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BUT A KIND OF GHOST

By
John Wyndham

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Sam Tineways was the first citizen of Yoxburgh to appear on the morning after the storm. He climbed over the sea-wall at an hour when the day was little more than a large dirty patch in the eastern sky. Down on the beach the high wind was still blowing bundles of yellow spume about the shingle that the tide had uncovered. The strand along the wall and the foot of the cliffs was narrow and spray-swept, but feasible. Sam huddled himself into his coat, and set out to plod along it with eyes cast down, intently searching the stones.

Most of the town of Yoxburgh used to stand further east—where, now, the gray waves of the North Sea roll. Immemorably this has been a troubled coast. Its men have had to take on Norsemen, Danes, Saxons, and Dutchmen, Frenchmen, and Germans in turn, but always the most persistent enemy has been the sea—an enemy that has sometimes been slowed, but who never retreats. Dykes and breastworks, houses and churches have, century after century, fallen before it, and still with every storm the waves carve further into the cliffs on the south side. One by one the cottages up there are undercut and fall into the hungry water while the inhabitants continue their lives of intermittent retreat.

People have been living and fighting around Yoxburgh for so long that they have left a great many traces of the past. When the cliffs crumble curious things often come down with them. After a new fall, a diligent searcher in the shingle may find coins of any date, corroded weapons, bronze pieces of mysterious purpose, and, sometimes, ornaments and jewelry. In the newly exposed cliff face, too, there may be unexpected sights—a scrap of metal catching the light, bones protruding. Once there was a bleached skull which kept up its last sightless stare at the sea for several weeks until another storm brought it down and ground it up in the pebbles.

But it is unusual for the prowlers on the shore to lift their eyes for a moment from their search. It was only to reassure himself that a half-house balanced on the cliff-edge was not about to fall upon him that Sam looked up, and so happened to notice the chest.

One surprising thing about the chest was that it had not already fallen, for it projected near to two feet out from the perpendicular cliff-face, and looked to be held none too firmly. Another thing was the depth at which it had originally been buried—all of ten feet below the surface, Sam reckoned. Even so, and although Yoxburgh's cliffs are modest, that put it out of reach, some fifteen feet above his head.

Sam considered it for a moment. Clearly it must be old, therefore it had possibilities. He looked round quickly to make sure no other searchers were out yet. To leave now would mean abandoning the chance of finding a bit of jewelry that he might give to Mary, or a few loose coins for himself. On the other hand, the box *might* be full of coins and jewelry . . .

He decided to take the risk, and hurried towards the cliff-ladder further on.

Ten minutes later he was sprawled precariously, head and shoulders over the cliff edge, coaxing a noose of rope round the protruding chest with a long rod. Once he had the noose tight, it needed only a few tugs to work the chest loose. There was a ticklish moment when it

came free. A small cascade of dirt rattled on to the pebbles. The chest tilted alarmingly, but it remained fast in the loop. Now that he could see the whole of it, Sam found it larger than he had expected.

He looked along the beach. In the distance two blue-jersied men were climbing over the sea-wall. They would, he knew, start working towards him. It would be unsafe to lower away. On Yoxburgh foreshore finding is keeping, and there were two of them . . . The only thing to do was to try to get it up before they were able to see round the bluff or cliff that hid it from them at present. Sam laid hold, and began to heave . . .

He was blowing and sweating by the time he got it safely over the edge, but as he mopped his brow his very success caused him to regard it with mixed feelings. His ability to pull it up at all argued that there could not be anything very valuable inside—if anything whatever. Nevertheless, it was old, all right, very old, without a doubt. But at the moment he noticed little more about it than that it was fastened with numerous metal bands. His present anxiety was to get it safely away before someone came to ask questions.

Another glance below showed him the two men quite close now, heads bent down and turning from side to side, immersed in the search. Sam thrust the chest under a convenient bush, and set off with an elaborately casual air to borrow a handcart.

Mary, in a cream-grey coat and with a flowered scarf over her tawny hair, came in while the Tineways family was at breakfast. She smiled at his parents, and spoke to Sam with a slightly managing air.

“Bus goes in five minutes,” she said.

Sam gulped the last mouthful, and reached for his cap.

Being a young man in love is an uneasy state at best. Moreover, some young men are younger than other young men, and it was Sam’s misfortune to be one of them. And young women are captious. They are apt to have a repertoire of moods they consider suitable in their swains, and times when they require them. There are, for instance, moments when they fancy enterprise, finding constancy and dog-eyed devotion ineffably tedious.—Though when someone like Sam succeeds in screwing down his natural awe of young goddesses and goats himself into a nervous semblance of enterprise it is, inexplicably, never one of these moments. After a series of wrongly chosen moments it becomes increasingly hard to display masterfulness at any moment at all, so that he retreats into unvocal devotion—and that’s wrong, too.

“Sam,” Mary explained to the Tineways parents, “is taking me to Becwich Fair.” And she swept him out.

Mary moved irritably at Sam’s side, and raised her voice above the bus noises.

“Not woken up yet?” she inquired, coolly.

Sam roused himself from speculations on the treasures that the chest, now safely deposited in his own room and disguised under an old sail, might hold for him.

“Just doing a bit of thinking,” he protested.

“Do you have to think when you’re out with me?” she asked.

There seemed to be several possible angles to that. Sam avoided all of them.

“I been on the beach. Thought I might come across a bit of jewelry or something for you,” he told her.

With a faint access of interest, she inquired:

“Find anything?”

Sam hesitated. He would look a fool if there turned out to be nothing in the chest, besides, there were other people in the bus to overhear him.

“No,” he said. “But one time I will.”

She gave a small sniff. “I don’t know as I’d care for the sort of stuff they find there, anyway. Old fashioned,” she said.

Sam sighed a little to himself at the tone of her voice. He wondered how he could stop it from becoming a day of indifferent replies without turning it into one of petty quarrels.

There was, perhaps a chance at the movie they went to that afternoon. At one point in it Sam became aware of a movement beside him. He took her hand. She pulled it away.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, but she shook her head.

Afterwards, in the cafe, she asked:

“Why is it you never say things to me like he was saying to her, Sam?”

“Maybe I thinks ’em,” said Sam.

“How do I know you think them if you don’t say them? I don’t believe you love me, Sam.”

Something rose in Sam. It struggled beneath the crust of habit and self-consciousness. But the crust held.

“You’re talking soft now,” he told her.

“Do you love me, Sam?” she insisted.

“Would I be here now if I didn’t?” Sam asked.

“You might, easy.”

“Not me,” said Sam.

He spoke stoutly, but that did not seem to be enough for her. Her face was turned away. She was hurt with him, and he was hurt with himself. Often when she wasn’t there he would think of things he would say to her about how she looked and how he felt about her; and then when he was with her they didn’t get said. Somehow—well, if he were to say to her what the fellow on the screen had said to his girl it wouldn’t sound right: most likely she’d think he was trying to be funny at her expense, and things would be worse than ever. Still, he made an effort:

“’F course I love you, Mary.”

“Really and truly?”

Well, here was the moment: the time to pour out all those things he had thought of.

“I—” he began, and then stopped. She was looking at him, lips a little apart.

“Yes, Sam—?” she prompted.

His mind was a miserable blank. He could not remember one of those things.

“I—I just told you so,” he said, unhappily.

Mary’s face kind of died a bit, but she let him take her hand . . .

The chest was a sturdy affair, not to be opened without trouble and noise. It was necessary for Sam, returning late that evening, to stretch his patience a little further still. In the morning, after his father had left the house, he collected a hammer and cold chisel and retired to his own small room.

Upon examination the thing proved stouter even than he had thought. It seemed first to have been covered with a sheathing of metal to protect the wood. Into this the long tongues of its hinges and other metal strappings had been recessed. Finally, overlaying the whole, and apparently added later, was a tightly clinched framework of heavier metal bands. These were

riveted without regard for the hinges, giving the inescapable impression that it was not intended to open at all.

For the first time since his original discovery of it Sam was encouraged: there must, he felt, be something of real value within so much protection. He rubbed away some dirt to find the line of the lid closure, and picked up his chisel.

Cutting through the bands was a longish job. The metal was moderately hard—bronze, it might be, certainly not iron, or they would have rusted away. It was necessary to sever them in six places, and he had barely started on the last when his mother called him down to dinner. She showed no interest in what he had been doing. The hammerings and sawings of menfolk were habitual to them in her experience, and if they seldom produced anything worth while, they did at least keep the men out of her way when they weren't working.

By mid-afternoon Sam had the lid ready to lift. He set the chisel carefully in the crack, gave it a rap or two, and bore down upon it. Nothing happened. He examined the crack more carefully. It appeared to have been caulked and then sealed with a hard, shiny substance. Sam was a patient young man. He spent an hour chipping and scraping it away. The next time he tried the lid creaked and gave. It did not jump up, for the bands passed over the hinges and would have to be bent. His excitement grew. He levered until there was room to get the toe of his boot into the gap. Then he put the fingers of both hands inside the lid and heaved. With a creaking and a cracking and a shower of flaky dirt it came up.

Sam straightened himself. He took one look into the box. Then he stood staring, blank as a waxwork, in petrified consternation. In all his varied speculations nothing had suggested to him that the chest might contain a body—and that it was the body of a young woman somehow made it worse . . .

It lay in there with lily-white limbs curled like an unopened flower. The toes, knees, hands and face were brushed with a petal pink. Lashes like a filigree of gilt velvet lay on her cheeks. To cover her she had nothing but the capricious serpentines of two thick plaits like golden hawsers.

Sam stood thunderstruck while a variety of sensations tangled inside him in wild competition; in a few seconds he ran through most of the major emotions before panic came uppermost, and set him sweating. All sense of the wonderful or marvellous was swept away by the perception that he had encumbered himself with a body. He had a quick-cut vision of innumerable policemen and officials eagerly disbelieving every word he told them about it. Panic did not wait to consider the enormity, the impossibility of what he now saw; it simply issued an order: 'Sam, get rid of it quick. Let somebody else hold this baby.' And Sam hesitated no longer.

He thrust down the lid, and pulled the canvas round the box to hide it. He could hear his mother safely at work in the scullery as he stole down with the load on his shoulder. It was just luck that his father entered the door as he reached the bottom step.

"Hullo, son. What you got there?" inquired Tineways senior, amiably enough.

Panic is a neglecter of details. Sam could not have looked more put out had he been carrying the corpse openly in his arms.

"Nothin'," he said in a way that made two simple syllables ooze with discomforture and guilt. Even he himself felt the reply inadequate. "Just an old box off the foreshore," he added.

His father's expression changed. He remembered how Sam had looked when caught in youthful misdemeanours.

"Let's have a look," he suggested.

"It's nothing," said Sam. "Just an old box like I told you."

His father twitched the canvas aside. "Aye. It's an old box, all right," he said. "An' what's inside?"

"Nothing," Sam protested again.

The older Tineways' suspicions became firm.

"Look here, my lad. We've always done right by you. Share and share alike it's always been here."

"But there ain't nothing in there, Dad."

"Well, then there'll be no harm in us having a look, will there?"

A hopeless feeling came over Sam. He knew his father with his mind made up. He put the box down on the floor. At that moment his mother entered from the scullery.

"Bringing that dirty thing in here," she said. "What've you got in it?"

"Nothing. It's empty, I tell you," muttered Sam.

His father took hold of the lid. Sam gave up, and averted his eyes, preparing for the thunder and lightning. The lid creaked as it was raised but the lightning failed to strike. Sam looked down. There she lay, lovely as a statue in tinted shell, pearl mounted with gold.

"H'm," said his father.

Sam goggled. It was the most improbable sound he had ever heard. He looked quickly at his mother, expecting to see her transfixed with horror and outrage. She was not. Her expression was match to his father's grunt. Sam felt his reason sliding. He was not certain of the forms parental reactions might take at the sight of a comely young woman's corpse stowed in a box with none of her beauty hidden, but this seemed to him to be none of them.

"Well?" he said, desperately.

"H'm," grunted his father again. He leant forward and reached down. Sam watched his father's hand hover over the smooth white shoulder, and then descend. It went on descending, disappearing into the milky skin until he heard its knuckles rap on the bottom of the box. Tineways went on to rap the sides. The figure lay in the box unaffected by the arm which by its motions should have dissected her into several parts.

"Queer thing to do a box up like that with nothing inside of it," Mr. Tineways said, ruminatively. He looked hard at Sam's expression of moonstruck vacancy. "Very queer," he added. "Still I'd not be surprised if someone mightn't give quite a bit for the box anyway, seeing as it's old, all right. Put it in the shed, lad, and we'll see about it."

Sam, in a cloudy-minded way, shouldered the box again, and took it outside. Mr. Tineways gave a quick nod to his wife, and slipped upstairs into Sam's room. In half a minute he was down again.

"Nothing up there," he said. "Funny him acting that queer, though."

Out in the shed Sam placed the box carefully on a pile of sacks, and stood staring at it. He hesitated, and then raised the lid again. One thing was inescapably clear—neither his father nor his mother had seen what he saw. He looked down on her. Tentatively he put forward a hand to touch. He hesitated again, it looked like a brutish paw above smooth alabaster. He stretched one finger out gently towards the shining shoulder. It met nothing. The end of it disappeared into whiteness as though it had been cut off. Sam jumped back as if he had been stung. He slammed down the lid, and hurried back into the cottage.

It would have been an immense relief to talk to someone about it. But whom?—And, also, how? You couldn't expect Mary or anyone else to be understanding about a thing like that. Scepticism was the usual thing towards even highly authenticated ghosts. So what could you

expect if you were to say: ‘I’ve got a ghost, a very private sort of ghost that nobody can see but me?’ Sam knew perfectly well what he himself would think of anyone who came to him with such a yarn . . .

The evening stroll with Mary was more than usually silent. It was clear to her that there was something heavily on his mind; unsatisfactory as Sam might be in several ways, absent-mindedness was not customarily one of them. As a rule he was there right enough, even if he was struggling away inside a sort of thicket of diffidence. She would have liked to help him, but he stayed as shy of the hints she cast as if they had concealed hooks. Their attempts at talk petered into silence before the walk ended. Somehow the parting left her with less of the usual desire to jolt him up a bit, and more of a protective feeling towards him.

With his mind full of unpleasant possibilities Sam found sleep elusive, though he wooed it first on one side and then on the other for a couple of hours or more. It was around perhaps the fiftieth turn that he caught a glimpse of something white in the beam of moonlight from the window. He blinked, and looked again. Then he lay very still.

She stood there looking at him. She seemed to shine more whitely than ever in the pale light, but she neither hindered it nor cast a shadow.

“You needn’t be afraid, Sam,” she said—or seemed to say.

That was all very well, but a fright like Sam’s was not going to be dissolved by one soft sentence. It took time for his tongue to become obedient enough to ask:

“Wh—wh—who are you?” And his voice was wobbly.

Any ghost is bad enough, but Sam found the pangs of embarrassment added to those of fright. The only naked woman Sam had ever seen before had been a summer visitor sunbathing, and that through a telescope. Somehow this was not at all the same. She had not looked quite so undressed when she lay curled up in the chest. But it was Sam who had all the disadvantage. She stood quite calmly looking at him. Only the ends of the thick plaits moved, swinging slightly.

“My name is Hiltrude,” she said, matter of factly.

Sam pulled himself together. He attempted severity.

“You—you didn’t ought to be here,” he told her.

“You needn’t be afraid, Sam,” she repeated.

“You’re out of that box. You’re a ghost,” Sam told her.

“Ghost?” she said. “Ghost—yes, I suppose you could call me that.”

“Well, I don’t believe in ghosts,” proclaimed Sam, stoutly.

“No, Sam?” she said, unmoved.

“What’s more,” Sam continued, “any ghost I ever heard of wore decent clothes, or at least a sheet.”

“How strange,” she mused. “A spiritual sheet. How very odd!”

Sam regained enough courage to sit up in bed.

“What are you doing here? What do you want?” he demanded.

“What do I want?” she repeated, and lapsed into thought.

With sheer sweet lines, and lucent, like fine porcelain, she stood in reverie while the moonlight glistened on the burnish of her plaits. The gold-fringed eyes of distant blue were looking at him still, but seeming now not to see him. She tilted her head upward and made a little suppliant movement with hands that were like pink petalled flowers on ivory stems.

“What *is* there—for me?” she asked.

Sam's alarm had declined, even his embarrassment was less acute, and his curiosity had increased. What he wanted was a straight answer to a straight question.

"Look here—" he began, forthrightly. She did so, and some of the decisiveness ebbed from his tone. "—I only want to understand what's going on," he ended, on a more plaintive note.

"You shall," she told him. "They said I had an evil star, Sam. They said that it was all because of me that storms arose, that rowers fell sick, that oars cracked, that the boats sprang leaks, that the dragonships broke their backs on sandbanks, that the water went sour, that fogs came up, that villages were prepared for us. All these things and many more they attributed to my star. I suppose they must have been right, some of them were wise men, but I didn't make all these things happen, honestly I didn't, Sam. Indeed, I prayed very hard that they shouldn't but things like that went on happening until at last they said they wouldn't take me any further lest they should all be lost. Some of them wanted to send me to Odin with a sword, but others were afraid that my spirit might follow them instead of going to Odin. So they put me into a fine casket, and some of them wept although they were afraid of me and my star. Then they sealed it up so that my spirit should not escape to trouble them. And after they had buried it deep, they sailed away."

Though Yoxburgh folk are used to history that is a living tradition rather than something pressed dry in the pages of a book, Sam was moved to say, doubtfully:

"That must have been a goodish while ago."

She agreed, reflectively: "Yes, I should think so. The world seems to have changed a great deal—and the people, too." She studied him with a thoughtful frankness which caused him some discomfort.

"I've always heard they talked very different in those days," he said, with pointed suspicion.

"But I'm not *talking* to you, Sam—not as you mean. No one but you can hear me unless I want them to."

Sam reverted to an earlier question:

"What do you want here, anyway?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly so that the golden cables slid on her satin shoulders.

"I don't know yet, Sam. It is clear, since you have set me free that my star still shines: whether or not it is indeed an evil one we shall doubtless find out quite soon. Has any misfortune already overtaken you since you opened the casket?"

"No," said Sam, "and I don't want none, neither. I got enough troubles as it is. You go away somewhere and leave me alone. You've got no right to be here at all—certainly not indecent like that."

She looked down at her shapely breasts and rounded arms.

"Don't you think I look nice, Sam? The world can't have changed *that* much! It must be you that's queer."

Before he could think of an adequate response she went on: "I can decide nothing now. There have been so many changes I must try to understand. I shall watch. I will come again soon."

"Now, look here—" Sam began. But even as he spoke she began in some way to lose definition. She blurred. She contracted into an opalescent pillar trickled with gold. Then she vanished away . . .

During the days that followed Tineways senior was in no hurry to get rid of the chest.

“With old stuff like this it don’t do to jump at the first offer,” he told Sam. “Got to feel your way around till you get hold of a chap as knows the stuff when he sees it.”

Sam would have been a great deal happier for knowing that the chest was out of the shed at any, or no, price, but as the days and nights continued to pass without incident he was able to reach the point where he could tell himself that the whole thing was a dream—though he did not get quite as far as opening the chest again to check on it.

And then, perhaps a week later, he awoke in the night to find Hiltrude standing beyond the foot of his bed. There was no moonlight this time, but he found he could see her just as clearly as before. She had the same easy grace. She seemed textured as softly as a dove’s breast. Her hair shone like gilded silk. But this time her face wore a pensive, rather puzzled expression.

“I have been watching,” she remarked. “This is a *very* strange, place, Sam. And full of strange people, too. The women *look* different—though they are still women. But the men! What has happened to them? Have they become children? Are they slaves? And they don’t fight! Why don’t they fight? It is very strange. . . .”

“Well, if you’d come a few years ago—” Sam began, but she paid no attention to him.

“The men I knew were strong and fierce. They fought, they took, they were jealous. They loved—and hated. These I have seen here not like that: not *men*.”

“Now look here—” Sam began, in protest.

She turned a serious and wondering regard upon him.

“You have told me to look here before. I am not much impressed,” she told him, but she continued to look. “You are not much of a man, Sam,” she remarked, at length.

“Look—” began Sam again. But she held up a hand, delicate as a silver leaf, to stop him.

“I have watched you,” she said. “I have seen you and the others working—sweating like slaves for a few coins, instead of taking what you want, like men. What is wrong with you all?”

“Well—it’s kind of different now. Things aren’t like that any more,” Sam said.

“That,” she pointed out, “is what I was telling you. But why?”

“We’re—sort of civilized. We—”

“And men cannot even make love any more. That is very sad for women. Now, take your Mary, Sam—”

“You leave Mary alone. She’s a nice girl, Mary is—and decent, too,” he added, pointedly.

“‘A nice girl’—oh, my poor Sam. Poor Mary!”

“Now, look—I mean, what’s it to do with you, anyway? You just keep off it.”

“But, Sam, Mary is a woman—a woman who puts a warm heart into your hands for you to make it warmer—and you handle it as if it were a snowball you’re afraid of melting. It’s dying of exposure, Sam.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I tell you it’s no business of yours.”

“But she’s lonely, Sam. Everyone’s lonely. Can’t you see she is?”

“No, I can’t,” Sam growled.

“You must try, Sam—because you’re lonely inside too. Do you love her, Sam?—Yes, I think you do, in your funny way. But only in taking love and giving love, Sam, do we ever get, for a time, the sweet illusion of unloneliness. Can you understand that, Sam?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he muttered.

“Then you shall, Sam,” she said, in a tone which made him eye her uneasily.

Hiltrude looked down at herself reflectively.

“I can’t just stay like this all the time. For it is a lonely thing, too, to be no more than a dream in the wind. I want a form that I can use and live in. I must take one over. I did think of taking Mary’s.”

Sam goggled, alarmed though uncomprehending.

“But then,” she went on, “I changed my mind. You see, although a woman is altogether nicer and a more alive thing to be—yet it is more convenient to be a man, even in this strange world of yours.”

“If you think—” Sam began. But his expostulation was cut off as she turned her face towards him.

“Look at me, Sam,” she told him.

Unwillingly he raised his gaze, past the curve of her chin, across the red blossom of her mouth, beyond the delicacy of her nostrils, until he met the far blue of her eyes. After that he could see nothing else. Huge, they grew. Vasty as a summer sky into which he fell, lost, and still more lost . . .

As suddenly as if a switch had clicked, it all stopped. He was back in his room. But he saw it differently, for he was no longer in bed. He was looking down at someone else who was in the bed—at least, it wasn’t exactly someone else, it was himself—only he happened to be looking at himself from outside. Very confusing.

The sham Sam, the Sam-usurper, in the bed smiled up at him. The standing Sam lowered his eyes to look down at himself—er—herself? It was—well, it was— He blushed, and averted his eyes, gathering the great golden plaits about him-herself for what modesty they afforded.

It was not warm; it was not cold; it was not anything much. There was little sense of presence, or of time for the most part, though occasionally something would solidify out of the shiftingness for a while, and become perceptible with true shape. There was no need for rest—yet ever the desire for it: no place to rest—yet everywhere. One was more tenuous than the wind, more insubstantial than a sigh. One floated in the ether like an unformed wish.

Yet there were currents, gently magnetic fluxes to sway one’s nothingness hither and thither. One had only to think, and one could be there. Sometimes it was misty and vague; sometimes so real that you could see every detail, hear every word, seeming so solid that you wondered that nobody saw you . . .

Sometimes the persuasion was from outside. Suddenly one came out of nowhere into somewhere, perhaps called by a thought, or, it might be, sped by a wanton list. Sometimes there was reason, at others, none.

But all the time it was lonely . . . lonely . . . lonely . . .

Clearest of all, and the most troubling, were the times when he found himself close to the Sam-usurper and to Mary. The first of these was a considerable shock.

They were close together on a grass bank by a small spinney. Mary was lying back with her eyes closed, an expression on her face that he had never seen there before. She drowsed in happiness, with the smile of the conquering captive on her lips. The Sam-usurper held the back of her head cupped in his hand. He leant closer to whisper in her ear. One could hear the words he said quite plainly; they were almost familiar, so nearly the things that Sam had rehearsed to himself and never dared to say to her. Her eyes opened slowly, like a lazing cat’s; but there was no laziness in their sparkle. They looked up into the Sam-usurper’s. She wound an arm about his neck, and pulled his face down against her own:

“Oh, Sam!” she sighed. “My sweet, sweet Sam. Why did you stay so far away from me?”

The enwraithed Sam was filled with an anguish. Things that he had never known before became suddenly clear to him. He felt lonelier than ever. And he felt deeply jealous. But which was he jealous of, the Sam-usurper, or Mary? The man or the woman? It was hard to tell, he had become so mixed up. Some of him was still Sam, all right—but some of him was suffused with the most unfamiliar sensibilities which, surely, must be Hiltrude’s. And then suddenly he knew he was jealous of them both—not because either of them was a man or a woman, but because they were both of them, for a time, unlonely . . .

Another time when the Sam-usurper was perfectly clear to him was when he discovered him alone in the shed behind the cottage. The Sam-usurper was at work on the chest there. He had pulled off the heavy outer metal bands and thrown them aside. He seemed quite unaware that he was not alone. With intent care he was using a screwdriver as a lever to prise up one of the ornamental bindings from its recess. When at length he had some ten inches of it free he worked it backwards and forwards until it broke off. He rolled it up as if it had been a ribbon of lead, pressed it still flatter between his palms, and put it in his pocket. Then he went out.

Sam wanted to follow, but before he could he lost entity. Something seemed to disperse him; he became part of everything once more, like water poured into water . . .

When awareness took him again, it came differently. He did not just happen somewhere. There was a coercive gathering together, an impulsive thrust, and there he stood, facing his disposessor.

The room was narrow, white, and lit by one small, high window with bars across it. Almost the only furniture was a shelf of boards against the wall. At one end of it lay a blanket, neatly folded. At the other sat the Sam-usurper, eyeing him moodily.

“This is a very strange world,” remarked the Sam-usurper.

“You said that before,” Sam told him.

“I don’t care for it.”

“It’s good enough for me,” said Sam.

“Probably,” agreed the Sam-usurper, with a touch of scorn. “Anyhow, your form is no good to me now. It’s in prison. So I shall go.”

“Prison?” echoed Sam, looking round with a new understanding. “What have you—?” he began. But he was not able to finish the question. The Sam-usurper’s eyes were fixed on his own, and he was falling, falling towards them . . .

Suddenly he was sitting down, and Hiltrude was standing in front of him.

And, with a catch of his breath, he understood her loveliness as if he had never seen it before. She was the sweet things of the earth, the soft curves of hills, falling water in the sunlight, a flower in Spring. He looked at her a long time.

“Hiltrude,” he said. “I didn’t understand— You are like a—goddess.”

She smiled, but she shook her head slowly.

“Oh, Sam,” she said reprovingly. “Have I wasted my time on you? It was nicely meant, but— No woman is like a goddess—she doesn’t want to be. So will you please remember that, Sam?”

“All right,” said Sam, “but all the same—”

“Good-bye, Sam,” she said.

Her white limbs hazed. They mingled with the golden glints of her hair. Her rose-red mouth lost form. The blue of her eyes softened and dispersed. For an instant there was a

column iridescent as a pearl. Then there was nothing at all . . .

A long time later a key turned in the lock, a face looked in, a hand beckoned, and a voice said, “’Ere.”

They led him in front of a desk. Sam noticed with relief that the place was not a prison, but the Charge-Room of Becwich Police Station. A sergeant behind the desk looked at him severely.

“Now, my lad, let’s have it,” he said, not unkindly.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” Sam told him simply.

The inspector picked up a familiar-looking strip of metal, and laid it on the blotting-pad. Some of the dirt had been rubbed off in places, and where the metal showed it gleamed yellow.

“Did you, or did you not, go to old Soames down the street this afternoon and ask him what he’d give you for this?” asked the sergeant, placing a massive forefinger upon it.

“Er—suppose I did?” countered Sam.

“Suppose you did,” agreed the sergeant, “then we’d like to know where you got it. Maybe it’s all right, but Soames just isn’t used to people walking about with loose strips of gold in their pockets; nor are we, for the matter of that. Better cough it up, lad.”

“All right,” Sam decided, and told him about the chest.

The sergeant shook his head.

“You didn’t ought to of, you know,” he said, in paternal reproof. “There has to be an inquest on things like that to decide who can claim them. You’ve still got it?”

Sam assured him it was still in the shed at home. The sergeant nodded.

“Well, they tell me from Yoxburgh you’re a decent lad,” he said. “I’ve a mind to let you cut along now—on condition you take it round to the local station first thing tomorrow morning—just as it is, mind.”

“I—I’d sooner take it round tonight,” Sam said.

The sun was near to setting when Sam, disburdened in both body and mind of the chest, left Yoxburgh police-station and hurried to Mary’s home.

The light in her eyes when she saw him at the door was something new—and very precious.

“Come along out,” said Sam.

There were still those things that he had wanted to tell her, now he could. And in a grassy hollow, with the twilight settling about them, he did. Possibly the Sam-usurper had told her some of the same things before, but she didn’t seem to mind.

Quite a long time passed before they started to wander back. On the cliff path they paused, looking out over the darkling sea. Sam heard her murmur something under her breath. He thought he caught the word “ghost” at the end. His arm tightened round her.

“What was that?” he asked, with misgiving.

She looked up at him smiling. “Something I once found in an old book, Sam. It used to make me cry sometimes because you— Oh, well, that’s all over. It doesn’t matter any more now.”

“But—something about a ghost—?” he prompted.

She said, shyly: “I don’t mind telling you—now, Sam.” And she quoted softly:

“‘A naked thinking heart that makes no show

“‘Is to a woman, but a kind of ghost . . .’”

Sam held her close and kissed her.

“We’re forgetting about that ghost from now on,” he said.

It seemed like a fine idea.

[The end of *But a Kind of Ghost* by John Wyndham]