

Oberon Road

AM Burrage

I am sorry to have to begin this true tale by breaking one of the written laws of the short story. My numerous Guides to Young Authors, compiled by gentlemen of great but undiscovered literary ability, assure me that I should begin with a striking incident or some pregnant dialogue, and never—no, never—with a long and prosy character sketch.

Well, no doubt they are right, but they were never set the task of writing this particular story. If you don't like my way of doing it, you had best say *au revoir*, and turn over a few pages, and perhaps we may meet again more auspiciously a month or so hence. For, honestly, I don't know how to begin this tale about Michael Cubitt without telling you all that ought essentially to be known about the man.

Michael Cubitt—you who are still reading—was a man of forty-two, or maybe forty-three, and he lived in the very worst suburb in the south-east of London. He lived there for two reasons—because he had settled there as a mere boy and hated changes, and because it was cheaper than most other suburbs. For he was very fond of money, and it would seem that his affection was reciprocated, since he had plenty. Not fond of money for money's sake, mind you, but because he wanted to make sure when he grew old of having a fire by which to warm his thin hands. He had already made sure of that fire; his money was safely and skilfully invested; but good and bad habits are alike tenacious.

Cubitt was a lawyer, a partner in a City firm with an enormous practice. He had begun in the same firm as a clerk, and had prudently bought his articles with part of the one thousand pounds which Aunt Martha left him. He was thin and spare, sallow and bloodless, and his humour—what there was of it—was sardonic. He had no friends and no enemies, because so far as could be discovered, he had never done anybody a bad or a good turn.

His landlady in Fenton Road, who had been ministering to him for more than twenty years, would not have lost him for anything, but at the same time she rather disliked him. For, as she told Mrs Perkins next door, although he paid regular and gave no trouble, there was something about him that wasn't quite 'uman.

Subject to railway strikes and minor alterations in the time-table, he went up by the same train every morning, and came back by the same train every evening. His only recreations seemed to consist of reading heavy books on conveyancing, and working out chess problems which are to be found in the more intellectual kind of newspapers. He had no apparent vices and no apparent virtues. Nobody but himself knew exactly what he got out of life.

He was not even fond of fresh air, and the only exercise he took was in walking from Fenton Road to the station, and from the station back again to Fenton Road.

Fenton Road was only two or three hundred yards from the station as the crow flies, but it was actually near half a mile by road, by reason of one having to walk round three sides of a square. The streets were old-fashioned and badly planned, and Cubitt was shocked and dismayed when he came to reckon up how much boot leather he had been compelled to waste in consequence. If you wanted to go from the station to the place of his abode, you had to cross the road, turn to the right, and walk about a furlong until you came to Norman Avenue; there you turned to the left, walked down Norman Avenue for the best part of a quarter of a mile, and turned to the left again. This brought you into Fenton Road, and Cubitt's lodgings were about two hundred yards up on the left. He hated Norman Avenue cordially, and when the weather was damp, and the road was up—as it was that Christmas time—he hated it worse than ever.

It was three or four evenings before Christmas, and the weather was wet and muggy and depressing, and the only snow to be seen was on the covers of the magazines, when Michael Cubitt departed from custom so far as to speak to a stranger. What made him do it he didn't know. He was in a bad temper because of the approaching holidays, when he wouldn't know what to do with his time, and because it was raining in streaks, and because Norman Avenue was 'up', and there would be no walking on the road, and he would be jostled by young fools who insist on walking abreast, and his eyes would be imperilled by the rib-ends of innumerable umbrellas. But, in spite of all this, he actually vouchsafed an answer when the only other occupant of his compartment laid aside an evening paper and suddenly addressed him.

'A lot of rain,' said the stranger casually.

Cubitt regarded him with a long, comprehensive glance. A queer-looking fellow, this man who sat opposite him. He was tall and thin and wore his clothes as if they grew upon him, like the fur of an animal. His mouth was long and straight, almost ludicrously like a receptacle for letters, his forehead high and narrow, and his eyes small, dark, beady, and full of meaningless laughter. But it was his ears which interested Cubitt most. These were long and large and had no lobes to them, and at the tops they were distinctly pointed. He caught himself wondering if they were the ears of a criminal; at least they were the ears of no normal person.

'Wretched weather,' Cubitt grunted.

'Oh, I like it,' said the other, grinning, 'it makes the toadstools grow.'

Cubitt frowned slightly over what he considered to be a pleasantry which was either feeble or beyond his understanding.

'And, of course,' he grunted, 'they've taken Norman Avenue up, and the pavements will be all over wet clay which the navvies have trodden there, and I shan't be able to move for people with shopping baskets and umbrellas. I don't know what the L.C.C. is thinking of— taking up the roads at this time of the year.'

The stranger had one eye closed as if in contemplation of something, but the other, turned upon Cubitt, grew suddenly very bright and friendly.

'You live in Judge Park?' he asked.

'Yes, Fenton Road,' said Cubitt, wondering at the same time what made him so communicative.

'Ah, I know Judge Park. I'm going there myself tonight. I've got something to give to a good policeman who gave a poor man sixpence yesterday instead of running him in for being without a home.'

'Oh!' said Cubitt shortly, not greatly interested.

'So,' added the stranger, making his eyes snap merrily, 'when you see him standing up in the rain, holding up some traffic with one hand, and beckoning other traffic forward with the other, you'll know he won't really be there at all. He'll be back in a hayfield down Shropshire way.'

It was at this point that Cubitt wished he had brought an evening paper to

retire behind, for he now surmised that his companion was a lunatic; and although he did not suppose him to be dangerous, he was very glad that Judge Park was the next station.

'But why go through Norman Avenue at all?' demanded the stranger, altering his tone.

'Because it's the shortest way to Fenton Road. It's the only way unless I turn to the left outside the station, and lose a quarter of a mile, and on a night like this'

'Nonsense! There's a much shorter way. Why don't you go through Oberon Road?'

'Oberon Road? I've never heard of it.'

'Cross the road outside the station,' said the stranger glibly, 'turn to your right, and it's the first turning on your left.'

'But that's Norman Avenue.'

'No, it isn't. It's Oberon Road—a long way before you get to Norman Avenue.'

Cubitt scowled because he hated to be contradicted.

'I tell you, sir,' he said, 'that there isn't any turning on the left until you come to Norman Avenue. It's all solid houses, and I ought to know because I've gone home that way every week-day evening for the last twenty-odd years.'

'Oberon Road is there,' said the stranger, 'only you haven't noticed it.'

'But it's impossible!' Cubitt exclaimed, wondering why he was taking the trouble to argue with a madman. 'Do you mean that it runs parallel with Norman Avenue and leads into Fenton Road?'

'It leads almost anywhere, and it doesn't run parallel to any road in the world that I've ever heard of.'

Cubitt was glad that the electric train stopped just then with all the abruptness peculiar to its kind, and to see Judge Park on the station lamps, although the light of them revealed straight diagonal lines of rain. He was first out of the compartment, because he had no liking for his queer companion.

'Good night,' he grunted over his shoulder.

'Oberon Road,' returned the other. 'The first on your left before you get to Norman Avenue.'

Cubitt joined the swarm of people collecting around the barrier, showed his season ticket, and went out as usual through the booking office. He did not wait under shelter to put up his umbrella, but opened it as he hurried across the road. He hurried not only because it was wet, but because he did not want to be overtaken by the madman who had been talking to him in the train. A very queer fellow, that! Fancy trying to tell him, Michael Cubitt, about a road on the left before one came to Norman Avenue! Why, it was all one solid unbroken line of villas and blocks of flats. Certainly there ought to have been a road cut through. It was scandalous that the people of Fenton Road should be compelled to go so far out of their way to and from the station. And if there had been such a road, as if he, Cubitt, wouldn't have known of it, seeing that he had gone that way every day for twenty-odd years.

So thought Cubitt as, with head down, he hurried forward under his umbrella. But he had not gone many yards ere he was brought up sharply and his thoughts rudely scattered. The pavement before him suddenly ended, as if he had reached the entrance to a side road. The curb on his right hand made a sweep to the left, enclosing him in an arc of a circle. At his feet was a gutter down which a muddy stream was flowing, to sing and splutter in a grating on the corner. Surely, he thought with a start, this couldn't be Norman Avenue already.

He lifted his gaze and knew immediately that it was not Norman Avenue.

He knew the houses on the corner too well to be mistaken. One of them was called Hazlehurst, and the other, being a place of public entertainment, was known as the Black Swan. And here were two villas which he could have sworn had hitherto been unbroken links in a long chain. He looked up, and there, painted on a board alongside one of the villas, was Oberon Road, as plain as a pikestaff!

So it was true after all, and Cubitt stood staring, holding his open umbrella down and letting the rain fall upon his head and shoulders.

'Well, I'm damned!' said Michael Cubitt, and you must understand that it was very rarely indeed that he was guilty of such an exclamation. Well, there was Oberon Road, an undoubted fact, and inviting him to take the short cut which he

had so often desired. If it ran straight, he reflected, it ought to bring him out into Fenton Road close to his lodgings. And yet he hesitated. There was something eerie about it all. How was it possible that he could have been so blind as not to see this road before? He could have sworn that it wasn't there in the morning. And how could they have made a road all in a few hours?

He looked up and down Station Road. That at least was normal.

Commonplace people were moving up and down, brushing against him as he stood there. A laden motor-bus ploughed by, spurting up liquid mud. On the other side of Station Road a youth was playing a mouth-organ, and another youth was wringing his mouth awry to do a like injustice to the King's English and a popular sentimental song. And these commonplace sights and sounds heartened Michael Cubitt. Absurd to have such vague, unquiet fancies when the world about him seemed to be as normal and as ugly as ever.

In a moment or two Cubitt made up his mind. He wheeled to the left and strode boldly up the pavement of Oberon Road.

At first Oberon Road was just like any other suburban road, except that it was unlit; and as Cubitt drew farther and farther away from the main thoroughfare the darkness grew deeper, until at last he could not see his hands which grasped the umbrella. And by and by the sounds of traffic and distant voices died away, and Cubitt walked in darkness and silence. And a great awe came upon him.

But after a little while the darkness lifted. The rain clouds above him parted, and the moon looked through, like a shining face peering between curtains. And the light grew stronger and stronger, until it was as bright sunlight, and Cubitt looked around him and uttered a little gasp of amazement and delight.

For Oberon Road was such a road as he had never seen before in any suburb or in any fair city. The houses were small, but they were a delight to the eye; some were thatched and some were gabled, after the Elizabethan style, and some were plastered and showed rough old timber; for all of them looked old. And all were set in delightful gardens of flowers and fair lawns and wooded spaces in which one knew there were little hidden arbours. And strangely enough it was not winter here, and the weather was warm and fair without being hot, as in the early days of a fine May. And Cubitt, who had never before coveted anything that was lovely for its

own sake, and had been content to stay on in his dingy lodgings to save expenses, caught himself thinking: I must certainly buy a house in Oberon Road, whatever it costs.'

In the front garden of one of these houses sat a girl who was lovelier than moonlight, who rocked a cradle with her foot, and sang a love song to the strumming of a guitar which she held in her white hands. So Cubitt went up to the gate, and lifted his bowler hat, and asked her if she knew of a house for sale or to be let, or failing that, would it be possible to get lodgings? And the girl stared at him curiously, and ceased singing, and shook her head.

'I really cannot tell you,' she said, 'I should inquire at the estate office.'

'And where is that?' he asked.

'Farther along. I would gladly come and show you, but Jack may be here at any minute, and it would never do for us to be absent when he came.'

'And who is Jack?' Cubitt asked.

'He is a failure, and unsuccessful poet; and when he has money he drinks; and when he has drunk he comes here for a little while. It is wrong of him to drink, but that is all understood and forgiven because he has suffered much. And because he was once kind and generous and brave, and beautiful in mind and body, they let him come here sometimes. No, I must not on any account be absent when Jack comes.'

'I see,' said Cubitt, who did not see at all. And lifting his bowler hat to her he passed on; and almost ran into Jenkins, one of his clerks, who was hurrying past in flannels, carrying a tennis racket.

'Why, Jenkins,' he exclaimed, 'fancy seeing you here!'

'Considering I live here, sir, it's really not so strange after all. That is to say, I live here sometimes. But I mustn't stop, sir, because I am going to play tennis with the dearest girl in the world. And one day, as soon as I can afford it, we are going to get married.'

'One moment, Jenkins. I want to know if I can get a house'

'I really mustn't stop, sir. You see, I didn't expect to meet you here. And, really,

I get so little time for tennis.'

It was then that Cubitt remembered that Jenkins had been lamed in the War, and was no longer able to play the game which had once been a passion with him. And he passed on, wondering, to see at a garden gate a boy with a cricket bat under his arm, and a familiar blazer hanging loose over his shoulders. He recognised the boy at once and greeted him with a shout of surprise, and the boy laughingly welcomed him, addressing him as Cupid.

Now Cupid was the name by which Cubitt had been called at school.

'If it isn't young Harvey!' Cubitt exclaimed. 'And what are you doing there with that cricket bat?'

'I am going to get some practice,' said young Harvey gravely, 'because, as you know, I am going to play for Middlesex when I grow up, and I must keep my hand in. But I never thought I should see you again, Cupid. And how funny and old and queer you look! And you do look silly with that umbrella!'

'Do you live here always, Harvey?' Cubitt asked wistfully. 'Or do you only come here sometimes?'

'Why, I live here always,' said young Harvey. And then Cubitt remembered that young Harvey had died when a boy of fourteen, and fear smote him again.

'Well,' he stammered, 'I hope you will do very well for Middlesex.'

'Yes,' said the boy gravely, 'we shall have a very good team when I begin to play. What with myself and Stoddart and Trott and J.T. Heame. And they say that new man Warner is very good. So you won't mind if I run off and get some practice, will you?'

So Cubitt watched him run away, and then, carrying his bewilderment like a load, walked on up the sunlit road between the fair houses and the fair gardens. For the moon which had first made light for him had given place to the sun, and his own shadow was the only ugly thing that he could see.

And along the road he met many, who were all very beautiful and very young, youths and young girls. For the most part they walked in pairs, and these couples had no eyes for anybody else but just each other. And Cubitt read in their eyes such

love for each other that his heart smote him with a pain which he had not suffered for more than twenty years, and had not thought ever to feel again.

It seemed to him that he had not walked very far ere he came to a house which was more beautiful than all the others; and why it was more beautiful he could not say, except that it gave more delight to his eyes. It was made of old red brick, with high rectangular windows, and a great wistaria in full bloom, with branches like a vine's, almost covered the face of it. Between the gate and the front door was a broad flagged path with moss and grass growing between the stones, and dividing two green lawns, on the left of which was a sundial.

And while he stood yearning after this little place of delight the door burst open and a little girl ran down the flagged path towards him. She was fair-haired and blue-eyed, and her frock was blue to match her eyes, and she wore a little white housewifely apron. And he knew her at once for Gladys, a little girl with whom he had played at being sweethearts when he was a small boy and whom he was once firmly determined to marry when he grew up.

This Gladys burst open the gate and ran straight into his arms and kissed him laughingly and violently, with a straight pursed-up mouth, as children kiss.

'Why, Gladys,' he said, 'if I had not just decided that I must give up being surprised, I should fall dead with amazement.'

'Dead?' she repeated wonderingly. 'What is "dead"?'

'And is this your house, my dear?' he asked quickly, for her question troubled him.

'And yours, too. Don't you remember it is just the house we decided we must have after we were married? And you were to have a real gun instead of one that only fired peas? And I was to have real babies instead of dolls?'

'My house?' he repeated. 'Our house?'

'Only, of course, you can't come and live in it like that. There's a regulation against it. For something has happened to you, and you're not a nice boy with inky fingers and a bag of sweets in your pocket any more.

You're a funny old gentleman with an umbrella and a bowler hat. And you can

only come here as the little boy you once were. But I know you're my Michael, all the same.'

Cubitt clasped the child to him rather wearily and began to whisper to her:

'My dear, tell me how I am to help being what I am. If this is my house it is unfair that I may not come and live in it. And how am I to be once more the boy who used to play with you in fields on which the builders have made houses since?'

'Perhaps,' said Gladys, 'you have not paid for our house. And it is only as little Michael that you can live in it. Why, all your old toys are in the attic, where they have been waiting for you all these years. And I have been wanting so much to hear you recite "Hohenlinden" again.'

'But what am I to do about it?' he asked hopelessly.

'If I were you,' she said, 'I should go and see them at the estate office.'

'Is that it, over there?' he asked.

'No. Where you are pointing now is the shed where Father Christmas keeps his sledge. You can see the reindeer grazing just beside it. He is a jolly old gentleman is Father Christmas, and often comes in to see me. No, that is the estate office—farther up the road, where I am pointing now.

'My dear,' said Cubitt, still holding her in his arms, 'I do not understand it. I do not understand anything. I only know that I, who thought I had never loved anything nor could love anything save myself, now love you better than anything else in life. I say this to you, who am an oldish man while you are still a child. And if I can win back to the boyhood which seemed to have been stolen from me while I slept, I may yet share with you the house which once we built together out of a dream.'

So said Cubitt, and she kissed him again with a little happy laugh and pursed-up mouth. Then Cubitt strode down the road to the estate office. The estate office was like any other estate office, but its surroundings invested it with a kind of beauty. Cubitt tapped at the door, and a voice bade him come in, and he entered to confront a very beautiful young man with white folded wings who sat behind a roll-top desk. And a little to his left was another young man, not so beautiful, and with

smaller wings, who pored over a ledger. Now it was well that Cubitt was determined to be surprised at nothing, for truly a house agent with wings is an unusual sight; and one would more expect to see a man of that calling decorated with horns and a tail. But Cubitt swallowed his surprise, even when he heard himself addressed courteously by name.

'Good-day, Mr Cubitt, and what can I do for you?'

'I want a house,' said Cubitt slowly and distinctly.

'A house? What sort of house? We have only small houses here, for those who require great mansions do not come to Oberon Road.'

'It is a small house that I want,' said Cubitt. 'That one with the wisteria and the sundial in front.'

'The sundial is merely a superfluous decoration, Mr Cubitt, because here it is always noon. But do you mean the house where Gladys lives?'

'That is the house. I understand that it is my house, too.'

'Yours?' He turned sharply to his clerk. 'Look it up, please, will you?'

And the clerk turned over several pages of the ledger and presently said, 'The house was built for Mr Cubitt, but he has not paid for it.'

'There you are, you see!' said the agent severely. 'And you don't think we're going to have middle-aged men with umbrellas living in Oberon Road, do you?'

Then Cubitt, controlling his voice with difficulty, said, 'I can pay for my house. You have only to say how much. For I have a great deal of money invested in gilt-edged securities, which I could realise in an hour.'

'I do not know the price, Mr Cubitt,' said the clear, hard voice. 'But I do not think that you can pay it now.'

'But—young Harvey never had any money!'

'Oh, yes, he did. He had a great deal. He had sixpence once, his week's pocket-money. And he gave it to a woman on the road who carried a baby which was starving because she was starving. And Jenkins bought his house here with a mouthful of water which he gave to a wounded man on Paschendael, when he

himself was wounded. It was his last drop of water, for none dared drink from the shell-holes; so he too paid a great price for his house, Mr Cubitt. And that girl whom you first saw here, she also paid a great price, for she gave all she had to an outcast; and that was tears, and sympathy, and a message of hope.'

'Do you mean that she gave them to the drunken poet she spoke of?' said Cubitt, with just a hint of outraged virtue in his tone, 'I wonder you have such an undesirable tenant. But perhaps he paid dearly for his villa.'

'He did, Mr Cubitt. He ruined himself to save a friend, and he was never strong enough to begin again. Some men are like that, Mr Cubitt. We do not admire drunkards; but when his brain is drugged with spirits he creeps here sometimes for little blessed half hours, and because he has paid for his house we have not the heart to turn him out.'

'Ah, the poor fellow!' said Cubitt, suddenly melting.

The agent regarded him out of kinder eyes.

'How did you get here, Mr Cubitt?' he asked; and Cubitt told him.

'This is one of Dandalon's tricks,' said the clerk curtly. 'He's always trying to be funny. It's about time you told him about it.'

'And yet,' said the agent thoughtfully, 'I do not altogether blame Dandalon. For I have just perceived symptoms in Mr Cubitt which bid me hope that we may yet do business together.'

'Ah, do you think so?' cried Cubitt, his face brightening. 'But tell me—oh, tell me—how much must I pay? Is it all that I have?'

'No,' said the agent, his voice growing very gentle, 'not all that you have; but all that you think you cannot spare. And you must give all your heart with it, and try at the same time not to think of the little house which you may be buying.'

'I will! I will!' Cubitt cried, very close to tears.

'Ah, well, then, perhaps we shall see you again not as you are today, and it may be that we shall become better acquainted.'

The agent spread his wings a little to help him rise to his feet; and he moved towards Cubitt, which was also towards the door, as a signal that the interview was

at an end.

'Goodbye,' said Cubitt, brokenly.

The agent held the door open for him.

'Goodbye for the present—Michael,' he said kindly, and he gave Cubitt the least little push between the shoulders.

And Cubitt stepped outside; not on to the fair road from which he had entered the office, but into the rain and darkness of the main thoroughfare of Judge Park.

Now I am afraid I know how the late Mr Dickens would have finished off this story. He would have made Cubitt straightway empty his pockets into the hands of the first tramp, and found some snow to enable him to pelt an errand boy out of sheer good nature. And Cubitt would have raised everybody's wages at the office next morning, and bought the prize turkey for the old charwoman whose oven wasn't big enough to cook it, and invited himself to the junior clerks' Christmas party and made an idiot of himself by dancing there.

But Cubitt did nothing to qualify himself for an asylum, although a change was soon apparent in him. He started giving, and perhaps the agent, hearing of these things, smiled, knowing how desperately it hurt Cubitt to give. And because it hurt him, this was counted in Cubitt's favour. And really I believe the man tried hard to be sorry for those to whom he gave. And that also was counted for grace.

More than that, besides being kind to others, the man began to be kinder to himself. He wore better clothes, and changed his lodgings—to the bitter indignation of his landlady— and sometimes stood himself a bottle of wine with his lunch, and thus gradually became a human being. And these things also were entered on his credit side.

And strangest of all he sought out Gladys again, and found her not only a spinster but extremely unwilling to remain one. She was now a fine woman of forty-one, and looked not a day over thirty-nine, at which age time ceases for all self-respecting women. So he married her; and this again was not counted against him, since he was well old enough to know his own mind. It was on their return from the honeymoon that Cubitt had a queer aberration. They were just getting into a taxicab to drive to their new home, and Cubitt was thinking deeply of something

—very likely wondering if fourpence were enough for a tip, or whether he oughtn't to spring sixpence.

'Drive us to Oberon Road, please,' he said.

The man didn't know where it was. But I think he may have taken them there, all the same.