, that I said there were children."

"Oh, I wouldn't frighten the children! I assure you, Agatha, nothing was further from my thoughts."

"I didn't mean that. I merely meant that such schemes are harder to carry out where there are children. Parents—"

I cannot speak from experience but I am a keen observer—are almost completely inured to the unusual. In a house where there are children no adult is surprised if a branch taps on the window where there is no branch to tap, and if a strange shadow appears on the counterpane the adult goes to sleep again without bothering to notice that it is not cast by the usual child waiting admittance to his parents' bed. Strange noises at midnight and clocks striking thirteen are, of course, mere commonplace."

"One cannot even establish an atmosphere?"

"Children are fatal to atmosphere."

"You speak very definitely, sister."

"I speak from experience."

"You too tried a method such as I suggest?"

"Not precisely, child. I confess that when I first came here I found it very difficult to settle down. Like you, I was homesick for the old life, though possibly, being so much older, I have come sooner to resignation. At any rate I wanted desperately to see the house again. I thought that perhaps if I got in touch with Mrs. Hudson she might encourage me as a regular visitor. I chose my moment with great care—it was a Saturday afternoon, dark, with a cold southerly blowing from the sea. Mr. Hudson had gone to a football match—"

"It always amazes me," interrupted Mamie, "to hear people say that the present generation is decadent. I remember Saturday afternoons at home and Papa and George shut up in the study with their whisky and cigars and no conversation to be heard till John had driven over the hill with the racing results."

"Mr. Hudson, too, seems to be a sporting gentleman," said Agatha, "but, as is the present-day habit, takes his pleasure farther afield. Mrs. Hudson was quite alone in the house, the children having gone to a birthday party. She had lit the fire, but the lights were not yet on. I stayed in the room a long time, wondering whether the moment was propitious to speak to her. I think she sensed my presence, for she laid her book aside and remained staring into the fire. I put my hand gently on her shoulder. She shivered a little. Then the front door opened and the children burst in, waving paper hats and blowing those long whistles and one of them shouting to be taken to the bathroom. I felt decidedly out of my element."

"My poor Agatha! You hurried away?"

"No, Mamie, I stood my ground. It's not that I'm exactly frightened of children, it's just that I find them a little—well—uncanny. At any rate, having come so far, I wanted to have a good look at the house."

"Agatha, how brave you are! You take after the military side of the family. Tell me, was it greatly changed?"

"Sadly so, to me."

"Tell me, sister. Do not seek to spare my feelings."

Agatha laid down her knitting and dabbed at her hollow eyes with a cobweb of handkerchief.

"It's wrong, I realise, to set such store by the past when theologians assure us we have all our life ahead of us. But, Mamie, it seemed so sacrilegious. Papa's billiard-room is called the Rumpus Room and the children play ping-pong in it. And the west bedroom where you—where you—"

"Pray don't distress yourself, dear Agatha. It brings it all back to me."

"By the way, dear, did I ever tell you how brave you were? And so young—"

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 699)

M	G	A	B	A	T	T	O	I	R
H	O	R	A	T	I	O	R	P	E
N	T	M	O	R	I	B	U	N	D
A	S	P	H	A	L	T	F	L	E
T	E	E	S	L	E	E	V	E	
R	E	P	R	E	S	S	E	N	M
E	R	O	S	S	D	A	C	R	E
C	S	I	Y	E	S	D	E	A	R
L	A	T	E	N	T	S	M	V	
A	P	W	S	I	M	I	L	A	R
I	D	O	L	A	T	E	R	R	G
M	N	R	R	E	L	A	T	E	D
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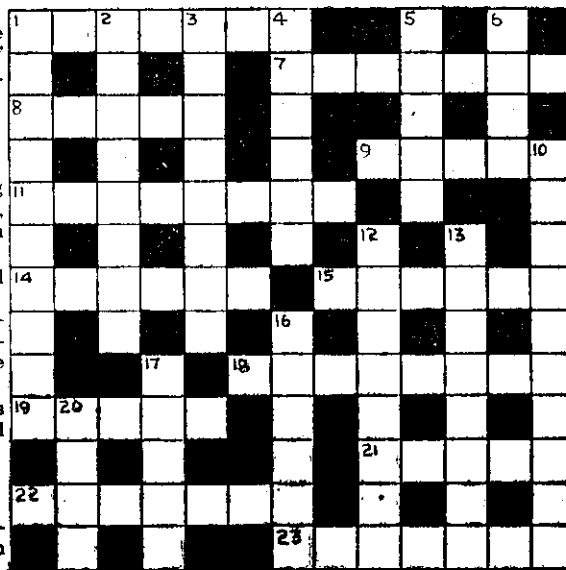
Clues Across

1. It would be definitely gruesome to find the horse had swallowed something she should be pulling.
7. Perplex.
8. Proverbially equally fit for goose or gander.
9. "But while men slept, an — came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way" (Gospel according to St. Matthew, Chapter 13).
11. Attempt after a river which rises in Tibet and flows into the Arabian Sea. This is certainly diligence.
14. As found round corn.
15. Get round Ann for a sea-bird.
18. Dear Noel provides a flowering shrub.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

19. Uninteresting advertisement, in short, for a wood-nymph.
21. Former name for Africa.
22. Decorative chain, and it could be a soft one.
23. "But four young — hurried up, All eager for the treat; Their coats were brushed, their faces washed, Their shoes were clean and neat" (Lewis Carroll).
10. "And all our — have lighted fools the way to dusty death" ("Macbeth," Act 5, Scene 5).
12. Bare alps (anag.).
13. Uneatable.
15. Part of the Royal binoculars.
17. Spruce.
20. A broken one is naturally unreliable.

No. 700 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Clues Down

1. Chewed, beginning with a kind of resin, and finishing with a mixed fruit.
2. "Double, double toil and trouble, Fire burn, and — bubble" ("Macbeth," Act 4, Scene 1).
3. Mr. Crosby has less in him. What a good thing!
4. Last.
5. Snaps back.
6. Street in Christchurch, or town in Ireland.