

The Blue Lenses

by Daphne du Maurier

Annotation column

This was the day for the bandages to be removed and the blue lenses fitted. Marda West put her hand up to her eyes and felt the bandage. The days had passed into weeks since the operation, and she had laid there suffering no physical discomfort, but only the anonymity of darkness, a negative feeling that the world and the life around was passing her by. As for the operation itself, it had been successful. Here was definite promise. A hundred per cent successful.

"You will see," the surgeon told her, "more clearly than ever before."

But always during these days of waiting, she had the fear that everybody at the hospital was being too kind. Therefore, when at last it happened, when at his evening visit the surgeon said, "Your lenses will be fitted tomorrow," surprise was greater than joy. She could not say anything, and he had left the room before she could thank him. "You won't know you've got them, Mrs. West"- the day-nurse assured her, leaving.

Such a calm, comfortable voice, and the way she shifted the pillows and held the glass to the patient's lips, the hand smelling faintly of the Moray French Fen soap. These things gave confidence and implied that she could not lie.

"Tomorrow I shall see you", said Marda West, and the nurse, with the cheerful laugh that could be heard sometimes down the corridor outside, answered, "Yes, I'll give you your first shock."

It was a strange thought how memories of coming into the nursing-house were now dim.

"Aren't you feeling excited?" this was the low, soft voice of her night-nurse, who, more than the rest of them, understood what she had endured. Nurse Brand was a person of sunlight, of bearing in fresh

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flowers, of admitted visitors. The weather she described in the world outside appeared of her own creation. "A hot day", she would say, opening windows, and her patient would sense the cool uniform, the scratched cap, which somehow toned down the penetrating heat.

Meals, too, even the dulllest of lunches were made to appear delicacies through her method of introduction.

The night brought consolation and Nurse Ansel. She did not expect courage. At first, during pain, it had been Nurse Ansel who had administered the drugs. It was she who had smoothed the pillows and held the glass to her lips. At night the patient had only to touch the bell, and in a moment Nurse Ansel was by the bed. "Can't sleep? I know, it's bad for you. I'll give you just two and a half grains, and the night won't seem so long."

How compassionate, that smooth and silken voice. All she did was faultless. She never annoyed. And when she went off duty, at five minutes to eight in the morning, she would whisper, "Until this evening."

It was a special secret sympathy that Nurse Ansel would announce the evening visitor. "Here is someone you want to see, a little earlier than usual," the tone suggesting that Jim was not the husband of ten years but a troubadour, a lover, someone whose bouquet of flowers had been plucked in an enchanted garden and now brought to a balcony. Then, shyly, the voice would murmur, "Good evening, Mr. West. Mrs. West is waiting for you." She would hear the gentle closing of the door, the tip-toeing out with the flowers and the almost soundless return, the scent of the flowers filling the room.

It must have been during the fifth week that Marda West had suggested, first to Nurse Ansel then to her husband, that perhaps when she returned home the night-nurse might go with them for the first week. Just a week. Just so that Marda West could settle to home again.

His comment was something between surprise and indulgence. Surprise that his wife considered a nurse a person in her own right, and

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indulgence because it was the whim of a sick woman.

"Aren't you feeling excited?" asked Nurse Ansel.

"In a way, said Marda West, "It's like being born again. I've forgotten how the world looks":

"Such a wonderful world," murmured Nurse Ansel, "and you've been patient for so long."

"It's strange," said Marda West, "tomorrow you won't be a voice to me anymore. You'll be a person.

"Aren't I a person now?"

"Yes, of course, but it will be different "

Even knowing she was dark and small - for so Nurse Ansel had described herself - Marda West must be prepared for surprise at the first encounter, the tilt of the head, the slant of the eyes, or perhaps some unexpected facial form like too large a mouth, too many teeth.

"Sleep, then. Tomorrow will come too soon." There came the familiar routine of the bell put within reach, the last minute drink, the pill, and then the soft, "Good night, Mrs. West. Ring if you want me "

"Thank you. Good night "

II

"Well, we can't complain of the weather!" Now it was the day itself, and Nurse Brand coming in like the first

breeze of morning.

"All ready for the great event?" she asked.

Then the surgeon removed the bandages and did something to her eyelids.

"Now, don't be disappointed," he said. "You won't know any difference for about half an hour. Then it will gradually clear. I want you to lie quietly during that time."

The dark lenses, fitted inside her lids, were temporary for the first few days. Then they would be removed and other fitted.

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"How much shall I see?" she asked at last.

"Everything. But not immediately in color. Just like wearing a pair of sunglasses on a bright day. Rather pleasant.

His cheerful laugh gave confidence, and when he and Nurse Brand had left the room she lay back again, waiting for the fog to clear and for that summer day to break upon her vision, however subdued, however softened by the lenses.

Little by little the mist dissolved.

All was in focus now. Flowers, the wash-basin, the glass with the thermometer in it, her dressing-gown. Wonder and relief were so great that they excluded thought.

"They weren't lying to me," she thought. "It's happened. It's true."

Colour was not important. The blue symmetry of vision itself was all-important. To see, to feel. It was indeed rebirth, the discovery of a world long lost to her.

She heard Nurse Brand's voice outside, and turned her head to watch the opening door.

"Well... are we happy once more?"

Smiling, she saw the figure dressed in uniform come into the room, bearing a tray, her glass of milk upon it. Yet, absurd, the head with the uniformed cap was not a woman's head at all. The thing staring down at her was a cow a cow on a woman's body. The frilled cap was upon wide horns. The eyes were large and gentle, but cow's eyes, the nostrils broad and humid, and the way she stood there, breathing, was the way a cow stood placidly in pasture, taking the day as it came, content, unmoved.

"Feeling a bit strange?"

The laugh was a woman's laugh, a nurse's laugh, Nurse Brand's laugh, and she put the tray down on the cupboard beside the bed. The patient said nothing. She shut her eyes, then opened them again. The cow in the nurse's uniform was with her still. It was important to gain time. The patient stretched out her hand carefully for the glass of milk.

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She sipped the milk slowly. The mask must be worn on purpose. Perhaps it was some kind of experiment connected with the fitting of the lenses - though how it was supposed to work she could not imagine.

"I see very plainly," she said at last. "At least, I think I do."

Nurse Brand stood watching her. The broad uniformed figure was as much as Marda West had imagined it, but that cow's head tilted, the ridiculous frill of the horns.... where did the head join the body, if mask it in fact was?

"Is it a trick?" Marda West asked.

"Is what a trick?"

"The way you look ... your ... face?"

The cow's jaw distinctly dropped.

"Really, Mrs. West. I'm as the good God made me."

"I didn't mean to offend you," she said, "but it is just a little strange. You see..."

She was spared explanation because the door opened and the surgeon came into the room. At least, the surgeon's voice was recognizable as he called. "Hullo! How goes it?" and his figure in the dark coat was all that an eminent surgeon should be, but... that terrier's head, ears pricked, the inquisitive, searching glance?

This time the patient laughed.

"Mrs West thinks us a bit of a joke," the nurse said. But her voice was not over-pleased.

The surgeon came and put his hand out to his patient, and bent close to observe her eyes. She lay very still. He wore no mask either. He was even marked, one ear black, the other white.

"I'll be in on Thursday," he said. "To change the lenses."

Marda West could not demand an explanation. Instinct warned her that he would not understand. The terrier was saying something to the

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cow, giving instructions.

As they moved to the door the patient made a last attempt.

"Will the permanent lenses," she asked, "be the same as these?"

"Exactly the same" yapped the surgeon, "except that they won't be tinted. You'll see the natural colour. Until Thursday, then."

He was gone and the nurse with him. She could hear the murmur of voices outside the door. What happened now? If it was really some kind of test, did they remove their masks instantly? She slipped out of bed and went to the door. She could hear the surgeon say, "One and a half grains. She's a little tired. It's the reaction, of course."

Bravely, she flung open the door. They were standing there in the passage, wearing the masks still.

"Do you want anything, Mrs. West?" asked Nurse Brand. Marda West stared beyond then down the corridor. The whole floor was in the deception. A maid, carrying dust-pan and brush, coming from the room next door, had a weasel's head upon her small body, and the nurse advancing from the other side was a little kitten, he cap coquettish on her

furry curls, the doctor beside her a proud lion.

Fear came to Marda West. How could they have known she would open the door at that minute? Something of her fear must have shown in her face, for Nurse Brand, the cow, took hold of her and led her back into the room.

"I'm rather tired," Marda West said. "I'd like to sleep."

"That's right," said Nurse Brand and gave her a sedative.

The sedative acted swiftly.

Soon peaceful darkness came, but she awoke, not for the sanity she had hoped for, but to lunch brought by the kitten. Nurse Brand was off duty.

"How long must it go on for?" asked Marda West. She had adjusted herself to the trick.

"How do you mean, Mrs. West?" asked the kitten, smiling. Such a

flighty little thing, with its pursed-up mouth, and even as it spoke it put a hand to its cap.

"This test on my eyes," said the patient, uncovering the boiled chicken on her plate. I don't see the point of it."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. West," the kitten said, "I don't follow you. Did you tell Nurse Brand you couldn't see properly yet?"

"It's not that I can't see," replied Marda West. "I see perfectly well. The chair is a chair. The table is a table. I'm about to eat boiled chicken. But why do you look like a kitten?" "I see what I see," said the patient. "You are a cat, if you like, and Nurse Brand's a cow."

This time the insult must sound deliberate. Nurse Sweeting, that was the cat's name, had fine whiskers to her mouth. The whiskers bristled.

"If you please, Mrs. West," she said, "will you eat your chicken, and ring the bell when you are ready for the next course?"

She left the room.

III

No, they could not be wearing masks. And the staff of the hospital could not possibly put on such an act for one patient, for Marda West alone - the expense would be too great. The fault must lie in the lenses, then. The lenses, by their very nature, by some quality beyond the layman's understanding, must transform the person who was perceived through them.

A sudden thought struck her, and pushing the trolley-table aside she climbed out of bed and went over the dressing-table. Her own face stared back at her from the looking-glass. The dark lenses concealed her eyes, but the face was at least her own.

"Thank heaven for that," she said for herself, but it swung her back to the thoughts of trickery. Her idea of masks had been the right one. But why?

She would try one further proof. She stood by the window, the

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curtain concealing her, and watched the passers-by. For the moment there was no one in the street. It was the lunch time, and traffic was slack. Then, at the other side of the street, a taxi crossed, too far away for her to see the driver's head. She waited. A van drew near, but she could not see the driver ... yes, he slowed as he went by the nursing-home and she saw the frog's head, the bulging eyes.

Sick at heart, she left the window and climbed back into bed. She had no further appetite and pushed away her plate, the rest of the chicken untasted. She did not ring the bell, and after a while the door opened. The kitten, her back arched, her fluff flying, put the coffee down without a word, and Marda West irritated - for surely, if anyone was to show annoyance, it should be herself? - said sharply, "Shall I pour you some milk in the saucer?"

The kitten turned. "A joke's is a joke, Mrs. West," she said "and I can take a laugh with anyone. But I can't stand rudeness."

"Miaow," said Marda West.

The kitten left the room. No one came to remove the coffee. The patient was in disgrace. She did not care. If the staff of the nursing-home thought they could win the battle, they were mistaken. Marda went to the telephone and asked the exchange to put her through to her husband's office. She remembered a moment afterwards that he would still be at lunch. Nevertheless, she got the number, and as luck had it he was there.

"Jim... Jim, darling."

"Yes?"

The relief to hear the loved familiar voice. She lay back on the bed, the receiver to her ear.

"Darling, when can you get here?"

"Not before this evening, I'm afraid. It's one hell of a day, one thing after another. Well, how did it go? Is everything O.K.?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean? Can't you see?"

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How was she to explain what had happened to her? It sounded so foolish over the telephone.

"Yes, I can see perfectly. It's just that ... that all the nurses look like animals. And the surgeon too. He's a fox terrier."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

he was saying something to his secretary at the same time, something about other appointment, and she knew from the tone of his voice that he was busy, very busy, and she had chosen the worst time to ring him up.

Marda West knew it was no use. She must wait till he come. Then she would try to explain everything, and he would be able to find out for himself what laid behind it.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "I'll tell you later."

"I'm sorry," he told her, "but I really am in a hurry."

Then she rang off. She put down the telephone.

It was much later in the afternoon that Matron called in to have a word with her. She knew it was Matron because of her clothes. But inevitably now, without surprise, she observed the sheep's head.

"I hope you're quite comfortable, Mrs. West?" A note of gentle inquiry in the voice.

"Yes, thank you."

Marda West spoke guardedly. It would not do to anger the Matron. Even if the whole affair was some gigantic plot, it would be better not to aggravate her.

"The lenses fit well?"

"Very well."

"I'm so glad. It was a nasty operation, and you've stood the period waiting so very well. Mrs. West..." The Matron seemed uncomfortable, and turned her sheep's head away from the woman in the bed, "Mrs. West, I hope you won't mind what I'm going to say, but our nurses do a fine job here and we are all very proud of them. They work long hours, as you know, and it is not really very kind to mock them, although I am

sure you intend it fun."

"Is it because I called nurse Sweeting a kitten?"

"I don't know what you called her, Mrs. West, but she was quite distressed. She came to me in the office nearly crying."

"It won't happen again. But Matron," said Marda West, "What is the object of it all?"

"The object of what, Mrs. West?"

"This dressing up."

There was silence. The Matron moved slowly to the door.

"I hope," she said, "when you leave us in a few days, Mrs. West, that you will look on us with greater tolerance than you appear to have now."

She left the room. Marda West closed her eyes. She opened them again. Why was it only people had changed? What was so wrong with people? She kept her eyes shut when her tea was brought to her, and when the voice said pleasantly, "Some flowers for you Mrs. West," she did not open them, but waited for the owner to leave the room. The flowers were carnations. The card was Jim's. And the message on it said, "Cheer up. We're not as bad as we seem."

She smiled, and buried her face in the flowers. Nothing false about them. Nothing strange about the scent. Carnations were carnations. Fragrant, graceful. Even the nurse on duty who came to put them in water could not irritate her with pony's head. After all, it was a trim little pony, with a white star on its forehead. It would do well in the ring. "Thank you," smiled Marda West.

The curious day dragged on, and she waited restlessly for eight o'clock. She realized, so strange had been the day, that she had not once thought about Nurse Ansel. Dear, comforting Nurse Ansel. Nurse Ansel, who was due to come on duty at eight. Was she also in the conspiracy? If she was, then Marda West would have a showdown. Nurse Ansel would never lie. She would go up to her, and put her hands on her shoulders, and take the mask in her two hands, and say to her,

"There, now take it off. You won't deceive me."

IV

At that moment the door opened and a long snake's head came into view.

"How does it feel to see yourself again?"

Nurse Ansel's voice coming from the head seemed grotesque and horrible. Marda West felt sick at the sight of her.

"Poor dear, they should have kept you quite, the first day," Nurse Ansel said.

"Tell me," she continued, "do I look as you expected me to look?" she must be careful, Marda West thought. The question might be a trap.

"I think you do," she said slowly.

"When I go home with you," said Nurse Ansel, "I needn't wear uniform - that is, if you don't want me to. You see, you'll be a private patient then, and I your personal nurse for the week I'm with you."

Marda West felt suddenly cold. In the rush of the day she had forgotten the plans. Nurse Ansel was to be with them for a week. It was all arranged. The vital thing was not to show fear. Nothing must seem changed. And then, when Jim arrived, she would tell him everything. If he could not see the snake's head as she did - and indeed, it was possible that he would not, if her hypervision was caused by the lenses - he must just understand that for reasons too deep to explain she no longer trusted Nurse Ansel, could not in fact, bear her to come home. The plan must be altered. She wanted no one to look after her. She only wanted to be home again, with him.

The telephone rang on the bedside-table and Marda West seizes it, as she might seize salvation. It was her husband.

"Sorry to be late," he said. "I'll jump into a taxi and be with you right away."

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He rang off, and looking up she saw the snake's head watching her. No doubt, thought Marda West, no doubt you would like to know what we were saying to one another.

"You must promise not to get too excited when Mr. West comes."
Nurse Ansel stood with her hand upon the door.

"I'm not excited. I just long to see him, that's all."

"You're looking very flushed."

"It's warm in here."

The twisting neck turned upward, then turned to the window. For the first time Marda West had the impression that the snake was not entirely at its ease. It sensed tension. It knew, it could not help but know, that the atmosphere had changed between nurse and patient.

"I'll open the window just a trifle at the top."

Then the neck settled in the collar, the tongue darted rapidly in and out, and with a gliding motion Nurse Ansel left the room.

Marda West waited for the sound of the taxi in the street outside. She wondered if she could persuade Jim to stay night in the nursing-home. If she explained her fear, her terror surely he would understand.

The taxi came at last. She heard it slow down, and then the door slammed and blessedly, Jim's voice rang out in the street below. The taxi went away. Her heart began to beat fast, and she watched the door. She heard his footstep outside, and then his voice again - he must be saying something to the snake.

The door opened, the familiar umbrella and bowler hat the first objects to appear round the corner, then the comforting burly fear, but - God ... no ... please God, not Jim too, not Jim, forced into a mask, forced into an organization of devils, of liars ... Jim had a vulture's head. She could not mistake it. The brooding eye, the blood-tipped beak, the flabby folds of flesh. As she lay in sick and speechless horror, he stood the umbrella in a corner and put down the bowler hat and the folded overcoat.

"I gather you're not too well," he said, turning his vulture's head and

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staring at her, "feeling a bit sick and out of sorts. I won't stay long. A good night's rest will put you right."

She was too numb to answer. She lay quite still as he approached the bed and bent to kiss her. The vulture's beak was sharp.

"It's a reaction, Nurse Ansel says," he went, "the sudden shock of being able to see again. It works differently with different people. She says it will be much better when we get you home."

We ... Nurse Ansel and Jim. The plan still held, then.

"I don't know," she said faintly, "that I want Nurse Ansel to come home."

"Not want Nurse Ansel?" he sounded startled. "But it was you who suggested it. You can't suddenly change."

There was no time to reply. She had not rung the bell, but Nurse Ansel herself came into the room. "Cup of coffee Mr. West?" she said. It was the evening routine. Yet tonight it sounded strange, as though it had been arranged outside the door.

"Thank, Nurse, I'd love some. What's this nonsense about not coming home with us?" The vulture turned to the snake, the snake's head wriggled, and Marda West knew, as she watched them, the snake with darting tongue, the vulture with his head hunched between his man's shoulders, that the plan for Nurse Ansel to come home had not been her own after all; she remembered now that the first suggestion had come from Nurse Ansel herself. It had been Nurse Ansel who had said that Marda West needed care during convalescence. The suggestion had come after Jim had spent the evening laughing and joking and his wife had listened, her eyes bandaged, happy to hear him. Now, watching the smooth snake whose adder's V was hidden beneath the nurse's cap, she knew too why Jim had not opposed it, why in fact he had accepted the plan at once, had declared it a good one.

The vulture opened its blood-stained beak. "Don't say you two have fallen out?"

"Impossible." The snake twisted its neck, looked sideways at the

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vulture, and added, "Mrs. West is just a little bit tired tonight. She's had a trying day, haven't you, dear?"

how best to answer? Neither must know. Neither vulture, nor snake.

"I'm all right," she said. "A bit mixed-up. As Nurse Ansel says, I'll be better in the morning."

"I won't bother you," said the vulture, "with these documents tonight. There's no violent hurry anyway. You can sign them at home."

"What documents?"

"The trust fund papers Forbes and Millway gave me. They suggest I should become a co-director of the fund."

The words stirred her memory. Something to do with her eyes. If the operation was not successful she would have difficulty in signing her name.

"What for?" she asked, her voice unsteady. "After all, it is my money."

He laughed. And, turning to the sound, she saw the beak open. It gaped like a trap, and then closed again.

"Of course it is," he said. "That's not the point. The point is that I should be able to sign for you, if you should be ill or away." The snake shrank into its collar and slid towards the door. "Don't stay too long, Mr. West," murmured Nurse Ansel. "Our patient must have a real rest tonight."

She glided from the room and Marda West was left alone with her husband. With the vulture.

V

"I don't propose to go away," she said, "or to be ill."

"Probably not. That's neither here nor there. These fellows always want safeguards. Anyway, I won't bore you with it now."

Could it be that the voice was over casual? That the hand, stuffing the document into the pocket of the greatcoat, was a claw?

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"Did you really mean that," Jim asked, "about Nurse Ansel?"

a vulture needed sharp claws for tearing its victim.

"I don't know," she said. "It seemed to me rather silly to go home with a nurse, now that I can see again."

"I think she's a treasure," he said. "I vote we stick to the plan. After all, if it doesn't work we can always send her away."

"Perhaps," said his wife.

"What will you do this evening?" she asked quietly.

"Have dinner at the club, I suppose," he answered. "It's becoming rather monotonous. Only two days more of it, thank goodness. Then you'll be back again."

Yes, but once at home, once back there, with a vulture and a snake, would she not be more completely at their mercy than she was here?

"You look unwell," he said suddenly. "Shall I call Nurse Ansel?"

"No ..."it broke from her, almost a cry.

"I think I'd better go now. She said not to stay long."

He got up from the chair, a heavy, hooded figure, and she closed her eyes as he came to kiss her good night. "Sleep well, my poor pet, and take it easy."

When he had gone she began to moan, turning her head upon the pillow.

"What am I to do?" she said. "What am I to do?"

the door opened again and she put her hand to her mouth. They must not hear her cry. They must not see her cry she pulled herself together with a tremendous effort.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. West?"

The snake stood at the bottom of the bed, and by her side the house physician. She had always liked him, a young pleasant man, and although like the others he an animal's head it did not frighten her. It was a dog's head, an Aberdeen's and the brown eyes seemed to quiz her.

"Could I speak to you alone?" she asked.

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"Of course. Do you mind, nurse?" he jerked his head at the door, and she had gone. Marda West sat up in bed and clasped her hands.

"You'll think me very foolish," she began, "but it's the lenses. They make everyone look strange."

"They're supposed to do that, you know. They don't show colour." His voice was cheerful, friendly.

"Yes," she said. His voice, even his head, gave her confidence. "Have you known people who've had this operation before?"

"Yes, scores of them. In a couple of days you'll be as right as rain. You'll actually see more clearly in every way. One patient told me that it was as though she had been wearing spectacles all her life, and then, because of the operation, she realized she saw all her friends and her family as they really were."

"As they really were?" she repeated his words after him.

"Exactly. Her sight had always been poor, you see. She had thought her husband's hair was brown, but in reality it was red, bright red. A bit of shock at first. But she was delighted.

The Aberdeen moved from the bed and nodded his head.

She repeated the words he had used himself. Marda West could see people as they really were. And those whom she had loved and trusted most were in truth a vulture and a snake...

the door opened and Nurse Ansel, with a sedative, entered the room.

"Ready to settle down, Mrs. West?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

There might be no conspiracy, but even so all trusted, all faith, were over.

The voice that had once seemed tender was over-smooth and false. How deceptive are ears, thought Marda West, what traitors to truth. And for this first time she became aware of her own latent power, the power to tell truth from falsehood, good from evil.

"Good night, Mrs. West."

"Good night."

Lying awake, Marda West decided upon her plan. She got out of bed; she took her clothes from the wardrobe and began to dress. She put on her coat and shoes and tied a scarf over her head. When she was ready she went to the door and softly turned the handle. All was quiet in the corridor. She stood there motionless. Then she took one step across the threshold and looked to the left, where the nurse on duty sat. The snake was there. The snake was sitting bent over a book.

Marda West waited. She was prepared to wait for hours. Presently the sound she hoped for came, the bell from a patient. The snake lifted its head from the book and checked the red light on the wall. Then, she glided down the corridor to the patient's room. She knocked and entered. Directly she had disappeared Marda West left her own room and went downstairs and into the street.

Marda West was walking down the street. She turned right, and left, and right again, and in the distance she saw the light of Oxford Street. She began to hurry. The friendly traffic drew her like a magnet, the distant lights, the distant men and women. When she came to Oxford Street she paused, wondering of a sudden where she should go, whom she should ask for refuge. And it came to her once again that there was no one, no one at all; because the couple passing her now, a toad's head on a short black body clutching a panther's arm, could give her no protection, and the policeman standing at the corner was a baboon, the woman talking to him a little pig. No one was human, no one was safe, the man a pace or two behind her was like Jim, another vulture. There were vultures on the pavement opposite. Coming towards her, laughing, was a jackal.

She turned and ran. She ran, bumping into them, jackals, hyenas, vultures, dogs. The world was theirs, there was no human left. Seeing her run they turned and looked at her, they pointed, they screamed and yapped, they gave chase, their footsteps followed her. Down Oxford Street she ran, pursued by them, the night all darkness and shadow, the

light no longer with her, alone in an animal world.

VI

"lie quite still, Mrs. West, just a small prick, I'm not going to hurt you."

She recognized the voice of Mr. Greaves, the surgeon, and dimly she told herself that they had got hold of her again.

They had replaced the bandages over her eyes, and for this she was thankful. Such blessed darkness, the evil of the night hidden.

"Now, Mrs. West, I think your troubles are over. No pain and no confusion with these lenses. The world's in color again."

The bandages were removed after all. And suddenly everything was clear, was day, and the face of Mr. Greaves smiled down at her. At his side was a rounded, cheerful nurse.

"Where are your masks?" asked the patient.

"We didn't need masks for this little job," said the surgeon. "We were only taking out the temporary lenses. That's better, isn't it?"

she looked around. She was back again all right. All was in natural colour.

"Something happened to me, didn't it?" she said. "I tried to get away."

The nurse glanced at the surgeon. He nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "you did. And frankly, I don't blame you. I blame myself. Those lenses I inserted yesterday were pressing upon a tiny nerve, and the pressure threw out your balance. That's all over now."

His smile was reassuring. And the large eyes of Nurse Brand - it must surely be Nurse Brand - gazed down at her in sympathy."

"It was terrible," said the patient. "I can never explain how terrible."

"Don't try," said Mr. Greaves. "I can promise you it won't happen again."

The door opened and the young physician entered. He too was

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smiling. "Patient fully restored?" he asked.

"I think so," said the surgeon. "What about it, Mr. West?"

"I thought you were dogs," she said. "I thought you were a hunt terrier, Mr. Greaves, and that you were an Aberdeen."

She turned to Nurse Brand. "I thought you were a cow," she said, "a kind cow. But you had sharp horns."

Everybody took it in good part.

The doctors were moving towards the door, laughing, and Marda West, sensing the normal atmosphere, the absence of all strain, asked Nurse Brand, "Who found me, then? What happened? Who brought me back?"

Mr. Greaves glanced back at her from the door. "You didn't get very far, Mr. West. The porter followed you. The person who really had the full shock was poor Nurse Ansel when she found you weren't in your bed."

"Nurse Ansel is here now," said Nurse Brand. "She was so upset when she went off duty that she wouldn't go back to the hostel to sleep. Would you care to have a word with her?"

Before she could answer the house doctor opened the door and called down the passage.

"Mr. West wants to say good morning to you," she said. Marda West stared, then began to smile, and held out her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, "you must forgive me."

How could she have seen Nurse Ansel as a snake! The hazel eyes, the clear olive skin, the dark hair trim under the frilled cap. And the smile, that slow, understanding smile.

"Forgive you, Mrs. West?" said Nurse Ansel. "What have I to forgive you for? You've been through a terrible thing."

Patient and nurse held hands. They smiled at one another. Nurse Ansel was so pretty, so gentle. "Don't think about it," she said, "You're going to be happy now on. Promise me?"

"I promise," said Marda West.

Annotation column

The telephone rang, and Nurse Ansel let go her patient's hand and reached for the receiver. "You know who this is going to be," she said. "Your poor husband." She gave the receiver to Marda West.

"Jim ... Jim, is that you?"

The loved voice sounding so anxious at the other end. "Are you all right?" He said. "I've been through to Matron twice; she said she would let me know. What the devil has been happening?"

Marda West smiled and handed the receiver to the nurse.

"You tell him," she said.

Nurse Ansel held the receiver to her ear. The skin of her hand was olive smooth, the nails gleaming with a soft pink polish.

"Is that you, Mr. West" she said. "Our patient gave us a fright, didn't she?" she smiled and nodded at the woman in the bed. "Well, you don't have to worry any more. Mr. Greaves changed the lenses. They were pressing on a nerve, and everything is now all right. She can see perfectly. Yes, Mr. Greaves said we would come home tomorrow."

Marda West reached once more for the receiver.

"Jim, I had hideous night," she said. "I'm only just beginning to understand it now. A nerve in the brain ..."

"So, I understand," he said. "Don't excite yourself. I'll be along later."

His voice went. Marda West gave the receiver to Nurse Ansel, who replaced it on the stand.

"Did Mr. Greaves really say I could go home tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes, if you're good." Nurse Ansel smiled and patted her patient's hand. "Are you sure you still want me to come with you." She asked.

"Why, yes," said Marda West. "Why, it's all arranged."

She sat up in bed and the sun came streaming through the window, throwing light on the roses, the lilies, the tall-stemmed iris. She thought of her garden waiting for her at home, the day-by-day routine of home to be taken up again with sight restored.

"The most precious thing in the world," she said to Nurse Ansel, "is sight. I know now. I know what I might have lost."

Annotation column

Nurse Ansel nodded her head in sympathy. "You've got your sight back," she said, "that's the miracle. You won't ever lose it now."

She moved to the door. "I'll slip back to the hostel and get some rest," she said. "Now I know everything is well with you'll be able to sleep. Is there anything you want before I go?"

"Give me my face-cream and my powder," said the patient, "and the lipstick and the brush and comb."

Nurse Ansel fetched the things from the dressing-table and put them within reach upon the bed. She brought the hand-mirror, too, and the bottle of scent.

Already, thought Marda West, Nurse Ansel fitted in. She saw herself putting flowers in the small guest-room., choosing the right books, fitting a portable wireless in case Nurse Ansel should be bored in the evenings.

"I'll be with you at eight o'clock."

The door closed. Nurse Ansel had gone.

Marda West lifted the hand-mirror and looked into it. Nothing changed in the room; the street noises came from outside, and presently the little maid who had seemed a weasel yesterday came in to dust the room. She said, "Good morning," but the patient did not answer. Perhaps she was tired. The maid dusted, and went her way.

Then Marda West took up the mirror and looked into it once more. No, she had not been mistaken. The eyes that stared back at her were doe's eyes, wary before sacrifice, and the timid deer's head was meek, already bowed.