



Fontana

THE 8TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

Chilling tales of the supernatural by Agatha Christie, Alfred Noyes,
Lord Lytton and others – selected by Robert Aickman



**THE EIGHTH FONTANA BOOK OF
GREAT GHOST STORIES**

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The Eighth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by Robert Aickman



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INTRODUCTION

So we meet again—for the eighth time. What could be more significant, more full of omen? Promisingly ominous, I trust.

There is a town in the north of England where one sometimes sees a queer-looking dog. At first one only glimpses it occasionally—as one rounds a corner, perhaps—or as it does. Then, shrinking into oneself from the street winds, one begins to observe it more often. In the end, one seems to notice it constantly: and then one knows that one is about to pass from this brief and troubled existence, to which the reading of a good ghost story seems often the only antidote.

Once more no author awaits within whom the reader has encountered before in this series. Once more a firm course has been steered between the merely horrific to the right of us and the merely scientific to the left of us. Throughout we commit ourselves to another world altogether: which none the less exists all around us; of which we are a part at least as much as of the familiar and material world; and which occasionally we see, hear, and even touch—or which touches us. There is no instant or guaranteed pathway through the borderland, and Mrs Christie's tale will serve to illustrate the dangers which can attend the desperate belief that there is; but it is none the less a completely open question whether this daily world is the dream or that other world we seem to glimpse so seldom. The most confining of all errors is to suppose there is no refuge from the hard facts: for these are primarily time and disappointment. From that lugubrious misconception let our nine authors open an eighth door.

Ibsen observed, in his later days, that the supreme sin was to destroy the love-life in another's heart. Compar-

able is the sin of wantonly destroying the sense of wonder. It is this quality which makes Turgenev's *Bezhin Lea* such an unqualifiable masterpiece. Each leaf is faintly luminous as we pass in the quiet evening; and round every corner may be for each of us such a microcosm of human destiny as was offered by the group of boys in the light of the fires.

Edward Bulwer Lytton was a great master of the ghost story; precisely because he took the existence of that other world for granted, and so was able to guide us through it in a careful, almost matter-of-fact way. He knew the subject from wide and deep study, comparable to the study which lies behind his famous historical novels; but more important was the fact that the mysteries of the ghostly realm were curiously paralleled by the intricacies of his own complex and elaborate personality. Even as an author, there were at least three Lyttons (and, of course, there were several quite other Lyttons also, notably the political Lytton, who rose to be Disraeli's Colonial Secretary). First, there is the observant author of *Pelham*. Joseph Conrad, in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, shows us the tough old seaman, Singleton, 'spelling through *Pelham* with slow labour, and lost in an absorption profound enough to resemble a trance'; and though *Pelham* is a very long long book, others who read it may find themselves entranced also. Second, there is the historical Lytton, who wrote *The Last Days of Pompeii* and *Harold* and *The Last of the Barons*; books read by many when I was a schoolboy, now read less often no doubt, though one never quite knows in such cases. Third, there is Lytton the supernaturalist, who incorporates the talents of the other two, including sometimes the comedy, but who wrote far more directly from the soul, strange soul though it was. Lytton's novel, *Zanoni*, is one of the few complete successes in its difficult field: the long novel of the supernatural. It may be added that his present story, *The Haunted and the Haunters*, is believed in its narrative circumstances to be closely based upon an

actual case. Lytton was by no means the only cabinet minister to take a particular interest in psychic research. A. J. Balfour was his most important successor in that direction, as is widely known.

Trains are eerie, as motorcoaches can seldom be, and boats have a mystery that rarely attaches to helicopters: so here we have Mr Ellis's *The Haunted Haven*, with some really nasty phantoms – and notably apt to be met with on a cold weather holiday; and *Midnight Express* by the late Alfred Noyes, poet, romantic, and prophet. Mrs Marsh's *The Tree* is one of those stories which takes the initiative in capturing and organizing an impression felt by all. Here is the primitive truth about the anachronistic ancient so often found stranded in the careful suburban patch after development has taken place. *The Red Lodge* details another peril of property ownership: the property this time being of the kind usually found not too far from a good golf club. It was H. R. Wakefield's intention to make the hair stand on end: an exercise necessary on occasion in such places. Wakefield was what one may term a *prolific* writer of ghost stories. They are few.

As for my own fable, my object is to illustrate the extremely disturbing, remarkably inexplicable things that go on everywhere and happen to everyone, but are fully discerned only when we look at life with as much detachment and objectivity as we can bring ourselves to muster. Calderon remarked that life is a dream; and those who complain it is boring should cast out the fashionable heresy that everything can be accounted for if only enough cash is made available for research and education.

Gertrude Bacon was a turn of the century professional lady writer who took a plucky shot at every target in sight. In her present story there is one detail which catches the breath and manifests the true cold touch of the supernatural image.

Selecting these stories involves much fireside reading, as I have remarked before; and I should like to thank the small group of men and women who help me with it, and

notably my friend, Mr Kirby McCauley of Minneapolis, who over the years has shown the most dependable and penetrating insight into what a ghost story should be and should not be, and who is held in high regard wherever the phantoms meet.

ROBERT AICKMAN.

THE HAUNTED HAVEN

A. E. Ellis

Attention all shipping. The Meteorological Office issued the following gale warning at 1600 hours: south-westerly gale, force eight, imminent in sea areas Irish Sea, Lundy, and Fastnet.

In the south-eastern angle of St Bride's Bay, sheltered from the south-west winds by the projecting tongue of land that ends in Wooltack Point, nestles the little fishing village of Ticklas Haven, which consists of an inn, a compact group of cottages, a stout jetty partly fashioned out of the living rock, and two snug little coves or havens, one on each side of the jetty. In the more northerly of these tiny bays ten or a dozen fishing smacks may usually be seen riding at their moorings, or lying in lopsided idleness at ebb tide. In the other cove, although it appears more sheltered and suitable in every way for use as a harbour, never a boat will be seen, nor any signs of human occupation, such as the lobster-pots, coils of rope, nets and tarpaulins, which litter the foreshore of the north cove.

Four steep roads converge upon the village, two from the landward side and two from the coast to the north and the south-west. About a furlong up the more southerly of the landward roads, a hundred and fifty feet above the cluster of cottages in the haven, stands a ruined house, still known in the village as the Doctor's House, although now deserted for some thirty years. Little remains of this once imposing and substantial dwelling, a mansion in comparison with the fishermen's cottages it dominates, save the ivy-grown walls, through which the Atlantic gales shriek and wail, and the heavy wooden gate, which creaks and bangs in the wind like demoniac artillery.

For a quiet and restful summer resort Ticklas Haven is hard to beat, and I congratulated myself on my good for-

tune in not only discovering so cosy a nook, but in securing comfortable lodging at the inn. The landlord was a kindly and intelligent man, some fifty years of age, and his wife a cheerful and competent housewife and an excellent cook. My days were mostly spent fishing for mackerel in the bay, taking long tramps up and down the rugged coast, or simply lolling amongst the soft lush grass on the cliff-tops, drinking in the glorious panorama of St Bride's Bay, as it sweeps round in a majestic curve from Ramsey Island in the north to the Isle of Skomer in the south. When the weather was too boisterous for outdoor pursuits, there was the snug bar-parlour of the inn, and the rough but genial society of the fishermen who frequented it. It was there that I was sitting one August evening when the radio in the bar gave utterance to that ominous gale warning.

At the mention of south-westerly gales, I perceived a sudden start amongst the fishermen present, and apprehensive glances were exchanged. Several boats were to be seen fishing in the bay, and one or two of the men walked to the door and peered out anxiously at the distant smacks.

'Glad I'm not out there now,' muttered one old salt.

'Hope my son William'll get in before dark,' said another.

This display of alarm was surprising, for the bay is sheltered to a great extent from the south-west wind, and in any case the boats were all near enough in to make harbour before being overtaken by the oncoming gale, of which the sky was already giving ample warning. I remarked as much to the innkeeper, who agreed that the boats were in no real danger, but added that nobody in Ticklas Haven would willingly be out in the bay, or even in the neighbourhood of the harbour, after nightfall, when the wind blew strongly from the south-west: it amounted to a fixed tradition with them. I at once became eager to learn the origin of this strange superstition, and besought the landlord to enlighten me further.

'Well, it's a strange story,' replied the innkeeper, 'and I can best begin by showing you a picture that a painter who

stayed here many years ago gave to my grandfather, when he was landlord of this inn.'

So saying, he led the way into a back parlour and pointed to an oil-painting hanging on the wall in a dark corner. I took it down and carried it to the window, and saw that it represented the harbour at Ticklas Haven as seen from the beach at low tide. Although about eighty years old, the painting might almost have been done yesterday, for everything was depicted much as it is now, with one striking exception. The north haven, where now all the boats are kept, was in the picture practically deserted, except for some children at play on the sand, whilst the south haven presented just such a scene of activity as would be expected in so excellent a harbour. Half a dozen fishing-boats lay high and dry at its entrance, while on the shingle sat a group of fishermen mending sails and nets. Two or three women were carrying baskets of fish up towards the village, and the usual litter of gear was scattered over the foreshore. In fact the two little inlets presented an aspect just the reverse of their present-day appearance.

'Why is it,' I asked, 'that the south haven, which seems so clearly the better of the two, has now been abandoned in favour of the other, which was apparently in use in your grandfather's day?'

'That is precisely what I am about to tell you,' replied the landlord.

The Innkeeper's Story

When I was a lad that south haven was still used, as you see it in that picture, and very few boats put into the north haven, which is, as you observe, less sheltered and convenient.

There lived in the village in those days three brothers, who worked for their uncle, the owner of a fishing-boat and gear. They were tall, strong young fellows, these three brothers, but of a morose disposition, and mixed little with other folk in the village. They were very hardy and fearless and would put to sea in all but the most tempestuous

weather, usually accompanied by their uncle, who was a first-rate seaman and could handle a craft in all seas. He was a grasping old ruffian, however, and on the strength of his ownership of the boat he appropriated most of the profits of the fishing and allowed his nephews barely enough to live upon, with the understanding that on his death they would inherit his property. His niggardliness was a source of much discontent amongst the brothers, who bore their uncle no affection and only continued to work for him in the expectation of some day possessing his wealth, which, owing to economy and judicious investment was pretty considerable for a man in his position.

One spring night – I was seventeen at the time – the four put to sea, although it was beginning to blow up a gale from the south-west and the crews of none of the other boats would venture out. We watched them beating out past the Stack Rocks till they were hidden by the rain and darkness, and some of us wondered whether we should ever see them again.

Early next morning the boat returned, with no fish, and without the uncle. The brothers' story was that he had been carried overboard by a huge wave and had at once disappeared. It was useless to search for him and they were themselves in great peril. They had a very rough time getting back and the boat and gear were badly damaged. The three brothers seemed more upset about the accident than one might have expected, considering the unfriendly relations existing between them and their uncle, by whose death they now became comparatively well off. They were loud in their expressions of grief at their loss and repeatedly cursed their folly in putting to sea on such a night.

Two days later the uncle's body was washed ashore in the south haven, where it was found by a fisherman in the early morning actually caught on the anchor of his own boat. The body was carried up to the quay, where it was noticed that there was a long, livid bruise across the right temple. The doctor, who lived in that big house, now a

ruin, up the hill, examined the corpse, and at the inquest expressed the opinion that the bruise had been inflicted before death and had been caused by a severe blow from some blunt instrument, such as a club – or perhaps a tiller.

The coroner looked up sharply at this, and asked if the bruise might not equally well have been caused by the deceased striking his head against the mast or the gunwale of the boat in falling overboard. The doctor agreed that that might have been the cause of the injury, but added that he could not believe that such a severe blow could have been inflicted in such a manner.

The eldest brother was then re-examined as to what precisely took place, and deposed that his uncle had been knocked overboard by the boom suddenly swinging over and striking him on the head. This fresh testimony was corroborated by the other brothers, although previously they had all repeatedly affirmed that their uncle was simply washed overboard by a wave and had made no mention of the boom. The jury, however, brought in a verdict of 'death by misadventure'. The coroner was later criticized for not excluding two of the brothers from the court while the first was giving evidence. The deceased was buried next day in the churchyard at Walwyn's Castle. That was near the end of April.

In the last week of May the youngest of the three brothers slipped on the jetty when landing from the boat one dark night, there being a heavy sea running due to a strong south-west wind, and broke his neck on the rocks in the south haven below.

Towards the end of June the eldest brother, being harbour-bound by a south-westerly gale, was gathering mussels and limpets on the rocks at the far side of the south haven, when a large stone fell from the cliff above and smashed in his skull.

Within a month the surviving brother was overtaken by a sudden squall, coming up from the south-west, while fishing out by Grassholm, and was washed ashore, together with the wreck of his boat, about a week later, at

almost the identical spot where his uncle's body had been found. The boat, so battered as to be no longer seaworthy, was hauled up on the shingle and left there to rot.

The violent deaths of these three brothers, following so regularly one after the other, considered together with the suspicious circumstances attending their uncle's death, gave cause for much gossip amongst the village folk, and what had at first been but a vague uneasiness developed into a general conviction that there had been foul play.

Some nine months after the death of the last of the brothers, we had a spell of very rough weather, with strong gales from the south-west, and the fishermen were idle for weeks on end. A large amount of driftwood was cast up during these storms and the men employed themselves in gathering and storing this for firewood. There was one old man in particular, now too infirm ever to go out fishing, who was to be seen early and late collecting this wood, and at low tide was always hobbling about the haven like some ungainly sea-bird, leaving off only when it grew too dark to see.

One stormy night the old man failed to return home and a search was made at daybreak. We had not far to look: his body was found wedged among the rocks in the south haven, with a ragged cut across the forehead. On his face was such a look of horror as I pray I may never see again. The doctor said that in his opinion the old man had received a bad fright and had started to run away, but had tripped over a boulder and stunned himself. He had then been drowned by the incoming tide. What on earth could have so terrified him was a mystery.

Some three months later, when the wind was again blowing strongly from the south-west, a girl of fifteen, daughter of one of the fishermen, went over to the rocks beyond the south haven to collect shellfish. She stayed too long and was cut off by the flowing tide, but her parents were not worried, for she was quite safe and had taken some food with her, and would be able to get back when the tide was low again at about ten p.m. The sea was too

rough for a boat to approach the rocks, and there was no way up the cliff, so she was just left to wait.

At half-past ten that night the girl suddenly burst into her home, screaming wildly and clearly crazed with terror. She had gone completely out of her mind and howled and raved like a maniac. Her cries soon attracted a crowd to the cottage and someone went and fetched the doctor. He could do nothing to calm the child, however, and had to put her under sedation. After being left under observation for a day or two she was taken away to the asylum, where she died soon afterwards without recovering her reason.

The most extraordinary feature of this sad case was what the poor child kept repeating in her insane ravings. It was all about 'dead men': 'the four dead men,' she would screech, 'the dead men in the boat!', and could utter nothing but incoherent phrases about 'the dead men'.

This second case of severe fright, following so soon after the death of the old wood-gatherer, and in the same place, namely the south haven, created a considerable stir amongst the villagers, and their fears were further increased by a peculiar occurrence which had been noticed several times and by many witnesses, including myself, namely that on the morning following a south-westerly gale tracks were seen in the sand leading down to the sea from the derelict boat, as if it had been launched and beached again during the night. This was humanly impossible, as the brothers' boat could not have floated for a single minute, but there the tracks always were at dawn after a high wind from the south-west, provided they had not been obliterated by the flowing tide.

One evening, shortly after the death of the poor demented girl, the doctor came into the bar-parlour here and asked to have a few words with my father in private. They came into this back room and the doctor told my father that he had been all around the village endeavouring to persuade someone to spend a night with him by the wrecked fishing-boat in the south haven when next the south-west wind blew a gale, in order to try and solve the mystery

of those tracks in the sand, but not a man would go near the place after dark for love or money. The doctor then asked my father if he would watch with him, for otherwise he would go alone, and it was desirable to have more than one witness of whatever took place. My father, though not at all liking the job, eventually undertook to keep the doctor company.

It was not until the autumn equinoctial gales began that a suitable opportunity for the investigation occurred, but at last the wind blew so strongly from the south-west that the boats were unable to put to sea. At about ten o'clock one cloudy night the doctor called in for my father and the pair of them went down to the south haven. They found a sheltered corner amongst the rocks in full view of the wrecked boat, where they made themselves as comfortable as they could and began their watch. My father afterwards said that he had experienced only one thing in his life more unpleasant than the beginning of that vigil, and that was its end.

The wind, now blowing a whole gale, sent dense masses of black clouds hurtling across the moon, which intermittently shone forth upon as wild a scene as could be imagined. Even in this sheltered corner of the bay the breakers were dashing high up the rocks, while, farther out, the sea seemed to have gone mad and was foaming in tempestuous fury like a living thing in torment. No fishing-boat could have weathered such a storm for a moment.

So fiercely magnificent was the view across the bay that the two watchers became absorbed in contemplating it and forgot about the boat on which they were supposed to be keeping an eye. Suddenly my father's gaze was diverted by a movement on the sand below and he grasped the doctor's arm and pointed. There, half way between its normal resting place and the edge of the surf, was the wreck of the fishing-smack, while four men, two on each side, were hauling it down the beach!

The doctor gave a shout and began to clamber down

from his perch on the rocks, but the men at the boat seemed not to hear the cry; they rapidly dragged the derelict down to the sea, launched it, and climbed aboard. Two of the men put out oars and started to row, one took the helm, while the fourth stationed himself in the bows. Then the old tub, with great rents in her sides and a hole in the bottom that a man could have crawled through, put out to sea and was quickly lost to view.

My father and the doctor stood by the edge of the sea like men thunderstruck until the incoming tide wet their legs and recalled them to themselves. They then went up the beach to make sure that it was the wreck that had thus been miraculously launched, and found that it was indeed gone. There could be no shadow of doubt that four men had put to sea in a near hurricane with a boat which would not normally have floated for ten seconds. There was nothing for it but to await the possible return of these uncanny mariners, so the two men returned to their former position on the rocks and kept a tireless watch upon the stormy sea.

Shortly after two o'clock in the morning their vigilance was rewarded by the sight of a boat approaching from the direction of the Stack Rocks. It drew rapidly inshore, and proved to be the old fishing-boat with her mysterious crew, who appeared quite unaffected by the mountainous seas and beached the boat as easily as if it had been a dead calm. The four men then dragged the boat up to its habitual place on the shingle and moved off in single file towards the village.

The doctor immediately jumped down and ran across the beach so as to intercept them, followed by my father. These two reached the foot of the quay where they waited for the four men to come up. On they came, walking stiffly in line, until they were abreast of the watchers, when the clouds covering the moon blew away and there was revealed a spectacle that sent my father tearing blindly across the beach and turned the doctor sick and faint where he stood.

Those four men were the long dead and buried brothers and their uncle!

The doctor, rallying from the first shock, continued to gaze in horror as they passed. In front, marching with no movement beyond a mechanical swinging of the legs, was the old man, a great, livid weal across the side of his forehead. Behind him, with the same mechanical gait, stalked his three nephews, the first with his head all crushed and bloody, the next swollen and bloated and covered with a tangle of seaweed, and the third with his head hanging on one side at a horrible angle. So the four dead men walked up from the sea, and the doctor, overcome with dreadful nausea, collapsed in a dead faint.

The spray blowing over the jetty brought the doctor round from his fainting fit and he tottered to his feet. The ghastly procession had vanished, so he went in search of my father, whom he found lying insensible on the shingle in the north haven, having fallen and struck his head on the prow of a boat. Help was summoned and my father was carried home, but it was many days before he was sufficiently recovered to attend to business and he never altogether got over the shock he received on that awful night. Meanwhile the doctor resolved to have the old fishing-boat destroyed, in the hope of putting a stop to these supernatural proceedings. Not a soul in the place would now go near it, so the doctor, single-handed, built up a pile of brushwood around the wreck and set it alight. The whole thing was soon consumed and the ashes were cast into the sea so that not a trace remained.

At eleven o'clock that very night, as I was shutting up the inn, four men passed up the street walking stiffly in single file. I hastily closed and locked the door and ran up to my bedroom, the window of which overlooked the street. It was too dark to see much, but something about the figures filled me with dread, and the rearmost carried his head at an unnatural angle. I watched them until they turned up the hill leading to the doctor's house, and then went to bed. A little later I fancied I heard a scream

coming from the hill, but it was not repeated and may merely have been a seagull crying.

Next day the woman who used to 'do' for the doctor came back to the village in great distress, saying that she had found the door open and the doctor gone. Search was made along the shore and all over the neighbourhood, but without success. A few days later the doctor's body was washed ashore by a high tide in the south haven and was deposited on the very spot where he had burnt the boat.

So now you can understand why we at Ticklas Haven avoid that south haven and fear the south-west wind.

'But do the dead men still haunt the haven when the sou'wester blows?' I asked.

'Nobody ever goes there to see,' replied the innkeeper.

THE RED LODGE

H. R. Wakefield

I am writing this from an imperative sense of duty, for I consider the Red Lodge is a foul death-trap and utterly unfit to be a human habitation—it has its own proper denizens—and because I know its owner to be an unspeakable blackguard to allow it so to be used for his financial advantage. He knows the perils of the place perfectly well; I wrote him of our experiences, and he didn't even acknowledge the letter, and two days ago I saw the ghastly pest-house advertised in *Country Life*. So anyone who rents the Red Lodge in future will receive a copy of this document as well as some uncomfortable words from Sir William, and that scoundrel Wilkes can take what action he pleases.

I certainly didn't carry any prejudice against the place down to it with me: I had been too busy to look over it myself, but my wife reported extremely favourably—I take her word for most things—and I could tell by the photographs that it was a magnificent specimen of the medium-sized Queen Anne house, just the ideal thing for me. Mary said the garden was perfect, and there was the river for Tim at the bottom of it. I had been longing for a holiday, and was in the highest spirits as I travelled down. I have not been in the highest spirits since.

My first vague, faint uncertainty came to me so soon as I had crossed the threshold. I am a painter by profession, and therefore sharply responsive to colour tone. Well, it was a brilliantly fine day, the hall of the Red Lodge was fully lighted, yet it seemed a shade off the key, as it were, as though I were regarding it through a pair of slightly darkened glasses. Only a painter would have noticed it, I fancy.

When Mary came out to greet me, she was not looking as well as I had hoped, or as well as a week in the country should have made her look.

'Everything all right?' I asked.

'Oh, yes,' she replied, but I thought she found it difficult to say so, and then my eye detected a curious little spot of green on the maroon rug in front of the fireplace. I picked it up—it seemed like a patch of river slime.

'I suppose Tim brings those in,' said Mary. 'I've found several; of course, he promises he doesn't.' And then for a moment we were silent, and a very unusual sense of constraint seemed to set a barrier between us. I went out into the garden to smoke a cigarette before lunch, and sat myself down under a very fine mulberry tree.

I wondered if, after all, I had been wise to have left it all to Mary. There was nothing wrong with the house, of course, but I am a bit psychic, and I always know the mood or character of a house. One welcomes you with the tail-writhing enthusiasm of a really nice dog, makes you at home, and at your ease at once. Others are sullen, watchful, hostile, with things to hide. They make you feel that you have obtruded yourself into some curious affairs which are none of your business. I had never encountered so hostile, aloof, and secretive a living place as the Red Lodge seemed when I first entered it. Well, it couldn't be helped, though it was disappointing; and there was Tim coming back from his walk, and the luncheon-gong. My son seemed a little subdued and thoughtful, though he looked pretty well, and soon we were all chattering away with those quick changes of key which occur when the respective ages of the conversationalists are 40, 33, and 6½, and after half a bottle of Meursault and a glass of port I began to think I had been a morbid ass. I was still so thinking when I began my holiday in the best possible way by going to sleep in an exquisitely comfortable chair under the mulberry tree. But I have slept better. I dozed off, but I had a silly impression of being watched, so that I kept waking up in case there might be someone with his

eye on me. I was lying back, and could just see a window on the second floor framed by a gap in the leaves, and on one occasion, when I woke rather sharply from one of these dozes, I thought I saw for a moment a face peering down at me, and this face seemed curiously flattened against the pane—just a ‘carry over’ from a dream, I concluded. However, I didn’t feel like sleeping any more, and began to explore the garden. It was completely walled in, I found, except at the far end, where there was a door leading through to a path which, running parallel to the right-hand wall, led to the river a few yards away. I noticed on this door several of those patches of green slime for which Tim was supposedly responsible. It was a dark little corner cut off from the rest of the garden by two rowan trees, a cool, silent little place I thought it. And then it was time for Tim’s cricket lesson, which was interrupted by the arrival of some infernal callers. But they were pleasant people, as a matter of fact, the Local Knuts, I gathered, who owned the Manor House: Sir William Prowse and his lady and his daughter. I went for a walk with him after tea.

‘Who had this house before us?’ I asked.

‘People called Hawker,’ he replied. ‘That was two years ago.’

‘I wonder the owner doesn’t live in it,’ I said. ‘It isn’t an expensive place to keep up.’

Sir William paused as if considering his reply.

‘I think he dislikes being so near the river. I’m not sorry, for I detest the fellow. By the way, how long have you taken it for?’

‘Three months,’ I replied, ‘till the end of October.’

‘Well, if I can do anything for you I shall be delighted. If you are in any trouble, come straight to me.’ He slightly emphasized the last sentence.

I rather wondered what sort of trouble Sir William envisaged for me. Probably he shared the general opinion that artists were quite mad at times, and that when I had one of my lapses I should destroy the peace in some

manner. However, I was duly grateful.

I was sorry to find Tim didn't seem to like the river; he appeared nervous of it, and I determined to help him to overcome this, for the fewer terrors one carries through life with one the better, and they can often be laid by delicate treatment in childhood. Curiously enough, the year before at Frinton he seemed to have no fear of the sea.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully – at least I think I can say so. After dinner I strolled down to the end of the garden, meaning to go through the door and have a look at the river. Just as I got my hand on the latch there came a very sharp, furtive whistle. I turned round quickly, but seeing no one, concluded it had come from someone in the lane outside. However, I didn't investigate further, but went back to the house.

I woke up the next morning feeling a shade depressed. My dressing-room smelled stale and bitter, and I flung its windows open. As I did so I felt my right foot slip on something. It was one of those small, slimy, green patches. Now Tim would never come into my dressing-room. An annoying little puzzle. How on earth had that patch – ? Which question kept forcing its way into my mind as I dressed. How could a patch of green slime . . . ? How could a patch of green slime . . . ? Dropped from something? From what? I am very fond of my wife – she slaved for me when I was poor, and always has kept me happy, comfortable, and faithful, and she gave me my small son Timothy. I must stand between her and patches of green slime! What in hell's name was I talking about? And it was a flamingly fine day. Yet all during breakfast my mind was trying to find some sufficient reason for these funny little patches of green slime, and not finding it.

After breakfast I told Tim I would take him out in a boat on the river.

'Must I, Daddy?' he asked, looking anxiously at me.

'No, of course not,' I replied, a trifle irritably, 'but I believe you'll enjoy it.'

'Should I be a funk if I didn't come?'

'No, Tim, but I think you should try it once, anyway.'

'All right,' he said.

He's a plucky little chap, and did his very best to pretend to be enjoying himself, but I saw it was a failure from the start.

Perplexed and upset, I asked his nurse if she knew of any reason for this sudden fear of water.

'No, sir,' she said. 'The first day he ran down to the river just as he used to run down to the sea, but all of a sudden he started crying and ran back to the house. It seemed to me he'd seen something in the water which frightened him.'

We spent the afternoon motoring round the neighbourhood, and already I found a faint distaste at the idea of returning to the house, and again I had the impression that we were intruding, and that something had been going on during our absence which our return had interrupted.

Mary, pleading a headache, went to bed soon after dinner, and I went to the study to read.

Directly I had shut the door I had again that very unpleasant sensation of being watched. It made the reading of Sidgwick's *The Use of Words in Reasoning*—an old favourite of mine, which requires concentration—a difficult business. Time after time I found myself peeping into dark corners and shifting my position. And there were little sharp sounds; just the oak-panelling cracking, I supposed. After a time I became more absorbed in the book, and less fidgety, and then I heard a very soft cough just behind me. I felt little icy rays pour down and through me, but I would not look round, and I would go on reading. I had just reached the following passage: 'However many things may be said about Socrates, or about any fact observed, there remains still more that might be said if the need arose; the need is the determining factor. Hence the distinction between complete and incomplete description, though perfectly sharp and clear in the abstract, can only have a meaning—can only be applied to actual cases—if it be taken as equivalent to *sufficient* description, the sufficiency

being relative to some purpose. Evidently the description of Socrates as a man, scanty though it is, may be fully sufficient for the purpose of the modest inquiry whether he is *mortal* or not' – when my eye was caught by a green patch which suddenly appeared on the floor beside me, and then another and another, following a straight line towards the door. I picked up the nearest one, and it was a bit of soaking slime. I called on all my will-power, for I feared something worse to come, and it should *not* materialize – and then no more patches appeared. I got up and walked deliberately, slowly, to the door, turned on the light in the middle of the room, and then came back and turned out the reading-lamp and went to my dressing-room. I sat down and thought things over. There was something very wrong with this house. I had passed the stage of pretending otherwise, and my inclination was to take my family away from it the next day. But that meant sacrificing £168, and we had nowhere else to go. It was conceivable that these phenomena were perceptible only to me, being half a Highlander. I might be able to stick it out if I were careful and kept my tail up, for apparitions of this sort are partially subjective – one brings something of oneself to their materialization. That is a hard saying, but I believe it to be true. If Mary and Tim and the servants were immune it was up to me to face and fight this nastiness. As I undressed, I came to the decision that I would decide nothing then and there, and that I would see what happened. I made this decision against my better judgment, I think.

In bed I tried to thrust all this away from me by a conscious effort to 'change the subject,' as it were. The easiest subject for me to switch over to is the myriad-sided, useless, consistently abused business of creating things, stories out of pens and ink and paper, representations of things and moods out of paint, brushes and canvas, and our own miseries, perhaps, out of wine, women and song. With a considerable effort, therefore, and with the edges of my brain anxious to be busy with bits of green slime, I recalled an article I had read that day on a glorious word

'Jugendbewegung,' the 'Youth Movement,' that pregnant or merely wind-swollen Teutonism! How ponderously it attempted to canonize with its polysyllabic sonority that inverted Boy-Scoutishness of the said youths and maidens. 'One bad, mad deed—sonnet—scribble of some kind—lousy daub—a day.' Bunk without spunk, sauce without force, Futurism without a past, merely a *Transition* from one yelping pose to another. And then I suddenly found myself at the end of the garden, attempting desperately to hide myself behind a rowan tree, while my eyes were held relentlessly to face the door. And then it began slowly to open, and something which was horridly unlike anything I had seen before began passing through it, and I knew It knew I was there, and then my head seemed burst and flamed asunder, splintered and destroyed, and I awoke trembling to feel that something in the darkness was poised an inch or two above me, and then drip, drip, something began falling on my face. Mary was in the bed next to mine, and I *would not* scream, but flung the clothes over my head, my eyes streaming with the tears of terror. And so I remained cowering till I heard the clock strike five, and dawn, the ally I longed for, came, and the birds began to sing, and then I slept.

I awoke a wreck, and after breakfast, feeling the need to be alone, I pretended I wanted to sketch, and went out into the garden. Suddenly I recalled Sir William's remark about coming to see him if there was any trouble. Not much difficulty in guessing what he had meant. I'd go and see him about it at once. I wished I knew whether Mary was troubled, too. I hesitated to ask her, for, if she were not, she was certain to become suspicious and uneasy if I questioned her. And then I discovered that, while my brain had been busy with its thoughts, my hand had also not been idle, but had been occupied in drawing a very singular design on the sketching-block. I watched it as it went automatically on. Was it a design or a figure of some sort? When had I seen something like it before? My God,

in my dream last night! I tore it to pieces, and got up in agitation and made my way to the Manor House along a path through tall, bowing, stippled grasses hissing lightly in the breeze. My inclination was to run to the station and take the next train to anywhere; pure undiluted panic – an insufficiently analysed word – that which causes men to trample on women and children when Death is making his choice. Of course, I had Mary and Tim and the servants to keep me from it, but supposing they had no claim on me, should I desert them? No, I should not. Why? Such things aren't done by respectable inhabitants of Great Britain – a people despised and respected by all other tribes. Despised as Philistines, but it took the jaw-bone of an ass to subdue that hardy race! Respected for what? Birkenhead stuff. No, not the noble Lord, for there were no glittering prizes for those who went down to the bottom of the sea in ships. My mind deliberately restricting itself to such highly debatable jingoism, I reached the Manor House, to be told that Sir William was up in London for the day, but would return that evening. Would he ring me up on his return? 'Yes, sir.' And then, with lagging steps, back to the Red Lodge.

I took Mary for a drive in the car after lunch. Anything to get out of the beastly place. Tim didn't come, as he preferred to play in the garden. In the light of what happened I shall be criticized for leaving him alone with a nurse, but at that time I held the theory that these appearances were in no way malignant, and that it was more than possible that even if Tim did see anything he wouldn't be frightened, not realizing it was out of the ordinary in any way. After all, nothing that I had seen or heard, at any rate during the daytime, would strike him as unusual.

Mary was very silent, and I was beginning to feel sure, from a certain depression and oppression in her manner and appearance, that my trouble was hers. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something, but I resolved to wait until I had heard what Sir William had to say. It was a dark, sombre, and brooding afternoon, and my spirits fell as we

turned for home. What a home!

We got back at six, and I had just stopped the engine and helped Mary out when I heard a scream from the garden. I rushed round, to see Tim, his hands to his eyes, staggering across the lawn, the nurse running behind him. And then he screamed again and fell. I carried him into the house and laid him down on a sofa in the drawing-room, and Mary went to him. I took the nurse by the arm and out of the room; she was panting and crying down a face of chalk.

'What happened? What happened?' I asked.

'I don't know what it was, sir, but we had been walking in the lane, and had left the door open. Master Tim was a bit ahead of me, and went through the door first, and then he screamed like that.'

'Did you see anything that could have frightened him?'

'No, sir, nothing.'

I went back to them. It was no good questioning Tim, and there was nothing coherent to be learnt from his hysterical sobbing. He grew calmer presently, and was taken up to bed. Suddenly he turned to Mary, and looked at her with eyes of terror.

'The green monkey won't get me, will it, Mummy?'

'No, no, it's all right now,' said Mary, and soon after he went to sleep, and then she and I went down to the drawing-room. She was on the border of hysteria herself.

'Oh, Tom, what is the matter with this awful house? I'm terrified. Ever since I've been here I've been terrified. Do you see things?'

'Yes,' I replied.

'Oh, I wish I'd known. I didn't want to worry you if you hadn't. Let me tell you what it's been like. On the day we arrived I saw a man pass ahead of me into my bedroom. Of course, I only *thought* I had. And then I've heard beastly whisperings and every time I pass that turn in the corridor I *know* there's someone just round the corner. And then the day before you arrived I woke suddenly, and something seemed to force me to go to the window, and I

crawled there on hands and knees and peeped through the blind. It was just light enough to see. And suddenly I saw someone running down the lawn, his or her hands outstretched, and there was something ghastly just beside him, and they disappeared behind the trees at the end. I'm terrified every minute.'

'What about the servants?'

'Nurse hasn't seen anything, but the others have, I'm certain. And then there are those slimy patches, I think they're the vilest of all. I don't think Tim has been troubled till now, but I'm sure he's been puzzled and uncertain several times.'

'Well,' I said, 'it's pretty obvious we must clear out. I'm seeing Sir William about it to-morrow, I hope, and I'm certain enough of what he'll advise. Meanwhile we must think over where to go. It is a nasty jar, though; I don't mean merely the money, though that's bad enough, but the fuss – just when I hoped we were going to be so happy and settled. However, it's got to be done. We should be mad after a week of this filth-drenched hole.'

Just then the telephone-bell rang. It was a message to say Sir William would be pleased to see me at half-past ten to-morrow.

With the dusk came that sense of being watched, waited for, followed about, plotted against, an atmosphere of quiet, hunting malignancy. A thick mist came up from the river, and as I was changing for dinner I noticed the lights from the windows seemed to project a series of swiftly changing pictures on its grey, crawling screen. The one opposite my window, for example, was unpleasantly suggestive of three figures staring in and seeming to grow nearer and larger. The effect must have been slightly hypnotic, for suddenly I started back, for it was as if they were about to close on me. I pulled down the blind and hurried downstairs. During dinner we decided that unless Sir William had something very reassuring to say we would go back to London two days later and stay at a hotel till we could find somewhere to spend the next six weeks. Just

before going to bed we went up to the night nursery to see if Tim was all right. This room was at the top of a short flight of stairs. As these stairs were covered with green slime, and there was a pool of the muck just outside the door, we took him down to sleep with us.

The Permanent Occupants of the Red Lodge waited till the light was out, but then I felt them come thronging, slipping in one by one, their weapon fear. It seemed to me they were massed for the attack. A yard away my wife was lying with my son in her arms, so I must fight. I lay back, gripped the sides of the bed and strove with all my might to hold my assailants back. As the hours went by I felt myself beginning to get the upper hand, and a sense of exaltation came to me. But an hour before dawn they made their greatest effort. I knew that they were willing me to creep on my hands and knees to the window and peep through the blind, and that if I did so we were doomed. As I set my teeth and tightened my grip till I felt racked with agony, the sweat poured from me. I felt them come crowding round the bed and thrusting their faces into mine, and a voice in my head kept saying insistently, 'You must crawl to the window and look through the blind.' In my mind's eye I could see myself crawling stealthily across the floor and pulling the blind aside, but who would be staring back at me? Just when I felt my resistance breaking I heard a sweet, sleepy twitter from a tree outside, and saw the blind touched by a faint suggestion of light, and at once those with whom I had been struggling left me and went their way, and, utterly exhausted, I slept.

In the morning I found, somewhat ironically, that Mary had slept better than on any night since she came down.

Half-past ten found me entering the Manor House, a delightful nondescript old place, which started wagging its tail as soon as I entered it. Sir William was awaiting me in the library. 'I expected this would happen,' he said gravely, 'and now tell me.'

I gave him a short outline of our experiences.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's always much the same story. Every time that horrible place has been let I have felt a sense of personal responsibility, and yet I cannot give a proper warning, for the letting of haunted houses is not yet a criminal offence—though it ought to be—and I couldn't afford a libel action, and, as a matter of fact, one old couple had the house for fifteen years and were perfectly delighted with it, being troubled in no way. But now let me tell you what I know of the Red Lodge. I have studied it for forty years, and I regard it as my personal enemy.

'The local tradition is that the second owner, early in the eighteenth century, wished to get rid of his wife, and bribed his servants to frighten her to death—just the sort of ancestor I can imagine that blackguard Wilkes being descended from.

'What devilries they perpetrated I don't know, but she is supposed to have rushed from the house just before dawn one day and drowned herself. Whereupon her husband installed a small harem in the house; but it was a failure, for each of these charmers one by one rushed down to the river just before dawn, and finally the husband himself did the same. Of the period between then and forty years ago I have no record, but the local tradition has it that it was the scene of tragedy after tragedy, and then was shut up for a long time. When I first began to study it, it was occupied by two bachelor brothers. One shot himself in the room which I imagine you use as your bedroom, and the other drowned himself in the usual way. I may tell you that the worst room in the house, the one the unfortunate lady is supposed to have occupied, is locked up, you know, the one on the second floor. I imagine Wilkes mentioned it to you.'

'Yes, he did,' I replied. 'Said he kept important papers there.'

'Yes; well, he was forced in self-defence to do so ten

years ago, and since then the death rate has been lower, but in those forty years twenty people have taken their lives in the house or in the river, and six children have been drowned accidentally. The last case was Lord Passover's butler in 1924. He was seen to run down to the river and leap in. He was pulled out, but had died of shock.

'The people who took the house two years ago left in a week, and threatened to bring an action against Wilkes, but they were warned they had no legal case. And I strongly advise you, more than that, *implore* you, to follow their example, though I can imagine the financial loss and great inconvenience, for that house is a death-trap.'

'I will,' I replied. 'I forgot to mention one thing; when my little boy was so badly frightened he said something about "a green monkey."'

'He did!' said Sir William sharply. 'Well then, it is absolutely imperative that you should leave at once. You remember I mentioned the death of certain children. Well, in each case they have been found drowned in the reeds just at the end of that lane, and the people about here have a firm belief that "The Green Thing," or "The Green Death" – it is sometimes referred to as the first and sometimes as the other – is connected with danger to children.'

'Have you ever seen anything yourself?' I asked.

'I go to the infernal place as little as possible,' replied Sir William, 'but when I called on your predecessors I most distinctly saw someone leave the drawing-room as we entered it, otherwise all I have noted is a certain dream which recurs with curious regularity. I find myself standing at the end of the lane and watching the river – always in a sort of brassy half-light. And presently something comes floating down the stream. I can see it jerking up and down, and I always feel passionately anxious to see what it may be. At first I think that it is a log, but when it gets exactly opposite me it changes its course and comes towards me, and then I see that it is a dead body, very decomposed. And when it reaches the bank it begins to climb up towards me, and then I am thankful to say I always

awake. Sometimes I have thought that one day I shall not wake just then, and that on this occasion something will happen to me, but that is probably merely the silly fancy of an old gentleman who has concerned himself with these singular events rather more than is good for his nerves.'

'That is obviously the explanation,' I said, 'and I am extremely grateful to you. We will leave to-morrow. But don't you think we should attempt to devise some means by which other people may be spared this sort of thing, and this brute Wilkes be prevented from letting the house again?'

'I certainly do so, and we will discuss it further on some other occasion. And now go and pack!'

A very great and charming gentleman, Sir William, I reflected, as I walked back to the Red Lodge.

Tim seemed to have recovered excellently well, but I thought it wise to keep him out of the house as much as possible, so while Mary and the maids packed after lunch I went with him for a walk through the fields. We took our time, and it was only when the sky grew black and there was a distant rumble of thunder and a menacing little breeze came from the west that we turned to come back. We had to hurry, and as we reached the meadow next to the house there came a ripping flash and the storm broke. We started to run for the door into the garden when I tripped over my bootlace, which had come undone, and fell. Tim ran on. I had just tied the lace and was on my feet again when I saw something slip through the door. It was green, thin, tall. It seemed to glance back at me, and what should have been its face was a patch of soused slime. At that moment Tim saw it, screamed, and ran for the river. The figure turned and followed him, and before I could reach him hovered over him. Tim screamed again and flung himself in. A moment later I passed through a green and stenching film and dived after him. I found him writhing in the reeds and brought him to the bank. I ran with him in my arms to the house, and I shall not forget Mary's face as she saw us from the bedroom window.

By nine o'clock we were all in a hotel in London, and the Red Lodge an evil, fading memory. I shut the front door when I had packed them all into the car. As I took hold of the knob I felt a quick and powerful pressure from the other side, and it shut with a crash. The Permanent Occupants of the Red Lodge were in sole possession once more.

MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

Alfred Noyes

It was a battered old book, bound in red buckram. He found it, when he was twelve years old, on an upper shelf in his father's library; and, against all the rules, he took it to his bedroom to read by candlelight, when the rest of the rambling old Elizabethan house was flooded with darkness. That was how young Mortimer always thought of it. His own room was a little isolated cell, in which, with stolen candle ends, he could keep the surrounding darkness at bay, while everyone else had surrendered to sleep and allowed the outer night to come flooding in. By contrast with those unconscious ones, his elders, it made him feel intensely alive in every nerve and fibre of his young brain. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall below; the beating of his own heart; the longdrawn rythmical 'ah' of the sea on the distant coast, all filled him with a sense of overwhelming mystery; and, as he read, the soft thud of a blinded moth, striking the wall above the candle, would make him start and listen like a creature of the woods at the sound of a cracking twig.

The battered old book had the strangest fascination for him, though he never quite grasped the thread of the story. It was called *The Midnight Express*, and there was one illustration, on the fiftieth page, at which he could never bear to look. It frightened him.

Young Mortimer never understood the effect of that picture on him. He was an imaginative, but not neurotic youngster; and he avoided that fiftieth page as he might have hurried past a dark corner on the stairs when he was six years old, or as the grown man on the lonely road, in the *Ancient Mariner*, who, having once looked round, walks on, and turns no more his head. There was nothing in the picture – apparently – to account for this haunting dread.

Darkness, indeed, was almost its chief characteristic. It showed an empty railway platform—at night—lit by a single dreary lamp; an empty railway platform that suggested a deserted and lonely junction in some remote part of the country. There was only one figure on the platform: the dark figure of a man, standing almost directly under the lamp, with his face turned away toward the black mouth of a tunnel, which—for some strange reason—plunged the imagination of the child into a pit of horror. The man seemed to be listening. His attitude was tense, expectant, as though he were awaiting some fearful tragedy. There was nothing in the text, so far as the child read, and could understand, to account for this waking nightmare. He could neither resist the fascination of the book, nor face that picture in the stillness and loneliness of the night. He pinned it down to the page facing it, with two long pins, so that he should not come upon it by accident. Then he determined to read the whole story through. But, always, before he came to page fifty, he fell asleep; and the outlines of what he had read were blurred; and the next night he had to begin again; and again, before he came to the fiftieth page, he fell asleep.

He grew up, and forgot all about the book and the picture. But half way through his life, at that strange and critical time when Dante entered the dark wood, leaving the direct path behind him, he found himself, a little before midnight, waiting for a train at a lonely junction; and, as the station clock began to strike twelve, he remembered; remembered like a man awaking from a long dream—

There, under the single dreary lamp, on the long glimmering platform, was the dark and solitary figure that he knew. Its face was turned away from him toward the black mouth of the tunnel. It seemed to be listening, tense, expectant, just as it had been thirty-eight years ago.

But he was not frightened now, as he had been in childhood. He would go up to that solitary figure, confront it, and see the face that had so long been hidden, so long

averted from him. He would walk up quietly, and make some excuse for speaking to it: he would ask it, for instance, if the train was going to be late. It should be easy for a grown man to do this; but his hands were clenched, when he took the first step, as if he, too, were tense and expectant. Quietly, but with the old vague instincts awakening, he went toward the dark figure under the lamp, passed it, swung round abruptly to speak to it; and saw – without speaking, without being able to speak –

It was himself – staring back at himself – as in some mocking mirror, his own eyes alive in his own white face, looking into his own eyes, alive –

The nerves of his heart tingled as though their own electric currents would paralyse it. A wave of panic went through him. He turned, gasped, stumbled, broke into a blind run, out through the deserted and echoing ticket office, on to the long moonlight road behind the station. The whole countryside seemed to be utterly deserted. The moonbeams flooded it with the loneliness of their own deserted satellite.

He paused for a moment, and heard, like the echo of his own footsteps, the stumbling run of something that followed over the wooden floor within the ticket office. Then he abandoned himself shamelessly to his fear; and ran, sweating like a terrified beast, down the long white road between the two endless lines of ghostly poplars each answering another, into what seemed an infinite distance. On one side of the road there was a long straight canal, in which one of the lines of poplars was again endlessly reflected. He heard the footsteps echoing behind him. They seemed to be slowly, but steadily, gaining upon him. A quarter of a mile away, he saw a small white cottage by the roadside, a white cottage with two dark windows and a door that somehow suggested a human face. He thought to himself that, if he could reach it in time, he might find shelter and security – escape.

The thin implacable footsteps, echoing his own, were still some way off when he lurched, gasping, into the little

porch; rattled the latch, thrust at the door, and found it locked against him. There was no bell or knocker. He pounded on the wood with his fists until his knuckles bled. The response was horribly slow. At last, he heard heavier footsteps within the cottage. Slowly they descended the creaking stair. Slowly the door was unlocked. A tall shadowy figure stood before him, holding a lighted candle, in such a way that he could see little either of the holder's face or form; but to his dumb horror there seemed to be a cerecloth wrapped round the face. No words passed between them. The figure beckoned him in; and, as he obeyed, it locked the door behind him. Then, beckoning him again, without a word, the figure went before him up the crooked stair with the ghostly candle casting huge and grotesque shadows on the whitewashed walls and ceiling.

They entered an upper room, in which there was a bright fire burning, with an armchair on either side of it, and a small oak table, on which there lay a battered old book, bound in dark red buckram. It seemed as though the guest had been long expected and all things were prepared.

The figure pointed to one of the armchairs, placed the candlestick on the table by the book (for there was no other light but that of the fire) and withdrew without a word, locking the door behind him.

Mortimer looked at the candlestick. It seemed familiar. The smell of the guttering wax brought back the little room in the old Elizabethan house. He picked up the book with trembling fingers. He recognized it at once, though he had long forgotten everything about the story. He remembered the inkstain on the title page; and then, with a shock of recollection, he came on the fiftieth page, which he had pinned down in childhood. The pins were still there. He touched them again—the very pins which his trembling childish fingers had used so long ago.

He turned to the beginning. He was determined to read it to the end now, and discover what it all was about. He felt that it must all be set down there, in print; and, though in childhood he could not understand it, he would be able

to fathom it now.

It was called *The Midnight Express*; and, as he read the first paragraph, it began to dawn upon him slowly, fearfully, inevitably –

It was the story of a man who, in childhood, long ago, had chanced upon a book, in which there was a picture that frightened him. He had grown up and forgotten it, and one night, upon a lonely railway platform, he had found himself in the remembered scene of that picture; he had confronted the solitary figure under the lamp; recognized it, and fled in panic. He had taken shelter in a wayside cottage; had been led to an upper room, found the book awaiting him and had begun to read it right through, to the very end, at last. – And this book too, was called *The Midnight Express*. And it was the story of a man who, in childhood – It would go on thus, forever and forever, and forever. There was no escape.

But when the story came to the wayside cottage, for the third time, a deeper suspicion began to dawn upon him, slowly, fearfully, inevitably – Although there was no escape, he could at least try to grasp more clearly the details of the strange circle, the fearful wheel, in which he was moving.

There was nothing new about the details. They had been there all the time; but he had not grasped their significance. That was all. The strange and dreadful being that had led him up the crooked stair – who and what was That?

The story mentioned something that had escaped him. The strange host, who had given him shelter, was about his own height. Could it be that he also – And was this why the face was hidden?

At the very moment when he asked himself that question, he heard the click of the key in the locked door.

The strange host was entering – moving toward him from behind – casting a grotesque shadow, larger than human, on the white walls in the guttering candlelight.

It was there, seated on the other side of the fire, facing him. With a horrible nonchalance, as a woman might pre-

pare to remove a veil, it raised its hands to unwind the cerecloth from its face. He knew to whom it would belong. But would it be dead or living?

There was no way but one. As Mortimer plunged forward and seized the tormentor by the throat, his own throat was gripped with the same brutal force. The echoes of their strangled cry were indistinguishable; and when the last confused sounds died out together, the stillness of the room was so deep that you might have heard – the ticking of the old grandfather clock, and the longdrawn rhythmical ‘ah’ of the sea, on a distant coast, thirty-eight years ago.

But Mortimer had escaped at last. Perhaps, after all, he had caught the midnight express.

It was a battered old book, bound in red buckram . . .

MEETING MR MILLAR

Robert Aickman

Before it is too late, I set out the events exactly as I recall them.

I seem to recall them very well, and they were not of a kind easily forgotten; but amnesia is, I know, more likely to play a part in my tale than exaggeration. As a matter of policy, I am determined to damp down, to play down, to pipe down. I am a man of the twentieth century as much as anyone else.

Of course when it comes to carrying conviction, I make a bad start by being an author. 'After all, he is an author!' I remember my grandmother saying when I anxiously questioned her about a particularly improbable tale Maurice Hewlett had told at her tea party that afternoon. I daresay it is precisely because I have sometimes made small sums of money with my pen that I have not related before now this story that is true.

And really with my pen. With this very pen in fact; and I was using the same pen when a year or two after the war (the real war – the first one), I took up my abode at the top of a house in Brandenburg Square. Fountain pens could then be had that were designed, positively, to last at least one lifetime.

I have faintly disguised the address because it is potentially libellous to designate a named house as haunted. I believe mine to be the narrative of a haunted man rather than of a haunted house, but after so many lawsuits, albeit mostly successful, I wish to avoid even a remote risk of another one.

I had the run of three small, dusty rooms, sketchily furnished, on the third floor. Hot in summer, cold in winter, they had been intended for servants' bedrooms. In one of them had lately been installed some inexpensive cooking

and washing apparatus. In a former cupboard or glory-hole had been lodged an equally inexpensive bath and water-closet; to both of which the supply of water percolated but irregularly.

My father had been killed. My mother had almost no resources beyond the consequent pension. I was an only child and knew myself open to criticism for not taking a job, living at home, and handing over the proceeds. But my mother never did criticize, and I believed that I could at least make enough to pay my small rent and maintain *myself*. I was remarkably sanguine, but so, in the event, it worked out. I was never once in arrears, and never once reduced to living for a week or a month or a year on nothing but bread and margarine, as have been so many poets. That was partly, of course, because I never set up to write poetry: the basic bread and butter of my income was provided by the odd employment of going over other people's pornographic manuscripts and turning them into saleable books. Since pornography is no longer as badly thought of as it was, I can mention that this work was given me by a man named Major Valentine. In any case, he is now dead; though I maintained touch with him almost until the end, partly because I was grateful to him for having kept me alive and enabled me to go my own way during such a critical period.

Major Valentine had been a comrade of my father's in the trenches. I first met him when he came to visit my mother after it was all over. He turned up one day, still in a 'trench coat', and in the course of conversation remarked that the war had changed many people's ideas about the sort of books they wanted to read, and that he was going to put his gratuity into setting up as a publisher. I was eighteen at the time and I was pretty certain that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the amount of a major's gratuity and the topless tower of phantom gold needed even by the wariest of publishers. I knew a little about it because already I was set upon being a writer myself, and took the current *Writers' and Artists' Year Book* to bed

with me nightly until my bloodstream had absorbed all it had to teach or hint at. But naturally I said nothing, because in those days boys did not venture to carp at mature men, let alone when the mature men were war heroes also; and I was rewarded by being offered an 'editor's' job there and then, no doubt in part as tribute to my father's memory and my mother's obvious problems. The American term 'editor' was not then commonly used in the context of publishing, and my father's friend was already displaying how modern he intended to be. Before the war he had been a free-lance journalist. He actually so described himself to me, possibly because he claimed also to have made a success of it, which is most uncommon.

I had been cheaply and indifferently educated in the formal sense, and against a stressful and impecunious home life. Fortunately for me, formal education counts little for most artists (and, according to my experience, less than is commonly supposed for most other people). Though I wanted 'to write', I had little idea of how to earn money at it – and a complete mental blank, with unpleasant elements of panic, whenever I thought about trying to earn money at anything else. Valentine made it clear that he was not yet in a position to offer enough to maintain me; but I clutched with joy and relief at the proffered regularity of his pittance, explained myself to my mother that same evening (Major Valentine could not stay to supper, and it was just as well), and was set up within the month in Brandenburg Square.

Valentine was never in a position to pay me much more than he paid me at the outset; but I beavered soberly around, and wrote increasingly persuasive letters, so that other jobs came in, a usefully wide variety of them, perhaps, when I came to writing my own first novel.

Major Valentine's subsequent career may as well be disposed of now: pornography is never – I think I may say *never* – as lucrative as it seems likely to be (I refer to the pornography that is recognized as such), and within three or four years Valentine turned to schoolmastering and then

went back to the Army as an instructor. In the end, he married. It was rather late in life, by the usual standard: but he married a woman who was older than he was, none the less, and she seemed to make him very happy – or perhaps keep him so, as he always seemed a happy person by nature. I went to visit them on several occasions, and certainly Valentine was living in very much better style than ever before when I had known him. Moreover, he was now a Lieutenant-Colonel. I suppose he had taken up with the Territorials. He was even fortunate in the manner of his death, which was in a fishing incident, and, they said, instantaneous.

When I took possession of my Brandenburg Square attic, there were two tenants below me.

On the second floor was the office of a political weekly named *Freedom*. Though appearing in English, it seemed to be produced by a staff composed entirely of foreigners, some of whom appeared to have difficulty even with conventionalities about the weather or the staircase cleaning when I chanced to run into them on their landing. A surprisingly large number and variety of them were encountered by me during the six months or so we were in the building together. I wondered how the paper could maintain them all, especially as it was hard to believe it had much sale among the general public. From time to time I used to extract copies from the waste sacks left out at night.

In the basement of the building lived a young man and woman of mildly intellectual aspect. At that time, however, the man worked in the local branch of a well-known provisions chain; and the woman had a part-time job with a credit bookmaker. These dispositions were consequent upon their having four children and, therefore, little margin.

Even the very smallest of the children, none the less, had reached some kind of age for schooling; and the young wife used to flit up to my attic in the afternoon for a cup of coffee and a talk after her return from the bookmaker's

establishment and before her departure to collect the child.

At first, I was not too keen. I was scrupulous about her position as a married woman living in the same house. Moreover, her visits soon became more and more frequent, almost daily; while at the same time I noticed that she always refused to commit herself about the day following, which I thought vaguely sinister. I fancied I owed it to myself to object a little to being interrupted in the course of composition (or editorship). Needless to say, none of this reserve availed for much or for long. It was no more than the subjective initial slowness or protest of the youthful male, respectably reared. Soon I was looking forward to this woman's visits so much that my morning's work suffered noticeably; and regretting in an entirely different way her continuing refusal to say whether tomorrow she would be back. 'I simply can't tell you,' she would reply. 'We must make the most of the present.' But her putting it like that helped to make it difficult for me to do so. Her name was Maureen. The name of her husband was Gilbert. Once she asked me to visit their place after the evening meal, but it could hardly be expected to be a success. The husband just sat there, worn out after a hot day in the provisions shop, and reading the *New Statesman*; and two or three of the children were old enough to stay up and ask questions and fall about. We never tried it again, I think.

The ground and first floors of the building were originally unlet, but that could not be expected to continue for very long now that the country was getting back on to its feet again. All the doors on to the hall and staircase were kept locked, and Maureen used to complain that it made the house seem depressing. I told her that it made for peace and quiet, but I appreciated the hullabaloo of four small children in a not very large flat. One day I observed her in conversation with the window cleaners who swilled away once a month at the outside of the never opened sashes. Of course they were glad of a few words with a pretty housewife having time on her hands. 'They

say there's nothing inside but emptiness,' Maureen told me later. I made no comment, but filled in by kissing her hair or something of the kind. Maureen had at that time rather droopy hair, possibly owing to lack of vitamins during the war; which she kept off her brow with a big tortoiseshell slide. Her brow was really beautiful, and so were her eyes. They had that gentle look of being unequal to life, which, as I later realized, always attracts me in a woman.

One night the numerous office staff of *Freedom* did not depart at the usual hour; and, as late as ten or eleven o'clock, looking over my banister, I saw them still heaving and rolling great packages on the landing below. They were being very quiet about it as far as conversation went: not at all like foreigners, one felt. Obviously, there was a crisis, but for that very reason I felt it unkind to probe. In bed, I was kept awake not merely by the stolid thumping downstairs but also by the likelihood that the crisis was one affecting the whole building and the harmless, neutral way of life we had all worked out within it. Conceivably it was my first clear apprehension of the truth that is the foundation of wisdom: the truth that change of its nature is for the worse, the little finger (or thick griping thumb) of mortality's cold paw.

And, duly, the next day the builders moved in. They actually woke me up with their singing, whistling, joshing, rowing, and other customary noises. They were in for an endless three weeks (though nowadays it would be six or nine); and, as serious work became impossible, I moved back to my mother's cottage for a spell, my first of more than a night or two since I had gone to London. The day of my departure was the first time also, as I well remember, that I kissed Maureen full and passionately on the lips. I had feared, if I may be honest, to commit myself so far: with Maureen's husband and children in permanent residence just below me, to say nothing of my own narrow circumstances. Now the break in my régime seemed to make it less of a commitment. It was not a very sympathetic way of seeing things perhaps, but the options are

so greatly fewer than people like to think.

When I reached the cottage, I found it impossible to work in the little bedroom that was always reserved for me, as the gravel lane outside was being 'metalled' and widened. Even in the small sitting-room facing the other way, the noise was disturbing, and I had to throw the *Daily Chronicle* over work sent me by Valentine, every time I heard my mother's step, which was frequently, as she was solicitous and would have liked to keep me with her. In the end, the rumbling, indecisive steam-roller, the clanking tar-boiler, the roadmenders more loudly jocund than Michael Fairless, withdrew to agitate other households, to diminish the more distant hedgerow. 'Do stop as long as you can,' said my mother.

Maureen had told me, before I left, that our ground, first, and second floors had all been made the subject of a single new letting. She had a way of picking up such things. She did not know whether the *Freedom* people had been actually driven out. It was impossible to believe that the enterprise could have much future in any case; and, indeed, I never heard of it again after that late sad night of removal and retreat, nor saw a copy of the paper on any bookstall or barrow.

In the end, I went to London for the morning in order to prospect. The whole front of the house had had its woodwork repainted, partly in blue, partly in white; including my two small square attic windows that looked on to the street. The early nineteenth-century front door had been brightly blued, and, to the left of it, at shoulder-height on the whited jamb, was an unusually large brass plate: *Stallabrass Hoskins and Cramp. Chartered Accountants*. The plate needed polishing, possibly because it had only just arrived from elsewhere.

It was the time of day when Maureen was working with her bookmaker. I let myself in and mounted towards my abode. The internal paintwork had been renewed from top to bottom, though rather roughly, as was to be expected so soon after the war, and in crude colours. The staircase

walls had been repapered in an assertive mid-green. There was even a mottled carpet, where before there had been dark lino and unravelling drugget. It occurred to me that the heterogeneous impression might be a consequence of drawing upon stock-ends sold off (in this moment of world historical renewal) at bargain prices. There was no one about, and all the doors were closed, and everything was silent. At least, and at last, the builders were out.

My own front door contained a letter-box, though no postman had in my time ever ascended to it, all our letters being left on a shaky shelf in the ground floor passage. Now I found a *billet-doux* marked 'By Hand': the agents were upset because I had not been there to admit the decorators. Would I please call in at their office as soon as possible? I never did anything more about that and nor did the agents. The building belonged to a vague charitable foundation which supported a school for needy boys. The school had been moved out of London before my time and the offices of the foundation with it. I had not found the agents to be over-officious. It had been one of the attractions.

My rooms were filled with every kind of grit and dirt owing to the decorating activities outside. They looked almost uninhabitable. I had never thought of affording any kind of professional cleaner; nor, indeed, had I ever noticed such a person in the whole place, though I realized that someone must have brushed the stairs from time to time. Now I wondered whether I should not have to solicit Maureen, or at least Maureen's advice.

It would have to be postponed. I had seen enough to know that in other, more important respects, I could return. Upon a writer unsuccessful and successful also in the degree that I then was, work always waits and presses. I went back to my mother's cottage for another night or two. 'You must have found your flat very dusty,' said my mother. 'You had better let me give it a good spring-clean.'

She not been there before and I was hesitant. But, fortunately, when the time came, she seemed quite to like the attic, despite the disconcerting approach, with all the new

colours staring out, and all the doors still locked. I know that at least most of them were locked and not merely shut, because my mother tried many of the handles, and in no uncertain way, which I on my own had not cared to do.

'How do you get on with the people in the basement?' asked my mother.

I told her in some suitable way.

'I'm glad the wife's taken to you. You need a woman around, I'm glad she's pretty too.'

It was not until several days after I finally returned that I again saw Maureen. My habits were pretty mousey, and I do not think she had realized that I was there. For my part, I held back from taking the initiative. In the first place, I had never done so hitherto. In the second place, I was more uncertain than ever, after the spell of absence, how things were going to develop, or even how I wanted them to develop. Then, one morning within the first week, as in a column of burning fiery chariots, entered into possession Messrs. Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp, with all their force, all their mechanism, all their archive. Their arrival was as confident, rowdy, and cheerful as the withdrawal of *Freedom* had been obscure and muted.

On the instant the staircase was alive with short-haired, short-skirted girls running up and down as in Jacob's dream, except that these girls were exchanging backchat with shouting removal men. (Short hair and short skirts were, of course, new at that date, though my mother had already gone in for both, even though she rarely travelled far from her cottage.) Moving through the throng were several men in white shirts, stiff collars, dark trousers, and braces. Could they be partners? Even Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp in person? Certainly they were going through motions which might well be a form of giving orders. The total number of persons involved quite eclipsed *Freedom*, even relatively. And that afternoon came Maureen tapping at my door.

'Why didn't you let me know you were back?'

'I hesitated.'

She was willing to let it go at that.

'What do you think?' I went on, inclining my head downwards and sideways.

Maureen twitched up a corner of her mouth.

'Do you suppose they'll quieten down?' I asked.

'I don't see why they should. They're a pretty awful lot from what little I've seen.'

'I've seen quite enough of them already.' Authors always tend to be hasty in their judgements. It is the strain of searching for peace and concentration.

'Have you seen Mr Millar?'

'Not that I know of. Who's Mr Millar?'

'He's the man whose outfit it really is. The names outside don't exist, or are all dead, or something. My guess is that Mr Millar's bumped them all off.'

I remember Maureen using that exact expression, which was then as new as short hair and short skirts.

'Not necessarily,' I said. 'You often find these firms with lots of names and none of the people really existing.'

'You haven't seen Mr Millar,' replied Maureen.

'Not that I know of. There seemed to be about a hundred of them. Is there anything special about Mr Millar's appearance?'

'Yes,' said Maureen. 'He looks like Cordoba the Sex Vampire.' This, I should observe, was a silent film that made a mark at the time, though I was a little surprised to find Maureen citing it.

'Then you'd better rub yourself all over with garlic before you go to bed,' I replied; and this helped to make things go more easily between Maureen and me after our separation.

I cannot say that Maureen's description of our new neighbour even stimulated my curiosity. As will have been gathered by now, I was an anxious and cautious youth,

walking his own tight-rope, and rather afraid than otherwise of new company, of becoming involved. Possibly the frightful stuff that Major Valentine sent up to me contributed to my social timidity. I am sure I thought that the longer I could keep entirely out of contact with Maureen's Mr Millar, the better. I had very little idea of 'gathering experience', and never doubted that I could spin books from inside me. For me the matter did not even need thinking about.

It was bad enough that the new tenants were all over the stairs and landings, with endless giggling, shouting, and banging of doors. Even during the first two or three days I noticed that they had a way of banging ordinary room doors several times in succession, as people do nowadays to doors of motor cars. None of it was at all the way I had supposed chartered accountants to behave.

'I wonder how they get any work done at all,' Maureen was soon exclaiming. It was indeed on the next occasion I saw her.

I agreed with her: being one who needed complete silence and total absence of distraction before I could work at all. Or so I then thought. Indeed, I elaborated a little to Maureen.

'It's different for you,' Maureen observed amiably. One of Maureen's many good points had always been her apparently sincere respect for an artist. It is probably grudging of me to term it 'apparently sincere', but it is a thing one never really knows.

'You're welcome to use our living-room at any time,' Maureen continued.

'Thank you very much.'

'If Mr Millar makes himself at home there, I don't see why you shouldn't. I like you much better,' Maureen added coquettishly.

'Mr Millar! How did he get in?'

'He rang our bell the afternoon he arrived. The day I told you about him. You'll find he does the same to you soon. I rather fancy it's the way he goes about things.'

'But what does he do in your flat?' I enquired feebly. I was astounded by what Maureen had said. The new people had been with us for only a few days.

'He lies down. In a darkened room, as he puts it. Though, as a matter of fact, our flat's not at all easy to darken properly. I once tried. Mr Millar says that he has to have what he calls intermissions. You can see what he means when you think about the din they all make.'

'They're his staff, after all. Why can't he make them shut up?'

'I can't tell you, Roy.'

'But what are you doing when he's there?'

'So far I've not been there. After all, it's only happened about three times. I suppose I can always keep the kids in the kitchen or put them in their bedroom.'

'You'd better charge him something,' I said sourly.

'Are you jealous, Roy?' asked Maureen.

'Yes,' I said; though it was not entirely the truth.

'Oh, good,' said Maureen. 'We progress.'

I had to admit to myself that I had probably invited remarks of that kind.

I had also to admit that, in the matter of meeting Mr Millar, to general distaste had now been added specific embarrassment.

I began to be upset by another irritating habit: the people downstairs had a way of letting their telephones (undoubtedly several of them – commoner now than then) ring and ring and ring before lifting the receiver. As they almost always left all their doors open, the trick contributed greatly to the distant uproar that ascended to my attic.

Sometimes I could not but overhear one end of these delayed telephone conversations; when I was passing through the house, I mean: I do not imply the actual definable words penetrated my floor or walls.

Whatever I did hear was always of unbelievable commonplaceness or banality. It never seemed to be business in any sense; only a flow of vapourings, mixed with giggles.

It is obvious that I judged with prejudice, but, as time passed, and I heard more and more of these vapid utterances, and never anything else, prejudice began to be mixed with a certain wonder, and then with a certain concern. Yes, I am almost sure that it was these overheard inanities, in no way my business and not even overheard all that frequently, because I passed through the house during business hours as rarely as I could, that *first* made me feel disturbed . . . feel that about the new tenants was something that as well as continually irritating me also frightened me. I had, of course, come upon jokes about typists talking on the telephone to their boy friends, but here was something that seemed to go much further. I think I might put it that a conversation as reasonable as a chat with a boy friend would have been positively welcome to my long ears, and explicable. Everything I heard or overheard was merely *empty*. For that reason nothing of it can be remembered. I doubt if I could have written down immediately what I had just heard as I climbed up to my fourth floor. Apart from anything else, I should have been *ashamed* to harbour such futilities in my thoughts or memory.

When I met them in the hall or on the stairs, the little girls leered at me forthcomingly, or smirked at me contemptuously, or sometimes manifested real hostility. Some of these words seem absurd; but they describe how the girls made me feel. All of them were very young. Many people would say that the fault must have been largely mine. No doubt in a sense it was. I admit that I could find no way of dealing with the girls. Conventional greetings seemed absurd. Moreover, the girls were always new: I suppose there might have been five or six working there (if that was the word) at a time, but faces that I had come to know, soon disappeared, and were apparently replaced by complete strangers. It was not possible to think in terms of getting to know individuals, even if that had been what I wanted to do.

As for the men in the firm, who did not change (and

were, needless to say, older), the custom was to stare me up and down, while, perhaps, I descended the stair or came in through the front door; to stare me up and down as if I were a stranger myself and an intruder off the street; and then sometimes, but not always, though always at the last moment, to utter an over-bland Good Morning or Good Evening.

The men never seemed to be fully dressed. Their clothes were always formal, the garments of the properly dressed professional man, but never (when I observed them) did the men seem to have them all on. It was always as if they were frightfully busy, or much too hot: even in winter, though, there, it is true that the offices were remarkably well heated. I would hardly have gazed in at the gas stoves or whatever they were, but from every open door, it might be in December or January, would come a positive and noticeable wave of hot air as one passed. The girls would wear summery dresses even in winter and then, necessarily, depart in heavy coats. But, of course, most people prefer to live and work in great heat; and I do not. I have to add that while the men always performed as if they were weighed down with work, I have no more recollection of seeing them doing any than I have in the case of the girls. But possibly I was and am influenced here by my own personal inability to work in an uproar. I did not know the names of the men (or, of course, of the girls); and though the girls chattered on through the open doors and all around me as if I were not present or were invisible, the shirt-sleeved men tended in the opposite direction to fall silent and stand motionless until I had altogether passed and was out of earshot. Nor, now I come to think of it, did I notice any of the usual office horseplay between the men and the girls; though most of the girls might have been thought ready enough for it.

And then there was the mystery of the firm's clients. The mystery was that one never seemed to see one: only the internal staff seething up and down.

'Have you ever seen any?' I asked Maureen.

'Mr Millar says there are a lot of people who've been with them a long time.'

'I wouldn't care to be among them.'

'How can we tell?' responded Maureen vaguely.

I noticed that Maureen had ceased asking me whether I had met Mr Millar.

I suppose the number of letters arriving each morning might have given some idea of how much genuine business there was. But here I was at a disadvantage. Authors are not normally early risers. In the old days I had put on my dressing gown (quite faded and stained—even torn, I believe) and descended to the shelf in the hall without giving a thought to what the *Freedom* people might think about me, numerous though they were (as I then considered). Now it seemed quite impossible: partly because of the girls, of course, but not entirely. So my slender morning post, even the ill-made packages from Major Valentine, had to await my being shaved and fully dressed; and by then any post there might have been for the people below had been long 'taken in', as the expression is. This was all the more unavoidable in that usually I made my simple breakfast before shaving and dressing, and could see no reason why I should change my ways because of Mr Millar and his merry men. But I think also that I had very little wish to know more of what went on below me. I have just spoken of 'genuine' business. I found it hard to believe there was much of it, though I could not even surmise what went on all the rest of the time. It is true that I found odd letters for the firm at other times of the day: almost all of them impersonal emanations on his Majesty's service. They did, I realized, suggest there might be some accountancy in hand. I recollected an uncle of my Mother's once observing that figures, my boy, are only a very small part of what a successful accountant does. And, indeed, I still do not know what did go on in that office. I have related my impressions as clearly as I can; but new developments began to seem of more importance.

I think it must have been at least a month before I even

set eyes upon Mr Millar. For obscure reasons, Maureen and I had altogether ceased referring to him. Then, all at once, I not only saw him but had to talk to him, with very little warning or preparation; and *à deux*.

One Friday, in the late afternoon, at half-past five perhaps, my own rather noisy doorbell suddenly rang. I say 'suddenly' because I had heard no steps coming up my staircase, which remained uncarpeted. Swearing, I threw my raincoat over the current material from Valentine, and went to see who it was. A man stood there.

'I'm Millar.' But he did not offer to shake hands, as one usually did in those days, and his eyes wandered about, never once looking into mine, but not, as I thought, examining my humble environment either. 'Won't you come in for a drink?' he said. 'Just on the floor below. And of course bring anyone with you.'

I need hardly say I did not want to, but I could think of no way to refuse, and it would be no doubt unwise to make an enemy. So I got out something affirmative.

'Come when you're ready. Second floor.'

It seemed a slightly odd way of putting it; but, for that matter, it was perfectly obvious that there was no one 'with me', not even a girl pushed into a cupboard. Without another word, Mr Millar descended. I saw that he was wearing beige suède shoes, doubtless with crêpe rubber soles. And of course he was in his braces, like the rest of them.

I was glad to have a few minutes for rehabilitation. One does not wear one's best clothes for editing a pornographic manuscript alone in an attic; and also I had in those days a habit of unconsciously running my right hand (I am left-handed) through my hair as I wrote, wrecking whatever parting there might have been, and making myself look like the picture in the German book for children, my hair being then unusually thick and wiry. I changed my shirt, put on my old school tie (such as it was), and tried my luck with the comb.

Then, striving to think about nothing, I plunged through

the door on the second floor landing. I had been in there several times during the *Freedom* period, but everything was now very different. The walls of the outer room had been newly papered in pink with a cornice of flowers, and were decorated with what appeared to be small English landscape paintings, probably by an amateur, and framed in nothing more permanent than *passe-partout*. There were a surprising number of them; not all exactly on a level from the floor. In the middle of the room was a desk, obviously new; but with nothing on it, not even a cloaked typewriter, or a rubber-out. Also I was alone. But the door into the further room was ajar. I went up to it. 'Anyone at home?' I said.

Mr Millar drew the door fully open. 'Come in,' he said, still neither looking me in the eye nor offering his hand. Also he was still without his jacket.

'No one with you?' He seemed disappointed, though, as I have said, it was absurd.

'No,' I said. 'Only me.'

'Working?' He said it not in the way of apology for interrupting me, or even in the way of making conversation, but rather as if he referred to some unusual hobby he had heard I went in for.

'Yes. But it doesn't matter. I'm glad of a break.' That, of course, was not the exact truth.

'Sherry?'

The bottle indicated that it came from one of the colonies, and the three glasses on Mr Millar's desk were from the threepenny and sixpenny store. One is not supposed to say such things so plainly, but on this occasion I think they are of significance. Conclusive perhaps was that the bottle had to be opened, and some small shavings or chippings brushed out of two glasses with the back of a carbon paper, before they could be used. It seemed clear that the feast had been assembled especially for me.

'Thank you very much.'

It was not a matter of an alternative to sherry. Obviously there was none.

Mr Millar fumbled away with a not very good corkscrew; one (as I knew even then) with too small a radius to the screw and too slender and cutting a handle. I almost felt that I should offer to help. I was quite sure that at least I should say something, as time was passing in silence while the cork split off and refused to come out; but I could think of nothing to the purpose.

I had not been offered a seat, though there were two new office chairs, as well as the one behind Mr Millar's equally new desk. Mr Millar's desk was in imitation mahogany, where the desk outside imitated some much lighter and yellower wood. The sanctum was papered in light purple, or perhaps deep mauve: I can see it now, even though I never saw it again after this one visit, and quite a brief visit too, as will be seen. There was also some purple stuff on the centre part of the floor, where the desk stood; though the purple was not the same. There were four or five old portraits of the kind one can buy twice a week at certain auction-rooms. Normally such portraits are genuinely ancient, but of limited artistic value. They are like the 'old books' which so many people believe to be of great value but which, though quite truly old, prove almost impossible to sell at all in the hour of need. These specimens were of seventeenth and eighteenth century gentry in lace and wigs, four men and one woman; and they were in battered, discoloured frames. The one woman was elderly and unexceptional. Somehow it could not occur to one that these could be likenesses of Mr Millar's own ancestors.

'Pity there was no one with you,' said Mr Millar, pouring out. He fished out from one glass a scrap of tinfoil dropped off the bottle. That was quite a job too, as only a paper-knife was available to do it.

'My home is not in London,' I said. 'I don't know many people here yet.'

Mr Millar seemed uninterested, and one could hardly blame him.

'I wonder how long Lloyd George will last?'

This was, almost aggressively, 'making conversation.' Plainly I had failed badly in having no one with me. But at last the glass of sherry had reached me. As I was still not offered a seat, I sat down on one for myself. Immediately Mr Millar sat down also. I could think of nothing intelligent to say about Lloyd George, but I suppose I said something.

'Santé!' said Mr Millar, still not looking at me – or at anything else, as it seemed to me. He was like a man with two glass eyes. I took a strong pull at the sherry glass, fortunately quite large.

'Thundery weather,' said Mr Millar. 'How long before it breaks?'

'Not just yet I should say.'

'You're a countryman?'

'More an outer suburban, I'm afraid. At least it's become that.'

'Rather good sherry, don't you think?'

'Frightfully good.'

'Do you take the *Post* or the *Telegraph*?'

'I take *The Times*.'

'Bit young for that, aren't you?'

'I grew up with it.'

'Really?'

'Never another paper in our house.'

'Good Lord! You'd better write and tell them so.' Mr Millar laughed metallically.

It seemed that there was positively nothing to me without that missing person 'with me'. Really we could hardly continue.

'Let me fill you up.' He said it as perfunctorily as he had said everything else; but I accepted with some relief. I much needed daredevilry I could hardly escape for a few more minutes.

I could think of nothing to say which would continue the conversation. I doubted very much whether anything I could possibly say, would continue it. The central fact about Mr Millar was that his thoughts were elsewhere:

were, I felt all the time I was with him, elsewhere permanently. His glass eyes and wandering hands spoke truth of a kind, where his lips spoke only cotton wool.

'Fancy anything for the Cambridgeshire?'

I could but shake my head. From one point of view, I could see that Mr Millar might hope for more lively company.

'What about the tennis this summer? Good to have it back don't you think?'

'Good to have a lot of things back.'

'But there's a lot that won't come back so soon.'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's true.'

'I shouldn't wonder if there's never proper polo to watch again. Not polo worth watching.'

He was sitting sideways at his desk, showing me his left profile. I have said little—indeed, as I see, virtually nothing—about Mr Millar's appearance. Perhaps it is because there is so little to say. As far as I recall, he was a plump, pale man of average height. He was clean-shaven, always a trifle rough in the jowl—but only a trifle. I suppose he was thirty; maybe a well-preserved forty. He had a wad of yellow hair, carefully trimmed round the edges, so that it seemed to fit his head like a cap, and always honeyed with brilliantine. He was at all times well dressed; at all times noticeably so, but not in a pejorative sense, except, conceivably, for such details as the suede shoes I have mentioned (he was wearing a townsman's country suit with them, it being the eve of the weekend). His counterparts are to be seen everywhere, at all times . . .

I think I might even say that Mr Millar belonged to a type whose members tend to make one feel that their thoughts are elsewhere. But few of them carry this impression as far as Mr Millar carried it. Even at that first (but almost only) meeting, I sensed that Mr Millar's thoughts were as far away as those of Boris Godounof, who had, some said, made away with the rightful heir; or even of our own misled Macbeth.

'While you're here,' said Mr Millar. 'There's something

I'd like to explain. It seems a good opportunity.'

'Oh yes,' I said, slanting my sherry glass, now once more less than half full.

'We're very busy just now. I often have to stay on. So don't be surprised if you hear sounds.'

'I'm glad you've mentioned it.'

'I didn't want you to think we'd got the burglars in.' Mr Millar laughed his metallic laugh. 'I supposed at first I could come to an arrangement with the girl in the basement. Rather a sweet person, don't you think?'

'From what I've seen of her,' I said.

'But of course she has her family to think about and all that sort of thing. So I've decided to shake down up here. After all, why not?' Mr Millar's colourless eyes roamed uneasily round the room, almost, it seemed, as if he thought his question might be answered. His gaze then proceeded to traverse the ceiling. To me his news was so unwelcome that again I could find nothing whatever to say.

'You're one of these famous authors, I'm told?'

'I aim to be,' I replied.

'I once thought I'd write a book myself.'

'Had you a subject in mind?' I enquired without a trace of sarcasm.

'I'm sure I had,' said Mr Millar. 'God knows what it was!' He laughed again. 'Let me fill you up.'

'I really ought to be on my way.'

'Just one more before you go,' said Mr Millar, making a discernibly minimal effort to retain me. He was waving the bottle about nervously, but managed to concentrate enough to refill my glass.

'Yes, a sweet little person that!'

I smiled at man to man; or rather that was how it would have been if both of us had been men, instead of one of us an adolescent and the other a simulacrum.

'Man was not meant to live alone. Don't you agree?'

'There are arguments on both sides,' I replied.

'You wait till you're older,' said Mr Millar, and laughed his laugh. 'You can't talk till then.'

'I live a long way away, you know,' he continued. 'I couldn't possibly go home every night when we're so infernally busy. Couldn't stand the fag of it.'

'I suppose it's a good thing accountancy's so prosperous.' But I was quite surprised that Mr Millar claimed to have a 'home', however distant.

'Yes, I suppose it is if you care to see it like that.'

I rose. 'Anyway, I must leave you to it.'

'Glad you were able to come.'

He saw me only to the door of his sanctum; then turned back, his mind concentrated upon someone or something else, one shrank from thinking what.

From then on, as I might have known, Mr Millar seemed to remain in his office almost every night. The rest of them disappeared at more or less the usual hour, but Mr Millar would continue pottering up and down the stairs, locking and unlocking doors, carting small objects from place to place, making and answering late telephone calls, sometimes talking to himself as he roamed. When his shuffling about stopped me working (which, I have to acknowledge, was only occasionally), I would quietly open my door and shamelessly eavesdrop down my dark stair. But Mr Millar's activities seemed so trivial and futile as to be hardly worth spying on for long, and the chatter he addressed to himself (quite loudly and clearly) was not so much obsessive as escapist. The burden of his thoughts had long ago driven him out of his own personality, even when he was by himself. He had become a walking shell from which the babble of the world re-echoed.

Did he ever really sleep? And, if so, on what? His sanctum had offered nothing but the floor when I had been in it; but, as I have said, I never entered it again. I suppose a sofa could have been introduced without my meeting it coming upstairs or hearing it bruise the new paintwork. I did not know whether Mr Millar locked his door, the outer one or the inner one, when finally he ceased to travail on the staircase and from room to room. Assuredly, I never

heard him snore through the ceiling; although his bleak sanctum was immediately below my bedroom. But snoring is always absurd, and absurd was never quite the word for Mr Millar.

That was how it was in the early days of Mr Millar's virtual residence beneath me. (I often wondered about the terms of his lease. It was as well that the agents we had to deal with were so easy-going.) But before long Mr Millar began to receive visitors.

I had observed that rather late in the evening he seemed often to be out of the building. I would wander downstairs for some reason, or come back from the gallery of a theatre or the front rows of a cinema (my mother warned me about the effect on my eyesight). At any time between, perhaps, nine o'clock and two o'clock, I would find the lights on, and some of the doors still open, but no sight or sound of Mr Millar. I supposed that even he had to seek a bite of food. I never looked into any of the open rooms, because I feared that Mr Millar would spring from behind the door, cry Peep-bo, and do me a hideous mischief; but I think I was right in supposing him out of the office at these times, and this was confirmed when he got into the way of not returning alone.

Normally I only heard voices; voices and trudging steps, coming up the stairs, often very slowly, and then interminable talk on the floor below me, though sometimes there were other noises less easily definable, or explicable. More often than not, the voices were female; and, more often than not, very common voices, even strident, though I could seldom hear precise words. Up to a point the explanation was obvious enough: in those days, and before Mr R. A. Butler's famous Act, there were streets in the immediate area where it was far easier to pick up a woman and do what you liked to her than to pick up a taxi. On other evenings, Mr Millar's late callers were men, and several of them at a time, and as rough-spoken as the women. But the women also usually came several at a time: several at a time and apparently all friends together.

I really had no will to investigate closely: Mr Millar both bored me and alarmed me, in oddly equal measure. But the noise that he and the late callers made together was sometimes a serious nuisance, though the things I have described did not happen every night.

An unfortunate development was that I felt inhibited from bringing in my own few friends, especially my few but precious girl friends. One never quite knew what would happen, and explanations were at once ridiculous, unconvincing, and sinister. It was impossible to devise even an invented explanation that meant anything. A very young man who can bring no one home is at a major disadvantage. I found myself spending far longer periods as a hermit than I cared for. I perceived that I was being handicapped by circumstances even more than by temperament in making new approaches. Moreover, Mr Millar had not only altered the atmosphere in the house, but had already brought about an indefinable change in me.

It first struck me in the matter of Maureen. Maureen had ceased to visit me, and when we met by chance, we were strangers. We stared into one another's eyes coldly, as if divided by incommunicable experiences. What horrified me, when I thought about it, was that I realized I did not care. And I had previously become far fonder of Maureen than I had ever been able to make real to her. Nor was it that another had taken her place. Far from it. I had somehow diminished.

In the end, and inevitably, I met, or at least encountered some of Mr Millar's late visitors; on the doorstep, or surging upwards with Mr Millar in the midst, or, once or twice, standing silently on the staircase waiting for something to happen. It was especially odd to come upon these complete strangers standing about one's own staircase late at night. Never did they think of speaking to me; but then the persons actually accompanying Mr Millar, sometimes arm in arm with him, never spoke to me either, though often plainly embarrassed, even startled, to see me. Least of all at these times did Mr Millar himself speak to me. He kept

his eyes away from me in his usual way; apprehending me and making way for me, drawing the others back, all, as if with his pineal gland.

Mr Millar's callers looked as they sounded, only sometimes still rougher. Hogarthian groups can be entertaining in a picture but seem less so when encountered going the other way on a narrow stair. The men callers looked like small-size professional criminals; with violence taken for granted, and a bad end also. I noticed that the sexes were seldom mixed among Mr Millar's callers, though once I did encounter a very pregnant girl, horribly white, being dragged upstairs by a man with gashes all over his face. Men and women alike tended to become silent even among themselves when they saw me; and when I did catch things they said, the things were always banalities worthy of Mr Millar himself. Never was there any question of a 'revelation'. But then about Mr Millar, though everything was in a sense wide open, nothing was revealed from first to last.

An almost ludicrously flat explanation of the late callers occurred to me at one time. Was it not possible that these people, or some of them, really were clients; concerned with small enterprises, cafés, for example, which, though doubtless shady, still needed to keep accounts of a kind, perhaps several sets of them (as my great-uncle would have said)? The people might have reasons for not calling during the daytime. They might even have good and honest reasons: the demands made by one-man and one-woman businesses. Thus, further, might be explained, or partly explained, Mr Millar's policy of sleeping in the office, and his claim that business required it. And indeed that explanation may have been a true one as far as it went; whatever else may be said or surmised about the late callers. It struck me also, however, that at no time did I seem to see any other persons who could be thought of as friends of Mr Millar. One would suppose that these late callers were his friends; even his only friends. Certainly he treated them as friends: with uneasy shoves in the ribs, and sidelong

jocularities, and teeth-flashing After-yous.

Looking back on it all, it seems to me that it slowly worked up. There appeared to be nothing stable about Mr. Millar's life in any of its aspects: one doubted whether he slept regularly, ate regularly, ever saw the same friend twice; had any underlying framework of habit and routine. None the less, there was a perceptibly advancing intensification as the pageant of his life with us flowed on; at once ludicrous and alarming, as everything else about Mr. Millar – and steadily more embarrassing for me, in every sense of that epithet.

Indeed, I suppose I should try to say a word about why I did not myself soon move out; or at least *seek* some other abode sooner than I did.

About this I could rationalize unanswerably. With truth I could say that three rooms at a low rent in central London were exceedingly hard to find, and that everyone I knew told me I was very lucky and should sit tight at all costs – not that any of them knew in the least what the costs were. I could stress how notional was my cash basis, so that almost any change, not absolutely compelled, would indeed on balance be almost certainly for the worse. I could point out that the inconvenience (or menace) linked with Mr. Millar was by no means continuous. Even towards the end, or apparent end, of his sojourn, there would be several evenings in each week when there was no trouble at all except the marginal one connected with his own solitary fumbblings and mumblings. And then there was the important problem, one which I could never forget, presented by my mother's strong, though mainly silent, wish to have me back with her at the cottage. Any weakening on my part would probably lead to my giving up my London life completely, and the new friends I had made. They were few, but I felt that they were nearly a matter of life or death to me, even though Mr. Millar was a problem there too.

All these things were entirely enough to settle the matter. But what really settled it was, I think, something quite dif-

ferent. It was as if Mr Millar had injected me with a lightly paralysing fluid, cocooned me in an almost undetectable glaze or fixative; diminishing my power of choice, weakening my rational judgement, to say nothing of the super-refinement that had been put upon it by the super-refinement of the way I had been brought up. Though, when I thought about it, I was antagonized by almost everything to do with Mr Millar, yet I realized that he was an experience (or ordeal) I might be unwise to avoid. I could not live for ever as a child, free and light as air. As we acquire weight in the world, we lose it within ourselves. Maturity is always in part a matter of emptying and contracting. By that standard, Mr Millar, almost weightless, almost adrift, almost without habits (where a baby has nothing else), had passed beyond mere maturity; but contact with him amounted to a compressed and simplified course in growing up. Mine was similar to the real reason why a school-boy does not run away from the school he hates.

One evening—it was perhaps seven o'clock—came Maureen, once more tapping gently at my door.

'How are you getting on?' she asked. It was the first time in months that actual spoken words had passed between us; and never before had she been able to visit me except in the afternoon, between her job and collecting the youngest child.

She was wearing a short, sleeveless grey dress, with a scooped out neck: very little of it altogether in fact; and with several stains on the front, left there by cooking, or the children. She wore no stockings and a pair of high-heeled shoes that more or less matched her dress. She had left off her slide, and her hair was drooping over her eyes, so that she had to look up from under it. Her hands were in need of a wash, and there was even a small grimy patch on her face.

It was summer, and I was wearing simply a shirt and trousers.

I stepped up to her and held her tightly and kissed her

as if it were for ever.

'Stranger!' said Maureen affectionately.

I took off her dress, quite gently; and then wriggled her out of her underclothes, which were charming.

We lay down together on my cheap bed, neither glamorous nor particularly comfortable.

'What about you?' asked Maureen.

So I removed my own clothes, which I had quite forgotten about; and I put her shoes neatly alongside one another.

We were together for three or four hours, until long after it was dark, listening to our hearts, and, intermittently, to the sounds of London.

I did not ask her about her husband and family, nor did she expound; and when suddenly she said 'I'm going now,' my luck was in, or ours, because Mr Millar was not even walking from room to room with bits of paper in his hands, let alone entertaining visitors. I should have hated Mr Millar to have seen me kissing Maureen goodbye.

'When can I see you again?'

'I simply can't tell you. We must make the best of the present.'

Talk about maturity! I still had far to go, and perhaps had even experienced a setback, a reversion to happy childhood.

I have said that the pageant (or mirage) of Mr Millar's life seemed steadily to work up, to intensify.

One thing that was a new embarrassment as far as I was concerned, was that Mr Millar was drinking. The ludicrous side of it, if one saw it like that, was that large crates of cheap spirits were continually being delivered to the house by men in peaked caps. Remarkably often they rang my outside bell instead of the one appertaining to Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp. I would toil down, with all the men in their braces staring at me as if they had never seen me before, and all the girls giggling, and then have to toil up again; the booby who had fallen into the trap.

(Mr Millar himself continued almost invisible during working hours, at least as far as I was concerned. For a time I wondered whether he did not use the day for sleeping.) I have described the spirits that were ceaselessly delivered as 'cheap': they were gins made by brewers, and whiskies not made in Scotland or in Ireland; both with jazzy labels on the bottles.

The alarming side of Mr Millar's new propensity was that now when I returned home, I would sometimes find him not wandering about, but sprawling or huddled on the staircase, very white and dishevelled, breathing hard, and once or twice with the pupils of his eyes unnaturally turned upwards. The stairs would smell of drink, sometimes the whole house, though I do not think I ever actually saw Mr Millar with a glass in his hand or a bottle (after that first uneasy party with him, of course). None the less, he must have been drinking heavily, if one might judge by the deliveries; and I began to fear worse consequences, such as delirium tremens, concerning which I felt the apprehension that arises from total ignorance. My great-uncle, again, had been terrifying on the subject without going much into detail; 'while your mother's in the room,' as he had said. Nor did the possibility of finding Mr Millar lying dead on the stairs rather than merely insensible, at all attract me.

In the meantime, the aspect of the matter, not necessarily either funny or frightening, which none the less gave me the most trouble was that Mr Millar, instead of merely talking to himself, had begun to warble and carol, to bawl and bellow. He seemed capable of keeping it up, at least intermittently, for hours on end, as he fussed around. When he was japing his late night friends, the noise could be appalling. The urban sons of toil, even when the nature of their toil is probably criminal, are seldom slow in striking up, nor, traditionally, are the daughters of joy, who seemed to constitute the larger part of Mr Millar's acquaintanceship. Indeed, the police came ringing in protest: at my bell of course. And, on another occasion, banging and thumping at

the outer door; a small posse of them, to judge by the sound; and by the stamping when once they had got in.

As far as I was concerned, there was occasionally another kind of interruption. I would hear hysterical shouting in the room below me and then steps running up my own uncarpeted stair. There would be frantic pounding at my attic door, and when I opened it, a dishevelled girl too distraught to say what was the matter. I would glance over her shoulder as she stood there crying and raving and beating at me to let her in; and there would be Mr Millar at the bottom of the stair, comparatively calm, though not always entirely steady. He never spoke a word at these times, but seemed merely an uneasy spectator, collapsed against the banister. One might have thought him genuinely embarrassed and baffled by what had happened: resolved not to take the risk of saying a word when someone else was dealing with the situation.

In all the circumstances, I could not possibly admit the girl, so I would edge her downstairs again, saying that I would see her safely out into the street, and of course trying to buck her up, though I had no idea how best to do that. We would creep past Mr Millar, sometimes with my arm round the girl's shoulders; and he would never say a word of any kind, or make a move.

On one of these occasions, out of the four or five that I suppose there were in all, I was much frightened. It was bad enough to have to drag the girl past Mr Millar himself standing there watching; but on the occasion I refer to, when I reached the bottom of my stair, which ran straight up between two walls, I found that standing beside Mr Millar, and previously hidden from me, were two huge louts in cloth caps. They looked like chuckers-out or unsuccessful bruisers, but now they were as still and silent as Mr Millar. I did not find it easy to continue downwards with the shrinking girl at my other side, pressing herself against the wall; but I managed it and, as usual, nothing further happened. When I came up again after these incidents, Mr Millar had usually withdrawn into his room

and shut the landing door. This time all three of them had disappeared. I expected some kind of rumpus to resound from below me; but none did.

On another occasion, I remember that the girl was of a different type from the usual: standing ashake on my dingy doorstep, she told me that she had met Mr Millar at Wimbledon, but, though she knew she had been a fool, she had no idea it would be like this. 'I had no idea it *could* be,' she said, her eyes boring into me. She very much wanted me to telephone the police but I thought it would solve nothing and end nothing. Moreover, I should have had to borrow Mr Millar's telephone. So I just manoeuvred her out in the usual way, and in the street she recovered remarkably. 'I'm most awfully sorry to have been so silly,' she said. Then she added, 'Curse it, I've left my coat behind and it's a new, summer one.'

Going down for my post a day or two later, I found Mr Millar's male staff chucking a girl's coat from one to another in the big ground floor room; snatching at it and yelling at each other in mock antagonism. I supposed it was the same coat. I remember the colour still; a rather unusual greenish yellow, like yerba maté.

Nor, very evidently, were lawn tennis and improvised office throwabouts and kickabouts (more usually with a waste-paper basket) the only sporting interests of the firm. Every day I noticed communications from bookmakers; and others with continental stamps that I identified as coming from operators of casino systems. (My great-uncle yet again, I fancy.) I suppose now that the bookmakers' letters can only have arrived during the racing season, and that I must tend to exaggerate their continuity. But I truly remember a very large number of them. I suppose there is a possible link between accountancy and the computation of odds; and even more, one would think, on the tables than on the turf. I came to modify my speculations about what Mr Millar did during the day: since he went to Wimbledon, he might well go to race meetings also, as well as on occasion simply sleeping.

Certainly there were sometimes 'sporting types' about the building during the day. I do not refer here to the evening bashers and barrow boys, but to men in tweeds, with rolled umbrellas and public school idioms. They would exchange loud badinage with the firm's staff, slap the bottoms of the girls (remarkably hard, I thought), and be gone in fast, popping cars almost as soon as they had come. One of them is associated with a development that was particularly upsetting; and thus with my decision to move out.

Up to a point, I could not mistake this particular man. The noise of his car was both doubly loud and very distinctive. I could always hear him approaching from afar. And when he had arrived, he immediately clumped upstairs with a quite particular firmness. He always climbed right up to Mr Millar's own second floor, and there, with clatter and circumstance, he would open Mr Millar's outer door, using, apparently, a key on his own ring. He would go inside, be heard loudly tumbling things about for a minute or two, and then emerge, relock the door, and clump off again. The whole performance was regularly audible through my window, door, and floor; right through to the long withdrawing thunder of the man's machine.

Originally, I supposed that it was Mr Millar himself arriving and departing; Mr Millar who had left something behind, or wanted to see how things were getting on. But one day I met the stranger. His car roared up just as I was about to go out. In came a round, red-faced, stocky man in a green suit and a green pork-pie hat. He threw back the front door and gave me a really heavy push against the wall—in fact, seriously bruising my elbow, as I later found, so that for several days I had some difficulty in writing. Before I could say a word (if I could have thought of one) he was well upstairs with his familiar clump. I knew that from those around I could expect laughter rather than sympathy, so I continued on my way.

All the time I was in Brandenburg Square, I spent nearly every weekend with my mother. On the few occasions

when I did not, but stayed up in London, either to complete some work or to spend time with a friend, I thought I had established that Mr Millar took himself off; as, of course, one would expect. I assumed that he withdrew to the home he had mentioned to me over the sherry; difficult though I had found it to imagine.

Some time (I cannot remember how long) after my direct encounter with the sporting man in the green suit, came one of those London weekends. I think my mother had departed to stay with my father's stepsister in Frinton, as, since my father's death, she had grown into the way of doing several times each year. By now I had ceased inviting people round to see me even at these rare weekends, so disconcerting was the atmosphere in my house. And, at that particular weekend, it was possibly as well that I had.

Everything remained silent and as usual on the Saturday night, while I worked away on some rubbish from Major Valentine; but after I had gone to bed, quite late, I was awakened by the noise of somebody moving about downstairs.

Almost my first conscious thought was that the noise was nothing like loud enough to have actually awakened me. Then I remembered that it was a Saturday-Sunday night when there should (as I thought) have been no noise inside the building at all. I realized that my unconscious mind might have taken stock of this fact and sent out an alarm. I was frightened already, but that thought made me more frightened.

The noise was totally unlike the usual stamping and banging. I could hardly hear it at all; and was soon wondering whether the whole thing was not fancy, a disturbance inside my own ears and head. But I could not quite convince myself of this as I lay there rigid with listening, while the gleam from the street lamp far below seemed to isolate my small bedroom from the blackness of so much around me. I began to wonder if this might not be purely a conventional burglary. I could just see the time by my watch. It was ten minutes past three.

It was my duty to take action.

I made my muscles relax, and with a big effort jumped out of bed. In the most banal way, I seized the bedroom poker. (At that time, even central London attics still had fireplaces.) I opened the door into my sitting-room, darker than the bedroom, but not so dark that I could not cross with certitude to the outer door, where the light-switch was. Without turning on the light, I opened the outer door, I looked down my pitch-dark flight of stairs. When a light was on farther down I could from this point always see the glow. Now there was no light.

I became aware that a smell was wafting up. It was quite faint, at least where I was, but, none the less, extremely pungent and penetrating. I must admit that the expression 'a graveyard smell' leapt into my mind at the first whiff of it. Even a faint whiff was quite enough to make me feel sick in a moment. But I managed to hang on, even to listen with all the intentness I could muster.

There could be no doubt about the reality of the sounds beneath me; but every doubt about what caused them. Something or someone was shuffling and rubbing about in the almost total darkness: I found it impossible to decide on which landing or on which part of the staircase. In a flight of rather absurd logic, the thought of a blind person came to me. But, truly, the sounds hardly seemed human at all: more like a heavy sack wearily dragging about on its own volition, not able to manage very well, and perhaps anxious not to disturb the wrong person.

As well as feeling sick—really sick, as if about to *be* sick—I was trembling so much that no difficult further decision was needed: investigation was just physically impossible. I withdrew into my own territory, and locked my door as quietly as I could. By conventional standards, I suppose I had heard enough to justify a robbery call to the police, but I do not think it was only the lack of a telephone that deterred me. I sat there in the dark, with my handkerchief held tightly to my nose. Soon I began to feel chilled, and crept back to the comfort of my blankets.

Mercifully the smell did not seem strong enough to penetrate, but I pressed my face hard into the pillow, and lay listening, stretching my ears hard for sounds I dreaded to hear, eager above all to draw no attention to myself. And thus, in the end, despite all discomforts, I fell asleep.

And on the Sunday morning, while I was still trying to eat my breakfast, I heard the first, distant roar of the green man's noisy car. I heard him throw open the street door with a bang and come clumping up the many flights of stairs. Neither he nor anyone else connected with the firm downstairs had ever before entered the building on a Sunday when I had been there. The man did not even pause at Mr Millar's level, as he usually did, but came straight up to the attic. I could feel my flesh creep obscurely as I heard him. Horrors often come in pairs. Instead of ringing my bell, he waited silently for a moment. Perhaps he assumed that his advent was sufficiently apparent already, as indeed it was. However, since I did nothing, he delivered an immense kick at the lower rail of the door.

I opened up with as much as I could manage of dignity. At least the faint smell seemed gone.

'Thought you would have heard me,' said the man, in a thick but (as we said in those days) educated voice.

'I did.'

'Well then,' said the man; but as if he were offhandedly agreeing to take no exception to a slight. He stared at me hard: his manner was most unlike Mr Millar's. Nor was he wearing or carrying his pork-pie hat.

'Seen anyone about?'

'Since when?' I asked.

'Yesterday or today,' said the man, as if it hardly needed saying, which of course it did not.

'No,' I said truthfully. 'No, I don't think so.'

'Or heard?' asked the man, staring at me still harder, consciously breaking me down.

'What should I have heard?'

'People or things,' said the man. 'Have you?'

'Out of the ordinary, I suppose you mean?'

I was merely gaining time, but the vigour of the man's affirmation shook me.

'If you like.'

I was, in fact, so shaken that I hesitated.

'What happened?' asked the man. It was the tone the prefects used to learn in public schools for interrogating the juniors.

'I don't know what it was,' I replied with extreme weakness of spirit. Doubtless I should have played my part as new boy and asked what business it was of his.

'So they've arrived,' said the man, much more thoughtfully. One might almost have supposed him awed, if such a man had been capable of awe.

I felt a little stronger; as if life had passed from him to me.

'Who do you mean by *they*?' I asked.

'I'm not telling you *that*, my boy,' said the man; now within distant sight of equal terms. 'What I'm telling you is that you'll never see *me* again for dust. There's an end to all things. Thanks for the tip-off.'

And he clumped off. In a moment, I heard his reverberant car explode into life and charge away as if unscorchable entities would any moment be clutching at the exhaust-pipe.

'There's an end to all things,' the man had said; and clearly this was the end for me also, and in a sense far past it: an end to setting my teeth in order to face life, putting up with injurious incidentals for the supposed sake of a higher settled purpose; an end, at almost any cost, to my Brandenburg Square tenancy.

I managed to finish my breakfast ('No breakfast, no man,' my father had always said), and then went down to have a word with Maureen.

After that marvellous evening when Maureen had worn the grey dress, she had reappeared a number of times, unpredictably as before; and things had continued to be mar-

vellous, though, naturally, not so marvellous as the first time, because things seldom are. I realized very clearly that, situated as I was, I was fortunate in Maureen, though it was a disadvantage that I had virtually no voice in our arrangements, however unavoidable that might be. Very much had Maureen been a further reason for my not moving out.

Now that I had made up my mind, I took the initiative with her, even though I realized that her husband, Gilbert, would almost certainly be there too, let alone the children. It was almost the first time I had been down there since my visit soon after my arrival.

I rang, and the husband answered the door. He was in very old clothes. I could hear the children screaming in the room behind him. I hardly knew him, and, in any case, the conversation I am about to report was the only serious one I ever had with him.

'Maureen is away,' he said, as if there could be no doubt why I had called. 'She's in hospital. A breakdown. I'll give you the name of the hospital, if you like. Though it'll probably be some time before you'll be able to see her.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said. 'But not altogether surprised.'

I realized by his look that he completely misunderstood me.

'It's this house,' I elucidated. 'I've decided to move.'

'If you can find anywhere else.'

'Quite,' I said. 'I suggest you should think about moving too.'

'All together, in fact?' He was not hostile, I thought, but he had again misunderstood me. It would indeed have been nice to continue living in the same building as Maureen, but I had taken for granted that it was too much to hope for, with accommodation of any kind as short as it was then; and has been ever since, needless to say.

'Splendid if we could find anywhere. But I suggest that you and Maureen should move too in any case. This house is all wrong.'

He glanced at me. 'Will you come in and have some coffee? I've become quite good at pigging it since Maureen left.'

'Thanks very much,' I said. The situation was not what I had had in mind, but I was willing to talk about recent events to anyone remotely suitable.

'Sorry I'm not toggled up.' He pushed back the door for me to go in first.

The din and dust inside were duly frightful, but Maureen's husband set about making the coffee as if we had been alone in the flat, and the children stared at me for only a minute or two, then started running up and down again. I picked up *The Observer*.

'What exactly do you mean by wrong?' asked Gilbert in due course. 'Milk and sugar?'

The coffee really was good, and thoroughly welcome, even though so shortly after my own small breakfast.

'The people on the floors above don't run a normal business.'

His brow creased slightly. 'I agree with you.'

'I don't know what they do.'

'Maureen doesn't either. You know we used to have that cove, Millar, in here from time to time. He paid a small *pourboire*, and I admit we were damned glad to have it. I find life a struggle, as I don't mind telling you. But Maureen never discovered very much about him. I never met Millar myself. I take it you know him quite well?'

'Not really.'

I thought I could tell him exactly how much I did know of Mr Millar, even though I had to speak more loudly than I should have wished, because of the din in the room.

Gilbert listened very carefully, and then, after a moment's thought, shouted out: 'Children! Go *outside* and play.' I was surprised by the way they instantly departed and climbed up to the street: in those days, safe and almost silent on the Sabbath. 'And I take it that there've been developments since?' he continued.

'In that connection I'm rather glad the children have

gone,' I said.

'Sex or spooks?' asked Gilbert. 'Have some more coffee?' he went on before I could answer. 'Sorry, I forgot.'

'Thank you very much. I'm the better for it.'

'I'm sorry Maureen's not here.'

'I hope it'll not be too long,' I said.

We paused a moment, lapping coffee.

'Are you clairvoyant?' he asked.

'Not that I know of. I'm probably too young.' He was perhaps six or seven years older, despite all those children. 'Why? Do you think I've imagined it all?' I put it quite amiably.

'It just struck me for one moment that you might have seen into the future. All these people slavishly doing nothing. It'll be exactly like that one day, you know, if we go on as we are. For a moment it all sounded to me like a vision of forty years on – if as much.'

And indeed I had to take a moment to consider.

'But they're doing it all the time,' I objected. 'Now. Well, not this moment. I *think* not this moment. But you can go up and look tomorrow. See for yourself.'

'It's not something I particularly *want* to see. Forty years on. Though I was at Harrow, strange as it seems.'

I admit that I was surprised. I doubt whether I had then knowingly met another Harrovian, though I knew the song he had quoted.

'I was sacked, of course.'

I attempted an appropriately expressive look before returning to the matter in hand.

'Maureen must have seen,' I continued. 'Isn't that why she's not here? Wasn't it all too much for her?'

He eyed me a little; then said nothing. I suddenly apprehended the possibility that he might attribute Maureen's breakdown simply to me.

I pressed my point about the people upstairs. 'Do you know how much Maureen knows? Some of what there is to know is pretty shattering.'

'I really don't doubt it. I agree with all you say. I told

you so.'

'There's a bit more. Something rather different.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'I think I should.'

'Sorry the coffee's finished.'

'It was good.'

'Well?'

So I told him about the even odder events of that morning and of the night before. After all, I had to tell someone.

'So we've got the Un-Dead in too?' he commented.

I stared at him.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Isn't that more or less what you were implying?'

I must have continued to stare at him.

'Or did you mean something quite different?'

'On the contrary,' I replied. 'I think you've got it. It's just that it never occurred to me.'

'That you were visited by a creature from another world than this? Or supposed you were. I thought that was your point?'

'What never occurred to me was - ' I couldn't quite say it. 'I've told you,' I went on, 'that Mr Millar gave me the impression of having something very much on his mind.'

'A haunted man, in fact. Yes, I got that,' said Gilbert.

I cannot pretend that my voice did not sink a little foolishly.

'This house might be haunted by the ghost of his victim.'

Maureen's husband looked straight at me. 'Victims. Didn't your friend in green put it in the plural?'

'Mr Millar might be always on the move, always running away. And going through the hoops in the attempt to forget. Through all the hoops he can find. Even asking me down for a drink.'

'Still like forty years on,' said Maureen's husband. 'But you mustn't let me philosophize. It's probably only that I'm not being a wild success myself. Why do you call him Mr Millar?'

I could see that it might irritate an Harrovian. But my answer, though a mere inspiration of the moment, I rather liked. 'To link him with the rest of the world. He's one who needs it.'

'I see,' said Maureen's husband. 'I'll think about what you've told me. I've never doubted that old Millar was a dead loss. I suppose I've kept away from him for that reason. Of course we're not in a position to move just at the moment. You might say that the tangible factors outweigh the intangible. So forgive me if I don't offer to sit up with you waiting for the line of nameless horrors.' His expression changed. 'You *will* forgive me? To start with, I can't leave the kids and I can hardly bring them with me.'

'I never even thought of it,' I replied; which was true.

'If you come screaming down the stairs at any time, don't hesitate to knock me up. Knock hard, because I sleep hard after slogging all day at the filthy shop. Besides it might scare away the apparitions.'

I should perhaps have been grateful for a slightly different attitude, but one had to take the man as he obviously was. I attempted one more word.

'I see it's no business of mine, but I do sincerely advise against staying long in the same house with those people upstairs. If they were to go, of course it would be different.'

'It might not, of course, from what you say. But the real trouble is that there's always something. Not just something wrong, but something badly wrong. I can see that Millar's got on your nerves and I don't blame you either. But if you'd ever lived in some of the places that Maureen and I have lived in since I was invalided out . . . Believe me, my friend, there's always something that's bloody about living among the toiling masses. From my point of view this place is a real oasis. You may see what I mean when you start looking for somewhere else. Mind if I get the kids down again?'

'I'll go,' I said. 'Thank you for listening.'

'Any time,' he said. 'Always a friendly bosom on which to lay the troubled head. I'll tell Maureen you looked in. When she's more compos, that is.'

Needless to say, Maureen's husband proved to be almost gruesomely in the right of it. I could find nowhere else to live that was even possible; and I found much on offer that was quite horrible. That was after spending almost the whole of the next week in the search; regardless of my duties to Major Valentine. A week does not sound very long, but it is surprising how many small, dark cavities six days can unearth. In any case, the unit of a week was critical. I should have liked at least to be sure of having somewhere else to go before having to face another Saturday and Sunday.

Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp seemed to be carrying on as usual, though as I was out of the house for the greater part of each day, it was impossible for me to be sure. On the Thursday night, Mr Millar was beating it up with three noisy girls until the dawn was filtering through my windows, grey as Maureen's dress.

I decided that I could not face the Saturday and Sunday nights. On the Saturday evening, I retreated to my mother, after spending a long day visiting a list of impossible addresses (many of them stated to be accessible on a Saturday only – often on a Saturday afternoon only, perhaps between two and four.)

'What a surprise!' exclaimed my mother. 'I wasn't sure I should ever see you again.'

And when, against some reluctance on my part as well as against the usual resistance on my mother's, I returned to Brandenburg Square in the later part of the Monday morning, I found a transformation.

In the first place, I had to open the street door with my key. This was unknown during 'business hours': the staff of Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp, and their sporting friends, pushed in and out so incessantly that a locked

front door would have been ludicrous. It would have been entirely out of harmony with the firm's way of life and what would now be called 'image'.

Within all was quiet. All the room doors were shut, which was also quite unknown. This time I applied myself to several of the handles with confidence. Every door I tried was locked.

I put down my canvas bag and went outside again, the front door swinging shut behind me on its heavy spring.

The firm's unusually large brass plate had gone. Even the phantom shape of it was fainter than usual in these cases; the firm having been with us for so much less than the customary (or then customary) forty or eighty years. I picked a bit at the screw-holes, but nothing peeped out. I stood back and looked up at the windows of the house. All were shut, but there was nothing unusual about that. I had never noticed an open window on the floors occupied by Messrs Stallabrass, Hoskins and Cramp. I reflected that it would be no use enquiring in the basement, as Maureen's husband would be at the provisions shop. (I wondered for the first time who was nowadays collecting the children from school.) As people were now staring at me, I gave the front door a push and re-entered.

Maureen stood halfway up the first flight of stairs, as if awaiting me.

She wore a white blouse that some of my mother's generation would have called 'skimpy', and a bright red skirt, and equally bright red shoes. Her stockings gently gleamed, her hair positively shone, and her face was nothing less than radiant.

'All silent as the tomb,' she said.

'Maureen!' I cried and hugged her and kissed her. It was impossible to do anything else.

'Suddenly,' she said. 'Quite suddenly. During the week-end. I was very ill, you know, Roy, and then almost at once I was all right. It was yesterday, and I've been in a bit of a trance ever since. I've spent this morning buying clothes that we really can't afford, and having my hair done, and

just sitting in the square, and smiling at everything.'

I kissed her again.

'How long have this lot been gone?' she went on. 'Gilbert's departed for the weekend and taken the children. Thought I was safely shut away. What's he up to, I wonder?'

'This lot were here when I left on Saturday. Come upstairs, Maureen.'

We went up arm in arm, even though I was carrying my canvas bag.

At Mr Millar's own floor, we stopped, and, for the hell of it, I tried the handle of Mr Millar's own outer door, the door into the pink room with the cornice of flowers. This time, the door opened.

I tried to push Maureen out, but I failed. Mr Millar was hanging there, in the outer office for all to see; and from a large hook, meant for hanging overcoats on a wall, which he, or someone, must have spent much time screwing into the plaster of the ceiling, or rather, I imagine, through the ceiling into one of the wooden joists of my floor above. The most curious thing was that though there was no detectable movement of air in the room, the roundish body swung back and forth quite perceptibly, as if it had been made of *papier mâché*, or some other featherweight expendable. Even the clothes looked papery and insubstantial. Was it the real Mr Millar at all who dangled there? It was remarkably hard to be sure.

A curious thing of another kind was that though, for a long time, I had been scared out of my wits by events in the house (and Maureen perhaps literally so), yet from quite soon after that climatic Sunday, I began to feel reasonably happy there almost all the time, indeed very happy indeed when I thought about Maureen or covered her sweet hair with kisses; and entirely forgot the idea of moving, or as entirely as life ever permits one to forget anything.

THE GORGON'S HEAD

Gertrude Bacon

'They that go down to the sea in ships' see strange things, but what they tell is oft times stranger still. A faculty for romancing is imparted by a seafaring life as readily and surely as a rolling gait and weatherbeaten countenance. A fine imagination is one of the gifts of the ocean – witness the surprising and unlimited power of expression and epithet possessed by the sailor. And a fine imagination will frequently manifest itself in other ways besides swear words.

Captain Brander is one of the most gifted men in this way in the whole merchant service. His officers say of him with pride that he possesses the largest vocabulary in the great steamship company of which he is one of the oldest and most respected skippers, and his yarns are only equalled in their utter impossibility by the genius he displays in furnishing them with minute detail and all the outward circumstance of truth.

I first learned this fact from the second engineer the evening of the sixth day of our voyage, as we leant across the bulwarks and watched the sunset. The second engineer was a bit of a liar – or I should say romancer – himself. The day he took me down into the engine room he told me, as personal experiences, tales of mutinous Lascar firemen, unpopular officers who disappear suddenly into the fiery maw of blazing furnaces, and so forth, which, whatever foundation of fact they may have possessed, certainly did not lose in the telling. As a humble aspirant in the same branch of art he naturally was quick to recognize the genius of that past master, the Captain, and his admiration for his chief was as boundless as it was sincere.

'I say, Miss Baker,' he said, apropos of nothing, 'have you had the skipper "on" yet?'

'Not that I am aware of,' I said. 'What do you mean?'

'Why, has he been spinning you any yarns yet? There isn't a man in the service can touch him for stories. I don't deny that he has seen some service, and been in some tight places, but for a real out-and-out lie, commend me to old Monkey Brand!' (It was by this sobriquet, I regret to say, suggested partly by his name, and mostly by his undoubted resemblance to a well-known advertisement, that the worthy captain was known in the unregenerate engine room).

'Oh, I should just love to hear him,' I cried. 'There is nothing I should like better. Do tell me how I can manage to draw him.'

'Well, he doesn't want much drawing as a rule,' said the engineer. 'He likes to give vent to his imagination. Let me see,' he continued, 'tomorrow afternoon we shall be about passing the Grecian Islands. Ask him about them, and try and get him on the subject of the Gorgons.'

'Gorgons!' I said. 'What a strange topic! Why since I've left school I have almost forgotten what they were. Weren't they mythological creatures who turned people into stone when they looked at them?'

'That's about it, I believe,' said the engineer, 'and a fellow called Perseus cut off their heads, or something of that kind. It's a lie anyhow, but you ask the skipper.'

It was the custom of Captain Brander every afternoon to make a kind of royal progress among his passengers, going the entire circuit of the ship; passing slowly from group to group, with a joke here and a chat there, and bestowing his favours in lordly and impartial fashion – especially among the ladies. I have watched him often coming the whole length of the promenade deck, making some outrageous compliment to one girl, patting another on the shoulder, even chucking a third under the chin; a sense of supreme self-satisfaction animating his red cheeks, curling his grey hair, and suffusing his whole short, portly person. Eccentric he was; indifferent to his personal appearance – his battered old cap had seen almost as much service as he had

— but a more popular man or an abler officer never walked the bridge. On this particular occasion I was at the end of the deck, and had so arranged that an inviting deck chair stood vacant beside me. Wearied by his progress by the time he reached me, he fell at once into my trap, and sat down on the empty chair, leant back, and spread his legs. He and I were fast friends, and had been since the day when I tried to photograph him, and he had frustrated my design by unscrewing the front lens of my camera and keeping it in his pocket for the rest of the morning.

'Captain,' I said, pointing to a cloudy grey outline faintly visible against the eastern horizon, 'what land is that?'

'My dear young lady,' said he, 'I am quite sick of answering that question. If I have been asked it once I have been asked it twenty times in the last half hour. That old Mrs Matherson in the red shawl buttonholed me on the subject to such an extent that I thought I should never get away again. Wonderful thirst for information that old party has! And she appears to think that because I'm Captain I must have a complete knowledge of geography, geology, history, etymology, mythology, and navigation. Well, for the twenty-first time, then, we are passing the isles off the coast of Greece, and that one straight ahead is Zante.'

'So that is Greece, is it?' I mused aloud. 'Well, from here at least it looks old enough and romantic enough to be the home of all those ancient heroes we read about — Alexander and Hercules — and — Gorgons and those sorts of things.' I felt I had introduced the subject somewhat lamely, after all, and the Captain looked me full in the face as if suspecting a plot. But if I am not very adroit in conversation, I can at least look innocent upon occasions, and he merely said, 'And what do you know about Gorgons, pray?'

'Oh, as much as most people, I expect!' I answered. 'They are only a sort of fairy tale, you know.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Captain Brander. 'Those fairy tales, as you call them, have often truth at the bottom of them. And as to Gorgons, why, I could tell you

a little incident that happened to me once – but it's rather a long story.'

Then I urged my best persuasions – not that he needed much pressing – and pushing his old cap off his bald forehead, and speaking slowly and with that almost American accent peculiar to him, he unfolded his tale of wonder as follows:

'It's nearly thirty years ago, Miss Baker – that's long before you were ever born or thought of – that I was fourth officer in the *Haslar*, a two thousand ton vessel of this same company I serve to this day. How times have altered, to be sure! The *Haslar* was reckoned a fine ship in those days, and if you had told me that I should presently command an eight thousand tonner, such as I do this day, with eleven thousand horsepower engines, and more men for the crew alone than the *Haslar* could hold when she was packed her tightest, I very probably wouldn't have believed you. However, that is neither here nor there. But thirty years ago in the spring-time – now I come to think of it, it was in the month of April – we were cruising in this very neighbourhood, and one thick foggy night our skipper lost his bearings a bit, got too near the coast, and ran us ashore off the south point of Zante.

'Of course there was a great fuss, and everybody came up on deck with life-belts, and all the girls screamed, and all the young fellows swore to save them or die in the attempt; and the skipper turned as white as paper – not that he was afraid, for he was no coward – none of our officers are that – but because he knew his prospects were ruined, and he would be turned out of the company and perhaps lose his certificate, and he'd got a wife and a big family, poor chap! Of course that consideration didn't affect me, for I was in my bunk and asleep at the time, but it was certainly unfortunate for him.

'Well, it was very soon discovered that the ship wasn't going down in a hurry, and nobody got into the boats, though they were lowered ready. And when daylight came we saw we were fast on the rocks, with half the stern

under water, and the saloon and a lot of the cabins flooded. But more than that the *Haslar* couldn't sink, and at low water you might almost walk dryshod on to the shore. There was no getting her off, however, and so all the passengers were landed and sent home as best they could across country, and a rough time they had of it, for Zante is not an over-hospitable sort of place; while we officers had to stick to the ship until we could get help, and then till she was repaired sufficiently to work her into dock somewhere.

'It was a tedious job, for help was slow in coming; and then all her boilers had to be taken out before she would float, and we fellows got jolly sick of it, I can tell you, for we were hard-worked, and Zante is a wretched hole to spend more than half an hour in. Our one amusement, when we were off duty, was to go ashore on foot or row round the island in a boat, shooting wild fowl and exploring the country. There was precious little to see and not much to shoot, and it was slow fun altogether till, one day, the second officer came back from a tramp ashore and told us he had found his way to some very remote village on the eastern coast, where there was a cave among the hills which the villagers warned him not to enter. He could not gather for what reason, because he didn't understand enough of their outlandish tongue, but as it was then growing late he was obliged to return to the ship without further investigation.

'I was always one for adventure when I was a lad, and directly the second officer told his tale I made up my mind to go and explore that cave before any of the rest had a chance. It so happened that next day was my turn for going ashore, and I went and looked up one of the assistant engineers and persuaded him to come with me. I wanted him because he was a chum of mine, and also he was the only one of us who could talk the language a bit. He had been in those parts before, and generally acted as interpreter in our dealings with the natives. His name was Travers, a queer little dark chap, with black eyes and a

hot temper, but a pleasant enough fellow, if you did not rub him the wrong way, and game for anything under the sun. He readily agreed to come with me, and we started as soon as we could get away, telling no one of our destination, for we had no wish to be forestalled.

'It was a long tramp, right across the island, to the village which Jenkins, the second officer, had indicated. But at last, after climbing a weary hill, we looked down on some clustering huts standing amid vineyards in the valley beneath, while another and much sheerer cliff rose on the opposite side, whose rugged scarp was all rent and riven as by an earthquake, and intersected by a deep ravine. Here and there among the rocks were dark shadows and black patches, which might be the entrances to caverns in the crag. "This must be the place," I said, "and one of those is the forbidden cave. How are we to find out which?"

'As if in answer to my question, at this moment there came along the hilltop toward us a burly countryman with a sunburned face and tattered garments. He regarded us with astonishment, as well he might, for they get few strangers in those parts, and he made some remark to us in his queer language, which, of course, I didn't understand, but Travers did and replied to it. Finding he was understood, the countryman stopped and talked.

' "Ah!" he said, or so Travers interpreted, "so you have reached the valley of the Haunted Cavern! It is far to seek and hard to find, but it lies spread beneath you."

' "But which is the Haunted Cavern, and why is it so called?" asked Travers.

' "It lies in yonder cleft of the hills," answered the man, pointing to the opposite ravine, "and it is called the Haunted Cavern because none who venture there return alive. Nay, they return not either alive or dead. They are seen no more!"

' "Tell that to the Marines!" said Travers, only he translated it into Greek, of course, or what the Zante people think is Greek. "You don't expect me to believe such a

yarn as that! Why, what is there up in that place?"

"That is what none can tell," replied the peasant, "for none come back to say. And, indeed, it is the truth I speak. Many men have attempted to find the secret. In bygone days, I have heard, a whole party of soldiers were sent there to search for brigands supposed to be in hiding, but not one was seen again. The cavern has an evil name, and now is shunned by one and all, but every now and then there arises a youth venturesome beyond the rest; and he heeds not the warnings of the old, but hopes to break the spell and find the treasure that some say is hidden there, and he starts in high hope and courage, but never again do we behold his face!"

"But what is the reason?" persisted Travers, the incredulous.

"Nay, that we cannot say," reiterated the man. "A short distance can one go up the ravine that leads to the cavern. I have been there myself, and truly there is nothing that can be seen except a barren valley, scattered all over with big black stones. Nothing more, and further than the entrance none must venture."

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Travers, in delight, "did you ever hear such an old liar? This beats anything I could have believed possible in the nineteenth century. Come on, Brander! We are in luck this time!" and the impetuous fellow dashed off down the hill, I at his heels, leaving the countryman dumb with amazement behind us.

'At the foot of the hill we entered the little village. An old, white-haired man of rather superior appearance was crossing the road before us. Travers accosted him and asked him the way to the Haunted Cavern. The old man turned quite pale with astonishment and apprehension.

"The Haunted Cavern, my son!" he said, in quavering tones. "Surely you are not going thither?"

"Yes, we are, though," said Travers, his eyes dancing with excitement. It is wonderful what enterprise that boy – he was little more – had in him. "And if you won't tell

us, we'll find the way out for ourselves!" and he pushed past the old man, who held out his skinny hands as if to detain him.

'Before we had got clear of the hamlet the news had somehow circulated that we were about to explore the ravine, and all the inhabitants turned out in the wildest excitement. Some were for staying us forcibly, till Travers began to get quite nasty, drew his revolver, and talked of firing. Many reiterated and emphasized alarming warnings and assurances that we should never return. All watched us with the utmost interest, and followed close on our footsteps until we began to near the fatal spot, when they fell off singly or in parties, till finally at the very entrance of the ravine we had left even the boldest spirits behind us.

'In truth, it was a strange spot to which we had penetrated. The narrow path had led us suddenly round the spur of the mountain, and now, look which way we might, the giant rocks towered up sheer above us, hundreds of feet high, in inaccessible grey walls. The sinking sun was now too low to shine within this well-like space, which his rays could only reach at midday, and the very air struck damp and chill. We were in an open valley, thus shut in by the cliffs, of considerable extent, but not to be reached by any path except that we had traversed. The ground was firm and smooth, but littered all over with the strangest black stones of all sorts of shapes, and in all positions, though of a fairly uniform size, and alike in material. There was something uncanny and weird about these black boulders, which strewed the valley the thicker the farther we advanced, till at the far end of the space, where a huge black hole yawned ominous in the cliff, they almost entirely blocked the way.

The dark cavern looked terribly grim and forbidding in the fading light. A little stream issued from its mouth and trickled among the stones. It did not gurgle and glisten as most mountain streams, but flowed noiselessly, sluggish, and dull, and gathered in stagnant pools on its rocky bed. No birds sang in that dismal nook; no sound from without

penetrated its recesses. All was silent, dim, and chill as the tomb itself.

'Despite my utmost efforts, I felt the spell of the weird, wild spot stealing over me, and a cold shudder crept down my backbone. There was but room for one at a time in the ever-narrowing track, and I was at first leading. My steps became slower and slower, and finally I paused altogether and turned to look back on Travers to see if he too was feeling the oppressive sense of evil that seemed to hang heavy in the air. But in his face was only visible an ecstasy almost of eagerness and delight. His dark eyes sparkled again, his cheeks were flushed, his breath came quickly, and his whole body was quivering with excitement.

'“Go on, Brander!” he cried. “What are you stopping for, man? This is grand! This is luck, indeed! Did you ever see such a place? Come on, I want to get to that cave!”

'I felt utterly ashamed to confess my weakness, but it was that cave that I had begun to dread more and more. Whatever else I may be, Miss Baker, it is not boasting to say I am no coward. I have seen danger, aye, and courted it all my life, and until that moment I doubt if I had known what fear was. But I knew then: the blind, unreasoning fear that saps the strength of mind and limb and melts the heart and paralyses all thought save that one overpowering instinct to fly – somewhere. Yet, in face of Travers's eagerness, I could not bear to show the white feather. I turned my back therefore on the dark cavern, now just ahead of us, and endeavoured to temporize.

'“Travers,” I said, “did you ever see such queer stones? How do you suppose they have got here? They are of quite a different nature from these cliffs, so they could not have fallen from the sides.”

'“Oh, bother the stones!” said Travers. “I can't look at them now, I want to get into the cave. Quick, before it gets dark!” And as I still hesitated, he pushed past me into a more open space beyond, almost at the cavern's mouth. I did not dare to leave him, and was scrambling after him

as best I might, when I suddenly heard him cry out in a voice such as I had never heard before, and hope never to again. A shrill, high-pitched cry in which there were surprise, wonder, disgust, alarm, and awful horror all combined in one: a cry of astonishment, a shriek of agony, a shout of dismay.

‘“Look, Brander! Look! Look!”

‘I could have sworn that when he spoke my companion was in full view, close beside me, touching me almost, though at the exact moment my eyes were looking away from him; but when I turned my head in answer to his cry he was gone.

‘For one second only had my gaze been averted, but in that time he had utterly vanished from sight, disappeared in a flash, gone – whither? A large black stone stood close beside me, similar to the rest in that ghostly valley; yet it struck me somehow that I had not noticed it there before. I placed my hand upon it as I peered round behind to see if Travers were there, and a shudder I could not explain ran up my arm, for the stone felt warm to the touch. I had not time then to analyse my unreasonable horror at this trivial circumstance; I was too eager to find my friend. I rushed madly among the stones, I yelled his name again and again, but the weird echoes of my cry, returned in countless reflections from cliff and cavern, alone answered me.

‘In a frenzy of despair I continued my search, for certain was I that by no natural means could Travers have disappeared so utterly in so brief a space. Blind panic seized me, and I knew not what I did, till my eye suddenly fell on a shallow pool of water collected in a rocky hollow at my very feet. It was not more than a couple of inches deep, and scarce a yard across, but on its placid face were reflected the overhanging rock and opening of the cavern just behind it, and also something else that glued my eyes to it in horror and rooted my flying feet to the ground.

‘Just above the cavern’s mouth was a narrow ledge of rock, running horizontally, and a few inches in width. On

this natural shelf, reflected in the water, I saw, hanging downward, a decayed fragment of goatskin, rotten with age, but which might have been bound round something, long years before. Upon this, as if escaped from its folds, rested a Head.

'It was a human head, severed at the neck, but fresh and unfaded as if but newly dead. It bore the features of a woman – of a woman of more perfect loveliness than was ever told in tale, or sculptured in marble, or painted on canvas. Every feature, every line, was of the truest beauty, cast in the noblest mould – the face of a goddess. But upon that perfect countenance was the mark of eternal pain, of deathless agony and suffering past words. The forehead was lined and knit, the death-white lips were tightly pressed in speechless torment; in the wide eyes seemed yet to lurk the flame of unquenchable fire; while around the fair brows, in place of hair, curled and coiled the stark bodies of venomous serpents, stiff in death, but their loathsome forms still erect, their evil heads yet thrust forward as if to strike.

'My heart stopped beating, and the chill of death crept over my limbs, as with eyes starting from their sockets I stared at that awful head, reflected in the pool. For hours it seemed to me I gazed fascinated, as the bird by the eye of the snake that has charmed it. I was as incapable of thought as movement, till suddenly forgotten schoolroom learning began to cross my brain, and I knew that I looked at the reflection of Medusa the Gorgon, fairest and foulest of living things, the unclean creature, half woman, half eagle, slain by the hero Perseus, and one glimpse of whose tortured face turned the luckless beholder into stone with the horror of it.

'If I once raised my eyes from the reflection to the actual head above I knew that I too should freeze in a moment into another black rock, even as poor Travers, and every other who had entered the accursed valley had done before. And as this thought occurred to me, the longing to lift my eyes and look upon the real object be-

came so overpowering that, in sheer self-preservation, I inclined my head closer and closer to the water till I seemed almost to touch it, when my senses fled and I knew no more.

When I woke at last it was far on in the night, and a bright moon, riding high, shone full down upon the valley, revealing the ragged rocks and scattered stones with a cold brilliance that almost equalled the day. I was lying chilled and stiff beside the pool, and I started up in amazement, unable to recall to my mind, for a moment, where I was or what I was doing there. I had my back to the cavern, fortunately, and as I gazed over the ghostly and deserted scene, the events of the day suddenly returned to my mind in a single flash of terror.

To escape from this ghastly place was now my only thought, and in order to do this I resolved to look no more at the pool at my feet in case the terrible fascination should again take possession of me. What it cost me to adhere to this resolution I cannot tell you, but with the courage of despair I pressed blindly forward to the mouth of the ravine, only pausing a second to lay my hand upon the now ice-cold stone that was once Travers.

Poor Travers! Gay, light-hearted fellow! Ever in the forefront of mischief, of danger, of adventure. How eager he had been to solve the secret of the haunted valley, which now must be his tomb forever. How full of health and spirits he had scrambled a few hours before among those very boulders, one of which now, standing stiffly erect among its forest of brethren, was at once the monument and sole relic of a fearless lad, a cheery friend, and a gallant seaman. Dear old Travers! Brave, foolish boy! My heart was heavy indeed for his awful fate, as I reverently touched the stone and murmured to the night breeze, stealing around the rocks, "Goodbye, old fellow; sleep sound!"

It seemed to me, in my loneliness and terror, that my fearsome journey would never be ended: that, lost in a labyrinth, I should tread that valley forever. But at last,

after endless ages, I reached the mouth of the ravine, and once on open ground I stretched my cramped limbs and ran, without ceasing, till I once more reached the ship.'

Here the captain paused, more from want of breath than anything else, I think.

'Go on, Captain Brander,' I cried. 'You haven't half finished yet. What did they say when you returned, and how did you explain about poor Travers?'

'Young lady,' said Captain Brander, 'don't ask any more questions. I think I have told you enough for one afternoon,' and here, an officer coming up and summoning him, he left me.

THE TREE

Joyce Marsh

Reita Oxley lay still, but wide awake in her narrow bed listening tensely to the shallow breathing of her husband sleeping in the large bed beside her. There was no light, but the huge moon threw twisted beams, painting the room with bizarre stripes and patches of luminous light. Suddenly the man in the bed coughed and moaned restlessly. With the swift silence of long practice, Reita slipped from her bed and padded across the few feet that separated them to look down at her husband. Thankfully she saw that he still slept and the slight cough had not been the forerunner of another attack. The harsh light of the moon accentuated the dark spots of colour high on the cheek-bones and the blue-tinged lips showed black in the moonlight.

As she lay down once more Reita felt a surge, not so much of sorrow, as of anger that her five short years of happiness were to end so soon. For the past year her husband's heart, strained by the privations of years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, had grown steadily weaker. It had been only five years ago that he had first come to her father's house in Northern India where he had been sent to recuperate in the soft climate of the hills. Young, gay, and always laughing, he had seemed almost like a being from another world to that household steeped in the traditions and superstitions of centuries. It was not surprising that the young Reita had loved him. It was more surprising, perhaps, that he had loved her and married her to bring her home to this strange and lovely England.

Now he was dying. She turned her head to look out of the window. The moon was huge, like an Indian moon but colder, and so close that it seemed to be tangled up in the bare twigs and branches of the great tree that grew outside the window. The brief gusts of a March wind made the

little twigs toss and jump but the trunk of the huge old oak moved not at all. It stood as it had done for countless years, its roots deep in the earth drawing up the strength that made it impervious to wind, rain or man.

The sick man moaned again and the sound filled Reita with an unreasoning anger, this time against the tree. She suddenly hated it for its strength, feeling it a mockery of her husband's weakness. The thought that it would stand there firm and untouched long after George was dead seemed almost obscene. 'In my country, in my great-grand-mother's time, I might have been married to such a tree,' she thought, 'but I married a warm, living, loving man and now he is slipping from me while the tree lives on. If only he had the strength of that tree I could believe again in the ancient gods and customs of my ancestors; if the strong sap coursed through my husband's veins he could live while the tree died.' Shuddering slightly at her own ridiculous thoughts, Reita turned away from the window and closed her eyes. In doing so she did not see a slight tremor that ran through the trunk of the old tree, or notice the brief, but violent shuddering of the branches.

The next morning the sun shone clear and bright; when Reita awoke she was surprised to see George awake before her and already sitting up in bed. 'Sleepy head,' he called to her with a grin reminiscent of their early days together. 'Let's get moving,' he went on gaily. 'You're going to trundle me right round the garden before breakfast, my lady.' Reita jumped quickly out of bed, pleased, but not deceived by his lively mood. She had seen so many days that he had started like this, bright with hope, only to watch the vitality slowly draining from him until the day ended in breathless gasps and exhaustion. She gave no hint, however, of her inward despair as she matched her mood to his, laughing and chattering as she dressed herself and him.

When George was at last ready and sitting in his wheelchair, he repeated his demand that they walk in the garden. Only too pleased to give him what pleasure she could,

Reita had him carried downstairs and they set off through the lovely English garden. All the way George talked and laughed and constantly called on her to stop while he examined the Spring bulbs just showing through. Even a tiny leaf bursting from a newly-pruned rose excited his interest. He seemed so gay that Reita managed to push aside her sickening dread for him. She forgot for a while that his strength must soon ebb and his chatter die away. But the day wore on without any change in George's mood and no signs of his vitality flagging.

After lunch he wanted to go back again into the garden. The sun was quite warm and he sat in his chair under the old oak. Reita had wandered a short distance away when he suddenly called. The urgency of his voice frightened her and as she turned to him the expression of repulsion on his face further alarmed her and sent her running towards him. George was staring down at his hand. The fingers were held stretched out and across the upturned palm lay a little twig snapped in two. As Reita came near she could see a red stain spreading over George's hand, and from the broken ends of the twig oozed tiny little droplets of red sticky fluid. 'It's blood, the twig is bleeding . . .' George's voice was thick with the revulsion he felt for the thing on his hand.

'Nonsense,' said Reita, disguising her own disgust. 'You must have crushed an insect when you picked the twig.' Hastily she wiped away the stain and hurried to get her husband back indoors, lest the unpleasant incident should spoil the best day he had had for months. But as she walked round to the back of his chair she felt something warm drop on to her cheek from the low branches. Looking up she saw a broken twig and, hanging from the end, a drop of blood. Fortunately George had not noticed, so scrubbing hard at her face she pushed him indoors. Once inside, George seemed to forget the whole episode and the day continued to its end in the same gay mood in which it had begun.

March gave way to April and the glorious Spring sun-

shine seemed never ending. To Reita's delight and his doctor's utter confusion, George grew stronger every day. They spent a great deal of time in the garden and the sick man's favourite place was under the oak. He seemed to have completely forgotten the little bleeding twig, although Reita noticed that he never reached up to pick another.

It was towards the end of April that George first insisted upon leaving his wheel-chair to try a step or two. Reita was a little apprehensive, but the last few weeks had brought such a return to happiness that she was determined to live each day as it came without thinking of tomorrow, so she did not try hard to dissuade him. They were in their usual place under the oak tree and when she helped him to his feet his firm stance astonished her. She held out her arms for him to come to her, but he turned away, to walk easily and steadily to the trunk of the tree. He flung his arms as far round as he could reach and the feeling came to Reita that this was more a gesture of love than a need for support. His voice too, when he spoke, frightened her. 'This old tree is in a bad way, in fact I reckon it's had it.' His tone was flat and expressionless and yet somehow triumphant.

Striving to suppress an unreasoning panic, Reita spoke lightly. 'Oh, I don't think so. It's a bit early for the oak leaves yet. In a couple of weeks it will begin to leaf-up, you'll see.'

'In a couple of weeks it will be dead.' This time there was no mistaking the curious note of triumph in his voice as he answered her. Reita felt a sudden cold shudder pass through her; fear that she could neither understand nor explain gripped her. It passed in a moment and she was soon laughing again as George showed his new-found strength and sent his wheel-chair trundling into the fish pond. From that day George never again referred to his illness. He walked in the garden, practised golf and even rowed a little. His doctors came and went away without seeing him, since he refused to be examined. Reita knew

that she should have been overjoyed, and to a certain extent she was, but at times she could not rid herself of the strange feeling of fear that there was something sinister in this near-miraculous recovery.

George spent so much time under the old oak, that often when she saw him there, his hand on the trunk or gazing up into the lifeless branches, the same cold shuddering panic came to her as it had on the first day he had walked. She found herself willing the oak tree to show signs of life and every day examined it for the little buds of new leaves – but none appeared. Spring had softly slipped into Summer before Reita admitted to herself that there was no hope for the old tree. All around her the garden rustled and glowed with bright new leaves; only the oak stayed bare and stark. Crumbling holes had appeared at the foot of the trunk where the roots had loosed their grip on the life-giving earth. With a sense of foreboding she walked away from the dead tree to sit in the rose arbour. As she looked towards the house, George came out of the garden door. He stood for a moment looking for her but she did not immediately call to him; instead she watched him, unseen, allowing time for her ridiculous depression over the death of the tree to drain away. At that moment a flock of small birds flew over her head towards the oak but, a few feet away from it, suddenly turned and wheeled away in fright. George had seen them, too. Slowly he lifted his arms and stretched out his fingers. At once the birds flew to him, settling on his arm, hands and head. They were gone again in a few seconds. As Reita ran across the lawn, the birds flew off and George turned towards her, smiling. Neither of them mentioned the episode, although George looked at his wife's anxious face with a kind of desperate appeal. She could not overcome the dread in her heart enough to talk about what she had seen.

The next day the contractors came to take down the dead tree. It was to be cut up and carted away, not a branch or twig was to be left, even the stump was to be

dragged out. Once Reita had accepted the tree was dead, the sight of it repelled her and she had ordered the work of its final destruction to be carried out with a desperate urgency which surprised the foreman of the gang sent out from the local builders. The men worked all day and by late afternoon only the roots remained. Reita wandered out on to the terrace to watch. The winch wheezed and panted, slowly gave way, until at last the stump was out, leaving a gaping wound. The workmen seemed to be gathering around the hole, staring down into it. Curious to know why, Reita went over.

The men gave way for her and, looking down, she saw the raw broken clay stained and in the bottom of the pit a little pool of red sticky fluid. Shuddering, she turned enquiringly to the foreman, and then she noticed for the first time that he and all his men were splashed with red and their hands were stained with it. Closing her eyes to shut out the sickening sight, she turned back towards the house, not even hearing the foreman's mumbling attempt to explain the number of nasty diseases that can attack an oak. George was sitting at the window and as Reita came into the room the expression in his eyes drove from her mind the horror of that blood-stained hole. Gently she cradled his head in her arms and soothed him until the shuddering of his body had died away and he was calm again. They never spoke of the old oak.

That night the moon shone clear and bright, flooding the bedroom with an unusual light, unbroken by the shadows and dancing patterns cast by the tree. Reita lay awake a long time gazing about a room that had suddenly become almost frighteningly unfamiliar. George still slept alone in the big double bed and she could hear by his breathing that he had long since fallen asleep. Her husband's distress at the death of the tree had been deep and shattering and for a long time he had clung to her, the shuddering sobs racking his body. With a deep sigh she pushed aside these vague fears, determined that the next day would bring a return of those days of exultant happiness after George's

miraculous recovery. So she fell asleep, only to be awakened some hours later by a faint rustling in the room. It was difficult to tell where it came from, but instinctively she turned to look at her husband. Her eyes flew open wide in sudden fear, for George was not there. Instead, the twigs and branches of a tree spread across the pillow and covered the whole bed. It was gone in a moment. As she sat up she could see his dear familiar face turned towards her and hear the soft deep breathing as he slept. She lay down again, half laughing and half angry with herself for being frightened of the shadows cast by moonlight shining through an old tree, but was asleep again before she had time to remember that now there was no tree to cast shadows on the bed.

Reita woke late the next morning and George was already up. There was no sound from their bathroom so she guessed that he must have gone into the garden for his usual morning stroll. The warm sun shone through the window – dispelling the fears of the night. For a moment she lay enjoying this moment of peace and happiness. It was to be the last moment of peace she was to know.

The carpet was soft and warm to her feet as she slipped from the bed and went over to the window to look for George. She saw him at once; he was still in his pyjamas, standing on the red clay where the tree had been. Even from that distance she could see the anguished contortions of his face and the frenzied straining of his body. Looking down she saw that his feet were buried to the ankles in the ugly red clay and all his struggles could not free them. Even as she watched, the oozing mud crept higher up his legs. Stifling a scream, Reita turned and ran out of the house and into the garden. George was still struggling when she reached his side, and dropping on to her knees she clawed at the mud with her bare hands, frantically pulling it away from his feet. At last, when her fingers were raw and bleeding, he gave a heave and was free. Sobbing with relief, Reita helped him into the house and back to their room. She would have helped him wash the filthy

mud from his feet, but at the bathroom door he suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her gently. 'Goodbye, my love,' he whispered and went into the room, shutting her outside. Wearily, Reita dressed. Everywhere around her now was filled with an unknown terror, and without understanding how or why, she knew that her husband's whispered words were to be his last farewell. With this realization came the calm acceptance and the patient resignation that she had inherited from her ancestors. Carefully she put away her dress, and, for the first time since coming to England, she wrapped herself in one of her jewel-bright saris. She clipped into her nostril the tiny gold bead that she had first worn for her baptism, and the caste mark on her forehead glowed bright as the Indian girl quietly left her room to go about her household duties.

In the weeks that followed, George rarely spoke and, although he drank huge quantities of water, he ate very little. He spent long hours in the garden standing where the tree had been. Birds flew around him and often alighted on his head and shoulders, sometimes little insects crawled over his face and hands, but he seemed not to notice. The servants saw his strangeness and they feared it. Reita kept her fear within herself, hidden by a calm acceptance of fate, and so the long hot Summer wore on. At last it seemed that the fine weather would break, for the day had been hot and thick with menacing storm clouds building up in the sunset sky. Reita felt sick and tired so she went to her room early while the stormy sun still lingered on the horizon. A little breeze had sprung up and she sat for a while at the window, watching her husband below her in the garden. She noticed the wind lift his hair and saw him gently moving his head from side to side in the cooling breeze. Although she called to him he did not answer or turn, so with a sigh she left the window and wearily lay down to sleep.

When she awoke it was quite dark. The breeze had become a rushing wind. With a start Reita sat up. The bed beside her was empty. She turned her head and the window

was filled once again with the sprawling branches of a huge tree. The storm swept and whistled through it, and softly in the moaning came the anguished sound of her name.

THE HAUNTED AND THE HAUNTERS

Lord Lytton

A friend of mine, who is a man of letters and a philosopher, said to me one day, as if between jest and earnest—'Fancy! since we last met, I have discovered a haunted house in the midst of London.'

'Really haunted?—and by what?—ghosts?'

'Well, I can't answer these questions—all I know is this—six weeks ago I and my wife were in search of a furnished apartment. Passing a quiet street, we saw on the window of one of the houses a bill, "Apartments, Furnished." The situation suited us; we entered the house—liked the rooms—engaged them by the week—and left them the third day. No power on earth could have reconciled my wife to stay longer, and I don't wonder at it.'

'What did you see?'

'Excuse me—I have no desire to be ridiculed as a superstitious dreamer—nor, on the other hand, could I ask you to accept on my affirmation what you would hold to be incredible without the evidence of your own senses. Let me only say this, it was not so much what we saw or heard (in which you might fairly suppose that we were the dupes of our own excited fancy, or the victims of imposture in others) that drove us away, as it was an undefinable terror which seized both of us whenever we passed the door of a certain unfurnished room, in which we neither saw nor heard anything. And the strangest marvel of all was, that for once in my life I agreed with my wife—silly woman though she be—and allowed, after the third night, that it was impossible to stay a fourth in that house. Accordingly, on the fourth morning, I summoned the woman who kept the house and attended on us, and told her that the rooms did not quite suit us and

we would not stay out our week. She said, dryly :

“I know why; you have stayed longer than any other lodger; few ever stayed a second night; none before you, a third. But I take it they have been very kind to you.”

“They – who?” I asked, affecting a smile.

“Why, they who haunt the house, whoever they are. I don’t mind them; I remember them many years ago, when I lived in this house, not as a servant; but I know they will be the death of me some day. I don’t care – I’m old, and must die soon, anyhow; and then I shall be with them, and in this house still.” The woman spoke with so dreary a calmness, that really it was a sort of awe that prevented my conversing with her further. I paid for my week, and too happy were I and my wife to get off so cheaply.’

‘You excite my curiosity,’ I said; ‘nothing I should like better than to sleep in a haunted house. Pray give me the address of the one which you left so ignominiously.’

My friend gave me the address; and when we parted, I walked straight towards the house thus indicated.

It is situated on the north side of Oxford Street, in a dull but respectable thoroughfare. I found the house shut up – no bill at the window, and no response to my knock. As I was turning away, a beer-boy, collecting pewter pots at the neighbouring areas, said to me, ‘Do you want any one in that house, sir?’

‘Yes, I heard it was to let.’

‘Let! – why the woman who kept it is dead – has been dead these three weeks and no one can be found to stay there, though Mr J – offered ever so much. He offered mother, who chars for him, one pound a week just to open and shut the windows, and she would not.’

‘Would not! – and why?’

‘The house is haunted; and the old woman who kept it was found dead in her bed with her eyes wide open. They say the devil strangled her.’

‘Pooh! – you speak of Mr J – . Is he the owner of the house?’

‘Yes.’

'Where does he live?'

'In G - Street, Number -'

'What is he? - in any business?'

'No, sir - nothing particular; a single gentleman.'

I gave the pot-boy the gratuity earned by his liberal information, and proceeded to Mr J - in G - Street, which was close by the street that boasted the haunted house. I was lucky enough to find Mr J - at home - an elderly man, with intelligent countenance and prepossessing manners.

I communicated my name and my business frankly. I said I had heard the house was considered to be haunted - that I had a strong desire to examine a house with so equivocal a reputation - that I should be greatly obliged if he would allow me to hire it, though only for one night. I was willing to pay for that privilege whatever he might be inclined to ask. 'Sir,' said Mr J -, with great courtesy, 'the house is at your service, for as short or as long a time as you please. Rent is out of the question - the obligation will be on my side should you be able to discover the cause of the strange phenomena which at present deprive it of all value. I cannot let it, for I cannot even get a servant to keep it in order or answer the door. Unluckily the house is haunted, if I may use that expression, not only by night, but by day; though at night the disturbances are of a more unpleasant and sometimes a more alarming character.

'The poor old woman who died in it three weeks ago was a pauper whom I took out of a work-house, for in her childhood she had been known to some of my family, and had been in such good circumstances that she had rented that house of my uncle. She was a woman of superior education and strong mind, and was the only person I could ever induce to remain in the house. Indeed, since her death, which was sudden, and the coroner's inquest, which gave it notoriety in the neighbourhood, I have so despaired of finding any person to take charge of it, much more a tenant, that I would willingly let it rent-free for a year to any one who would pay its rates and taxes.'

'How long is it since the house acquired this sinister character?'

'That I can scarcely tell you, but very many years since. The old woman I spoke of said it was haunted when she rented it between thirty and forty years ago. The fact is that my life has been spent in the East Indies and in the civil service of the Company. I returned to England last year on inheriting the fortune of an uncle, amongst whose possessions was the house in question. I found it shut up and uninhabited. I was told that it was haunted, that no one would inhabit it. I smiled at what seemed to me so idle a story. I spent some money in repainting and roofing it—added to its old-fashioned furniture a few modern articles—advertised it, and obtained a lodger for a year. He was a colonel retired on half-pay. He came with his family, a son and a daughter, and four or five servants: they all left the house the next day, and although they deponed that they had all seen something different, that something was equally terrible to all. I really could not in conscience sue, or even blame, the colonel for breach of agreement.

'Then I put in the old woman I have spoken of, and she was empowered to let the house in apartments. I never had one lodger who stayed more than three days. I do not tell you their stories—to no two lodgers have there been exactly the same phenomena repeated. It is better that you should judge for yourself, than enter the house with an imagination influenced by previous narratives; only be prepared to see and to hear something or other, and take whatever precautions you yourself please.'

'Have you never had a curiosity yourself to pass a night in that house?'

'Yes. I passed not a night, but three hours in broad daylight alone in that house. My curiosity is not satisfied, but it is quenched. I have no desire to renew the experiment. You cannot complain, you see, sir, that I am not sufficiently candid; and unless your interest be exceedingly eager and your nerves unusually strong, I honestly add that I advise you not to pass a night in that house.'

'My interest is exceedingly keen,' said I, 'and though only a coward will boast of his nerves in situations wholly unfamiliar to him, yet my nerves have been seasoned in such variety of danger that I have the right to rely on them – even in a haunted house.'

'Mr J – said very little more; he took the keys of the house out of his bureau, gave them to me – and thanking him cordially for his frankness and his urbane concession to my wish, I carried off my prize.

Impatient for the experiment, as soon as I reached home I summoned my confidential servant – a young man of gay spirits, fearless temper, and as free from superstitious prejudice as anyone I could think of.

'F –,' said I, 'you remember in Germany how disappointed we were at not finding a ghost in that old castle, which was said to be haunted by a headless apparition? Well, I have heard of a house in London which, I have reason to hope, is decidedly haunted. I mean to sleep there tonight. From what I hear, there is no doubt that something will allow itself to be seen or to be heard – something, perhaps, excessively horrible. Do you think, if I take you with me, I may rely on your presence of mind, whatever may happen?'

'Oh, sir! pray trust me,' answered F –, grinning with delight.

'Very well – then here are the keys of the house – this is the address. Go now – select for me any bedroom you please; and since the house has not been inhabited for weeks make up a good fire – air the bed well – see, of course, that there are candles as well as fuel. Take with you my revolver and my dagger – so much for my weapons – arm yourself equally well; and if we are not a match for a dozen ghosts, we shall be but a sorry couple of Englishmen.'

I was engaged for the rest of the day on business so urgent that I had not leisure to think much on the nocturnal adventure to which I had plighted my honour. I dined alone, and very late, and while dining, read, as is my

habit. The volume I selected was one of Macaulay's Essays. I thought to myself that I would take the book with me; there was so much of healthfulness in the style, and practical life in the subjects, that it would serve as an antidote against the influences of superstitious fancy.

Accordingly, about half-past nine, I put the book into my pocket, and strolled leisurely towards the haunted house. I took with me a favourite dog – an exceedingly sharp, bold, and vigilant bull-terrier – a dog fond of prowling about strange ghostly corners and passages at night in search of rats – a dog of dogs for a ghost.

It was a summer night, but chilly, the sky somewhat gloomy and overcast. Still, there was a moon – faint and sickly, but still a moon – and if the clouds permitted, after midnight it would be brighter.

I reached the house, knocked, and my servant opened with a cheerful smile.

'All right, sir, and very comfortable.'

'Oh!' said I, rather disappointed; 'have you not seen nor heard anything remarkable?'

'Well, sir, I must own I have heard something queer.'

'What? – what?'

'The sound of feet pattering behind me; and once or twice small noises like whispers close at my ear – nothing more.'

'You are not at all frightened?'

'I! not a bit of it sir;' and the man's bold look reassured me on one point – viz. that, happen what might, he would not desert me.

We were in the hall, the street-door closed, and my attention was now drawn to my dog. He had at first run in eagerly enough, but had sneaked back to the door, and was scratching and whining to get out. After patting him on the head, and encouraging him gently, the dog seemed to reconcile himself to the situation and followed me and F – through the house, but keeping close at my heels instead of hurrying inquisitively in advance, which was his usual and normal habit in strange places.

We first visited the subterranean apartments, the kitchen and other offices, and especially the cellars, in which last there were two or three bottles of wine still left in a bin, covered with cobwebs, and evidently, by their appearance, undisturbed for many years. It was clear that the ghosts were not wine-bibbers.

For the rest we discovered nothing of interest. There was a gloomy little backyard, with very high walls. The stones of this yard were very damp – and what with the damp, and what with the dust and smoke-grime on the pavement, our feet left a slight impression where we passed. And now appeared the first strange phenomenon witnessed by myself in this strange abode. I saw, just before me, the print of a foot suddenly form itself, as it were. I stopped, caught hold of my servant, and pointed to it. In advance of that footprint as suddenly dropped another. We both saw it. I advanced to the place; the footprint kept advancing before me, a small footprint – the foot of a child: the impression was too faint thoroughly to distinguish the shape, but it seemed to us both that it was the print of a naked foot. This phenomenon ceased when we arrived at the opposite wall, nor did it repeat itself on returning.

We remounted the stairs, and entered the rooms on the ground floor, a dining parlour, a small back-parlour, and a still smaller third room that had been probably appropriated to a footman – as still as death. We then visited the drawing-rooms, which seemed fresh and new. In the front room I seated myself in an armchair. F – placed on the table the candlestick with which he had lighted us. I told him to shut the door. As he turned to do so, a chair opposite to me moved from the wall quickly and noiselessly, and dropped itself about a yard from my own chair, immediately fronting it.

‘Why, this is better than the turning-tables,’ said I, with a half-laugh – and as I laughed, my dog put back his head and howled.

F –, coming back, had not observed the movement of the chair. He employed himself now in stilling the dog. I

continued to gaze on the chair, and fancied I saw on it a pale blue misty outline of a human figure, but an outline so indistinct that I could only distrust my own vision. The dog now was quiet. 'Put back that chair opposite to me,' said I to F-; 'put it back to the wall.'

F- obeyed. 'Was that you, sir?' said he, turning abruptly. 'I- what?'

'Why, something struck me. I felt it sharply on the shoulder- just here.'

'No,' said I. 'But we have jugglers present, and though we may not discover their tricks, we shall catch them before they frighten us.'

We did not stay long in the drawing-rooms- in fact they felt so damp and so chilly that I was glad to get to the fire upstairs. We locked the doors of the drawing-rooms- a precaution which I should observe, we had taken with all the rooms we had searched below. The bedroom my servant had selected for me was the best of the floor- a large one, with two windows fronting the street. The four-posted bed, which took up no inconsiderable space, was opposite to the fire, which burned clear and bright; a door in the wall to the left, between the bed and the window, communicated with the room which my servant appropriated to himself.

This last was a small room with a sofa-bed, and had no communication with the landing-place- no other door but that which conducted to the bedroom I was to occupy. On either side of my fireplace was a cupboard, without locks, flushed with the wall, and covered with the same dull-brown paper. We examined these cupboards- only hooks to suspend female dresses- nothing else; we sounded the walls- evidently solid- the outer walls of the building. Having finished the survey of these apartments, warmed myself a few moments, and lighted my cigar, I then, still accompanied by F-, went forth to complete my reconnaissance. In the landing-place there was another door; it was closed firmly. 'Sir,' said my servant in surprise, 'I unlocked this door with all the others when I first came; it cannot

have got locked from the inside, for it is a -'

Before he had finished his sentence the door, which neither of us then was touching, opened quietly of itself. We looked at each other a single instant. The same thought seized both - some human agency might be detected here. I rushed in first, my servant followed. A small blank dreary room without furniture - a few empty boxes and hampers in a corner - a small window - the shutters closed - not even a fireplace - no other door but that by which we had entered - no carpet on the floor, and the floor seemed very old, uneven, worm-eaten, mended here and there, as was shown by the whiter patches on the wood; but no living being, and no visible place in which a living being could have hidden. As we stood gazing around, the door by which we had entered closed as quietly as it had before opened: we were imprisoned.

For the first time I felt a creep of undefinable horror. Not so my servant. 'Why, they don't think to trap us, sir; I could break that trumpery door with a kick of my boot.'

'Try first if it will open to your hand,' said I, shaking off the vague apprehension that had seized me, 'while I open the shutters and see what is without.'

I unbarred the shutters - the window looked on the little backyard I have before described; there was no ledge without - nothing but sheer descent. No man getting out of that window would have found any footing till he had fallen on the stones below.

F -, meanwhile, was vainly attempting to open the door. He now turned round to me, and asked my permission to use force. And I should here state, in justice to the servant, that, far from evincing any superstitious terrors, his nerve, composure, and even gaiety amidst circumstances so extraordinary compelled my admiration, and made me congratulate myself on having secured a companion in every way fitted to the occasion. I willingly gave him the permission he required. But though he was a remarkably strong man, his force was as idle as his milder efforts; the door did not even shake to his stoutest kick. Breathless and

panting, he desisted. I then tried the door myself, equally in vain.

As I ceased from the effort, again that creep of horror came over me; but this time it was more cold and stubborn. I felt as if some strange and ghastly exhalation were rising up from the chinks of that rugged floor, and filling the atmosphere with a venomous influence hostile to human life. The door now very slowly and quietly opened as of its own accord. We precipitated ourselves into the landing-place. We both saw a large pale light – as large as the human figure, but shapeless and unsubstantial – move before us, and ascend the stairs that led from the landing into the attics. I followed the light, and my servant followed me. It entered, to the right of the landing, a small garret, of which the door stood open. I entered in the same instant. The light then collapsed into a small globule, exceedingly brilliant and vivid; rested a moment on a bed in the corner, quivered, and vanished. We approached the bed and examined it – a half-tester, such as is commonly found in attics devoted to servants. On the drawers that stood near it we perceived an old faded silk kerchief, with the needle still left in a rent half repaired. The kerchief was covered with dust; probably it had belonged to the old woman who had last died in that house, and this might have been her sleeping-room.

I had sufficient curiosity to open the drawers; there were a few odds and ends of female dress, and two letters tied round with a narrow ribbon of faded yellow. I took the liberty to possess myself of the letters. We found nothing else in the room worth noticing – nor did the light reappear; but we distinctly heard, as we turned to go, a pattering footfall on the floor – just before us. We went through the other attics (in all, four), the footfall still preceding us. Nothing to be seen – nothing but the footfall heard. I had the letters in my hand; just as I was descending the stairs I distinctly felt my wrist seized, and a faint soft effort made to draw the letters from my grasp. I only held them more tightly, and the effort ceased.

We regained the bed-chamber appropriated to myself, and I then remarked that my dog had not followed us when we had left it. He was thrusting himself close to the fire, and trembling. I was impatient to examine the letters; and while I read them, my servant opened a little box in which he had deposited the weapons I had ordered him to bring, took them out, placed them on a table close at my bed-head, and then occupied himself in soothing the dog, who, however, seemed to heed him very little.

The letters were short—they were dated; the dates exactly thirty-five years ago. They were evidently from a lover to his mistress, or a husband to some young wife. Not only the terms of expression, but a distinct reference to a former voyage indicated the writer to have been a seafarer. The spelling and handwriting were those of a man imperfectly educated, but still the language itself was forcible. In the expressions of endearment there was a kind of rough wild love; but here and there were dark unintelligible hints at some secret note of love—some secret that seemed of crime. 'We ought to love each other,' was one of the sentences I remember, 'for how everyone would execrate us if all was known.' Again: 'Don't let any one be in the same room with you at night—you talk in your sleep.' And again: 'What's done can't be undone; and I tell you there's nothing against us unless the dead could come to life.' Here there was underlined in a better handwriting (a female's), 'They do!' At the end of the letter latest in date the same female hand had written these words: 'Lost at sea the 4th of June, the same day as—'

I put down the letters, and began to muse over their contents.

Fearing, however, that the train of thought into which I fell might unsteady my nerves, I fully determined to keep my mind in a fit state to cope with whatever of marvellous the advancing night might bring forth. I roused myself—laid the letters on the table—stirred up the fire, which was still bright and cheering—and opened my volume of Macaulay. I read quietly enough till about half-past eleven.

I then threw myself dressed upon the bed, and told my servant he might retire to his own room, but must keep himself awake. I bade him leave open the door between the two rooms. Thus alone, I kept two candles burning on the table by my bed-head. I placed my watch beside the weapons, and calmly resumed my Macaulay.

Opposite to me the fire burned clear; and on the hearth-rug, seemingly asleep, lay the dog.

In about twenty minutes I felt an exceedingly cold air pass by my cheek, like a sudden draught. I fancied the door to my right, communicating with the landing-place, must have got open; but no – it was closed. I then turned my glance to my left, and saw the flame of the candles violently swayed as by a wind. At the same moment the watch beside the revolver softly slid from the table – softly, softly – no visible hand – it was gone. I sprang up, seizing the revolver with the one hand, the dagger with the other; I was not willing that my weapons should share the fate of the watch. Thus armed, I looked round the floor – no sign of the watch. Three slow, loud, distinct knocks were now heard at the bed-head; my servant called out, 'Is that you, sir?'

'No; be on your guard.'

The dog now roused himself and sat on his haunches, his ears moving quickly backwards and forwards. He kept his eyes fixed on me with a look so strange that he concentrated all my attention on himself. Slowly he rose up, all his hair bristling, and stood perfectly rigid, and with the same wild stare. I had no time, however, to examine the dog. Presently my servant emerged from his room; and if ever I saw horror in the human face, it was then. I should not have recognized him had we met in the streets, so altered was every lineament. He passed by me quickly, saying in a whisper that seemed scarcely to come from his lips, 'Run – run! it is after me!' He gained the door to the landing, pulled it open, and rushed forth. I followed him into the landing involuntarily, calling him to stop; but without heeding me, he bounded down the stairs, clinging to the bal-

usters, and taking several steps at a time. I heard, where I stood, the street door open – heard it clap to. I was left alone in the haunted house.

It was but for a moment that I remained undecided whether or not to follow my servant; pride and curiosity alike forbade so dastardly a flight. I re-entered my room, closing the door after me, and proceeded cautiously into the interior chamber. I encountered nothing to justify my servant's terror. I again carefully examined the walls, to see if there were any concealed door. I could find no trace of one – not even a seam in the dull-brown paper with which the room was hung. How, then, had the Thing, whatever it was, which had so scared him, obtained ingress except through my own chamber?

I returned to my room, shut and locked the door that opened upon the interior one, and stood on the hearth, expectant and prepared. I now perceived that the dog had slunk into an angle of the wall, and was pressing himself close against it, as if literally trying to force his way into it. I approached the animal and spoke to it; the poor brute was evidently beside itself with terror. It showed all its teeth, the slaver dropping from its jaws, and would certainly have bitten me if I had touched it. It did not seem to recognize me. Whoever has seen at the Zoological Gardens a rabbit fascinated by a serpent, cowering in a corner, may form some idea of the anguish which the dog exhibited. Finding all efforts to soothe the animal in vain, and fearing that his bite might be as venomous in that state as if in the madness of hydrophobia, I left him alone, placed my weapons on the table beside the fire, seated myself, and recommenced my Macaulay.

Perhaps in order not to appear seeking credit for a courage, or rather a coolness, which the reader may conceive I exaggerate, I may be pardoned if I pause to indulge in one or two egotistical remarks.

As I hold presence of mind, or what is called courage, to be precisely proportioned to familiarity with the circumstances that lead to it, so I should say that I had been long

sufficiently familiar with all experiments that appertain to the Marvellous. I had witnessed many very extraordinary phenomena in various parts of the world – phenomena that would be either totally disbelieved if I stated them, or ascribed to supernatural agencies. Now, my theory is that the Supernatural is the Impossible, and that what is called supernatural is only a something in the laws of nature of which we have been hitherto ignorant. Therefore, if a ghost rise before me, I have not the right to say, 'So, then, the Supernatural is possible,' but rather, 'So, then, the apparition of a ghost is, contrary to received opinion, within the laws of nature – i.e. not supernatural.'

Now, in all that I had hitherto witnessed, and indeed in all the wonders which the amateurs of mystery in our age record as facts, a material living agency is always required. On the Continent you will find still magicians who assert that they can raise spirits. Assume for the moment that they assert truly, still the living material form of the magician is present; and he is the material agency by which from some constitutional peculiarities, certain strange phenomena are represented to your natural senses.

Accept again, as truthful, the tales of Spirit Manifestation in America – musical or other sounds – writings on paper, produced by no discernible hand – articles of furniture moved about without apparent human agency – or the actual sight and touch of hands, to which no bodies seem to belong – still there must be found the medium or living being, with constitutional peculiarities capable of obtaining these signs. In fine, in all such marvels, supposing even that there is no imposture, there must be a human being like ourselves, by whom, or through whom, the effects presented to human beings are produced. It is so with the now familiar phenomena of mesmerism or electro-biology; the mind of the person operated on is affected through a material living agent. Nor, supposing it true that a mesmerized patient can respond to the will or passes of a mesmerizer a hundred miles distant, is the response less occasioned by a material being; it may be through a material

fluid—call it Electric, call it Odic, call it what you will— which has the power of traversing space and passing obstacles, that the material effect is communicated from one to the other.

Hence all that I had hitherto witnessed or expected to witness, in this strange house, I believed to be occasioned through some agency or medium as mortal as myself; and this idea necessarily prevented the awe with which those who regard as supernatural things that are not within the ordinary operations of nature, might have been impressed by the adventures of that memorable night.

As, then, it was my conjecture that all that was presented, or would be presented, to my senses, must originate in some human being gifted by constitution with the power so to present them and having some motive so to do, I felt an interest in my theory which, in its way, was rather philosophical than superstitious. And I can sincerely say that I was in as tranquil a temper for observation as any practical experimentalist could be in awaiting the effects of some rare though perhaps perilous chemical combination. Of course, the more I kept my mind detached from fancy, the more the temper fitted for observation would be obtained; and I therefore riveted eye and thought on the strong daylight sense in the page of my Macaulay.

I now became aware that something interposed between the page and the light—the page was overshadowed; I looked up, and I saw what I shall find it very difficult, perhaps impossible, to describe.

It was a Darkness shaping itself out of the air in very undefined outline. I cannot say it was of a human form, and yet it had more resemblance to a human form, or rather shadow, than anything else. As it stood, wholly apart and distinct from the air and light around it, its dimensions seemed gigantic, the summit nearly touching the ceiling. While I gazed, a feeling of intense cold seized me. An iceberg before me could not more have chilled me; nor could the cold of an iceberg have been more purely physical. I feel convinced that it was not the cold caused

by fear. As I continued to gaze, I thought – but this I cannot say with precision – that I distinguished two eyes looking down on me from the height. One moment I seemed to distinguish them clearly, the next they seemed gone; but still two rays of a pale-blue light frequently shot through the darkness, as from the height on which I half-believed, half-doubted, that I had encountered the eyes.

I strove to speak – my voice utterly failed me; I could only think to myself, 'Is this fear? It is not fear!' I strove to rise – in vain; I felt as if weighed down by an irresistible force. Indeed, my impression was that of an immense and overwhelming Power opposed to my volition; that sense of utter inadequacy to cope with a force beyond men's, which one may feel physically in a storm at sea, in a conflagration, or when confronting some terrible wild beast, or rather, perhaps, the shark of the ocean, I felt morally. Opposed to my will was another will, as far superior to its strength as storm, fire and shark are superior in material force to the force of men.

And now, as this impression grew on me, now came, at last, horror – horror to a degree that no words can convey. Still I retained pride, if not courage; and in my own mind I said, 'This is horror, but it is not fear; unless I fear, I cannot be harmed; my reason rejects this thing; it is an illusion – I do not fear.' With a violent effort I succeeded at last in stretching out my hand towards the weapon on the table; as I did so, on the arm and shoulder I received a strange shock, and my arm fell to my side powerless. And now, to add to my horror, the light began slowly to wane from the candles – they were not, as it were, extinguished, but their flame seemed very gradually withdrawn; it was the same with the fire – the light was extracted from the fuel; in a few minutes the room was in utter darkness.

The dread that came over me, to be thus in the dark with that dark Thing, whose power was so intensely felt, brought a reaction of nerve. In fact, terror had reached that climax, that either my senses must have deserted me, or I must have burst through the spell. I did burst through

it. I found my voice, though the voice was a shriek. I remember that I broke forth with words like these – ‘I do not fear, my soul does not fear’; and at the same time I found the strength to rise. Still in that profound gloom I rushed to one of the windows – tore aside the curtain – flung open the shutters; my first thought was – LIGHT. And when I saw the moon high, clear, and calm, I felt a joy that almost compensated for the previous terror. There was the moon, there was also the light from the gas-lamps in the deserted slumberous street.

I turned to look back into the room; the moon penetrated its shadow very palely and partially – but still there was light. The dark Thing, whatever it might be, was gone – except that I could yet see a dim shadow which seemed the shadow of that shade, against the opposite wall.

My eye now rested on the table, and from under the table (which was without cloth or cover – an old mahogany round table) there rose a hand, visible as far as the wrist. It was a hand, seemingly, as much of flesh and blood as my own, but the hand of an aged person – lean, wrinkled, small too – a woman’s hand.

That hand very softly closed on the two letters that lay on the table: hand and letters both vanished. There then came the same three loud measured knocks I had heard at the bed-head before this extraordinary drama had commenced.

As those sounds slowly ceased, I felt the whole room vibrate sensibly; and at the far end there rose, as from the floor, sparks or globules like bubbles of light, many-coloured – green, yellow, fire-red, azure. Up and down, to and fro, hither, thither, as tiny will-o’-the-wisps, the sparks moved, slow or swift, each at its own caprice. A chair (as in the drawing-room below) was now advanced from the wall without apparent agency, and placed at the opposite side of the table. Suddenly, as forth from the chair, there grew a shape – a woman’s shape. It was distinct as a shape of life – ghastly as a shape of death. The face was that of youth, with a strange mournful beauty; the throat and

shoulders were bare, the rest of the form in a loose robe of cloudy white. It began sleeking its long yellow hair, which fell over its shoulders; its eyes were not turned towards me, but to the door; it seemed listening, watching, waiting. The shadow of the shade in the background grew darker; and again I thought I beheld the eyes gleaming out from the summit of the shadow – eyes fixed upon that shape.

As if from the door, though it did not open, there grew out another shape equally distinct, equally ghastly – a man's shape – a young man's. It was in the dress of the last century, or rather in a likeness of such dress; for both the male shape and the female, though defined, were evidently unsubstantial, impalpable – simulacra – phantasms; and there was something incongruous, grotesque, yet fearful, in the contrast between the elaborate finery, the courtly precision of that old-fashioned garb, with its ruffles and lace and buckles, and the corpse-like aspect and ghost-like stillness of the flitting wearer. Just as the male shape approached the female, the dark Shadow started from the wall, all three for a moment wrapped in darkness. When the pale light returned, the two phantoms were as if in the grasp of the Shadow that towered between them; and there was a bloodstain on the breast of the female; and the phantom-male was leaning on its phantom-sword, and the blood seemed trickling fast from the ruffles, from the lace; and the darkness of the intermediate Shadow swallowed them up – they were gone. And again the bubbles of light shot, and sailed, and undulated, growing thicker and thicker and more wildly confused in their movements.

The closet-door to the right of the fireplace now opened, and from the aperture there came the form of a woman, aged. In her hand she held letters – the very letters over which I had seen the Hand close; and behind her I heard a footstep. She turned round as if to listen, then she opened the letters and seemed to read; and over her shoulder I saw a livid face, the face as of a man long drowned – bloated, bleached – seaweed tangled in its dripping hair; and at her

feet lay a form as of a corpse and beside the corpse there cowered a child, a miserable, squalid child, with famine on its cheeks and fear in its eyes. And as I looked in the old woman's face, the wrinkles and lines vanished, and it became a face of youth – hard-eyed, stony, but still youth; and the Shadow darted forth and darkened over these phantoms as it had darkened over the last.

Nothing now was left but the Shadow, and on that my eyes were intently fixed, till again eyes grew out of the Shadow – malignant, serpent eyes. And the bubbles of light again rose and fell, and in their disordered, irregular, turbulent maze, mingled with the wan moonlight. And now from these globules themselves as from the shell of an egg, monstrous things burst out; the air grew filled with them; larvae so bloodless and so hideous that I can in no way describe them except to remind the reader of the swarming life which the solar microscope brings before his eyes in a drop of water – things transparent, supple, agile, chasing each other, devouring each other – forms like nought ever beheld by the naked eye. As the shapes were without symmetry so their movements were without order. In their very vagrancies there was no sport; they came round me and round, thicker and faster and swifter, swarming over my head, crawling over my right arm, which was outstretched in involuntary command against all evil beings.

Sometimes I felt myself touched, but not by them; invisible hands touched me. Once I felt the clutch as of cold soft fingers at my throat. I was still equally conscious that if I gave way to fear I should be in bodily peril; and I concentrated all my faculties in the single focus of resisting, stubborn will. And I turned my sight from the Shadow – above all, from these strange serpent eyes – eyes that had now become distinctly visible. For there, though in nought else around me, I was aware that there was a will, and a will of intense, creative, working evil, which might crush down my own.

The pale atmosphere in the room began now to redden

as if in the air of some near conflagration. The larvae grew lurid as things that live in fire. Again the room vibrated; again were heard the three measured knocks; and again all things were swallowed up in the darkness of the dark Shadow, as if out of that darkness all had come, into that darkness all returned.

As the gloom receded, the Shadow was wholly gone. Slowly as it had been withdrawn, the flame grew again into the candles on the table, again into the fuel in the grate. The whole room came once more calmly, healthfully into sight.

The two doors were still closed, the door communicating with the servant's room still locked. In the corner of the wall, into which he had so convulsively nighed himself, lay the dog. I called to him – no movement; I approached – the animal was dead; his eyes protruded; his tongue out of his mouth; the froth gathered round his jaws. I took him in my arms; I brought him to the fire; I felt acute grief for the loss of my poor favourite – acute self-reproach; I accused myself of his death; I imagined he had died of fright. But what was my surprise on finding that his neck was actually broken – actually twisted out of the vertebrae. Had this been done in the dark? – must it not have been by a hand human as mine? – must there not have been a human agency all the while in that room? Good cause to suspect it. I cannot tell. I cannot do more than state the fact fairly; the reader may draw his own inference.

Another surprising circumstance – my watch was restored to the table from which it had been so mysteriously withdrawn; but it had stopped at the very moment it was so withdrawn; nor, despite all the skill of the watchmaker, has it ever gone since – that is, it will go in a strange erratic way for a few hours, and then comes to a dead stop – it is worthless.

Nothing more chanced for the rest of the night. Nor, indeed, had I long to wait before the dawn broke. Not till it was broad daylight did I quit the haunted house. Before I did so, I revisited the little blind room in which my servant

and myself had been for a time imprisoned. I had a strong impression – for which I could not account – that from that room had originated the mechanism of the phenomena – if I may use the term – which had been experienced in my chamber. And though I entered it now in the clear day with the sun peering through the filmy window, I still felt, as I stood on its floor, the creep of the horror which I had first there experienced the night before, and which had been so aggravated by what had passed in my own chamber. I could not, indeed, bear to stay more than half a minute within those walls. I descended the stairs, and again I heard the footfall before me; and when I opened the street door, I thought I could distinguish a very low laugh. I gained my own home, expecting to find my runaway servant there. But he had not presented himself; nor did I hear more of him for three days, when I received a letter from him, dated from Liverpool, to this effect: –

'HONoured SIR, – I humbly entreat your pardon, though I can scarcely hope that you will think I deserve it, unless – which Heaven forbid! – you saw what I did. I feel that it will be years before I can recover myself: and as to being fit for service, it is out of the question. I am therefore going to my brother-in-law at Melbourne. The ship sails to-morrow. Perhaps the long voyage may set me up. I do nothing but start and tremble, and fancy It is behind me. I humbly beg you, honoured sir, to order my clothes, and whatever wages are due to me, to be sent to my mother's, at Walworth – John knows her address.'

The letter ended with additional apologies somewhat incoherent, and explanatory details as to effects that had been under the writer's charge.

This flight may perhaps warrant a suspicion that the man wished to go to Australia, and had been somehow or other fraudulently mixed up with the events of the night. I say nothing in refutation of that conjecture; rather, I suggest it as one that would seem to many persons the most probable solution of improbable occurrences. My own theory remained unshaken. I returned in the evening to

the house, to bring away in a hack cab the things I had left there, with my poor dog's body. In this task I was not disturbed, nor did any incident worth note befall me, except that still, on ascending and descending the stairs I heard the same footfall in advance. On leaving the house, I went to Mr J—'s. He was at home. I returned him the keys, told him that my curiosity was sufficiently gratified, and was about to relate quickly what had passed, when he stopped me, and said, though with much politeness, that he had no longer any interest in a mystery which none had ever solved.

I determined at least to tell him of the two letters I had read, as well as of the extraordinary manner in which they had disappeared, and I then inquired if he thought they had been addressed to the woman who had died in the house, and if there were anything in her early history which could possibly confirm the dark suspicions to which the letters gave rise. Mr J— seemed startled, and, after musing a few moments, answered, 'I know but little of the woman's earlier history, except, as I before told you, that her family were known to mine. But you revive some vague reminiscences to her prejudice. I will make inquiries, and inform you of their result. Still, even if we could admit the popular superstition that a person who had been either the perpetrator or the victim of dark crimes in life could re-visit, as a restless spirit, the scene in which those crimes had been committed, I should observe that the house was infested by strange sights and sound before the old woman died—you smile—what would you say?'

'I would say this, that I am convinced, if we could get to the bottom of these mysteries, we should find a living human agency.'

'What! you believe it is all an imposture? For what object?'

'Not an imposture in the ordinary sense of the word. If suddenly I were to sink into a deep sleep, from which you could not awake me, but in that sleep could answer questions with an accuracy which I could not pretend to when

awake – tell you what money you had in your pocket – nay, describe your very thoughts – it is not necessarily an imposture, any more than it is necessarily supernatural. I should be, unconsciously to myself, under a mesmeric influence, conveyed to me from a distance by a human being who had acquired power over me by previous rapport.’

‘Granting mesmerism, so far carried, to be a fact, you are right. And you would infer from this that a mesmerizer might produce the extraordinary effects you and others have witnessed over inanimate objects – fill the air with sights and sounds?’

‘Or impress our senses with the belief in them – we never having been *en rapport* with the person acting on us? No. What is commonly called mesmerism could not do this; but there may be a power akin to mesmerism, and superior to it – the power that in the old days was called Magic. That such a power may extend to all inanimate objects of matter, I do not say; but if so, it would not be against nature, only a rare power in nature which might be given to constitutions with certain peculiarities, and cultivated by practice to an extraordinary degree. That such a power might extend over the dead – that is, over certain thoughts and memories that the dead may still retain – and compel, not that which ought properly to be called the soul, and which is far beyond the human reach, but rather a phantom of what has been most earth-stained on earth, to make itself apparent to our senses – is a very ancient though obsolete theory, upon which I will hazard no opinion. But I do not conceive the power would be supernatural.

‘Let me illustrate what I mean from an experiment which Paracelsus describes as not difficult, and which the author of the *Curiosities of Literature* cites as credible: A flower perishes; you burn it. Whatever were the elements of that flower while it lived are gone, dispersed, you know not whither; you can never discover nor re-collect them. But you can, by chemistry, out of the burnt dust of that flower, raise a spectrum of the flower, just as it seemed in life. It may be the same with the human being. The soul

has so much escaped you as the essence or elements of the flower. Still you may make a spectrum of it. And this phantom, though in the popular superstition it is held to be the soul of the departed, must not be confounded with the true soul; it is but the eidolon of the dead form.

Hence, like the best-attested stories of ghosts or spirits, the thing that most strikes us is the absence of what we hold to be soul—that is, of superior emancipated intelligence. They come for little or no object—they seldom speak, if they do come; they utter no ideas above that of an ordinary person in earth. These American spirit-seers have published volumes of communications in prose and verse, which they assert to be given in the names of the most illustrious dead—Shakespeare, Bacon—heaven knows whom. Those communications, taking the best, are certainly not a whit of higher order than would be communications from living persons of fair talent and education; they are wondrously inferior to what Bacon Shakespeare, and Plato said and wrote when on earth.

Nor, what is more notable, do they ever contain an idea that was not on the earth before. Wonderful, therefore, as such phenomena may be (granting them to be truthful), I see much that philosophy may question, nothing that is incumbent on philosophy to deny—viz. nothing supernatural.

They are but ideas conveyed somehow or other (we have not yet discovered the means) from one mortal brain to another. Whether, in so doing, tables walk of their own accord, or fiend-like shapes appear in a magic-circle, or bodiless hands rise and remove material objects, or a Thing of Darkness, such as presented itself to me, freeze our blood—still am I persuaded that these are but agencies conveyed, as by electric wires, to my own brain from the brain of another. In some constitutions there is a natural chemistry, and those may produce chemic wonders—in others a natural fluid, call it electricity, and these produce electric wonders. But they differ in this from Normal Science—they are alike objectless, purposeless, puerile,

frivolous. They lead on to no grand results; and therefore the world does not heed, and true sages have not cultivated them. But sure I am, that of all I saw or heard, a man, human as myself, was the remote originator; and I believe unconsciously to himself as to the exact effects produced, for this reason: no two persons, you say, have ever told you that they experienced exactly the same thing. Well, observe, no two persons ever experience exactly the same dream. If this were an ordinary imposture, the machinery would be arranged for results that would but little vary; if it were a supernatural agency permitted by the Almighty, it would surely be for some definite end.

'These phenomena belong to neither class; my persuasion is, that they originate in some brain now far distant; that that brain had no distinct volition in anything that occurred; that what does occur reflects but its devious, motley, ever-shifting, half-formed thoughts; in short, that it has been but the dreams of such a brain put into action and invested with a semi-substance. That this brain is of immense power, that it can set matter into movement, that it is malignant and destructive, I believe: some material force must have killed my dog; it might, for aught I know, have I been as subjugated by terror as the dog—had my intellect or my spirit given me no countervailing resistance in my will.'

'It killed your dog! that is fearful! indeed, it is strange that no animal can be induced to stay in that house; not even a cat. Rats and mice are never found in it.'

'The instincts of the brute creation detect influences deadly to their existence. Man's reason has a sense less subtle, because it has a resisting power more supreme. But enough; do you comprehend my theory?'

'Yes, though imperfectly—and I accept any crotchet (pardon the word), however odd, rather than embrace at once the notion of ghosts and hobgoblins we imbibed in our nurseries. Still, to my unfortunate house the evil is the same. What on earth can I do with the house?'

'I will tell you what I would do. I am convinced from

my own internal feelings that the small unfurnished room at right angles to the door of the bedroom which I occupied, forms a starting-point or receptacle for the influences which haunt the house; and I strongly advise you to have the walls opened, the floor removed – nay, the whole room pulled down. I observe that it is detached from the body of the house, built over the small backyard, and could be removed without injury to the rest of the building.’

‘And you think, if I did that –’

‘You would cut off the telegraph wires. Try it. I am so persuaded that I am right, that I will pay half the expense if you will allow me to direct the operations.’

‘Nay, I am well able to afford the cost; for the rest, allow me to write to you.’

About ten days afterwards I received a letter from Mr J –, telling me that he had visited the house since I had seen him; that he had found the two letters I had described, replaced in the drawer from which I had taken them; that he had read them with misgivings like my own; that he had instituted a cautious inquiry about the woman to whom I rightly conjectured they had been written. It seemed that thirty-six years ago (a year before the date of the letters), she had married, against the wish of her relatives, an American of very suspicious character; in fact, he was generally believed to have been a pirate. She herself was the daughter of very respectable tradespeople, and had served in the capacity of a nursery governess before her marriage. She had a brother, a widower, who was considered wealthy, and who had one child of about six years old. A month after the marriage, the body of this brother was found in the Thames, near London Bridge; there seemed some marks of violence about his throat, but they were not deemed sufficient to warrant the inquest in any verdict other than that of ‘found drowned’.

The American and his wife took charge of the little boy, the deceased brother having by his will left his sister the guardian of his only child – and in the event of the child’s death, the sister inherited. The child died about six months

afterwards – it was supposed to have been neglected and ill-treated. The neighbours deposed to have heard it shriek at night. The surgeon who had examined it after death, said that it was emaciated as if from want of nourishment, and the body was covered with livid bruises. It seemed that one winter night the child had sought to escape – crept out into the backyard – tried to scale the wall – fallen back exhausted, and been found at morning on the stones in a dying state. But though there was some evidence of cruelty, there was none of murder; and the aunt and her husband had sought to palliate cruelty by alleging the exceeding stubbornness and perversity of the child, who was declared to be half-witted. Be that as it may, at the orphan's death the aunt inherited her brother's fortune.

Before the first wedded year was out, the American quit-
ted England abruptly, and never returned to it. He obtained a cruising vessel, which was lost in the Atlantic two years afterwards. The widow was left in affluence; but reverses of various kinds had befallen her: a bank broke – an investment failed – she went into a small business and became insolvent – then she entered into service, sinking lower and lower, from housekeeper down to maid-of-all-work – never long retaining a place, though nothing peculiar against her character was ever alleged. She was considered sober, honest, and peculiarly quiet in her ways; still nothing prospered with her. And so she had dropped into the workhouse, from which Mr J – had taken her, to be placed in charge of the very house which she had rented as mistress in the first year of her wedded life.

Mr J – added that he had passed an hour alone in the unfurnished room which I had urged him to destroy, and that his impressions of dread while there were so great, though he had neither heard nor seen anything, that he was eager to have the walls bared and the floors removed as I had suggested. He had engaged persons for the work, and would commence any day I would name.

The day was accordingly fixed. I repaired to the haunted house – we went into the blind dreary room, took up the

skirting, and then the floors. Under the rafters, covered with rubbish, was found a trap-door, quite large enough to admit a man. It was closely nailed down, with clamps and rivets of iron. On removing these we descended into a room below, the existence of which had never been suspected. In this room there had been a window and a flue, but they had been bricked over, evidently for many years. By the help of candles we examined this place; it still retained some mouldering furniture—three chairs, an oak settle, a table—all of the fashion of about eighty years ago. There was a chest of drawers against the wall, in which we found, half-rotted away, old-fashioned articles of a man's dress, such as might have been worn eighty or a hundred years ago by a gentleman of some rank—costly steel buckles and buttons, like those yet worn in court dresses—a handsome court sword—in a waistcoat which had once been rich with gold lace, but which was now blackened and foul with damp, we found five guineas, a few silver coins, and an ivory ticket, probably for some place of entertainment long since passed away. But our main discovery was in a kind of iron safe fixed to the wall, the lock of which it cost us much trouble to get picked.

In this safe were three shelves and two small drawers. Ranged on the shelves were several small bottles of crystal, hermetically stopped. They contained colourless volatile essences, of what nature I shall say no more than that they were not poisons—phosphor and ammonia entered into some of them. There were also some very curious glass tubes, and a small pointed rod of iron, with a large lump of rock-crystal, and another of amber—also a loadstone of great power.

In one of the drawers we found a miniature portrait set in gold, and retaining the freshness of its colours most remarkably, considering the length of time it had probably been there. The portrait was that of a man who might be somewhat advanced in middle life, perhaps forty-seven or forty-eight.

It was a most peculiar face—a most impressive face. If

you could fancy some mighty serpent transformed into man, preserving in the human lineaments the old serpent type, you would have a better idea of that countenance than long descriptions can convey: the width and flatness of frontal – the tapering elegance of contour disguising the strength of the deadly jaw – the long, large, terrible eye, glittering and green as the emerald – and withal a certain ruthless calm, as if from the consciousness of an immense power. The strange thing was this – the instant I saw the miniature I recognized a startling likeness to one of the rarest portraits in the world – the portrait of a man of a rank only below that of royalty, who in his own day had made a considerable noise. History says little or nothing of him; but search the correspondence of his contemporaries, and you find reference to his wild daring, his bold profligacy, his restless spirit, his taste for the occult sciences. While still in the meridian of life he died and was buried, so say the chronicles, in a foreign land. He died in time to escape the grasp of the law, for he was accused of crimes which would have given him to the headsman.

After his death, the portraits of him, which had been numerous, for he had been a munificent encourager of art, were bought up and destroyed – it was supposed by his heirs, who might have been glad could they have razed his very name from their splendid line. He had enjoyed a vast wealth; a portion of this was believed to have been embezzled by a favourite astrologer or soothsayer – at all events, it had unaccountably vanished at the time of his death. One portrait alone of him was supposed to have escaped the general destruction; I had seen it in the house of a collector some months before. It had made on me a wonderful impression, as it does on all who behold it – a face never to be forgotten; and there was that face in the miniature that lay within my hand. True, that in the miniature the man was a few years older than in the portrait I had seen, or than the original was even at the time of his death. But a few years! – why, between the date in which flourished that direful noble, and the date in which

the miniature was evidently painted, there was an interval of more than two centuries. While I was thus gazing, silent and wondering, Mr J— said:

'But is it possible? I have known this man.'

'How—where?' I cried.

'In India. He was high in the confidence of the Rajah of —, and wellnigh drew him into a revolt which would have lost the Rajah his dominions. The man was a Frenchman—his name de V—, clever, bold, lawless. We insisted on his dismissal and banishment: it must be the same man—no two faces like his—yet this miniature seems nearly a hundred years old.'

Mechanically I turned round the miniature to examine the back of it, and on the back was engraved a pentacle; in the middle of the pentacle a ladder, and the third step of the ladder was formed by the date 1765.

Examining still more minutely, I detected a spring; this, on being pressed, opened the back of the miniature as a lid. Withinside the lid was engraved 'Mariana to thee—Be faithful in life and in death to—.' Here follows a name that I will not mention, but it was not unfamiliar to me. I had heard it spoken of by old men in my childhood, as the name borne by a dazzling charlatan, who had made a great sensation in London for a year or so, and had fled the country on the charge of a double murder within his own house—that of his mistress and his rival. I said nothing of this to Mr J— to whom reluctantly I resigned the miniature.

We had found no difficulty in opening the first drawer within the iron safe; we found great difficulty in opening the second: it was not locked, but it resisted all efforts till we inserted in the chinks the edge of a chisel. When we had thus drawn it forth, we found a very singular apparatus in the nicest order. Upon a small thin book, or rather a tablet, was placed a saucer of crystal; this saucer was filled with a clear liquid—on that liquid floated a kind of compass, with a needle shifting rapidly round, but instead of the usual points of a compass were seven strange char-

acters, not very unlike those used by astrologers to denote the planets. A very peculiar, but not strong nor displeasing odour came from this drawer, which was lined with a wood that we afterwards discovered to be hazel. Whatever the cause of this odour, it produced a material effect on the nerves. We all felt it, even the two workmen who were in the room – a creeping tingling sensation from the tips of the fingers to the roots of the hair. Impatient to examine the tablet, I removed the saucer. As I did so the needle of the compass went round and round with exceeding swiftness, and I felt a shock that ran through my whole frame, so that I dropped the saucer on the floor. The liquid was spilt – the saucer was broken – the compass rolled to the end of the room – and at that instant the walls shook to and fro, as if a giant had swayed and rocked them.

The two workmen were so frightened that they ran up the ladder by which we had descended from the trap-door; but seeing that nothing more happened, they were easily induced to return.

Meanwhile I had opened the tablet: it was bound in a plain red leather with a silver clasp; it contained but one sheet of thick vellum, and on that sheet were inscribed, within a double pentacle, words in old monkish Latin, which are literally to be translated thus: – ‘On all that it can reach within these walls – sentient or inanimate, living or dead – as moves the needle, so work my will! Accursed be the house, and restless be the dwellers therein.’

We found no more. Mr J – burnt the tablet and its anathema. He razed to the foundations the part of the building containing the secret room with the chamber over it. He had then the courage to inhabit the house himself for a month, and a quieter, better-conditioned house could not be found in all London. Subsequently he let it to advantage, and his tenant has made no complaints.

But my story is not yet done. A few days after Mr J – had removed into the house, I paid him a visit. We were standing by the open window and conversing. A van con-

taining some articles of furniture which he was moving from his former house was at the door. I had just urged on him my theory that all these phenomena regarded as supermundane had emanated from a human brain; adducing the charm, or rather curse, we had found and destroyed in support of my philosophy. Mr J— was observing in reply, 'That even if mesmerism or whatever analogous power it might be called, could really thus work in the absence of the operator, and produce effects so extraordinary, still could those effects continue when the operator himself was dead? and if the spell had been wrought, and, indeed, the room walled up, more than seventy years ago, the probability was, that the operator had long since departed this life'; Mr J—, I say, was thus answering, when I caught hold of his arm, and pointed to the street below.

A well-dressed man had crossed from the opposite side, and was accosting the carrier in charge of the van. His face, as he stood, was exactly fronting our window. It was the face of the miniature we had discovered; it was the face of the portrait of the noble three centuries ago.

'Good Heavens!' cried Mr J—, 'that is the face of de V—, and scarcely a day older than when I saw it in the Rajah's court in my youth!'

Seized by the same thought, we both hastened downstairs. I was first in the street; but the man had already gone. I caught sight of him, however, not many yards in advance, and in another moment I was by his side.

I had resolved to speak to him, but when I looked into his face I felt as if it were impossible to do so. That eye—the eye of the serpent—fixed and held me spellbound. And withal, about the man's whole person there was a dignity, an air of pride and station and superiority, that would have made any one, habituated to the usages of the world, hesitate long before venturing upon a liberty or impertinence. And what could I say? what was it I would ask? Thus ashamed of my first impulse, I fell a few paces back, still, however, following the stranger, undecided what else to do. Meanwhile he turned the corner of the street; a plain

carriage was in waiting, with a servant out of livery, dressed like a *valet-de-place*, at the carriage door. In another moment he had stepped into the carriage, and it drove off. I returned to the house. Mr J— was still at the street door. He had asked the carrier what the stranger had said to him.

‘Merely asked whom that house now belonged to.’

The same evening I happened to go with a friend to a place in town called the Cosmopolitan Club, a place open to men of all countries, all opinions, all degrees. One orders one’s coffee, smokes one’s cigar. One is always sure to meet agreeable, sometimes remarkable persons.

I had not been two minutes in the room before I beheld at a table, conversing with an acquaintance of mine, whom I will designate by the initial G—, the man—the Original of the Miniature. He was now without his hat, and the likeness was yet more startling, only I observed that while he was conversing there was less severity in the countenance; there was even a smile, though a very quiet and very cold one. The dignity of mien I had acknowledged in the street was also more striking; a dignity akin to that which invests some prince of the East—conveying the idea of supreme indifference and habitual, indisputable, indolent, but resistless power.

G— soon after left the stranger, who then took up a scientific journal, which seemed to absorb his attention.

I drew G— aside. ‘Who and what is that gentleman?’

‘That? Oh, a very remarkable man indeed. I met him last year amidst the caves of Petra—the scriptural Edom. He is the best Oriental scholar I know. We joined company, had an adventure with robbers, in which he showed a coolness that saved our lives; afterwards he invited me to spend a day with him in a house he had bought at Damascus—a house buried amongst almond blossoms and roses—the most beautiful thing! He had lived there for some years, quite as an Oriental, in grand style. I half suspect he is a renegade, immensely rich, very odd; by the way, a great mesmerizer. I have seen him with my own eyes produce an effect on inanimate things. If you take a letter from

your pocket and throw it to the other end of the room, he will order it to come to his feet, and you will see the letter wriggle itself along the floor till it has obeyed his command. 'Pon my honour, 'tis true: I have seen him affect even the weather, disperse or collect clouds, by means of a glass tube or wand. But he does not like talking of these matters to strangers. He has only just arrived in England; says he has not been for a great many years; let me introduce him to you.'

'Certainly! He is English then? What is his name?'

'Oh! – a very homely one – Richards.'

'And what of his birth – his family?'

'How do I know? What does it signify! – no doubt some parvenu, but rich – so infernally rich!'

G – drew me up to the stranger, and the introduction was effected. The manners of Mr Richards were not those of an adventurous traveller.

Travellers are in general constitutionally gifted with high animal spirits: they are talkative, eager, imperious. Mr Richards was calm and subdued in tone, with manners which were made distant by the loftiness of punctilious courtesy – the manners of a former age. I observed that the English he spoke was not exactly of our day. I should have said that the accent was slightly foreign. But then Mr Richards remarked that he had been little in the habit for many years of speaking in his native tongue. The conversation fell upon the changes in the aspect of London since he had last visited our metropolis. G – then glanced off to the moral changes – literary, social, political – the great men who were coming on. In all this Mr Richards evinced no interest. He had evidently read none of our living authors, and seemed scarcely acquainted by name with our younger statesmen. Once and only once he laughed; it was when G – asked him whether he had any thought of getting into Parliament. And the laugh was inward – sarcastic – sinister – a sneer raised into a laugh. After a few minutes G – left us to talk to some other acquaintances

who had just lounged into the room, and I then said quietly:

'I have seen a miniature of you, Mr Richards, in the house you once inhabited, and perhaps built, if not wholly, at least in part, in - Street. You passed by that house this morning.'

Not till I had finished did I raise my eyes to his, and then his fixed my gaze so steadfastly that I could not withdraw it - those fascinating serpent eyes. But involuntarily, and as if the words that translated my thoughts were dragged from me, I added in a low whisper, 'I have been a student in the mysteries of life and nature; of those mysteries I have known the occult professors. I have the right to speak to you thus.' And I uttered a certain password.

'Well,' said he, dryly, 'I concede the right - what would you ask?'

'To what extent human will in certain temperaments can extend?'

'To what extent can thought extend? Think, and before you draw breath you are in China.'

'True. But my thought has no power in China.'

'Give it expression, and it may have: you may write down a thought which, sooner or later, may alter the whole condition of China. What is a law but a thought? Therefore thought is infinite - therefore thought has power; not in proportion to its value - a bad thought may make a bad law as potent as a good thought can make a good one.'

'Yes; what you say confirms my own theory. Through invisible currents one human brain may transmit its ideas to other human brains with the same rapidity as a thought promulgated by visible means. And as thought is imperishable - as it leaves its stamp behind it in the natural world even when the thinker has passed out of this world - so the thought of the living may have power to rouse up and revive the thoughts of the dead - such as those thoughts were in life - though the thought of the living

cannot reach the thoughts which the dead now may entertain. Is it not so?’

‘I decline to answer, if, in my judgement, thought has the limit you would fix to it; but proceed. You have a special question you wish to put.’

‘Intense malignity in an intense will, engendered in a peculiar temperament, and aided by natural means within the reach of science, may produce effects like those ascribed of old to evil magic. It might thus haunt the walls of a human inhabitation with spectral revivals of all guilty thoughts and guilty deeds once conceived and done within those walls, all, in short, with which the evil will claims rapport and affinity – imperfect, incoherent, fragmentary snatches at the old dramas acted therein years ago. Thoughts thus crossing each other haphazard, as in the nightmare of a vision, growing up into phantom sights and sounds and all serving to create horror, not because those sights and sounds are really visitations from a world without, but that they are ghastly monstrous renewals of what have been in this world itself, set into malignant play by a malignant mortal.

‘And it is through the material agency of that human brain that these things would acquire even a human power – would strike as with the shock of electricity, and might kill, if the thought of the person assailed did not rise superior to the dignity of the original assailant – might kill the most powerful animal if unnerved by fear, but not injure the feeblest man, if, while his flesh crept, his mind stood out fearless. Thus, when in old stories we read of a magician rent to pieces by the fiends he had evoked – or still more, in Eastern legends, that one magician succeeds by arts in destroying another, there may be so far truth, that a material being has clothed, from its own evil propensities, certain elements and fluids, usually quiescent or harmless, with awful shape and terrific force – just as the lighting that had lain hidden and innocent in the cloud becomes by natural law suddenly visible, takes a distinct shape to the eye, and can strike destruction on the

object to which it is attracted.'

'You are not without glimpses of a very mighty secret,' said Mr Richards composedly. 'According to your view, could a mortal obtain the power you speak of, he would necessarily be a malignant and evil being.'

'If the power were exercised as I have said, most malignant and most evil – though I believe in the ancient traditions that he could not injure the good. His will could only injure those with whom it has established an affinity, or over whom it forces unresisted sway. I will now imagine an example that may be within the laws of nature, yet seem wild as the fables of a bewildered monk.

'You will remember that Albertus Magnus, after describing minutely the process by which spirits may be invoked and commanded, adds emphatically that the process will instruct and avail only to the few – that a man must be born a magician! – that is, born with a peculiar physical temperament, as a man is born a poet. Rarely are men in whose constitution lurks this occult power, of the highest order of intellect; – usually in the intellect there is some twist, perversity, or disease. But, on the other hand, they must possess, to an astonishing degree, the faculty to concentrate thought on a single object – the energetic faculty that we call will. Therefore, though their intellect be not sound, it is exceedingly forcible for the attainment of what it desires. I will imagine such a person, pre-eminently gifted with this constitution and its concomitant forces. I will place him in the loftier grades of society. I will suppose his desires emphatically those of the sensualist – he has, therefore, a strong love of life. He is an absolute egotist – his will is concentrated in himself – he has fierce passions – he knows no enduring, no holy affections, but he can covet eagerly what for the moment he desires – he can hate implacably what opposes itself to his objects – he can commit fearful crimes, yet feel small remorse – he resorts rather to curses upon others, than to penitence for his misdeeds. Circumstances, to which his constitution guides him, lead him to a rare knowledge of the natural

secrets which may serve his egotism. He is a close observer where his passions encourage observation, he is a minute calculator, not from love of truth, but where love of self sharpens his faculties—therefore he can be a man of science.

‘I suppose such a being, having by experience learned the power of his arts over others, trying what may be the power of will over his own frame, and studying all that in natural philosophy may increase that power. He loves life, he dreads death; he wills to live on. He cannot restore himself to youth, he cannot entirely stay the progress of death, he cannot make himself immortal in the flesh and blood; but he may arrest for a time so prolonged as to appear incredible, if I said it—that hardening of parts which constitutes old age. A year may age him no more than an hour ages another. His intense will, scientifically trained into system, operates, in short, over the wear and tear of his own frame. He lives on. That he may not seem a portent and a miracle, he dies from time to time, seemingly, to certain persons. Having schemed the transfer of a wealth that suffices to his wants, he disappears from one corner of the world, and contrives that his obsequies shall be celebrated. He reappears at another corner of the world, where he resides undetected, and does not revisit the scenes of his former career till all who could remember his features are no more. He would be profoundly miserable if he had affections—he has none but for himself. No good man would accept his longevity, and to no men, good or bad, would he or could he communicate its true secret. Such a man might exist; such a man as I have described I see now before me! Duke of—, in the court of—, dividing time between lust and brawl, alchemists and wizards;—again, in the last century, charlatan and criminal, with name less noble, domiciled in the house at which you gazed to-day, and flying from the law you had outraged, none knew whither; traveller once more revisiting London, with the same earthly passions which filled your heart when races now no more walked through yonder streets; outlaw

from the school of all the nobler and diviner mystics; execrable Image of Life in Death and Death in Life, I warn you back from the cities and homes of healthful men; back to the ruins of departed empires; back to the deserts of nature unredeemed!

There answered me a whisper so musical, so potently musical, that it seemed to enter into my whole being, and subdue me despite myself. Thus it said:

'I have sought one like you for the last hundred years. Now I have found you, we part not till I know what I desire. The vision that sees through the Past, and cleaves through the veil of the Future, is in you at this hour; never before, never to come again. The vision of no puling fantastic girl, of no sick-bed somnambule, but of a strong man, with a vigorous brain. Soar and look forth!'

As he spoke I felt as if I rose out of myself upon eagle wings. All the weight seemed gone from air—roofless the room, roofless the dome of space. I was not in the body—where I knew not—but aloft over time, over earth. Again I heard the melodious whisper,—'You say right. I have mastered great secrets by the power of Will; true, by Will and by Science I can retard the process of years: but death comes not by age alone. Can I frustrate the accidents which bring death upon the young?'

'No; every accident is a providence. Before a providence snaps every human will.'

'Shall I die at last, ages and ages hence, by the slow, though inevitable growth of time, or by the cause that I call accident?'

'By a cause you call accident.'

'Is not the end still remote?' asked the whisper with a slight tremor.

'Regarded as my life regards time, it is still remote.'

'And shall I, before then, mix with the world of men as I did ere I learned these secrets, resume eager interest in their strife and their trouble—battle with ambition, and use the power of the sage to win the power that belongs to kings?'

'You will yet play a part on the earth that will fill earth with commotion and amaze. For wondrous designs have you, a wonder yourself, been permitted to live on through the centuries. All the secrets you have stored will then have their uses – all that now makes you a stranger amidst the generations will contribute then to make you their lord. As the trees and the straws are drawn into a whirlpool – as they spin round, are sucked to the deep, and again tossed aloft by the eddies, so shall races and thrones be plucked into the charm of your vortex. Awful Destroyer – but in destroying, made, against your own will, a Constructor!'

'And that date, too, is far off?'

'Far off; when it comes, think your end in this world is at hand!'

'How and what is the end? Look east, west, south and north.'

'In the north, where you never yet trod, towards the point whence your instincts have warned you, there a spectre will seize you. 'Tis Death! I see a ship – it is haunted – 'tis chased – it sails on. Baffled navies sail after that ship. It enters the region of ice. It passes a sky red with meteors. Two moons stand on high, over ice-reefs. I see the ship locked between white defiles – they are ice-rocks. I see the dead strew the decks – stark and livid, green mould on their limbs. All are dead but one man – it is you! But years, though so slowly they come, have then scathed you. There is the coming of age on your brow, and the will is relaxed in the cells of the brain. Still that will, though enfeebled, exceeds all that man knew before you, through the will you live on, gnawed with famine; and nature no longer obeys you in that death-sprawling region; the sky is a sky of iron, and the air has iron clamps, and the ice-rocks wedge in the ship. Hark how it cracks and groans. Ice will imbed it as amber imbeds a straw. And a man has gone forth, living yet, from the ship and its dead; and he has clambered up the spikes of an iceberg, and the two moons gaze down on his form. That man is yourself; and

terror is on you – terror; and terror has swallowed your will. And I see swarming up the steep ice-rock, grey grisly things. The bears of the north have scented their quarry – they come near you and nearer, shambling and rolling their bulk. And in that day every moment shall seem to you longer than the centuries through which you have passed. And heed this – after life, moments continued make the bliss or the hell of eternity.’

‘Hush,’ said the whisper; ‘but the day, you assure me, is far off – very far! I go back to the almond and rose of Damascus! – sleep!’ The room swam before my eyes. I became insensible. When I recovered, I found G – holding my hand and smiling. He said, ‘You who have always declared yourself proof against mesmerism have succumbed at last to my friend Richards.’

‘Where is Mr Richards?’

‘Gone, when you passed into a trance – saying quietly to me, “Your friend will not wake for an hour”.’

I asked as collectedly as I could, where Mr Richards lodged.

‘At the Trafalgar Hotel.’

‘Give me your arm,’ said I to G –; ‘let us call on him; I have something to say.’

When we arrived at the hotel, we were told that Mr Richards had returned twenty minutes before, paid his bill, left directions with his servant (a Greek) to pack his effects and proceed to Malta by the steamer that should leave Southampton the next day. Mr Richards had merely said of his own movements that he had visits to pay in the neighbourhood of London, and it was uncertain whether he should be able to reach Southampton in time for that steamer; if not, he should follow in the next one.

The waiter asked my name. On my informing him, he gave me a note that Mr Richards had left for me, in case I called.

The note was as follows: ‘I wished you to utter what was in your mind. You obeyed. I have therefore established power over you. For three months from this day you

can communicate to no living man what has passed between us; you cannot even show this note to the friend by your side. During three months, silence complete as to me and mine. Do you doubt my power to lay on you this command? – try to disobey me. At the end of the third month, the spell is raised. For the rest I spare you. I shall visit your grave a year and a day after it has received you.'

So ends this strange story, which I ask no one to believe. I write it down exactly three months after I received the above note. I could not write it before, nor could I show G—, in spite of his urgent request, the note which I read under the gas-lamp by his side.

BEZHIN LEA

Ivan Sergeivitch Turgenev

(Translated by Richard Freeborn)

It was a beautiful July day, one of those days which occur only when the weather has been unchanged for a long time. From early morning the sky is clear and the sunrise does not so much flare up like a fire as spread like a mild pinkness. The sun – not fiery, not molten, as it is during a period of torrid drought, not murkily crimson as it is before a storm, but bright and invitingly radiant – peacefully drifts up beneath a long thin cloud, sends fresh gleams through it and is immersed in its lilac haze. The delicate upper edge of the long line of cloud erupts in snaky glints of light: their gleam resembles the gleam of beaten silver. But then again the playful rays break out – and as if taking wing the mighty sun rises gaily and magnificently. About midday a mass of high round clouds appear, golden-grey, with soft white edges. They move hardly at all, like islands cast down on the infinite expanses of a flooding river which flows round them in deeply pellucid streams of level blue; away towards the horizon they cluster together and merge so that there is no blue sky to be seen between them; but they have themselves become as azure-coloured as the sky and are pervaded through and through with light and warmth. The light, pale-lilac colour of the heavens remains the same throughout the day and in all parts of the sky; there is no darkening anywhere, no thickenings as for a storm, though here and there pale-blue columns may stretch downwards, bringing a hardly noticeable sprinkling of rain. Towards evening these clouds disappear. The last of them, darkling and vague as smoke, lie down in rosy mistiness before the sinking sun. At the point where the sun has set just as calmly as it rose into the sky, a crimson glow lingers for a short

time over the darkened earth, and, softly winking, the evening star burns upon the glow like a carefully carried candle. On such days all the colours are softened; they are bright without being gaudy; everything bears the mark of some poignant timidity. On such days the heat is sometimes very strong and occasionally even 'simmers' along the slopes of the fields. But the wind drives away and disperses the accumulated heat, and whirling dust storms – a sure sign of settled weather – travel in tall white columns along roads through the ploughland. The dry pure air is scented with wormwood, harvested rye and buckwheat. Even an hour before nightfall you can feel no dampness. It is just such weather that the farmer wants for harvesting his grain.

It was on precisely such a day that I once went out grouse shooting in Chernsk county in the province of Tula. I found, and bagged, a fair number of birds. My full game-pouch cut mercilessly at my shoulder. But I did not finally decide to make my way home until the evening glow had already died away and chill shadows began to thicken and proliferate in air that was still bright, though no longer illuminated by the rays of the sunset. With brisk steps I crossed a long 'plaza' of bushy undergrowth, clambered up a hillock and, instead of the expected familiar moor with a little oak wood to the right of it and a low-walled white church in the distance, I saw completely different places which were unknown to me. At my feet there stretched a narrow valley; directly ahead of me rose, like a steep wall, a dense aspen wood. I stopped in bewilderment and looked around. 'Ah-ha!' I thought. 'I'm certainly not where I should be: I've swerved too much to the right' – and, surprised at my mistake, I quickly descended from the hillock. I was at once surrounded by an unpleasant, motionless damp, just as if I had entered a cellar. The tall, thick grass on the floor of the valley was all wet and shone white like a smooth tablecloth; it felt clammy and horrible to walk through. As quickly as possible I scrambled across to the other side, and, keeping to the

left, made my way along beside the aspen wood. Bats already flitted above its sleeping treetops, mysteriously circling and quivering against the dull paleness of the sky; a young hawk, out late, flew by high up, taking a direct keen course in hurrying back to its nest. 'Now then, as soon as I reach that corner,' I said to myself, 'that's where the road'll be, so what I've done is to make a detour of about three-quarters of a mile!'

I made my way finally to the corner of the wood, but there was no road there, only some low, unkempt bushes spread out widely in front of me and beyond them, in the far distance, an expanse of deserted field. Again I stopped.

'What's all this about? Where am I?' I tried to recall where I had been during the day. 'Ah, these must be the Parakhin bushes!' I exclaimed eventually. 'That's it! And that must be the Sindeyev wood . . . How on earth did I get as far as this? It's very odd! Now I must go to the right again.'

I turned to the right, through the bushes. Meanwhile, night was approaching and rose around me like a thunder cloud; it was as if, in company with the evening mists, darkness rose on every side and even poured down from the sky. I discovered a rough, overgrown track and followed it, carefully peering ahead of me. Everything quickly grew silent and dark; only quail gave occasional cries. A small night bird, which hurried low and soundlessly along on its soft wings, almost collided with me and plunged off in terror. I emerged from the bushes and wandered along the boundary of a field. It was only with difficulty that I could make out distant objects. All around me the field glimmered faintly; beyond it, coming closer each moment, the sullen murk loomed in huge clouds. My footsteps sounded muffled in the thickening air. The sky, which had earlier grown pale, once again began to shine blue, but it was the blue of the night. Tiny stars began to flicker and shimmer.

What I thought was a wood turned out to be a dark, round knoll. 'Where on earth am I?' I repeated again out loud, stopping for a third time and looking questioningly at

my yellow English piebald, Diana, who was by far the most intelligent of all four-legged creatures. But this most intelligent of four-legged creatures only wagged her small tail, dejectedly blinked her tired little eyes and offered me no practical help. I felt ill at ease in front of her and strode wildly forward, as if I had suddenly realized which way to go, circled the knoll and found myself in a shallow hollow which had been ploughed over. A strange feeling took possession of me. The hollow had the almost exact appearance of a cauldron with sloping sides. Several large upright stones stood in the floor of the hollow – it seemed as if they had crept down to that spot for some mysterious consultation – and the hollow itself was so still and silent, the sky above it so flat and dismal, that my heart shrank within me. A small animal of some kind or other squeaked weakly and piteously among the stones. I hurried to climb back on to the knoll. Up to that point I had not given up hope of finding a way home, but now I was at last convinced that I had completely lost my way and, no longer making any effort to recognize my surroundings, which were almost totally obliterated by the darkness, I walked straight ahead of me, following the stars and hoping for the best . . . For about half an hour I walked on in this way, with difficulty, dragging one foot after another. Never in my life, it seemed, had I been in such waste places: not a single light burned anywhere, not a single sound could be heard: one low hillock followed another, field stretched after endless field, and bushes suddenly rose out of the earth under my very nose.

I went on walking and was on the point of finding a place to lie down until morning, when suddenly I reached the edge of a fearful abyss.

I hastily drew back my outstretched leg and, through the barely transparent night-time murk, saw far below me an enormous plain. A broad river skirted it, curving away from me in a semicircle; steely gleams of water, sparkling with occasional faint flashes, denoted its course. The hill on which I was standing fell away sharply like an almost

vertical precipice. Its vast outlines could be distinguished by their blackness from the blue emptiness of the air and directly below me, in the angle formed by the precipice and the plain, beside the river, which at that point was a dark, unmoving mirror, under the steep rise of the hill, two fires smoked and flared redly side by side. Figures clustered round them, shadows flickered, and now and then the front half of a small curly head would appear in the bright light. At last I knew the place I had reached. This meadowland is known in our region as Bezhin Lea. There was now no chance of returning home, especially at night; moreover, my legs were collapsing under me from fatigue. I decided to make my way down to the fires and wait the dawn in the company of the people below me, whom I took to be drovers. I made my descent safely, but had hardly let go of my last handhold when suddenly two large, ragged, white dogs hurled themselves at me with angry barks. Shrill childish voices came from the fires and two or three boys jumped up. I answered their shouted questions. They ran towards me, at once calling off the dogs who had been astonished by the appearance of my Diana, and I walked towards them.

I had been mistaken in assuming that the people sitting round the fires were drovers. They were simply peasant boys from the neighbouring villages keeping guard over the horses. During hot summer weather it is customary in our region to drive the horses out at night to graze in the field, for by day the flies would give them no peace. Driving the horses out before nightfall and back again at first light is a great treat for the peasant boys. Bareheaded, dressed in tattered sheepskin jackets and riding the friskiest ponies, they race out with gay whoops and shouts, their arms and legs flapping as they bob up and down on the horses' backs and roar with laughter. Clouds of fine sandy dust are churned up along the roadway; a steady beating of hooves spreads far and wide as the horses prick up their ears and start running; and in front of them all, with tail high and continuously changing his pace, gallops a shaggy

chestnut stallion with burrs in his untidy mane.

I told the boys that I had lost my way and sat down among them. They asked me where I was from and fell silent for a while in awe of me. We talked a little about this and that. I lay down beside a bush from which all the foliage had been nibbled and looked around me. It was a marvellous sight: a reddish circular reflection throbbed round the fires and seemed to fade as it leaned against the darkness; a flame, in flaring up, would occasionally cast rapid flashes of light beyond the limit of the reflection; a fine tongue of light would lick the bare boughs of willows and instantly vanish; and long sharp shadows, momentarily breaking in, would rush right up to the fires as if the darkness were at war with the light. Sometimes, when the flames grew weaker and the circle of light contracted, there would suddenly emerge from the encroaching dark the head of a horse, reddish brown, with sinuous markings, or completely white, and regard us attentively and gravely, while rapidly chewing some long grass, and then would at once disappear. All that was left was the sound as it continued to chew and snort. From the area of the light it was difficult to discern what was happening in the outer darkness, and therefore at close quarters, everything seemed to be screened from view by an almost totally black curtain; but off towards the horizon, hills and woods were faintly visible, like long blurs. The immaculate dark sky rose solemnly and endlessly high above us in all its mysterious magnificence. My lungs melted with the sweet pleasure of inhaling that special, languorous and fresh perfume which is the scent of a Russian night. Hardly a sound was audible around us . . . Now and then a large fish would make a resounding splash in the nearby river and the reeds by the bank would faintly echo the noise as they were stirred by the outspreading waves . . . Now and then the fires would emit a soft crackling.

Around the fires sat the boys, as did the two dogs who had been so keen to eat me. They were still unreconciled to my presence and, while sleepily narrowing their eyes

and glancing towards the fire, would sometimes growl with a special sense of their personal dignity; to start with, these were only growls, but later they became faint yelps, as if the dogs regretted their inability to satisfy their appetite for me. There were five boys in all: Fedya, Pavlusha, Ilyusha, Kostya and Vanya. (I learned their names from their conversation and I now intend to acquaint the reader with each of them.)

The first of them, Fedya, the eldest, would probably have been fourteen. He was a sturdy boy, with handsome and delicate, slightly shallow features, curly fair hair, bright eyes and a permanent smile which was a mixture of gaiety and absent-mindedness. To judge from his appearance, he belonged to a well-off family and had ridden out into the fields not from necessity but simply for the fun of it. He was dressed in a colourful cotton shirt with yellow edging; a small cloth overcoat, recently made, hung open somewhat precariously on his small narrow shoulders and a comb hung from his pale-blue belt. His ankle-high boots were his own, not his father's. The second boy, Pavlusha, had dishevelled black hair, grey eyes, broad cheekbones, a pale, pock-marked complexion, a large but well-formed mouth, an enormous head – as big as a barrel, as they say – and a thick-set, ungainly body. Hardly a prepossessing figure – there's no denying that! – but I nonetheless took a liking to him: he had direct, very intelligent eyes and a voice with the ring of strength in it. His clothes gave him no chance of showing off: they consisted of no more than a simple linen shirt and much-patched trousers. The face of the third boy, Ilyusha, was not very striking: hook-nosed long, myopic, it wore an expression of obtuse, morbid anxiety. His tightly closed lips never moved, his frowning brows never relaxed; all the while he screwed up his eyes at the fire. His yellow, almost white, hair stuck out in sharp little tufts from under the small felt cap which he was continually pressing down about his ears with both hands. He had new bast shoes and foot cloths; a thick rope

wound three times around his waist drew smartly tight his neat black top-coat. Both he and Pavlusha appeared to be no more than twelve years old. The fourth, Kostya, a boy of about ten, aroused my curiosity by his sad and meditative gaze. His face was small, thin and freckled, and pointed like a squirrel's; one could hardly see his lips. His large, dark, moistly glittering eyes produced a strange impression, as if they wanted to convey something which no tongue – at least not his tongue – had the power to express. He was small in stature, of puny build and rather badly dressed. The last boy, Vanya, I hardly noticed at first: he lay on the ground quietly curled up under some angular matting and only rarely poked out from under it his head of curly brown hair. This boy was only seven.

So it was that I lay down apart from them, beside the bush, and from time to time looked in their direction. A small pot hung over one of the fires, in which 'taters' were being cooked. Pavlusha looked after them and, kneeling down, poked the bubbling water with a small sliver of wood. Fedya lay, leaning on one elbow, his sheepskin spread round him. Ilyusha sat next to Kostya and continually, in his tense way, screwed up his eyes. Kostya, with his head slightly lowered, stared off somewhere into the distance. Vanya did not stir beneath his matting. I pretended to be asleep. After a short while the boys renewed their talk.

To start with, they gossiped about this and that – tomorrow's work or the horses. But suddenly Fedya turned to Ilyusha and, as if taking up from where they had left off their interrupted conversation, asked him:

'So you actually did see one of them little people, did you?'

'No, I didn't see him, and you can't really see him at all,' answered Ilyusha in a weak, croaky voice which exactly suited the expression on his face, 'but I heard him, I did. And I wasn't the only one.'

'Then where does he live around your parts?' asked Pavlusha.

'In the old rolling-room.'¹

'Do you mean you work in the factory?'

'Of course we do. Me and Avdyushka, my brother, we work as glazers.'

'Cor! So you're factory workers!'

'Well, so how did you hear him?' asked Fedya.

'It was this way. My brother, see, Avdyushka, and Fyodor Mikheyevsky, and Ivashka Kosoy, and the other Ivashka from Redwold, and Ivashka Sukhorukov as well, and there were some other kids as well, about ten of us in all, the whole shift, see—well, so we had to spend the whole night in the rolling-room, or it wasn't that we had to, but the Nazarov, the overseer, he wouldn't let us off, he said: "Seeing as you've got a lot of work here tomorrow, my lads, you'd best stay here; there's no point in the lot o'you traipsing off home."

'Well, so we stayed and all lay down together, and then Avdyushka started up saying something about, "Well, boys, suppose that goblin comes?" and he didn't have a chance, Avdey didn't, to go on saying anything when all of a sudden over our heads someone comes in, but we were lying down below, see, and he was up there, by the wheel. We listen, and there he goes walking about, and the floorboards really bending under him and really creaking. Then he walks right over our heads and the water all of a sudden starts rushing, rushing through the wheel, and the wheel goes clatter, clatter and starts turning, but them gates of the Keep² are all lowered. So we start wondering who'd raise them so as to let the water through. Yet the wheel turned and turned, and then stopped.

'Whoever he was, he went back to the door upstairs and began coming down the stairway, and down he came, taking his time about it, and the stairs under him really

¹ Rolling-rooms or 'dipping-rooms' are terms used in paper factories to describe the place where the papers are baled out in the vats. It is situated right by the mill, under the mill-wheel.

² The Keep is the name used in our region for the place where the water runs over the wheel.

groaning from his weight . . . Well, so he came right up to our door, and then waited, and then waited a bit more – and then that door suddenly burst open it did. Our eyes were poppin' out of our heads, and we watch – and there's nothing there . . . And suddenly at one of the tubs the form^a started moving, rose, dipped itself and went to and fro just like that in the air like someone was using it for swilling, and then back again it went to its place. Then at another tube the hook was lifted from its nail and put back on the nail again. Then it was as if someone moved to the door and started to cough all sudden-like, like he'd got a tickle, and it sounded just like a sheep bleating . . . We all fell flat on the floor at that and tried to climb under each other – bloody terrified we were at that moment!

'Cor!' said Pavlusha. 'And why did he cough like that?'

'Search me. Maybe it was the damp.'

They all fell silent.

'Are them 'taters done yet?' Fedya asked.

Pavlusha felt them.

'Nope, they're not done yet . . . Cor, that one splashed,' he added, turning his face towards the river, 'likely it was a pike . . . And see that little falling star up there.'

'Now, mates, I've really got something to tell you.' Kostya began in a reedy voice. 'Just you listen to what my dad was talkin' about when I was there.'

'Well, so we're listening,' said Fedya with a condescending air.

'You know that Gavril, the carpenter in the settlement?'

'Sure we know him.'

'But do you know why he's always so gloomy, why he never says nothing, do you know that? Well, here's why. He went out once, my dad said – he went out, mates, into the forest to find some nuts. So he'd gone into the forest after nuts and he lost his way. He got somewhere, but God knows where it was. He'd been walkin', mates, and no!

^a The net with which the paper is scooped out.

he couldn't find a road of any kind, and already it was night all around. So he sat down under a tree and said to himself he'd wait there till mornin' – and he sat down and started to snooze. So he was snoozin' and suddenly he heard someone callin' him. He looked around – there's no one there. Again he snoozes off – and again they're callin' him. So he looks and looks, and then he sees right in front of him a water-fairy sittin' on a branch, swingin' on it she is and callin' to him, and she's just killin' herself laughin' . . . Then that moon shines real strong, so strong and obvious the moon shines, it shows up everythin', mates.

'So there she is callin' his name, and she hersel's all shiny, sittin' there all white on the branch, like she was some little minnow or gudgeon, or maybe like a carp that's all whitish all over, all silver . . . And Gavril the carpenter was just frightened to death, mates, and she went on laughin' at him, you know, and wavin' to him to come closer. Gavril was just goin' to get up and obey the water-fairy, when, mates, the Lord God gave him the idea to cross hisself . . . An' it was terrible difficult, mates, he said it was terrible difficult to make the sign of the cross 'cos his arm was like stone, he said, and wouldn't move, the darned thing wouldn't! But as soon as he'd managed to cross hisself, mates, that water-fairy stopped laughin' and started to cry . . . An' she cried, mates, an' wiped her eyes with her hair that was green and heavy as hemp. So Gavril kept on lookin' and lookin' at her, and then he started askin' her, "What's it you're cryin' for, you forest hussy, you?" And that water-fairy starts sayin' to him, "If you hadn't crossed yourself, human being that you are, you could've lived with me in joy and happiness to the end of your days, an' I'm cryin' and dyin' of grief over what that you crossed yourself, an' it isn't only me that'll be dyin' of grief, but you'll also waste away with grievin' till the end of your born days." Then, mates, she vanished, and Gavril at once comprehended-like – how to get out of the wood, that is; but from that day on he goes around everywhere all gloomy.'

'Phew!' exclaimed Fedya after a short silence. 'But how could that evil forest spirit infect a Christian soul – you said he didn't obey her, didn't you?'

'You wouldn't believe it, but that's how it was!' said Kostya. 'Gavrila claimed she had a tiny, tiny, voice, thin and croaky like a toad's.'

'Your father told you that himself?' Fedya continued.

'He did. I was lyin' on my bunk an' I heard it all.'

'What a fantastic business! But why's he got to be gloomy? She must've liked him, because she called to him.'

'Of course she liked him!' Ilyusha interrupted. 'Why not? She wanted to start tickling him, that's what she wanted. That's what they do, those water-fairies.'

'Surely there'll be water-fairies here,' Fedya remarked.

'No,' Kostya answered, 'this is a clean place here, it's free. 'Cept the river's close.'

They all grew quiet. Suddenly, somewhere in the distance a protracted, resonant, almost wailing sound broke the silence – one of those incomprehensible sounds which arise in the deep surrounding hush, fly up, hang in the air and slowly disperse at last as if dying away. You listen intently – it's as though there's nothing there, but it still goes on ringing. This time it seemed that someone gave a series of long, loud shouts on the very horizon and someone else answered him from the forest with sharp high-pitched laughter and a thin, hissing whistle which sped across the river. The boys looked at each other and shuddered.

'The power of the holy cross be with us!' whispered Ilyusha.

'Oh, you idiots!' Pavlusha cried. 'What's got into you? Look, the 'taters are done.' (They all drew close to the little pot and began to eat the steaming potatoes; Vanya was the only one who made no move.) 'What's wrong with you?' Pavlusha asked.

But Vanya did not crawl out from beneath his matting. The little pot was soon completely empty.

'Boys, have you heard,' Ilyusha began saying, 'what

happened to us in Varnavitsy just recently?"

'On that dam, you mean?' Fedya asked.

'Ay, on that dam, the one that's broken. That's a real unclean place, real nasty and empty it is. Round there is all them gullies and ravines, and in the ravines there's masses of snakes.'

'Well, what happened? Let's hear.'

'This is what happened. Maybe you don't know it, Fedya, but that's the place where one of our drowned men is buried. And he drowned a long time back when the pond was still deep. Now only his gravestone can be seen, only there's not much of it – it's just a small mound . . . Anyhow, a day or so ago, the bailiff calls Yermil the dog-keeper and says to him: "Off with you and fetch the mail." Yermil's always the one who goes to fetch the mail 'cos he's done all his dogs in – they just don't somehow seem to live when he's around, and never did have much of a life no-how, though he's a good man with dogs and took to it in every way. Anyhow, Yermil went off for the mail, and then he mucked about in the town and set off home real drunk. And it's night-time, a bright night, with the moon shining . . . So he's riding back across the dam, 'cos that's where the route came out. And he's riding along, this dog-keeper Yermil, and he sees a little lamb on the drowned man's grave, all white and curly and pretty, and it's walking about, and Yermil thinks: "I'll pick it up, I will, 'cos there's no point in letting it get lost here," and so he gets off his horse and picks it up in his arms – and the lamb doesn't turn a hair. So Yermil walks back to the horse, but the horse backs away from him, snorts and shakes its head. So when he's quieted it, he sits on it with the lamb and starts off again holding the lamb in front of him. He looks at the lamb, he does, and the lamb looks right back at him right in the eyes. Then that Yermil the dog-keeper got frightened: "I don't recall," he thought, "no lambs looking at me in the eye like that afore." Anyhow, it didn't see nothing, so he starts stroking its wool and saying "Sssh, there, sssh!" And that lamb bares its

teeth at him sudden-like and says back to him: "Sssh, there, sssh! . . ."

The narrator had hardly uttered this last sound when the dogs sprang up and with convulsive barks dashed from the fire, disappearing into the night. The boys were terrified. Vanya even jumped out from beneath his mat. Shouting, Pavlusha followed in hot pursuit of the dogs. Their barking quickly retreated into the distance. There was a noisy and restless scurrying of hooves among the startled horses. Pavlusha gave loud calls: 'Gray! Beetle!' After a few seconds the barking ceased and Pavlusha's voice sounded far away. There followed another pause, while the boys exchanged puzzled looks as if anticipating something new. Suddenly a horse could be heard racing towards them: it stopped sharply at the very edge of the fire and Pavlusha, clutching hold by the reins, sprang agilely from its back. Both dogs also leapt into the circle of light and at once sat down, their red tongues hanging out.

'What's there? What is it?' the boys asked.

'Nothing,' Pavlusha answered waving away the horse.

'The dogs caught a scent. I thought,' he added in a casual tone of voice, his chest heaving rapidly, 'it might have been a wolf.'

I found myself full of admiration for Pavlusha. He was very fine at that moment. His very ordinary face, enlivened by the swift ride, shone with bold courageousness and a resolute firmness. Without a stick in his hand to control the horse and in total darkness, without even so much as blinking an eye, he had galloped all by himself after a wolf . . . 'What a marvellous boy!' was my thought, as I looked at him.

'And you saw them, did you, those wolves?' asked the cowardly Kostya.

'There's plenty of them round here,' answered Pavlusha, 'but they're only on the prowl in the winter.'

He again settled himself in front of the fire. As he sat down he let a hand fall on the shaggy neck of one of the dogs and the delighted animal kept its head still for a

long time as it directed sideward looks of grateful pride at Pavlusha.

Vanya once again disappeared under his mat.

'What a lot of horrible things you've been telling us, Ilyusha,' Fedya began. As the son of a rich peasant, it was incumbent upon him to play the role of leader (though for his own part he talked little, as if for fear of losing face). 'And it could've been some darn thing of the sort that started the dogs barking . . . But it's true, so I've heard, that you've got unclean spirits where you live.'

'In Varnavitsy, you mean? That's for sure! It's a really creepy place! More than once they say they've seen there the old squire, the one who's dead. They say he goes about in a coat hanging down to his heels, and all the time he makes a groaning sound, like he's searching for something on the earth. Once grandfather Trofimych met him and asked him: "What's it you are searching for on the earth, good master Ivan Ivanych?"'

'He actually asked him that?' broke in the astonished Fedya.

'He asked him that.'

'Well, good for Trofimych after that! So what did the other say?'

"Split-grass," he says, "that's what I'm looking for." And he talks in such a hollow, hoarse voice: "Split-grass." "And what, good master Ivan Ivanych, do you want split-grass for?" "Oh, my grave weighs so heavy," he says, "weighs so heavy on me, Trofimych, and I want to get out, I want to get away . . ."

'So that's what it was!' Fedya said. 'He'd had too short a life, that means.'

'Cor, stone me!' Kostya pronounced. 'I thought you could only see dead people on Parents' Sunday.'

'You can see dead people at any time,' Ilyusha declared with confidence. So far as I could judge, he was better versed in village lore than the others. 'But on Parents' Sunday you can also see the people who're going to die that year. All you've got to do is to sit down at night in the

porch of the church and keep your eyes on the road. They'll all go past you along the road – them who're going to die that year I mean. Last year, grandma Ulyana went to the church porch in our village.'

'Well, did she see anyone?' Kostya asked him with curiosity.

'Sure she did. To start with she just sat there a long, long time, and didn't see no one and didn't hear nothing. Only there was all the time a sound like a dog starting to bark somewhere. Then suddenly she see there's someone coming along the road – it's a little boy in nothing but a shirt. She looked close and she saw it was Ivashka Fedoseyev walking along.'

'Is that the boy who died in the spring?' Fedya broke in.

'That's the one. He walks along and doesn't even raise his head. But Ulyana recognized him. But then she looks again and sees a woman walking along, and she peers and peers and – God help us! – it's she herself, Ulyana herself, walking along.'

'Was it really her?' asked Fedya.

'God's truth. It was her.'

'But she hasn't died yet, has she?'

'No, but the year's not over yet either. You take a close look at her and then ask yourself what sort of a body she's got to carry her soul around in.'

Again they all grew quiet. Pavlusha threw a handful of dry sticks on the fire. They blackened in sharp outline against the instantly leaping flames and began to crackle and smoke and bend, curling up their burned tips. The reflections from the light, shuddering convulsively, struck out in all directions, but particularly upwards. Suddenly, from God knows where, a small white pigeon flew directly into the reflections, fluttered around in terror, bathed by the fierce light, and then vanished with a clapping of its wings.

'Likely it's lost its way home,' Pavlusha remarked. 'Now it'll fly until it meets up with something, and when it finds it, that's where it'll spend the night till dawn.'

'Look, Pavlusha,' said Kostya, 'mightn't that be the soul of some good person flying up to heaven, eh?'

Pavlusha threw another handful of sticks on the fire.

'Maybe,' he said after a pause.

'Pavlusha, tell us, will you,' Fedya began, 'were you able to see the heavenly foreboding⁴ in Shalamavo?'

'You mean, when you couldn't see the sun that time? Sure.'

'Didn't you get frightened, then?'

'Sure, and we weren't the only ones. Our squire lets us know beforehand that "Well, there'll be a foreboding for you," but soon as it gets dark they say he got real scared. And in the servant's hut, that old granny, the cook, well – soon as it's dark, listen, she ups and smashes all the pots in the oven with a pair of tongs. "Who's going to need to eat now it's the end of the world," she says. The cabbage soup ran out all over everywhere. And, boy! What rumours there were going about in our village, such as there'd be white wolves and birds of prey coming to eat people, and there'd be Trishka⁵ himself for all to see.'

'What's this Trishka?' asked Kostya.

'Don't you know about Trishka?' Ilyusha started up heatedly. 'You're a dumb cluck, mate, if you don't know who Trishka is. It's just dunces you've got in your village, nothing but dunces! Trishka – he'll be a real astonishing person, who'll be coming, and he'll be coming when the last times are near. And he'll be the sort of astonishing person you won't be able to catch hold of, you won't be able to do nothing to him: that's the sort of astonishing person he'll be. The peasants, say, will want to try to catch him, and they'll go out after him with sticks and surround him, but what he'll do is lead their eyes astray – he'll lead their eyes astray so that they start beating each other. Say they put him in prison and he asks for some water in a ladle; they'll bring him the ladle and he'll jump

⁴ The name given by the local peasants to an eclipse of the sun.

⁵ The superstition about 'Trishka' probably contains an echo of the legend about Antichrist.

right into it and vanish clean away, all trace of him. Say they put chains on him, he'll just clap his palms together and they'll fall right off him. So then this Trishka'll go walking through the villages and towns; and this smart fellow, this Trishka, he'll tempt all Christian folk . . . but there won't be a thing you can do to him . . . That's the sort of astonishing, real cunning person he'll be.'

'Yes, that's the one,' Pavlusha continued in his unhurried way. 'He was the one that we were all waiting for. The old men said that soon as the heavenly foreboding begins, Trishka'll be coming. So the foreboding began, and everyone poured out into the street and into the field to see what'll happen. As you know, our place is high up and open so you can see all around. Everyone's looking – and suddenly down from the settlement on the mountain there's a man coming, strange-looking, with an astonishing big head . . . Everyone starts shouting: "Oy, oy, it's Trishka coming! Oy, oy, it's Trishka!" and they all raced for hiding, this way and that! The elder of our village he crawled into a ditch and his wife got stuck in a gate and let out such a howling noise that she fair terrified her own watch-dog, and it broke its chain, rushed through the fence and into the wood. And Kuzka's father, Dorofeyich, jumped in among the oats, squatted down there and began to make cries like a quail, all 'cos he thought to himself: "For sure that soul-destroying enemy of mankind'll spare a poor wee birdie!" Such a commotion they were all in! . . . But all the time that man who was coming was simply our barrel-maker Vavila, who'd bought himself a new can and was walking along with that empty can perched on his head.'

All the boys burst out laughing and then once again fell quiet for an instant, as people talking out in the open air frequently do. I looked around me: the night stood guard in solemn majesty; the raw freshness of late evening had been replaced by midnight's dry mildness, and it still had a long time to lie like a soft quilt over the dreaming fields; there was still a long time to wait until the first murmur,

the first rustlings and stirrings of morning, the first dew-beads of dawn. There was no moon in the sky: at that season it rose late. Myriads of golden stars, it seemed, were all quietly flowing in glittering rivalry along the Milky Way, and in truth, while looking at them, one sensed vaguely the unwavering, unstoppable racing of the earth beneath . . .

A strange, sharp, sickening cry resounded twice in quick succession across the river, and, after a few moments, was repeated farther off . . .

Kostya shuddered: 'What was that?'

'That was a heron's cry,' Pavlusha answered calmly.

'A heron,' Kostya repeated. 'Then what was it, Pavlusha, I heard yesterday evening?' he added after a brief pause. 'Perhaps you know.'

'What did you hear?'

'This is what I heard. I was walkin' from Stone Ridge to Shashkino, and at first I went all the way along by our nut trees, but afterwards I went through that meadow – you know, by the place where it comes out like a narrow file,⁶ where there's a tarn.⁷ You know it, the one that's all overgrown with reeds. So, mates, I walked past this tarn an' suddenly someone starts makin' a groanin' sound from right inside it, so piteous, piteous, like: "Oooh – oooh . . . OOOh – oooh!" I was terrified, mates. It was late an' that voice sounded like somebody really sick. It was like I was goin' to start cryin' myself . . . What would that have been, eh?'

'In the summer before last, thieves drowned Akim the forester in that tarn,' Pavlusha remarked. 'So it may have been his soul complaining.'

'Well, it might be that, mates,' rejoined Kostya, widening his already enormous eyes. 'I didn't know that Akim had been drowned in that tarn. If I'd known, I wouldn't have got so terrified.'

⁶ A 'narrow file' is a sharp turn in a ravine.

⁷ A 'tarn' is a deep hole filled with spring water remaining after the spring torrents, which does not dry up even in summer.

'But they do say,' continued Pavlusha, 'there's a kind of little frog makes a piteous noise like that.'

'Frogs? No, that wasn't frogs . . . what sort of . . .' (The heron again gave its cry over the river.) 'Listen to it!' Kostya could not refrain from saying. 'It makes a noise like a wood-demon.'

'Wood-demons don't make a cry, they're dumb,' Ilyusha inserted. 'They just clap their hands and chatter . . .'

'So you've seen one of them, a wood-demon, have you?' Fedya interrupted him scornfully.

'No, I haven't, and God preserve that I should see one. But other people have seen one. Just a few days ago one such overtook one of our peasants and was leading him all over the place through the wood and round and round some clearing of other . . . He only just managed to get home before it was light.'

'Well, did he see him?'

'He saw him. Big as big he was, he said, and dark, all wrapped up, just like he was behind a tree so you couldn't see him clearly, or like he was hiding from the moon, and looking all the time, peering with his wicked eyes, and winking them, winking . . .'

'That's enough!' exclaimed Fedya, shuddering slightly and convulsively hunching his shoulders. 'Phew!'

'Why should this devilish thing be around in the world?' commented Pavlusha, 'I don't understand it at all!'

'Don't you scold it! It'll hear you, you'll see,' Ilyusha said. Again a silence ensued.

'Look up there, look up there, all of you!' the childish voice of Vanya suddenly cried. 'Look at the little stars of God, all swarming like bees!' He had stuck his small, fresh-complexioned face out from beneath the matting, was leaning on one little fist and slowly looking up with his large, placid eyes. The boys all raised their eyes to the sky, and did not lower them until quite a while had passed.

'Tell me, Vanya,' Fedya began to say in a gentle voice, 'is your sister Anyurka well?'

'She's well,' Vanya answered, with a faint lisp.

'You tell her she ought to come and see us. Why doesn't she?'

'I don't know.'

'Tell her that she ought to come.'

'I'll tell her.'

'Tell her that I'll give her a present.'

'And you'll give one to me, too?'

'I'll give one to you, too.'

Vanya sighed. 'No, there's no need to give me one. Better you give it to her, she's so good to us.'

And once more Vanya laid his head on the ground. Pavlusha rose and picked up the little pot, now empty.

'Where are you going?' Fedya asked him.

'To the river, to get some water. I'd like a drink.'

The dogs got up and followed him.

'See you don't fall in the river!' Ilyusha called after him.

'Why should he fall?' asked Fedya. 'He'll be careful.'

'All right, so he'll be careful. Anything can happen, though. Say he bends down, starting to dip up the water, and then a water-sprite grabs him by the hand and pulls him down below. They'll start saying afterwards that, poor boy, he fell in the water . . . But what sort of a fall is that? Listen listen, he's in the reeds,' he added, pricking up his ears.

The reeds were in fact moving, 'hushing', as they say in our parts.

'Is it true,' asked Kostya, 'that that ugly woman, Akulina, has been wrong in the head ever since she went in the water?'

'Ever since then . . . And look at her now! They say she used to be real good-looking before. The water-sprite did for her. Likely he didn't expect they'd drag her out so soon. He corrupted her down there, down in his own place at the bottom of the water.'

I had come across this Akulina more than once. Covered with tatters, fearsomely thin, with a face as black as coal, a vacant gaze and permanently bared teeth, she used to

stamp about on the same spot for hours at a time, at some point on the road, firmly hugging her bony hands to her breast and slowly shifting her weight from one foot to the other just like a wild animal in a cage. She would give no sign of understanding, no matter what was said to her, save that from time to time she would break into convulsions of laughter.

'They do say,' Kostya went on, 'that Akulina threw herself in the river because her lover deceived her.'

'Because of that very thing.'

'But do you remember Vasya?' Kostya added sadly.

'What Vasya?' asked Fedya.

'The one who drowned,' Kostya answered, 'in this very river. He was a grand lad, a really grand lad! That mother of his, Feklista, how she loved him, how she used to love Vasya! And she sort of sensed, Feklista did, that ruin would come to him on account of water. That Vasya used to come with us boys in the summer when we went down to the river to bathe – and she'd be all bothered, his mother would. The other women wouldn't care, going waddling by with their washtubs, but Feklista would put her tub down on the ground and start calling to him: "Come back, come back, light of my life! O come back, my little falcon!" And how he came to drown, God alone knows. He was playing on the bank, and his mother was there, raking hay, and suddenly she heard a sound like someone blowing bubbles in the water – she looks, and there's nothing there 'cept Vasya's little cap floating on the water. From then on, you know, Feklista's been out of her mind: she goes and lies down at that place where he drowned, and she lies down, mates, and starts singing this song – you remember the song Vasya used to sing all the time – that's the one she sings, plaintive-like, and she cries and cries, and complains bitterly to God . . .'

'Here's Pavlusha coming,' Fadya said.

Pavlusha came up to the fire with a full pot in his hand.

'Well, boys,' he began after a pause, 'things aren't good.'

'What's happened?' Kostya quickly asked.

'I heard Vasya's voice.'

They all shuddered.

'What's that you're saying? What's it all about?' Kostya babbled.

'It's God truth. I was just bending down to the water and suddenly I hear someone calling me in Vasya's voice, and it was just like it was coming from under the water: "Pavlusha, hey Pavlusha!" I listen, and again it calls: "Pavlusha, come down here!" I came away. But I managed to get some water.'

'God preserve us! God preserve us!' the boys said, crossing themselves.

'It was a water-sprite for sure calling you, Pavlusha,' Fedya added. 'And we were only just talking about him, about that Vasya.'

'Oh, it's a real, bad omen,' said Ilyusha, giving due weight to each word.

'It's nothing, forget it!' Pavlusha declared resolutely and again sat down. 'Your own fate you can't escape.'

The boys grew quiet. It was clear that Pavlusha's words had made a profound impression on them. They began to lie down before the fire, as if preparing to go to sleep.

'What was that?' Kostya suddenly asked, raising his head. Pavlusha listened.

'It's some snipe in flight, whistling as they fly.'

'Where would they be flying?'

'To a place where there's never any winter, that's what they say.'

'There isn't such a land, is there?'

'There is.'

'Is it far away?'

'Far, far away, on the other side of the warm seas.'

Kostya sighed and closed his eyes.

More than three hours had already flowed by since I joined the boys. Eventually the moon rose. I failed to notice it immediately because it was so small and thin. This faintly moonlit night, it seemed, was just as magnificent as it had been previously. But many stars which

had only recently stood high in the sky were beginning to tilt towards its dark edge; all around absolute quiet descended, as usually happens only just before morning: everything slept the deep, still sleep of the pre-dawn hours. The air was not so strongly scented, and once again it seemed to be permeated with a raw dampness. O brief summer nights! The boys' talk died away along with the dying of the fires. Even the dogs dozed: and the horses, so far as I could make out by the vaguely glittering, feeble flux of the starlight, were also lying down with their heads bowed. A sweet oblivion descended on me and I fell into a doze.

A current of fresh air brushed my face. I opened my eyes to see that morning was beginning. As yet there was no sign of dawn's pinkness, but in the east it had begun to grow light. The surrounding scene became visible, if only dimly. The pale-grey sky shone bright and cold and tinged with blue; stars either winked their faint light or faded; the ground was damp and leaves were covered with the sweat of dew, here and there sounds of life, voices could be heard, and a faint light wind of early morning began its wandering and fleet-footed journey across the earth. My body responded to it with a mild, joyful shivering. I got briskly to my feet and walked over to the boys. They slept the sleep of the dead about the embers of the fire; only Pavlusha raised himself half-way and glanced intently at me.

I nodded my head at him and set off to find my way home along the bank of the river, shrouded with smoky mist. I had hardly gone more than a mile when sunlight streamed all around me down the length of the wide damp lea, and ahead of me on the freshly green hills, from forest to woodland, and behind me along the far, dusty track, over the glistening blood-red bushes and across the river which now shone a modest blue under the thinning mist – flowed torrents of young, hot sunlight, crimson at first and later brilliantly red, brilliantly golden. Everything began quivering into life, awakening, singing, resounding, chatter-

ing. Everywhere, large drops of dew began to glow like radiant diamonds. There carried to me, pure and crystal-clear as if also washed clean by the freshness of the morning's atmosphere, the sound of a bell. And suddenly I was overtaken by the racing drove of horses, refreshed after the night, and chased along by my acquaintances, the boys.

I have, unfortunately, to add that in that same year Pavlusha died. He did not drown; he was killed in falling from a horse. A pity, for he was a fine lad!

THE LAST SÉANCE

Agatha Christie

Raoul Daubreuil crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about 32, with a fresh-coloured face and a little black moustache. By profession he was an engineer.

In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No. 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging 'Good morning,' to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor.

As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman, whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

'Good morning, monsieur.'

'Good morning, Elise,' said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

'Madame expects me, does she not?' he asked over his shoulder.

'Ah, yes, indeed, monsieur.'

Elise shut the front door and turned toward him.

'If Monsieur will go into the little salon, Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself.'

Raoul looked up sharply. 'Is she not well?'

'Well!'

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and opened the door of the little salon for him. He went in and she followed him.

'Well!' she continued. 'How should she be well, poor lamb? Séances, séances, and always séances! It is not right – not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil.'

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

'There, there, Elise,' he said soothingly, 'do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand.'

Elise shook her head.

'Ah well,' she grumbled under her breath, 'Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don't like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!'

She held up her hands. 'Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in paradise, and the others are in purgatory.'

'Your view of the life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise,' said Raoul as he dropped into a chair.

The old woman drew herself up. 'I am a good Catholic, monsieur.'

She crossed herself, went toward the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

'Afterwards when you are married, monsieur,' she said pleadingly, 'it will not continue – all this?'

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

'You are a good faithful creature, Elise,' he said, 'and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this "spirit business," as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more séances.'

Elise's face broke into smiles.

'Is it true what you say?' she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

'Yes,' he said, speaking almost more to himself than to her. 'Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same, Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful

medium in Paris – more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit.'

Elise gave a snort of contempt.

'Deceit! Ah, no, indeed, Madame could not deceive a newborn babe if she tried.'

'She is an angel,' said the young Frenchman with fervour. 'And I – I shall do everything a man can do to make her happy. You believe that?'

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

'I have served Madame for many years, monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored – *eh bien*, monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb.'

Raoul laughed. 'Bravo, Elise! You are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits.'

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

'Supposing, monsieur,' she said hesitatingly, 'the spirits will not give her up?'

Raoul stared at her. 'Eh! What do you mean?'

'I said,' repeated Elise, 'supposing the spirits will not give her up?'

'I thought you didn't believe in the spirits, Elise?'

'No more I do,' said Elise stubbornly. 'It is foolish to believe in them. All the same –'

'Well?'

'It is difficult for me to explain, monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest, and –'

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe. 'Things happen. It is not trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, monsieur, it is not

right. It is against nature and *le bon Dieu*, and somebody will have to pay.'

Raoul got up from his chair and patted her on the shoulder.

'Calm yourself, my good Elise,' he said, smiling. 'See, I will give you some good news. Today is the last of these séances; after today there will be no more.'

'There is one today, then?' asked the old woman suspiciously.

'The last, Elise, the last.'

Elise shook her head disconsolately. 'Madame is not fit - ' she began.

But her words were interrupted. The door opened and a tall fair woman came in. She was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul's face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

'Simone!'

He took both her long white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

'Raoul, my dear one.'

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

'Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my beloved?'

'No, not ill - ' she hesitated.

He led her to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

'But tell me then.'

The medium smiled faintly. 'You will think me foolish,' she murmured.

'I? Think you foolish? Never.'

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a few moments gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

'I am afraid, Raoul.'

He waited, expecting her to go on; but when she did not he said encouragingly, 'Yes, afraid of what?'

'Just afraid . . . that is all.'

'But - '

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

'Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don't know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible is going to happen to me.'

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

'My dearest,' he said, 'come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium's life. All you need is rest – rest and quiet.'

She looked at him gratefully. 'Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet.'

She closed her eyes and leaned back a little against his arm.

'And happiness,' murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

'Yes,' she murmured, 'yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life – the terrible life of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means.'

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

'One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness, of nothingness. Deliberately one gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired – so terribly tired.'

'I know,' murmured Raoul, 'I know.'

'So tired,' murmured Simone again. Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

'But you are wonderful, Simone.'

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

'You are unique – the greatest medium the world has ever known.'

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

'Yes, yes,' Raoul insisted.

He drew two letters from his pocket.

'See here, from Professor Roche of the Salpêtrière, and this one from Dr Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally.'

'Ah, no!'

Simone sprang suddenly to her feet.

'I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished, all done with. You promised me, Raoul.'

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

'Yes, yes,' he said. 'Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters.'

She threw him a swift glance of suspicion.

'It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?'

'No, no,' said Raoul, 'unless perhaps you yourself would care to just occasionally for these old friends—'

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly. 'No, no, never again. There is danger. I tell you I can feel it, great danger.'

She clasped her hands on her forehead, then walked across to the window.

'Promise me never again,' she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arms round her shoulders.

'My dear one,' he said tenderly, 'I promise you after today you shall never sit again.'

He felt the sudden start she gave.

'Today,' she murmured. 'Ah, yes, I had forgotten Madame Exe.'

Raoul looked at his watch. 'She is due any minute now; but perhaps, Simone, if you do not feel well—'

Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following her own train of thought.

'She is – a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know, I have almost a horror of her.'

'Simone!'

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

'Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But – I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands – have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man's. Ah!'

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

'I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for another woman, a mother bereft of her only child.'

Simone made a gesture of impatience. 'Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt –'

She flung her hand out. 'Fear! You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune.'

Raoul shrugged. 'Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite,' he said dryly. 'All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amélie was able to control you at once, and the materializations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one.'

'Materializations,' said Simone in a low voice. 'Tell me, Raoul – you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance – are the materializations really so wonderful?'

He nodded enthusiastically. 'At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze,' he explained, 'but at the last séance –'

'Yes?'

He spoke very softly. 'Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even

touched her – but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result.’

Simone turned again toward the window.

‘I was terribly exhausted when I woke,’ she murmured. ‘Raoul, are you sure – are you really sure that all this is right? You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?’ She laughed rather uncertainly.

‘You know what I believe,’ said Raoul gravely. ‘In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs to Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, and from today onward you are free to be happy.’

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

‘Madame Exe is late,’ she murmured. ‘She may not come.’

‘I think she will,’ said Raoul. ‘Your clock is a little fast, Simone.’

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

‘I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?’ she observed. ‘Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her.’

Raoul shrugged. ‘Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium,’ he observed. ‘It is an elementary precaution.’

‘I suppose so,’ agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

‘You see,’ she murmured, ‘I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very – very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit today?’

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

'You promised, Simone -' he began gently.

She backed against the wall. 'I won't do it, Raoul. I won't do it!'

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

'It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realize that the money this woman has offered you for a last sitting is enormous, simply enormous.'

She interrupted him defiantly. 'There are things that matter more than money.'

'Certainly there are,' he agreed warmly. 'That is just what I am saying. Consider - this woman is a mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part - you can deny a rich woman a caprice, but can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?'

The medium flung her hands out despairingly.

'Oh, you torture me,' she murmured. 'All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of - it is the word "mother."'

'Simone!'

'There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilization, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals - human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.'

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile. 'I am foolish today, Raoul. I know it.'

He took her hands in his. 'Lie down for a minute or two,' he urged. 'Rest till she comes.'

'Very well.' She smiled at him and left the room. Raoul remained lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room on the other side of it, a sitting-room very much like the one he

had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big arm-chair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so that they could be pulled across the alcove.

Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

'The last time,' murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. 'Ah, monsieur, I wish it were over and done with.'

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

'There she is, that great *gendarme* of a woman,' continued the old servant. 'Why can't she go and pray decently for her little one's soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?'

'Answer the bell, Elise,' said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute she returned ushering in the visitor.

'I will tell my mistress you are here, madame.'

Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone's words floated back to his memory.

'So big and so black.'

She was a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

'I fear I am a little late, monsieur.'

'A few minutes only,' said Raoul, smiling. 'Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought.'

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vice.

'But she will sit?' she demanded sharply.

'Oh, yes, madame.'

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

'Ah, monsieur!' she murmured, 'you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these

séances to me! My little one! My Amélie! To see her, to hear her, even – perhaps – yes, perhaps to be even able to stretch out my hand and touch her.'

Raoul spoke quickly. 'Madame Exe – how can I explain? On no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger.'

'Danger to me?'

'No, madame,' said Raoul, 'to the medium. You must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapour issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing – but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium on any handling of the phenomena. Were anyone to seize hold of the materialization roughly, the death of the medium might result.'

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

'That is very interesting, monsieur. Tell me, will there not be a time come when the materialization advances so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?'

'That is a fantastic speculation, madame.'

She persisted. 'But, on the facts, not impossible?'

'Quite impossible today.'

'But perhaps in the future?'

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained control of herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

'I regret, madame, to hear that you are indisposed,' said Madame Exe.

'It is nothing,' said Simone rather brusquely. 'Shall we begin?'

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

'You are not strong enough,' he exclaimed. 'We had better cancel the séance. Madame Exe will understand.'

'Monsieur!'

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

'Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it.'

'Madame Simone promised me one last sitting.'

'That is so,' agreed Simone quietly, 'and I am prepared to carry out my promise.'

'I hold you to it, madame,' said the other woman.

'I do not break my word,' said Simone coldly. 'Do not fear, Raoul,' she added gently, 'after all, it is for the last time—the last time, thank God.'

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the window so that the room was in semi-obscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

'You will pardon me, monsieur, but—you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me.'

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

'Madame!' cried Raoul. 'This is an insult!'

'A precaution.'

'I repeat, it is an insult!'

'I don't understand your objection, monsieur,' said Madame Exe coldly. 'If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear.'

Raoul laughed scornfully. 'I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will.'

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for

Madame Exe murmured unemotionally, 'Thank you, monsieur,' and advanced upon him with her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from behind the curtain gave a cry.

'No, no, Raoul, don't let her do it.'

Madame Exe laughed derisively. 'Madame is afraid,' she observed sarcastically.

'Yes, I am afraid.'

'Remember what you are saying, Simone,' cried Raoul. 'Madame Exe is apparently under the impression that we are charlatans.'

'I must make sure,' said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically about her task, binding Raoul securely to his chair.

'I must congratulate you on your knots, madame,' he observed ironically when she had finished. 'Are you satisfied now?'

Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room examining the panelling of the walls closely. Then she locked the door leading into the hall, and removing the key, returned to her chair.

'Now,' she said in an indescribable voice. 'I am ready.'

The minutes passed. From behind the curtain the sound of Simone's breathing became heavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironical laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium's figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast.

Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbon-like stream of mist was issuing from the medium's mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

'Amélie! My little Amélie!'

The hoarse whisper came from Madame Exe. The hazy figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously.

lousy. Never had there been a more successful materialization. Now, surely, it was a real child, a real flesh-and-blood child standing there.

'Maman!' The soft childish voice spoke.

'My child!' cried Madame Exe. 'My child!' She half rose from her seat.

'Be careful, madame,' cried Raoul warningly.

The materialization came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood there, her arms held out.

'Maman!'

'Ah!' cried Madame Exe. Again she half rose from her seat.

'Madame,' cried Raoul, alarmed, 'the medium -'

'I must touch her,' cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

'For God's sake, madame, control yourself,' cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now.

'Sit down at once.'

'My little one, I must touch her.'

'Madame, I command you, sit down!'

He was writhing desperately with his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

'In the name of God, madame, sit down!' he shouted. 'Remember the medium!'

Madame Exe paid no attention to him. She was like a woman transformed. Ecstasy and delight showed plainly in her face. Her outstretched hand touched the little figure that stood in the opening of the curtains. A terrible moan came from the medium.

'My God!' cried Raoul. 'This is terrible. The medium -'

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

'What do I care for your medium?' she cried. 'I want my child.'

'You are mad!'

'My child, I tell you. Mine! My own flesh and blood! My little one come back to me from the dead, alive and breathing.'

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman! Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the same word echoed: 'Maman!'

'Come then, my little one,' cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of anguish.

'Simone!' cried Raoul.

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtain there still sounded the terrible, high, long-drawn scream, such a scream as Raoul had never heard. It died away in a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling.

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the rope by sheer strength. As he struggled to his feet Elise rushed in, gasping, 'Madame!'

'Simone!' cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain. Raoul staggered back.

'My God!' he murmured. 'Red – all red.'

Elise's voice came beside him, harsh and shaking.

'So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, monsieur, what has happened. Why is Madame all shrunken away – why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?'

'I do not know,' said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

'I do not know. I do not know. But I think – I am going mad . . . Simone! Simone!'

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