

THE 2ND FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT
HORROR STORIES

EDITED BY CHRISTINE BERNARD



**THE SECOND FONTANA BOOK OF
GREAT HORROR STORIES**

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THE SECOND FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT

Horror Stories

Selected by Christine Bernard



COLLINS - Fontana

**First published in Fontana Books 1967
Ninth Impression November 1981**

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Acknowledgements

The editor gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint copyright material to the following:

Elizabeth Walter for THE SPIDER

Margaret Irwin and A. D. Peters & Co. for THE BOOK

Kingsley Amis for SOMETHING STRANGE

Lady Eleanor Smith and Hughes Massie Ltd. for SATAN'S
CIRCUS

Nigel Kneale for THE PHOTOGRAPH

W. F. Harvey and J. M. Dent for THE BEAST WITH FIVE
FINGERS

Joan Aiken for AS GAY AS CHEESE

Christie Copyrights Trust and William Collins Sons & Co.
for THE HOUND OF DEATH

Mrs. Stina Bergman for JUDITH

May Sinclair and Curtis Brown Ltd. for THE VICTIM

Norman Matson and A. D. Peters & Co. for THE HOUSE
ON BIG FARAWAY

L. P. Hartley for THE KILLING BOTTLE

THE SPIDER

*Elizabeth Walter**

Justus Ancorwen was thirty-five years old, five feet eight-and-a-half inches, a bachelor, and moderately obese. He was a journalist (although he called himself a writer) who specialized in magazine articles on interior décor, cosy chats with well-known—preferably titled—persons in their settings, wine and food. There was sometimes a distinctly patronizing tone to his articles: "We liked the curtains caught back with a rose . . . the sole *bonne femme*"; but as it had never occurred to him that his accolades could be resented, they continued to be bestowed through the medium of the royal and editorial "we".

Surprisingly, he made a comfortable living out of his writing, and a small private income helped. He could afford to gratify his tastes and had no one to gainsay him. Self-indulgence was in consequence his vice. Not that Justus ever overdid things; he was fastidious, despite his bulk. He was still this side of gluttony, abstained from bread and potatoes, preferred steak rare and shied away from stout. Nevertheless, the choicest delicacies were always on his table. Like some women, his palate had to be tickled to respond. He was fond of toying with a scent, a flavour, a sensation, but having sampled it, his interest did not extend beyond. His refrigerator was always full of half-eaten bits and pieces which, twice a week, his charwoman took home.

Justus had lived alone for years, and liked it. He had a flat in Hampstead, near the Heath. It was on the first floor with two drawing-room windows from floor to ceiling and tiny wrought-iron balconies in front of each. The other rooms were rather less impressive, but Justus made sure they were seldom seen, and concentrated instead on the drawing-room—his setting—with results that were both tasteful and serene.

Serenity was one of Justus's watchwords. He disliked crisis,

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muddle, dirt, incompetence. He kept his home as scrupulously as he kept his deadlines. His reputation for reliability was high. It explained in part the lucrative nature of his commissions (for his writing was seldom as good as he supposed), but the magazine public being even less critical than he was, editors were eager to reserve him in advance. There was something satisfying about introducing Justus Ancorwen to someone well-known who had consented to have his home written up. One could rely on an article the right length, promptly delivered, and pleasing to subject, editor and public alike.

One evening late in August, Justus was returning from such a trip. August had been a hot, dry month, with cracks in the soil and baking sunlight; at nights the air outdoors was as warm as it was within. It was after ten, but the Hampstead streets were crowded. Outside pubs and cafés the customers lingered over their drinks. In the residential streets people sat out on balconies, terraces, porches. Windows were flung wide, and curtains for the most part drawn back.

Justus was in his usual state of smooth self-satisfaction. The visit had gone rather well. The people were titled, which had predisposed him in their favour, and they had given him lunch and tea. He had had dinner on the train back to London, and between whiles leafed through his notes. These were detailed and, he flattered himself, observant. An excellent article should result.

He was whistling a little as he walked up the steep road he lived in, but at the gate the sound was abruptly switched off. The top floor was brightly illuminated. He did not wish to draw attention to his return. It was some months since his attentions to Isabel Bishop had ended—attentions which, he now admitted, he ought never to have begun—but he still felt a certain reluctance to be reminded of her, or—even worse—to have her be reminded of him.

Not that he feared Isabel's further advances. She had amply demonstrated her pride. She neither avoided him nor sought him; she appeared to be utterly unchanged. When he had first moved into the flat she had said good morning, accompanying it with a pleasant impersonal smile; now that they were strangers again she still greeted him, made some remark about

the weather, and gazed at him with neither curiosity nor dislike. Justus found this disconcerting. It was almost as if the affair had never been, as though Isabel the aloof had never kindled into an ardour that had rather frightened him.

Justus was not unattractive to women in a cuddly teddy-bear kind of way. He was aware of this and enjoyed it, though he had no intention of being caught. Some day he supposed he would marry, just as some day he knew he must die, but both events were comfortably in the future; they did not disquiet him much.

The affair with Isabel Bishop had been different. That had cost him a number of white nights. The unwisdom of embarking on friendship with the woman in the flat above him had not been apparent at first. It was only later, when he felt the urge to extricate himself, that he realized he could not: it would mean abandoning his lease. The lease was a long one, negotiated in his favour. He was pinned like a butterfly in a collection into place.

He was all the more grateful to Isabel for behaving in a civilized fashion, although doubtless the same mechanism operated in her case. She too was bound by agreements and solicitors' letters to a flat which she did not wish to vacate. It was in both their interests to be considerate, and Justus was aware of this. He showed his delicacy by avoiding a confrontation whenever possible, sometimes going to great lengths to give Isabel a miss.

To-night he could see her sitting at her window, her hands resting, he was sure, on the needlework in her lap. Isabel embroidered exquisitely and was seldom without such work. Latterly, however, Justus had noticed that her hands were often idle, as she sat dreaming the dreams for which youth—even youth well-nigh past—is famous, and concentrating her unfocused gaze on whatever object she chanced to be looking at. Once or twice he had tried waving, but the experiment had not been a success. Isabel had raised a hand in a hail-and-farewell gesture, and Justus had felt relegated to nothingness.

The trouble was that Isabel Bishop was a virgin. She had no background of experience, no sense of proportion, so to speak. What to another woman would have been simply an affair, without past or future, was to Isabel a great deal more.

She confidently expected marriage, and allowed that expectation to be known. Justus, already tiring of her, became aware that she regarded him as her life mate. Thereafter his affection suffered a rapid diminution; he congratulated himself on having had a narrow escape.

Indeed, now that his transient interest was over, he wondered what he had seen in Isabel—a big, dark girl, firm-buttocked and deep-bosomed, who failed to carry herself well. She was tall and wore flat shoes in an effort to counteract it, which enhanced her too long, too independent stride. She walked like a woman bent on demonstrating her own lack of attachments, in whom unattractiveness has become a source of pride. Not that Isabel was in fact bad-looking; with a different personality, her face and figure would have been good; she was a university librarian, she could afford to dress well—except that dressing was an art she had not understood. She bought good clothes, but she bought to last; she was out of fashion—not glaringly but dully out of step. Justus winced inwardly at many of her outfits. She would look much better undressed.

As he closed the gate quietly behind him, Justus kept his eyes on Isabel. She had not noticed him; he was relieved and thankful. He stole stealthily towards the house. The Powells who had the ground floor were on holiday. He and Isabel would be alone in their respective flats, separated by the width of plaster and beams and floor-boards from any communion closer than that. Nevertheless, Justus closed the front door of his own flat behind him, feeling more than usually glad to be home. He was tired; he would have a bath followed by a nightcap, followed by an early night and at least eight hours' repose. Then he remembered that he had forgotten to switch on the immersion heater; the water would be stone cold. It looked as though he would go to bed even earlier than expected, but he was far too irritable to feel consoled.

He tried the door of the sitting-room where the drinks were, only to find it locked. Justus swore under his breath, although he was himself responsible, having carefully turned the key that morning before he started out. He was exceedingly particular about burglars, and kept everything carefully locked, although since the keys were kept in the drawer of the

hall table, no burglar of ingenuity and experience would for long have allowed himself to be blocked. However, no burglar had called in his absence. The keys were where they always lay. Justus selected the right one, fitted it into the keyhole, and proceeded to unlock the door, leaving the key on the outside.

The room smelt stuffy as he entered. He flung the two tall casement windows wide. Outside, the warm night air was soft as feathers; somewhere, not too far distant, an owl cried. Justus stood on the balcony inhaling; the garden was moon-laced with silver below. He wondered if, at the window above, Isabel still sat with her sewing—and decided abruptly that he did not really want to know.

As though a chill had fallen on the night, he shivered, and, closing the windows behind him, came back inside. Fatigue had set his nerves on edge; it was time for that nightcap. He poured himself a drink and went to the kitchen in search of ice.

The refrigerator was full, as usual, of half-eaten titbits, delicacies that he had sampled and cast aside. Fortunately the charwoman came to-morrow; he would be glad for her to have the lot. He drew out the ice-tray and, holding it gingerly, carried it across to the tap. Then he drew back with a movement of horror and repulsion. There was an enormous spider in the sink.

Justus had an unreasoning fear of spiders. It had tormented him ever since he was a child. They seemed to him black and monstrous and evil; their presence in a room was enough to make it seemed defiled. More particularly, Justus dreaded that one might get on him, its eight legs running up his flesh. He was convinced he would die if one of the bent-legged brutes should touch him; against this conviction reason was powerless. His fear belonged to the same class of instinctive horror as that inspired in other people by mice, black beetles and snakes, except that Justus rather liked mice, handled snakes (non-poisonous) with equanimity, and was not noticeably sensitive about crushing black beetles underfoot. Only spiders produced in him this peculiar terror, this inability to stay in a room where one was known to be at large, this dread even of attempting to kill one in case he fluffed it and was in turn attacked.

He had learnt of course, to master his terror a little; he no longer screamed as he had done when a child. He had even killed spiders by dropping heavy weights upon them (he kept a stack of old telephone directories with this eventuality in mind). He could hit them with a shoe—providing his foot were not in it; but the thought of treading on one, even through a thick leather sole, turned him faint. For him, the months of August and September were months of torment, for at that time of year the spiders came indoors. At any moment a dark form might dart across the carpet and put his screwed-up courage to the test. The fact that, should one do so, he risked making himself ridiculous before others was not the least part of Justus Ancorwen's distress.

On this occasion, however, after the first moment of revulsion, he congratulated himself that he was so strategically placed. He had only to turn on both taps to wash the spider down the waste-pipe, up which it had no doubt laboriously climbed.

He had once read that spiders came indoors in search of water; it would certainly explain their frequent presence in bath and sink. Now that he looked closely at this one, he saw it was near a little pool of water. Was it against the laws of hospitality to kill a guest who had dropped in merely for a drink?

The spider in the sink was a big one. Its body was not black but dark brown. Its legs were bent at an obtuse angle. It had a relaxed, almost wallowing, look. This was understandable if it had come in search of water from the drought and dust outside. For an instant Justus was reminded of a man sprawling in his bath-tub. Then, with a decisive gesture, he turned both taps full on.

The spider had barely time to bunch its legs together before the water swept them from under it. It struck out gamely, recognized that the cascade was too much for it, and was borne in an unprotesting ball towards the waste-pipe. There, in a swirling maelstrom, it disappeared. Justus ran the water for several minutes, determined to make absolutely certain that his enemy was destroyed. Normally it took no time to dispose of a spider in this way and the annihilator could

afford to be brisk, but this had been a big brute and he proceeded accordingly. He was not taking any risks.

When he was satisfied that everything must be over, he turned off the taps and reverted to the matter of his drink, which he now began to feel he needed badly. He picked up the ice-tray and was preparing to dislodge the ice-cubes when a movement near the waste-pipe caught his eye. He stood as frozen as the water in the ice-tray as the spider, drenched and waterlogged, clambered forth.

It rested for a moment, clearly exhausted. Justus could almost see it give itself a shake. It moved a leg, as though making sure no bones were broken, and suddenly began to run. The transformation from stillness to movement was startling; it was doubtless a reflex of fear. In an equal reflex, Justus dropped the ice-tray he was holding and reached for the taps once more.

The spider had reached the sink-side and was trying to climb it, but the smoothness afforded it no hold. Its legs struggled frantically for purchase, but each time it slithered and fell back. Meanwhile the water from the taps was swirling round it (Justus imagined it ankle-deep), but in its corner the spider was protected from the flow's violence and able to hold its own. So long as it cowered there, the water could run for ever; something more drastic was required. After a moment's thought, Justus turned off one tap and fitted to it the short rubber hose he used for cleaning down the sink.

Against this concentrated jet of water, the spider was powerless. Again the unresisting black ball was swept towards the waste-pipe and again Justus Ancorwen drew breath. Then he became aware that the water was meeting resistance; the outflow was obstructed in some way. The sink would begin to fill, and then, with a glou-glou, the obstruction would yield momentarily and the water drain away. With each gurgled siphoning of the water, a great air-bubble rose and burst. It took Justus a moment to realize that the spider had grasped the underside of the sink-grille and was clinging on for literally dear life.

Sickened, Justus turned the hose upon the sink-grille. The bubbles rose faster now. But they rose; the spider was still living. He felt the sweat starting on his brow. If he had only

had hot water it would have been easy, and for the spider a less protracted agony at least. He deflected the flow of one tap to fill a kettle, and against the reduced cascade he saw two feeler-like legs emerging. Despite himself, Justus admired the persistence of the beast.

The kettle filled and on the gas, he once more directed the hose-jet upon the sink-grille. Something in him imagined the spider's despair as the flow redoubled after the respite. He wished to God he need not go on standing there. But someone had to direct that sink-hose. The normal flow was not sufficiently strong; it would never dislodge the spider from the sink-grille—and the spider was determined to hang on.

Behind him he could hear the kettle singing, when suddenly the intermittent glou-glou stopped. The air-bubbles had ceased to rise and burst as the obstructed water poured down the waste-pipe. The spider had been finally overcome. Relief and guilt were uncomfortably mingled in Justus: relief because the spider was no more, and guilt because never in his life had he felt such a murderer, such an evil instrument for destroying the miracle of life. The spider, by its resistance, had become personalized; it had battled bravely, although the odds were all on his side. The forces he had used against it seemed suddenly contemptible, like his fear of it, which was the reason it had died. His irrational terror had led to its slow destruction, not even to a quick and easy death. He had tortured it, buffeting its fragile body with the water, making it know fear, perhaps pain, and a drawn-out struggle for breath.

The kettle boiled over behind him. Justus seized it with shaking hands. The least he could do for what was left of the spider, to say nothing of his own peace of mind, was to make sure it did not linger in the waste-pipe. As though pouring an expiatory libation, he emptied the kettle's contents down the sink.

Afterwards he had his drink—neat—and hastened to go to bed. He was shivering despite the whisky. He longed for warmth, sleep, darkness and oblivion. All these he found as soon as he laid down his head.

He did not know how long he had been asleep when he

wakened, nor what had aroused him. It was dark. He could not even make out the window framed between its curtains, although he could feel the night air blowing in. It was late enough for all activity to have ceased in the streets and gardens, and still a long while before the dawn. The moon had set; the street lamp outside was extinguished; a car whined up the hill in the distance and was gone.

Justus sat up and switched on the light beside him. His watch showed half past two. His room looked perfectly normal, yet he was increasingly convinced all was not well. He considered whether he had indigestion, while straining his ears for the least sound. Nothing. The silence had a heavy, wadded quality, like something in the heart of a cocoon. Nor was he afflicted with any of those discomforts which an acid stomach can cause. Nevertheless, a little bicarbonate might be helpful; it could do no harm to try.

He put on his slippers, mindful of the time of year and the risk of spiders, and wrapped his silk dressing-gown reassuringly about him until he resembled a mandarin. The bicarbonate was in the bathroom cupboard, and he had just opened the door when a sound, or rather a vibration, froze him with horror. There was someone in the drawing-room.

He supposed he must have neglected to fasten the windows. For an athletic thief those balconies would be an easy climb. And now the man was prowling about among his treasures. He must get to the 'phone and dial nine-nine-nine. Justus had such a dread of burglars that he had frequently rehearsed what to do if one ever came. Now this recurrent nightmare was happening. And the telephone was in the drawing-room. He could not dial the police. He could only brave it out and hope that the burglar, more frightened than he was, would do a bolt as he flung open the drawing-room door.

Justus was not a physical coward, his fear of spiders apart. His heart was beating less fast as he crept down the hall towards the burglar than it had done when he drowned the spider in the sink. He moved with surprising speed and silence, having all a portly man's grace and lightness on his feet. The drawing-room appeared to be in total darkness. Outside the door Justus paused to listen and reflect.

The silence in the room appeared to equal that in the hall

outside it. It seemed impossible two men could stand so still. Then, just as Justus was beginning to think he had imagined the burglar, there was a movement on the other side of the door. Again, it was not so much a movement as a vibration—as though a cat had run across the room. The district abounded in cats; it was perfectly possible that one had climbed to the balcony and got in. There might even be two cats; yes, that was still more likely; two cats at play who had bounded across the room.

Justus flung open the door and switched the light on. No draught greeted him; the two tall windows were closed. They must have blown shut behind the feline intruders; it was the sound of this that had perhaps awakened him. Dazzled by the light, Justus stood blinking in the doorway; nothing seemed to be broken or disturbed; none of his precious objects lay in pieces; he could not even see the cats. They must be lurking behind the sofa; he made a move to go and see, when an unfamiliar dark object in the corner near the bookcase suddenly attracted his eye.

Crouched in the corner was the largest spider that Justus or anyone else had ever seen. It was about the size of a coal-scuttle, black and hairy, with the lower part of its body a good ten inches off the ground. Its great legs were bent up around it like a protective fence; they were covered in bristles like a hearth-brush; the two front ones ended in claws. Justus had read once in a children's encyclopædia that, size for size, the claw of the spider is more terrible than that of the lion, and this information came back to him now, making him curse that random and unselective reading that was at once his good fortune and his curse. He imagined those claws tearing into him as he lay paralysed by the spider's venomous bite. Their poison, he recalled, operated on the nervous system; a victim could be eaten while still alive. And eaten was a delicate expression; Justus had once watched a hungry spider gorge, moving this way and that above the web-bound fly, its supper, like someone tilting and scraping the plate. Later the dry husk of the fly had been cast from the web's centre, while the spider retired to digest. Later, Justus thought, his own drained body would be abandoned, while this blood-bloated monster slept.

He dared not move, lest movement should act as a magnet and bring it forth with a flurry of its eight cat-like-sounding feet. He could not see its eyes, but he knew it was aware of his presence—by scent, or by vibration, perhaps.

Justus longed to believe that it was part of a nightmare, brought on by the events of the evening and his own disordered nerves, but there was something too exact and palpable about all his surroundings; he feared the horror was all too real. And even if it wasn't, what means had he of proving it except by putting it to the test? Walking towards the giant spider, poking it. . . . Justus could too easily imagine the rest.

He had read of people fainting with terror, and he wondered now if he were to be one more. He heard his own irregular gaspings and heart-beats, and felt the colour flood into and drain from his face. Only his hand clutching the door-handle kept him upright; the knuckles seemed bursting through the skin. A tremor went through his rigid, knotted muscles. And at that moment the spider moved.

It was only a little movement, but it was enough for Justus. Somehow he was outside in the hall with the drawing-room door slammed shut. The spider's eight legs blurred to a rumble of sound behind him. It stopped just in time to prevent itself being flattened against the door.

On his side Justus Ancorwen, his hands shaking, turned the key and drew a shuddering breath. He had gained a temporary safety, but he had still to think what to do next. He could dress and go out to a public 'phone box and dial the police or the Zoo, but at three o'clock in the morning he doubted very much if they would believe him; they would be more likely to charge him with a malicious call. Alternatively, he could go in person. Hampstead police station was conveniently near. But would they be any more likely to believe him? They might assume he was crazed without attributing it to fear. Or they might think him drunk. If only he hadn't had that whisky! How long did alcohol linger on the breath? But the truth was he did not feel inclined to risk it. Until dawn, outside help was definitely out.

There remained his friends, of which he had a number. Even so, he hesitated to ring them up. It is carrying friendship rather far to rouse a man from slumber to tell him there

is a spider as big as a coal-scuttle in your flat. Justus thought he knew the kind of answers he would be given: terse, unhelpful, unsympathetic, and even downright coarse. Admittedly his friends were going to laugh on the other side of their faces later, but that did not help him at present to decide what he ought to do.

If it had been any creature but a spider, Justus felt he would have been able to cope. A lion (apart from the fact that its claw was inferior to the spider's) would have been easy by comparison. Like Samson, he would have rent it apart, and worn the pelt like an African witch-doctor; they were said to set great store by lion-skins. And even if he did nothing of the kind but merely waited until morning, at least he could wait with dignity. He would not be driven from home by his own unreasoning horror to seek any form of society—especially since the only society available was that of Isabel Bishop whom for months he had been trying to avoid.

Now that he had formulated the thought, he felt a bit better about it. Isabel was a woman; she would surely understand. It was not so long ago that she had been crooning over him as if he were a baby, and asking what he had looked like when he was a boy. Justus couldn't remember if he had told her, but for the first time he appreciated her desire to know; it argued a sympathy which he felt he badly needed. Leaving the front door of his own flat propped open, he started up the stairs on tiptoe.

The action brought back memories he would rather not have awakened. How often last winter had he crept up these same stairs. Outside Isabel's door he paused and listened. He had been accustomed to give three short rings; before the third had died away the door would be open, and Isabel waiting eagerly to draw him in. Should he do so now to assure her she need not be frightened, or would it merely serve to make her close her ears? Having once given himself away, he could not then assume a new personality. It would be no use giving a thunderous knock and shouting "Police".

His hesitation was ended abruptly by something running lightly over his foot. Justus leapt in the air with the agility of a ballet-dancer, though he landed without the grace. His

heart was again thumping uncontrollably, and he gazed fearfully behind him down the stairs. It could only have been a spider—that tickling, feathery run. The monster must be spawning them in thousands. They would come after him. Like the rats after Bishop Hatto.

The three short rings he gave at Isabel's doorbell were the result of a reflex of fear, and it is possible that he would have gone on jabbing it indefinitely had the pursuing spiders not explained themselves away. As he moved again and felt that terrifying tickle, he noticed one fringed end of the cord of his dressing-gown trailing on the floor because he had failed to tie it securely. It was brushing lightly against his foot.

He was still recovering from this confusion when the door opened on a chain and Isabel Bishop peered out. Justus noticed mechanically that she had her hair in curlers—a habit he had forced her to abandon during their affair. The chain on the door though not new, had not been used for a long time. Isabel had clearly reverted to type. Her voice when she spoke was polite, but guarded and distant.

"Yes, Justus? What is it? Are you ill?"

It gave no indication of her feelings, which were in the wildest tumult of hope and anger and joy. Justus Ancorwen here, on her doorstep, in the small hours? What impertinence! And how she longed to forgive her cruel, heartless boy!

She had spent months in blackening his character, but on so slippery a surface denigration refused to take. The most she could manage were one or two streaks of greyness—and in the small hours all cats are grey. She had so often dreamed of his returning, her needlework lying idle in her lap, that now that he had she believed she was still dreaming. She spoke guardedly because she feared to wake up.

Moreover, like the dreams of most romantic women, Isabel's were of the Florence-Nightingale type. Justus would be ill and she would save him by her nursing. She would look after him, blind or crippled, and be the radiance and blessing of his life. Such dreams ignore the realities of the given situation, but they are powerful motivators none the less. There was a world of wish-fulfilment behind Isabel's inquiry, which Justus, egotistically innocent, could not guess.

Instead he came out with what was uppermost.

"Isabel, you've got to help me. There's an enormous spider in my flat."

Isabel looked at him as though she suspected her hearing. "You rouse me in the middle of the night for that?" She omitted to tell him that she had in any case been lying wakeful. She had in fact been thinking of him.

"I know it must sound odd," Justus insisted—he was determined she should understand—"but honestly, I've never seen anything like it. Do you think I could use your 'phone to call the police?"

"Call the police to catch a little spider?" Isabel began to wonder if he was mad.

"It's not a little spider," Justus protested. "It's as big as—bigger than—a cat."

"Then it isn't a spider," Isabel declared authoritatively. "The biggest in the world aren't that size. I know," she added. "I'm interested in natural history. I always look at all the books on it that come in."

"Perhaps you haven't got the latest editions," Justus suggested, regretting his flippancy too late, since adverse comment on the library was to Isabel a personal affront. "Or it might be a mutation, do you think?"

"Are you sure it didn't come from Mars?" Isabel asked icily. She made no move to open her inhospitable door.

"I don't know where it came from," Justus said desperately. "All I can tell you is that it's there."

He would have invited her to see for herself but for one thing: in her incredulity she might conceivably let it out. Isabel had no fear of normal spiders; she would not take even ordinary care. And supposing it were to kill and eat her? He would incur some adverse comment in court. He might no longer be welcome in titled houses if it became known that he had behaved less gallantly than he ought.

"Isabel," he said, with all the sincerity he could muster, "I'm not joking—really I'm not. I woke and heard something moving in the drawing-room. When I went to look, I found this monster there."

"What did you do?" Isabel asked, despite herself interested.

"I locked the door on it."

"Can it get out?"

"No," Justus said. "I don't think so."

"Then why have you come up here?"

"Because my 'phone is in the drawing-room."

"You could go out if you wanted to 'phone."

She was inexorable in her shameless stripping of his motives.

"All right," Justus capitulated. "I didn't want to stay down there alone."

"Ah!" Isabel relaxed triumphantly. "I thought it was something like that. And why should you suppose I want your company?"

"I don't suppose you do," Justus said. "I don't blame you. *You've* a perfect right to be sticky. Only I hoped that, being you, you'd understand."

He waited hopefully for the results of this flattery, but Isabel merely smiled and said: "Being me, I understand all too well. You've simply discovered that I can still be useful to you. That's all there is to it."

Justus shrugged. "If you insist on hurting yourself this way. . . ."

"What else am I to think?" Isabel asked.

She prayed earnestly that Justus would come up with a suitable alternative, something as a sop to her pride. There was nothing she wanted more than to slip that chain off the front door, but he must pronounce the open sesame first.

Fortunately Justus did not fail her.

"Look, Isabel," he said, looking first down, then up, and then sideways, "forget what's been between us—if you can. I'm not here to make excuses or to argue. I had no right to begin it, if you like. But since I did, and since you weren't unwilling, accept that I also had a right to make an end."

"What about me? Don't I have rights?" Isabel interrupted.

"You also could have made an end if you had wished."

"But I didn't wish!"

"I know. I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to make you love me, Isabel."

"Love you!" Isabel cried, furious at his correct interpretation. "I couldn't care less what you do."

"Then if it's really such a matter of indifference, couldn't you perhaps open the door?"

Isabel undid the chain and held the door open in silence. Justus passed into the flat. Isabel pointed to the 'phone which stood on a small hall table. "You'd better ring up the police."

"I can't," Justus admitted. "They wouldn't believe me."

"Any more than I do, I suppose."

"Do you think I've made all this up?" Justus demanded.

"I think you've been drinking," Isabel said.

"You mean you think I'm seeing pink elephants?"

"Pink elephants in your particular form."

"It's not true!" Justus exclaimed in anger. "Look, my hands are steady as a rock." He held out his hands, which in his excitement were shaking, and dropped them on Isabel's shoulders to conceal the fact.

She flinched, but did not withdraw them. Justus had to do so himself. He thought he detected disappointment in her but dismissed the idea at once. He had no wish to become involved once more with Isabel Bishop. Looking at her now, he wondered how he ever could. She seemed to him gross and unattractive, her hands and feet and body all too big. In an effort to improve her, Justus put out a hand and touched a curler.

"Must you continue to wear these?"

"I must," Isabel said, jerking her head away from him. "I'll look a sight to-morrow if I don't. And I no longer share your view that to-night is all that matters. If you don't like me as I am, you can go."

He was in her power, Justus realized; this was her trump card. It was one she all too clearly meant to play.

"I do like you as you are," he said a shade too hastily.

Isabel seemed waiting for something more.

Damn it, was she expecting him to kiss her? Justus essayed a peck. But it was so late, so unspontaneous, it was insulting. Isabel averted her face.

"You don't have to pay for your night's lodging."

"Don't worry, I haven't yet sunk as low as that."

They stood glaring at each other from opposite sides of the hallway. Suddenly Isabel began to cry.

"What's the matter?" Justus asked, irritated and resentful. Trust a woman to make a bad situation worse.

"I don't know what I've done," Isabel sobbed, gulping, "that you shouldn't love me any more."

Justus wondered whether to point out that he had never protested he loved her. On second thoughts, he decided to forbear.

"Look," he said awkwardly, "let's have a cup of coffee. There's no need for all these tears."

Isabel stopped crying long enough to consider how to take this.

"That's my girl," Justus approved.

She brightened up and departed to the kitchen, leaving him to regret the ill-chosen phraseology of his remark. Whichever way he moved, he seemed entangled, as though he were a fly caught in that gigantic spider's web. He listened, but no movement could be heard through the floor-boards. The creature had all its species' ability to lie low. He imagined it crouched in some dark corner, its attention focused on the door.

It was partly this immobility of spiders that Justus found so frightening. There was no indication when they would move, no muscles flexed and tautened, nothing even to signify the direction in which they would run. He had been told as a child that they never ran towards you—"they're more frightened of you than ever you are of them"—but he had disproved this theory on numerous terrifying occasions, each more distressing to him than the last.

He was almost relieved to see Isabel return with the coffee. He noted that she had removed the curlers from her hair, which now fell dark and snake-like about her shoulders, giving her a witch-like air. He had never noticed before that there was so much hair about her, but perhaps he was unduly sensitive to hair to-night. The thought of the giant spider's black, bristling body produced in him a shudder of dislike.

His cup rattled, spilling coffee into the saucer.

"What is it?" Isabel asked.

"I was thinking of that horrible spider."

"You're not still harping on that?"

"You haven't seen it," Justus answered.

"That's easily remedied."

"No. You mustn't. It might attack you."

"I should simply tread on it."

"But Isabel, it's too big. You *must* believe me."

"I'm sorry, Justus, but I don't."

"There would be no point in my inventing such a story."

"You could have had a nightmare, couldn't you?"

"I could, but I assure you I didn't. The creature is real enough. If I were superstitious I should say it had come for vengeance."

"What are you talking about?"

Hesitantly, Justus told her about the murder of the spider he had found in the kitchen sink. The recital upset him. The creature's death had been so prolonged, so horrible. It did not do to let oneself dwell on it.

Isabel sat with eyes downcast while she listened. She had picked up her embroidery-frame. A needle threaded with coloured silk lay ready. She began idly to work it to and fro. Backwards and forwards went the needle unhurried, patient and well planned. A corner of the design was taking shape already. It was like watching a spider at its work. The simile stopped Justus in mid-sentence.

Isabel looked up. "Do go on."

"I forget where I was," Justus muttered.

"You were about to pour a kettle of boiling water down the sink."

"That's right," Justus agreed, "so I was. So I did, I mean," he corrected. "That put paid to the spider all right."

"Until your guilty conscience aroused you. Strange. I've never known you have a conscience before."

"You're being a bit hard, surely."

"Am I? No, Justus, I think not. What you don't like, you've no use for. All you want is to have it removed from your sight. Like those bits of half-eaten food in your refrigerator."

Justus hoped she was not going to carry this comparison too far. There was no telling where it might lead them. He must try to distract her again—and with Isabel he knew of only one way to distract her. He put out a hand as if absently and allowed it to caress her hair. It was going to be a long

time till morning. He was not sure how many more hours like the last he could bear.

"You must be feeling more like yourself," Isabel said dryly. But she did not jerk her head away.

"It's the good effect you have on me," Justus murmured. It was the only thing he could think of in reply.

They sat in silence for some minutes while Isabel embroidered and Justus mechanically went on stroking her head. The gesture was soothing to him, though not to Isabel, who was hoping for something more. She continued to insist to herself that Justus was not worth the having—but this fact was accepted by her head, not by her heart, which, as always, beat uncomfortably fast in his presence—though not so fast as to make her wish him to depart.

Isabel's instincts had always been primarily maternal. A man was the giver of children—in the literal sense, a mate. She therefore thought essentially in terms of marriage because this was the way she had been taught. She had seen herself as the mother of Justus's children, above all, of Justus's sons. It had been a cruel awakening to discover that whatever she herself might desire, she was not desired in her turn. And therefore her desires must remain unsatisfied. Isabel felt this to be bitterly unfair. Like being required to pass an examination in Old Testament history before one could take a course in electronics or child welfare. She hated the advantages which Nature had so generously bestowed upon the male sex, while at the same time feeling herself superior to men. And superior to Justus Ancorwen in particular, who was frightened by a little spider in his den.

And now he was here beside her. Not as closely as he had been in the past, but still, it was to her he had turned when a nightmare overwhelmed him. She allowed herself to forget that there was no one else in the house. Not for a moment did Isabel believe Justus's story, especially now that she had heard what led up to it, but she felt a great tenderness for him, as for a child who has been frightened. She longed to be able to comfort him.

"You know," she said, "this giant spider is all nonsense. I never heard sound of it."

"That doesn't prove anything," Justus answered.

"But I heard you slam the drawing-room door. I was awake anyway," she added, "and I heard all your movement downstairs."

She had in fact wondered if he too were wakeful and if it was through thinking of her. He might have regretted ending their association and be seeking a means of reopening the affair.

"If there was really a spider in your drawing-room," Isabel persisted, "a spider as big as a cat, I should have heard it when it ran across the room towards you. I can hear most of what goes on in your flat."

Justus was half convinced by her logic. He allowed it to show in his face. The room was warm, the coffee excellent. He began to forget his fear. On the face of it, his story was ridiculous. He could not blame Isabel for disbelief. Spiders, as she said, simply did not grow to such proportions; but his imagination did. That horrible business of murdering the spider had undoubtedly upset his nerves. At the end of a tiring day and on top of a good dinner, it had been just too much for him. He had had nightmares before, though of a different nature (usually he dreamed that he was trapped), but it was not surprising if, after such an experience, the subconscious manifested itself in other forms. Depend upon it, it was his imagination. He had been brought up in his mother's belief that he was highly strung. The giant spider would prove to have as innocent an explanation as the small one which he had believed was running over his foot.

Instinctively he relaxed and let his arm slide downwards. Isabel was not so bad after all. No beauty, and a little too intense for comfort, but a woman in her reactions—and in her curves. She had a woman's earthy common sense, too. No giant spiders for her! Every man at times required such a corrective. Perhaps he had been wrong in not pursuing their affair. Not, of course, that he would marry Isabel, but it ought to be possible to string her along. Some heaven-sent excuse would surely arise to prevent their union. If not, one could be manufactured here on earth. . . .

"You're very affectionate," Isabel remarked, snipping her cotton. Her body moved under his hand.

"Ah——" Justus expressed many emotions in that long-drawn-out monosyllable—"you're very attractive, my dear."

"You surprise me," Isabel said. Her heart was beating faster and she knew her colour was rising. But she was determined, this time, to hold out. She had to make sure of what she wanted. There must be no more mistaking the means for the end.

Justus put out a hand and turned her face towards him. "Do I surprise you, Isabel?"

"Very much, if you really mean I am attractive. Why in that case did you break things off?"

"I panicked," Justus said truthfully. "I didn't want to go too far."

"You mean you didn't want to marry me?" Isabel persisted.

Justus turned away his head. His profile was one of his best angles and he knew it. If he held his head up, his double chin hardly showed.

"Isabel," he began, speaking softly, "must you drag marriage in all the time?"

Isabel started to say yes and reconsidered. To her, marriage was the inevitable prelude to a child, but it was the child she wanted rather than the marriage. She did not really want Justus around. There were, she knew, unmarried mothers who had deliberately chosen their lot. One could always move elsewhere, become technically a widow; one was as likely to be believed as not. As for Justus, he would be thankful to be rid of her; if not, she must certainly contrive to be rid of him. A smile transformed her lips as a solution struck her. For an instant her face had a predatory, lupine grin.

She felt no hesitation, for what did she owe Justus? She was about to make final settlement of their account. He would not, she was sure, return to her afterwards, for she would humiliate him so that he would not be able to hold up his head.

"I'm sorry, Justus," she said, sounding contrite. "I ought not to have let myself say that. It's only that I had rather hoped—I mean, I naturally expected . . ."

Here we go, Justus thought wearily. A woman always returns to that. The old marriage-go-round is still turning; sooner or later the wedding-horse comes back.

"There is love in marriage and love outside marriage," he murmured. "One has to make a distinction between the two."

He was convinced that Isabel would never make one, but he was to learn too late that this was dangerously untrue.

Not that this was immediately apparent. Her reaction was what he had feared. "Do you love me?" she demanded intensely.

Without looking at her, Justus murmured: "I do."

It was not quite a lie, he consoled himself, because at least at this moment he desired her, and desire is one element of love. But Isabel as usual disconcerted him. She stood up, letting her embroidery fall.

Her blue dressing-gown flew open—too harsh and bright a blue for her. He saw with surprise that she was naked beneath it. Her eyes in her pale face blazed.

"Then prove it," she commanded hoarsely.

Justus had no option but to obey. He knew a moment's sheer physical repugnance, but Isabel held out her arms. He was caught in the web she had been spinning.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on Isabel's charms.

When Justus awoke, it was daylight—the thin, pale greyness that comes before summer dawns. The sun was not up, but the eastern sky had a brightness that promised to turn to colour and warmth. Already, although the window was only an oblong translucence, he could see that it was going to be a beautiful day.

Justus was sweating because he had had a nightmare in which the spider had trapped him in a corner and then sprung. He had retreated backwards to escape its powerful, bristling body, through the open drawing-room window, over the balcony and down. . . . He woke with that terrifying sensation of having fallen which is allegedly due to a missed heart-beat, but which feels to anyone who has ever experienced it as though the hangman's trap-door has opened beneath his feet. And even now the monster was watching, waiting . . . gathering itself for a second, more successful spring. Its eyes were on him; it marked every movement. With a cry, Justus turned over and sat up.

Isabel Bishop, lying beside him, chuckled—a full, rich, bed-shaking sound. Justus reverted to the present situation, which was a nightmare of a wholly different kind.

"Sorry," he apologized, "I was dreaming."

"You looked very funny," Isabel said. Her voice was lazy and sated, like her body, which occupied far more than its fair share of the bed. Justus saw with horror that she was encroaching. She edged towards him even as she spoke.

He sat up abruptly and swung his feet to the floor. "I must be going."

Then he remembered the spider in his flat below.

He was caught between Isabel and the monster, both of whom regarded him as their prey. It came back to him that the female spider devoured her spouse after mating. He eyed Isabel uneasily.

Isabel was contemplating him without uneasiness. There was even a certain assurance in her gaze. She was no longer the suppliant; she was the commander; she had become the one who takes and not the one who begs. She would never again be just an over-large, gawky young woman, hopelessly unsure of herself. Instead, in later years, she would be called masterful, domineering, and expressions less flattering still. The discovery that Justus, like all men, was expendable had made her at once something more and something less. She was a personality that has acquired a new dimension and yet is no longer whole.

She had planned her revenge down to the last detail. Justus should be humiliated before her once and for all. Only so could she be sure of getting rid of him. His pride, of which he had in her opinion more than sufficient, was riding for a Lucifer-like fall.

She watched him get up and pull his dressing-gown around him, suppressing the thought that he looked pathetic like that. His matutinal stubble was decidedly unbecoming, and his flesh, though still firm, was abundant and layered with fat. He put out a podgy foot towards his slippers. Just so might a baby's toes grope. *Would* a baby's toes grope, Isabel assured herself, so strong was her maternal hope.

"Shall I come down with you?" she offered.

"Don't bother," Justice said.

Isabel pouted, or tried to. "Doesn't he want his Isabel, then?"

"No!" Justus said, controlling his violence.

"Naughty! Is he going to kill that great big spider himself?"

Justus did not answer, but Isabel was insensitive now that she had at last got her way. She rose, and Justus had leisure to admire her figure before it disappeared beneath the bright blue dressing-gown. Apart from that, he was already regretting his involvement with her. He said again, "Don't bother to come down."

"I couldn't sleep unless I did," Isabel replied. She led the way downstairs—she who had always followed. The tables were completely turned.

Justus made no attempt to reverse them, but outside his own flat he paused.

"There's no need for you to see me home, Isabel. I shall be perfectly all right by myself."

Isabel was too unused to being escorted to get the sarcasm of his remark. Or perhaps she was too intent on securing his humiliation. She made straight for the drawing-room.

"I'll just satisfy myself that it's all your imagination."

Justus felt a terrible foreboding and hung back. It was not his fault if Isabel insisted on being foolhardy, on putting her head into the lion's mouth or the spider's jaws. He half expected the brute to make a rush at her; it must be hungry by now; but when she unlocked the door and marched boldly into the drawing-room, no sight or sound suggested its presence there.

The sun was just rising above the roof-tops and the drawing-room was flooded with light, yet it was cool from the air that had come in through the balconied window, which had been left open all night. The spider, of course, could have made its escape through the window, descending on a length of web as thick as cord. It might now be lurking in the garden. Or squatting malevolently under an arm-chair.

But Isabel, who did not believe in its existence, gazed round the room and saw no sign of it; and what the senses do not perceive nor the mind accept *is* non-existent. Reality is subjective, after all.

"You can come in now," she called to Justus. "Your nightmare has vanished with the dawn." When he still hesitated she called again, commanding: "Come on in and see for yourself; the spider has gone."

Justus took an agonized step forward. His instinct warned him that there was something sinister in the room—something connected somehow with Isabel Bishop, who had changed in a mysterious subtle way. She seemed now to be larger than life, a taunting figure, a priestess waiting to sacrifice her victim at a rite. But where she led he could not refuse to follow; no "heaven-sent excuse" could be manufactured to deliver him from his plight.

He entered the drawing-room. The breeze through the window blew freshly, spilling the petals of an overblown late rose in a vase. One of them hung, suspended by the web of an invisible spider. Was it possible that the monster could have shrunk to *that*? Justus looked around him fearfully. There were still places in the room where the giant spider might lie hid, pieces of furniture which he would have liked to peer behind but dared not, because of what might happen if he did.

"Well, Justus? Are you satisfied?"

Isabel Bishop was watching him from the door, surveying almost with distaste his incipient pot-belly and the ovoid rotundity of his form. Now that she had taken the decision to dispense with him, she was surprised how easy it had become. She was about to humiliate one whom, twelve hours ago, she believed she pined for, and she felt nothing. Her emotions were completely numb.

She watched Justus turn towards her and grin sheepishly—a travesty of the comic fat man's grin. Then, while his features were still moulded in it even though the expression in his eyes had altered, she stepped smartly backwards through the door, slammed it shut, turned the key, and locked her lover in.

She heard his fists pounding against it and his hoarse cry, "Isabel! Let me out!"

"Later," she called. "When you've made friends with your giant spider." She heard herself laugh as she spoke. He was like left over food in a refrigerator; she had had all she

wanted of him and the rest could wait. She would release him later, white and shaken, and look scornful as he hurried hang-dog out. He would never be able to hold up his head in her presence, and therefore he would avoid her. She even doubted if he would keep on his flat.

And then she heard a new sound and a cry of terror that was to haunt her for the rest of her life. It was a curious muffled rumble, such as a creature with eight long legs might make if it were running. The sound came from the drawing-room.

Everyone was very kind to Isabel at the inquest, especially when she let it be known that she was expecting Justus's child. There was a general feeling that Ancorwen must have been a bit of a bounder to commit suicide and leave the girl like that. The more kindly disposed said he was obviously unbalanced, to fling himself from a window and contrive to break his neck without even the explanation of a note or a lovers' quarrel. What kind of a suicide was that? In the end, Isabel's story that he sleep-walked (and after all, his mistress should know) was accepted as the likeliest explanation, and an open verdict was returned.

Isabel Bishop sold up her flat (she said it had Memories) and withdrew to a midland town. She lives just outside Sheffield now, styles herself a widow, keeps a photograph of Justus on the mantelpiece, and devotes herself to the upbringing of her boy. The child is normal in every respect, to her satisfaction, except perhaps for unusually hairy arms and legs. Isabel smiles and says it is because she was frightened by a spider. She has almost forgotten that this is the literal truth.

THE BOOK

Margaret Irwin

On a foggy night in November, Mr. Corbett, having guessed the murderer by the third chapter of his detective story, arose in disappointment from his bed and went downstairs in search of something more satisfactory to send him to sleep.

The fog had crept through the closed and curtained windows of the dining-room and hung thick on the air, in a silence that seemed as heavy and breathless as the fog.

The dining-room bookcase was the only considerable one in the house and held a careless unselected collection to suit all the tastes of the household, together with a few dull and obscure old theological books that had been left over from the sale of a learned uncle's library. Cheap red novels bought on railway stalls by Mrs. Corbett, who thought a journey the only time to read, were thrust in like pert undersized intruders among the respectable nineteenth-century works of culture, chastely bound in dark blue or green, which Mr. Corbett had considered the right thing to buy during his Oxford days; beside these there swaggered the children's large, gaily bound story-books and collections of fairy tales in every colour.

From among this neat new cloth-bound crowd there towered here and there a musty sepulchre of learning, brown with the colour of dust rather than leather, with no trace of gilded letters, however faded, on its crumbling back to tell what lay inside. A few of these moribund survivors from the Dean's library were inhospitably fastened with rusty clasps; all remained closed, and appeared impenetrable, their blank forbidding backs uplifted above their frivolous surroundings with the air of scorn that belongs to a private and concealed knowledge.

It was an unusual flight of fancy for Mr. Corbett to imagine that the vaporous and fog-ridden air that seemed to hang more thickly about the bookcase was like a dank and poisonous breath exhaled by one or other of these slowly rotting volumes.

He hurriedly chose a Dickens from the second shelf as appropriate to a London fog, and had returned to the foot of the stairs when he decided that his reading to-night should by contrast be of blue Italian skies and white statues, in beautiful rhythmic sentences. He went back for a Walter Pater.

He found *Marius the Epicurean* tipped sideways across the gap left by his withdrawal of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

It was a very wide gap to have been left by a single volume, for the books on that shelf had been closely wedged together. He put the Dickens back into it and saw that there was still space for a large book. He said to himself, in careful and precise words: "This is nonsense. No one can possibly have gone into the dining-room and removed a book while I was crossing the hall. There must have been a gap before in the second shelf." But another part of his mind kept saying, in a hurried, tumbled torrent: "There was no gap in the second shelf."

He snatched at both the *Marius* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* and went to his room in a haste that was unnecessary and absurd.

To-night, Dickens struck him in a different light. Beneath the author's sentimental pity for the weak and helpless he could discern a revolting pleasure in cruelty and suffering, while the grotesque figures of the people in Cruikshank's illustrations revealed too clearly the hideous distortions of their souls. What had seemed humorous now appeared diabolic, and in disgust at these two old favourites he turned to Walter Pater for the repose and dignity of a classic spirit.

But presently he wondered if this spirit were not in itself of a marble quality, frigid and lifeless, contrary to the purpose of nature. "I have often thought," he said to himself, "that there is something evil in the austere worship of beauty for its own sake." He had never thought so before, but he liked to think that this impulse of fancy was the result of mature consideration, and with this satisfaction he composed himself for sleep.

He woke two or three times in the night, an unusual occurrence, but he was glad of it, for each time he had been dreaming horribly of these blameless Victorian works. Sprightly devils in whiskers and peg-top trousers tortured a lovely

maiden and leered in delight at her anguish; the gods and heroes of classic fable acted deeds whose naked crime and shame Mr. Corbett had never appreciated in Latin and Greek Unseens.

When he had wakened in a cold sweat from the spectacle of the ravished Philomel's torn and bleeding tongue, he decided there was nothing for it but to go down and get another book that would turn his thoughts in some more pleasant direction. But his increasing reluctance to do this found a hundred excuses. The recollection of the gap in the shelf now recurred to him with a sense of unnatural importance; in the troubled dozes that followed, this gap between two books seemed the most hideous deformity, like a gap between the front teeth of some grinning monster.

But in the clear daylight of the morning Mr. Corbett came down to the pleasant dining-room, its sunny windows and smell of coffee and toast, and ate an undiminished breakfast with a mind chiefly occupied in self-congratulation that the wind had blown the fog away in time for his Saturday game of golf. Whistling happily, he was pouring out his final cup of coffee when his hand remained arrested in the act, as his glance, roving across the bookcase, noticed that there was now no gap at all in the second shelf. He asked who had been at the bookcase already, but neither of the girls had, nor Dicky, and Mrs. Corbett was not yet down. The maid never touched the books. They wanted to know what book he missed in it, which made him look foolish, as he could not say.

"I thought there was a gap in the second shelf," he said, "but it doesn't matter."

"There never is a gap in the second shelf," said little Jean brightly. "You can take out lots of books from it, and when you go back the gap's always filled up. Haven't you noticed that? I have."

Nora, the middle one in age, said Jean was always being silly; she had been found crying over the funny pictures in the *Rose and the Ring*, because she said all the people in them had such wicked faces.

Mr. Corbett did not like to think of such fancies for his Jeannie. She retaliated briskly by saying Dicky was just as bad, and he was a big boy. He had kicked a book across the

room and said, "Filthy stuff," just like that. Jean was a good mimic; her tone expressed a venom of disgust, and she made the gesture of dropping a book as though the very touch of it were loathsome. Dicky, who had been making violent signs at her, now told her she was a beastly little sneak, and he would never again take her for rides on the step of his bicycle. Mr. Corbett was disturbed as he gravely asked his son how he had got hold of this book.

"Took it out of that bookcase, of course," said Dick furiously.

It turned out to be the *Boy's Gulliver's Travels* that Granny had given him, and Dicky had at last to explain his rage with the devil who wrote it to show that men were worse than beasts and the human race a wash-out.

Mr. Corbett, with some annoyance, advised his son to take out a nice bright modern boy's adventure story that could not depress anybody. It appeared, however, that Dicky was "off reading just now," and the girls echoed this.

Mr. Corbett soon found that he, too, was "off reading". Every new book seemed to him weak, tasteless, and insipid, while his old and familiar books were depressing or even, in some obscure way, disgusting. Authors must all be filthy-minded; they probably wrote what they dared not express in their lives.

His taste for reading revived as he explored with relish the hidden infirmities of minds that had been valued by fools as great and noble. He saw Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as two unpleasant examples of spinsterhood: the one as a prying, sub-acid busybody in everyone else's flirtations, the other as a raving, craving mænad seeking self-immolation on the altar of her frustrated passions.

These powers of penetration astonished him. With a mind so acute and original he should have achieved greatness yet he was a mere solicitor and not prosperous at that. If he had but the money he might do something with those ivory shares, but it would be a pure gamble, and he had no luck. His natural envy of his wealthier acquaintances now mingled with a contempt for their stupidity that approached loathing. The digestion of his lunch in the City was ruined by meeting sentimental yet successful dotards, whom he had once regarded as

pleasant fellows. The very sight of them spoiled his game of golf, so that he came to prefer reading alone in the dining-room even on sunny afternoons.

He discovered also, and with a slight shock, that Mrs. Corbett had always bored him. Dicky he began actively to dislike as an impudent blockhead, and the two girls were as insipidly alike as white mice; it was a relief when he abolished their tiresome habit of coming in to say good night.

In the now unbroken silence and seclusion of the dining-room he read with feverish haste, as though he were seeking for some clue to knowledge, some secret key to existence which would quicken and inflame it.

He even explored the few decaying remains of his uncle's theological library. One of these books had diagrams and symbols in the margin, which he took to be mathematical formulae of a kind he did not know. He presently discovered that they were drawn, not printed, and that the book was in manuscript, in a very neat, crabbed black writing that resembled black letter printing. It was, moreover, in Latin, a fact that gave Mr. Corbett a shock of unreasoning disappointment. For while examining the signs on the margin he had been filled with an extraordinary exultation, as though he knew himself to be on the edge of a discovery that should alter his whole life. But he had forgotten his Latin.

With a secret and guilty air, which would have looked absurd to anyone who knew his harmless purpose, he stole to the schoolroom for Dicky's Latin dictionary and grammar, and hurried back to the dining-room, where he tried to discover what the book was about with an anxious industry that surprised himself. There was no name to it, nor of the author. Several blank pages had been left at the end, and the writing ended at the bottom of a page, with no flourish nor superscription, as though the book had been left unfinished. From what sentences he could translate it seemed to be a work on theology.

There were constant references to the Master, to his wishes and injunctions, which appeared to be of a complicated kind. Mr. Corbett began by skipping these as mere accounts of ceremonial, but a word caught his eye as one unlikely to occur in such an account. He read this passage attentively looking

up each word in the dictionary, and could hardly believe the result of his translation.

"Clearly," he decided, "this book must be by some early missionary, and the passage I have just read the account of some horrible rite practised by a savage tribe of devil-worshippers." Though he called it "horrible," he reflected on it, committing each detail to memory. He then amused himself by copying the signs in the margin near it and trying to discover their significance. But a sensation of sickly cold came over him, his head swam, and he could hardly see the figures before his eyes. He suspected a sudden attack of influenza and went to ask his wife for medicine.

They were all in the drawing-room, Mrs. Corbett helping Nora and Jean with a new game, Dicky playing the pianola, and Mike, the Irish terrier, who had lately deserted his accustomed place on the dining-room hearth-rug, stretched by the fire.

He thought how like sheep they looked and sounded, nothing in his appearance in the mirror struck him as odd: it was their gaping faces that were unfamiliar. He then noticed the extraordinary behaviour of Mike, who had sprung from the hearth-rug and was crouched in the farthest corner uttering no sound, but with his eyes distended and foam round his bared teeth. Under Mr. Corbett's glance he slunk towards the door, whimpering in a faint and abject manner, and then as his master called him he snarled horribly, and the hair bristled on the scruff of his neck.

"What *can* be the matter with Mike?" asked Mrs. Corbett.

Her question broke a silence that seemed to have lasted a long time. Jean began to cry. Mr. Corbett said irritably that he did not know what was the matter with any of them.

Then Nora asked: "What is that red mark on your face?"

He looked again in the glass and could see nothing.

"It's quite clear from here," said Dicky. "I can see the lines in the finger-print."

"Yes, that's what it is," said Mrs. Corbett in her brisk staccato voice: "the print of a finger on your forehead. Have you been writing in red ink?"

Mr. Corbett precipitately left the room for his own, where

he sent down a message that he was suffering from headache and would have his dinner in bed. He wanted no one fussing round him. By next morning he was amazed at his fancies of influenza, for he had never felt so well in his life.

No one commented on his looks at breakfast, so that he concluded the mark had disappeared. The old Latin book he had been translating on the previous night had been moved from the writing bureau, although Dicky's grammar and dictionary were still there. The second shelf was, as always in the daytime, closely packed; the book had, he remembered, been in the second shelf. But this time he did not ask who put it back.

That day he had an unexpected stroke of luck in a new client of the name of Crab, who entrusted him with large sums of money; nor was he irritated by the sight of his more prosperous acquaintances; but with difficulty refrained from grinning in their faces, so confident was he that his remarkable ability must soon place him higher than any of them. At dinner he chaffed his family with what he felt to be the gaiety of a schoolboy.

In spite of this new alertness, he could not attend to the letters he should have written that evening, and drifted to the bookcase for a little light distraction, but found that for the first time there was nothing he wished to read. He pulled out a book from above his head at random, and saw that it was the old Latin book in manuscript.

As he turned over its stiff and yellow pages, he noticed with pleasure the smell of corruption that had first repelled him in these decaying volumes, a smell, he now thought, of ancient and secret knowledge.

This idea of secrecy seemed to affect him personally, for on hearing a step in the hall he hastily closed the book and put it back in its place. He went to the schoolroom where Dicky was doing his homework and told him he required his Latin grammar and dictionary again for an old law report. To his annoyance he stammered and put his words awkwardly; he thought that the boy looked oddly at him and he cursed him in his heart for a suspicious young devil, though of what he should be suspicious he could not say. Nevertheless, when

back in the dining-room, he listened at the door and then softly turned the lock before he opened the books on the writing bureau.

The script and Latin seemed much clearer than on the previous evening and he was able to read at random a passage relating to a trial of a German midwife in 1620 for the murder and dissection of 783 children.

It appeared to be an account of some secret society whose activities and ritual were of a nature so obscure, and when not, so vile and terrible, that Mr. Corbett would not at first believe that this could be a record of any human mind.

He read until far later than his usual hour for bed, and when at last he rose, it was with the book in his hands. To defer his parting with it, he stood turning over the pages until he reached the end of the writing, and was struck by a new peculiarity.

The ink was much fresher and of a far poorer quality than the thick rusted ink in the bulk of the book; on close inspection he would have said that it was of modern manufacture and written quite recently, were it not for the fact that it was in the same crabbed late seventeenth-century handwriting.

This, however, did not explain the perplexity, even dismay and fear he now felt as he started at the last sentence. It ran: *Continue te in perennibus studiis*, and he had at once recognized it as a Ciceronian tag that had been dinned into him at school. He could not understand how he had failed to notice it yesterday.

Then he remembered that the book had ended at the bottom of a page. But now, the last two sentences were written at the very top of a page. However long he looked at them, he could come to no other conclusion than that they had been added since the previous evening.

He now read the sentence before the last: *Re imperfecta mortuus sum*, and translated the whole as "I died with my purposes unachieved. Continue, thou, the never-ending studies."

With his eyes still fixed upon it, Mr. Corbett replaced the book on the writing bureau and stepped back from it to the door, his hand outstretched behind him, groping and then tugging at the door handle. As the door failed to open, his

breath came in a faint, hardly articulate scream. Then he remembered that he had himself locked it, and he fumbled with the key in frantic ineffectual movements until at last he opened it and banged it after him as he plunged backwards into the hall.

For a moment he stood there looking at the door handle; then with a stealthy, sneaking movement, his hand crept out towards it, touched it, began to turn it, when suddenly he pulled his hand away and went up to his bedroom, three steps at a time.

There he hid his face in the pillow, cried and raved in meaningless words, repeating: "Never, never, never. I will never do it again. Help me never to do it again." With the words "Help me," he noticed what he was saying—they reminded him of other words, and he began to pray aloud.

But the words sounded jumbled, they persisted in coming into his head in a reverse order so that he found he was saying his prayers backwards, and at this final absurdity he suddenly began to laugh very loud. He sat up on the bed, delighted at this return to sanity, common sense and humour, when the door leading into Mrs. Corbett's room opened, and he saw his wife staring at him with a strange, grey, drawn face that made her seem like the terror-stricken ghost of her usually smug and placid self.

"It's not burglars," he said irritably. "I've come to bed late, that is all, and must have wakened you."

"Henry," said Mrs. Corbett, and he noticed that she had not heard him: "Henry, didn't you hear it?"

"What?"

"That laugh."

He was silent, an instinctive caution warning him to wait until she spoke again. And this she did, imploring him with her eyes to reassure her.

"It was not a human laugh. It was like the laugh of a devil."

He checked his violent inclination to laugh again. It was wiser not to let her know that it was only his laughter she had heard. He told her to stop being fanciful, and Mrs. Corbett gradually recovered her docility.

The next morning, Mr. Corbett rose before any of the ser-

vants and crept down to the dining-room. As before, the dictionary and grammar alone remained on the writing bureau; the book was back on the second shelf. He opened it at the end. Two more lines had been added, carrying the writing down to the middle of the page. They ran :

Ex auro canceris

In dentem elephantis.

Which translated as :

Out of the money of the crab

Into the tooth of the elephant.

From this time on, his acquaintances in the City noticed a change in the mediocre, rather flabby and unenterprising "old Corbett." His recent sour depression dropped from him; he seemed to have grown twenty years younger, strong, brisk, and cheerful, and with a self-confidence in business that struck them as lunacy. They waited with a not unpleasant excitement for the inevitable crash, but his every speculation, however wild and hare-brained, turned out successful.

He never stayed in town for dinners or theatres, for he was always now in a hurry to get home, where, as soon as he was sure of being undisturbed, he would take down the manuscript book from the second shelf of the dining-room and turn to the last pages.

Every morning he found that a few words had been added since the evening before, and always they formed, as he considered, injunctions to himself. These were at first only with regard to his money transactions, giving assurance to his boldest fancies, and since the brilliant and unforeseen success that had attended his gamble with Mr. Crab's money in African ivory, he followed all such advice unhesitatingly.

But presently, interspersed with these commands, were others of a meaningless, childish, yet revolting character, such as might be invented by a decadent imbecile.

He at first paid no attention to these directions, but found that his new speculations declined so rapidly that he became terrified not merely for his fortune but for his reputation and even safety, since the money of various of his clients was involved. It was made clear to him that he must follow the commands in the book altogether or not at all, and he began

to carry out their puerile and grotesque blasphemies with a contemptuous amusement, which, however, gradually changed to a sense of their monstrous significance. They became more capricious and difficult of execution, but he now never hesitated to obey blindly, urged by a fear that he could not understand.

By now he understood the effect of this book on the others near it and the reason that had impelled its mysterious agent to move the books into the second shelf, so that all in turn should come under the influence of that ancient and secret knowledge.

In respect to it, he encouraged his children, with jeers at their stupidity, to read more, but he could not observe that they ever now took a book from the dining-room bookcase. He himself no longer needed to read, but went to bed early and slept soundly. The things that all his life he had longed to do when he should have enough money now seemed to him insipid. His most exciting pleasure, was the smell and touch of these mouldering pages, as he turned them to find the last message inscribed to him.

One evening it was in two words only : *Canem occide.*

He laughed at this simple and pleasant request to kill the dog, for he bore Mike a grudge for his change from devotion to slinking aversion. Moreover, it could not have come more opportunely, since in turning out an old desk he had just discovered some packets of rat poison bought years ago and forgotten. He whistled light-heartedly as he ran upstairs to rummage for the packets, and returned to empty one in the dog's dish of water in the hall.

That night the household was awakened by terrified screams proceeding from the stairs. Mr. Corbett was the first to hasten there, prompted by the instinctive caution that was always with him these days. He saw Jean, in her nightdress, scrambling up on to the landing on her hands and knees, clutching at anything that afforded support and screaming in a choking, tearless, unnatural manner. He carried her to the room she shared with Nora, where they were quickly followed by Mrs. Corbett.

Nothing coherent could be got from Jean. Nora said that she must have been having her old dream again : when her

father demanded what this was, she said that Jean sometimes woke in the night, crying, because she had dreamed of a hand passing backwards and forwards over the dining-room bookcase, until it found a certain book and took it out of the shelf. At this point she was always so frightened that she woke up.

On hearing this, Jean broke into fresh screams, and Mrs. Corbett would have no more explanations. Mr. Corbett went out on to the stairs to find what had brought the child there from her bed. On looking down into the lighted hall he saw Mike's dish overturned. He went down to examine it and saw that the water he had poisoned must have been upset and absorbed by the rough doormat, which was quite wet.

He went back to the little girls' room, told his wife that she was tired and must go to bed, and he would now take his turn at comforting Jean. She was now much quieter. He took her on his knee, where at first she shrank from him. Mr. Corbett remembered with an awed sense of injury that she never now sat on his knee, and would have liked to pay her out for it by mocking and frightening her. But he had to coax her into telling him what he wanted, and with this object he soothed her, calling her by pet names that he thought he had forgotten, telling her that nothing could hurt her now he was with her. He listened to what he had at last induced her to tell him.

She and Nora had kept Mike with them all the evening and taken him to sleep in their room for a treat. He had lain at the foot of Jean's bed and they had all gone to sleep. Then Jean began her old dream of the hand moving over the books in the dining-room bookcase; but instead of taking out a book it came across the dining-room and out on to the stairs. It came up over the banisters and to the door of their room, and turned their door handle very softly and opened it. At this point she jumped up, wide awake, and turned on the light, calling to Nora. The door, which had been shut when they went to sleep, was wide open, and Mike was gone.

She told Nora that she was sure something dreadful would happen to him if she did not go and bring him back, and ran down into the hall, where she saw him just about to drink from his dish. She called to him and he looked up, but did not come, so she ran to him and began to pull him along with

her when her nightdress was clutched from behind and then she felt a hand seize her arm.

She fell down and then clambered upstairs as fast as she could, screaming all the way.

It was now clear to Mr. Corbett that Mike's dish must have been upset in the scuffle. She was again crying, but this time he felt himself unable to comfort her. He retired to his room, where he walked up and down in an agitation he could not understand.

"I am not a bad man," he kept saying to himself. "I have never done anything actually wrong. My clients are none the worse for my speculations, only the better."

Presently he added: "It is not wrong to try and kill a dog, an ill-tempered brute. It turned against me. It might have bitten Jeannie."

He noticed that he had thought of her as Jeannie which he had not done for some time; it must have been because he had called her that to-night. He must forbid her ever to leave her room at night; he could not have her meddling. It would be safer for him if she were not there at all.

Again that sick and cold sensation of fear swept over him; he seized the bed-post as though he were falling, and held on to it for some minutes. "I was thinking of a boarding school," he told himself, and then, "I must go down and find out—find out——" He would not think what it was he must find out.

He opened his door and listened. The house was quiet. He crept on to the landing and along to Nora's and Jean's door, where again he stood, listening. There was no sound, and at that he was again overcome with unreasonable terror. He imagined Jean lying very still in her bed, too still. He hastened away from the door, shuffling in his bedroom slippers along the passage and down the stairs.

A bright fire still burned in the dining-room grate. A glance at the clock told him it was not yet twelve. He stared at the bookcase. On the second shelf was a gap which had not been there when he had left. On the writing bureau lay a large open book. He knew that he must cross the room and see what was written in it. Then, as before, words that he

did not intend came sobbing and crying to his lips, muttering "No, no, not that. Never, never, never." But he crossed the room and looked down at the book. As last time, the message was in only two words: "*Infantem occide.*"

He slipped and fell forwards against the bureau. His hands clutched at the book, lifted it as he recovered himself, and with his finger he traced out the words that had been written. The smell of corruption crept into his nostrils. He told himself that he was not a snivelling dotard but a man stronger and wiser than his fellows, superior to the common emotions of humanity, who held in his hands the sources of ancient and secret power.

He had known what the message would be. It was after all the only safe and logical thing to do. Jean had acquired dangerous knowledge. She was a spy, an antagonist. That she was so unconsciously, that she was eight years old, his youngest and favourite child, were sentimental appeals that could make no difference to a man of sane reasoning power such as his own.

Jean had sided with Mike against him. "All that are not for me are against me," he repeated softly. He would kill both dog and child with the white powder that no one knew to be in his possession.

He laid down the book and went to the door. What he had to do he would do quickly, for again that sensation of deadly cold was sweeping over him. He wished he had not to do it to-night; last night it would have been easier, but to-night she had sat on his knee and made him afraid. He imagined her lying very still in her bed, too still.

He held on to the door-handle but his fingers seemed to have grown numb, for he could not turn it. He clung to it, crouched and shivering, bending over it until he knelt on the ground, his head beneath the handle which he still clutched with upraised hands. Suddenly the hands were loosened and flung outwards with the frantic gesture of a man falling from a great height, and he stumbled to his feet.

He seized the book and threw it on the fire. A violent sensation of choking overcame him, he felt he was being strangled, as in a nightmare he tried again and again to shriek aloud, but his breath would make no sound. His breath would

not come at all. He fell backwards heavily down on the floor, where he lay very still.

In the morning the maid who came to open the dining-room windows found her master dead. The sensation caused by this was scarcely so great in the City as that given by the simultaneous collapse of all Mr. Corbett's recent speculations. It was instantly assumed that he must have had previous knowledge of this and so committed suicide.

The stumbling-block of this theory was that the medical report defined the cause of Mr. Corbett's death as strangulation of the windpipe by the pressure of a hand which had left the marks of its fingers on his throat.

SOMETHING STRANGE

Kingsley Amis

Something strange happened every day. It might happen during the morning, while the two men were taking their readings and observations and the two women busy with the domestic routine: the big faces had come during the morning. Or, as with the little faces and the coloured fires, the strange thing would happen in the afternoon, in the middle of Bruno's maintenance programme and Clovis's transmission to Base, Lia's rounds of the garden and Myri's work on her story. The evening was often undisturbed, the night less often.

They all understood that ordinary temporal expressions had no meaning for people confined indefinitely, as they were, to a motionless steel sphere hanging in a region of space so empty that the light of the nearest star took some hundreds of years to reach them. The Standing Orders devised by Base, however, recommended that they adopt a twenty-four-hour unit of time, as was the rule on the Earth they had not seen for many months. The arrangement suited them well: their work, recreation and rest seemed to fall naturally into the periods provided. It was only the prospect of year after year of the same routine, stretching further into the future than they could see, that was a source of strain.

Bruno commented on this to Clovis after a morning spent repairing a fault in the spectrum analyser they used for investigating and classifying the nearer stars. They were sitting at the main observation port in the lounge, drinking the midday cocktail and waiting for the women to join them.

"I'd say we stood up to it extremely well," Clovis said in answer to Bruno. "Perhaps too well."

Bruno hunched his fat figure upright. "How do you mean?"

"We may be hindering our chances of being relieved."

"Base has never said a word about our relief."

"Exactly. With half a million stations to staff, it'll be a

long time before they get round to one like this, where everything runs smoothly. You and I are a perfect team, and you have Lia and I have Myri, and they're all right together—no real conflict at all. Hence no reason for a relief."

Myri had heard all this as she laid the table in the alcove. She wondered how Clovis could not know that Bruno wanted to have her instead of Lia, or perhaps as well as Lia. If Clovis did know, and was teasing Bruno, then that would be a silly thing to do, because Bruno was not a pleasant man. With his thick neck and pale fat face he would not be pleasant to be had by, either, quite unlike Clovis, who was no taller but whose straight, hard body and soft skin were always pleasant. He could not think as well as Bruno, but on the other hand many of the things Bruno thought were not pleasant. She poured herself a drink and went over to them.

Bruno had said something about its being a pity they could not fake their personnel report by inventing a few quarrels, and Clovis had immediately agreed that that was impossible. She kissed him and sat down at his side. "What do you think about the idea of being relieved?" he asked her.

"I never think about it."

"Quite right," Bruno said, grinning. "You're doing very nicely here. Fairly nicely, anyway."

"What are you getting at?" Clovis asked him with a different kind of grin.

"It's not a very complete life, is it? For any of us. I could do with a change, anyway. A different kind of job, something that isn't testing and using and repairing apparatus. We do seem to have a lot of repairing to do, don't we? That analyser breaks down almost every day. And yet——"

His voice tailed off and he looked out of the port, as if to assure himself that all that lay beyond it was the familiar starscape of points and smudges of light.

"And yet what?" Clovis asked, irritably this time.

"I was just thinking that we really ought to be thankful for having plenty to do. There's the routine and the fruits and vegetables to look after, and Myri's story. . . . How's that going, by the way? Won't you read us some of it? This evening, perhaps?"

"Not until it's finished, if you don't mind."

"Oh, but I do mind. It's part of our duty to entertain one another. And I'm very interested in it personally."

"Why?"

"Because you're an interesting girl. Bright brown eyes and a healthy glowing skin—how do you manage it after all this time in space? And you've more energy than any of us."

Myri said nothing. Bruno was good at making remarks there was nothing to say to.

"What's it about, this story of yours?" he pursued. "At least you can tell us that."

"I have told you. It's about normal life. Life on Earth before there were any space stations, lots of different people doing different things, not this——"

"That's normal life, is it, different people doing different things? I can't wait to hear what the things are. Who's the hero, Myri? Our dear Clovis?"

Myri put her hand on Clovis's shoulder. "No more, please, Bruno. Let's go back to your point about the routine. I couldn't understand why you left out the most important part, the part that keeps us busiest of all."

"Ah, the strange happenings." Bruno dipped his head in a characteristic gesture, half laugh, half nervous tremor. "And the hours we spend discussing them. Oh yes. How could I have failed to mention all that?"

"If you've got any sense you'll go on not mentioning it," Clovis snapped. "We're all fed up with the whole business."

"You may be, but I'm not. I want to discuss it. So does Myri, don't you, Myri?"

"I do think perhaps it's time we made another attempt to find a pattern," Myri said. This was a case of Bruno not being pleasant but being right.

"Oh, not again." Clovis bounded up and went over to the drinks table. "Ah, hallo, Lia," he said to the tall, thin, blonde woman who had just entered with a tray of cold dishes. "Let me get you a drink. Bruno and Myri are getting philosophical—looking for patterns. What do you think? I'll tell you what I think. I think we're doing enough already. I think patterns are Base's job."

"We can make it ours, too," Bruno said. "You agree, Lia?"

"Of course," Lia said in the deep voice that seemed to Myri to carry so much more firmness and individuality in its tone than any of its owner's words or actions.

"Very well. You can stay out of this if you like, Clovis. We start from the fact that what we see and hear need not be illusions, although they may be."

"At least that they're illusions that any human being might have, they're not special to us, as we know from Base's reports of what happens to other stations."

"Correct, Myri. In any event, illusions or not, they are being directed at us by an intelligence and for a purpose."

"We don't know that," Myri objected. "They may be natural phenomena, or the by-product of some intelligent activity not directed at us."

"Correct again, but let us reserve these less probable possibilities until later. Now, as a sample, consider the last week's strange happenings. I'll fetch the log so that there can be no dispute."

"I wish you'd stop it," Clovis said when Bruno had gone out to the apparatus room. "It's a waste of time."

"Time's the only thing we're not short of."

"I'm not short of anything," he said, touching her thigh. "Come with me for a little while."

"Later."

"Lia always goes with Bruno when he asks her."

"Oh yes, but that's my choice," Lia said. "She doesn't want to now. Wait until she wants to."

"I don't like waiting."

"Waiting can make it better."

"Here we are," Bruno said briskly, returning. "Right. . . . Monday. *Within a few seconds the sphere became encased in a thick brownish damp substance that tests revealed to be both impermeable and infinitely thick. No action by the staff suggested itself. After three hours and eleven minutes the substance disappeared.* It's the *infinitely thick* thing that's interesting. That must have been an illusion, or something would have happened to all the other stations at the same time, not to speak of the stars and planets. A total or partial illusion, then. Agreed?"

"Go on."

"Tuesday. *Metallic object of size comparable to that of the sphere approaching on collision course at 500 kilometres per second. No countermeasures available. Object appeared instantaneously at 35 million kilometres' distance and disappeared instantaneously at 1500 kilometres. What about that?*"

"We've had ones like that before," Lia put in. "Only this was the longest time it's taken to approach and the nearest it's come before disappearing."

"Incomprehensible or illusion," Myri suggested.

"Yes, I think that's the best we can do at the moment. Wednesday: a very trivial one, not worth discussing. *A being apparently constructed entirely of bone approached the main port and made beckoning motions. Whoever's doing this must be running out of ideas.* Thursday. *All bodies external to the sphere vanished to all instruments simultaneously, reappearing to all instruments simultaneously two hours later.* That's not a new one either, I seem to remember. Illusion? Good. Friday. *Beings resembling terrestrial reptiles covered the sphere, fighting ceaselessly and eating portions of one another. Loud rustling and slithering sounds.* The sounds at least must have been an illusion, with no air out there, and I never heard of a reptile that didn't breathe. The same sort of thing applies to yesterday's performance. *Human screams of pain and extreme astonishment approaching and receding. No visual or other accompaniment.*" He paused and looked round at them. "Well? Any uniformities suggest themselves?"

"No," Clovis said, helping himself to salad, for they sat now at the lunch table. "And I defy any human brain to devise any. The whole thing's arbitrary."

"On the contrary, the very next happening—to-day's when it comes—might reveal an unmistakable pattern."

"The one to concentrate on," Myri said, "is the approaching object. Why did it vanish before striking the sphere?"

Bruno stared at her. "It had to, if it was an illusion."

"Not at all. Why couldn't we have had an illusion of the sphere being struck? And supposing it wasn't an illusion?"

"Next time there's an object, perhaps it will strike," Lia said.

Clovis laughed. "That's a good one. What would happen if it did, I wonder? And it wasn't an illusion?"

They all looked at Bruno for an answer. After a moment or two, he said: "I presume the sphere would shatter and we'd all be thrown into space. I simply can't imagine what that would be like. We should be . . . Never to see one another again, or anybody or anything else, to be nothing more than a senseless lump floating in space for ever. The chances of——"

"It would be worth something to be rid of your conversation," Clovis said, amiable again now that Bruno was discomfited. "Let's be practical for a change. How long will it take you to run off your analyses this afternoon? There's a lot of stuff to go out to Base and I shan't be able to give you a hand."

"An hour, perhaps, after I've run the final tests."

"Why run tests at all? She was lined up perfectly when we finished this morning."

"Fortunately."

"Fortunately indeed. One more variable and we might have found it impossible."

"Yes," Bruno said abstractedly. Then he got to his feet so abruptly that the other three started. "But we didn't, did we? There wasn't one more variable, was there? It didn't quite happen, you see, the thing we couldn't handle."

Nobody spoke.

"Excuse me, I must be by myself."

"If Bruno keeps this up," Clovis said to the two women, "Base will send up a relief sooner than we think."

Myri tried to drive the thought of Bruno's strange behaviour out of her head when, half an hour later, she sat down to work on her story. The expression on his face as he left the table had been one she could not name. Excitement? Dislike? Surprise? That was the nearest—a kind of persistent surprise. Well, he was certain, being Bruno, to set about explaining it at dinner. She wished he were more pleasant, because he did think well.

Finally expelling the image of Bruno's face, she began re-reading the page of manuscript she had been working on when the screams had interrupted her the previous afternoon. It was part of a difficult scene, one in which a woman met by chance a man who had been having her ten years earlier, with the complication that she was at the time in the company of

the man who was currently having her. The scene was an eating alcove in a large city.

"Go away," Volsci said, "or I'll hit you."

Norbu smiled in a not-pleasant way. "What good would that do? Irmy likes me better than she likes you. You are more pleasant, no doubt, but she likes me better. She remembers me having her ten years ago more clearly than she remembers you having her last night. I am good at thinking, which is better than any amount of being pleasant."

"She's having her meal with me," Volsci said, pointing to the cold food and drinks in front of them. "Aren't you, Irmy?"

"Yes, Irmy," Norbu said. "You must choose. If you can't let both of us have you, you must say which of us you like better."

Irmy looked from one man to the other. There was so much difference between them that she could hardly begin to choose: The one more pleasant, the other better at thinking, the one slim, the other plump. She decided being pleasant was better. It was more important and more significant—better in every way that made a real difference. She said: "I'll have Volsci."

Norbu looked surprised and sorry. "I think you're wrong."

"You might as well go now," Volsci said. "Ila will be waiting."

"Yes," Norbu said. He looked extremely sorry now.

Irmy felt quite sorry too. "Good-bye, Norbu," she said.

Myri smiled to herself. It was good, even better than she had remembered—there was no point in being modest inside one's own mind. She must be a real writer in spite of Bruno's scoffing, or how could she have invented these characters, who were so utterly unlike anybody she knew, and then put them into a situation that was so completely outside her experience? The only thing she was not sure about was whether she might not have overplayed the part about feeling or dwelt on it at too great length. Perhaps *extremely sorry* was a little heavy; she replaced it by *sorrier than before*. Excellent: now there was just the right touch of restraint in the middle of all the feeling. She decided she could finish off the scene in a few lines.

"Probably see you at some cocktail hour," Volsci said. she

wrote, then looked up with a frown as the buzzer sounded at her door. She crossed her tiny wedge-shaped room—its rear wall was part of the outer wall of the sphere, but it had no port—threw the lock and found Bruno on the threshold. He was breathing fast, as if he had been hurrying or lifting a heavy weight, and she saw with distaste that there were drops of sweat on his thick skin. He pushed past her and sat down on her bed, his mouth open.

"What is it?" she asked, displeased. The afternoon was a private time unless some other arrangement were made at lunch.

"I don't know what it is. I think I must be ill."

"Ill? But you can't be. Only people on Earth get ill. Nobody on a station is ever ill: Base told us that. Illness is caused by——"

"I don't think I believe some of the things that Base says."

"But who can we believe if we don't believe Base?"

Bruno evidently did not hear her question. He said: "I had to come to you—Lia's no good for this. Please let me stay with you, I've got so much to say."

"It's no use, Bruno. Clovis is the one who has me. I thought you understood that I didn't——"

"That's not what I mean," he said impatiently. "Where I need you is in thinking. Though that's connected with the other, the having. I don't expect you to see that. I've only just begun to see it myself."

Myri could make nothing of this last part. "Thinking? Thinking about what?"

He bit his lip and shut his eyes for a moment. "Listen to this," he said. "It was the analyser that set my mind going. Almost every other day it breaks down. And the computer, the counters, the repellers, the scanners and the rest of them—they're always breaking down too, and so are their power supplies. But not the purifier or the fluid-reconstitutor or the fruit and vegetable growers or the heaters or the main power source. Why not?"

"Well, they're less complicated. How can a fruit grower go wrong? A chemical tank and a water tank is all there is to it. You ask Lia about that."

"All right. Try answering this, then. The strange happen-

ings. If they're illusions, why are they always outside the sphere? Why are there never any inside?"

"Perhaps there are," Myri said.

"Don't. I don't want that. I shouldn't like that. I want everything in here to be real. Are you real? I must believe you are."

"Of course I'm real." She was now thoroughly puzzled.

"And it makes a difference, doesn't it? It's very important that you and everything else should be real, everything in the sphere. But tell me: whatever's arranging these happenings must be pretty powerful if it can fool our instruments and our senses so completely and consistently, and yet it can't do anything—anything we recognize as strange, that is—inside this puny little steel skin. Why not?"

"Presumably it has its limitations. We should be pleased."

"Yes. All right, next point. You remember the time I tried to sit up in the lounge after midnight and stay awake?"

"That was silly. Nobody can stay awake after midnight. Standing Orders were quite clear on that point."

"Yes, they were, weren't they?" Bruno seemed to be trying to grin. "Do you remember my telling you how I couldn't account for being in my own bed as usual when the music woke us—you remember the big music? And—this is what I'm really after—do you remember how we all agreed at breakfast that life in space must have conditioned us in such a way that falling asleep at a fixed time had become an automatic mechanism? You remember that?"

"Naturally I do."

"Right. Two questions, then. Does that strike you as a likely explanation? That sort of complete self-conditioning in all four of us after . . . just a number of months?"

"Not when you put it like that."

"But we all agreed on it, didn't we? Without hesitation."

Myri, leaning against a side wall, fidgeted. He was being not pleasant in a new way, one that made her want to stop him talking even while he was thinking at his best. "What's your other question, Bruno?" Her voice sounded unusual to her.

"Ah, you're feeling it too, are you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you will in a minute. Try my other question. The night of the music was a long time ago, soon after we arrived here, but you remember it clearly. So do I. And yet when I try to remember what I was doing only a couple of months earlier, on Earth, finishing up my life there, getting ready for this, it's just a vague blur. Nothing stands out."

"It's all so remote."

"Maybe. But I remember the trip clearly enough, don't you?"

Myri caught her breath. I feel surprised, she told herself. Or something like that. I feel the way Bruno looked when he left the lunch table. She said nothing.

"You're feeling it now all right, aren't you?" He was watching her closely with his narrow eyes. "Let me try to describe it. A surprise that goes on and on. Puzzlement. Symptoms of physical exertion or strain. And above all a . . . a sort of discomfort, only in the mind. Like having a sharp object pressed against a tender part of your body, except that this is in your mind."

"What are you talking about?"

"A difficulty of vocabulary."

The loudspeaker above the door clicked on and Clovis's voice said: "Attention. Strange happening. Assemble in the lounge at once. Strange happening."

Myri and Bruno stopped staring at each other and hurried out along the narrow corridor. Clovis and Lia were already in the lounge, looking out of the port.

Apparently only a few feet beyond the steelhard glass, and illuminated from some invisible source, were two floating figures. The detail was excellent, and the four inside the sphere could distinguish without difficulty every fold in the naked skin of the two caricatures of humanity presented, it seemed, for their thorough inspection, a presumption given added weight by the slow rotation of the pair that enabled their every portion to be scrutinized. Except for a scrubby growth at the base of the skull, they were hairless. The limbs were foreshortened, lacking the normal narrowing at the joints, and the bellies protuberant. One had male characteristics, the other female, yet in neither case were these complete. From each open, wet, quivering toothless mouth

there came a loud, clearly audible yelling, higher in pitch than any those in the sphere could have produced, and of an unfamiliar emotional range.

"Well, I wonder how long this will last," Clovis said.

"Is it worth trying the repellers on them?" Lia asked.

"What does the radar say? Does it see them?"

"I'll go and have a look."

Bruno turned his back on the port. "I don't like them."

"Why not?" Myri saw he was sweating again.

"They remind me of something."

"What?"

"I'm trying to think."

But although Bruno went on trying to think for the rest of that day, with such obvious seriousness that even Clovis did his best to help with suggestions, he was no nearer a solution when they parted, as was their habit, at five minutes to midnight. And when, several times in the next couple of days, Myri mentioned the afternoon of the caricatures to him, he showed little interest.

"Bruno, you are extraordinary," she said one evening. "What happened to those odd feelings of yours you were so eager to describe to me just before Clovis called us into the lounge?"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders in the almost girlish way he had. "Oh, I don't know what could have got into me," he said. "I expect I was just angry with the confounded analyser and the way it kept breaking down. It's been much better recently."

"And all that thinking you used to do."

"That was a complete waste of time."

"Surely not."

"Yes, I agree with Clovis, let Base do all the thinking."

Myri was disappointed. To hear Bruno resigning the task of thought seemed like the end of something. This feeling was powerfully underlined for her when, a little later, the announcement came over the loudspeaker in the lounge. Without any preamble at all, other than the usual click on, a strange voice said: "Your attention, please. This is Base calling over your intercom."

They all looked up in great surprise, especially Clovis, who said quickly to Bruno: "Is that possible?"

"Oh yes, they've been experimenting," Bruno replied as quickly.

"It is perhaps ironical," the voice went on, "that the first transmission we have been able to make to you by the present means is also the last you will receive by any. For some time the maintenance of space stations has been uneconomic, and the decision has just been taken to discontinue them altogether. You will therefore make no further reports of any kind, or rather you may of course continue to do on the understanding that nobody will be listening. In many cases it has fortunately been found possible to arrange for the collection of station staffs and their return to Earth: in others, those involving a journey to the remoter parts of the galaxy, a prohibitive expenditure of time and effort would be entailed. I am sorry to have to tell you that your own station is one of these. Accordingly, you will never be relieved. All of us here are confident that you will respond to this new situation with dignity and resource.

"Before we sever communication for the last time, I have one more point to make. It involves a revelation which may prove so unwelcome that only with the greatest reluctance can I bring myself to utter it. My colleagues, however, insisted that those in your predicament deserve, in your own interests, to hear the whole truth about it. I must tell you, then, that contrary to your earlier information we have had no reports from any other station whose content resembles in the slightest degree your accounts of the strange happenings you claim to have witnessed. The deception was considered necessary so that your morale might be maintained, but the time for deceptions is over. You are unique, and in the variety of mankind that is no small distinction. Be proud of it. Good-bye for ever."

They sat without speaking until five minute to midnight. Try as she would, Myri found it impossible to conceive their future, and the next morning she had no more success. That was as long as any of them had leisure to come to terms with their permanent isolation, for by midday a quite new phase of

strange happenings had begun. Myri and Lia were preparing lunch in the kitchen when Myri, opening the cupboard where the dishes were kept, was confronted by a flattish, reddish creature with many legs and a pair of unequally sized pincers. She gave a gasp, almost a shriek, of astonishment.

"What is it?" Lia said, hurrying over, and then in a high voice: "Is it alive?"

"It's moving. Call the men."

Until the others came, Myri simply stared. She found her lower lip shaking in a curious way. *Inside* now, she kept thinking. Not just outside. *Inside*.

"Let's have a look," Clovis said. "I see. Pass me a knife or something." He rapped at the creature, making a dry, bony sound. "Well, it works for tactile and aural, as well as visual, anyway. A thorough illusion. If it is one."

"It must be," Bruno said. "Don't you recognize it?"

"There is something familiar about it, I suppose."

"You suppose? You mean you don't know a crab when you see one?"

"Oh, of course," Clovis looked slightly sheepish. "I remember now. A terrestrial animal, isn't it? Lives in the water. And so it must be an illusion. Crabs don't cross space as far as I know, and even if they could they'd have a tough time carving their way through the skin of the sphere."

His sensible manner and tone helped Myri to get over her astonishment, and it was she who suggested that the crab be disposed of down the waste chute. At lunch, she said: "It was a remarkably specific illusion, don't you think? I wonder how it was projected."

"No point in wondering about that," Bruno told her. "How can we ever know? And what use would the knowledge be to us if we did know?"

"Knowing the truth has its own value."

"I don't understand you."

Lia came in with the coffee just then. "The crab's back," she said. "Or there's another one there, I can't tell."

More crabs, or simulacra thereof, appeared at intervals for the rest of the day, eleven of them in all. It seemed, as Clovis put it, that the illusion-producing technique had its

limitations, inasmuch as none of them saw a crab actually materialize: the new arrival would be "discovered" under a bed or behind a bank of apparatus. On the other hand, the depth of illusion produced was very great, as they all agreed when Myri, putting the eighth crab down the chute, was nipped in the finger, suffered pain and exuded a few drops of blood.

"Another new departure," Clovis said. "An illusory physical process brought about on the actual person of one of us. They're improving."

Next morning there were the insects. Their main apparatus room was found to be infested with what, again on Bruno's prompting, they recognized as cockroaches. By lunch-time there were moths and flying beetles in all the main rooms, and a number of large flies became noticeable towards the evening. The whole of their attention became concentrated upon avoiding these creatures as far as possible. The day passed without Clovis asking Myri to go with him. This had never happened before.

The following afternoon a fresh problem was raised by Lia's announcement that the garden now contained no fruits or vegetables—none, at any rate, that were accessible to her senses. In this the other three concurred. Clovis put the feelings of all of them when he said: "If this is an illusion, it's as efficient as the reality, because fruits and vegetables you can never find are the same as no fruits and vegetables."

The evening meal used up all the food they had. Soon after two o'clock in the morning Myri was aroused by Clovis's voice saying over the loudspeaker: "Attention, everyone. Strange happening. Assemble in the lounge immediately."

She was still on her way when she became aware of a new quality in the background of silence she had grown used to. It was a deeper silence, as if some sound at the very threshold of audibility had ceased. There were unfamiliar vibrations underfoot.

Clovis was standing by the port, gazing through it with interest. "Look at this, Myri," he said.

At a distance impossible to gauge, an oblong of light had become visible, a degree or so in breadth and perhaps two and

a half times as high. The light was of comparable quality to that illuminating the inside of the sphere. Now and then it flickered.

"What is it?" Myri asked.

"I don't know, it's only just appeared." The floor beneath them shuddered violently. "That was what woke me, one of those tremors. Ah, here you are, Bruno. What do you make of it?"

Bruno's large eyes widened further, but he said nothing. A moment later Lia arrived and joined the silent group by the port. Another vibration shook the sphere. Some vessel in the kitchen fell to the floor and smashed. Then Myri said: "I can see what looks like a flight of steps leading down from the lower edge of the light. Three or four of them, perhaps more."

She had barely finished speaking when a shadow appeared before them, cast by the rectangle of light on to a surface none of them could identify. The shadow seemed to them of a stupefying vastness, but it was beyond question that of a man. A moment later the man came into view, outlined by the light, and descended the steps. Another moment or two and he was evidently a few feet from the port, looking in on them, their own lights bright on the upper half of him. He was a well-built man wearing a grey uniform jacket and a metal helmet. An object recognizable as a gun of some sort was slung over his shoulder. While he watched them, two other figures, similarly accoutred, came down the steps and joined him. There was a brief interval, then he moved out of view to their right, doing so with the demeanour of one walking on a level surface.

None of the four inside spoke or moved, not even at the sound of heavy bolts being drawn in the section of outer wall directly in front of them, not even when that entire section swung away from them like a door opening outwards and the three men stepped through into the sphere. Two of them had unslung the guns from their shoulders.

Myri remembered an occasion, weeks ago, when she had risen from a stooping position in the kitchen and struck her head violently on the bottom edge of a cupboard door Lia had happened to leave open. The feeling Myri now experienced

was similar, except that she had no particular physical sensations. Another memory, a much fainter one, passed across the far background of her mind: somebody had once tried to explain to her the likeness between a certain mental state and the bodily sensation of discomfort, and she had not understood. The memory faded sharply.

The man they had first seen said: "All roll up your sleeves."

Clovis looked at him with less curiosity than he had been showing when Myri first joined him at the port, a few minutes earlier. "You're an illusion," he said.

"No I'm not. Roll up your sleeves, all of you."

He watched them closely while they obeyed, becoming impatient at the slowness with which they moved. The other man whose gun was unslung, a younger man, said: "Don't be hard on them, Allen. We've no idea what they've been through."

"I'm not taking any chances," Allen said. "Not after that crowd in the trees. Now this is for your own good," he went on, addressing the four. "Keep quite still. All right, Douglas."

The third man came forward, holding what Myri knew to be a hypodermic syringe. He took her firmly by her bare arm and gave her an injection. At once her feelings altered, in the sense that, although there was still discomfort in her mind, neither this nor anything else seemed to matter.

After a time she heard the young man say: "You can roll your sleeves down now. You can be quite sure that nothing bad will happen to you."

"Come with us," Allen said.

Myri and the others followed the three men out of the sphere, across a gritty floor that might have been concrete and up the steps, a distance of perhaps thirty feet. They entered a corridor with artificial lighting and then a room into which the sun was streaming. There were twenty or thirty people in the room, some of them wearing the grey uniform. Now and then the walls shook as the sphere had done, but to the accompaniment of distant explosions. A faint shouting could also be heard from time to time.

Allen's voice said loudly: "Let's try and get a bit of order going. Douglas, they'll be wanting you to deal with the people

in the tank. They've been conditioned to believe they're congenitally aquatic, so you'd better give them a shot that'll knock them out straight away. Holmes is draining the tank now. Off you go. Now you, James, you watch this lot while I find out some more about them. I wish those psycho chaps would turn up—we're just working in the dark." His voice moved farther away. "Sergeant—get these five out of here."

"Where to, sir?"

"I don't mind where—just out of here. And watch them."

"They've all been given shots, sir."

"I know, but look at them, they're not human any more. And it's no use talking to them, they've been deprived of language. That's how they got the way they are. Now get them out right away."

Myri looked slowly at the young man who stood near them: James. "Where are we?" she asked.

James hesitated. "I was ordered to tell you nothing," he said. "You're supposed to wait for the psychological team to get to you and treat you."

"Please."

"All right. This much can't hurt you, I suppose. You four and a number of other groups have been the subject of various experiments. This building is part of Special Welfare Research Station No. 4. Or rather it was. The government that set it up no longer exists. It has been removed by the revolutionary army of which I'm a member. We had to shoot our way in here and there's fighting still going on."

"Then we weren't in space at all."

"No."

"Why did they make us believe we were?"

"We don't know yet."

"And how did they do it?"

"Some new form of deep-level hypnosis, it seems, probably renewed at regular intervals. Plus various apparatus for producing illusions. We're still working on that. Now, I think that's enough questions for the moment. The best thing you can do is sit down and rest."

"Thank you. What's hypnosis?"

"Oh, of course they'd have removed knowledge of that. It'll all be explained to you later."

"James, come and have a look at this, will you?" Allen's voice called. "I can't make much of it."

Myri followed James a little way. Among the clamour of voices, some speaking languages unfamiliar to her, others speaking none, she heard James ask: "Is this the right file? Fear Elimination?"

"Must be," Allen answered. "Here's the last entry. *Removal of Bruno V and substitution of Bruno VI accomplished, together with memory-adjustment of other three subjects. Memo to Preparation Centre: avoid repetition of Bruno V personality-type with strong curiosity-drives. Started catching on to the set-up, eh? Wonder what they did with him.*"

"There's that psycho hospital across the way they're still investigating; perhaps he's in there."

"With Brunos I to IV, no doubt. Never mind that for the moment. Now. *Procedures: penultimate phase. Removal of all ultimate confidence: severance of communication, total denial of prospective change, inculcation of 'uniqueness' syndrome, environment shown to be violable, unknowable crisis in prospect (food deprivation).* I can understand that last bit. They don't look starved, though."

"Perhaps they've only just started them on it."

"We'll get them fed in a minute. Well, all this still beats me, James. *Reactions. Little change. Responses poor. Accelerating impoverishment of emotional life and its vocabulary: compare portion of novel written by Myri VII with contributions of predecessors. Prognosis: further affective deterioration: catatonic apathy: failure of experiment.* That's comfort, anyway. But what has all this got to do with fear elimination?"

They stopped talking suddenly and Myri followed the direction of their gaze. A door had been opened and the man called Douglas was supervising the entry of a number of others, each supporting or carrying a human form wrapped in a blanket.

"This must be the lot from the tank," Allen or James said.

Myri watched while those in the blankets were made as comfortable as possible on benches or on the floor. One of them, however, remained totally wrapped in his blanket and was paid no attention.

"He's had it, has he?"

"Shock, I'm afraid." Douglas's voice was unsteady. "There was nothing we could do. Perhaps we shouldn't have——"

Myri stooped and turned back the edge of the blanket. What she saw was much stranger than anything she had experienced in the sphere. "What's the matter with him?" she asked James.

"Matter with him? You can die of shock, you know."

"I can do what?"

Myri, staring at James, was aware that his face had become distorted by a mixture of expressions. One of them was understanding: all the others were painful to look at. They were renderings of what she herself was feeling. Her vision darkened and she ran from the room, back the way they had come, down the steps, across the floor, back into the sphere.

James was unfamiliar with the arrangement of the rooms there and did not reach her until she had picked up the manuscript of the novel, hugged it to her chest with crossed arms and fallen on to her bed, her knees drawn up as far as they would go, her head lowered as it had been before her birth, an event of which she knew nothing.

She was still in the same position when, days later, somebody sat heavily down beside her. "Myri. You must know who this is. Open your eyes, Myri. Come out of there."

After he had said this, in the same gentle voice, some hundreds of times, she did open her eyes a little. She was in a long, high room, and near her was a fat man with a pale skin. He reminded her of something to do with space and thinking. She screwed her eyes shut.

"Myri. I know you remember me. Open your eyes again." She kept them shut while he went on talking.

"Open your eyes. Straighten your body."

She did not move.

"Straighten your body, Myri. I love you."

Slowly her feet crept down the bed and her head lifted.

SATAN'S CIRCUS

Lady Eleanor Smith

I once asked a circus artist whom I knew to have worked at one time with the Circus Brandt whether or not he had enjoyed travelling with this well-known show. His reply was a curious one. Swiftly distorting his features into a hideous grimace, he spat violently upon the floor. Not another word would he say. My curiosity was, however, aroused, and I went next to an old Continental clown, now retired, who had the reputation of knowing every European circus as well as he knew his own pocket.

"The Circus Brandt," he said thoughtfully. "Well, you know, the Brandts are queer people, and have an odd reputation. They are Austrian, and their own country-people call them gipsies, by which they mean nomads, for the Brandts never pitch in their own land, but wander the whole world over as though the devil himself were at their heels. In fact, some call them 'Satan's Circus.'"

"I thought," I said, "that the Circus Brandt was supposed to be a remarkably fine show?"

"It is," he said, and lit his pipe; "it's expensive, ambitious, showy, well run. In their way these people are artists, and deserve more success than they have had. It's hard to say why they're so unpopular, but the fact remains that no one will stay with them more than a few months; and, what's more, wherever they go—India, Australia, Rumania, Spain, or Africa—they leave behind them a nasty, unpleasant sort of reputation as regards unpaid bills—which," he added, blowing smoke into the air, "is odd, for the Brandts are rich."

"How many Brandts are there?" I inquired, for I wished to know more about Europe's most elusive circus.

"You ask too many questions," said he, "but this being my last reply to them, I don't mind telling you that there are two, and that they are man and wife—Carl and Lya. The lady is a bit of a mystery, but if you ask my opinion I would

say that she is of Mexican blood, that she was at some time or other a charmer of snakes, and that of the two she is, on the whole, the worse, although that is saying a good deal. However, all this is pure guess-work on my part, although, having seen her, I can tell you that she's a handsome piece, still a year or two on the right side of forty. And now," he said firmly, "I will speak no more of the Circus Brandt."

And we talked instead of Sarrasani, of Krone, of Carmo, and of Hagebeck.

A year passed, and I forgot the Circus Brandt, which no doubt during this period of time wandered from Tokio to San Francisco and Belgrade up to Stockholm and back again, as though the devil himself were at its heels.

And then I met an old friend, a famous juggler, whom I had not seen for many months. I offered him a drink and asked him where he had been since our last meeting. He laughed, and said that he had been in hell. I told him I was not much of a hand at riddles. He laughed again.

"Oh—hell?" he said. "Perhaps that's an exaggeration; but, anyhow, I've been as near to it as ever I want to. I've been touring with Circus Brandt."

"The Circus Brandt?"

"Exactly. The Balkan States, Spain, North Africa. Then Holland and Belgium, and finally France. I cleared out in France. If they'd doubled my salary I'd not have stayed with them."

"Is the Circus Brandt, then," I asked, "as rough as all that?"

"Rough?" he said. "No, it's not rough. I can stick roughness. What I can't stand, however, is working with people who give me the creeps. Now you're laughing, and I'm not surprised, but I can assure you that I've lain awake at night in my wagon sweating with fear and I'm by no means a fanciful chap."

By this time I was keenly interested.

"Please tell me," I asked, "what it was that frightened you so much."

"That I can't do," he replied, and ordered another drink,

"for the fact is that I, personally, was not treated badly during the tour. The Brandts were very civil to me—too civil, in fact, for they'd ask me into their wagon sometimes for a chat between shows, and I hated going—it gave me gooseflesh down my back. Somehow—and you'll laugh again I know—it was like sitting there talking to two big cats that were just waiting to pounce after they'd finished playing with you. I swear I believed, at the time, that Carl and Lya could see in the dark. Now, of course, that's ridiculous, and I know it, but I still get the creeps when I think about them. I must have been nervy—overtired, you know, at the time."

I asked whether anyone else at the circus had been similarly affected by the Brandts, and he wrinkled his brows, as though trying to remember, with obvious distaste, any further details of his tour.

"There's one thing that happened so that all could see," he remarked after a pause, "and that was in a wild part of Rumania, somewhere near the Carpathian mountains. We were passing through a little village, on our way to a town a few miles' distance, and the peasants came flocking out to watch us pass, which was, of course, only natural, for the show is a very fine one. Then, in the village street, a van stuck, and the Brandts came out of their big living-wagon to see what had happened."

"Well?" I asked, for he paused again.

"Well, it was funny, that's all. They scattered like rabbits—rushed into their cottages and banged the doors. The wagon was shoved out of the rut and we went on, but in the next village there was no sign of life, for everything was deserted and the doors were barred. But on every door was nailed a wreath of garlic flowers."

"Anything else?" I asked, for he had relapsed into silence.

"Oh, one little thing I remember noticing. The menagerie. The Brandts seldom bother to inspect that part of the show. They're too busy about the ring and the ticket office. But one day she—Mme. Brandt—had to go through the horse-tent and the menagerie to find some agent who was talking to the boys there. It really was a bit odd—the noise was blood-curdling. It was as though the lions and tigers were frightened; not angry, you know, or roaring for their food, but quite a different

sort of row. And, when she had gone, the horses were sweating. I felt 'em myself, and it was a chilly day."

"Really," I said, "it's time you came back."

"Oh," he replied. "I don't expect you to believe me. Why should you? I wouldn't have talked if you hadn't asked me about the Circus Brandt. I'd just have said I was glad to be home. But as you asked me . . . Oh, well, one day I'll tell you why I left them in France. It's not a pretty story. But I won't tell it to-night. I avoid the Brandts as a bedtime topic—I've been dreaming about them lately."

It took me some time to coax the juggler's tale from him. One morning, however, as we were walking along the Unter den Linden, in pale but radiant spring sunshine, he consented to tell it. Translated into English, this is the story :

While the Circus Brandt was touring Northern Africa, when it was, in fact, only a few days from Tangier, a man arrived asking for work. He was, he said, an Alsatian, and had been a stoker, but his ship had abandoned him at Tangier, and he had been seeking a job ever since. This man was interviewed by Carl Brandt himself, who had been accosted by him on the lot. They were a curiously contrasted pair as they stood talking together outside the steps of the Brandts' palatial living-wagon. The Alsatian was fair, a big handsome young man with thick, blond hair, a tanned skin and honest, rather stupid, blue eyes. Carl Brandt was tall, too, but emaciated, wasted, and swarthy dark; he had a smooth, darting black head like a snake's head; his long face was haggard, and yellow as old ivory; he wore a tiny dark imperial beard; his black eyes were feverishly alive in heavy purple hollows, and his teeth were sharp and broken and rotten. He was said to drug, and indeed he had very much the appearance of an addict. While the two men were talking, the door of the wagon opened and Mme. Brandt appeared on the threshold, asking her husband what the stranger wanted of him. She herself was, incidentally, a remarkably handsome woman, although no longer young. She was powerfully but gracefully made, with quantities of shining blue-black hair, delicate features, oblique, heavy-lidded eyes, and one of those opaque

white skins that always look like milk. She had no colour, but was all black and white. Even her lips were pale, not being painted, and her face was heart-shaped against the shadow of her dark hair. She wore white in hot countries and black in the north, but somehow one never noticed that she was not dressed in colours. She seldom looked at the person to whom she was talking, so that when she did it was rather a shock. Her voice was low, and she never showed her teeth, making one imagine that they must be bad, like her husband's.

Both Brandts stayed talking to the Alsatian for about ten minutes in the hot sunshine. It was impossible to eavesdrop, but once the Alsatian was heard reiterating rather warmly that he was a stoker by profession. Finally, however, Carl Brandt took the man off to the head keeper of the menagerie and said that he was to be given work. The Alsatian for his part said that his name was Anatole, and that he was used to rough jobs. Soon afterwards the circus went on towards Tunis.

The new hand, Anatole, was a good-natured, genial, simple fellow, who soon became popular, not only with the tent-men and grooms, but also with the more democratic of the performers, who amused themselves, during the tedium of long "jumps," by making him sing to them, for he had a rich and beautiful voice. Generally he sang German *Lieder* or long-forgotten French music-hall songs, but sometimes he favoured them with snatches of roaring, racy, impudent ballads couched in an *argot* with which they were every one unfamiliar. On one occasion, before the evening show, when Anatole was shouting one of these coarsely cheerful songs inside the Big Top, the flap was suddenly opened to reveal Mme. Brandt's pale, watchful face in the aperture.

Instantly, although some of the small audience had not seen her, a curious discomfort fell upon the gay party. Anatole, whose back was turned towards the entrance, immediately became aware of some strain or tension among his listeners, and, wheeling round, stopped abruptly in the middle of a bar. The little group scrambled awkwardly to its feet.

Mme. Brandt murmured in her low voice :

"Don't let me interfere with your concert, my friends. Go on, you"—to Anatole—"that's a lively song you were singing. Where did you pick it up?"

Anatole, standing respectfully before her, was silent. Mme. Brandt did not look at him or seem to concern herself with him in any way, but sent her oblique eyes roving over the empty seats of the great tent, yet somehow, in some curious way, it became obvious to her listeners that she was stubbornly determined to drag from him an answer.

Anatole at length muttered :

"I learned the song, madame, on board a Portuguese fruit-trader many years ago."

Mme. Brandt made no sign of having heard him speak.

After this incident, however, she began to employ the odd hand on various jobs about her own living-wagon, with the result that he had less time to sing and not much time even for his work in the menagerie. Anatole, good-humoured and jovial as he was, soon conceived a violent dislike of the proprietress, and he took no pains to hide it from his friends, who were incidentally in hearty agreement with him on this point. Everyone hated the Brandts; many feared them.

The circus crossed to Spain and began to tour Andalusia. Several performers left; new acts were promptly engaged. Carl Brandt had always found it easy to rid himself of artists. Ten minutes before the show was due to open he would send for some unlucky trapezist and, pointing to the man's apparatus, complicated and heavy, slung up to one of the big poles, he would say casually :

"I want you to move that to the other side of the tent before the show."

The artist would perhaps laugh, thinking the director was making some obscure joke.

Brandt would then continue, gently :

"You had better hurry, don't you think?"

The artist would protest indignantly.

"It's impossible, sir. How can I move my apparatus in ten minutes?"

Brandt would then watch him, sneering, for a few seconds. Then he would turn away, saying suavely :

"Discharged for insubordination," and walk off to telegraph to his agent for a new act.

Mme. Brandt took a curious perverse pleasure in teasing Anatole. She knew that he feared her, and it amused her to send for him, to keep him standing in her wagon while she polished her nails or sewed or wrote letters, utterly indifferent to his presence. After about ten minutes she would look up, glancing at some point above his head, and ask him, in her soft, languid voice, if he liked circus life, and whether he was happy with them. She would chat for some time, casually asking him searching questions about the other performers, then suddenly she would look direct at him, with a strange, brooding stare, while she said :

"Better than tramp ships, isn't it, eh? You are more comfortable here than you were as a stoker, I suppose?"

Sometimes she would add :

"Tell me something about a stoker's life, Anatole. What were your duties, and your hours?"

Always, when she dismissed him, his hair was damp with sweat.

The Circus Brandt wandered gradually northwards towards the Basque country, until the French border was almost in sight. They were to cut across France into Belgium and Holland, then back again. The Brandts could never stay long anywhere. Just before the circus entered French territory Anatole gave his notice to the head keeper. He was a hard worker and so popular with his mates that the keeper went grumbling to Carl Brandt, who agreed to an increase of salary. Anatole refused to stay on.

Mme. Brandt was in the wagon when this news was told to her husband. She said to Carl : "If you want the Alsatian to stay, I will arrange it. Leave it to me. I think I understand the trouble, and, as you say, he is a useful man."

The next day she sent for Anatole, and after ignoring him for about five minutes she asked him listlessly what he meant by leaving them. Anatole, standing rigid near the door, stammered some awkward apology.

"Why is it?"

"I have—I have had offered me a job."

"Better than this?" she pursued, stitching at her work.

"Yes, madame."

"Yet," she continued idly, "you were happy with us in Africa, happy in Spain. Why not, then, in France?"

"Madame——"

She snapped a thread with her teeth.

"Why not in France, Anatole?"

There was no reply.

Suddenly she flung her sewing to the ground and fixed him with an unswerving glance. Something leaped into her eyes that startled him, an ugly, naked, hungry look that he had never before seen there. Her eyes burned him, like a devil's eyes. She said, speaking rapidly, scarcely moving her lips:

"I will tell you why you are afraid of France, shall I, Anatole? I have guessed your secret my friend. . . . You are a deserter from the Foreign Legion, and you are afraid of being recaptured. That is it, isn't it? Oh, don't trouble to lie; I have known ever since we were in Africa. It's true, isn't it, what I have said?"

He shook his head, swallowing, unable to speak.

It was a hot day and he wore only a thin shirt. In a second she sprang from her chair across the wagon and threw herself upon him, tearing at this garment with her fingers. Terrified, he struggled, but she was too swift, too violent, too relentless. The shirt ripped in two and revealed upon his white chest the seam of livid scars.

"Bullet wounds!" she laughed in his ear. "A stoker with bullet wounds! I was right, wasn't I, Anatole?"

He was conscious, above his fear, of a strange shrinking sensation of repulsion at her proximity. "God," he thought, "she's after me!" And he was sickened, as some people are sickened by the sight of a deadly snake. And then, surprisingly, he was saved. She darted away from him, sank down in her chair, snatched up her sewing.

Her quick ear had heard the footsteps of Carl Brandt. Anatole stood there dazed, clutching the great rent in his shirt. Carl Brandt entered the wagon softly, for he always wore rubber soles to his shoes. His wife addressed him in her low unfurried voice.

"You see Anatole there? He has just been telling me why

he is afraid to come with us to France. He is a deserter from the Foreign Legion. Look at the wounds there, on his chest."

Anatole gazed helplessly at the long, yellow face of Brandt, who stared at him for some moments in silence.

"A deserter?" Brandt said at length, and chuckled. "A deserter? You needn't be afraid, my lad, to come with us to France. They've something better to do than hunt for obscure escaped legionaries there. Oh, yes, you'll be safe enough. I'll protect you."

And he stood rubbing his hands and staring thoughtfully at Anatole with his gleaming black eyes. Anatole, to escape from them, promised to stay. He had the unpleasant sensation of having faced in the wagon that afternoon not one snake, but two. He disliked reptiles. He meant to bolt, but he had lied to Madame Brandt when he talked of a new job, and he was comfortable where he was. He was, too, an unimaginative creature, and the horrors of the Legion now seemed very remote. Soon he was in France, utterly unable to believe that he was in any danger. To his delight, his mistress ignored him after the scene in the wagon. She had obviously realised, he thought to himself, that he found her disgusting. And he would have been completely happy had he not known that he had made a dangerous enemy.

The Circus Brandt employed as lion-tamer an ex-matador, a man named "Captain" da Silva. This individual was not best pleased with his situation. He had lost his nerve about a year before, but after working the same group of lions for ten months he had become more confident and consequently more content. Then, without any warning, Carl Brandt bought a mixed group of animals, and told da Silva to start work at once. The tamer was furious. Lions, tigers, bears, and leopards! He shrugged his shoulders and obeyed sulkily. Soon the mixed group was ready for the ring, and appeared for a week with great success.

Then one morning da Silva went to the cages and found his animals in a wild, abnormal state. Snarling, bristling, foaming at the mouth, they seemed unable even to recognise their tamer. A comrade, coming to watch, whispered in his ear :

"She walked last night."

Da Silva shuddered. There was a legend in the Circus Brandt that whenever the animals were nervous or upset Lya Brandt, the "she-devil," had walked in her sleep the night before, wandering into the menagerie and terrifying the beasts, who presumably knew her for what she was.

The tiger roared, and was answered by the lioness. Da Silva turned to his companion.

"I'm off. I wouldn't work these cats to-night for a fortune."

In twenty minutes' time he was at the railway station.

Carl Brandt heard the news in silence. Then he raised his arm and struck his head keeper savagely on the mouth. Wrapping his black cloak about his tall, thin figure, he left the office and sought his own wagon. His wife was engaged drinking a cup of coffee. They eyed each other in silence.

Then she said calmly :

"It's da Silva, I suppose?"

"Da Silva, yes. Already he has gone. Now who will work the mixed group?"

She drained her cup and answered thoughtfully :

"I know of several tamers."

"Probably. And how long will they take to get here?"

"Exactly," she said, pouring out more coffee. "That, I agree, is the great objection. Is there no one on the lot who could work the cats for a week or two?"

"What nonsense are you talking?"

She put her hand over her eyes.

"You seem to forget Anatole. An escaped Legionary in French territory. Would he disobey your orders, do you think?"

There was a pause.

"I'll send for him," said Brandt at length.

They were silent as they waited for the Alsatian. When he came in Lya did not look at him, but began to polish her nails.

Carl Brandt turned his yellow, wrinkled face towards Anatole. His eyes were dark and smouldering hollows. He said gently :

"You know that da Silva has left?"

"Yes, sir." Anatole was perplexed.

"There is no one now to work the animals until a new tamer is engaged."

"No, sir."

"It is not my custom to fail my patrons. I show always what I advertise. The new tamer should be here in a week. It is about this week that I wish to speak."

Another pause. Anatole's heart began to pump against his ribs.

Brandt said placidly :

"I am about to promote you, my friend. For a week you shall work the mixed group."

Anatole turned dusky red. He was furiously angry, so angry indeed that his fear of the silent woman sitting at the table vanished entirely. No longer conscious of her presence he blurted out violently :

"What! You wish me to go in the cage with those animals? Then you must find someone else; I wouldn't do it for a fortune."

Brandt smiled, showing his black, broken teeth. His wife, utterly indifferent, continued to paint her nails bright red. Brandt said pleasantly :

"Are you perhaps in a position to dictate, my friend? I may be wrong, of course, but I am under the impression that we are now in *French territory*. Charming words, eh?"

Anatole was silent. He thought suddenly and with horror of the Legion—blistering sun, filth, and brutality. He thought, too, of the salt-mines, that ghastly living death to which he would inevitably be condemned in the event of capture. Then he remembered the animals as he had last seen them, ferocious, maddened. He shook his head.

"That's bluff," he said shakily. "I'm no tamer. You can't force me into the cage."

Carl Brandt chuckled. The delicate yellow ivory of his skin seamed itself into a thousand wrinkles. He pulled out his watch.

"Five minutes, Anatole, to come with me to the menagerie. Otherwise I telephone the police. If I may be permitted to advise you, I suggest the menagerie. Even the belly of a lion is preferable, I should imagine, to the African salt-mines. But take your choice."

Madame Brandt, snapping an orange-stick in two, now obtruded herself quietly into the conversation.

"No, Anatole," she said musingly, "it will not be possible to run away in the night. The Herr Director will take trouble, great trouble, to have you traced. The Herr Director has no wish to protect criminals."

Once again she looked directly at him, fixing him with the burning and threatening glance that was like a sword.

Brandt glanced at his watch.

"I must remind you, Anatole, that you have only two minutes left," he said with an air of great courtesy. "How many years did you serve in the Legion, I wonder? And is it eight years in the salt-mines for deserters, or perhaps more?"

"I'll work the animals," said Anatole shortly. He knew that Lya Brandt had read his thoughts, and wiped the sweat from his face as he went towards the menagerie. It was not possible for the mixed group to appear at the *matinée*, but it was announced to the circus in general that the cats would work that night without fail. Anatole was to spend the afternoon rehearsing them.

His face was grey as he shut himself in the cage, armed only with a tamer's switch. Outside the bars stood two keepers with loaded revolvers. They, too, were nervous. The animals stood motionless to stare at the stranger, hackles raised, restless yellow eyes fixed upon him. Around the cage were arranged painted wooden pedestals, upon which the animals were trained to sit at the word of command. The Alsatian now gave that command. They took no notice. He repeated it louder, slapping the bars with his switch, and they scattered in a sudden panic to take up their accustomed seats. He pulled out the paper hoop through which the lions must jump. They snarled for several minutes, striking out with their savage paws, then, in the end, possibly deciding that obedience was less trouble, they bounded through the loop with an ill grace. The two keepers, and Anatole as well, were soon streaming with perspiration as though they had been plunged into water. The Alsatian was now, however, more confident. He turned to the bears.

Twenty minutes later Carl Brandt rejoined his wife in the living-wagon.

"Better than I expected," said the director coolly. Mme. Brandt made no reply, nor did she turn her head.

That evening the Alsatian was supplied with a splendid sky-blue uniform and cherry-coloured breeches from the circus wardrobe. Out on the lot his comrades glanced at him sympathetically. One or two, unconcious of his antecedents, warned him to defy Brandt and keep out of the cage. Anatole merely shook his head, incapable of giving an explanation.

It was dusk. The bandsmen, splendid in their green and gold uniforms, played the overture inside the huge tent. A group of clowns, glittering in brilliant spangles, stood waiting to make their comic entry. Behind the clowns six or seven grooms were busy controlling twenty milk-white Arab stallions with fleecy white manes and tails. These horses were magnificent in scarlet trappings. The Chinese troupe, dark kimonos over gorgeous brocade robes, diligently practised near the bears' cage. Anatole sat on a bale of hay near the tigers, deaf to the advice muttered in his ear by various comrades. The circus proceeded.

Up in the dome of the tent two muscular young men in peach-coloured tights flung themselves from bar to bar with thrilling grace and swiftness. Down below, the attendants rapidly constructed a vast cage, staggering beneath sections of heavy iron bars. Soon the band crashed out a chord, and Anatole, the Legionary, stepped into the cage, bowing modestly in response to the applause. Then an iron door was slid aside and down the narrow tunnel crept a file of tawny shapes.

Lions, tigers, leopards, bears. Gracefully they padded into the arena, stretching themselves, rubbing against the bars of the cage, yawning at the bright lights, showing their teeth, slinking with a cat-like agility about the ring.

Gripping his switch, Anatole uttered the first command. One minute later the animals were seated with a certain docility upon their wooden pedestals. Anatole produced his hoop. At first the people of the circus held their breath, then, gradually, as five minutes passed, they relaxed. He was doing well. They sighed with relief. The climax of the act was a tableau during the course of which the animals grouped themselves, standing erect on their hind legs about the trainer, who himself sprang upon a pedestal, arm upraised to give more

effect to this subjugation of the beasts. The biggest tiger lay at his feet during the tableau, and while the other animals soon assumed their accustomed positions when ordered, the tiger was at first always unwilling to fling himself upon the sawdust.

Posing the lions and leopards, Anatole, one foot on the pedestal, spoke briskly, curtly, to the great beast, which stared at him sulkily. A second passed, seeming longer than a minute to the circus watchers. The tiger continued to stare, and Anatole, banging at the bars with his switch, pointed stubbornly at the ground at his feet.

His back was towards the ring entrance, and he did not see the grooms and attendants draw back respectfully to allow someone to pass through the red velvet curtains. His comrades did, and nudged one another, for Mme. Brandt seldom came near the arena during a performance. She stood for a moment near the curtains, tall and straight in her flowing white dress, her face pale against the dense blackness of her hair.

Then, suddenly, there was tumult in the peaceful cage, as snarling furiously, the animals leaped from their pedestals to dash themselves savagely against the bars. Caught by surprise, Anatole turned, slashing with his switch, shouting, oblivious of the sullen tiger behind him. A leopard, maddened with fright, collided against him and sent him stumbling to the ground. With the fierce swiftness of a mighty hawk, the great tiger sprang. A thick choking growl that made the blood run cold, yells of terror from the crowd, and then the crack of two revolver shots. Armed with hosepipes, the menagerie men drove the animals back. The tiger was wounded in the the shoulder, and clawed the ground, biting at itself in a frenzy of pain.

Anatole lay doubled up on the sawdust looking like a rag dummy, so limp and twisted was his body. On the bright blue of his uniform oozed a clotted stream of red. His face? Anatole had no longer a face; only a huge and raw and gaping wound. Opening a side door, they dragged his body from the cage and swiftly wrapped it in the gorgeous coat of a Chinese acrobat standing nearby. Screaming, weeping, cursing, the horrified audience fought, struggled and stampeded to leave the tent. In the noise and tumult, Mme. Brandt

slipped through the red velvet curtains and vanished like a white shadow.

That night the body was laid temporarily in a little canvas dressing-room belonging to the clowns. It was late before the show people retired to bed, but by one o'clock in the morning all was still in the tent-town of Brandt's Circus. Only the night watchman, a stolid, unimaginative fellow, paced slowly up and down, swinging his lantern, but from time to time a lion would whimper and growl in the silence of the night.

It was the watchman, however, who afterwards related to his comrades what he saw during this lonely vigil. . . . It was about an hour before dawn, and the man was lolling on a heap of hay, relieved, no doubt, to think the night would soon be over, when all at once his quick ear caught the soft sound of approaching footsteps. He turned, hiding his lantern beneath his coat. It was Mme. Brandt, of course, walking slowly, like a sleep-walker, across the deserted arena towards the dressing-rooms, seeming no more tangible than a shadow, a white shadow that gleamed for a moment in the darkness, and then was gone, swallowed by the gloom of the night. Now, the watchman was a brave fellow, and inclined to be inquisitive. He slipped off his shoes and crept after her.

Madame Brandt glided straight to the little dressing-room wherein lay the mangled body of the Legionary. The watchman had not dared to bring his lantern, and it was, therefore, difficult for him to see what was happening, but at the same time he managed to observe quite enough. He glimpsed her white figure kneeling near the dark shape on the floor; as he watched, she struggled with some drapery or other, and he saw that she was trying to drag away the sheet that covered the corpse. Having apparently achieved her purpose, she remained still for a moment, staring at what she saw; this immobility, which lasted only for a second, was succeeded by a sudden revulsion of feeling more horrible than anything that had gone before; for with all the ferocity of a starving animal she flung herself upon the body, shaking it, gripping it tightly to steady its leaden weight while she thrust her face, her mouth, down upon that torn and bleeding throat . . . then

in the distant menagerie the lions and tigers broke the silence of the night with sudden tumult.

"Yes," said the juggler, after a pause, "we liked Anatole. He was a good comrade, although, mind you, he had probably been a murderer, and most certainly a thief. But in the Circus Brandt, you know, that means nothing at all."

"Where is the Circus Brandt now?" I asked, after another pause.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Poland, I think, or possibly Peru. How can I tell? The Brandts are gipsies, nomads. Here to-day, gone to-morrow. Possibly they travel fast because there is always something to hush up. But who can say? The devil has an admirable habit of looking after his friends."

I was silent, for I was thinking both of Lya Brandt and Anatole. Suddenly I felt rather sick.

"Look here," I said, "do you mind if we don't talk any more about the Circus Brandt for the moment?"

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Nigel Kneale

When he stuck them sideways out of the bed, his legs felt as if they were doing a new thing, something they did not understand.

"Dress quickly, now," said Mamma. "It is easy to catch cold after being so long in bed. I shall call your sister to help you."

It was hard to keep upright. His legs were still sore in the places where they bent; his arms, too, when he held them up to go through sleeves.

"Feel funny?" said his sister Gladys. "Hold on to the bedpost while I fasten these buttons. Why, Raymond, I do believe you've grown taller in bed, dear!"

He saw a face low down in the great wardrobe mirror.

For a moment everything in him stopped.

A terrible, thin face. With perfectly round shiny eyes; shadows you could almost see through, that belonged to a thing, not a person; dull, dull, tangled hair.

"Well, how do you look?" said Gladys.

She was putting a kind of jolliness into her voice. Her head came down beside his, to see. She was healthy, different only in the way all people looked in mirrors.

Mamma brought out his green suit with the white curly collar, and laid it on the bed. He watched little creases being smoothed from its special cloth.

"Is it Sunday?" he said.

Lines folded deeper in Mamma's face; her bright eyes fixed on him so hard that he felt guilty, and blinked several times. "No," she said in a low voice, "but you are to wear it to-day. I am taking you to have your photograph made."

Gladys squeezed him. "The doctor says you're a lot better now, Raymond. Won't it be nice?"

He clutched her warm arm. Sideways, through Gladys's hair, he could see Mamma standing still, watching.

"Silly! Little silly boy! He's frightened!" said Gladys. "I had it done last year—you know that. And Mamma has. Everybody has. There, funny boy."

She brushed his hair till it was smooth, and cut off some little pieces and put them in an envelope.

"Glad," he said, "what are you crying for?"

But instead of answering she began to dab his face gently with a puff of her own powder.

It was cold downstairs. Everything felt hard and big, and the linoleum looked like frozen water. "Button his overcoat up," said Mamma. "Stay quietly in that chair, Raymond, until the cab comes. Close to the fire."

The yellow-tiled grate turned on him an unfamiliar, quivering heat that made him blink often. Soon the little pains in his knees died out. He was damp and hot inside his clothes.

"You must behave well," said Mamma. "Do exactly as the gentleman directs. Keep very still for him—that is the most important thing. Are you warm?"

"The cab!" Gladys called. "It's here!" She came into the room. "Oh, how much better he looks! He'll be sorry to leave such a nice fire, won't you, Raymond?"

They got into the cab. There was a strange smell of its leatheriness, and some kind of scent, and pipe smoke were in the thick blue cloth of the seat, and the padded walls. He sat between Mamma and Gladys and watched the tall roofs stream past the window.

"Isn't it fun?" said Gladys. "Listen to the horse's feet! Trotting as fast as he can go. All specially for this little boy!"

When they climbed down the cab's iron steps, it was in a street with shops and high buildings. Mamma stopped to talk to the driver. "Come along," said Gladys. "Up we go. Let me help you, old mister shaky-legs!"

There were many stairs inside the building; whenever they stopped, they saw more leading upwards. "Must be growing while we climb them!" Gladys panted. She had both arms tightly round him, almost carrying him. From below Mamma was calling softly and crossly, "Gladys! Wait a moment, if you please! We must all go in together!"

They came to the last of the stairs, and there was a door that was partly made of glass, with printed letters on it.

'Come," said Mamma.

The man inside wore black clothes. There was no hair on his head, and he had yellow eyes that moved in a sort of liquid. He said, "So this is the little man! A bright chap! In no time you'll be as fit as a fiddle, eh?" He held a hand down to Raymond. The fingers were dark brown, and some of the nails had split until you could see into the cracks.

"Shake hands with the gentleman, Raymond," said Mamma.

He could do nothing.

"Not altogether surprising," said the man, and made a noise like a laugh; but he was not pleased. "Chemicals ruin the hands, madam. Sit down in this nice chair, little man."

He began to talk to Mamma in a whisper, glancing sideways.

The room was very big, with wide windows in the ceiling, but they were painted streaky white and no sky showed through them. Tall shining things made of wood and glass and yellow metal stood everywhere.

"Now," said the man. "Let us begin. The little fellow's overcoat off, please, madam?"

Then Raymond was on a different chair. His legs hung down from the huge leather seat. The man picked up his hand and pressed it on to the chair's cold, knobbed arm as if it belonged there. A polished table stood close by; on it were a book made of leather and a shiny plant like Mamma's. "Genuine antiques," the man was saying to Mamma. "The floral background is hand-painted in oils."

"Tidy his hair, Gladys," whispered Mamma.

A burning brightness came, high up. His eyes itched and watered. The man said, "Don't look at the lights, little fellow," and moved metal things that clicked, under a black cloth.

Raymond shivered. He seemed to be in another place, feeling nothing; like being asleep and not dreaming. He could hear Gladys blowing her nose somewhere behind the brightness.

"Ah, yes," said the man, busy jerking things in the dark, "doesn't he look a picture?" He cleared his throat. "Steady, now! Still as a mouse. See what I've got in my hand?" And, as if he was singing a little tune, "Keep-quite-quite-quiet-still——"

Clack, went his machine. "Now, again——"

When the lights went out at last, everything broke into spots of purple darkness.

"This very evening, madam," the man was saying; on one hand he had put a glove with a head like a monkey. "Without fail. In the circumstances." His voice had a secret in it. "I'm so very sorry——"

On the way downstairs Raymond sneezed.

He lay quietly in the bed. When he moved, all the old pains jumped in his arms and legs, worse than weeks ago. His nose was running.

For a time the sun made slow reddish squares on the wall-paper. Then it disappeared.

His heart began to hurry, bumping until it hurt. The bed seemed to shake. A tiny ticking noise began, somewhere down among the springs; keeping time with his heart.

The door opened; it was Gladys again.

"How now, dear?" she said, and put her cheek against his forehead. "The shivering's stopped, and now he's too hot. Poor little sick Raymond!" She sat on the bed. "I've got a surprise for you," she said. "Lie very still, and I'll show you. It's just this moment arrived.

"Look!" She held something up, high above his chest. A reddish-brown picture. He knew the table in it, the huge chair, the book, the shiny plant, from some time in the past.

There, too, was that terrible face.

After a moment he turned to her. She smiled and nodded. "It's the photograph, darling. Isn't it nice?"

He twisted his head away, and his neck ached. Tears came out of his eyes. He felt angry and frightened; as if he had lost part of himself.

Gladys was tightening the bedclothes round him. "Poor dear! Does it hurt to look up? I'll put the photo here on the mantelpiece, and light the candle so that you can see it all the time. We're going to have another big one, in a frame, to hang downstairs. Mamma is so pleased and—and——" Her voice turned down and trembled.

Suddenly he felt himself held tightly. "Raymond!" Gladys was crying again, and a tear ran down inside his collar. "Oh, my little——"

She squeezed him until he gasped. Then she ran out of the room and the door thudded.

He felt cold and small.

Then, in the same instant, he was enormous. His head stretched from the pillow until it touched the walls. His huge hands were pressing down through the bed to the floor. From far below came the ringing click of the bedspring, like distant hoofbeats.

On the mantelpiece was the little brown picture-child. His face was white and horrible and still. He clung to his chair and stared at Raymond.

The candle was too bright to look at. And when it flickered, the whole room bobbed. Waves of fright rushed over him, up through the bed. His ears were bursting with the noise.

"Keep still," said something inside him. "Keep-quite-quite-quiete-still!"

His head was changing its shape because it was so heavy, and the beating, bubbling heart climbed up to meet it.

"Keep-quite-quiete-quiete-still!" said a voice.

It sounded like his own, but this time it was not inside his head. It was outside, close to his ear. He twisted himself through the hot clothes, crying because it hurt; and looked.

He nearly screamed with terror.

By the bed stood the picture-child. Alive. In the green suit, but now it was reddish-brown. His face was the narrow photograph-face. Like a hollow, china thing.

"Still!" said the boy. "Keep-quite-quiete-quiete-still, little man."

He put out a hand and laid it on the rumpled sheet. Brown fingers, and the nails were split wide open. "Your heart's going to burst," he said.

The whole of the bedroom roared and crackled; yet at the same time it was utterly quiet. The boy smiled. Little bony teeth.

"I'm going to have your tops," he said. "The new ones too."

The bedspring kept time like a great bell.

"And in this bed will be me. Just-keep-quite-quite-quite-still. You won't be anything at all.

"Feel it bursting?"

Downstairs, they were arguing.

"Crass folly——!"

She twisted a handkerchief in her fingers, and tried to hold her lips firm; but they trembled.

"Kindly remember, Doctor, that I am the child's mother! I wanted this memory of him, to keep. More than anything you could ever understand!"

"Nonsense, madam!" said the doctor. "Think I wouldn't have told you if he was dying? But now—I can't answer for what you may have done to-day. Let me see him at once."

Half-way up the first flight of stairs, they heard the cries in his bedroom, and ran the rest of the way. The doctor threw the white door open.

"Raymond!" his mother exclaimed.

He was crouching near the window in his nightshirt, but over it he had pulled the jacket of his best green suit. The trousers were clasped to his chest. His eyes were bright with delirium, staring towards the bed.

"I won't! I won't be still!" The screaming went on, hoarse and terrified.

He did not seem to see them. From the windowledge he snatched a picture-book and held it tightly.

"I won't! No! No! I won't go on the mantelpiece!"

THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS

W. F. Harvey

The story, I suppose, begins with Adrian Borlsover, whom I met when I was a little boy and he an old man. My father had called to appeal for a subscription, and before he left, Mr. Borlsover laid his right hand in blessing on my head. I shall never forget the awe in which I gazed up at his face and realised for the first time that eyes might be dark and beautiful and shining, and yet not able to see.

For Adrian Borlsover was blind.

He was an extraordinary man, who came of an eccentric stock. Borlsover sons for some reason always seemed to marry very ordinary women; which perhaps accounted for the fact that no Borlsover had been a genius, and only one Borlsover had been mad. But they were great champions of little causes, generous patrons of odd sciences, founders of querulous sects, trustworthy guides to the bypath meadows of erudition.

Adrian was an authority on the fertilisation of orchids. He had held at one time the family living at Borlsover Conyers, until a congenital weakness of the lungs obliged him to seek a less rigorous climate in the sunny south-coast watering-place where I had seen him. Occasionally he would relieve one or other of the local clergy. My father described him as a fine preacher, who gave long and inspiring sermons from what many men would have considered unprofitable texts. "An excellent proof," he would add, "of the truth of the doctrine of direct verbal inspiration."

Adrian Borlsover was exceedingly clever with his hands. His penmanship was exquisite. He illustrated all his scientific papers, made his own woodcuts, and carved the reredos that is at present the chief feature of interest in the church at Borlsover Conyers. He had an exceedingly clever knack in cutting silhouettes for young ladies and paper pigs and cows for little children, and made more than one complicated wind-instrument of his own devising.

When he was fifty years old Adrian Borlsover lost his sight. In a wonderfully short time he adapted himself to the new conditions of life. He quickly learnt to read Braille. So marvellous indeed was his sense of touch, that he was still able to maintain his interest in botany. The mere passing of his long supple fingers over a flower was sufficient means for its identification, though occasionally he would use his lips. I have found several letters of his among my father's correspondence; in no case was there anything to show that he was afflicted with blindness, and this in spite of the fact that he exercised undue economy in the spacing of lines. Towards the close of his life Adrian Borlsover was credited with powers of touch that seemed almost uncanny. It has been said that he could tell at once the colour of a ribbon placed between his fingers. My father would neither confirm nor deny the story.

Adrian Borlsover was a bachelor. His elder brother, Charles, had married late in life, leaving one son, Eustace, who lived in the gloomy Georgian mansion of Borlsover Conyers, where he could work undisturbed in collecting material for his great book on heredity.

Like his uncle, he was a remarkable man. The Borlsovers had always been born naturalists, but Eustace possessed in a special degree the power of systematising his knowledge. He had received his university education in Germany; and then, after post-graduate work in Vienna and Naples, had travelled for four years in South America and the East, getting together a huge store of material for a new study into the processes of variation.

He lived alone at Borlsover Conyers with Saunders, his secretary, a man who bore a somewhat dubious reputation in the district, but whose powers as a mathematician, combined with his business abilities, were invaluable to Eustace.

Uncle and nephew saw little of each other. The visits of Eustace were confined to a week in the summer or autumn—tedious weeks, that dragged almost as slowly as the bath-chair in which the old man was drawn along the sunny sea-front. In their way the two men were fond of each other, though their intimacy would, doubtless, have been greater, had they shared the same religious views. Adrian held to the old-

fashioned evangelical dogmas of his early manhood; his nephew for many years had been thinking of embracing Buddhism. Both men possessed, too, the reticence the Borlsovers had always shown, and which their enemies sometimes called hypocrisy. With Adrian it was a reticence as to the things he had left undone; but with Eustace it seemed that the curtain which he was so careful to leave undrawn hid something more than a half-empty chamber.

Two years before his death Adrian Borlsover developed, unknown to himself, the not uncommon power of automatic writing. Eustace made the discovery by accident. Adrian was sitting reading in bed, the forefinger of his left hand tracing the Braille characters, when his nephew noticed that a pencil the old man held in his right hand was moving slowly along the opposite page. He left his seat in the window and sat down beside the bed. The right hand continued to move, and now he could see plainly that they were letters and words which it was forming.

"Adrian Borlsover," wrote the hand, "Eustace Borlsover, Charles Borlsover, Francis Borlsover, Sigismund Borlsover, Adrian Borlsover, Eustace Borlsover, Saville Borlsover B. for Borlsover. Honesty is the Best Policy. Beautiful Belinda Borlsover."

"What curious nonsense!" said Eustace to himself.

"King George ascended the throne in 1760," wrote the hand. "Crowd, a noun of multitude; a collection of individuals. Adrian Borlsover, Eustace Borlsover."

"It seems to me," said his uncle, closing the book, "that you had much better make the most of the afternoon sunshine and take your walk now."

"I think perhaps I will," Eustace answered as he picked up the volume. "I won't go far, and when I come back, I can read to you those articles in *Nature* about which we were speaking."

He went along the promenade, but stopped at the first shelter, and, seating himself in the corner best protected from the wind, he examined the book at leisure. Nearly every page was scored with a meaningless jumble of pencil-marks; rows of capital letters, short words, long words, complete sentences, copy-book tags. The whole thing, in fact, had the appearance

of a copy-book, and, on a more careful scrutiny, Eustace thought that there was ample evidence to show that the handwriting at the beginning of the book, good though it was, was not nearly so good as the handwriting at the end.

He left his uncle at the end of October with a promise to return early in December. It seemed to him quite clear that the old man's power of automatic writing was developing rapidly, and for the first time he looked forward to a visit that would combine duty with interest.

But on his return he was at first disappointed. His uncle, he thought, looked older. He was listless, too, preferring others to read to him and dictating nearly all his letters. Not until the day before he left had Eustace an opportunity of observing Adrian Borlsover's new-found faculty.

The old man, propped up in bed with pillows, had sunk into a light sleep. His two hands lay on the coverlet. His left hand tightly clasping his right. Eustace took an empty manuscript-book and placed a pencil within reach of the fingers of the right hand. They snatched at it eagerly, then dropped the pencil to loose the left hand from its restraining grasp.

"Perhaps to prevent interference I had better hold that hand," said Eustace to himself, as he watched the pencil. Almost immediately it began to write.

"Blundering Borlsovers, unnecessarily unnatural, extraordinarily eccentric, culpably curious."

"Who are you?" asked Eustace in a low voice.

"Never you mind," wrote the hand of Adrian.

"Is it my uncle who is writing?"

"Oh my prophetic soul, mine uncle!"

"Is it anyone I know?"

"Silly Eustace, you'll see me very soon."

"When shall I see you?"

"When poor old Adrian's dead."

"Where shall I see you?"

"Where shall you not?"

Instead of speaking his next question, Eustace wrote it. "What is the time?"

The fingers dropped the pencil and moved three or four times across the paper. Then, picking up the pencil, they

wrote: "Ten minutes before four. Put your book away, Eustace. Adrian mustn't find us working at this sort of thing. He doesn't know what to make of it, and I won't have poor old Adrian disturbed. Au revoir!"

Adrian Borlsover awoke with a start.

"I've been dreaming again," he said; "such queer dreams of leaguered cities and forgotten towns. You were mixed up in this one, Eustace, though I can't remember how. Eustace, I want to warn you. Don't walk in doubtful paths. Choose your friends well. Your poor grandfather . . ."

A fit of coughing put an end to what he was saying, but Eustace saw that the hand was still writing. He managed unnoticed to draw the book away. "I'll light the gas," he said, "and ring for tea." On the other side of the bed-curtain he saw the last sentences that had been written.

"It's too late, Adrian," he said. "We're friends already, aren't we, Eustace Borlsover?"

On the following day Eustace left. He thought his uncle looked ill when he said good-bye, and the old man spoke despondently of the failure his life had been.

"Nonsense, Uncle," said his nephew. "You have got over your difficulties in a way not one in a hundred thousand would have done. Everyone marvels at your splendid perseverance in teaching your hand to take the place of your lost sight. To me it's been a revelation of the possibilities of education."

"Education," said his uncle dreamily, as if the word had started a new train of thought. "Education is good so long as you know to whom and for what purpose you give it. But with the lower orders of men, the base and more sordid spirits, I have grave doubts as to its results. Well, good-bye, Eustace; I may not see you again. You are a true Borlsover, with all the Borlsover faults. Marry, Eustace. Marry some good, sensible girl. And if by any chance I don't see you again, my will is at my solicitors. I've not left you any legacy, because I know you're well provided for; but I thought you might like to have my books. Oh, and there's just one other thing. You know, before the end people often lose control over themselves and make absurd requests. Don't pay any attention to them, Eustace. Good-bye!" and he held out his hand. Eustace took it. It remained in his a fraction of a second

longer than he had expected and gripped him with a virility that was surprising. There was, too, in its touch a subtle sense of intimacy.

"Why, Uncle," he said, "I shall see you alive and well for many long years to come."

Two months later Adrian Borlsover died.

Eustace Borlsover was in Naples at the time. He read the obituary notice in the *Morning Post* on the day announced for the funeral.

"Poor old fellow!" he said. "I wonder whether I shall find room for all his books."

The question occurred to him again with greater force when, three days later, he found himself standing in the library at Borlsover Conyers, a huge room built for use and not for beauty in the year of Waterloo by a Borlsover who was an ardent admirer of the great Napoleon. It was arranged on the plan of many college libraries, with tall projecting bookcases forming deep recesses of dusty silence, fit graves for the old hates of forgotten controversy, the dead passions of forgotten lives. At the end of the room, behind the bust of some unknown eighteenth-century divine, an ugly iron corkscrew stair led to a shelf-lined gallery. Nearly every shelf was full.

"I must talk to Saunders about it," said Eustace. "I suppose that we shall have to have the billiard-room fitted up with bookshelves."

The two men met for the first time after many weeks in the dining-room that evening.

"Hallo!" said Eustace, standing before the fire with his hands in his pockets. "How goes the world, Saunders? Why these dress togs?" He himself was wearing an old shooting-jacket. He did not believe in mourning, as he had told his uncle on his last visit; and, though he usually went in for quiet-coloured ties, he wore this evening one of an ugly red, in order to shock Morton, the butler, and to make them thrash out the whole question of mourning for themselves in the servants' hall. Eustace was a true Borlsover. "The world," said Saunders, "goes the same as usual, confoundedly slow.

The dress togs are accounted for by an invitation from Captain Lockwood to bridge."

"How are you getting there?"

"There's something the matter with the car, so I've told Jackson to drive me round in the dogcart. Any objection?"

"Oh dear me, no! We've had all things in common for far too many years for me to raise objections at this hour of the day."

"You'll find your correspondence in the library," went on Saunders. "Most of it I've seen to. There are a few private letters I haven't opened. There's also a box with a rat or something inside it that came by the evening post. Very likely it's the six-toed beast Terry was sending us to cross with the four-toed albino. I didn't look because I didn't want to mess up my things; but I should gather from the way it's jumping about that it's pretty hungry."

"Oh, I'll see to it," said Eustace, "while you and the captain earn an honest penny."

Dinner over and Saunders gone, Eustace went into the library. Though the fire had been lit, the room was by no means cheerful.

"We'll have all the lights on, at any rate," he said, as he turned the switches. "And, Morton," he added, when the butler brought the coffee, "get me a screwdriver or something to undo this box. Whatever the animal is, he's kicking up the deuce of a row. What is it? Why are you dawdling?"

"If you please, sir, when the postman brought it, he told me that they'd bored the holes in the lid at the post office. There were no breathing holes in the lid, sir, and they didn't want the animal to die. That is all, sir."

"It's culpably careless of the man, whoever he was," said Eustace, as he removed the screws, "packing an animal like this in a wooden box with no means of getting air. Confound it all! I meant to ask Morton to bring me a cage to put it in. Now I suppose I shall have to get one myself."

He placed a heavy book on the lid from which the screws had been removed, and went into the billiard-room. As he came back into the library with an empty cage in his hand, he heard the sound of something falling, and then of something scuttling along the floor.

"Bother it! The beast's got out. How in the world am I to find it again in this library?"

To search for it did indeed seem hopeless. He tried to follow the sound of the scuttling in one of the recesses, where the animal seemed to be running behind the books in the shelves; but it was impossible to locate it. Eustace resolved to go on quietly reading. Very likely the animal might gain confidence and show itself. Saunders seemed to have dealt in his usual methodical manner with most of the correspondence. There were still the private letters.

What was that? Two sharp clicks and the lights in the hideous candelabras that hung from the ceiling suddenly went out.

"I wonder if something has gone wrong with the fuse," said Eustace, as he went to the switches by the door. Then he stopped. There was a noise at the other end of the room, as if something was crawling up the iron corkscrew stairs. "If it's gone into the gallery," he said, "well and good." He hastily turned on the lights, crossed the room, and climbed up the stair. But he could see nothing. His grandfather had placed a little gate at the top of the stair, so that children could run and romp in the gallery without fear of accident. This Eustace closed, and, having considerably narrowed the circle of his search, returned to his desk by the fire.

How gloomy the library was! There was no sense of intimacy about the room. The few busts that an eighteenth-century Borlsover had brought back from the grand tour might have been in keeping in the old library. Here they seemed out of place. They made the room feel cold in spite of the heavy red damask curtains and great gilt cornices.

With a crash two heavy books fell from the gallery to the floor; then, as Borlsover looked, another, and yet another.

"Very well. You'll starve for this, my beauty!" he said. "We'll do some little experiments on the metabolism of rats deprived of water. Go on! Chuck them down! I think I've got the upper hand." He turned once more to his correspondence. The letter was from the family solicitor. It spoke of his uncle's death, and of the valuable collection of books that had been left to him in the will.

"There was one request [he read] which certainly came

as a surprise to me. As you know, Mr. Adrian Borlsover had left instructions that his body was to be buried in as simple a manner as possible at Eastbourne. He expressed a desire that there should be neither wreaths nor flowers of any kind, and hoped that his friends and relatives would not consider it necessary to wear mourning. The day before his death we received a letter cancelling these instructions. He wished the body to be embalmed (he gave us the address of the man we were to employ—Pennifer, Ludgate Hill), with orders that his right hand should be sent to you, stating that it was at your special request. The other arrangements about the funeral remained unaltered."

"Good lord," said Eustace, "what in the world was the old boy driving at? And what in the name of all that's holy is that?"

Someone was in the gallery. Someone had pulled the cord attached to one of the blinds, and it had rolled up with a snap. Someone must be in the gallery, for a second blind did the same. Someone must be walking round the gallery, for one after the other the blinds sprang up, letting in the moonlight.

"I haven't got to the bottom of this yet," said Eustace, "but I will do, before the night is very much older." And he hurried up the corkscrew stair. He had just got to the top, when the lights went out a second time, and he heard again the scuttling along the floor. Quickly he stole on tiptoe in the dim moonshine in the direction of the noise, feeling, as he went, for one of the switches. His fingers touched the metal knob at last. He turned on the electric light.

About ten yards in front of him, crawling along the floor, was a man's hand. Eustace stared at it in utter amazement. It was moving quickly in the manner of a geometer caterpillar, the fingers humped up one moment, flattened out the next; the thumb appeared to give a crab-like motion to the whole. While he was looking, too surprised to stir, the hand disappeared round the corner. Eustace ran forward. He no longer saw it, but he could hear it, as it squeezed its way behind the books on one of the shelves. A heavy volume had been displaced. There was a gap in the row of books, where it had got in. In his fear lest it should escape him again, he seized the first book that came to his hand and plugged it into

the hole. Then, emptying two shelves of their contents, he took the wooden boards and propped them up in front to make his barrier doubly sure.

"I wish Saunders was back," he said; "one can't tackle this sort of thing alone." It was after eleven, and there seemed little likelihood of Saunders returning before twelve. He did not dare to leave the shelf unwatched, even to run downstairs to ring the bell. Morton, the butler, often used to come round about eleven to see that the windows were fastened, but he might not come. Eustace was thoroughly unstrung. At last he heard steps down below.

"Morton!" he shouted. "Morton!"

"Sir?"

"Has Mr. Saunders got back yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Well, bring me some brandy, and hurry up about it. I'm up in the gallery, you duffer."

"Thanks," said Eustace, as he emptied the glass. "Don't go to bed yet, Morton. There are a lot of books that have fallen down by accident. Bring them up and put them back in their shelves."

Morton had never seen Borlsover in so talkative a mood as on that night. "Here," said Eustace, when the books had been put back and dusted, "you might hold up these boards for me, Morton. That beast in the box got out, and I've been chasing it all over the place."

"I think I can hear it chawing at the books, sir. They're not valuable, I hope? I think that's the carriage, sir; I'll go and call Mr. Saunders."

It seemed to Eustace that he was away for five minutes, but it could hardly have been more than one, when he returned with Saunders. "All right, Morton, you can go now. I'm up here, Saunders."

"What's all the row?" asked Saunders, as he lounged forward with his hands in his pockets. The luck had been with him all the evening. He was completely satisfied, both with himself and with Captain Lockwood's taste in wines. "What's the matter? You look to me to be in an absolutely blue funk."

"That old devil of an uncle of mine," began Eustace—"Oh, I can't explain it all. It's his hand that's been playing

Old Harry all the evening. But I've got it cornered behind these books. You've got to help me to catch it."

"What's up with you, Eustace? What's the game?"

"It's no game, you silly idiot! If you don't believe me, take out one of those books and put your hand in and feel."

"All right," said Saunders; "but wait till I've rolled up my sleeve. The accumulated dust of centuries, eh?" He took off coat, knelt down, and thrust his arm along the shelf.

"There's something there right enough," he said. "It's got a funny, stumpy end to it, whatever it is, and nips like a crab. Ah! no, you don't!" He pulled his hand out in a flash. "Shove in a book quickly. Now it can't get out."

"What was it?" asked Eustace.

"Something that wanted very much to get hold of me. I felt what seemed like a thumb and forefinger. Give me some brandy."

"How are we to get it out of there?"

"What about a landing-net?"

"No good. It would be too smart for us. I tell you, Saunders, it can cover the ground far faster than I can walk. But I think I see how we can manage it. The two books at the ends of the shelf are big ones, that go right back against the wall. The others are very thin. I'll take out one at a time, and you slide the rest along, until we have it squashed between the end two."

It certainly seemed to be the best plan. One by one as they took out the books, the space behind grew smaller and smaller. There was something in it that was certainly very much alive. Once they caught sight of fingers feeling for a way of escape. At last they had it pressed between the two big books.

"There's muscle there, if there isn't warm flesh and blood," said Saunders, as he held them together. "It seems to be a hand right enough, too. I suppose this is a sort of infectious hallucination. I've read about such cases before."

"Infectious fiddlesticks!" said Eustace, his face white with anger; "bring the thing downstairs. We'll get it back into the box."

It was not altogether easy, but they were successful at last. "Drive in the screws," said Eustace; "we won't run any risks. Put the box in this old desk of mine. There's nothing in it

that I want. Here's the key. Thank goodness there's nothing wrong with the lock."

"Quite a lively evening," said Saunders. "Now let's hear more about your uncle."

They sat up together until early morning. Saunders had no desire for sleep. Eustace was trying to explain and to forget; to conceal from himself a fear that he had never felt before—the fear of walking alone down the long corridor to his bedroom.

"Whatever it was," said Eustace to Saunders on the following morning, "I propose that we drop the subject. There's nothing to keep us here for the next ten days. We'll motor up to the Lakes and get some climbing."

"And see nobody all day, and sit bored to death with each other every night. Not for me, thanks. Why not run up to town? Run's the exact word in this case, isn't it? We're both in such a blessed funk. Pull yourself together, Eustace, and let's have another look at the hand."

"As you like," said Eustace; "there's the key."

They went into the library and opened the desk. The box was as they had left it on the previous night.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Eustace.

"I am waiting for you to volunteer to open the lid. However, since you seem to funk it, allow me. There doesn't seem to be the likelihood of any rumpus this morning at all events." He opened the lid and picked out the hand.

"Cold?" asked Eustace.

"Tepid. A bit below blood heat by the feel. Soft and supple too. If it's the embalming, it's a sort of embalming I've never seen before. Is it your uncle's hand?"

"Oh yes, it's his all right," said Eustace. "I should know those long fingers anywhere. Put it back in the box, Saunders. Never mind about the screws. I'll lock the desk, so that there'll be no chance of its getting out. We'll compromise by motoring up to town for a week. If we can get off soon after lunch, we ought to be at Grantham or Stamford by night."

"Right," said Saunders, "and to-morrow—oh, well, by

to-morrow we shall have forgotten all about this beastly thing."

If, when the morrow came, they had not forgotten, it was certainly true that at the end of the week they were able to tell a very vivid ghost-story at the little supper Eustace gave on Hallow-e'en.

"You don't want us to believe that it's true, Mr. Borlsover? How perfectly awful!"

"I'll take my oath on it, and so would Saunders here; wouldn't you, old chap?"

"Any number of oaths," called Saunders. "It was a long thin hand, you know, and it gripped me just like that."

"Don't, Mr. Saunders! Don't! How perfectly horrid! Now tell us another one, do! Only a really creepy one, please."

"Here's a pretty mess!" said Eustace on the following day, as he threw a letter across the table to Saunders. "It's your affair, though. Mrs. Merrit, if I understand it, gives a month's notice."

"Oh, that's quite absurd on Mrs. Merrit's part," replied Saunders. "She doesn't know what she's talking about. Let's see what she says."

"Dear Sir [he read]. This is to let you know that I must give you a month's notice as from Tuesday, the 13th. For a long time I've felt the place too big for me; but when Jane Parfit and Emma Laidlaw go off with scarcely as much as an 'If you please,' after frightening the wits out of the other girls, so that they can't turn out a room by themselves or walk alone down the stairs for fear of treading on half-frozen toads or hearing it run along the passages at night, all I can say is that it's no place for me. So I must ask you, Mr. Borlsover, sir, to find a new housekeeper, that has no objection to large and lonely houses, which some people do say, not that I believe them for a minute, my poor mother always having been a Wesleyan, are haunted.

Yours faithfully,

ELIZABETH MERRIT.

"P.S.—I should be obliged if you would give my respects to Mr. Saunders. I hope that he won't run any risks with his cold."

"Saunders," said Eustace, "you've always had a wonderful way with you in dealing with servants. You mustn't let poor old Merrit go."

"Of course she shan't go," said Saunders. "She's probably only angling for a rise in salary. I'll write to her this morning."

"No. There's nothing like a personal interview. We've had enough of town. We'll go back to-morrow, and you must work your cold for all it's worth. Don't forget that it's got on to the chest, and will require weeks of feeding up and nursing."

"All right; I think I can manage Mrs. Merrit."

But Mrs. Merrit was more obstinate than he had thought. She was very sorry to hear of Mr. Saunders's cold, and how he lay awake all night in London coughing; very sorry indeed. She'd change his room for him gladly and get the south room aired, and wouldn't he have a hot basin of bread and milk last thing at night? But she was afraid that she would have to leave at the end of the month.

"Try her with an increase of salary," was the advice of Eustace.

It was no use. Mrs. Merrit was obdurate, though she knew of a Mrs. Goddard, who had been housekeeper to Lord Gargrave, who might be glad to come at the salary mentioned.

"What's the matter with the servants, Morton?" asked Eustace that evening, when he brought the coffee into the library. "What's all this about Mrs. Merrit wanting to leave?"

"If you please, sir, I was going to mention it myself. I have a confession to make, sir. When I found your note, asking me to open that desk and take out the box with the rat, I broke the lock, as you told me, and was glad to do it, because I could hear the animal in the box making a great noise, and I thought it wanted food. So I took out the box, sir, and got a cage, and was going to transfer it, when the animal got away."

"What in the world are you talking about? I never wrote any such note."

"Excuse me, sir; it was the note I picked up here on the floor on the day you and Mr. Saunders left. I have it in my pocket now."

It certainly seemed to be in Eustace's handwriting. It was written in pencil, and began somewhat abruptly.

"Get a hammer, Morton," he read, "or some other tool and break open the lock in the old desk in the library. Take out the box that is inside. You need not do anything else. The lid is already open. Eustace Borlsover."

"And you opened the desk?"

"Yes, sir; and, as I was getting the cage ready, the animal hopped out."

"What animal?"

"The animal inside the box, sir."

"What did it look like?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't tell you," said Morton, nervously. "My back was turned, and it was half-way down the room when I looked up."

"What was its colour?" asked Saunders. "Black?"

"Oh no, sir; a greyish white. It crept along in a very funny way, sir. I don't think it had a tail."

"What did you do then?"

"I tried to catch it; but it was no use. So I set the rat-traps and kept the library shut. Then that girl, Emma Laidlaw, left the door open when she was cleaning, and I think it must have escaped."

"And you think it is the animal that's been frightening the maids?"

"Well no, sir, not quite. They said it was—you'll excuse me, sir—a hand that they saw. Emma trod on it once at the bottom of the stairs. She thought then it was a half-frozen toad, only white. And then Parfit was washing up the dishes in the scullery. She wasn't thinking about anything in particular. It was close on dusk. She took her hands out of the water and was drying them absentminded like on the roller towel, when she found she was drying someone else's hand as well, only colder than hers."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Saunders.

"Exactly, sir; that's what I told her; but we couldn't get her to stop."

"You don't believe all this?" said Eustace, turning suddenly towards the butler.

"Me, sir? Oh no, sir! I've not seen anything."

"Nor heard anything?"

"Well, sir, if you must know, the bells do ring at odd times, and there's nobody there when we go; and when we go round to draw the blinds of a night, as often as not somebody's been there before us. But, as I says to Mrs. Merrit, a young monkey might do wonderful things, and we all know that Mr. Borlsover has had some strange animals about the place."

"Very well, Morton, that will do."

"What do you make of it?" asked Saunders, when they were alone. "I mean of the letter he said you wrote."

"Oh, that's simple enough," said Eustace. "See the paper it's written on? I stopped using that paper years ago, but there were a few odd sheets and envelopes left in the old desk. We never fastened up the lid of the box before locking it in. The hand got out, found a pencil, wrote this note, and shoved it through the crack on to the floor, where Morton found it. That's plain as daylight."

"But the hand couldn't write!"

"Couldn't it? You've not seen it do the things I've seen." And he told Saunders more of what had happened at Eastbourne.

"Well," said Saunders, "in that case we have at least an explanation of the legacy. It was the hand which wrote, unknown to your uncle, that letter to your solicitor bequeathing itself to you. Your uncle had no more to do with that request than I. In fact, it would seem that he had some idea of this automatic writing and feared it."

"Then if it's not my uncle, what is it?"

"I suppose some people might say that a disembodied spirit had got your uncle to educate and prepare a little body for it. Now it's got into that little body and is off on its own."

"Well, what are we to do?"

"We'll keep our eyes open," said Saunders, "and try to catch it. If we can't do that, we shall have to wait till the bally clockwork runs down. After all, if it's flesh and blood, it can't live for ever."

For two days nothing happened. The Saunders saw it sliding down the banister in the hall. He was taken unawares and lost a full second before he started in pursuit, only to find

that the thing had escaped him. Three days later Eustace, writing alone in the library at night, saw it sitting on an open book at the other end of the room. The fingers crept over the page, as if it were reading; but before he had time to get up from his seat, it had taken the alarm, and was pulling itself up the curtains. Eustace watched it grimly, as it hung on to the cornice with three fingers and flicked thumb and forefinger at him in an expression of scornful derision.

"I know what I'll do," he said. "If I only get it into the open, I'll set the dogs on to it."

He spoke to Saunders of the suggestion.

"It's a jolly good idea," he said; "only we won't wait till we find it out of doors. We'll get the dogs. There are the two terriers and the under-keeper's Irish mongrel, that's on to rats like a flash. Your spaniel has not got spirit enough for this sort of game."

They brought the dogs into the house, and the keeper's Irish mongrel chewed up the slippers, and the terriers tripped up Morton, as he waited at table; but all three were welcome. Even false security is better than no security at all.

For a fortnight nothing happened. Then the hand was caught, not by the dogs, but by Mrs. Merrit's grey parrot. The bird was in the habit of periodically removing the pins that kept its seed- and water-bins in place, and of escaping through the holes in the side of the cage. When once at liberty, Peter would show no inclination to return, and would often be about the house for days. Now, after six consecutive weeks of captivity, Peter had again discovered a new way of unloosing his bolts and was at large, exploring the tapestried forests of the curtains and singing songs in praise of liberty from cornice and picture-rail.

"It's no use your trying to catch him," said Eustace to Mrs. Merrit, as she came into the study one afternoon towards dusk with a step-ladder. "You'd much better leave Peter alone. Starve him into surrender, Mrs. Merrit; and don't leave bananas and seed about for him to peck at when he fancies he's hungry. You're far too soft-hearted."

"Well, sir, I see he's right out of reach now on that picture-rail; so, if you wouldn't mind closing the door, sir, when you leave the room, I'll bring his cage in to-night and

put some meat inside it. He's that fond of meat, though it does make him pull out his feathers to suck the quills. They *do* say that if you cook——"

"Never mind, Mrs. Merrit," said Eustace, who was busy writing; "that will do; I'll keep an eye on the bird."

For a short time there was silence in the room.

"Scratch poor Peter," said the bird. "Scratch poor old Peter!"

"Be quiet, you beastly bird!"

"Poor old Peter! Scratch poor Peter; do!"

"I'm more likely to wring your neck, if I get hold of you." He looked up at the picture-rail, and there was the hand, holding on to a hook with three fingers, and slowly scratching the head of the parrot with the fourth. Eustace ran to the bell and pressed it hard; then across to the window, which he closed with a bang. Frightened by the noise, the parrot shook its wings preparatory to flight, and, as it did so, the fingers of the hand got hold of it by the throat. There was a shrill scream from Peter, as he fluttered across the room, wheeling round in circles that ever descended, borne down under the weight that clung to him. The bird dropped at last quite suddenly, and Eustace saw fingers and feathers rolled into an inextricable mass on the floor. The struggle abruptly ceased, as finger and thumb squeezed the neck; the bird's eyes rolled up to show the whites, and there was a faint, half-choked gurgle. But, before the fingers had time to loose their hold, Eustace had them in his own.

"Send Mr. Saunders here at once," he said to the maid who came in answer to the bell. "Tell him I want him immediately."

Then he went with the hand to the fire. There was a ragged gash across the back, where the bird's beak had torn it, but no blood oozed from the wound. He noted with disgust that the nails had grown long and discoloured.

"I'll burn the beastly thing," he said. But he could not burn it. He tried to throw it into the flames, but his own hands, as if impelled by some old primitive feeling, would not let him. And so Saunders found him, pale and irresolute, with the hand still clasped tightly in his fingers.

"I've got it at last," he said, in a tone of triumph.

"Good, let's have a look at it."

"Not when it's loose. Get me some nails and a hammer and a board of some sort."

"Can you hold it all right?"

"Yes, the thing's quite limp; tired out with throttling poor old Peter, I should say."

"And now," said Saunders, when he returned with the things, "what are we going to do?"

"Drive a nail through it first, so that it can't get away. Then we can take our time over examining it."

"Do it yourself," said Saunders. "I don't mind helping you with guinea-pigs occasionally, when there's something to be learned, partly because I don't fear a guinea-pig's revenge. This thing's different."

"Oh, my aunt!" he giggled hysterically, "look at it now." For the hand was writhing in agonised contortions, squirming and wriggling upon the nail like a worm upon the hook.

"Well," said Saunders, "you've done it now. I'll leave you to examine it."

"Don't go, in heaven's name! Cover it up, man; cover it up! Shove a cloth over it! Here!" and he pulled off the antimacassar from the back of a chair and wrapped the board in it. "Now get the keys from my pocket and open the safe. Chuck the other things out. Oh, lord, it's getting itself into frightful knots! Open it quick!" He threw the thing in and banged the door.

"We'll keep it there till it dies," he said. "May I burn in hell, if I ever open the door of that safe again."

Mrs. Merrit departed at the end of the month. Her successor, Mrs. Handyside, certainly was more successful in the management of the servants. Early in her rule she declared that she would stand no nonsense, and gossip soon withered and died.

"I shouldn't be surprised if Eustace married one of these days," said Saunders. "Well, I'm in no hurry for such an event. I know him far too well for the future Mrs. Borlsover

to like me. It will be the same old story again; a long friendship slowly made—marriage—and a long friendship quickly forgotten."

But Eustace did not follow the advice of his uncle and marry. Old habits crept over and covered his new experience. He was, if anything, less morose, and showed a great inclination to take his natural part in country society.

Then came the burglary. The men, it was said, broke into the house by way of the conservatory. It was really little more than an attempt, for they only succeeded in carrying away a few pieces of plate from the pantry. The safe in the study was certainly found open and empty, but, as Mr. Borlsover informed the police inspector, he had kept nothing of value in it during the last six months.

"Then you're lucky in getting off so easily, sir," the man replied. "By the way they have gone about their business I should say they were experienced cracksmen. They must have caught the alarm when they were just beginning their evening's work."

"Yes," said Eustace, "I suppose I am lucky."

"I've no doubt," said the inspector, "that we shall be able to trace the men. I've said that they must have been old hands at the game. The way they got in and opened the safe shows that. But there's one little thing that puzzles me. One of them was careless enough not to wear gloves, and I'm bothered if I know what he was trying to do. I've traced his fingermarks on the new varnish on the windowsashes in every one of the downstairs rooms. They are very distinctive ones too."

"Right hand or left or both?" asked Eustace.

"Oh, right every time. That's the funny thing. He must have been a foolhardy fellow, and I rather think it was him that wrote that." He took out a slip of paper from his pocket. "That's what he wrote, sir: 'I've got out, Eustace Borlsover, but I'll be back before long.' Some jailbird just escaped, I suppose. It will make it all the easier for us to trace him. Do you know the writing, sir?"

"No," said Eustace. "It's not the writing of anyone I know."

"I'm not going to stay here any longer," said Eustace to

Saunders at luncheon. "I've got on far better during the last six months than I expected, but I'm not going to run the risk of seeing that thing again. I shall go up to town this afternoon. Get Morton to put my things together, and join me with the car at Brighton on the day after to-morrow. And bring the proofs of those two papers with you. We'll run over them together."

"How long are you going to be away?"

"I can't say for certain, but be prepared to stay for some time. We've stuck to work pretty closely through the summer, and I for one need a holiday. I'll engage the rooms at Brighton. You'll find it best to break the journey at Hitchin. I'll wire to you there at the Crown to tell you the Brighton address."

The house he chose at Brighton was in a terrace. He had been there before. It was kept by his old college gyp, a man of discreet silence, who was admirably partnered by an excellent cook. The rooms were on the first floor. The two bedrooms were at the back, and opened out of each other. "Mr. Saunders can have the smaller one, though it is the only one with a fireplace," he said. "I'll stick to the larger of the two, since it's got a bathroom adjoining. I wonder what time he'll arrive with the car."

Saunders came about seven, cold and cross and dirty. "We'll light the fire in the dining-room," said Eustace, "and get Prince to unpack some of the things while we are at dinner. What were the roads like?"

"Rotten. Swimming with mud, and a beastly cold wind against us all day. And this is July. Dear Old England!"

"Yes," said Eustace, "I think we might do worse than leave Old England for a few months."

They turned in soon after twelve.

"You oughtn't to feel cold, Saunders," said Eustace, "when you can afford to sport a great fur-lined coat like this. You do yourself very well, all things considered. Look at those gloves, for instance. Who could possibly feel cold when wearing them?"

"They are far too clumsy, though, for driving. Try them on and see." And he tossed them through the door on to Eustace's bed and went on with his unpacking. A minute

later he heard a shrill cry of terror. "Oh, lord," he heard, "it's in the glove! Quick, Saunders, quick!" Then came a smacking thud. Eustace had thrown it from him. "I've chucked it into the bathroom," he gasped; "it's hit the wall and fallen into the bath. Come now, if you want to help." Saunders, with a lighted candle in his hand, looked over the edge of the bath. There it was, old and maimed, dumb and blind, with a ragged hole in the middle, crawling, staggering, trying to creep up the slippery sides, only to fall back helpless.

"Stay there," said Saunders. "I'll empty a collar-box or something, and we'll jam it in. It can't get out while I'm away."

"Yes, it can," shouted Eustace. "It's getting out now; it's climbing up the plug-chain.—No, you brute, you filthy brute, you don't!—Come back, Saunders; it's getting away from me. I can't hold it; it's all slippery. Curse its claws! Shut the window, you idiot! It's got out!" There was the sound of something dropping on to the hard flagstones below, and Eustace fell back fainting.

For a fortnight he was ill.

"I don't know what to make of it," the doctor said to Saunders. "I can only suppose that Mr. Borlsover has suffered some great emotional shock. You had better let me send someone to help you nurse him. And by all means indulge that whim of his never to be left alone in the dark. I would keep a light burning all night, if I were you. But he *must* have more fresh air. It's perfectly absurd, this hatred of open windows."

Eustace would have no one with him but Saunders. "I don't want the other man," he said. "They'd smuggle it in somehow. I know they would."

"Don't worry about it, old chap. This sort of thing can't go on indefinitely. You know I saw it this time as well as you. It wasn't half so active. It won't go on living much longer, especially after that fall. I heard it hit the flags myself. As soon as you're a bit stronger, we'll leave this place, not bag and baggage, but with only the clothes on our backs, so that it won't be able to hide anywhere. We'll escape it that

way. We won't give any address, and we won't have any parcels sent after us. Cheer up, Eustace! You'll be well enough to leave in a day or two. The doctor says I can take you out in a chair to-morrow."

"What have I done?" asked Eustace. "Why does it come after me? I'm no worse than other men. I'm no worse than you, Saunders; you know I'm not. It was you who was at the bottom of that dirty business in San Diego, and that was fifteen years ago."

"It's not that, of course," said Saunders. "We are in the twentieth century, and even the parsons have dropped the idea of your old sins finding you out. Before you caught the hand in the library, it was filled with pure malevolence—to you and all mankind. After you spiked it through with that nail, it naturally forgot about other people and concentrated its attention on you. It was shut up in that safe, you know, for nearly six months. That gives plenty of time for thinking of revenge."

Eustace Borlsover would not leave his room, but he thought there might be something in Saunderson's suggestion of a sudden departure from Brighton. He began rapidly to regain his strength.

"We'll go on the first of September," he said.

The evening of the thirty-first of August was oppressively warm. Though at midday the windows had been wide open, they had been shut an hour or so before dusk. Mrs. Prince had long since ceased to wonder at the strange habits of the gentlemen on the first floor. Soon after their arrival she had been told to take down the heavy window curtains in the two bedrooms, and day by day the rooms had seemed to grow more bare. Nothing was left lying about.

"Mr. Borlsover doesn't like to have any place where dirt can collect," Saunders had said as an excuse. "He likes to see into all the corners of the room."

"Couldn't I open the window just a little?" he said to Eustace that evening. "We're simply roasting in here, you know."

"No, leave well alone. We're not a couple of boarding-

school misses fresh from a course of hygiene lectures. Get the chessboard out."

They sat down and played. At ten o'clock Mrs. Prince came to the door with a note. "I am sorry I didn't bring it before," she said, "but it was left in the letterbox."

"Open it, Saunders, and see if it wants answering."

It was very brief. There was neither address nor signature.

"Will eleven o'clock to-night be suitable for our last appointment?"

"Who is it from?" asked Borlsover.

"It was meant for me," said Saunders. "There's no answer, Mrs. Prince," and he put the paper into his pocket.

"A dunning letter from a tailor; I suppose he must have got wind of our leaving."

It was a clever lie, and Eustace asked no more questions. They went on with their game.

On the landing outside Saunders could hear the grandfather's clock whispering the seconds, blurring out the quarter-hours.

"Check," said Eustace. The clock struck eleven. At the same time there was a gentle knocking on the door; it seemed to come from the bottom panel.

"Who's there?" asked Eustace.

There was no answer.

"Mrs. Prince, is that you?"

"She is up above," said Saunders; "I can hear her walking about the room."

"Then lock the door; bolt it too. Your move, Saunders."

While Saunders sat with his eyes on the chessboard, Eustace walked over to the window and examined the fastenings. He did the same in Saunders's room, and the bathroom. There were no doors between the three rooms, or he would have shut and locked them too.

"Now, Saunders," he said, "don't stay all night over your move. I've had time to smoke one cigarette already. It's bad to keep an invalid waiting. There's only one possible thing for you to do. What was that?"

"The ivy blowing against the window. There, it's your move now, Eustace."

"It wasn't the ivy, you idiot! It was someone tapping at

the window." And he pulled up the blind. On the outer side of the window, clinging to the sash, was the hand.

"What is it that it's holding?"

"It's a pocketknife. It's going to try to open the window by pushing back the fastener with the blade."

"Well, let it try," said Eustace. "Those fasteners screw down; they can't be opened that way. Anyhow, we'll close the shutters. It's your move, Saunders, I've played."

But Saunders found it impossible to fix his attention on the game. He could not understand Eustace, who seemed all at once to have lost his fear. "What do you say to some wine?" he asked. "You seem to be taking things coolly, but I don't mind confessing that I'm in a blessed funk."

"You've no need to be. There's nothing supernatural about that hand, Saunders. I mean it seems to be governed by the laws of time and space. It's not the sort of thing that vanishes into thin air or slides through oaken doors. And since that's so, I defy it to get in here. We'll leave the place in the morning. I for one have bottomed the depths of fear. Fill your glass, man! The windows are all shuttered; the door is locked and bolted. Pledge me my Uncle Adrian! Drink, man! What are you waiting for?"

Saunders was standing with his glass half raised. "It can get in," he said hoarsely; "it can get in! We've forgotten. There's the fireplace in my bedroom. It will come down the chimney."

"Quick!" said Eustace, as he rushed into the other room; "we haven't a minute to lose. What can we do? Light the fire, Saunders. Give me a match, quick!"

"They must be all in the other room. I'll get them."

"Hurry, man, for goodness sake! Look in the bookcase! Look in the bathroom! Here, come and stand here; I'll look."

"Be quick!" shouted Saunders. "I can hear something!"

"Then plug a sheet from your bed up the chimney. No, here's a match!" He had found one at last, that had slipped into the crack in the floor.

"Is the fire laid? Good, but it may not burn. I know—the oil from that old reading-lamp and this cotton wool. Now the match, quick! Pull the sheet away, you fool! We don't want it now."

There was a great roar from the grate, as the flames shot up. Saunders had been a fraction of a second too late with the sheet. The oil had fallen on to it. It, too, was burning.

"The whole place will be on fire!" cried Eustace, as he tried to beat out the flames with a blanket. "It's no good! I can't manage it. You must open the door, Saunders, and get help."

Saunders ran to the door and fumbled with the bolts. The key was stiff in the lock. "Hurry," shouted Eustace, "or the heat will be too much for me." The key turned in the lock at last. For half a second Saunders stopped to look back. Afterwards he could never be quite sure as to what he had seen, but at the time he thought that something black and charred was creeping slowly, very slowly, from the mass of flames towards Eustace Borlsover. For a moment he thought of returning to his friend; but the noise and the smell of the burning sent him running down the passage, crying: "Fire! Fire!" He rushed to the telephone to summon help, and then back to the bathroom—he should have thought of that before—for water. As he burst into the bedroom there came a scream of terror which ended suddenly, and then the sound of a heavy fall.

This is the story which I heard on successive Saturday evenings from the senior mathematical master at a second-rate suburban school. For Saunders has had to earn a living in a way which other men might reckon less congenial than his old manner of life. I had mentioned by chance the name of Adrian Borlsover, and wondered at the time why he changed the conversation with such unusual abruptness. A week later Saunders began to tell me something of his own history; sordid enough, though shielded with a reserve I could well understand, for it had to cover not only his failings, but those of a dead friend. Of the final tragedy he was at first especially loath to speak; and it was only gradually that I was able to piece together the narrative of the preceding pages. Saunders was reluctant to draw any conclusions. At one time he thought that the fingered beast had been animated by the spirit of Sigismund Borlsover, a sinister eighteenth-century ancestor, who, accord-

ing to legend, built and worshipped in the ugly pagan temple that overlooked the lake. At another time Saunders believed the spirit to belong to a man whom Eustace had once employed as a laboratory assistant, "a black-haired, spiteful little brute," he said, "who died cursing his doctor, because the fellow couldn't help him to live to settle some paltry score with Borlsover."

From the point of view of direct contemporary evidence, Saunders's story is practically uncorroborated. All the letters mentioned in the narrative were destroyed, with the exception of the last note which Eustace received, or rather which he would have received, had not Saunders intercepted it. That I have seen myself. The handwriting was thin and shaky, the handwriting of an old man. I remember the Greek "e" was used in "appointment." A little thing that amused me at the time was that Saunders seemed to keep the note pressed between the pages of his Bible.

I had seen Adrian Borlsover once. Saunders I learnt to know well. It was by chance, however, and not by design, that I met a third person of the story, Morton, the butler. Saunders and I were walking in the Zoological Gardens one Sunday afternoon, when he called my attention to an old man who was standing before the door of the Reptile House.

"Why, Morton," he said, clapping him on the back, "how is the world treating you?"

"Poorly, Mr. Saunders," said the old fellow, though his face lighted up at the greeting. "The winters drag terribly nowadays. There don't seem no summers or springs."

"You haven't found what you were looking for, I suppose?"

"No, sir, not yet; but I shall some day. I always told them that Mr. Borlsover kept some queer animals."

"And what is he looking for?" I asked, when we had parted from him.

"A beast with five fingers," said Saunders. "This afternoon, since he has been in the Reptile House, I suppose it will be a reptile with a hand. Next week it will be a monkey with practically no body. The poor old chap is a born materialist."

AS GAY AS CHEESE

Joan Aiken

Mr. Pol the barber always wore white overalls. He must have had at least six, for every day he was snowy-white and freshly starched as a marguerite, his blue eyes, red face, and bulbous nose appearing incongruously over the top of the bib.

His shop looked like—and was—a kitchen, roughly adopted to barbering with a basin, mirror, and some pictures of beautiful girls on the white-washed walls. It was a long narrow crack of a room with the copper at one end and a tottering flight of steps at the other, leading down to the street; customers waiting their turn mostly sat on the steps in the sun, risking piles and reading *Reveille*.

Mr. Pol rented his upstairs room to an artist, and in the summertime when the customers had been shaved or trimmed they sometimes went on up the stairs and bought a view of the harbour, water or oil, or a nice still-life. The artist had an unlimited supply of these, which he whipped out with the dexterity of a card-sharper.

Both men loved their professions. When the artist was not painting fourteen-by-ten-inch squares for the trippers, he was engaged on huge complicated panels of mermaids and sharks, all mixed up with skulls, roses, and cabbages, while Mr. Pol brooded over the heads of his customers as if he would have liked to gild them.

"Ah, I'm as gay as cheese this morning," he used to say, bustling into his kitchen with a long, gnomish look at the first head of hair waiting to be shorn. "I'll smarten you up till you're like a new button mushroom. . . ."

"Now I'm as bright as a pearl," he would exclaim when the long rays of the early sun felt their way back to the copper with an underwater glimmer.

When Mr. Pol laid hands on a customer's head he knew more about that man than his mother did at birth, or his sweetheart, or confessor—not only his past misdeeds but his

future ones, what he had had for breakfast and would have for supper, the name of his dog, and the day of his death.

This should have made Mr. Pol sad or cynical, but it did not. He remained impervious to his portentous gift. Perhaps this was because the destinies of the inhabitants of a small Cornish town contained nothing very startling, and Mr. Pol's divinings seldom soared higher or lower than a double twenty or a sprained ankle.

He never cut his own hair, and had no need to, for he was as bald as an egg. "It was my own hair falling out that started me thinking on the matter," he told the artist. "All a man's nature comes out in the way his hair grows. It's like a river—watch the currents and you can tell what it's come through, what sort of fish are in it, how fast it's running, how far to the sea."

The artist grunted. He was squatting on the floor, stretching a canvas, and made no reply. He was a taciturn man, who despised the trippers for buying his pink-and-green views.

Mr. Pol looked down at the top of his head and suddenly gave it an affectionate, rumpling pat, as one might to a large woolly dog.

"Ah, that's a nice head of hair! It's a shame you won't let me get at it."

"And have you knowing when I'm going to eat my last bite of bacon? Not likely."

"I wouldn't tell you, my handsome!" said Mr. Pol, very shocked. "I'm not one to go measuring people for their coffins before they're ready to step in. I'm as close as a false tooth. There's Sam now, off his lorry, the old ruin; I could tell a thing or two about him, but do I?" He stumped off down the stairs, letting out a snatch of hymn in his powerful baritone.

"And there's some way," he went on, as he sculpted with his shears round the lorry driver's wicked grey head, "that you can grow turnip from carrot seed under the right moon. Who'd want to do that, I ask you?"

"Shorter round the ears," grumbled Sam, scowling down into the enamel basin.

When the night train from Paddington began to draw down

the narrow valley towards the sea town, Brian and Fanny Dexter stood up stiffly from the seats where they had slept, and started moving their luggage about. Brian was surly and silent, only remarking that it was damned cold and he hoped he could get a shave and a cup of coffee. Fanny glanced doubtfully at her reflection in the little greenish mirror. A white face and narrow eyes, brilliant from lack of sleep, glanced back at her.

"It'll be fine later," she said hopefully. Brian pulled on a sweater without comment. He looked rough but expensive, like a suede shoe. His thick light hair was beginning to grey, but hardly showed it.

"Lady Smythe and Penelope said they'd be getting to Pengelly this week," Brian observed. "We might walk along the cliff path later on and see if they've arrived yet. We can do with some exercise to warm us and they'll be expecting us to call."

"I must do some shopping first. It's early closing, and there's all the food to lay in."

Brian shot her an angry look and she was reminded that although the ice of their marriage seemed at the moment to be bearing, nevertheless there were frightening depths beneath and it was best not to loiter in doubtful spots.

"It won't take long," she said hurriedly.

"It was just an idea," Brian muttered, bundling up a camel-hair overcoat. "Here we are, thank the lord."

It was still only nine in the morning. The town was grey and forbidding, tilted steeply down to a white sea. The fleet was out; the streets smelt of fish and emptiness.

After they had had coffee Brian announced that he was going to get his shave.

"I'll do my shopping and meet you," suggested Fanny.

"No you bloody well won't, or you'll wander off for hours and I shall have to walk half over the town looking for you," snapped Brian. "You could do with a haircut yourself, you look like a Scotch terrier."

"All right."

She threaded her way after him between the empty tables of the café and across the road into Mr. Pol's shop. Mr. Pol was carefully rearranging his tattered magazines.

"Good morning, my handsome," he cautiously greeted Fanny's jeans and sweater and mop of dark hair, assessing her as a summer visitor.

"Can you give me a shave and my wife a haircut, please?" cut in Brian briskly.

Mr. Pol looked from one to the other of them. "I'll just put the kettle on for the shave, sir," he answered, moving leisurely to the inner room. "And then I'll trim the young lady, if you'd like to take a seat in the meanwhile."

Brian preferred to stroll back and lean against the doorpost with his hands in his pockets, while Mr. Pol wreathed Fanny's neck in a spotless towel. Her dark head, narrow as a boy's, was bent forward, and he looked benignly at the swirl of glossy hair, flicked a comb through it, and turned her head gently with the palms of his hands.

As he did so, a shudder like an electric shock ran through him and he started back, the comb between his thumb and forefinger jerking upward like a diviner's rod. Neither of the other two noticed; Brian was looking out into the street, and Fanny had her eyes on her hands which were locked together with white knuckles across a fold of the towel.

After a moment Mr. Pol gingerly replaced his palms on the sides of her head with a pretence of smoothing the downy hair above the ears, and again the shock ran through him. He looked into the mirror, almost expecting to see fish swimming and seaweed floating round her. Death by drowning, and so soon; he could smell salt water and see her thin arm stretched sideways in the wave.

"Don't waste too much time on her," said Brian looking at his watch. "She doesn't mind what she looks like."

Fanny glanced up and met Mr. Pol's eyes in the glass. There was such a terrified appeal in her look that his hands closed instinctively on her shoulders and his lips shaped to form the words: "There, there, my handsome. Never mind," before he saw that her appeal was directed, not to him, but to her own reflection's pathetic power to please.

"That's lovely," she said to Mr. Pol with a faint smile, and stood up, shaking the glossy dark tufts off her. She sat on one of his chairs looking at a magazine while Brian took her place and Mr. Pol fetched his steaming kettle.

"You're visiting the town?" Mr. Pol asked as he rubbed up the lather on his brush. He felt the need for talk.

"Just come off the night train; we're staying here, yes," Brian said shortly.

"It's a pretty place," Mr. Pol remarked. "Plenty of grand walks if you're young and active."

"We're going along to Pengelly by the cliff path this morning," said Brian.

"Oh, but I thought you only said we *might*—" Fanny began incautiously, and then bit off her words.

Brian shot her a look of such hatred that even Mr. Pol caught it and scuttled into the next room for another razor.

"*Will* you stop being so damned negative," Brian muttered to her furiously.

"But the groceries——"

Brian drew back his hand; Fanny flinched uncontrollably. They remained motionless, eyes locked, for a moment, and she paled under the poison of his look.

Then he slowly lowered his hand.

"Oh, to hell with the groceries. We'll eat out. Lady Smythe and Penelope will think it most peculiar if we don't call—they know we're here. I suppose you want to throw away a valuable social contact for the sake of a couple of ounces of tea. I can't think why you need to do this perpetual shopping—Penelope never does."

"I only thought——"

"Never mind what you thought."

Mr. Pol came back and finished the shave.

"That's a nice head of hair, sir," he said, running his hands over it professionally. "Do you want a trim at all?"

"No thanks," replied Brian abruptly. "Chap in the Burlington Arcade always does it for me. Anything wrong?"

Mr. Pol was staring at the ceiling in a puzzled way.

"No—no, sir, nothing. Nothing at all. I thought I saw a bit of rope hanging down, but it must have been fancy." Nevertheless Mr. Pol passed his hand once more above Brian's head with a gesture of someone brushing away cobwebs.

"Will that be all? Thank you, sir. Mind how you go on that path to Pengelly. 'Tis always slippery after the rain, and we've had one or two falls of rock this summer."

"We'll be all right, thanks," said Brian, walking out of the door without listening. "Come on, Fanny." He swung up the street with Fanny almost running behind him.

"Have they gone? Damnation, I thought I could sell them a view of the cliffs," said the artist, coming in with a little canvas. "Hallo, something the matter?" For the barber was standing outside his door and staring in indecision and distress after the two figures, now just taking the turning up to the cliff path.

"No," he said at last, turning heavily back and picking up his broom. "No, I'm as gay as cheese."

And he began sweeping up the feathery dark tufts of hair from his stone floor.

THE HOUND OF DEATH

Agatha Christie

It was from William P. Ryan, American newspaper correspondent, that I first heard of the affair. I was dining with him in London on the eve of his return to New York and happened to mention that on the morrow I was going down to Folbridge.

He looked up and said sharply: "Folbridge, Cornwall?"

Now only about one person in a thousand knows that there is a Folbridge in Cornwall. They always take it for granted that the Folbridge, Hampshire, is meant. So Ryan's knowledge aroused my curiosity.

"Yes," I said. "Do you know it?"

He merely replied that he was darned. He then asked if I happened to know a house called Trearne down there.

My interest increased.

"Very well indeed. In fact, it's to Trearne I'm going. It's my sister's house."

"Well," said William P. Ryan. "If that doesn't beat the band!"

I suggested that he should cease making cryptic remarks and explain himself.

"Well," he said. "To do that I shall have to go back to an experience of mine at the beginning of the war."

I sighed. The events which I am relating took place in 1921. To be reminded of the war was the last thing any man wanted. We were, thank God, beginning to forget. . . . Besides, William P. Ryan on his war experiences was apt, as I knew, to be unbelievably long-winded.

But there was no stopping him now.

"At the start of the war, as I dare say you know, I was in Belgium for my paper—moving about some. Well, there's a little village—I'll call it X. A one horse place if there ever was one, but there's quite a big convent there. Nuns in white what do you call 'em—I don't know the name of the order.

Anyway, it doesn't matter. Well, this little burgh was right in the way of the German advance. The Uhlans arrived——"

I shifted uneasily. William P. Ryan lifted a hand reassuringly.

"It's all right," he said. "This isn't a German atrocity story. It might have been, perhaps, but it isn't. As a matter of fact, the boot's on the other leg. The Huns made for that convent—they got there and the whole thing blew up."

"Oh!" I said, rather startled.

"Odd business, wasn't it? Of course, off hand, I should say the Huns had been celebrating and had monkeyed round with their own explosives. But it seems they hadn't anything of that kind with them. They weren't the high explosive johnnies. Well, then, I ask you, what should a pack of nuns know about high explosive? Some nuns, I should say!"

"It is odd," I agreed.

"I was interested in hearing the peasants' account of the matter. They'd got it all cut and dried. According to them it was a slap-up one hundred per cent efficient first-class modern miracle. It seems one of the nuns had got something of a reputation—a budding saint—went into trances and saw visions. And according to them she worked the stunt. She called down the lightning to blast the impious Hun—and it blasted him all right—and everything else within range. A pretty efficient miracle, that!

"I never really got at the truth of the matter—hadn't time. But miracles were all the rage just then—angels at Mons and all that. I wrote up the thing, put in a bit of sob stuff, and pulled the religious stop out well, and sent it to my paper. It went down very well in the States. They were liking that kind of thing just then.

"But (I don't know if you'll understand this) in writing, I got kinder interested. I felt I'd like to know what really had happened. There was nothing to see at the spot itself. Two walls still left standing, and on one of them was a black powder mark that was the exact shape of a great hound.

"The peasants round about were scared to death of that mark. They called it the Hound of Death and they wouldn't pass that way after dark.

"Superstition's always interesting. I felt I'd like to see

the lady who worked the stunt. She hadn't perished, it seemed. She'd gone to England with a batch of other refugees. I took the trouble to trace her. I found she'd been sent to Trearne, Folbridge, Cornwall."

I nodded.

"My sister took in a lot of Belgian refugees the beginning of the war. About twenty."

"Well, I always meant, if I had time, to look up the lady. I wanted to hear her own account of the disaster. Then, what with being busy and one thing and another, it slipped my memory. Cornwall's a bit out of the way anyhow. In fact, I'd forgotten the whole thing till your mentioning Folbridge just now brought it back."

"I must ask my sister," I said. "She may have heard something about it. Of course, the Belgians have all been repatriated long ago."

"Naturally. All the same, in case your sister does know anything I'll be glad if you pass it on to me."

"Of course I will," I said heartily.

And that was that.

II

It was the second day after my arrival at Trearne that the story recurred to me. My sister and I were having tea on the terrace.

"Kitty," I said, "didn't you have a nun among your Belgians?"

"You don't mean Sister Marie Angelique, do you?"

"Possibly I do," I said cautiously. "Tell me about her."

"Oh! my dear, she was the most uncanny creature. She's still here, you know."

"What? In the house?"

"No, no, in the village. Dr. Rose—you remember Dr. Rose?"

I shook my head.

"I remember an old man of about eighty-three."

"Dr. Laird. Oh! he died. Dr. Rose has only been here a few years. He's quite young and very keen on new ideas. He

took the most enormous interest in Sister Marie Angelique. She has hallucinations and things, you know, and apparently is most frightfully interesting from a medical point of view. Poor thing, she'd nowhere to go—and really was in my opinion quite potty—only impressive, if you know what I mean—well, as I say, she'd nowhere to go, and Dr. Rose very kindly fixed her up in the village. I believe he's writing a monograph or whatever it is that doctors write, about her."

She paused and then said:

"But what do you know about her?"

"I heard a rather curious story."

I passed on the story as I had received it from Ryan. Kitty was very much interested.

"She looks the sort of person who could blast you—if you know what I mean," she said.

"I really think," I said, my curiosity heightened, "that I must see this young woman."

"Do. I'd like to know what you think of her. Go and see Dr. Rose first. Why not walk down to the village after tea?"

I accepted the suggestion.

I found Dr. Rose at home and introduced myself. He seemed a pleasant young man, yet there was something about his personality that rather repelled me. It was too forceful to be altogether agreeable.

The moment I mentioned Sister Marie Angelique he stiffened to attention. He was evidently keenly interested. I gave him Ryan's account of the matter.

"Ah!" he said thoughtfully. "That explains a great deal."

He looked up quickly at me and went on.

"The case is really an extraordinarily interesting one. The woman arrived here having evidently suffered some severe mental shock. She was in a state of great mental excitement also. She was given to hallucinations of a most startling character. Her personality is most unusual. Perhaps you would like to come with me and call upon her. She is really well worth seeing."

I agreed readily.

We set out together. Our objective was a small cottage on the outskirts of the village. Folbridge is a most picturesque place. It lies in the mouth of the river Fol mostly on the east

bank, the west bank is too precipitous for building, though a few cottages do cling to the cliffside there. The doctor's own cottage was perched on the extreme edge of the cliff on the west side. From it you looked down on the big waves lashing against the black rocks.

The little cottage to which we were now proceeding lay inland out of the sight of the sea.

"The district nurse lives here," explained Dr. Rose. "I have arranged for Sister Marie Angelique to board with her. It is just as well that she should be under skilled supervision."

"Is she quite normal in her manner?" I asked curiously.

"You can judge for yourself in a minute," he replied, smiling.

The district nurse, a dumpy pleasant little body, was just setting out on her bicycle when we arrived.

"Good evening, nurse, how's your patient?" called out the doctor.

"She's much as usual, doctor. Just sitting there with her hands folded and her mind far away. Often enough she'll not answer when I speak to her, though for the matter of that it's little enough English she understands even now."

Rose nodded, and as the nurse bicycled away, he went up to the cottage door, rapped sharply and entered.

Sister Marie Angelique was lying in a long chair near the window. She turned her head as we entered.

It was a strange face—pale, transparent looking, with enormous eyes. There seemed to be an infinitude of tragedy in those eyes.

"Good evening, my sister," said the doctor in French.

"Good evening, M. le docteur."

"Permit me to introduce a friend, Mr. Anstruther."

I bowed and she inclined her head with a faint smile.

"And how are you to-day?" inquired the doctor, sitting down beside her.

"I am much the same as usual." She paused and then went on. "Nothing seems real to me. Are they days that pass—or months—or years? I hardly know. Only my dreams seem real to me."

"You still dream a lot, then?"

"Always—always—and, you understand?—the dreams seem more real than life."

"You dream of your own country—of Belgium?"

She shook her head.

"No. I dream of a country that never existed—never. But you know this, M. le docteur. I have told you many times." She stopped and then said abruptly: "But perhaps this gentleman is also a doctor—a doctor perhaps for the diseases of the brain?"

"No, no." Rose was reassuring, but as he smiled I noticed how extraordinarily pointed his canine teeth were, and it occurred to me that there was something wolf-like about the man. He went on:

"I thought you might be interested to meet Mr. Anstruther. He knows something of Belgium. He has lately been hearing news of your convent."

Her eyes turned to me. A faint flush crept into her cheeks.

"It's nothing, really," I hastened to explain. "But I was dining the other evening with a friend who was describing the ruined walls of the convent to me."

"So it was ruined!"

It was a soft exclamation, uttered more to herself than to us. Then looking at me once more she asked hesitatingly: "Tell me, Monsieur, did your friend say how—in what way—it was ruined?"

"It was blown up," I said, and added: "The peasants are afraid to pass that way at night."

"Why are they afraid?"

"Because of a black mark on a ruined wall. They have a superstitious fear of it."

She leaned forward.

"Tell me, Monsieur—quick—quick—tell me! What is that mark like?"

"It has the shape of a huge hound," I answered. "The peasants call it the Hound of Death."

"Ah!"

A shrill cry burst from her lips.

"It is true then—it is true. All that I remember is true. It is not some black nightmare. It happened! It happened!"

"What happened, my sister?" asked the doctor in a low voice.

She turned to him eagerly.

"*I remembered.* There on the steps, I remembered. I remembered the way of it. I used the power as we used to use it. I stood on the altar steps and I bade them to come no farther. I told them to depart in peace. They would not listen, they came on although I warned them. And so——" she leaned forward and made a curious gesture. "And so I loosed the Hound of Death on them . . ."

She lay back on her chair shivering all over, her eyes closed.

The doctor rose, fetched a glass from a cupboard, half-filled it with water, added a drop or two from a little bottle which he produced from his pocket, then took the glass to her.

"Drink this," he said authoritatively.

She obeyed—mechanically as it seemed. Her eyes looked far away as though they contemplated some inner vision of her own.

"But then it is all true," she said. "Everything. The City of the Circles, the People of the Crystal—everything. It is all true."

"It would seem so," said Rose.

His voice was low and soothing, clearly designed to encourage and not to disturb her train of thought.

"Tell me about the City," he said. "The City of Circles, I think you said?"

She answered absently and mechanically.

"Yes—there were three circles. The first circle for the chosen, the second for the priestesses and the outer circle for the priests."

"And in the centre?"

She drew her breath sharply and her voice sank to a tone of indescribable awe.

"The House of the Crystal. . . ."

As she breathed the words, her right hand went to her forehead and her finger traced some figure there.

Her figure seemed to grow more rigid, her eyes closed, she swayed a little—then suddenly she sat upright with a jerk, as though she had suddenly awakened.

"What is it?" she said confusedly. "What have I been saying?"

"It is nothing," said Rose. "You are tired. You want to rest. We will leave you."

She seemed a little dazed as we took our departure.

"Well," said Rose when we were outside. "What do you think of it?"

He shot a sharp glance sideways at me.

"I suppose her mind must be totally unhinged," I said slowly.

"It struck you like that?"

"No—as a matter of fact, she was—well, curiously convincing. When listening to her I had the impression that she actually had done what she claimed to do—worked a kind of gigantic miracle. Her belief that she did so seems genuine enough. That is why——"

"That is why you say her mind must be unhinged. Quite so. But now approach the matter from another angle. Supposing that she did actually work that miracle—supposing that she did, personally, destroy a building and several hundred human beings."

"By the mere exercise of will?" I said with a smile.

"I should not put it quite like that. You will agree that one person could destroy a multitude by touching a switch which controlled a system of mines."

"Yes, but that is mechanical."

"True, that is mechanical, but it is, in essence, the harnessing and controlling of natural forces. The thunderstorm and the power house are, fundamentally, the same thing."

"Yes, but to control the thunderstorm we have to use mechanical means."

Rose smiled.

"I am going off at a tangent now. There is a substance called wintergreen. It occurs in nature in vegetable form. It can also be built up by man synthetically and chemically in the laboratory."

"Well?"

"My point is that there are often two ways of arriving at the same result. Ours is, admittedly, the synthetic way. There might be another. The extraordinary results arrived at by

Indian fakirs for instance, cannot be explained away in any fashion. The things we call supernatural are not necessarily supernatural at all. An electric flashlight would be supernatural to a savage. The supernatural is only the natural of which the laws are not yet understood."

"You mean?" I asked, fascinated.

"That I cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that a human being *might* be able to tap some vast destructive force and use it to further his or her ends. The means by which this was accomplished might seem to us supernatural—but would not be so in reality."

I stared at him.

He laughed.

"It's a speculation, that's all," he said lightly. "Tell me, did you notice a gesture she made when she mentioned the House of the Crystal?"

"She put her hand to her forehead."

"Exactly. And traced a circle there. Very much as a Catholic makes the sign of the cross. Now, I will tell you something rather interesting, Mr. Anstruther. The word crystal having occurred so often in my patient's rambling, I tried an experiment. I borrowed a crystal from someone and produced it unexpectedly one day to test my patient's reaction to it."

"Well?"

"Well, the result was very curious and suggestive. Her whole body stiffened. She stared at it as though unable to believe her eyes. Then she slid to her knees in front of it, murmured a few words—and fainted."

"What were the few words?"

"Very curious ones. She said: '*The Crystal! Then the Faith still lives!*'"

"Extraordinary!"

"Suggestive, is it not? Now the next curious thing. When she came round from her faint she had forgotten the whole thing. I showed her the crystal and asked her if she knew what it was. She replied that she supposed it was a crystal such as fortune tellers used. I asked her if she had ever seen one before. She replied: 'Never, M. le docteur.' But I saw a puzzled look in her eyes. 'What troubles you, my sister?'

I asked. She replied: 'Because it is so strange. I have never seen a crystal before and yet—it seems to me that I know it well. There is something—if only I could remember. . . .' The effort at memory was obviously so distressing to her that I forbade her to think any more. That was two weeks ago. I have purposely been biding my time. To-morrow, I shall proceed to a further experiment."

"With the crystal?"

"With the crystal. I shall get her to gaze into it. I think the result ought to be interesting."

"What do you expect to get hold of?" I asked curiously.

The words were idle ones but they had an unlooked-for result. Rose stiffened, flushed, and his manner when he spoke had changed insensibly. It was more formal, more professional.

"Light on certain mental disorders imperfectly understood. Sister Marie Angelique is a most interesting study."

So Rose's interest was purely professional? I wondered.

"Do you mind if I come along too?" I asked.

It may have been my fancy, but I thought he hesitated before he replied. I had a sudden intuition that he did not want me.

"Certainly. I can see no objection."

He added:

"I suppose you're not going to be down here very long?"

"Only till the day after to-morrow."

I fancied that the answer pleased him. His brow cleared and he began talking of some recent experiments carried out on guinea pigs.

III

I met the doctor by appointment the following afternoon, and we went together to Sister Marie Angelique. To-day, the doctor was all geniality. He was anxious, I thought, to efface the impression he had made the day before.

"You must not take what I said too seriously," he observed, laughing. "I shouldn't like you to believe me a dabbler in occult sciences. The worst of me is I have an infernal weakness for making out a case."

"Really?"

"Yes, and the more fantastic it is, the better I like it."

He laughed as a man laughs at an amusing weakness.

When we arrived at the cottage, the district nurse had something she wanted to consult Rose about, so I was left with Sister Marie Angelique.

I saw her scrutinising me closely. Presently she spoke.

"The good nurse here, she tells me that you are the brother of the kind lady at the big house where I was brought when I came from Belgium?"

"Yes," I said.

"She was very kind to me. She is good."

She was silent, as though following out some train of thought. Then she said:

"M. le docteur, he too is a good man?"

I was a little embarrassed.

"Why, yes. I mean—I think so."

"Ah!" She paused and then said: "Certainly he has been very kind to me."

"I'm sure he has."

She looked up at me sharply.

"Monsieur—you—you who speak to me now—do you believe that I am mad?"

"Why, my sister, such an idea never——"

She shook her head slowly—interrupting my protest.

"Am I mad? I do not know—the things I remember—the things I forget . . ."

She sighed, and at that moment Rose entered the room.

He greeted her cheerily and explained what he wanted her to do.

"Certain people, you see, have a gift for seeing things in a crystal. I fancy you might have such a gift, my sister."

She looked distressed.

"No, no, I cannot do that. To try to read the future—that is sinful."

Rose was taken aback. It was the nun's point of view for which he had not allowed. He changed his ground cleverly.

"One should not look into the future. You are quite right. But to look into the past—that is different."

"The past?"

"Yes—there are many strange things in the past. Flashes come back to one—they are seen for a moment—then gone again. Do not seek to see anything in the crystal since that is not allowed you. Just take it in your hands—so. Look into it—look deep. Yes—deeper—deeper still. You remember, do you not? You remember. You hear me speaking to you. You can answer my questions. Can you not hear me?"

Sister Marie Angelique had taken the crystal as bidden, handling it with a curious reverence. Then, as she gazed into it, her eyes became blank and unseeing, her head drooped. She seemed to sleep.

Gently the doctor took the crystal from her and put it on the table. He raised the corner of her eyelid. Then he came and sat by me.

"We must wait till she wakes. It won't be long, I fancy."

He was right. At the end of five minutes, Sister Marie Angelique stirred. Her eyes opened dreamily.

"Where am I?"

"You are here—at home. You have had a little sleep. You have dreamt, have you not?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I have dreamt."

"You have dreamt of the Crystal?"

"Yes."

"Tell us about it."

"You will think me mad, M. le docteur. For see you, in my dream, the Crystal was a holy emblem. I even figured to myself a second Christ, a Teacher of the Crystal who died for his faith, his followers hunted down—persecuted. . . . But the faith endured.

"Yes—for fifteen thousand full moons—I mean, for fifteen thousand years."

"How long was a full moon?"

"Thirteen ordinary moons. Yes, it was in the fifteenth thousand full moon—of course, I was a Priestess of the Fifth Sign in the House of the Crystal. It was in the first days of the coming of the Sixth Sign . . ."

Her brows drew together, a look of fear passed over her head.

"Too soon," she murmured. "Too soon. A mistake. . . . Ah! yes, I remember! The sixth Sign!"

She half sprang to her feet, then dropped back, passing her hand over her face and murmuring:

"But what am I saying? I am raving. These things never happened."

"Now don't distress yourself."

But she was looking at him in anguished perplexity.

"M. le docteur, I do not understand. Why should I have these dreams—these fancies? I was only sixteen when I entered the religious life. I have never travelled. Yet I dream of cities, of strange people, of strange customs. Why?" She pressed both hands to her head.

"Have you ever been hypnotised, my sister? Or been in a state of trance?"

"I have never been hypnotised, M. le docteur. For the other, when at prayer in the chapel, my spirit has often been caught up from my body, and I have been as one dead for many hours. It was undoubtedly a blessed state, the Reverend Mother said—a state of grace. Ah! yes," she caught her breath. "*I remember, we too called it a state of grace.*"

"I would like to try an experiment, my sister." Rose spoke in a matter-of-fact voice. "It may dispel those painful half-recollections. I will ask you to gaze once more in the crystal. I will then say a certain word to you. You will answer with another. We will continue in this way until you become tired. Concentrate your thoughts on the crystal, not upon the words."

As I once more unwrapped the crystal and gave it into Sister Marie Angelique's hands, I noticed the reverent way her hands touched it. Reposing on the black velvet, it lay between her slim palms. Her wonderful deep eyes gazed into it. There was a short silence, and then the doctor said: "*Hound.*"

Immediately Sister Marie Angelique answered "*Death.*"

IV

I do not propose to give a full account of the experiment. Many unimportant and meaningless words were purposely

introduced by the doctor. Other words he repeated several times, sometimes getting the same answer to them, sometimes a different one.

That evening in the doctor's little cottage on the cliffs we discussed the result of the experiment.

He cleared his throat, and drew his note-book closer to him.

"These results are very interesting—very curious. In answer to the words '*Sixth Sign*,' we get variously *Destruction*, *Purple*, *Hound*, *Power*, then again *Destruction*, and finally *Power*. Later, as you may have noticed, I reversed the method, with the following results. In answer to *Destruction*, I get *Hound*; to *Purple*, *Power*; to *Hound*, *Death* again, and to *Power*, *Hound*. That all holds together, but on a second repetition of *Destruction*, I get *Sea*, which appears utterly irrelevant. To the words '*Fifth Sign*,' I get *Blue*, *Thoughts*, *Bird*, *Blue* again, and finally the rather suggestive phrase *Opening of mind to mind*. From the fact that '*Fourth Sign*' elicits the word *Yellow*, and later *Light*, and that '*First Sign*' is answered by *Blood*, I deduce that each Sign had a particular colour, and possibly a particular symbol, that of the Fifth Sign being a *bird*, and that of the Sixth a *hound*. However, I surmise that the Fifth Sign represented what is familiarly known as telepathy—the opening of mind to mind. The Sixth Sign undoubtedly stands for the Power of Destruction."

"What is the meaning of *Sea*?"

"That I confess I cannot explain. I introduced the word later and got the ordinary answer of *Boat*. To Seventh Sign I got first *Life*, the second time *Love*. To Eighth Sign, I got the answer *None*. I take it therefore that Seven was the sum and number of the signs."

"But the Seventh was not achieved," I said on a sudden inspiration. "Since through the Sixth came *Destruction*!"

"Ah! You think so? But we are taking these—mad ramblings very seriously. They are really only interesting from a medical point of view."

"Surely they will attract the attention of psychic investigators."

The doctor's eyes narrowed. "My dear sir, I have no intention of making them public."

"Then your interest?"

"Is purely personal. I shall make notes on the case, of course."

"I see." But for the first time I felt, like the blind man, that I didn't see at all. I rose to my feet.

"Well, I'll wish you good night, doctor. I'm off to town again to-morrow."

"Ah!" I fancied there was satisfaction, relief perhaps, behind the exclamation.

"I wish you good luck with your investigations," I continued lightly. "Don't loose the Hound of Death on me next time we meet!"

His hand was in mine as I spoke, and I felt the start it gave. He recovered himself quickly. His lips drew back from his long pointed teeth in a smile.

"For a man who loved power, what a power that would be!" he said. "To hold every human being's life in the hollow of your hand!"

And his smile broadened.

V

That was the end of my direct connection with the affair.

Later, the doctor's note-book and diary came into my hands. I will reproduce the few scanty entries in it here, though you will understand that it did not really come into my possession until some time afterwards.

Aug. 5th. Have discovered that by "the Chosen," Sister M.A. means those who reproduced the race. Apparently they were held in the highest honour, and exalted above the Priesthood. Contrast this with early Christians.

Aug. 7th. Persuaded Sister M.A. to let me hypnotise her. Succeeded in inducing hypnotic sleep and trance, but no *rapport* established.

Aug. 9th. Have there been civilisations in the past to which ours is as nothing? Strange if it should be so, and I the only man with the clue to it. . . .

Aug. 12th. Sister M.A. not at all amenable to suggestion

when hypnotised. Yet state of trance easily induced. Cannot understand it.

Aug. 13th. Sister M.A. mentioned to-day that in "state of grace" the "gate must be closed, lest another should command the body." Interesting—but baffling.

Aug. 18th. So the First Sign is none other than . . . (*words erased here*) . . . then how many centuries will it take to reach the Sixth? But if there should be a short-cut to Power . . .

Aug. 20th. Have arranged for M.A. to come here with Nurse. Have told her it is necessary to keep patient under morphia. Am I mad? Or shall I be the Superman, with the Power of Death in my hands?

(Here the entries cease)

V I

It was, I think, on August 29th that I received the letter. It was directed to me, care of my sister-in-law, in a sloping foreign handwriting. I opened it with some curiosity. It ran as follows:

CHER MONSIEUR,—I have seen you but twice, but I have felt I could trust you. Whether my dreams are real or not, they have grown clearer of late . . . And, Monsieur, one thing at all events, the Hound of Death is no dream. . . . In the days I told you of (whether they are real or not, I do not know) He Who was Guardian of the Crystal revealed the Sixth Sign to the people too soon. . . . Evil entered into their hearts. They had the power to slay at will—and they slew without justice—in anger. They were drunk with the lust of Power. When we saw this, We who were yet pure, we knew that once again we should not complete the Circle and come to the Sign of Everlasting Life. He who would have been the next Guardian of the Crystal was bidden to act. That the old might die, and the new, after endless ages, might come again, *he loosed the Hound of Death upon the sea* (being careful not to close the circle), and the sea rose up in the shape of a Hound and swallowed the land utterly . . .

Once before I remembered this—*on the altar steps in Belgium. . . .*

The Dr. Rose, he is of the Brotherhood. He knows the First Sign, and the form of the Second, though its meaning is hidden to all save a chosen few. *He would learn of me the Sixth.* I have withstood him so far—but I grow weak. Monsieur, it is not well that a man should come to power before his time. Many centuries must go by ere the world is ready to have the power of death delivered into its hand . . . I beseech you, Monsieur, you who love goodness and truth, to help me . . . before it is too late.

Your sister in Christ,

MARIE ANGELIQUE

I let the paper fall. The solid earth beneath me seemed a little less solid than usual. Then I began to rally. The poor woman's belief, genuine enough, had almost affected *me*! One thing was clear. Dr. Rose, in his zeal for a case, was grossly abusing his professional standing. I would run down and—

Suddenly I noticed a letter from Kitty amongst my other correspondence. I tore it open.

"Such an awful thing has happened," I read. "You remember Dr. Rose's little cottage on the cliff? It was swept away by a landslide last night, the doctor and that poor nun, Sister Marie Angelique, were killed. The *débris* on the beach is too awful—all piled up in a fantastic mass—from a distance it looks like a great *hound* . . ."

The letter dropped from my hand.

The other facts may be coincidence. A Mr. Rose, whom I discovered to be a wealthy relative of the doctor's, died suddenly that same night—it was said struck by lightning. As far as was known no thunderstorm had occurred in the neighbourhood, but one or two people declared they had heard one peal of thunder. He had an electric burn on him "of a curious shape." His will left everything to his nephew, Dr. Rose.

Now, supposing that Dr. Rose succeeded in obtaining the secret of the Sixth Sign from Sister Marie Angelique. I had always felt him to be an unscrupulous man—he would not shrink at taking his uncle's life if he were sure it could not be brought home to him. But one sentence of Sister Marie

Angelique's letter rings in my brain : ". . . being careful not to Close the Circle. . . ." Dr. Rose did not exercise that care—was perhaps unaware of the steps to take, or even of the need for them. So the Force he employed returned, completing its circuit. . . .

But of course it is all nonsense! Everything can be accounted for quite naturally. That the doctor believed in Sister Marie Angelique's hallucinations merely proves that *his* mind, too, was slightly unbalanced.

Yet sometimes I dream of a continent under the seas where men once lived and attained to a degree of civilisation far ahead of ours. . . .

Or did Sister Marie Angelique remember *backwards*—as some say is possible—and is this City of the Circles in the future and not the past?

Nonsense—of course the whole thing was mere hallucination!

JUDITH

Hjalmar Bergman

The old man sat on a stool by the gateway. To each one who approached he called out :

"Leave my house in peace."

The house was a cottage, consisting of three rooms, a kitchen and two attics. The trees in the garden were bare, the grass frostbitten, so that it could not even be used for grazing. Truly it was not much to watch over, but the old man did not leave his post. He sat there still though it was dusk, and to each one who went by he called out :

"Leave my house in peace."

If any of the enemy soldiers stopped by his gate, he got up, took off his greasy, green cap, and said that death was in the house.

"I speak in your own interest, I have death in the house. If you do not believe me, follow. I will show you. But it is catching, sir, very catching."

The soldier would believe his words, for he himself looked like death.

This house, which harboured death, was the last in the village. When night had fallen a young soldier came and asked for lodging. He had knocked at many doors and found all the beds already occupied. It was impossible for him to find his way to the next house, or village, in the darkness. As for death he feared it as little as a soldier allows himself fear. The old man repeated what he had said to other passers-by, but this one was very young and somewhat overbold. He laughed and said :

"I have heard that tale before. Look here, let me in. I will neither steal nor kill. I only want to sleep."

When the old man told him of death in the house, he was not to be frightened away. He pushed the old man aside, and stepped into the garden. It was so dark that he could not see the door of the house, but went up to a lighted window. The

old man followed him. When they stood together at the window, he said :

"Look, I do not lie. It is my son-in-law in there. He is dead."

There was a bed in the middle of the room, with the head towards the window. On it lay a dead man. He was as young as the soldier, but dead. He was covered by a sheet up to the neck. By the head of the bed sat a young woman, almost a girl. She sat in front of a table on which were placed four lighted candles. The soldier looked more at the girl than at the dead man. He found her beautiful, but rather too dark, and not as pretty as his own sweetheart at home. But after all it was something which did not concern him. He only wanted to sleep. He turned to the old man and said :

"Surely there is a bed in the house, or at least a mattress, or something to lie on?"

"There is," answered the old man. "In the attic there is a bed made up, which my son-in-law used to use before he was married. But, sir, I speak in your own interest, you can see with your own eyes that there is death in the house. It is catching. I beg you to leave my house in peace. I am an old man and have sorrows enough."

The soldier said: "Old fellow, I don't intend to deny myself that bed in the attic. My lying there won't hurt anybody, and it will feel splendid to creep down between sheets again."

He turned a deaf ear to the old man's objections and found his way to the door. The porch was quite dark; he was forced to open the door of the room, where the four candles were burning. Having once opened the door it would have been impolite not to step in and state his errand. He stood at attention just inside the door. The young woman got up slowly and bowed her head.

The soldier said: "Pardon, madame, I merely seek shelter for the night. Would you or someone else show me to the room where your intended used to sleep?"

"The bed is ready. I will fetch water and candles. It is cold; would you like a fire? We always used to have a fire at this time of the year when my betrothed slept up there. He was now my husband. We were married this summer."

The soldier took off his helmet and went up to the bed on tip-toe. He felt he must say something, and asked: "What was his illness?"

"Oh," she said, looking him in the eyes for the first time, "my husband died in the war. He was killed the day before yesterday. From what they told me it happened in a bayonet charge. He had his throat cut."

"Your father . . ." he began. She interrupted:

"Yes, I know. He says we have a catching illness in the house. You did not let yourself be frightened off by that yarn. It is a usual one. Father fears that I should behave badly if I met any of you. But I am not so foolish. Who murdered him? Neither this one nor that one. It was the war?"

"That's true," said the soldier. "It's no use being angry with individuals. It's the war, that's all."

He came a few steps nearer and looked at the dead man. The wife bent forward and showed how the bayonet had cut, right across the throat. The soldier shook his head:

"Yes. It is not pleasant to see them like this. While it is going on it seems all right. But to see them afterwards, and like this at home—it's hard. Yes, your chaps are damn' fine fighters. I was in that charge, too."

"I know," called the woman. "Father thought that our reinforcements had come up and that you would go another way, but I knew you would come here. I heard your signals at mid-day. Father wanted us to hide. But what's the use of that?"

"True," cried the soldier, flushed with eagerness and joy. "We don't hurt anyone; just let us alone and—but it's really nice of you not to be afraid. . . ."

He stopped short, ashamed of his eagerness. He felt so terribly strange here in the enemy country, but it was a feeling that could not be confessed to just anyone. Fortunately, she seemed to be preoccupied with her thoughts. She was bending over the dead man, stroking his hair and forehead in the same gentle, soothing way his sweetheart used to do at home. Then she said:

"We can't go on standing here. I suppose you are hungry?"

She took him into the dining-room, lit the lamp and laid the cloth. She took his helmet and cloak and hung them in the passage. She did not touch the rifle. He did not want to have it out of reach, so when she went into the kitchen he took the opportunity to lay it under the table and kept his foot on the butt. She placed quite a banquet before him. The soldier took up his purse and counted the coins. There were not many.

"Thank you, thank you," he murmured, embarrassed. "Madame is taking altogether too much trouble. . . ."

When she brought two bottles of wine he had to refuse.

"No, really this won't do. I don't want anything so luxurious, and at the moment I am not in funds. . . ."

She smiled a little.

"I say, put that away. It is treachery to one's country to sell food to the enemy. But to feed the hungry can't be wrong, even in war-time."

She poured out a glass of wine.

"Drink. Drink to whoever you choose. Perhaps you have a sweetheart at home? Yes, I can see you have. Eat now and drink. Meanwhile, I will prepare your room."

The soldier ate and drank. He thought: I will eat just sufficient to be satisfied, no more. She is really very decent to me, and it would be taking advantage of her goodness to eat up the lot, though I could easily manage it. If she or the old man would keep me company it would be another matter. But I can't expect that.

After a while she came back. "Why aren't you eating? Don't despise the little the house can offer. Perhaps you think I've poisoned the wine? See here." She poured out a glass, drank half of it, and then handed it to him. He laughed and drank it.

"Oh, I'm not frightened. You are very good. But why won't your father keep me company?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Father has such old-fashioned ideas. He would not break bread with the enemy. But it doesn't do to be so narrow these days. When one's own people are gone one has to put up with the company that comes. Don't you think so? I'm quite

hungry. Just think, I haven't eaten since I last sat at table with my husband. And that's four days ago."

She took a chair and sat down opposite him. He cut the meat and handed her a helping, they drank to each other, they began to speak of this and that, the weather, the bad roads, the destroyed crops. They avoided the war, but he told jolly stories of his home. First he talked of his father and mother and his childhood. He would have liked best to speak of his sweetheart, but did not dare.

She listened attentively, smiling a little when he laughed. Suddenly she asked, "And your sweetheart? You don't say anything about her?" He flushed. There wasn't anything to talk about, just vague plans for the future. She agreed with him.

"Perhaps you will never see her again."

He sighed and thought: Why does she torment me with that? I would like her to sit here beside me, and let me hold her hand in mine. I feel so lonely.

Just then she got up, went to the door and listened. He twisted uneasily on his chair, bent down, and carefully moved the rifle nearer. The woman came back to the table, moved her chair closer to his, telling him that she felt so horribly lonely. "Just think. I've been married only four months, and now I am a widow. You can understand how empty it is, as though the world had come to an end. I haven't anything to think about now, nothing to hope for, nothing to fear. It is dreadful not to have anyone to be fond of . . ."

"You were very fond of him?" he asked.

She did not answer. Her head sank. The pretty curve of her bent neck moved him. He thought: Poor little thing, she is so pretty and so lonely, just like I am. What shall I do now? I don't want to get fond of her, I don't want to, I don't . . . Perhaps I've been drinking too much. Her husband is lying in there. Ugh! Oh, she could never have been in love with him, or why is she sitting here like this? I'd better go up to bed.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She looked up, staring at him with a surprised expression.

"What is my name? You mean my first name? I am called Judith."

"Judith," he repeated, smiling sleepily. "That sounds Biblical; but it's a nice name."

She nodded; then suddenly she said: "What a nice neck you have."

He gave an embarrassed laugh, and made excuses. Without thinking, he had unbuttoned a few buttons of his uniform. Camp manners. He buttoned up. But she did not want him to. Oh, no! He was to feel quite at home. At least for one night he should have a home. As she undid the buttons again she touched his bare neck. He caught her arm and drew her closer. She resisted gently, their feet touched the rifle, and the bayonet hit against the table-leg with a clang of steel. They started.

He laughed. "There you are," he said. "We are sitting here at the table nearly like man and wife, at home. But the bayonet is under the table. *C'est la guerre.*"

She got up quickly and went into the kitchen. Now I have annoyed her, he thought. What a stupid, clumsy fool you are. Thought she would throw herself into your arms at once. Oh, no, she is a decent woman. And you didn't want to do anything to her, you have had too much, that's what's the matter. Now go to bed without saying good-night, she doesn't want to see you.

He got ready and picked up the rifle. As he stood up she came back. She had fetched dessert and a bottle of sherry. He had to make the best of it. They ate and drank. He was on his guard, and behaved as correctly as could be, spoke of indifferent things, and took care to keep his eyes and his thoughts away from the woman. For the last time he drank to her.

"Are you going to bed, too?" he asked.

"No, I am going in to my husband," she answered.

He suspected a rebuke in those words, it annoyed him. He had an overwhelming desire to say something sharp to her. Why are you sitting here, if you really loved your husband? But he controlled himself, and merely said as he raised his glass: "I pity you, my beautiful enemy. But . . . *c'est la guerre.*"

He bowed good-night, and took up his rifle. The old man

lit him up the stairs. He locked the door, putting on the hook, and began to undress.

The room was quite small and low. The bed stood in the middle of the floor, nicely bedded with sheets. Oh, that was going to feel fine. On the bedside table four candles were lighted. What extravagance. He put out two of them, and then kicked off his boots. Suddenly he crept over to the door in his stockinged feet, and listened. The stairs creaked. He opened the door and whispered softly into the darkness: "Judith . . . Judith . . ."

Silence. He closed the door slowly, but did not latch it. He got into bed and put out the lights. He said to himself: I'm only going to think about the folks at home. . . .

In a few seconds he was asleep. . . .

He woke. The room was brightly lit, he saw the four flaming candles. Judith was bending over him. His heart began to thump, thump, thump. Oh, it almost hurt. He stretched out his arms and touched her head with shaking hands.

"Judith . . . Judith . . ."

"For you my name is Judith. To him, who lies down there, I had another name. Who will call me by name now?"

"Judith . . . Judith . . ."

He drew her head towards him.

Then he felt that she was cutting his throat.

"Judith!" he screamed.

She only answered: "I pity you, my beautiful enemy. . . ."

The death rattle sounded in his throat. She left him alone. The whole house was in darkness except these two rooms, where four candles burned. The whole village was dark and silent. Strangers were sleeping there among enemies.

THE VICTIM

May Sinclair

Steven Acroyd, Mr. Greathead's chauffeur, was sulking in the garage.

Everybody was afraid of him. Everybody hated him except Mr. Greathead, his master, and Dorsy, his sweetheart.

And even Dorsy now, after yesterday!

Night had come. On one side the yard gates stood open to the black tunnel of the drive. On the other the high moor rose above the wall, immense, darker than the darkness. Steven's lantern in the open doorway of the garage and Dorsy's lamp in the kitchen window threw a blond twilight into the yard between. From where he sat, slantways, on the step of the car, he could see, through the lighted window, the table with the lamp and Dorsy's sewing huddled up in a white heap as she left it just now, when she had jumped up and gone away. Because she was afraid of him.

She had gone straight to Mr. Greathead in his study, and Steven, sulking, had flung himself out into the yard.

He stared into the window, thinking, thinking. Everybody hated him. He could tell by the damned spiteful way they looked at him in the bar of the "King's Arms"; kind of sideways and slink-eyed, turning their dirty tails and shuffling out of his way.

He had said to Dorsy he'd like to know what he'd done. He'd just dropped in for his glass as usual; he'd looked round and said "Good-evening," civil, and the dirty tykes took no more notice of him than if he'd been a toad. Mrs. Oldishaw, Dorsy's aunt, *she* hated him, boiled-ham-face, swelling with spite, shoving his glass at the end of her arm, without speaking, as if he'd been a bloody cockroach.

All because of the thrashing he'd given young Ned Oldishaw. If she didn't want the cub's neck broken she'd better keep him out of mischief. Young Ned knew what he'd get if he came meddling with *his* sweetheart.

It had happened yesterday afternoon, Sunday, when he had gone down with Dorsy to the "King's Arms" to see her aunt. They were sitting out on the wooden bench against the inn wall when young Ned began it. He could see him now with his arm round Dorsy's neck and his mouth gaping. And Dorsy laughing like a silly fool and the old woman snorting and shaking.

He could hear him. "She's my cousin if she *is* your sweetheart. You can't stop me kissing her." *Couldn't* he?

Why, what did they think? When he'd given up his good job at the Darlington Motor Works to come to Eastthwaite and black Mr. Greathead's boots, chop wood, carry coal and water for him and drive his shabby secondhand car. Not that he cared what he did so long as he could live in the same house with Dorsy Oldishaw. It wasn't likely he'd sit like a bloody Moses, looking on, while Ned——

To be sure, he had half killed him. He could feel Ned's neck swelling and rising under the pressure of his hands, his fingers. He had struck him first, flinging him back against the inn wall, then he had pinned him—till the men ran up and dragged him off.

And now they were all against him. Dorsy was against him. She had said she was afraid of him.

"Steven," she had said, "tha med'a killed him."

"Well—p'raps next time he'll knaw better than to coom meddlin' with *my* lass."

"I'm not thy lass, ef tha canna keep thy hands off folks. I should be feared for my life of thee. Ned wurn's doing naw 'arm."

"Ef he does it again, ef he comes between thee and me, Dorsy, I shall do 'im in."

"Naw, tha maunna talk that road."

"It's Gawd's truth. Anybody that cooms between thee and me, loove, I shall do 'im in. Ef 'twas thy aunt, I should wring 'er neck, same as I wroong Ned's."

"And ef it was me, Steven?"

"Ef it wur thee, ef tha left me—Aw, doan't tha assk me, Dorsy."

"There—that's 'ow tha scares me."

"But tha 'astna left me—'tes thy wedding claithes tha'rt making."

"Aye, 'tes my wedding claithes."

She had started fingering the white stuff, looking at it with her head on one side, smiling prettily. Then all of a sudden she had flung it down in a heap and burst out crying. When he tried to comfort her she pushed him off and ran out of the room, to Mr. Greathead.

It must have been half an hour ago and she had not come back yet.

He got up and went through the yard gates into the dark drive. Turning there, he came to the house front and the lighted window of the study. Hidden behind a clump of yew he looked in.

Mr. Greathead had risen from his chair. He was a little old man, shrunk and pinched, with a bowed back and slender neck under his grey hanks of hair.

Dorsy stood before him, facing Steven. The lamplight fell full on her. Her sweet flower-face was flushed. She had been crying.

Mr. Greathead spoke.

"Well, that's my advice," he said. "Think it over, Dorsy, before you do anything."

That night Dorsy packed her boxes, and the next day at noon, when Steven came in for his dinner, she had left the Lodge. She had gone back to her father's house in Garthdale.

She wrote to Steven saying that she had thought it over and found she daren't marry him. She was afraid of him. She would be too unhappy.

II

That was the old man, the old man. He had made her give him up. But for that, Dorsy would never have left him. She would never have thought of it herself. And she would never have got away if he had been there to stop her. It wasn't Ned. Ned was going to marry Nancy Peacock down at Morfe. Ned hadn't done any harm.

It was Mr. Greathead who had come between them. He hated Mr. Greathead.

His hate became a nausea of physical loathing that never ceased. Indoors he served Mr. Greathead as footman and valet, waiting on him at meals, bringing the hot water for his bath, helping him to dress and undress. So that he could never get away from him. When he came to call him in the morning, Steven's stomach heaved at the sight of the shrunken body under the bedclothes, the flushed, pinched face with its peaked, finicking nose upturned, the thin silver tuft of hair pricked up above the pillow's edge. Steven shivered with hate at the sound of the rattling, old-man's cough, and the "shoob-shoob" of the feet shuffling along the flagged passages.

He had once had a feeling of tenderness for Mr. Greathead as the tie that bound him to Dorsy. He even brushed his coat and hat tenderly, as if he loved them. Once Mr. Greathead's small, close smile—the greyish bud of the lower lip pushed out, the upper lip lifted at the corners—and his kind, thin "Thank you, my lad," had made Steven smile back, glad to serve Dorsy's master. And Mr. Greathead would smile again and say, "It does me good to see your bright face, Steven." Now Steven's face writhed in a tight contortion to meet Mr. Greathead's kindness, while his throat ran dry and his heart shook with hate.

At meal-times from his place by the sideboard he would look on at Mr. Greathead eating, in a long contemplative disgust. He could have snatched the plate away from under the slow, fumbling hands that hovered and hesitated. He would catch words coming into his mind: "He ought to be dead. He ought to be dead." To think that this thing that ought to be dead, this old, shrivelled skin-bag of creaking bones should come between him and Dorsy, should have power to drive Dorsy from him.

One day when he was brushing Mr. Greathead's soft felt hat a paroxysm of hatred gripped him. He hated Mr. Greathead's hat. He took a stick and struck at it again and again; he threw it on the flags and stamped on it, clenching his teeth and drawing in his breath with a sharp hiss. He picked up the hat, looking round furtively, for fear lest Mr. Greathead or Dorsy's successor, Mrs. Blenkiron, should have seen him. He pinched

and pulled it back into shape and brushed it carefully and hung it on the stand. He was ashamed, not of his violence, but of its futility.

Nobody but a damned fool, he said to himself, would have done that. He must have been mad.

It wasn't as if he didn't know what he was going to do. He had known ever since the day when Dorsy left him.

"I shan't be myself again till I've done him in," he thought.

He was only waiting till he had planned it out; till he was sure of every detail; till he was fit and cool. There must be no hesitation, no uncertainty at the last minute, above all, no blind, headlong violence. Nobody but a fool would kill in mad rage, and forget things, and be caught and swing for it. Yet that was what they all did. There was always something they hadn't thought of that gave them away.

Steven had thought of everything, even the date, even the weather.

Mr. Greathead was in the habit of going up to London to attend the debates of a learned society he belonged to that held its meetings in May and November. He always travelled up by the five o'clock train, so that he might go to bed and rest as soon as he arrived. He always stayed for a week and gave his housekeeper a week's holiday. Steven chose a dark, threatening day in November, when Mr. Greathead was going up to his meeting and Mrs. Blenkiron had left Eastthwaite for Morfe by the early morning bus. So that there was nobody in the house but Mr. Greathead and Steven.

Eastthwaite Lodge stands alone, grey, hidden between the shoulder of the moor and the ash-trees of its drive. It is approached by a bridle path across the moor, a turning off the road that runs from Eastthwaite in Rathdale to Shawe in Westleydale, about a mile from the village and a mile from Hardraw Pass. No tradesmen visited it. Mr. Greathead's letters and his newspaper were shot into a post-box that hung on the ash-tree at the turn.

The hot water laid on in the house was not hot enough for Mr. Greathead's bath, so that every morning, while Mr. Greathead shaved, Steven came to him with a can of boiling water.

Mr. Greathead, dressed in a mauve and grey striped sleeping-suit, stood shaving himself before the looking-glass that hung on the wall beside the great white bath. Steven waited with his hand on the cold tap, watching the bright curved rod of water falling with a thud and a splash.

In the white, stagnant light from the muffed window-pane the knife-blade flame of a small oil-stove flickered queerly. The oil sputtered and stank.

Suddenly the wind hissed in the water-pipes and cut off the glittering rod. To Steven it seemed the suspension of all movement. He would have to wait there till the water flowed again before he could begin. He tried not to look at Mr. Greathead and the lean wattles of his lifted throat. He fixed his eyes on the long crack in the soiled green distemper of the wall. His nerves were on edge with waiting for the water to flow again. The fumes of the oil-stove worked on them like a rank intoxicant. The soiled green wall gave him a sensation of physical sickness.

He picked up a towel and hung it over the back of a chair. Thus he caught sight of his own face in the glass above Mr. Greathead's; it was livid against the soiled green wall. Steven stepped aside to avoid it.

"Don't you feel well, Steven?"

"No, sir." Steven picked up a small sponge and looked at it.

Mr. Greathead had laid down his razor and was wiping the lather from his chin. At that instant, with a gurgling, spluttering haste, the water leaped from the tap.

It was then that Steven made his sudden, quiet rush. He first gagged Mr. Greathead with the sponge, then pushed him back and back against the wall and pinned him there with both hands round his neck, as he had pinned Ned Oldishaw. He pressed in on Mr. Greathead's throat, strangling him.

Mr. Greathead's hands flapped in the air, trying feebly to beat Steven off; then his arms, pushed back by the heave and thrust of Steven's shoulders, dropped. Then Mr. Greathead's body sank, sliding along the wall, and fell to the floor, Steven still keeping his hold, mounting it, gripping it with his knees. His fingers tightened, pressed back the blood. Mr. Greathead's face swelled up; it changed horribly. There was a

groaning and rattling sound in his throat. Steven pressed in till it had ceased.

Then he stripped himself to the waist. He stripped Mr. Greathead of his sleeping-suit and hung his naked body face downwards in the bath. He took his razor and cut the great arteries and veins in the neck. He pulled up the plug of the waste-pipe, and left the body to drain in the running water.

He left it all day and all night.

He had noticed that murderers swung just for want of attention to little things like that; messing up themselves and the whole place with blood; always forgetting something essential. He had no time to think of horrors. From the moment he had murdered Mr. Greathead his own neck was in danger; he was simply using all his brain and nerve to save his neck. He worked with the stern, cool hardness of a man going through with an unpleasant, necessary job. He had thought of everything.

He had even thought of the dairy.

It was built on to the back of the house under the shelter of the high moor. You entered it through the scullery, which cut it off from the yard. The window-panes had been removed and replaced by sheets of perforated zinc. A large corrugated glass skylight lit it from the roof. Impossible either to see in or to approach it from the outside. It was fitted up with a long, black slate shelf, placed, for the convenience of butter-makers, at the height of an ordinary work-bench. Steven had his tools, a razor, a carving-knife, a chopper and a meat-saw, laid there ready, beside a great pile of cotton waste.

Early the next day, he took Mr. Greathead's body out of the bath, wrapped a thick towel round the neck and head, carried it down to the dairy and stretched it out on the slab. And there he cut it up into seventeen pieces.

These he wrapped in several layers of newspaper, covering the face and hands first, because, at the last moment, they frightened him. He sewed them up in two sacks and hid them in the cellar.

He burnt the towel and the cotton waste in the kitchen fire; he cleaned his tools thoroughly and put them back in their places; and he washed down the marble slab. There wasn't a spot on the floor except for one flagstone where the

pink rinsing of the slab had splashed over. He scrubbed it for half an hour, still seeing the rusty edges of the splash long after he had scoured it out.

He then washed and dressed himself with care.

As it was war-time Steven could only work by day, for a light in the dairy roof would have attracted the attention of the police. He had murdered Mr. Greathead on a Tuesday; it was now three o'clock on Thursday afternoon. Exactly at ten minutes past four he had brought out the car, shut in close with its black hood and side curtains. He had packed Mr. Greathead's suit-case and placed it in the car with his umbrella, railway rug, and travelling cap. Also, in a bundle, the clothes that his victim would have gone to London in.

He stowed the body in the two sacks beside him on the front.

By Hardraw Pass, half-way between Eastthwaite and Shawe, there are three round pits, known as the Churns, hollowed out of the grey rock and said to be bottomless. Steven had thrown stones, big as a man's chest, down the largest pit, to see whether they would be caught on any ledge or boulder. They had dropped clean, without a sound.

It poured with rain, the rain that Steven had reckoned on. The Pass was dark under the clouds and deserted. Steven turned his car so that the headlights glared on the pit's mouth. Then he ripped open the sacks and threw down, one by one, the seventeen pieces of Mr. Greathead's body, and the sacks after them, and the clothes.

It was not enough to dispose of Mr. Greathead's dead body; he had to behave as though Mr. Greathead were alive. Mr. Greathead had disappeared and he had to account for his disappearance. He drove on to Shawe station to the five o'clock train, taking care to arrive close on its starting. A troop-train was due to depart a minute earlier. Steven, who had reckoned on the darkness and the rain, reckoned also on the hurry and confusion on the platform.

As he had foreseen, there were no porters in the station entry; nobody to notice whether Mr. Greathead was or was not in the car. He carried his things on to the platform and gave the suit-case to an old man to label. He dashed into the booking-office and took Mr. Greathead's ticket, and then

rushed along the platform as if he were following his master. He heard himself shouting to the guard, "Have you seen Mr. Greathead?" And the guard's answer, "Naw!" And his own inspired statement, "He must have taken his seat in the front, then." He ran to the front of the train, shouldering his way among the troops. The drawn blinds of the carriages favoured him.

Steven thrust the umbrella, the rug and the travelling cap into an empty compartment, and slammed the door to. He tried to shout something through the open window; but his tongue was harsh and dry against the roof of his mouth, and no sound came. He stood, blocking the window, till the guard whistled. When the train moved he ran alongside with his hand on the window ledge, as though he were taking the last instructions of his master. A porter pulled him back.

"Quick work, that," said Steven.

Before he left the station he wired to Mr. Greathead's London hotel, announcing the time of his arrival.

He felt nothing, nothing but the intense relief of a man who has saved himself by his own wits from a most horrible death. There were even moments, in the week that followed, when, so powerful was the illusion of his innocence, he could have believed that he had really seen Mr. Greathead off by the five o'clock train. Moments when he literally stood still in amazement before his own incredible impunity. Other moments when a sort of vanity uplifted him. He had committed a murder that for sheer audacity and cool brain work surpassed all murders celebrated in the history of crime. Unfortunately the very perfection of his achievement doomed it to oblivion. He had left not a trace. Not a trace.

Only when he woke in the night a doubt sickened him. There was the rusted ring of that splash on the dairy floor. He wondered, had he really washed it out clean. And he would get up and light a candle and go down to the dairy to make sure. He knew the exact place; bending over it with the candle, he could imagine that he still saw a faint outline.

Daylight reassured him. *He* knew the exact place, but nobody else knew. There was nothing to distinguish it from the natural stains in the flagstone. Nobody would guess. But he was glad when Mrs. Blenkiron came back again.

On the day that Mr. Greathead was to have come home by the four o'clock train Steven drove into Shawe and bought a chicken for the master's dinner. He met the four o'clock train and expressed surprise that Mr. Greathead had not come by it. He said he would be sure to come by the seven. He ordered dinner for eight; Mrs. Blenkiron roasted the chicken, and Steven met the seven o'clock train: This time he showed uneasiness.

The next day he met all the trains and wired to Mr. Greathead's hotel for information. When the manager wired back that Mr. Greathead had not arrived, he wrote to his relatives and gave notice to the police.

Three weeks passed. The police and Mr. Greathead's relatives accepted Steven's statements, backed as they were by the evidence of the booking office clerk, the telegraph clerk, the guard, the porter who had labelled Mr. Greathead's luggage and the hotel manager who had received his telegram. Mr. Greathead's portrait was published in the illustrated papers with requests for any information which might lead to his discovery. Nothing happened, and presently he and his disappearance were forgotten. The nephew who came down to Eastthwaite to look into his affairs was satisfied. His balance at his bank was low owing to the non-payment of various dividends, but the accounts and the contents of Mr. Greathead's cash-box and bureau were in order and Steven had put down every penny he had spent. The nephew paid Mrs. Blenkiron's wages and dismissed her and arranged with the chauffeur to stay on and take care of the house. And as Steven saw that this was the best way to escape suspicion, he stayed on.

Only in Westleydale and Rathdale excitement lingered. People wondered and speculated. Mr. Greathead had been robbed and murdered in the train (Steven said he had had money on him). He had lost his memory and wandered goodness knew where. He had thrown himself out of the railway carriage. Steven said Mr. Greathead wouldn't do *that*, but he shouldn't be surprised if he lost his memory. He knew a man who forgot who he was and where he lived. Didn't know his own wife and children. Shell-shock. And lately Mr. Greathead's memory hadn't been what it was. Soon as he got it

back he'd turn up again. Steven wouldn't be surprised to see him walking in any day.

But on the whole people noticed that he didn't care to talk much about Mr. Greathead. They thought this showed very proper feeling. They were sorry for Steven. He had lost his master and he had lost Dorsy Oldishaw. And if he *did* half kill Ned Oldishaw, well, young Ned had no business to go meddling with his sweetheart. Even Mrs. Oldishaw was sorry for him. And when Steven came into the bar of the "King's Arms" everybody said "Good evening, Steve," and made room for him by the fire.

III

Steven came and went now as if nothing had happened. He made a point of keeping the house as it would be kept if Mr. Greathead were alive. Mrs. Blenkiron, coming in once a fortnight to wash and clean, found the fire lit in Mr. Greathead's study, and his slippers standing on end in the fender. Upstairs his bed was made, the clothes folded back, ready. This ritual guarded Steven not only from the suspicions of outsiders, but from his own knowledge. By behaving as though he believed that Mr. Greathead was still living he almost made himself believe it. By refusing to let his mind dwell on the murder he came to forget it. His imagination saved him, playing the play that kept him sane, till the murder became vague to him and fantastic like a thing done in a dream. He had waked up and this was the reality; this round of caretaking, this look the house had of waiting for Mr. Greathead to come back to it. He had left off getting up in the night to examine the place on the dairy floor. He was no longer amazed at his impunity.

Then suddenly, when he really had forgotten, it ended. It was on a Saturday in January, about five o'clock. Steven had heard that Dorsy Oldishaw was back again, living at the "King's Arms" with her aunt. He had a mad, uncontrollable longing to see her again.

But it was not Dorsy that he saw.

His way from the Lodge kitchen into the drive was through the yard gates and along the flagged path under the

study window. When he turned on to the flags he saw it shuffling along before him. The lamplight from the window lit it up. He could see distinctly the little old man in the long shabby black overcoat, with the grey woollen muffler round his neck hunched up above his collar, lifting the thin grey hair that stuck out under the slouch of the black hat.

In the first moment that he saw it Steven had no fear. He simply felt that the murder had not happened, that he really *had* dreamed it, and that this was Mr. Greathead come back, alive among the living. The phantasm was now standing at the door of the house, its hand on the door-knob as if about to enter.

But when Steven came up to the door it was not there.

He stood fixed, staring at the space which had emptied itself so horribly. His heart heaved and staggered, snatching at his breath. And suddenly the memory of the murder rushed at him. He saw himself in the bathroom, shut in with his victim by the soiled green walls. He smelt the reek of the oil-stove; he heard the water running from the tap. He felt his feet springing forward, and his fingers pressing, tighter and tighter, on Mr. Greathead's throat. He saw Mr. Greathead's hand flapping helplessly, his terrified eyes, his face swelling and discoloured, changing horribly, and his body sinking to the floor.

He saw himself in the dairy, afterwards; he could hear the thudding, grinding, scraping noises of his tools. He saw himself on Hardraw Pass and the headlights glaring on the pit's mouth. And the fear and the horror he had not felt then came on him now.

He turned back; he bolted the yard gates and all the doors of the house, and shut himself up in the lighted kitchen. He took up his magazine, *The Autocar*, and forced himself to read it. Presently his terror left him. He said to himself that it was nothing. Nothing but his fancy. He didn't suppose he'd ever see anything again.

Three days passed. On the third evening, Steven had lit the study lamp and was bolting the window when he saw it again.

It stood on the path outside close against the window, looking in. He saw its face distinctly, the greyish, stuck-out bud of the underlip, and the droop of the pinched nose. The small

eyes peered at him, glittering. The whole figure had a glassy look between the darkness behind it and the pane. One moment it stood outside, looking in; and the next it was mixed up with the shimmering picture of the lighted room that hung there on the blackness of the trees. Mr. Greathead then showed as if reflected, standing with Steven in the room.

And now he was outside again, looking at him, looking at him through the pane.

Steven's stomach sank and dragged, making him feel sick. He pulled down the blind between him and Mr. Greathead, clamped the shutters to and drew the curtains over them. He locked and double-bolted the front door, all the doors, to keep Mr. Greathead out. But, once that night, as he lay in bed, he heard the "shoob-shoob" of feet shuffling along the flagged passages, up the stairs, and across the landing outside his door. The door handle rattled; but nothing came. He lay awake till morning, the sweat running off his skin, his heart plunging and quivering with terror.

When he got up he saw a white, scared face in the looking-glass. A face with a half-open mouth, ready to blab, to blurt out his secret; the face of an idiot. He was afraid to take that face into Eastthwaite or into Shawe. So he shut himself up in the house, half-starved on his small stock of bread, bacon and groceries.

Two weeks passed; and then it came again in broad daylight.

It was Mrs. Blenkiron's morning. He had lit the fire in the study at noon and set up Mr. Greathead's slippers in the fender. When he rose from his stooping and turned round he saw Mr. Greathead's phantasm standing on the hearthrug close in front of him. It was looking at him and smiling in a sort of mockery, as if amused at what Steven had been doing. It was solid and completely lifelike at first. Then, as Steven in his terror backed and backed away from it (he was afraid to turn and feel it there behind him), its feet became insubstantial. As if undermined, the whole structure sank and fell together on the floor, where it made a pool of some whitish glistening substance that mixed with the pattern of the carpet and sank through.

That was the most horrible thing it had done yet, and

Steven's nerve broke under it. He went to Mrs. Blenkiron, whom he found scrubbing out the dairy.

She sighed as she wrung out the floor-cloth.

"Eh, these owd yellor stawnes, scroob as you will they'll navver look clean."

"Naw," he said. "Scroob and scroob, you'll navver get them clean."

She looked up at him.

"Eh, lad, what ails 'ee? Ye've got a faace like a wroong dishclout hanging over t'sink."

"I've got the colic."

"Aye, an' naw woonder wi' the damp, and they misties, an' your awn bad cooking. Let me roon down t' 'King's Arms' and get you a drop of whisky."

"Naw, I'll gaw down mysen."

He knew now he was afraid to be left alone in the house. Down at the "King's Arms" Dorsy and Mrs. Oldishaw were sorry for him. By this time he was really ill with fright. Dorsy and Mrs. Oldishaw said it was a chill. They made him lie down on the settle by the kitchen fire and put a rug over him, and gave him stiff hot grog to drink. He slept. And when he woke he found Dorsy sitting beside him with her sewing.

He sat up and her hand was on his shoulder.

"Lay still, lad."

"I maun get oop and gaw."

"Nay, there's naw call for 'ee to gaw. Lay still and I'll make thee a coop o' tea."

He lay still.

Mrs. Oldishaw had made up a bed for him in her son's room, and they kept him there that night and till four o'clock the next day.

When he got up to go Dorsy put on her coat and hat.

"Is tha gawing out, Dorsy?"

"Aye. I canna let thee gaw and set there by thysen. I'm cooming oop to set with 'ee till night time."

She came up and they sat side by side in the Lodge kitchen by the fire as they used to sit when they were together there, holding each other's hands and not talking.

"Dorsy," he said at last, "what astha coom for? Astha coom to tall me tha'll navver speak to me again?"

"Nay. Tha knows what I've coom for."

"To saay tha'll marry me?"

"Aye."

"I maunna marry thee, Dorsy. 'Twouldn't be right."

"Right? What dostha mean? 'Twouldn't be right for me to coom and set wi' thee this road ef I doan't marry thee."

"Nay, I darena'. Tha said tha was afraid of me, Dorsy. I doan't want 'ee to be afraid. Tha said tha'd be unhappy. I doan't want 'ee to be unhappy."

"That was lasst year. I'm not afraid of 'ee, now, Steve."

"Tha doan't know me, lass."

"Aye, I know thee. I know tha's sick and starved for want of me. Tha canna live wi'out thy awn lass to take care of 'ee."

She rose.

"I maun gaw now. But I'll be oop to-morrow and the next day."

And to-morrow and the next day and the next, at dusk, the hour that Steven most dreaded, Dorsy came. She sat with him till long after the night had fallen.

Steven would have felt safe so long as she was with him, but for his fear that Mr. Greathead would appear to him while she was there and that she would see him. If Dorsy knew he was being haunted she might guess, why. Or Mr. Greathead might take some horrible blood-dripping and dismembered shape that would show her how he had been murdered. It would be like him, dead, to come between them as he had come when he was living.

They were sitting at the round table by the fireside. The lamp was lit and Dorsy was bending over her sewing. Suddenly she looked up, her head on one side, listening. Far away inside the house, on the flagged passage from the front door, he could hear the "shoob-shoob" of the footsteps. He could almost believe that Dorsy shivered. And somehow, for some reason, this time he was not afraid.

"Steven," she said, "didsta 'ear anything?"

"Naw. Nobbut t'wind oonder t'roogs."

She looked at him; a long wondering look. Apparently it

satisfied her, for she answered: "Aye. Mebbe 'tes nobbut wind," and went on with her sewing.

He drew his chair nearer to her to protect her if it came. He could almost touch her where she sat.

The latch lifted. The door opened, and, his entrance and his passage unseen, Mr. Greathead stood before them.

The table hid the lower half of his form; but above it he was steady and solid in his terrible semblance of flesh and blood.

Steven looked at Dorsy. She was staring at the phantasm with an innocent, wondering stare that had no fear in it at all. Then she looked at Steven. An uneasy, frightened, searching look, as though to make sure whether he had seen it.

That was her fear—that *he* should see it, that *he* should be frightened, that *he* should be haunted.

He moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder. He thought, perhaps, she might shrink from him because she knew that it *was* he who was haunted. But no, she put up her hand and held his, gazing up into his face and smiling.

Then, to his amazement, the phantasm smiled back at them; not with mockery, but with a strange and terrible sweetness. Its face lit up for one instant with a sudden, beautiful shining light; then it was gone.

"Did tha see 'im, Steve?"

"Aye."

"Asta seen anything afore?"

"Aye, three times I've seen 'im."

"Is it that as scared thee?"

"'Oo tawled 'ee I was scared?"

"I knawed. Because nowt can 'appen to thee but I maun know it."

"What dostha think, Dorsy?"

"I think tha needna be scared, Steve. 'E's a kind ghawst. Whatever 'e is 'e doan't mean thee no 'arm. T' owd gentleman navver did when he was alive."

"Didn' 'e? Didn' 'e? 'E served me the woorst turn 'e could when 'e coomed between thee and me."

"Whatever makes 'ee think that, lad?"

"I doan' think it. I *knaw*."

"Nay, loove, tha dostna."

"'E did. 'E did, I tell thee."

"Doan' tha say that," she cried. "Doan' tha say it, Stevey."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Tha'll set folk talking that road."

"What do they know to talk about?"

"Ef they was to remember what tha said."

"And what did I say?"

"Why, that ef annybody was to coom between thee and me, tha'd do them in."

"I wasna thinking of 'im. Gawd knows I wasna."

"*They* doan't," she said.

"*Tha* knows? Tha knows I didna mean 'im?"

"Aye, I know, Steve."

"An', Dorsy, tha'rn't afraid of me? Tha'rn't afraid of me anny more?"

"Nay, lad. I loove thee too mooch. I shall navver be afraid of 'ee again. Would I coom to thee this road ef I was afraid?"

"Tha'll be afraid now."

"And what should I be afraid of?"

"Why—'*im*."

"'*Im*! I should be a deal more afraid to think of 'ee setting with 'im oop 'ere, by thysen. Wuntha coom down and sleep at aunt's?"

"That I wunna. But I shall set 'ee on t' road pass t' moor."

He went with her down the bridle-path and across the moor and along the main-road that led through Eastthwaite. They parted at the turn where the lights of the village came in sight.

The moon had risen as Steven went back across the moor. The ash-tree at the bridle-path stood out clear, its hooked, bending branches black against the grey moor-grass. The shadows in the ruts laid stripes along the bridle-path, black on grey. The house was black-grey in the darkness of the drive. Only the lighted study window made a golden square in its long wall.

Before he could go up to bed he would have had to put out the study lamp. He was nervous; but he no longer felt the sickening and sweating terror of the first hauntings. Either

he was getting used to it, or—something had happened to him.

He had closed the shutters and put out the lamp. His candle made a ring of light round the table in the middle of the room. He was about to take it up and go when he heard a thin voice calling his name: "Steven." He raised his head to listen. The thin thread of sound seemed to come from outside, a long way off, at the end of the bridle-path.

"Steven, Steven——"

This time he could have sworn the sound came from inside his head, like the hiss of air in his ears.

"Steven——"

He knew the voice now. It was behind him in the room. He turned and saw the phantasm of Mr. Greathead sitting, as he used to sit, in the arm-chair by the fire. The form was dim in the dusk of the room outside the ring of candlelight. Steven's first movement was to snatch up the candlestick and hold it between him and the phantasm, hoping that the light would cause it to disappear. Instead of disappearing the figure became clear and solid, indistinguishable from a figure of flesh and blood dressed in black broadcloth and white linen. Its eyes had the shining transparency of blue crystal; they were fixed on Steven with a look of quiet, benevolent attention. Its small, narrow mouth was lifted at the corners, smiling.

It spoke.

"You needn't be afraid," it said.

The voice was natural now, quiet, measured, slightly quavering. Instead of frightening Steven it soothed and steadied him.

He put the candle on the table behind him and stood up before the phantasm, fascinated.

"*Why* are you afraid?" it asked.

Steven couldn't answer. He could only stare, held there by the shining, hypnotizing eyes.

"You are afraid," it said, "because you think I'm what you call a ghost, a supernatural thing. You think I'm dead and that you killed me. You think you took a horrible revenge for a wrong you thought I did you. You think I've come back to frighten you, to revenge myself in my turn.

"And every one of those thoughts of yours, Steven, is wrong. I'm real, and my appearance is as natural and real as anything in this room—more natural and more real if you did but know. You didn't kill me, as you see; for I am here, as alive, more alive than you are. Your revenge consisted in removing me from a state which had become unbearable to a state more delightful than you can imagine. I don't mind telling you, Steven, that I was in serious financial difficulties (which, by the way, is a good thing for you, as it provides a plausible motive for my disappearance). So that, as far as revenge goes, the thing was a complete frost. You were my benefactor. Your methods were somewhat violent, and I admit you gave me some disagreeable moments before my actual deliverance; but as I was already developing rheumatoid arthritis there can be no doubt that in your hands my death was more merciful than if it had been left to Nature. As for the subsequent arrangements, I congratulate you, Steven, on your coolness and resource. I always said you were equal to any emergency, and that your brains would pull you safe through any scrape. You committed an appalling and dangerous crime, a crime of all things the most difficult to conceal, and you contrived so that it was not discovered and never will be discovered. And no doubt the details of this crime seemed to you horrible and revolting to the last degree; and the more horrible and the more revolting they were, the more you piqued yourself on your nerve in carrying the thing through without a hitch.

"I don't want to put you entirely out of conceit with your performance. It was very creditable for a beginner, very creditable indeed. But let me tell you, this idea of things being horrible and revolting is all illusion. The terms are purely relative to your limited perceptions.

"I'm speaking now to your intelligence—I don't mean that practical ingenuity which enabled you to dispose of me so neatly. When I say intelligence I mean intelligence. All you did, then, was to redistribute matter. To our incorruptible sense matter never takes any of those offensive forms in which it so often appears to you. Nature has evolved all this horror and repulsion just to prevent people from making too many little experiments like yours. You mustn't imagine that these

things have any eternal importance. Don't flatter yourself you've electrified the universe. For minds no longer attached to flesh and blood, that horrible butchery you were so proud of, Steven, is simply silly. No more terrifying than the spilling of red ink or the rearrangement of a jig-saw puzzle. I saw the whole business, and I can assure you I felt nothing but intense amusement. Your face, Steven, was so absurdly serious. You've no idea what you looked like with that chopper. I'd have appeared to you then and told you so, only I knew I should frighten you into fits.

"And there's another grand mistake, my lad—your thinking that I'm haunting you out of revenge, that I'm trying to frighten you. . . . My dear Steven, if I'd wanted to frighten you I'd have appeared in a very different shape. I needn't remind you what shape I *might* have appeared in. . . . What do you suppose I've come for?"

"I don't know," said Steve in a husky whisper. "Tell me."

"I've come to forgive you. And to save you from the horror you *would* have felt sooner or later. And to stop your going on with your crime."

"You needn't," Steven said. "I'm not going on with it. I shall do no more murders."

"There you are again. Can't you understand that I'm not talking about your silly butcher's work? I'm talking about your *real* crime. Your real crime was hating me.

"And your very hate was a blunder, Steven. You hated me for something I hadn't done."

"Aye, what did you do? Tell me that."

"You thought I came between you and your sweetheart. That night when Dorsy spoke to me, you thought I told her to throw you over, didn't you?"

"Aye. And what did you tell her?"

"I told her to stick to you. It was you, Steven, who drove her away. You frightened the child. She said she was afraid for her life of you. Not because you half killed that poor boy, but because of the look on your face before you did it. That look of hate, Steven.

"I told her not to be afraid of you. I told her that if she threw you over you might go altogether to the devil; that she

might even be responsible for some crime. I told her that if she married you and was faithful—if *she loved you*—I'd answer for it you'd never go wrong.

"She was too frightened to listen to me. Then I told her to think it over what I'd said before she did anything. You heard me say that."

"Aye. That's what I heard you say. I didn' know. I didn' know. I thought you'd set her agen me."

"If you don't believe me, you can ask her, Steven."

"That's what she said t'other night. That you navver coom between her and me. Navver."

"Never," the phantasm said. "And you—don't hate me now?"

"Naw. Naw. I should navver 'a hated 'ee. I should navver 'a laid a finger on thee, ef I'd knawn."

"It's not your laying fingers on me, it's your hatred that matters. If that's done with, the whole thing's done with."

"Is it? Is it? Ef it was knawn, I should have to hang for it. Maunna I gie mysen oop? Tell me, maun I gie mysen oop?"

"You want me to decide that for you?"

"Aye. Doan't gaw," he said. "Doan't gaw."

It seemed to him that Mr. Greathead's phantasm was getting a little thin, as if it couldn't last more than an instant. He had never so longed for it to go, as he longed now for it to stay and help him.

"Well, Steven, any flesh-and-blood man would tell you to go and get hanged to-morrow; that it was no more than your plain duty. And I daresay there are some mean, vindictive spirits even in my world who would say the same, not because *they* think death important, but because they know *you* do, and want to get even with you that way.

"It isn't *my* way. I consider this little affair is strictly between ourselves. There isn't a jury of flesh-and-blood men who would understand it. They all think death too important."

"What do you want me to do, then? Tell me and I'll do it! Tell me!"

He cried it out loud; for Mr. Greathead's phantasm was getting thinner and thinner; it dwindled and fluttered, like a

light going down. Its voice came from somewhere away outside, from the other end of the bridle-path.

"Go on living," it said. "Marry Dorsy."

"I darena. She doan' knaw I killed 'ee."

"Oh yes"—the eyes flickered up, gentle and ironic—"she does. She knew all the time."

And with that the phantasm went out.

THE HOUSE ON BIG FARAWAY

Norman Matson

"Surely the old woman told you she was *going* toward the Partelo farm, or had passed by there, something of that sort, rather than that she was staying there," Dr. Greerson said, gently correcting his host.

Bunny Brooks was positive. "'*Staying*' was the word she used."

Dr. Greerson hesitated, seemed to decide not to argue. He was a stout man with a brown beard. He turned toward Bunny's sister. "What did you think of her, Natalie?"

Only her grey eyes moved, meeting his. "I did not see her."

Young Kenneth Durham, the Doctor's nephew, laughed in his nose. He was sprawled out for six feet on the grass. The Doctor owned a farm fifteen miles away. They were, the four of them, on the newly-cut lawn of Bunny's discovery, an old farm house with a stone chimney, small window panes and clapboards black with weather. It had been unoccupied for years, standing blind and empty on its round hill. Now that all its windows looked again they saw a scene that had greatly changed. The horizon was green woods.

The only meadow left—it sloped down to the glinting pond—was covered with sumac and young birch trees, its high stone walls lost under a tangle of grape vines, elderberry and poison ivy. And there was not in all the landscape one house visible, though thirty years before all this abandoned land was farmed.

Bunny was a small, rather dapper, city man with grey hair parted neatly in the middle, a neat round face. On either side of his nose was a red mark from the grip of the glasses that usually rode there, slanted forward, gleaming. He swung the glasses now at the end of their ribbon, nervously, his forehead puckered as with some irritating thought.

"Doctor, where is this Partelo farm?"

"Half a mile that way—it's on the Big Faraway Road, too."

"Who are they—the Partelos?"

"There aren't any Partelos."

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody lives there."

Young Kenneth rolled half over and looked at the reddening afternoon sky, laughed with his big mouth. He had known that was coming.

"The house is empty?"

"There isn't any house. There's nothing there but a heap of chimney stones."

"And lilacs," Kenneth said. "Haw, haw."

Bunny tucked his glasses away. He looked quite dashed.

Natalie said: "If you're making it up, Bunny, do leave off now." She was pretty in a frail way, nostrils waxy and her ears small. Her hair was pale gold.

"No, I didn't see her, Doctor," she said. "I was in the back of the house. When I heard Bunny's voice I was frightened."

"At your brother's voice?" Dr. Greerson looked at her curiously.

"We've been alone here for three days. No one comes by on the road, you know, it goes nowhere but here: beyond it is quite impassable. I called out: 'Bunny, are you talking to yourself?' Then I went out into the front hall and . . ."

"I'll tell it," her brother said. "I had gone upstairs to get a coil of wire I remembered having seen in the bedroom (there's only one finished room up there; the rest is attic, you know). The door wouldn't open at first. The latch must have fallen. I had to shove hard to get in. I picked up the wire—it was rusty and quite useless I found out later—and started down again. Someone had closed the door at the bottom of the stairway."

"I am sure I didn't," Natalie put in quietly. She had evidently said this before as it angered her brother. He spoke loudly, turning on her: "Very well. It was the cook we haven't got. It was a ghost. What the devil difference does it make what it was?"

"Oh, come," Dr. Greerson said reasonably, "it was the wind."

Kenneth winked at Natalie.

"Anyway," Bunny went on, "it was damned dark on that stairway. I had to grope for the catch and I came out blinking against the bright square of light from the window in the front door. When I could see clearly I was looking at *her*."

"Who?" Kenneth asked.

"An old woman in a bonnet. Her face was close to the pane, her mouth slightly open. One tooth here at the side was gone. She was screwing up her eyes to see in, shading them with one hand. The hand had a black, fingerless mitten on it. She was looking at the air in front of me. Her eyes lifted slowly, focused into mine. They opened wide. We stared at each other through the glass. I was frightened, I'll admit, but I managed to open the door and I said: 'How d'you do?'

"She said slowly in a whisper, 'I don't know who you are.' I didn't say anything. For a moment I wasn't sure myself who I was. She whispered: 'I'm staying at the Partelo's.' Then, 'If you see my sister say I went to church.'

"Who was her sister? Someone who had lived in this house before us? I didn't know. I realised I was rudely gaping at her, our first visitor. I said 'Come in, won't you?' but she shook her black bonnet. 'I'll be back,' she whispered, and that was all. She went away. I watched her go along the road. She had scarlet stockings on and shiny black shoes."

Natalie looked to Dr. Greerson, wanting to know what he thought. She said: "So I called out: 'Are you talking to yourself, Bunny?' He didn't answer. I found him staring at the empty road. I ran out the back way, ran round the other side of the corn crib, my eyes all ready to see his old woman; but the air was empty. She had evaporated."

"There's a footpath into the woods there," Dr. Greerson said. He repeated this as if he thought it important.

"You ran after her!" Bunny exclaimed. "That was a damned funny thing to do."

Kenneth sat up. His eyes were bright with mischief. He picked a blade of grass, said thoughtfully: "Scarlet stockings!"

Bunny turned as if he had been slapped. "Yes. I saw them. I saw her and I talked with her."

"Man, man, we believe you," Dr. Greerson said.

"But you don't. Kenneth doesn't. Natalie doesn't. Hell, I've got feelings! Doctor, you tell me, you're supposed to know something about the mind, you tell me why I should imagine that old woman."

"You didn't imagine her. You saw her, actually in the flesh. We all know that. But you were going to show me the old mill dam, where you plan the swimming pool. Come on, the afternoon's already gone."

"Sorry." Bunny got up, looked at Kenneth.

Kenneth shook his head. "I've seen your dam."

Bunny and the Doctor started down through the timothy grass toward the pond.

They were soon out of sight. A Bob White called, sudden as a pistol shot, and that seemed to mark the end of the day, though it was still broad light. A chill breath ran across the yard.

"Who was she?" Natalie reached for Kenneth and his hand met hers, held it. They were to be married, or at least so they had planned for two years. Her expression made him laugh.

"Who was she? Nobody, darling." He tapped his forehead. "Is Bunny often followed by funny old women? Are you?"

"No. Or," she smiled, parting her red lips slowly, "or generally I'm not. I do feel strange upstairs. In the bedroom—my room now—whoever was there before me and who is gone now, is still there, in a way. For years this house waited. Now we come. Still the house waits. I don't know what for. I wish I did." He noticed goose-flesh on her arm. An actual shudder had run through her even while she smiled.

Saying how soon she would get over such notions, he put an arm around her waist, and she relaxed, pleased. All the green wood was still. It was evening.

"People walk about upstairs in these old houses, creak-creak, back and forth." He smiled down on her, feeling superior. "Know why? Because the wide floor-boards

expand and contract with temperature changes. That's all. Bertha Bliven's no more than a thermal crack. Haw. Haw."

"Who's Bertha Bliven?"

"She opens doors. She's in the bedroom upstairs."

"My room!"

"Yes, and if I tell you about her you'll begin to imagine that you see her with her legs all limp, so I won't tell you."

"Please."

He was eager to tell, really; and he quickly made her see Bertha Bliven, a thin woman of thirty-something, of extraordinary vitality and a bitterness toward Farmer Bliven. Neither one of their two babies had lived long, and she grieved for them. Perhaps he was weary of her grief. Once he thrashed her with a bridle. Bertha's sister Matilda, who was thirteen or fourteen, would walk down the road and visit. She came one Sunday on her way to church. Bertha wouldn't go. "I'll stay here alone," she said.

Matilda had gone on for a mile. There she stopped. For thinking of her sister's strange expression she could not go on nor turn back. In the end she turned back, retraced her steps, passed the smithy, over the little bridge, the long bridge where the Bonacutt rushes over big stones, under the chestnuts by the white school-house. When she came to the lower barn she stopped. Here one had the first glimpse of her sister's house. It had changed. Shutters upstairs and down were tight closed, all of them.

She crept in the back door, called "Bertha!" in the darkness. No one answered. She dared at last to call at the stair door. She went up, one step at a time, and knocked.

In the attic darkness she remembered the still clear noon-day that surrounded the house. She heard her heart.

From inside the bedroom began another pounding, rapid and irregular, growing louder. It thundered through the house. Matilda ran down and hid in the cupboard under the stairs.

When Bliven returned from church Matilda was lying on the floor, hands to her ears. To prove to her that there was nothing to be afraid of, that Bertha had merely gone back to their mother's, as she had often threatened, he forced Matilda to go back upstairs with him.

Of course, Bertha was there in the bedroom. The wire she had used had cut into her neck; blood lay long and thick down her Sunday white, and her stockinged heels had struck great holes in the plaster. In the candle-light her face seemed quite black.

"I suppose, it was," Kenneth added. "One has to fill in here and there."

Natalie played with her thin white hands, looking at them. She nodded slowly.

"Good story?"

"Yes, a good, dreadful story. What a dreadful thing to do to that girl. What happened to her?"

"There history is silent."

As soon as the others returned Kenneth and Dr. Greerson prepared to leave. The Doctor asked Natalie, holding her hands, "What has he been telling you?"

"Stories." She stood very straight like a little girl. "Good night, Doctor. Good night, Kenneth."

"And you, Bunny, get a lot of sunlight into that house of yours. And fires going! I'm afraid it's still damp."

Night had fallen. They inched along in second gear to the old Providence turnpike, a mile away, fearful lest tie-rod or differential strike against a stone. On asphalt at last and rolling smoothly, Kenneth said: "He ought to be psycho-analysed."

Dr. Greerson said: "Bosh."

"Well, he sees things, doesn't he? He almost had Natalie believing in that old woman. I told her there never was such a person, that she was a figment of Bunny's disordered imagination."

"You did!"

"I certainly did!"

The Doctor found he had to think about that. He slowed down. He stopped and pulled the brake back.

"What's the matter?"

"What else did you tell her?"

The young man's voice rose. "What else! My dear Uncle, she is my——" He broke off, with a gasp. The headlights made a clear-edged cavern in the black dark. Someone had stepped into that radiance. An old woman. A stooping

old woman with a bonnet on, who grinned and showed where one tooth was gone.

In a harsh whisper, peering blindly, she asked: "Who's that behind those glary lights?"

"Dr. Greerson."

"Good evening to you, Doctor." She had gone back into the darkness, was walking away.

The Doctor started the car. After a minute: "That's Matilda," he said, "Matilda Morris, sister to Bertha Bliven who hanged herself. Matilda's the little girl or was. She's quite all right in the mind save for that one memory. Hallo, there's a drop of rain." He started the windshield wiper. "She often walks this road. Walks like a man. She's strong."

"I'd have offered her a lift but she always refuses. They say she used to go running to that house, trying to be on time, you know, over and over again. The house was boarded up, of course, and the first sight of it often would straighten her out. She'd snap back to normal, but not always; she has been seen trying to open the front door, whimpering, calling out to her sister that she was coming."

Kenneth's dry mouth finally made words. "So you knew it was she all the time Bunny was telling us?"

"Of course."

"And you said nothing. Explained nothing to him."

"He's high-strung, though not as high-strung as his sister. I didn't want to feed their imaginations any more than they had already been fed."

Here was the Greerson driveway. They left the car in an open carriage-shed and ran through pelting rain for a side door.

A gusty wind staggered against the window-panes. Greerson sat down before his fire. Kenneth paced the long room. He said:

"Which direction was she going?"

"Up the road, home—I suppose."

"Sure?"

Dr. Greerson slowly shook his head. "Come to think of it, maybe she wasn't."

"Maybe she was going back."

"Back where?"

"To her sister's. To Bunny's house. For the first time she finds somebody to open the door for her. You know, I think we'd better go back there, too."

"In this downpour? Over that road?"

"We'll say that we've actually seen the old woman, that we know who she is, that she's . . . Do come, for God's sake."

"They'll be in bed, my boy."

"Yes. But you see, I did another wrong thing. I told Natalie about Bertha Bliven and how her little sister came calling her, too late."

"You're a donkey," Dr. Greerson said.

Kenneth did not deny that. "All right. But I must get there, and quickly."

"Go ahead."

"But you must come, we might need you."

II

With lamps and candles darkness is always near; rooms are not filled tanks of light as with electricity. Natalie, putting dishes away in the new lean-to kitchen, walked from darkness to darkness. A whip-poor-will began loudly its witless reiteration outside the window and bending down she looked out, saw in silhouette a large bird on the stone wall, ugly in a nameless fashion, saw how it raised its head and fluttered its wing each time it whistled, heard the slight smacking sound after. She wished it would go away.

In the big room that had been the kitchen, within the outer radiance of the fire in the huge fireplace, Bunny sat at a trestle table, as usual writing down and diagramming further plans for the farm. He did not speak as she came in from the kitchen and sat down opposite him, started to sew on pink silk. The light was on her chin and under her eyes, which were all shadow save when she looked this way and that. Then they flashed . . . It was too quiet. She wanted Bunny to say something. She did not believe in his old woman. Was he, she wondered, really a little queer despite his precise words, his neat diagrams?

Into the silence, spreading out, filling it like a quick torrent, like the rising spreading sound heard under ether, she heard one word, one straining whisper:

"Bertha!"

Natalie looked at her sewing. Bunny made another mark on his paper.

There were many other sounds, sounds in the walls. She even heard the latch of the front door click, and click again, as if it had been closed after someone entering. Her imagination was running wild. She looked across without raising her eyes, stealthily, at Bunny's hand, the one holding the pencil. Was it trembling? Was he too concealing his fears? She would have to say something.

"It's getting late." Her voice seemed loud.

He looked up, smiled. "Must be all of nine o'clock. How sleepy we get out here!"

"Let's go to bed."

He yawned and agreed; went out into the front hall and locked the door. He called from there: "Why did you lock the cupboard under the stairs?"

"I didn't lock it."

He came back. "Perhaps I did," he said. "It's no matter."

They went upstairs, he first, said good-night at the head of the stairway.

"Sleep well."

"I'll try," she said. His expression in the lamplight was strange; his eyes moved too quickly. Was he terrified, as she was; or was this again her imagination?

From his bed in a far corner of the great attic he called cheerfully to her. For a long time she combed her hair in the lamplight, watching herself in the mirror. Behind her on that square beam was an iron hook. Was that the one Bertha had used? Possibly. She combed very slowly. If she could only lock the door, perhaps that would make her feel better. But there was no lock, the latch was broken.

She heard, or seemed to hear, a door open downstairs in the hall. The cupboard door. One hand up with the comb she waited. It was nothing. It was the wind. . . . A stair creaked, quite plainly. After a long time another creaked.

She heard someone breathing out there, just outside her door.

The latch began to move.

The door opened. She, the old woman, stood in the doorway, black bonnet and shawl gleaming with rain. She was terrified, her white hands shaking as she raised them and came into the room.

Natalie moved back. The lamp went over with an outburst of brittle little sounds. For a moment it was dark, black dark. In that blindness she felt the old woman's arms tight around her.

III

Midway between highway and farm the car hit something with a clang. For a moment they sat in silence. The rain had stopped. Kenneth climbed out, flashlight in hand. Presently he said: "Tie-rod's bent almost double. We'll have to leave her here."

They splashed and stumbled on. At the first stone gate there was the house, and a light upstairs, reflecting on the wet leaves of an elm. They went on through the orchard. Kenneth whispered: "Wait!" and pointed.

Under an apple tree near the house stood Matilda. She did not move.

"Good thing we came," Kenneth whispered.

The light upstairs was brighter. Lights flickered in the downstairs windows.

Bunny's voice, high strangled, called: "Who's that?"

"Dr. Greerson and I," Kenneth shouted. "We came back. The car——"

"For God's sake come quickly. Natalie's gone."

They found him crawling in the long grass. He looked up at them. "Natalie's gone."

He tried to tell how he had heard her screams, had found her room ablaze, had tried in vain to smother the fire.

All the windows were broadly lighted now. From the rain-soaked shingles of the great roof rose clouds of steam and smoke, and within a multitude of voices were started, crackling, whistling, whispering. The green woods stared. As

flames filled the kitchen wing a dish fell. A small, deliberate crash, then another and another.

They looked over the ground for Natalie, called her name. The Doctor found her lying at Matilda's feet.

"What have you done?"

The old woman looked above his head at the glare of the fire. She was smiling. The roof-tree pitched down with a rending final cry.

"I carried her out—in time, in time," Matilda said. Her head was filled with a weary confusion of madness and actual memories. How many times through the years she had come back here! She sighed: "At last. At last."

Dr. Greerson on his knees listened for life. Terror, he thought. How would he tell those others. He pretended to listen.

THE KILLING BOTTLE

L. P. Hartley

Unlike the majority of men, Jimmy Rintoul enjoyed the hour or so's interval between being called and having breakfast; for it was the only part of the day upon which he imposed an order. From nine-fifteen onwards the day imposed its order upon him. The bus, the office, the hasty city luncheon; then the office, the bus, and the unsatisfactory interval before dinner: such a promising time and yet, do what he would with it, it always seemed to be wasted. If he was going to dine alone at his club, he felt disappointed and neglected; if, as seldom happened, in company, he felt vaguely apprehensive. He expected a good deal from his life, and he never went to bed without the sense of having missed it. Truth to tell, he needed a stimulus, the stimulus of outside interest and appreciation, to get the best out of himself. In a competitive society, with rewards dangled before his eyes, his nature fulfilled itself and thrived. How well he had done at school, and even afterwards, while his parents lived to applaud his efforts. Now he was thirty-three; his parents were dead; there was no one close enough to him to care whether he made a success of his life or not. Nor did life hand out to grown-up men incontestable signs of merit and excellence, volumes bound in vellum or silver cups standing proudly on ebony pedestals. No, its awards were far less tangible, and Jimmy, from the shelter of his solicitors' office, sometimes felt glad that its more sensational prizes were passing out of his reach—that he need no longer feel obliged, as he had once felt, to climb the Matterhorn, play the *Moonlight Sonata*, master the Spanish language, and read the *Critique of Pure Reason* before he died. His ambition was sensibly on the ebb.

But not in the mornings. The early mornings were still untouched by the torpors of middle-age. Dressing was for Jimmy a ritual, and like all rituals it looked forward to a culmination. Act followed act in a recognised sequence, each

stage contributing its peculiar thrill, opening his mind to a train of stimulating and agreeable thoughts, releasing it, encouraging it. And the culmination: what was it? Only his morning's letters and the newspaper! Not very exciting. But the newspaper might contain one of those helpful, sympathetic articles about marriage, articles that warned the reader not to rush into matrimony, but to await the wisdom that came with the early and still more with the late thirties; articles which, with a few tricks of emphasis, of skipping here and reading between the lines there, demonstrated that Jimmy Rintoul's career, without any effort of his own, was shaping itself on sound, safe lines. The newspaper, then, for reassurance; the letters for surprise! And this morning an interesting letter would be particularly welcome. It would distract his mind from a vexing topic that even the routine of dressing had not quite banished—the question of his holiday, due in a fortnight's time.

Must it be Swannick Fen again? Partly for lack of finding others to take their place, he had cherished the interests of his boyhood, of which butterfly-collecting was the chief. He was solitary and competitive, and the hobby ministered to both these traits. But alas! he had not the patience of the true collector; his interest fell short of the lesser breeds, the irritating varieties of Wainscots and Footmen and what-nots. It embraced only the more sensational insects—the large, the beautiful, and the rare. His desire had fastened itself on the Swallow-tail butterfly as representing all these qualities. So he went to Swannick, found the butterfly, bred it, and presently had a whole hutch-full of splendid green caterpillars. Their mere number, the question of what to do with them when they came out, whether to keep them all in their satiating similarity, to give them away, or to sell them; to let them go free so that the species might multiply, to the benefit of all collectors; to kill all but a few, thus enhancing the value of his own—these problems vexed his youthful, ambitious, conscientious mind. Finally he killed them all. But the sight of four setting-boards plastered with forty identical insects destroyed by a surfeit his passion for the Swallow-tail butterfly. He had coaxed it with other baits: the Pine Hawk moth, the Clifden Nonpareil; but it would not respond, would accept no

substitute, being, like many passions, monogamous and constant. Every year, in piety, in conservatism, in hope, he still went to Swannick Fen; but with each visit the emotional satisfaction diminished. Soon it would be gone.

However, there on his dressing-table (for some reason) stood the killing bottle—mutely demanding prey. Almost without thinking he released the stopper and snuffed up the almond-breathing fumes. A safe, pleasant smell; he could never understand how anything died of it, or why cyanide of potassium should figure in the chemists' book of poisons. But it did; he had had to put his name against it. Now, since the stuff was reputed to be so deadly, he must add a frail attic to the edifice of dressing and once more wash his hands. In a fortnight's time, he thought, I shall be doing this a dozen times a day.

On the breakfast-table lay a large, shiny blue envelope. He did not recognise the handwriting, nor, when he examined the post-mark, did it convey anything to him. The flap, gummed to the top and very strong, resisted his fingers. He opened it with a knife and read:

VERDEW CASTLE.

MY DEAR RINTOUL,

How did you feel after our little dinner on Sunday? None the worse, I hope. However, I'm not writing to inquire about your health, which seems pretty good, but about your happiness, or what I should like to think would be your happiness. Didn't I hear you mutter (the second time we met, I think it was, at Smallhouse's) something about going for a holiday in the near future? Well, then, couldn't you spend it here with us, at Verdevew? Us being my brother Randolph, my wife, and your humble servant. I'm afraid there won't be a party for you; but we could get through the day somehow, and play bridge in the evenings. Randolph and you would make perfect partners, you would be so kind to each other. And didn't you say you collected bugs? Then by all means bring your butterfly-net and your killing bottle and your other engines of destruction and park them here; there are myriads of green-flies, blue-bottle-flies, may-flies, dragon-flies, and kindred pests which would be all the better for your attentions. Now don't say

no. It would be a pleasure to us, and I'm sure it would amuse you to see ye olde castle and us living in our mediæval seclusion. I await the favour of a favourable reply, and will then tell you the best way of reaching the Schloss, as we sometimes call it in our German fashion.

Yours,

ROLLO VERDEW.

Jimmy stared at the facetious epistle until its purpose faded from his mind, leaving only a blurred impression of redundant loops and twirls. Verdew's handwriting was like himself, bold and dashing and unruly. At least, this was the estimate Jimmy had formed of him, on the strength of three meetings. He had been rather taken by the man's bluff, hearty manner, but he did not expect Verdew to like him: they were birds of a different feather. He hadn't felt very well after the dinner, having drunk more than was good for him in the effort to fall in with his host's mood; but apparently he had succeeded better than he thought. Perhaps swashbucklers like Verdew welcomed mildness in others. If not, why the invitation? He considered it. The district might be entomologically rich. Where exactly was Verdew Castle? He had, of course, a general idea of its locality, correct to three counties; he knew it was somewhere near the coast. Further than that, nothing; and directly he began to sift his knowledge he found it to be even less helpful than he imagined. The notepaper gave a choice of stations: wayside stations they must be, they were both unknown to him. The postal, telegraphic, and telephonic addresses all confidently cited different towns—Kirton Tracy, Shrivecross, and Pawlingham—names which seemed to stir memories but never fully awakened recollection. Still, what did it matter? Verdew had promised to tell him the best route, and it was only a question of getting there, after all. He could find his own way back.

Soon his thoughts, exploring the future, encountered an obstacle and stopped short. He was looking ahead as though he had made up his mind to go. Well, hadn't he? The invitation solved his immediate difficulty: the uncertainty as to where he should take his holiday. The charm of Swannick had failed to hold him. And yet, perversely enough, his old hunting-ground chose this very moment to trouble him with

its lures: its willows, its alders, the silent clumps of grey rushes with the black water in between. The conservatism of his nature, an almost superstitious loyalty to the preferences of his early life, protested against the abandonment of Swannick—Swannick, where he had always done exactly as he liked, where bridge never intruded, and the politenesses of society were unknown. For Jimmy's mind had run forward again, and envisaged existence at Verdew Castle as divided between holding open the door for Mrs. Rollo Verdew and exchanging compliments and forbearances and commiseration with Rollo's elder (or perhaps younger, he hadn't said) brother Randolph across the bridge-table, with a lot of spare time that wasn't really spare and a lot of being left to himself that really meant being left to everybody.

Jimmy looked at the clock: it was time to go. If it amused his imagination to fashion a mythical Verdew Castle, he neither authorised nor forbade it. He still thought himself free to choose. But when he reached his office his first act was to write his friend a letter of acceptance.

Four days later a second blue envelope appeared on his breakfast-table. It was evidently a two-days' post to Verdew Castle, for Rollo explained that he had that moment received Jimmy's welcome communication. There followed a few references, necessarily brief, to matters of interest to them both. The letter closed with the promised itinerary:

So we shall hope to see you in ten days' time, complete with lethal chamber and big-game apparatus. I forget whether you have a car; but if you have, I strongly advise you to leave it at home. The road bridge across the estuary has been dicky for a long time. They may close it any day now, since it was felt to wobble the last time the Lord-Lieutenant crossed by it. You would be in a mess if you found it shut and had to go trailing thirty miles to Amplesford (a hellish road, since it's no one's interest to keep it up). If the bridge carried the Lord-Lieutenant it would probably bear you, but I shouldn't like to have your blood on my head! Come, then, by train to Verdew Grove. I recommend the four o'clock; it doesn't get here till after dark, but you can dine on it, and it's almost express part of the way. The morning train is too bloody for anything:

you would die of boredom before you arrived, and I should hate that to happen to any of my guests. I'm sorry to present you with such ghastly alternatives, but the Castle was built here to be out of everyone's reach, and by Heaven, it is! Come prepared for a long stay. You must. I'm sure the old office can get on very well without you. You're lucky to be able to go away as a matter of course, like a gentleman. Let us have a line and we'll send to meet you, not my little tin kettle but Randolph's majestic Daimler. Good-bye.

Yours,

ROLLO.

It was indeed a troublesome, tedious journey, involving changes of train and even of station. More than once the train, having entered a terminus head first, steamed out tail first, with the result that Rintoul lost his sense of direction and had a slight sensation of vertigo whenever, in thought, he tried to recapture it. It was half-past nine and the sun was setting when they crossed the estuary. As always in such places the tide was low, and the sun's level beams illuminated the too rotund and luscious curves of a series of mud-flats. The railway-line approached the estuary from its marshy side, by a steep embankment. Near by, and considerably below, ran the road bridge—an antiquated affair of many arches, but apparently still in use, though there seemed to be no traffic on it. The line curved inwards, and by straining his neck Rintoul could see the train bent like a bow, and the engine approaching a hole, from which a few wisps of smoke still issued, in the ledge of rock that crowned the farther shore. The hole rushed upon him; Rintoul pulled in his head and was at once in darkness. The world never seemed to get light again. After the long tunnel they were among hills that shut out the light that would have come in, and stifled the little that was left behind. It was by the help of the station lantern that he read the name, Verdew Grove, and when they were putting his luggage on the motor he could scarcely distinguish between the porter and the chauffeur. One of them said:

"Did you say it was a rabbit?"

And the other: "Well, there was a bit of fur stuck to the wheel."

"You'd better not let the boss see it," said the first speaker.

"Not likely." And so saying, the chauffeur, who seemed to be referring to an accident, climbed into the car. As Rollo had said, it was a very comfortable one. Jimmy gave up counting the turns and trying to catch glimpses of the sky over the high hedges, and abandoned himself to drowsiness. He must have dozed, for he did not know whether it was five minutes or fifty before the opening door let in a gust of cool air and warned him that he had arrived.

For a moment he had the hall to himself. It did not seem very large, but to gauge its true extent was difficult, because of the arches and the shadows. Shaded lamps on the tables gave a diffused but very subdued glow; while a few unshaded lights, stuck about in the groining of the vault, consuming their energy in small patches of great brilliancy, dazzled rather than assisted the eye. The fact that the spaces between the vaulting-ribs were white-washed seemed to increase the glare. It was curious and not altogether happy, the contrast between the brilliance above and the murk below. No trophies of the chase adorned the walls; no stags' heads or antlers, no rifles, javelins, tomahawks, assegais, or krisses. Clearly the Verdews were not a family of sportsmen. In what did Randolph Verdew's interests lie? Rintoul wondered, and he was walking across to the open grate, in whose large recess a log-fire flickered, when the sound of a footfall startled him. It came close, then died away completely, then still in the same rhythm began again. It was Rollo.

Rollo with his black moustache, his swaggering gait, his large expansive air, his noisy benevolence. He grasped Jimmy's hand.

But before he could say more than "Damned glad," a footman appeared. He came so close to Jimmy and Rollo that the flow of the latter's eloquence was checked.

"Mr. Rintoul is in the Pink Room," announced the footman.

Rollo put his little finger in his mouth and gently bit it.

"Oh, but I thought I said——"

"Yes, sir," interrupted the footman. "But Mr. Verdew thought he might disturb Mr. Rintoul in the Onyx Room, because sometimes when he lies awake at night he has to

move about, as you know, sir. And he thought the Pink Room had a better view. So he gave orders for him to be put there, sir."

The footman finished on a tranquil note and turned to go. But Rollo flushed faintly and seemed put out.

"I thought it would have been company for you having my brother next door," he said. "But he's arranged otherwise, so it can't be helped. Shall I take you to the room now, or will you have a drink first? That is, if I can find it," he muttered. "They have a monstrous habit of sometimes taking the drinks away when Randolph has gone to bed. And by the way, he asked me to make his excuses to you. He was feeling rather tired. My wife's gone, too. She always turns in early here; she says there's nothing to do at Verdew. But, my God, there's a lot that wants doing, as I often tell her. This way."

Though they found the whisky and soda in the drawing-room, Rollo still seemed a little crestfallen and depressed; but Jimmy's spirits, which sometimes suffered from the excessive buoyancy of his neighbour's, began to rise. The chair was comfortable; the room, though glimpses of stone showed alongside the tapestries, was more habitable and less ecclesiastical than the hall. In front of him was an uncurtained window through which he could see, swaying their heads as though bent on some ghostly conference, a cluster of white roses. I'm going to enjoy myself here, he thought.

Whatever the charms of the Onyx Room, whatever virtue resided in the proximity of Mr. Randolph Verdew, one thing was certain: the Pink Room had a splendid view. Leaning out of his window the next morning Jimmy feasted his eyes on it. Directly below him was the moat, clear and apparently deep. Below that again was the steep conical hill on which the castle stood, its side intersected by corkscrew paths and level terraces. Below and beyond, undulating ground led the eye onwards and upwards to where, almost on the horizon, glittered and shone the silver of the estuary. Of the castle were visible only the round wall of Jimmy's tower, and a wing of the Tudor period, the gables of which rose to the level of his bedroom window. It was half-past eight and he dressed quickly, meaning to make a little tour of the castle precincts before his hosts appeared.

His intention, however, was only partially fulfilled, for on arriving in the hall he found the great door still shut, and fastened with a variety of locks and bolts, of antique design and as hard to open, it seemed, from within as from without. He had better fortune with a smaller door, and found himself on a level oblong stretch of grass, an island of green, bounded by the moat on the east and on the other side by the castle walls. There was a fountain in the middle. The sun shone down through the open end of the quadrangle, making the whole place a cave of light, flushing the warm stone of the Elizabethan wing to orange, and gilding the cold, pale, mediaeval stonework of the rest. Jimmy walked to the moat and tried to find, to right or left, a path leading to other parts of the building. But there was none. He turned round and saw Rollo standing in the doorway.

"Good-morning," called his host. "Already thinking out a plan of escape?"

Jimmy coloured slightly. The thought had been present in his mind, though not in the sense that Rollo seemed to mean it.

"You wouldn't find it very easy from here," remarked Rollo, whose cheerful humour the night seemed to have restored. "Because even if you swam the moat you couldn't get up the bank; it's too steep and too high."

Jimmy examined the farther strand and realised that this was true.

"It would be prettier," Rollo continued, "and less canal-like, if the water came up to the top; but Randolph prefers it as it used to be. He likes to imagine we're living in a state of siege."

"He doesn't seem to keep any weapons for our defence," commented Jimmy. "No arquebuses or bows and arrows; no vats of molten lead."

"Oh, he wouldn't hurt anyone for the world," said Rollo. "That's one of his little fads. But it amuses him to look across to the river like one of the first Verdews and feel that no one can get in without his leave."

"Or out either, I suppose," suggested Jimmy.

"Well," remarked Rollo, "some day I'll show you a way of

getting out. But now come along and look at the view from the other side; we have to go through the house to see it."

They walked across the hall, where the servants were laying the breakfast-table, to a door at the end of a long narrow passage. But it was locked. "Hodgson!" shouted Rollo.

A footman came up.

"Will you open this door, please?" said Rollo. Jimmy expected him to be angry, but there was only a muffled irritation in his voice. At his leisure the footman produced the key and let them through.

"That's what comes of living in someone else's house," fumed Rollo, once they were out of earshot. "These lazy devils want waking up. Randolph's a damned sight too easy-going."

"Shall I see him at breakfast?" Jimmy inquired.

"I doubt it." Rollo picked up a stone, looked round, for some reason, at the castle, and threw the pebble at a thrush, narrowly missing it. "He doesn't usually appear till lunch-time. He's interested in all sorts of philanthropical societies. He's always helping them to prevent something. He hasn't prevented you, though, you naughty fellow," he went on, stooping down and picking up from a stone several fragments of snails' shells. "This seems to be the thrushes' Tower Hill."

"He's fond of animals, then?" asked Jimmy.

"Fond, my boy?" repeated Rollo. "Fond is not the word. But we aren't vegetarians. Some day I'll explain all that. Come and have some bacon and eggs."

That evening, in his bath, a large wooden structure like a giant's coffin, Jimmy reviewed the day, a delightful day. In the morning he had been taken round the castle; it was not so large as it seemed from outside—it had to be smaller, the walls were so thick. And there were, of course, a great many rooms he wasn't shown, attics, cellars, and dungeons. One dungeon he had seen: but he felt sure that in a fortress of such pretensions there must be more than one. He couldn't quite get the "lie" of the place at present; he had his own way of finding his room, but he knew it wasn't the shortest way. The hall, which was like a Clapham Junction to the

castle's topographical system, still confused him. He knew the way out, because there was only one way, across a modernised drawbridge, and that made it simpler. He had crossed it to get at the woods below the castle, where he had spent the afternoon, hunting for caterpillars. "They" had really left him alone—even severely alone! Neither of Rollo's wife nor of his brother was there yet any sign. But I shall see them at dinner, he thought, wrapping himself in an immense bath-towel.

The moment he saw Randolph Verdew, standing pensive in the drawing-room, he knew he would like him. He was an etherealised version of Rollo, taller and slighter. His hair was sprinkled with grey and he stooped a little. His cloudy blue eyes met Jimmy's with extraordinary frankness as he held out his hand and apologised for his previous non-appearance.

"It is delightful to have you here," he added. "You are a naturalist, I believe?"

His manner was formal but charming, infinitely reassuring.

"I am an entomologist," said Jimmy, smiling.

"Ah, I love to watch the butterflies fluttering about the flowers—and the moths, too, those big heavy fellows that come in of an evening and knock themselves about against the lights. I have often had to put as many as ten out of the windows, and back they come—the deluded creatures. What a pity that their larvae are harmful and in some cases have to be destroyed! But I expect you prefer to observe the rarer insects?"

"If I can find them," said Jimmy.

"I'm sure I hope you will," said Randolph, with much feeling. "You must get Rollo to help you."

"Oh," said Jimmy, "Rollo——"

"I hope you don't think Rollo indifferent to nature?" asked his brother, with distress in his voice and an engaging simplicity of manner. "He has had rather a difficult life, as I expect you know. His affairs have kept him a great deal in towns, and he has had little leisure—very little leisure."

"He must find it restful here," remarked Jimmy, again with the sense of being more tactful than truthful.

"I'm sure I hope he does. Rollo is a dear fellow; I wish he came here oftener. Unfortunately his wife does not care for

the country, and Rollo himself is very much tied by his new employment—the motor business.”

“Hasn’t he been with Scorchers and Speedwell long?”

“Oh no; poor Rollo, he is always trying his hand at something new. He ought to have been born a rich man instead of me.” Randolph spread his hands out with a gesture of helplessness. “He could have done so much, whereas I—ah, here he comes. We were talking about you, Rollo.”

“No scandal, I hope; no hitting a man when he’s down?”

“Indeed no. We were saying we hoped you would soon come into a fortune.”

“Where do you think it’s coming from?” demanded Rollo, screwing up his eyes as though the smoke from his cigarette had made them smart.

“Perhaps Vera could tell us,” rejoined Randolph mildly, making his way to the table, though his brother’s cigarette was still unfinished. “How is she, Rollo? I hoped she would feel sufficiently restored to make a fourth with us this evening.”

“Still moping,” said her husband. “Don’t waste your pity on her. She’ll be all right to-morrow.”

They sat down to dinner.

The next day, or it might have been the day after, Jimmy was coming home to tea from the woods below the castle. On either side of the path was a hayfield. They were mowing the hay. The mower was a new one, painted bright blue; the horse tossed its head up and down; the placid afternoon air was alive with country sounds, whirring, shouts, and clumping footfalls. The scene was full of an energy and gentleness that refreshed the heart. Jimmy reached the white iron fence that divided the plain from the castle mound, and, with a sigh, set his feet upon the zigzag path. For though the hill was only a couple of hundred feet high at most, the climb called for an effort he was never quite prepared to make. He was tramping with lowered head, conscious of each step, when a voice hailed him.

“Mr. Rintoul!”

It was a foreign voice, the i’s pronounced like e’s. He looked up and saw a woman, rather short and dark, watching him from the path above.

"You see I have come down to meet you," she said, advancing with short, brisk, but careful and unpractised steps. And she added, as he still continued to stare at her: "Don't you know? I am Mrs. Verdew."

By this time she was at his side.

"How could I know?" he asked, laughing and shaking the hand she was already holding out to him. All her gestures seemed to be quick and unpremeditated.

"Let us sit here," she said, and almost before she had spoken she was sitting, and had made him sit, on the wooden bench beside them. "I am tired from walking downhill; you will be tired by walking uphill; therefore we both need a rest."

She decided it all so quickly that Jimmy, whose nature had a streak of obstinacy, wondered if he was really so tired after all.

"And who should I have been, who could I have been, but Mrs. Verdew?" she demanded challengingly.

Jimmy saw that an answer was expected, but couldn't think of anyone who Mrs. Verdew might have been.

"I don't know," he said feebly.

"Of course you don't, silly," said Mrs. Verdew. "How long have you been here?"

"I can't remember. Two or three days, I think," said Jimmy, who disliked being nailed down to a definite fact.

"Two or three days? Listen to the man, how vague he is!" commented Mrs. Verdew, with a gesture of impatience apostrophising the horizon. "Well, whether it's three days or only two, you must have learnt one thing—that no one enters these premises without leave."

"Premises?" murmured Jimmy.

"Hillside, garden, grounds, premises," repeated Mrs. Verdew. "How slow you are! But so are all Englishmen."

"I don't think Rollo is slow," remarked Jimmy, hoping to carry the war into her country.

"Sometimes too slow, sometimes too fast, never the right pace," pronounced his wife. "Rollo misdirects his life."

"He married you," said Jimmy gently.

Mrs. Verdew gave him a quick look. "That was partly because I wanted him to. But only just now, for instance, he has been foolish."

"Do you mean he was foolish to come here?"

"I didn't mean that. Though I hate the place, and he does no good here."

"What good could he do?" asked Jimmy, who was staring vacantly at the sky. "Except, perhaps, help his brother to look after—to look after——"

"That's just it," said Mrs. Verdew. "Randolph doesn't need any help, and if he did he wouldn't let Rollo help him. He wouldn't even have him made a director of the coal-mine!"

"What coal-mine?" Jimmy asked.

"Randolph's. You don't mean to say you didn't know he had a coal-mine? One has to tell you everything!"

"I like you to tell me things!" protested Jimmy.

"As you don't seem to find out anything for yourself, I suppose I must. Well, then: Randolph has a coal-mine, he is very rich, and he spends his money on nothing but charitable societies for contradicting the laws of nature. And he won't give Rollo a penny—not a penny though he is his only brother, his one near relation in the world! He won't even help him to get a job!"

"I thought he had a job," said Jimmy, in perplexity.

"You thought that! You'd think anything," exclaimed Mrs. Verdew, her voice rising in exasperation.

"No, but he told me he came here for a holiday," said Jimmy pacifically.

"Holiday, indeed! A long holiday. I can't think why Rollo told you that. Nor can I think why I bore you with all our private troubles. A man can talk to a woman about anything; but a woman can only talk to a man about what interests him."

"But who is to decide that?"

"The woman, of course; and I see you're getting restless."

"No, no. I was so interested. Please go on."

"Certainly not. I am a Russian, and I often know when a man is bored sooner than he knows himself. Come along," pulling him from the bench much as a gardener uproots a weed; "and I will tell you something very interesting. Ah, how fast you walk! Don't you know it's less fatiguing to

walk uphill slowly—and you with all those fishing-nets and pill-boxes. And what on earth is that great bottle for?"

"I try to catch butterflies in these," Jimmy explained. "And this is my killing bottle."

"What a horrible name. What is it for?"

"I'm afraid I kill the butterflies with it."

"Ah, what a barbarian! Give it to me a moment. Yes, there are their corpses, poor darlings. Is that Randolph coming towards us? No, don't take it away. I can carry it quite easily under my shawl. What was I going to tell you when you interrupted me? I remember—it was about the terrace. When I first came here I used to feel frightfully depressed—it was winter and the sun set so early, sometimes before lunch! In the afternoons I used to go down the mound, where I met you, and wait for the sun to dip below that bare hill on the left. And I would begin to walk quite slowly towards the castle, and all the while the sun was balanced on the hilltop like a ball! And the shadow covered the valley and kept lapping my feet, like the oncoming tide! And I would wait till it reached my ankles, and then run up into the light, and be safe for a moment. It was such fun, but I don't expect you'd enjoy it, you're too sophisticated. Ah, here's Randolph. Randolph, I've been showing Mr. Rintoul the way home; he didn't know it—he doesn't know anything! Do you know what he does with this amusing net? He uses it to catch tiny little moths, like the ones that get into your furs. He puts it over them and looks at them, and they're so frightened, they think they can't get out; then they notice the little holes, and out they creep and fly away! Isn't it charming?"

"Charming," said Randolph, glancing away from the net and towards the ground.

"Now we must go on. We want our tea terribly!" And Mrs. Verdew swept Jimmy up the hill.

With good fortune the morning newspaper arrived at Verdew Castle in time for tea, already a little out of date. Jimmy accorded it, as a rule, the tepid interest with which, when abroad, one contemplates the English journals of two days ago. They seem to emphasise one's remoteness, not lessen it.

Never did Jimmy seem farther from London, indeed, farther from civilisation, than when he picked up the familiar sheet of *The Times*. It was like a faint rumour of the world that had somehow found its way down hundreds of miles of railway, changed trains and stations, rumbled across the estuary, and threaded the labyrinth of lanes and turnings between Verdew Grove and the castle. Each day its news seemed to grow less important, or at any rate less important to Jimmy. He began to turn over the leaves. Mrs. Verdew had gone to her room, absent-mindedly taking the killing bottle with her. He was alone; there was no sound save the crackle of the sheets. Unusually insipid the news seemed. He turned more rapidly. What was this? In the middle of page fourteen, a hole? No, not a mere hole: a deliberate excision, the result of an operation performed with scissors. What item of news could anyone have found worth reading, much less worth cutting out? To Jimmy's idle mind, the centre of page fourteen assumed a tremendous importance, it became the sun of his curiosity's universe. He rose; with quick cautious fingers he searched about, shifting papers, delving under blotters, even fumbling in the more public-looking pigeon-holes.

Suddenly he heard the click of a door opening, and with a bound he was in the middle of the room. It was only Rollo, whom business of some kind had kept all day away from home.

"Enter the tired bread-winner," he remarked. "Like to see the paper? I haven't had time to read it." He threw something at Jimmy and walked off.

It was *The Times*. With feverish haste Jimmy turned to page fourteen and seemed to have read the paragraph even before he set eyes on it. It was headed: *Mysterious Outbreak at Verdew*.

"The sequestered, little-known village of Verdew-le-Dale has again been the scene of a mysterious outrage, recalling the murders of John Didwell and Thomas Presland in 1910 and 1912, and the occasional killing of animals which has occurred since. In this instance, as in the others, the perpetrator of the crime seems to have been actuated by some vague motive of retributive justice. The victim was a shepherd dog, the property of Mr. J. R. Cross. The dog, which was known to

worry cats, had lately killed two belonging to an old woman of the parish. The Bench, of which Mr. Randolph Verdew is chairman, fined Cross and told him to keep the dog under proper control, but did not order its destruction. Two days ago the animal was found dead in a ditch, with its throat cut. The police have no doubt that the wound was made by the same weapon that killed Didwell and Presland, who, it will be remembered, had both been prosecuted by the R.S.P.C.A. for cruelty and negligence resulting in the deaths of domestic animals. At present no evidence has come to light that might lead to the detection of the criminal, though the police are still making investigations."

"And I don't imagine it will ever come to light," Jimmy muttered.

"What do you suppose won't come to light?" inquired a voice at his elbow. He looked up. Randolph Verdew was standing by his chair and looking over his shoulder at the newspaper.

Jimmy pointed to the paragraph.

"Any clue to the identity of the man who did this?"

"No," said Randolph after a perceptible pause. "I don't suppose there will be." He hesitated a moment and then added:

"But it would interest me much to know how that paragraph found its way back into the paper."

Jimmy explained.

"You see," observed Randolph, "I always cut out, and paste into a book, any item of news that concerns the neighbourhood, and especially Verdew. In this way I have made an interesting collection."

"There seem to have been similar occurrences here before," remarked Jimmy.

"There have, there have," Randolph Verdew said.

"It's very strange that no one has even been suspected."

Randolph Verdew answered obliquely:

"Blood calls for blood. The workings of justice are secret and incalculable."

"Then you sympathise a little with the murderer?" Jimmy inquired.

"I?" muttered Randolph. "I think I hate cruelty more than anything in the world."

"But wasn't the murderer cruel?" persisted Jimmy.

"No," said Randolph Verdew with great decision. "At least," he added in a different tone, "the victims appear to have died with the minimum of suffering. But here comes Vera. We must find a more cheerful topic of conversation. Vera, my dear, you won't disappoint us of our bridge to-night?"

Several days elapsed, days rendered slightly unsatisfactory for Jimmy from a trivial cause. He could not get back his killing bottle from Mrs. Verdew. She had promised it, she had even gone upstairs to fetch it; but she never brought it down. Meanwhile, several fine specimens (in particular a large female Emperor moth) languished in match-boxes and other narrow receptacles, damaging their wings and even having to be set at liberty. It was very trying. He began to feel that the retention of the killing bottle was deliberate. In questions of conduct he was often at sea. But in the domain of manners, though he sometimes went astray, he considered that he knew very well which road to take, and the knowledge was a matter of pride to him. The thought of asking Mrs. Verdew a third time to restore his property irked him exceedingly. At last he screwed up his courage. They were walking down the hill together after tea.

"Mrs. Verdew," he began.

"Don't go on," she exclaimed. "I know exactly what you're going to say. Poor darling, he wants to have his killing bottle back. Well, you can't. I need it myself for those horrible hairy moths that come in at night."

"But Mrs. Verdew——!" he protested.

"And please don't call me Mrs. Verdew. How long have we known each other? Ten days! And soon you've got to go! Surely you could call me Vera!"

Jimmy flushed. He knew that he must go soon, but didn't realise that a term had been set to his stay.

"Listen," she continued, beginning to lead him down the hill. "When you're in London I hope you'll often come to see us."

"I certainly will," said he.

"Well, then, let's make a date. Will you dine with us on the tenth? That's to-morrow week."

"I'm not quite sure——" began Jimmy unhappily, looking down on to the rolling plain and feeling that he loved it.

"How long you're going to stay?" broke in Mrs. Verdew, who seemed to be able to read his thoughts. "Why do you want to stay? There's nothing to do here: think what fun we might have in London. You can't like this place and I don't believe it's good for you; you don't look half as well as you did when you came."

"But you didn't see me when I came, and I feel very well," said Jimmy.

"Feeling is nothing," said Mrs. Verdew. "Look at me. Do I look well?" She turned up to him her face: it was too large, he thought, and dull and pallid with powder; the features were too marked; but undeniably it had beauty. "I suppose I do: I feel well. But in this place I believe my life might stop any moment of its own accord! Do you never feel that?"

"No," said Jimmy, smiling.

"Sit down," she said suddenly, taking him to a seat as she had done on the occasion of their first meeting, "and let me have your hand—not because I love you, but because I'm happier holding something, and it's a pretty hand." Jimmy did not resist: he was slightly stupefied, but somehow not surprised by her behaviour. She held up his drooping hand by the wrist, level with her eyes, and surveyed it with a smile, then she laid it, palm upward, in her lap. The smile vanished from her face: she knitted her brows.

"I don't like it," she said, a sudden energy in her voice.

"I thought you said it was a pretty hand," murmured Jimmy.

"I did; you know I don't mean that. It is pretty: but you don't deserve to have it, nor your eyes, nor your hair; you are idle and complacent and unresponsive and ease-loving—you only think of your butterflies and your killing bottle!" She looked at him fondly; and Jimmy for some reason was rather pleased to hear all this. "No, I meant that I see danger in your hand, in the lines."

"Danger to me?"

"Ah, the conceit of men! Yes, to you."

"What sort of danger—physical danger?" inquired Jimmy, only moderately interested.

"*Danger de mort*," pronounced Mrs. Verdew.

"Come, come," said Jimmy, bending forward and looking into Mrs. Verdew's face to see if she was pretending to be serious. "When does the danger threaten?"

"Now," said Mrs. Verdew.

Oh, thought Jimmy, what a tiresome woman! So you think I'm in danger, do you, Mrs. Verdew, of losing my head at this moment? God, the conceit of women! He stole a glance at her; she was looking straight ahead, her lips pursed up and trembling a little, as though she wanted him to kiss her. Shall I? he thought, for compliance was in his blood and he always wanted to do what was expected of him. But at that very moment a wave of irritability flooded his mind and changed it: she had taken his killing bottle, spoilt and stultified several precious days, and all to gratify her caprice. He turned away.

"Oh, I'm tougher than you think," he said.

"Tougher?" she said. "Do you mean your skin? All Englishmen have thick skins." She spoke resentfully; then her voice softened. "I was going to tell you——" She uttered the words with difficulty, and as though against her will. But Jimmy, not noticing her changed tone and still ridden by his irritation, interrupted her.

"That you'd restore my killing bottle?"

"No, no," she cried in exasperation, leaping to her feet. "How you do harp on that wretched old poison bottle! I wish I'd broken it!" She caught her breath, and Jimmy rose too, facing her with distress and contrition in his eyes. But she was too angry to heed his change of mood. "It was something I wanted you to know—but you make things so difficult for me! I'll fetch you your bottle," she continued wildly, "since you're such a child as to want it! No, don't follow me; I'll have it sent to your room."

He looked up; she was gone, but a faint sound of sobbing disturbed the air behind her.

It was evening, several days later, and they were sitting at

dinner. How Jimmy would miss these meals when he got back to London! For a night or two, after the scene with Mrs. Verdew, he had been uneasy under the enforced proximity which the dining-table brought; she looked at him reproachfully, spoke little, and when he sought occasions to apologise to her, she eluded them. She had never been alone with him since. She had, he knew, little control over her emotions, and perhaps her pride suffered. But her pique, or whatever it was, now seemed to have passed away. She looked lovely to-night, and he realised he would miss her. Rollo's voice, when he began to speak, was like a commentary on his thoughts.

"Jimmy says he's got to leave us, Randolph," he said. "Back to the jolly old office."

"That is a great pity," said Randolph in his soft voice. "We shall miss him, shan't we, Vera?"

Mrs. Verdew said they would.

"All the same, these unpleasant facts have to be faced," remarked Rollo. "That's why we were born. I'm afraid you've had a dull time, Jimmy, though you must have made the local flora and fauna sit up. Have you annexed any prize specimens from your raids upon the countryside?"

"I have got one or two good ones," said Jimmy with a reluctance that he attributed partially to modesty.

"By the way," said Rollo, pouring himself out a glass of port, for the servants had left the room, "I would like you to show Randolph that infernal machine of yours, Jimmy. Anything on the lines of a humane killer bucks the old chap up no end." He looked across at his brother, the ferocious cast of his features softened into an expression of fraternal solicitude.

After a moment's pause Randolph said: "I should be much interested to be shown Mr. Rintoul's invention."

"Oh, it's not my invention," said Jimmy a little awkwardly.

"You'll forgive me disagreeing with you, Rollo," Mrs. Verdew, who had not spoken for some minutes, suddenly remarked. "I don't think it's worth Randolph's while looking at it. I don't think it would interest him a bit."

"How often have I told you, my darling," said Rollo, leaning across the corner of the table towards his wife, "not

to contradict me? I keep a record of the times you agree with me: December, 1919, was the last."

"Sometimes I think that was a mistake," said Mrs. Verdew, rising in evident agitation, "for it was then I promised to marry you." She reached the door before Jimmy could open it for her.

"Ah, these ladies!" moralised Rollo, leaning back and closing his eyes. "What a dance the dear things lead us, with their temperaments." And he proceeded to enumerate examples of feminine caprice, until his brother proposed that they should adjourn to the bridge table.

The next morning Jimmy was surprised to find a note accompany his early morning tea.

Dear Mr. Rintoul (it began), since I mustn't say "Dear Jimmy." ("I never said she mustn't," Jimmy thought.) I know it isn't easy for any man, most of all an Englishman, to understand moods, but I do beg you to forgive my foolish outburst of a few days ago. I think it must have been the air or the lime in the water that made me *un po' nervosa*, as the Italians say. I know you prefer a life utterly flat and dull and even—it would kill me, but there! I am sorry. You can't expect me to change, *à mon âge*! But anyhow try to forgive me.

Yours,

VERA VERDEW.

P.S.—I wouldn't trouble to show that bottle to Randolph. He has quite enough silly ideas in his head as it is.

What a nice letter, thought Jimmy drowsily. He had forgotten the killing bottle. I won't show it to Randolph, Jimmy thought, unless he asks me.

But soon after breakfast a footman brought him a message: Mr. Verdew was in his room and would be glad to see the invention (the man's voice seemed to put the word into inverted commas) at Mr. Rintoul's convenience. "Well," reflected Jimmy, "if he's to see it working it must have something to work on." Aimlessly he strolled over the drawbridge and made his way, past blocks of crumbling wall, past grassy hammocks and hollows, to the terraces. They were gay with flowers; and looked at from above, the lateral stripes and

bunches of colour, succeeding each other to the bottom of the hill, had a peculiarly brilliant effect. What should he catch? A dozen white butterflies presented themselves for the honour of exhibiting their death-agony to Mr. Randolph Verdew, but Jimmy passed them by. His collector's pride demanded a nobler sacrifice. After twenty minutes' search he was rewarded; his net fell over a slightly battered but still recognisable specimen of the Large Tortoiseshell butterfly. He put it in a pill-box and bore it away to the house. But as he went he was visited by a reluctance, never experienced by him before, to take the butterfly's life in such a public and cold-blooded fashion; it was not a good specimen, one that he could add to his collection; it was just cannon-fodder. The heat of the day, flickering visibly upwards from the turf and flowers, bemused his mind; all around was a buzzing and humming that seemed to liberate his thoughts from contact with the world and give them the intensity of sensations. So vivid was his vision, so flawless the inner quiet from which it sprang, that he came up with a start against his own bedroom door. The substance of his day-dream had been forgotten; but it had left its ambassador behind it—something that whether apprehended by the mind as a colour, a taste, or a local inflammation, spoke with an insistent voice and always to the same purpose: "Don't show Randolph Verdew the butterfly; let it go, here, out of the window, and send him an apology."

For a few minutes, such was the force of this inward monitor, Jimmy did contemplate setting the butterfly at liberty. He was prone to sudden irrational scruples and impulses, and if there was nothing definite urging him the other way he often gave in to them. But in this case there was. Manners demanded that he should accede to his host's request; the rules of manners, of all rules in life, were the easiest to recognise and the most satisfactory to act upon. Not to go would clearly be a breach of manners.

"How kind of you," said Randolph, coming forward and shaking Jimmy's hand, a greeting that, between two members of the same household, struck him as odd. "You have brought your invention with you?"

Jimmy saw that it was useless to disclaim the honour of its

discovery. He unwrapped the bottle and handed it to Randolph.

Randolph carried it straight away to a high window, the sill of which was level with his eyes and above the top of Jimmy's head. He held the bottle up to the light. Oblong in shape and about the size of an ordinary jam jar, it had a deep whitish pavement of plaster, pitted with brown furry holes like an overripe cheese. Resting on the plaster, billowing and coiling up to the glass stopper, stood a fat column of cotton-wool. The most striking thing about the bottle was the word *poison* printed in large, loving characters on a label stuck to the outside.

"May I release the stopper?" asked Randolph at length.

"You may," said Jimmy, "but a whiff of the stuff is all you want."

Randolph stared meditatively into the depths of the bottle. "A rather agreeable odour," he said. "But how small the bottle is. I had figured it to myself as something very much larger."

"Larger?" echoed Jimmy. "Oh, no, this is quite big enough for me. I don't need a mausoleum."

"But I was under the impression," Randolph Verdew remarked, still fingering the bottle, "that you used it to destroy pests."

"If you call butterflies pests," said Jimmy, smiling.

"I am afraid that some of them must undeniably be included in that category," pronounced Mr. Verdew, his voice edged with a melancholy decisiveness. "The cabbage butterfly, for instance. And it is, of course, only the admittedly noxious insects that need to be destroyed."

"All insects are more or less harmful," Jimmy said.

Randolph Verdew passed his hand over his brow. The shadow of a painful thought crossed his face, and he murmured uncertainly:

"I think that's a quibble. There are categories . . . I have been at some pains to draw them up. . . . The list of destructive lepidoptera is large, too large. . . . That is why I imagined your lethal chamber would be a vessel of considerable extent, possibly large enough to admit a man, and its use attended by some danger to an unpractised exponent."

"Well," said Jimmy, "there's enough poison here to account for half a town. But let me show you how it works." And he took the pill-box from his pocket. Shabby, battered and cowed, the butterfly stood motionless, its wings closed and upright.

"Now," said Jimmy, "you'll see."

The butterfly was already between the fingers and half-way to the bottle, when he heard, faint but clear, the sound of a cry. It was two-syllabled, like the interval of the cuckoo's call inverted, and might have been his own name.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "What was that? It sounded like Mrs. Verdew's voice." His swiftly turning head almost collided with his host's chin, so near had the latter drawn to watch the operation, and chased the tail-end of a curious look from Randolph Verdew's face.

"It's nothing," he said. "Go on."

Alas, alas, for the experiment in humane slaughter! The butterfly must have been stronger than it looked; the power of the killing bottle had no doubt declined with frequent usage. Up and down, round and round flew the butterfly; its frantic flutterings could be heard through the thick walls of its glass prison. It clung to the cotton-wool, pressed itself into corners, its straining, delicate tongue coiling and uncoiling in the effort to suck in a breath of living air. Now it was weakening. It fell from the cotton-wool and lay with its back on the plaster slab. It jolted itself up and down and, when strength for this movement failed, it clawed the air with its thin legs as though pedalling an imaginary bicycle. Suddenly, with a violent spasm, it gave birth to a thick cluster of yellowish eggs. Its body twitched once or twice and at last lay still.

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and turned to his host. The look of horrified excitement whose vanishing vestige he had seen a moment before, lay full and undisguised upon Randolph Verdew's face. He only said:

"Of what flower or vegetable is that dead butterfly the parasite?"

"Oh, poor thing," said Jimmy carelessly, "it's rather a rarity. Its caterpillar may have eaten an elm-leaf or two—nothing more. It's too scarce to be a pest. It's fond of gardens

and frequented places, the book says—rather sociable, like a robin."

"It could not be described as injurious to human life?"

"Oh, no. It's a collector's specimen really. Only this is too damaged to be any good."

"Thank you for letting me see the invention in operation," said Randolph Verdew, going to his desk and sitting down. Jimmy found his silence a little embarrassing. He packed up the bottle and made a rather awkward, self-conscious exit.

The four bedroom candles always stood, their silver flashing agreeably, cheek by jowl with the whisky decanter and the hot-water kettle and the soda. Now, the others having retired, there were only two, one of which (somewhat wastefully, for he still had a half-empty glass in his left hand) Rollo was lighting.

"My dear fellow," he was saying to Jimmy, "I'm sorry you think the new model insecticide fell a bit flat. But Randolph's like that, you know: damned undemonstrative cove, I must say, though he's my own brother."

"He wasn't exactly undemonstrative," answered Jimmy, perplexity written on his face.

"No, rather like an iceberg hitting you amidships," said his friend. "Doesn't make a fuss, but you feel it all the same. But don't you worry, Jimmy; I happen to know that he enjoyed your show. Fact is, he told me so." He gulped down some whisky.

"I'm relieved," said Jimmy, and he obviously spoke the truth. "I've only one more whole day here, and I should be sorry if I'd hurt his feelings."

"Yes, and I'm afraid you'll have to spend it with him alone," said Rollo, compunction colouring his voice. "I was coming to that. Fact is, Vera and I have unexpectedly got to go away to-morrow for the day." He paused; a footman entered and began walking uncertainly about the room. "Now, Jimmy," he went on, "be a good chap and stay on a couple of days more. You do keep us from the blues so. That's all right, William, we don't want anything," he remarked parenthetically to the footman's retreating figure. "I

haven't mentioned it to Randolph, but he'd be absolutely charmed if you'd grace our humble dwelling a little longer. You needn't tell anyone anything: just stay, and we shall be back the day after to-morrow. It's hellish that we've got to go, but you know this bread-winning business: it's the early bird that catches the worm. And talking of that, we have to depart at cock-crow. I may not see you again—that is, unless you stay, as I hope you will. Just send a wire to the old blighter who works with you and tell him to go to blazes."

"Well," said Jimmy, delighted by the prospect, "you certainly do tempt me."

"Then fall, my lad," said Rollo, catching him a heavy blow between the shoulder-blades. "I shan't say good-bye, but 'au revoir.' Don't go to bed sober; have another drink."

But Jimmy declined. The flickering candles lighted them across the hall and up the stone stairs.

And it's lucky I have a candle, Jimmy thought, trying in vain the third and last switch, the one on the reading-lamp by the bed. The familiar room seemed to have changed; to be closing hungrily, with a vast black embrace, upon the nimbus of thin clear dusk that shone about the candle. He walked uneasily up and down, drew a curtain and let in a ray of moonlight. But the silver gleam crippled the candle-light without adding any radiance of its own, so he shut it out. This window must be closed, thought Jimmy, that opens on to the parapet, for I really couldn't deal with a stray cat in this localised twilight. He opened instead a window that gave on to the sheer wall. Even after the ritual of tooth-cleaning he was still restless and dissatisfied, so after a turn or two he knelt by the bed and said his prayers—whether from devotion or superstition he couldn't tell: he only knew that he wanted to say them.

"Come in!" he called next morning, in answer to the footman's knock.

"I can't come in, sir," said a muffled voice. "The door's locked."

How on earth had that happened? Then Jimmy remembered. As a child he always locked the door because he didn't like to be surprised saying his prayers. He must have done so

last night, unconsciously. How queer! He felt full of self-congratulation—he didn't know why. "And—oh, William!" he called after the departing footman.

"Yes, sir?"

"The light's fused, or something. It wouldn't go on last night."

"Very good, sir."

Jimmy addressed himself to the tea. But what was this? Another note from Mrs. Verdew!

DEAR JIMMY (he read),

You will forgive this impertinence, for I've got a piece of good news for you. In future, you won't be able to say that women never help a man in his career! (Jimmy was unaware of having said so.) As you know, Rollo and I have to leave to-morrow morning. I don't suppose he told you why, because it's rather private. But he's embarking on a big undertaking that will mean an enormous amount of litigation and lawyer's fees! Think of that! (Though I don't suppose you think of anything else.) I know he wants you to act for him: but to do so you positively *must* leave Verdew to-morrow. Make any excuse to Randolph; send yourself a telegram if you want to be specially polite: but you must catch the night train to London. It's the chance of a life. You can get through to Rollo on the telephone next morning. Perhaps we could lunch together—or dine? *A bientôt*, therefore.

VERA VERDEW.

P.S.—I shall be furious if you don't come.

Jimmy pondered Mrs. Verdew's note, trying to read between its lines. One thing was clear: she had fallen in love with him. Jimmy smiled at the ceiling. She wanted to see him again, so soon, so soon! Jimmy smiled once more. She couldn't bear to wait an unnecessary day. How urgent women were! He smiled more indulgently. And, also, how exacting. Here was this cock-and-bull story, all about Rollo's "undertaking" which would give him, Jimmy, the chance of a lifetime! And because she was so impatient she expected him to believe it! Luncheon, indeed! Dinner! How could they meet for dinner, when Rollo was to be back at Verdew that same evening? In her haste she had not even troubled to

make her date credible. And then : " I shall be furious if you don't come." What an argument! What confidence in her own powers did not that sentence imply! Let her be furious then, as furious as she liked.

Her voice, just outside his door, interrupted his meditation.

" Only a moment, Rollo, it will only take me a moment!"

And Rollo's reply, spoken in a tone as urgent as hers, but louder :

" I tell you there isn't time : we shall miss the train."

He seemed to hustle her away downstairs, poor Vera. She had really been kind to Jimmy, in spite of her preposterous claims on his affection. He was glad he would see her again to-morrow. . . . Verdew was so much nicer than London. . . . He began to doze.

On the way back from the woods there was a small low church with a square tower and two bells—the lower one both cracked and flat. You could see up into the belfry through the slats in the windows. Close by the church ran a stream, choked with green scum except where the cattle went down to drink, and crossed by a simple bridge of logs set side by side. Jimmy liked to stand on the bridge and listen to the unmelodious chime. No one heeded it, no one came to church, and it had gone sour and out of tune. It gave Jimmy an exquisite, slightly morbid sense of dereliction and decay, which he liked to savour in solitude; but this afternoon a rustic had got there first.

" Good-day," he said.

" Good-day," said Jimmy.

" You're from the castle, I'm thinking?" the countryman surmised.

" Yes."

" And how do you find Mr. Verdew?"

" Which Mr. Verdew?"

" Why, the squire, of course."

" I think he's pretty well," said Jimmy.

" Ah, he may appear to be so," the labourer observed; " but them as has eyes to see and ears to hear, knows different."

" Isn't he a good landlord?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes," said the old man. "He's a tolerably good landlord. It isn't that." He seemed to relish his mysteriousness.

"You like Mr. Rollo Verdew better?" suggested Jimmy.

"I wouldn't care to say that, sir. He's a wild one, Mr. Rollo."

"Well, anyhow, Mr. Randolph Verdew isn't wild."

"Don't you be too sure, sir."

"I've never seen him so."

"There's not many that have. And those that have—some won't tell what they saw and some can't."

"Why won't they?"

"Because it's not their interest to."

"And why can't the others?"

"Because they're dead."

There was a pause.

"How did they die?" asked Jimmy.

"That's not for me to say," the old man answered, closing his mouth like a trap. But this gesture, as Jimmy had already learned, was only part of his conversational technique. In a moment he began again:

"Did you ever hear of the Verdew murders?"

"Something."

"Well, 'twasn't only dogs that was killed."

"I know."

"But they were all killed the same way."

"How?"

"With a knife," said the old man. "Like pigs. From ear to ear," he added, making an explanatory gesture; "from ear to ear." His voice became reminiscent. "Tom Presland was a friend o' mine. I seed him in the evening and he said, he says, 'That blamed donkey weren't worth a ten-pound fine.' And I said, 'You're lucky not to be in prison,' for in case you don't know, sir, the Bench here don't mind fellows being a bit hasty with their animals, although Mr. Verdew is the chairman. I felt nigh killing the beast myself sometimes, it was that obstinate. 'But, Bill,' he says, 'I don't feel altogether comfortable when I remember what happened to Jack Didwell.' And sure enough he was found next morning in the ditch with his throat gapin' all white at the edges, just like

poor old Jack. And the donkey was a contrary beast, that had stood many a knock before, harder than the one what killed him."

"And why is Mr. Verdew suspected?"

"Why, sir, the servants said he was in the castle all night and must have been, because the bridge was drawed. But how do they know he had to use the bridge? Anyhow, George Wiscombe swears he saw him going through Nape's Spinney the night poor old Tom was done in. And Mr. Verdew has always been cruel fond of animals, that's another reason."

How easy it is, thought Jimmy, to lose one's reputation in the country!

"Tell me," he said, "how does Mr. Verdew satisfy his conscience when he eats animals and chickens, and when he has slugs and snails killed in the garden?"

"Ah, there you've hit it," said the old man, not at all nonplussed. "But they say Mr. Rollo Verdew has helped him to make a mighty great list of what may be killed and what mayn't, according as it's useful-like to human beings. And anybody kills anything, they persuade him it's harmful and down it goes on the black list. And if he don't see the thing done with his own eyes, or the chap isn't hauled up before the Bench, he doesn't take on about it. And in a week or less it's all gone from his mind. Jack and Tom were both killed within a few days of what they'd done becoming known; so was the collie dog what was found here a fortnight back."

"Here?" asked Jimmy.

"Close by where you're standing. Poor beast, it won't chase those b——y cats no more. It was a mess. But, as I said, if what you've done's a week old, you're safe, in a manner of speaking."

"But why, if he's really dangerous," said Jimmy, impressed in spite of himself by the old man's tacit assumption of Randolph's guilt, "doesn't Mr. Rollo Verdew get him shut up?" This simple question evoked the longest and most pregnant of his interlocutor's pauses. Surely, thought Jimmy, it will produce a monstrous birth, something to make suspicion itself turn pale.

"Now don't you tell nothing of what I'm saying to you," said the old man at length. "But it's my belief that Mr. Rollo don't want his brother shut up; no, nor thought to be mad. And why? Because if people know he's mad, and he goes and does another murder, they'll just pop him in the lunatic asylum and all his money will go to government and charity. But if he does a murder like you or me might, and the circumstances are circumstantial, he'll be hanged for it, and all the money and the castle and the coal-mine will go into the pockets of Mr. Rollo."

"I see," said Jimmy. "It sounds very simple."

"I'm not swearing there's anything of the sort in Mr. Rollo's mind," said the old man. "But that's the way I should look at it if I was him. Now I must be getting along. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night."

Of course it wasn't really night, only tea-time, five o'clock; but he and his acquaintance would meet no more that day, so perhaps the man was right to say good-night. Jimmy's thoughts, as he worked his way up the castle mound, were unclear and rather painful. He didn't believe a tithe of what the old man said. It was not even a distortion of the truth; it was ignorant and vulgar slander, and had no relation to the truth except by a kind of contiguity. But it infected his mood and gave a disagreeable direction to his thoughts. He was lonely; Randolph had not appeared at lunch, and he missed Rollo, and even more he missed (though this surprised him) Rollo's wife. He hadn't seen much of them, but suddenly he felt the need of their company. But goodness knows where they are, thought Jimmy; I can't even telephone to them. In the midst of these uneasy reflections he reached his bedroom door. Walking in, he could not for a moment understand why the place looked so strange. Then he realised; it was empty. All his things had been cleared out of it.

"Evidently," thought Jimmy, "they've mistaken the day I was going away, and packed me!" An extraordinary sensation of relief surged up into his heart. Since his luggage was nowhere to be seen, it must have been stacked in the hall,

ready for his departure by the evening train. Picturing himself at the booking-office of Verdew Grove station buying a ticket for London, Jimmy started for the hall.

William cut short his search.

"Were you looking for your things, sir?" he asked, with a slight smile. "Because they're in the Onyx Room. We've moved you, sir."

"Oh," said Jimmy, following in the footman's wake. "Why?"

"It was Mr. Verdew's orders, sir. I told him the light was faulty in your bedroom, so he said to move you into the Onyx Room."

"The room next his?"

"That's right, sir."

"Couldn't the fuse be mended?"

"I don't think it was the fuse, sir."

"Oh, I thought you said it was."

So this was the Onyx Room—the room, Jimmy suddenly remembered, that Rollo had meant him to have in the beginning. Certainly its colours were dark and lustrous and laid on in layers, but Jimmy didn't care for them. Even the ceiling was parti-coloured. Someone must have been given a free hand here; perhaps Vera had done the decoration. The most beautiful thing in the room was the Chinese screen masking the door that communicated, he supposed, with Randolph's bedroom. What a clatter it would make if it fell, thought Jimmy, studying the heavy, dark, dully-shining panels of the screen. The door opening would knock it over. He heard the footman's voice.

"Is it for one night or more, sir? I've packed up some of your things."

"I'm not sure yet," said Jimmy. "William, will this screen move?"

The footman took hold of the screen with both hands and telescoped it against his chest. There was revealed an ordinary-looking door covered with green baize. Jimmy could see the point of a key-head, so that door was probably not very thick.

"This used to be the dressing-room," William volunteered,

as though making a contribution to Jimmy's unspoken thoughts.

"Thank you," said Jimmy, "and would you mind putting the screen back? . . . And, William!"

The footman stopped.

"There's still time to send a telegram?"

"Oh yes, sir. There's a form here."

All through his solitary tea Jimmy debated with himself as to whether he should send the telegram—a telegram of recall, of course, it would be. The message presented no difficulty. "Wire if Croxford case opens Tuesday." He knew that it did, but his attendance was not at all necessary. He was undoubtedly suffering from a slight attack of nerves; and nowadays one didn't defy nerves, one yielded to them gracefully. "I know that if I stay I shall have a bad night," he thought; "I might as well spend it in the train." But of course he hadn't meant to go at all; he had even promised Rollo to stay. He had wanted to stay. To leave abruptly to-night would be doubly rude: rude to Randolph, rude to Rollo. Only Vera would be pleased. Vera, whose clumsy attempt to lure him to London he had so easily seen through. Vera, whose "I shall be furious if you don't come" rankled whenever he thought of it. Every moment added its quota to the incubus of indecision that paralysed his mind. Manners, duty, wishes, fears, all were contradictory, all pulled in different directions. A gust of apprehension sent him hot-foot to the writing-table. The telegram was ready written when, equally strong, an access of self-respect came and made him tear it up. At last he had an idea. At six o'clock he would send the telegram; the office might still be open. There might still be time to get a reply. If, in spite of his twofold obstacle he had an answer, he would take it as the voice of fate, and leave that night. . . .

At half-past seven William came in to draw the curtains; he also brought a message. Mr. Verdew begged Mr. Rintoul to excuse him, but he felt a little unwell, and was dining in his own room. He hoped to see Mr. Rintoul to-morrow to say good-bye. "You are going, then, sir?" added the footman.

Jimmy blindfolded his will, and took an answer at random from among the tablets of his mind.

"Yes. And—William!" he called out.

"Sir?"

"I suppose it's too late now for me to get an answer to my telegram?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

For a second Jimmy sunned himself in a warm flow of recovered self-esteem. Luck had saved him from a humiliating flight. Now his one regret was that his nerves had cheated him of those few extra days at Verdew. "If there had been a bolt on my side of the green door," he said to himself, "I should never have sent that telegram."

How like, in some ways, was the last evening to the first. As bedtime approached, he became acutely conscious of his surroundings—of the stone floors, the vaulted passages, the moat, the drawbridge—all those concrete signs which seemed to recall the past and substitute it for the present. He was completely isolated and immured; he could scarcely believe he would be back in the real, living world to-morrow. Another glass of whisky would bring the centuries better into line. It did; and, emboldened by its heady fumes, he inspected, with the aid of his candle (for the ground-floor lights had been turned out) the defences of door and window, and marvelled anew at their parade of clumsy strength. Why all these precautions when the moat remained, a flawless girdle of protection?

But was it flawless? Lying in bed, staring at the painted ceiling, with its squares and triangles and riot of geometrical designs, Jimmy smiled to remember how Rollo had once told him of a secret entrance, known only to him. He had promised to show it to Jimmy, but he had forgotten. A nice fellow Rollo, but he didn't believe they would ever know each other much better. When dissimilar natures come together, the friendship blossoms quickly, and as quickly fades. Rollo and Jimmy just tolerated each other—they didn't share their lives, their secrets, their secret passages. . . .

Jimmy was lying on his back, his head sunk on the brightly lit pillow, his mind drowsier than his digestion. To his departing consciousness the ceiling looked like a great five of diamonds spread over his head; the scarlet lozenges moved on hinges, he knew that quite well, and as they moved they gave a glimpse of black and let in a draught. Soon there

would be a head poking through them all, instead of through this near corner one, and that would be more symmetrical. But if I stand on the bed I can shut them; they will close with a click. If only this one wasn't such a weight and didn't stick so. . . .

Jimmy awoke in a sweat, still staring at the ceiling. It heaved and writhed like a half-dead moth on the setting-board. But the walls stood still, so that there was something more than whisky at the back of it. And yet, when he looked again, the ceiling did not budge.

The dream was right; he could touch the ceiling by standing on the bed. But only with the tips of his fingers. What he needed was a bar of some kind with which to prise it open. He looked round the room, and could see nothing suitable but a towel-horse. But there were plenty of walking-sticks downstairs. To light his candle and put on his dressing-gown and slippers was the work of a moment. He reached the door in less time than it takes to tell. But he got no further, because the door was locked.

Jimmy's heart began to beat violently. Panic bubbled up in him like water in a syphon. He took a wild look around the room, ran to the bed-head, and pressed the bell-button as though he meant to flatten it in its socket. Relief stole in his heart. Already he heard in imagination the quick patter of feet in the corridor, the hurried, whispered explanations, the man's reassuring voice: "I'll be with you in a moment, sir." Already he felt slightly ashamed of his precipitate summons, and began to wonder how he should explain it away. The minutes passed, and nothing happened. He need not worry yet; it would take William some time to dress, and no doubt he had a long way to come. But Jimmy's returning anxiety cried out for some distraction, so he left the edge of the bed where he had been sitting, fetched the towel-horse, and, balancing unsteadily on the mattress, began to prod the ceiling. Down came little flakes and pellets of painted plaster; they littered the sheets, and would be very uncomfortable to sleep on. . . Jimmy stopped to flick them away, and saw from the tail of his eye that since he rang five minutes had gone by. He resumed the muffled tattoo on the ceiling. Suddenly it gave; the red diamond shot upwards and fell

back, revealing a patch of black and letting in a rush of cool air.

As, stupefied, Jimmy lowered his eyes, they fell upon the screen. It was moving stealthily outwards, toppling into the room. Already he could see a thin strip of the green door. The screen swayed, paused, seemed to hang by a hair. Then, its leaves collapsing inwards upon each other, it fell with a great crash upon the floor. In the opening stood Randolph, fully dressed; he had a revolver in his right hand, and there was a knife between his teeth. It was curved and shining, and he looked as though he were taking a bite out of the new moon.

The shot missed Jimmy's swaying legs, the knife only grazed his ankle, and he was safe in the darkness of the attic, with the bolt of the trap-door securely shut. He ran trembling in the direction the draught came from, and was rewarded first by a sense of decreasing darkness, and then by a glimpse, through a framed opening in the roof, of the stars and the night sky.

The opening was low down, and to climb out was easy. He found himself in a leaden gully, bounded on one side by a shallow parapet two feet high, and on the other, as it seemed, by the slope of the roof. Finding his way along the gully, he was brought up sharp against an octagonal turret, that clearly marked the end of the building. The moat was directly below him. Turning to the left, he encountered another similar turret, and turning to the left again he found himself up against a wall surmounted by tall chimneys. This wall appeared to be scored with projections and indentations—soot-doors he guessed them to be; he hoped to be able to use them to climb the wall, but they were awkwardly spaced, close to the parapet, and if he missed his footing he ran the risk of falling over its edge.

He now felt a curious lightheartedness, as though he had shuffled off every responsibility: responsibility towards his pyjamas, which were torn and dirty, towards his foot, which was bleeding, towards trains, letters, engagements—all the petty and important demands of life. Cold, but not unhappy, he sat down to await daybreak.

The clock had just chimed three-quarters, which three-

quarters he did not know, when he heard a scraping sound that seemed to come from the corresponding parapet across the roof. He listened, crouching in the angle between the chimney wall and the battlement. His fears told him that the sound was following the track by which he had come; the shuffling grew indistinct, and then, the first turret passed, began to draw nearer. It could only be Randolph, who clearly had some means of access to the roof other than the trap-door in Jimmy's bedroom. He must have, or he could not have reached it to spy on his victim while he was asleep. Now he was turning the last corner. Jimmy acted quickly and with the courage of desperation. At the corner where he crouched there projected above the battlement three sides of an octagonal turret, repeating the design of the true turrets at the end. Grasping the stone as well as he could, he lowered himself into space. It was a terrible moment, but the cautious shuffle of Randolph's approach deadened his fear. His arms almost at their full stretch, he felt the dripstone underneath his feet. It seemed about six inches wide, with a downward curve, but it sufficed. He changed his grip from the plain stone band of the parapet to the pierced masonry beneath it, which afforded a better purchase, and held his breath. Randolph could not find him unless he leant right over the balustrade. This he did not do. He muttered to himself; he climbed up to the apex of the roof; he examined the flue-doors, or whatever they were. All this Jimmy could clearly see through the quatrefoil to which he was clinging. Randolph muttered, "I shall find him when the light comes," and then he disappeared. The clock struck four, four-fifteen, four-thirty, and then a diffused pallor began to show itself in the eastern sky.

The numbness that had taken hold of Jimmy's body began to invade his mind, which grew dull and sleepy under the effort of compelling his tired hands to retain their hold. His back curved outwards, his head sank upon his breast; the changes of which his cramped position admitted were too slight to afford his body relief. So that he could not at once look round when he heard close above his head the sound of an opening door and the sharp rattle of falling mortar. He recognised the figure as it passed him—Rollo's.

Jimmy restrained his impulse to call out. Why had Rollo

come back? Why was he swaggering over the roofs of Verdew Castle at daybreak looking as though he owned it? It was not his yet. Rollo turned, and in the same leisurely fashion walked back towards Jimmy's corner. His face was set and pale, but there was triumph in his eyes, and cruelty, and the marks of many passions which his everyday exterior had concealed. Then his eyebrows went up, his chin quivered, and his underlip shot out and seemed to stretch across his face. "Just five minutes more, five minutes more; I'll give him another five minutes," he kept muttering to himself. He leaned back against the wall. Jimmy could have touched the laces of his shoes, which were untied and dirty. "Poor old Jimmy, poor old James!" Rollo suddenly chanted, in a voice that was very distinct, but quite unlike his own. To Jimmy's confused mind he seemed to be speaking of two different people, neither of whom was connected with himself. "Never mind, Jimmy," Rollo added in the conciliatory tone of one who, overcome by his better nature, at last gives up teasing. "Anyhow, it's ten to one against." He stumbled down the gully and round the bend.

Jimmy never knew how he summoned strength to climb over the parapet. He found himself sprawling in the gully, panting and faint. But he had caught sight of a gaping hole like a buttery hatch amid the tangle of soot-doors, and he began to crawl towards it. He was trying to bring his stiff knee up to his good one when from close by his left ear he heard a terrible scream. It went shooting up, and seemed to make a glittering arc of sound in the half-lit sky. He also thought he heard the words, "Oh, God, Randolph, it's me!" but of this he was never certain. But through all the windings of Rollo's bolt-hole, until it discharged itself at the base of a ruined newel-staircase among the outbuildings, he still heard the agonised gasping, spasmodic, yet with a horrible rhythm of its own, that followed Rollo's scream. He locked the cracked, paintless door with the key that Rollo had left, and found himself among the lanes.

Late in the evening of the same day a policeman asked to see Mrs. Verdew, who was sitting in a bedroom in the King's Head inn at Fremby, a market town ten miles from Verdew

Castle. She had been sitting there all day, getting up from time to time to glance at a slip of paper pinned to one of the pillows. It was dated, "7.30 a.m., July 10th," and said, "Back in a couple of hours. Have to see a man about a car. Sorry—Rollo." She wouldn't believe the constable when he said that her husband had met with an accident some time early that morning, probably about five o'clock. "But look! But look!" she cried. "See for yourself! It is his own handwriting! He says he went away at half-past seven. Why are all Englishmen so difficult to convince?"

"We have a statement from Mr. Randolph Verdew," said the policeman gently. "He said that he . . . he . . . he met Mr. Rollo at the castle in the early hours of the morning."

"But how can you be so stupid!" cried Mrs. Verdew. "It wasn't Rollo—it was Mr. Rintoul who . . ."

"What name is that?" asked the policeman, taking out his notebook.

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