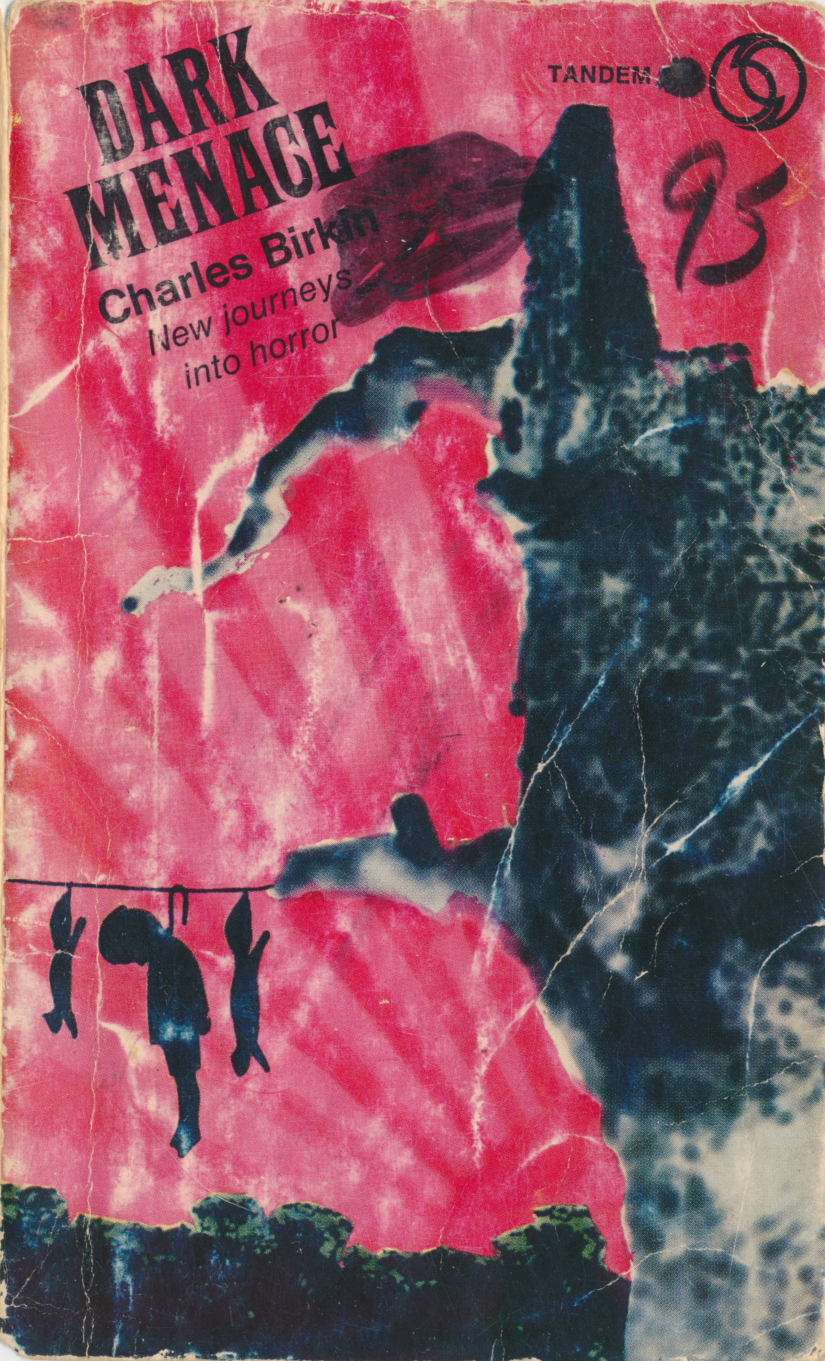
DARK MENACE
Charles Birkin
New journeys into horror
TANDEM
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TANDEM

Dark Menace

Charles Birkin

Thirteen stories of horror and the macabre: a combination for connoisseurs of the dreadful, the fearsome, the menacing.

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Dark Menace

Thirteen New Stories of Horror
and the Macabre

Charles Birkin

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For
Angela Laycock
who has a wide interest
in the odd and abstruse.

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DARK MENACE

THE black and silver Rolls turned through the entrance that led from the Embankment into Scotland Yard and halted in an inner court. Many cars were there already, but a policeman stepped forward and indicated a place where the driver could park. The May sunshine sparkled on the paintwork of the orderly lines of vehicles.

Cedric Brough switched off the engine and held open the rear door for his two passengers. He was in his early sixties, dressed meticulously, and had succeeded in keeping his figure by dint of sensible dieting and regular golf and swimming, at which he was expert. His hair and his eyes were iron grey, and his face was stencilled by lines of wry humour and hard work.

Flora Ladbroke stepped down on to the gravel followed by Valentine. They were actors of some repute, happily married, and Flora, under her professional name of Francis Fane, enjoyed a second career as a writer of detective fiction. They had been friends of Cedric for many years, their friendship dating back to the days before his wife's death. They were on their way to make a tour of the Black Museum.

Cedric Brough was a novelist with nearly fifty titles to his credit. Several of these had been successfully dramatized and others had been filmed. He was held in high esteem by both public and critics, and had won an enviable and profitable reputation in the United States.

He turned to the constable. "I take it that there's no need to lock the car!"

The man grinned back at him to show that he shared the joke. "I think that when you come out, sir, there's a fair chance of your finding it still here!"

They walked along a pavement and then up a flight of steps which brought them to a hallway out of which ran wide corridors. A policeman came towards them, an eyebrow raised in

enquiry. Going to meet him, Valentine said: "We have an appointment with Mr. Trumper at half past two."

"Will you please wait here for a minute, sir, and I will inform him of your arrival."

Under the window there was a narrow seat on which they perched in a line like starlings as the policeman disappeared through a door to their left. The sharp sound of booted feet rang on the uncarpeted floor as men, in uniform or in plain clothes, hurried about their occupations. Studying them, the majority seemed to Cedric to be very young. They were, of course, nothing of the sort, it was merely that he was growing old. Apart from Flora there was not a woman to be seen. She was absorbing her environment and thinking how alarming this strictly professional "venue" could have appeared had one been on the wrong side of the law.

Cedric sat with his hands clasped round the tightly rolled umbrella lodged between his knees. He had accepted this invitation of Valentine's because the book on which he was presently engaged was to a minor degree concerned with the activities of a member of a Soho gang. He had scant interest in crime or violence, as such, but in his current novel it had been unavoidable. He was a stickler for accurate detail and he had been told that the Museum possessed a comprehensive collection of the weapons which the criminals employed in the savage fights which raged sporadically among them.

Only once in his life had he had reason for contact with the police, and then it had really been Dorothy and not himself who had borne the brunt of their compassionate but distressing investigations. It had happened twenty years ago and his mind still shied away in self protection from that period of fear and misery, during which he had struggled through a dark tunnel of the soul. It had left a wound which would never wholly heal, and had been the dagger that eventually had killed his wife.

He had been abroad when Alexandra had disappeared. There had been no possibility of his leaving any forwarding address, for he had been making a six months journey through the lesser known outposts of the East Indies and the islands of Micronesia, travelling on cargo boats or fishing vessels, or in whatever primitive transport could be found to take him from one ocean

speck to another. When he returned to Europe the hue and cry for Zandra had been in progress for nine weeks. On his way home he had telephoned Dorothy from Marseilles, and it had been there, while he had been cooped up in a claustrophobic telephone box outside a waterfront café, that he had heard the disastrous news.

Zandra had been Dorothy's whole existence, and Cedric, too, had been shattered by her death but, by reason of his absence and consequent ignorance of the child's disappearance, he had been spared the initial horror and shock, and the subsequent attrition of hope or of any expectancy of good tidings. It had been Dorothy who had had to be brave, on whom had fallen the burden of answering endless questions, kindly and helpful as the police had been.

'When was the child last seen?'

'On the way home from her day school near Queen's Gate.'

'What had she been wearing?'

'A grey flannel skirt. White shirt. Blue tie.'

'Description?'

'Dark hair. Grey eyes. Alexandra is slightly built. I should say that she's nearly five feet in height. And she would have had her satchel with her.'

'Have you or your husband at any time received any threats, or demands for ransom?'

'None. In his absence my husband's secretary deals with all his mail. I have heard nothing of that kind from her. Nothing at all.'

'Has your daughter any special distinguishing marks?'

For a moment Dorothy had been unable to answer. 'Distinguishing marks? I don't believe so.' She had hesitated. 'Yes—she has a mole behind her right knee. And, except for games, she wears spectacles.' She tried to think if there was anything else to add. 'She can't say her r's very well . . . but she's improving.'

She had been asked if, as a family, they had any enemies. The query had been put gently, but all the same it had startled her.

'Not that I know about. Why should we?'

And so the nightmare inquisition had gone on. It was unbelievable to think that had Zandra lived she would now be a

woman of thirty-two years of age.

Two years after Zandra's disappearance Dorothy had died. She had tried her best to comfort him, putting up a gallant front and talking to her friends about Zandra as if it were yet possible that she would be found, resolutely refusing to admit her death, but behind her bright façade something in her had atrophied. She had continued to entertain, and she had gone to theatres and had played cards, but Cedric had noticed that religion was playing an increasingly important part in her life, and that she had become a regular and dedicated attendant at church.

She had paid poignant attention to the small daughters of her friends, and he thought she had done so in order to keep at bay the tide of bitterness that had encroached with the passage of time. She had been seeking reassurance, fearing that in some way her ability to give out love might have gone from her for ever.

Whenever he could do so he himself had avoided the company of children. He had not got Dorothy's courage. He had taken refuge in his work, and in the research for which it called, and it had proved to be a safety valve for the retention of his sanity. Eventually Dorothy had cracked under the strain. She had become ill, and at first it had been thought that the cause was mental, but an operation had been found to be necessary, an operation from which she had not recovered. He had known that she had had no wish to go on living—and this he had understood.

The door through which the policeman had gone opened and a tall man emerged. He walked towards them smiling. "Mr. Ladbroke?"

They rose to greet him. Valentine held out his hand. "Mr. Trumper? This is indeed kind of you, and we really are most grateful." He indicated Flora and Cedric with a slight gesture. "My wife . . . and Sir Cedric Brough—of whom I expect you have heard?"

They shook hands. "I know your books, of course, Sir Cedric," Edward Trumper said. "And may I add that I'm an ardent admirer of yours, Miss Fane—or should it be Mrs. Ladbroke? In fact, I'm your fan in both of your rôles."

Flora's hand remained in his grasp as she exercised her con-

siderable charm. "How very sweet of you!"

He cleared his throat. "If you will follow me shall we make a start?" He led the way across the echoing hall and down several spirals of stairs to what originally must have been a basement. He unlocked a door and they entered the first of a series of surprisingly cramped rooms furnished with cupboards and cabinets containing all manner of exhibits. There were uniforms of the nineteenth century, surgical instruments, bottles of pills and powdered crystals, heavy mahogany coloured lumps of opium resembling sea-smoothed pebbles, pipes, dried marijuana, and a fantastic range of banknotes and documents. They looked around them in bewilderment.

"There's no objection to your smoking," Edward Trumper said. He was accustomed to putting people at their ease. He opened one of the cases and took from it an obsolete five-pound note. "We will start with forgery," he said drily, "and progress to murder!"

Many of the forgeries were brilliantly executed and drawn exquisitely by hand. The hours which each one must have taken to produce made Cedric ponder if the financial reward could have been worth while. They were works of art, as perfect and exact as those which had been printed on hand presses.

Edward Trumper had made this tour hundreds of times, and while he talked he tried to place Sir Cedric Brough. His fame as a writer he knew, although he had never read one of his books. His sister and brother-in-law were most enthusiastic about them. The name had been familiar in another sphere. It had been back in the past, during his days as a detective. He could not pinpoint it. Anyway it did not matter.

Next they were shown and allowed to handle the vicious home-constructed bludgeons used by the thugs and gangsters in their mêlées. There were knuckledusters filed to devils' claws, clubs in which razor blades had been inserted, lengths of chain and lethal ugly coshes—a collection of fiendish implements of offence with which revolting injuries could be inflicted, weapons capable of ripping a man's cheek from his skull at a single blow.

Cedric Brough lingered over his examination, peered at them intently as he listened to the questions put by his companions

and occasionally adding one of his own. These exhibits were what he had come to see. His respect increased for the unarmed police who had to join in combat with an enemy of such a depraved brutality.

They passed on into the second of the rooms. On one wall hung a framed facsimile of a taunting letter from Jack the Ripper, penned in red ink to simulate blood. Here, also, there were glass-fronted cupboards and cabinets devoted to notorious murderers from the reign of Queen Victoria up to the present day. Charles Peace was featured, and the mild visaged owlish Crippen, and Haigh and Heath and Christie with, in some instances, the knives and cords and whips which they had used. It was a gallery of sadists, perverts and compulsive killers. On a table was a pile of albums containing the official photographs of the bodies of their victims.

Edward Trumper noticed Valentine scrutinising the death mask of a man with prim, rather feminine lips. "Himmler," he said curtly. "His score can be numbered in millions!"

They stared down in fascination at the pale effigy, withdrawn and inscrutable, of the man who had been the greatest mass murderer in the history of the world, whose ambition had been to annihilate an entire race and who, when captured, had put an end to his infamous life with poison.

It was very quiet in the Museum. Flora tried to imagine what Heinrich Himmler could have been like as an individual. She did not know whether or not his parents had lived to see how he had abused the total power which had been given to him by the Nazis, and she wondered what his mother's feelings could have been if she had survived to learn of the massacres which had been carried out on his orders. A chill of deadly evil, a cold dark menace, seemed to ooze from the sightless eyes of the plaster cast.

Edward Trumper continued the slow circuit of the room, telling them anecdotes and giving sidelights on the complex characters of the personalities involved. They paused at length before a glossy print of a man in his thirties. He had an open, and a rather handsome face, and in his tweed coat and open-necked shirt he might have been mistaken for a footballer or a boxer.

"Lance Heston-Harper." Their escort's voice was terse, his

normally kind eyes were as hard as steel.

"My God, that was the most ghastly case!" said Valentine.

Edward Trumper gave a shrug. "Nowadays," he said, "all of these delightful gentlemen would probably get off with 'life'." He did not elaborate, but it was plain that he had no sympathy with those advocates who pleaded "reduced responsibility of action" which, in the cases of bestial killers, he regarded as no less than insane leniency.

Lance Heston-Harper. His name in the papers had hit the headlines in heavy type. At the time of his trial, which had been some months after Dorothy's funeral, Cedric had been in Australia. He had read of the crime, although it had not received a tenth of the coverage abroad that had been given to it in England. The story came back to him as he read the dossier on the explanatory slip.

"This chap may have been a bit before your time, Mrs. Ladbroke," Edward Trumper said. "As a matter of fact, I was one of those working on the job—if you'd care to hear about it?"

It appeared that during the war Heston-Harper had been taken prisoner by the Japanese. After repatriation and later on demobilisation he had, on several occasions, been in trouble —passing bad cheques, and embezzlement on an inconsiderable scale. Then, for a while, he had gone straight, having by some dubious means acquired a tolerable sum of capital. Blackmail had been suspected but not proved. With the money he had collected he had bought a remote farm in Bedfordshire which consisted mainly of chickens and a few pigs; and to all outward appearances he had made a remarkable go of the venture.

He had also been executed for the murder of no less than seven children, four boys and three girls. None of the victims had been from the locality. "As I remarked earlier on, Mrs. Ladbroke: 'Forgery to murder'." Edward Trumper paused. "It's applicable to more than the lay-out of this place! Many a crook has followed the pattern."

The discovery of the crimes, which had been spread over a span of six years, had come about almost by chance. One evening Heston-Harper had been driving back from London in his battered station wagon. Sitting at his side had been a little girl

of the name of Juliet Smith. She had been a pretty child with a dark Irish beauty and a friendly disposition, one of a large family, and she had lived in Camden Town.

On the outskirts of Bedford Heston-Harper had had the misfortune to suffer a puncture. He discovered to his dismay that his spare was also flat, and since he had no pump it left him with no option except to go to a garage. When the car had been towed in, from a distance of half a mile, there was a wait while the spare tyre was being inflated. He filled up with petrol, and it was during the few minutes when he was in the office getting his bill that Juliet fell into conversation with the young man at the petrol pumps, who later was able to recall in detail not only her face but exactly what she had been wearing. There had been a red spotted bow in her hair attached to a green plastic slide, and a silver locket in the shape of a shamrock hung on a chain round her neck. The duration of their conversation had been short, but it had been enough to hang the murderer.

Listening to the details, Cedric thought: poor little bitch. She must have set great store by her finery. Maybe it was the reason that Heston-Harper's eye had fallen on her. His mind went back to his own daughter who must have been about the same age. Zandra had disliked jewellery, especially the junk that appeals to most children. Not that he had ever suggested she should wear plastic slides! She had had adult good taste and already had been blessed with the gift of "chic".

Juliet Smith had given the first direct lead to the identity of the elusive kidnapper. During Heston-Harper's business at the garage—and he had seemed in a curious hurry to get away—the number of his car had been noted. The punctured tyre was by no means worn smooth and was quite suitable for retreading. When this suggestion had been made to him, however, he had turned it down abruptly, declaring rather rudely that his own garage would be perfectly capable of dealing with it, and that he had no time to waste. He had then discovered that he had insufficient money, changed his manner, and asked if a cheque would be accepted. They obliged him and he cashed one for five pounds, signing a false name and giving a non-existent address in Suffolk. He could not throw off his old habit of dishonesty. It was by reason of this foolish act that, when

the description of Juliet Smith had been given national publicity, Heston-Harper had been remembered so vividly. Within forty-eight hours of the garage hand's statement the hunt for Juliet had ended at Rockbridge Farm.

Her body had been discovered lying on a bed in an attic of the farmhouse. She had been raped and mutilated. A further search disclosed the remains of two children buried under the floor of an outhouse. They were small boys who had also been sexually assaulted. The bones of at least four more children were disinterred from one of the pigstys which housed a sow and her litter. A portion of the flooring had, comparatively recently, been newly concreted.

Edward Trumper did not look at his audience. Instead he looked at the man who had been responsible for the tale he was telling. "The cache of bones which they found had been splintered and gnawed, and there was not a shred of flesh adhering to them. Examination by experts showed that the limbs had been severed and then fed to the pigs—in troughs of swill and hog-wash. Identification was impossible. We had to do the best we could from the files of missing persons." He lit a cigarette. The long ago discovery had retained its power to move him. "Only pathetic ornaments came to light; a string of blue beads, a sheriff's badge of discoloured tin, a medal won at some fun-fair shooting gallery, a marble, a tarnished buckle from a sandal . . . a worthless foreign coin. All of these sad trinkets had been raked into a corner, buried and stamped down in a pulp of ash that once had been clothing—and cemented over." He nodded towards the pitiful souvenirs that had defied all attempts at destruction and which now lay in a jumbled heap at one side of the display case underneath the photograph of the murderer.

"How utterly fantastic!" Valentine said. "The part about the pigs never came out in the papers."

"The Press has its own kind of voluntary censorship," said Edward Trumper. "At Heston-Harper's trial they had to draft in extra men for fear of his being lynched." He paused. "As I told you, quite a lot of the bones were missing completely, so we can only guess at the exact number of the bodies." He moved towards the centre table upon which lay the albums and his voice changed as he started on a new topic. "These books

refer mainly to Haigh, Heath and Christie." He was speaking to Flora. "I will warn you," he said, "when we are getting near to the really nasty ones."

Valentine, elegant in his beautifully cut suit, was very much at variance with his surroundings. He was wondering what Edward Trumper privately thought about the motives of his conducted parties for wishing to see the Museum, and what was the proportion of the sightseers who came solely for a thrill at second-hand.

As the book of photographs was opened Flora seemed suddenly older. the light absent from her eyes. The evidence she had just seen was so personal, so much a part of everyday life, and in conjunction with the tragedies, so terrifying. It was like stripping off a mask from a kindly stranger and encountering Satan.

The first page showed the squalid kitchen in Rillington Place where Christie, the necrophile, had lived. Next there came a close-up of the concealed cupboard and its huddled grisly occupant, discovered when the covering paper had been torn away by the tenant who had been allowed the use of the room after Christie had left. This was followed by one of a corpse which had been excavated from under the floorboards. From the filthy state of both the house of death and of its garden the smell of corruption could have caused no comment in that place of warring odours.

Cedric remained where he was, standing in front of the picture of Lance Heston-Harper, sickened and revolted by the abysmal horror of child murder. He stared fixedly at the handsome face of the man who had been responsible for the atrocities, trying to find a clue as to what might have motivated him. Finally he lowered his gaze to the glass case.

He did not rejoin the Ladbrokes until the last of the albums had been closed with a gentle slap, and Edward Trumper had intimated that their inspection was concluded. They were grouped under an archway before going back to the exit when Valentine saw that there was a third room which they had not been shown. He had caught a glimpse of an ancient tub of iron or zinc, and, inquiring what it might be, was told that it was the bath in which the ill-fated "Brides" had been done to death.

As they made their way to the foot of the staircase their solitude was invaded by a knot of young men who came in through the door. They wore dark suits and were all of burly build. The rumble of their muttered comments could be clearly heard, and from their disciplined demeanour and matter-of-fact approach it was obvious that they were members of the Force—probably cadets.

Back in the hallway the Ladbrokes thanked Mr. Trumper for his trouble and courtesy and they walked down the steps into the fresh air. "After that 'tour de force'," Flora said shakily, "don't you think it's simply wonderful to be out in the sunshine?" Valentine, who was lagging behind, had not heard her little joke, and Cedric made no answer. It had been a somewhat feeble effort to introduce a lighter note. When she had spoken the words Flora had thought her 'double entendre' inoffensive and quite funny. Now she had doubts and regretted her impulse.

They climbed into the car. As they drove down the Embankment alongside the sparkling crowded river, alive with shipping, Flora stole a glance at Cedric's face. It was drawn and set, and so harsh that his lips could have been carved from granite. Although she had experienced shock and revulsion, she was surprised that a man of his experience should have been so profoundly disturbed by what they had been shown. She made no comment, aware that any further attempt at conversation would not be appreciated.

In silence Cedric took them to their house in Markham Square, where they said their goodbyes. Then he drove home to Regent's Park. He let himself in and went straight into the library, locking the door behind him. On his writing table there were several messages left there by Miss Wyatt, but he did not see them.

He saw only the glass cabinet which had been allotted to the Lance Heston-Harper case, and the pathos of the mound of children's personal effects which had been put there.

His hands were clenched tightly in the pockets of his coat in an effort to control their shaking. He was consumed by a hatred of which he had not believed he was capable. If by a miracle Heston-Harper could be brought back again to life from his grave of quicklime behind a prison's walls, what would he not give to have him here—naked and defenceless? There

was no conceivable cruelty which he would not have gloried in inflicting. Small wonder that the murderer had been in real danger of lynching. What could have been the emotion of the parents of those tragic children?

He thought of his own child. There had been so many treasured incidents connected with Zandra's early life. They began to run through his mind, intimate and inconsequential as an amateur movie. Zandra delving into her Christmas stocking, sitting crosslegged on the foot of their bed; Zandra shrieking with joyous excitement as she began to master the bicycle given to her on her seventh birthday; Zandra, haunted by the inexplicable fears of infancy, calling out in the night, calling for help which invariably had come swiftly to her from her father or her mother or her Nanny. Why, until now, had all recollection faded of that blissful afternoon when they had taught Zandra to swim—when she had managed a few strokes and been rightly boastful of her new achievement, inviting their applause, her eyes bright with innocence and eager expectation of the future.

It was odd how buried memories could surface in the mind. While he had been in the Museum Cedric had recalled a trivial point, how Zandra had repeatedly broken her spectacles and how her mother had used to remonstrate with her, urging her to take more care and pointing out how expensive replacements were to buy. Zandra had always been disarmingly contrite. When she had . . . gone, he had thought, she had probably been wearing an old pair, of which the tortoiseshell bridge had been patched with adhesive tape and a blob of green sealing wax. Zandra had made the makeshift repair herself. They were, in her own words, her "second best". Dorothy had not known about them, for she would have been bound to disapprove, and would have declared them unsafe and unbecoming. So it had been their secret.

Contact lenses had been the child's ambition. She was to have been given them as a reward for passing her 'O' levels—or sooner if she became more careful, and he had not wished to jeopardise their acquisition.

But why, this afternoon, had he had to remember the broken pair of spectacles, and why in God's name had he chanced to see a fragment among the miscellany of the Heston-Harper

relics, a piece of tortoiseshell bridge which had been mended with grimy adhesive tape and a smear of green sealing wax?

Why had he gone with Flora and Valentine? Why had fate seen fit to tear open in such a ghoulishly grim way the wound which he thought had at last begun to heal?

How was it possible for him to go on living with this knowledge?

2

'HAPPY AS LARRY'

"FAZELEY?"

The woman to whom the question was addressed pointed straight ahead with her free hand, the other being in the fierce clutch of a small girl engaged in sucking a lollipop. "Fazeley? You go through the village and about two miles on you take the second fork to the left."

"Thank you." Smiling, Effie put her hired Vauxhall into gear. Whenever possible she asked for directions from a member of her own sex. Women were much less verbose and seldom suggested irritating alternative routes.

Effie Barlow was twenty-five years of age and this was her first trip to England. Richard Barlow, her grandfather, had emigrated to Australia in the 'nineties. He had been an uncle of Sir Hugh's, whose family had owned Fazeley for generations. Before she had left Brisbane Effie had written to the present holder of the title asking permission to visit the house. He had sent back a warm reply saying that she could do so whenever she wished. He feared that she would find it somewhat down-at-heel for there was only a caretaker. Shortly after the war, as doubtless she was aware, he and his wife had gone to live in Italy. He wrote that he had sold the greater part of the land and had let the remainder; so that Fazeley itself was in the nature of a white elephant. Nowadays nobody wanted a big house which would be impossible to staff and which, he added wryly, was also riddled with dry rot. He had ended by saying that should her travels bring her to Florence he would be more than delighted if she would contact him.

It was six o'clock on an evening in the first week of August. Effie had been staying at "The Hare" not far from Malmesbury, driving herself to the towns and villages which had become a part of her family folk lore, and she had left Fazeley purposely to the last. On the following morning she was to return to

London to meet Bernard and Pauline Chantry who were taking her to stay with them in Norfolk for the weekend.

England, for once, was basking in the glow of a wonderful summer. The clumps of cow parsley lining the hedgerows were sere and brittle as scorched paper and the chestnut trees were shedding the surplus of their spiky half-formed fruits. The whirring of tractors beat through the still air, a throbbing punctuated by the hectoring shouts of farm hands in pursuit of a rabbit as it twisted and bolted from a diminishing island of security to seek cover elsewhere.

Effie took the second turning to her left as she had been instructed and after another five minutes came to a serpentine wall of dark brick overhung by branches. She slowed down as she passed a three-pronged signpost at a junction of minor roads. Barningham 4. Fazeley 1. Hornsby-on-the-Green 6. On the other side of the road beyond the post she saw a pair of wrought-iron gates. They must have been left open for years, for their lowest cross-bars were embedded in the earth.

The tree-lined avenue up which she drove was rutted and pot-holed and nearly half a mile in length—a tunnel of interlacing foliage in which sweet chestnuts and limes alternated. The avenue ended in a sweep of weed-grown gravel. A balustrade, pierced in the centre by a flight of shallow steps, guarded the terrace which ran the length of the eighteenth-century façade. The rows of windows were uncurtained and some were blind with shutters, and the stone griffons which flanked the top of the steps were chipped and stained with moss and lichen. A regiment of carved urns held only the strident splash of dandelions and feathery tufts of seeding grass. In the parkland beyond the white painted fencing a dozen Friesians ambled in tail swishing contentment in the shadows of the oaks.

Effie switched off the engine and sat back looking at the house, trying to picture it as it had been in the past, regretting that it had had to be abandoned and allowed to fall into decay. She could observe no evidence of occupation. In all probability the caretaker had a cottage of his own. Effie decided to investigate.

She got out of the car and ran up the steps and walked along the terrace past trellises sagging under the weight of climbing roses tangled with swags of bindweed and sweet smell-

ing honeysuckle. Peering through one of the long windows she could glimpse a pale marble fireplace brooding over the emptiness of a panelled room. On the embossed crimson wallpaper brighter patches showed where pictures had hung. She hurried on to the end of the terrace to where an arch led to the eastern side of the house. Here the grass swept right up to the wall. A pair of fantail pigeons, disturbed by her approach, ceased their strutting and circled up into the air. Turning the corner Effie came at last upon signs of life. Three ground floor rooms in what had been the servants' quarters showed curtains of washed-out cretonne. Near by there were other buildings, a disused laundry, a dairy, a dovecot, a coalshed. Chickens were scratching and pecking in the beaten earth around a trio of hen houses, and an Alsatian dog attached to a lengthy chain yawned and stretched before springing to his feet and barking.

Effie halted uncertainly, then, seeing the chain tighten, she went over to the door in some relief. "Is there anyone at home?" There was no answer and after a minute she tried the knob, but the door did not give. She was about to turn away when a child came quietly up from behind her. He was about ten years old and was swinging an empty basket.

"Aren't there no one in?" he asked.

"Hello!" said Effie. "No—it doesn't seem like it."

"Oh!" The child sounded annoyed. "That's rum. They knew I'd be along. I'm sent up every Friday at the same time to fetch the eggs." He frowned. "Perhaps they've shut themselves up in the walled garden. If they have it's no good. They don't let no one in."

"Why not?"

The boy shrugged. "Search me!"

Effie gave him a friendly grin. "What's your name?"

"Alec. Alec Chelmer." He put the basket on the ground and rapped loudly with the knocker. "I don't know what my Mum will do. She's right out." He frowned. "Miss Manor must have been expecting me. Two dozen a week we have," he said with a touch of pride. "Regular." He stood on tiptoe and looked in through the window. "The eggs are there right enough. She's put them in a big crock on the table."

"Then I should think that someone will be along soon," said Effie. She ruffled his hair playfully and he did not appear to

resent this liberty. "You stay here, Alexander-the-Great, and I'll go on to the garden."

"It's over there," said Alec, "but you'll not be gaining entrance," he added discouragingly.

Effie's mouth twitched at his unusual phraseology. "If I do succeed—I'll tell Miss Manor you're waiting."

"Thanks," the boy said. "You from London?"

"No. I'm from Down Under."

"Where's that?"

"It's as far as you can go without stepping off the edge of the world."

"Don't be daft! The world's round." He let the matter drop, suspecting that he was having his leg pulled. "You'll not be gaining entrance," he repeated in an effort to put her in her place. "They don't let no one in," he said. "Ever."

"I may be the exception," said Effie cheerfully.

The way to the garden wound through a shrubbery at the end of which loomed an expanse of wall patterned with the probing fingers of ground ivy. A short way to the right it was broken by a gate which had been left ajar. Effie walked across and with one hand on the rusty iron gazed curiously at the wilderness inside. Behind her clumps of rhododendrons showed their withered cinnamon heads, and farther off yellowing leaves were bright against the ubiquitous green that threw into prominence the flamboyant clusters of rowan berries.

She went through into the garden and along a pathway edged by lavender. Then came an irregular patch of herbs, chaotic and long since run riot, a springing sea of mint, through which leggy rosemary and the mottled spikes of sage had struggled for survival. The kitchen garden was fully two acres in extent, a third of which had been planted as an orchard, apples, pears and plums with an occasional scabby quince or crab apple to vary the monotony. They were all in dire need of pruning. At the first intersection of the groundsel-speckled paths were traces of more recent cultivation—a parade of zinnias showing the peeping colours of their flowers, a bed of strawberries stripped of its crop, rows of raspberry canes partially netted from the pillage of the birds.

Sweet peas, already fading and forming seed pods, made a barrier from the edge of the path to the wall, and from behind

it there came the sound of a woman's voice. "If I've told you once, Julia, I must have told you a hundred times not to leave those sharp tools where Larry can get at them. It's not safe. They're not toys, you know. You're becoming most careless and remiss, not only about the tools but about the gate as well." She tutted in exasperation. "It simply will not do!"

"But he likes to make himself useful, Mardie." Julia was putting up a half-hearted defence for her behaviour. "And he's very careful. He must have some occupation." She sought for an argument. "He's beginning to outgrow his toys."

"Then we must give him some new ones," Mardie said crisply. There was the murmur of a reply which Effie could not catch.

"I say!" she called out. "Is that Miss Manor?" An abrupt silence fell, the speakers apparently stunned by her interruption. "Miss Manor?" Effie repeated.

A tall woman stepped out from the shelter of the sweet pea hedge. She was dressed in a striped cotton frock that reached almost to her ankles, and she carried a trug in which were heaped a bunch of young carrots, a lettuce and the crinkled grape-bloom leaves of a freshly cut cabbage. Rigid with surprise and ill-concealed hostility, she regarded Effie inquiringly.

"I'm sorry to butt in on you like this," Effie said, "but there's a boy at your flat—he said his name was Alec Chelmer—and he's come for some eggs and can't get in. He told me he was expected."

Miss Manor did not comment but continued to stare at Effie, making it clear that Alec Chelmer's problem was no possible business of hers, and that she was impatient to hear some better explanation for her intrusion. While she stood gazing at her in cold interrogation her companion, whom she had been reprimanding, stepped out on to the path to join her. She was shorter and plumper, but there was a strong resemblance.

"Mardie!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so late. How could we have forgotten about Alec?"

In order to drive home her previous complaint Miss Manor looked from her sister to Effie. "It would appear, Julia, that once more you have left the garden gate unlocked." She glanced down at her watch embedded in a leather cup and attached to a sturdy brown strap, and then allowed her eyes

to dwell upon Effie with faint distaste. "It is *not* late," she contradicted reprovingly, "the boy is merely here before his customary time. It is inconsiderate of him." She dismissed the matter and with eyebrows raised turned again to Effie. "And what can we do for you, Miss . . .? Miss . . .?"

"Barlow," said Effie. "My name is Effie Barlow."

The women exchanged looks and Miss Manor said in a marked change of tone: "Did you say Barlow? Then it is likely that you are a relation of Sir Hugh's?" She smacked at a fly that had settled on her forehead. "He sent no word that you might be coming to see us. As you will no doubt have noticed we are hardly in a state to be able to receive visitors!" The hard line of her mouth relaxed. "This house has been unoccupied for twenty years."

Effie smiled. "I wasn't intending to inflict myself on you," she said. "I just wanted to have a peek at Fazeley and, if I may, go round the house? I'm staying quite near." She paused. "Sir Hugh has written giving me his permission. My grandfather spent his childhood here before he went off to Australia—and he used to speak about it so often to my father."

"Your grandfather?" said Mardie. "He must have been Mr. Richard. Surely he's not still alive?"

"No." Effie shook her head. "He died a long while ago—before I was born."

Julia, who so far had not addressed her now did so. "It's a pleasure to meet any member of the family," she said warmly. "They've been so good to us." She glanced down apologetically. "I won't offer to shake hands. They're real mucky." She stabbed the fork with which she had been working into the earth. "My sister was a bit startled to see you," she explained. "We don't have many visitors. But now that you've found your way you must stay and have a cup of tea with us and afterwards Mardie will take you round the house, won't you, dear? Not that there's a lot to look at but bare boards!" She wiped her palms on the side of her dress, which was the twin of her sister's. "I'm Mrs. Grylls," she volunteered, "Julia Grylls. Come along, my dear, we'll go and give Alec his eggs and then I'll put the kettle on."

They began to walk slowly back to the flat, Mardie saying that she would follow them in a few minutes. She held out her hand. "You had better give that key to me, Julia," she said

drily. "I'll do the locking up when I leave."

Effie was amused. From the trouble the sisters took, the walled garden might have contained the Crown Jewels or the Holy Grail. The little boy was in the yard sitting beside the Alsatian, scratching him behind the ears, and he scrambled up as soon as he saw them. "Good evening, Alec," said Julia. "I hope all's well at home?" She produced a large key and they went in after her.

Alec Chelmer took two grubby pound notes from the pocket of his jeans and gave them to her. "Mum says this is for the month."

"Thank you, dear," said Julia. She dropped the money into a blue and white jar on the dresser and counted out the eggs putting them gently into a paper bag. "Tell your mother these were all laid today," she said. "Warm from the hens! And give her my compliments." She handed him four florins as change.

"Right you are, Missus." Alec took the bag from her and ran out of the door.

"Mind how you go!" Julia shouted after him. "You don't want to scramble them before you get them home." She filled the kettle and put it on the gas ring. "They're a nice lot, the Chelmers," she said.

While they waited she cut bread and butter and brought out a pot of bramble jelly and a plate of shortbread, and questioned Effie about her various relatives, taking her painstakingly through the family tree. She showed a lively interest concerning life in Australia, telling her that they had a cousin, Ned Tebbutt, in Adelaide, and seeming surprised when Effie confessed that she did not know him. Despite Julia's verbosity it seemed to the girl that she was ill at ease, and anxious for her sister's return.

"Now you must tell me about Fazeley," Effie said. "There's so much I want to hear. To me it's like stepping back into the past. In Australia we are all so terribly proud of our 'roots'. We're worse than the Americans! It's because we're such a new country that anything over a hundred years old has glamour." She lit a cigarette. "Have you always lived here?"

"No, dear, I haven't. As a girl I lived near Canterbury, and after I married Norman he took me to Southampton. He worked there in a shipyard. It was nice. We had a semi-detached in Mulberry Road. The houses were all newly built

and most convenient. Not like this at all!" She was back in the home that they had made, speaking freely, and her shyness had vanished. "I came here during the war. My sister Mardie who, as you know, is now the caretaker, was cook-housekeeper to her Ladyship. They had to cut down like everybody else. It was this way, Miss. We was bombed out, Norman and me." She pulled out a chair and rested her elbows on the chequered tablecloth. "The first time the Germans came I lost my home—and the second time I lost my family—Norman, Terry, Doris and Aubrey. After that there was only me left. Me and baby Larry. They dug us out of the rubble. So I brought him up to Fazeley. I'd had enough. I mean to say you don't bear children and rear them just to have them blown into . . . into bloody bits of confetti—do you now? It's not right. My job was to see to Larry's safety, and that I have done to the best of my ability. They'll not take him away save over my dead body! The country air has made him ever so bonny and I've never regretted it. Mind you, it was Mardie who arranged it all with her Ladyship, and a nicer lady than Lady Winifred you'll never meet. The first two years that we were here she already had a houseful of evacuees, so it didn't put her out as you might say—and when Sir Hugh took her off to Italy, well, we stayed on." She fell silent, pleating her apron between her fingers.

There had been a bleak lack of emotion in Julia's telling of her story that had verged on the apathetic, but which had served as an armour against the re-opening of her near mortal wound. The blitz, to Effie, was a part of history. She had been an infant in arms, like Larry. when the cities of England had reeled under the hammer blows of Hitler. "I'm terribly sorry," she said, "and so glad for your sake that Larry was spared."

"Yes," said Julia simply. "He's all we've got." She jumped up as the kettle began to sing. "I shouldn't have been telling you all this—so you won't mention it, will you? Mardie's inclined to be a . . . close one, and doesn't hold with blathering on about our affairs."

She was making the tea when Mardie Manor came in, and with her coming there was a swift change of subject. She flung down her ancient straw hat and hung up the key, for which she had been so insistent, on a nail above the sink, and nodded reassuringly to Julia in answer to some unspoken inquiry. They

sat down at the table.

The shortbread was delicious and the tea was strong and hot, and while they drank it Mardie spoke of her long service in the Barlow family and of how her mother before her had been in their employ as cook to old Sir John who had been the father of Sir Hugh. The Manors, Mardie said, were from Kent, and her mother had arrived at Fazeley as under-kitchenmaid. "In those days," said Mardie, "there were four in the kitchen and three men in the pantry as well as the housemaids and the upper servants. My mother started at ten shillings a week and rose to eighty pounds a year, which was a fine wage for the turn of the century, and then she got wed and went back to her own part of the country." As she talked it was clear that Mardie was the dominant character of the sisters, and that it was she who made all the decisions in the placid running of their lives.

After Effie had refused the offer of a third cup of tea Mardie rose to her feet. "Good gracious—it's past seven. The light will soon be going, so we'd better make a start." As she stepped into the yard she spoke over her shoulder to Julia. "There's no need for you to come. We will be quite all right by ourselves." It was more of a statement than a dismissal.

She led Effie in through a larder and along stone-flagged passages to where a green baize door gave access to the main hall which was vast and high-ceilinged and which had a floor of black and white marble. There was a curving staircase with an exquisitely wrought handrail. On one side of the hallway were an imposing drawing room and a smaller sitting room and on the opposite side there was a dining room and a library and a billiards room in which the table still stood under its dis-coloured sheeting. The landings that criss-crossed the storey above were lined with the doorways to a dozen bedrooms, and there were also two lavatories with ornate floral china pans which Effie thought enchanting, and baths with wide surrounds of polished mahogany.

The house was saturated with an atmosphere of desolation, and the droppings of rats and mice peppered the floors by the skirting boards, where gaping holes had been gnawed, and everywhere, on paper or paint, were the livid squares or oblongs left by the vanished paintings and portraits.

"Don't you sometimes find it depressing to see this... this

shell?" said Effie.

"I'm used to it, Miss Barlow." Mardie Manor shrugged her angular shoulders. "I can't do more than try to keep the place aired and swept. I think that Sir Hugh hoped that one day Mr. Hilary might be able to live here." She gave her painful thin-lipped smile. "But there's small likelihood of that unless he gets himself an heiress. Mr. Hilary's nigh on forty and not the marrying kind. He's more of an artist, you might say, and even if he was on the look-out for a wife, there're few enough who would fancy a big place like this without the land."

They retraced their steps and went down the staircase and into the hall and as they crossed it to the front door with its leaded semi-circular fanlight their shoes made the marble echo. Mardie stretched up and then crouched almost to the floor to draw back the heavy bolts. "This way will be nearer for your car, Miss."

The sun, low on the horizon, shimmered through the traceries of the oak boughs beneath which the cattle were grazing. Mardie Manor held out a hand in farewell. "Good-bye, Miss Barlow," she said, and her eyes were steady and held no warmth. "It's been a pleasure, I'm sure."

Effie was half-way down the drive when she remembered with vexation that she had left her bag in the sisters' flat. She would have to go back for it. She remembered, too, that she had neither thanked nor said good-bye to Julia Grylls. She turned the car and drove to the house. The pattern of her earlier visit repeated itself. The fantail pigeons circled up in affront as she drew level with them, the yard was deserted, and this time there was no disgruntled little boy thwarted of his eggs.

"Miss Manor . . . Mrs. Grylls?"

At the sound of her voice the Alsatian raised his head but did not take the trouble to bark. He inspected her disinterestedly and rolled over on to his side, his front legs crossed and bent. Effie saw that his water bowl was dry and was surprised that the observant Miss Manor should have omitted to notice this deficiency. Maybe it was among the tasks which she left to Julia.

She would try the kitchen garden: "The Secret Garden", as

she had come to think of it, the walled enclosure which was the hub of the sisters' existence. It was getting late and unless she took her departure quickly there would be no dinner at the hotel. She hurried up the path through the shrubbery and was lucky to catch up with Julia Grylls as she was pushing open the gate, and at the beat of her running footsteps the woman turned round.

"Why, Miss Barlow! Mardie told me that you had gone!"

"I had," said Effie. "I was on my way when I realised that I'd been stupid enough to forget my bag, and I wanted to thank you for my tea. It's inexcusable of me to disturb you again. I called at your flat but there was no one there. I'm being the most appalling nuisance."

"Not at all, Miss Barlow. We're none of us infallible!" She was turning over in her mind her best course of action. "There is something which I have to do and then we will go together and retrieve your bag." They were inside the garden pacing along the path flanked by the lavender bushes. "It's Larry's bedtime," Julia Grylls explained, "and I have to settle him down for the night. You see, we have our own humble abode, Larry and I, where we are self-contained. Mardie seldom, if ever, steps inside it. It's our own little hideaway. It was originally the bothy, but we've made it quite comfortable and shipshape although I say it myself." A flicker of caution passed over her face. "If you would not mind waiting for me here . . . ? I won't be more than ten minutes."

"Let me help you," Effie said. "Please. I love children." The day was dying, the shadows gaining substance and creeping out from the bowls of the gnarled fruit trees in encroaching pools. "Honestly, Mrs. Grylls, I'd be flattered if you'd let me."

"No, Miss Barlow. It would be impossible." Julia Grylls halted, suddenly aware of the extent of their progress along the path. "You should not be here at all," she said. "If she knew—Mardie would be most put out."

"Why?" asked Effie. "Why all the mystery?" She gave her wide smile. "What's wrong? Is Larry infectious?" She said it jokingly. "Has he got measles or mumps?"

"Infectious? Certainly not. He's in the best of health." All at once Julia capitulated. In spite of the grey hair, scraped back into a severe bun, her face was unlined and her skin and

innocent eyes were those of a schoolgirl. "Very well, Miss, if you're so set on it you can come along with me and sit in what is left of the sun." She lowered her voice until it became a conspirator's whisper. "Mardie won't know nothing about it. She's shutting up in the big house and after that she'll be busy getting supper."

They passed the hedge of sweet peas and a clutter of disintegrating frames and glass-houses from which the majority of the glazing was missing. Daggers and slivers of broken glass glinted in the westerly rays of the setting sun. At the far side of this débris, tucked away behind a tumbledown potting shed, was the bothy.

It was an odd building, erected against the north wall, and Julia's boast that it had been kept in fair repair was justified. There were two rooms, one above the other, and the upper floor topped the wall by several feet. Each of the rooms had a single circular window facing south over the garden. At the side of the olive-painted door there was a wooden bench, and a few paces on a pyramid of chopped logs, against which an axe was leaning.

"Make yourself comfortable, dear." To Effie's astonishment Julia produced yet another key. Was the unfortunate infant kept in continual confinement and allowed out only for exercise? There had been a firmness in Julia's edict that had made it plain that Effie should be permitted to go this far and no further, and the girl sat down on the bench as had been suggested. Julia nodded her approval and closed the door decisively behind her.

Effie leant back with eyes half closed, trying to conjure up the by-gone splendours of Fazeley as it had been in Victorian and Georgian days, when the sweep of raked gravel in front of the house had been briefly scarred by the wheels of carriages, when silk-hatted coachmen and footmen and grooms had stood by waiting to hand the guests into their conveyances; when the house itself had been humming with activity and the lawns and gardens had been meticulously tended by an army of men and boys.

She could hear from the room at her back the chink of plates, and presently Julia's voice reached her from the storey above, and after a few moments she could hear her crooning

to the child. "Baby Baby Bunting—Daddy's gone a'hunting—To get a little rabbit skin—To wrap his Baby Bunting in . . ."

The nursery rhyme evoked all but forgotten memories of Effie's own earliest nursery days, and as her thoughts slipped away to that misty period of her young life she shut her eyes completely, caressed by the sleepy warmth around her. She wondered where Larry's mother might be, and why the child should have been left entirely to his grandmother's care, for he could only be her grandchild. Had she died, or had she remarried? And what of his father? What had been the reason for Julia's presence at Fazeley? She had not once mentioned either parent.

The singing stopped and Effie could hear her coming down the staircase, and then she was calling out to her imperturbably: "Nearly done, Miss Barlow! I won't be two shakes of a dog's tail."

Effie felt in the pocket of her jersey and took out a packet of Players and a box of book matches. Three of the cigarettes remained and one of these she lit, for the midges had begun their yo-yo gyrations. Was the child frightened by being left alone so much, or had he become accustomed to his routine? Julia's devotion was beyond question, but even so there must be long periods during which she could not be with him, and surely he could have been accommodated in Mardie's flat?

"Here we are!" Julia Grylls was beside her. She had come quietly out, and as Effie got up from her bench she said in a whisper: "We can go now, dear."

They walked without speaking as far as the wreckage of the glass-houses. Julia was looking straight in front of her, but Effie glanced back over her shoulder. She thought for a fleeting second that she could see a face at the upper window, but it was not the face of a child. It was that of a young man, and it was framed in a fuzz of fair beard. His arms were raised and he was tapping sullenly on the pane with a silver spoon and an infant's "pusher". His broad shoulders were covered in an embroidered smock and, even as Julia touched her sleeve to urge her on, he withdrew from Effie's sight.

Julia had started to talk again, taking up her confidences where they had been interrupted by Mardie's advent. "Yes, I'm glad I left Southampton. He's so happy here. It's the ideal

place for him. He's as 'happy as Larry', as the Irish say! There are so many advantages, dear. We're largely self-supporting, and we have our pensions, and Mardie has her salary as well, and there's no rent to pay. We manage, dear. We manage very well, really. Mardie was as heartbroken as I was when . . . when it happened." For a moment she was unable to continue. "You see, dear, she adored all the children—especially darling Larry. It's a crying shame that she never married and had some of her own. Of course we've always been very close to one another, Mardie and me, which has been some comfort. Sisters so often are, don't you think?" She gave a sigh. "Poor Mardie! She's been so good to us. There's literally nothing that she would not do for me and little Larry."

"*Little* Larry?" Effie could not stop herself from underlining the adjective.

Julia's eyes hardened and she let her hand drop from Effie's sleeve. "Boys never grow up entirely where their mothers are concerned. Naturally you wouldn't know about that as yet, Miss Barlow." The sympathetic pressure of Effie's fingers groping for her own banished her suspicions, and she went on in her former confiding voice: "My cousin, Ned, told me that on the Normandy beaches he heard men calling for their mothers at the very moment of death."

In the gate of "the secret garden" the key was once more turned. Effie was giving only half of her attention to Julia, incapable of believing what it was that she had seen. It must have taken place in her imagination—or been some trick of the light. What could be the explanation? They could not have made Larry retarded deliberately, refused to let him learn to speak or read. They would not have chosen that he should have an infant's brain in the powerful body of a man. Was he perhaps insane? Anyway it was none of her business. If Larry was in fact an imbecile, then what his mother and his aunt were doing for him was not a criminal offence. It was for his own protection. A chill thought struck her. Were the sisters themselves mentally unbalanced?

She followed Julia into the kitchen of the flat to collect her bag. It was on the dresser next to the blue and white jar. Mardie was bending over the stove. She looked up sharply as they came in. "Miss Barlow had to come back for her bag,"

Julia said before Mardie could speak. "I met her just now—outside in the yard."

Mardie did not say a word. There was an utter withdrawal about her, and Effie said nothing. She picked up her bag and went out to find her car.

As she drove back to her hotel she was obsessed by the face at the window, telling herself again that it was not her concern. Had their obsession for Larry's protection from the world blinded them to all reality—had panic given them a total inability to distinguish right from wrong? The task of preserving the surviving child's purdah had been all that had mattered to them. She had no right to interfere. There was no valid reason for her to take on the role of meddlesome-mattie.

It was a long time before she could shake off her nagging sense of unease, not until after she had met the Chantrys in London and had stayed with them at Burnham Market and had made through their help a host of agreeable acquaintances in London. Only then did her memories of Fazeley become less real to her, dimmed and overlaid by the impact of new experiences.

Effie had been back in Brisbane for eight months when a copy of the *Evening Star* was delivered in the afternoon post. The date on the paper was a week old. It had been air-mailed to her by Stewart Edgeley whom she had met with Pauline and Bernard Chantry, and on the front of the paper he had pencilled: 'See page four!' She turned to the page in question and read an account of the party which he had given to celebrate the opening of his new boutique. The Chantrys had been there and Herbert Hazledene, and Judy Taylor and 'Russ' Arnison and the Milbankes... He had invited The Nits, who were making their mark in the world of pop, and Noel Gaylord had come in after his performance in *Black Velvet* and had played and sung some of the songs from his new production which was to open in September. It sounded great fun and, as had been his intention, it made her feel nostalgic for England.

When she had read through the column twice she skimmed through the rest of the news. The Russians were rumoured to have landed a television camera on the planet Mars, an achievement which they would neither confirm nor deny. The latest

public opinion poll in the *Daily Gleaner* had given the Tory party a six per cent lead over Labour; a new musical offering starring Evelyn Manners and Wally Lund had folded after a run of five performances; the Earl of Manx was seeking a divorce from his fourth wife . . .

She was about to put the paper aside when a further news item caught her eyes:

SISTERS FOUND BRUTALLY MURDERED

The bodies of two elderly sister, Mrs. Julia Grylls and Miss Martha Manor, both in their late sixties, were discovered yesterday in the walled garden of an unoccupied Gloucestershire mansion. They had been sexually assaulted and had suffered severe wounds; in the case of Miss Manor the head having been practically severed from the neck.

The mansion, Fazeley House, where Miss Manor had been left as caretaker, was formerly the home of Sir Hugh and Lady Barlow who are at present living in Florence. The gruesome find was made by Alec Chelmer, aged ten, who was in the habit of paying a weekly visit to Fazeley to buy eggs. The gate into the walled garden was locked, but Miss Manor was visible lying on the grass inside. Mrs. Grylls was later found stretched on the ground outside the gardener's bothy.

A man in his middle twenties has been detained. He is thought to be related to the two victims, although his existence came as a surprise to their neighbours, who had not seen him since he was an infant, whom they had known as Larry Grylls. In 1945 it had been put about by Miss Manor that he had emigrated for health reasons to South Australia with the family of a cousin, Mr. Edward Tebbutt.

After prolonged interrogation the young man gave his name as "Larry Bunting", and his mental development is that of a child of three. He was wearing a blood-stained smock, and his vocabulary was limited to a few words and simple phrases. It has been stated that he is unfit to plead.

Effie stared out at the harsh tropical sunshine, tormented by the ghostly reprise of Julia's lullaby from the upper room. 'Baby Baby Bunting . . . Daddy's gone a'hunting . . .' Now there was no one 'to get a little rabbit's skin'—there were only the violated bodies huddled on the tussocky grass of 'the secret

garden'.

Effie asked herself how she could have been so selfish and feckless as to have driven away without having taken any constructive action. Why, in God's name, had she made no report? She could see in retrospect the face with its lax and petulant mouth . . . could see the hands like hams tapping with the baby's silver 'pusher' against the circular window.

She could hear the echo of Julia's doting voice: 'You see, my dear, she adored all the children—especially darling Larry. There's literally nothing she would not do for me and little Larry . . . They'll not take him away from me save over my dead body . . .'

Nor had they done so.

It had been 'Baby Bunting' who finally had gone a'hunting.

She let the paper slide to the floor. Had it, indeed, been no concern of hers?

The reason for Mardie Manor's incomprehensible conduct dawned on her. Larry had not been the one who had entwined himself round her heart, and whom she had considered it necessary to shield. All the time it had been Julia.

3

S.O.S.

His hands were clasped firmly behind his broad tweed-covered back as Colonel James Cripps stood staring out across the sodden lawns to where the rain-blurred clumps of flowering shrubs clustered at each side of the wicket gate which gave on to the golf course. That doctor fellah, Ansley, was taking a deuce of a time over his examination of old 'Manders'.

James was concerned about 'Manders'. Major Manderville Colville had been a friend of his since they had been at Sandhurst together thirty-five, or was it thirty-six, years ago? He was, perhaps, the best friend that he had ever had. He was a rattling good chap, 'Manders', a fine shot, and thoroughly at home on a horse. Excellent war record, too. Africa, Normandy, the lot... It was a damned shame that he had let himself go to seed.

Drink, he thought bitterly, had certainly taken its toll from among the ranks of his generation. There had been Dick Thompson, Keith Cranland and Christopher Roxby, all of them killed by it, and in the case of the latter the end had been hastened by his own hand. Shot himself, had poor Chris; and now there was old 'Manders'. Oddly enough it was the active energetic fellahs who seemed to take to the bottle, men who had been accustomed to facing up to things, and not the feeble duds as one would have expected.

The Colonel knocked out the ashes from the bowl of his pipe and, putting it on his writing table, took out his watch. Doctor Ansley had been upstairs for more than twenty minutes. It looked like a bad show. He decided that he would go along and find out what was happening. He fingered his grey moustache thoughtfully. It wouldn't do to go barging in, but all this waiting about was getting on his nerves.

He was crossing the hall when he saw the doctor at the head of the curving staircase. One glance at his face was enough to tell him that the news would not be good. He stood where he

was until the young man joined him and then led the way back into the library. Neither of them spoke. James Cripps closed the door carefully behind him, although there was no one who would be likely to overhear what might be said. He raised his bushy eyebrows in inquiry.

For the past few days he had been very disturbed about his friend's condition, having noticed him suddenly wince and pale on several occasions as though in considerable pain, and he had taken on the colour of candlewax. When he had asked 'Manders' what had been the matter he had replied that 'it was only a touch of colic—and not to worry'.

Today, however, had been different, the pains had been almost continuous—at times they had been more severe than at others—and although he had eaten nothing—'Manders' had twice vomited and eventually had acquiesced gratefully when James had insisted on sending for his doctor.

Edward Ansley went over to the fire and bent down, rubbing his palms together. "I'm afraid he's not in very good shape, Colonel," he said. "He should be operated upon as soon as possible. With your permission I'll make the arrangements now, if I may use your telephone."

Colonel Cripps pointed to the table where the instrument stood. "Go ahead," he said. "Appendicitis, I take it?"

"No," said Doctor Ansley. "I'm afraid it's a case of intestinal obstruction. Damned painful. I have given him something to relieve his pain, but the sooner we can get him into hospital the better." He was standing by the telephone, his finger ready to dial. "There's no harm in your going in to see him if you'd like to do so." He made it plain that he would prefer to be by himself and free of interruptions when he spoke to the hospital.

"Right," said James Cripps. He lit a cigarette. As he left the room he heard the beginning of a technical talk in which there was mention of a rigid abdominal wall. He had faith in young Ansley. His nearest neighbour, Emily Dearden, was saying only the other day how fortunate they were in their G.P. Still, he didn't like the idea of surgery, didn't like it at all.

'Manders' was stretched on his bed wearing only his shorts. The room was warm, oppressively so, for the windows had been closed and the central heating was powerful. He opened his eyes as James came in. His forehead and chest were beaded

with sweat and his spotted silk dressing gown was crumpled in a ball beside him. He appeared weary but peaceful.

James pushed a chair to the bedside and sat down upon it heavily. He stubbed out the half smoked cigarette, nervously produced his pipe, frowned at it and put it away again. "How are you feeling?" he asked gruffly.

"The pain's better at the moment," 'Manders' said. "What are they planning to do with me? Did that doctor chap tell you? Or is it a professional secret?"

James hesitated. "He said you'd have to go into hospital for a bit. They may have to operate."

"I see." 'Manders' looked away. "When am I to be collected?" he asked, forcing a smile.

"I left Ansley making the arrangements," James said. "I should say that they'll be along in about half an hour. There's nothing to worry about," he added reassuringly.

"No." The man on the bed fell silent. " 'Fraid I'm being a bloody nuisance." He studied his fingernails. "What about a drink?" he asked.

"Better not." James had not consulted Doctor Ansley on the subject but he knew from common-sense that alcohol before an operation must be inadvisable.

"Not even a small one?" 'Manders' persisted. "I could do with it." He tried to cover up the pleading note in his voice.

"Not just now, old chap." It was, of course, 'just now' that old 'Manders' would need one. Nobody cared for the idea of the operating table however brave a face they might contrive to put on.

'Manders' must have the constitution of an ox. In spite of everything, James told himself, he was still a splendid looking type, like the rugged hero in one of those naval films, who were liable to end up with a Victoria Cross. Alcoholism was the very devil. It was as much of a disease as tuberculosis or cancer. It was only after the war that 'Manders' had taken to drinking seriously—about nineteen forty-seven, when he had left the army, and when that damned bitch, Flora, had run off.

Not that she could have been much of a loss, but 'Manders' had seemed to be cut up about it. There was no accounting for tastes. She had been one of those sickening women, all pop eyes and ear-rings and stiletto heels, who had talked in dated slang,

and who used to smoke before the port. She had had no claim whatsoever to being a lady. Eventually she had bolted with some gigolo—some bandsman, a ghastly looking dago. Flora had had money of her own. He had never understood what could have possessed 'Manders' to marry her—it had certainly not been for her cash. He would never have done a thing like that. Not 'Manders'. He shouldn't wonder if she'd been a nymphomaniac, the sort who'd make a play for muscle men, or even for Negroes if she'd had the chance. She was so feminine that she made sex seem obscene. Flora, he considered, would have been more than enough to drive any man to drink. There had been no children.

James Cripps levered himself up from the chair. "You've nothing to fuss about," he said. "I'll see to it that Ansley gets hold of the best chap, and you'll be as right as rain in no time, mark my words, fitter than ever you were." He paused in the doorway and spoke over his shoulder. "I'll look in on you as soon as they'll let me." His heart was despondent as he trudged down the stairs. He was no medico, but he wouldn't have said that the poor bastard was in a healthy state to undergo major surgery.

Young Doctor Ansley was finishing his call as the Colonel came in. He replaced the receiver and lifted his left cuff. "The ambulance will be here in a quarter of an hour or so," he said. "I'll go along with the patient and see him settled in."

"Thank you," said James. He frowned as he searched for the right words. "There is one thing that I should tell you. He's been hitting the bottle quite hard . . . and for quite a long time." He spoke a little defensively.

The doctor nodded. "I had an idea that he might have been doing so," he said drily. Why was it that laymen always thought it necessary to teach one one's own business? And almost without exception their information came too late.

"He asked me if he might have a drink," said James. "I did not give him one."

"You acted wisely." Doctor Ansley set the confidence aside. There were practical matters to which he must attend. These confirmed bachelors could be as agitated as old women when confronted with anything outside of their routine. "We've been lucky enough," he said, "to get Sir Ian Malcolmson."

"Malcolmson?" James Cripps looked blank.

"The surgeon," explained Ansley. "In my opinion he is in a class by himself."

In the room above that in which the two men stood talking 'Manders' had struggled up into a sitting position. Over the bedhead there was a shelf of books. He pulled two of them out and groped blindly in the space behind where they had stood. When he withdrew his hand it held a tarnished silver flask. He had further caches concealed in strategic points around the house, but this particular one was kept filled always. It was his final reserve of whisky, kept strictly for moments of extreme crisis when there was no other supply and when he could stand abstinence no longer.

He lay back and drained the neat spirit, pushing the empty flask under the pillow when not another drop remained. Even after the warning given by the murmur of their approaching voices he had been barely in time to conceal it before Doctor Ansley and James entered the bedroom.

Major Manderville Ramsay Colville opened his eyes. At first they refused to focus. It seemed that he had been imprisoned in something that could only be a tent. The cot in which he lay was high and narrow and rather hard, and when he tried to move his left arm he found that he could not do so for it had been tucked in close to his side by a sheet. His right arm, he was puzzled to see, was pointing straight upward, attached to a complicated contraption of steel and rubber and chromium that had been wheeled up to the side of his bed. A ruddy great needle had been stuck into his arm from one of the tentacles of this alarming companion.

He saw that he was not, in fact, in a tent, but screens had been positioned at the foot, and to one side, of his bed. He squinted up at a crack that zigzagged across the plaster of what he could observe of the white painted ceiling. So it must be all over. He had no recollection of having been taken along to the theatre. He was not in pain exactly but there was a maddening sensation of irritation across his stomach. His eyelids were heavy. He turned his head restlessly on the hard pillow and after a little while sleep came to him again.

When he regained consciousness he concentrated through lowered lids on the angle made by the two screens, behind which, he had the impression, a white clad figure had just disappeared. It must, he supposed, have been one of the nurses who had come to see how he was and who had whisked away again before he had had time to tell her anything. It had been very lax behaviour on her part, but then nowadays, or so he had heard, hospitals were inclined to be lax in their treatment of private patients. Overcrowded and understaffed, that's what they were, but still it was no excuse for leaving him alone in a room, or a cubicle or wherever it was that he had been left utterly helpless and as weak as a kitten—not when they had allowed that damned great dog to creep in and crouch in one corner of it. A vicious dangerous looking brute it was too, a regular hound... hound of the Baskervilles. How the hell had it got in? Was there no supervision? If he shut his eyes maybe it would go away. He counted fifty slowly before he opened them again.

The bloody thing was still there. He would like to have been able to sit up so that he could see it more clearly but it was impossible to move. He might have been strapped into a straitjacket. He eyed the huge dog that squatted on its haunches staring at him unblinkingly. Its face was almost human. He tried in vain to outstare it. It *was* human. It was a mastiff—with a woman's face, a sneering and wicked face. It was... Flora's face. He started to cry out in terror.

There was the clicking of heels on oilcloth and a young nurse hurried in. "What on earth's the matter, Major Colville?" she asked severely. "What is all this noise?"

He nodded towards the screen. "Send it away," he said. "For God's sake send it away."

"Send what away?" The nurse followed his glance. "There's nothing there." She was feeling tired and her feet were hurting her. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Great bitch," he mumbled.

The young nurse was indignant. "Please, Major Colville!" she said.

He gave her a sly look. "So you're in it too," he said. "I might have known."

"I'll have a word with Sister," said the young nurse placat-

ingly. She would never get used to night duty. The unexpected and unpleasant happenings always occurred at night. She must humour him. Perhaps Sister Winch would allow a shot of morphine. "There's nothing there, I assure you," the nurse repeated. As she walked down the corridor to the big ward she could hear her patient crying out.

Nurse Tyler frowned and stopped abruptly in her tracks. Major Colville had started again, this time on a new tack. He no longer sounded frightened but if she couldn't quieten him he'd disturb the patients in Ward B. She did not want to have to go running to Sister Winch. Nurses were supposed to be able to deal with minor disturbances on their own initiative, and rightly so, but there really seemed to be no alternative. At her first sight of him she had thought that when he had been young he must have been attractive. The gulf between her twenty-three and his fifty-five years was a yawning chasm, and now she could discern only the vestiges of his good looks, although she was conscious of his sex appeal.

His deep voice came to her from behind the screens, a different timbre, warm and enthusiastic. "Just study him carefully. Did you ever set eyes on a horse that looked better than that? Loins and a back that could carry a house without any trouble at all, and quarters to lift him smack over a Town hall!" 'Manders' was laughing softly to himself. "He's as fit as a fiddle, and I swear he could give any other bugger in the race two stone easy and still trot the bloody thing. You'd be stark staring mad, James, not to put your maximum on him, or even double it, although he's almost bound to start odds on. Unfortunately, men aren't blind, and his class stands out a mile."

Nurse Tyler stepped inside the door. "Please, Major Colville," she said, "do please stop it! The patients in the ward next to your room are trying to get some rest."

'Manders' did not answer her. Instead he started on a new topic. There was, it seemed, a naked girl standing by the end of his bed who was even more exciting to him than the horse had been. He began to describe her charms and enumerated in detail the things that he would like to do to and with her. Nurse Tyler blushed and hurried away in search of Sister Winch.

Doctor Ansley was extremely apologetic. He had been told

that Major Colville was a heavy drinker, but it had not been made clear to him that he was an alcoholic. He was under the impression that he had mentioned the matter when he had brought the patient into hospital? If he had omitted to do so then it had been most remiss of him.

The Sister in whom he confided did not directly reply. It was not for her to criticise the doctors. Sir Ian Malcolmson would be looking in shortly and meanwhile she would carry out Doctor Ansley's instructions and add the requisite amount of gin to the intravenous drip. If it transpired subsequently that there had been any negligence then it would be the responsibility of the two men.

Sir Ian when he came approved of Ansley's instructions, and 'Manders' had no further hallucinations. He continued, however, to ask when he might return to 'Clandon'. The distance was not great, he pointed out, and he could go by ambulance. He found hospital routine irksome and complained that he was occupying a bed unnecessarily when alternative plans could be arranged so simply.

It was five days later that 'Manders' was allowed to go back to his friend's house with a new nurse, Nurse Hodges, in attendance. She was some years older than Nurse Tyler, a martinet who specialised in private nursing and who invariably upset any staff that were called upon to wait on her. However, she was experienced and knew her job. It was arranged that for the next week he should also have a night nurse.

The move was effected, and 'Manders' continued to make good progress, although he continually complained that the irritation of his wound was intolerable. In due course the night nurse was dispensed with as had been arranged. Edward Ansley paid a daily visit, and James slept with his bedroom door open so that he could hear if the invalid were to wake up and require any attention.

James had had a prolonged discussion with Doctor Ansley regarding his friend's alcoholism and had been encouraged by him in the belief that 'Manders' enforced hospitalisation might indeed have produced the opportunity for a cure. Accordingly, now that the saline and alcohol drip had been relegated to the past the importance of constant wariness had been impressed upon Nurse Hodges, not only in regard to her patient, who was

confined to his bed, but also in regard to Colonel Cripps' couple, the Parkes, who were devoted to Major Colville but who might not always be trusted to ignore his distressing pleas for whisky or similar stimulants. They had known him for a long time, were natural 'spoilers', and it would be hard for them to realise the serious consequences of any indulgence. Annoyed by Nurse Hodges' bossiness, Mrs. Parke had gone so far as to accuse Doctor Ansley of deliberate cruelty. "Cutting the Major off like that," she had protested. "Shock to the system, if you ask me. It's not right. Melt a heart of stone, he would. These doctors and nurses! There's nothing they won't do!" she had added darkly.

It was shortly after Nurse Hales, who had done night duty, had left 'Clandon' that James found himself one evening in virtual charge of 'Manders'. Nurse Hodges had taken herself off for a few hours to a cinema after her spell of duty, it was the first time that she had left the house, and Parke was sitting in 'Manders' dressing room busied with his football pools. Mrs. Parke was occupied in the kitchen. She had, it was true, left her pots and pans for a few minutes to look in on the Major, seeing as how that Nurse Hodges had gone out, and she *had* taken the opportunity of taking him a little present. Parke had not seen her slip it into his hand—he had been far too intent on trying to win a fortune! The Major had smiled and had given her a grateful nod and had put a finger to his lips in answer to her own cautionary gesture. After all that he had been through the poor man deserved a treat, and what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over, was what she always said. She felt the comforting glow of kindly achievement as she started to make the bread sauce.

The time was half past seven and James was settled in the library writing letters when the door was pushed open quietly and the butler stood with one hand on the knob. He gave an apologetic cough. "I think it might be best if you were to come up, sir," he said. "It's Major Colville, sir. I'm sorry to say that he's having one of his 'go's' again, sir."

" 'Go's'?" echoed James. His pen stopped but he did not raise his head. Only once since he had been moved home had 'Manders' suffered from hallucinations, and Ansley had soon been able to put a stop to them with an injection.

"Yes, sir," said Parke. He hesitated. "He says that there's a snake in his bed, sir. I can't do nothing with him. He won't let me near. Keeps on asking for you, sir. He's lying there rigid as a board and afraid to move. I've never seen a man more scared, sir. Said to ask you to come at once . . . that it was in the nature of . . . of an S.O.S."

James signed the letter upon which he had been engaged, folded it, slipped it into an envelope and rose to his feet. He glanced at Parke's strained face. "What time will that nurse be back?" he asked brusquely.

"Not until after ten o'clock, sir." Parke's hand slid along the gold chain that disappeared into his waistcoat pocket, and he glared at his watch reprovingly. "It was arranged that I should collect her from the cinema just before the hour," he said. He did not allow his resentment of this chore on behalf of Nurse Hodges to show in his reply.

"Right," said James. "We'd better go up to the Major at once and then you must drive down and collect the nurse right away. Ask for the Manager, and get him to locate her."

James could not understand it. There was no reason why the hallucinations, the delirium tremens or whatever they were, should have returned. Ansley had stated clearly that the decrease in 'Manders' alcoholic intake would not be too violent. What could have gone wrong?

He went up the staircase followed by Parke. On the top stair he paused. From 'Manders' room came the mutter of his voice as he talked to himself in a tense monotone. "Parke won't believe me. The damned fool thinks I'm lying, that it's all my imagination. But it's not. I can feel it lying here, by the back of my hand. That is why I daren't budge, why I can't even twitch a muscle. That's why I couldn't let Parke turn back the sheet and look. How could I? If he had done so the bloody thing would have struck. Where the hell is James? Why doesn't he come? It will be too late. I can feel its filthy slime, but it's not cold, it's not cold at all, it's warm. Oh God, what can I do? Just lie here and wait until it moves? Wait for the end like a tethered calf and do nothing?" His words were slurred. "James, you old sod, why don't you come? Help me. If only you'd come you'd know what to do. You'd believe me. I've never lied to you in all my life and you know it. Maybe you could knife the

disgusting thing through the blanket." 'Manders' raised his voice, but cautiously, as if by shouting he would stir up the thing that was in his bed. "James! James, where are you? I need you. Where in hell has everybody got to? I'm in danger ... in desperate danger. Help me, James. You must help me."

Colonel Cripps froze where he stood at the top of the staircase, motioning to Parke to halt also. "It's all right, 'Manders'," he called back. "I can hear you. Don't panic. I'll be right with you." He started to walk down the corridor.

"Tread softly, or you'll rouse it," said 'Manders' in a loud whisper.

James went into the room. The light on the bedside table shone full on 'Manders' ' head and shoulders. His face was glistening with the cold sweat of fear, his arms motionless by his thighs under the bedclothes. He looked up at his friend agonizedly. "Careful, James, it's quiet at the moment, but any sudden movement might be fatal." His eyes were dark with terror. "It's a hell of a size ... must have escaped from that private zoo place over near Guildford. Don't know what sort it is, but some of the bleeders can strike like forked lightning. I think its head is by my right hand. Get a poker or something and smash down at it ... hard. Don't be afraid of hurting me."

James Cripps came slowly forward. "Take it easy," he said. "There's no snake there, you must believe me."

"But there is," insisted 'Manders'. "I'm not a lunatic. I tell you I can feel it. I can feel its ghastly weight."

"Parke!" James called. As the butler came in he nodded towards the bed. "Parke," he said again, and as he did so he allowed one eye to close in a half wink. "I want you to do exactly as I say. Go over and stand by the Major's side. I'll join you, but if you *should* see anything move under the blanket before I can get there—grab it!"

'Manders' lay still watching them and hardly breathing. Between Parke and his employer there was an unspoken understanding that they must play along with the patient. Parke tiptoed across to take up his position.

James quietly stepped forward to stand beside him and as he leant to take the turned down tops of the sheet and blankets in both hands he heard 'Manders' draw in his breath sharply. "Steady on, old boy," he said.

'Manders' pupils were dilated with fright. "No. Don't do that! Go away—both of you. It must have heard you. It's awake . . . it's moving. My only chance now is to lie perfectly still and it may settle down again. Go away, blast you, and leave me alone."

James made no reply, but signalled to Parke to go out with him on to the landing. They stood together in anxious silence outside the door. "There's nothing there of course," James whispered, "still I wish to God that Ansley would come back."

They stood looking at one another. Finally it was Parke who spoke. "If you'll excuse me, sir, might I suggest that we pull off the sheet so that the Major can see there's nothing for himself? He's getting properly worked up."

James Cripps frowned. "Perhaps that would be best." They turned back into the room. As they came through the doorway 'Manders' screamed, a searing falsetto cry of one in extremis. They ran over to the bed together and James drew back the covers with a quick gesture and then stood gazing down at what had been revealed. 'Manders' was lying in a pool of blood. Somehow, doubtless driven on by the unbearable irritation, he had managed to tear off the many tailed bandage that had been wound around his abdomen together with the Elastoplast dressing that had been beneath it, and from the gaping wound in his belly the coils of his small gut spiralled out, distended, glistening and engorged and writhing spasmodically like a purplish serpent from the oozing wound.

The two men stood horror struck and impotent by the bedside, rendered speechless by what they saw, and listening to the laboured choking sounds that issued from the throat and contorted mouth of the terrified man who lay stretched below them staring with fascinated incredulity at the crimson chaos of his ripped stomach.

Lying unnoticed on the carpet, and almost touching the toecap of James Cripps' gleaming Lobb shoe, was an empty half bottle of Black and White whisky.

4

THE JUNGLE

"AUBREY, darling, go into the kitchen at once and wash your hands. Imagine coming to the table in such a state! And yours aren't much better, Patsy." Mrs. Freeman paused in the cutting of the bread. "Archie, how many more times do I have to tell you to tie your shoe laces properly, and in heaven's name straighten your tie. I've never known such a bunch of rapscallions. You're turning yourselves into a band of gipsies, and your home into a slum. I'm sure I don't know what Daddy would have to say about it if he was here. Now do as you are told—and no argy-bargy!

It was teatime at number fourteen Elm Road on a Saturday in October, and Harold Freeman, a traveller in fancy goods, was in Scotland on his firm's business and was not due back until the next afternoon since he had planned to break his return journey at York.

Elm Road was a street in the newer part of Haxbey. Soon after the war, when the houses had been built, they had been practically in the country, as you might say, but the coming of the housing estate would make their suburb more of a wedge thrusting out into an enclave of fields. From the rate that things were going it would be twelve months at least before Haxbey Close would be ready for occupation—or so Harold had estimated. "What price private enterprise?" he had asked, delighted by the poor progress made by the Council. They hadn't even laid the foundations, and the road out was no better than a track.

"Well, duckies?" Joyce brought in a plate of six boiled eggs and put it on the middle of the table. "What did you do with yourselves this afternoon? I thought after lunch that it looked like rain, but it turned out nice after all." A dish of raspberry jam tarts and a tin of mixed biscuits were placed deftly beside the eggs. "I asked you what you'd been doing, kiddies. Have

you all lost your tongues?"

"Nothing much," said Archie. Being the eldest he was usually the spokesman.

"That is interesting, I must say!" Their mother was busy filling the cups. Tea for Patsy and Archie, and milk for Aubrey, who was only eight. It was impossible to penetrate the defences of their cabal, but she refused to be discouraged.

"Can't I have some tea?" asked Aubrey.

"No, dear." She patted his head. "Trust Archie to give me the news! And, if I may be so bold as to ask, what does 'nothing much' mean?" Joyce Freeman was accustomed to shouldering the burden of carrying on a conversation with her children. It was a mother's duty to bring them out of themselves and she was determined to make a gay effort.

Patricia's reply was of no great help. "We just mucked about," she said.

"What a way to speak, Patsy! Nice little girls don't 'muck about'."

"This one did," said Archie, and Aubrey grinned.

"Here's your tea, Archie, and try not to spill it. And don't plop lumps of sugar in like that. You're not precision bombing a town!"

"Worse luck!" he said.

"Archie's snatched the biggest egg," Aubrey complained. Since he was three years junior to his brother he was fatalistic.

"Archie always does," said Patsy resignedly.

"There's no difference—not a spoonsful," Joyce said. "If you can't have better table manners none of you deserves to be given treats." She decided to strike a less querulous note. "What did the chicken say when it came out of the shell?" She raised her eyebrows in enjoyment of the answer.

"'Ma me laid'," Aubrey told her glumly. "You asked us the same question last week."

"Did I? I must be growing forgetful in my old age." There was a ring at the front door. The bell gave a mellow two-tone chime. "Now whoever can that be?" Joyce patted her hair and hurried out into the hall.

The children could hear her voice as they thrust fingers of the bread and butter into their egg yolks. "Oh, it's you, Mrs. Lesley!" she was saying. "I wondered for a moment who it

could be. Won't you come in and join us? We're having a cup of tea." Her manner was more polite than welcoming. She wished that she had put out a clean cloth and was regretting the miscellany of the cups and saucers.

"Thank you, Mrs. Freeman, but I can't stop. I looked in to see if Ernie was here by any chance."

"Ernest? No, he's not here. What made you think that he might be?"

"No particular reason. He plays with your Aubrey sometimes."

Joyce shook her head. "Hang on a moment and I'll ask the brats. I don't think they mentioned him." Joyce pushed open the door. "Any of you seen Ernest Lesley this afternoon?"

"Ernie?" Archie frowned. "Not set eyes on him since after school yesterday. Why? Has he gone and lost himself?" He spoke slightingly and Joyce signalled an admonitory warning.

"His mother is here and she thought you might have met him."

There was a silence and then Patricia said: "He wasn't with us."

Joyce returned to the hall to tell Noreen Lesley what already she must have overheard. She was surprised that Noreen had called, for their children were not close friends. She happened to know that Archie and Patricia despised Ernest and considered him a milksop, and the boy certainly did lack charm when his contemporaries were present. He was more relaxed with his parents' generation. "I'm afraid they can't help," she said.

Mrs. Lesley raised her worried eyes. "It's so unlike him to stay out after dark. I'm so afraid that something may have happened. Well, I'm sorry to have bothered you by butting in like this." She turned to go. In the porch she hesitated. "All those dreadful things you read in the papers... one can't be anything else but anxious..."

"He'll turn up," Joyce said. "He'll probably be in the house by the time you get back." This was hardly likely as the Lesley's lived at number four, less than a hundred yards down the street.

"I sincerely hope you're right. Luckily it won't be long before Mervyn's home—and he'll know what to do. Good-night, Mrs.

Freeman."

"Good-night."

Joyce went back to her family. "It's very naughty of Ernie Lesley," she said. "His mother's worried to death. Mind that none of you stay out late, or you'll get stick. Make no mistake."

The children did not comment. "Can I have some more tea, please?" asked Patsy.

They all looked towards the window, startled by the sudden drumming of rain, for there had been a five-week drought. "Just listen!" said Joyce as she filled the cup. "I've never heard anything like it. Cats and dogs! Poor Mrs. Lesley came out without her coat and she'll get drenched." Gamely she went on chatting about various subjects before, one by one, the children drifted away to watch television which at weekends they were allowed to do until their bedtimes.

Joyce was sorry for Noreen Lesley. She was a nice woman. Not one who should be encouraged to become too matey, popping in at all hours, but none the less a nice woman. Joyce was a trifle impatient with her own children for clearly disliking Ernie. He couldn't help being timid and shy. She suspected that Archie was inclined to bully him. Boys could be such little beasts to one another.

She took from a drawer the half finished jersey that she was making for Harold. It was to be a Christmas present. The pattern was complicated and needed all of her concentration, and the wool was a useful olive green. The click of the needles was soothing. It was so seldom that she had a peaceful hour to herself.

The clock on the chimneypiece pointed to a quarter past nine when the telephone shrilled into life. Joyce put aside the jersey and went to answer it.

"Joycie?"

"Yes?"

"It's Clover."

"Oh, hello!"

"Joycie, isn't it perfectly dreadful about Ernie Lesley?"

"Why? What's happened? His mother was here at about six to ask if we knew anything. We didn't, of course. Has he had an accident? Has he been found?"

"No. No one knows where he is. I mean he's completely disappeared. Noreen came here as well—after she'd been to you, and now her husband has notified the police."

"Mervyn Lesley's called in the police! I suppose it was the sensible thing to do, Clover. Oh, poor Noreen!"

"It's not safe to let children out of your sight these days," said Clover. "And yet one doesn't want to alarm them, I mean apart from emphasising the importance of not speaking to strangers . . ."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

There was a lull and Clover Belcher said: "I mean that I should be out of my mind if it were Roddie or Roberta."

"Or Patsy or Aubrey or Archie," said Joyce.

"Yes." Their conversation languished and Clover asked: "Will you be at Fay Jackson's coffee morning?"

"I will. She makes such delicious shortbread. We can have a real yatter then."

"See you on Tuesday. I do think that it's so awful about Ernie. Goodbye, Joycie."

" 'Bye, Clover." Joyce hung up.

On the landing above, Archie crept back into the bedroom which he shared with Aubrey. Patsy was there also, curled up on the end of his bed. "They've called in the police," he said. "Over Ernie."

Aubrey said sleepily: "Will they find him?"

"Shouldn't think so," Patsy said. "The other night I heard Daddy telling Mummy that the list of missing people was growing all the time."

"If they do," said Archie slowly, "whoever is responsible for . . . for anything will be sent to prison for years and years." He added darkly: "They might even be hanged."

The battering of the rain had changed its tempo as the earth softened and turned to mud. Water gurgled hysterically in the gutters and coursed down from hillsides into ditches brimming and clogged with the fragmentary flotsam of autumn.

Joyce Freeman's voice was calling up the staircase. "Stop talking, boys. It's nearly half past nine, and you'll wake Patsy. 'Night-'night."

" 'Night, Mummy." Archie began to whisper. "Patsy, remember what I said. And you, Aubrey. People can be shut up in

prison for years and years—for all sorts of things, especially when they call it 'incarceration'." He touched the sleeve of his sister's nightgown. "Buzz off, Pat, or we'll be having Mummy up here."

There was over an hour before it would be time for Sunday school. Patsy waited until her mother was occupied with the washing-up and then slipped out of the front door. She had not confided in the boys.

During the night she had kept on waking up and thinking about Ernie Lesley. At one point she had left her bed and had shaken Archie awake. He had been half comatose and wholly indignant and had demanded if she was proposing that he should get dressed and walk all that way in the downpour and darkness. "*Me* go back and make sure? Not likely, Pat! The night watchman will have heard him. He'll have been home for hours, and if he's not we'll put a note in his letter box in the morning suggesting where he can be found. Anonymous, naturally. That means unsigned. Don't you worry. Ernie will be all right. A wetting never hurt anybody, and after all he's not a girl." He had spoken in a hoarse whisper so as not to disturb Aubrey, and she had had no choice but to go back to bed.

The rain had stopped and the sun was shining, and pools of water sparkled at the sides of the road's metalling wherever the drainage was bad. Her own home was the last but one at the end of Elm Road and as she walked quickly along she encountered no one.

The strip of country between Haxbey and the embryo Close was a mixture of grass and ploughland which surrounded two farmhouses. There were no other habitations before reaching the wood on whose far side the new housing estate was being erected. Patsy recalled the site as it had been less than a year ago when the bulldozers had not yet begun their work and when there had been no trenches to scar the gentle slope. In those days it had been a riot of brambles and bracken that among themselves they had referred to as 'the jungle', and there had been the ruins of a cottage which Daddy had told them had dated back to the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth. Local lore had attributed to it a haunting. It was near to this ramshackle building that the workmen had uncovered the well.

The events of the previous afternoon were as vivid as inlaid enamel in Patsy's mind. They had gone to the site, Archie and Aubrey and herself. The idea had been that they should pick blackberries on the wasteland that lay beyond it. It was late in the year and they had not found many, and they had gone back to play among the excavations and the huge pipes and the stacks of breezeblocks which the workmen had piled up in readiness for the coming weeks.

They had been having a game of hide-and-seek when Ernie had tried to join them. He must have tagged along after them all the way from Elm Road. It was a nerve, for none of them liked him, and he knew it. Archie said that no one really liked Ernie Lesley except Keith Grogan, and he didn't count for he was another twerp. It irritated them that the grown-ups thought him 'cute', which was the blackest mark of all.

She was living again exactly what had transpired. Aubrey was the first to notice his presence. Ernie was sauntering along, pretending to be unconcerned. He was at a loose end, bored and lonely with the hopeless tedium of an only child. In age he came between Archie and Patricia. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his shorts and his dun-coloured macintosh flapped open. His steel rimmed spectacles glinted in the sun, and as he walked along he whistled and kicked at loose stones with his fat legs. His bearing was unconcerned but held an underlying wariness.

Ernie admired the Freemans, and occasionally Aubrey could be quite nice to him. He thought that they must be going to the building site and had decided that he would go along too and meet them there, seemingly by chance, and maybe they would let him join them. His longing for acceptance had forced him to grow a skin of feigned indifference to snubs. It was a thin armour which could be pierced very easily. He had hidden behind a tree and waited until they returned from their abortive search for blackberries.

Put on their guard by Aubrey the children at first paid him no attention, and Ernie walked round them in ever narrowing circles until, having been told neither to take himself off nor invited to participate, he came to a standstill at a few yards distance from a locked hut where implements were stored, and which they had been using as 'home' in their game. "Hello!"

he said as Aubrey ran past followed by Patsy in hot pursuit.

" 'Lo, Ernie!" Aubrey greeted him. "Want to play?"

"Ernie's too fat to run," Archie said witheringly. He had emerged from behind the hut.

"I'm not—so!" Ernie said. He was pink with indignation. He had eased himself into the game and they had played hide-and-seek for half an hour and had then sat down on a pile of bricks. They were very out of breath.

"Like to see what we found?" Aubrey asked when they had ceased fanning themselves.

"Don't mind."

"It's a well—and it's hundreds of years old."

"How do you mean—*you* found it?" Ernie said. "It must have been uncovered by the builders when they were digging."

"We found it," Patsy said firmly.

Ernie looked sceptical. His manner was unfortunate, patronising and aggressively cocksure.

"It's true," Aubrey said.

They walked in a follow-my-leader line to where an iron-bound wooden cover was lying in the centre of a piece of flat ground. Archie and Patsy dragged it to one side. The top of the well was eight feet in diameter and its depth was approximately fifteen. The ancient brick lining of the walls narrowed with its descent. The well was empty save for a sludge of mud at its bottom. The Freeman children stood round it peering down, their hands on their hips. Ernie was crouching on the earth and peering cautiously over the edge. He could not bear heights. Aubrey picked up a pebble and tossed it into the opening.

Archie, from the corner of his eye, noticed Ernie's set expression. "I know what we'll do," he said. "Let's be tightrope walkers." He ran to where a stack of deal planks had been piled outside the hut. They were newly sawn and springy, about an inch thick and ten feet in length with a width of eight inches. He put one over the mouth of the well. "Watch me!" Full of confidence Archie see-sawed his way across, his arms spread out for balance. He fancied himself as a leader which, in fact, he was.

"My turn!" Patsy said. She was a shade nervous and wished to get it over. She ran lightly across with no trouble.

"Aubrey." Archie rested his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Over you go!"

Aubrey walked slowly on to the plank. In the middle he stopped and bowed graciously to imaginary applause before stepping off on to the other side.

"And now," Archie declaimed, "we come to our star attraction. The Daring Ernie Lesley!" Ernie did not stir. "Well?" Archie demanded. "What are you waiting for?" In the growing silence they all looked at him, united in a tribal understanding.

"Scared?" Patsy asked.

"It's potty, really," Aubrey said kindly.

"It's too narrow," said Ernie. "That plank's too narrow." It was a dare that he was afraid to take.

"I didn't think so," Archie said innocently. "Did you think it was too narrow, Aubrey?"

"We'll get him another one," Patsy suggested. She had grown embarrassed by the male antagonism and was tracing a pattern in the dust with the toe of her shoe.

Ernie continued to sit where he was while they made a search. "Got one!" Patsy called. "Give us a hand, Archie." She was tugging at a beam which had been a part of the old cottage. It had turned the colour of black treacle from age and exposure. Between them they lugged it over and made it just span the well's opening.

"We could stroll across that thing in pairs," Archie said. "Are you still funking it?"

Ernie got to his feet reluctantly. "It's time I went back," he said. "For my tea."

Archie studied his watch in blank amazement. "It's half past three," was his dry comment.

Ernie Lesley glanced at the faces regarding him. Archie's was scornful, Patsy's expectant, and Aubrey's encouraging. "If you're going to be chicken," Archie said, "there's nothing we can do about it. But don't try and tag along again. Stay with the babies. Understand?" His dismissal was cold and final.

Ernie stepped on to the beam where it rested on the security of the ground. One of his stockings was in wrinkles and had sagged down over his plump calf. He looked down into the funnel of the well and then resolutely up at the sky. "Who said I was chicken?"

"I did." Archie was sardonic. "Shall I say it again?"

Ernie took a pace forward and was aware immediately of the void below him. He forced himself to move on so that he might get across quickly. His lips were stretched in a stiff and gallant grin and he was blinking his eyes rapidly. By sheer will power he made his right foot advance while the children smiled and watched. "Here goes!" he said. Gradually he neared the middle of his 'bridge'. He felt the beam beginning to yield under his weight and stood stockstill gripped by terror. His nails were digging into the palms of his hands. There was a dull crunch and the rotten wood parted, and sick with dread he cried out.

"Jump, you fool," Archie shouted. "Jump for it!"

The beam splintered and disintegrated, and Ernie was thrown against the bricks of the wall, clawing frenetically for a handhold, and crashed down with a scream of fear into the slime of the base. As he huddled dazedly in the mud he was conscious of a searing pain from the leg which had been buckled under him in the fall. His spectacles had been shattered and had caught, dangling, in a button of his raincoat.

He heard excited voices from above and the heads of the Freeman children had appeared in dark silhouette against the circle of greying sky. "Ernie!" It was Patsy who shouted down. "Ernie, are you all right? You're not hurt, are you?"

"It's my leg. You shouldn't have made me do it. You didn't ought to have done. I'll tell my Mum."

"Oh no, you won't!" Archie said. "Unless you promise us not to sneak we won't help you out. We didn't ask you to play. We didn't want you with us. We'll leave you down there. All night."

"I'll get out by myself—and I'll tell her just the same." Ernie's face had looked funny, twisted up at them like a pale moon.

"Very well, you try telling her. No one will believe you. Don't forget that we're three to one." Archie straightened up and started to walk away with Aubrey and Patsy close behind him.

"Archie," Ernie shouted. "Aubrey—come back!"

The children did not stop. They went jumping down the hillside and ran off among the chaos of the builders' materials.

"We'll let the little twerp cool his heels," Archie said.

"Patsy—don't leave me!" The voice had grown fainter and

muffled and held a note of panic.

"We can't leave him there," Patsy protested.

"He'll be O.K.," Archie said contemptuously. "He'll go on screeching and the workmen will hear him. Anyhow how could we reach him? We'd need a rope or a ladder or something."

"There won't be any workmen on a Saturday afternoon," Aubrey said quietly. He was not questioning his brother's decision. He was merely pointing out a mistake.

"There'll be a night watchman in charge of all those valuable pipes and the other stuff, and he should be along soon. In a couple of hours at most. When he does come I don't want him to find *us*." Self protection was the paramount law in the savage jungle of childhood. "If Mr. or Mrs. Lesley start making a fuss it will be our word against his." Archie went on: "Ernie's a fat cowardly twerp—and we've not seen him. Remember that, Aubrey, or I'll make you sorry you were ever born. You just keep your mouth shut."

They reached the road and were walking in the direction of Haxbey. They had covered a few hundred yards when there was an insistent blaring of a horn and a battered station wagon drew level with them and halted. "Hi, Archie!" The driver was Don Turner, who lived at Priory Farm. He was a great hero to all of them, big and blond and cheerful, and he was nineteen. "I'm on my way to Bellingham," he said. "Coming along for the ride?" Archie noted with envy the pipe clenched between his teeth.

They climbed in. Don Turner had taken them to the market town on several occasions, and when he had finished his business there he would conduct them to Arnold's and buy them cakes or ice cream cones. It was a five mile expedition. They could still be home for their high tea at a quarter to six. As they drove along he had teased Patsy who was an especial favourite of his. He told them that he must collect some sacks of lime for his father and that it shouldn't take long. When he pulled up in front of the shop he stood on the pavement and squinted up at the sky. The sun had gone and banks of cloud were massing from the north-east. "When that lot breaks there's going to be a proper storm," Don said. "Still, mustn't grumble. We need it. The ground's like iron."

Don was in an expansive mood. Not only did he buy them

ice creams, but a packet of Smarties each and a half pound box of Black Magic chocolates. He let it be known that later in the evening he would be taking Avril Darwin to a dance, and the prospect filled him with keen anticipation, although Patsy saw no valid reason for such elation. She considered Avril to be a rather silly and conceited girl. Not nearly good enough for Don.

It was twenty minutes to six when Donald Turner dropped them at their door. With the excitement of their trip to Bellingham, and the smuggling of the sweets into the boys' room, they had almost forgotten about Ernie.

It had been a nightmare which, far from fading with the advent of morning, had taken on a hideous actuality.

The building site was a quagmire. Patsy plodded through the sticky clay towards the well. The place was deserted. The plank which they had used for themselves was lying where they had abandoned it. "Ernie?" she called. "Ernie?"

She did not really expect an answer. He would have made his way home long since, just as Archie had said, or they would have heard more about it at breakfast. She slithered on the glutinous clods which had become copper coloured with their drenching. Reaching the side of the well she looked in. It was three-quarters full of muddy water and Ernie Lesley was lying face down in the scum. Under his macintosh air pockets had kept him semi-buoyant. His school cap was floating beside him and his body was fringed with decaying leaves and wisps of packing straw. Patsy thought that she was going to vomit. At nine years of age she was incapable of accepting the implications of what she saw.

She gazed down at the little figure, lying as passively as a dead frog in a pond, and her brain refused to allow her to acknowledge its meaning. "Ernie," she whispered. "Ernie, it's Patsy—and I've come back." The desolation of her surroundings matched that in her heart. This was no longer a game. Yesterday it had been play, unkind play, but nothing more—even for Archie. She must persuade him to let her talk to Aubrey so that he would not be frightened. Somehow, as a result of the shock, Ernie was not yet real to her . . . not, that is, the drowned Ernie Lesley who was sprawled in the waterlogged hole on the

building site. She must pretend to herself that she had not seen him. Her thoughts veered away from the knowledge that he would have been trapped in any case—even if he hadn't hurt his leg.

There had been no night-watchman.

She would have to stop Archie leaving that note in the Lesleys' letterbox. It was urgent that they should protect themselves against the grown-up world, and against the police. Don had seen them on the road, but they could say, which was true, that they had gone blackberrying. They could deny having visited Haxbey Close. No one could prove anything.

She would have to tell Archie about Ernie on their way to Sunday school when Mummy could not overhear. She knew that she had to leave the Close at once.

They had not meant that Ernie should die. If they had thought him to be in real danger they would have summoned help. They had not allowed for the flood. Needless to say, it would be impossible to explain.

She ran all the way back until the stitch in her side nearly doubled her up. As she let herself in at the garden gate Rita Carney from next door called out to her, but Patsy did not turn her head. When she pushed open the kitchen door she could hear her mother in the hall talking to the boys. There was no chance of speaking to Archie alone. She went on tiptoe through the kitchen. Perhaps she would be able to sneak upstairs to tidy herself before she was spotted. She had reached the foot of the stairs when Joyce Freeman swivelled round and saw her.

"Where on earth have you been, Patsy?" Joyce was extremely annoyed. "I'm hoarse from calling for you. Whatever have you been doing? Hurry up, dear, and wash your hands and face and put on your blue dress and give me your Sunday coat to brush —if there's anything to be done with it! You're a perfect disgrace! How did you get so dirty? Even your stockings are soiled. When you asked me to buy them I told you that white was not practical, but you insisted, and now perhaps you will admit that I was right. You must leave in two minutes or you'll be late—so get a move on." She gave her attention to the boys, but for once there were only minor criticisms. "Aubrey, don't you possess a comb? Come here and let me do it. Such tangles! Archie,

your shoes could do with a rub. Think of your father's—they're always like mirrors. There's a chammy under the sink." Joyce was used to these final inspections. "Patsy!" She put her hand to her mouth to channel her voice. "Do bustle up, dear, your brothers are waiting."

She opened her bag and after some routling she held out three sixpences as her daughter, stepped into the hall. "Here you are, darlings. For the collection." She pressed a coin into each outstretched hand. "Don't forget to give my regards to Miss Rollo. I remember how much I used to enjoy Sunday school! I managed to collect all the stamps for good behaviour—from Adam and Eve right up to the Resurrection."

Under this barrage of reminiscing Patsy nudged Archie and said through lips which scarcely moved: "Ernie's dead. There was no one there." He shot her a quick glance of warning—or had it been disbelief?

Joyce was shepherding her brood to the door. "Don't lose your sixpences." They started down the short path in a huddle. "What was the rhyme about a crooked sixpence?" she asked gaily. "Not that yours are counterfeit! 'There was a crooked man who had a crooked smile, and who found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile'? No, that's not quite right. Aubrey, dear, don't scuff your shoes." She was waving to them from the porch. "I love those old jingles. 'Bye, darlings. Be good. 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses.' Goodness knows how they all orginated!" She was being carried away by her own whimsy. " 'Ding-dong-dell, pussy's in the well!' "

" 'Who put her in?' " Patsy automatically joined in her mother's refrain.

Joyce Freeman stood in the doorway watching her children as they wheeled to the left outside the gate. How sweet was childhood—and how short! Archie was already on his way to becoming a man. What a strong and good-looking boy he was! She closed the door. She had to see to the Sunday beef and the Yorkshire pudding. They seemed never to tire of Yorkshire pudding. Harold might be home in time to enjoy it, too. She was grateful that he had not driven through last night's storm.

Archie looked back over his shoulder and saw the door close. He noticed that his sister was crying, and kicked her smartly on the shin. "Idiot!" he said. "*You'll* be in the well if you don't

watch out. Or in a prison which is worse." He smoothed his cap of short dark curls. "Haven't you any sense at all? Tell me what happened."

Aubrey was clutching his *'Bible Stories for Children'*. "I've lost the stamp of Cain swotting Abel," he said. "Do you think Miss Rollo will give me another?" He made a swipe in the air with his book. "Wham! Zing! Zowie!"

5

T-I-M

"No, Jimmy darling. Not just now. Mummy's got rather a headache and she'd like to have a rest for half an hour. She'll read to you later. Promise. Why don't you see what's on the television?"

Elspeth Martineau felt very ill indeed. Her headache and malaise had come on so suddenly. Her skull was splitting. A quarter of an hour ago she had been perfectly all right. She had never suffered from migraines, but this must be one, and there was a curious tingling sensation in her right side. Since her son remained silent she said encouragingly: "I believe there's a play—or perhaps it's a cartoon."

"I'd sooner you read to me," Jimmy said. "I'm tired of telly."

Elspeth's hand was gripping the edge of the dressing table tightly. "Darling," she said, "I simply can't. Really and truly. We're dining out tonight, and unless I have a snooze I'll have to chuck, and Daddy would be very disappointed. He's been looking forward to it."

Jimmy gazed up at her. He adored his mother and she was certainly not well. He would have to resign himself to watching the children's programme. All at once, and to his utter dismay, he saw Elspeth clutch at her side and slump forward across the bed. In consternation he ran over to her. She was making a painful effort to speak and the five words which she managed to whisper were scarcely audible. "Telephone Tim . . . telephone Doctor Rye." In her endeavour to smile her face had become contorted and grotesque.

The little boy had no idea of what he could do to help. He was five years of age and unversed in the mechanics of telephoning. Never before had he been asked to cope. It had been others who had made arrangements and been the protectors. "How do I get him?" he asked practically. "What is his

number?"

He had heard people use the phrase. He pulled urgently at his mother's sleeve, but she was unable to answer him. She was so quiet. Usually she was laughing. He brushed back the long mouse-coloured fringe from his forehead. "Mummy," he repeated, "how am I to get Doctor Rye?"

He wondered why she had chosen to call Tim—'Doctor' Rye. As well as being a doctor he was a great friend of theirs. He came and lunched with them at their cottage and was always willing to play games. Tim was fun, and quite young. It was the first time that he had heard either of his parents refer to him as 'Doctor', and he did not like it.

Jimmy stumped out of the room and into his father's library. It was tidy and impersonal and he did not feel at all at ease in it. The telephone was in there, near to the big writing table. He had observed Elspeth when she had been dialling numbers, had taken her whirring of the dial for granted and now wished that he had paid more attention to see how it had been done.

Rye. His finger spun the lettered disc. R . . . I. Nothing happened. He would try Tim—which was Doctor Rye's proper name, just as his own proper name was Jimmy. It was an easy word to spell. T.I.M. He dialled carefully. There was a brief silence and then to his relief he heard the voice of a lady. She had a nice voice and she was speaking slowly and clearly.

"Hello," Jimmy said, "can I speak to Tim, please?"

'At the third stroke the time will be five sixteen precisely,' the lady informed him somewhat to his surprise.

Jimmy thought it wiser to ignore this. "Is Tim Rye there? It's Jimmy . . . Jimmy Martineau." The lady did not answer. There was only the pinging of the pips.

'At the third stroke the time will be five sixteen and ten seconds.'

"Is that Tim's house?" Jimmy persisted. "You see, my Mummy's not well and he's a doctor and she wants him to come round to us."

They were both of them speaking at once. *'. . . and twenty seconds,'* the voice told him.

"Listen to me," Jimmy said. "Please, why won't you listen? I can't make Mummy speak to me . . . not one word. She's fallen on her bed and she doesn't hear me or move, and I'm

frightened."

'*. . . it will be five sixteen and thirty seconds,*' intoned the lady, remaining perfectly calm.

"My Mummy's not just sleepy. She's ill." Jimmy was half shouting. "I don't want to know what time it is. Shut up! Can't you shut up? I've got to talk to Tim—to Doctor Rye. She told me to find him. He's Mummy's doctor. Is he there?" The only thing to be done was to talk the lady down.

'*At the third stroke the time will be five sixteen and forty seconds.*' Then came the reiteration of the three measured pips.

"Mummy's terrible bad. She must be." There was a catch in Jimmy's voice. "Let me speak to Doctor Rye. Quickly. Oh please . . . please!"

Once more there was the treble punctuation. '*At the third stroke the time will be five sixteen and fifty seconds.*'

Jimmy could picture his mother sprawled across the bed in the room at the end of the passage. "Stop it!" he said angrily. "Stop it! You're horrid, whoever you are. Stop teasing me. It's not fair. Mummy's very very ill. Perhaps she's dying." He was drowning the lady's mellifluous statements. "I don't know what to do. Please find Tim for me. Please find Doctor Rye. Please . . . please."

'*At the third stroke the time will be five eighteen precisely.*'

Maybe he had the wrong number—but there couldn't be any other 'Tims' except Tim Rye. Jimmy banged the receiver back into position. He circled the room eyeing the rows of books, some bound in leather, others bright in their paper jackets. When he was walking around it was easier to think. He was dwarfed by the furniture. Everything seemed so much bigger when there were no grown-ups there to give perspective. He must dial Tim. He could have made a mistake.

T-I-M. There she was! '*. . . time will be five eighteen and fifty seconds.*' He frowned at the earphone from which the midget voice was talking. The aggravating lady had not gone. She was like Georgie Kemp at school, who kept on mimicking everything you said. He would ignore her silly joke and she would grow tired of it and finally give in and tell Tim Rye that he was wanted.

Edith Crump thrust her head round the door of Keith Mar-

tineau's office. "I'm afraid the line is still busy," she said. "Would you like me to keep on trying?"

"Yes, Miss Crump." He took out his watch. "I'll have to be on my way. When you do get through would you tell my wife that I'll be bringing Mr. Clifton home with me?"

"Yes, Mr. Martineau." Keith was ten years Miss Crump's junior and he held enormous glamour for her. She was not a foolish or sentimental woman. It was an inescapable fact.

Nearly twenty past five. He had a date with Dick Clifton at half past. They would have a quick drink at the club, which was round the corner in St. James's Street, and they should be in Ovington Square by six o'clock at the latest. While Elspeth and Dick talked and played with young Jim he could have a shower. They would reach Henley by a quarter to eight. He was looking forward to dining by the river after being cooped up at his desk on such a sweltering July day, and to changing into less formal clothes. Dick had offered to drive them in his new Jaguar of which he was intensely proud.

Keith hoped that Bindie Lampton would not be late in turning up. She was a seventeen-year-old niece of Elspeth's, and privately he suspected her of a tendency to fecklessness. He put a finger between his neck and his stiff collar to ease the constriction. He was inclined to be over-anxious where his son was concerned.

Reluctantly Jimmy went back to his mother. He would have to ask her how to work the telephone. He had done his best and it hadn't been any good and he admitted defeat.

She did not stir and was quite still and deathly pale, and made no reply when he spoke to her. He touched her hand tentatively, lifting it from the bed cover. It lay passively in his and fell limply back when he released it. "Mummy," he said. "Mummy?"

He was desperate. His mother was so remote from him that he might have been with an alien being. She looked entirely different, as if she was made from another and strange sort of stuff. One of her shoes had fallen off, and her eyes were half closed. They seemed to be glittering at him coldly and, discomfited and unhappy, he slid his glance away. A few weeks ago he had had the same eerie feeling when he had seen poor

'Puz' after the dog had died. He hadn't been supposed to see him. He'd asked what had happened and his father had told him that 'Puz' had been ailing for a long while and that now he was 'deaders'. He had chosen the slang word since it was less abrupt than 'dead', and Mummy had added that there was nothing to worry about as 'Puz' had gone to heaven; and then they had made an excuse and sent him out of the room in case he should be upset. He'd been sad about 'Puz' since he'd been a part of his life ever since he could remember.

They still had 'Muz', although he'd heard his father say that she was nudging eleven and couldn't be expected to live indefinitely and that they should really think about buying a puppy. Eleven was nearly twice his age, and she was becoming very grizzled. She was smelly as well, but he did not mind. Eleven was ancient for a pug, or so Bindie had said when he had asked her.

Cautiously Jimmy touched his mother's arm. She couldn't be 'deaders'—not like poor old 'Puz'. If he could only speak to Tim everything would be fine. Doctors always made people better. Everyone told him so. Perhaps Mrs. Wardell, who lived in the flat below, would be able to find Tim Rye. He should have thought of Mrs. Wardell before. Nobody knew what it was like to be left on your own. Security disappeared.

Jimmy hurried into the hall. He stood on tiptoe, but the latch was stiff and set high in the door and he was unable to reach it. There couldn't be much longer before Bindie would be here. This was one of her days.

He pattered back to the telephone, which he had taken from its table and put down on to the carpet. He had left the handpiece off and the lady was jabbering away to herself. As he squatted beside it he could hear her monotonous information, punctuated by the chiming of the pips. She had not noticed that he had gone away. His mouth twitched in satisfaction. Well, it would serve her right.

He made a grab at the receiver. "Hello . . ." he said, "hello? It's me again. It's Jimmy. I've just been in to see Mummy and she's sort of funny looking. Is Tim Rye back yet? Can I talk to him?"

'. . . five twenty-eight and ten seconds,' said the maddening lady.

Jimmy's face puckered and there was the salt smarting of tears in his eyes. "You're a beast," he said. "You're a beastly horrible old beast, and I hate you. Yes, I do. I hate you."

'... stroke it will be five twenty-eight and twenty seconds.'

With his free hand Jimmy beat frantically on the floor. "I'll tell my father," he said. "I'll tell Bindie as well, and she'll be here soon. Why won't you help me? Why?"

'... five twenty-eight and forty seconds.'

Jimmy flung down the receiver. He could no longer hold back his tears, and he hammered the telephone in impotent fury, his small body quivering in panic and grief. Unless he was able to get Tim it might be too late. Already it might be too late. "I hate you," he said. "I hate your silly teasing. I hate you worse than Miss Potter at my kindergarten."

He ran back into the bedroom. His mother, the victim of a cerebral thrombosis, was lying exactly as he had left her. As he stood by her side, uncertain of his next move, 'Muz' came waddling in, breathing stertoriously, and regarded him with filmy bulbous eyes. Unconscious of her presence, he paid her no attention, and she went away in a huff. Jimmy could not bring himself to look at his mother. He sensed that in some way, and through no fault of his own, he had failed her. He stared at his feet. "Mum ... Mummy?" He was talking into a vacuum. She must be asleep. She was tired, that was all. He knew what it was to be tired. He left her and went out to stand forlornly in the doorway of the library. He would have to try yet again.

'... five thirty-three precisely.'

He thought that the lady sounded cross. "I'm sorry if I was rude," he said. She must be annoyed because she had been talking to herself. "I don't hate you deep down ... not really."

'... at the third stroke it will be five thirty-three and ten seconds.'

She was not going to accept his apology. Jimmy had reached breaking point. "Shut up! Shut up, can't you?" His sobs were threatening to choke him. "I've said I'm sorry for being rude —and I am. Tim. Please let me talk to Tim ..."

Bindie Lampton had her own key, for a planned pattern had emerged and her sessions of baby sitting took place on an average of twice a week—when she had finished her day at the

typing school. In return her Aunt Elspeth had promised to pay for her air ticket to Malaga where she was to spend her holiday in August. It was an arrangement which suited them both and, contrary to Keith's expectations, she had proved herself punctual and reliable.

This evening she had arrived half an hour early. She had pleaded an indisposition, had taken the afternoon off, and had done some shopping, and afterwards it had not been worth while for her to go home. She closed the door of the flat behind her. "Aunt Elspeth?"

She waited for an answering greeting. Elspeth must have gone out with Jimmy. Bindie decided that she would wait for her in the drawing room and read the magazines and paper until they came back. She loved the flat and was not averse to having it to herself for a little while.

She was combing her hair in front of the large gilt-framed looking-glass which hung on the wall opposite the door when she heard Jimmy's voice in the library. So her aunt must be there after all. She would never have left the child by himself. She put the comb back in her bag. "Aunt Elspeth?" she called. "Jimmy?"

"Shut up! Shut up, can't you?" Jimmy sounded terribly upset, and he was crying bitterly.

Bindie pushed open the half closed door. The little boy was clutching the telephone and as she came in he dashed it down. He was on the verge of hysteria. His face was scarlet and tears were coursing down his cheeks. She knelt beside him. "Why, Jimmy! What on earth is the matter, darling?"

His eyes were swimming as he flung his hot arms around her neck and pressed his face damply against hers. "Oh, Bindie, I'm glad you're here. It's Mummy. She's ill, and she told me to get Tim Rye—and when I try all I can hear is a nasty lady who won't listen to me. All she will do is to tell me the time." He was clamped against her as tenaciously as a limpet clings to a rock.

Bindie stretched out an arm and put the receiver back on its cradle, and immediately the telephone rang. She had had no opportunity to discover what exactly had occurred. She sat cross-legged on the floor, holding the child on her lap. "Yes?"

"It's Mr. Martineau's secretary speaking. I have endeavoured

to ring you several times but your line has always been busy. Mr. Martineau asked me to say that he will be bringing Mr. Richard Clifton with him."

"Is Mr. Martineau there?" Bindie enquired.

"No, I'm afraid he couldn't wait. He had an appointment and he left ten minutes ago."

"Thank you." Bindie Lampton hung up. She kissed the top of the little boy's head. She knew that something was radically wrong. "Jimmy," she said quietly. "Where is Mummy?"

He pressed his face into her shoulder and his reply was muffled. "She's in her room, and I don't want to go in there. And oh, Bindie, I think . . . I think she's . . . deaders'."

6

THE LIFE GIVER

THE rain was lashing the wide windows with all the concentrated ferocity of a car-washing appliance gone berserk, the shattered crystals of the drops splintering against the glass, gleaming momentarily against the leaden background of the sky across which massed dark clouds were hurrying headlong in unbroken procession.

In contrast to the outside wildness the sitting room, where a turf fire filled the air with its cloying sweetness, was warm and secure and although it was as yet early, shaded lamps spilled pools of brightness on the polished tops of the tables.

"We're quite a cosy party," said Margaret Tenterden, "which, since we may have to bear with one another's company for goodness knows how long, is just as well! Sometimes these gales can go on raging for days, and no one can possibly reach us. It means no papers, no mail, no contact with the outside world whatsoever! We might be adrift in the ocean on a raft, except that if we were we would not be nearly so comfortable. You should all be thankful that I'm a provident housekeeper whose store cupboard is bulging with delicious food, for I'm afraid the island is far from self supporting. You'd have had to make do with potatoes and fish!"

Her hostess's voice seemed to the girl to be coming from a long way off, which was ridiculous, as there she was, sitting only a few feet away from her. The two other guests had installed themselves on either side of a card table which had been placed in the alcove of the built-out bay window. They were playing backgammon, the irritating rattle of their dice muted by the cork lining of the board.

The other guests, Kurt Goebling and Eva Schwarz, were of German nationality, and they had arrived shortly before the weather had broken. June thought that Mrs. Tenterden had appeared most worried in case they might have been delayed and so unable to make the crossing. Owing to the language

barrier June Ives had made small progress with them, contenting herself with the bestowal and reception of cheerful nods and shy ingratiating smiles. Her hostess had had no such difficulty of communication. She was practically bi-lingual, but then she had the benefit of an expensive education, and German and French came to her lips as readily as English.

Mrs. Tenterden did everything beautifully and without effort. She rode, skied, played an excellent game of bridge, and when she was on form her tennis was up to near professional standard. She was able to discuss literature and painting with authority and originality, and wrote poetry which was eagerly sought after by the editors of the more highbrow magazines. In addition to these talents she was extraordinarily decorative.

She was, of course, immensely rich. Her husband was a member of a long-established dynasty that owned one of the great American fortunes. June wondered why Glenn Tenterden had not come to Europe to spend Christmas with his enchanting wife. She was in such demand and so high powered it seemed odd that she should have chosen to go into retirement at so festive a season.

Normally it would have been impossible to open an illustrated paper without seeing her photograph, engaging in one of her numerous activities; yachting in Florida or cruising among the Greek islands, arriving at the opera or ballet on gala nights, relaxing at the villa in Formentore, or dancing with a glamorous escort in one or other of the New York nightclubs. There was a stack of these glossy periodicals chronicling her pursuits on the needlework stool before the fire.

June had admired the study of Glenn which stood in a leather frame by Margaret's bedside. She had been told that it had been taken some years previously, and it showed him standing in bathing trunks by the side of a swimming pool, his muscular arms folded across his bare chest. He was tall and fair haired and strikingly handsome; and June thought that given different circumstances he would have had no difficulty in making a fabulous career in Hollywood.

Inishrath, on which the four members of the house party were now assembled, lay two miles out in the Atlantic at the end of a rugged narrow peninsula which stabbed out from the coast of County Clare. Set in a panorama of incredible beauty,

it was described by those who had either seen or heard of it as a millionaire's folly. In addition to 'the big house' there was a cluster of tiny thatched cottages grouped round the crescent of the shallow harbour. The island was, perhaps, a hundred and fifty acres in extent, about a third of which was suitable for grazing or agriculture, the stony ground being enriched and made fertile by liberal applications of the seaweed which surrounded the island in abundance. The population had shrunk during the years from ninety to forty souls, the men depending for their livings mainly upon fishing.

Some eighteen months previously, when the Tenterdens had been touring the west coast of Ireland after paying a series of country house visits, it had been Margaret who, on an apparent impulse, had bought the down-at-heel property, or so Glenn had mistakenly thought at the time. It had been her purchase and she had paid for it out of her own money. She had built the house on the highest point so as to take advantage of the glorious views thus afforded, but despite her efforts which had made it superbly comfortable Glenn had never troubled to stay there, nor had she really encouraged him to do so. He had been content to keep to the well-trodden trails of the international playgrounds that he knew so well.

During the building of her home, which had been effected under the guidance of Dermot O'Brien, an architect from Dublin, Margaret had spent many weeks on the adjacent mainland in a house which she had rented near Quilty, and it was from there that she had supervised the decorations and furnishings, taking immense pains over the most trivial details.

Glenn had been wrong in regard to Inishrath. She never made a purchase for which she would have no future practical use. The present occasion, however, was the first one since the completion of the house on which she had taken up actual residence.

She had brought with her Anna, her personal maid for nearly twenty years and, since it was out of the holiday season and she had been glad to accept the high wages offered, a Mrs. Ryan, from a guest house in Milltown Malbay, had been engaged as cook. The wife of one of the fishermen, who came in daily, completed the domestic staff.

Margaret had been popular in Quilty. She was a lavish spender and had been determined to make the most of what

companionship there was to be found in and around the little town. She had contributed generously to the local charities, irrespective of religious denomination, taken an active interest in the events of the district and had, by her enthusiasm and absence of affectation, endeared herself to everyone whom she had met.

Young Doctor O'Malley had voiced the general opinion when he had declared over a glass of Powers in one of the seven Select Bars which he frequented: "I'm here to say that if all the Americans are as likeable as Mrs. Tenterden then a pity it is that Ireland cannot take her place as one more star in that fancy old flag of theirs. I'm asking you now, would not that be a grand thing for us altogether?" Such a revolutionary solution for Eire's advancement was a novel one to his listeners, and they were at a loss for an answer. As June had observed, the islanders too had many reasons for gratitude to their open-handed benefactress.

"Little did I imagine, June," Margaret said, "that my chance encounter with Phyllida Wardroper would have led to your being here with me on this sliver of granite in midwinter." She sat gazing into the huge pyre of burning peat, its edges blurred with a fuzz of grey. "I've known Phyllida since I was a child. Originally she was a crony of my mother's. She's a dear, dear person . . . my very first friend in England. So incredibly kind and unselfish! Why she never married I do not know. She was engaged once but her beau was killed in the nineteen fourteen war—and when it was over, well, it was a case of the lost generation, and there weren't enough men left to go round. Even so . . ." Margaret paused. "I understand that you have only met her once?"

"Twice," said June.

"It was typical of her to take you under her wing on so brief an acquaintance," Margaret said. "When she was telling me about you and how . . . how nice and . . . congenial she found you, she said that she remembered how lonely she herself had been once, when she had been just about your age. For some reason she was in Capetown and knew absolutely no one. 'Utterly desolate', was how she described it." Margaret took a cigarette from an onyx box by her side. "You know that she had orginally intended inviting you to spend Christmas and

New Year with her, don't you? But, as I believe she wrote you, her ancient mother was taken ill. She must be older than God, and poor Phyllida couldn't cope. The old lady lives in a minute bungalow somewhere in the country with absolutely no help, and truly it was out of the question for her to have a house guest. Then, when I mentioned I was coming to Ireland she suggested I ask you—which I was glad to do—so here we are!"

June widened her mouth into a smile. "It was kind of you." She felt so terribly tired that she could barely keep her eyes open.

"We decided that as your Art course was not due to begin until the second week in January it would be tedious for you hanging around in your 'digs'. Later on, when you have got to know some of the other students, it will be different." Margaret spoke slowly with a trace of a Southern accent. "I expect that after New Zealand you find London vast and kind of overwhelming?" She raised her eyes and looked directly at the girl. "I have never been to your country. Sydney, yes, with Glenn, soon after we were married. We joined his yacht down there and made a trip to the Great Barrier Reef. Quite fantastic and fascinating! It is one of the chief advantages of being rich," she added in a matter-of-fact tone, "to be able to go anywhere you wish to . . . anywhere in the world . . . in comfort. And have I appreciated it!" Her laugh was apologetic. "What an offensively smug thing for me to have said! I'm not usually such a vulgarian."

"You're only being honest, Mrs. Tenterden." June hesitated. "It must be like owning a magic carpet."

Margaret leant forward, her pointed chin cupped in her hand, her lovely blue eyes serene and contemplative. How dreary and dispiriting it must be to have been born with so little charm as had this girl. She was not merely plain, she did not possess even a modicum of sex appeal; and why, in heaven's name, had her family taken no steps to have the livid birthmark on her cheek removed? It had been criminal negligence on their part. " 'A magic carpet'," she repeated. "You have summed it up very well, my dear."

"It must be marvellous," the girl said, "to do . . . to buy . . . what you like . . . always." She blinked her eyes rapidly. It crossed her mind that the rhythm of the dice was growing inter-

mittent, that the players were more interested in the conversation than they were in their game, that they were unobtrusively watching her.

"When you say 'buy' it sounds derogatory and rather crude," said Margaret lightly. "Like administering a hometruth!" The wretched girl had not meant to be *gauche*. Those tight, dreadful trousers! Hardly an ideal choice for her dumpy figure. All buttocks and no legs. They made their wearer look grotesque. June was well meaning and tried her best to please, and she must possess some talent for drawing or she would never have won that scholarship, but she would never live a full life, never attract a man, never know love or romance. Conditioned herself by years of open admiration and thankful for her own advantages Margaret could imagine nothing more ghastly than to have been born an ugly woman.

"I cannot pretend that I have not been fortunate," she said, "fortunate, that is, so far as possessions and being able to have a wonderful time are concerned. I suppose few people have been luckier. I was brought up from the cradle in the spoiling cushioned comfort that riches and doting parents can give, but wealth, like everything else, is relative." Doctor Goebling sat motionless, contemplating the board, patently uncertain of his next move. "Glenn has a bachelor uncle whose fortune makes that of my own family seem as if they were living on relief!" Margaret said. "Not that I am any longer affected personally by my father's financial position. He gave me my share when I married. A quarter of a million dollars as a loving pay-off! He has that odious British notion that boys should take monetary precedence just because of their sex—and I happen to be blessed with two dear brothers!" She flicked her cigarette stub into the fireplace and added with a gamine grin: "Still, one mustn't grumble. I can still eat!"

"Bread *and* jam," said June.

Margaret paid no attention to this observation. "I trust that our existence has not been entirely selfish, that we may have done some good in the world. It would be disheartening otherwise!" She lit another cigarette and then went on: "Way down Glenn *is* public spirited, especially when genuine need is pointed out to him which, I confess, sometimes it has to be—with a sledgehammer! He is always so frantically busy enjoying him-

self. We have a host of friends and a legion of hangers-on and the poor man is apt to get confused between the two. He is as energetic and strong as the proverbial bull—and so am I." Her voice changed as she continued: "The one thing that the Lord has seen fit to deny us so far is a child, and there I fear that I may be to blame. Blame! What a silly word for me to use. Neither one of us is culpable." The laugh she gave was metallic. "It is just an unfortunate flaw in my physical make-up, like being deaf or colour-blind. Naturally I have consulted the leading specialists, gotten the best advice, both in Europe and the States. Their opinions, I may say, were not exactly exhilarating. I have not given up hope entirely and comfort myself that the medical profession is inherently conventional and loth to hold out any false encouragement which cannot be substantiated." She gave a shrug. "The sands are running out. I shall be thirty-nine on my next birthday."

The rattle of the dice had stopped.

"Thirty-nine?" echoed June in polite amazement. "It can't be true."

"In November," Margaret confirmed briskly. Her verbal admission of the date somehow crystallised the fears which recently she had tried so resolutely to thrust from her mind.

It was for Glenn's sake that she was prepared to take these extraordinary hazards. She knew that he was still fond of her. They laughed together and had a lot of fun. For the first ten years of their marriage he had even been in love with her. And now? She could not give the answer with any confidence. None of his other women had altogether succeeded in usurping her place, but she would not dare to put him to too severe a test. She might be a gambler but she was not a fool where Glenn was involved, and she knew that her position was more than vulnerable.

If Glenn was to continue to tread the untrammelled primrose path which he held so dear, which was as necessary to him as food and drink, and which had been his since childhood, his ability to do so must be secured by means of a son. Glenn was a born playboy, albeit a delightful one. The rôle, to which he was not averse, was one that he played to perfection, and one that had been thrust upon him.

The casting director had been his uncle, Winston Glenn

Tenterden, an elderly man with a will of iron, who had made no secret of his intentions, and it was he, in Margaret's judgment, who, by his action, had been unjust to her husband. He had been proud of young Glenn, proud of his looks and his gaiety and his social success, of his prowess at sports and of the automatic entrée that these gifts had given him into exclusive society on both sides of the ocean. But he was even more devoted to the Tenterden name and to the increasing pressing problem of its preservation.

There was another nephew, Stuart, about whom he had never really cared. This young man, as he was fond of pointing out, was a dull dog and he had married a dull girl, but already he had produced a son and a daughter. Also he was industrious in business. And so, Mr. Tenterden senior insisted, if by the hour of his death, Glenn had failed to produce an heir apparent it would be upon Stuart that the family millions would devolve. Glenn must bear in mind that, although hale, his uncle was nearing eighty years of age. He regretted his decision but it was one which he was afraid must stand. Margaret, who recognised the steel underlying the old man's badinage, had made herself face the fact that if she was to keep her husband, and if Glenn was to inherit, there was no time to waste.

She had to accept that Glenn was selfish and weak. Otherwise he would have made some attempt to carve out a profitable niche for himself, either in one of his uncle's concerns or on his own initiative, instead of which he had been perfectly content to exist on the huge allowance which was cheerfully doled out to him at irregular intervals, either in cash or occasionally in somewhat sardonic payment of his debts. Margaret supposed that she, also, had been at fault by her acquiescence of the pleasant existence which had been given them.

They had taken it for granted that they would have children eventually, when a convenient opportunity for so doing presented itself, one that would not have interrupted their engagements, but such had not been the case and the swift slipping away of the years had come as a shock to them both. She had not even had a miscarriage. It had seemed to her that of late Glenn had been ready to accept the idea that she was barren and was waiting placidly for her to offer him his freedom. He was far too civilised to ask her outright. He was not an Eastern

royalty safeguarding the succession. He had no grounds for a divorce . . . how could he? Nevertheless he was confident that she would agree.

She had refused to admit that she was being driven into a corner, but when, during the spring before last, she had met Kurt Goebling in Rio she had grasped eagerly at the glimmer of hope which he had held out to her.

The silence had lengthened and Margaret glanced across at June who was crouched in the low chair opposite to her. "Thirty-nine may be mature," she said drily, "but I doubt if it would make history in the field of gynaecology!" She half turned her head, throwing the statement over her shoulder at the backgammon players in the window embrasure. "And amazing strides in surgery are being made every year, aren't they?"

"Your pardon?" It was Fraulein Schwarz who answered her. Margaret put her question again, this time in the woman's own tongue. Kurt Goebling closed the board and got to his feet.

"Am I not right?" Margaret insisted when neither of them replied.

"I would not say that a great deal of new research has been undertaken, or that anything of startling importance has been achieved, either in the United States or in Great Britain." Doctor Goebling lifted his shoulders a shade contemptuously. "In Switzerland they are—persevering. In my own former country . . ." he favoured her with his brilliant smile, "well, shall I say that we have always been more ready—more willing—to experiment . . . to take certain chances . . ."

June raised her heavy lids and stared at him. He was speaking in English. Why had he refused to do so before? Both he and Fraulein Schwarz were regarding her speculatively.

"Exactly!" said Margaret. She glanced surreptitiously at her watch and addressed herself to June. "I'm afraid I must have been boring you dreadfully with my concerns. An endless saga! I loathe people who go on about their bodily ills. There should be a severe penalty for such horrid self-indulgence. Now let us talk about you. I wrote to Phyllida on the day after your arrival. The boat took the letters when it went across to collect the Herr Doktor and Fraulein Schwarz. Our last link!" She crossed one slender leg over the other. "Dear Phyllida has such a strong

sense of responsibility, and I wanted to assure her that here we have skilled care. I told her about your having had a pain, and about the sickness, and that you had refused to go back to London. Also that you had laughed off your indisposition, insisting that it was not serious."

"A pain?" repeated June stupidly. "You wrote that I had had a pain?" She could make no sense at all of this unexpected turn of the conversation. So far as she was aware she had not been indisposed. There had been no pain, she had made no complaint, so why on earth had Mrs. Tenterden written to Phyllida Wardroper?

"Doctor Goebling," Margaret said soothingly, "was one of the finest surgeons in Germany and so, even if this blasted storm keeps up, I assure you that you will have no reason for alarm. Fraulein Schwarz is a trained nurse, and to them an appendix operation would be no more than a matter of routine."

June could not control the nodding of her head. She made an abortive attempt to sit up, trying uncertainly to smooth the hair back from her forehead. Why this harping on about illness? What could Mrs. Tenterden mean? She saw from the corner of her eye that Fraulein Schwarz was quietly leaving the room.

A surgeon and a nurse and a hospital, all on this remote island—she would be lucky indeed if any unforeseen crisis should arise—but why should one? She remembered making a tour of Inishrath with Margaret while they had waited for the boat's return from Quilty. They had stopped to talk to the women who were gathered together by the harbour and had admired one of the children. They had walked back up the slope of the hill through the cemetery with the weathered Celtic crosses which encircled the derelict church that Mrs. Tenterden had promised to repair, and which dated back to the fourteenth century. She had been taken over the two-storeyed house that consisted, apart from the servants' wing, of four bedrooms and bathrooms and on the ground floor two large living-rooms. There was also, she recalled, a small building communicating by a covered passage way with the main block, but the door to this had been locked and her hostess had made no reference to it.

She had been surprised that this had been passed over, for Margaret was so obviously elated by all she had achieved, and

June had asked her to what it might lead and Mrs. Tenterden had replied that it was her hospital, explaining that she had built it to serve the isolated community whose welfare had been entrusted into her keeping. She had gone on to say that since they were subject to bad weather, to being cut off from the mainland, she had felt easier in her mind once some medical facilities had been installed on the island. It transpired that some years back a young woman had died in childbirth due to the absence of hygienic nursing. When finally Doctor O'Malley had succeeded in reaching the cottage she had been too ill to be moved, and Margaret had been determined to prevent a recurrence of a similar tragedy.

Kurt Goebling broke the silence. "My dear young lady, it would be nothing. Nothing," he added emphatically.

"But I... I'm not threatened by appendicitis. What makes you think that I am?"

"We trust not." Margaret held up a finger to forestall argument. "But if it should flare up again and Doctor Goebling does find it imperative to operate I don't want you to panic if we are still marooned. As well as Fraulein Schwarz, my maid did some nursing during the war, so he would have two expert assistants. And while we are on this supposition, June, in the event of any unlikely complications which might involve a long convalescence—I sincerely hope that there would not be any, but one can never tell—is there anybody whom you would like notified? We don't want it to look as if you've been kidnapped and had disappeared into the blue! Does anyone, with the exception of Phyllida, know that you are here?"

"No." June shook her head. She wished that she were able to concentrate. This sense of stupor was maddening. She had no idea of how they had got round to the topic of operations, or why they were dwelling on it. "No one," she said once more. "No one would miss me except Eric."

"Eric?" asked Margaret quickly. "And who is Eric?"

June frowned in bewilderment. She could not think who Eric could be. Surely she had not said the name Eric? Of course not—her voice must have been slurred which, considering how drowsy she was, was not astonishing. Eric? Well, why should she not produce a suitor... a fiancé? Other girls had young men. It would raise her status, but she knew somehow

that Mrs. Tenterden would not be deceived, and in any case it did not matter.

There had been that rather portly man on the boat coming over, the middle-aged one with the pince-nez. He had been called Hal something—or other. On the last night of the voyage he had given a cocktail party in his cabin and had made her drink too much, and she had stayed on after the rest of them had left. She had no clear recollection of what had happened after that, except that she had not enjoyed it, and on the following morning she had been worried and remorseful. When she allowed herself to think about it she was still worried, but it was too early to be certain if anything had... had gone wrong. She prayed that everything would all be all right. She had given him her address in London, but he had not spoken to her as they were leaving the boat, nor had he made any effort to communicate after they had landed.

All June wanted to do at the moment was to be left alone, to go to sleep. "Erica," she said firmly, "not Eric. She's a girl I know in New Zealand. Erica Elliott. She lives in Wellington."

"Wellington?" asked Kurt Goebling.

"On North Island. She's my best friend." Her voice was like that of a tired child. She was speaking as if she were under hypnosis. Why were they questioning her? What rubbish it all was. Why did she feel so peculiar? She had felt odd and half doped ever since she had drunk the second cup of coffee which that hatchet faced Fraulein had poured out for her.

"I have my reasons for asking you these things," Margaret said. "I must say, Kurt, she doesn't *seem* to be at all well, does she?"

Pulling out a slim gold watch from his waistcoat pocket, the man walked across to June and held her wrist between his fingers to take her pulse.

Margaret's eyes continued to search the girl's face. She was wondering what June's parents could have been like as individuals. Her mother, she thought, probably had been a minor intellectual, a schoolmistress or lecturer, and had come, like the father, from a respectable lower middle-class background. The girl's gift for drawing may have skipped a generation. June had mentioned a maternal grandfather who, she had said, used to exhibit, before he had emigrated, in one of the Midland towns.

What had caused the family to leave England? She wished that she knew more about heredity, although in a case such as this it probably would not apply.

"I do apologise for hammering on," Margaret said, "but while you are staying with me you are my responsibility, and I would be happier if I could have the name of a cousin or somebody whom I could contact. You may consider me a fusspot—but then older women often are!"

"I have told you there is no one but Erica," said June. "My mother did have a sister but she died in infancy." What on earth was making her confide all her family history? Why did they want to know? Why was Mrs. Tenterden practically giving her the third degree? From the way in which Mrs. Tenterden kept on looking at Doctor Goebling, she might have been seeking information on his behalf. Suddenly she was conscious of a stirring of deep unease. She did feel so absolutely dreadful. She should have gone up to her room long ago. Perhaps, after all, she *had* had an attack and had blacked out.

Kurt Goebling slid his watch back into his pocket and walked over to the fireplace. A delightful painting by the Irish artist, Nora McGuinness, framed his well-shaped head and broad shoulders. It depicted a young boy wandering through a wasteland of tumbled rocks, and its exquisite and subtle colouring, both sophisticated and simple, was a tribute to Margaret's impeccable taste.

Doctor Goebling was in his late fifties, tall, thickset, with a dominating personality and a deceptively youthful face that was lined and tanned by his long sojourn under a tropical sun. His arrogant magnetism was potent and beguiling. He could be a demanding and on occasion a vicious lover, as Margaret knew. She looked up at him, and answering her unspoken query he gave her a nod of approval. He dropped a hand on to her shoulder, a hand that was heavy and purposeful. Her mouth softened as she raised her own to meet his, and her mind went back to when she had made his acquaintance.

It had been nearly two years before, although to her it could have been more like ten, for there had been so much to be done since their first encounter. She had been walking up and down on the terrace of her hotel, looking out over the spread of the spectacular bay, and her lighter had refused obstinately to work.

He had stepped forward out of the shadows, elegant in his white dinner jacket, and with a Prussian click of the heels had offered her his own and she had allowed him to light her cigarette for her.

Glenn had taken himself off to go 'round the town' on what, he had taken care to explain, was to be a stag party, and she had intended to have an early night; but after she had sat for a while by the moon-blanched balustrade, talking to her new acquaintance, she had changed her mind and had accepted Kurt Goebling's embarrassed invitation to have a drink with him in the bar. His diffidence had been unexpected.

They had stayed there for an hour, sitting at a secluded table in a corner, and afterwards they had gone on to dance in the nightclub of the hotel. They had drunk champagne for which she had insisted upon paying, and later he had given her a glass of brandy. She had found him *sympathique* and forceful, and in a way, touching, as he had endeavoured to disguise the wistful nostalgia that was not unusual among displaced Europeans.

He had walked back with her to the door of the lift and had been unwilling to release her hand when he had bidden her goodnight, until the uniformed page had grown restless under the barrage of buzzing from the upper floors, and Kurt had said a little desperately: "My meeting with you, Madame, has given me immense pleasure. These days it is seldom that I have the opportunity of talking to someone as amusing and as cultured as yourself. It will be an evening for me to treasure." His eyes had been full of compliments, and sad, and very blue against the thick silver wings of his hair. "You are such a life giver! It has for me been a stimulating experience for which I thank you."

She had gone up to her room happier than she had been for a long while and had not wanted to lie awake to listen for Glenn's return. Her agreeable new friend had restored her confidence in her desirability, and in the succeeding days she had spent much of her time in his company. Glenn had embarked on a transient *affaire* with a sparkling and predatory Brazilian divorcée, and for once she herself had felt guilty and did not mind his behaviour at all.

She learned that Kurt Goebling had at one time been a

doctor in Germany, and that he had settled in South America immediately after the war. He had, to begin with, been reticent about his earlier life, but gradually he had disclosed that it had been a period which held for him only horror. He had been caught in a corrupt web from which there had been no escape. Against his will he had been forced to work in Auschwitz, but he had had no alternative. It had been a soul-searing experience and one which haunted his dreams and upon which he did not dare to dwell. "I cannot believe when I see my reflection in a looking-glass that these eyes which you are looking into with such understanding saw sights which should have blinded them, that this tongue, which is talking to you in these sane and sophisticated surroundings, should have agreed to the perpetration of atrocities which could belong only to hell. I forced these hands to do things which one would hesitate to demand of a crazy beast." He had pounded his clenched fist on his knee. "You must believe that I am not the same man, mentally or physically, as the one who was forced to commit those agonising brutalities. It is as unfair to demand retribution against me as it would be to hold a man responsible for what he had done in a previous incarnation." He leaned back exhausted before he said: "The Nazis took hostages, even from among their own people, and I was of their number."

His wife and family, he told her, had been killed in the Hamburg holocaust when the city had been pounded to a mass of shapeless rubble, and when hostilities had ceased he had managed to make his way to Brazil under an assumed name to avoid prosecution as a war criminal. "In those days the climate in my country was deadly. They were seeking scapegoats. Had I remained I would have been given no chance of proving my innocence, although they must have known that I could not have disobeyed orders. Believe me that I did all that I could to be humane, but in the conditions prevalent it was not possible. I am being frank with you, Mrs. Tenterden."

He had drifted for a while through a series of humdrum jobs degrading for a man of his background, and had finally found a post with a firm of chemical manufacturers to whom his knowledge was valuable, and he was now making enough to exist in quite reasonable comfort; but he hated having to live a life of evasion and pretence, which was in many ways little

better than that of a hunted gangster. The night on which he had lit her cigarette had been the first time that he had ventured into a public restaurant.

Margaret had in her turn confided to him some of her own worries, and he had listened to her without interruption, and when she had finished he had stayed silent, staring with bent head at the inch of ash on his cigar, and had at last said: "If you have sufficient courage and, above all, discretion, I might be able to help you. It will be exorbitantly expensive and most difficult to arrange—and in the arrangements themselves I can offer you no assistance—and it will take time. How much time I cannot even guess. That will be up to you . . . and to fate. In many ways there will be frightening risks, not only for me but for you also."

They had talked together until dawn, and before they parted she had persuaded him to accept a large cheque, and it had been agreed that, should his plan come to a successful conclusion, he would receive the sum of one hundred thousand dollars in addition to all his expenses. She would attend to the preliminaries, and when, and if, she found what she was seeking she would notify him at once where he was to join her.

His dead family, he had said, had consisted of three young boys. "I could only sire sons," he had said. "My brother fathered four boys. As a clan the Goeblings always run to males." His lips had been near to hers and she had been quick to understand the message . . . and its implication. Or had it been a promise? "In my student days," he had continued, "there was a girl who was in love with me. She made no secret of it. We spent a happy, carefully concealed holiday together in Bavaria. When we got back she told me most firmly, if captivatingly, that we should not be seeing one another again. She had nothing whatsoever against me personally—quite the contrary—but she was . . . how do you say? . . . engaged. It was a betrothal which had been arranged by their parents. Her desire was, perhaps, not entirely dissimilar to your own, except that the bridegroom was younger than Lise and not, or so I should have thought, attractive to, or attracted by, women. I knew him by reputation." Finishing his liqueur, Kurt had added with a grimace of feigned astonishment: "After the marriage she had a premature baby—at seven months! It was a fine lusty boy who

weighed nearly nine pounds at birth. I would have liked to have been his . . . his godfather, but the idea never even occurred to her—the selfish little bitch!"

The chance meeting with Phyllida had enabled her to send the cable, and immediately he had flown to Ireland bringing with him Fraulein Schwarz, who had been a former colleague. Margaret's purchase of Inishrath and the building of the house had been an essential part of the preparations which she had undertaken with relentless efficiency.

She had thought on one occasion, in the course of the previous autumn, when the buildings were nearing completion, that she had discovered a suitable 'subject', but to her dismay she had grown fond of the girl, who had been a fellow American, and she had been unable to make herself go through with it. June Ives was different and, to be realistic, the future could not hold a lot in store for her except increasing loneliness and decay. Margaret had felt that in her case she would not be a destroyer, but rather a giver, of life in the true sense of the word.

She sighed as Kurt Goebling lifted his hand from her shoulder. She was fully aware of the appalling chances which they were taking. Failure and discovery would bring scandal, and imprisonment, and most likely death. On the credit side Kurt was a distinguished surgeon and there would be, so far as it lay in his power, the minimum of suffering.

There was no going back. Margaret kept on repeating to herself that everything would work out. June would have died from a burst appendix. Doctor Goebling would have made every effort to save her life, but would have unfortunately failed. A man of his experience would have no difficulty in faking the appropriate incisions, and surely Doctor O'Malley, should it be incumbent upon him to do so, could have no hesitation in giving the cause of death on the certificate? It would be simply a matter of form, and he would not distress her by questions, especially as she herself by then would have taken to her bed suffering from shock. She would receive Shane O'Malley, who so much admired her, but his visit would not be a professional one, for she would be the official patient of her guest. The weather forecast foretold the continuance of gales for another week or more, and the funeral would duly take place in the

windswept churchyard, and it would be a quiet and private one.

June's head had fallen forward, lolling to one side, and her eyes were closed, her breathing heavy and regular. She appeared to have sunk into unconsciousness. Margaret raised her eyebrows at Kurt Goebling.

"Miss Ives," he said quietly. "Miss Ives—can you hear me?" The girl in the chair made no response. She had in fact heard his voice, but it had reached her muffled by anaesthesia and she was incapable of answering. She had endeavoured to summon up the last ounce of her strength, but where movement was concerned she was in the grip of total inertia. Deep in her subconscious a warning bell had rung, with the realisation that some ghastly and unknown peril was threatening her, that she was defenceless, and that caution had come too late.

Margaret saw Fraulein Schwarz poised in the doorway. She had put on a white linen coat and her expression was purposeful. She carried a syringe in her hand and looked questioningly towards Doctor Goebling, and as she did so he made a slight gesture to where the girl lay unconscious in the armchair.

There was no sound but that of the drumming of the rain.

When Fraulein Schwarz rolled back the sleeve of her jersey June scarcely felt the prick of the needle as it was inserted smoothly into her upper arm. Margaret was sitting straight and still as Kurt, with murmured instructions, helped Fraulein Schwarz to carry June Ives from the room.

Shortly it would be her own turn to follow them into the meticulously equipped theatre. She had been told exactly what she must do. She must summon Anna, her devoted Anna, who had been alerted, and she would put her to bed and attend to all that was required before they came to take her away on a stretcher. Margaret's finger nails dug into the palms of her hands as she thought of the girl who would so soon be prone and helpless on the operating table.

She had informed Mrs. Ryan of June's 'attack'—had suggested it might be more tactful not to refer to it. Anna, too, had been warned, although in her case she would have to be told the truth. Margaret knew that Anna Penn would go to the stake for her. It was *her* safety and welfare that would engage her mind and about which she would worry. She would have to be taken into Margaret's confidence and, when it was all over,

Miss June Ives would hold no more importance for Anna than if she had been a blood donor.

When they had left her she walked slowly across to the window in that wall of the sitting room which faced the north and commanded the annexe, and while she stood there gazing out through the downpour, the three rectangles of light were extinguished one by one as the blinds were drawn down.

Kurt had told her something of the experiments which he had performed in the Institute for Hygiene and Scientific Research in the neat clinic, surrounded by beds of flowers, that had been tucked away unobtrusively in a corner of the camp not far from the brothel which had been provided for the soldiers on their way back to the front. There had been no shortage of material in those days, for the supply of Jewish and gipsy girls had been unlimited. He had assured her that towards the end he had had few failures, and that there must be a score or more of young and virile men and women living in Germany today who were the products of his grafting of the girls' ovaries into the bodies of barren but otherwise robust recipients. He had conceded that the girls themselves had invariably died, which had been the price that science had demanded. In this instance there could, for obvious reasons, be no question of survival, but he could guarantee that his patient would feel nothing.

There would not be a lot left from her inheritance. Inishrath, Kurt Goebling, Fraulein Schwarz . . . little enough would remain of her quarter of a million dollars. Glenn had nothing in his own right, and they would be saddled with a rented penthouse in New York and a villa on a short lease in the Mediterranean. It was true that they would have a certain amount of jewellery, and there would also be the yacht, which would have to be sold. She would probably be able to salvage fifty thousand dollars or so in cash, which might bring them in a net income of around eight hundred pounds a year, which was less than they were paying their butler.

Margaret knew that it would be at best a fifty-fifty chance, but in spite . . . in spite of everything, Glenn must be given his son. She would not be rejoining him until April. Which one of them would in the end be the real 'life giver'? Would it be Kurt? June Ives? Glenn? Or herself?

Did it matter, so long as there was an heir?

7

'DON'T EVER LEAVE ME'

GUISEPPE RICCI was at peace with the world. His business as a building contractor was flourishing, he had money piling up in the bank together with an increasing number of securities, his health was superb, and shortly he was to marry a girl who was an heiress and who also happened to be pretty. In addition to these assets he had a young and adoring mistress who, financially, was not in the least demanding. He could think of few young men of his acquaintance who were better placed.

At present he was erecting a block of flats on a piece of derelict land between Rome and the airport, land that had gone back to weeds, and on which stood the shells of cottages and meaningless sections of walls dating from God knew when, that had to be razed before building could begin; and when the flats had been completed he had other orders to fill, certainly enough for three, and perhaps four years. His sole worry was that he was slightly behind schedule, but not to the same degree as the majority of his competitors. He knew how to manage men and on the whole his relations with his labour were good. He paid high wages and did not stint bonuses when they were deserved, and in return he demanded hard work. Later on it might be necessary to work overtime by floodlights. He hoped to avoid it since it would be an additional expense.

The scene which he surveyed was as busy as an ant heap. Indeed, with the scurrying figures in attendance on the great earth-moving machines, the huge scoops and the tracked bulldozers, all of them quick and efficient, but expensive to hire, it resembled a human ant heap. Among so much mechanisation the gangs of men wielding pickaxes might have wandered in from another era. A haze of dust lingered in the warm air softening with the approach of dusk and holding a hint of thunder. His thumbs were tucked into the broad leather belt circling his waist and his blue shirt was unbuttoned, displaying

a gold cross on a chain in the mat of hair on his broad chest. Between his fingers he held a thin black cigar. He looked at his watch. There was half an hour to go before it was time for the men to knock off.

"Signor Ricci!"

Guiseppe turned to face the man who had run up to his side. It was Bastiani, his foreman. "What is it?" he asked.

"Signor Ricci. I am glad that you are here. We . . . that is, Luigi . . . has made a discovery."

"A discovery?" Guiseppe gave an incredulous grin. "He is for ever making 'discoveries', Pietro. What is it this time? A bit of broken statuary? The chipped base of a column? Such finds are to be as expected as starfish on the sea shore."

Pietro Bastiani dabbed at his sweat beaded face. "No, Signor. I can assure you that it is nothing so commonplace. Luigi has uncovered a tomb."

"Indeed?" said Guiseppe. "How very resourceful of him! He has always been one to draw attention to himself—especially if it will enable him to take an unearned breather. He is wasted as a labourer. He should have been an archaeologist!" He drew on his cigar. "Who knows? If he had had a trace of education he might have become one. Instead he devoted his energies to the siring of ten children!" Guiseppe tossed away the cigar butt. "It is probably the cellar of one of the cottages."

"But I have seen the tomb myself, Signor. There are steps, and at the bottom there is a small chamber containing a stone coffin. It is what they call a . . . what they call . . ."

"A sarcophagus?" Guiseppe suggested.

"Yes, Signor. There is a sarcophagus. It is sealed and it is plain. There is no ornament or carving upon it."

"Then it can be of little significance," said Guiseppe.

"Will you not come and inspect it?"

"Naturally."

"I warned Luigi to hold his tongue until he had spoken with you."

"You did wisely." Guiseppe patted Pietro's arm with approval. The two men walked together across the battlefield of the building site, Bastiani glancing up anxiously at his companion, hurrying to keep abreast of the other's long stride. He was aware already that his employer intended to disregard Luigi's

find, and feared that should he do so there would be trouble. The authorities took severe measures against those who did not report incidents of potential archaeological importance. A year or so ago a sepulchre had been opened containing the coffin of some Eastern princess or concubine, and it had created a great stir. Noting Guiseppe's expression Bastiani saw that Signor Ricci would go to almost any lengths to escape entanglement with interfering professors and a consequent hold-up in the completion of his contract.

Luigi was waiting for them. He appeared ill at ease in case he should be accused of idling. When they came level with him Guiseppe raised his eyebrows and paused before he spoke. He used two definite approaches to his workmen. Sometimes he was one of them, and at others he left them in no doubt that he was their boss, detached and aloof, a member of the ruling class. It was the latter role that he chose to play.

Bastiani had told him of the discovery and he would have a look at it personally. He went briefly down into the cavern. When he returned he told Luigi that it was just as he had thought. It was, unfortunately, of no interest or value, except maybe of nuisance value. Still, it might be as well to keep their knowledge to themselves. Bastiani would explain to him why at knocking off time. Meanwhile had he no job to do? Guiseppe had made it clear that the tomb was of negligible worth.

He left Luigi to resume his work and beckoned to Pietro to follow him. "You will understand," he said, "that we can afford no hold-ups. You will not lose by being discreet, my friend. Neither will Luigi. It might be best if you, rather than I, were to settle this trivial matter with him—and again impress upon him the desirability of his co-operation. I give you my word that I am concealing no object of art! I suggest that you pay him twenty thousand lira tonight." Guiseppe produced his wallet from his hip pocket and counted out the requisite sum from a roll of notes. "Promise him double this amount after the block has been finished. You, Pietro, will receive a hundred thousand the day after we leave the site." Guiseppe was flattering his foreman by including him by implication as being one of the management. "We have how many men working on this job? Fifty-seven, is it not? I should point out to Luigi how much more sensible it would be for them to take their pay

packets home to their families than to be laid off for God knows how many weeks for the sake of an old relic of no monetary significance. You, my dear Pietro, will return here at dawn, when there will be no likelihood of spectators—and I want you to obliterate all traces of the entrance before the men clock in. It should take you no more than half an hour." Guiseppe clasped Bastiani's hand in his own, exercising all of his charm. "We are friends as well as workmates, are we not?" He took a cigar from his shirt pocket and gave it to Pietro. "Now I will do my final round of the day. I am leaving a little early this evening."

Pietro Bastiani smiled appreciatively as he watched Guiseppe walk away, stopping frequently to make a suggestion or criticism and occasionally letting drop a word of praise. Signor Ricci was a fly one all right. He'd like to meet a man smart enough to hold that one down.

Guiseppe piled the saucepan and the dirty dishes in the sink and splashed them with water from the cold tap. Sophia would deal with them in the morning. Sophia was the elderly widow who came in each day for three hours to clean and do his mending, and give him breakfast and make his sandwiches, and leave for him either a cold supper or one that he could heat up. After he married he would be sorry to lose her, but wives seldom kept on the domestics from their husbands' bachelor days, even if the domestics were willing to stay.

He was proud of his home, into which he had moved six months previously. It was a bungalow that he had designed and built for his own needs. In anticipation of a family there were three bedrooms, a sitting room and a dining room. He had installed modern plumbing and labour-saving devices, which Sophia refused to use, and there was a square of garden enclosed by a white wall studded on the top with spikes and entered by a splendid gate of silvered iron. He had planted trees which would in time give shade, and there were flower beds along the base of the walls. All of the windows had shutters of turquoise blue. The effect was that of a tasteless doll's house.

The night was warm and he was stretched out in his chair sucking at a cigarette and with a bottle of wine within easy

reach. He contemplated the progress of the day. Luigi's find had been tiresome. However it had been no more than a minor problem which he had dealt with adequately. He wished that his other problem was equally easy of solution. His other problem was Anna Renzetti.

Anna was twenty-two years old. She worked in a hat shop, and she had been his mistress since she had been eighteen. At the beginning he had been in love with her, and now he was used to her. She adored him and had become part of the pattern of his life. He had had no intention of giving her up, the idea had never entered his head until Antonio Barbieri had sent for him, and he had been most unreasonable. He had been nagged into it by his wife, Gina. There was no doubt of that. The Barbieris were Claudia's parents.

Guiseppe had been unable to discover which of the interfering busybodies it had been who had told them about Anna. He would like to wring their silly necks. He thanked God that Claudia did not know. Claudia was very strait-laced. Other men had mistresses—so why shouldn't he? He'd be astonished if, even at his age, Antonio was faithful to that old bag, Gina. Just to look at her Signora Barbieri was enough to make anyone impotent. Antonio had threatened to call off the marriage if Anna was not sent about her business, and after a prolonged and stormy interview Guiseppe had been forced to capitulate. Claudia was, after all, an heiress, and later on he would be free to go his own way. There were many attractive women waiting for someone with his prowess and personality.

He would have to tell Anna, and he might as well get it over. She would be with him soon, and he was not looking forward to seeing her. It was not that he dreaded wounding her, although he would have preferred not to have to do so. It was the reason for making the break, the way in which he had been coerced, that would make him appear a hag-ridden milksop and which would destroy the virile swash-buckling image that he had taken such pains to create.

Guiseppe poured himself a second glass of the red wine. He wondered if he could postpone the conversation with Anna until after they had gone to bed together. He would have to offer her a 'golden handshake', and he might as well get his money's worth. He looked at the large ornate watch on its intricately

meshed gold bracelet. It was ten o'clock.

The air was vitiated with stale urban heat, and he picked up the glasses and the bottle and went on to the porch where he had set out cane chairs and a table. The porch had been built of plaster and painted a strident vermilion to simulate brick. He lowered himself into a chair and closed his eyes. He was weary from the long day and when the doorbell rang twice he was half dozing. The double ring was a pre-arranged signal between Anna and himself. If he had an unexpected visitor he did not answer it, and she would wait a moment or so and then go away.

Anna knew all about his coming marriage. She had not liked it, but had also taken for granted that their liaison could be continued, accepting the fact that he would not have considered Claudia had she not been possessed of a fortune. Anna was a realist who had settled for half the loaf.

Guiseppe unlocked the door and stood to one side to admit her. In the streak of light from the hallway she looked strained and sallow. He put an arm round her waist. "It's stuffy in the house," he said. "I thought we might have a drink together on the verandah." Her face was peaky and she seemed ten years older than when he had last seen her. Perhaps, after all, it was best for them to part.

She shook her head as he held out his cigarette case, and pulled back a chair. She had made no move to kiss him. Guiseppe filled the two glasses. It was plain that Anna was waiting for him to speak. She was creating a deliberate attitude of reproach. Well . . . he would let her stew. A mosquito pinged past his head and he made a futile grab at it. The silence between them grew oppressive.

She continued to stare in front of her, avoiding his eyes. At last she spoke. "We have not met for nearly a week." Her voice was low and iced with politeness. "Why this sudden summons? May I ask when your wedding day is to be?"

"A month from tomorrow," Guiseppe laughed. "Are you so anxious to see the last of me?"

"No. That is not at all what I want." He was extraordinarily handsome. It was not fair.

"You would give me a good reference?"

"As a lover? I have no complaints, but neither have I a wide

experience."

"You are lucky in having studied under a master!"

"Who himself has in the past learned from older women!" She shrugged. "Claudia will reap the benefit. Italian men run true to form . . . the mature . . . the young . . . and back again through boredom to the—to the skilful!"

"I am a long way yet from reaching the stage when I wish to pleasure dowagers." He raised his hand in protest. "Oh I don't deny that it may come, Anna!" As he made a gesticulation the heavy ring on his finger sparkled in the light. "But not for a year or so. In any case it would be safer, would it not, one does not wish to confront angry husbands and dowagers have concrete ways of showing their appreciation." His facetiousness was brittle and he dropped abruptly his tone of banter. "May I inquire if you have been visiting dear Gina Barbieri?"

"Signora Barbieri?" Her pencilled eyebrows rose in surprise. "Certainly not. I wished first to talk to you."

So she *had* intended to make a fuss! He spoke harshly and his mouth took on an ugly line. "Keep out of my affairs. Do you hear?"

"Guiseppe," said Anna patiently, "they are mine also. I am going to have a child. Your child. No—please let me finish. When first I fell in love with you, from a wordly point of view you were not a great catch. You had brains and you had ambition. You had wicked sex appeal, and I adored you. Now, entirely on your own efforts, you are a success. You don't *need* Claudia's money. And I do need you. As well as being your mistress I happen to be a human being. I am not someone to whom you beckoned on a street. My family is not altogether insignificant. You cannot dismiss me so easily." Her back was as straight as a ruler as she rested the palms of her hands on the table's edge. "You don't love this girl, Guiseppe. It is all so needless."

"That is for me to decide." Guiseppe drained his glass. "Anna, won't you please be sensible? I will not deny that Claudia is rich. She is. One day she will be very, very rich." He broke off while he lit a cigarette. "One must be practical. My marriage will not be an affair of the heart . . . it will be an investment."

"From which you alone will draw the dividends?"

Guiseppe decided that this moment was as good as any for him to say his piece. Her attitude had made it easier for him. "Much as I regret it, with regard to ourselves, I am afraid that this evening must be good-bye. It has nothing to do with the baby, so don't think I am running away from responsibilities. That scrofulous old bitch, who will be my mother-in-law, has made it a stipulation. No extra-marital relationships." He shot a quick glance at Anna. "We've enjoyed ourselves together, have we not?" She did not answer and he said: "I shall of course give you a present . . . make some provision."

"A present?" There was pity in Anna's voice. "I've pointed out to you that I am not a street-walker. How naive you are! It is fortunate that your career is a builder's and not a diplomat's! Life is not quite so simple, Guiseppe. I am going to have your child, and the child is going to have a father. Today I went to a doctor and he confirmed what I had already suspected. If you refuse to marry me I will not go running to the Signora. I will go direct to Claudia . . . to your boring little virgin. I hear that she is very religious and 'correct'. I hear, too, that she is spoiled and that when she announced her intentions her parents were not exactly overjoyed by her choice of a husband." Anna took a gulp of the red wine and her tone grew mocking. "I cannot altogether blame them. If I had a young daughter I would have certain qualms about handing her over to you. For me it is different. I am what you so charmingly call 'qualified'. 'An apt pupil' was how you once put it. Claudia will be enrolled in a demanding school!"

Guiseppe's face was in shadow, while on Anna's the shaft of light fell from the hall like a spotlight on an actress. He saw the bitter line of her lips. This was no bluff. It was maddening that she had had to conceive after four years. He toyed with the idea that he might query or deny his paternity. She would know that he was lying and caution prompted him to leave the words unsaid. He understood that she was fighting not only to protect herself and the child, but also because she loved him, which made her the more formidable.

He had learned at the start that Anna had high standards, although they did not coincide with his own. It would never have struck him that his own, in the moral sense, were non-existent. Anna's worldliness was protective and feminine and

down to earth while his was selfish and ruthless. He had not worked and planned to reach such eminence as he had gained only to be banned by sentiment from scaling the higher peaks on the horizon.

Anna must be silenced, and there was one way only to achieve this and the way was . . . murder. It was unforeseen and regrettable but there was no alternative. The act of murder was simple in itself. It was the disposal of the body which presented difficulties, and the destruction of evidence.

"Marriage to me would not be so terrible, would it, Guiseppe?" Anna was sipping her wine. She put the glass down on the lace cloth. "We know each other well, and there would be no unpleasant surprises." She stretched out a hand and he took it in his. He must play for time. There was no sense in further antagonising her.

"We cannot decide tonight," he said. "We will have to think over what course to take."

Anna smiled, content that she was gaining ground. "I agree with you," she said. "We will try to arrange things so that no one is hurt more than can be helped."

He was sparring with her to no purpose. The last thing to benefit him would be the maintenance of a sullen silence, and an angry outburst would be worse. "You're right," he said. "Women should be the bosses. There'd be no more wars . . . no more want . . . and no more excitement!"

Guiseppe's mind was mulling over the crimes about which he had read. In every case the man had been caught by his clumsy concealment, or dismembering of the corpse. Should there be no body found it would be difficult, if not impossible, to bring a case. He had a vague idea that a prosecution could not be brought in such circumstances. Burial at sea was by no means foolproof. The dead had an awkward habit of getting themselves washed ashore. Incineration was rarely successful. Acid was both dangerous and complicated. What then? Where could Anna be concealed so that no suspicion would come his way?

She was speaking, elaborating their conversation and interrupting his musings. "There would be safety and security and, believe it or not, there would be discipline."

"As in the kindergarten."

"Which is healthier than the massacre of the arena!"

Guiseppe had a flash of inspiration. Fate was kind to him. He would take Anna to the tomb that Bastiani had uncovered and which would in a matter of hours be filled in for ever, covered by tons of rubble that in a week or so would be buried under the rising walls and girders of the eight-storeyed block of flats.

He would have to act quickly.

He reached out once more for her hand. "Anna," he said, "I am not accustomed to having a pistol put to my head." His laugh might have been spontaneous. "An apt simile—for really what you are suggesting is a shotgun wedding!"

"No," she said. "I am unarmed. All I want is your child's happiness, and yours. And my own."

"So that's the way it is!" Guiseppe got up and stepped towards her. He bent down and kissed the nape of her neck. "Perhaps you are right at that! 'Better the devil you know!' Can you believe that in a way I'm honestly rather relieved? Old habits are hard to break. I'm not at all sure that I haven't benefited from your shock treatment!" Tilting his face up towards the moon, momentarily swimming in a cloud-free patch of sky, he said: "The storm may pass over us. It seems to be moving south." Anna sat quite still, smiling at him. "What am I to do, my old-lady-of-the-sea?" Guiseppe asked. "I'm not looking forward to breaking the news to Claudia—nor to her parents. They may not take kindly to their child losing her candy, even if they did disapprove of me. What in the hell can I say? I could hardly plead a secret tendency to homosexuality!" He frowned. "How about tuberculosis?"

"Unconvincing," said Anna. "You're as strong as an ox. Between us we'll think of something." Content had returned to her face, making it beautiful. He was reminded of the day when he had met her. She had been serene and cool and out of place. It had been at a party in Roberto Lambelli's studio, and for the most part the guests had been film starlets and publicity men and decorators, with a sprinkling of rather down-at-heel Americans and English in self-imposed exile.

Guiseppe lifted the wine bottle. It was empty. "I'll go in and get some more," he said. "We will celebrate our engagement. I feel like a Mormon—and it's all your fault! You wait here."

He turned his wrist to look at his watch. "And then, darling, I'll drive you back to your flat. I'd say that an early bed is indicated—and alone, my poppet. Tomorrow we'll have to be alert, with all our wits about us, and our heads must be clear."

He went into the kitchen. From the wine rack in the tiled larder he chose a vintage burgundy. It was one that he had been saving for a special occasion. It would be Anna who would share it with him in the place of Claudia. He carried it to the sitting room. Behind a picture of the Nativity, and built flush with the wall, was a safe. He took down the picture and unclipped the ring from his gold key-chain. He unlocked the safe. Inside there were papers and money and the small amount of jewellery which he had inherited from his parents.

There was also a tiny pill box. It contained two tablets, one white and the other yellow. They had been issued to his father who, towards the end of the war, had worked in the Resistance against the Germans. The white one, or so he had been told, was a suicide pill—a way out should he have fallen into the hands of the Gestapo. The other, when slipped into a man's drink, would render him unconscious. Guiseppe did not know what had made him keep them. After his father's death his mother had pleaded with him for their destruction.

He tipped them into his hand, tempted to make use of the white pill, the effect of which he had heard was instantaneous—but then he would be left with a corpse. He put it back in the box and returned the box to its shelf. Relocking the safe he replaced the picture on its hook. Next he poured out the glasses of wine and into one of them he dropped the yellow tablet. It dissolved at once. He sniffed at the rim, and there was no unusual odour.

He carried out one glass and the bottle to where Anna was sitting. Then he came back for his own drink. He was silhouetted in the doorway as she rose from her chair, and there came the chink of glass as he proposed his toast: "To my captor!"

Anna laughed. She had a very attractive laugh. "To my captive!" She took a sip and stood cradling the glass.

"You must finish your drink in one draught," Guiseppe said, "or it will bring bad luck!" He drained his own and threw the glass against the wall. He smiled at her look of protest and

said: "It's a Russian custom!"

She imitated his action. The bottle was between them on the table. "It's a waste," she said indignantly. "It will spoil your set!"

"And now," said Guiseppe, "we must plan our future. I presume that as soon as we are married you will give up your flat?"

"Certainly. It's on a monthly lease."

They had talked for no more than three minutes before Anna's head fell forward. She made an abortive effort to sit up. "Guiseppe . . . I feel so very odd." She was slurred with sleep. "I can't keep my eyes open any longer. Could you . . . could you please drive me home?"

She was swaying from side to side, and for a minute he feared that she would slip to the floor. "Anna!" he said brusquely. "Anna!" Her mouth was slightly open and he could see the tip of her tongue between her parted lips. "Anna!" he repeated. "Wake up!" The girl did not stir.

Guiseppe threw away the stub of his cigarette and, taking the bottle with him, went into the bungalow. When he came out again he was carrying a small brush and a pan. He knelt down by the flower bed and swept up the remains of the broken glasses. He deposited them in the dustbin, covering them with coffee grounds and the discarded outer leaves of lettuce so that they would escape Sophia's notice.

The telephone started to ring. He did not want to answer it. It would be Claudia or Carlo, his younger brother—who probably wanted to borrow money, or perhaps it was his sister-in-law, Clara, speaking on Carlo's behalf. He did not wish to talk to any of them. All at once he changed his mind and decided to take the call. It might be as well to be able to establish his presence in the bungalow. He picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

It was a wrong number.

From the hall Guiseppe could see out on to the porch. Anna was slumped forward as he had left her. He walked out on to the verandah and stood over her. "I'm sorry, Anna," he said. "But you left me no choice."

Distasteful as it was, he must get on with the job. The sooner it was finished the better for him it would be. If his plans did not miscarry he should be in his bed shortly after

midnight.

The Fiat was parked a yard or so from the silvered gate. It had been painted purple and white to his specifications, and Guiseppe had a pang of fear because it was too easily recognisable. He would have to leave it at some distance from the site and carry Anna the rest of the way. Should they encounter any pedestrians they would think that he was helping her along. He could make a joke about her having a weak head, and having had one too many. Drunken girls no longer caused any comment in Rome.

Anna was sagging in her chair and when he spoke to her she did not answer. He shook her experimentally by the shoulders and she remained apathetic in his grip. He turned off the lights in the house and closed the front door behind him. Carrying her down the path her head lolled back, and a fine drizzle, no more than a heavy mist, settled on her face and bare arms. They met no one on the road. The district was only beginning to be built up and the street lighting was sketchy. A cat darted by, indistinct save for the blaze of its green eyes.

It was scarcely two miles to the excavation and he drove with extreme care. To the north-east the glow from the city gilded the sky. An incoming jet screeched overhead, shattering the peace by which he was surrounded. The rows of newly planted trees lining the verge slid by, the houses became more widely spaced, and soon he had reached the waste land.

Guiseppe drew in to the rutted track that formed one boundary of the building site and extinguished his headlights. He sat back listening to the tiny noises of the night. A moth blundered against his windscreen. A scavenging mongrel dog, ever on guard, raised its muzzle and trotted silently away. Guiseppe shifted his wide shoulders into a more comfortable position. Before he made a move he must make certain that he had not been observed. Ten minutes passed before he climbed out on to the clay of the by-road, its surface sticky from the gentle rain.

He walked round to Anna's side of the car and gathered her up in his arms. Even now he could not believe in what he was doing. He looked straight ahead to where, half an hour's drive away, the capital hummed under its million neon lights. At the side of the road was a shallow ditch, the depository of a collection of rubbish blown there by the gusty winds of spring. In

it had been dumped all manner of filth, broken bottles, disintegrating cardboard packaging and jagged rusted cans. His boots crunched on slivers of glass as he lifted Anna across and on to the stretch of barren land. Scudding clouds obscured the moon and such light as there was gleamed intermittently. Thunder growled and rumbled from a long way off.

There was no one on the site. The huge machines were motionless, covered with tarpaulins, looming above him like petrified creatures from another world. Anna was heavy as he toiled with her over the rough ground, stumbling in his clay-smeared boots. How different things could appear once daylight had gone! He should be near to the spot where he had talked with Bastiani, but he had no recollection of the towering pyramid of earth, tilted at a hazardous angle, by which he was confronted. He halted, trying to get his bearings. The mound had, of course, not been there earlier in the evening. After the men had knocked off, Bastiani must have stayed behind to make it, in preparation for the completion of the filling in at dawn. Yes, it was all right—there was the bulldozer a little way to the left.

Guiseppe skirted the base of the teetering pile and saw with relief the black slit of the tomb's entrance. The topmost steps that led down to it were already littered with earth and débris, broken slats of wood, shreds of sacking and fragments of crumbling cement. Near the base of the heap a beam stuck out, giving the stairway no more than a three foot clearance. As he had estimated, half an hour should be ample for Bastiani to wipe out all traces of the sepulchre's existence.

He laid Anna on the ground, propped against the pile of earth and picked his way down the flight of steps to reconnoitre, bending low to creep under the jutting beam. On the last step he paused to flick his lighter. Inside he was forced to stoop for the ceiling was too low to permit him to stand upright. The walls were devoid of frescos. Save for the absence of a cross it might have been the resting place of some early Christian. The sarcophagus lay on a stark slab of stone. To satisfy his curiosity Guiseppe was for an instant tempted to prise open the coffin, but he had no tools and was fully aware of the foolhardiness of lingering any longer than was absolutely imperative. He looked up the narrow well to the stormy sky. From where he stood the

section of it that he could see was bisected by the massive beam which had jutted out so inconveniently from the mound. He listened for any sound from the world outside, but the silence was unbroken. He closed the lighter with a snap and went up the steps.

Apart from the difficult negotiation of the beam it was awkward carrying Anna down the steep steps, for the treads were scarcely wider than his feet, and had been made treacherous by the damp leaves and the straw that had drifted in. He picked his way circumspectly. The entrance was too narrow for his powerful shoulders and he had to pause and adjust his burden and edge in sideways. It was dark as pitch and he paced slowly forward until the toecap of his boot jarred against the block which supported the sarcophagus. He lowered Anna on to the smooth stone and, with one arm supporting her, fumbled for his cigarette lighter. Why had he not brought a torch?

Anna was as limp as a dummy. The lashes fanned down on her cheek and she was breathing deeply under the influence of the drug. He put her down gently and, staring down at her unconscious figure, crossed her arms over her chest. It was hard to take in that the reason he had brought her here was to kill her, and that her death could be delayed no longer. She had loved him and once he had loved her, this girl with whom he had slept so often, and he could not bring himself to leave her to be buried alive. His hands were big and strong and capable and for a minute he gazed at them in fascination, before he closed them round her soft throat, where he could feel the blood pulsing in the veins of her neck.

He shut off the little flame. What had to be done would be easier in the dark. He would be as quick and as merciful as possible. He was not a killer by nature. He detested physical violence. He was activated by forces beyond his control. This was not murder, he told himself. It was self preservation. Anna had to die.

As he straightened up his breathing was hoarse. She had not struggled. It was over. Irrationally he longed for hot water and a towel and soap. Anna's skin was warm and he knew that for a while it would remain so, and somehow the knowledge reassured him. She would not be claimed by the clammy chill of death until he was back among familiar surroundings, and by

then the cold figure would have less reality for him.

His impulse was to get away, to leave as swiftly as he could, but before he drove back to his house he had to be positive that the entrance to the vault was disguised and that there was nobody in the vicinity. Sometimes out of work youths and tramps sneaked in during the early hours to sleep on these building sites. There was one boy in particular, a beggar and a simpleton known as Guilio whom he had ordered off twice during the course of that day. Usually there was a night-watchman, but old Mario had complained of feeling unwell, and Guiseppe had not bothered to enlist a replacement for one night, since all the equipment was either immobilised or else had been secured under lock and key. Now he was glad of this omission. It had been his subconscious realisation that there would be no watchman that had given him the idea of the tomb as the perfect hiding place.

He was quite alone with Anna . . . if, in fact, the figure on the slab *was* Anna? The walls pressed in on him, menacing and claustrophobic. He was waiting for their nutcracker crunch. It was all a fantasy in which he had not really taken part. He had been merely an observer, regarding the performances of others.

Guiseppe walked to the opening, his boots eerily noisy on the fitted blocks of stone. He would begin the filling in of Anna's grave himself—enough to make entry awkward—no more, or Bastiani might well note the change and become suspicious that vandals had forced their way in. Guiseppe did not propose to start up the bulldozer. It would attract too much attention. He would be able to obstruct the passage of the stairway by using a spade. He had a duplicate key to the shed in which the smaller tools were stored. When he was finished it would seem that a part of the insecure pyramid had slipped forward. The unseen presence of the dead girl was palpable. In the confined space which they shared he could smell her scent. It had a French name . . . '*Je reviens*'?

In his hurry to get into the fresh air his foot slipped as he ran up the steps and he fell forward. His arm shot out and automatically grasped at the beam which he had seen from below. Under the frenzied grip of his fingers, and disturbed by the considerable weight of his body behind them, the mound of

rubbish trembled and swayed and cascaded down in an avalanche.

Guiseppe staggered backwards, choking with dust and wiping at his eyelids with the sleeve of his shirt. When he was able to open his streaming eyes he was in darkness. He flipped his lighter. The dust was swirling and gradually settling, making him cough and retch. He groped his way to the foot of the stairway. It was blocked solidly with earth and stones and shattered wedges of plaster and cement from the mound outside. He scrabbled at the mass with his bare hands but was unable to make an impression for, as trickles of clay fell away, he encountered boulders or shaped stones that had become tightly wedged one against another.

His watch told him that it was nearly midnight. In six hours or less Bastiani would be at work finishing the task which he had been bribed and detailed to do, and then he would be sealed in for ever. After the killing of Anna he could not cry out or scream for help, he dared not do so even if there was a slender chance that he might be heard. He was an outcast... a murderer.

He snapped off the lighter in which he knew that only a drop of fuel remained. He refused to turn his head in the direction of the sarcophagus. Anna was of the past and he must not think of her. He could only wait. Perhaps Pietro would excavate the stair shaft before he started work with the bulldozer, if only to make certain that the foundations would be secure. Surely, in order to complete a professional job, he would have to do so? In that case, should Bastiani discover that Guiseppe had a... a companion, he would have to throw himself on his mercy. Fortunately he had money—and he could pay him well.

Guiseppe crouched against a corner of the wall. At intervals he would make use of his lighter to glance at the time. Ten minutes past one. Five minutes to two. The night was endless. Once he thought he could hear the patter of running footsteps. Guilio's? He was not to be trusted, and he would be likely to have companions with him. Guiseppe determined to keep his head. If he did not panic all would be well. He could prevent Bastiani from actually entering the vault. He would shout to him to keep out... emphasise the imminent danger of the roof's total collapse.

Incredibly as it seemed to Guiseppe, he must have fallen asleep, for the next time he consulted his watch it pointed to half past four. Another hour and a half crawled by. Guiseppe sprang up. What was that noise? There was someone above, somebody who was not so very far away. Faintly he could hear a harsh grating sound followed by the clank and clatter of metal, and then the rhythm of an engine. To his horror he realised that the bulldozer was moving. Pietro Bastiani, true to his promise, had arrived.

Guiseppe hurried over to the foot of the steps. The flame of his lighter was weak and flickering. "Pietro . . ." he shouted. "Pietro . . . stop! I implore you to stop in the name of the Holy Virgin. I'm down here . . . I'm in the tomb . . . It's Signor Ricci."

The racket increased. From his perch on the driver's seat it would be impossible for Bastiani to hear him. Guiseppe wiped away the sweat that was pouring down his face. "Pietro . . . Pietro . . . you *must* hear me . . . you must . . ."

The clang and grinding of the machine was becoming increasingly dulled and blanketed, and at the end of half an hour it had decreased to a murmur, and then it ceased altogether and the silence closed in. "Pietro . . . Pietro . . ." Guiseppe was deafened by his own cries. "You haven't gone . . . you can't have gone . . . come back, Pietro . . . come back, I beg . . . it's Guiseppe Ricci . . ."

The air was growing stale and fetid with the stench that wet earth exudes in an enclosed space, and Guiseppe started to tear anew at the débris in the stair well, but he made no impression for it had become packed hard. He was trapped. He began to sob, all manhood gone, crossing himself and praying incoherently, his eyes focused on the minute triangular flame which, as he watched it, flowered and died.

Through the darkness there came a movement and a hardly audible sigh as Anna stirred painfully upon the stone sarcophagus. She spoke in a rasping whisper and each word was an effort. "Guiseppe? Don't . . . ever . . . leave . . . me. Please . . . say it . . . Please . . . tell me . . . my darling . . . that . . . you . . . will never . . . leave . . . me."

8

THE YELLOW DRESSING GOWN

LILIAN HAMMERTON sat at the writing table in her bedroom. She turned her head and looked out of the window at the garden in which she spent a lot of her time. The roses were blazing in the two long beds. 'Like neon lights,' Jason had said. She was sure that her husband had the better taste, but with such a small garden there was no space for a restrained lay-out, and she was unable to resist the beguiling catalogues which were sent to her. Besides, she liked colour.

She noticed that the lawn would benefit from mowing and that the flowers in the herbaceous border needed to have the dead heads removed. Delphiniums, campanula, Regale lilies, Canterbury Bells... she had tried to keep to a scheme of blues and white. Jason had told her on their honeymoon that blue was his favourite colour.

So she had worn blue dresses. With her brown eyes and dark reddish hair they had not suited her, and after a while, at Jason's suggestion, she had reverted to the pinks and greens and burnt orange which she had worn formerly. Blue was for Carola Haig-Dunfield. It set off her gay beauty to perfection.

Jason knew that Lilian loved the country and when he had bought the cottage he had done so largely on her behalf. It was not far from Pangbourne and within easy reach of London. At weekends Henrietta was left behind in Cheyne Gardens in the care of Nurse Rooney. Jason had said that Lilian must have both time off from the child and a change of scene, and so it had been arranged that Maeve Rooney should be in sole charge of the girl and take her own two 'half days' during the week.

Carola Haig-Dunfield, or 'La' as Jason called her, was her husband's mistress. Originally she had been a friend of Lilian's. Those distant days now seemed to have been in another incarnation, but in point of fact they had been scarcely four years ago.

'La' had been living with Jason for several months before Lilian had found out, and then it had been because 'La' had wished it. She had made the position plain without saying a word, partly by planned silences when Lilian had been talking about Jason, partly by her level and unsmiling stare when Lilian had said: 'If he ever left me I don't think that I could go on living', and most of all by her complete assurance and cool dissociation with which she had emphasised the difference in their ages. 'La' was in her late twenties. She was also a prize bitch.

'La' had several characteristics which Lilian thought *must* be unattractive to Jason, one of which was her habit of putting names into their diminutive. 'La' had been of her own invention, or perhaps it stemmed from her baby days. Jason was 'Jay', and Virginia Wick, a mutual friend, had been dubbed 'Gin'. Nurse Rooney had become 'Roo'. She had left Lilian's name severely alone, which should have been a pointer.

'La' was a bohemian. At least that was how she thought of herself. She would boast frequently of her penniless and nomadic childhood, and wore it as a medal. To Lilian she was merely aggravatingly untidy with an undeveloped sense of the sanctity of personal possessions. She was a borrower who forgot to return the articles borrowed, and when finally she did so their owners had little further use for them. Books came back dog-eared, lipsticks were handed back squashed and squalid, and clothes, even after a day's wear, had to be sent at once to the cleaners.

She was, however, extremely pretty and, on her own outrageous wavelength, very amusing. Mockery was her weapon, backed by dry self ridicule sparingly used. After she had told one of her stories, when Lilian ventured a comment, 'La' would pause and then she would laugh appreciatively and turn to Jason: 'Don't you think Lilian's *funny*, "Jay"? Lilian, you *are* so funny!' and Lilian's contribution would immediately be devalued into an unnecessary and rather boring observation.

'La' professed to be anti-marriage, which seemed to amuse Jason, although Lilian suspected the sincerity of these views. To Lilian's certain knowledge she had, immediately after leaving school, embarked upon a series of turbulent love affairs. She was highly sexed and must be, Lilian imagined, what men meant

by being 'good in bed'. She worked in an obscure art gallery in Knightsbridge.

Lilian was devoted to Jason. They had been married for a long time, and until 'La's' advent he had, so far as she knew, been faithful to her. It was hard that 'La' had taken him away while Henrietta had been so desperately ill. It had been Henrietta's illness (she was now spoken of as 'Retta') that had been the cause of Lilian's breakdown.

The child had been ten when polio had struck, and it had left her paralysed in her arms and in her right leg. It had happened while they had gone as a quartet on holiday in the west of Ireland, and Lilian blamed herself bitterly for having failed to take more effective action. She had thought that Henrietta was suffering from 'flu', and precious days had been lost before a doctor had been summoned from Limerick and it had been on his advice that the nightmare dash by ambulance had been made to Dublin. She would never forgive herself for what she was now convinced had been her negligence.

They—or to be exact—she and Henrietta had come back to England after an interim of three exhausting months. Lilian realised how lucky she was in the fact that they could afford a nurse. It meant at least that the child could be in her own home. Jason was making quite a lot of money, and when his mother died he would be really rich, and as his only child, Henrietta eventually would in her turn be an heiress.

It had been shortly after their return to London that 'La' had let Lilian know about Jason. She had tried to take the deadly knowledge calmly, had told herself that she was not the first wife who had had to face determined competition, but she knew that she was ill-equipped to combat this particular form of piracy. In retrospect she knew that it had been 'La' who had worked upon Jason to encourage her to go to Hill Hall for a 'cure'.

Looking back she could not really blame Jason. Not that she had ever blamed him for anything. She must have been impossible to live with. She had not made a scene about 'La'. She had tried to salve her pride and hide her breaking heart by a pretence of ignorance. She had been over-bright and had smiled and laughed far too much, talking irritating nonsense on a high hysterical note, or else she had retreated into bouts of depres-

sion and melancholia during which she had cried incessantly and refused to speak or eat.

Her breakdown had sent her away for a further six weeks, during which she received therapy and shock treatment before she was pronounced cured. It had been a most unpleasant period. Upon her 'discharge', as she chose to call it, 'La's' visits to the flat gradually grew less frequent. Jason found it necessary to absent himself more and more, explaining to Lilian that he did not want to put her under the strain of office entertaining until she was fully recovered. It was an eminently reasonable behaviour and she could make no protest.

It had been at that point that 'La' had begun to show her hand. She had dismissed Lilian as a serious rival, ignored her claims as 'Jay's' wife, and had treated her with patronising tolerance. Her attitude, most cleverly controlled, had been that Lilian should be pitied—even pampered, and that no one appreciated more than she did 'Jay's' need for loyalty.

She had made a great play for Cass, Jason's boxer dog. She never missed a trick. After Lilian had come back from Hill Hall Jason had taken her for two weeks holiday in Yugoslavia, and while they had been away 'La' had cared for Cass and won his affection with no trouble at all. On their first evening at home she had encouraged him to his own fireside.

'Cass—aren't you pleased to be back where you belong? Say "hello" to Lilian. Go *on* . . I'm not your owner. You are a bad boy! Lilian—say "walkies"!' She had laughed up at Jason. 'Aren't dogs insulting, Jay, when they won't do their stuff?'

Lilian had paid no attention to Cass. She had occupied herself with her needlework, feigning indifference. Keeping a watchful eye on Jason Cass had yawned and stretched himself out at 'La's' feet.

Jason appeared to be sublimely ignorant of Lilian's cognizance of his relationship with 'La', and treated her with unfailing solicitude, and of late, when Miss Haig-Dunfield was invited to Chevne Gardens, there was usually another man to make a fourth, or occasionally they would be a party of six.

Lilian was well aware that 'La' had made up her mind to marry Jason, and that she was in no hurry to do so. She could afford to wait and was biding her time. It was clear to her also that 'La' was banking on Lilian's love for her husband to

enable her to gain her end. If Jason was able to persuade her that his happiness lay in his freedom—then 'La' was certain that Lilian would give him a divorce. On the other hand, Lilian knew 'La' far better than Jason could ever know her and was well aware that in the drama of her life she had reached the end of Act One, and that she wanted a man of her own who could give her permanent security—a man by whom, luckily, she was attracted. She had had plenty of experience and she had settled for 'Jay'.

Lilian glanced at her watch. It was five o'clock. Jason should be here by half past seven at the latest. They were to have a cold supper, Vichysoise, salmon, and strawberries and cream. She had already made the preparations. All at once she wondered if he would telephone and make some excuse to postpone his arrival until the following day. Should he do so it would take all of her self-control not to burst into tears, which she knew would be fatal.

To occupy her mind she must go into the garden and tidy up the border. Where had she put the secateurs? They had not been in their proper place on the shelf in the shed, and she had a vague idea that she might have brought them into the house. She pulled out the drawer of the writing table. There was not a sign of them. There was a catalogue of 'Quality Bulbs' from de Jagers which had been delivered on Monday morning, two or three bills which wanted her attention... electricity... water rates... one from the local garage. She pushed them impatiently to one side, and her fingers touched a cold spherical surface. Smiling nostalgically she took out the crystal ball with which once she had told fortunes. She had not held it for years and indeed had forgotten all about it. Until Jason had bought the cottage it had been in store with their surplus furniture. She scrabbled around at the rear of the drawer until she found the ebony stand exquisitely carved with the heads of dragons. Sitting back in her chair she weighed the sphere in her hand, tempted to try to see if she had retained her modest psychic powers, a talent of which Jason had most strongly disapproved. He had an inborn hostility to soothsayers and spiritualists and had declared them to be rogues or charlatans. 'In either case,' he had said with considerable acerbity, 'they are best left alone.'

Lilian had always been somewhat apprehensive about her 'gift', had been unwilling to give card or crystal readings to her friends, and when, with politeness it had been impossible to evade the issue she had maintained an adamant silence about the revelation of any unpleasant happening, contenting herself with giving such advice as might possibly avert its occurrence, for the accuracy of her vision had depressed and alarmed her.

She put the crystal on its stand and bent her head over it. At first she could see nothing. The palms of her hands cupping the sides glimmered indistinctly, but looked as solid as sausage meat on a butcher's slab. The minutes went by, and while she concentrated the interior of the globe clouded and gradually cleared, like morning mist dissolving under the onset of the sun.

She was peering into a room papered in stripes of lime and lemon. A bed was pushed up against a wall and the bedhead was covered in a buttoned quilting of grey and white chintz. In the bed a little girl was lying, her dark hair spread out over the pillow. The room was one she knew well. It was on the ground floor of their maisonette in Cheyne Gardens—and the child was Henrietta. Beyond the window beside the bed the forked branches of the fig tree which straddled the courtyard were bare of leaves and showed starkly against a darkening wintry sky.

The door opened and a woman came in. She was wearing a yellow dressing gown and on her feet were slippers of the same colour. It must be, Lilian thought, an afternoon in autumn. She realised that it was herself whom she was watching—but when had the incident happened? What was she doing? Curiously, for the art of necromancy was tied up with what was to be, it came as a shock that the scene had not yet occurred, and that it lay in the future, for only yesterday she had bought the yellow dressing gown at Harrods, and had asked for it to be delivered to her when she got back to London after the weekend. She could see that it was no longer new. It had faded with washing, and one of the cuffs was frayed.

Henrietta did not move. She was asleep. When her visitor perched herself on the side of the bed she did not stir. Lilian sat engrossed, wishing that the picture was clearer. For what reason was she being shown this trivial incident? She watched herself leaning forward, and there was something furtive in her

action. Why? She was slipping a pillow from beneath the child's head. What the hell was she doing? She gazed in horror as the pillow was pressed over Henrietta's face and held there with brutal force. The little girl's paralysed arms did not even twitch. Lilian was rigid with fear as she watched her taut figure engaged in the dreadful task of suffocation, for it was murder that she was witnessing, the murder of her adored daughter. She gave a cry of terror and, jerking her head upwards, encountered the glow of the glorious July afternoon.

Lilian shivered as she lowered her eyes once more to the crystal, but just as the mist had cleared it was creeping back inexorably, eddying like sluggishly rising smoke from a damp bonfire. She pushed the crystal away, stunned and appalled by what she had seen. Through the wide flung window there came the drowsy murmur of bees in the lavender.

Lilian dug her nails into her hands, afraid that she was about to faint. She refused to believe, to credit, the shocking thing that had been revealed to her. Was she to go completely insane and be the murderer of her own child? If God existed He would not allow life to be so terrible—therefore life was a denial of God's existence.

Dimly she could hear the insistent ringing of a bell. It was the clamour of the telephone from the sitting room. Leaning heavily against the writing table Lilian managed to pull herself to her feet. Perhaps by the time she reached the sitting room the caller would have rung off. She could not speak to anyone, not yet, not until she had been given a respite in which to recover. She refused to answer it. She stood propped against the wall at the foot of the stairway.

Jason. It must, of course, be Jason. She forced her legs to hurry. "Yes?" she said, lifting the receiver.

"Lilian?" Jason's voice was clipped. He wasted no words on the telephone. It was one of his few economies. "You took so long to answer I thought you must be out. Look! I can't get down tonight . . . in fact I doubt very much if I can manage tomorrow. I'll be with you for luncheon on Sunday and we can drive back together after tea. I'll come by train." He hesitated, searching for an adequate explanation. "I've a date with a fellah from Barringers' in New York. He should have been here today but couldn't make it. Got tied up in Paris. You know

what these tycoons are like! Only time he's able to give me is tomorrow evening. Sorry to change plans at the last moment—but there it is! It might lead to a big deal." He stopped, and then added: "Look after yourself!"

"Yes, Jason, I quite understand." Lilian was about to hang up when she heard his voice again.

"Anything the matter?" he asked.

"No," she said. "No, Jason. I'm just . . . disappointed."

"Well goodbye, old girl."

"Goodbye."

Lilian went out into the garden, the sunshine warm on her skin. A swift arrowed gracefully from the eaves in search of the myriad insects which soon would begin their frenetic aerial ballets. She was numb, but fully conscious of the beauty surrounding her. She would like to stay imprisoned in this garden for ever, in a timeless and beautiful July, where she would be safe, and where she would never have to see another human being . . . not Maeve Rooney . . . not Jason . . . not Henrietta. Especially not Henrietta.

However hard she tried the nagging could not be kept at bay. Jason had told her about his business dinner, but at most it was a ninety minute drive, and he was free tonight and most of the next day. And so, no doubt, was 'La'. She asked herself if Jason would go back to Cheyne Gardens before Sunday. She thought it probable that he would, that he would stop off to say good-night to Henrietta on his way to 'La'. He might even stay to read to her for half an hour. Or maybe he had been at the flat when he had telephoned. She had no means of knowing. There had not been any background noises—no other voices.

There was no choice left to her. After what the crystal had told her it was plain that dementia lay ahead, madness that would lead her to the abominable murder of the one who, next to Jason, she loved the most in the world. If either of them must die it should surely be herself. Jason adored the child and would give her every care.

Lilian did not think that it would be hard to die. She had nothing to which she could look forward. This morning Jason had been on the verge of asking her for a divorce. He had not put his request into words but it had been there in his mind. She knew and understood him so well. He had not wanted tc

hurt her, had not known how to say it.

If she were to take her own life the way would be open for him and 'La', and he would have no reason to reproach himself. 'La' would see to that, would point out to him her mental instability. 'Poor Lilian! "Jay", darling, you're not to blame. Don't think I can't understand. In a way she acted very courageously. It's all over. You've yourself to think of—and "Retta".'

Lilian would leave no note of farewell. No explanation. She would lock her door so that when Mrs. Roberts came in the morning she would not have the shock of finding her dead without warning. She would sense that something was wrong and would go for help.

She went into the tiny dining room and took a bottle of whisky from the tray on the side table. It would make it easier. She knew little about drugs, but had an idea that alcohol accentuated their effect. The whisky would serve a dual purpose.

Slowly she climbed the stairs and walked along the landing to her bedroom. It was such a short time ago since she had put the finishing touches to the cottage. Those Victorian theatrical prints—which they had discovered on a barrow in the Portobello Road . . .

She sat down at her writing desk. Beside the bed on a two-tiered bamboo table was a bottle of parti-coloured sleeping pills which she had grown into the habit of taking since her 'discharge' from the sanatorium. It was half full. There was a new month's supply on an upper shelf in the bathroom cupboard. She went along to collect it, together with a tooth glass. She arranged the sleeping pills in neat rows, lined up like guardsmen on parade. Her eyes rested on the crystal ball squatting on its carved stand. Suddenly she was grateful for the impulse which had made her use it.

In a recess of the bureau, above the line of drawers, there was a photograph of Jason and herself which had been taken on their wedding day. How young she looked, and how very handsome Jason had been! The leading pair of the child attendants were the only ones in focus. They had been the youngest—a little page, and a bridesmaid who had carried her train. The small boy was grinning, displaying a gap where two of his baby teeth were missing. His companion had a serious

expression and was weighed down by the weight of her responsibilities. Mark Thornton and Jenny Fenley. She had attended Mark's own wedding in the spring. Lilian turned the photograph face downwards on the dark green leather of the table's top.

She poured out an inch of whisky. It burned her throat and she pondered the wisdom of getting herself a jug of water but rejected the idea. She picked up three of the pills, resolutely washing them down with the raw spirit. Then she got up and locked the door. Back in her chair she continued mechanically to swallow the pills, and after ten minutes there was none left and the whisky bottle was more than a third empty.

What would the moment of death be like? Would she—deep in a coma—know that she had died? Would the end be peaceful, a gentle drifting into quiet waters, or would she be condemned to experience the suffocation which had been lying in wait for Henrietta? Surely not, for she was paying off her debts in advance. She was unable to understand why the Church was so cruel in its attitude to suicides. She supposed that in the past she would have been buried at a crossroads in unconsecrated ground.

She remembered the number of people whom she had known who had made the 'transition'. The term caused her to smile. It was so mealy-mouthed. Everyone had to die sooner or later, so it couldn't be so horrible. Her parents... boys she had known at her dancing class who had been killed in the war... her darling Nanny, who had been a victim of the blitz... Tim Melbury, who had met his death motor racing... dear Ellie, dead in an air disaster . . . and many many more. Was there an afterlife? And if so, would she meet them again?

It was ten minutes since she had taken the last of the capsules and she was beginning to relax. She poured out another measure of whisky and lifting up the bottle thought that it was as heavy as lead.

Now, she told herself wryly, was the final occasion to put her psychic aptitude to the test. Lilian's arm stretched out to the crystal and drew it in front of her. She cradled it in the fingers of one hand, the other supporting her chin. The crystal ball was as void and meaningless as if it had been made of ordinary glass. She was finding it impossible to concentrate. It was sleep that she craved . . . sleep. And to have done.

She had no notion of how long she had waited before the clouding of the crystal began. She could hear the beating of her heart, but it was coming from her brain and not her body, a dull thudding which was increasing in volume. And by degrees the mist vanished and she was again in the room with the lemon and lime striped paper, and it was as if a film projector had stopped, and was starting up once more at the following frame.

"Oh, *no*!" Lilian's protest was a sigh. She was praying to the God whom she had denied. "No . . . oh no!" Were the final moments of her consciousness to be dedicated to viewing what-might-have-been? Was she to be forced, in the rôle of spectator, to be present at the culmination of a murder which now would not occur? She knew that she had been presumptuous in seeking to pierce the veil shrouding her own death, but to put her through the torture of Henrietta's fictitious agony was too bestial.

From some distant plane in the recesses of her mind a voice was speaking to her harshly: 'You are so *funny*, Lilian. Why must you always get things wrong? You're so utterly pathetic, I could almost feel sorry for you!'

Through waves of infinite fatigue Lilian saw herself rise from the bed and toss back her hair. Henrietta's face was buried in the pillow in absolute quiescence. The woman in the bathrobe straightened up. Lilian made an effort to look away, but she was unable to move a muscle. All power, all initiative, had left her. She could not bear to have to see her expression . . . dreaded to encounter her own face contorted in abysmal misery or fear or, worst of all, alight with exultant insanity.

The scene in the crystal had a flawless clarity, and she was helpless to withdraw her gaze. As she got to her feet the woman turned her head on its lovely neck and looked straight in her direction—and the beautiful azure blue eyes were bright with malice and mockery.

Lilian was incapable of rousing herself. She was sinking fast into the quicksands of inertia.

The woman in the yellow dressing gown was 'La'.

9

WAITING FOR TRAINS

"WATERLOO and Charing Cross" enunciated the refined voice of the announcer. "The train about to leave platform four stops at Waterloo and Charing Cross only."

The fat man in the corner opposite to George shot back his striped cuff and glowered angrily at the watch in the wide-banded bracelet on his wrist in an affronted manner. "Nearly twenty minutes late," he complained indignantly. "It's perfectly disgraceful." He gave his paper a vicious shake.

"Well," said a little man who was sitting next to him, conversationally, "that's not too bad, we were a quarter of an hour behind time leaving Salisbury."

"If there's one thing I detest," said a woman who must have been his wife, "it's standing around on railway stations. Nothing is more aggravating than waiting for trains." She glanced round the carriage as if she had made an original 'bon mot'.

The fat man who had grumbled did not answer, and the talk died. George closed his eyes. Waiting-for-trains pounded the wheels, waiting-for-trains, waiting-for-trains. It must be many years ago, George thought, since he had waited-for-trains, waited-for-trains, waited-for-trains...

His little office had been on the left of the station's main entrance. Above the door was tacked a notice, hand printed in square, rather irregular red lettering: 'R.T.O.'—and underneath in smaller and more crowded black letters was his name. Lieut. G. Barrow. The office was bisected by a high counter which served the dual purpose of offering some protection to the Railway Transport Officer from the importunate soldiers, and also of affording, by reason of its wide top, a suitable surface for the display of the numerous rules and regulations deemed to be necessary for war-time travel in an occupied country, both for military personnel and for the occasional civil-

ian passenger.

This shelf had become intricately patterned by rings and semi-circles, memorials of many cups of tea. The solitary electric bulb hung unshaded from the centre of the ceiling. The windows gave on to the bleak station approach. In winter the room was bitterly cold, and in the heat of summer festoons of fly-papers rapidly collected their quota of victims, indeed so quickly did they do so, that after a few hours there remained scanty space for more belated arrivals who, intent on suicide, had to crawl over the stiff or still spasmodically struggling bodies of the earlier comers.

Following the end of actual hostilities, and after his armoured car regiment had been disbanded as being redundant, George had been posted to the border town of Dresselburg as an unwilling member of Movement Control. He disliked the job cordially, resented the imbecility of having been cast for it, knew nothing of railway workings and was merely filling in time until the delirious day of his demobilisation.

The outer office was on the other side of the station hall and gave directly on to the railway lines. His staff there consisted of a sergeant, a lance corporal and half a dozen private soldiers. These latter were constantly being changed. The corporal had been a railwayman in civilian life and in consequence took a certain interest in the work. The others were frankly waiting for 'demob'—the drabness of their routine being made tolerable by various profitable and involved transactions concerning cigarettes and coffee on the one hand and cameras and typewriters on the other.

George Barrow was tall and thin and fair, and thirty-five years old. An additional reason for his loathing of his present occupation was the extremely long hours during which he had to be on duty, hours when he had nothing whatsoever to do. He had gone to his billet and was sitting on the edge of his bed about to pull off his second boot when there was a tap on his door. He had been expecting it, for his room was at the end of the landing in the stationmaster's house and he had heard the inexorable clumping of the night clerk's feet as he came along the passage.

George looked at his watch and saw that it was a quarter to twelve. He sighed. The door opened to reveal not Smith, the

night man, but Corporal Thompson. George regarded him with surprise. "Hello, Thompson, thought you'd gone to bed."

"So I had, sir," replied Thompson gloomily, "but Smith came and got me up. Major Humphries wants you on the phone. Seems we've got another of them Specials in the morning," his humorous mouth relaxed in a smile, "at 05.30 shitting hours."

"O.K. Tell him I'm over with U.N.R.R.A. and will call him back as soon as I get in." He knew it would take a couple of minutes to put on his boots again and finish dressing, and Humphries' sense of his own importance forbade him to be kept waiting. George had been up since half past six that morning and was tired. Apparently H.Q. never gave a thought that sleep was necessary for those labouring in the wilderness.

When he got back to the office it took him nearly half an hour to get through to Humphries. While he was holding on George wondered why the hell these advices always came through at the last moment. They'd all been hitting it up at the Officers' Club, he supposed. He doodled on the dog-eared blotting paper, carefully shading in triangles and squares with a blue pencil. Finally he made his connection. He spoke into the receiver: "Dresselburg here," he said with false brightness.

A voice began to clack at the other end. "Hello . . . that you, Barrow? Where in God's name were you when I rang before?"

"I had to go along and see U.N.R.R.A., sir, to check about the D.P. train at nine tomorrow morning."

"Oh, did you! You never seem to be there when you're wanted. That's the worst of you odds and sods. Listen. There's a Special coming to you tomorrow at 05.30 hours. Train number: S two oblique seven three five, with figures two eight two men. Got that? I repeat, have you got that?" He was being unnecessarily offensive. "I want extra sentries laid on at all station entrances, and eight lorries and drivers. Better have them down there by 05.00."

"Right, sir. But where do I get the extra men?"

"How do I know? Use your initiative, can't you?" George thought Humphries sounded vaguely drunk. "Oh, try to get them from the Transit Camp," he continued impatiently, "—and the lorries too. With petrol for a return journey of

fifty miles."

"But there'll be no one there at this hour except the night clerk," George objected. "I know. I've tried them before."

"Well," Humphries suggested jocosely, "rout em out of bed." And the line went dead.

Rout 'em out of bed! It was three miles to the Transit Camp and George had no form of transport, his solitary vehicle being, as usual, in workshops. Perhaps if he could have gone over and seen the Adjutant he could have explained better. He wasn't such a bad chap.

'That bloody R.T.O.!' He knew what was thought of Movement Control up there! Reluctantly he got the operator. There was, as he had known there would be, considerable difficulty in locating the Adjutant. The clerk said he thought he was out of camp, and it was not until George, in desperation and suspecting that this message was only to put him off, insisted on speaking to the Camp Commandant in person, that the Adjutant was found and persuaded to come to the telephone. Humphries demands, which George repeated, were ill received.

"My dear fellah, it's quite out of the question. We've simply not got the personnel—and it's far too late to lay on the lorries. Why on earth must you always get on to us at such short notice? (It's some damned R.T.O.)" George heard him say in an aside. "In any case," he asked querulously, "why all the flap —and where are the lorries going to? What's it all about?"

"All I was told was that they must have enough petrol for fifty miles," George said. "It's top secret, I gather. He could sympathise with the involuntary jeering laugh that greeted this piece of information. George had no strong feelings of loyalty towards his senior officers since he himself had not been impressed by such of his superiors as he had encountered. He disliked these by-ways of the Army in which he was floundering.

"Blast you!"" said the Adjutant after a lengthy and unfriendly silence. "I suppose this time we'll have to do what we can to help you out, but try this sort of thing once more and you can go and chase yourself from here to Amsterdam for all I care. Nine O.R.s and eight lorries to report to you 05.00 hours? All right, but do, for Christ's sake, ask your people to give us more warning. Well, good-*night*!"

Again George heard the angry slam of the receiver. He

switched off the light and went across to the office to see if Thompson was still there. He was. Smith slumped dozing in his chair. Thompson was perched on the edge of the table—a steaming cup cradled in his hand. The sleeper ungummed a disinterested eye and half struggled to his feet.

"Like a cup, sir?" Thompson asked.

"No, thanks." George pushed a heap of meaningless bumph to one side so that he could sit down. "I've been on to Major Humphries," he said. "The Special arrives at 05.30 hours, as you told me. I've laid on transport and extra sentries with the camp. They're to report to me at 05.00. I'm afraid I'll need both Sergeant Everett and you. Good-night." George turned to go. "And wake me up at 04.30, Smith."

"What is it, sir? More D.P.s?" Thompson asked.

"Expect so. Seems a bit of a mystery, which should be solved in . . . exactly five hours."

George looked at the clock. Thompson grunted. "More like eight, sir, if the trains are running to their usual form."

George passed through the deserted echoing station back to his billet. A thin drizzle had started to fall. He wondered if it would be worth while undressing.

After deliberation George had gone to bed. He lay there, alert for his call, and wasted most of what remained of the night by constantly looking to see how much longer he had before it was time to get up, so that it was almost a relief when finally Smith came in with a cup of luke-warm 'char'. It was still dark and George could not see through the window whether or not it had stopped raining. He called this question after Smith's back and was told that it was still 'pissing down'. George washed his face and hands in cold water and decided to postpone shaving until after breakfast.

It was a quarter to five when he got to his desk. The room smelled stuffy and the atmosphere was vitiated with stale smoke. He opened the window to let in the cool rain-washed air. Then he rang the bell that communicated with the outer office. It was answered eventually by Smith. George thought for the hundredth time that he had never seen a more dejected object. "Where's Sergeant Everett?" he asked.

"Just come down, sir."

"Tell him I want him—and Corporal Thompson."

Smith ambled away. George tore open a new package and lit a cigarette. He must go slow on his smoking until the new ration was issued. He had only three packets left.

"Anyone arrived from the camp yet?" he inquired as the two men came in. He shivered in the cold draught and slammed the window down.

"It's not quite time." The sergeant yawned. The three of them leant against the wooden counter, cigarettes dangling from their lips.

After a while George said: "Think I'd better get on to the camp to check if those trucks are on their way."

He had been put through when they heard the noise of an approaching vehicle, followed a few seconds later by the blur of its lights which glowed dully through the dirty glass of the rain-smeared window. The two N.C.O.s went out to meet the newcomers. "Hold everything," George told the receiver, "I think they're coming now." He peered into the darkness and saw men moving in front of the lorry's lights. "O.K.," he said and rang off.

Everett came back to report. "The men are here, sir, eight of them and a corporal. We may need two more if we're to cover all the entrances. The other trucks are on their way."

"We can't get any more men from camp. Get Heaton up—and it won't hurt Smith to stay on a bit longer," he said savagely. "Tell them, will you?" He followed Everett out into the main hall. As he walked towards the lorry the rain had almost stopped and a faint glimmer was beginning to blanch the eastern sky.

"Who's in charge of this party?" George called. Out of the gloom a figure came towards him. He could hear the men's rifles clinking against the sides of the lorry as they moved around.

"Corporal Martin here, sir."

"Right. Follow me, Corporal. I want two men on each of the three gates over on the other side and two at each end of the platform. I'll show you where they're to go. You'd better stay out front to direct the transport."

They went off through the dim hall and out across the platform and down the ramp, picking their way carefully over the railway sleepers.

"What's it all about, sir?" inquired the corporal with curiosity.

"Polish D.P.s probably. They're usually inclined to be troublesome, poor buggers."

The corporal laughed. "I seen some of them! Thought perhaps it was another of those coffin trains, like we had before you came here. Wanting guards and all," he finished.

"Coffin trains?"

"Yes. You know. The ones with one-way ticket passengers."

George did not know, and was damned if he was going to ask the corporal for enlightenment. He pointed out the positions where he wanted the sentries to be stationed. "Five o'clock. The train isn't due for another half hour, but tell your men to be at their posts by 05.20. The lorries must go over the bridge and round to the back." He broke off and then said: "Want a cup of tea?"

They returned to the office. As they were drinking the tea they heard the other lorries rattling into the yard. George rang the bell for Everett, who was to take the corporal over to show the drivers their parking place.

George was becoming worried. It was a quarter past six, and in another fifty minutes the invasion for the leave train would begin, and then there would be one hell of a mix-up if the Special hadn't been cleared. and there was still no sign of it.

He went again to ask the civilian staff if there was any news. The stationmaster had just come on duty, and George fancied that, at the mention of the Special, he looked at him oddly, his expression withdrawn and curiously speculative. "No," he said, "no advice of the train had come forward." He gave some instructions to the clerk who worked the telephone down the line. The clerk had talked fast in German and the stationmaster had translated it back to George. "The train has passed through Kleinsdover since ten minutes. It should be here in a similar period also."

George thanked him and returned to Number 2 platform, where he retailed his news.

Dawn had brightened into daylight, and the surface of the platform was cratered with shallow puddles that reflected the grey morning. Two high-booted German policemen stood smartly

by the main entrance. Bored by their long wait the sentries in contrast lounged near the doorways. George walked up and down. At length he heard the faint rumble of the approaching train and presently could see it snaking round the curve into the straight that led to the station. It was, he saw, composed of cattle trucks, with barred doors. As the train slowed to a standstill three of the doors, at evenly spaced intervals in the train's length, slid back and a number of officers and soldiers in Soviet uniform jumped down. The remainder of the cattle trucks remained closed.

George eyed the Russians, endeavouring to locate the officer in charge. The Russians stood about uncertainly. He approached a short burly figure who, by reason of the embellishment on his epaulettes, he had decided must be the senior. Holding the train particulars in his hand George walked inquiringly forward. They saluted each other.

"Two eighty two men?" George asked. "The lorries are parked through those gates." He pointed as he spoke. A little man with spectacles bustled belatedly forward. "Two eighty two. That is exact. And six Russian officers with thirty Russian guards also. I am the interpreter," he explained unnecessarily.

The officers had gathered together in a group and were looking around them and talking among themselves. George observed they all had similar rather flat faces with small alert eyes. They were extremely correct to each other. The private soldiers, he noticed, seemed mostly to be Mongolian, and their faces and eyes were without expression. A scruffy looking lot he decided. All the party were fully armed. The senior officer—the interpreter told him that he held the rank of a Major—gave an order and immediately six of the Mongols and one officer took up their positions, three soldiers to each side of a wagon door.

The Major shouted again and the officer unlocked the first of the cattle trucks. Through the darkened rectangle George could see men standing closely wedged together. Again came a command and one by one the men began to extricate themselves with difficulty and climbed stiffly down on to the platform where, flexing their arms and legs, they were formed up into ranks. Peering inside to see that none had remained within, the officer slammed and locked the door.

The Major was conducting a roll call, ticking off names from

a list. The men in the ranks looked straight before them. They were dressed in shabby German army uniforms and were hatless. Some of them appeared to be dropping with fatigue.

At the end of the roll call the officer in charge of the squad gave an order and a number of the guards stepped forward to take their places at the sides of the small column, which then proceeded to follow the officer through the gate to the waiting lorries.

Looking over the fence which shut off the station from the by-road George saw the men clamber wearily up into the back of the truck. The officer and the guards, their automatics in evidence, stood waiting round the lorry.

George could not comprehend why he had been told to lay on extra British sentries when such a display of armed force had arrived with the train. The men from the transit camp were showing but scant interest in the proceedings. Their corporal came up to George.

"Nasty lot of customers, aren't they, sir?" he said. George had thought them, under their masks of tiredness and grime, on the whole a rather fine looking bunch—and said so.

"No, not them, sir, I didn't mean *them*!" protested the corporal. "No, no, not them! Not the prisoners! I meant those there frozen faced Bolshies."

Another wagon had been dealt with, and George began to think that, after all, the station might be cleared by the time the leave train arrived.

"Who are they exactly?" he asked.

"Wot, them? Don't you know, sir? They're the Whites wot fought in the German army, mostly in labour units. Conscripted types. They're being 'repatriated' for mass trial. They're going to Glenheisen, about twenty miles over the border from here, in the Russian Zone. I shouldn't be surprised if there won't be one of 'em alive by dinner time," the corporal said earnestly. "They say they bury them all together in communal pits."

The first lorry was full and George watched the officer jump up beside the driver while two of the guards hoisted themselves on to the tail-board and reached down for their automatics to be handed up to them. The remainder of the soldiers strolled slowly back to the station as the lorry moved off.

The corporal's information had made George feel woolly-

headed. He did not want to think about it, did not want to take it in, certainly he did not want to be a part of it. His mouth tasted salty and he swallowed once or twice, looking at the impassive, and what struck him now as the brutal, face of the Mongol soldier who was standing to attention near him. The second lorry had drawn up and was racing its engine as men started to pull themselves up into it. Another double file was forming on the platform.

George stared at a seat and saw that its green paint was peeling badly. He wondered if it had been painted since before the war, or if it had been done during Hitler's régime. He noticed that his boots and leggings were spattered with mud which was beginning to dry round the edges in pale cracked flakes. His hand groped for his cigarette case, and he carefully shielded the match flame as he lit the cigarette. He held the match too long, until it burned his fingers. He flipped away the blackened end and forced himself to look up. He was almost opposite the prisoners lined along the platform.

Suddenly one of them fell forward on his knees and started jerking over towards him like a mechanical doll, whispering some incomprehensible plea. He was a big man, tall and heavy, and his face was puckered into tucks of misery and fear like a frightened child's and his eyes were clouded by terror. He brushed against George's legs with his clasped outstretched hands. A rifle butt tapped the man gently on the shoulder and George, turning his head, saw Everett beside him, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Get up!" Everett said in an urgent voice. "Get up, I tell you!"

The suppliant on his knees made a strangling choking sound. The men standing each side of him bent down and gently pulled him upright.

It had all happened in a matter of seconds, and the man was standing in line again before the Russians had appreciated the incident. Once more a roll call started and each man answered his name. The big fellow stood erect with the others and answered in his turn, with the tears running down his face.

"The bastard!" Everett murmured softly. "The poor bloody bastard!"

George glanced at the sergeant uneasily, and asked him to tell

Smith that there would be no necessity for him or Heaton to stay on. He had not meant to say this, but felt compelled to say something. There were only three more wagons to deal with —and the Russians obviously had everything well under control. "You'd better be getting back to the office, too," George said. "If the leave men arrive early don't let them in to the station until their train is actually signalled."

He watched Smith and the sergeant walk back. The squad with the man who had had the *crise* had reached its lorry.

The platform seemed to be filling with slant-eyed yellow faces as the guards, their duties finished, filtered back from the road outside. The Major's voice, which was once more calling out strange sounding names, abruptly stopped. George saw him march towards a young prisoner in the front rank who had interrupted the roll call. The interpreter and two other officers were converging towards him also. The boy was evidently making some protest.

George walked over to join the knot of men. He could not understand a word that was being said. The prisoner turned to George and, ignoring the curt orders of the Russians who were apparently attempting to silence him, tried to explain to George what was wrong. Since it was obvious that he was making no headway he changed from Russian to German, a language of which George had a smattering. Finally the boy said in English, pointing to himself and shaking his head violently: "German—not Russian."

George laid his hand on the interpreter's shoulder in an effort to attract his attention. "He claims to be German—not Russian."

The interpreter gave the prisoner a scornful look. "He is lying. He was born in Russia and is therefore a citizen of the Soviet."

The boy turned his head towards them, straining as he tried to understand. Several of the officers were expostulating in quick angry sentences, all shouting at once. The prisoner continued to talk to the interpreter in German. George thought he caught the words 'German Navy' and 'papers'. The expressions of the Russian officers were grim, their eyes had grown as hard as agate. One of them stepped forward and pushed the boy roughly in the chest with his open hand.

"I heard him say he had papers proving that he served with

the German Navy," George interrupted. "There must have been a mistake. He is a German national."

"He is of Russian birth, like all the other traitors," replied the interpreter, "and is equally guilty of treason."

"I was a child . . . a baby," protested the boy. "I left Russia carried in my mother's arms."

George studied the prisoner. He was young, not more than twenty-five or six as far as George could judge, therefore he could only just have been born in Russia if his parents had left that country, say, in 1919. He knew he would have to assert himself. "This station is in the British Zone," George said slowly. He found himself using stilted phrases. "I must communicate with the British Military Government concerning this matter. There has obviously been a misunderstanding. The British Military Government may want a fuller inquiry. You will please leave this man until the last, while I telephone. I will not be long."

The interpreter, looking sharp as a ferret, repeated George's speech to the Major, who shrugged his shoulders and made some answer. George wondered if his ultimatum would be obeyed. He and the Major stared at each other for what seemed to George to be an eternity. The Major was the first to look away. He shouted a command, the prisoner stepped from the ranks, and two of the Mongols grabbed him by the arms.

The boy was trying to appear indifferent to his treatment, and endeavoured to convey to George his nightmare bewilderment. The officers muttered together and glared at them both with equal hostility.

George was consumed with a burning anger as he hurried over to his office and looked up the number of the nearest Military Government detachment. It was too early, he knew, to hope to reach anyone with any real authority, but in this he was lucky. He was told that Captain Paton was billeted there, but had not yet been called.

"Then get him up," George said. "It's a priority matter."

After a while Captain Paton came to the telephone. George could hear by his voice that he was still sleep fuddled.

"Who is that?" the voice asked. "Who did you say? R.T.O. Dresselburg?" He sounded outraged. "Well, what can I do for you, R.T.O.?"

George explained what had happened. "I didn't know whether to contact you or the Security people," he apologised.

"No—you did quite right to try us," Paton agreed reluctantly. He sounded much brisker. "I think it's definitely our pigeon, old chap. But there's not really much we can do, you know," he went on doubtfully, as a new thought struck him. "After all, that train is technically Russian territory."

"Maybe it is," George said, "but my platform isn't. Can't you suggest some way by which I could detain that unfortunate boy here while inquiries are being made . . . so that he'd at any rate have a chance?"

"Don't see quite how we could do that, old fruit," Paton said. "There'd be the deuce of a stink if we started interfering with the Russians in matters that concern only themselves. Sorry I can't help. C'est la guerre! Quite appreciate your feelings and all that. It must be most unpleasant for you, but there's really nothing to be done as far as I know."

"If you could *see* them," George said. "Those Whites. They know what's coming to them." He was afraid he was beginning to sound hysterical. "What on earth does a rocket matter if there's even a chance of saving that wretched fellow?"

"It may not matter to you," Paton said in a nettled tone, "but it certainly would matter to me. I can only go by instructions. Ten to one the chap's lying. They all do, you know. All the Krauts cry for Nanny when it's time to pay the bill! Sorry not to be able to be of more help." Who the hell did this R.T.O. chap think he was!

"But this boy could only have been a baby when his family left Russia," George protested.

"Too bad for him," said Paton. "We were all babies once." And he rang off.

George sat still. Wild ideas jostled through his head. He wondered if, perhaps, he could get the prisoner over here on some pretext—explain to him he could try to escape out of the office window, maybe. But he wouldn't get far, even if the Russians could be persuaded to let him go into the office without escort. And anyway, as Paton had pointed out, he might be lying over the whole thing. George hoped to God he was, but could not convince himself that such was the case. Technically Russian territory! Would the horror of this war, even in

its aftermath, never end?

He got up and went dismally back to platform 2, choked by the shame of his own impotence. The last carriage had been cleared and the men were preparing to march out of the station. The prisoner was standing to one side between the two guards, where George had left him.

George knew the boy must be trying to meet his eyes, but could not bring himself to see the hope die. He turned to the interpreter. "Tell that man to fall in with the others."

He turned on his heel and bent his head to light a cigarette. He kept his face turned from the Russians and went to see how the loading of the lorry was progressing. He wondered if it were apathy or dignity that made the prisoners so obedient—or more likely it was just the threat of the guns.

Now they were crossing the road. The boy from the navy did not turn round. His back was straight and his step firm. He was the last to climb in.

All the Russians who were left jumped up on to the remaining lorry. Some of them began to smoke, and George saw them joking together for the first time.

George went across to the final prisoners' lorry, which was getting under way. As it started to move he ran a few steps after it and called "Hey!" He threw up a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. The boy leant down and caught the cigarettes with an instinctive movement of his hands. The match box fell back on to the road. George picked it up and lobbed it over the tailboard of the receding truck, and as he did so he saw the boy's eyes, and they were the eyes of a man already dead.

As he watched the lorries drive away he felt the weak warmth of the early morning sun on the back of his neck. He fumbled for his cigarette case, but when he opened it it was empty.

Corporal Martin came up to him and asked if they could go. George thanked him, and said yes—there was nothing more to be done.

As he went back to the office George passed the neat figure of Miss Stevens, an American who worked with the U.N.R.R.A. team. She smiled a greeting. George did not see her. As he reached the main hall he met Sergeant Everett.

"Well, that went off all right, sir," the sergeant said. "A

piece of cake!" He too, turned his head towards the road which the convoy had taken. "The first of the leave men are coming in," he went on. "The train will be half an hour behind time. Shall I let 'em on the platform?"

George did not seem to hear him. He went to his office and called Mensdorff. "Dresselburg here," he said. "Train No. S2/735 arrived 06.30 hours, departed 07.10." As he spoke he heard the shunting of the empty train from platform 2. "Two eighty-two men with six Russian officers and thirty Russian guards, not given in the advice."

He looked out of the window. The yard was milling with British soldiers much encumbered with packs and packages. There was a great deal of laughter and joking as they waited for the leave train.

George leant out of the window. "The train's half an hour late," he called.

"Never mind, sir," a man shouted back, "we're used to waiting for trains." At the rear of the crowd someone started to sing and the sound spread, for they were all looking forward to being in England.

10

'THE LORD GOD MADE THEM ALL'

THE gardens of Greystoke Towers were at their peak on this July afternoon. The formal beds of roses had no weeds to mar their perfection. The herbaceous border was in full flower and the groups of cedar trees cast pools of deep shadow on the newly mown grass. Relaxed in deck chairs, or erect and straight-backed on garden seats, women in twos and threes and sometimes singly sprawled and sat. Some read, others talked together or nodded agreement, occupied with knitting and needlework. A few were doing nothing, their eyes closed in the warmth of the sun.

Greystoke Towers was expensive. The fees of the patients ranged from forty-five to sixty guineas a week according to the accommodation. Those who paid the maximum had small rooms to themselves, while those on the lower scale were given cubicles, three or four to a dormitory. It had been fifty years since Greystoke Towers had opened its portals as a mental home. 'A Recuperation Centre' was the description used in the brochure. The number of those accepted was limited to thirty-three, and there had always been a waiting list for admission. It was a most excellent and humanely run establishment, with the velvet glove to the fore. Today was a Friday. Visiting days were on Saturdays and Sundays.

"Janey . . . what does it feel like? To be getting out of here?"

"It's hard to believe." Jane Purdey stroked the kitten on her lap. "In a way it's rather frightening."

"I remember so well the day I met you," said Zellie. "I was with my parents in the drawing room having tea with 'The Maggot' when your mother brought you in. You were so bewildered and timid!"

"I was scared to death," Jane admitted. "As I've told you, I'd never been to a boarding school. It was the first time I'd been away and I didn't know what to expect."

Zellie smiled. "I could have hugged you! I could hardly wait for 'Ma' to go. I'd been lonely for five years—and that is a long time."

"Yes." Five years was the period that Jane herself had spent at Greystoke Towers. "I can imagine."

"Tea!" Nurse Greene might have been announcing the winner of a sweepstake.

"Your arrival made all the difference," said Zellie.

"I'm not late, dears, am I?" asked Nurse Greene.

"No. Not at all." Jane was amused by the conversational misunderstanding.

"Bourbon biscuits today!" Nurse Greene said. "We're ever so fond of Bourbons, aren't we?"

"Are we?" said Zellie.

Phyllis Greene dumped their tray on the grass and laughed. "You know very well we are!"

Zellie raised her eyebrows at the nurse's retreating back and gave a twitch of irritation. "Give me patience!" She wondered if Nurse Green was equally aggravating when off duty with her own friends.

The women in the high walled garden were not unduly regimentated. They wore their own clothes. Those who wished to do so were allowed to smoke during the daytime. Only the nursing staff were in uniform, and the male orderlies had white mess jackets like stewards. The routine was not arduous. Breakfast was at nine and luncheon at one. Tea, which was voluntary, was at half past four and there was an evening meal at seven. Afterwards there was a short service in the chapel for those who wished to attend. Many did so, for they enjoyed the singing. It made a change from television.

"I can't bear the idea of your leaving me," Zellie said. "I forbid myself to think about it."

"It won't be all that long before you're well, too, Zellie, and then you must come and stay with us. I know that my family would love to have you."

"Would they?" Zellie Seal stretched out her arm and squeezed the wrist of the girl beside her. "It will be something for me to look forward to. Now how about turfing off that wretched animal and giving me some tea?" She knew that her own departure from Greystoke Towers was unlikely, at any rate in the

forseeable future. In the kindest possible way her parents had implied that her term there might be, to put it kindly, indefinite.

Gently Jane dislodged the kitten from her knee and cleared away the tangles of coloured raffia and the half finished bag which she had been making and began to pour out the tea. She looked up as a bundle of chiffon and tulle passed in front of them. "Oh good-afternoon, Miss Seal," the old lady said. "Feeding time at the Zoo?" During the summer months this was her daily ritual and she was beaming happily. The old woman had been at Greystoke Towers since the middle of the First World War. She was one of the original intake. The second part of her joke was now trotted out. "Dear me! No fish? Surely they've never put *that* on the ration?" She was tireless in its repetition.

"Hello, Miss Hales," said Jane. "Any news of your fiancé?"

"Not today. dear. I may hear from the War Office tomorrow. What a lot of muddle heads they are!" Miss Hales's fiancé had been reported missing after the battle of Mons.

"I shouldn't bank on it," said Zellie.

Miss Hales glanced at her sharply and the good humour faded from her face. "Indeed I shall not. One mustn't count one's chickens! Nevertheless I shall be hearing one of these fine days. Bernard said he'd come safely back to me and he always kept his word." She wandered off in the direction of the cedar trees, prodding at the ground with the ferrule of her parasol.

Miriam Hales was among them because none of her relatives was prepared to be saddled with her. She received almost no visitors. In her early days a former Nanny used to come once a month, but she had died in the 'twenties and her place had not been filled. Miss Hales's money was in the care of trustees and would go to a nephew, who sent her presents on her birthday and at Christmas, and who would make unannounced visits every year or so to keep an eye on the progress of his 'prospects'. Doctor Margot Cooper did not care for him at all.

"Poor old thing!" said Jane.

"She's as mad as a hatter," Zellie said. She smoothed back her dark hair which was cut in a short page-boy bob. "Janey, when is your appointment with 'The Maggot'?"

"With Doctor Cooper? After lunch on Monday."

"Any definite hour?"

"She told me to come along to her office at about three."

"Will it take long?"

"I can't say. You know as well as I do, Zellie. Twenty minutes or half an hour is the normal session."

"I'm going to miss you so very much."

"More Bourbons?" Nurse Green was standing by their side, a biscuit tin in her hand. Zellie shook her head.

When she had gone Jane said: "You'll see . . . we won't be separated for ever." Zellie did not answer.

Harley, the head orderly, was collecting the tea trays. There were four men on the staff at Greystoke Towers. Since October their number had been doubled, after the day that Babbette Keswicke had made a savage attack on Nurse King. On the morning following Babbette had left Greystoke Towers in an ambulance. There had been a brief speculation as to where she might have gone, but by common consent no one any longer referred to her. It was better forgotten. She had left Greystoke Towers by 'the wrong door'.

The kitten had finished its saucer of milk and Jane picked it up and sat back in her chair. Unless they played table tennis or croquet there would be nothing to do until they went in to get ready for supper, and she was tired of both games. Boredom closed in like fog around the world of waiting women. Zellie was hunched forward with her hands clasped over her knees, her expression withdrawn and introspective. "It'll never be the same," she said.

In theory Nurse Greene handed over her patients to the care of Nurse King at nine o'clock. In practice there was often an overlap due to the chapel service, when they would sit down and talk over the occurrences of the day. Tonight there was little to report. "I don't know what Zellie Seal will do without Jane," said Nurse Greene. "Of all 'the heavenly twins' I've known . . ."

"She'll get over it. When you've worked here as long as I have you'll learn that no one person is indispensable to another. It's the same as school. I'm pleased for her sake that we're losing Jane," Nurse King went on, "she's never been a scrap of trouble has that one. I'm sure I don't understand why Mrs. Purdey has left her with us as long as she has. Mind you, I've

not forgotten about Jane's 'black-outs'. Perhaps it's a case of 'Better safe than sorry'! I hear Mrs. Purdey is collecting her a week from tomorrow if Doctor Cooper gives the all clear—*and* she will!"

"Tonio will be lost without her as well," said Nurse Greene. "Zellie won't be the only one! That cat follows them around everywhere. It makes me smile. To be quite truthful I've never much fancied Zellie Seal. She's so moody." She was remembering the mocking eyes when she had overheard her words mimicked. "Of course she did have an unfortunate experience . . . but even so, why must she be *so* moody? Her sole interests seem to be centred in Jane and the theatricals."

"She's very good in the concerts."

"Too good, if you ask me! I don't think it's healthy."

"They've got to keep themselves occupied," Nurse King said, "and theatricals are an escape. They can't have days off and a change of scene like we do, dear. You must remember that." She put out her cigarette as she heard voices in the corridor. "Did I tell you what Mrs. Wayte said to me this morning? She really is a card!"

Jane and Zellie were talking in the former's room. They were not encouraged to be in and out of one another's rooms, but so long as the door was left open objections were seldom made. Zellie had a cubicle, one of three in the large room across the passage. Jane's bedroom was square and painted a pale lemon yellow. There were orange and white striped curtains of coarse linen at the windows and the effect was self-consciously gay and cheerful.

A radiator stood by one wall, and photographs of Jane's parents and of her brother were arranged on the chimney-piece. In addition to the bed there was an armchair, an upright one of wood, and a writing table on which there was a vase of cream coloured roses. There were also a pair of framed flower prints and a waste paper basket. Zellie was lying on the bed and Jane occupied the big chair. Through the open window drifted the bright voices of the visitors.

Zellie's mother came to see her on the second Sunday of each month, her father less often. Jane's, who rarely missed a Saturday, had not appeared, since she would be driving down so

soon to collect her daughter and take her home. The two girls had come in from the garden to get away from the over-talkative, or momentarily silent groups who somehow had to plough through the afternoon until the hour of liberation at six o'clock.

"Janey," Zellie said, "do you know that I shall be thirty next month?"

"Will you? I knew your birthday was on the twenty-second."

"It's the end of youth." Although smoking was supposed to be confined to the public rooms, Zellie lit a cigarette. "You have another five years before you reach that awesome milestone."

"Thirty is no age."

"It is when you're . . . rotting." Zellie got up from the bed. "Don't be too upset if that cow Margot tells you that you're going home on a holiday. She said it to me. 'The Maggot' tries that one on—in case you're bundled back. 'Returned to sender!' " Zellie blew smoke through her nostrils. "I don't know why we can't have a man in charge of this dump. I'm not over fond of the sex—but it would give variety." A cabbage butterfly hovered in the window opening before fluttering into the room. Zellie stood watching it. "I shouldn't pay too much attention to me, darling. It's just that I'm so bloody browned off." The dated phrase, a legacy from her childhood, underlined the present restriction of her life.

"Doctor Cooper said it to *you?*" Jane repeated in surprise. "Why haven't you told me?"

Zellie smiled. "Oh, I had my holiday all right, a month or so before you turned up here. There was no point in my telling you. It wasn't a success."

"Oh, poor Zellie!"

"There may be worse places than Greystoke Towers. Many. I'm quite sure there are." The butterfly settled for a moment with white wings spread on the primrose paint, as delicate as a Japanese drawing, and Zellie stooped to pick up one of Jane's bedroom slippers.

Jane glanced up. "Zellie! Don't! It's not doing any harm."

"You're wrong, Jane. Those white ones do. They're pests, like wood lice and slugs and snails." She struck out with all her force at the butterfly, and it became an oozing affront on the surface of the wall.

"Zellie!" said Jane. "How could you!"

There was a quick step in the passage. "Jane?... Zellie? If you two want any tea you'd better look sharp. Harley's about to collect the trays."

"We'll skip it," Zellie called out. 'Skipping' was one of Nurse Greene's favourite expressions.

"As you like." Nurse Greene was clearly nettled. She came in through the doorway. "You know quite well, Miss Seal, that you are not allowed to be in each other's bedrooms." Realising belatedly that she was speaking not to schoolgirls but to grown women she slightly modified her tone. "We must have our rules and you should help me by obeying them." She turned to go, and the slimy smear of the butterfly caught her attention. She halted abruptly, on her guard. "What a horrid mess! Jane... Miss Seal... which of you has... has obliterated that unfortunate insect? A wasp or even a mosquito I could understand—but a pretty and inoffensive butterfly!"

Jane looked at Zellie guiltily. "We didn't mean to kill it, Nurse Greene. We were trying to shoo it out of the window and —and my bedroom slipper must have caught it. I mean we were... well I suppose that actually we were sort of swishing at it."

Nurse Greene let a long pause elapse before she spoke. "Oh, never mind!" She gave a thin-lipped smile. "I daresay we can wash it off. Now, Miss Seal, you've your own room to go to, haven't you, dear?" Her eyes were steely. "I think you're silly to skip tea, Jane. It's ever so nice outside and there's a new kind of biscuit."

"Squashed flies?" said Zellie.

Nurse Greene did not reply. She stood to one side to let Zellie go out of the room. "I'm sorry, Nurse Greene," Jane said. "It was a mistake. Lend me a damp towel and I'll wash it clean."

"No, dear. Leave it to me." She regarded Jane steadily. "We will say no more about it." She paused. "If you get my meaning."

On Monday afternoon Jane went for her interview with Doctor Cooper as had been arranged. Jane was one of the doctor's favourites, although 'The Maggot' would never have

admitted to having any variation of feeling towards her patients. Margot's study was a marriage of utility and charm. It contained nothing that had not been included for a purpose. She sat beside Jane on a sofa and their talk ranged over a number of subjects. It was only towards the end of the talk that Jane's future was discussed.

"I so hope that we have been able to help you here," Margot Cooper said. "In fact, if I may say so, I am certain that we *have* done so. On Saturday morning your mother will be coming to take you home. She mentioned eleven or half past. At first it may seem a little strange to you, but I can assure you that after a few days you will think that you have never been away ... that this was a mirage. There'll be such a lot for you to do, catching up with all your old friends and making new ones, going to theatres and cinemas. It will all be tremendous fun." Doctor Cooper lit a cigarette. She had the spurious femininity possessed by some of the ladies in a Labour Government. "And don't forget that I am here in case you are in need of any advice which I am perhaps qualified to give. Just write me a letter, Jane, or drive down to see me. It would give me immense pleasure and you will be most welcome. You will agree that we have endeavoured to make you as happy as we could. Now is there anything at all you would like to ask me?"

"No." Jane hesitated. "No, I don't think so." She gazed out of the window at the big motor mower busy on the lawns. "Doctor Cooper. Am I really cured? I won't have any more 'black-outs'? I don't think I could bear it. What I'm trying to say is—am I being finally discharged, or am I being sent home on a kind of trial?"

"My dear Jane! What a question!" Margot Cooper seemed highly amused. "Of course it won't be 'on trial'. Whatever could have given you such an idea?"

Jane smiled. "I thought it might be part of the procedure."

"Good gracious me, no! I won't say that it has not happened, but in all my experience, and I have been in charge at Greystoke Towers for nearly twenty years, a patient of mine has only once returned to us." She lifted an interrogative eyebrow. "Who has been talking to you? Your friend, Zellie Seal?"

"No," said Jane. "It was a possibility I thought up for myself."

Doctor Cooper rose from the sofa. "Well, my dear, you need not worry your head on that score. Now you must tell me how the play is progressing. Is Wednesday the dress rehearsal? I do so enjoy those evenings. Let me see: you and Zellie and Miss Avalon are giving us *The Maker of Dreams*, are you not? And Lady Sarah is in charge of the other piece—*The Bathroom Door*? Always so amusing! You have real talent, Jane, and so has Zellie." Margot Cooper's hand on her shoulder was comforting. "On your way to your room you might be a sweetie-pie and find Harley and tell him to ask Miss Hales if she would care to come along to me for a talk." Her laugh was indulgent. "Now and again the poor dear likes to complain about the inefficiency of the War Office." Margot and Jane were together, on the same side of the cobweb curtain. "During our talk on Friday she sang several songs to me. *There's a long long trail a'winding* and *Good-byee* included! Wasn't it lucky that I had seen *Oh What A Lovely War!*, and so was *au fait*?"

Rest period was over, and Jane found Zellie waiting for her in the passage. She was wearing a new cotton dress that Jane had not seen and had taken considerable trouble with her hair and make-up. "How did it go?" she asked at once.

"All tied up. Saturday morning."

"Darling, how marvellous for you! Come along and let's bag those chairs under the cedar before Mrs. Wayte and silly Lady Sarah get them, and you can tell me all about it."

As they stepped out on to the lawn the residents at Greystoke Towers were emerging from their siestas and the more favoured of the chairs were being claimed rapidly by those who either had a head start or no manners. As at an airport, when a decorous march from exit door to gangway swiftly deteriorates into a rout, with the younger and longer of leg reaching their objective first, so did the claiming of the best places undo the dignity of their claimants. Lady Sarah had no chance at all against Zellie.

Jane unfolded her chair. "And did 'Margot Maggot' imply that you would be out 'on parole'?" asked Zellie.

"No." Jane was suddenly cautious. For some reason she had no intention of elaborating on her interview. Soon she would be quit of the intrigue and backbiting at Greystoke Towers.

'You've got a new dress," she said.

"This morning's post. As you may have noticed, my devoted mother keeps me supplied with clothing thrice yearly, in April, July and October." Her voice was edged with bitterness. "Each batch becomes more fussy and feminine. One might say a case of wishful thinking gone mad!"

"It's very pretty."

In justice to Margot Cooper, she had suggested to Colonel Seal that his daughter might feel more at ease in jeans or trousers, but he had been most displeased and would not hear of the innovation.

"I no longer bother to put up a fight about clothes," Zellie said. "I can't—from Greystoke. I wear what I'm given. I understand how thwarting I must be for Mama. Instead of me she should have had a little dolly for a daughter. Sometimes I think that my soul, or whatever dainty word you choose to call one's ego, wandered into the wrong body." She shielded a match with her square fingered capable hand. When her cigarette was burning evenly she said: "Clothes aren't worth fighting for. No more are possessions. Only people."

"People can be in danger of becoming possessions when they're too much loved."

Zellie's mouth stretched into a boyish grin. "Janey, darling, how perceptive you are! You really are a sweet girl, and one," she added gruffly, "for whom it would be well worth joining battle."

"Into battle! Wouldn't you get a kick out of it! I can almost picture you as a knight in armour." All at once Jane grew embarrassed. "Hey, Tonio!"

The black kitten was zig-zagging towards them, inexpertly boxing at invisible bees. He had been in search of Jane, and in search of the milk which his pink tongue would lap up as rhythmically as the probing needle of a sewing machine. He knew that he was early and stopped to rub himself against her ankle. Jane scooped him up in one hand and kissed him between his pointed ears.

"Yes, Janey." Zellie was looking at her with amusement through narrowed lids. "I don't want to bore on—but to my way of thinking, anyone in their senses would be a fool to let you go."

Tuesday morning was spent in rehearsing. In the one-act play which they were to perform Jane took the part of Pierrette, Miss Avalon—who had been at Greystoke Towers longer than anyone, with the exception of Miss Hales—played the elfin old man, and Zellie was excellent as a conceited, strutting Pierrot. They were word perfect. It was the penultimate rehearsal and it passed off without a hitch. On the night of the performance it was the custom of the staff to invite their friends and, with the addition of the patients, the audience was often in the region of a hundred strong.

At the end of luncheon Doctor Cooper crossed over to Jane's table. "Jane, would you come to my sitting room? We might have some more coffee. There are a few things I'd like to talk over with you." She turned to smile at Zellie. "I won't keep her for very long. I've not forgotten how busy you actors must be!"

"You're getting V.I.P. treatment, Janey!" Zellie took a cigarette from her case.

"*Not* in the Dining Hall, *if* you please," said Nurse Greene.

Zellie lingered behind while the others were leaving the dining room and, telling Nurse Greene that she had to collect her book from the garden, she did not follow until the door leading to Margot Cooper's private wing had closed behind her. Zellie had been working out a plan and this seemed an opportune moment for her to try to carry it out.

During luncheon when Jane had confided that one of the things which she would most enjoy when she went home was dancing, Zellie had laughed and pointed out that it was allowed at Greystoke Towers, and had said that to her manner of thinking they danced very well together and Jane had agreed but had added that it was not the same as having a man for a partner. Zellie had been overwhelmed by a surge of jealousy and had changed the subject and talked instead about the play.

It was no good. She knew that when Jane had gone she could not face the future. It would stretch out before her, drear and featureless. She had her own life to live, and in life one had to come to terms. And one had to fight. There were all kinds of love—even in the outside world. She reviewed the ghosts of those whom, in the past, she had included in her one-sided emotional entanglements and by whom she had been forgotten. Jane must not be permitted to drift away to join their

misty ranks. The knight in shining armour could not again be left alone.

As she walked over to her own part of the sprawling house she was humming a tune. It was a snatch from one of Cole Porter's perennial songs, one to which she had danced during the abortive season when she had been so awkward and out of place. '*Don't you know, little fool . . . you never can win . . .*' But she *had* woken up to reality, and perhaps she could win. She must be very careful to make no mistakes.

She stood in the hall, listening. Everywhere there was the smell of varnish and furniture polish. The staircase spiralled three flights to the top floor. The lift door was shut. There was no sound. In their rooms the women and girls were settling down for an hour's rest, to sleep or to read, or just to lie on their beds and think. The nurses on duty, Greene and the brusque Norman and the gaunt Appleby, would each be in her own sitting room, temporarily taking things easy.

There was a mew, demanding and plaintive, and Zellie saw that Tonio was arching himself by her feet. She bent to gather him up. How very lucky. He must have been on his way to find Jane. Their rooms were on the second floor. Zellie remained perfectly still and then, satisfied, ran quickly up the stairs. There was something to be said for inflexible routine. She did not use the lift, for the drone of its ascent would draw attention to her arrival. She had not much time. Soon Nurse Greene would be doing her bustling round to ensure that her charges were quiet.

In her cubicle Zellie dropped Tonio on to her bed. She had encountered no one. There were insignificant noises from her neighbours. Mrs. Wayte was clearing her throat. Ada Avalon was muttering querulously to herself. She picked up her tape recorder. It had come in very useful during rehearsals and they had amused themselves with it for hours. She turned it on softly. It was dialogue in '*Dreams*', when Pierrot and Pierrette had been left alone. She wound back the tape and changed the reel for an old recording in which she had delivered Hamlet's famous soliloquy and made other renderings from Shakespeare's works.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed when Nurse Greene popped her head round the side of the door. "Quite comfort-

able, Zellie? Found your book? That's good." She moved on without waiting for an answer. "Got everything you want, Mrs. Wayte? . . . Mind you have a nice snooze, Miss Avalon . . ." Her footsteps receded down the passage.

Zellie made no move until they had died away altogether, and then she switched on the tape recorder. Kicking off her shoes, and carrying Tonio in the crook of her arm, she padded across the corridor and into Jane's room.

The brief respite during which, her round completed, she could put her feet up, was highly treasured by Nurse Greene. She spent it in writing letters or turning the pages of one of the two fashion magazines to which she subscribed. Accordingly she was both shaken and shocked by the screams of hysteria which shattered this pleasant interlude. The screams were coming from Number 19. Jane Purdey's room. In a moment she was hurrying down the corridor. What could have occurred?

All along the passage doors were opening. Nurse Greene saw Zellie run out from her own room followed by Mrs. Wayte and Miss Avalon, while Miss Masters and Mrs. Huntley-West wavered irresolutely in their doorways, uncertain what they should do. "Ladies—please!" called out Nurse Greene. "I am sure that nothing has happened with which I cannot perfectly well deal. Please go back to your rooms at once. There is no reason for alarm." Obediently Mrs. Huntley-West and Miss Masters stepped back from her sight, leaving their doors half closed. Nurse Greene was perfectly aware that behind them they would be eavesdropping.

Zellie Seal had gone in to Jane, whose screams were still ringing out, piercing and manic. "Zellie!" Nurse Greene was outside Number 19. "Zellie, come out of there immediately, do you hear me? Mrs. Wayte . . . Miss Avalon . . ." She made an authoritative motion of dismissal. "Mrs. Wayte . . . will you *please* be good enough to retire . . .?" She pushed her way past them.

On the threshold of the room she stopped. At the proximity of Nurse Greene's voice Jane's clamour had died away, and she was shuddering and sobbing in Zellie's protective arms. Her hands and the front of her dress were sodden and scarlet with blood. Looking past her Nurse Greene drew in a sharp breath,

and for an instant she felt quite faint.

Dangling from the light suspended from the centre of the ceiling was Tonio. The little body was as empty as a puppet's discarded in the wings of a Punch and Judy booth. He had been strangled, almost decapitated, by a length of blue raffia, and three of his paws had been hacked off. His reeking abdomen had been ripped up and the guts spewed out obscenely from the slit stomach. It was astonishing that such a small creature could have been possessed of such a quantity of entrails.

"Miss Seal! Kindly leave. Immediately. Jane, dear, you come with me and tell me exactly what has happened."

Jane's eyes met hers without recognition, and she had to take her by the hand, sticky with the animal's blood.

"What did I do?" Jane's voice was a whisper. "You can't believe that it was me . . . that I killed Tonio?"

"Nurse Greene!" Zellie fought to control herself. "Nurse Greene, I implore you! Can't we hush this up? Could you not, for this once, keep it from Doctor Cooper? You know that Jane is leaving on Saturday. Won't you please be . . . be human?"

Nurse Greene had not forgotten the smear of the butterfly on the yellow wall, an incident which she had not reported. She stared back at Zellie. "I am afraid that what you are asking is impossible."

Zellie bit her lip and looked down at her own hands that had become stained from contact with Jane's dress. When Zellie had gone into the room Jane had been clawing at the kitten trying to release the furry body from the strands that bound it. "Does the death of a cat mean more to you than the happiness of a woman?" she said. "If so—may God forgive you!"

Nurse Greene turned on her heel and Zellie watched Jane as she was led away, and her expression was not one of anger at all.

Doctor Margot Cooper was deeply depressed. An occurrence such as this made her wonder if the work she was trying to do was of any value and whether she was pursuing the right lines. She would have been prepared to stake her reputation that Jane Purdey had been cured, and that there would be no recurrence of the 'black-outs' which had led her to commit acts

of temper and violence that were normally totally foreign to her nature.

She had been informed belatedly by Nurse Greene of the incident of the butterfly. The nurse had told her that to begin with she had suspected Zellie Seal of having destroyed it, but where the killing of Tonio was concerned Zellie had been completely exonerated. It had been extraordinary about the kitten. Both the girls had seemed to adore him. Margot had regarded the kitten as being a part of their therapy.

Zellie had been in her own room, or rather cubicle, for the whole of the time in question. Mrs. Wayte had heard her declaiming Shakespeare up to the moment when Jane had begun to scream. In fact, she had been within an ace of going along to complain to Nurse Greene that Zellie Seal was disturbing her rest period. Finally she had rapped insistently on the wall, and Zellie had desisted. She had heard her running the tap in her basin and singing softly to herself, and after that, Mrs. Wayte had said, there had, thank goodness, been some peace.

Miss Ada Avalon, too, had borne witness that Zellie had not been absent. "She was practising her voice production," she had said. "Her delivery is vastly improved. She is using her diaphragm. As you may know, Doctor Cooper, I am a judge of acting having done so much of it as a girl. I must admit I would describe Florence Wayte's attitude as having been a trifle selfish."

It was not only Margot Cooper who had questioned the girls. At her suggestion Nurse King, who was very popular, had had a long talk with them, and Harley a shorter one. It had been informal and 'off the record'. The consensus of opinion had been that Zellie knew no more than anybody else, and that she was trying to shield Jane.

Jane had been stunned, and hotly denied that she had harmed the kitten. Why should she? She had adored it. Someone must have come into her room. But who? She could offer no names, no explanations except that Doctor Cooper did not realise the petty jealousies that existed. It was known that she would be leaving. Somebody had done this dreadful thing so as to keep her there.

Who would have minded her departure? Zellie Seal? No—not

Zellie. She was her friend. Why had she not summoned help as soon as she had discovered Tonio? Why had she wasted precious minutes?

Jane had no coherent memory of what had occurred. She had stated that she had dallied in the hall waiting for Zellie for more than ten minutes. "I waited and waited but she didn't come." She said it had been arranged between them that they should meet there so that Zellie could hear about her final interview with Margot. Zellie had not kept the appointment, and had privately denied that she had made one. The next thing that Jane could remember was her horror at being confronted by the mutilated kitten. She had no idea how long she had been in her room before she had screamed. She had stood for a while clutching her sewing scissors, which had been used for the disembowelling, in appalled fascination.

Zellie Seal had done her best to take her share of any blame, declaring that Jane had not intended to harm Tonio, that on several occasions they had both played a game—teaching him to fly from the bed to the table—like the children in *Peter Pan* had flown round their nursery. She said that Jane had always kept her hand under Tonio 'in flight', and that there must have been an accident. Her story, however, did not explain the ghastly mutilation, and had fooled no one.

It had been a horrible task for Margot Cooper having to inform Mrs. Purdey, and she had given her a watered-down account of the facts. To Jane her mother's visit had been purgatory. The questions that had been left unasked, the lack of talk about, and reference to, home, the unspoken hurt and sympathy and sadness, had made Jane think of herself as a leper. There was nothing that she could say in her own defence. She had stammered out a few sentences and they had been received with compassion and concealed disbelief. She wished that her mother would never come again, and that she could be forgotten. Even prisoners serving life sentences were permitted to sink into oblivion if they wished to have done with the world beyond their walls. It would be kinder far to let her do the same. She remembered her mother's drawn face as she had stolen a look at her watch, when there had been another quarter of an hour before she had been able to leave.

Jane had longed to say to her: "Go now—and don't come

again. Don't. Oh, please don't!" They were words she could not say.

The chapel was tiny. There were six pews which could each accommodate five occupants. At the back there were also three 'stalls'. On the left of the entrance was the harmonium on which Doctor Cooper's secretary played the accompaniment to the psalms and hymns. The service was taken by Margot Cooper. Occasionally on a Sunday evening the vicar from Todds Cross would come in to officiate, and at intervals he would arrange for Communion.

Two weeks had passed since Tonio's death. The setting sun shone red-gold through the cedar's branches as the congregation filed to their seats. The voices of the women were thin and uncertain as they strove to follow the reedy playing of Miss Locke, tardily finding strength with the hymn which all knew well.

"All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,"

From the corner of her eye Zellie saw Jane's pale face. There were tears running down her cheeks and her gaze was fixed on the altar with all the dedication of a novice. Zellie's fingers crept along the shiny oak of the pew's top to touch Jane's hand.

"All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all."

Zellie's pressure on Jane's fingers increased. "Never mind, Janey darling," she whispered. "Never mind. We still have each other."

"Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings . . ."

There was pathos in the congregation's simple enjoyment of the words.

"He made their glowing colours.
He made their tiny wings. . . "

It had been a pity and a mistake, Zellie thought, that *The Maker of Dreams* had been cancelled. 'The Maggot' had

decreed that Jane was not up to it. They could give it later on, probably at Christmas when Jane was recovered. Altogether the evening of the theatricals had been rather a mess. The first half of the evening had been a hodge-podge of songs and recitations. So wide had the net been flung that Harley had been enlisted to tell funny stories. Zellie was convinced that they could have done '*Dreams*'. It would have done Jane good. She was the ideal Pierrette.

And now the service was over and 'The Maggot' was intoning her valedictory piece. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore."

There came the chorus of hushed 'Amens', and the rustle of women getting to their feet. Zellie pulled at Jane's sleeve. She had remained kneeling after everyone else had risen. "Come along, Jane, and we'll have some cocoa. It's your mother's visiting day tomorrow. You'll be pleased to see her, won't you?"

Jane made a gesture of hopelessness. "Why do they make me see her?"

"For four hours once a week?" Zellie's face was lit by happy fulfilment. "Janey darling, pull yourself together! It's a meaningless interruption—that's all. Part of the pantomime—and it gives her pleasure."

Miss Avalon reached the chapel door at the same moment, and they stood aside to give her precedence. She smiled her gracious acceptance. "Lovely hymn, Jane!" she said. She sang a line, proud of the true timbre of her voice. "'All creatures great and small . . . la la la la la lala . . . the Lord God made them all . . .'"

She had not meant to be unkind, and the thought that she might have been did not even cross her mind.

II

THE ACCESSORY

'THE rear of my Mini-van was stuffed with bargains—a motley collection of purchases made by my niece Charlotte. She had browbeaten me into driving her to the sale at Merrion. It was a Saturday and the last afternoon of an auctioneer's three day marathon. I was grateful that I had arrived for the weekend only that morning.

'Merrion was a vast Victorian mansion which had little to recommend its survival and which, apart from caretakers, had been unoccupied for many years. Lady Armstrong, the widowed owner, had lived abroad, and after her death it had passed to a great-nephew who wished to have no part of it. Hence the sale which had magnetised neighbours from as far as a forty-mile radius.

'As a matter of fact Charlotte *had* made a few worthwhile discoveries. Some of the better objects, as occasionally happens, had gravitated to servants' bedrooms and even into the attics and stables, where they had been forgotten and overlain by all manner of junk. She had bought three really charming Regency chairs which needed recaning, a delightfully decorated coal scuttle and a grime-covered oil painting of a Chinese port which, when cleaned, might well turn out to be by George Chinnery. In addition she had possessed herself of a large leather sofa and several patchwork bedspreads. The total cost of these purchases had set her back less than twenty pounds. True, at one moment she had contemplated the acquisition of a stuffed bear holding out a tin tray for visiting cards, but by dint of unaccustomed firmness I had been able to overcome this eccentric whim.

'Merrion was about an hour's drive from Charlotte's house and during our return journey she had been talking happily about her new treasures, as boastful as a pirate putting into port after a foray. "It's so amazing what rubbish people keep," she said. "One wonders what could have come over them in the

first place to have found them in any way desirable! They can't all of them been presents from relatives." She had stared at me accusingly. "Uncle Roland, would you at any period of your life ever have bought a sjambok?"

'"Never," I said truthfully. "I am not a sadist."

'"Or a dozen assegais and a Red Indian brave in tooled leather?"

'"Not if I'd been sober!"

'"Or an elephant's foot for a door stopper? Would you, Uncle Roland?"

'"So far I have not been tempted by one." I turned the car into Charlotte's gate and we drew up at the back door. "Nor am I particularly drawn to skulls or Juju masks or necklaces of human teeth!" I said as we braked to a halt.

'"I should hope not!" said Charlotte. "Oh, there's Graham on the look-out for us! He seems very apprehensive."

'"Hardly surprising. The majority of young husbands would tend to be a trifle wary when their brides return from a jaunt like ours."

'"Why did you bring up those necklaces?" Charlotte demanded as she opened the van door. "I did not see one."

'"Nor more did I. Once, long before you were born, I saw several human... relics. Sometime I'll tell you about it. Now—heave-ho!"

'We heaved. "You'll tell me about it tonight," she said.

'"All right, I will. After dinner. And I hope you'll sleep well."

'"Why do you make it sound so ghoulish?" Charlotte deposited the coal scuttle carefully on to the gravel. "Did they haunt you?" She raised her voice. "Come and help, you idle bastard! Graham adores horrors," she added. "*Did* they haunt you?" she repeated.

'"What?"

'"Those disgusting 'relics'," she said impatiently.

'"No. Not exactly."

'Graham was walking with reluctance towards us. "Just wait until you see what we've got!" Charlotte called. "I'm always telling you I should set up as an *antiquaire*."

Her husband winced. "A Burmese gong... a magic lantern with broken slides ..and the collected works of Ethel M.

Dell?" He threw away the stub of his cigarette. "We'd better get it over," he said.

'Charlotte is twenty-three years old, Graham is thirty, and I am sixty-six. Charlotte and Graham are very nice to me and appear to enjoy my company, and I am conceited enough to think that their kindness is not wholly prompted by my being a well-heeled bachelor. They have been married for a year. Charlotte is a honey blonde and astonishingly pretty and Graham is clever and amusing and has the build of a stevedore, which is convenient when it comes to the manhandling of leather-covered sofas.

'The Spanish maid had taken away the coffee tray and we were talking over the plans for the next day when Charlotte said: "Graham, Uncle Roland's got a tale to tell. It happened in the Dark Ages when he was a young man and he says it's on your horrid wavelength."

'"I said nothing of the kind."

'"I'll give him a drink, then there'll be no fidgeting," said Graham. "Raconteurs hate to be interrupted."

'When we were settled I began my piece. The impact of the events had been dulled by the passing of more than three decades, but as I tried to marshal the facts the evening in question became very real to me again. "I imagine that you are both too young to have heard of Wilfred Mitchell?" A blank silence was my answer. "He was not a character in mediaeval history," I said with a touch of asperity. "So far as I am aware he is still alive. I am a few years his junior. He was a great character and in his younger days an explorer of some fame. As, indeed, was Colonel Fawcett."

'"I've heard of Fawcett," volunteered Graham obligingly.

'"Good!" I said. "Wilfred Mitchell was a very different sort of chap. In 'Pop' at Eton, a golden boy, whose early arrogance remained with him always. He was rather a 'show off' as we used to say. He was an all round athlete, and had enough money to do most of the things he wanted to do. He had brains as well as brawn and could achieve what he wished with the minimum of effort. The girls were all mad about him, and to be of his circle was 'one up'. 'Will Mitchell!' they used to say, as if they were savouring cream. 'I'm dining with Will

Mitchell on Thursday.' Or simply 'Will'. No surname was necessary. Their rivals always knew who was meant. Although it was such a dated name his possession of it made it ultra smart! When he exerted himself to switch it on he had tremendous charm. He had also a cruel streak and a filthy temper which luckily he could quite easily control. We were at Oxford together—just—and for some odd reason he liked me. I always felt I was playing Doctor Watson to his Sherlock Holmes and was rather flattered."

'"False modesty butters no parsnips," Charlotte said. "No. I've got it wrong."

'I paid no attention. "After he left Oxford he joined several archaeological expeditions to various countries; Indo-China, Syria and Yucatan. In pursuit of adventure, and in the range of his love affairs, he was the James Bond of his day—or that was the impression he sought to give. When he was twenty-eight years old he married an American divorcée by the name of Nadine Leroy. She was tough and quite amusing in the wise-cracking fashion which was then so popular. She had extraordinary physical courage and had been beautiful. A year or so before her wedding to Will she had been to Kenya on safari and her cheek had been badly mauled by a wounded lioness. It had remained puckered, for plastic surgery was in its infancy. Her figure was superb and her clothes avant-garde. She was the first woman to wear black pyjamas on the Lido. *The Tatler* and *Bystander* adored her! She was forty-one when Will married her. She was rich by any standards. Where Will had hundreds she had as many thousands. Rumour had it that she was a nymphomaniac. However, Wilfred did not seem to be worried on that score! He was well equipped to cope. One of Nature's stallions!" I glanced across at Graham. Sometimes I thought that I shocked him.

'"A dish," said Graham.

'"Two dishes," Charlotte said.

'I told them not to interrupt. "They had two houses in Royal Avenue in Chelsea, which they had knocked into one, and a villa in the South of France, and in the winter they used to go to Melton Mowbray, to Craven Lodge, for the hunting. That was a side of their lives in which I did not participate. Nadine announced quite frequently that she liked to live dangerously."

' "Which I expect is why Mr. Leroy divested himself of her," Charlotte said cattily. "I don't blame him. She sounds a dreadful bore."

' "No. She was representative of the café society of her generation. She had a most attractive husky voice—and her milk of human kindness had long run dry. She was much admired and a bit of a bitch. Apart from their age difference they seemed to be ideally matched. They were both of them flamboyant and were both inclined to drink too much—Nadine especially. I did hear that they fought on occasion. It was surprising to me that the conventional round of their existence satisfied them for as long as it did. It took five years for wanderlust to claim them and make them restless."

' "I wouldn't have minded their 'round'," Charlotte said.

' "No more did Wilfred. He appreciated money and knew how to spend it. You must believe me when I tell you that I was more respectful than envious of his scope. It was Nadine who organised the expedition up the Amazon. There had been stories in the popular press of a lost civilisation deep in the Mato Grosso, of gold awaiting discovery on the banks of the Rio Juruena, of easily mined diamonds whose whereabouts was known only to Indian tribes who had never had contact with a white man. Real Will-o'-the-wisp romantic stuff! It was all most enticing and exciting to Nadine and Wilfred.

'They talked a lot about it and made endless plans and then one day they were ready to sail for Rio. I remember that the night before they left they gave a tremendous and raucous farewell party at the Embassy Club. It was in the summer of 1930. We stayed up all night and a dozen of us went to Southampton to give them a final send-off. Their departure took place in a blaze of publicity and flash bulbs and champagne, and I felt perfectly dreadful when I got back to my office. There were letters and cuttings from Rio and from several of the smaller towns in the interior until, with the passing of time, they gradually ceased.

'Nadine I never met again. About eighteen months after the start of the expedition news filtered through that she had died of fever in some God-forsaken hole hundreds of miles from anywhere. I remember thinking unkindly that fate should have allowed her to reach a ripe and unbecoming old age."

' "Why did you dislike her so much?" asked Charlotte.

' "It was more mutual antipathy than dislike. She did not consider me 'chic', and I resented her 'take over' technique with Will! Still, it was a singular ending to a rather hackneyed cosmopolitan existence. Lots had been happening in the world and when the item reached Fleet Street it rated about a quarter of a column on an inner page.

'Wilfred Mitchell I did see once more, at the time of Munich, when all the talk was of approaching war. When finally it came he won a Military Cross. Eight years gap is quite a span when you are young and, as you will realise, I had been getting on with my own life. I caught up with Will at a dance given by the Emerys. He had not changed much. He had put on weight and his face was browned by the tropical sun. I did not know many of the people at the party and apparently neither did he. There was a sprinkling of the more mature, but in the main the guests were débutantes and their "Delights", and I for one was fully conscious of the burden of my years.

'We were standing next to each other at the bar and he suddenly noticed me and said, as if we had never lost touch: "Rolie! How nice to see you! I never thought you'd be here. Isn't it all ghastly! We *needn't* stay! Come back to my house for a drink." He had dined with the hostess and I had been a somewhat elderly replacement for a young man who had chucked one of the dinner parties at the last moment.

'We slipped away, and in the taxi en route to Royal Avenue he sketched in his movements since our last meeting. He had been fascinated by Brazil and had not been able to tear himself away. He declared that from an investor's point of view it had a big future. He had found neither gold nor diamonds in commercial quantities, but he had put in long stints of excavation, including work on an immense temple which must have given rise to the legends of a lost city, and he had penetrated beyond the farthest point reached by any of his predecessors. Would I like to inspect his souvenirs? He would be delighted to show them to me. They formed an impressive collection.

'He told me that on his way home he had spent almost a year in Rio, and that he had married again. His wife was a Brazilian girl named Sylvia, and she was a stunner and as smart as paint. At the moment she was in France. "Doing the house

over, Rolie. Women are never satisfied!" He would be joining her there at the end of the week.

'He inquired what experiences I had had. Was I still with the same firm of stockbrokers? How was my sister, Paula? Why had I eschewed marriage?

'"And why *have* you?" said Charlotte. "You'd have made a marvellous husband."

'"Selfishness," I said. "And love of comfort. Maybe I did get my priorities wrong."

'"Go on," Graham said. "Shut up, Charlotte. Don't suck up to your Uncle."

'When we reached Will's house we went into the sitting room on the first floor which I knew so well. It was little altered. Grant Hill's painting of Nadine was no longer hanging over the fireplace, and there were no flowers. Otherwise it was the same. On tables and on the wide shelf formed by the tops of the cupboards under the bookcases pieces of pottery and statuettes and weapons and other exotic trophies were littered, and a hideous Devil's mask had replaced the Hill portrait.

'Will stood by the drink tray with his back to me and poured out two strong whiskies and soda. While he was doing so I picked up a small god carved from an olive green stone and started to examine it. It was startlingly obscene. Will turned round and grinned. "You can have him if you like, Rolie. This lot is a fraction of what I've got in the villa. Naturally I was made to leave the best of the stuff in Brazil. Their museums have first claim and they're dreadfully sticky about letting anything at all spectacular out of the country."

'"Thank you," I said, "but I must refuse. My Miss Cadogan would give notice instantly!"

'"My dear Rolie Poly! It might cause her to regard you with added interest!" He seemed larger than life in a vaguely nasty way and I was thankful that I was no longer under his spell. With dedicated concentration Will lit a cigar and the end of the burning match dropped on to the carpet. As he bent to retrieve it the front of his stiff shirt creaked in protest. Like all tall men he looked his best in a tail coat. We were very smart in my youth, Graham.

'"In strait jackets!"

'"Evening dress was both cool and comfortable, unlike the

sloppy garments that are affected nowadays. All those belts and high boots and the Neanderthaloid hair, and the rest of the masquerade. Some of the very young can get away with it—if they're clean!" I could not resist adding: "Why should one want to emulate the sartorial eccentricities of 'The Common Man' in this rolled gold age? Previously fashion has percolated down—and not up—the social scale. 'The Common Man' has never shown taste in urban areas. Only in the pastures. It makes no sense."

'Graham indulged in a bar or so of *The British Grenadiers* and Charlotte remarked: "Don't be such a snob, Uncle Roland!"

'I paid no attention to their comments and went on with my story. Well, we spent half an hour examining his exhibits. I must admit that Will had a thorough knowledge of his subject and made it enthralling. He refilled both of our glasses and overruled my half-hearted declaration about going home to bed. "What rubbish!" he said, taking out his watch. "What's the hurry? It's not even half past two!' The house was absolutely quiet. Somewhere the servants were doubtless enjoying a profound sleep.

'In the corner of the room behind the door, and suspended from a nail like the remnant of a chaplet of onions, hung what looked to me to be a bunch of wizened fruit that had been modelled into the semblance of miniature human heads. Will caught me staring with distaste in their direction and, walking across to where they dangled, he brought them over to me. On closer inspection I saw that the scalps were covered with long hair.

'He thrust the string to which they were attached into my hand. "They're not unique by any manner of means—but in their way I find them captivating. Where I bought them, or rather . . . where I traded for them, head shrinking is a local art. From what I could make out from my mimed negotiations with the owners the one with blue beads in its ears is more than two centuries old. The Indians don't like parting with them. The larger the number a tribe has, the greater is its resultant kudos."

'They were perfectly revolting . . . with their stretched skin and vacant simian features. It was impossible to believe that once they had been human beings who, according to Will, had

been killed in battle or taken prisoners of war. I handed them back to him as soon as I could.

'He was looking at me quizzically, waiting for my reaction, and there was a challenge in his eyes. "The same squeamish old Rolie," he said. He dangled the heads on their string as if they had been yo-yos. "They were ugly little creatures," he went on, "more like animals, and they had disgusting habits. To begin with they regarded Nadine as a goddess." It was the first reference that Will had made to her. "Eventually many of them lost their reverence completely. Before she died they came to know her very well. I saw to that! I'm glad you find my souvenirs compelling. Each of these... mementos has its own individuality." He turned away and replaced his macabre string of "onions" on its nail. Then, in contrast to his former hospitality, he took out his watch and deliberately frowned at it to underline the lateness of the hour. "Life has its ups and downs, Rolie Poly, and we can't all like the same things—or people. Sylvia, for instance, does not share my love of curios. I'm taking those 'little creatures' back with me to Cap d'Antibes. Sylvia must adapt herself. We must all of us adapt ourselves. She is inclined to be superstitious, so I will hang my intriguing puppets above our bed, where she will see them continually. Someday she might find in them a lesson... a warning? Besides, they might get moth if they were left here!" He smiled. "Familiarity will cure her of her silly fear." His hand closed on my arm as insistently as the grip of a taunting bully at school. He yawned and said: "Perhaps it is time for good boys like you to go to sleep." I had learned early on that his extrovert behaviour often masked a hidden purpose, but I could not see what his present objective could be. "Ours has been a long and curious friendship," he said. "Close and... odd. Goodnight, Rolie Poly."

'He loomed over me, an immaculate study in black and white, yet on that evening he might have been in costume. For a second he gave out an aura of the past, and I visualised him clad in a tunic and broad arm bands, straddling a chariot and flogging on his horses in a race; or standing magnificently aloof in a feathered cloak. He released my arm abruptly and splashed whisky into a glass. "You can let yourself out, can't you?" he said.

'I stopped talking. Graham caught my eye. "Frankly, Uncle Roland, I'm disappointed. I sympathise with your unease—but I do not shudder!"

'"I should have loathed it if anyone had tried to make me handle those filthy things," Charlotte said loyally. "But maybe, darling, our family are made of finer clay!"

'I lit a cigarette before I finished. "I can assure you it was most unpleasant," I said. "The reason why it was so gruesome was that one of the heads, far from being two hundred years old, was comparatively modern. Its hair had been dyed, and on one of the cheeks a lion's claw had gouged a livid scar, and as you may know, there are no lions in South America."

'"Uncle Roland!"

'I looked across at Charlotte. "I suppose one might say that I was—and indeed am still—an accessory after the fact?"'

12

SIMPLE SIMON

THE woods seemed enchanted on that evening in late September. The shadows, which were beginning to lengthen and intensify, emphasised the reddening of the setting sun, alternating pools of emerald and orange with circles and wedges of contrasting darkness among the boles of the trees and pinpointing the vermilion tips of rusting fronds of fern.

The young man trod softly along the rides and through the open spaces where disintegrating tree trunks, collared and blotched with fungi, lay embedded in the earth. He was trained to walk without noise, for on innumerable occasions he had followed Shevlin or one of his assistants on their rounds in the early morning or after dusk. He was a well-covered young man, big boned and heavily built, but he could be as light on his feet as a boxer.

He came to the border of the wood and vaulted over the fence into a strip of pasture which probed in a tongue of green between massed blocks of trees. Here it was damp and his high boots squelched in the mud where, among the pitted marks of hooves, cowpats had been scattered in a fly-infested archipelago. A line of browsing rabbits froze at once before raising their heads tentatively, and a pigeon whirred noisily away from the branches above him.

He strode on across the grassy enclave and entered the wood on its farther side. Again he took pains to cover his approach, stepping carefully and finally standing motionless, with the broken light playing on his dun coloured tweed and providing him with perfect concealment.

He would have been good-looking had it not been for his mouth. His eyes were spaced widely apart, his nose was slightly aquiline and finely cut. His hair was a cap of close dark curls, but his mouth was lax and wet, and had the cruel pouting expression of stupidity. He carried a stout stick, its knob stained

and polished from long usage.

Around him were the soothing sounds of approaching night, the crooning of pigeons, the staccato notes of song birds half-heartedly breaking the hush of a day that was nearing its end. Midges danced in myriads, hazing the still air.

A low voice spoke at his shoulder. "Good evening, m'Lord."

Simon Tamberley turned his head abruptly. "Good God. Shevlin. I never heard you come up."

"I should hope not, m'Lord," replied the man with a smile.

"Anything doin'?" Simon asked.

"Not as yet. Joe Bowman's back in the village together with his brood. He was about due. The Smiths are there too, and others of the rascals. They've made a regular encampment."

"Those bloody gipsies!" Simon said. "They should be in gaol, the ruddy lot of them."

"Quite so, m'Lord." Shevlin squinted up at the sky and the thin veiling of cloud which was creeping in from the west.

"Where were you going?" asked Simon.

"Up to Pitt's Copse and along the ridge."

The young man poked at the ground with his stick, waiting for his companion to continue. The head keeper touched his hat and began to move away. After a moment's hesitation Simon followed him, neither of them saying a word. He allowed a few paces to lapse between himself and the broad corduroy covered back ahead. Shevlin had his gun at the slope and a small terrier was crowding his heels.

When they had reached the top of the steep incline Shevlin halted. "I don't expect a deal of activity tonight," he said. "Saturday and Sunday will be the ones they'll choose." Today was Wednesday. "Although, on account of this coming Saturday being October the first they may take a chance." He peered down into the valley where the great house had been built in unquestioned majesty, secure in the isolation of the beautifully planted park through which twisted the shallow river, spanned by a Palladian bridge. "It's a grand evening, m'Lord."

"Yes, Shevlin, it is."

"Any news from Inverossie?" the man asked.

"I understand that Mr. Hilliard had a letter," Simon said shortly. "I haven't heard anything myself."

"They say it's a good year they're having up there," volun-

teered Shevlin. "Maybe that's why the Earl and Countess have stayed on beyond their custom."

"And from what I've seen it'll be a good one here also," said Simon.

"Yes, we've plenty of birds," Shevlin agreed. "It's been a wonderful summer." He wished to be off on his rounds and had no desire for Lord Tamberley's company. "I'm not fashed about the poachers," he added reassuringly. "They'll be in for a hot reception right enough. Well, good-night to you, my Lord."

"Good-night, Shevlin."

When the man had left him Simon was undecided what to do. He walked forward into a little clearing in the middle of which two weather-stained posts joined by a cross bar had been hammered. Suspended from this primitive construction was an array of corpses, for the most part far gone in corruption. They were a haphazard collection of small animals and birds, stoats, weasels, jays, carrion crows, owls and a solitary wild cat. Their wizened bodies dangled dejectedly from the nooses round their necks, their paws or talons hanging in limp acceptance of their demise, like the woebegone hands of men who had been done to death on a gibbet. For the main part the glassy eyes had vanished, and grey or white maggots writhed and jostled in the safety of decomposing fur or feathers, while a minority appeared to have been wind sucked and mummified, the tiny bones showing through the stretched and splitting skin like the ivory skulls of very old men. They had been strung up there and left as a warning, a mute testimony to the fate of all marauders.

Simon studied them for some moments, his lips curved in approval, before he went back to the path which zigzagged down into the valley. He would be in time to wash before Blake announced dinner; but with his parents away in the wilds of Perthshire there would be no question of dressing and it would not matter if he were to be late, and afterwards he could come out again and take a last walk round. He might pick up some snared rabbits. There wasn't very much that Shevlin could teach him which he did not already know.

When he had completed his inspection of the ridge Jim Shevlin consulted his bulky silver watch. He would complete the

circuit and then go home for a bite and take it easy for an hour or two. He had a rendezvous with Bolton and young Horace and John Harris at half past nine. It had been arranged that they should meet by the big oak at Hilton Bottom for briefing.

His Lordship at times fair gave him the creeps. Not that it was his fault. People couldn't help it if they were a bit simple. He had been taken ill soon after he had left the nursery for the schoolroom. Shevlin's wife, Mabel, from whom he gleaned most of his information, had never known the exact nature of the malady, she had known only that her Ladyship had been nearly out of her mind with worry and for months had been distraught with anxiety, and that prayers had been offered for his recovery, both in the private chapel and in the village church. One thing was certain—after his convalescence the design of Simon's life had been changed. He had been treated protectively and cosseted against the harsh realities and competition with which most boys had to cope. None of the staff ever referred to the matter.

It was bad luck, tho', on the Earl. Now there was a man for you! One of the best shots in the entire country, hunted hounds, and was as much at home with a rod as with a gun. He could be stern and he was no fool in business affairs, but he was a man to be trusted, one who gave everyone with whom he came into contact a fair hearing and a straight deal. It was a pity indeed that there weren't more men of the calibre of the Earl of Crane. Her Ladyship, too, and Lady Ambrosine—nicer ladies it would be impossible to find! Shevlin was glad that Lady Ambrosine had married Mr. Michael Dennis, they were all of them glad. He was one of the best, and they made a handsome couple.

Shevlin really couldn't blame the Earl for leaving Simon behind at Tamberley. It made it more of a holiday for the rest of them. The boy wasn't certifiable, nothing of the sort, he was merely odd, and where book learning was concerned he wasn't all that backward. He just wasn't quite like others. Privately Shevlin thought that his disabilities had been exaggerated but, as Mabel had remarked, they didn't know the whole story.

He had to admit that his Lordship had a mean streak which needed watching, meaner than most people realised. Perhaps it

was because he hadn't been sent away to school, had never had to rough it. Not so long ago Mrs. Barlow, the housekeeper, had confided to Mabel that Mr. Blake had told her that his Lordship would come out with things during dinner that one wouldn't have expected to hear from an angry child—and right in front of company! It could be that the Earl made him nervous. Yes, it was a pity that he was the only boy.

As a child he had been so gentle. He'd had all kinds of pets, guinea pigs, kittens, a ring dove. He'd hated shooting and would never go out with the guns, wouldn't even step on a mouse. Perhaps the Earl had been afraid he'd grow up a milksop, which was why he'd encouraged him to spend so much time with Bolton, particularly as he couldn't persuade him to go near a horse. Now his Lordship didn't seem to care what he did. It was as if he'd utterly conquered his revulsion of taking life. Was it because he thought that toughness would raise him in the Earl's estimation? If so, it was sad because he hadn't gone about it in the right way. He was a rum lad sure enough. It was funny how natures could change.

Somehow he'd developed a savage, brutal streak, which he tried to hide. Once he'd seen him kill a wounded badger with a spade. He'd taken his time over doing it, almost chopped the beast in pieces, and had enjoyed every second. Lately he'd acquired an abnormal sense of his own importance, but then, of course, he would in due course occupy a great position. Oh, well! James Shevlin gave a mental shrug, for when the day came for Simon to succeed to the earldom he himself would be in pensioned retirement, so why should he worry about the future? By then Stanley Bolton would have taken over.

Supper was ready when he reached his cottage. His wife was finishing the laying of the table as he came in. "There's more of them, Jim," she said. "They've parked their caravans on the roadside beyond Coe's. They must be twenty or thirty strong." She bent down to draw a pie from the oven. "You'll take care, dear, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, Mabel, I'll take care." He drew up his chair. "Those gipsy fellahs mostly take a night or so to settle in. It's the weekend we've got to watch out for. That's when there'll be fireworks, as I was telling his Lordship."

Mrs. Shevlin glanced up from her buttering of newly baked

bread. "Had him on your back all day, Jim? He's taken quite a fancy to you."

James laughed. "I don't mind it, not now and again. He was quite fetching when he was a little 'un."

"He ain't a little 'un no longer." said Mabel shortly. "He's a big 'un, and one that's not right in the head." She frowned. "I'm always edgy at the start of the pheasant shooting." She went over to the dresser, returning with a jug and a pewter tankard. "You must promise me, Jim."

"Promise you what?"

"To be careful," she said "—that's what! You're the only husband I've got. I know you can take care of yourself... but even so!"

James laughed and wiped his moustache. "You're a good cook, dear," he said. "That's why I married you."

The gipsy's boy was fourteen, small for his age, and wiry, His skin was as brown as a Sicilian's, and his hair an unexpected carroty red. His eyes were never still. His clothes were ragged, patched and colourless. He had spent all of his short life on the road.

Joe Bowman, his father, had given him a leg-up on to the top of the grey stone wall and had then left him. He had been instructed to spy out the land from the gate lodge to where the new planting began, and that was to be all. The snares would be laid tomorrow night. He was not frightened for he had been on similar expeditions for the past five years, serving his apprenticeship, but this was the first occasion when he had been sent ahead on his own into a vast keeper-patrolled estate such as Tamberley.

Tom had been told that he was to stay there until dawn. He had been lent a watch and had been instructed to note and remember the routine of the keepers, which was liable to be an erratic one. He was also to take notice of where the pheasants roosted in numbers, and of likely spots for a quick getaway. He stood in the shadows pressed against the base of the wall while he memorised exactly where he was, and waited to get the feel of his surroundings.

About a mile from where he crouched, his father and Luke Smith would be doing much the same thing in preparation for

the next night, when they would be turning out in force.

His fingers touched the snares in his pockets, the snares which he had been expressly forbidden to bring. He would set them, and if when he collected them they held their quota of rabbits and game he knew that nothing would be said, no retaliation taken for disobeying orders.

When he had grown accustomed to the gloom cast by the web of the interlaced branches he moved on cautiously through the trees. He knew precisely how to place his feet on the twig strewn mould, and was as quiet as a fox. He reached one of the rides, where the hillside fell sharply below him until levelling out to the pasture where he could see the grandeur of the great house washed by the moonlight between slowly drifting clouds.

Mansions such as Tamberley were as remote to Tom's understanding as was the planet Mars. He could neither imagine what they might contain nor how their inhabitants lived, nor the characters of those who dwelt in them. They were a race apart, unknown and unapproachable. Theirs was another dimension as distant from his own life and experience as was that of the matronly Queen Victoria herself who, had Tom but known it, was destined to reign for a further four decades.

The aristocracy was not 'the enemy'. Rather were they alien beings without reality, who were to be defied and, whenever possible, plundered; but who were also to be respected, for their power was illimitable. It was the hosts of minions in their employ who constituted the real adversaries.

Tom held his breath. A man was stalking up the ride, hugging the darker side. He had a gun under his arm and every now and then he stopped to listen, his head cocked, alert as an animal. He was in his thirties, and Tom knew that he must be one of the under-keepers. As he watched him a bat, with a squeak which was scarcely audible, skittered out from a hole which gaped empty as an eye-socket in the forked branch of a tree opposite. An owl hooted mournfully and, apparently satisfied, the burly man with the gun slunk quietly on.

Tom remained flattened against the tree trunk until he was out of sight. It was unlikely that another of the bastards would make an appearance for half an hour or so. He would set his snares and return to his vantage point. He turned the dial of

the big watch towards the sky and peered intently at its hands. It was half past eleven.

The little boy padded off until he came to a place where the trees thinned. His snub nose wrinkled at the stench of corruption which came from the necklace of rotting vermin dangling in its centre. Then, running at a tangent, he slanted away down the hillside.

After he had covered a hundred yards he paused. This would be the place to position his snares. He knelt down, his face absorbed and his hands busy. A short distance to his right a roughly cleared path cut through the trees to make a junction with one of the major rides. It was seldom used and the leaves of many winters had formed a thick unrutted carpet over its surface.

Tom Bowman straightened up and rubbed his fingers on the sides of his tattered trousers. He must hurry back to resume his vigil. He shivered, for the autumn night was beginning to strike chill, and the threadbare oversized coat, which his mother had begged, had already served several owners. The concealment and pegging of the wire snares had taken him longer than he had allowed.

He inspected the path minutely. He would have to jump over it to avoid leaving any tell-tale footprints. It was, perhaps, six feet in width. Tom took a preparatory run, but as his feet left the ground a noose of briar snatched at one of his ankles causing him to stumble and fall forward with outstretched arms, landing heavily where the leaves were thickest.

There came a searing pain in his thigh, and as he struggled to rise he found to his horror that he could not move his leg. He was caught in the merciless grip of an iron man-trap, its serrated jaws biting savagely into his flesh. The agony was intolerable. He dared not call for help, for if he should do so and his own people were to hear, then, too, would the keepers. He would have to lie there in torture until by some miracle his father or Luke Smith might happen to find and release him.

When the expedition had been discussed his mother had been against his inclusion. "He's not old enough, Joe," she'd protested, "not to be left by himself, he isn't. It's different when you're there to keep an eye on him." Joe had grinned and had gone on smoking his clay pipe. "Please," she'd said, "leave him

be for another year. I'm not one for asking no favours—but he's too young I tell you, and they're a hard lot at Tamberley."

His father had quirked an eyebrow. "Are you too young, Tommy Boy?" he had inquired. "I was on my own when I was a sight younger than you." He had added as an afterthought: "I'll not be after forcing him if he's nervous."

Tom had said quite angrily: "No, Mam. I'm not nervous and I am old enough. There's no call for you to interfere and try to stop me."

His mother had made a gesture of resignation. "You've the safety of others to think of besides your own, Tommy." She had scarcely spoken for the remainder of the evening.

He could feel the warm blood welling down over his knee. He scrabbled frantically among the leaves until he uncovered the ponderous chain which secured the man-trap to the ghostly trunk of a silver birch. Strain as he would he was unable to move the trap by as much as an inch. Kneeling in the middle of the pathway he rested his weight upon his wrists, biting back his cries through clenched teeth. Sweat beaded his forehead, coagulated, and trickled down his cheeks. If only he could summon up the courage to keep quiet until help came... and succour must surely come.

The woods lay silent under the moon, and one by one the lights shining through the tall windows of the huge house in the valley were extinguished. A rat broke off from its nocturnal scavenging to regard Tom with inquisitive eyes, and after a few minutes a hedgehog ambled by, stopping to nuzzle the bark of a flaking stump in search of beetles and slugs. The yellow and copper leaves broke free, spiralling and drifting softly to the earth.

Simon Tamberley finished his coffee and made his way along the endless stone corridors to the Gun Room. Here, with the exception of that facing the windows, the whitewashed walls were decorated with inferior portraits sorely in need of cleaning, and excellent sporting prints. The back wall had been built out into large glass-fronted cupboards containing some twenty shotguns and rifles. Simon struck a match and lit the oil lamp that squatted under its china shade in the centre of the baize covered table.

He saw that the key of the cupboard was where he had left it. Gervase Hilliard, his father's agent, had lent it to him on the previous morning on the understanding that it should be returned to him by the evening. Simon had been out in the fields with Bolton. He was allowed to shoot pigeon whenever he wished if he was accompanied by Mr. Hilliard or by one of the keepers. He had been asked to leave the key on the table and had done so, but it had not been collected. During his employer's absence Mr. Hilliard was inclined to be remiss about details.

Simon unlocked a cupboard and took out a twelve-bore gun. It was a Lang and was the same which he had used when he had gone out with Stan Bolton. He squinted down the barrel to check if it had been cleaned. Slipping the key and half a dozen cartridges into his coat pocket he let himself out of the narrow vaulted door which gave on to the stable yard. A faint glow came from the saddle room, where old Trigg, who was fond of a game of whist with the lads, was doubtless playing cards. Subdued noises and muffled snortings issued from the row of closed loose boxes where his parents' hunters were kept. The carriage horses were housed in the inner yard.

He walked on through the kitchen gardens and past the heated glass-houses and through the apple orchard, recently stripped of its fruit. He climbed a stile which led into a meadow, beyond which loomed the massive barriers of the woodlands. He left tracks of crystal on the dew burdened grass as he went, and once he stopped to break the gun, pushing cartridges into the breach.

His family were to return on Thursday, and on Saturday week there was to be the opening shoot of the season. A number of guests had been invited, and already, under the supervision of Blake and Mrs. Barlow, the house was in a bustle of mounting activity. The shoot was the culmination of six months of hard work by nearly thirty men, the annual climax of a treasured heritage of more than a century of skilful planning, of tending, and of determined preservation.

As he opened the gate into the nearest of the rides Simon Tamberley was filled with a quietly arrogant content. These woods, and the four thousand acres of arable and farm land, all belonged to his father, Lord Crane, and one day they would devolve on him. They formed a private kingdom of which he

was the heir-apparent and in which his word would be law and no one would have the right to question it.

In his way Shevlin was an efficient fellow, Simon freely admitted, but supervision was always beneficial, for even the best of servants could grow slack. Simon was proud that he was to be one of the guns on that first Saturday. He was taking the end of the line for the whole day, and young Barney Trigg had been allotted to him as his loader.

It was intolerable that poaching had not been stamped out, and that the birds so painstakingly nurtured should be exposed to disturbance and the threat of having their numbers decreased. For half an hour Simon patrolled slowly along the rides, keeping to the level strips which had been scythed along their edges. Sometimes he halted by a dense tangle of briars or in the shelter of a hummock of rhododendrons. He knew that at least five of the men must be on duty, but he saw and heard no one. Shevlin had warned him that man-traps had been laid and had told him where they had been positioned. He had indicated to Simon that a prudent silence on that subject was advisable. The Earl had not actually forbidden their use. He had taken it for granted that they had long since been discontinued, and Shevlin had seen no reason to disillusion him, for they were the best of deterrents.

Simon Tamberley yawned. His boots and stockings were soaking. Shevlin had said that there was small likelihood of excitement tonight; no trespassers, no malefactors who could be cornered and caught red-handed and cowed into submission. It was time for bed. He would take the track which wound back to the house from Pitt's Copse to Creighton's Meadow.

Lightly as he trod, Tom Bowman was aware of Simon's approach even before he had turned the corner. His fingernails curved like claws, digging into the palms of his hands. Who was it who was about to discover him—would it be Luke Smith, or his own father? Or would it be one of the legginged bullies, one of those guardians of privilege whom for as long as he could remember he had been indoctrinated to hate? Even at this moment of peril Joe Bowman's scornful phrase rang in his ears.

Simon Tamberley stopped abruptly. Among the leaves on the path ahead there was a humped shape, which a moment before

had made an involuntary movement and which was now trying hard to make itself invisible, endeavouring by maintaining complete immobility to blend in with its surroundings. He stood watching it for some minutes through narrowed eyes, warmed by a flickering surge of excitement.

He'd caught one of the thieves who would, not so long ago, have been hanged for this offence, or sentenced to transportation for life, and a good thing too! He crept forward warily, for the intruder might be concealing a weapon.

Now he could see that it was either a boy or a runt of a man, who had blundered into the trap. Shevlin had been wise to continue their use. Simon went forward and stood over the prostrate form. It must be one of the gipsies' guttersnipes, a vagabond who had been sent to spy out the land. Simon's anger rose in his throat, bitter as bile. How dared such a creature have the impudence to venture on to his estate. They were worse than nuisances, these gipsies. They were a menace to life and property, and they deserved to be exterminated.

He said nothing, letting the boy savour the threat of his proximity. Tom did not look up. He focused his gaze on the delicate veining of a skeleton leaf on the ground in front of him. From somewhere at his back there came the high pitched squeal of a terrified rabbit. He lifted his head with an effort, staring at the muscular legs clad in green woollen stockings. The coarse-grained boots stepped very near.

Fear had robbed him of the power of speech. His thigh was burning with a fiery throbbing. This man who towered above him was not a keeper. He was one of the Olympians . . . perhaps a friend of the Queen's at Windsor Castle. Should he shout for help? Where was his father? Where was Luke? They could not abandon him. At dawn, which would break in a few hours, they had been going to meet at the caravans. He knew well what the pattern would be. His mother would have food prepared for them, and after he had eaten she would bundle him off to bed to sleep until he awoke of his own accord. She would give him breakfast, eggs or porridge, or sometimes a stew which she reheated over the fire. The giant was trying to scare him. When he had talked himself out he would hand him over to the keepers and eventually they would let him free.

Tom could hear the young man's laboured frenetic breathing

and real dread enveloped him. This venomous anger which confronted him was not the blind fury of which his father was capable, it was something infinitely more implacable. Instinctively he knew that it was the blood lust of a maniac. The cold arrogance was lethal and the tone of voice when the man spoke was hideously caressing. "You're quite young, aren't you?"

"They sent me, sir," Tom muttered. "They heaved me over the wall."

Simon Tamberley smiled. He felt like a god. The fate of this scrap of human garbage was in his hands. He was the destroyer, armoured with power, and in full command of the situation. He *was* God. No longer was he to be despised or ignored. The unspoken criticisms, the pained silences, the faintly raised eyebrows with which his family had signified bewildered disapproval of his gaucherie and often ill-expressed opinions, all were being sloughed and he felt strong and potent and virile. He was the master, the Almighty.

"Look at me, boy," he said. "Look at me."

Tom lifted his eyes to those of his tormentor standing straddle-legged over him and he knew that there was to be no escape. Simon saw the gleam of courage in the boy's eyes and read it as defiance, and Tom in his turn recognised the glint of murder.

There was a flurry of wings as feathered bodies launched themselves from the branches of the trees and rocketed up across the lopsided orb of the moon, and then there was nothing to mar the peace of the night, across which floated the chimes from the stable clock to reach the ears of a broad-shouldered figure that stood staring down in fascination at a dark and twisted shadow sprawled brokenly at his feet.

James Shevlin stiffened as he heard the dual report. It sounded as if it had come from about half a mile away in the direction of Pitt's Copse, which had been the agreed boundary between his territory and Bolton's. What could have happened? Why had not Stan Bolton given a blast on his whistle? Horace, also, would have been warned and would be on his guard. Had there been serious trouble? He strode towards the spot where he had judged the shots to have been fired, filled with disquiet and strange foreboding.

Joe Bowman, too, heard the report and his heart turned over. It could not be that they were shooting at Tom. In woodcraft and evasion the boy was a match for them, he was adept in making himself invisible, and even if they had chanced to catch him they'd have to release him after a bawling out and a thrashing. He was so young, and he wasn't armed, and there were no snares on him, he'd made sure of that. In any case it was a million to one against the little chap letting one of them get near him. He was as nimble as a squirrel.

Simon Tamberley searched around the trunk of the silver birch for the stubby instrument which would open the trap, and which was left near the chain so that whoever found the prisoner could, if he so wished, release him from constraint without waiting for Shevlin's arrival. Almost immediately his groping was successful. Averting his head he lifted up the boy in his arms, holding him well away from his jacket to avoid contact with the blood. Exhaustion had swept over him, draining his former exhilaration. In the ditch by the side of the path he scooped a shallow grave and laid him down, quickly covering the place with leaf mould and fronds of withered bracken which he smoothed with his heel. Next he reset the man trap, concealing it under its former camouflage, before he replaced the key in its hiding place.

When he was satisfied with the results of his work he walked up to the intersection of the rides and turned off to the right. A silhouette stepped out from the obscurity of a laurel bush.

"That you, m'Lord?" Shevlin asked in a low voice.

"Yes." Glancing down Simon noticed that his hand was smeared and thrust it out of sight. "Did you hear a shot, Shevlin?"

"I did, m'Lord." The keeper eyed the gun which Simon carried. "Was it you, m'Lord, who fired it?" he asked.

"No."

"Then it must have been Bolton or young Horace." James Shevlin sounded puzzled. "It came from hereabouts." He was wondering if one of his men had been not the marksman, but the target, for they had strict orders not to shoot except as a last resort. As a third figure materialised he said sharply: "Bolton?"

"It's Horace, Mr. Shevlin. Stan's on his way."

"Seen anything?" the head keeper asked.

"No, Mr. Shevlin."

They stood in a huddle without speaking. James Shevlin broke the silence. "If I were you, m'Lord," he suggested, "I should turn in. There'll be naught doing after that racket."

"Yes, I think I will," said Lord Tamberley. "Good-night, Shevlin. 'Night to you, Horace."

They looked after him as he disappeared into the darkness. "It came from somewhere between the two of us," Horace said uneasily. "I mean it came from somewhere between Stan Bolton and me."

"Best to forget it." James Shevlin shrugged. "Like as not it was his Lordship. Took a pot shot at an owl, the silly fool, and doesn't want to admit it."

Hidden on the slope below, Luke Smith touched Joe Bowman's sleeve. "Let's beat it," he whispered. "Those bastards will be round us like hornets."

Joe grunted. There were only the three of them out tonight, Luke and Tommy and himself, unless Bill Cork had changed his mind and come on his own, which would have been a stupid thing to do. And keepers didn't go banging off during the hours of darkness before the opening of the season—that they ruddy well didn't! Joe Bowman spat into the undergrowth. "If those sods have hurt my boy," he said savagely, "I'll do 'em in if I have to swing for it."

Simon was sitting on the terrace, basking in the sunshine of the Indian summer, when Mr. Hilliard stepped out from an open french window. "Lord Tamberley," he said, "Shevlin is here and has asked for a word with you. He is in the Gun Room."

Simon put down the copy of *The Times*. When his father was at home he had to wait until the evening before he could read it. 'Lord Tamberley.' The mode of address was flattering. Until a year ago the agent had called him by his Christian name. They had been 'Simon' and 'Gerry' to one another. Now, rightly, the time had come for a more formal relationship between them. "Would you please tell him to come out here," he

said.

"Certainly." Gervase Hilliard lingered, fingering his watch chain. "If you will excuse me," he said, "I would like to remind you about the key. As you know, I am responsible to your father for every one of the guns."

Simon looked at him lazily for a few seconds before he answered. "By all means, Hilliard. I believe that I left it on my dressing table. Blake will give it to you." He picked up the paper to indicate dismissal.

"I will go and see Blake," said Gervase Hilliard. Annoyed by the coolness of Simon's manner he spoke curtly. As he walked away, stiff-backed, his receding footsteps rang on the flagstones of the terrace.

Simon lay back in the long wicker chair turning the pages of *The Times* quickly and without interest. He was aware that James Shevlin had joined him and that, hat in hand, he was standing at his elbow. At length the young man looked up in feigned surprise. "'Afternoon," he said. "Something cropped up that Mr. Hilliard can't deal with?"

"No, m'Lord." Shevlin seemed embarrassed. "It is just about . . . about last night. Osier came to see me this morning. It appears that one of the gipsies' children is missing. One of the Bowmans. A lad of thirteen or fourteen. He told me that the mother went to the police station. Unusual for them to do that. They take care to steer clear of the law. I wondered if by any chance you might have caught a glimpse of him?"

Simon shook his head. "No," he said. "I have already assured you that I encountered nobody. Had you forgotten? Did anyone else see him? What makes you think the ragamuffin was in these woods?"

Shevlin coughed. "No reason, m'Lord. According to Osier," he continued drily, "the boy's parents profess to be in complete ignorance of where he might have gone." The keeper rubbed his nose with the knuckle of his thumb. "The mother is very distressed, m'Lord." Tomorrow, he decided, he must tell Bolton to organise a thorough search. His men had to catch up on some sleep, they'd been kept at it pretty hard.

"Those people have so many brats I'm astonished that the absence of one of them has even been remarked," said Simon.

Shevlin's smile was thin. "Exactly, m'Lord, but in this in-

stance, m'Lord, it was!"

"Sorry I'm unable to be of help," Simon said. "Why didn't you enlist Mr. Hilliard's assistance instead of bothering me?"

"I thought I had better check with you again, m'Lord. It seems that this Joe Bowman is out to make trouble."

"Quite." Simon Tamberley got up from his chair. "I daresay the little brute will be found. He'll turn up. In fact, I'm certain that he will!" He laughed as he wandered across to where the semi-circle of the balustrade, with its carved stone pine-apples embraced the terrace, his mouth parted in the enjoyment of some secret joke. "Want me to give you a hand tonight?" he asked.

"I don't think there is any necessity, m'Lord, although it is kind of you to suggest it."

"Not kind at all. It is my duty. I'm not such a useless fellow as you all seem to imagine, and I don't like to be robbed. One of these days this place will be mine."

"I have not forgotten that, m'Lord," said Shevlin.

"Very well." Simon's look was sly. "I'm no longer a child, Shevlin. I'm perfectly capable of taking decisions for myself."

"If you will pardon me, m'Lord, I should leave your gun behind. We don't want any accidents, and one of us will always be within call."

Simon's expression darkened and he did not reply.

The man hesitated. "I might just mention, m'Lord, that the traps have been left where they were."

"Thank you, Shevlin," Simon said tersely. "You may go." He leaned with his arms folded on the flat top of the balustrade and did not look round again. He was engaged in watching the swans on the lake as they sailed in dignified procession past the columned temple on its rush-fringed islet.

He had been giving great thought to his personal standing among his father's employees, which left much to be desired and would have to be rectified. He would show them that he was a man to be reckoned with, to demonstrate beyond all question that he was a worthy heir.

James Shevlin made his final climb up the hill to Pitt's Copse. It was the sweet hour when the star-flecked sky grew grey and took on a flush of pink that heralded the rising sun,

the transient period when, after a preliminary and experimental twittering, the bird chorus swelled and gladdened the heart, and when the countryside stirred in fresh innocence to face the challenge of a new day.

He was worried. The gipsies in their encampment were in an ugly mood, or so Osier had said. It was, of course, over the disappearance of Joe Bowman's son. Shevlin suspected that his Lordship might know more about it than he had let on. He had always been quick on the trigger. On the other hand he might be doing him an injustice. The gipsy boys were in the habit of running away, sometimes after getting a hiding, or more often if they were in some skirmish with authority, and frequently they did not rejoin their families for a month or more. They were really no one's concern except that of their own tribe. If the child had met with an injury of a serious nature they would know more by nightfall, when the woods had been combed.

James Shevlin was tired. It was twenty hours since he had slept, and the calves of his legs ached and felt hot and clammy in the clasp of the leather gaiters. He would be glad to get his clothes off. There was a stirring of the leaves and a flash of fur as a weasel struggled in the loop of a snare in which it was entangled. It had been maimed but not killed, and the animal had gnawed one of its forelegs to the bone in its panic-stricken efforts to liberate itself.

James swung the but of his gun to smash the narrow head and deliver the *coup de grâce*, and as he bent to pick up the corpse the keeper's eyes were those of the trained killer, impersonal and calm and with a detached kindness.

When he drew level with the clearing Shevlin groped in his breeches pocket for a piece of string with which to add the new addition to the line of vermin already threaded along the cross-bar. In the tree arched opening he halted horror struck, unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes.

Since yesterday evening another victim had been added to the row of decomposing carrion. Fastened to one of the tall posts was the body of a boy, a large meat hook thrust brutally through his neck. His thin arms were flaccid at his sides and his face had been half blasted away from his skull. A dull thick coating of congealed blood was clotted on his chest and had soaked into

the stuff of his shabby coat. One of his trouser legs was rent from waist to knee, and the purplish lacerated flesh could be clearly seen.

James Shevlin heard the echo of Simon Tamberley's querulously defiant voice: 'I'm not such a useless fellow as you all seem to imagine. I don't like to be robbed.'

So this was the explanation of the shots which he had made such a poor job of investigating on Wednesday night. Small wonder that his Lordship had been agitated! The poor bugger must be as mad as a coot.

The keeper laid down his gun and the dead weasel, and like a sleep-walker went over to where Tom was hanging. Even for his practised fingers it was no easy matter to remove the hook, and when finally he had succeeded in so doing he was shaking and racked with nausea.

He wished to God that the Earl could have returned a day earlier from Inverossie for he did not know what to do or what story he could tell. There would be the man-traps to explain—and the ghastly wounds which must have been inflicted at point blank range—and why in the name of Christ had that moronic loon seen fit to cause further mutilation with the meat hook?

Cradling Tom like a baby he carried him up to the cottage. He would have to notify Pete Osier immediately.

13

SIREN SONG

It was to be a camping holiday. On September 2nd Bella and Douglas Foster had hired a caravan for nine days to celebrate their third wedding anniversary. Fortunately there was a heat wave. In fact, it was the high spot of a very uncertain summer. They had left St. John's Wood on a Friday afternoon and it was now Sunday evening. Salisbury lay some twelve miles to the south of where they had pulled in for the night.

Ten o'clock, and no breath of wind fanned the dying mound of their fire. The moon was a sickle of silver and scattered wisps of almost motionless cloud patterned the star-sprinkled vault of the sky. Douglas was lying on his side on a ground sheet, flicking fragments of twig into the embers, and Bella was inside the caravan turning down the beds. "Want some beer, darling?" she called.

"Please." He sat up crosslegged. "Leave all that for a minute and come out here and talk to me. It's so lovely. I saw the most magnificent shooting star not five seconds ago."

"All right." His wife picked her way cautiously down the steps. She was carrying a bottle of lager and an opener. She was taking care not to slip, for she was seven months pregnant. "It's your turn to do breakfast tomorrow," she said.

"It'll be scrambled eggs. Mine are much better than yours."

"All men are good at eggs." She dismissed his boast. Kneeling down on the ground sheet she offered him the beer like a libation. "Would you care to go over the Cathedral in the afternoon?"

"Salisbury? Yes, let's. I believe The Close is enchanting." She settled herself in the crook of his arm and leant her head against his shoulder. They sat together in contentment. London might never have existed. The peace of the vast open space was healing balm to their traffic-shredded nerves. "Bella," he said suddenly. "What on earth was that?"

"What?"

"Didn't you see it?" he asked. "It came from over there above that clump of trees on the horizon." He pointed in the direction of Pewsey.

"No," she said. "I didn't see a thing."

"How very odd!"

"I had my eyes shut," she told him a little defensively.

"Blind as a bat to the beauty that surrounds you." Douglas laughed. "It was extremely curious—and I don't mean your myopia."

"Well what was it for heaven's sake?"

"A . . . a sort of flying saucer. Or rather it was the ghost of one."

"Douglas, how could it have been 'the ghost' of one? Do try and make some sense."

"It was semi-transparent. Like a jelly-fish."

"Rubbish," Bella said. Few women are either fans of, or willing to believe in, objects from outer space. "It's bedtime. Is it safe to leave the fire, or should we kick it to pieces?"

"Perfectly safe." They struggled to their feet. Douglas flung his arms wide, embracing the perfection of the night. "I'm going for a short walk. Want to come?"

"Really short?" she asked suspiciously.

"Uh-huh. Five minutes. Promise."

"Cross your heart?" He took her hand and they walked uphill over the springy turf. He felt impelled to pursue the course which his mystery 'sighting' had taken.

At the top of the rise they halted. Below them the land fell away quite sharply for a hundred yards before levelling out into a chalk-streaked plateau, and it was on this plateau that the thing which had so startled Douglas had come to rest. They stood staring at it incredulously and without speaking and Bella's fingers twisted in his.

In shape the saucer was much as imagery had depicted in a dozen films and countless stories. There was the shallow cone, the tapered edge and a double ring of portholes. No engine was visible. Grounded, the saucer was not translucent, but opaque, and the metal from which it had been constructed was the colour of pale alabaster. Only in its size was it amazing, for it

was fully a hundred feet in diameter and at its highest point it was four times the height of a man.

"Darling," Bella whispered, "it can't be true! Such things don't happen in England. Arizona or Colorado—yes, maybe! But not in Wiltshire."

As they watched enthralled one of the circles of portholes began to glow softly, as windows in front of drawn curtains glow. "You stay here," Douglas said. "I've got to get a closer view."

"Douglas—don't be so idiotic." Bella clutched at him. "You've absolutely no idea what might be inside."

"Intelligent beings, I should imagine," he said drily.

"But you can't know what sort! They may be revolting."

"And I never will know if I stay rooted to this spot like an imbecile."

"Don't go, darling."

"Why not? If this... this craft is what we both think it is, we don't want to give our visitors the impression of being a couple of gibbering aborigines!"

He started off down the slope. After a moment Bella followed him. The withered grass was slippery. She caught him up and grabbed his arm and together they went forward. When they were within a few feet of the ship they stopped. Looming above them it was gigantic and awe inspiring. From the arrangement of the portholes it was obvious that there were two decks, and it was on the lower, where the lights shone, that the casing of the aircraft had become semi-transparent as if the illuminated interior had absorbed the substance of the outer shell. Bella understood what Douglas had meant by his use of the word 'ghost'.

The speckling of weeds and tufts of coarse grass clinging to the chalk were not charred, nor had the space-ship made an appreciable indent on the surface. It must have made a landing as delicate as a glider's. The glow of the lights intensified and a door, flush with the casing, slid back and a ramp unfolded, snaking out until it had made contact with the ground. Through the brightly lit rectangle a passage could be seen, and over the sweet stillness of the night air there crept the murmur of strange and infinitely beguiling music. Of the vessel's crew there was no sign.

Douglas was at the bottom of the ramp. "Hello?" There was no answer. "Hey!" he called again. "Can you hear me? You in there—can you hear me?"

Bella joined him and with the palm of her hand touched the alabaster metal. It had the cool smoothness of lacquer. She glanced up at her husband's eager expression and her own face was equally alive with excitement and anticipation. "Douglas, darling," she said, "are you . . . I mean shall we . . . ?"

"Go in there?" he said. "Of course. At least I'm going in. It's the chance of a lifetime."

"Then I'm coming with you."

Too fascinated by the adventure he appeared not to hear her. They climbed the ramp to the accompaniment of the soft and bewitching music and stepped into the passage, half dazed and totally content. They were oblivious of the quiet shutting of the door when the ramp had been withdrawn. "Hello! Hello there! Where are you?" Douglas's voice echoed from the bare walls. The source of the melody lay ahead, spreading from deep in the bowels of the ship. On their right was an aperture and as they approached it the blank wall at the rear of the recess rolled back. They walked through into a circular room, and once again a door closed behind them.

The room was untenanted. It was furnished with a bench and a long table of azure blue, and a criss cross of narrow channels were carved in the floor which was crystalline. There was no discernible exit and no portholes broke the symmetry of the walls. It was impossible to identify even the section through which they had entered.

"We're aboard! Why are you hiding from us?" Douglas was puzzled, but not alarmed. The celestial music was muted but still audible, and added to it was an undertone of humming. "You're not very welcoming," he called out. "We're here to make friends. Please show yourselves. We won't hurt you."

The floor gave a slight tilt and Bella caught hold of his sleeve. "We're moving!" The humming had ceased and a mild vibration had taken its place. "Douglas—they've taken off!"

"Of course they haven't taken off." He was impatient, and longing to make contact with their elusive hosts.

She gazed at him in panic. "Douglas, I tell you that they have! Oh why the hell were we so foolhardy as to board this

bloody thing? We're already at God knows how many thousand feet." She ran across to where she thought the door to have been. There was no hinge. Nothing. "Why can't we get out? I can't bear it. It's like being buried alive."

"Bella—there's no need to be frightened. We're with civilised people—probably far more advanced than we are ourselves. Calm down. Everything will be all right."

"We may never get back. They've kidnapped us." She was rapidly becoming hysterical. "Darling, hold me. Hold me!"

Douglas took her in his arms. Then he released her abruptly. There was a new and pungent scent. It reminded him of crushed thyme. Tilting back his head he saw that in the middle of the ceiling there was a perforated panel and it was through its mesh of tiny holes that a pinkish aromatic smoke was pouring, thin as steam eddying from a kettle.

"I'm . . . I'm . . ." Bella was about to say 'frightened', but she could not finish her sentence.

The 'steam' had settled upon them in a fine dew, as piercingly cold as a local anaesthetic. Douglas made an effort to draw her to him but found himself incapable of movement. They stood staring at one another appalled, and bereft of all power of communication. The smoke, or gas, which had spewed down from above was dispersing and dwindling into non-existence. Bella and Douglas were helpless, standing face to face, almost touching, and immovable as statues.

A shrill whistling sounded from the passage way. Piped orders. These were followed by a sharp click and the wall in front of them disintegrated as shutters rolled up to reveal shelves of surgical instruments meticulously laid out in rows. There were scalpels, forceps, tweezers and many more which were unfamiliar both in their shape and in their purpose. Some were of a leaden hue and some glimmered with phosphorescence, while others glittered with the fire of diamonds. There was a second click and instantly the remainder of the wall surfaces shot up like blinds.

Douglas saw that the chamber had been designed as a laboratory, and the long gleaming table in its centre took on a new and sinister significance. Around the circumference, except in the segment where the instruments had been laid out, bowls of white enamel and sealed bottles were ranked in tiers, and jars

and containers and great tanks of crystal. A bewildering range of retorts and test tubes and thermostatic appliances winked in the harsh light.

All of the containers had been filled with a liquid of clear primrose and each of them held one or two exhibits. In the largest floated the carcases of bigger animals, including a sheep, a lioness and a wallaby. The smaller receptacles enclosed a variety of the minor fauna among which were a hedgehog, a mongrel dog, squirrels, mice and a hare. There was also a representative collection of birds, together with a few frogs and a lizard and fish.

Prior to being sewn up again every one of the bodies had been gutted, and in each case the intestines had been put into adjacent receptacles and methodically labelled in a complicated writing that consisted of groupings of multi-coloured dots.

Unable to move her head Bella studied the scene from the corner of her eye. Just within her range of vision was a further case and in it were representatives of *homo sapiens.* In one tank a muscular negro bobbed buoyantly as a pip in lemonade, and by his side a young Chinaman was submissively genuflecting. Her caste mark plain on her forehead, an Indian woman was serene and dignified even in death. Next to her was an adolescent girl from one of the Latin races, and stark terror was stamped upon her features. The clothing and ornaments of the corpses had been wrapped in what looked like cellophane and had been placed neatly beside them.

A thousand miles above the earth the crew of the huge 'dredger', bearing its cargo of specimens of the primitive life forms of an alien planet, was headed on a homeward course. The trip had been successful. Not only were they taking back with them selected members of the human race who, or so it was understood, were the most developed of all the world's creatures, but, as observation from their place of concealment had shown, they would have a foetus also, which would prove to be of inestimable interest to the scientists.

The door from the corridor opened and two figures wearing masks of gauze peered into the room. Their eyes alone could be seen and they were the colours of emeralds. A switch beside the instrument cabinet was turned and the lights dimmed, save for intersecting beams which were focused on the table. The male

would be routine work, but they would have a messy and unpleasant task to perform on the female before, freed from all risk of infection, they could relax.

Half crazed with fear Bella saw that the last of the tanks waited to be filled. The seductive music had reached a conclusion and there was only the high pitched drone no louder than the whine of a mosquito.

The Siren Song had ended.

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