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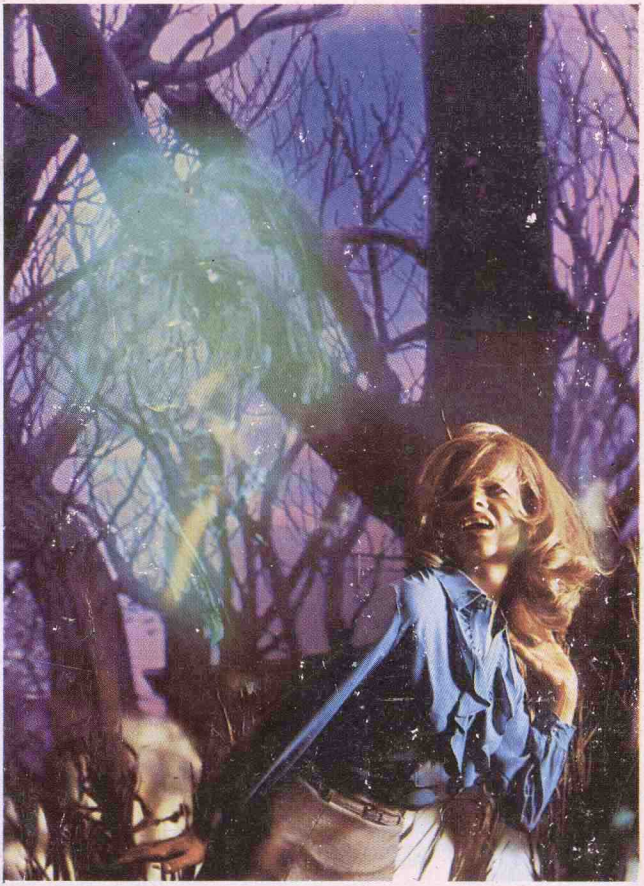
21 Stories of the occult—designed to enhance the shiver down the spine...

TALES OF UNEASE

Edited by John Burke



"2 UNUSUAL STORIES WILL ENCHANT AND HARDLY LEAVE THE MIND OR IMAGINATION"

—BUFFALO EVENING NEWS

Caution: more than two or three of these tales at one sitting can be hazardous to your nerves.

Practical jokers decide to haunt a house for a skeptic, then the real spirits turn up . . .

A dead partner speaks to his hated associate from the grave, admitting a murder . . .

A guide to a castle makes up a tale of sorcery about an ancient king—or is it his own story?

Two polite murderers in a boarding house form a friendship based on mutual depravity . . .

TALES OF UNEASE

EDITED BY JOHN BURKE

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Introduction

What are the things that make us uneasy: not terrified, not stricken with horror . . . just uneasy? They vary from person to person, from mood to mood. But for everyone there are certain whispers at noonday which can be far more disturbing than things that go bump in the night.

In this collection there are stories in which the unease lingers on as a bitter aftertaste, stories of an unease that settles gradually into an easement—and some which explode into unexpected naked fear. There are few ghosts, wraiths, spectres: we are dealing not so much with noises that make you look over your shoulder as with normal sounds gone suddenly discordant, normal landscapes gone suddenly awry.

Most of the contributions appear here for the first time, and the editor is grateful to those authors who accepted the challenge of writing stories which would slyly unsettle the reader rather than knock him brutally backwards. There are others which have already appeared elsewhere but which cried out to be included in an anthology of this kind. Thanks are due to Messrs Hutchinson & Co Ltd for permission to include *The Skylight* from *Saturday Lunch with the Brownings* and to Messrs Constable & Co Ltd for permission to include *Sheela-Na-Gig* from *Statement Against Corpses* by B. S. Johnson and Zulfikar Ghose.

JOHN BURKE

Contents

The Sound and the Silence

D'arcy Niland

□ The noise became a big wheel spinning, pounding, humming, roaring. There was the shock of crashing mountains in it and the pace of comets. There was an agony of terror. And then it seemed the house flew apart like flowers in a high wind, and the noise was gone.

And when he saw it was gone he went over and sat on the bed and simpered. He folded his arms, the hands crushed under the armpits, and rocked back and forth, moaning a little. He sat there for a long time.

When he got up he stood for a moment, then walked to the door leading out of the bedroom and suddenly, on the threshold, turned his face in fear. But there was no need. He made a little cautious noise in his throat and backed away down the hall. He went into the kitchen and took food from the cupboard, a muttonbone, and started to wrest the meat off it; and he was tearing off the heel of a loaf when he stopped, listening, with the bread still in his mouth and a sweat of alarm on his forehead.

He crept back along the hall towards the bedroom and, standing pressed against the wall, held the bread in his outstretched hand in the doorway. His mouth was open, waiting. But there was no sound. He stood square in the doorway and ate the bread and there was no sound, and he stared in wonderment and perplexity.

Then he made sure. He cried out: "I will take all the food in the house and eat it all. All the food I can put in my belly. And I will go outside, too. Right out."

And when he said these words he waited in dread. But nothing happened. And he made doubly sure. He went to the forbidden drawer and pulled out of it the guarded treasures—the trinkets and the photographs and the doilies—and flung them scattered on the floor. And his heart was like a great bird in the cage of his chest as he watched and waited, but nothing happened. And slowly the little sounds came out of his throat and the light broke across his understanding, gradually melting the last lingering shadows of his incredulity.

The noise was gone.

Sitting there, thinking, his hands came into focus, and he lifted them up and turned them this way and that; but he didn't see the thick wrists, the padded palms, the hair-bronzed joints, the burred knuckles. He saw them as hollow gloves, and the noise had gone into them. He slapped them upturned and downturned on the bed and struck them against the wall, skinning them, and no noise came and he knew the noise wasn't in them.

He was full of joy. He went back into the kitchen and ate bread and butter and drank milk. And he saw the packet of cigarettes on the shelf and he took one for the first time in his life and struck a match to light it. He puffed at the cigarette, but held it away and scrutinized it with a look of distaste. Then he thought there was pleasure in crushing it out. He held the lighted end in the saucer and pressed down and the cigarette bent and crumpled with a twist. He liked that. He lit all the cigarettes and put them out that way.

He went into his little room and fell asleep on the stretcher. And he came out of sleep in the darkness and jumped up and ran to the door listening for footfalls; and pelting back and turning on the kitchen light, and standing aghast at the dirt and neglect, he swiftly cleared the table, shoving the dishes in the sink and putting on the tablecloth and pulling potatoes out of the vegetable box and hurrying to peel them.

And then he remembered what he remembered this morning. He went on with the tea but he didn't hurry, and there was a bright calm on his face. He ate the meal and he defiantly left the dishes and went back to bed. He lay awake in the darkness, and the creak of the house was strange in the darkness as the darkness was strange in the creak of the house. He knew the sound of the iron roof shrinking, the weatherboards stretching, the floorboards talking like mice among themselves. The tap dripped like a little mallet on glass and the window across from him shrugged loosely in its frame. He knew all these things that had been with him a thousand nights, but tonight they were strange.

He went to sleep when sleep took him like a drug. But he woke again in darkness and sat bolt upright in terror. He jumped out of bed and ran through the house putting on the lights. He was naked to the waist, the way he always slept, and the hair glinted redly on his chest and was a tumbled shaggy flare on his head. His thick shoulders hunched as he stood there, with his long shadow up the hall like a wet stain on the faded carpet. The slight currents of air touched and

turned chill the sweat of his body, raising a rough braille on his flesh.

The noise was not gone out of that house. . . . It was still in that house, hidden away somewhere in the silence. It was around. It waited unheard and watched unseen. It was with him. Like a man who walks in fear of coming upon an armed quarry, he crept through the house, listening, listening with a strained alertness for its whereabouts.

It was laired in that silence and he sought clues from the silence. He looked up into the darkish corners of the roof among the wisps of cobweb bearded with dust as if he might see it there. And he scouted under the bed and behind the plain cheap wardrobe, looking and listening; and he went into the other bedroom, but he stood stock-still when he saw the bicycle chain on the floor. His teeth started to chatter and he ran out of the room and slammed the door shut, and was shivering.

Then the silence was all around him as around a statue and he heard the wash of it in his ears. He went into the kitchen and stared all round, knowing it was looking at him and knowing that he might surprise it grimacing from behind the tins on the top of the dresser, leering from under the table, sitting with cunning secrecy, like a sniper, on the broken light shade above his head. But he saw and heard nothing, and rage came snarling out of his horror, and he wanted the silence to be shaped—shaped so he could beat it into confessing the whereabouts of the noise.

But there was no way he could handle it and fright and horror strengthened in him.

This was not like yesterday, when the chains were broken and the house was no longer a barricade and he dwelt on the pleasant instincts of freedom. He hadn't vanquished the noise; he'd only hidden it and now he couldn't find it. And he feared its power more than ever because it was unseen and unexpectant.

He fled into his room and shut the door and fell on the bed.

In a little while he heard another noise and he listened to it —the light slap of running feet, the clink of bottles on the verandah, the feet again, and silence. He put out the light and looked through the window. A misty man was running along the street in the dawn.

He went and opened the front door, put his hand around and picked up the milk; and he drank one bottle of it in a frightened way, as though trying to lure the sound out of its

silence. He went back to his bedroom and lay there, tortured, and started moaning.

At five o'clock in the evening he heard footsteps crunching on the gravel walk, and, wild-eyed, shaggy-headed, he ran down the hall and pulled the key out of the front door. A woman was framed in the keyhole, walking up to the keyhole, then a check wall against the keyhole.

She knocked. He didn't move his head. His lip curled slightly. She knocked again, and then again. "Yoo-hoo. Anyone home?"

"Go away," he said, frightened by the voice.

"That you, Billy?" the woman said, with a note of greeting in her voice. "Where's your mother?"

"Go away."

"I've got a message for her. Will you tell her I want to see her?"

He didn't answer. He saw the check wall move around in a circle and the area enlarge as the woman walked to the edge of the verandah; then it diminished again. "Is she in?"

"Go away."

"She's not sick, or something, is she?"

He didn't answer, and she said sharply with anger: "The boss wants to know why she wasn't at work yesty, or today. Tell her I want to see her at once."

Still he didn't answer, and he heard her angry voice as if she were pressing her mouth to the wood. "If you don't answer me or do as I say I'll tell her when I see her, and you know what that'll mean for you. Don't you? Are you going to answer my questions?"

She waited, and he waited, and she said: "All right, my lad."

And he watched her shrink in the keyhole again. Halfway down the path she turned her white, wrinkled face and looked back. He saw her thin mouth and squinted eyes. He watched her go through the gate and past the keyhole.

And suddenly he felt the exhaustion of the day's search and the day's vigilance. He felt the weakness in his bowels, a sick emptiness, and he cringed away from the conqueror: the noiseless noise sheltering in the stillness, hiding in the silence; and he was crying his submissiveness, cowering, and mouthing his obedience, saying: "I will be good. I will be good. I won't steal no more food when you're away. I won't answer no doors. I will keep inside."

And he started sobbing in a terrible fright of contrition,

slobbering in his hands and rocking his head wildly. And then slowly he stopped. He kept very quiet. He sat very still.

As if a light had poured into his brain, he knew where the noise was. He knew where it was and he knew why it wouldn't start, because the words had to start it. The words had to start it, and the words had to leave off being words and become only sound, and the sound build fast and heavy and become the big wheel spinning, roaring like the whirl of atoms and terrible in its velocity.

He ran into the bedroom and fell down where the noise was cooped; where he thought it was cooped, and where he had to prove it was cooped, so that by proving it to be there he would prove it to be nowhere else.

He punched and tugged and pulled and slapped, shouting: " 'Idiot, ape, beast.' Say the words. Say them. Say them."

But the silence was only the more clam-lipped and deeper for the sound from himself: his screeching voice, his harsh panting, the fleshy cuffings of his hands, the bumping of the head on the floor.

"Say them. Say them. 'Thief, liar, sneak.' And all the words. Say them. Say them."

He shrieked: "Take the chain and beat me and say them. Take the chain."

He was weeping, screaming, but the deaf don't hear and the dumb don't speak, and the dead are deaf and dumb.

And then he saw of a sudden the black shiny boot, the blue serge, and he shot his head up wildly, and the policeman was staring down at him, at his crumpled face, the grey hair in his clutching hands, and the heavy masculine woman with the frozen snarl whose body he sat astride.

The Other Woman

Andrew Hall

☐ He woke up covered in sweat, his pyjamas sticking to him, and lay there for several minutes trembling very slightly, making no effort to control it. The sweat suddenly felt cold and he eased himself out of bed and went into the bathroom, leaving both doors open so that their closing should not wake the sleeping woman. He stripped off the damp pyjamas and rubbed himself down with a rough towel. To find other pyjamas he would have to go back into the bedroom and turn on the light. After a moment's thought he groped in the airing-cupboard for a shirt and underpants, put these on, tucking the shirt into the pants, and went back into the bedroom, leaving the bathroom door open but closing the bedroom door very gently. He eased himself back between the damp sheets without waking his wife. The ticking of the alarmclock loud in his ears he lay there, not thinking, waiting for daybreak.

Looking at the receptionist John decided that, whatever other changes he might find, Alan's taste in women had remained completely static: they had to be tall, painfully thin, ash-blonde. As she picked up the phone to announce him he found himself wondering whether his old friend had ever taken time to analyse himself and find the reason for this strange clinging to one shape, size and colour of woman: lovely as they were in their way, it must surely become boring. Then the door behind her was thrown open and Alan came out, grinning from ear to ear, took him by the hand and shoulder and propelled him into the other room. As the door closed behind them John was amused to catch a glimpse of the receptionist's startled face. Obviously an older Alan was not usually so informal.

It was a beautifully thought-out room; combining without clash the necessities of an office and the comfort of a lounge. In addition to a very large, very modern desk, there was a small, low occasional table with a cluster of elegant chairs round it. Alan lowered him into one of these, crossed to a battered old bookcase, which somehow fitted perfectly into

the otherwise modern decor, and brought back a bottle of whisky, a soda-siphon and two glasses.

"You still drink this poison at any hour of the day and night, I suppose."

"Try me," grinned John, the familiar, almost tangible warmth of his friend's personality filling him with ease. "I see your taste in women hasn't changed, either. Doesn't it get a bit boring, leaving a woman at the office and finding virtually the same woman waiting for you when you get home? How is Jean, by the way?"

Alan finished putting together the whisky and soda, taking his time, his face expressionless.

"I gathered that you wanted to see me professionally," he said at last, pushing one glass across the unpolished mahogany towards John. "For yourself, or for someone else?"

"I'm probably wasting your time," said John, trying to smile, but merely twisting his mouth, "but I do badly need some advice."

"You know I'm no longer a practising psychiatrist, merely an admin type—a pen-pusher, as you so elegantly put it. Although, mind you, it takes a psychiatrist to try to get any sense out of this load of nuts; psychiatrists they call themselves—they need analysing to a man." He sipped his drink, his eyes above the glass intent for a moment on John's long, dark face.

"What's the trouble, John? I gather you seem to have dropped most of your old friends. Roger tells me he hasn't really seen you for nearly a year. It must be nearly three years since I last actually saw you to talk to—although that's partly my fault . . . this job . . ."

John hunched his shoulders and relaxed them again, going over yet again in his mind the form in which he had planned to present his problem to his old friend.

Receiving no comment, Alan continued talking to fill the gap. "There's no trouble at home, is there? Jean saw Sue . . . I suppose it must have been just after Christmas . . . I gathered you had both settled down nicely since the move. Work going all right? I never see your rag, of course, but trade journals can't help thriving, can they?"

John hardly heard any of this. The genuine warmth of his friend's interest made it impossible for him to go through the elaborate chain of half-truths which he had so carefully forged. He knew he was going to tell the story unvarnished. The thought appalled him, and he was still desperately anx-

ious that Alan should not think that he was *seriously* worried. He wanted to give the impression that he was simply curious for an explanation.

He looked squarely at Alan for the first time since entering the room, noticing the clusters of grey in his tight, jet black curls, and the wrinkles across the forehead, now deepened by concern. The brown eyes behind the heavy glasses were red-rimmed but bright with intelligence. John drank the rest of the whisky and put down the glass. Alan refilled it.

"You remember Alice Northwood," began John, a statement rather than a question. "Yes, of course, of course," he put in quickly, as Alan's expression turned to mild amusement. Alan had introduced them.

"Well, there was something about her death which never came out. It was so silly, so far-fetched, that there was simply no point in bringing it up at the time. But it has nagged at me on and off ever since, and now . . ."

Alan's expression had turned to one of intense concern, his professional calm forgotten. Several times he began to speak and stopped, but John somehow understood what he was shying from asking.

"No, no, Alan. I was in the clear, I had nothing to do with it, but . . ."

"Of course you didn't," interrupted Alan, anxious to make amends for his momentary doubt. "Sue testified . . . not only testified but told me personally—it was impossible to doubt her—that you were by her side all that night. What's worrying you?"

"Alan, as far as I know, and I've thought about it again and again, Alice was completely faithful to me. What I said in evidence was perfectly true: as far as I know there was no other man in her life, but . . . well . . . it's hard to explain . . ."

"It was a great pity it all had to come out," mused Alan, lifting his glass and looking through it towards the window. "I honestly thought Sue wasn't going to get over it. You did the right thing in moving away from there." He finished his drink and poured two more.

They were silent for a while, each following wisps of memory.

"I'm almost positive there was no other man," John said quietly, sounding his memory of events as he spoke; "and yet I had a series of the most uncanny dreams you ever came

across." He grinned wearily as Alan suddenly radiated attention.

"Dreams? What dreams?"

John put down his untouched drink and for the first time in many months allowed his mind to wander through the months of his time with Alice.

"You know, the strangest thing about that whole business was how close she and I lived together. What? Two hundred yards? I must have seen her dozens of times around the artists' colony, and she must have seen me. Yet when you introduced us at your party I fell, hook, line and sinker, and it hit her just as badly. Terry had been dead little more than a year at that time, and she had loved him very much—I suppose you know more about that than I do; you know them both. He was pretty gifted, wasn't he?"

Alan nodded, and his eyes turned briefly to a small picture on the wall beside his desk. John assumed that this was the work of Alice's husband, but said nothing.

"Anyhow, here she was, not much more than a year later, in love again—that tiny, uncomplicated little woman, hardly a year later, and feeling guilty about it. As much in love as we were, she just wouldn't sleep with me. Remember me asking you to analyse her? All the time she said that it was because I was married, unwilling to give the real reason, even when I spelled it out for her. But finally, as you know, it began to make me ill—physically ill. Seeing so much of her, knowing she wanted me as much as I wanted her . . . and nothing. Well, we did become lovers, and if you knew how unsatisfactory it was at first, you'd wonder why we continued. But it improved with time, until in the end . . . But, what the hell, I bored you with all this at the time . . . no, no," he added as his friend protested his willingness to listen, "the point is this . . ." He sat for a moment marshalling his thoughts, taking an untasted sip of his drink.

"One day I saw her coming out of a restaurant with a man." He shifted in his chair, uncomfortable at the memory. "It was the strangest thing: we were always running into each other unexpectedly, which makes one think that all the time we didn't know each other we must have passed each other in the street hundreds of times. But this was something else. She hadn't noticed me and I followed them for a few minutes, then got sick of myself and turned into a side street and went back to the office. I was sick with jealousy and disappoint-

ment. We both of us always knew what the other was doing, even if we didn't see each other for several days: who we were lunching with, our plans for the weekend. But she had never mentioned this man to me. They hadn't seemed very intimate as they walked along, but somehow, by the time I reached my office, I had managed to convince myself that they were either lovers or were about to become lovers.

"I didn't phone her that day, or the next, but just as I was about to leave the office that evening she phoned me. I tried to be distant with her and refused to explain my coldness, but her voice broke, and the next thing I knew I was gabbling my hurt into the phone, nearly hysterical."

He grinned ruefully at the memory.

"It turned out that she *had* told me about this chap: Robin someone or other. He wanted to buy two of Terry's paintings. But I used to know a girl called Robin, knew her very well, and I, probably not paying much attention in any case, had assumed that she was talking about a woman. That was our first quarrel, or misunderstanding if you like, and after it we were, if anything, closer than ever. Then, about a week later, I had my first dream."

Alan shifted impatiently in his chair, and taken up though he was with his own thoughts, John smiled involuntarily at his friend's Pavlovian reaction to the mention of dreams.

"They were the weirdest dreams I have ever had. I say weird, but that's just what they were not. The terrifying thing about them was their complete normality. Like watching a film, or a TV play, and taking a part at the same time. Or, to be more exact, two parts."

The phone rang and they both jumped. Almost spitting with annoyance Alan was at the door in two long strides, tore it open and said in a mild, reasonable voice: "Jane, I'm not to be disturbed." Closing the door quietly and going back to his seat he gulped down the rest of his drink. John followed suit, but waved away the bottle when Alan made to fill his glass.

"That's what it was like," said John, as if there had been no interruption: "like watching a TV serial. I dreamed that Alice met a man at a party. He said that he had heard of her husband's work and would like to see it. But all the time I knew, and she knew, that he was merely looking for a way of quickly establishing a relationship. They arranged for him to call at the colony the next evening. Something woke me up at this point, but I dreamed parts of the dream again during the night. It was so vivid next day still, that when I was about to

phone her, I found myself fuming, hating her. I deliberately arranged to meet her that evening, although at such short notice it was a little difficult for both of us. And all the time I knew that I was doing this so as to prevent any possibility of her meeting this other man."

John smiled unconvincingly, his eyes sad, and searched his friend's face for reactions. Alan smiled back with just the right balance of amusement and concern.

"What makes it so daft, was that the other man was me! That's the one element in these dreams which was definitely dreamlike. The other man was me. I knew it but Alice didn't. His approach was the typical cynical one of the practised womanizer; making his approach slickly and with the minimum of fuss. And what made it so horrible for me was that I knew he was going to succeed, and easily. Whereas I loved the woman and had gone through torments for months before we finally went to bed. Somehow that was humiliating.

"Well, I met her that evening, and within minutes things were back to normal. She had a wonderful effect on me, you know. Whenever I was with her, there was this wonderful warmth and ease . . . by God, Alan, I loved her . . . I still love her . . . I don't know how I go on from day to day, knowing that I will never see her again . . . every so often I think I see her in the street, and it's like a punch to the stomach . . . the phone goes and I expect to hear her voice . . . I see a part of London I last saw with her . . . But the dreams went on. About every third or fourth night the story unfolded. They didn't make love that first evening, although she was perfectly willing. Somebody called and made it impossible. But she arranged to meet him in town and then a few days later at another party. After the party they went and spent the night at his place. There were elements of fantasy here too, because his place was my place, and Susan and the children were somewhere in the house.

"I had continued to see her, of course, but each time it became more and more difficult to behave normally with her. I knew on a conscious level that this was only a series of incredibly vivid dreams, but some expression would cross her face, or she would say something she had said in one of the dreams, and I would find myself hating her, as if the dreams were real.

"She thought I was cooling towards her, and her bruised dignity about it, after the initial bewilderment, made me love her more and more. You've noticed that? How you think you

can't love any more deeply, any more widely, but then you find you can? It reached the point in the dreams when I told her that she must choose between him and me. She laughed at me, enjoying my pain. I gave her a back-handed slap across the face which sent her reeling across the room. She was such a tiny little thing. The sense of relief was enormous. I woke up next morning feeling cheerful for the first time in weeks. We had lunch together and I told her about the dreams. She practically cried with relief and we arranged to spend the next evening together at her place. Then, next day, shortly before I was about to leave the office to go to her, she phoned, putting me off, and was vague about the reason. I assumed that someone was in the office with her and that she couldn't speak freely, but I was miserably disappointed. By the time I reached home I was convinced that she was going to spend the night with my other self, as if he really existed. I tried hard to shake off the feeling. I was desperate to leave the house and go along to the colony, but it was impossible; there was no possible excuse. If only I had! Well, you know the rest. It came out in the police enquiries. I think I *could* do with another drink."

Alan poured two more drinks, his movements automatic, preoccupied with the implications of his friend's dreams. He handed John a drink.

"That was the night she died, I suppose?"

"Yes, but this is where I come to the really frightening part. That night I dreamed that I killed her. Strangled her in exactly the way she was found. I dreamed that I got out of bed, put trousers over my pyjamas, put on an overcoat, left the house, walked to the colony in my slippers, found her sleeping alone, but with signs of someone having slept with her, and I strangled her.

"When I put my hands round her little throat, inserting my fingers between her neck and the pillow, she opened her eyes, startled and then full of joy when she recognized me. At that moment, in my dream, I knew that the dreams were not true, that I was suffering from some horrible hallucination, but I pressed my hands together and choked her to death.

"The dream didn't show me how I got back to my bed. I woke up dripping with sweat, Sue fast asleep beside me. The dream had been so vivid that I don't know how I forced myself to remain in bed. I wanted so desperately to go to the colony and make certain she was all right.

"When I phoned her office next morning and she hadn't

arrived, and had sent no message, I was hysterical with foreboding. I phoned her home and one of the police people answered. It was ghastly."

Alan put a hand on his shoulder, then, embarrassed by the gesture, stood up and went and adjusted a book on his desk.

"That was three years ago," continued John; "almost exactly three years. I still love her. I still miss her horribly. And every so often I find myself convinced that I killed her. I've tried so hard to lead a normal life, but it's empty, quite empty."

Alan waited a long time for his friend to continue, but it was as if John had forgotten where he was and that someone else was with him.

"But my dear, dear laddy," said Alan at last from the desk. "It was proved beyond doubt that there was another man with her that evening, and no one saw him leave. I don't believe myself that she was playing around, and whoever it was may not have been the man that killed her, but one thing is certain: it wasn't you!"

"I know," said John with a sigh, "but what worries me is that I've started to dream again."

"What?"

"Yes, exactly the same kind of dream. About a woman living a little way down the road. Her name's Margaret Owen."

"You mean you're having an affair with her?"

"No, no, Alan; there's been no-one since Alice. No. I can see what started it, but I can't see why it goes on. This woman is a widow, older than Alice, but much the same shape and size, but very dark and foreign looking, whereas Alice . . . Looking at her from a distance sometimes the resemblance is quite striking. Being a little, rounded woman she holds herself and walks very like Alice. When she first moved in a few months ago my heart was in my mouth every time I caught a glimpse of her. But then she and Sue became friends very quickly and I saw quite a lot of her. She's so completely different from Alice, I can't think why I continue to identify them.

"I think what must have started the dreams was seeing a man come out of her place late one night. It set me thinking about whoever it was that killed Alice. Presumably he's still around somewhere, living a normal life, unsuspected. That night I dreamed about Margaret. I met her at a party, exactly as I met Alice. You introduced us. She *was* Alice, but she was also Margaret. The difference was that I fell in love and she

didn't. Oh, she was quite prepared to have an affair, but she kept me waiting—as Alice had done, but not for the same reason: deliberately torturing me, getting pleasure out of it. In dream after dream what had happened between Alice and me was repeated, but distorted almost beyond recognition. It has been so vivid that when I meet Margaret I find myself puzzled that an occasional glance does not pass between us. It seems impossible that she can be unaware of what is going on.

"Then, about a fortnight back, I had a dream which was an exact replica of the first one I had about Alice. She met a man at a party. The man was me and was someone else. The woman was both Margaret Owen and Alice. Every other night or so the sequence of dreams has followed, exactly as before. And, Alan, you'll probably think I'm mad, but in the next dream I shall strangle her. There it is—I shall strangle her!"

Alan looked squarely at his friend, apparently at a loss; searching for the best form of words. He left the desk, and taking one of the easy chairs placed it so that he was exactly facing his friend.

"Now look, John. There is no doubt that this is one of the oddest things I've ever come across, but I assure you there is some perfectly normal explanation. I'll talk to you as I might not to the average patient. Not that I'm regarding you as a patient," he put in quickly at a frown from John. "The point is that, as odd as it may seem to you, you probably had the first series of dreams *after* Alice's death, not before. I know, I know," he continued quickly, as John made to protest, "but believe me, it's the most likely explanation. It doesn't mean you're round the bend, or anything like that. You'd be amazed just how common hallucinations of this kind are with people who have had a really serious emotional shock. When is the next dream likely to be?"

"Almost certainly tonight. It would have been last night, I'm sure, but I somehow managed to keep awake all night—anything rather than go through that. That's why I came to see you. I can't explain it to Sue, but I can't sleep in that house tonight. I must be somewhere far away. I was hoping you could put me up, and sort of keep an eye on me. We would have to find some reasonable-sounding excuse for Sue, but I've told her that I've been getting awful dreams and that I was probably going to mention them to you."

Alan looked at his friend's anxious, pleading face.

"Now look, John. You probably do need analysing, and I think we ought to arrange it, but almost certainly the best thing you can do is to sleep at home tonight. Have the dream. You'll wake up to find that all is well and be halfway to being cured."

"Alan, I'm not sleeping in that house tonight."

A flicker of impatience crossed Alan's face, but he said nothing for several minutes.

"Can you find any good reason for me staying with *you* tonight?" he asked at last.

John's eyes lit up. "That's it. Alan, could you really? It's a bit short notice for Jean."

"Yes," said Alan, "and at an awkward time, too: I've been away rather a lot recently. But it can be done without much trouble. What can you tell Sue, though?"

"Oh, heavens, don't worry about that," said John, his face transformed. "Now. We won't put you in the guest room. We'll put you on the couch downstairs. Anybody going out of the house from upstairs has to pass through the lounge. The house is very much like yours, come to think of it; sort of open-plan."

"I'll have to go home to collect some things," said Alan, moving towards the desk. "I'll have a word with Jean."

Alan waited for all movement upstairs to stop, then got up from the couch, put on his dressing-gown, feeling cold in spite of the central heating. He debated whether or not to switch on the main lighting, but decided to move the table-lamp from its stand to the gate-leg table. He opened out one leaf of the table, took a large notebook from his bag and began to make notes about John's case.

He had promised to stay awake and this was one way he intended to pass the night. He finished the notes and looked at his watch: 1.5. He had planned to spend a good part of the rest of the night going through the rough notes of the previous month's executive committee meeting, putting them into some sort of order, but he had drunk a little more than usual during the evening and now felt disinclined. He hunted through John's shelves for something to read. Hesitating between *Don Quixote* and O. Henry, he decided for the noble Spaniard, and after pouring himself a Bitter Lemon settled into an armchair, nicely placed for the lamp. After three

pages he left the Don to his own devices and plunged into the O. Henry.

A long time later, deep into a moving tale concerning the sacrifice of a young woman's tresses for the man she loved, he was startled to look up and find John coming down the stairs, looking very dishevelled, a lock of his thinning hair plastered across his damp forehead.

"You had the dream?" asked Alan, lowering him into the chair.

"Yes, by God," said John, watching his friend bring a blanket from the couch and tuck it in round him. "Exactly like last time," he was almost sobbing. "Except that I knew that the woman wasn't really Alice, and this time I enjoyed it. I enjoyed killing her! Oh my God!" And now he really did sob, crying as a man does, deep, juddering sobs twisting his body.

Alan left him to it and went and fixed a whisky and soda and another Bitter Lemon.

"It's the best thing that could have happened. And now the thing to do is to drink this and get back to bed. Those pyjamas are soaked—change them. It's a bit late for a sleeping pill, it would leave you dopey in the morning, but try to get some sleep. Then come over to our place on Sunday, as planned, and we'll take a look at this thing."

John wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and then with the collar of his pyjamas. He sipped at the whisky and stared in front, his eyes unfocused.

"Just the same," he said at last, "I won't feel happy until I see that woman walking around again, unharmed. You can't imagine how vivid these dreams are." He took another sip at the whisky and put it down. "Will you finish that so that it's not around in the morning? How does Sue manage to sleep through things the way she does?"

He stood up, draped the blanket over the back of the couch and went slowly up the stairs.

Alan watched him go, then crossed to the table and took up his pen to make a further note. After a moment's thought he changed his mind, took up the drinks and went through to the kitchen, where he poured them down the sink and ran the tap for a few moments. He went back into the lounge, turned out the lamp, groped his way to the couch, took off his dressing-gown and clambered into the crumpled bedding, pulling the dangling blanket more or less over the others. Briefly he wondered how the O. Henry story ended, and then was asleep.

Sue watched with satisfaction as Alan finished a substantial breakfast, and took the opportunity of chiding John on his usual thin slice of toast and honey. John paid no attention and later had to be woken out of a reverie to answer the children's calls as they stormed out of the front door. He heard Sue giving her usual last-minute instructions about crossing the roads and then was dimly aware that she was talking to someone at the door. This went on for some minutes, when suddenly something in their way of speaking alerted him. Jumping from his chair he rushed to the door just as Sue turned to call to him.

"Something's happened down the road. Dr. Ellis's car is outside."

He pushed her to one side and she disappeared out of his line of vision as Alan, too, pushed past her.

A little way down the road a small group of people were clustered round a garden gate, looking up the drive towards the open door of one of the houses. A green Zodiac was stationed outside and from a side turning further down the road the familiar black shape of a police car emerged and came purring towards them.

Such a Good Idea

Andrea Newman

☐ He hasn't noticed yet. It really is extraordinary, but he just hasn't noticed. He's been locked in that room for an hour and a half but he doesn't know.

I didn't mean to do it. That's what they all say, of course, oh, about serious things, in court, things like that, but I didn't. Until I did it, I had no idea I was going to. The key looked so tempting. Silly to have a key anyway, so unnecessary in a place like this, as if any burglar would ever come out here and what in hell would he find to burgle? But there it was in the lock, I'd put down the tray and as usual he didn't even notice let alone say thank you, just went on writing, while I picked up the other tray, hardly touched though I'd tried so hard to make it look nice. And then when I came out and shut the door it was as if I'd seen the key in the lock for the first time, suddenly realized what it was for. So I turned it.

I've had a wonderful hour and a half. It's been such fun; just knowing that for once I've got the upper hand has made everything such fun. I haven't done anything special, but I've felt so lighthearted. It's like being young again. It can't last, though; he's bound to notice eventually. I won't think about that. I won't let it spoil my fun. Right now, at this minute, I'm the boss. He's in that room and he has to stay there till I let him out, because I turned his stupid key.

Oh God, it's started. He's turning the handle and it won't open. He's rattling it. What an awful noise he's making. I should run and open it really while he's making all that noise and then he'd never know. He's going to be so angry. He'll want to know why I did it and I don't know.

"Sarah. Sarah."

Now he's calling me. I can't move. My feet just won't move. It's like forgetting how to walk downstairs; you can fall and break your neck all because you're thinking too hard about something that should happen naturally. Like a door opening when you turn the handle. Unless it's locked, of

course. Then it's natural for it not to open. That's funny, really. I mustn't laugh. He mustn't hear me laughing when I've done something awful. It isn't funny; it's stupid. I've been naughty. A naughty girl.

"Sarah, what's the matter with this door?"

You're on the wrong side of it, that's what I want to say. There's nothing wrong with the door. I think that's funny. Oh dear, I mustn't laugh. I've got to answer him.

"Sarah, what the hell's going on?"

He sounds so angry; I knew he would be. I'll have to go. I wish my legs would work. It's no good just sitting here looking at my feet; I should be using them. Perhaps if I try very hard. Looking at my feet makes me feel they have a life of their own. They look so powerful, so purposeful. Maybe they don't want to move and they never will again. He's still shouting. I wish he wouldn't.

"I'm coming." I actually manage to answer him, well, a sort of croak it sounds like, but it's better than nothing and my feet are actually moving, out of sheer surprise I dare say.

"What the hell have you done to this door?"

What does he think I've done? I must answer. "I've locked it."

A shocked pause. I suppose it's a shocking thing to be told that your wife's locked you in your study though if it takes you an hour and a half to notice I can't see that it's quite so terrible.

"Then you'd better open it, hadn't you?"

His cold voice. He's not shouting any more. I wanted him to stop but now that he has it's much worse. I'm shaking all over and it's really quite a warm day.

"Sarah, do you hear me? I said you'd better open it."

That terrible voice. But I don't know. I mean, had I better open it? What will he do? It's bad enough when he's just shouting. If I open the door he may hit me. I've never made him so angry before.

"What the bloody hell d'you think you're playing at?"

That's just it. I don't know. I *was* playing at first, I mean it was a game, just to see when he'd notice, just to get the upper hand, just to—I don't know. I must have had a reason. No. It just seemed the obvious thing to do, quite suddenly, like seeing the solution to a problem all in a flash. But it's not a game any more. I'm scared.

"Sarah, open this door before I break it down."

But he can't. It's too thick, and the times he's boasted

about that. Good solid craftsmanship. He knows he can't break it down. He's only saying that, and he's stopped swearing too. He must be thinking. Getting his great brain to work; he's sure to find a solution. After all, he's clever, isn't he, not like me. But I've got the key.

Tuesday

He didn't break it down; of course he didn't. He couldn't, and he knew it all the time. But he didn't call out or swear any more either. At least if he did I never heard him. I went away to the other end of the house because the silence was beginning to frighten me more than anything and I played some records and opened a tin of pilchards for my supper. He hates the smell so I never have them. They tasted wonderful. I had milk and chocolate biscuits on a tray in bed and no one to go on about the crumbs: I was even careless on purpose when I bit into the biscuits so as to make lots of crumbs. I've never done that before though he always said I did. You don't quite realize what a lot you are giving up till you get it back. I listened to the play on the wireless and I didn't have to agree it was rubbish and he could do much better. I thought I wouldn't sleep but I did. I wasn't even worried; I felt sure I'd wake up with the answer. Well, I mean wake up brave enough to unlock the door and face him and have it out. . . .

I went down to the beach this morning. Just for a walk to think things out. I didn't wake up brave after all. I felt funny instead. Sort of . . . distant, as if he'd gone away or I wasn't really married to him. I stood and looked at the sea for a long time. It's so restful; I'm sure it's good for people. Doctors ought to prescribe it instead of those silly pills and things. But I didn't really do any thinking after all. I just walked about and felt peaceful and . . . rather clever, like a scientist making an important discovery.

All day I worked myself up to walking past the room but when I did I wasn't sure he was in there. It could have been anyone; or no-one. Of course I *knew* he was—he couldn't open the door and the ventilation grills would hardly let a sparrow through. He's done it himself really; I mean, no normal person finds a window spoils his concentration. I bet he's sorry about that now, though even so it's a nasty drop. But he didn't speak. Maybe he didn't hear me. Asleep perhaps. I had the key in my pocket; I felt I ought to take it though I didn't really intend to use it then. Cold metal. I touched it with my fingers and it frightened me.

Wednesday

We had a conversation today. I walked past the room early; I think I felt curious, and he called out, "Sarah, is that you?" Silly, really, like on the telephone. If we'd had a telephone. Then he started, in this reasonable, gentle voice: "I know I haven't been an easy husband, too wrapped up in my work. You've made me stop and think. It may be a good thing. Unlock the door, there's a good girl, and we'll talk it over. I'm not cross any more. Really."

Then I don't know what happened to me. I started saying things I hadn't planned at all. Usually I pick my words so carefully to talk to him, not to say something stupid, I mean, or tactless, but this time I didn't even know what I was going to say till I said it. I said, "It's too late."

He said, "Whatever do you mean?"

I said, "I'm too old to have a baby now," and I started crying. I hadn't cried for years, not since—oh, not for years. Then I found I was sitting on the floor outside the door. I said, "I'm too old. I'm not even pretty any more," and went on crying. I was very noisy. Presently he said in a terribly soothing voice, "Just unlock the door and we'll talk about it. You can tell me all about it." He'd never been so gentle; the door made us equal. The door was my friend. I stroked it. I said, "You never wanted me; you just wanted someone to admire you."

"That's not true," he said.

"Yes, it is." I'd never contradicted him before.

"All right." I couldn't believe it; he was actually agreeing with me. "Perhaps you're right. But it's not too late. You unlock the door and we'll have a long talk."

"I'm too old," I said. "I'm ugly." I went on crying.

He said, "Sarah, listen to me. Open this door and we'll talk about it."

I said, "I haven't got the key." I was still crying.

He said very patiently, carefully, "You're overwrought. Take one of your pills and get the key. Then we'll have a nice long talk."

I didn't answer.

"It's the only sensible thing to do," he said.

Presently, when I had stopped crying and he had stopped saying things to me, I got up and went away. But I didn't take a pill and I didn't fetch the key. I just didn't go back at all. I had a very hot bath and looked at my body and thought how

wrinkled and yellow it was. But it didn't really matter. Then I went to bed.

Thursday

I wish he wouldn't make all that noise. It makes my head ache. Yesterday he was all reasonable and talking to me but today he's like a madman, and he always said *I* was unstable.

It started in the night. Banging and crashing, really an awful row. It would have brought all the neighbours round, if we'd had any. I'd have had to apologize to them; it would have been most embarrassing. So I've hardly slept at all. He knows I need my sleep but he was always selfish.

Even now I feel funny admitting that. I've believed for years I didn't understand him, he was too clever for me, all that. *I've been such a fool.*

But I don't like this noise. He's always been so dignified. Remote, you might say. I don't like him like this. I despise him. A key's not a very big thing but it makes quite a difference. He's been shouting for hours, things about food and water, in a very hoarse voice. He sounds frightened. No one's ever been frightened of me before, least of all him. It's rather odd. He's only been in there four days and he did have that last tray. I bet he wishes he hadn't turned up his nose at the other one now. I wonder if he's really in such a bad way as he says. He insists he needs a doctor and I must realize, etc., etc. He keeps going on about common humanity. Will I really have to get him a doctor and nurse him and get him well just so that we can go on as before?

I wonder if he looks any different. I wonder what four days like that do to a person. Is he a lot thinner? Swollen lips, cracked and black? No, that's the desert, in films anyway, not very likely here. But I don't want to know. It's horrible. I'd rather not think about it. The doctor said I shouldn't think about things that upset me. Not that I've had much choice, until lately.

Life doesn't turn out a bit the way you expect. Being ignored and taken for granted and looked down upon, well, nobody would get married if they knew all that was going to happen. It wasn't like that at first. Not when I was pretty. But there wasn't any reason to make a fuss, nothing people would take seriously, I mean. I didn't even think about it. I thought I loved him, I really thought, right up to the moment I turned the key. It's only now I can get it clear. I can't love him. I can't even like him, can I, or I'd have let him out days ago.

Or never have locked him in there in the first place. I don't know. It seemed such a good idea at the time, still is really, and now he's stopped shouting I can think; it's peaceful. But I didn't mean to leave him in so long. I didn't mean anything, just to do something positive for the first time in thirty years.

He doesn't seem real any more. It's not my husband—no, himself, now I see why the Irish have that expression—it's not himself in there. It's some horrible stranger who looks different and shouts all these awful things to frighten me. He's somewhere else. I don't know where; I don't want to know. Would Doctor Anderson think I'm making progress now I've done something positive? Or would he be cross? I won't tell him. I don't like people being cross with me.

I never meant to leave him, really I didn't. What would I have done? But it wasn't just that. I mean I couldn't have left him. I couldn't have done anything so positive. I still can't. But now it's as if he's left me. He's gone into that room as usual one day and never come back. It's better that way. It's the only way. I wonder why I never thought of it before.

Friday

Doctor Anderson said I should have reasons for what I do, to stop me drifting. I see that now. And really the truth is there's no *reason* to go upstairs and unlock the door. So I must be doing the right thing; I must be. That makes me feel better. I've always tried to do the right thing, only I haven't been very successful.

A quiet night, I'm sleeping in another room now so I can't hear anything, if there's anything to hear. But I'm frightened of that key. I'm sure it's dangerous. I keep looking at it, touching it—well, it's absurd that such a small thing can be so powerful.

I ought to do something about it. But it's so hard to do anything.

Saturday

I went for a walk this morning, just along the beach. The sea was wonderful. There's always the sea, no matter what happens. I had the key in my pocket. The water was all blue and grey and marvellous. It made me feel better just to look at it. Sometimes it's quite hard, when I get outside or on the beach, to remember what's been happening lately. I used to have

very confused bad dreams like that, with a problem to solve and lots of darkness. It's been like that. But it isn't any more. I threw the key in the water. The tide was going out and I made my arm as strong as I could. The key went out with the tide.

I know I've done the right thing. The key was dangerous. I might have done something with it for no reason.

I feel very peaceful now. I don't know what I'm going to do. I might stay here or I might go away. I don't know yet. But I shan't go up to that room again; I know that. There's no point.

The Skylight

Penelope Mortimer

☐ The heat, as the taxi spiralled the narrow hill bends, became more violent. The road thundered between patches of shade thrown by overhanging rock. Behind the considerable noise of the car, the petulant hooting at each corner, the steady tick-tick of the cicadas spread through the woods and olive groves as though to announce their coming.

The woman sat so still in the back of the taxi that at corners her whole body swayed, rigid as a bottle in a jolting bucket, and sometimes fell against the five-year-old boy who curled, thumb plugged in his mouth, on the seat beside her. The woman felt herself disintegrate from heat. Her hair, tallow blonde, crept on her wet scalp. Her face ran off the bone like water off a rock—the bridges of nose, jaw and cheekbones must be drained of flesh by now. Her body poured away inside the too-tight cotton suit and only her bloodshot feet, almost purple in the torturing sandals, had any kind of substance.

"When are we there?" the boy asked.

"Soon."

"In a minute will we be there?"

"Yes."

A long pause. What shall we find, the mother asked herself. She wished, almost at the point of tears, that there were someone else to ask, and answer, this question.

"Are we at France now?"

For the sixth time since the plane had landed she answered, "Yes, Johnny."

The child's eyes, heavy-lidded, long-lashed, closed; the thumb stoppered his drooping mouth. Oh, no, she thought, don't let him, he mustn't go to sleep.

"Look. Look at the . . ." Invention failed her. They passed a shack in a stony clearing. "Look at the chickens," she said, pulling at the clamped stuff of her jacket. "French chickens," she added, long after they had gone by. She stared dully at the taxi-driver's back, the dark stain of sweat between his shoulder-blades. He was not the French taxi-driver she had expected. He was old and quiet and burly, driving his

cab with care. The price he had quoted for this forty kilometre drive from the airport had horrified her. She had to translate all distances into miles and then apply them, a lumbering calculation, to England. How much, she had wanted to ask, would an English taxi-driver charge to take us from London Airport to . . . ? It was absurd. There was no one to tell her anything. Only the child asking his interminable questions, with faith.

"Where?" he demanded suddenly, sitting up.

She felt herself becoming desperate. It's too much for me, she thought. I can't face it. "What do you mean—where?"

"The chickens."

"Oh. They've gone. Perhaps there'll be some more, later on."

"But when are we there?"

"Oh, *Jonathan* . . ." In her exasperation, she used his full name. He turned his head away, devouring his thumb, looking closely at the dusty rexine. When her hot, stiff body fell against him, he did not move. She tried to compose herself, to resume command.

It had seemed so sensible, so economical, to take this house for the summer. We all know, she had said (although she herself did not), what the French are—cheat you at every turn. And then, the horror of those Riviera beaches. We've found this charming little farmhouse up in the mountains—well, they say you can nip down to Golfe-Juan in ten minutes. In the car, of course. Philip will be driving the girls, but I shall take Johnny by air. I couldn't face those dreadful hotels with him. Expensive? But, my dear, you don't *know* what it cost us in Bournemouth last year, and I feel one owes them the sun. And then there's this dear old couple, the Gachets, thrown in so to speak. They'll have it all ready for us, otherwise of course I couldn't face arriving there alone with Johnny. As it is, we shall be nicely settled when Philip and the girls arrive. I envy us too. I couldn't face the prospect of those awful public meals with Johnny—no, I just couldn't face it.

And so on. It was a story she had made up on the cold, well-ordered English spring. She could hear herself telling it. Now it was real. She was inadequate. She was in pain from the heat, and not a little afraid. The child depended on her. I can't face it, she thought, anticipating the arrival of the strange house, the couple, the necessity of speaking French, the task of getting the child bathed and fed and asleep. Will there be hot water, mosquitoes, do they know how to boil an

egg? Her head beat with worry. She looked wildly from side to side of the taxi, searching for some sign of life. The woods had ended, and there was now no relief from the sun. An ugly pink house with green shutters stood away from the road; it looked solid, like an enormous brick, in its plot of small vines. Can that be it? But the taxi drove on.

"I suppose he knows where he's going," she said.

The child turned on his back, as though in bed, straddling his thin legs. Over the bunched hand his eyes regarded her darkly, unblinking.

"Do sit *up*," she said. His eyelids drooped again. His legs, his feet in their white socks and disproportionately large brown sandals, hung limp. His head fell to one side. "Poor baby," she said softly. "Tired baby." She managed to put an arm round him. They sat close, in extreme discomfort.

Suddenly, without warning, the driver swung the taxi off the road. The woman fell on top of the child, who struggled for a moment before managing to free himself. He sat up, alert, while his mother pulled and pushed, trying to regain her balance. A narrow, stony track climbed up into a bunch of olive trees. The driver played his horn round each bend. Then, on a perilous slope, the car stopped. The driver turned in his seat, searching back over his great soaked shoulder as though prepared, even expecting, to find his passengers gone.

"La Caporale," he said.

The woman bent, peering out of the car windows. She could see nothing but stones and grass. The heat seized the stationary taxi, turning it into a furnace.

"But—where?"

He indicated something which she could not see, then hauled himself out of the driving seat, lumbered round and opened the door.

"Ici?" she asked, absolutely disbelieving.

He nodded, spoke, again waved an arm, pointing.

"Mais . . ." It was no good. "He says we're here," she told the child. "We'd better get out."

They stood on the stony ground, looking about them. There was a black barn, its doors closed. There was a wall of loose rocks piled together. The cicadas screeched. There was nothing.

"But where's the house?" she demanded. "Where is the house? *Ou est la maison?*"

The driver picked up their suitcases and walked away. She took the child's hand, pulling him after her. The high heels of

her sandals twisted on the hard rubble; she hurried, bent from the waist, as though on bound feet. Then, suddenly remembering, she stopped and pulled out of her large new handbag a linen hat. She fitted this, hardly glancing at him, on the child's head. "Come on," she said. "I can't think where he's taking us."

Round the end of the wall, over dead grass; and above them, standing on a terrace, was the square grey house, its shuttered windows set anyhow into its walls like holes in a warren. A small skylight, catching the sun, flashed from the mean slate roof.

They followed the driver up the steps on to the terrace. A few pots and urns stood about, suggesting that somebody had once tried to make a garden. A withered hosepipe lay on the ground as though it had died trying to reach the sparse geraniums. A chipped, white-painted table and a couple of wrought-iron chairs were stacked under a palm tree. A lizard skittered down the front of the house. The shutters and the door were of heavy black timber with iron bars and hinges. They were all closed. The heat sang with the resonant hum of failing consciousness. The driver put the suitcases down outside the closed door and wiped his face and the back of his neck with a handkerchief.

"Vous avez la clef, madame?"

"La clay? La clay?"

He pursed and twisted his hand over the lock.

"Oh, the key. No. *Non.* Monsieur and Madame Gachet . . . the people who live in the house . . . *Ce n'est pas,*" she tried desperately, *"ferme."*

The driver tried the door. It was firm. She knocked. There was no answer.

"Vous n'avez la clef?" He was beginning to sound petulant.

"Non. Non. Parce que . . . Oh *dear."* She looked up at the blind face of the house. "They must be out. Perhaps they didn't get my wire. Perhaps . . ." She looked at the man, who did not understand what she was saying; at the child, who was simply waiting for her to do something. "I don't know *what* to do. Monsieur and Madame Gachet . . ." She pushed back her damp hair. "But I wrote to them weeks ago. My husband wrote to them. They *can't* be out."

She lifted the heavy knocker and again hammered it against the door. They waited, at first alertly, then slackening, the woman losing hope, the driver and the child losing inter-

est. The driver spoke. She understood that he was going, and wished to be paid.

"But you can't leave us like this. Supposing they don't get back for hours? Can't you help us to get in?"

He looked at her stolidly. Furious with him, humiliated by his lack of chivalry, she ran to one of the windows and started trying to prise the shutters open. As she struggled, breaking a fingernail, looking about for some object she could use, running to her handbag and spilling it out for a nail file, a pair of scissors, finding nothing, trying again with her useless fingers, she spoke incessantly, her words coming in little gasps of anger and anxiety.

"Really, one would think that a great man like you could *do* something instead of just standing there, what do you think we shall *do,* just left here in the middle of nowhere after we've come all this way. I can tell you people don't behave like this in England, haven't you got a knife or something? *Un couteau? Un couteau,* for heaven's sake?"

She was almost hysterical. The driver became angry. He picked up her wallet, thrown out of the handbag, and shook it at her. He spoke very quickly. Frightened, she controlled herself. She snatched the wallet from him. She was trembling.

"Very well. Take your money and go." She had not got the exact amount. She gave him two hundred francs. He nodded, looked over the house once more, shrugged his shoulders and moved away.

"The change!" she called. "Change . . ." pronouncing the word, with little hope, in French. *"L'argent . . ."*

"Merci, madame," he said, raising his hand. *"Bonne chance."* He disappeared down the steps. In a moment she saw him walking heavily, not hurrying, across the grass.

"Well," she said, turning to the child. "Well . . ." She paused, listening to the taxi starting up, the sound of its engine revving as it turned in the stony space, departing, diminishing—gone. The child looked at her. Suspicion, for the first time in his life, darkened and swelled his face. It became tumescent, the mouth trembling, the eyes dilated before the moment of tears.

"Let's have some chocolate," she said. The half-bar fallen from her handbag had melted completely. "We can't," she said, with a little, brisk laugh. "It's melted."

"Want a drink?"

"A drink." As though in a strange room, she looked round

searching for the place where, quite certainly, there must be drink. "Well, I don't know . . ." There was a rusty tap in the wall, presumably used for the hose. She pretended not to have seen it. Typhus or worse. She remembered the grapes—they looked far from ripe—that had hung on sagging wires over the steps. "We'll get into the house," she said, and added firmly, as though there was no question about it, "we must get in."

"Why can't we go into the house?"

"Because it's locked."

"Where did the people put the key?"

She ran to the door and started searching in the creeper, along the ledge, her fingers recoiling from fear of snakes or lizards. She ran round to the side of the house, the child trotting after her. A makeshift straw roof had been propped up over an old kitchen table. A rusty oil stove stood against the wall of the house. She searched in its greasy oven. She tried the holes in the wall, the dangerous crevices of a giant cactus. The child leant against the table. He seemed now to be apathetic.

"We'll go round to the back," she said. But at the back of the house there were no windows at all. A narrow gully ran between the house and a steep hill of brown grass. The hill, rising to dense woods, was higher than the roof of the house. She began to climb the hill.

"Don't come," she called. "Stay in the shade."

She climbed backwards, shading her eyes against the unbearable sun. The child sat himself on the wall of the gully, swinging his legs and waiting for her. She looked down on the glistening roof and saw the small mouth of the skylight, open. She knew, even while she measured it with her eyes, imagined herself climbing through it, that it was inaccessible. Her mind gabbled unanswerable questions: how far is the nearest house? Telephone? How can we get back to Nice? Where does the road lead to? As she looked down at the house, something swift and black, large as a cat, streaked along the gutter, down the drainpipe and into the gully.

"Johnny!" she called. "Johnny!" She began to run back down the hill. Her ankle twisted, she fell on the hard grass. She pulled off her sandals and ran barefoot. "Get up from there! Don't sit there!"

"Why?"

"I saw . . ."

"What? What did you see?"

"Oh, nothing. I think we'll have to go back to that house we passed. Perhaps they know . . ."

"What did you see, though?"

"Nothing, nothing. The skylight's open."

"What's a skylight?"

"A sort of window in the roof."

"But what did you *see?*"

"If there was a ladder, perhaps we could . . ." She looked round in a worried way, but without conviction. It was to distract the child from the rat.

"There's a ladder."

It was lying in the gully—a long, strong, new ladder. She looked at it hopelessly, disciplining herself to a blow from fate. "No," she said. "I could never lift it."

The child did not deny this. He asked: "When are the people coming back?"

"I don't know."

"I want some chocolate."

"Oh, Johnny!"

"I want a drink."

"Johnny—*please!*"

"I don't want to be at France. I want to go home now."

"Please, Johnny, you're a big man, you've got to look after Mummy—"

"I don't *want* to—"

"Let's see if we can lift the ladder."

She jumped down into the gully. The ladder was surprisingly light. As she lifted one end, propping the other against the gully wall, juggled it, hand over hand on the rungs, into position, she talked to the child as though he were helping her.

"That's right, it's not a bit heavy, after all, is it, now let's just get it straight, that's the way . . ."

Supposing, she thought, the Gachets come back and find me breaking into the house like this? You've paid the rent, she told herself. It's your house. It's scandalous, it's outrageous. One must do *something.*

"Are you going to climb up there?" the child asked, with interest.

She hesitated. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I suppose so."

"Can I go up the ladder too?"

"No, of course not." She grasped the side of the ladder firmly, testing the bottom rung.

"But I *want* to . . ."

"Oh, *Jonathan!* Of course you can't!" she snapped, exasperated. "What d'you think this is—a game? Please, Johnny, *please* don't start. Oh, my God . . ." I *can't* face it, she thought, as she stepped off the ladder, pulled herself up onto the grass, held his loud little body against her sweat-soaked blouse, took off his hat for him and stroked his stubbly hair, rocked him and comforted him, desperately wondered what bribe or reward she might have in her luggage, what prize she could offer . . . She spoke to him quietly, telling him that if he would let her go up the ladder and get into the house she might find something, she would almost certainly find something, a surprise, a wonderful surprise.

"A toy."

"Well, you never know." She was shameless. "Something really *lovely*."

"A big toy," he stated, knowing his strength.

"A big toy, and a lovely bath and a lovely boiled egg—"

"And a biscuit."

"Of course. A chocolate biscuit. And a big glass of milk."

"And two toys. One big and one little."

"Yes, and then we'll go to sleep, and not tomorrow but the next day Daddy will come . . ." She felt, by the weight against her breast, that she was sending him to sleep. She put him from her carefully. He lay down, without moving the curled position of his body, on the grass. He sucked his thumb, looking at her out of the corners of his bright eyes. "So I'll climb the ladder. You watch. All right?"

He nodded. She jumped down into the gully again, pulled her tight skirt high above her knees, and started to climb. She kept her eyes away from the gutter. The fear of a rat running close to her made her sick, almost demented with fear. If I see a rat, she thought, I shall jump, I know I shall jump, I can't face it. She saw herself lying dead or unconscious in the gully, the child left completely alone. As she came level with the roof she heard a sound, a quick scuttering; her feet seemed steeped in hot glycerine, her hands weakened. She lay for a moment face downwards on the ladder, certain that when she opened her eyes she would be falling.

When she dared to look again, she was amazed to see how near she was to the skylight—little more than a yard. This distance, certainly, was over burning slate, much of it jagged and broken. But the gutter was firm, and the gradient of the roof very slight. In her relief, now edged with excitement, she did not assess the size of the skylight. The ladder, propped

against the gully wall, was steady as a staircase. She mounted two more rungs and cautiously, with one foot, tested the gutter. Now all she had to do was to edge, then fling herself, forward; grasp the sill of the skylight and pull herself up. She did this with a new assurance, almost bravado. She was already thinking what a story it would be to tell her husband; that her daughters—strong, agile girls—would certainly admire her.

She lay on the roof and looked down through the skylight. It was barely eighteen inches wide—perhaps two feet long. She could no more get through it than a camel through a needle's eye. A child, a thin child, could have managed it. Her youngest daughter could have wormed through somehow. But for her it was impossible.

She looked down at the dusty surface of a chest of drawers. She could almost touch it. Pulling herself forward a little more she could see two doors—attics, no doubt—and a flight of narrow stairs descending into semi-darkness. In her frustration she tried to shake the solid sill of the skylight, as though it might give way. It's not fair, she cried to herself; it's not fair. For a moment she felt like bursting into tears, like sobbing her heart out on the high, hard shoulder of the house. Then, with a kind of delight, she thought—Johnny.

She could lower him through. He would only have to run down the stairs and unbolt one of the downstairs windows. A few weeks ago he had locked himself in the lavatory at home and seemed, for a time, inaccessible. But she had told him what to do, and he had eventually freed himself. Even so, I don't believe you can do this, she told herself. I don't believe you can risk it. At the same time, she knew that she had thought of the obvious—it seemed to her now the only—solution. Her confidence was overwhelming. She was dealing with the situation in a practical, courageous way. She was discovering initiative in herself, and ingenuity.

She came quickly, easily down the ladder. The boy was still curled as she had left him. As she approached, smacking the dust and grime from her skirt, he rolled on to his back, but did not question her. She realized with alarm that he was nearly asleep. A few minutes more and nothing would rouse him. She imagined herself carrying him for miles along the road. Already the heat was thinning. The cicadas, she noticed, were silent.

"Johnny," she said. "Would you like to climb the ladder?"

His eyes focused, but he continued to suck his thumb.

"You can climb the ladder, if you like," she said carelessly.

"Now? Can I climb it now?"

"Yes, if you want to."

"Can I get through the little window?"

She was delighted with him. "Yes. Yes, you can. And, Johnny . . ."

"What?"

"When you've got through the little window, I want you to do something for me. Something very clever. Can you do something clever?"

He nodded, but looked doubtful.

She explained, very carefully, slowly. Then, taking his hand, she led him round to the front of the house. She chose a window so near the ground that he could have climbed through it without effort from the outside. She investigated the shutters, and made certain that they were only held by a hook and eyelet screw on the inside. She told him that he would have to go down two flights of stairs and then turn to the right, and he would find the room with the window in it. She tied her handkerchief round his right wrist, so that he would know which way to turn when he got to the bottom of the stairs.

"And if you can't open the window," she said, "you're to come straight back up the stairs. Straight back. And I'll help you through the skylight again. You understand? If you can't open the window, you're to go *straight back* up the stairs. All right?"

"Yes," he said. "Can I climb the ladder now?"

"I'm coming with you. You must go slowly."

But he scaled it like a monkey. She cautioned him, implored him, as she climbed carefully. "Wait, Johnny. Johnny, don't go so fast. Hold on tightly. Johnny, be *careful* . . ." At the top, she realized that she should have gone first. She had to get round him in order to reach the skylight and pull him after her. She was now terribly frightened, and frightened that she would transmit her fear to him. "Isn't it exciting?" she said, her teeth chattering. "Aren't we high up? Now hold on very tightly, because I'm just going to . . ."

She stepped round him. It was necessary this time to put her full weight on the gutter. If I fall, she thought clearly, I must remember to let go of the ladder. The gutter held, and she pulled herself up, sitting quite comfortably on the edge of the skylight. In a moment she had pulled him to her. It was absurdly easy. She put her hands under his arms,

feeling the small separate ribs. He was light and pliable as a terrier.

"Remember what I told you."

"Yes." He was wriggling, anxious to go.

"What did I tell you?"

"Go downstairs and go that way and open the window."

"And supposing you can't open the window?"

"Come back again."

"And hurry. I'll count. I'll count a hundred. I'll go down and stand by the window. You be there when I've counted a hundred."

"All right," he said.

Holding him tightly in her hands, his legs dangling, his shoulders hunched, she lowered him until he stood safely on the chest of drawers. When she let go he shook himself, and looked up at her.

"Can you get down?" she asked anxiously. "Are you all right?"

He squatted, let his legs down, slid backwards on his stomach and landed with a little thud on the floor.

"It's dirty down here," he said cheerfully.

"Is it all right, though?" She had a new idea, double security. "Run down those stairs and come back, tell me what you see."

Obediently, he turned and ran down the stairs. The moment he had gone, she was panic-stricken. She called, "Johnny! Johnny!" her head through the skylight, her body helpless and unable to follow. "Come back, Johnny! Are you all right?"

He came back almost immediately.

"There's stairs," he said, "going down. Shall I go and open the window now?"

"Yes," she said. "And hurry."

"All right."

"I'm beginning to count now!" And loudly, as she slid back to the ladder, she called, "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ." Almost at the bottom, her foot slipped, she tore her skirt. She ran round to the front of the house, and as she came up to the window she began calling again in a bold voice, rough with anxiety. "Forty-nine . . . fifty . . . fifty-one . . ." She hammered with her knuckles on the shutter, shouting, "It's this window, Johnny! Here, Johnny! This one!"

Waiting, she could not keep still. She looked at the split in

her skirt, pushed at her straggled hair; she banged again on the shutter; she glanced at her watch; she looked up again and again at the blank face of the house.

"Sixty-eight . . . sixty-nine . . . seventy . . . !"

She sucked the back of her hand, where there was a deep scratch; she folded her impatient arms and unfolded them; she knocked again, calling, "Johnny! Johnny! It's this one!" and then, in a moment, "I've nearly counted a hundred! Are you there, Johnny?"

It's funny, she thought, that the crickets should have stopped. The terrace was now almost entirely in shadow. It gets dark quickly, she remembered. It's not slow. The sun goes, and that's it: it's night-time.

"Ninety . . . ninety-one . . . ninety-two . . . Johnny? Come on. Hurry up!"

Give him time, she told herself. He's only five. He never can hurry. She went and sat on the low wall at the edge of the terrace. She watched the minute-hand of her watch creeping across the seconds. Five minutes. It must be five minutes. She stood up, cupping her hands round her mouth.

"A hundred!" she shouted. "I've counted a hundred!"

An aeroplane flew high, high overhead, where the sky was the most delicate blue. It made no sound. There was no sound. As though she were suddenly deaf she reached, stretched her body, made herself entirely a receptacle for sound—a snapping twig, a bird hopping; even a fall of dust. The house stood in front of her like a locked box. The sunlight at the end of the terrace went out.

"Joh-oh-oh-nny! I'm here! I'm down here!"

She managed to get two fingers in the chink between the shutters. She could see the rusty arm of the hook. But she could not reach it. The shutters had warped, and the aperture at the top was too small for anything but a knife, a nail file, a piece of tin.

"I'm going back up the ladder!" she shouted. "Come back to the skylight! Do you hear me?"

One cicada began its noise again; only one. She ran round to the back of the house and for the third time climbed the ladder, throwing herself without caution on to the roof, dragging herself to the open skylight. There was a wide track in the dust, where he had slid off the chest of drawers.

"Johnny! Johnny! Where are you?"

Her voice was deadened by the small, enclosed landing. It was like shouting into the earth. There was no volume to it,

and no echo. Without realizing it, she had begun to cry. Her head lowered into the almost total darkness, she sobbed, "Johnny! Come up here! I'm here by the skylight, by the little window!"

In the silence she heard, quite distinctly, a tap dripping. A regular, metallic drip, like torture. She shouted directions to him, waiting between each one, straining to hear the slightest sound, the faintest answer. The tap dripped. The house seemed to be holding its breath.

"I'm going down again! I'm going back to the window!"

She wrestled once more with the shutters. She found a small stick, which broke. She poked with her latchkey, with a comb. She dragged the table across the terrace and tried, standing on it, to reach the first-floor windows. She climbed the ladder twice more, each time expecting to find him under the skylight, waiting for her.

It was now dark. Her strength had gone and her calls became feeble, delivered brokenly, like prayers. She ran round the house, uselessly searching and shouting his name. She threw a few stones at the upper windows. She fell on the front door, kicking it with her bare feet. She climbed the ladder again and this time lost her grip on the gutter and only just saved herself from falling. As she lay on the roof she became dizzy and frightened, in some part of her, that she was going to faint. The other part of her didn't care. She lay for a long time with her head through the skylight, weeping and calling, sometimes weakly, sometimes with an attempt at command; sometimes, with a desperate return of will, trying to force herself through the impossible opening.

For the last time, she beat on the shutters, her blows as puny as his would have been. It was three hours since she had lowered him through the skylight. What more could she do? There was nothing more she could do. At last she said to herself, something has happened to him, I must go for help.

It was terrible to leave the house. As she stumbled down the steps and across the grass, which cut into her feet like stubble, she kept looking back, listening. Once she imagined she heard a cry, and ran back a few yards. But it was only the cicada.

It took her a long time to reach the road. The moon had risen. She walked in little spurts, running a few steps, then faltering, almost loitering until she began to run again. She remembered the pink house in the vineyard. She did not know how far it was; only that it was before the woods. She was

crying all the time now, but did not notice it, any more than she was aware of her curious, in fact alarming, appearance. "Johnny!" she kept sobbing. "Oh, Johnny." She began to trot, keeping up an even pace. The road rose and fell; over each slope she expected to see the lights of the pink house. When she saw the headlamps of a car bearing down on her she stepped into the middle of the road and beat her arms up and down, calling, "Stop! Stop!"

The car swerved to avoid her, skidded, drew up with a scream across the road. She ran towards it.

"Please! . . . Please! . . ."

The faces of the three men were shocked and hostile. They began to shout at her in French. Their arms whirled like propellers. One shook his fist.

"Please . . ." she gasped, clinging to the window. "Do you speak English? Please do you speak English?"

One of the men said, "A little." The other two turned on him. There was uproar.

"Please. I beg of you. It's my little boy." Saying the words, she began to weep uncontrollably.

"An accident?"

"Yes, yes. In the house, up there. I can't get into the house—"

It was a long, difficult time before they understood; each amazing fact had to be interpreted. If it had been their home, they might have asked her in; at least opened the door. She had to implore and harangue them through a half-open window. At last the men consulted together.

"My friends say we cannot . . . enter this house. They do not wish to go to prison."

"But it's *my* house—I've paid for it!"

"That may be. We do not know."

"Then take me to the police—take me to the British Consul—"

The discussion became more deliberate. It seemed that they were going to believe her.

"But how can we get in? You say the house is locked up. We have no tools. We are not—"

"A hammer would do—if you had a hammer and chisel—"

They shook their heads. One of them even laughed. They were now perfectly relaxed, sitting comfortably in their seats. The interpreter lit a cigarette.

"There's a farm back there," she entreated. "It's only a little way. Will you take me? Please, please, will you take me?"

The interpreter considered this, slowly breathing smoke, before even putting it to his friends. He looked at his flat, black-faced, illuminated watch. Then he threw the question to them out of the corner of his mouth. They made sounds of doubt, weighing the possibility, the inconvenience.

"Johnny may be dying," she said. "He must have fallen. He must be hurt badly. He may"—her voice rose, she shook the window—"he may be dead . . ."

They opened the back door and let her into the car.

"Turn round," she said. "It's back there on the left. But it's away from the road, so you must look out."

In the car, since there was nothing she could do, she began to shiver. She realized for the first time her responsibility. I may have murdered him. The feeling of the child as she lifted him through the skylight came back to her hands: his warmth. The men, embarrassed, did not speak.

"There it is! There!"

They turned off the road. She struggled from the car before it had stopped, and ran to the front door. The men in the car waited, not wishing to compromise themselves, but curious to see what was going to happen.

The door was opened by a small woman in trousers. She was struck by the barrage of words, stepped back from it. Then, with her myopic eyes, she saw the whole shape of distress—a person in pieces. "My dear," she said. "My dear . . . what's happened? What's the matter?"

"You're English? Oh—you're English?"

"My name's Pat Jardine. Please come in, please let me do something for you—" Miss Jardine's handsome little face was overcast with pain. She could not bear suffering. Her house was full of cats; she made splints for sparrows out of matchsticks. If her friend Yvonne killed a wasp, Miss Jardine turned away, shutting her eyes tight and whispering, "Oh, the poor darling." As she listened to the story her eyes filled with tears, but her mind with purpose.

"We have a hammer, chisel, even a crowbar," she said. "But the awful thing is, we haven't a man. I mean, of course we can try—we *must* try—but it would be useful to have a man. Now who can I—?"

"There are three men in the car, but they don't speak English and they don't—"

Miss Jardine hurried to the car. She spoke quietly but passionately, allowing no interruption. Another woman appeared, older, at first suspicious.

"Yvonne," Miss Jardine said, breathlessly introducing her. "Get the crowbar, dear, and the hammer—and perhaps the axe, yes, get the axe—" At the same time she poured and offered a glass of brandy. "Drink this. What else do we need? Blankets. First-aid box. You never know."

"Thank you. Thank you."

"Nonsense, I'm only glad you came to us. Now we must go. Yvonne? Have you got the axe, dear?"

The three men had got out of the car and were standing about. They looked, in their brilliant shirts and pointed shoes, their slight glints of gold and chromium, like women on a battlefield—at a loss. Yvonne and Miss Jardine clattered the great tools into the boot. Miss Jardine hurried away for a rope. The men murmured together, and laughed quietly and self-consciously. When everything was ready they got into the car. The three women squeezed into the back.

On the way, driving fast, eating up the darkness, Miss Jardine said, "But I simply don't understand the Gachets. If they knew you were coming today. I mean, it's simply scandalous."

"They are decadent people," Yvonne said slowly. "They have been spoiled, pigging it in that house all winter. The owners take no interest, now their children are grown up. The Gachets did not wish to work for you, obviously."

"But at least they could have *said*—"

"They are decadent people," Yvonne repeated. After half a mile, she added, "Gachet drinks two litres of wine a day. His wife is Italian."

Now there were so many people. The hours of being alone were over. But she could not speak. She sat forward on the seat, her hands tightly clasped, her face shrivelled. When they came to the turning she opened her lips and took a breath, but Miss Jardine had already directed them. They lurched and bumped up the lane, screamed to a stop in front of the black barn doors.

"Is that locked too?" Yvonne asked.

There was no answer. They clambered out. Yvonne gave the tools and the rope to the men. Yvonne and Miss Jardine carried the blankets and the first-aid box. The moonlight turned the grass into lava.

"A torch," Miss Jardine said. "Blast!"

"We have a light," the interpreter said. "Although it does not seem necessary."

"Good. Then let's go."

She ran in front of them, although there was no purpose in

reaching the house first. It was so clear in the moonlight that she could see the things spilled out of her handbag, the mirror of her powder compact, the brass catch of her purse. Before she was up the steps she began to call again, "Johnny? Johnny?" The others, coming more slowly behind her with their burdens, felt pity, reluctance and dread.

"What shall we try first? The door?"

"No, we'll have to break a window. The door's too solid."

"Which of you can use an axe?"

The men glanced at each other. Finally the interpreter shrugged his shoulders and took the axe, weighing it. Yvonne spoke contemptuously to him, making as though to take the axe herself. He went up to the window, raised the axe and smashed it into the shutters. Glass and wood splintered. It had only needed one blow.

She was at the window, tugging at the jagged edges of the glass. The interpreter pushed her out of the way. He undid the catch of the window and stood back, examining a small scratch on his wrist and shaking his hand in the air as though to relieve some intolerable hurt. She was through the window, blundering across a room, while she heard Miss Jardine calling, "Open the front door if you can! Hold on! We're coming!"

They did not exist for her any longer. She did not look for light switches. The stairs were brilliant.

"Johnny?" she called. "Johnny? Where are you?"

A door on the first-floor landing was wide open. She ran to the doorway and her hands, without any thought from herself, flew out and caught the lintel on either side, preventing her entrance.

He was lying on the floor. He was lying in exactly the same position in which he had curled on the grass outside, except that his thumb had fallen from his mouth; but it was still upright, still wet. His small snores came rhythmically, with a slick click at the end of each snore. Surrounding him was a confusion, a Christmas of toys. In his free hand he had been holding a wooden soldier; it was still propped inside the lax, curling fingers. She was aware, in a moment of absolute detachment, that the toys were very old; older, possibly, than herself. Then she stopped thinking. She walked forward.

Kneeling, she touched him. He mumbled, but did not wake up. She shook him, quite gently. He opened his eyes directly on to her awful, hardly recognizable face.

"I like the toys," he said. His thumb went back into his

mouth. His eyelids sank. His free hand gripped the soldier, then loosened.

"Jonathan!"

With one hand she pushed him upright. With the other, she hit him. She struck him so hard that her palm stung.

One of the women started screaming. "Oh, no! . . . No!"

She struggled to her feet and pushed past the blurred, obstructing figures in the doorway. She stumbled down the stairs. The child was crying. The dead house was full of sound. She flung herself into a room. "Oh, thank God," she whispered. "Oh, thank God . . ." She crouched with her head on her knees, her arms wrapped round her own body, her body rocking with the pain of gratitude.

Rendezvous

John Christopher

☐ The company tried to persuade me to take a long holiday when Helen was drowned, but in the end they accepted my argument that I needed work more than rest. They put the proposition up again six months later. I was asked to spend the weekend with the Ashtons, and along with hospitality Freddy and Paula applied friendly but persistent pressure. My initial prescription had, they agreed, quite probably been right. At the same time the body, like the mind, had limitations, and I had been driving mine too hard. What I was heading for, Paula pointed out gently, was nothing romantic: merely a coronary and years of enforced idleness, possibly helplessness. By this time, of course, things had changed with me. The wound, once viciously tender, had scarred over. The scar ached, but bearably. Freddy told me they had booked me for a cruise to the Cape in ten days' time, and I did not argue with him.

I spent the journey out in a torpor which I think I cultivated deliberately as a defence against associating with my fellow passengers. Since Helen's death, I had seen people in one context only, that of work. It was disturbing and frightening to contemplate them in their reality as individuals: they were pointers to pointlessness. I drank a fair deal, but on my own. We moved from cold grey seas and skies to light and warmth and blueness, and I sat on my stool at the end of the bar. I was quietly drunk every night, and not completely sober after eleven in the morning. I did not go ashore with the others when we docked. The Chief Purser had a tactful word or two with me, and told me about some of the interesting things to see and do in South Africa, but he fairly soon abandoned the attempt to make me see reason. He gave the impression of having met my kind before.

It was on the return journey that I met Cynthia Parker. I was at my usual place in the bar one morning, and was lighting a cigarette when a voice spoke just behind me. I spun round, holding the burning match, and saw her shrink from it.

I said: "I'm sorry."

"It's silly." She had a strong, rather pleasantly harsh voice.

"I've been nervous of flame from a child. Even a match. I was asking you if this stool was free."

I bought her a brandy and ginger ale, and within a quarter of an hour she was through the wall of uncooperative blankness which had so successfully kept the others away. She had the unhesitating directness of someone with supreme confidence in herself. She had striking looks: the embers, glowing and capable of firing with a smile, of great beauty. She was, as she told me in that first fifteen minutes, sixty-eight.

It was on the face of it an odd association, even by shipboard standards. Apart from the almost thirty years between us, we had few things in common. I was a dull businessman, who had worked long hours in my youth and come up, as they say, the hard way. Only with Helen had I learned anything of the refinements of life, and then for no more than three bitterly short years. Cynthia, on the other hand, had been born into luxury, and had lived in it ever since. She had been married three times, divorcing one husband and surviving two. I got the impression that they had all been wealthy men and that she was a very wealthy woman.

She was a good talker and a keen listener, and the brisk way in which she had forced through the barriers I had put up was flattering. Moreover, she offered femininity without sex, the ideal solace for a man in the mood I was in. What she saw in me was more difficult to establish. Not just an escape from loneliness, at any rate. She had never been a lonely woman, and was not likely to be.

She was a hard but not excessive drinker. She part-weaned me from the bar, and many hours that I would otherwise have spent getting drunk were occupied in our lying side by side on the sundeck, watching the waves and talking. The first two days I talked about my work and about my childhood. On the third, I talked about Helen. She listened, and said eventually:

"So that was it. I wondered what it was that was sitting on your back, crippling you."

She spoke as a doctor might, pleased with unravelling a difficult case. Strangely enough that, and the absence of the artificial expressions of condolence that I had grown used to, was refreshing. Sympathy with grief is presumptive, a claim to kinship. She, as far as her reaction was concerned, might never have known sorrow for human loss. That which was a devil to me was to her no more than a curious beastie, a phantasm.

She told me about her own beastie that evening, after dinner.

We went to the bar for a nightcap, and she was in fine form, talking scathingly about our fellow passengers who had come under her shrewd and wicked eye. To one who, as she did, lived so intensely in the world, the whole escape notion of cruising was anathema. Time-wasting, in any class or context, she could neither understand nor tolerate. There was no difference to her between the elegantly groomed and dressed men and women who surrounded us, and the young men and women, in Mod or Rocker dress, who lounged vacuously in coffee bars or at street corners. They were all decadent, all contemptible.

I saw, I thought, a weakness in her diatribe, and seized on it. After all, she was here with them. She had told me she lived chiefly in the United States, had been visiting a married sister near Johannesburg, and needed to go to London to attend to business matters. I pointed out that she need not have joined our cruise ship. She could have flown to London instead, and the trip would have taken hours instead of days.

She paused before replying and then nodded to the barman, who brought us more drinks. She said:

"I've never flown in my life, and never will."

One meets, of course, old ladies who cannot attune themselves to modern developments, but the description was a long way from fitting her. She had told me she kept a Thunderbird at home, and was fond of speedboat racing. The firm quiet negative over air travel made me curious. I asked her:

"Why not?"

She took her drink, lifted it, and stared at me over the rim of the glass.

"Through fear," she said.

I shook my head. "Not convincing."

There was silence again, and I thought she was shying away from the subject. But after a time she began to speak, in a low voice, and I listened.

It went back nearly fifty years, to the time when the First War was dragging and grinding itself slowly on and she was a young woman, a girl, of eighteen. She had been surrounded by admirers since the schoolroom, and could have been expected to have a brilliant season. The war was a bore from that point of view. On the other hand, it provided a never-ending supply of young, handsome, uniformed men, and a sense of patriotic duty in letting them take her out and give

her a good time. And there were good times to be had, even in 1917, for those who had the means of commanding them.

There were dozens of young men, and some she was sorrier to see go than others, but none made much impression on her before Tony Anderson came along. I doubt if she loved him because I doubt if she ever was able to yield control to that extent, but she was fascinated by him and the fascination, forty-eight years later, was still evident in the way she talked about him.

He was tall and swarthy, with a fierce black moustache, a slightly hooked nose and deep blue eyes. He had great physical strength and magnetism: the first time she shook hands with him she was made aware of both. Besides these, he had other impressive qualities. He was the grandson of a Duke, the son of one of the better steel millionaires. In her parents' eyes, as in her own, he was entirely eligible. They were engaged six weeks after they met, and at that had been marking time for four.

She had sensed a wildness in him, and it had attracted her, but it was only by degrees that she understood how deep the wildness went. He was a man of whims, and iron-willed about indulging them. He decided to buy her a diamond bracelet at one o'clock in the morning, and had the proprietor of a Bond Street shop called from his bed and brought in a taxi to serve him. He took her for a picnic on the river—just the two of them, with champagne on ice and a Fortnum's hamper—and as they tied up by a small island on a deserted reach the air was full of soft sweet sounds: the entire string section of the Royal London Orchestra. All this was flattering and exciting; and a little frightening. Because where he gave, he claimed.

And giving himself totally, he demanded the same of her. He told her this plainly. She was his, he said, for eternity. She shivered inside, and smiled, and said:

"You're very romantic, darling, for all that solid English ancestry. The Prayer Book only says till death us do part."

The blue eyes fixed her, the strong full mouth was unsmiling. He stared at her, and said:

"Let me tell you a story."

"A romantic one?"

"If you like. About my grandmother."

His grandmother had been the daughter of a peer, and engaged to a Duke. Her father was appointed Ambassador to the Court of the Emperor in Vienna, and she went there with

him. She met—no-one quite knew how—a young Hungarian. He was completely undesirable; not only a revolutionary, but a gypsy. They fell in love. As the date of her marriage drew near, she found herself pregnant. She told her lover, and he was delighted. They would elope together and live at peace in a peaceful land. Perhaps America. She was his and he was hers. He had faith in her and in their love.

But she was weak, and afraid of what was happening to her. She confessed to her father, and he took the story to the Duke. The Duke was a realist. He was also poor, for a Duke, while her father, though only a Baron, was rich. Her dowry, already impressive, was generously, magnificently increased. The wedding took place, as arranged, and the happy couple went to live in a quiet remote villa in Switzerland. Her child was born there, and was a girl. Everything had worked out even better than had been hoped. The future of the family was safe; and there was time for her to have sons.

Or there would have been time, if she had lived.

Her father was still Ambassador. They visited Vienna in the spring, almost a year after she had left the place and her lover. They did not stay at the Embassy, but at a small hunting lodge in the woods. It was the place to which her lover had been taken by the Duke's men. The marital bed was set up in the room in which, while two men held his arms, the Duke had stabbed him to death. He was saving this up to tell her the next morning for, like all realists, he prided himself on his sense of humour. The Duchess retired early, while the Duke drank his port. When he went up to her she was dead, covered with congealed blood from the stab wound in her breast.

Cynthia paused at this stage, and I ordered her another drink.

"Gruesome," I said, "and Gothic, but not altogether unlikely. She had killed herself?"

"No. Why should she? She had no idea her lover was not still alive. That very day she had asked a maid to make enquiries for him. She was safe, and could afford to be romantic again. And besides, she was a coward who could not stand the sight of blood."

"Then her husband killed her."

"Not that, either. There was a reversion clause in the dowry, and the bulk of the money went in trust to her daugh-

ter. Though he was under suspicion, for a time. You see, there was no trace of the dagger."

"Then . . . ?"

"A burglar, the police decided. An unknown man who had come in, surprised the Duchess in her bed, and killed her to stop her raising the alarm. And then fled."

I sipped my brandy. "It sounds reasonable."

"That's what I said."

"But he—your fiance—didn't agree?"

"He was a quarter gypsy, remember. That was the part of his ancestry which fascinated him, not the rest. He had gone to Hungary, found the tribe, lived with them for a time. He had learned their beliefs. One was that violent death tied the spirit to the spot in which death came. And that where there had been great love, or great hate, the spirit could make its claim whenever the person who had inspired it passed that way. It was a belief that had its social value. In cases of murder, suspects were bound and left in the place where the murder had occurred. It was not unusual for them to be found dead the next morning."

"Not surprising, either," I said. "So his view was that his gypsy ancestor had come back to claim his faithless love? And had stabbed her to death with a ghostly knife?"

"Yes. He believed that."

"You still haven't told me why you are afraid of travelling by air."

"He was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps. Those were the days of the Zeppelins over London. A few nights later, he attacked one and brought it down in flames. It was a very daring attack, pressed beyond the limits of ordinary courage. Quite reckless. He came down, burning, with the Zeppelin. They gave him a Victoria Cross posthumously."

"Even now, I don't understand."

She said slowly: "He told me that I was his, belonging to him through life and beyond death. When he told me about his grandfather and grandmother, he meant that he would come for me, if I betrayed him. And I did betray him." Her still magnificent eyes fixed on mine. "I was pregnant, too. Within a month of his death I gave myself, and his son, to another man."

I protested. "How can you call that betrayal? You had nothing to do with his death."

She shrugged. "His death did not matter to him. What mat-

tered was his love, his pride. He had made provision for me, in case of his death. I know what he expected. That I should bear his son and live as his widow, until death reunited us. I married instead. That was the betrayal."

I shook my head. "And you think, because of that . . ."

"He died in the air. If he waits anywhere, it is there. I can face death as well as most, I think. But not death in a burning aircraft. Not death and him together."

"Nearly fifty years ago," I said. "And based on a melodrama fifty years older than that."

"What is fifty years?" She stared at the meaningless array of bottles behind the bar. "I remember him better than I will remember you, the day after we leave this ship."

We said goodbye at Southampton, with no expectation of meeting again. Nor did we. I went back to my work. I thought of her at times, in the quiet hours of the night when, not being able to sleep, I went downstairs to commune with a bottle of whisky. It was the irony of it that struck me most. Two people meeting on shipboard, with nothing in common but a preoccupation with death. One wishing the dead could rest, but fearing their survival. The other willing to give anything to call them back, but knowing they were dead indeed.

Then, by chance, I saw her name in a newspaper, and read the story in which it appeared. And the following day I resigned my job, and came down here.

I have a room in a boardinghouse in Poole, but I spend little time there. The boat I have got is a small but sturdy one, and I take her out in all but the worst of weathers.

It happened not far outside the harbour—not more than a mile out. A sudden squall, and the friends Helen was with not as skilled as they should have been in the handling of a boat like that. She capsized, and the man who skippered her managed to swim to shore. The others did not. I could not trust myself to speak to him then, and still cannot.

But at least there is hope now or, if not hope, a dream to follow. The story in the newspaper was about Cynthia, and about her death. She had died in her hotel room, in a fire. It was thought, the story said, that she might have been smoking in bed and fallen asleep.

She did not smoke, though, and she feared all flame, even a match. The hotel proprietors were quick to point out that there had been no negligence on their part. Each floor, each

room, was individually fireproofed, the electrical wiring impeccable. It was, after all, a very new hotel. And yet she had died by burning.

For what she had forgotten was that in fifty years the earth had risen to meet the sky. It was a very new hotel, the Metropolitan Towers, and it soared high above the crawling roofs of London. Forty-five floors, and her room was on the forty-second. Say five hundred feet. I checked in an old copy of *The Illustrated London News.* The Zeppelin had already been hit and was losing height when its attacker made his last run-in. Down to five hundred feet, they estimated, heading west over Mayfair.

It took her nearly fifty years to come, unwillingly, to her trysting place. I have only been here a year, so far. I live modestly, and have the means to do so for a long time yet.

Each day, each tide, is different, but the sea never changes.

Red Rubber Gloves

Christine Brook-Rose

□ From this position on my high balcony, the semidetached beyond the garden looks more squat than it ought to in such a prosperous suburb, and it is in fact quite large, forming with its Siamese twin a square inverted U that faces me and boxes a wide inverted T of a backyard, neatly divided by a hedge of roses and hydrangeas. On the left of the hedge there is a bit of lawn. On the right, only a square paved yard. The house on the left seems quite devoid of life, devoid, that is, of the kind of life liable to catch the eye and stop it in its casual round, mutating its idle curiosity through momentary fascination, inexorably, by the mere process of reiteration, to a mild but fixed obsessiveness. As does the right-hand house.

In the angle of the square U outside the french windows of the right-hand house the girl sits on the edge of the red canvas bed in a pale pink bikini, carefully oiling every inch of her thin white body. Because the pink bikini is so pale she looks, from up here, totally naked on the red canvas bed whch is set obliquely in the paved yard to face the morning sun. She sits now with her legs stretched out on the red canvas bed, carefully oiling inch after inch of her thin white body. She has done the arms, the chest, the midriff. Now she is doing her right leg, starting with the foot, the ankle, then the shin, as if to meet her upper oily self half way. Now the right thigh. Inside the thigh. The top of the left foot. If the heat-wave holds out she will perhaps become brown enough to contrast with the pink and so look less totally naked on the red canvas bed. The inside of the left thigh. She lies now framed in the red canvas bed, chin up, eyes closed to face the hot June sun. Round the corner from her naked body, at the square end of the inverted U, the red rubber gloves lie quiet on the kitchen sill.

Sometimes it is the bathroom window that drags down my at first unwilling gaze, above the kitchen in the right-hand house. In the morning the large rectangular windows tend to reflect the sun in some at least of their thirty-two small black squares framed in cream-painted wood. And in the afternoon they are quite cast into the shade as the sun moves round to

face me on my balcony, immobilized in convalescence. I cannot therefore see much further than the beginning of the pink wash-basin in the bathroom, or, in the kitchen below it, the long and gleaming double sink unit. And the red rubber gloves, moving swiftly apart and then together, vanishing and reappearing, moving apart and down.

All the windows of both houses, those of the kitchen and the bathroom above it at each end of the square inverted U, and those of each bedroom inside the U above the french windows, are rectangular and divided into four panels, each of eight black squares, two over two over two over two, all in cream-painted frames.

The thin girl has melted away in the sun, the red canvas bed is empty.

At least, that is presumably also the shape of the bathroom and kitchen windows in the right-hand house, for they are mostly hidden by the apple-tree. The houses are almost identical, except for the lawn on the left of the hedge. In the backyard of the right-hand house a clothes-line stretches from the high wooden fence to one end of the kitchen window, and another from the same spot in the high wooden fence to the other end, forming a V with the first clothes-line.

The girl, the daughter of the house, is perhaps aware that I am watching it, for the bathroom curtains have been hastily drawn. On closer scrutiny I can see that the bathroom in fact occupies only two of the framed panels in the upper window, the right-hand two, the curtains of which have been hastily drawn and are lined in white. The other two must belong to a small bedroom, the girl's bedroom perhaps. Its curtains, drawn back on either side of it, have a buff lining. It is midday and the cool sun of a cold July tries to pierce through the greyness to warm me in my convalescence. I call it convalescence because the doctor does, and the sun is trying to shine, but I know that the paralysis will not retreat, rather will it creep up, slowly perhaps but inexorably over the years, even decades, until it reaches the vital organs.

In the kitchen window of the right-hand house the panel of two squares over two over two over two is open to reveal a black rectangle and the beginning of the gleaming sink. Inside the sink is a red plastic bowl and on the window-sill are the red rubber gloves, now at rest.

In the morning the sunlight slants on all the windows, reflecting gold in some of the black squares but not in others, making each rectangular window, with its eight squares across

and four squares down, look like half a chessboard gone berserk in order to confuse the queen and both her knights.

In the black rectangle of the open kitchen window the sunlight gleams on the stainless steel double sink unit, just beyond the cream-painted frame. Above the gleaming sink the red rubber gloves move swiftly, rise from the silver greyness lifting a yellow mass, plunging it into greyness, lifting it again, twisting its tail, shifting it to the right-hand sink, moving back left, vanishing into greyness, rising and moving swiftly, in and out, together and apart.

On closer scrutiny I can see that in the left-hand house the wooden frames of the thirty-two black squares, eight by four in each of the rectangular windows, are painted white. It is only the right-hand house which has cream-painted windows. They all looked the same behind the trees against the strong September sun that faces me on my high balcony. The left-hand house seems quite devoid of life. Possibly the two rectangular windows, one above the other in the square end of the inverted U, are not the windows of the bathroom and kitchen at all in the left-hand house. It is difficult to see them through the apple-tree, and of course through the goldening elm in the garden at the back of my block. In the right-hand house, however, the lower room is definitely the kitchen, in the black rectangle of which the red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, shake hands, vanish into greyness, lift up a foam-white mass, vanish and reappear, move to the right, move back, lunge into greyness, rise and move swiftly right. Beyond the red rubber gloves is a pale grey shape, then blackness.

Despite so much washing activity and two clothes-lines in the back yard I have not seen the woman yet. Surely she must come out one day to hang the washing on the line. I have not seen the woman yet, only her rubber gloves, although she has been washing ceaselessly day after day since I first began to watch the house. She must have a large family, which likewise I have not seen, except for the girl sunbathing in that June heat-wave, oiling her body inch by inch, lying it seemed quite naked on the red canvas bed. But as I stare at the empty clothes-line, I know with a mild pang that I have seen shirts hang from it, and slips, and nightdresses, and underpants, many a time, without then registering the image, which only now recurs very precisely somewhere in the back of my memory. Yet I have never seen the woman herself come out to hang the washing. She must hang that washing while I am

having physiotherapy, or seeing the doctor, or eating a meal. Perhaps she waits for a moment when I am not on the balcony to hang out her washing.

On the stainless steel draining board just inside the black rectangle of the open kitchen is a red mass on a white plate. One of the red rubber gloves unfolds the mass, the other holds a carving knife, almost invisible in the redness of the glove, and cuts the meat into small square pieces on a pale blue chopping board, carefully removing the gristle. In red rubber gloves. A bit much, really. The left red rubber glove sweeps the gristle into the gleaming sink, and then moves up and down quickly pushing the gristle into, presumably, the waste-disposal unit. One of the red rubber gloves holds the edge of the stainless steel sink, the other moves quickly all round it.

There is no doubt about it, now that the bright September sun has dimmed, the window frames and the frames of all the small black squares inside the window of the left-hand house are painted white. And the window frames and all the frames of the small black squares in the windows of the right-hand house are painted cream.

The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, rise from the greyness lifting a white mass, vanish and reappear. The arms above the gloves are thin and white. Despite so much washing activity I have not seen the woman yet. But then I have not been out on the balcony for quite some time; it is too cold, even with rugs. So I wheel my chair by the dining-room window and watch. Surely the woman must one day emerge to hang all that tremendous wash. But no, the cold November drizzle is too cold and drizzly. Unless perhaps she has a spin-dryer.

The woman steps out into the paved backyard holding in her thin white embrace the red plastic bowl full of wet clothes. She wears a black jumper and a short grey skirt, and the red rubber gloves. She is thin and has short hair. She puts the basin down and picks from it a shirt which she smooths out and hangs upon the line upside down by the tails. And then another shirt. Then a pyjama top, with stripes. She and the girl who seemed totally naked on the red canvas bed are one.

Nobody moves at all in the house on the left. And yet the window corresponding to the bathroom and small bedroom window has one of its panels open. Through the denuded elm, books are visible on the extreme left wall.

The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart behind the cream-painted frames of the kitchen in the right-hand house. One of the squares reflects a pale December sun but otherwise all the squares are dark on the lower half of the chessboard. The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, shake hands, vanish into a foam-grey mass, rise up, vanish and reappear, move swiftly apart, vanish, rise, move apart, vanish, rise, move swiftly. In the blackness beyond the gloves the shape is darkish red.

The woman has no daughter, and no washing-machine. She is the daughter, she is the washing-machine. She is probably the spin-dryer too. Whoever she washes for so continually is never to be seen, from this position at my high dining-room window in the immobility of my convalescence. The twin houses have separate roofs, high and deeply sloping in a late Edwardian style, with neat little, tight little tiles of darkened red.

The red rubber gloves are also worn to chop up meat on the pale blue chopping board. A bit much really. The meat must taste of stale detergent. The left red rubber glove sweeps the gristle into the gleaming sink, and then moves up and down pushing the gristle into the presumably waste-disposal unit. One of the red rubber gloves holds the edge of the stainless steel sink, the other moves swiftly around it.

The lower half of the chessboard reflects no sun. In the black rectangle of the kitchen window the red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, vanish into the suds, reappear with a pink tail, plunge off again and reappear. Soon the woman will come out to hang the washing on the line. I hope the doctor doesn't arrive just then.

The red rubber gloves are upstairs now, in the pink washstand just beyond the cream-painted squares of the right-hand house. It is very exciting when they go upstairs. They move apart and vanish, rise and come together, shake hands, vanish and reappear. They look larger in the small wash-basin. The shape behind them is white in the rosy darkness and the arms above the gloves are clearly visible. It is a rosy darkness due to the walls being probably painted pink. Inside it must be quite light. The arms are thin and white. The red rubber gloves have been removed, the wrists dip naked into the wash-basin, one hand soaps the other arm, under the arm, the neck, the other hand soaps the first arm, under the arm, the neck.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon and the wintry sun ac-

cuses my impotence with blank undazzling orange in a dull white sky. The thin white shape appears at the small bedroom window, draws the buff-lined curtains with swift brusquery. This is the first time I have seen the woman relax. At least, I assume she is relaxing since she has drawn the curtains. It was so jerkily done. Staring at the drawn buff curtains I know that I have seen them drawn before, without registering the image. No doubt in June already, during the heat-wave, she went up to the bedroom at three o'clock in the afternoon and drew the curtains swiftly, jerkily, in a great hurry to relax while I was dozing off. Perhaps she is not relaxing. All I saw was a quick white shape, a slip maybe, unless it was an overall, although her arms were bare. In the kitchen she sometimes wears a white overall, which makes her stand out better against the darkness of the rectangle. And of course the red rubber gloves. They lie at rest now on the kitchen window-sill just inside the small black squares, while she relaxes, thinking of black velvet or of restful landscapes as she isolates her head, and then dismisses it as she isolates her neck, and then dismisses it as she isolates her left shoulder, her left arm, flowing, flowing, out, her right arm, and then dismisses it as she isolates her left leg, her left foot, and then dismisses them as she isolates her right leg, her right foot. That is what the physiotherapist tells me to do when I am in pain. Normal people have to do it all the way down, isolating the left leg, then the right, but I feel no pain down there at all, my legs have isolated themselves, so there's no point. It is the neck and shoulders, and the back especially, that ache. Perhaps she isolates the inside of her thigh.

The curtains are drawn open swiftly and a white shape moves away. They are the buff-lined curtains on the left of the rectangle, the curtains of the small bedroom window next to the bathroom. Perhaps it is the spare room. A quick relaxation, that, merely counting to a hundred maybe, with a hundred deep breaths.

The thin white shape appears behind the cream-faced squares of the two panels in the right-hand half of the rectangle. Briefly, for the white-lined curtains are drawn with a brusque movement.

On closer scrutiny the bathroom curtains are not lined in white but are made of plastic, the reverse side of which is white. Unless perhaps they have replaced, quite recently, the earlier bathroom curtains with the white cotton lining. It is now impossible to tell. The slanted sun reappearing shows a

faint pink and blue pattern, ducks, possibly, or boats, brighter and more precise no doubt on the inside. Six out of thirty-two black squares reflect the pale December sun, Castle one, Bishop three, White Queen on her colour, pawn one to Castle three, pawn two to Knight four, pawn four immobilized in dire paralysis.

The lower half of the chessboard reflects no sun. In the black rectangle of the kitchen window the red rubber gloves move swiftly apart. One of the gloves holds the edge of the stainless steel sink, the other moves swiftly around it. Three shirts are hanging on the line, upside down, and a pyjama top, male underpants, two nighties, two slips, three panties and a pale green blouse. There are no pyjama trousers.

Snow covers the two steep roofs, and all the trees and gardens. The narrow bricks of the Siamese twin houses seem unnaturally dark. The back yards look alike, no lawn now on the left, only the apple-tree, bare-branched in black and white. The snow piles high on the window-sills and the left-hand house. But on the right-hand house the window-sills have been swept clean and stand out dark and grey. The light is on in the kitchen, the woman clearly visible in a blue smock over a red polo-neck. The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, plunge into greyness and bring out a plate, a cup, another plate, another, and a saucepan, after scouring, and a frying-pan.

The snow makes maplike patterns on the dark red and steeply sloping roofs.

The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart above the gleaming sink in the dark rectangle of the open kitchen window. The April sun slants on the small black squares, whitening a few and leaving others black, like half a chessboard gone berserk in order to confuse the queen and both her knights.

During my relapse I have thought a lot about the woman. I was unable to sit by the window but I saw her in my mind's eye. Busy, always busy in her red rubber gloves. But I know. Clearly she has a lover. She receives him at three o'clock in the afternoon and swiftly draws the curtains. There is so little time.

At three o'clock in the afternoon I sit by the dining-room window now and watch the house. The lover is there, behind the drawn curtains, caressing her face, and then her back, her breasts, her belly and the inside of her thighs as she lies totally naked on the red counterpane. Her belly is enormous for

she is eight months pregnant by him. She must have been getting bigger and bigger during my relapse, and of course before, although at that time it wouldn't have been so noticeable from this position at my high dining-room window. Therefore he cannot make love to her but he caresses her. She loves me manually and I am content.

The tiny baby lies dead on the stainless steel draining board. She cuts him up with the big carving knife and drops the small bits one by one into the waste-disposal unit which grinds them down into white liquid pulp.

The red rubber gloves move swiftly apart, half lost in all the blood. One hand holds the edge of the stainless steel sink, the other moves quickly around it.

The heat-wave is tremendous for late May. The woman sits on the red canvas bed, carefully oiling inch after inch of her thin white body, the arms, the chest, the curve of the breasts, the midriff. Now she is doing the right leg, starting with the top of the foot, the ankle, then the shin, as if to meet her upper oily self half way. The right thigh. Inside the thigh. The top of the left foot. She has oiled her body inch by inch and lies on the red canvas bed, thin, white and totally naked in her invisible bikini, chin up, eyes closed to face the morning sun that pours down melting her and my left side on my high balcony. In the black rectangle of the open kitchen window the yellow rubber gloves lie on the sill, at rest.

Superstitious Ignorance

Michael Cornish

☐ Edward tapped his gloved fingers on the leather-covered steering wheel. He stared through the glistening windscreen at the sheen on the bonnet; then at the square houses running away in the half-darkness of the seedy street beyond.

The squat bonnet gleamed with twentieth-century superiority over the peeled and grimy facades of the eighteenth-century villas to either side of the street. Their decayed facades were too ingrained with grime to benefit from the charm of the gaslight—the original Victorian gaslights had survived in that area—which was usually as flattering to such architecture as night club light to female complexions.

"Georgian, I'd say," Edward said. "Definitely Georgian."

His wife Penny stirred beside him in the passenger seat. The big collar of her fawn cashmere coat was turned up, and it pushed out her honey blond hair a little, but attractively nevertheless. Looking attractive was quite natural to her, and not something studied. The coat, which she had been able to buy at a knock-down price from the people she'd modelled it for, looked marvellous against the black leather upholstery of the Mini-Cooper.

"Yes," Penny said. "But my God, look at it."

"Oh, do try to use your imagination, darling," Edward said excitedly. "Just think. A detached Georgian house with a large garden at the back. Eight big rooms and a hall. Think of what we could make of it."

Penny pulled her coat tightly about her, which he resented a little because there was an excellent heater in the car, until he recognized that it was an instinctive defensive measure against coming to this down-at-heel area at all.

He knew very well in his heart she'd be happy to spend all her life in flats in Chelsea frittering away their modest lump of capital, and that it was only her determination to "be a good wife" that had steeled her to coming with him in the first place.

"I didn't like that estate agent, darling," Penny said nervously. "He did seem so—well, so *shifty*. And vague too. And such a seedy little office."

Edward laughed indulgently. It made him both exasperated and affectionate to remember that she was still a sucker for any smart exterior, though he'd been quietly trying to open her eyes to the real world for all of the eighteen months he'd known her.

"Oh, come now, Penny my love. He was quite a nice man really. Quite a fine sense of humour if you listened for it. Did you hear how he described negotiating with the little people who own property in this area? 'Like dealing with a tankful of eels,' he said."

He saw she wasn't ready to be cajoled out of her nervousness and put his arm round her.

"Now, darling. Just this one house tonight—it shouldn't take more than half an hour—then we can go back. And, seeing that it's Friday night, I'll take you to dinner in the Roman Room. There. What about that?"

She turned her face to him. Her eyes showed a mixture of contrition and delight now that he'd mentioned her favourite place. He kept on smiling, though deep down he was a bit irritated with her for making him resort to such extravagant bribery.

"Besides," he said, "it's just because that estate agent's so clueless that he hasn't seen the potential of this area yet. It stands to reason areas like this, only three or four stops on the Tube from the West End, *must* come up. People can't go on paying more and more astronomical prices for houses around the smarter areas, and the rail fares and so on are already driving the long-distance commuters back into town."

He knew it was all so much repetition, but it seemed to be the only way to do it.

"And what's more, Penny, remember those houses that'd been done up so nicely in the terrace just back around the corner. It's already happening, you see. We just can't afford to miss a chance like this. We'd kick ourselves for ever about it if we did."

Just for a moment, he saw in his mind's eye the house as it might be: the stucco restored round the windows and the classic door. The door itself could be in natural wood, with coach lamps setting off its delicate, balanced grace. Penny, in the very latest evening gown—she'd surely pick up something just right from her modelling as she always did—in the doorway welcoming the astonished and admiring first-comers to their housewarming.

Penny smiled the sweetest of her private smiles for him,

and he knew the enthusiasm that had been in his voice had rekindled her support.

"Oh, Teddy darling, I know you're right. It's just me again. You know you're not to mind."

He kissed her tenderly and then opened the door and got out to make the most of it before her mood faltered.

He took his big torch out of the side pocket in the door just in case, and then went round to help her out. He shut the door after her briskly, enjoying again the solid musical clunk as the well-made panel fitted as smoothly into place as a folded wing to a falcon's back.

The sound of their feet on the road, then on the pavement, then on the five shallow steps to the front entrance to the house were the only noises to be heard in the quiet and deserted street. Only the light shining dimly here and there through the cheap curtains in the windows of some of the houses, and the old second-hand cars parked intermittently along the roadside, showed that the area was inhabited at all.

The porch light was broken, of course, so the elegant shape of the stucco beneath its peeling, sooty surface paint offered only a sense of desolation and unwelcome now as he groped about with gloved fingers and eyes for signs of a bell. Eventually he found it and pressed it. There was no answering noise from inside: no sound at all.

Penny's patent leather high heel shoes glistened as she moved her feet apprehensively to a new position.

"It's extraordinary, though, that it should be going so cheap if it's as much of a find as you say," she said quietly as though someone might be listening. "It does seem . . . well . . . *fishy*."

He laughed briskly, establishing the masculine "no nonsense" note on which they had to see the thing through. He found the door-knocker—obviously a pleasing bit of brass beneath these caked layers of ancient black paint—and banged it sharply several times.

"D'you think anyone's there?" Penny said. "I don't think the place is occupied after all."

"Of course there's someone there. The estate agent said there was a sitting tenant, and sitting tenants don't run out unless there's a very good reason. A woman, I think he said, with some kids."

There was still no sound from inside.

"The point is, Penny darling, for £3,000 this place is a snip, sitting tenant or no sitting tenant. Besides, I'm sure we

can winkle her out in no time if we pay her a few hundred to move, and we'll easily be able to do that if we can get this for only £3,000."

At that moment there was a startling grinding of bolts behind the door and it swung half open to present them with a gust of moist and fetid air that was obviously being changed for the first time in months, and a small squat woman in an unspeakably filthy apron. Her face was primitive and olive skinned. Her eyes, so far as Edward could tell in the miserable light of the thirty-watt bulb in the hall behind her, were dark and hot with an unfathomable mixture of suspicion, hostility and imperviousness. Her hair was black and parted in the middle, then heaped in an untidy bun at the back of her head. It looked as if it had never been washed, ever.

"Good evening," Edward said firmly in his best junior management tone. "Mrs. Laristi?"

The woman didn't reply. She watched them as though they were some sort of distant passing show.

"My name's Grafton, and this is my wife. I hope Mr. Faithwell at the estate agent's told you we were coming round tonight to look at the house. I gather you know it's up for sale."

Mrs. Laristi spoke at last in a deep, hoarse voice.

"Mr. Faidwhell, yes. He been here sometime. Two weeks ago, maybe. He say something or other, I don't know."

She shrugged, pulling her lips down at the corners.

He decided a firm lead would be the thing to make up for Faithwell's inefficiency. There was no point in letting it go now, as it would be no end of a job getting Penny back here another time. He stepped into the hall past the woman, smiling politely but firmly, and saying, "Well, we'll be very quick. I promise you, Mrs. Laristi, we'll disturb you as little as possible."

It was then that he noticed the string of kids standing silently behind her. There were four of them and they were all disgustingly filthy. Some had their fingers stuffed in their messy mouths; some worked nervously at the dirty garments at their groins. All stared at him and Penny with their mother's dark-eyed, complex stare.

He took Penny's arm in his to show their solidarity, and looked round the hall, taking in as much as the great plague of shadows left by the 30-watt bulb would allow. The hall was beautifully proportioned, and focused naturally on the swing of the staircase at the end in spite of the peeling wallpaper

and the hideously blistered and ancient green paint all over the place. The floor was well laid and seemed sound.

"Is no good. This house," Mrs. Laristi said. She shook her head. "Bad spirits."

"Bad spirits?" Penny repeated, then blinked at Edward for support. "I think we'll look in this room first," Edward said dismissively for answer to both of them.

Somehow the Laristi brood infiltrated past him to stand in a body in front of the door.

"Is our room," Mrs. Laristi said. "Is for us, for living. Is private."

"Look," Edward said reassuringly, "we won't steal anything or even touch anything. We only want a quick look to see the shape of the room and whether it's structurally OK. You must be sensible, Mrs. Laristi. The more fuss you make the longer it'll take, and the longer we'll be here."

Mrs. Laristi watched him for a moment and then shrugged and opened the door, then switched on the dim light. She had been telling the truth. What had presumably once been the kitchen for the whole house was the only room her family apparently used. The old-fashioned iron range built into the wall around the fireplace was in a state of unutterable squalor. The room stank bitterly of urine and filth. There was one massive bed, in which presumably all of them slept, with soiled bedclothes grey and shiny with dirt heaped on it. Clothes and papers and empty and half-empty food containers lay heaped in what remaining space there was. Two cheap wooden chairs were the only other pieces of furniture in the room.

Three or four mangy fox-faced cats suddenly shot from under the bed and out between his legs to disappear somewhere into the house.

"Yes," Edward said. "Thank you, I think we've seen enough of that room."

"It's becoming a little more obvious why it's only three thousand," Penny muttered to him breathlessly; she had been holding her breath in Mrs. Laristi's room.

Edward walked across to the other side of the hall and reached for the handle of the nearest door, glad that he had kept his gloves on, and thinking that there was no future in paying too much deference to the woman, because she didn't own the place anyway.

But Mrs. Laristi suddenly moved with unexpected speed to push past in front of him, reeking of old cooking grease and bodily staleness.

"Ah, Dios, wait . . . wait! For other rooms first it must be done, it must be done." She rolled her eyes upwards, crossed herself and muttered on while she went through a series of genuflections and then some weird and distinctly pagan-looking gestures in front of the door. To Edward's amazement, all the children imitated her movements as best they could behind her.

"How depressing," Penny said weakly beside him. She had turned her head a little so that her nose was against the big turned-up cashmere collar. He squeezed her waist to reassure her.

When she had finished, Mrs. Laristi opened the door fearfully and peered hesitantly beyond it as though it might at any moment be necessary to bolt. Edward stepped in after her and switched on the light, which once again proved to be a bare 30-watt bulb. There was nothing unpleasant to see in the room beyond its dirtiness. Obviously it wasn't even used now. And it stank of cats. Otherwise, there were some old and rotted armchairs, a bare iron bedframe, and a lot of old newspapers and magazines and empty cans scattered about—presumably when the chaos became too much in her room she simply shifted the excess in here.

Edward made himself miss all this and see the potential of the beautiful casement windows at either end. Above, he saw to his delight, there was a fine moulded ceiling that certainly looked as though it were the work of real craftsmen, and was more or less intact apart from the dirt. There was a sort of arch in the middle of the room to indicate that it could be used as two if necessary, and fine wood fireplace surrounds in each section. His heart leaped with new resolution about the house as he went out.

"Yes," he said, rubbing his gloved hands together. "And now let's move on. Shall we see the room opposite?"

Mrs. Laristi burst into speech again.

"This house no good. Not glad. Is evil presences. Is old evil thing, maybe murder, I don't know. Very evil things live here. No good for you."

"I'm afraid ghosts are allergic to me," he said, enjoying his archness the more because he knew it would be meaningless to her. "They just vanish away wherever I go."

Mrs. Laristi looked at him suspiciously and sniffed.

Edward said: "Now I think we'll have a look in this room opposite."

He moved to the door on the opposite side of the hall, but

once again Mrs. Laristi and her troop of silent children sprang ahead of him and went through their weird and muddled ritual.

"Oh, Teddy darling, I don't like this. It's so strange, what're they doing?"

"Don't take any notice of the silly old troll. She thinks going through all this corny mumbo jumbo is going to frighten us off the house. Really, I ask you, it's too absurd for words! It makes you want to laugh out loud."

Mrs. Laristi had stopped now and looked round at them with hostility, suspicious about their whispering. From her face it looked as though she thought they had been planning to murder her.

"What nice children you have, Mrs. Laristi," Penny said reassuringly. "It must be so jolly, all being together in a group like that. So nice for playing." She produced a semblance of her social laugh, and Edward squeezed her hand in gratitude for the effort she had made.

Mrs. Laristi looked at her children as though Penny had reminded her of an enemy. She turned on her children suddenly and began shouting at the youngest and hitting him for no apparent reason. The child immediately started to scream, and then one of the elder children began to attack its mother. She turned on it too with gusto, until she had eventually subdued them both.

Penny put her hand behind Edward's arm and they watched with more disgust than embarrassment this flurry of near-animal turmoil. When it was over Edward opened the door and strode firmly into the room. The light didn't work and he had to use his torch. This room was completely bare, and had only one casement window. It didn't run the whole length of the house like the room opposite. The air in it was damp and clammy and cold. There was a strange smell about that wasn't quite so recognizable this time. There was something more to it than just dirt and staleness and cats. Something familiar and rather disturbing. Not quite drains or mustiness. Something else.

"What's that funny smell, Penny darling?"

But Penny had taken out the little handkerchief soaked in Worth perfume she kept in her handbag and was dabbing it to her nose, so presumably she had managed to avoid it altogether.

Edward walked across the room puzzling over the smell, listening to his feet echoing on the boards. He pulled absent-

mindedly at a piece of peeled wallpaper exposed by the steely finger of light from his torch; still the smell meant nothing to him.

"Now, upstairs," Mrs. Laristi said, pressing them with sudden vigour. "Many rooms upstairs."

They trooped up the bare shadowy stairs which pirouetted round to face a narrow landing. The landing was in complete darkness. Edward switched on his torch and swung it about. There seemed to be rather nice panelling in the form of a dado on both walls, although it was of course ruined at present by countless layers of horrible old paint. Possibly that might have saved it from the worm, though: that was a consoling thought worth remembering.

"Of course," he said to Penny in a strong, conversational tone, "you have to remember this area was something of a little health spa right outside the City of London when all these nice houses were built. That accounts for the expensive and tasteful workmanship. This house probably belonged to a rich merchant; probably his little showpiece in the country. It seems odd to think of it like that now, doesn't it?"

"These rooms," Mrs. Laristi said. "Bad rooms. Cold and not good. You wait for me make it done for you go in."

She and her children then went into her ritual once again before she would let them into any of the rooms. Edward found, to his intense irritation, that his common sense was being eroded slowly by the repetition of her muddled yet strangely disturbing performance. The inept support from her children added to its macabre effect now instead of making it more ridiculous, as he had expected. He began to feel uneasy, and this made him furious with her and all the more determined to overcome the puerile weakness in him that was susceptible to such rubbish.

The rooms he went into with Penny were not in so bad a state as those downstairs, though they too were suffering from long neglect. They were all completely empty, and had obviously not even been entered, let alone used, more than once or twice in decades. The ancient and filthy wallpaper had not been changed since Victorian times. There were thick layers of dirt on the pleasantly shaped windows, some of which had broken panes with pieces of wood tacked over them.

The two rooms which had been the principal bedrooms had excellent ceilings in the same style as the downstairs main rooms, and really attractive fireplace surrounds disfigured by

chocolate paint. As far as he could tell from the beam of his torch—none of the lights were working, of course—there were no tell-tale signs of a leaky roof above the ceilings either.

"There's something eerie about these rooms," Penny muttered. "They're so—well, so *deserted.* It's as though as much living as ought to be done in them has been done already. They're . . . well—sort of empty tombs. Aren't they?"

"Oh, don't be silly," he said shortly, because something of the same feeling had come to him—simply as a result of the Laristis' repeated absurdities, he knew very well. "All houses are like this before anything's been done to them. You've got to look at them with what can be done in your mind, not just take them as they are."

She didn't reply, and he knew he had upset her, but he hardened himself against it. Everything he had seen so far had confirmed the potential of the place, and he damned well wasn't going to be jockeyed out of it by female pressure, even if Penny's was being added to the Laristi woman's for the time being. He'd soon shake her out of that when he got her to the Roman Room.

"Is evil, this house," Mrs. Laristi chose that moment to chip in again, watching him with her black eyes, which looked in the gloom of the landing like the source of all the darkness in the house. "Sometimes," she said, "there is terrible cries and shrieks. There is horror that frightens my little ones so they cannot sleep or eat for days. They sick for days."

"Oh, for God's sake, that's enough of this drivel," Edward burst out. "We've had quite enough ignorance and folly for now. What kind of fools d'you think we are? We're not taken in by that sort of thing, don't you see. If we like the house we'll buy it whatever you say, and we'll probably even give you a whole lot of money to find somewhere else to live you'll like better. Now let us see the rest of it without any more fuss."

Mrs. Laristi's face went wooden. Behind her, the small faces of her children watched him, their eyes glittering like rats' eyes in the shadows.

Mrs. Laristi shrugged.

"You have seen all. Is no more to see."

"Oh, really," Edward said, regretting his outburst now as a sign of being rattled. "Now listen, Mrs. Laristi. I know there's another room downstairs which you deliberately avoided

showing me. The room at the back on the opposite side to the long living room. I shan't go until we've seen it. Now come on."

He led the way imperiously down the stairs, the beam of his torch a sword blade cutting the gloom aside. He could hear Penny's high heels following, then the multiple trample of the Laristi horde.

He strode straight to the door which he knew led to the room Mrs. Laristi had been keeping from him. She jostled furiously in front of him once again and put her revolting hands on his dark crombie overcoat, pushing him away from the door.

"Ah no, no," she shrieked, "is the evil room, the evil room! You must not to go in for fear of death . . . ah Dios, Dios!"

To his surprise, Edward saw that she was genuinely terrified now. Her face was as lifeless as dough, her black eyes bright with panic.

"This room is where big evil in the house is living. There is terrible sounds in this room, always. Maybe old murder there, maybe many murders, maybe worse. There is terrible things come out at night to make evil in the house. Oh, Madre de Dios."

"Oh, Teddy," Penny's voice was thin as water. "Let's leave it and go . . . please, please. Surely this one room doesn't matter now when we've seen so many."

"Nonsense!" Edward almost shouted. "Superstitious nonsense! I'm not surprised there're terrible noises with those revolting cats having the run of the place. For God's sake let's behave like intelligent adults instead of a lot of snivelling savages."

He gripped Penny's arm roughly to bring her to her senses and then swept Mrs. Laristi and her children aside with the hand in which he held his big torch. He pushed at the door, but it was locked. Fortunately the woman had left the key in the lock. He turned it and flung the door open, pulling Penny firmly inside with him so that the beginning would be over before there was time to think.

He almost laughed with the pathos of it when he looked round in the room. It was big and harmless and empty. It was almost cheerful with the moonlight pouring in through the pleasing french windows that gave on to the long garden beyond. Of course, the garden was bound to be a wilderness now, but perhaps some good plants had survived and could be

trimmed into shape again. And, unsurprisingly, the glass in the french windows was mostly broken.

The only sound was the voices of the Laristis gabbling away at their mumbo jumbo outside, louder than ever because of her panic.

The room was really very nice indeed, with perhaps the best ceiling of all, though the wallpaper was in ruins again. The only odd thing about it was the smell, which was once again very much the same smell as in the other adjoining room which he'd been in at the beginning, and which had perplexed him then.

He walked forward with Penny across the room, sniffing at the smell, knowing at the back of his mind that there was something important about it, while he played his torch on the intricacies of the ceiling.

At that moment a cat scuttled from a dark corner and out of the broken french window, and the floor cracked and gave way beneath them. Penny's thin, elastic scream coincided with the sensation of their falling, and then unconsciousness came and hit him like a giant fist.

Agonizing pain in his legs brought him to, he didn't know how long afterwards. At the same moment the smell he had been worrying about the moment before the accident leaped forward to reveal itself in his mind. It was the vile smell of the hideous, insidious fungus that swallowed houses alive like a python. It was *Merulius Lacrymans*. Dry rot.

He tried to move, but the pain in his legs leaped, making him scream. He realized his trousers were warm and wet, and that he was already faint from loss of blood. He groped with his hands and found he was lying on heaps of rubble and broken brick. They must have fallen through to some deep foundations beneath the house.

Panic at the thought of Penny shot through him. He called her name and groped about in the darkness for her. His hand came in contact with the familiar softness of her cashmere coat. He sobbed with relief and grasped at her for comfort, in spite of the pain.

But she didn't respond. When his fingers found her face he knew why. Her head was right over, her neck broken. She was dead.

Then the sound of the key turning in the lock in the door above somewhere and the noise of the Laristis gabbling their charms came to him dimly, showing him that he couldn't have been unconscious for long.

He cried out for help, but the pain in the effort turned it to a scream. The only answer was increased gabbling from the Laristis. It dawned on him suddenly that she would take their disappearance merely as the work of the evil she imagined to be in control of the room. Any cries she heard would only confirm in her mind that something awful had happened to them because of it. He knew for certain she'd do nothing about it.

His thoughts flew to the estate agent, Faithwell. Surely he'd do something.

But there was little hope of anything from an inefficient and listless fellow like that. He'd take the fact that they didn't contact him again as a sign that they weren't interested in the house; if he remembered them at all.

And it was Friday night. Nobody would miss them until Monday at the earliest, when they'd see he hadn't turned up at the office . . .

Tears sprang into his eyes; tears of fury at Mrs. Laristi and the superstition that was now inevitably going to be the death of him, too. He put his head on Penny's sweet-smelling cashmere coat and wept with fury, and with weakness through his rapid loss of blood, which he did not know how to stop.

Sheela-Na-Gig

B. S. Johnson

☐ This was at the time when I felt sure that I had nothing better to do than hang around waiting for the right one.

It was my third summer in Wales, in Lleyn, in the peninsula that dipped its tentative finger into St. George's Channel. A man could feel himself a king in Lleyn, I used to think, could climb Garn Fadryn and see his kingdom stretched about him in extent, bounded on three sides by the sea, valleys and fields and woods and villages. Not that, however, I would have mentioned my imagined sovereignty to the Welsh, I, a Londoner—this would really have strained their tolerance of my summers. For the first two I had worked, and this third I had come down on a kind of working holiday: I stayed at David's farm on the alluvial plain extending back from Hell's Mouth, and helped with the harvest and anything else there was to help with. In the evenings we would go out drinking, driving all over Lleyn—Aberdaron, Sarn, Rhyd-y-clafdy, Abersoch, Criccieth—and sometimes up as far as the Mermaid on Anglesey, or to Llandudno and Rhyl.

That was how we lived in the summer, worked hard all day and enjoyed ourselves all evening and most of the night: there was a group of thirty or so of us, all in our twenties, in that tense, competitive group relationship of the unmarried, Trefor and Anne and Gwendy and Iolo and Alice and Gwillim and Mos and Jenny and Llyr and David and Rhiain and a dozen more who would racket about North Wales in sheer enjoyment, imaginative enjoyment, that is, not that kind of mixture of foolishness and bravado born of boredom. We could all drive—you had to drive to get anywhere west of Pwllheli—and were good drivers, too, for I never heard of any of us having an accident in spite of the way we used to belt around.

In the winter, of course, they used to tell me, it was very different; I would hardly, they said, recognize the places or the people. But from June until September, the summer: that was the time for me to be in Lleyn.

One afternoon the combine-harvester pitched awkwardly and stubbed its drum into the earth, fracturing the left-hand

support arm—a great casting about four feet long—with a crack which I was afterwards told was heard as far away as Rhiw. The quickest way to replace the arm was for someone to drive down overnight to the spare-part stockists of this particular Swedish machine, in Dorset, near Poole. As the others could havest by hand, at which I was useless, it was sensible and logical that I should be the one to make the round trip of about six hundred miles. I should be back the following night, so that only one full day's work would be lost. I slung a caravan bunk mattress and my sleeping-bag into the back of David's ten-hundredweight van, and left at about five.

There was not much traffic even the other side of Pwllheli, and I made good time over the slower stretch through Maentwrog and Blaenau out on to the A5. I began to enjoy myself. I sang sad songs to myself with deep sentimental feeling, unashamedly, secure in my solitude. I looked out for hitch-hikers, for this was one of the few times I was in a position to repay some of the hitch-hiking debt I had incurred myself as a student in the past. But I saw only one, and she was running for a wagon in front of me which had just stopped. Something about her made me feel that she was on the game, a wagon-driver's pickup. I would have liked to have talked with her.

Past Shrewsbury the sun was half-set, and for fifteen minutes or so I drove enravished through the most sensuously affecting light effects: I had the headlights full on, and, instead of marking the effect by their artificiality, they added to it, being and epitomizing my relationship with the sun's light. I thought at the time that I was asking for trouble, enjoying the sun: but I persuaded myself that it was after all the death of the sun.

I did not feel at all tired. The van was comfortable and easy to drive; I could rest the outside of my right foot against a projection whilst using the accelerator, so that my ankle did not become overtired. I thought that I would drive for as long as I did not feel tired.

The moon rose about eleven.

I stopped once just beyond Ludlow to look at my map. I should go through Leominster, Hereford, Ross and Gloucester. Seeing Hereford on the map caused me to remember its cathedral, and then the church at Kilpeck, just the other side of the city, which I had read of as being one of the finest examples of Norman and late Romanesque architecture in the whole of Britain. At the same time, I realized that I was be-

ginning to feel tired. I would make my way to Kilpeck, although it was eight or ten miles out of my way towards Abergavenny rather than towards Ross, and spend the night parked nearby. I was delighted at the thought of waking in the morning to find the church there to be given my mind.

I found it easily, almost uncannily, for although the moon shone fully the way was quite intricate: past a railway halt, over another bridge, and then right down an avenue—of elms, I think. I pulled off onto the verge not twenty yards from the gate, and climbed over into the back of the van, onto the mattress. It was just after one o'clock. Through one of the door windows at the back I could see the outline of the church against the sky; it was smaller than I had expected.

The windows were misted over when I awoke, and it was nearly eight. I had slept longer than I had wanted to, and I decided I could spare the church only about fifteen minutes. I sloughed off the sleeping-bag, and pushed my hair back.

There was a castle mound to the west of the church, with thickset stumps of rubble walls on it, and I decided to go up there first to look at the church from a distance. My bladder needed emptying, too, preferably out of sight of the farmhouse just opposite the van.

The first surprise was to see a mountain to the west with an outline almost exactly similar to that of Garn Fadryn from David's farm at Llanengan: from the north, a fairly gentle slope levelling out to a plateau, closed by a cairn-shape which fell to a forty-five degree scarp on the south.

The church was exquisitely lovely. Its sandstone was iron-mould brown-red in colour, like the warm hide of a stag. A groundmist covered the churchyard nearly to the top of the surround wall, so that the church seemed to be suspended within a thin rectangle.

I went down. The gate was locked. I vaulted over the low wall.

The south door of the church gave me an emotional shock: I had read that it was the first glory of the building, but this had not prepared me for what I saw. It was elaborately and richly carved, the architrave carrying a tympanum with the Tree of Life, semicircled by a plain moulded order, then a carved order with heads of fantastic and grotesque beasts, and outside that a label with large linked medallions enclosing more beast-heads. The inner order of the jambs was plain, but the outer had two shafts each side, both carved differently: intricately intertwining foliage, and serpents with their tails in

their mouths, and two armed figures wearing strange caps or helmets. I felt oddly that the style and matter of the carving were pre-Christian, even anti-Christian.

The door was not locked; surprisingly.

Inside, the chancel arch had two mouldings, one with a chevron pattern and the other with lozenge-and-pellet ornament. The label also had chevrons, and the responds facing west had three apostlelike figures carved on them. These and the modern brass cross on the altar came as a shock to me: the whole atmosphere, feeling, of the church was to me pagan, non-Christian, and these apostles and this cross were alien here.

At the door there was a table, and on it flowers and a thick pile of a royal blue quarto monograph with *Kilpeck Church* in gold fat-face Gothic on the front. I picked one up, and put half a crown into a box by the vase. Glancing through the pamphlet I saw illustrated a holy-water stoup, believed to be Saxon and therefore older than the twelfth-century church. I looked around me, and found it: it was in a very worn condition, but two arms carved round the rim, some sort of band round the waist, and two feet, toes downward, could still be made out easily enough. I felt I knew what it was really, and smiled at its being used in a church.

I shut the pamphlet, resolving to read it later. It was now half-past eight, and I thought that I ought soon to be moving again: but the outside of the building was so interesting that it was impossible for me not to give it a close if quick scrutiny.

Outside the remarkable doorway I turned right and looked up at the west wall: it had a splendidly-proportioned window with an inner interlaced roll-moulding, and at the ends and centre of the corbel table below it there were three narrow, stylized crocodile-heads protruding, with curled grotesque tongues. These latter heads were another shock: I hardly thought of Norman landowners in the Marches even knowing of the existence of crocodiles, let alone wishing to decorate their church with stylized representations of them.

What was so remarkable about the carving on the church was that it was so well-preserved: the stone was not weathered at all as far as I could judge. Inspecting it closely I could still see the toolmarks on it, just as the masons had left them over eight hundred years before. This seemed extraordinary to me: Old Red Sandstone formations are not usually notable for their resistance to friability.

Of all the carving, it was the corbel table which fascinated

me most: at intervals of about a foot, all the way round the building, projected carvings of grotesque heads, figures, monsters, and animals: dogs, bulls, rabbits, serpents, bears, pigs—all seen in nightmarish mutations. Here and there a corbel was missing, the stone looking as though it had been deliberately smashed off. I looked in the pamplet and read that some had been destroyed in the nineteenth century because they had been considered obscene: I felt I knew exactly what kind of corvel had been so childishly effaced.

All the more to my surprise, then, the last shock this astonishing building had for me that summer morning, when I saw the last figure on the corbel table of the sweetly-rounded apse to be the *sheela-na-gig* narrow face, huge eyes, thin lips, skeletal ribs, legs haunched high and wide, sticklike arms outside and under the thighs for the hands to hold open an enormously exaggerated vulva.

I read later that there are two or three other examples of the *sheela-na-gig* in Britain, and a lot more in Ireland. The *sheela-na-gig* is a representation of the twin aspects of life: death and procreation, symbolized by her upper and lower halves. She is pre-Christian, pre-Celtic, and has been traced as far back in Britain as the advent of the Beaker People early in the second millennium B.C., and in Egypt as far back as the VIIth Dynasty of the First Intermediate Period. But what the *sheela-na-gig* stands for is constant for all ages, eternal and universal: for if there were no death then there would be no need for procreation. The two are inseparable.

Even though I did not know all this that morning, I felt I knew why the despoilers had left this one alone, had left the *sheela-na-gig* alone.

Whatever foreign building techniques and Romanesque style the Normans had imposed on their vassals, they had known enough to let these master-masons of the Marches decorate and ornament Kilpeck Church in their own tradition, a religious tradition far older than the Christian one.

I turned away.

A woman in an apron was unlocking the gate. She did not seem surprised that I was already inside.

I put the blue monograph on the shelf under the dash, started the engine, and drove awkwardly off the verge. In the mirror I saw the small rustbrown church until I turned the corner: reflected then was the mountain like Garn Fadryn; and Rhiain was in my mind.

The feeling of disembodiment came upon me. I had had it once before whilst driving, in North Wales the previous summer, strangely enough, and had been frightened afterwards. It is very difficult to describe. It was as though someone else were using my body, and I was above (always above), dispassionately regarding this other person's actions. As last year I drove dangerously fast along narrow roads. As last year I had very near escapes several times. When I think of the risk I took I am full of reprehension for myself. I remember the above-myself thinking at the time what a fool this body was, as well.

Eventually I found myself following signs to Ross, and finally a main road to Ross. Gradually myself came down, returned to my body, consonant with an increasing hunger. Perhaps that was something to do with it, feeling hungry. But I do not think so really, because the summer before it had occurred not very long after lunch.

Gloucester Cathedral stood fretted and haughty and threatening above the city, white, far whiter than most buildings in England, and in the morning sun it looked as though carved in packed snow. I considered stopping again to visit it: but I thought that the cold Perp. of the cathedral would sort ill with the vision of warm Romanesque that I had within me, so did not stop.

I settled down to drive hard, taking as direct a line south as I could through Stroud, Nailsworth and Tetbury. I was enjoying the sun-impregnated stone of the villages, and driving as well as I had ever done: fast, but very safely.

I was furious when a petrol tanker backed into me in Malmesbury, smashing my offside headlight and damaging the wing. There is a tower in Malmesbury, and a right-angle turn round it wide enough for only one vehicle at a time. A huge mirror is fixed to the corner and there is an equally huge sign directing attention to it. I was waiting about three yards behind a petrol tanker when without warning it began to back. All I could do was to sound my horn; luckily the handbrake was off and there was nothing behind. The infuriating thing was that there was no action I could have taken in time to prevent the accident.

The tanker driver was a great hick, and resented me having been behind him. He had obviously not looked in his nearside mirror or he would have seen me. He was hardly perturbed, however, as we exchanged addresses, in contrast to my anger, and we parted in deepest enmity.

I drove savagely then, though I surprised myself by how well, too, being determined to make up the time lost and to reach Poole by the early afternoon. I arrived shortly after two, and found the spare-part stockists to be pleasantly efficient and co-operative. I was on my way back, having had a meal as well, by three.

Just before the shops shut, I stopped to buy a couple of meat pies and some cakes. Otherwise I did not stop until about nine o'clock, when the sun was poised on a holt to the west, and I was a few miles south of Shrewsbury. There, having left the van in a rutted gate entrance, I sat on a great stone newel and ate one of the pies and a couple of the cakes.

On the left, under a rowan, there was what I now know to have been a man lying with what I now know to have been a woman, making what I already knew to be love.

I considered whether I should drive on after dark or not, in view of the damaged headlight, which, surprisingly, still worked in spite of its glass being broken: for I was not sure whether the accident had so altered its alignment that it would dazzle other drivers. I could drive until dark, sleep, and then go on when it became light. But remembering how I had overslept hours past dawn the night before, I decided that I would risk driving through the night: otherwise I should not be back at Llanengan before midday, and David would have lost the best part of another day's harvesting.

The offside headlight certainly did dazzle other drivers, I soon found: they flashed their own lights at me, and all I could do was show them by main beam and off again that I was already dipped and could not help it. Fortunately there was not much traffic about.

The moon bobbled about in the rearview mirror occasionally as the road turned to accommodate it.

After I had passed Corwen and was trying to make up my mind whether to go through Blaenau or Beddgelert back to Lleyn, I remembered the minor road through Yspytty-ifan and over the moor: I thought that it would be almost deserted at that time of night, and therefore less dangerous both for me and for others. I began to look out for the turning: I was not sure whether it was the near side of Pentrefoelas or past it. I looked forward to seeing the moor at night; I had driven across it several times by day, a desolate, hardly inhabited tract of land with round-shouldered hills separated by marshy stream-cut valleys: it was more typical of Dartmoor than of North Wales.

Half a mile before the turning the far side of Pentrefoelas I saw a woman standing in the road. She moved her arm as the nearside headlight picked her out. I swerved to avoid her and braked harshly. I told her I was not going much farther along the A5, but through Yspytty-ifan and thence to Portmadoc and down Lleyn.

"I know," I feel she said.

She climbed in. I drove off. I asked her where she wanted to go.

"You know," I feel she said.

I glanced at her strangely. She had a sharp, narrow Welsh face. We turned left towards the moor, and passed the village. I was busy watching where the road was going, for once through the village the sides are marked only by limewash stones at intervals of about ten feet. There were often sheep, too, lying down in the road to sleep, for reasons no doubt best known to themselves, to be avoided; perhaps the road was still warm from the sun.

The moon was uncovered suddenly by cloudbanks, above and slightly to our right.

We drove for about twenty minutes. I certainly did not know where she was going, I thought, and she's got a bloody cheek. Then she said:

"Here! Here!" in a voice which it was impossible not to obey.

I braked harshly again. She turned in opening the door, looked at me, and I felt her moonlit thin-lipped smile. Then she was gone, leaving the door open. I leant across to close it, straightened up, and then there she was, sitting down in the road facing me, just inside the headlights' range. She raised her knees, and suddenly she was the *sheela-na-gig*, just as the one at Kilpeck, but living, *living*.

I felt an elemental oneness, union, unity, with the moon, the lights, the road, the moor, the sheep, the van, the stones, and, above all, with her.

I began to feel disembodied again.

I watched myself put the van into gear, and start to drive round her: and watched myself surprised that she moved with the beams, stayed in the same position relative to the van whichever way my body tried to turn it on the road.

Then I lost interest in my body.

The rest of the journey has no being in my memory: but certainly the above-myself returned, certainly I was wholly myself again when I reached Llanengan, for I remember

Rhiain stepping from the gate-breach in the church wall as I slowed to take the turning for the farm, and being warm and gentle and kind and her hair damp from the night; and suddenly it was right with Rhiain, good and right, and three summers' knowing had fallen into love between us.

Rhiain's father runs sheep on half a mountain behind Beddgelert. The old man was lonely with only his daughter. Now he has a son-in-law and a grandson, too. He teaches me, and is delighted at my learning. This is my home now, Wales, Lleyn.

To Rhiain I tell everything, everything. She listens and understands and knows. She smiles in her way, the pointed Welsh face full of love for me and for our son. And knows.

But it has taken more than two years for me to bring myself to write it down.

It hit me.

Gone Is Gone

Joan Fleming

☐ Dead is dead and gone is gone, and there was no doubt about it that Clowd was dead and gone, as dead as mutton or any other dead thing, and gone to earth in Kensal Green Cemetery.

Mr. Comfort had waited a long time for Clowd to die; for weeks, for months, indeed for years. And now at last Clowd had shuffled off—and shuffled off was the word for it, for he had suffered from a slowly progressive disease which paralysed him by degrees. For years Mr. Comfort had watched his partner going downhill, slowly, slowly. For years he himself had suffered from severe heart attacks, and sometimes it would seem that, after all, Comfort would go before Clowd.

Clowd would laugh when Mr. Comfort returned to work after one of his attacks. "I'll see you out yet!" he would say.

Oh no, you won't! thought Mr. Comfort, and he saw to it that he stayed alive. Sometimes the pain he suffered was so acute that he almost wished to die, but he knew that he couldn't, he knew that he must stay and see Clowd out.

It was a matter of principle. Clowd, it had always been understood, was the inferior person. A great deal younger than Mr. Comfort, he had been taken into partnership in a weak moment when it looked as though Mr. Comfort would have to close down his antique business and seek a job. But ever since Clowd had been taken on, the business had flourished; Clowd was, as it were, a talisman. Though his partner was a spendthrift and altogether a tiresome person, Mr. Comfort was superstitious about dissolving the partnership. Clowd was so good with customers, so charming and gay, he beguiled them into buying things that they were not sure they wanted. Mr. Comfort, on the other hand, was morose. It was much more in his line to go round to sales, picking up bargains with which to supply the shop; he couldn't be bothered with the customers. But without the customers, of course, there would have been no use having a shop at all.

So Mr. Comfort quietly loathed Clowd. Once he is dead, he used to plan, things will be very different. He would have a pretty woman in the shop, a pliable young creature who

would charm the customers just as much, and be a little less prodigal with money, a young woman whom he could forbid to reduce the prices. Clowd's habit of cheapening prices was a torment. Mr. Comfort would forbid any reduction at all. But Clowd was in no hurry to die: he fell away before one's eyes, but he continued to live, to laugh and to joke, to make fun of his own disabilities and to be lighthearted about money.

"What are you saving up for, you mean old wretch?" Clowd would chaff him. "Remember, there are no pockets in a shroud!"

"The less said about shrouds the better," Mr. Comfort grunted meaningly.

Yes, Clowd had thought himself very clever: with full panoply of lawyer and witnesses, he had made his will. He made it a long time ago, when he first became ill. He had provided for that dim little woman he called his wife and their sickly child by leaving his share of the business of Comfort and Clowd to her. He had insisted that Mr. Comfort do the same, and as Mr. Comfort had no dependents of his own and as this was at the beginning of the partnership, before he had come to detest Clowd so thoroughly, Mr. Comfort had grudgingly agreed and had signed the documents accordingly.

Now, however, that Clowd was really dead and gone, at last, Mr. Comfort intended to out-Clowd Clowd. *He,* Comfort, would be just as clever as Clowd thought himself to be. Now that the business was his and, he considered, his alone, he was going to adjust the books. Alone in the office in the evenings, he, Comfort, was going to copy out all purchases and sales of the last two years into fresh books, and these new entries would show that the business of Comfort and Clowd was worthless. He would prove that they were bankrupt. Carey Street had no fears for him; he would willingly go through the bankruptcy court if it meant, as it would, that the wretched dependents of his late partner would have to go without their share of the profits.

Already, weeks before Clowd had finally departed this life, Mr. Comfort had bought the new account books and was leaving them lying about the place so that they would become dusty and used-looking. He hated to spend the money on the books, but he fondled them lovingly because of all that they were going to mean to him.

Mr. Comfort lived over the shop, but Clowd lived in a little house at Kensal Rise. There were flowers in the garden and

roses round the door and all that sort of nonsense; Jr. Comfort had never been there, but he had often had it described to him by the proud owner, and it made him sick. It made him sick partly because of the shocking waste of money and partly because of the tribute it implied to Clowd's business abilities.

Well, that could all be put behind him now, because Clowd was gone, finally and forever, and already, less than a week after his death, Mr. Comfort was feeling a great deal better; he had not had one of his attacks since Clowd had died, and he would not be surprised if he recovered from them altogether. The painful mortification of Clowd's continued existence now being over, Mr. Comfort would not be surprised if he took a new lease on life; he almost skipped as he alighted from the bus bringing him back from the cemetery. He would celebrate, he decided, by buying half a pound of beef sausages from the delicatessen shop next door for his tea.

In deference to the dead, the antique shop had been closed for the day. When Mr. Comfort let himself in it smelled musty, strangely unoccupied. When he turned on the light he saw, with a pang, that it looked neglected. Clowd had been very particular about the condition of their stock; he had spent a great deal of time polishing and furbishing. Mr. Comfort could not see the point; it had been yet another bone of contention.

"People prefer to buy antiques in a dirty condition," he always said.

Never mind, that was all over now. The business was all his own, and he would run it just as he liked; he could, if he liked, allow dust to settle and spider's webs to hang, and there was no one to gainsay him.

With the sausages merrily frying on the gas-ring, he thought over the afternoon. It had been a perfect day for a funeral, to be sure. A bitter wind and a low-hung sky of a livid white. There had been a surprising number of people round the grave. Mr. Comfort had spoken to no one; he would not, in fact, have gone to the funeral had he not wanted to make quite sure that Clowd was really disposed of, finally and forever. He noted the widow, a little slip of a white-faced thing, holding by the hand an equally white-faced child. Dry-eyed, composed, she had thrown a handful of soil in on the coffin, and had stood, staring down into the grave, until the parson had touched her arm to wake her from her reverie.

Mr. Comfort had waited until the first few shovelfuls of soil had gone down on top of Clowd, then he had turned away and walked slowly down the long avenue to the main entrance, past the trestle table upon which winkles and jellied eels were being sold, to the bus-stop. He felt like leaping, but he was only able to hoist himself on board the bus with the assistance of the conductor.

So Clowd was dead and gone.

With great relish Mr. Comfort ate four beef sausages, four slices of white bread and margarine, and drank four cups of tea, orange-coloured and sickly-sweet—it was, indeed, a celebration. Mr. Comfort gobbled the baked meats of this gargantuan saturnalia rather too rapidly, he could hardly wait to start work on the new account books.

Gulping down the last mouthful, but still chewing certain odd remnants, he hurried downstairs to the office at the back of the shop, rubbing his hands together so that they sounded like the dry leaves outside, blowing along the concrete pavement.

Then he set to work, by the light of a candle to save electricity, bending low over his books.

The evening marched on, footsteps outside became less and less frequent, the last bus rumbled past, a policeman trudged by. Then there was silence, except for the leaves and odd fragments of paper which the wind, every now and then, hustled past the closed shop.

It was quiet, very quiet. It was cold, too, in the office. Mr. Comfort was wearing his overcoat and there was a moth-eaten rug over his knees. Yes, it was cold and quiet.

As cold as the grave.

And as quiet.

Clowd would be very cold now, in the damp clay.

And how quiet it would be down there, how quiet for Clowd, who had always been so noisy, who had always liked people around him, and laughter. Yes, Clowd would be very quiet now.

Mr. Comfort's pen ceased scratching at the paper as he thought these solemn thoughts.

A little cluster of leaves again blew past outside, a little whispered requiem for Clowd.

Then the telephone rang.

The blood circulating sluggishly round Mr. Comfort's veins seemed to stop and go into reverse. He had a fright. He swallowed once or twice, disposing, as it were, of his shock.

It would be the wrong number, of course.

Mr. Comfort lifted the receiver and opened his mouth, but no words came out, for at once a voice said: "Is that you, Comfort? Clowd here." A pause. "Did you hear me? C-l-o-w-d, Clowd." There was another long pause, during which Mr. Comfort heard a curious soft regular sound, almost a rustle, like the leaves on the pavement outside. A ghostly sound.

There was never a shadow of doubt in Mr. Comfort's mind that it was Clowd's voice. There was no *question* about it. It was not muffled, nor husky, nor squeaky, nor disguised in any way. It was, quite simply, Clowd's voice.

"That *is* you, Comfort, isn't it? There is something I wanted to say to you. I forgot to say it before I died . . ."

But Mr. Comfort did not ever hear what it was his late partner wanted to say. For he, too, had died.

In a small villa somewhere in Kensal Rise there was a fire, even at this late hour, still burning in the grate, and presently the fire flared up, in a big burst of fire-laughter, for there was something unusual being burnt, something inflammable, and the leaping flames lighted up the set features and sad little mouth of the small woman who held the object firmly in place with the poker.

She was burning a gramophone record.

A Pleasure Shared

Brian Aldiss

☐ At seven thirty I rose and went over to the window and drew back the curtains. Outside lay another wintry London day—not nice.

Miss Colgrave was still in the chair where I had left her. I pulled her skirt down. Female flesh looks very unappetizing before breakfast. I went through into the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea and poached an egg on the gas ring. While I did so I smoked a cigarette. I always enjoy a cigarette first thing in the morning.

I ate my breakfast in the bedroom, watching Miss Colgrave closely as I did so. At one point I rose to adjust the scarf round her neck, which looked unsightly. Miss Colgrave had not been a very respectable woman; she had paid the price of sin. But it would be a nuisance disposing of her.

First I would have to wrap her in a blanket, as I had done with Miss Robbins. This was also a nuisance, since I was rather short of blankets, and the worst of the winter was yet to come. I thought what a pity it was that the disposal of useless females like Miss Colgrave and Miss Robbins could not be made legal. After all, they were a blot on the community with their dirty habits.

For some while I thought about the blanket, enjoying another smoke as I did so. Then I decided I would go for a walk before doing anything. Miss Colgrave would not run away.

I went out on to the landing, locked my flat door, and proceeded downstairs. On the landing of the first floor, I met Mrs. Meacher, dressed to go out. Mrs. Meacher was a very proper little woman, and she liked me. Although she was young, I must say she was not as nosey as some.

"Good morning, Mr. Cream," she said. "Not a very nice morning, is it?"

"At least it's not raining, Mrs. Meacher."

"No, well, there is that to be thankful for. And how's the sciatica this morning?"

I had sprained my back carrying Miss Robbins down to the coal cellar, and it had bothered me.

"Not too troublesome this morning, Mrs. Meacher. We all

have our crosses to bear, as Father used to say. And how's your rheumatism?"

"These stairs don't do it any good you know. I lay awake with it half the night. Still we mustn't grumble, must we?"

"Grumbling doesn't do any good, does it?"

"You didn't sleep too well, either, did you, Mr. Cream? I mean I heard you walking about in the early part of the night, and several bumps. I got quite worried."

Mrs. Meacher was a very respectable young widow, but all women are curious. They do not keep themselves to themselves as men do. It is a fault that ought to be eradicated. However, I was very polite as usual; I explained I had been exercising my sciatica. Something made me add, "You don't have a spare blanket, Mrs. Meacher, that you could lend me?"

She looked a bit doubtful, and fiddled with her hat in the irritating way some women have.

"I might have one in the bottom of my wardrobe," she said. "I could spare you that. I'm in a bit of a hurry now. Perhaps you'd care to come in this afternoon for it. We could have a cup of tea together, if you like."

"That would be nice, Mrs. Meacher."

"Yes, it would. I believe in people minding their own business, but it's nice to be neighbourly, isn't it, when your neighbours are the right sort."

"Those are my sentiments, Mrs. Meacher."

She adjusted her hat. "Half past four, then. I *respect* a man who doesn't drink, Mr. Cream—not like that awful Mr. Lawrence just moved in on the ground floor."

"Public houses are the inventions of the devil, Mrs. Meacher. Mother told me that, and I've never forgotten it. There's a lot of truth in it."

She went downstairs, and I followed. I thought perhaps it would be a nice idea to ask her to have a cup of tea with me one afternoon—when I had my room clear, of course.

Mrs. Meacher had bustled out of the front door before I got down into the dark hall. You could only see down there when the electric light was on. The bulb had fused, and our landlord had failed to replace it. He was a hard man who cared only about money—just the kind of man I despise.

"Cream!"

A door opened, and Lawrence appeared. He was a little fat man who walked about in slippers and shirtsleeves. I never let

anybody see me without my jacket on. Careless in dress, careless in morals.

"Good morning, Mr. Lawrence," I said, trying to make him keep his distance.

"Here, Cream, I want a word with you. That was Flossie Meacher just went out, wasn't it?"

"No other women live in this establishment to my knowledge."

"What about that pusher you had up in your room last night? I saw yer!"

To be accused thus of having women up in my room—as if I were some common little seducer!—by this vulgarian—made me very angry. But he continued, "Come in my room a moment. There's a thing or two you can help me on."

"I am a busy man, Mr. Lawrence."

"Not too busy to help a chap, I hope. I know you're as thick as thieves with Flossie Meacher. You wouldn't want me to tell her about the pushers you have up in your room, would you?"

In this there was some truth. Though I had no great liking for Mrs. Meacher, I did not wish to be lowered in her estimation. Making the best of a bad job, I stepped into Lawrence's untidy room.

The room contained an unmade bed, chairs, a table covered with beer and milk bottles, a pile of dirty clothes on the floor, and precious little else. Obviously the man lived a bohemian way of life I found distasteful; my parents had always brought me up to be tidy in all I did.

Lawrence offered me a cigarette.

"I'll smoke one of my own, thank you," I said. I am a great believer in avoiding unnecessary germs. We both lit up—I condescended to share his match—and he said, "Flossie Meacher don't think much of me, does she?"

"I have no idea of her opinions on the subject."

"Oh yes, you have! I heard her telling you on the landing I was a dirty bastard. I stood here with my door ajar and heard every word you two said."

"Mrs. Meacher would not use foul language, Mr. Lawrence."

"Come off it, mate. Who do you think you are?"

Inspiration came to me at this point; I can think very quickly on occasions. It occurred to me that there would probably be other emergencies after Miss Colgrave, of a simi-

lar nature, and here I could turn this meeting to my future advantage.

"I merely came down, Mr. Lawrence, to ask you if you could lend me a blanket. The nights are growing chilly."

This disconcerted him. He looked very silly with his mouth open. I never open mine more than I can help, although my teeth are a good deal more attractive than his.

"I might have a spare blanket," he said at last. "But I was going to ask you about Flossie Meacher."

"I will be pleased to tell you what I know in exchange for a blanket."

"So that's the way it is! You're a funny cove, Cream, and no mistake . . . Well then, tell me this: is her husband, old Tom Meacher, dead?"

"I understand her husband passed away before she came to live in Institution Place."

"Did he now? Poor old Tom! How did he peg out?"

"Mrs. Meacher gave me to understand that her husband passed away due to pneumonia."

"I see. I used to know old Tom Meacher. He used to have the occasional pint with me when I was working at Walthamstow. He was a brickie, same as me."

I thought his coarse, disgusting hands looked like a bricklayer's. I signified I was ready to receive the blanket and go.

"Not so fast. Here, sit down and have a beer with me, like a civilized man."

"Thank you, but to my knowledge civilized men don't touch beer. Certainly I never drink it."

"You're a real snob, mate, aren't you?"

"Not at all. I will speak to anyone in any walk of life. I just have standards, that's all."

"Standards . . . Ah well." He shrugged his shoulders and went on. "Tell me some more about Flossie. She's a proper martinet, isn't she?"

"She observes the decencies, if that's what you mean."

"Comes to the same thing. People who observe the decencies never got any time for anything else. I know she drove old Tom to drink, and then spent her life trying to keep him off it."

"Mr. Lawrence, Mrs. Meacher's private life is entirely her own affair."

"Ah, but it's not, you know. You see, I'm scheming to marry Flossie Meacher."

Other people's lives can be so sordid that I really don't care to hear about them. But this man Lawrence's announcement surprised me to such an extent that I consented to sit by his table and listen while he told me a rambling tale. Several times I lost the thread of what he was saying, for it really was not particularly interesting.

He opened a bottle of beer for himself, as if he could not think without the nauseating stuff.

"I daresay you're wondering, Cream, why I should want to marry a woman I know is a young battleaxe, eh? It's a funny story, really, I suppose. The years go by and we don't get no different . . . I'm the sort of man who *needs* a harsh woman, Cream. I've always been the same . . ."

I had been more fortunate. I had had a harsh mother to show me what the world was really like. That might have been the difference between this man and me; you could see even in the way we dressed which of us had had proper discipline as a child. I could still recall vividly the agony of having Mother clean my nails with the sharp file that dug down into the quick; in fact I think of it most times I bite my nails, even today.

"I was the younger of seven kids, Cream. My parents were as kind as could be—never hurt a fly—and my brothers and sisters were kind too. We lived in a place out Dagenham way. Funny thing about their kindness—they never told me what to do, never told me a thing. You won't believe this, but I grew up in a proper maze, really lost, although there was lots of people all crowded round me all the time . . ."

Oh, I believe it all right, Mr. Lawrence, because you obviously are lost now. It just shows how breeding will tell. I was my parents' only child. I had their attention all the time, and as a result I have grown up neat and normal and sensible. Although Mother and Father passed away years ago, I often have the feeling they still watch over me. Well, I don't have to reproach myself for anything. I've grown up as they would wish. In fact I think I may say I'm stronger and just a little more respectable than they were. That was almost the last thing I said to Miss Colgrave, I remember, when I finally got her down into the chair. Disgraceful the way their bowel muscles lose control in those last moments. Father was so particular about such things; many's the whipping he gave me for wetting my bed; I knew he would understand how I felt about Miss Colgrave.

"It was only when I was twelve anyone took any proper notice of me. Funny how it comes back to you, ain't it? I can see the broken railings round our back yard now . . . It was when I was twelve I had my first girl friend. Sally, her name was, Sally Beeves. She was so pretty, she was. God, I can see her now! She had a little sister, Peggy. That pair made dead set at me, Cream. They used to get me in the attic over the old garage her father ran. It'd turn your blood cold, Cream, if I told you all the things those girls did to me! Talk about torture. Why, one day, Sally got some rubber tubing . . ."

Disgusting men like Lawrence can never talk about anything but women. If I took him upstairs and showed him Miss Colgrave, he might think a deal less of their breed.

And now he was telling me horrible things I did not want to hear. I could not keep my own thoughts separate from them. For a moment I thought in my anger how good it would be if the world were rid of Lawrence. But that was not my job; I had enough work on my hands. Besides, being a fastidious man, I heartily dislike scuffles, and Lawrence was probably stronger than me. When selecting my women, I always make sure they are physically small and on the weak side, so that we avoid any unseemly struggles. Besides, I have my heart to think of.

"Yet despite all she did to me, I loved Sally Beeves. You see, she was the first person ever to take real notice of me. The general family kindness wasn't enough. Honest, you may laugh, but I preferred Sally's cruelty. And sometimes when she made me cry, she'd kiss me, and then I'd swear to myself I'd marry her when I grew up . . ."

Marriage! I might have known Lawrence's tedious tale would get round to *that*. Frankly, marriage is a subject I prefer to avoid. After Mother's death I foolishly married that woman Emily; if she had been alive to guide me I am sure I should never have done so.

Yet on the surface Emily seemed respectable enough. She was older than me and had some money of her own. She insisted we went for our honeymoon to Boulogne, which rather put me out, since I dislike travelling abroad where people cannot speak English. We crossed the Channel on the night ferry. We had hardly got into our cabin before she started making advances in a very obvious way I could not ignore.

I was more shocked and disappointed with Emily than I can say. On some pretext or other I got her up on to the boat

deck and pushed her over the rail. It was easy and then I felt better.

Of course, later I felt sorry. I remember I suffered from one of my periodic bouts of diarrhoea. But her parents were so sympathetic when they heard of the accident, that I soon got over it.

"As things turned out, Dad's business went bust, and we moved, so I never saw Sally again. And somehow after that, well, ordinary girls didn't have the same appeal. I have found other girls to treat me rough, but not in the same way as dear old Sally Beeves. Funny, isn't it? I mean I sometimes think I actually *prefer* being unhappy.

"Has it ever struck you, Cream, that we never really know ourselves, never mind other people?"

His life was a mess. Mine was so neat and self-contained. I had nothing in common with him, nothing at all. He was on his second bottle of beer already. Suddenly I stopped biting my nails and said, "About that blanket, Mr. Lawrence . . ."

He said, "I was getting round to asking you about Flossie upstairs. Don't you reckon she'd be the type for me, strict and hard? How old would you say she was?"

"I have never thought to enquire."

"Make a guess, man."

"About forty."

"Ah. Thirty-eight or nine, I'd have said. And I'm forty-nine, so that wouldn't be so bad. Mind you, I like comforts with my miseries—does she strike you as having money, Cream?"

"She has her own furniture."

"Ah. Well, old Meacher made a lot of money out of building in the fifties, before he died. Left her quite a tidy sum. I did hear ten thousand pounds mentioned. So she must be hanging on to it tight to be living in a dump like this."

"Number Fourteen was perfectly respectable till you came here, Mr. Lawrence."

"Don't give me that! Have you ever been and had a sniff down the cellar? No, I don't suppose you have. It wouldn't be smart enough for the likes of you. It stinks as if they stored dead 'uns as well as lumber down there. Anyhow, the question is, has anyone else got his eye on our Flossie? And do you think she'd have me?"

"Since you force me to be honest, I don't think she'd even consider you, Mr. Lawrence."

"Then maybe you've got a surprise coming, *Mister* Cream.

Nothing wrong with me when I'm sober . . . Anyhow, what I want you to do is put in a good word for me. How about it?"

"I can't promise anything."

"Go on, I'll give you a blanket. Two blankets."

If the man wished to be foolish, I saw no reason why I should discourage him. I said I would do what I could. Eventually I accepted two very poor blankets from him and proceeded upstairs with them.

For an awful moment, I can't say why, I thought it was my mother in the chair. I had completely forgotten Miss Colgrave as I came in the door. This made me feel very bad, and I decided to go out for a coffee.

It seems a pity that people who do all they can to deserve to be happy should not be happy all the time.

I sat in a small cafe where I sometimes go, drinking a coffee. I had already decided not to work that day. They did not appreciate my efforts at the warehouse. I would turn up on the next day, and if they made trouble I should simply leave. Money was rather a worry; I hardly had enough for cigarettes. With some surprise I thought over what Lawrence had said about Mrs. Meacher having ten thousand pounds.

A girl came in and sat at the next table to me. She was about my type, so I got talking to her. With these girls, you don't have to say much and they run on and on; they don't mind if you don't listen to them. This one said she was working at a nearby draper's and that she did photographic modelling in her spare time.

Ha ha, my girl, I thought, I know your sort. I hate photography and all art, because they all lead to the same thing. If I had my way, I'd burn all the picture galleries in the world. Then we might have less of all this immorality you read about. I've heard Father say that painters and authors were minions of the Devil, although he made an exception for some improving writers like Lloyd Douglas and Conan Doyle.

When I found out from this girl that she came to the cafe at the same time every day, I knew I could get in touch with her when I wished. I told her I was a director of a big blanket-manufacturing firm in the Midlands, and she agreed to pose naked for me if I required it. Then I left the cafe, after bidding her good morning.

On the occasions when I have disposal troubles on my mind, I often take long rambles round London. This I did

now, although it was rather chilly. My stomach was a little upset, so that I was forced to visit various gentlemen's lavatories on my route. When I read some of the things written in the cubicles, they made me very ashamed and excited.

I watched some old buildings being pulled down. Demolition work always fascinates me, but my pleasure was spoilt by the racial people labouring on the site. These Jamaicans and other people should be sent back to Africa where they belong; there must be plenty of room for them there. Not that I believe in the colour bar. It's just that there isn't room for them here. I shouldn't want a daughter of mine to marry anybody at all racial.

Being able to amuse myself has always been one of my virtues. I'm never lonely, and I don't depend on other people. Father used to hate me playing with other boys; he said they might teach me dirty language. When I write filthy things on cubicle walls, it's always to make other boys ashamed. So when I saw by a jeweller's clock that it was half past four, I remembered I was invited to have tea with Mrs. Meacher, and I directed my footsteps back towards Number Fourteen, Institution Place.

In the hall it was very dark. A slight smell drifted up from the cellar, dampish, mouldy, not unpleasant. Lawrence's door was ajar, but by the silence there I guessed he was out. As I began to ascend the stairs, a voice from above called my name. It was Mrs. Meacher.

When I reached her landing, I observed she was looking distraught.

"I am afraid I am a little late for our tea party, Mrs. Meacher," I said politely.

"You'll have to prepare yourself for a shock, Mr. Cream. Something awful has happened."

I dislike awful things happening. They are apt to happen where women are. I said, "I'm afraid I have to go out in a minute, Mrs. Meacher."

She became very wild.

"You can't go out. You can't leave me. Come in here, please! It's that Mr. Lawrence. He's dead!"

In her excitement, she had taken hold of my arm and half dragged me into her room.

The place was in a disgraceful state. I saw at once that it was well furnished, even down to having a nice carpet on the floor, and lampshades and pictures and things. But a table and

an armchair had been overturned. A tray with a cup and saucer and such lay on the carpet, with lump sugar spilling out in a curve. Some of these lumps were red, sucking up the blood that lay in pools or splashes here and there.

The cause of the blood lay in one corner under the window, bent double with his head hanging over a small work table. It was Lawrence.

Though his face was turned away from me, I recognized him by the pattern of his shirt, and the width of his fat back. The shirt was disfigured with blood. A pair of scissors stuck out of it. I saw at once that these scissors were the weapon used, and congratulated myself on the fact that the scarf I employed during my upsets with Miss Colgrave, Miss Robbins and the others, was so much less messy.

I sat down on an upright chair.

"Some water, please, Mrs. Meacher. I feel quite faint at the sight of blood. You shouldn't have brought me in here."

She fetched me the water. As I was drinking it, she began to talk.

"It wasn't deliberate, really it wasn't. I'm scared of men, I'm scared of men like that! He's a boozer, just like my husband was—just the same. You never know what they'll want next. But I never meant to kill him. I got so scared, you see. I could smell the drink on him. He scared me down in the dark hall, and then he followed me up here. I was scared out of my wits, really I was—but it wasn't deliberate."

"I feel better for that," I said, putting the glass down. It was a nice clean glass with a leaf pattern cut in it. "You'd better tell me what happened, Mrs. Meacher."

She seemed to make an effort to calm herself, and sat down facing me so that she could not see Lawrence and the scissors.

"There's nothing much to tell, not really. Like I say, he followed me upstairs. He'd been drinking. I know the smell of beer all right, and you could tell by the way he acted. I couldn't get this door shut in time. I had to let him in, he was so insistent. Oh, I got all scared. And then he got down on his knees and—and he—oh, he asked me to *marry* him."

"So you stabbed him with the scissors?"

"I lost my head. I kicked him and told him to get up. He begged me to kick him again. He seemed to get all excited. When he grabbed my skirt, I knew what he was up to. Drunken, filthy brute! My sewing things were left out on the table. Without realizing what I was doing, I took hold of my

big pair of scissors and drove them into his back as he knelt there."

I noticed with distaste that there were a few splashes of blood on her blouse and skirt.

Her eyes were wide as she added in a whisper, "He took such a long time to die, Mr. Cream. I thought he would never have done with blundering and falling round the room. I ran out until I heard he was quite still."

"He didn't actually attack you, Mrs. Meacher?"

"I've told you what he did. He grabbed my skirt. I felt his knuckles on my stockings!"

"He was touching your skirt in the process of proposing matrimony, I take it."

"Mr. Cream, he was *drunk!*"

I stood up.

"You realize I must report this to the police at once," I said. "I can't go getting myself mixed up in murder."

She stood up too. She was shorter than me. Her eyes went very narrow.

"When he was still—moving about, I ran up to your room to see if you were in, to get you to come and help me. I knocked and ran straight in, Mr. Cream. I saw that dead woman in that chair. You'd better *not* go to the police, Mr. Cream! You'd better stay and help me get rid of this body, or someone's going to hear about that dead woman in that chair."

With irritation, I recalled that although I had locked my door when I first left my room that morning, I had forgotten to do so later, after leaving Lawrence's blankets in there, owing to a temporary depression of spirits. It just shows: you can't be too careful. I recalled the way Father used to tease Mother by saying that a woman would always find your secrets out.

"Well, what do you say to that?" Mrs. Meacher asked.

"Naturally I will help you if I can."

"The body?"

"I will help you dispose of the body."

My stomach began to rumble the way it sometimes does in times of crises.

"Excuse me, please," I said, beginning to leave the room.

She followed me up instantly, in a very pugnacious manner I did not like at all.

"Where are you going?"

"To the toilet, Mrs. Meacher," I said with dignity.

It was a disgrace that the whole house had only the one toilet on the ground floor. While there, I had a chance to think things over more calmly. Lawrence would not be the sort of man anyone would want to trace. Who was there to care if he lived or died—except our landlord, who would ask no questions as long as he got his rent? Mrs. Meacher could see to that.

Then we could have a little sort of double funeral. Both Miss Colgrave and Mr. Lawrence could go down into the cellar, behind all that useless wood and junk, to join Miss Robbins, and the Irish girl. It would be nice to have help with the weight down all those wretched stairs. A pleasure shared is a pleasure doubled, as Mother used to say every Sunday when we went to chapel.

Thinking along those lines while I juggled with the chain until the cistern flushed, I had an idea. What Lawrence had said about Mrs. Meacher's ten thousand pounds returned to my mind. It was a lot of money, and somehow I felt I deserved it.

She was a respectable woman—her reactions to Lawrence proved that. Besides, if the worst came to the worst, she was smaller than me. Flossie. Flossie Meacher. Flossie—Cream.

As I proceeded back upstairs, I called out cheerfully, "I'm just going to get a blanket. Don't worry. Leave everything to me, Flossie!"

Black Goddess

Jack Griffith

☐ Bill Rees was mad! Iestyn Morgan had suspected it for a long time; now he was sure of it.

It was autumn 1930, and they were sitting in an underground lodge of a coal mine, eating their food. The lodge was simply a hole left behind in the workings as the coal face had advanced. It was barely large enough to hold both of them as they sat side by side on a sleeper converted into a seat.

They were discussing mutual problems for running their district where Bill was fireman, the official in charge, and Iestyn his assistant.

Bill looked out of place in a mine, with his sensitive face and beautiful features. And his soul seemed to be beating at powerful but invisible barriers which denied it freedom where it could exist unfettered and without restraint.

He worked in the mines because it was a job into which circumstances had forced him. Yet, although he hated everything associated with it, he had become a minor official.

Iestyn was different. He was strong in body and solid in mind. Although some years younger than Bill he was already a qualified colliery manager, for mining was his chosen career as it had been his father's. Being a junior official was just a period of preparation for more important things.

Even their eating was different. Bill consumed delicate little sandwiches with care, throwing away the corners marked by dusty fingers. Iestyn gobbled bread-and-butter and a tomato he dipped into salt in a screwed-up piece of paper. He ate everything, dust and all.

Yet they were fond of each other, and Iestyn was concerned at Bill's condition even though he felt there was nothing he could do about it.

When they had finished their food they also stopped talking. Iestyn leaned his head back and dozed. Bill's chin rested on his hands, his elbows on his knees. Everything was silent and still.

Iestyn stirred uncomfortably, his body cramped. He lifted his head, suddenly becoming alert. The expression on Bill's face, lit by a lamp a few inches away, disturbed him.

"Feeling O.K., Bill?" he asked.

Bill turned his head, his blue eyes showing distant paleness. "Yes. Why?" His voice, too, seemed distant.

"Oh—nothing, only you look thoughtful."

They did not speak again for a while. Once more Iestyn dozed.

Suddenly Bill broke the silence. "Tell me, Iestyn, have you ever noticed anything peculiar in the pit?"

Iestyn grinned and tried to scrape an unpleasant taste from his tongue. "Everything from the manager down," he replied.

"I didn't mean that. I meant something queer."

Iestyn's grin vanished. From the privacy of the gloom he peered at his companion's face. "What do you mean, queer?" he asked, attempting to sound casual.

Bill looked at him and cried, "Haven't you ever felt that there's something queer in the pit? Some evil influence spreading itself everywhere, trying to capture the souls of men and destroy them before it kills their bodies?"

Iestyn stiffened. This was it! He swallowed, but there was nothing to swallow. "Can't say I have," he murmured. "Why, have *you?*"

"Often! I can see it grinning at me as if it's about to pounce. I'm afraid of it, only I won't let it see that I am. Once it knows I'm afraid of it, it will get me. It'll kill me, and I don't want to be killed. I don't want to die—here—down in the pit. I want to die somewhere else where my spirit can be free, not imprisoned in this hole forever. If I die here, Iestyn, I'll never get away; I'll be a prisoner here for all eternity."

Iestyn tried to reassure him. "You're not going to die, Bill. Don't be a fool and start thinking things like that."

He wanted to say more, but did not know what. He wondered whether madmen really were endowed with superhuman strength as they were reputed to be.

"It wants to kill me," Bill went on tragically. "And I don't want to die. It killed George last week, and Ianto Twp is in hospital with his spine smashed. He's going to die; the spirit got him. I tell you—"

"Don't you worry about Ianto; he took his chance like the rest of us. And you won't have to stick this job all your life, either: you'll get one outside some day, and forget all about it."

"Forget all about it!" Bill's voice was shrill and trembling. Had there been room he would have risen from his seat. "D'you think I can forget about this—this spirit of evil de-

manding human sacrifices—even burnt offerings—to satisfy its cruel appetites? *Thou shall have no other gods before me, for I, the Lord thy god, am a jealous god.* All cruel gods are the same, cruel and jealous. It's a Black God, Iestyn, a Black God that rules everything in the pit. It's a cruel god; cruel, cruel cruel . . ."

His voice trailed away. He pressed his face into his hands.

Iestyn knew for certain that Bill was mad, yet did not know what to do about it. He ought to report it at the end of the shift, even though Bill would be sacked, perhaps even put away. Yet—against what he knew to be true—he hoped it might be only a state of temporary depression. Tomorrow, and he would be all right . . .

Although it was long past their usual time for returning to work Iestyn was afraid of letting Bill get away from him. He wanted to see him in a more normal condition first.

"A Black God," he said suddenly, trying to find something to talk about and delay their leaving. "You must mean a Black Goddess. If it's cruel and callous it's probably a female. The female is the cruel one. 'The female of the species . . .'"

Bill looked up sharply. "A Black Goddess!" His voice was quiet and clear. "That's it: a Black Goddess." Then his voice lost its vigour. "No, it's got a big face, like a giant, a Russian giant with a big beard. He's got a robe on, and a belt round his waist. And he's always laughing; only you can't hear him, you can only see him." He took his cap off and ran his fingers through his long hair. "You can't hear him; you just know he's doing it."

Iestyn tapped the crumbs out of his food box and put the lid on, then pushed the box into his pocket. "Then there's only one thing to do: laugh back at it; laugh back at it like hell," he said. "Well, boy, much as I hate to say it, it's time we went. The whole district might be on stop for all we know."

He squeezed his way out to the main roadway and took off his jacket. He hung it on a nail in the lodge.

Bill remained sitting, gazing at the gloom of the heading where Iestyn was, his face grave with concern. "Perhaps you're right," he murmured; "it might have been a woman after all. A witch. An old witch trying to be big but succeeding only in being cruel. A shabby black witch trying to be a Black Goddess."

Iestyn did not know what to do. If Bill went on talking and thinking like this anything could happen. He had known Bill

for so long that it was difficult to realize that he was different from what he had always been. But today he was quite mad. What had been suspicion was now understanding. But what could he do? Interest in work might delay anything unpleasant until the end of the shift, so he must get him back to work. "Come on," he cried, "let's put a jerk in it. We'll never finish our rounds if we don't put a move on."

A sound of footsteps came from around the bend where one road went off to the right, dividing the district into two. Beams of light followed it.

"Put a jerk in it, Bill," Iestyn whispered. "There's someone coming round the turn from Enoch's."

Bill scrambled out of the lodge, pulling off his jacket and hanging his lamp on his belt.

A man came dimly into sight where the roads joined.

"Hoi," Iestyn called.

"Where's Bill?" the newcomer asked.

"Oh, it's you, Dick," Bill replied. "Here I am. What do you want?"

"There's a hell of a fall on D.7. conveyor. It's all on stop. The whole place is blocked up; I think the whole place have fell in."

"Good God! It was all right this morning."

"Aye, it's only been on work about a half-hour."

"Come on," Bill cried, leading the way towards the conveyor.

"Come on, Dick," Iestyn called, following him.

The conveyor was a metal trough which jerked coal along to fall eventually into trams waiting at one end. It was about eighty yards long.

The three men hurried towards the road at the other end.

Bill squeezed past a horse attached to an empty tram just inside the mouth of the road. The tram had gone off the rails, a corner getting jammed against a post supporting the side.

"Give us a shove on the fourpenny side, Morgans," the haulier called to Iestyn as the latter scrambled past.

"It's an empty," came the retor. "Why don't you shove it on yourself?"

"It's a bad dram, mun," the haulier explained. "The wheel's all loose. Give us a lift on the front end and I'll be able to shove it on the rail on my own."

But Iestyn was gone. "Dick'll give you a lift," he called.

When Dick arrived the haulier said, "He's jammed fast as hell. Get on in front and let's shove him back."

They put their buttocks against the tram and heaved.

"Stamback," the haulier called to the horse who moved gingerly against the metal shafts. "Stamback. Stambackstambackstambackstamback." Nothing happened.

Dick stopped pushing. "Nothing doing, Shoni," he said. "Horses are no good at backing underground."

"We've got to get the damn thing loose somehow," Shoni muttered, turning to examine the place where the tram was stuck against the post. "We'll have to try and pull it forward."

Dick turned the beam of his lamp towards the roof. "You'll pull a hell of a fall if you ent careful," he warned.

"I'll pull the lousy pit in for tuppence," Shoni muttered. "Get out of the way a bit."

Dick did so.

Shoni turned to the horse and cried, "Now then, my flower: come up, come up."

The horse gave a sharp tug but stopped when it felt strong resistance.

"Come up, come up. Duke, come up; come up."

Duke responded with all he had. His stomach almost scraped the ground; his blood vessels stood out like whips.

Suddenly the tram came loose, tearing a huge scar along the post. It rumbled forward, rising and falling over sleepers and rough ground. Shoni sprang on to the iron "gun" which connected the shafts to the tram.

"Steady, old china," he shouted. "Whoa, my flower."

He ducked as they passed under a collar, a cross-piece lower than the rest. The tram struck the side and bounced across the road. It caught a post, broken but not completely severed, and knocked it out. The collar collapsed under a shower of dirt and stones. The tram jammed again, the horse plunging and struggling to go forward. Shoni, dazed by a falling stone, tried to get past.

Then the roof came down—massive, thundering—behind him.

Something falling struck him. He staggered and fell on his face.

"His foot's on my neck," he mumbled. "His foot's on my neck . . ."

The fall, still sounding like thunder, increased to immensity as Dick dragged the now unconscious Shoni to a safer place.

Bill and Iestyn paused when they heard the crash, then turned and hurried back, followed by John Daniel, a member of one of the more rigid religious denominations, and a fifteen-year-old boy named Tommy. They worked at the nearer end of the conveyor, next to Dick.

Iestyn examined Shoni while, with Tommy's electric lamp, Bill and Dick approached the fall. Thick dust was settling again, the dimmed lights becoming less obscure. Grim, puritanical John Daniel remained standing, his arms folded across his black and hairy chest draped with a torn singlet. Tommy stood near Iestyn, uncertain of what was happening. He had been working underground only a few months, and was not used to it. His face was like a cherub's, and an old cap of his father's would have made him look comic had it not been pathetic. He was nervous and wished Dick would come to him.

Soon they were able to observe the size of the fall. It was like a mountain of boulders sprinkled with protruding props of timber near the base. The tram was buried almost completely. Iestyn, followed by Tommy, joined Bill and Dick.

"Duw," Iestyn muttered, stooping and peering up under an overhanging rock.

"How we going to get out, Dick?" Tommy's querulous treble startled the others.

The men glanced at each other. They hadn't thought about it.

Dick spat into the dust, then said, "We'll have it cleared away in no time, bach. Only they'll have to do it from the other side, so we might be a bit late going out tonight."

"But why can't we shift it from this side?"

"'Cos . . . 'cos . . . 'cos we ent got nowhere to put the muck when we shift it, see; that's why."

"Aye, that's it," Iestyn agreed. "You go back and sit down, Tommy, and have a rest."

"Aye," Dick said brightly, taking the boy's arm and leading him away, "you come back and sit by Shoni. You look after him and—and watch the beetles don't crawl over him." He lowered his voice. "And have a sleep if you can. The bosses won't say nothing at a time like this."

Although they did not say so the men knew they were entombed, trapped between two falls. They sweated. The air was hot, for ventilation had been checked if not actually stopped. For a while they peeped and scouted vainly for a way of escape, then stood in moody silence. After a while

Iestyn went back from the fall and sat on a pile of timber. The others also sat down.

"Put those electric lamps out," Iestyn advised. "We'll be glad of all the light we can get later on. God knows how long we'll be down here."

Bill looked at him, a hunted expression on his face. He had spoken little, which made Iestyn afraid he was thinking too much.

The others switched off their lights. Only Bill's oil-lamp remained burning. The flame was topped with transparent blue, like a small gas-cap. Tiny golden specks sped up it to oblivion.

Iestyn slid off the timber and lay on the floor.

"It's getting hot as hell," Dick muttered, removing a sharp stone from under his shoulder.

"Of course it's getting hot," John Daniel agreed grimly. "There's no air coming in, is there?"

Bill's face had been in his hands; he looked up. "No air!" he cried. "No air! We must have air or we'll die!"

"Shut up, you bloody fool; you'll frighten the kid," said Dick in a low voice. Then, louder, "You all right, there, Tommy?"

"Aye, I'm all right, Dick. And Shoni is saying something now."

Iestyn went to him. Shoni was muttering, "His foot's on my neck; his foot's on my neck." He sat up, rubbing the back of his head. He gazed at Iestyn's dim form silhouetted against the feeble lamplight. "I felt his foot coming right down on my neck. Knocked me sick, aye."

Iestyn told him it was a stone, not the horse's hoof which had struck him. But Shoni insisted, "I know it was a foot. I could feel his tip."

"Come over here, Tommy bach," Dick invited raising a black and shining arm. "Lie down by here and have a sleep. You'll be all right." The boy snuggled under in gratefully.

Shoni, still rubbing his head, went to the edge of the fall. "Tidy little hayrick," he said, viewing the mass of earth and stones. Sweat ran down his eyes, burning them. He saw that the stones were damp with condensation. "Duw, Duw, even the stones are sweating." He turned sharply, screwing the pot of his lamp to light it. "Where's Duke? Is he all right?

"He's O.K.," Iestyn replied. "He's on inside."

Shoni stumbled through the gloom towards the shadowy figure of the horse. With lamp lifted he examined the animal's back. There was a long, deep scratch across the haunches.

Shoni wiped it with the hem of a football jersey he wore instead of a shirt.

"I'll wash it clean for you, butty," he murmured affectionately.

Taking a water-jack from the side of the road, he was about to pour water over the cut when Iestyn saw what he was doing.

"Don't waste that water, you flaming lunatic," the latter cried. "We'll want all we can get of that. God knows when we're going to get out of here."

"Sorry, Morgans." The haulier replaced the cork. Then, to the horse, "We'll have to do it when we get out tonight, bach." He sat down again.

The others slept or dozed. Shoni, who lay asleep across the tramrails, snored so loudly that he kept waking up. Duke shook himself until his harness jingled.

For a while nothing could be heard except heavy breathing, the rattle of Duke's harness and the shuffle of his hoofs, and the occasional hollow thud of a "pounce" in the coal-face.

Iestyn stirred, moving his body which had become cramped. His head ached and his chest felt compressed. He sighed as if in pain. Tommy, sweating under Dick's arm, moaned softly. He was hot and uncomfortable, but affection for Dick kept him close. He sat up and tried to spit, but the saliva clung stickily to his lips and fell over his chin. He wiped it with a damp, black arm.

Bill was the only one really awake. He had been thinking continuously, while the others had been idly ruminating until they had fallen asleep. He picked up his lamp; the glass had become smoked and brown. He held it by the heavy brass pot and blew through the ventilation holes at the top. The flame brightened. He blew again, rotating the lamp so that he could clear the many holes in turn. Then he put it down again, holding it by the handle.

As it was lowered it revolved slightly, and a splash of mud which had been on the glass all day flung a shadow which turned as the lamp turned. Bill yelled, dropping the lamp. It went out.

The others scrambled to their feet, switching their lights on.

" 's matter?" Shoni asked, dazed from sleep.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Bill?" Iestyn cried, half afraid of finding out.

"I saw it!" Bill shrieked, pointing a finger. "I saw it! I saw it again!"

"Saw what?"

"That black thing! That Black Goddess! She's trying to kill me all the time."

Iestyn pushed his dusty cap back from his forehead and rubbed his chin. "Everything's all right boys; it's something between Bill and me," he tried to assure the others. "Don't you worry; I know what it is."

"It's I who knows what it is," Bill cried, his voice tense with passion. "It's something that's trying to kill me. It's trying to kill us all. Give me that lamp." He grabbed Iestyn's.

Iestyn clung to it. "What do you want it for?"

"I'm going to get out of here—now—and I want a lamp to see with. Give it to me, I tell you."

"All right; all right." Isetyn's voice was soothing. "But how are you going to manage to get out? I want to come with you, that's all; I don't want to stop down here longer than I can help."

Silently the others watched. They could not understand but they realized that something odd was happening.

"How are you going to get out?" Iestyn repeated, still clinging to the lamp.

Bill's eyes puckered questioningly as if that had not occurred to him.

John Daniel, rugged and grim, wanted to pray but felt that this was not a time to suggest it. So far as he was concerned it was the only solution.

Bill replied uncertainly, "Over the fall. I'm going to climb it. Give me that lamp."

"You'll never reach the top," Iestyn argued, shaking his head.

Shoni mumbled agreement, while Tommy's fingers were curled in Dick's leather belt as he stood behind him.

"Better wait a bit," Dick cautioned.

John Daniel felt the time had come to ask for Divine help. "God will help us out," he said dispassionately. "Same as He got us in."

"Give me that lamp!" Bill screamed, his face distorted with passion. He pushed Iestyn in the chest, making him trip over a sleeper, releasing the lamp.

"Hold him!" Iestyn cried, his voice tense with pain. His buttocks hurt.

Bill ran towards the fall, ducking to avoid the boulder

under which Dick had peeped. His head went past, but his shoulder struck it, bringing down a mass of earth and stones on top of him. His legs slowly straightened themselves, scales of rock sliding down under the pressure of his toes. His lamp lit stones and posts with a mysterious white glare.

Hurriedly Iestyn and Dick and John Daniel scraped away the rubbish. Bill's scalp hung loose. Iestyn felt his heart saying after a while. "Can't feel anything much. I think he's dead."

Dick asked, "Can't we do nothing for him?" He thought that there should be something.

"What can we do?"

They laid Bill at the side of the road, between the tramlines and the timber. Iestyn took off his own sweat-soaked shirt and put it over Bill's bloodstreaked head. He laid it there reverently and gently, as if afraid the body might feel roughness from his touch. They all thought something should be done, yet did not know what. The time had not come for a hymn or a committal. Bill was still with them—he hadn't been from them. It was just as if he had fallen asleep.

Wearily Iestyn settled himself on the ground again. The others did likewise.

It was getting hotter and hotter, and breathing was difficult. All were weak and wet with sweat. They sat or lay around muttering and moaning, and taking frequent sips of the water left in their tin jacks. Iestyn shared that of the others. Dick had one arm across Tommy who lay on his stomach with his cheek upon the man's grimy trousers. Bill's death had meant nothing to him when it had occurred, being natural to life underground. But now something was stirring within him, disturbing and depressing. Shoni rose and staggered into the gloom. The others could hear him vomiting.

After a while Dick muttered, "Hell's bells. I'll be spewing with him if he don't stop."

Iestyn, too, was afraid to open his mouth in case he also became sick. John Daniel was silent.

Shoni came back, wiping the clinging saliva from his lips. His throat burned and there were tears in his eyes.

"Ugh, no good," he said, shaking his head. "Can't get it up although I want to. Shoved my fingers down and all."

Tommy turned his head from the damp familiarity of Dick's trousers. "When they going to get us out, Dick?" he asked. "How they going to do it?"

"I don't know, bach," Dick replied, giving the boy's shoul-

der an assuring squeeze. "But they'll find somehow to do it. I expect they're working on it now outside of the fall."

John Daniel rose ponderously to his feet. Not tall, he was broad and heavy.

"There's one way we haven't tried," he proclaimed. "We haven't prayed. Let us pray to God for guidance and hope—that he brings us safely out of this great danger."

Iestyn turned on his side, feeling too ill to be interested. The others watched apathetically.

John Daniel got down on his knees and began praying aloud, a mystic figure in the gloom. With a confident voice he began, "Father in Heaven, we ask Thee to be our Guide and Strength as Thou wast the Guide and Strength of the Israelites in the wilderness, and of Daniel in the flaming fire . . ."

The sight of his worshipping body and the sound of his resonant voice filled Tommy with uncontrollable fear. He sobbed violently on Dick's breast, his arms around his neck.

Dick sat up. "Stop it, John Daniels," he cried. "Stop it, will you. You'll drive this kid balmly if you don't stop, and me with him."

But John Daniel went on, his voice rich with urgent supplication. "We are in Thy hands, O Lord, and need Thy comfort which even Thy Beloved Son did not have upon the Cross. But we ask it now, O Lord—"

"Stop it, I tell you!" Dick cried again, rising to one knee, Tommy still clinging around his neck. "I don't want no bloody God hanging around me. If He wanted to get us out of here He wouldn't have got us into it. If He ent man enough to get us out of a mess like this of His own accord when this kid's here He can keep his bloody miracles."

John Daniel stopped aghast. "Don't you blaspheme, Richard Jones," he rebuked. "We should thank God in an hour like this that our lives have been spared and that we got strength left to try and get out."

"We're not out yet by a hell of a long way, butty, and don't you forget it. And I suppose we got to thank God for getting us out of what He got us into. If I get out I'll thank the bloke that gets me out, not somebody that's floating around in the air making trouble and then having to be asked to give a hand to shift it."

"Richard Jones"—there was cold dignity in the voice—"you are a wicked man. A very wicked man. And some day will come a judgment that will make you realize your folly—when it is too late."

Throwing Tommy aside Dick rose to his feet, his face furrowed with rage.

"I hope you're right," he shouted. "And when I'm up for judgment I'll have a bit of straight talk to give Him, too, even if I have to rot in hell for it. Making kids like Tommy here to come down and work in a bastard hole like this—and for life, too—is bad enough, but to get him in a jam like this as well. . . . You . . ." He drew his fist back to strike the man who stood resolutely in front of him.

Iestyn and Shoni were on their feet. Shoni slipped his arm around Dick's neck from behind, while Iestyn got between the quarrelling men.

"Haven't you two got anything better to do at a time like this?" Iestyn asked bitterly. "Sit down, you pair of bloody fools. Sit down, John, and if you want to pray, pray to yourself. God will hear you that way as well as any other. You, of all people, ought to have more sense."

John Daniel turned away. The others lay down, even more exhausted than before. Tommy crept back to Dick. "Don't quarrel again, Dick," he begged. "You won't, will you?"

Tears flowed down Dick's cheeks. He felt weak; his emotions were near the surface. "All right, Tommy bach," he muttered. "We won't quarrel again, will we, John?"

John Daniel looked across at them, his puritanical face like carved stone.

"No, we won't quarrel again, Richard Jones," he replied. "Quarrelling is a very wicked thing."

Iestyn came to himself with a start. His head hung back and his mouth was open and dry. He had been asleep, but did not know for how long. He felt ill and dazed.

A faint, familiar smell made him raise his tired head and sniff. His tongue touched his cracked lips.

"Gas!" he tried to say aloud, but managed only to shape the words.

With a weary hand he lifted the iron lamp which seemed almost too heavy to lift, and peered around. There was no sound; the others must be sleeping. He listened for the jingle of Duke's harness, for he could not see him, but there was nothing but intense, echoing silence.

"Gas," his lips said again; "the place is full of it."

He clambered laboriously to his feet, climbing up his legs with his hands. His body ached. He wanted water but could not remember where the jacks were. Perhaps they were on

the other side of the road; he tried to get there. His head reeled and he was able to move only a few inches at a time. He almost collapsed, and had to cling to the side for support.

"Pull—your—self—to—geth—er," he mumbled almost inaudibly. He rested his back against the timber and tried to clear his mind. He knew the others were being asphyxiated, and wondered if he should warn them. But even his fuddled brain realized that waking them to a knowledge of their danger would not help them.

Again he tried to get the water, but had barely taken his weight off the post when his knees began to sag. He fought against it, struggling to keep himself from sliding to the ground.

"Mustn't . . . sit . . . down," he mouthed, wiping his lips with his wrist and forearm. "Mustn't . . . sit down . . . or . . . I'll go to sleep and . . . and never wake up."

Lights raced upward before his eyes in glittering streaks. He crumpled and fell on his side, his knees twisted and bent, his head lolling back.

He sighed. A trickle of saliva rolled slowly across his cheek from the corner of his mouth.

The racing lights merged into one motionless yellow flame, like a huge altar candle. . . .

The fall of earth stretched up to where the seam above had been worked away.

Coals seams were like shelves in a cupboard, but with earth between them instead of air. Some were worked more quickly than others, as this upper one had been.

It did not take long for the shaking of the intervening ground by passing horses and trams to loosen the thin crust of earth, forming a hole which increased continuously, letting the gas escape from the lower seam. In time comparatively fresh air took its place, and the gas had disappeared almost entirely before the hole was discovered by men working in the upper seam.

When the fireman in charge there arrived with a hastily assembled working party he tested the ground with his foot, one man holding his hand and a third forming another link in the human chain in case he fell through.

In the hold itself, tramrails sagged from lack of support and one sleeper hung down with only a bent nail holding it. As the fireman stamped his foot the rail fell away and skidded raggedly down the fall.

After several unsuccessful attempts the ground remained firm enough for him to wriggle through the hole and down on the massive, rugged heap. In his hand he carried an oil lamp for testing gas, while a heavy electric one hung from his belt.

Down the fall he went, stones and earth sliding away under his weight. He soon had to shift the oil lamp to his mouth, the curved handle gripped between his teeth. Then he travelled on hands and toes and stomach. The stones cut his hands.

At the bottom he paused to regain his breath.

"You O.K. there, Dai?" a voice called from above.

"Aye, but don't come down yet; I'll tell you when to come."

"O.K."

After some moments he went carefully and laboriously from man to man as they lay around. Iestyn was between the tramlines. Tommy was embracing Dick; his cap had fallen off, and his face showed calm and serene through a film of coaldust. Shoni, in his football jersey, had his mouth open as if in an eternal snore. John Daniel was on his knees in an attitude of prayer. Duke was a massive heap on the ground. Dai listened to their hearts, even that of the horse.

When he got to Bill he removed Iestyn's shirt. "Duw, Duw," he murmured with awe. "He must have had a hell of a clout."

Then he listened to Bill's heart. Bill was the last. He listened for a long time. . . .

The manager arrived at the edge of the hole above. "What's it like down there, Dai?" he called, preparing to follow. "Are they all right?"

"No," came the echoing reply; "they're . . . all dead."

"What! All of them?"

"Aye, all of them—except one. Bill Rees the fireman's still alive. There was a wet shirt over his face, and it kept the gas out and saved him. And he's mumbling something about some Black Goddess who's laughing at something. . . ."

Reflection of the Truth

John Kippax

☐ When a man thinks he has lost his wife, it is a terrible moment. When, like me, he is incapable of swift physical action, then it is a frustrating moment indeed.

But, alas, I cannot move fast; those who know me are often surprised that I can continue to show tourists round Cimodjin Castle, day after day, with this stiff leg. But the pain diminishes when I remember that I got it in the Resistance, during the Occupation, and that, really, it is a badge of honour. I try to be a modest man though, and I only wear my Hero of the Republic medal on special days. Mostly, I am just Lazlo Janacek, castle guide. My friends call me "Historian Janacek," for I have long studied our country's history, and once I lectured at the university.

It is not bad, being a guide, now that the tourists from the west are coming in increasing numbers; I admit to being tired after a full two-and-a-half-hour tour of the castle, but if the tips are good and they like my work then I am satisfied.

Yes, that tires me—but I never felt more tired than I do at this moment. That is why I am sitting here, between the great suit of armour of the Grand Duke Rudolf, and the equally fine outfit of Otto the First, with my stiff old leg stretched out in front of me, waiting for the strength to get up and carry on. Above me, pencils of sunlight strike through the high mullions, lining the great corridor with scutcheons of gold, limning the ancient banners as they jut from the grey walls which have known so much splendour and pomp and blood and terror.

Had I been a king who ruled from Cimodjin Castle, I might have no problem now.

As you know, the revolution came soon after the end of the war. Do not ask me much about it. Fortunately, I had a good war record and no political history at all. I got my job here through Stepanek, an old friend who looked me up after an absence of several years. On that occasion he brought with him his daughter Jovanka.

She was twenty-eight when we first met, and I was a grey

forty-four. Why she was drawn to me I cannot say, but you have only to see her to understand why I was attracted to the plump, black-haired beauty of Stepanek's daughter. We were married six months after our first meeting.

Why did she marry me? Perhaps it was for safety; but she could love, with enough fire for two, and she was good in so many ways. She used to taunt me a little about my job, and my studies, and declare that I thought more of the castle than I did of her. But she knew that those studies would pay off with the tourists. To this end, also, I practised a style of delivery which I think I have perfected, giving the facts, sometimes a little decorated, in a dryly humorous or sardonic manner; this has become almost a part of me.

So, Jovanka and I lived together for three years. There were no children; I never spoke of this disappointment, and, after all, she had freedom to visit relatives, to keep the house spotless and so on.

Last month her father died. I was with him at the end. I remember a curious remark he made when my wife was out of the room.

He said weakly, "Lazlo, is she behaving herself, now?"

I assured him that she was, and I thought no more of it until a few minutes ago.

Jovanka had been away, visiting an aunt in Brno; it was the height of the season and I had been very busy. I did two full tours yesterday, and I felt it, I can tell you. This afternoon I had an easy party, where I only had to keep switching from English to French. As we neared the end of the journey, at the spot along here where I tell them the story of the terrible bedroom of Ladislas the Third, and show it to them, I was aware, as we came out, of a smiling face watching me. It was Jovanka; she had returned by an earlier train and had come up to the castle, tacking herself on to the tourists and listening to me do my stuff.

When the tourists had gone, I came and sat down here, tired, and she sat by me, and stroked my hair and kissed me. After three days it was wonderful to be near her again, to smell her perfume and her soft body scent.

"Lazlo. That story of Ladislas and his queen. I never knew that."

"You are an ignorant peasant girl," I said, and kissed her. "How was your aunt?"

"Getting better. Quite comfortable, in fact. That *story*."

"We are a weird people."

As she gazed at me with her great dark eyes, the corners of her mouth twitched deliciously.

"Working here has put a spell on you. Why not get out of it for a while?"

"Really, little one? And who would find the money for the food on the table, and all those nice things that Madame Janacek wears for the delight of her husband?"

She rose lightly and said, "Well, now that I am here, I will go and stand where Ladislas stood."

She blew me a kiss, and walked away, and I watched the swing of her hips, and thought how lucky I was. She waved as she walked into the room.

Perhaps you do not know the story?

There was once a king of Bohemia, who never doubted the goodness and virtue of his queen. This was a good thing, for, in those days, when virtue was doubted, action tended to be swift and violent, with heads rolling first and recriminations of a lighter kind coming a long way after. Virtue was so highly thought of in this province that no court would convict a man for summarily disposing of his wife and her lover on the spot; he might choose his method, a sword and a good right arm, or one of the new and impartially dangerous contraptions called firearms. If, on any occasion, it so happened that the lover was the stronger, then, on the husband's claim being fairly proved (assuming that the lover had left him in one piece), the lover had to pay a large fine and be pelted in the stocks. The wife, however, was considered the greater sinner in such cases. She was paraded through the streets of the city on market day in one of the city muckcarts, stripped, and with a card round her neck bearing one single blunt word of Teutonic origin.

At this time there was a feverish search throughout Europe for the philosopher's stone, that wondrous thing which transmutes base metals into gold, and rich indeed was the man who appeared able to do it—for as long as his illusion lasted. But when his patron discovered that here was but one more character doing his legerdemain with gilt, or using pyrites, or merely salting with real gold, then swift was the sorcerer's descent from the heights of court or palace down to those dark chambers well below ground, where, by the light of torches, the fallen magicians sobbed out their last breath on the rack, or met death with despairing screams as the iron maiden took them to her black and hellish embrace.

This king of Bohemia, Ladislas, the third of that name, had a young queen named Violetta, a comely woman who was, so it was said, an Italian princess before her marriage. Her dark, olive-skinned grace, her many accomplishments, were a wonder. As time went on, they became more than a wonder—became, in fact, rather more than many ladies of the court could bear with equanimity. It was good that a lady should be able to embroider, to paint, to write poems, to cook, to dance, to arrange flowers, to play the viol-de-gamboys, to sing, to compose music, to speak Latin and Greek and Spanish and Russian. For a lady to do one, two, or even three of these things was good and proper; but for a lady to do them all, and well at that, savoured of nothing more than vulgar ostentation.

At the time of what came to be called "The Skimalis Affair," the king had been on the throne for three years, succeeding his father after that worthy but somewhat obtuse man had reigned for a quarter of a century. During the three years things happened with some speed. Ladislas III, a noted warrior and swordsman, put down a serfs' rebellion with incredible ferocity, collected taxes which no one had been able to collect for years, killed three powerful and obstreperous barons, one of whom he personally executed in the town square of Cimodjin, and reiterated his belief that the fine old custom of publicly shaming all unfaithful women should be carried out with the utmost rigour.

To prove his point the king, his hands still dripping with the far-spurted blood of the executee, had brought before him the wife of one of his nobles, who had been caught in *flagrante delicto* disporting herself with one of the court pages, a fine big lad with aspirations beyond his years or station. His majesty personally disrobed her, shaved her head, and then flogged her with a whip. After which he hung round her neck the card bearing the short word of Teutonic origin.

King Ladislas was a big man, broad, with fair skin and hair of a fiery redness which was unusual for that part of Europe. This made it all the more unusual that there should be such a number of red-haired children and young people in the town, their ages ranging from about eighteen to mere mewling babes. Anyone who cared to risk his life remarking on the fact might also have observed that their mothers had, for the most part, at one time been good-looking serving wenches at Cimodjin Castle. But this could have been simple coincidence, of course. It was well known that his young and virile majesty

(he was then thirty-two) was a great believer in the utmost rectitude for all those who served him.

Her Majesty Queen Violetta, who was then twenty-four, had borne the king four sons, with their mother's good looks and their father's hefty proportions. And yet, to the annoyance of the court ladies, the queen retained her girlish figure, her grace and beauty and many accomplishments. She seemed not to notice their irritation, speaking their language always very charmingly, and with more fluency than the natives themselves could muster. Whenever the king sought to hide her, she was ready with cooing words of such tenderness that His Majesty was instantly soothed.

Once he said to her: "Violetta, should you wear such a slashing decolletage all the time? I have noticed that while most of the lords stare fixedly past you—as, indeed, they had better—the ladies frown in disapproval, and some of the bigger pages grow quite red. That reminds me—we ought to have more light on the kitchen stairs."

"My lord," replied his queen, "surely my style of dress reminds you, the father of my four fine sons, that with all my responsibilities I still try to remain the charmer you married? Do I not serve as an example to other men's wives that they should keep their husbands virtuous?"

But King Ladislas was not content. It was a matter of cash. At this point in the history of the country there began that doleful procession of quacks and charlatans to the castle, followed by the successive descent of all comers down to the dungeons and the hands of the torturers. The king grew angry, and one day his anger boiled over when he saw that his Violetta had ordered herself yet another gown of gold lame trimmed with ermine and diamonds.

"Does Her Majesty know," he asked, with what he imagined to be irony, "does Her Majesty *know*," said he, louder, "that this kingdom of mine is almost without funds? Is Her Majesty so bereft of common sense that, in the face of my order, she continues to indulge?"

Violetta opened her mouth to reply, but the king, knowing how persuasive she could be, got in another quick volley.

"Return that confection to the varlet who made it," he roared, "and see that he is told that if he is fool enough to send so much as a button without my approval, he will be flogged, flayed alive and hung in chains!"

At this the beautiful Violetta gazed at him with round dark

eyes for a couple of seconds, and then fled the room with one superbly timed sob.

Much later that evening, in the warm and scented confines of the royal bedchamber, Ladislas found that, instead of reproaching him, his queen snuggled up to him (she was the most charming of snugglers) and said:

"My lord, I have been thinking. Perhaps there is someone who can help us."

The king ceased his reflective fondling.

"You can? Who is this person?"

"A philosopher and sorcerer who once came to the court at Ancona. A German, I believe, named Skimalis. I am sure he could do as you asked."

The king's hopes were raised, but they sank again.

"He will have been snapped up," he returned, gloomily. "Fellows like that—"

"I do not think he seeks a permanent situation."

"What is this fellow like?"

"He is all things to all men," she answered, "and he has great magic."

"Tell me more, my love," he said tenderly, "and come closer."

His queen hastened to show that this was possible.

The next morning the king, having breakfasted upon a haunch of venison and a mug of imported slivovitz, said to his queen:

"My dear, how may we summon this Skimalis?"

Violetta looking very fetching in an orange and purple gown of precipitous decolletage, lowered her long lashes and murmured:

"He will come, dear Ladislas, if I call him."

The king, who had taken magic and demonology as a subsidiary subject at the university, realized that this fellow must have very superior magic. He did not give a thought for the submissiveness of the queen, who had not reproached him for his sharpness of the previous day.

"Then pray call him at once."

She rose and went out on to the balcony, which faced into the newly risen sun. The king followed her, and watched her raise her arms, close her eyes, and murmur three times:

"Skimalis, Violetta needs you."

Ladislas fingered his flaming beard and stared at the sun through slitted green eyes.

"No sign of him . . ." he began to say, when, out of the orb, and travelling very low and fast, there materialized a small black cloud, no bigger than the first puff which rises from the fire newly kindled beneath the screaming victim at a burning. Rapidly approaching, it passed over the town and then arrowed up towards the heights of the castle. A second later, it alighted upon the rail of the balcony.

From it stepped Skimalis.

Here is an important point. When the king looked on Skimalis, he saw a withered, long-nosed, raddle-skinned old vagrant, with precariously perched spectacles, a doublet which had once been black but was now green with age, the whole effect being of decay and disrepair. When Violetta looked, she saw a young, strong, golden-haired man, clad in silks and satins, with a jewelled sword, a plumed hat, and a devilish gleam in his eye.

"Greeting, noble ones," said Skimalis.

The king heard a croaking old voice, while the queen heard the vibrant tones of a young man.

"You are Skimalis the sorcerer?" asked the king. He was aware that here was power such as he had never seen before.

The other bowed.

"Please come in," said Ladislas.

Skimalis held up his hand.

"One moment. Are there mirrors in this room, and elsewhere?"

"There are many," returned the king. "Why do you ask?"

"Your queen has called me, therefore I am needed for work here. But where I work, there can be no mirrors. It is vital that they be all removed. *All.* Glass can imprison me, hold me living for all eternity. A silvered glass is abomination to me and all those I hold dear. It is thus with all those who are sons of a troll and wili."

"What is the last one?" asked Violetta, gazing at the beautiful young man.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Ladislas, looking at old Skimalis.

"A wili is an earthwoman who is betrothed but who dies before she can be married."

At these words the sunlight seemed to bend back from the trio, so that, for a moment, the balcony was in darkness as thick as hell. Then the light returned.

The king gave orders about the mirrors, and when the work was done he took Skimalis to his apartments. Ladislas thought that such a powerful person should have only the

best. And His Majesty, accompanying the sorcerer along the corridors, wondered why the women gazed at the wizened creature so lovingly.

Ladislas said to his queen that night:

"The old fellow seems in reasonable good health, and comfortable. He says that he will start work tomorrow if the signs are right. What do you think of him?"

She did not tell her husband what she saw when she looked at Skimalis. There were reasons. Firstly, she remembered his sharpness about the gold lame gown; secondly, and much more important, she found it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that there was one code of behaviour for her, and another much easier one for the king. She thought of her four sons, and then of the red-haired brats who were still appearing about the castle and the town, springing from some quite unlikely mothers. (Ladislas is still known as the father of his people.)

So she said, very softly: "I think he will do well for us, my love."

And, more than this, the queen would not say. She suddenly became very drowsy.

The sorcerer set up a small laboratory in which he installed retorts, and crucibles, and a great forced draught fire which roared with small thunder. He asked for a quantity of lead, very fresh and pure, in order to try his skill in the new surroundings. At first he did not want anyone else present, but the king had been had before, and was worried about giving the torturers more work to do. He had his pride, King Ladislas. It was a matter of deep principle for the king that anyone who failed him should suffer. Thus, he insisted on being present, and Skimalis consented with a scowl.

It is awesomely recorded by Vanya, the court scribe of the time that, after about an hour's work of which the king understood not the smallest part, approximately five kilos of gold resulted from about the same amount of lead. The king was so delighted that he actually executed a jig in the presence of the wonder worker.

"I will send for tons and tons of lead!" he cried. "I will strip the country of it, I will buy abroad, and you shall turn it all into gold!"

An old Skimalis (as he appeared to the king) sat, without emotion, his eyes watchful.

"How will you pay for what I can do?" he asked.

The king stopped his jigging in mid-hop.

"H'm?" he rubbed his beard. "Lands?"

Skimalis shook his head.

"Jewels, then?"

For answer, Skimalis took a few pebbles and cast them on the ground, where, to the dismay of Ladislas III, they burned and glowed with fire, transformed into rubies.

"There are limits to my powers," he said, in a smooth voice, "but these things are easily done."

"Well, then?" The king was uneasy—a new feeling for him. He was so used to being at the fore when there was action needed, and now he was at a loss.

Skimalis' eyes were brightly evil.

"What I have done, so far, has expended my power. I need a source of new power, something of priceless value, to enable me to carry on."

"Such as?" asked the king, his temper giving him a nudge.

"A very beautiful woman."

The king relaxed.

"Easy!" he said. "I will have fifty of our finest paraded tomorrow morning, and you can take your pick. Will that do for a start?"

Now the sorcerer's tone was faintly menacing.

"You do not quite follow," he said, "I need a specially beautiful woman."

"I do follow," returned His Majesty, a shade tartly. "If necessary, I will round up the wives of my nobles for your inspection. They should be willing to make this sacrifice." The king swelled. "They *will* be willing! You need power from a beautiful woman, and you shall have it, by Wenceslas!"

"Let me be specific," put in the other. "I require the assistance of Her Majesty Queen Violetta."

The king's sword was half out of its sheath before he stayed its course: the suggestion took his breath away! And then he realized that he had been trapped by his own words. Slowly the sword went back. At length, feeling bemused, and breathing deeply, he summoned a page and commanded that the queen be sent for at once.

She came, lovely as ever, this time in a silver gown of eye-dazzling decolletage, her beautiful form most ravishingly displayed by the cunning of the dressmaker's art.

"Yes, my love, my lord?" she enquired in a honeyed voice, all the while sensible of the devouring gaze of the young Skimalis. At the sight of her pristine beauty, the king felt all his

love for her well up within him; he trembled—a weird sensation to him—and spoke gently. He knew, then, that he could not do it!

"My love—it was nothing. It—that is, we—forgive me. Violetta, dearest heart, please leave us. I—I am confused."

With a little curtsey, and a discreet glance at Skimalis, she began to go.

Skimalis whispered urgently, "Without her, it cannot be done! I must be in the same room with her, and no one else, for twenty-four hours! Without the power that she can give, I cannot work with the large quantities you need!"

The king looked on the old, withered form, and muttered, anxiously, half to himself: "What harm can there be?"

Forthwith he recalled his queen, and he explained what was required of her.

She seemed aghast.

"That you—you!—my lord, who uphold with such vigour the sanctity of marriage, should consent to such a thing!" Very gracefully she did a swoon on to a couch, in such a way that she could keep her eyes on the young Skimalis.

His Majesty snorted.

"Why not? What harm can he do you? None!" He bent close to her, whispering urgently, suppressing his teeming emotions. "Have I ever before asked you to make any sacrifice of any kind?" She began to speak of the gold lame gown, but he brushed that aside. "Violetta, this will be a secret, completely! It is for our country; he insists that only you can give the power. Do you think that I would permit this, if I thought that any harm could come of it? If that were so, the country could go to absolute ruin before I would allow it!"

He spoke the last words with great intensity, not being entirely sure that they were true. He looked down at her; her eyes were so beautiful, with such long lashes. He felt full of pride and admiration; she was so straight where she should be straight, so well rounded where such a shape was desirable.

She took a deep breath, and that was good to see, too.

"Very well, Ladislas. For you, and the country, I will do this."

And she turned away quickly, so that her lord should not see her blush under the ardent gaze of the young Skimalis—where Ladislas saw only the satisfied nodding of a harmless old man.

The king gave orders that one whole section of the castle, including the royal bedchamber, should be cleared, and that

no one, on pain of instant death, was to enter. He kept his feelings under iron control, and quivered when the sorcerer asked that the royal bed should be freshly draped, and garlanded with flowers; but the thing was done.

The time came when Violetta, looking more ravishing than her uneasy husband ever remembered seeing her, entered the chamber with its great canopied bed on the high dais. Ladislas gave Skimalis a searching glance; yes, he *was* very old. Even so, he stayed the sorcerer at the door, his eyes burning with a feverish light.

"There will be much gold?"

"Much. The power of beauty and the power of sorcery are great."

"You—will not harm her?" His eyes searched the old face.

"I will use no magic with her, your Majesty."

The fears of Ladislas were soothed as he met the watery gaze of the other. He gave his queen a swift, fervent kiss, and walked from the room, down the corridor, and out of the forbidden section of the castle, locking the great doors behind him.

A duplicate key of the bedroom was in his pocket, and he tried not to think about it.

Throughout the day he busied himself, meeting ambassadors from other countries with confidence, thinking of the financial independence which he would soon enjoy. Some there were in the court who fingered their necks, and wondered what his almost frenetic joviality portended. His announcement that the queen was away on important court business caused a buzz among the court ladies who resented what seemed to be yet another accomplishment of the queen; so now she was ambassadress!

While playing with his sons, His Majesty's thoughts were elsewhere. His elder boys asked for their mother, and would scarcely be reassured by him. It was not long before Ladislas began to miss his queen so much that he left the royal nursery, and descended the not-well-lit-stairway, where he met what he sought—a new serving wench of considerable charm. After this, he felt a little better, but not for long.

As night came he dismissed his servitors and, with an oft-replenished mug of slivovitz to hand, walked his private apartments, thinking. And while he thought, the fire of the slivovitz took hold of him.

This was for the country.

Of course.

She had acceded because she loved him, and for no other reason.

Certainly—with that old mumbler—what else? He was so old.

But . . . suppose Skimalis pawed her?

Well? Would she be any the worse for it?

He loved her.

The country needed gold.

The two irresistible forces met in the centre of his skull and ground together like armoured men in mortal combat.

Eventually he was impelled to leave his rooms and to go and stand at the doors of the sealed section of the castle. Here, by the light from two high sconces, Ladislas stood in perplexed thought, his hand on the key of the twin doors and the key of that *other* door. He opened the twin doors slowly and stood listening to the mouse-haunted silence of the darkness beyond. Then he took a sconce from its bracket, hesitated, replaced it, and shook his head. No, he knew the way! He pinched his lips tightly, and strove to ignore the thudding of his heart. All he wanted to do was to approach the door softly, and listen . . . just in case.

He walked down the corridor, one hand holding the scabbard of his sword for fear that it should clank, and the other hotly upon the key to the bedroom. A tiny scuttling form winked a red eye at him, and disappeared. Hammers beat in his head and he could not tell why. He slowed as he approached the door, very quietly, and listened.

For a moment he heard nothing at all; then he made out a man's voice very soft.

"You did not know what he saw, then?"

A *young* man's voice! The red beard of the king began to bristle.

Violetta answered; her voice was warm, plummy, content. The king knew the tone, and remembered the occasions when she was wont to use it.

"No. I only knew what *I* saw. Mmmmmmmmm." She sighed. "Oh, Skimalis, you are as ardent as you were at Ancona, six years ago." She laughed, and the listening monarch began to tremble. "Hello again, young Skimalis!"

When the sorcerer laughed the blood rose so swiftly with rage that it sang in the head of His Majesty, and his whole body shook. He had but one desire, to unlock the door, charge in, and unseam them both from the nave to the chaps.

Violetta, *his* Violetta, had deceived him! But amid his anguish there sounded the voice of caution. Swords might not prevail against the cunning Skimalis, nor racks nor iron maidens.

What, then?

By the side of the door, darkly swathed, stood the great mirror, tall as the king himself, which had been removed from the royal bedchamber. Remembering what Skimalis had said, the king unsheeted it and stood it ready beside the door, which he unlocked with quivering caution. Not the tiniest creak was heard. It swung wide, revealing the softly lit room, with the high dais crowned by the great bed. Now the fiery anger of the king was replaced by a cold desire for revenge. With the queen he would deal later, but for Skimalis, this was annihilation! Holding the mirror, glass side outwards, he crept forward, step by step, the fond noises of the couple tearing at his very soul. At a crouch he ascended the five steps, the mirror still held in front of him.

They did not hear him.

When he spoke, it was in a hissing whisper.

"Look, Skimalis, look!" he said.

Violetta gave a scream, and the other started up. For a tiny instant, Ladislas saw the *young* man, and then, with a moan, the sorcerer's body seemed to lose shape and slid horribly into the mirror like a viscous liquid poured from a jar.

A moment later, uttering a cry of indescribable sorrow, Violetta followed. The king had forgotten—that not only would Skimalis perish thus, but also those dear to him; Violetta was now dear to him. He set down the mirror and turned it round. Within, he saw the terrible crawling shapes of Violetta and Skimalis, twisting grotesquely, screaming soundlessly, turning and leaping with a ghastly slowness, mouthing and writhing like the figures of the damned.

King Ladislas began to scream.

He was still screaming when the servitors rushed in to find him completely mad, and mad he was until the day of his death.

That same mirror remains. It is said that, on occasion, those who have been unfaithul to their spouses can see in its glass the agonized shapes of the lovely Violetta and her evil lover.

I have told this story many times; I told it to the visitors this afternoon.

Jovanka walked away, with that fine swing of hips, and into

the royal apartment; a moment later I heard a penetrating scream of utter terror, and she ran out, screaming still, and away down the corridor.

I could not catch her; I cannot move fast enough; I must phone her aunt in Brno—I expect that she *did* visit her aunt in Brno?

You see, it is true that there was a King Ladislas III who went mad; it is true that he had a beautiful queen named Violetta, who died suddenly. But, as for the Skimalis affair, it is a tale for tourists: I made it up.

Short Circuit

Charles Eric Maine

☐ In the early evening an expensive black saloon car came quietly along the uneven track and stopped outside the house. The man behind the wheel switched off the ignition with squat fingers. For a while he surveyed the bleak open country, then produced a slim gold cigarette case from his pocket and lit a cigarette without offering one to his companion. A big diamond ring glittered icily on his finger.

"Desolate," he remarked.

The other man fingered his moustache in a nervous gesture. "Yes, Mr. Fassberger," he said, "though, mind you, at this time of year . . . I mean, when spring comes and the trees are in leaf . . ."

"I prefer it desolate," Fassberger stated crisply. "Why do you imagine I bought one hundred acres of ground on which to build the house?"

"Of course, Mr. Fassberger."

Fassberger blew grey smoke at the curved windscreen. "I want desolation, privacy and security. I can afford to get what I want, Mr. Mason." He inspected the cigarette critically, then crushed it contemptuously into the dashboard ashtray. "Well, let's take a look at this house which you tell me is finished."

Fassberger opened the car door and heaved himself out. Mason joined him in a moment, and for a few seconds they stood side by side staring at the house. Mason was as tall and slender as Fassberger was short and rotund, and his clothes were less elegant, though by no means shabby.

"The main structure was completed about three weeks ago," Mason explained. "Since then the engineers have been installing and testing the electronic circuits. I believe the final tests were made only yesterday."

"And the builders?"

"They were flown back to the Continent immediately. By now they will all be in their own individual countries. The danger of information leaking out is—well, remote. . . ."

Mason smiled reassuringly, but Fassberger's blue eyes remained frosty.

"Shall we go in, Mr. Fassberger?"

They walked forward to the front door of the house, Mason leading the way. The building loomed over them like an enormous white cube pierced by wide horizontal windows, as yet uncurtained. The ground, not yet cultivated, was soft from recent rain, and the moist grass stained the brown suede of Fassberger's shoes.

Mason produced a key and inserted it in the lock of the door.

"To all intents and purposes it's an ordinary lock with an ordinary key, Mr. Fassberger," he commented. "Nobody would suspect that the tumblers are actuated by coded magnets in the key, and that they in turn operate six electronic locks which are built into the door and are quite inaccessible." He tapped the white surface of the door with his knuckles. "Laminated steel, just like the walls and floor. It would stop an armour-piercing shell."

"Good," Fassberger grunted.

Mason turned the key, waited for three seconds, then pushed open the door. They went into the entrance hall. He pressed a switch and a latticed ceiling began to glow with soft rose-tinted light. The walls were matt grey, with two white doors and a wide staircase, uncarpeted, leading to an upper storey. He opened one of the doors and ushered Fassberger into a bare cubic room with a steel-framed horizontal window.

"Naturally it will look better with furniture. . . ." Mason ventured. "And in about nine months, when the decorating is complete. . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Fassberger impatiently, crossing to the window and running his finger along the steel frame.

"Deceptive, isn't it?" Mason remarked, eager to say something pleasing. "You wouldn't imagine there would be space for steel shutters to slide across. And this"—he touched the glass with his long forefinger—"is polarized one-way. You can see out, but nobody can see in."

"And all the windows are the same?"

"Exactly the same, shutters and all. I can tell you, Mr. Fassberger, that the whole house was built as a precision engineering job. It is foolproof. Nobody, absolutely nobody, can break in. The instant someone tries to tamper with the windows or outside doors, the entire electronic gadgetry comes into operation. The house is completely sealed off from the outside world."

Fassberger nodded in silent satisfaction. "A steel fortress," he murmured, pursuing his own inner thoughts. "Fassberger's fortress. Impenetrable. Impregnable."

He turned abruptly to the taller man. "Very well, Mason. Let's have a demonstration—but first I want to see the safe deposit."

"Of course," said Mason, smiling. "It's in the next room."

He led the way through the communicating door into a smaller room, switching on the luminous ceiling, for there was no window. The floor, which gleamed like gunmetal, was divided into a mosaic of geometrical shapes like a crazy paving of steel tiles.

Mason closed the door and produced another key which he inserted in the lock. "Specially coded," he remarked. "Three turns this time, to set the machinery in motion." He twisted the key round and round. Fassberger watched the floor.

A rectangular tile, centrally located, dropped downwards then slid to one side, exposing a dark cavity. The air hummed with the attenuated whine of a distant machine.

"One hundred feet deep," said Mason. "The capsule rises on compressed air. It takes fifteen seconds to surface."

As they watched, a rectangular metal canister rose from the cavity, growing taller and taller until it stood three feet high. With a scarcely audible click the machinery became silent. Mason dangled the door key from his thin fingers and tapped the canister.

"The same key will open it and inside there's a combination lock. But of course, Mr. Fassberger, only you know the combination. . . ."

"Open up," Fassberger ordered.

Mason inserted the key in a slot, then lifted a heavy hinged lid, revealing a calibrated dial. Fassberger then stepped forward and rotated the dial, first to the left, then the right, and to and fro in a predetermined pattern of movement. Presently he was able to remove a second lid, at which point he stooped to peer into the dark cavity of the safe deposit. It was empty.

"Good," he murmured. "Put it away."

Mason replaced the lids, locked the canister, then used the key to make it sink back into the floor.

"Now," he announced, with a certain nuance of pride in his voice, "I will show you the electronic control equipment, if I may. Afterwards I will demonstrate how it operates."

Fassberger nodded.

Mason crossed to the wall facing the door and patted the

surface with his hand until he found a spot of different texture. He pressed it firmly. Machinery hummed faintly, and a moment later the entire wall moved downwards into the floor, revealing a small, concealed antechamber. Fassberger stepped forward to inspect the contents. Electronic equipment had been built into the rear wall, revealing grey panels with switches, rotary controls and paraded fuses, punctuated by green and red pilot lamps.

"The main electricity supply for the whole house comes in here," Mason explained, pointing to a small black metal box mounted near the floor. "That contains the power company's fuses. Naturally it is sealed, and only the company's electricians can open it. But every other circuit in the house is individually fused, so, you see, nothing can go wrong." He smiled ingratiatingly, then added: "But, in any case, there is an emergency diesel generator in an outhouse at the back. In the event of a power failure you can generate your own electricity. We've thought of everything."

"I hope so," Fassberger grunted. "This house is costing me nearly one hundred thousand pounds. I expect perfection."

Mason nodded eagerly. "That's exactly what you've got, Mr. Fassberger. Perfection. And now, if you like, I'll demonstrate the electronic security measures. . . ."

Without waiting for a reply, he flicked a row of switches and turned half a dozen control knobs. The pilot lamps blinked, and hidden relays clicked methodically.

"We're ready," Mason said affably. "If you would care to go into the next room and watch the window, I'll show you just how rapidly and efficiently the steel shutters slide across. Then afterwards I'll go outside and pretend to be a burglar, and you will see how the full security equipment comes into operation."

"Very well," said Fassberger. He went back into the other room.

Fassberger stood by the horizontal window and fingered the edge of the steel frame with his podgy fingers. The big diamond ring in its flashy platinum setting glittered richly in the subdued daylight. Despite his cold, deadpan expression, he was genuinely impressed by the way in which his plans had achieved fruition. The window itself was incredible enough: he found it difficult to believe that glass of such transparency (indeed, invisibility) could be opaque from outside, and the steel frame was slim and intact, without grooves or slots, so

that it was difficult to imagine just where and how a shutter might be concealed.

Touching the edge of the metal, he imagined for a moment that his fingernail had detected a slight crevice. He inspected the surface with some care, but could see nothing. Then he scratched at the metal again and was convinced that he could feel the shape of an infinitesimal slot.

"Ready?" came Mason's voice from the adjacent room.

"Yes," said Fassberger, still fingering the window frame.

It happened so suddenly that his eyes were completely deceived. One moment there was a window looking out on bleak bare countryside; next instant the window had gone, and in its place was a sheet of blue-grey steel. The only sound was a faint complex click: it might have been the noise of an expensive camera with a focal plane shutter. Curiously, there was also an agonizing pain in the middle finger of his right hand. Even more frightening, the hand seemed suddenly to have become immovably attached to the window frame.

"Mason," he shouted, looking at his hand.

Certain things became apparent. The shutter, for instance, had not slid entirely across the window. There was a narrow gap of about a quarter of an inch on one side, and the gap was due to the simple fact that the diamond of his ring was trapped securely between the shutter edge and the steel window frame. The platinum setting of the ring had been twisted, and the thing was biting into his finger in a most painful manner.

Perspiration materialized in tiny beads on Fassberger's brow. I might have lost my finger, he thought. In fact, that damned shutter might have chopped my hand off altogether. Lucky it caught the diamond—at least, diamond is harder than steel.

"Mason!" he called again, louder this time.

Mason came hurrying into the room, his expression a little anxious. "Coming, Mr. Fassberger," he said dispiritedly. "Something strange seems to have happened. I think one of the fuses has blown. . . ."

He broke off as he observed Fassberger's odd stance, with hand pinned to the window frame. "What on earth . . ."

"Open the shutter, man," Fassberger snarled. "Can't you see my hand is caught in the thing?"

"Yes, yes . . ." Mason murmured in confusion. He rushed back to the control room. Fassberger stood immobile, fighting the pain, eyeing the distorted shape of the diamond ring with

distaste. "Bungling fool," he muttered to himself. "I never did trust that man. Too tall, too thin." Then, bellowing: "For God's sake hurry up!"

Mason's voice echoed plaintively from the next room. "It's the fuse, Mr. Fassberger. I can't open the shutter until I've fitted a new fuse."

"Then get a move on!"

There was silence for a moment, then Fassberger distinctly heard Mason utter a lurid obscenity. A moment later Mason's voice shouted: "The new fuse has blown, too." A pause, then: "It's because the shutter's jammed. The drive motor is taking too much current. It's a virtual short-circuit on the power line."

"Well do something about it. Don't just stand there talking bloody technical rubbish!"

Mason's wan face appeared round the edge of the door. "Can't you take your finger out?" he asked wearily.

Fassberger uttered a profound blasphemy.

Mason came over to the window and examined the hand, the ring and the shutter. "It's just unfortunate," he observed sadly. "That shutter is edged with a special alloy that will cut through anything. If someone tried to smash through the window with a steel bar, the shutter would cut the thing in half. But diamond is too hard. A fraction of an inch either way and there'd have been no trouble."

"I might have lost my finger," Fassberger pointed out.

Mason nodded wearily. "That wouldn't have blown the fuse. It's the diamond that's causing the trouble. The shutter can't cut through it, so the drive motor has come to a dead stop, and the armature is taking an overload current." He sniffed the air delicately. "It may even be burning at this moment. That's why the fuse keeps blowing. It's only rated for five amps."

"Then put a bigger fuse in," Fassberger suggested with immense patience.

Mason's expression brightened perceptibly. "It might work," he conceded. "If one could open the shutter a fraction of an inch, perhaps . . ." He hurried back into the control room.

"Fifteen amps," he shouted. "That ought to do it." Then, after an interval of waiting: "No good, that's blown, too."

"Try thirty amps, or even more," Fassberger called.

Judging by the odd noises issuing from the next room, Mason was evidently complying. "Stand by," came his voice,

apprehensively. "I've put a dead short across the fuse. This ought to produce some results."

It did. There was an audible explosion and both rooms were plunged into darkness. Fassberger could smell something pungent in the air. Mason's voice, sour with frustration, loosed a lurid curse. A few moments later he stumbled back into the room, an unhappy and dejected shambling shape in the faint ghostly daylight filtering through the narrow gap in the shutter.

"It's no use," he said, in a desperate voice. "The company's fuses have blown. That really *is* a short-circuit."

"Then telephone the power company. Ask them to send their electricians here immediately. Tell them it's *urgent!*"

Mason shifted uneasily on his feet. "That's impossible, Mr. Fassberger. The telephone isn't connected yet."

Fassberger breathed heavily. "In that case you had better take my car. Drive to the nearest town. Bring back electricians, engineers, the fire brigade, anyone you like—but let's have some *action.* Don't you realize that I'm in dreadful pain?"

Mason's expression became gloomier than ever: his face was a pallid death-mask in the semi-darkness. "I can't get out of the house," he explained solemnly. "There isn't any power to operate the doors and windows. All those electronic locks and shutters. . . . We're *sealed in,* Mr. Fassberger."

"Then start the diesel engine which is supposed to provide emergency power."

"But the diesel is in the outhouse. Unless I can open a door I can't even reach it."

Fassberger sighed in exasperation. "Tell me, Mason, what do you propose to do? I asked you to build a house which could not be broken into, not a house which one can't escape from."

"The one is the same as the other," Mason said wearily. "You can't break in, and you can't break out—not without power. The plain fact is that we haven't got any power." He considered for a moment. "I suppose the only thing left to do is to try to force open the power company's fusebox, but there might be trouble. . . ."

"I don't care about trouble," said Fassberger with a great show of patience. "I've got trouble enough already. I want my finger back, and in one piece. Open the company's fusebox and put some new fuses in."

"The point is," Mason said uneasily, "that I haven't got any

tools. The fusebox is sealed, and you have to have a special star-shaped screwdriver. There's nothing in the house I could use, and all I've got on me is a bunch of keys and a pipe-scraper."

"Feel in my left-hand trouser pocket," Fassberger suggested. "You'll find a key ring with a tiny gold penknife attached. It's not very strong, but it might help a little."

"I'll do what I can," Mason agreed. He fumbled in Fassberger's pocket, unclipped the knife, then made to return to the control room, but stopped and came back.

"I'll also need a light," he pointed out. "I can't work in the dark. I've got a few matches, but . . ."

"In my coat pocket there is a gold cigarette lighter," said Fassberger coldly. "You may use it."

Mason found the lighter, then fumbled his way into the next room. With a distinct feeling of martyrdom Fassberger settled down to wait with all the patience he could muster.

After several hours, when the strip of sky visible through the gap in the shutter was beginning to darken into night, it became obvious that Mason was achieving exactly nothing. The cigarette lighter had long since run out of gas, and the matches had been used up one by one. He was still working, in total darkness, attempting to force the star-screws by touch, with the aid of the keys and the tiny gold penknife, but they refused to move. In the end he gave up and returned to Fassberger, who was showing signs of strain and fatigue, obliged as he was to maintain a standing posture with the finger of one hand trapped in the shutter.

"It's no use," Mason breathed. "I can't make any impression at all on those screws, Mr. Fassberger, not without the proper tools."

"So what are we going to do?" Fassberger demanded.

"I don't know. I don't know at all."

"I can't stand here all night like this," Fassberger pointed out icily. "This damned ring is almost cutting through the bone of my finger. In fact the finger feels quite dead already."

"Do you suppose . . ." Mason said hesitantly, then broke off.

"Suppose what?"

"Well, it might be possible to cut through the ring. That would release your finger."

"Yes," Fassberger remarked, after some thought, "that

would help. But the ring is of platinum, and you can't cut platinum with a gold blade."

"I could try."

"Very well. Try."

Mason tried. The sky was now a mere strip of lesser darkness in the black void of the room. For an hour he sawed at the slim platinum band, working by touch and instinct. He succeeded in scratching the surface, but it was becoming more and more apparent that the blade of the miniature gold penknife was rapidly losing its edge. Presently he attacked the ring with the serrated sides of the keys, with even less effect.

"No good," he said finally. "Perhaps if one could prise the diamond from its setting. . . ."

Fassberger, who was half asleep, although still standing, stirred painfully. "That might be difficult," he murmured in a faraway voice. "The diamond alone cost more than two thousand pounds, and the ring was specially made with exceptionally strong claws to hold the stone in position. I didn't want to run the risk of losing it."

"Of course not," Mason commented, unable to conceal an element of cynicism in his voice.

"You can try," Fassberger said.

"There's one important point," Mason continued. "The ring is trapped in such a way that the shutter is pressed hard against the diamond, while the window frame is engaged with the platinum setting. There is a danger of dislodging the stone if I succeed in opening the claws."

"Danger? In what way?"

"Look, Mr. Fassberger. Every door and window in this house is sealed—completely sealed—with the exception of this one. Here we have a gap of about a quarter of an inch, not much more, which forms the only contact between us and the outside world. If I should dislodge the diamond in releasing your finger, then the shutter would close under the pressure of its springs, and we should be sealed off altogether. The house would become our tomb."

Fassberger considered for a moment. "It's already that so far as I am concerned, Mason. All I want for the moment is to have my finger back and to be able to sleep. Tomorrow we will think of something."

"But we still have a gap in the shutter," Mason insisted. "We can still see through the window, although nobody can look in from outside. Sooner or later we shall be missed, and people will come to find us."

"What do you mean—sooner or later?"

"Three days, perhaps four days. There are people who will miss me. There may even be people who will miss you."

Fassberger smiled ironically in the darkness. "Nobody will miss me," he said quietly. "I'm a lonely man—always have been. I depend on no-one and no-one depends on me."

"In that case," Mason said thoughtfully, "it wouldn't really matter if you were to die, here, in this house."

"No, it wouldn't really matter," Fassberger agreed.

"Then—what I don't understand is—why build the house in the first place, with the concealed safe deposit, and all the elaborate security precautions . . . ?"

Fassberger's laugh was almost inaudible. "I have an instinct about things, Mason. I have been keeping a finger on the economic pulse of the world for many years. I'll tell you this, and may it benefit you in the long term, that the world is on the brink of what may well be the worst economic crisis in all history. So what is a man to do, a man like myself who, by using his judgment and ability, has been able to amass an immense fortune in the course of his life? Currency will lose all value, and the share market will slump to unprecedented levels. Gold would be a worthwhile investment, if one could buy gold, but there are always precious stones. Mason, I've sunk almost everything I possess into an enormous purchase of diamonds, natural sapphires and emeralds—nearly four million pounds' worth. When the crisis comes—and I give it not more than six months from now—those stones will not only maintain their value, but they will increase, and the longer the slump lasts, the more they will be worth. I shall come out of it with a very handsome profit—a million, or perhaps two million, or even more. . . ."

Mason began to laugh, quietly and cynically.

"I'm serious," Fassberger professed. "I worked it out in detail. Having bought the stones, I had to consider their safe keeping. There isn't a bank in the country I would trust. It may be that they will all be in liquidation by the end of the year. So I had to build my own bank, as it were, with its own impregnable safe deposit."

Mason stopped laughing. "You're a shrewd man, Mr. Fassberger. Shrewder than most. But what are you going to do about your finger?"

"I don't know," said Fassberger earnestly. "I would willingly give half—no, ten per cent—of my fortune to the man who could solve this predicament."

"Do you mean that?"

Fassberger paused to reconsider his words. "Five per cent," he said finally. "I would give five per cent for my release."

Mason's manner suddenly became more direct, more positive. "Five per cent of four million pounds is two hundred thousand," he said. "I'll take you up on that, Mr. Fassberger. Can I rely on your word?"

Fassberger made faint huffing noises. "Of course you can accept my word—but I reserve the right to revise my offer as the situation develops."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that if you can release me and get me out of this infernal house here and now, you shall have your five per cent, but for every day I have to wait I'll reduce it by one per cent."

Mason stroked his lips reflectively. "What you mean is that after five days, if we're still here, I shall get nothing at all."

"After five days we shall both be dead," Fassberger stated, "so it won't really matter."

"Fair enough," Mason commented. "I need time to think about it."

He wandered off into the adjacent control room and spent the next hour communing with himself.

Fassberger spent the remainder of the night standing up, contriving to snatch moments of sleep when his posture permitted of reasonably comfortable relaxation, but the sleep was superficial, and by the morning he was thoroughly exhausted. Mason, having retired to the next room, had apparently thought and thought until his brain gave up, and had presumably slept fairly comfortably on the hard tiled floor.

Sunlight gleamed through the slit in the shutter, sparkling on the many facets of the big diamond. Fassberger, pale-faced and hollow-eyed, returned to full uneasy consciousness and inspected his finger. It was by now quite without feeling, and blue-grey in colour. The ring, if anything, was tighter than ever.

"Mason!" he shouted.

He shuffled his feet around, trying to ease the cramp in his calves, but as one pain vanished, so another one appeared. Of Mason there was no sign whatever.

"Mason," he bellowed, then again: "Mason, Mason!"

Mason, limp and deflated, presently stumbled into the room

groaning quietly to himself. Fassberger, irritated beyond measure, said firmly: "Four per cent now. You let me down, Mason. I had to spend the whole night pinned to the window. Four per cent, not a penny more."

Mason, still tired and inarticulate, came over to the window and inspected Fassberger's trapped finger rather warily. "Looks bad," he muttered. "Sort of dead. Could be gangrene."

"I made you an offer, a handsome offer," Fassberger said angrily, "but you haven't done a thing about it. For God's sake, Mason, *think* of something!"

"Yes," Mason murmured vaguely. "Can't risk allowing the shutter to close entirely. That means the ring must stay where it is." Suddenly he seemed to stiffen, and stared at Fassberger in restrained horror.

"Well, what is it?" Fassberger demanded impatiently.

"We might be here for days," said Mason. "You can't stand there all the time—not like that, with a dead finger. . . ."

"I'm aware of that."

"It will have to come off, Mr. Fassberger."

Fassberger merely eyed him coldly.

"One of us will have to cut your finger off," Mason went on. "It's the only thing to do, otherwise you'll just have to stand there and stand there . . ."

Fassberger closed his eyes and remained silent for a long time. Finally he seemed to make up his mind, and said quietly: "All right, Mason. Amputate the finger. You'll have to use the small gold penknife."

"It's blunt," Mason protested, "and the blade is all chewed up."

"It's the only knife we have. You can force the blade between the third joint of the finger. It shouldn't be too difficult."

In the semi-gloom Mason's face seemed to grow several shades paler. "I couldn't, Mr. Fassberger. I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

"In that case, give *me* the penknife."

"I couldn't even let you do that. . . ."

"Mason," Fassberger roared suddenly, "it's *my* finger and if I want to cut it off I'll damn well do so without asking your permission. Give me that knife."

Nervously and hesitantly Mason produced the tiny gold penknife and opened the blade, feeling the blunt twisted edge with revulsion. He handed it to the other man. Fassberger,

holding it firmly in his other hand, took a deep breath and muttered something inaudibly to himself. Then deliberately, without wasting time, he pressed the jagged blade hard into the flesh at the base of the trapped finger and hacked away systematically. Dark blood oozed sluggishly down his hand and pain poured torrentially into his brain, but he persisted in a mood of grim determination until the operation was completed. Suddenly, with a sense of exultant freedom, he found that his arm was capable of independent movement again. He waved it triumphantly, flexing and unflexing the remaining fingers as if he had just recovered from a bout of total paralysis.

"There," he announced. "There—you see!"

Mason could only see the three inches of purple blood-stained finger suspended in the gap of the shutter by the twisted diamond ring. Suddenly and uncontrollably he was sick, to the immense scorn of Fassberger who had now regained much of his self-assurance.

"I'm free," Fassberger stated. "I can move around. I'm more than half way towards solving the entire problem."

"Yes," said Mason faintly, "yes—indeed you are."

Fassberger smiled hugely through his pain. "It's only a matter of time, Mason," he said warmly. "Just a matter of time."

On the eighth day Mason died. Always a cadaverous looking man, with the appearance of being habitually undernourished, he went into a coma after three days and three nights of sitting motionless in a corner of the room. Fassberger, ravenous and thirsty, his hand now healed but swollen and festering from some obscure infection, could not avoid a feeling of contempt as he confirmed the fact of the other man's death. Almost immediately certain dark thoughts crystallized in his mind. He crossed to the window where the decomposing remains of the finger, still contained in its expensive diamond ring, held the shutter open, and peered through the narrow gap at the bleak open countryside. There was not the slightest sign of another human being, nor had there been during the past eight days: it might have been some remote outpost in the desert, or even on another planet.

Fassberger's hunger and thirst had become obsessive, so that he was unable to think of anything but food and drink. There was no water in the house, and certainly nothing to eat, and for days past his tongue had been swollen and dry and had begun to crack along its surface. Mason's death was a

new factor in the situation. The living man had become a mass of inanimate flesh impregnated with still blood, and in Fassberger's mind the flesh was meat and the blood was drink. For hours he walked around the dead body, looking down on it, thinking and pondering and speculating, and toying with the small gold penknife with its blunt blood-stained blade.

Another night went by during which Fassberger, who had now lost much of his affluential weight, became perceptibly weaker, and the next morning there was still no visible sign of any human being within the vicinity of the house. His infected hand with the missing finger was now aflame with heat and pain, and his abdomen, empty of food, was distended with gases. Slowly he crawled over to the pale waxen body of Mason, and opened the tiny penknife.

I have no alternative, he told himself. If I baulk at the idea I am committing suicide. Mason is dead, and he doesn't care any more. Even though he never liked me it might please him to think that his flesh had helped to save my life—and what's more, I'll be generous, I'll give him his five per cent. I'll even make it ten per cent, and I'll present it to his wife and family. After all, if I survive now, at this stage, it will be because of him, and that was the basis of our agreement.

He looked at Mason's dead, impassive face. I'm sorry, he said silently to himself. In my normal, rational state of mind I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing, but under stress one's values become distorted, and human ethics are meaningless. I would willingly trade my four million pounds' worth of precious stones for a pound of your flesh and a pint of your blood, Mason, my friend.

Slowly, with considerable effort, he removed Mason's coat and shirt. Somewhere, sometime, he thought, I've read about this. One chooses the limbs first, the arms and the legs, and one cuts the flesh off in narrow strips, because that way it is easier to chew . . .

He took a deep breath and steeled himself against the nausea that threatened to twist his stomach into knots, then plunged the twisted blade of the gold penknife into the thin bicep muscle of Mason's arm.

At that instant something rapped clearly and distinctly against a hard surface in the room. A spasm of fear contracted Fassberger's heart: for a dreadful instant speckled blackness hovered in an immense cloud before his eyes. He left the knife where it was, embedded in the arm of the dead

man, and turned round, scanning the room hastily. Incredibly there was a shadow across the narrow slot of light between the shutter and the window frame.

With a wild animal cry Fassberger flung himself across the room towards the window and wasted a whole second in peering through the gap. He could see a face, a real human face, but he also knew that because of the polarized glass the face could not see him. He shouted and screamed and hammered on the tough steel panel of the shutter.

After that things seemed to happen automatically. Glass broke and splintered with a vicious tinkling sound, and fresh clean air filtered through the narrow gap. "Hello, hello in there," shouted a voice. "Are you all right?"

Fassberger started in horrific fascination at the shrivelled, decaying thing that had been his finger, and at the bright diamond that had caused all the trouble.

"Yes," he replied feebly, "I'm all right."

"Open the door."

"I can't. You'll have to use a crowbar on the shutter."

He stood by and watched blankly, almost objectively, as they inserted a steel rod into the gap between the shutter and window frame and worked on the gap. Presently the dead finger with its diamond ring fell away, and slowly the narrow strip of daylight was widening, and there were more faces, and there were more steel bars. In the course of time, Fassberger never knew whether it was hours or minutes, they had opened the shutter to its fullest extent, and a man was climbing through the glassless aperture of the window. Strong hands took his arm and supported him.

"Thank you," he said simply. "Thank you very much."

In hospital they amputated Fassberger's hand and injected innumerable drugs into his arteries, then three weeks later they discharged him. Mason had been cremated. Fassberger visited his widow, and expressed sincerely and regretfully his sorrow at what had happened. The widow was a small, dark, mature woman, not unattractive, in the mid-thirties, and she had two teenage children. Fassberger, full of remorse and in a magnanimous mood, gave her the ten per cent of his fortune which he had promised to the dead Mason, and she in turn, gratefully, offered him her modest hospitality.

"I'm going to sell the electronic house," he told her one evening. "I have acquired a new sense of values. I sought security, only to find insecurity and danger. In the face of an impending economic crisis I tried to contract out, but it didn't

work. Why should one man be able to contract out when millions of others can't?"

She smiled sympathetically at him. "Mr. Fassberger," she said amiably and thoughtfully, "life is not an investment. You can't really *live* in terms of profit and loss—only in terms of the years that have gone and the years that are still to come. Somehow we have to make the most of them, whether we have a fortune or not. In the long run, life is people—just like you and me—and the rest is unimportant."

He took her hand and stroked it affectionately. "You are so right, my dear. You have taught me so much. Money doesn't matter at all, really."

"Not at all," she murmured.

He was quite unaware of the hard shrewdness in her eyes.

The Appointment

John Marsh

☐ It's four in the morning but I daren't go to bed.

My present predicament started three months ago on the day I decided to commit suicide.

When you've gone through a fortune left by your father in just over two years, there's nothing left but to bow yourself out gracefully. Better than taking a job at a few quid a week and living on memories of what might have been if certain horses had travelled a little faster.

I decided the Tube was the quickest way out. Just a matter of stepping off the platform edge and—oblivion.

But, perverse devil that I am, I couldn't resist buying an evening paper before I made towards the escalator. I'd backed a horse in the 4.30 and though I knew I should be in Eternity in less than five minutes, I felt I had to know whether this quadruped had served me as ill as all its four-footed friends had in the last two years.

The man who handed me the paper was little and muffiered. His cloth cap was pulled down over his eyes. He appeared to have only the one paper, and I noticed how cold and clammy his hand felt as, for a moment, his fingers touched mine as he handed it over.

Standing there at the top of the escalator, in the bright electric light, I looked at the Stop Press.

The 4.30, I saw, had been won by a horse called Calm Error, at evens. I shrugged and thought how furious my bookie would be when he found that this was a loser I would not be settling for.

Then I stopped. Surely Calm Error was a good thing for tomorrow, not today.

Sweating a little I went back for the paper I had dropped. My hands trembled as I looked for the name of the winner of the two o'clock, which I knew.

It was not the same. The runner was a colt I had never heard of.

Of course we've all read stories about a man having tomorrow's newspaper. I'm no exception. But I venture to think that this story of mine is just a bit different from the usual run. . . .

At that moment, though the situation was familiar, it was a big shock to see tomorrow's date at the top of the page.

I went to the station entrance and looked for the man who had sold the paper to me. But there was no trace of him. A barrow boy, leaning against his load of fruit, frowned when I asked him if he'd seen the other man.

"Ain't been no one selling papers 'ere tonight, Guv," he said, and, dazed, I wandered away.

Of course I didn't commit suicide. Instead I went home and combed through tomorrow's paper, noting the winners of the following afternoon's races, marking the closing prices at the Stock Exchange, even viewing with amazement the winners of greyhound races to be run at various tracks that evening.

I went to bed in a whirl. Tomorrow I would start to recoup my losses. If I didn't ever see my newspaper vendor again I'd at least give myself enough capital to carry on for a while.

If you know the winners of six horse races you can make quite a bit of money in one day's racing through the medium of doubles, trebles and accumulators.

The following evening I made my way to the Tube station again.

As I approached, a husky voice said: "Paper, sir!"

It was the same shabby little individual, a muffler over his chin, a cap pulled over his eyes so that I could not see his face. As his cold hand brushed mine, I again noticed that the paper I took was the last he had for sale.

"I say . . ." I began, determined to learn more.

But someone jostled me as they came from the station entrance and when I looked round the newspaper seller had gone.

In the days that followed I made a lot of money at the expense of several unfortunate bookmakers as well as from operations conducted by my stockbroker. Each evening at six I went to the Tube station to buy the following evening's newspaper. And each evening my mufflered friend was there. Always the paper I bought was the last he had to sell.

I ceased to be curious. He was making me rich. And he obviously resented the tentative advances I had made in the beginning.

Once again I paid court to Janey. I had thought, when I knew I was ruined and had decided to end it all, that I would never see her again.

Janey's father is well-connected though perpetually hard-up. I knew he would consider me as a son-in-law only if I had enough money to keep his daughter in the manner she had never been accustomed to. Now there was no difficulty

on that score. I was rich and growing richer every day. In fact, I was the talk of the town. Janey and her father welcomed me whenever I appeared.

Arrangements for the wedding at St. Margaret's were speeded up. We decided to go to Switzerland to the winter sports.

I continued to fetch my paper every evening from the little man at the Tube station. In fact I fell into such a routine that I no longer wondered about him or why he had only the one copy he held out to me as soon as I appeared.

The day before my wedding I decided never to go for the paper again. I no longer needed to know what would win the 2.30 tomorrow, for my holdings of stocks and shares had made me one of the richest men in the land.

When I married Janey on the morrow I would put out of my mind for ever the shabby, dirty little man in the muffler and cap whose cold, clammy touch had so revolted me.

Yet I did go for the paper as usual, not because I wanted to make more money, but because, vainly, I could not bear to wait to see what tomorrow's paper had to say about the society wedding of the year—mine!

It was, as usual, the only paper the man had to sell. As I took it he lifted his face for a moment so that, for the first time, I saw the sunken eyes and grey, drawn cheeks. I stepped back a pace, a shiver running through me at the sight of that awful mask. And as I looked the man smiled a ghastly smile, raised his long bony hand as if in salute, then turned and disappeared into the Tube station.

I went home very shaken. But I cheered up as I let myself into the flat. The man must have guessed I would never be buying my evening paper off him again. That was why he had waved me farewell.

Opening the paper, I scanned it eagerly. But there was nothing about the wedding. I couldn't understand it, for both Janey and I had answered countless journalistic enquiries in the last week.

I looked at the date. Yes, it was tomorrow's paper all right. Yet—no wedding.

Then I caught sight of a paragraph on the front page.

BRIDEGROOM DIES IN SLEEP, said the headline.

My heart raced. The blood pounded in my temples.

For there I read that I had died in my sleep, being found by my servant in a chair, pen in hand, fully dressed. Cause of death was thought to be heart failure.

So I'm writing this to keep awake. Only a few hours before the wedding . . . only—a—few—hours . . .

Watch Your Step

Cressida Lindsay

☐ "Have you got the key?"

"Yes, it's in my pocket." He took her hand.

She said: "We must say good-bye first."

They went back into the crowded living room, looked for their hostess and couldn't find her.

"So you haven't gone," remarked the large beige woman who had given them the key.

They looked foolish. "We came back to find our hostess."

"Have a night cap," she said, trying to look understanding. They took glasses from a tray that was being carried round by a young girl dressed up as a Hungarian folk dancer. She went on, "You will remember to leave the key on the hall table, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," they replied rapidly.

Slightly drunker, she leant towards them. "I've always had a soft spot for you young ones in distress. Well, good-bye and be good."

They laughed politely as she retreated, her back seeming to be very little different from her front. With the conspiracy of lovers they looked over the tops of their glasses into each other's eyes. She said, looking down: "Michael, I feel odd."

He found somewhere to put their glasses and drew her nearer to the music. "It's because we've at last found somewhere where we can be alone together," he said, as they fell into step.

"Do you think so?"

"I'm sure so."

"But I haven't ever . . ."

"I know, I know."

Embarrassed, she asked: "Do you like her? The old girl. I have a feeling she'll say to the people she's spending the weekend with, 'Oh, I met two charming lovebirds at a party and let them use my room for the night. I was drunk at the time, I do hope I've done the right thing.' "

"I don't care what she says. I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth, but she seemed rather a bitch to me."

"Oh, no, just stuffy."

They gave in to the music for a while, then drank three more glasses of wine and left without saying good-bye to their hostess.

Ignoring the lift they ran down the thick-carpeted stairs laughing as they bumped against the walls and giggling over the difficulty of opening the front door.

As the taxi left them outside a tall Bayswater house she said: "I'm very drunk."

"So am I," he sang. "Two o'clock in the morning," and then, "funny if I couldn't make it after all."

She said, almost with relief: "Darling, I love you, no matter what."

"Julie, shuu, now she told us to be good children and keep quiet." He took the keys from his pocket and held them up to the street light. "Now this is the front door key and this is the key to the flat. Good solid respectable citizen lady who loves nobody because she loves *people*." He opened the door. There was enough light for them to see the faded carpet stairs, the polished hall table with a few letters on it, and on the landing a conservatory window with a plant in front.

"Room number four," he said with a burp.

"Shu . . ."

Second floor. On the door below the brass number of the flat was typewritten in a neat black frame: *Miss Argyl-Smith.*

"That's us," she said too loudly as he put the key in the lock. The door opened easily.

"It's not as posh as I thought," said Julie, swaying in the half darkness.

"Well, she said she only uses it from time to time. One day, two days, buckle my shoe. My Christ, I'm drunk, isn't there any light in this god-forsaken place?"

They both felt around the doorway. Already they were growing accustomed to the silver light from the tall windows. She said: "Oh, we don't need a light, there's the bed," and pointed.

"Thank God, so it is." He took her hand, felt a slight tension in her body, so he picked her up quickly and almost ran. He felt as he ran as if his body were resisting movement, and that at one moment the room was full of noise and the next silent. But then the bed was in front of him sooner than he expected and he threw her down. She lay with her eyes half closed, feeling dizzy and slightly sick. He threw his jacket on the floor and lay down beside her. She had a light spring coat on which he managed to take off. Then he realized that she

was asleep. He lay beside her and drew her near him, knowing that in a few minutes he too would be asleep.

She woke up first to find the beginnings of daylight coming through the window to the left of the bed. The street outside was silent. Very quickly she remembered where she was and closed her eyes again. In the night they had separated, so she turned over to face him and felt his shirt under her hand.

He stirred. She said: "It's only dawn."

"Funny, feels later than that." He became fully awake and freed his arm to look at his watch. "Can't read it properly."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to wake up yet."

"Neither do I." After a pause he said: "I didn't like that party. Too many pretty girls with empty faces and too many smart nervous men. We must have been there hours . . . Wait a minute, I think my watch said something like twenty past twelve. It can't be." He looked again.

"Well, what time is it?"

There was no answer. She pulled his wrist downward towards her. "Can't focus, too tired." She handed him back his arm. "What does it matter anyway."

He sat up, she tried to pull him back, but he remained upright. He said: "Something's gone wrong with my eyes."

"What?"

"Well, all the numbers are backwards."

"You're joking."

"I'm not, take a look yourself." He undid the watch and handed it to her. She stared at it closely and handed it back. "I'm not in the mood for one of your jokes. I've never got over the time you told my mother to dial WXY for the post office special lullaby service, and she, poor thing, did it." She slid further into the bed. "Oh, do lie down."

"In a minute." He put the watch on the bedside table on which stood a lamp with a fringed tapestry shade. He found the switch under the bulb and pushed it in. The bulb was not very bright. He said, "Won't be a minute," and swung his feet over the edge of the bed. He had dropped his jacket some distance from the bed, near the wall. As he approached it he saw that a good third of it was in total darkness as if cut by a knife. He pulled the jacket towards him. It was complete. He stood, hearing himself breathing softly and realized that the darkness was not a shadow. He forced himself to stand where the jacket had lain and then to put an arm through the thin cutting edge of the blackness, then he walked back towards the bed watching his arm appear as if created by the

light. He sat at the end of the bed, which was near enough the centre of the room, and looked carefully around him. On the opposite wall was a large mirror, reflecting the bed, the two bedside tables, and a tall window, its dawn light diffusing with the table light. From where he sat the room was shaped like a trowel without its point. He knew that the slanting edges of the trowel were not walls but . . . remembering the sensation of his hand in the darkness, he quickly got back into bed again.

"Are you back?" she asked, in a half sleep. Then, "What's the matter? You feel all cold."

"Julie, something has happened."

"Oh . . . what?"

"It's to do with this room. Can you remember last night?"

She flung herself away from him resignedly and looked up. "How dark the ceiling is. Last night. Can't remember much. Oh, yes, that woman. We came here and we were very drunk, tut tut, so . . ."

"Can you remember coming into this room?"

"Yes, why . . . at least, I think so."

"Tell me what you remember."

"You sound very odd."

"Yes, well, don't worry. Just tell me."

"Oh, come off it, Michael. What do you want to know for, anyway?"

He sighed. "Nothing in particular."

"Every time we go anywhere you're investigating. Can't you forget your science for once?"

"Sorry."

"You're not going to put our experience of being drunk into some research on human behaviour under the influence."

"You're right . . . darling, do you mind?"

"Yes . . . actually, when I think about it, I don't. OK. What do you want to know?"

"What I said: exactly movement for movement what we did or thought we did."

"Well . . ." She put her arms around his waist and lay still for a moment. "We got a taxi . . ."

"Can you remember the room when we opened the door? What did it look like?"

"Look like? It was very dark. We felt for the light and couldn't find it. I remember seeing the bed in the middle of the wall—old-fashioned arrangement, that—and the windows, a dressing table, I think certainly a cupboard."

"To the left or to the right of the door?"

"What—the cupboard?"

"No, the bed, silly."

"Oh, that . . . to the left."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Well, I believe the bed was to the right of the door because I remember feeling around for the switch, and I'm sure —in fact positive, even though I was drunk—that there was a wall to the left. Think again." She thought. He continued: "Darling, there *was* a wall to the left of the door. Remember you said something about there not being enough room for a switch."

"That's right. I remember we both started looking on the other side."

"Yet the way you pointed *was* to the left and there wasn't enough room for a bed on the left because, oh, as we both know, there was a wall."

"Maybe there was an alcove or some kind of an archway."

He was silent.

She said: "Oh, well, then, we went to the right; how do you expect me to remember?"

"But *I* do."

"Oh, you always remember directions and science things." She was almost sarcastic.

"And I'm usually right."

She said after an uneasy pause: "Let's get up and have coffee somewhere."

"I don't think we can."

"What do you mean?"

"Julie . . . something has happened, maybe because we were very drunk, but somehow we've managed to . . ."

"To what?"

"No, you'll think I'm mad."

"Oh, come off it, Michael, I won't. Hurry up and get it over with."

"Well, you remember the watch?"

"Yes, you're funny . . ."

"Well, it isn't a trick watch. My father gave it to me when I got into university."

"You mean it changed round like that in the night?"

"Yes, in a way, but there's something else I want to show you."

She put a hand to her mouth. "You're not going to say that this room is haunted. Oh, no, I couldn't bear that, please."

He interrupted. "Look, I don't know what yet. All I want is for you to say what you think and watch me. O.K. No, I'm being serious."

Suddenly she brightened. "O.K."

He got out of bed and threw his jacket to where it had lain before. More of dawn was in the room so that by now there was no mistaking the clear edge of the darkness.

"Now, why is it dark there?" he asked.

"Because the curtains are drawn over the other . . . wait. But there is no other window, and both the curtains were drawn back, I remember. . . . What's happened?"

He did not reply but showed her what happened to his jacket and then his arm.

They both ran over the small space of carpet and into bed which still contained the previous warmth of their closeness.

"We're together at last," he said. She was trembling, saying, "I don't understand," and demanding to be woken up. Finally she accused him of setting a trap.

"No, I'm trying to keep sane in a situation that seems to be mad. I want as much as you to get out of here."

"And I thought it was going to be our night. We've always talked of going away. We should have gone on holiday as we meant to. Oh, for God's sake, what nightmare have you landed us into? All we have to do is to go, just go . . . find the door in the darkness. Oh, anything."

He held her back. "No, Julie. Look, I feel hysterical too, but we must wake up properly and try to understand what's happened."

"I don't know. You're the one to discover everything. You got me here—now get me out."

"Shut up."

"You tell me we can't go to certain parts of the room because it's dark there. Did you try a light?"

"Don't have to, it would vanish just the same, and come back."

"But why in the corners of the room, why not up this end, why not us?"

"Because . . . oh, you'll think I'm mad."

"The whole thing is mad. It's so mad in a moment I'm going to laugh. Go on, then, wake me up."

He said: "We went through the mirror."

"We what?"

"Somehow or other we went through the mirror."

"Oh, don't be silly."

"But I'm right. Look, everything points to that. The clock, and the fact that there's darkness in an area that wouldn't be included in the mirror. We must have gone straight through the middle."

"But how?"

"A freak chance, the light, or . . ."

"Oh, Michael, you don't believe that."

"Oh, God, I don't want to, Julie, but what else am I to believe?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anything . . . Look, your watch is only one thing. Hold on a minute, my handbag. Here it is, a letter, that's what we need." She handed an envelope to him. "You look at it."

"It's the same mirror writing." She took it from him and looked at it. Then she quickly pushed it back into her bag, saying, "But we're real."

"I know. I've been thinking of that."

They both lay back staring at the patch of ceiling that could be seen before the darkness began.

"It's not possible that we're dreaming?" she asked.

"I've been thinking about that too, and I don't think there's any way of finding out."

"Oh, there must be. Isn't there some kind of test we can do?"

"Like what?"

After thinking, she said: "You're right. Funny, I've never thought about it before, but perhaps you could even say that our dreams are reality. On the other hand, I know we could try and prove that we're not dreaming, and then . . . Oh, God, the whole thing is quite frightening. I was feeling all right a moment ago, and now . . ."

He took hold of her hand and gripped it tightly. "Have you a mirror in your handbag?"

"Yes, I think so." She found herself trembling. Her hand shook so much she had to stop and take a deep breath. She said through tears that refused to flow: "I can't bear this much longer. Why us, what have we done? If only things were normal again. I bet even this two-shilling piece is crazy. It's no good, I'm too scared to look for the mirror."

He took the bag from her, and instead of going through it, he held her close. "Look, I feel like you do, but certain things

give me hope. We are together and we must work things out."

"Do you think we'll get out?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

She thought a long time. "Yes, I do."

"Good. Can you feel my heart beating?"

"Yes. Why?"

"We are alive and we have time."

"Do you think if we went back to sleep again . . . ?"

He shook his head and took out the mirror. After a while she said: "Come on, what do you see?"

"Myself—I mean, how I look to other people."

She took the mirror from him and gazed into it. "It's not what I'm used to seeing. My expression is different. Ugh, I don't like it." She handed the mirror back. "Funny, but I feel better again."

Still he heard a note of hysteria buried and felt like responding to it. For a moment his mind shuttered, he wanted to say, "We're both mad," but found himself tucking her mirror back into the handbag.

They sat on the pillows at the top of the bed with their legs drawn up.

"I could do with a cigarette," she said.

He found the packet and a box of matches in his pocket. They lit up. She flicked the ash off the blanket and said: "Do you think that the bed out there has us on it?"

"No."

"Oh, then we don't exist."

He sighed. "I don't know."

"But when she comes back she'll see us. It'll kill her."

"And we'll see her, but only in the mirror."

"It won't happen. It can't." She hid her face in the crook of her arm, finding the darkness a relief. "How about the window? Oh, no, we'd still be in the mirror. Supposing I set fire to the bed?"

"We'd die of burning."

She raised her head. "You're not really listening to me, are you? You think I'm being childish."

"Oh, I don't know." He lay back and stared up.

"Have I permission to go on talking? I'll go mad if I stop."

"Yes, sure."

She sighed. "Did you feel what it was like where your jacket had gone to?"

"Yes, there was not even the feeling of a hole. Just nothing. I can't describe it."

"And what about the mirror here—this one?"

"No different from any other."

They laughed half-heartedly.

She put her cigarette out on the table leg and disappeared under a blanket. He could feel her body heaving. He stared around for a while, then took hold of the wooden frame of the bed and gripped it tightly, gritting his teeth. He wanted more than anything to cry out and to shatter the still air into movement. He heard her say: "You carried me into here, so you can get me out."

He said, not expecting her to hear: "But you pointed out the way, and now we're here together forever."

"Oh, shut up, shut up, shut up." Her voice echoed, muffled, enclosed. Suddenly she appeared, flinging back the blanket from her red face. "This is mad."

He took hold of her but she froze against him. He waited, then said: "Look, give me some more time to think and investigate."

But means of escape kept crowding into her mind. "We'll take the mirror down. We'll break the mirror. We'll find the door." He disagreed with all of them. Finally she said: "You're right. It's no good getting het up. What we need is a combined effort, scientifically mainly . . ."

"Good." But he sounded as if he only half believed. "Now the main thing is—how did we get here?"

"We were drunk."

"Yes, and . . ."

"We couldn't see."

"Oh, shut up interrupting."

"My God, I hate you."

"O.K. But it doesn't matter for now."

"Or ever, for that matter." She lay back again.

After a long time he said: "Mind if I take another look round?"

"Do what you like."

He looked under the bed, felt again the blackness. He went over to the mirror and ran his hands up and down.

When he came back she said: "I want to go to the lavatory."

"So do I."

"Shall we try the window?"

"I've looked. There is a square of light, half a tree and a bit of the house opposite. The rest is darkness. In fact, only what would be seen from the other side of the mirror."

"Then we are trapped."

"Yes, and we have to go back. In a way it's a relief. I imagined an inverted world. Anyway, it narrows the alternatives."

Daylight had finally taken over the frail side light, but it revealed no more than what they already knew. He put a hand out to switch off the light and felt the heat from the bulb. They sat again at the top of the bed with a blanket over their knees. They smoked another cigarette, watching the smoke ascend straight upwards.

"It's only the darkness that's frightening," she said.

"I know. When I put my hand into it there was almost positively nothing. No up, no down, no warmth or cold."

"Like outer space."

"Yes, I imagine so. But we aren't completely cut off. Wait a minute whilst I find a pencil and paper."

They had become more relaxed. She put an arm round his shoulders whilst he wrote on the inside of a cigarette packet: THINGS WE HAVE. They looked at each other. "It's the right way round," she said. "Yes, and I wrote it with my right hand, you see."

"What?"

"We are all right, we're intact, and so are some other things." He continued writing. WE HAVE TIME (watch). WE HAVE HEAT AND LIGHT (table lamp). OUR BODIES ARE FUNCTIONING NORMALLY.

"So what don't we have?" she asked.

He wrote down THINGS WE DON'T HAVE: Noise from the other side, and no other objects than those that would be in a mirror image.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"No." He dropped the carton and pencil onto the bed and closed his eyes.

"Are you feeling awful?" she asked.

"Yes, rather. Just at the moment I can't see what we're going to do."

She took hold of his head and kissed him on the mouth. "I'm sorry. I expect you to have all the answers and it just isn't fair. You did forget one other thing—we still have our feelings, and, what's more, our imagination."

"You're right." He put his arms round her and they lay close for a while. He said: "Christ, I'm hungry."

"You had some chocolate in your pocket yesterday."

"That's right, and there's some left." They almost laughed at the mirror writing on the wrapping, and ate greedily.

Later they worked out the time on the watch to be ten past four. They made plans. They remembered as nearly as possible the exact time they must have gone through the mirror. They tidied the room and the bed, throwing their cigarette butts, the carton and wrappings into the darkness, attempting to leave everything as it must have been on their arrival . . . and waited.

"Do you think you can do it?" he asked.

"Everything is so weird I think my imagination can do anything for me. How about you?"

"I feel the same way."

"Have another glass of wine."

They drank, they heard the music, there was no sound, there were no glasses.

At one-thirty in the morning they turned off the light, their minds overtaken by a feeling of relaxed drunkenness. He picked her up, felt her fear, and ran.

She screamed as they fell against the mirror. "You idiot, that's not the way." They were both sitting on the floor. He burped: "Sorry, darling." Then, contrite, he stood up and swayed over her. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I don't think so, but you might look where you're going."

"If only I could find the bloody light," she was saying. "Don't like this place anyway. Stuffy."

"You're not backing out, are you?" He found the switch. "There, that's better." They looked round. "Still don't like it," she said. "I think I feel sick too. All that wine." She got up from the floor and went over to the doorway. "Can we go somewhere else?" He came towards her. "No, Michael, please, I want to go."

He put his arms round her. She went on: "It's not you, it's this place."

"But it's just an ordinary room. Look, the room opposite has 'bathroom' written on it. Go and put your head under the tap and see how you feel then. OK?"

She sniffed. "All right, but I'm not going to change my mind."

When she came back he was on the landing closing the door. Surprised, she looked at him. He said: "Maybe you're right, it's not our kind of room. Come on, we'll find an all-night coffee bar, how's that?"

"Lovely."

Outside she felt like crying with relief. He said: "I feel somehow as though the war's over or I've just got through my exams. Maybe it's just sobering up."

They found a Wimpy Bar and sat next to each other.

"I broke my watch throwing you against that mirror," he said. She shivered. "I thought you'd be angry with me for not . . ."

"No, I agree with you, actually."

"Why?"

"Well, when you were in the bathroom—you'll find this hard to believe—but you know the mirror? . . . Maybe it was the light or me being drunk. I had a good look at it because it seemed to be so important. Even you had thought the bed was there, anyway." He sighed. "It definitely reflected the whole room, much more than it could have, really. It wasn't like looking through a mirror—there was too much there. It was like . . . like looking through a window."

Janus

Paul Tabori

□ Let no man write his epitaph—for as far as we know he isn't dead yet. But if he were and if one did, one could do a good deal worse than quoting Abe Bromwood, his American brother-in-law.

Here lies, then, Christopher Masters, Q.C., M.P. And, as Abe said:

It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. But it shouldn't have happened to a dog.

The acorn, the lost nail in the horseshoe, the first drop in the bucket or the last straw was a very slight itching at the back of his head, just below the supra-occipital bone. He was a fanatic about personal hygiene, needing no best friend to tell him about the slightest infringement of his self-imposed rules of cleanliness; he took two baths a day and his breath was as fresh as his linen. But the itch persisted and so he went to his barber and ordered a dry shampoo followed by a vibro-massage. This he repeated several days running, brushing and combing his hair, which was the colour of a well-polished conker, shading from glossy brown into sleek red, until it shone with an aura any hair-cream model would have envied. And for a while the itching ceased. But at the same time he had a far more distressing experience. He was speaking in the House and had reached his peroration. The subject was one of supreme importance: the freedom of choice in the colour and shape of garden sheds erected on council estates by the tenants. He not only knew exactly what he wanted to say but held very strong convictions on the subject. Yet as he came to the end of his carefully prepared speech, there was a momentary blankness, a tiny black-out. In those few seconds another voice sounded in his ear—a close whisper, an intimate warning. Masters, of course, was for tidy uniformity in the design of garden sheds; the colours, though bright and even gay, had to be the same not only in each street but in each section, he argued; and if any undisciplined tenant defied the regulations, he should be fined and an immediate order for the demolition of the offending structure should be is-

sued. The arguments, the facts and figures, the considerations of national economy were so clear that nobody could refute them. And yet the voice had the impudence to say, clearly, with a sort of cold sneer: *"Does it matter, cock?"*

The vulgarity was startling and disconcerting. He glanced over his shoulder. But the Honourable Member for Pettidale, sitting just behind him, was quite obviously asleep—and the seats flanking him were empty. There was no one within sufficiently close reach to have whispered those four blatantly unparliamentary words. He glared across the floor at the Opposition benches. But they were too distant and their occupants too somnolent to furnish serious suspects. Reluctantly, with growing uneasiness, he was forced to accept the only two remaining possibilities: he was either suffering from aural hallucination or, even worse, the voice had been his own, speaking within his skull. The first, however obnoxious, was the less offensive—especially as the accent had been quite unmistakably North Country, Geordie-like, to be precise—a handicap Christopher Masters had long ago overcome and refused even to remember.

It was all over in a couple of seconds and, reaching the end of his speech without further mishap, he was quite prepared to put it out of his mind. He had sufficient alibis; he had been working very hard, his social life had been more than exacting, and the preparations for his marriage (he was engaged to a charming girl, inevitably named Penelope, daughter of a merchant banker) had also brought some strain. Perhaps he should go away for a weekend; Clive Buxton had been after him for months to spend a few days in Lanarkshire. Penny would understand; she was always pressing him to relax, to have fun, to be with it, instead of all work and the parade of duty.

"Fine speech, Chris," murmured the P.P.S. of the Minister of Local Government as they met in the corridor. This was a relief even if the P.P.S. didn't mean it; at least no one had noticed anything wrong.

But next morning when he woke, the itching had started again—and as he gingerly felt the back of his head he discovered a slight swelling. He tried to trace it with a hesitant finger; the area was narrow but quite long, stretching from just below the top of his skull to within an inch or so of his nape. He rang up Larry Hooper, who was his doctor and a personal friend; after a bit of unnecessary, bantering chit-chat

he managed to get an appointment in Wimpole Street for the next day.

Larry was youngish, very advanced in his ideas of diagnosis and treatment and highly successful. His surgery was decorated with half a dozen expensive paintings; his secretary and his nurse were both pretty and equally expensive. He gave Christopher a thorough check-up and found nothing wrong with him except a slightly below normal blood pressure. The swelling he dismissed as unimportant; a slight subcutaneous infection that a shot of antibiotics would clear up in no time. He seemed to be far more interested in the latest Westminster gossip and in the details of the forthcoming wedding; his casual manner reassured the patient while at the same time leaving him vaguely dissatisfied.

That night he had dinner at Penny's house, very much *en famille*, with Eugene Seward, his future father-in-law, Gloria, Penny's stepmother, barely five years her senior, and Eric, Penny's teen-age stepbrother, around the candlelit table. Seward was a man who couldn't help talking shop and he particularly wanted to know what Masters thought of the current negotiations for the expansion of East-West trade. As Christopher's whole life was devoted to being dutiful, unambiguous and clear-minded, he hadn't the slightest doubt that his views on practically everything were preferable to those of others. He hated devious and fuzzy minds; he couldn't understand how anybody, being in full possession of the facts, could fail to draw proper conclusions from them. The only questions he considered legitimate were those that could be answered yes or no. It was this masculine and never-to-be shaken self-assurance that had won him Holywell, an industrial constituency in Yarnshire; it was his forensic ability that made him one of the youngest and highest-paid Q.C.s.

"Well, Christopher," said Eugene Seward, sniffing appreciatively the bouquet of his glass of Gevrey Chambertin, "don't you think that lifting this particular embargo would contribute substantially to the reduction of tension? I don't mind telling you . . ."

The voice spoke again but now it was mimicking Seward's slightly nasal tones: ". . . that I don't care one brass farthing for the reduction of tension but only for the increase of my already exorbitant profits . . ."

Horrified, Masters gulped his wine. He choked and began to cough, covering his lips with his napkin in the nick of time while Seward, Gloria and Penny stared at him amazed and

Eric began to snicker. He recovered swiftly enough but by this time he felt he had disgraced himself. He tried to put things right by agreeing with everything his prospective father-in-law was saying; but all the time he was listening with one ear for the voice, tense and frightened that this time it would pass from inside his skull into his mouth, along his tongue, and become audible to others.

Later that night Penny walked with him down the long drive of the large garden that was the pride of the Seward mansion. She stopped under a walnut tree that had been imported at vast cost from France but had failed to produce any walnuts yet; she tilted her face, closed her eyes and waited for Christopher's kiss. She was a girl with healthy and well-defined appetites and it was only in reluctant deference to her fiance's principles that she hadn't yet seduced him. She was quite determined to go to bed with him if the wedding was delayed beyond Easter, the date she had set without consulting anybody's wishes except her own. In the meantime she wanted what *ersatz* she could get even if it was but a mild semblance of the real thing.

Christopher's kisses were reasonably expert and certainly did not lack fervour. But as her slim figers caressed his neck and then moved slowly upwards from his nape, he suddenly stiffened and drew back. Penny, far from being satisfied, continued to cling to him and her fingers went on exploring the back of his head.

"Why, darling," she said with a little laugh, "what a funny little ridge you've got here. I never noticed!"

He tore himself free, so violently that she stumbled and almost fell, finding support at the last moment in the rough, deeply furrowed bark of the tree.

"What . . . what is it?" she gasped.

He had recovered his self-control but it was touch-and-go.

"N-nothing . . . I . . . I twisted my ankle . . . I was shifting my leg a little and . . ."

He was a bad liar and she would have pursued the matter; but Eric came cycling past them on his way to some esoteric gang-meeting, and they turned back to the house. But the memory lingered in Penny's fingers—a strange, tactile memory of a thin, hard, slightly curving protuberance at the back of Christopher's head where it had no business to be.

What panicked him really wasn't the discovery his fiancee's exploring fingers had made but his own physical reaction to her touch. He had felt an almost irresistible urge to *sneeze.*

There was something obscene about this—as if his foot had suddenly started to speak or his navel had grown a fingernail. It was obscene because it was against nature, against the normal and established—that is, against his whole conception of the universe.

He went to a hospital on the outskirts of South London and gave a false name. A tall, slim man whose skin was the colour of milk chocolate, a colour emphasized by his spotless white coat, listened patiently to his somewhat incoherent complaint. Then his long, dark-brown fingers moved gently over Christopher's skull, pausing now and then as if conducting a phrenological examination. The West Indian doctor's face was impassive, his lips pursed judiciously. Christopher watched him anxiously, waiting for a verdict that did not come.

A couple of X-ray photographs were taken and he was told to wait. It was about an hour later that he was called back into the surgery. The doctor was sitting behind his desk, studying the X-ray plate in the holder; now he switched off the light and leant back, his fingertips touching.

"There's no tumour or any pathological change, Mr. Smith," he said. "The only thing I can find is an enlargement of the pre-inter parietal . . ."

"The what?"

The doctor switched on the light again. He pointed to a finger-long shape stretching downwards from the ghostly but well-defined image of Christopher's skull.

"You see this? It's called the lambda—the point where the sagittal and lambdoid sutures of the skull meet. You know, where the two halves of your skull are fitted or, if you like, stitched together. Can you see it?"

"Yes," Christopher said reluctantly.

"Now just at this point is a small Wormian bone we call the pre-inter parietal . . ."

Christopher was getting a little tired of this anatomical lecture.

"A small bone?" he repeated.

"Usually it's small enough. But in your case it has become enlarged and seems to be reaching almost to the inion . . ."

"Look, doctor, I'm afraid all this . . ."

". . . means nothing to you?" The West Indian's smile was dazzling. "I'm sorry. It's called the external occipital protuberance. In your case the pre-inter parietal has become extended vertically and the inion has spread horizontally . . ."

"I'm afraid I still don't . . ."

The doctor sighed. "Let me assure you, it's nothing to worry about. Unusual—but I've heard of similar cases before. It just means that you have an extra bump or two at the back of your head . . ."

He felt a strong urge to tell about his disconcerting experiences, the one in the House, the others with Penny's father and Penny herself. But what tangible facts could he supply? That he heard voices? That he suddenly saw two sides of the same question? That he had felt the urge to sneeze when the girl's finger had touched him?

Apart from his life-long habit of unequivocal opinions and uncompromising choices, the deepest characteristic of Christopher Masters was a fear of ridicule, a horror of being laughed at. So he walked out of the surgery and went home, resisting the impulse of feeling the back of his head, trying to trace the pre-inter parietal and inion—whatever they were.

When he woke next morning he lay for a few minutes with his eyes closed. There was a burning, throbbing sensation which seemed to pulsate inside his skull. He waited for a while before he dared to pass his palm across his head, stopping for a moment at the top and then slowly, reluctantly sliding it down—until it froze.

The vertical ridge, as he followed it with trembling fingers, was no longer hidden under his hair. It felt as if it had thrust forward, burst through his scalp. No longer skeletal or bony, it was apparently clothed in flesh. At its lower end there were two small openings into which he could insert the tip of his small finger. And as he did so, he sneezed. But—this was the blackest moment—the sneeze did not convulse his nose, involve his mucous membranes. It was lunatic and impossible—but he was sneezing through the back of his head or through the pre-inter parietal. At the same time he felt a quiver lower down and, as he gathered all his courage to slide his middle finger a bit closer to his nape, he touched a horizontal swelling—no, not one: two small but clearly marked fleshy excrescences or protuberances.

With a hoarse scream Christopher Masters jumped from bed and rushed into the bathroom. With shaking fingers he adjusted his shaving mirror so that it faced the larger one above the washbasin. He had to rub them both to wipe off the steam that fogged them and his eyes had difficulty in focusing —or perhaps deliberately refused to function properly.

He parted the hair at the back of his head. He bent close to

the bigger mirror, twisting the other one slightly to get the best—or worst—view.

The thing the West Indian doctor had called the pre-inter parietal was exactly like a nose with small, pinched nostrils, a well-marked bridge and slightly curving sides. Below it—and this was the more terrifying—a pair of narrow yet clearly discernible lips had appeared with a gleam of white between them.

Christopher Masters, Q.C., M.P., was growing a second nose, an extra mouth—for all he knew, a second face.

It's only at the very end of one's tether that the defence mechanism of the brain fails to start functioning. And Christopher, however filled with self-loathing and despair, was very far from his end. His despair soon yielded to indignation—"Why does this have to happen to me?"—and then to the sober balancing of facts. ("What can I do? What can be done for me?")

He had lost all faith in doctors—lackadaisical Larry or the chocolate-coloured, molasses-voiced G.P. couldn't help him; he was sure that no specialist or faith-healer would be of any use. This was no sickness, no mysterious tropical disease, no brain tumour—as a matter of fact, apart from the state of shock that was passing fast, he felt perfectly normal and well. It was something that had never happened before and would probably never happen again to any human being. And again, he revolted that he of all people should be chosen by some blind and sadistic power to endure this.

He made a few telephone calls; it wasn't easy, but his brain worked with its usual incisive efficiency and persuasiveness and within a couple of hours he had freed himself of all engagements and obligations for the next two weeks. It meant telling a few hastily improvised yet quite plausible lies; it meant putting the burden of his regular work on not always willing shoulders. But by the middle of the morning he was able to dress, put on an old duffle coat he had unearthed from a seldom-opened closet and, half-anonymous under its hood, sneak out the back entrance of his mews house. He had cut a Soho address from an evening paper, and took a taxi to it.

"It's for a show my club's putting on," he explained to the little man in the wigmaker's shop, who didn't seem to be very much interested.

"What's the play?"

Christopher thought fast. *"School for Scandal,"* he said

with only a second's hesitation. "But I'd like to use my own hair . . . just make it fuller at the back . . ."

"Not easy to match, that colour . . . I'll see what we've got. Might be pricey, though . . ."

He paid thirty pounds in cash. Luckily he had drawn a hundred the day before: there had been a plan, now cancelled, of going to the dogs with Penny, who liked "plebian" amusements. The wig was a near enough match and though he disliked its too-soft, artificial feeling, he couldn't be choosey. He refused to try it on, explaining that the company had its own hairdresser who could fit it. He did it himself, not without some fumbling, and cursing. He looked like a middle-aged Mod, he told himself—or was it a Rocker?—an aging Beatle or a somewhat battered pop star. But there was enough of it to cover securely whatever was burgeoning and swelling over his occiput.

Next day he was established at the small inn. He used to know the proprietor but the man had been dead five years and no one would recognize him, he hoped. He had started to grow a moustache and would grow a beard, if necessary and if he had the time. Time for what? The questions had to be asked before any answers could be attempted. His work, Penny, his friends, political and legal allegiances—a hundred problems he had to sort out. If *this*—this obscene and, above all, undignified and undeserved business—continued, where would it end? What would he be fit for except to join a circus side-show as a freak?

He had bought two triple mirrors and a couple of large torches, and he spent much of his time locked in his bare but comfortable and clean room at the Cumberland inn, studying and watching the face that was developing and shaping—it seemed to him, at an ever-increasing pace. As if whatever was under his skin had just waited for the right moment to erupt. The lips were full now, much fuller than his own; and between them there was a set of small, even, white teeth, rather like a child's first set. This was all for the time being—but it was more than enough. The face he was growing wasn't a duplicate of his own, of that he was quite sure; it was different, softer and yet somehow faunlike. Maybe he would start sprouting horns, he told himself as he adjusted the wig before he went down to the bar, or a third eye in the middle of supra-occipital. . . .

He watched himself with intense narcissistic attention. For a few days there was no further development of the second

face—except that the skull area on both sides of the nose became swollen and gradually shaped into smooth, fuzz-covered cheeks—and he began to plan the future. He would have to resign both his seat and his partnership in Grove, Masters and Grove; and, though this was something of a wrench, he would have to break off his engagement to Penny. He had no particular illusions about her: she might be willing to marry a philanderer, a sadist or a snob—but certainly not a freak.

He had some savings but hardly sufficient to keep him for the rest of his life. Maybe if he could carry on for another six months or so—there were one or two particularly lucrative briefs coming up—he would have a more secure basis for retirement. Certainly he could find a place and some sphere of activity where his peculiarities could remain hidden, where no one would suspect his second face. If he devoted a few weeks to planning, he was confident he could solve his future, provided . . .

The girl arrived next day, a young, blatantly nubile creature in shorts, a rucksack on her back and a transistor blaring at her flank hanging on a strap. Christopher was shunning all but the most necessary human contacts; he would sit in the saloon bar, always in the same dim corner and glower at anybody who tried to approach. But the girl refused to be snubbed and made it obvious that singleness and solitude were unthinkable to her. She told Christopher that she had been on a walking tour with a boy friend, had quarrelled with him and left him; now she was waiting at the inn until he came "crawling to heel." She was quite confident that this would happen; or, if it didn't, she would find some other suitable companion.

She elected Christopher for the role—making the choice at the end of the second day when the recalcitrant boy friend had not appeared. She did not waste time on small talk or coquetry; late that night she came into his room wearing her plastic mac—she was travelling light, of course—and nothing else.

He felt no inclination to play Joseph to her Madame Potiphar, for she was young and reasonably shapely and offered a welcome way of escaping, however temporarily, his grim brooding. She didn't ask him for leave, anyhow. She shed the flimsy mac and got into the four-poster in which Queen Elizabeth would have slept if she had ever passed that way.

She was both expert and enthusiastic, prolonging the preliminaries pleasureably until Christopher forgot everything in the sweetness of her flesh, the fusing of their bodies. Her firm,

pear-shaped breasts pressed against him, her nipples burrowing into the hair on his chest; her hips moved in a slow, steady rhythm that would soon become a gallop towards the climax; the scent that enveloped them was neither too sweet nor too overpowering, and her mouth and tongue aided their rising lust with frankly professional skill.

Her hands had been under her head as they started but now they began to move up the line of his spine, pausing now and then to give a sort of glissando run on the strings of his rib-case. It was too late to stop them even if he had been able to concentrate on anything but the rhythm of their love-making. Her right hand dug into his shoulder blade, the fingernails raking his skin; her left hand moved higher, caressed his nape, his hair . . .

The scream was low and it had nothing to do with pleasure. Almost the same second his own climax came—yet a moment later she had twisted away and rolled to the edge of the bed, sobbing and panting. Christopher, helpless in his orgasm, couldn't speak or move immediately. And when he did, he felt something indescribable—the taste of blood was in his mouth . . . but it wasn't his mouth and it wasn't his palate or tongue that tasted it.

The girl had stopped screaming. She was groping for the sheet. Then she switched on the bedside lamp.

"You . . ."

He faced her, terrified, frozen.

"What is it? What's happened?"

She was shaking and clutching the sheet, as if covering her nakedness would also protect her from some menace.

"You . . . you bit my hand . . . you . . ."

And then she ran, not daring to look at him, not even daring to point to the back of his head where the lips were half open and the whiteness of the teeth was stained with red.

He dressed, shivering and dumb with self-loathing; he packed and, leaving money on the bedside table, slipped out of the inn and walked the three miles to the railway station.

The girl didn't know his real name; there was hardly any likelihood that she would tell the story. But he had to get away. There was no escape, no forgetting *that* way: the gate was closed, the gates of women's bodies. For if he couldn't control that *other* face, its lips and nose and whatever else was still burgeoning inside his skull, how could he ever make love?

He became a little calmer during the long train ride. He needed help. And he thought of his sister Muriel and her husband Abe. They were his only living relatives, and though they only met a couple of times a year they were *family*. Christopher had always snubbed his brother-in-law and was only slightly put out by the fact that Abe, cheerfully Jewish and Brooklynese, never seemed to realize that he was being snubbed. Abe had been working for the *Daily Platform* since he was a cub reporter and was now the paper's most popular syndicated columnist; he was raucous and witty, a pricker of stuffed shirts and milker of sacred cows. Whatever Muriel saw in him, Christopher failed to fathom; but they had been married ten years and Abe had sired five children so they must be reasonably close.

They received him with equal surprise and pleasure, for Muriel was genuinely fond of her brother, the children adored his avuncular manner, and Abe was fascinated by him as the Mark 1966 of the Typical Upper Middle Class Englishman. Muriel remarked that he was pale and had lost weight, asked about Penny and the wedding but, as it is the wont of busy mothers and housewives, didn't really listen to his evasive answers. When he asked whether he could stay a day or two with them, she was delighted and immediately concerned with clean towels and extra steaks. It wasn't fair to inflict it upon her, Christopher thought, and he postponed it for a day, hoping irrationally that he would find a way of disclosing his secret without shocking and dismaying her.

But that night as he removed his wig and parted the hair at the back of his head, "airing" his second face, he noticed a fresh and alarming development. Just under the crown of his scull, on both sides of the sagittal suture, there were shallow indentations which had not been there before. Above them hair was sprouting—marking twin arches. It took him a little time, tracing the edges of the hollows (which felt tender and taut), before he realized with a cold, sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach, that they were shaped like incipient, lightly sketched eye-sockets.

For some reason this discovery gave him a gloomy pleasure, a perverse reassurance. If he had to grow a second face, it might as well be complete, he thought. Perfection was better than a partial achievement—even in being a freak. He did not pause to consider where it would stop—whether he would sprout an extra pair of ears or whether he would have to start shaving both front and back . . . Of all the doubled "gifts"

some mischievous and malevolent fate was bestowing on him, the eyes at the back of his head might be the most useful or the least objectionable. . . .

That night, when the children had exhausted the last strategic excuses for not going to bed, he asked Muriel not to switch on the television; he had something to tell them. Abe, replete and pleased with the column he had written that afternoon, filled up their brandy glasses. Muriel, frowning a little, said:

"Let me guess—it isn't about Penny, is it, Chris? She's such a lovely girl—I hope to goodness . . ."

"No. It isn't about Penny. At least, she isn't the most important part of it. You see—"

He found it harder than he had anticipated—as though he had to pronounce a four-letter word or make a declaration of bankruptcy. Muriel was looking at him with gentle disapproval; Abe was sniffing at the brandy. Christopher took a very deep breath.

"I'm growing a second face," he said.

There. It was out; and he was proud of his courage.

But the response was shattering.

"Are you sure, dear?" Muriel said, picking up her sewing-basket. "Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

"Damn useful thing," Abe added cheerfully. "Whenever a politician loses one face he wishes he had another one . . ."

He felt like screaming at them; but instead, he got up and systematically switched on all the lights in the big, comfortable shabby living room. They watched him, half-indulgent, half-uneasy. He stopped in the middle of the carpet and, with a slightly melodramatic gesture, whipped off the wig.

"Holy smoke!"

This was Abe.

Muriel just stared; then she started to rise, slowly, as if hypnotized. Abe was just in time to catch her as she keeled over, spilling the contents of the sewing basket all over the floor.

With Muriel in bed, stuffed with tranquillizers and an ice-pack over her heart, Abe tossed off a double brandy and settled down to a man-to-man talk.

"And those are the . . . the only extras you're growing?" he asked.

"What d'you mean?"

Abe grinned. "Well, a man could sometimes do with a second . . ."

"Abe, you do have a filthy mind!"

". . . a second pair of hands or feet, I was going to say," the columnist replied with a look of indignant innocence.

"The answer is no."

"And the doctors? You've seen any?"

"Yes. They're no help."

"But otherwise—"

"I feel quite well. My digestion, my bodily functions—they're all quite normal."

"So—what's your problem?"

Christopher stared at his brother-in-law, who was rather bald and plump but handsome in an Old Testament way.

"I mean—why don't you go on? Muriel and I will keep our mouths shut. You're always welcome in this house if you want help or advice—"

"But can't you see, Abe—"

"Look—there are people who carry on with one leg or in a wheelchair or with even more serious handicaps. You've got a surplus, not a deficiency. And if you ever want to sell your story, I can get you a cool hundred thousand bucks—a million, with the film rights. Think of it—*I was Janus.* Or: *The Man With the Extra Face.* Or . . ."

"Oh stop it, Abe."

But while he protested, the *other* voice, the voice that he now recognized as part and parcel of his other face, was saying: "Why not? Don't be a fool—why not?"

And yet that was the one thing he couldn't tell his brother-in-law about. The fear that the second face also meant a second mind. It wasn't schizophrenic—for in the case of split personality your mind just divided. With him it was the opposite: his own brain was still whole, inviolate—something had been added, something had grown and developed, and he wasn't certain whether the two were complementary or deadly opponents. But even if he had known, what could he have done about it?

They spent the rest of the night talking, and in the morning he went back to his mews house, collected the list of calls from the answering service, spoke to his clerk at Lincoln's Inn, and scanned most of his mail. It was the middle of the morning when he stopped suddenly, halfway through a long newspaper clipping which one of his constituents had sent to him. It was the familiar itching he felt again but more violent than before, mixed with sudden stabbing, flashing spasm of pain.

He went into the bathroom, removed the wig he was now wearing day and night and adjusted the mirrors. Then, hesitantly, he parted his hair at the back of his head, brushing it out of the way.

He blinked—but, as his vision cleared, his eyes focused, it was a dizzy, whirling image that appeared. A little like the photographer's trick of producing the front page of a magazine with a figure holding a copy of the same publication—and so on, ever diminishing until it was all lost in an indistinct blur. Except that with him the image was not growing smaller. The eyes whose sockets he had traced only a few days before had now developed and were open—with eyebrows, lids, eyelashes, pupils, corneas, all complete. Four eyes staring at each other in pairs, the two faces reflected in the mirrors and their images being reflected again and again until he felt faint and had to close one pair of eyes. But which one? The dizziness grew and it was a long time before he could be sure whether his "new" or his "old" eyes were open. He hastily brushed his hair over the back of his head, donned his wig; but the eyes at the back opened again and he saw a dim waterfall of brownish strands—broken rays of light penetrated under the wig from the sides until, almost frantic, he rearranged things and was left with single vision . . . at least temporarily.

As he emerged from the bathroom, his front doorbell rang and a moment or so later he heard steps ascending the narrow staircase. Only two people had keys to the house—his charwoman and Penny. And he had sacked the cleaning woman when he had gone off to the remote country inn.

"Christopher!" The girl looked exceptionally pretty, her colour high, her firm breasts straining. "What on earth have you been up to?"

"Nothing . . . just a little under the weather . . ."

"You're starting lying much too soon," she said while she tilted her face for his kiss. Dutifully, though gingerly, he obliged. She sighed. He took both her hands and imprisoned them in his own—he did not want the unfortunate experience of the Sewards' garden to be repeated. And there was so much for her to *feel* now . . . so much more for her caressing fingers to discover.

"Now, really, Chris," she pouted, "I hate mysteries. It's the one thing I absolutely can't stand."

"What d'you do about them, then?" he tried to tease her.

"Solve them—or ignore them, if they concern people I

don't care for. But with you, darling . . . So, are you going to tell me?"

He wanted to say, of course: "But there's nothing to tell." Instead, a high-pitched voice that was as different from his usual, well-schooled baritone as a Beatle's scream from Whispering Smith's dulcet tones, spoke in loud irritation:

"I'll tell you, you silly little bitch . . . and you can make the most of it!"

Penny's mouth was a pink oval of speechless amazement as her fiance swung round. For the first time the voice, the *other* voice, was no longer muffled and caged within his skull. He felt his second set of lips moving; clipped, sneering and cold, the words came:

"I've grown a second face. You can have two at the price of one. I'm sure that no other girl in SW7 could boast of such a priceless acquisition!"

She stared at him, still unable to speak though he could see her throat moving, her lips working. And then the dam burst —but it was laughter, an avalache of mirth that shook and overwhelmed her. It wasn't hysterical, either; one couldn't imagine Penelope Seward to be governed by emotions rising from the womb.

"Oh, my darling!" she gasped, helplessly swayed and swept by laughter. "This is certainly priceless! I must get one, too!"

It was his turn to gape.

"So lifelike and so beautifully fitted! And the voice—how do you do it? Is it plastic? Or some new kind of material?"

He had expected horror, flight, revulsion—maybe pity or curiosity. But certainly not disbelief.

He grabbed her right hand.

"Feel . . ."

Her palm passed hesitantly over chin, lips, cheeks. Then she gave a sudden tug, holding his "other" nose between thumb and forefinger. The pain was excruciating but he didn't cry out; however, his eyes—those recently-opened, newly acquired eyes—filled with tears.

She dropped her hand and stepped back.

"I . . . I don't believe it," she whispered. "It's a joke . . . a hideous, awful . . ."

Christopher produced a handkerchief and blew his nose while Penny watched him, spellbound and, in spite of her words, no longer incredulous.

Then she turned on her stiletto heels and ran.

The disappearance of Christopher Masters, M.P., Q.C., was one of the front-page mysteries of the year. Several newspaper-columnists hinted that he must be the Fourth Man—only, instead of Moscow he must have defected to Peking. Indeed, he was seen in half a dozen places, and three men bearing a slight resemblance to the published photographs were arrested in Hong Kong, Casablanca and Melbourne. None of them was Christopher. Naturally, Abe and Muriel were besieged by reporters but when the columnist of the *Platform* insisted on "no comment" his colleagues realized that he either knew nothing or that whatever he knew, he was unable to publish. Penelope Seward was in Switzerland and refused to make any statement; six months later she married one of her father's junior partners.

By then the story faded and almost died, though now and then there was a little flurry of speculation and a whiff of red herrings. In due course Christopher Masters's seat was declared to be vacant and a by-election was held; his name was also removed from the roll of the Inner Temple and, when the statutory period had passed, he was declared dead, his estate was wound up, and practically all traces of his existence vanished.

Almost ten years later a writer-producer of television documentaries came back to London after an extensive Far Eastern tour. He swore that he was telling the truth and offered, a little desperately, a few feet of film evidence. But nobody really believed him. For one thing he was known to be fond of drink *and* of practical jokes; for another, the film was underexposed and out of focus. It showed a tall, spare figure, clad in what must have been rags, sitting on a pedestal or the section of a ruined wall. The TV man declared that he had plainly and unmistakably recognized Christopher Masters, with whom he had once filmed a long interview about council housing. The facts that this startling figure was wearing nothing but a loincloth, that he was seemingly enthroned at the top of the high frontier pass between India and China, and that he had two faces, sounded so fantastic that no one had the slightest intention of verifying them. After a while the TV man himself gave up his attempt. After all, what did the story prove? What was the sense of it?

But the man with two faces—*if* he existed—would sit there in the pure, rare mountain air, nourished by the pious gifts of the faithful, facing both ways and perfectly at peace.

The Voice

Marten Cumberland

☐ Musgrave had held marvellous cards throughout the long session, and was apologetic at having all the luck. About midnight the four remaining players began to yawn. At the end of a round of jackpots Briscoe rose to his feet.

"It's not my night!" he said, bitterly. "This is where I throw in."

"Well," Musgrave began, "I don't like walking away with all this sordid loot, so if you fellows are thirsting to get your own back, then we might . . . ?"

The others, however, were in agreement with Briscoe. The little party broke up. Musgrave and Briscoe walked away from the club together.

"It's not very late," said Musgrave as they turned into Piccadilly. "Come along to my place and have a nightcap."

"Thanks." Briscoe accepted. "I'll do anything with you except play cards! But I mustn't be too late, I'm going abroad tomorrow."

Reaching Musgrave's small but luxurious house in Curzon Street the two men went up to the drawing room on the first floor.

Musgrave was still in apologetic mood.

"I'm afraid it's deucedly cold. The wife's gone south and taken the servants with her. I'll probably go myself, tomorrow, or get a room at the club. Do sit down. I'll put a match to this gas fire. Rather old-fashioned set-up but the wife loves the house."

"Right!" said Briscoe. "I'll keep my coat on for a few minutes. You don't mind a pipe . . . ?"

"Good Lord, no!"

Musgrave shook his large, blond head. He was tall, a little over thirty, with a pink complexion that gave him a slightly ingenious air. His blue eyes appeared almost abnormally large, whilst his mouth was small and sensitive. There was a suggestion of the peaceful Viking about this wealthy shipowner, and he contrasted rather comically with Briscoe, short, spectacled, desiccated.

After squatting on his heels until the fire changed from faint blue to a reddish glow, the big man stood up, and, straightening himself, looked at his companion.

"It's odd," he said. "Two or three times tonight you spoke of the impossibility of your having any good luck. I find it queer to think that you scientific fellows may be superstitious."

Briscoe laughed.

"Scientific fellow!" he echoed. "That's a big name for a poor devil of a manufacturing chemist! I'm certainly not superstitious in the ordinary sense of the word. I believe in runs of luck, because I've seen 'em—and I saw yours tonight! I believe, too, in the laws of average."

Still in his overcoat Briscoe settled back in a huge armchair that made his figure appear slighter than ever: a dark, birdlike man, something between forty and forty-five. His quick, black eyes shifted to the other's face.

"Does that remark of yours mean that you incline towards superstition, Musgrave?"

"Well, few of us are entirely free from credulity, you know!" Musgrave laughed in nervous apology. "As a matter of fact I have one . . . er . . . article of faith. It's a kind of family heritage. A queer one—but I don't think I'd like to ignore it."

"Really!" The small man sat up straight. "What form does this take? If one is allowed to ask?"

"Certainly. I don't talk about it as a rule, but I'd like to have your views. That is one reason why I wanted you to come along here. You have the analytical, unemotional sort of mind, and . . . Well, our family seems to be blessed—I *think* that's the word—with a kind of preternatural guidance in certain emergencies. We are warned against a possible danger. This warning comes in the form of a voice."

Musgrave took some rolls of notes from his pockets and dropped them carelessly into a drawer in an elaborate Boule desk. He was trying to keep his manner perfectly casual, but his hands were shaking.

"A voice?" said Briscoe.

"A warning voice," said Musgrave slowly. "Members of my family have been warned against disaster. It's very, very queer . . . and, to me, frightfully interesting, of course. My grandfather, whom I never knew, heard this voice. You may have read perhaps, in old memoirs, about the terrible fire at the Theatre Moderne, in Paris, about fifty years ago? There were

appalling scenes. Women trampled . . . nearly eighty people killed. My grandfather had booked a seat. As he was setting out in his brougham he heard this voice. Immediately he changed his plans and went elsewhere. My father had a similar warning when he was discussing an investment. He was going to sink some forty thousand pounds in the Dixon White Syndicate . . . Now where the deuce have they put the whisky?"

He went about the room rather irritably, opening two cupboards without finding what he wanted.

Briscoe was leaning forward a little and eyeing the other keenly.

"And have you yourself ever heard this voice?"

Musgrave turned as he closed a cupboard door.

"Yes!" he said, on a note of suppressed excitement. "I heard it for the first time in my life—tonight."

"When was that?"

Briscoe's voice sounded somehow a little strained. His hands were clenched tightly in his overcoat pockets.

"It was at the club tonight," said Musgrave. "It was just at the moment when I suggested that we go on playing. I heard the voice quite distinctly. I was startled! I don't mind admitting that I felt jolly glad when my suggestion was turned down. The voice was just as my father described it—a soft, low, feminine voice. It just whispered one word: *No.* That is all it has ever said, I understand. Queer, isn't it?"

He laughed shakily and took out his cigarette case. As he lighted a cigarette his fingers were unsteady.

Briscoe smiled slowly. He was leaning back in his chair once more and his meagre frame relaxed.

"Now suppose we go into this," he said, judicially. "For argument's sake I'll accept the suggestion that your father heard this warning voice. And his father too; and other ancestors of yours. From what I have observed there would seem to be a slight abnormality in your mental make-up; and perhaps you have inherited certain traits. Although a pretty good athlete, you are obviously highly strung. Perhaps your father and grandfather were the same. You are precisely the type to hear voices. Highly strung people commonly have such experiences—like the mystics, saints and poets. One can be as scientific and sceptical as one likes and still accept all this sort of nervous phenomena. It is quite well established. But now . . ."

Briscoe pointed at the other with the stem of his pipe.

"Let us examine your particular instance, Musgrave—the warning voice you heard tonight. I know you're balanced and of temperate habits, and I accept your statement unreservedly. But hasn't your warning voice crashed pretty badly, old man? This time there was no reason for alarm—no danger. What was there to warn you against? I certainly see nothing to justify any special activity on the part of what we may call the Musgrave guardian angel!"

The little man paused, rather in the manner of a lecturer demonstrating to a class.

"Let us consider the facts. You are warned not to go on playing cards. Now you had the most amazing run of luck. And since we had, for tonight, dropped the usual club limit, you had won a good deal of money. Shall we say about five hundred pounds?"

"Over six hundred," said Musgrave. "I'd been winning before you joined us."

Briscoe nodded.

"Over six hundred pounds then. A nice sum! Quite a lot, say, for a poor devil like me . . . I should never gamble, or even perhaps belong to a club like the Bellington. But—and this is my point—six hundred pounds is practically nothing to you, Musgrave. You won't pretend that the loss of such a sum could inconvenience you . . . ?"

"No," admitted Musgrave. "I haven't said it would."

"Very well then! All right! Yet you are claiming that a supernatural voice comes from mysterious realms specially to warn you against continuing in our game? Now, in any case, we would have played on only for about another hour. Supposing your run of luck had dried up? Supposing it had changed completely? You might have lost all your six hundred pounds. Or let us be absurdly generous in our estimate of the bad luck, and let us imagine your losing five hundred in addition to your winnings. Ridiculous! But I think that drives home my point. A man in your position would not notice the money loss. You see? So why on earth should the ordinary laws of nature, as we know them, be temporarily suspended to so little purpose?"

Briscoe leaned back and passed a slim hand complacently over his thin hair. Musgrave, with all his thoughts of whisky forgotten in the heat of discussion, took a pace or two about the room. Then he halted and shook his head.

"That's all very well, Briscoe," he said. "You make your point, and I'm bound to agree with it. But you haven't cov-

ered everything. You are thinking only of financial loss. There are worse things than losing money. There is physical hurt. There is even loss of life."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Briscoe's eyes narrowed, and a peculiar glint appeared in them for a moment.

Musgrave flicked the ash off his cigarette with a quick, nervous gesture.

"You may think I'm hypersensitive—even morbid—if you like, Briscoe. But my father was one of the sanest men I've known. I tell you I can't laugh at this thing. You say a money loss wouldn't hurt me, and I agree. But there might have been worse, had we played on. For example, Vincent was in the game. You know him. I don't care to play with the man. He has a vile temper. He is reckless—and a bad loser. He can be violent . . . You heard the story of his going for the hall-porter the other night? Vincent nearly had to resign from the club. Well, he lost plenty tonight, including his temper. It was he who had insisted that we drop the usual club limit, and then he complained . . . There was one or two little things he said—about Scotch millionaires, and so forth. Well, I ignored them, largely because he was a bit tight. All the same, had the game continued it is quite conceivable that we might have had a hell of a row. He might have injured me—killed me!"

"More likely you would have broken *his* neck, old man! Vincent wouldn't have a chance against you!"

Musgrave laughed.

"Well, it would come to much the same thing. There could have been a tragedy. I don't want to be hanged for breaking Vincent's neck; or even expelled from my favourite club, perhaps, after an unpleasant scene. Anyhow, your example of loss of money by no means covers all the unpleasantness possible during another hour of play. So the family voice leaves the court without a stain on its character! Personally, I'm confident it's been jolly useful in the past; and I'd need proof to the contrary before writing it off as a bad debt."

There was silence for a moment and then the chemist laughed harshly.

"You certainly have imagination!" he observed. "Of course you *would* have. I've no doubt you'll never be at a loss to explain your warning voice. If you're saved from catastrophe by obeying it, then the voice has functioned efficiently. If there is no obvious catastrophe then one would have occurred had

you not evaded the possibility. Heads I win, tails you lose, old man!"

Briscoe laughed again and Musgrave joined in: but the younger man had flushed angrily.

"Yes, I thought you'd be sceptical. Meanwhile I wonder where the devil that whisky . . . Ah!"

He had opened a smaller cupboard flush with the wall. Now he produced a decanter of whisky, a siphon of soda water and two glasses. He put them on a silver tray set upon a small table.

Briscoe was watching his host with curious intentness whilst Musgrave arranged things.

"By the way," said Briscoe. "Whilst I think of it . . . Have you got that book you were talking about? If it's handy I'd very much like to borrow it, if I may. I could read it on the train tomorrow. If you like, I'll post it back from Brussels."

"That's not necessary," said Musgrave. "No hurry about that. Let's see . . . it was Suttie's *Origins Of Love And Hate,* I think. It's downstairs in the library. Mix yourself a drink, will you?"

As the other left the room Briscoe rose to his feet. Quietly, but quickly, he crossed to the table holding the whisky and from his overcoat pocket he took a leather case containing a number of long, narrow phials. One of these phials he selected, uncorked and put to his nostrils for an instant.

A few seconds later he had poured out two whiskies, added soda water to one of the drinks and carried this back to his chair. And he was sitting back, drink in hand, when Musgrave re-entered the room.

"Here's the book," said Musgrave. "It's years since I read it, but I found it very satisfying. Different, and satisfying in ways that . . . Hullo! You look a bit off colour. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm all right." Briscoe uttered his short harsh laugh. "Late nights get me down a bit. Or perhaps your tale of ghostly warnings has affected my nerves! I poured you a whisky, but you'd better add the soda yourself."

"Oh! Thanks."

Musgrave went to the small table and splashed some soda into his glass.

Briscoe seemed to shrink into himself. He lay back in his chair, his face white as paper. He started violently when there came a loud cry from Musgrave's lips.

"What . . . what is it?" stammered Briscoe.

At the other side of the room Musgrave had set down his glass, after almost dropping it. White to the lips, he was gazing wildly before him.

"My God!" he cried. "The voice! I heard it plainly then! I almost thought you must have heard it. What does it mean?"

Briscoe was on his feet and trembling. For a moment the two men stared at one another, then Musgrave shot a glance around the room almost as though he feared attack.

"I . . . I heard nothing," Briscoe whispered.

Musgrave went swiftly to his desk, pulled open a lower drawer, took out an automatic pistol and examined the clip. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"There were burglars last week in Half Moon Street. Wife and servants away . . . These things get around, eh? I'm having a look downstairs. You stay where you are."

He went out of the room quickly, leaving Briscoe standing alone in the middle of the room. The chemist picked up his whisky and swallowed it down almost at a gulp. His face was now very white and he was trembling.

For a moment or two he listened, and faintly he could hear Musgrave's steps as he moved about below. A door opened downstairs, and then another. Outside in the street there came the shrill hoot of a klaxon horn.

Slowly and on the tips of his toes Briscoe went over to Musgrave's desk. Very softly he opened the top drawer, took out several rolls of notes and stowed them away in his pockets. As he closed the drawer, sweat stood out on his forehead, and his lips set in a hard straight line.

He took off his overcoat and placed it carefully upon a sofa. From below came the sound of a door closing gently, and the faint patter of Musgrave's feet on the tiles in the hall.

Briscoe's pipe was now gripped between his teeth. He took a quiet pace or two about the room, halting now and then to listen intently. The house seemed now very still. A clock on the mantelpiece made a sudden whirring sound, and then struck one. The little man had raised his head nervously.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "This won't do. It won't do!"

He carried his empty glass over to the occasional table and there was a rattle as he poured out a stiff peg of whisky. As he added soda his eyes fell upon Musgrave's untouched drink. Briscoe hesitated. He gazed round the room from gas fire to coquettish wastepaper basket, and then to a potted fern. There was a look of indecision on his face. His hand was outstretched towards Musgrave's glass when the sound of a vig-

orous step gave him pause. Hastily he moved away from the table holding the drinks as his host came back into the room.

"Darned queer!" said Musgrave loudly. "I've been all over the house and there's nothing wrong. Not even a stray cat. I can't understand. It beats me!"

Briscoe laughed on a high-pitched note.

"Nerves, my dear man!" he said. "That's what is the matter with you."

"Perhaps you're right. If so, it's a new complaint."

Musgrave dropped his pistol onto a couch and went over to the drinks. Briscoe moved to the other side of the room and stared fixedly at a bronze statuette.

He had his back to his host and he never turned his head. He heard the scraping of a glass across the silver tray, and his keyed-up senses even detected the physical sounds of Musgrave drinking.

"Good whisky," said Musgrave. "A bit too strong perhaps."

There came the hiss of a siphon being operated and then a little sigh of satisfaction.

Briscoe still stared before him. His clenched, hot hands were deep in his trousers pockets. His teeth were biting so hard upon his unlighted pipe they threatened to break its stem. The man was unconscious of every visible object around him. Of the bronze figure in front of him he saw nothing. He was listening. He was waiting. And, as he waited, little beads of sweat trickled down his forehead.

There was a strange buzzing in his ears; and a tiny bell-like note rather like the whine of a mosquito. In a vague way he felt apprehensions of heightened blood-pressure. He made to speak, without turning round; but he stopped as he appreciated that his voice would betray him.

Musgrave seemed to be thinking things over. He said nothing, but he whistled softly through his teeth. The sound began to madden Briscoe. He took the pipe from his mouth and gripped it until knuckles gleamed white. He felt that if the other whistled any longer he would have to shout—swear at the man—do something idiotic. Desperately he fought for his self-control, and finally he was able to speak quite calmly, he felt.

"I must be getting along," he said. "It's after one."

"What's your hurry?" said Musgrave, easily. "You have not far to go. Jermyn Street, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Briscoe went over to his overcoat and picked it up. Surrep-

titiously he glanced at his wristwatch. His brain was clearing. He felt he had quite recovered from the awful panic that had swept over him like some fantastic nightmare illusion.

"You forget I'm going abroad, Musgrave. I have some packing to do, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, yes."

Musgrave took a cigarette from a silver box and lighted it.

"Pity!" he said. "I wanted to have a yarn. I still don't understand this voice business. Twice tonight! And I never before heard it! It's worrying, in a way. My father said . . ."

He broke off with a laugh, and crossed to give Briscoe a hand with his overcoat.

"However, you don't want to hear about my father or our family voice. You think I'm crazy, eh, Briscoe?"

"No," Briscoe shook his head, and tried to smile. "Of course I don't, Musgrave. As I've said: you are highly strung. There's very little wrong with you." Stealthily he looked at his wristwatch and then at his host. "Well, bye-bye. I'll be toddling," he said.

"I say! I say!"

Musgrave crossed the room and came back with a whisky and soda.

"You're not going Briscoe, without finishing your drink! This is stuff that's worthy of respect, I can tell you!"

He held out the glass and watched whilst Briscoe finished off the drink.

"Thanks, Musgrave. You're right, it's the real goods. Well, I'll send you back your book by registered post from Brussels."

Briscoe began to button his overcoat, whilst his dark eyes were fixed searchingly on the other's pink, ruddy face.

"Don't worry about it," said Musgrave. "Take your time. It's really an interesting book . . . How long are you staying in Belgium?"

"I never quite know," said Briscoe. "Maybe two weeks, and it might be a couple of months. It depends on a number of things. I might have to go on to . . ."

He broke off; and, at the look of utter horror on his face Musgrave cried out:

"What on earth is the matter?"

Briscoe reeled, and put out a hand to save himself. His fingers clutched the back of a chair.

"Nothing," he stammered. "Nothing . . . at all."

His face was ghastly. His eyes went desperately to the table

where stood Musgrave's empty glass. Then he looked at the glass he had himself emptied. He sat down abruptly and put his hands to his head.

"You're ill, man!" said Musgrave. "Is there anything I can do?"

Briscoe got to his feet, unsteadily. The book and hat fell from his hands. He took two steps in the direction of the door. Then he paused, swaying like a man suddenly drunk.

"Nothing!" he cried. "There's nothing! I'm done for!"

This time he nearly fell and only saved himself by gripping the back of the couch.

"The wrong glass," he muttered. "My God!"

As Musgrave looked on, horrified and helpless, Briscoe's hands clawed the back of the couch as he slid to his knees. His face was distorted: he shook from head to foot.

Suddenly he began to laugh, and at the sound Musgrave ran to him.

"Stop! For Heaven's sake, man! What's the matter?"

Briscoe opened his mouth, stared wildly, and collapsed on the floor.

"Briscoe! Briscoe!"

Musgrave fell on his knees beside the stricken man. With trembling fingers he undid Briscoe's coats and the waistcoat. As he did so a thick roll of notes slipped to the floor.

Musgrave stared. His exploring fingers touched other notes, and then a glass phial. He felt over the other man's heart and knew Briscoe was dead. There was nothing to be done now.

Slowly Musgrave rose, with the half-emptied phial in one hand. He uncorked it and sniffed.

"Good God!"

In two strides he was at the table where the dead man had set down his glass. For a moment Musgrave looked at the glass almost as though he feared the discovery he was about to make. Then he raised the glass to his nostrils.

Bewilderment now vanished from his eyes and a grim look transformed his face. Then he walked towards the telephone, pausing a moment to look down at Briscoe's form.

"Bloody fool!" Musgrave muttered. "Why didn't you *ask* me for the money?"

A Mistake of Creation

Kate Barlay

☐ "My brother-in-law was guillotined for the murder of my only sister. The agent didn't tell you? That's the reason for the low price. The villa is mine now. I'm selling because of its sad associations. They needn't bother you. Look!" She threw open the shutters. "Isn't the view perfect?"

"Yes, it is."

She turned and said: "Will you have a drink on the terrace before you go? You don't have to make up your mind at once."

She poured the drinks into fragile crystal glasses. I watched her surreptitiously. She was plain, greying at the temples but her grey eyes reminded me of mountain glaciers, deep, serene and calm. She handed me my drink and sipped a grenadine herself.

"Did what I tell you embarrass you?"

"No. Only . . ." I hesitated.

"You would like to know more? Almost anybody would tell you in Nice. Or you could look up the old newspapers in the library. The strange thing is *why* my sister Louise married Henry."

I waited attentively. It was obvious she needed to talk. And it was easier, perhaps, to talk to a stranger.

"I was dead against her marrying him. We had lost father only a few months previously. Until then we girls had hardly ever been separated. Father brought us up. He was slightly eccentric, didn't like people around. We never married. Then suddenly after his death, we found that we had more money than we had ever dreamed of."

"How did your sister meet her husband?" I prompted her.

"The simplest, stupidest way. She wanted to travel, to be free at last. He was a courier at the travel agency. Half French, half English, handsome and seven years younger than Louise. Charming, with a veneer of sophistication. It seemed Louise was everything he had ever wanted. At first she didn't even hear him. But Henry had will-power, determination. He had no pride when he wanted something. He had to win in the end. They were married.

"Afterwards? He kept on winning, all down the line, at every point. Strangely, the more he won the less pleased he seemed to be. My poor Louise was very unhappy.

"Then Henry made her buy this villa and they came to live here. I never saw her alive again."

She rose as if to terminate my visit. "I'm sorry for boring you with my family history. Let me know what you decide."

I thanked her for the drink and right then and there told her I was buying the Villa Mimosa.

Next day I engaged a lawyer to draw up the contract and within a week I was installed. I had bought the place lock, stock and barrel and fully furnished.

I slept in Louise's bedroom. The view was really perfect. To make the villa really mine I decided to rearrange the furniture.

As I pulled a small secretaire away from the wall, a small, slim blue volume fell to the floor. It must have been stuck between the wall and the furniture. On the fly-leaf was Louise's name. On the first page the words: "I am in love with Henry." Nothing more. Then empty pages. Towards the end of the volume in a nervous hand she had written: "I must take stock, gather all the threads. Nothing must be left to chance. For once it is I who will be pulling the strings."

I felt real excitement. I had obtained the old papers reporting Henry's trial, but not yet read them. I knew Louise's end. Now it seemed as if the dead had returned to tell me by what road she had travelled to get there. . . .

. . . At first it didn't matter so much, though it tired me to force myself to be animated. I had to match the girl, she had such laughing eyes and the corners of her mouth turned upwards, so I tried to say funny things, too. She liked the bistro Henry had found up on the old town, in a steep, narrow street. The Bar des Amis. Entering from the diamond-hard sunshine, it was like entering a cave.

Gloria liked the place as much as Henry. I said I did. It was horrible, filled with shapeless old men in shirt sleeves who ate garlic sausages. There was a dull, fly-marked mirror on the wall and sawdust on the floor. The place smelled of urine. Beyond the bead curtain was the *pissoir* and the men kept going in there.

Henry said: "What wonderful characters!" Gloria said: "Thank God for at least one place unspoiled by tourists." We drank Asti Spumanti, cold and sparkling, but to my taste

sweet and cloying. It didn't do me any good. It gave me palpitations and my head ached. Before we met Gloria we used to have one drink before lunch. Now Henry ordered a whole bottle.

Exactly at noon the gun sounded and the great evacuation from the beaches began. Within seconds the sands were deserted. *Manger!* The rite of the midday meal was about to begin. This was the time we entered the Bar des Amis.

After lunch I used to have a siesta. It did me a lot of good —but not any more. Henry never rested in the afternoons. How could he, when he never got up until noon? I cannot sleep in the mornings, even if I have tossed sleepless all night. The sun doesn't stop just because people like to turn night into day. At first I tried to wake Henry, at least around ten. Half asleep he would murmur something, burrowing in his bed. "I will be with you in a minute." But he only snuggled deeper into the softness of the pillow. It was then that I loved and hated him most, withdrawn in his sleep, beyond my reach. I knew him! At noon he would show up, dewy-fresh, for his drink, the life and soul of any party, whoever happened to be around. And so he went on, late into the night, until—tired and worn—I was forced to go to bed, but not to find the solace of sleep . . . to listen to the creaking of floor-boards, to hear his stealthy footsteps when he returned. It was always so in London—and now here.

Not long ago I had a nervous breakdown. My doctor advised a change. Henry was most solicitous. He found the Villa Mimosa, through an advertisement. He made me buy it. He had made all the arrangements.

Menton pleased me. The villa was shabby but it had a large garden. The scent of the orange blossoms made me cry. I cried easily for no reason. But by the end of the first week I was beginning to feel better. The sea was only a few steps from the garden—not a proper beach, just a narrow strip of sand, strewn with boulders, and the shore shelved away steeply so that after only a few steps the water was waist high. It carried my body gently in calm weather. One afternoon the wind became high and the waves nearly knocked me over, breaking high over my head, burying me under the salty foam, leaving me blind, gasping and running in terror from the white horses galloping so hard towards the shore.

That afternoon I met the boy. I was sitting on a boulder to dry when I became aware of a curious sound, like the grunting of a pig or the growling of a dog. At first I didn't associ-

ate the sound with the crouching boy. He was collecting stones and filling a cavity with them at the base of a rock.

When he got up, I shuddered. His head was so much out of proportion to the rest of his body that it seemed to be stuck directly onto his chest, his barrel-like protruding chest. His arms were powerful and muscular, the hands normal but large, his legs sturdy and straight. His flat shapeless face was sprinkled with freckles. His soft blond curly hair glinted in the sun. As I watched, he started to take stones from his collection and, with furious, concentrated abandon, flung them into the sea or at boulders he selected as targets. He had a deadly accuracy. Then he began to run about as he threw the stones and some of them came close to me. When I jumped up in alarm he stomped with malicious glee. I made a step towards him but he ran into the sea, dived and disappeared, only to reappear what seemed a long time after, far out, beyond the breakers. He swam like a triton, a creature of the sea.

I waited for him to return and spoke softly to him when he was coming out of the water. He couldn't run away now as the waves knocked him over, too strong even for him. I spoke gently as to a stray dog, suspicious of strangers. Standing quite motionless so as not to alarm him, I spoke haltingly in French.

"I cannot swim as well as you can. Your aim with the stones is wonderful. Could I learn to do these things? Would you teach me?"

He pretended not to hear me but didn't run away. He showed off in front of me for the rest of the morning. I went back to the boulder, praising him from time to time as he came closer, in ever-narrowing circles.

Next day he was there again and I offered him chocolates. He sauntered close and grabbed one. So we became friends. His name was Leon. He wasn't sure how old he was. His voice was deep, as if it came from great depths, and he wasn't vicious with me any more, only suspicious. At times his eyes darted like a trapped animal's but softened when he was praised. I praised him constantly, exaggeratedly, as if talking to a stray dog. "Good Leon, strong Leon, brave Leon . . . you take care of me, Leon. . . ." And he would nod his head, his poor, misshapen head; and the nods were like the wagging of a dog's tail. I fed him chocolates. Leon adored sweets.

Usually there were no other people on our bit of shore, as a little further on the coast widened into a pleasant bay.

There the bathers could lounge in deck chairs set out on a white wooden platform, by courtesy of the hotel close to our villa.

In a way I could never really discover, Leon belonged to the hotel, but he never enlightened me.

Henry never met Leon. I didn't swim in the afternoons and in the mornings Henry was asleep. He didn't like children and hated my sentimentality over animals. He didn't believe in kindness for its own sake and often told me that kindness was a form of neurosis. "People are kind because they hope for a bit of kindness in return." And Henry would laugh. "I don't want anyone's kindness. What I want I take. And what I don't want I drop. Boredom, that's what you have to avoid. Boredom ages people. Whatever bores you—cut it out!"

That's the way Henry talked, but I didn't take him seriously then. Later when I remembered this my chest felt tight, so tight that I could hardly breathe. Menton didn't do me any good any more.

Henry would come for me around four and we would go for a drive, stopping for drinks somewhere before dinner. The day I first saw Gloria, Henry was late. Around five, I went to look for him. He wasn't reading in the garden; nor was he on our beach. I walked over to the white platform of the hotel and almost at once I saw Henry, holding a girl around the waist in the water, laughing. Suddenly there was a splash near them from a stone thrown into the water and the girl broke away. They looked around but could see nobody; neither could I, but I knew it was Leon, hidden behind some rock, crouching like an animal, grinning with savage pride.

I knew the girl was frightened for a moment. She didn't know what or who had frightened her but at that instant the tightness left me and for some reason I felt a strange joy. It was as if I had received a rare, unexpected gift.

Henry noticed me and said something to the girl. Both of them came out of the water up the wooden steps towards me. Henry was annoyed, I could see. His eyes were hard but his voice syrupy.

"So here you are. You came to fetch me, darling? All right, I'll come quietly." The girl wore no bathing cap. She shook the water from her blond hair and boldly looked me over. "See what I found in the water," said Henry, waving his hands towards her. "A mermaid!" He laughed. "Meet Gloria!"

I didn't like his laughter, or the syrup in his voice.

Just before we came to Menton, Henry was withdrawn, sulky, and evasive. I never knew where he spent his evenings. Henry can be very silent when he wants to be. He never told me, either, how he came to fish the "mermaid" from the water. Surely they had not met that day for the first time? I detected an indefinable tone of intimacy in their banter. I knew I wouldn't learn the truth by asking so I didn't.

After this, Gloria became part of our routine, except in the mornings. In the mornings Henry slept.

I would have been very lonely without Leon.

Sometimes I helped him to collect stones, sometimes gave him little tasks to do. I selected the targets he had to hit, or threw coins into the sea and made him dive for them, and he always brought them back, like a good, faithful dog. The weather was perfect. My tan deepened, so did my confusion. Perched on my rock I tried to sort things out, until the sun parched me dry and the glare from the sunlit water blinded me. Then, when the heat and the accumulated pressure inside me became unendurable, I would run, with a cry matching Leon's in wildness, into the water.

One evening the three of us went to the old harbour to the carnival. The floats were lined up for the procession, fairy lights glittered gaudily along the jetty and the crowd milled about expectantly. Stall-holders were selling bags of confetti, paper streamers and flowers. For those who could afford them there were seats on the grandstand; the rest jostled about on the route of the procession. I asked Henry to get seats. Crowds are more colourful and less frightening from a distance. But Gloria squealed: "No, Henry, let's mingle! I want to be part of it. Let's stay." So we did.

As soon as the procession started the crowd surged forward, shouting, shoving. A good-natured, vulgar crowd. I stood sandwiched between an old sour-smelling man and a young soldier. The crowd separated me from Henry. He was holding Gloria's elbow. When there was a small break in the procession I tried to join them. I stepped forward but somebody almost tripped me over. Henry saw what happened, came over and I clutched his arm. "It hurts, Henry. Let's leave." He looked annoyed—I thought he was angry with the soldier. But he only said impatiently: "Why don't you look where you are going? When the procession has passed I'll get you a seat."

I didn't answer. Almost at the same moment the confetti battle began. The crowd went crazy. The men tried to push

handfuls of confetti into the dresses of the women, or into their laughing, screaming, snapping mouths. The crowd became one exultant mass. Dizzily pushed this way and that, I watched Gloria jumping and shouting as Henry threw streamers. A huge sailor grabbed Gloria and shoved a fistful of confetti deep down in the front of her dress. She screamed. Henry heard her and in a flash was at her side, his face distorted with rage. The sailor grinned, threw a bagful of confetti into Henry's face and fled. The crowd closed in after him. It was carnival time and he was playing the game. But Henry's private little game had been given away.

At once we left. Henry insisted. Gloria would have preferred to stay. He was using my sprained ankle as an excuse to get her away. Pouting, she agreed. I was being used as a cat's paw. I knew it, and she knew it, too.

We went on to the Casino. Henry tried to persuade me to let him drop me at the villa to rest. I shook my head. I wanted to hang around, goodness knows why. Henry was in love with her, no doubt on that score. A summer madness, maybe, that would blow over? I felt there was more to it than that.

In the Casino I changed a few thousand francs and took a seat at the table opposite Gloria. Henry stood behind her. I felt excited. I played a game within a game. If they bet on black I backed red. They were against me. I had to put it to the test. So far I had never dared to say anything to Henry. If I won, all would work out well in the end for me. If I lost . . .

Henry and Gloria were winning. Several times I had to change more money. *"Neuf—rouge—impair—manque."* I had bet on black and the croupier swept away my chips with one deft movement of his rake. As soon as winnings were paid, eager hands stretched out to place new chips on the green baize. And forever the croupiers chanted like priests in ancient rituals. As a rule I am not a passionate gambler. Roulette bores me. But that night it was different. Fever gripped me. Every turn of the wheel was laden with drama.

I kept my eyes on the table watching their hands—Gloria's and sometimes Henry's, with the big onyx ring on his little finger which I had given him. He had put six hundred francs on a *cheval*—and won. I lost. I pushed my chair back to go to buy more chips. Gloria called to me: "Are you working on a new system?" Her voice was a mixture of curiosity, sarcasm and malicious pleasure in equal proportions. I didn't answer.

When I returned to the table, I felt fear, almost panic. I *had* to win.

I placed my bets, suddenly changed my mind and gathered them up again to place them on other numbers as the wheel was already turning. The croupier almost shouted at me. *"Rien ne va plus, Madame! Terminez! Rien ne va plus!"* Still I lost.

Nothing helped me. I was miserable, in a state of misfortune. There was no cure for me. At last Henry seemed to realize he had to intervène. He came over and got hold of my arm. "Come, you can't break the bank tonight. We are going to buy you a glass of champagne." He meant Gloria and himself. I think I must have laughed too loud. People looked at me.

During the night I got up and went out. I walked about, thinking, for a long time. There was Henry, Gloria and me. Henry was seven years younger. This didn't matter before but it did now. What were Henry's plans? Did he want a divorce? When did he and Gloria first meet? How long had it been going on? What part was I expected to play? All question marks. No answers. Only one certainty. Henry didn't love me. Worse, I bored him.

It was during the night I realized that I couldn't live without Henry. It became clear as well that I had never trusted him from the start. My nature is pessimistic and through my pessimistic fears at times I have achieved a near clairvoyance. Events often thrust their shadows ahead in my mind, my supersensory perception. There is no other explanation.

For no reason at all the thought came to me that night that Gloria and Menton were connected. I hadn't really wanted to come to the South of France.

The sky was like a crazy canvas daubed with red when I returned to the villa. I didn't stay to see the sun rise. I was shivering and must have been cold for a long time without realizing it. At that time there was something just beyond my fingertips and I was stretching and reaching for it. The effort exhausted me. When I tumbled into my bed I passed into a deep sleep within seconds. . . .

Next morning, the answer came with almost ridiculous simplicity—through the post. Henry was asleep. There was one letter with Gloria's name on the envelope, addressed to the Villa Mimosa. I opened it without hesitation. ". . . having written several times to your London address without success, we happened to learn by chance from another client that you

might possibly be at your villa in Menton. We enclose our account . . ."

So that was it! Henry had sold to me his mistress's ramshackle villa at an exorbitant figure and put her into the hotel next door, having fun on my money.

My immediate reaction was crazy. It was pride! A kind of release that I knew it, anyway. Then came a shaking, trembling fury at having been made a fool of. After that came fear. Where would all this lead to?

I couldn't live without Henry, I was obsessed by him. If he did not love me, why did he stay? The answer suggested itself. He needed the things I could afford. He would stay as long as he had to, then leave. But when? His problem was how much of my money he could get hold of—and how fast. I had made it easy for him. Since I became ill, I had authorized him to draw on my bank account. The cheques simply had to be signed by both of us.

Why was I ill? Since when? I hadn't been ill before I met Henry. Now I knew. I had to find out only the details.

My London bank had transferred a considerable sum to their branch in Nice. It was still early. I decided to take the local bus. In Nice I went to the bank. I talked to the manager who put through a call to London. It was easy to find out how much Henry had stolen from me. The money didn't matter. If my money made Henry happy and he loved me. . . . He hadn't taken as much as he could have. He was being careful, doing it gradually. He had forged my signature rather cleverly.

I took a taxi back to Menton, dismissing it before I reached the villa. I put on a swimsuit and went down to the beach. I even remembered to take Leon his chocolates. My bank arrangements were left as before, still giving Henry free access to the account. Henry mustn't suspect that I knew.

Henry had to stay. It was obvious—Gloria had to go. The sun was high and hot and my head throbbed. I couldn't see Leon anywhere. I ran into the water, gasping in the salty spray. Something touched me under the water . . . then again —tugging at my feet. For a second I felt fear. It passed almost at once. I knew it was Leon, showing off. He surfaced, turning his vacuous, innocent face towards mine, and a slow grin spread over it. A new idea suddenly struck me.

"Leon, come here! Try to pull me down under the water if you can. Not for long, Leon . . . Leon, be careful! Only for a short while. . . ."

He disappeared in a flash. My left ankle was gripped in a vice. I was dragged down, though I struggled, half drowned, half unconscious until Leon released me then pulled me to the shore. Afterwards he planted himself in front of me, grinning and nodding, waiting to be praised.

"Good Leon!" I told him feebly. "Eat your chocolates!"

The next few days went by as if I had high fever. Everything seemed to be out of focus. When I walked about the rooms I kept knocking myself against the sharp edges of the furniture. Still, I pulled myself together. I made myself listen when Henry spoke to me, or smile when Gloria did. My lips felt cold and stiff. Perhaps from the near-drowning I did every day. Leon loved the game.

Henry was so totally submerged in Gloria that he didn't notice anything unusual about me. Gloria started to wear red—an exclamation mark in scarlet! She shouldn't have looked so good. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I hated her so much. I had to watch her all the time. I avoided looking at Henry; it would have been indecent to see his face as his eyes followed Gloria, a small vein pulsating on his temple! When I imagined the two of them together in the scented darkness of the night, my hands clenched.

Marie, my maid, often found me in tears. My bruises made her jump to conclusions. The good woman thought Henry beat me. "No, no, Marie!" I sobbed, protesting. "M'sieur loves me very much." But she shook her head in disbelief. *"Pauvre petite madame!"*

The following day I spoke to Leon. I went down very early to the beach. He was waiting. Far out the water shimmered in the morning sun; but inshore it was choppy and grey. I felt chilly, I did not sit on my usual boulder but between the rocks in the hollow.

"Leon, you love me?" He was crouching on his haunches next to me, his large freckled face wreathed in smiles, and his nods came fast. He understood me perfectly. "Leon, I am sad, very sad . . . the girl in red made a man beat me. . . ." I pointed to my bruises. "They wanted to steal my money. They *robbed me,* Leon. I couldn't buy you any chocolates today."

His face clouded. The vicious, hard expression returned—the one I knew before I tamed him. The effect pleased me. He was attuned to me. Sometimes I thought his grotesque, distorted appearance was the reflection of my own frenzy. I identified myself with him. We were both so lonely.

"Tomorrow, Leon, the girl in red will come here to swim." My hatred emanated from me like a cloud, enveloped him and took him over. He was to become the angel of death—for me! I was willing to carry the burden of anything later. Leon was innocent. He was a child and would remain one forever. A mistake of creation. He was never evil, the intention was missing. It is the intention which makes bad really bad. He was to become the instrument only.

"Leon, listen!" I said very carefully. "Hide here." I watched his mounting excitement. "When she comes, you go into the water, quickly, quietly. Keep out of sight. When she is alone, play the game under the water, as you play with me. Only, Leon—understand . . ." Now I nearly screamed at him. "Don't let her go at all! Pull her under. If she tries to come to the surface, do it again! When she doesn't move, swim away—under the water. Don't let anybody see you. You understand? Pull her down. If you don't, the girl in red won't let you see me again—ever." I kissed him then, and cried: "I love you, Leon."

He clung to me, whimpering like a dog.

It will be done! Only a few hours to wait until tomorrow. At noon, Gloria and Henry will come down to bathe with me. I asked them. I shall be there before them—to play with Leon once more and to remind him. I have no fears. Leon is cunning. . . .

. . . Louise wrote no more. Now I read the report of Henry's testimony.

"It was shortly after noon when Gloria and I skirted a boulder and saw Louise. On the beach lay my wife, her feet in the cool water. Leon crouched close by. As Gloria appeared, wearing her red bathing suit, he gave a strange howl and fled into the water, submerged and disappeared. I hardly noticed him. I walked towards my wife. Only a few seconds later did I receive the complete shock of the totally unexpected.

"With horror my eyes met hers as she stared at the sun in the middle of the sky, and there was no life left in that dead gaze.

"I ran for help to the hotel, and when the confusion had died down, we carried her to the Villa Mimosa and laid her on her bed. She looked peaceful. I took a large drink. I needed it. It was the shock. 'She must have drowned while

bathing,' I told the police. 'There were no witnesses. . . .' "

This was Henry's testimony.

He did not know that Leon was cunning—how at that very moment Leon was crying and babbling a terrible tale. So terrible that everybody believed it at once, because Leon was as he was. He couldn't have invented it.

"The man with the girl in red hurt her . . . he beat her . . . she was sad, very sad . . . she cried because they stole her money. . . . They hid among the rocks, then dragged her into the water and pulled her down. . . . When she came up they pulled her down again. . . ."

Leon whined, whimpered and thrashed about with flailing arms. Obviously he had had a terrible experience, fixed so firmly in his mind that no one could ever shift it. He repeated what Louise had implanted in his memory so carefully. Only one detail he could not remember. How, in the excitement of the final rehearsal, he had confused the rehearsal for the performance. . . .

Out of the Country

Jeffry Scott

☐ Mr. Billy Bullivant's baby-blue eyes twinkled ingratiatingly as he set the murderer at ease. "You'll be out of the country by this time tomorrow," he promised, "with no trouble at all. My system's foolproof, I assure you."

"It's damned expensive, too," grunted the visitor.

An expression of near consternation flitted across Mr. Bullivant's bland, creaseless pink face. "Oh dear, don't tell me you haven't got enough money. That would be too bad."

The murderer chuckled without humour, flicking open a cigarette case which had cost more than Mr. Bullivant spent on tobacco in a year. "Set your mind at rest, I'm not down to my last thousand yet."

The heavy furrows running from domineering nose to lantern jaw deepened suddenly. "Look here, Bullivant, this swanning off into the blue business just won't do. I've got a definite objective in mind, and since I'm paying this much, I might as well go straight there."

Mr. Billy Bullivant stared back owlishly for a moment. Then he opened a drawer in his desk and dropped a late city edition of the evening paper on the scarred and tea-ringed wood. "The police have a definite objective in mind for you, too," he said flatly.

It became evident that he was neither childish nor soft.

"You might have done me the favour of crediting me with a little intelligence, you know. *'Tax troubles,'* you reckoned, when you phoned this afternoon. Wife troubles would be nearer the mark—and what a messy solution you found."

In the silence which followed, they could hear the dreary call of a ship leaving harbour, and the dried-leaf rustling of rats in the factory beneath the stuffy little office.

"I—I'm sorry," said the murderer, stupidly. Then, as he recovered: "But where *are* you sending me?"

"It depends, ol' man." Mr. Bullivant pursed his lips and squinted judicially. "I'll just scan the orders I get in the morning, you see, and push you off with the next consignment to whatever spot happens to be furthest away."

The murderer swallowed drily. "Sounds . . . uncomfortable," he muttered. And lit another cigarette.

"You won't feel a thing," joked Mr. Bullivant.

Climbing wearily up the stairs to the office in the early hours of the following morning, a ghost of golden stubble sanding his plump chops, he discovered the factory cat stretched on its side, legs stiff and jaws frozen in a maniac grin. The overturned glass opposite Mr. Bullivant's own on the desk gave a clue to the small tragedy.

His mild eyes misted. But even in his sorrow he reflected on how much the cat resembled the murderer—and vice versa. Not surprising, since they had both sipped the same final drink.

Stopping only to take a fat cigarette from his newly acquired gold case, Mr. Bullivant plodded downstairs with the little corpse wrapped in the previous evening's paper.

"Woman found dead in flat. Man sought by police," screamed the headlines on the newsprint shroud.

"Dead as yesterday's news—what an apt phrase," muttered Mr. Bullivant as he passed the sizeable pile of dog-food tins which he had filled during the night.

Gaudy labels bore a modest message: *Bullivant's Mystery Mixture * * * British and Best * * * Made By Men Who Love Dogs, To a Centuries-old Recipe.*

Mr. Bullivant's habitual good humour came to the surface once more and, shifting the grim parcel to his left hand, he gave the nearest tin an approving pat. In a few days the consignment would be on its way to the United States, a hundred tins among two thousand.

Or had the latest order come from Paris? No matter, thought Mr. Bullivant, with a shrug. One of his aged, not-too-bright work-people would sort it out when they came in.

The important thing was that a contract had been honoured.

Mr. Bullivant's murderer—his latest murderer—was getting out of the country.

End of the Road

Alex Hamilton

☐ The town seemed to reach out for them. Grab them and draw them in.

"Don't you think you're going too fast, Henry?"

Stupid woman.

"Yes, Henry, this *is* a bit fast. Imagine if some school child were to dash out."

Another stupid woman. If any child dashed out at this time of day he'd be playing truant. Serve him right if he bump-bumped under the wheel.

He said to his wife and her sister:

"It only looks fast because we've buildings round us now. Actually our speed is only . . ."

"Don't mumble, dear. We can't catch what you say here in the back if you mumble."

Henry took his eyes off the road to face about. The two women were startled out of their cosy mile-after-mile feeling by the tautness of his features, the uplifted eyebrows, the scornful puckering of his mouth as he snapped at them:

". . . said we were only doing a hundred miles an hour!"

"Don't, Henry," said Molly feebly, as soon as he had whipped his gaze back on to the road ahead, "don't do things like that. It scares me."

"It scares both of us," said his wife firmly. The women nodded to one another in the back seat as if to affirm the moral value of fear.

Henry took a handkerchief from the top pocket of his jacket and wiped the steering wheel. Two long arcs had blackened with perspiration.

"Not much about on the roads at this time of day," muttered Henry.

"Best to allow for other people's follies," said his wife placatingly.

Follies. Follies! All kicking their legs up. All in time on the temporary surface.

"And police," added Molly, "with their radar traps. They sit in the hedge with radar, clocking you."

Clocking you. Dashing out of the macrocarpa with no hat

on, whirling radar round and round, finally to whack you across the head with it.

"I'm well within the law," he said mildly.

"Of course you are, dear," said his wife. "Henry's really a very good driver, at home," she told Molly, "it's only these long journeys that make me a little nervous."

"In Africa I drove hundreds of miles at a stretch," said Henry.

"You are immune, dear," said his wife. "In Africa they listened for the sound of Henry's car. They came flocking."

"Motoring in England has lost its savour," said Molly.

The buildings they were passing jumped closer and closer to the road. They were putting some queer stuff up these days. Bloody monstrosities. Gobbling up the green.

"I do hope we're not going to be late, Henry," said his wife.

"Do you or do you not want me to slow down?" asked Henry.

"Yes, only I promised Doris we wouldn't be late. If you hadn't pottered around so . . . Henry's always the same when we're going anywhere. Every mortal thing you can think of he messes about with then suddenly he realizes, and it's all tear and rush."

Every mortal thing. If things had only been mortal he would shoot down these eager buildings, leaping nearer and nearer the road all the time. Like animals pent up. Like crowds running to line a road once the police barrier was down. He had never trusted them, there was always one madcap in every mob of gogglers. Some pricey structures in this ribbon development—and some beady-eyed squat little creatures tucked in amongst them, by God! And what had that been, flashing like that from the attic?

"Henry, are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, don't flap! It was only a bit of a glare off an upstairs window."

"Can't you put your sunshade down?"

"The sunshade is now down, my dear."

"Henry *loves* the sun. You'd think Africa would have given him enough to last a lifetime, but . . . Oh look, Molly, isn't that where Frank and Mary used to live?"

But "No!" interrupted Henry. The two women waited in surprise.

"They had acres of ground," said Henry at last, but uncertainly.

"But it *is* the place. I can see where Frank spent all afternoon one afternoon putting down crazy paving. We all said at the time he was crazy himself to be putting down crazy paving on top of all that lamb . . ."

Slapping the paving down madly with the lamb moving, refusing to be buried, caught and tied down by hurrying, hostile chunks of stone.

"Couldn't we stop one moment, Henry? I'm sure Molly would like to have a little peek at all the changes."

"No," said Henry, "there'll be nothing to see. Frank took advantage of the prices they're paying for land near the metro, that's obvious. The whole thing looks cramped and depressing now. I imagine Frank got out while the going was good, taking his loot with him."

"I shouldn't care to live within the commuter belt," declared Molly.

Especially under the buckle! Listening to the juices warbling and moaning down into the cavernous paunch. And the return, the lines jammed and late for dinner, the buckle pulled in closer and closer. The hellish tightening of the unbearable trouser, the stench of warm flannel, the pressure of the rump of the creature ahead in the queue . . .

"If you have a car a little jaunt like this gives one all the London one can ask for. And of course Henry knows it terribly well from the days when he first entered the Service as a gay bachelor . . ."

"Now from here on in always *was* built up," said Henry.

"It can't *always* have been built up," said Molly, "unless we're to assume that houses grow from seeds like trees." She laughed.

But Henry replied sourly:

"If I were to exaggerate every blasted thing you women said literally you'd see some damn silly pictures."

There was a sullen silence.

Until Henry saw a cinema he recognized from a visit years ago, which cheered him up.

"Talking of damn silly pictures, do you remember that damn silly song and dance thing you and I saw at the Odeon, where the bloke sings while the house is falling in and the heroine runs around on the lawn with a highly inflammable nightie on?"

"Was that me with you that night, dear? I don't seem to remember it."

"If it wasn't you it was adultery!" exclaimed Henry.

"Please, Henry!"

"We're all friends in here, I hope," said Molly. She exhaled a wicked cloud of smoke, having lit two cigarettes, one of which she now passed with a look of solace over his shoulder to Henry. It was as if all those years ago her sister could not have been trusted to understand the prime male need of a cigarette after intercourse and she were now completing the event as a family occasion.

"Good girl, Molly," said Henry. He held the cigarette awkwardly, vertically, gripping the wheel tightly. "We lived in a burrow somewhere through there behind the cinema. We had some times, Edith and I."

"I couldn't go back to it," said his wife: "all those stairs, fetching and carrying. He forgets that side of it."

"In London," said Molly, "everybody lives on top of one another."

One on top of another. *Ad infinitum.* One person on top was enough, more than enough sometimes. But all on top. A pressure of hundreds of tons to the square inch. Thin as paper down at the bottom, maps in vermilion and blue of the sensuous, hungry body. Each an empire (progressively flatter as the darkness deepened) and each served by a similar alimentary canal.

Henry's cigarette quivered. Ash ran down the back of his hand. He flicked it away towards the window in a nice roly-poly little lump, but the wind blew it in dust across the seat.

"I cleaned the car this morning," said his wife. "I had a terrible job getting into all the corners. Especially into the ash-trays—they're the devil's own little traps."

Persistent little woman, shrinking, edging, rubbing herself down into the little traps. The big bust caught for a moment on the ledge and then, like a deflating balloon, subsiding and tucked in as well. And then, snap! The lid shuts down tight. A thin squeaky voice complaining, muffled at last in the ash.

"I can see you smiling in the mirror, Henry. I can't see what you find so funny in that. One day in the year we visit Doris I should have thought you could put yourself out a little bit and help keep the car shipshape as I had it."

Shipshaped car, able to be free of the roads, taking the dull, grey ranks of terraced houses like rollers. Up there ahead that vast, overbearing wave, higher than any . . .

"What's the matter? Why are we stopping?"

"That's the new whatsisname building up in front there . . ."

"Well, we don't want to look at that now, darling. We're late enough as it is."

"Yes, perhaps," said Henry, "but you two going on at me like that, I've lost my bearings for the minute." He rubbed his palms along his trousers.

"Oh Edith," said Molly, "do leave the poor man alone! We've made him give up his day at the cricket for us. I don't mind a bit of ash on the seat."

"You take his side because you're both smokers. Anyway he can have the afternoon to himself. As long as he comes back to Doris's in time to leave before it gets dark."

Henry disengaged the clutch and drove on.

"I'm turning off here," he said.

"Don't you know where we are?"

"Yes, of course I do. But that big new building and all this redevelopment has altered the lie of the land a bit. I think perhaps I should have turned off sooner. Doris lives somewhere behind the garage . . . I think."

"Henry knows his London very well. It can be very confusing if you're not a Londoner, born and bred."

Henry stopped the car. Both women jerked forward, involuntarily, to rest their chins almost on the back of the driver's seat.

"What is it?" they both exclaimed.

"Cul-de-sac," said Henry.

Suddenly like that, with no indication.

"Oh, Henry, much better to follow the beaten track."

The padding of thousands of bare feet. The foliage creeping closer, the roots of the trees breaking the hard earth. Only unremitting travel keeping back the enclosing forces.

He turned the car and drove back. He turned left, not wanting to come close to that disturbing, towering building again.

"It was further on than this, Henry. Look, we're coming into a shopping district!"

"Oh look!" said Molly, pointing. "Nine and eleven coffee, in that window. Isn't that the giddy limit?"

At the farthest extreme, spinning.

Ahead, blocking the road, was a wall. It appeared suddenly. Henry braked and turned the car before the women, chattering about prices, had had time to see that he had run them into another cul-de-sac.

He drove back fast, and turned right. And right again.

"Not too fast, dear, Doris . . . won't mind . . . we can give her a tinkle."

Round her neck, like a cowbell.

"Henry, we're back in the cul-de-sac!"

"Do you know," said Molly, "I *thought* that last house looked familiar. Just after those big apartments because I noticed that washing with all that heliotrope underwear and I thought . . ."

Henry had turned the car in a wide sweep, crunching a small cardboard box on the grass verge.

He turned left and then right but this too led into the High Street. He knew that round the next corner, where the tall buildings succeeded the shops, there would be the blind end. Like a swollen gut he saw the road filled with stricken traffic.

"The coffee shop," muttered Molly.

There it was ahead, the wall, before the corner.

He spun the wheel, ran the car out on the broad pavement, narrowly avoided a woman with a pram, and bounced back into the road.

"Henry, stop a minute . . ."

"We'll ask a policeman . . ."

He turned right.

But the cul-de-sac had closed in. It was only just ahead now, the wall glittering with summer flowers. He accelerated round the pumps of a garage, while a writhing hose snaked out to enfold him.

If he turned right, perhaps he would not be caught. He might, through the portals of that great new building, yet find a path, back into the country.

The brickwork loomed close as he took the corner.

He put his foot down.

But the wall had anticipated the move. It was there before him, sullen. Not a flower on it. Broken bottles more like, embedded in the concrete. He swerved away left.

"Hen . . . !"

"Why . . . ?"

Stupid women. Hadn't even read it right. Not coffee at all at nine and eleven.

The white letters which had spelt the words out on the plate glass window were spinning giddily in the air all round them.

The car swept through and plunged fiercely into the depths of the shop beyond.

The Practical Joke

Dell Shannon

☐ I will admit it was a silly thing to do. But you know the atmosphere in a group of friends enjoying themselves, when everybody's had several drinks. I don't mean any of us was tight. Just relaxed and easy. In the ordinary way, too, everybody there was a rational sort and not given to practical joking, that most obnoxious of minor cruelties. Bob and Ruth are a writing team—juveniles—and Ruth does their charming illustrations; Kenny is a commercial artist, his wife Pat is intelligent, Neville is a well-known photographer, and if I am a crime-novelist it's a purely commercial venture. All responsible people, you see, and all moderately successful—so it isn't a question of our envying Griffiths.

But we all knew him; and liked him. Yes, I can say that. There was no malicious intent. Griffiths never had any sense of humour; that's the worst anyone can say of him. He and Bob and Kenny and I had been at the same school, and Griffiths was always like that. When you get a Welshman without a sense of humour he can be grim: so damned earnest. But Jevon Griffiths is intelligent, kind, clean, honest and a good talker, and most people like him well enough. He has a private income, enough to let him amuse himself writing the kind of thing he wants to. This was just after he had published *Nemesis of Nonsense,* and everyone was a bit surprised it was having such a good sale. Perhaps it was a sign of the times—more people appreciating pure cynicism. I expect you remember the book. He had covered all the superstitions, as he called them—from witchcraft to wolf-children to ghosts and poltergeists and apparitions—and methodically, dispassionately dissected and destroyed them—to his satisfaction anyway. As a lot of them deserve; don't mistake me, broken mirrors and black cats hold no terror for me. He'd made a good job of the book; its cool analytical style was effective, and even the chapter on religions was not as offensive as it might have been. He was an agnostic, of course—a practising sincere agnostic; and reason was his whole rule of thumb.

Well, there we were that evening in Kenny's flat and, as I say, everyone was feeling nicely thank you but quite under

control. I don't remember how we began to talk about Griffiths. I had met him somewhere the day before and he'd said he was looking for a country place to rent for the summer; he'd begun a novel and wanted some peace and quiet to finish it. I mentioned that, and we speculated what kind of fiction he might turn out. It was Ruth who took such violent objection to *Nemesis*. She said of course she wasn't superstitious, but Griffiths' book showed him as a complete materialist; and she thought he was unnecessarily dogmatic when he said so definitely that everything of the so-called Supernormal was impossible and non-existent. Quite a few serious scientists, she pointed out, were researching in that field. Somebody mentioned Rhine and Bob wanted to bring in Dunne's theory of time but Pat interrupted.

"Maybe some day Jevon'll be sorry he said ghosts don't exist," I think she said. "Wouldn't it be marvellous if he actually met one?"

"He wouldn't believe it," I said.

"He'd never see one," said Ruth, "*because* he doesn't believe in them. You only meet ghaisties and ghoulies if you believe they're there."

"Well, damn it," said Bob, "if I was a ghost that's exactly the kind of man I'd appear to. Griffiths is a man any ghost might be proud to haunt."

"*I'm* not dogmatic about it," said Pat dreamily, "I just say queer things happen you can't account for. I don't believe we're just several gallons of water and eight-and-sixpence worth of chemicals or whatever it is. I agree with Bob. It'd be a kind of judgment on Jevon if he did meet a ghost."

Kenny said yes but there weren't any; and Pat asked how he knew. Neville said, "It's a noble thought anyway. An unsuperstitious Welshman is an impossibility if you ask me. I'll bet if Griffiths went up to bed one night and found something horrible gibbering at him from the top of the bureau, he'd break the mile record."

"No, he wouldn't—he wouldn't see it," insisted Ruth. "He's too materialistic."

"I wouldn't say Griffiths is materialistic in that sense," I said. "Actually he's very sensitive and imaginative—look how crazy about animals he is."

Pat and Kenny were arguing about ghosts and Bob told them to shut up. We were in that mood, rude and gay: adolescent, you know? "There's no point arguing that. What I say is that, underneath, Griffiths is just as superstitious as the aver-

age man. The primitive isn't far below the surface in any of us. We may ridicule ninety-nine silly superstitions and believe the hundredth ourselves. I think Neville's right; if Jevon ever did see a ghost or something he thought was a ghost, he'd be terrified. He couldn't help it. He may claim to be a materialist, and consciously he is, but there's just as much Neanderthal in him as in the rest of us."

"I'd love," said Ruth wistfully, "to see something like that happen to him."

And Pat objected, "But it's no good just saying it, there'd be no way to prove whether he—" And then they both had the idea at the same time and squealed delightedly.

Bob was keen on it from the first; Kenny and I tried feebly to raise objections, but . . . well, it was an entertaining idea, you know. Or seemed that way at the time. Griffiths was always so sure of himself. I don't think I really believed we'd do it; it was amusing to discuss, that was all.

"But it's got to be good," Bob kept saying. "He'd never be taken in by a sheet and groans—it's got to be subtle."

"We'll make it subtle, darling. We'll show him a ghost he's got to believe, and I bet we scare him stiff! Oh, and look—what Alex just said!—he's going to take a cottage in the country. We'll haunt it for him. Work out the details later—produce a ghost to go with the house, and see how Jevon reacts."

Well, we made some definite plans, and I daresay if we hadn't that's as far as the thing would have gone. Because it looked a bit different next day; and I, at least, never found amateur theatricals amusing. I'm not sure now what made us —six reasonably normal adults—go through with such a thing. Partly it was Griffiths' own fault; he was always so *damned* sure of himself. The basis of practical joking is egotism: to bolster up one's own ego by making someone else look ridiculous; we all have impulses to it. Is there any right-minded person who doesn't get an unholy thrill out of seeing some pompous dignitary step on an orange-skin and take a toss? I don't fool myself; it was a childish thing and we'd no business to do it. Damn it, we all liked the man well enough. I said at the time, it wasn't so much a practical joke as a scientific experiment, to test whether Griffiths had the courage of his convictions.

And I must take the blame for most of the plot, such as it was. After all, plots are my job. I'll tell you what we did and I refuse to apologize any more for what we've admitted was a schoolboy trick. The point is, we did go on with it.

Griffiths' flat in London was not far from mine, we all knew many of the same people, and it wasn't unusual for us to meet fairly often. But as a matter of fact it was Kenny who got the go-ahead signal. We had to wait, you see, until Griffiths had actually got his country cottage. He told Kenny about it one night a week or so later, and the evening after that we all got together and polished up our plan.

The cottage Griffiths had taken was in Somerset, up toward the Mendips, outside a small village. He had told Kenny he was going to settle in in about a week. I drove down there the next day to see the agent and have a look at the place. Of course it all depended on the agent; if he wouldn't play, it'd make it a lot more difficult. But he did. He was a youngish, pleasant fellow named Barlow, and he was tickled at the whole idea. He had read Griffith's book, and having met him he thought Griffiths wouldn't turn a hair at the most convincing ghost who ever walked, but he was quite willing to test it. In fact he offered to lay me a quid on it. He *was* a practical joker by nature.

He called it a Sporting Proposition. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said. "Most sporting proposition I've run across since I came down from Cambridge. Just tell me the story you've fixed up."

We'd had quite an argument over that. Bob kept insisting that we had to be subtle, and I saw the point; most kinds of hauntings have been tediously overdone, as it were, both in fact and fiction. But the more subtle we were the more difficult it would be to produce a plausible apparition; besides, Griffiths wouldn't consciously find one sort of ghost essentially more believable than another. In the end we'd borrowed the standard model, you might call it: the tale we wanted Barlow to pitch to Griffiths was the one about the murdered young wife and the husband hanged for his horrid deed—"And dress it up, you know," I said to Barlow. He nodded enthusiastically.

"I can do that on my head. I know what you want. Pass it on as amusing local history, laugh ha-ha at the superstitious villagers. I'll do you better than that. I've a couple of pals around who'd be happy to oblige—get 'em to back me up, all very casual—"

"For heaven's sake don't spread it over the whole county," I begged. "He'll suspect something at once if you shove it down his throat."

"Soul of discretion," said Barlow. "Trust me, I'll put it over

all right. Are you on for the bet?" I said I wasn't: if he stood to win anything if Griffiths unmasked us he'd be too apt to let us down putting the tale over. He grinned and said he was a better sport than that, and I'd better have a look at the place to see the possibilities for ghost-production. We were very much pals together. I suppose along with the Neanderthal there's a good deal of the adolescent in all of us.

So he took me out to look at Griffiths' cottage. (I should have explained that we knew Griffiths was tied up in town that day and wouldn't be dropping by.) . . . You know that country? I don't care for it myself. It is such terrifically calm country: those rolling sweeps, open to the sky and unearthly still, and then little patches of wood that are quieter than woods should be. The cottage was only a couple of miles from a decent-sized village, at the end of a short lane off the main road, and it was a nice little place, not really isolated, only quiet. It had been built about ten years ago, Barlow said, and looked solid and comfortable, two-storeyed, all modern conveniences, and a wild little garden. Actually it was for sale, but Griffiths had said he wouldn't buy it until he was sure he liked living in it. In spite of its general pleasantness it wasn't a place I'd have liked to live; but I'm a townsman. We went round it, and I saw there was a closed porch built on at the back, with a sloping roof and no windows. But I was mainly interested in seeing how the ghost could appear. We decided the husband had drowned the wife in the quite sufficiently deep stream that ran down behind the fence at the rear of the house, and the ghost came up from there trying to get in.

"There's plenty of cover in the garden," Barlow pointed out, "and it can come and gibber at the study window." He laughed. "My God, if it doesn't scare Griffiths it's likely to keep him without a daily help!"

I said we weren't planning to make a full-time job of haunting. He said regretfully he supposed not, and how did we propose to go about it? We'd argued about that too, and thought Griffiths might recognize either Ruth or Pat—even under adverse conditions as it were—so Pat had got a friend of hers to play ghost, and delighted to be let in on it. Blonde girl named Jean—her husband was overseas. Oh, we were being clever about this, I tell you. When grown-up people indulge in pranks they do the thing seriously.

I told Barlow the gist of the idea. And I started to make a sketch of the house and garden for our ghost. About then

Barlow swore and said, "I suppose if the trick works he'll decide not to buy the place after all. Doing myself out of a commission. Oh, well, I didn't really expect to sell it."

"No? Well, it's not everyone'd care to live in such a spot."

"There's nothing the matter with the *house*," said Barlow. "We never have trouble renting it in the summer—weekenders and so on. But sell it?—no."

"Don't tell me it really is haunted."

He laughed. "No, though it has rather a queer history. The fellow who built it was bats—old chap called Graves, and a damned appropriate name too. No, he didn't murder anyone exactly. He gave out that he was a scientist, never said what sort—and he stuck on that porch thing at the back as a laboratory."

"Mmh?" I was making a sketch of the grounds then.

Barlow jingled coins in his pocket. "Well, people up here live and let live, you know, and though the daily help—old Mother Hatwell and her daughter Rosie—talked about the awful noises in that laboratory, nobody thought much about it until one day old Graves wandered into the village in his birthday suit and held an animated coversation with somebody he said was Satan under the war-memorial."

"Good lord," I said politely.

"So they took him off to the asylum, and there he is yet as far as I know. But when they came to go through the house—" Barlow broke off and hunched his shoulders, grimacing. "They found about a hundred dogs and cats and mice and guinea pigs in that lab, in cages, and the bones of hundreds more in the boiler and buried in the garden. The live ones were in an awful state. He was a sadist, you see—I suppose he was too timid to use people, so he worked on animals instead. Some of the things he'd done to them . . . Well, they all had to be destroyed and, as I say, the old chap was tucked away where at least he hasn't any live playthings."

It was a queer, rather horrible story, but I paid little attention to it. I was putting the finishing touches on the other story.

Another thing we had decided was that only one of us could keep an eye on Griffiths. We could hardly descend on him in a body, and Kenny and Neville couldn't get away from town anyway. A couple of broad hints had got me an invitation to spend a weekend with him early the next month; and a couple of weeks before that Bob and the three girls went down to stay in a rather primitive rented cottage the

other side of Bristol, an easy drive to Griffiths' place. We'd give it two weeks, producing the ghost a dozen times.

You will think it all absurdly elaborate, and so it was. We were all a trifle younger and sillier then.

I arrived at the cottage, ostensibly for the first time, late one Friday afternoon. I was to stay over Monday. Griffiths came out to welcome me and I had a look at him for any evidences of agitation. He had been living there a bit over a month and he'd had ten days of the ghost. I could imagine Barlow putting the tale across him all right, in that ingenuous manner; and Griffiths' testy answer, too. At first glance he looked just the same as usual, and I thought, well, that's that; he hasn't even begun to fall for it. Then . . .

Griffiths is a little chap like a lot of Welshmen, tough and dark and peppery. But he wasn't looking so cocky now. It wasn't that he seemed apprehensive; after an hour or so, while we said all the usual things and he made drinks, I identified it—he looked *anxious*. Like a man in a house of illness, waiting for the doctor. He said his work was coming on slowly.

"I should think you'd get peace and quiet here," I said. Mind you, I was feeling foolish about this thing by then, but it had gone too far for me to back out. "Don't tell me you've been bothered by the ghost."

"The ghost?" he repeated absently. "Oh, no. How did you come to hear of that?"

"Stopped in the village to ask direction," I said mendaciously, "and heard they did hope as how Mr. Griffiths wasn't troubled with the poor sperrit. Who is the ghost and why does he, she or it haunt?"

"Oh, the ghost," he said, and after a moment laughed. "It's some local story—the house-agent told me—a woman, I really forget the tale. He seemed to think I might want to get out of the agreement, apologized for not telling me before." Yes, clever of Barlow to put it like that. "Curious," said Griffiths, "how these things hang on. Of course it's a practical joke of some sort. Somebody has even thought it worth while to dress up and flit round the garden, hoping to frighten me, I expect."

"That's extraordinary," I said. "Surely nobody'd go to that bother."

"Oh, someone might. Someone who'd read my book. It's queer, you know, how angry people are when you attack

some set idea. They look on it as a personal insult." He spoke like a scientist discussing the behaviour of guineapigs, talking of people. That was one way he was irritating. He didn't mean it like that, of course. He's a lonely, solitary chap, and though he is liked he is never intimate with anyone; perhaps that troubles him. It started in shyness, I suppose, so he's abrupt when he wants to be quite otherwise. I believe that's why he's so fond of animals, because you can be natural with a dog or cat. He had his two dogs with him, a very old and dignified spaniel and a Scottish terrier.

"Yes, but it seems an extraordinary length to go to," I said, watching him. "Are you sure it *is* somebody dressed up?"

"Am I sure? What d'you mean? Of course I'm sure. I could hardly think it was a real ghost." He looked at me and laughed. "By God, Alex, I think you'd be pleased if you thought I'd been taken in by a thing like that. It'd suit your peculiar sense of humour."

I told him not to be a fool, filling my pipe.

"I expect that's what it is—someone who's read the book—trying to make me admit I'm frightened after all." And that was surely an odd way to put it. *Make me admit*—not just *frighten*. He was not quite as usual; there was something on his mind. I thought he was reacting very much in character; he was startled by the ghost, and the primitive in him was frightened, but Griffiths the conscious man would never admit that, and all his intellect was setting up a defence.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Oh, most of the time I've been here. You'll probably see it yourself. The twilight hour," he said with an angry little laugh, "is the favourite. It comes through the back garden and taps on the window to get my attention. It wants to be very sure I notice it, you see."

Well, I did. I saw that he was annoyed, but he wasn't giving anything away; possibly the first time he had been frightened, but after that his reason insisted that it was a lie. All the same, I'd watch him this evening when the ghost appeared. There was something besides annoyance in his voice and eyes.

There were two good-sized bedrooms upstairs and a modern bathroom. I had a wash and unpacked, and when I came down we had an early dinner. As it turned out there was no question of scaring off Griffiths' daily; a woman from the village came out every morning, washed up dishes for him and so on, and went off at noon. He'd been catering for himself; he seemed to like pottering around a kitchen. He had laid out

a scratch meal on the table in the study, which was just behind the little parlour and substituted for a dining room. The dogs came in and lay down beside his chair. He had arranged it so both of us had a view of the one large window.

"It'll be along presently, you'll see," he promised. I knew that; I was more concerned with watching him. In the stronger light he looked even more strained. Being so dark, he was naturally sallow and blue-chinned, but now he looked almost haggard. He did not again mention the ghost, but kept up a flow of desultory talk. But I thought he was listening and watching with another part of him. And I thought, it's got to him after all. His trouble is a contest between the primitive and civilized pulls in him; he has found his reason of no use to him for once. And I'm afraid that as a writer I was clinically interested.

For all that I was expecting it, the ghost gave me the hell of a start; it was effective. It was nearly dark outside, the uncurtained window a blackish square. Suddenly a pale shape outlined itself there, and made a faint tapping on the glass, and thrust a staring white vague face to flatten on the pane with two white starfish of hands. I started and exclaimed, "Good God," or something, and the dogs went wild, rearing up to the window and barking.

Griffiths did not start at all. "There it is, you see," he said softly. I tell you, I was having to remind myself it was that friend of Pat's—amateur theatricals. They'd made a good production of it. "That's flesh and blood," said Griffiths; he had not moved. "The dogs know. If it was anything else—if it could be anything else—they wouldn't take any notice."

The thing disappeared from the window and I got up to look. "It's only wandering around the garden," said Griffiths calmly.

"I always understood animals could detect the presence of a spirit before humans," I said at random.

"According to superstition. Actually there could be no sensory perception whatever, and an animal has only physical senses to perceive with. Any hallucination convincing a human being he sees—something like that," he nodded at the window, "is a product of the unconscious mind, which animals don't possess. That's the second reason I know it's a practical joke."

"The first being?"

"Why, that the 'supernormal' doesn't exist." He was infuriatingly undisturbed. I was unreasonably angry with him, and

with myself, for—even one moment—finding the ghost startling. But one thing was clear, the experiment had failed. The anxiety in his eyes and his nervousness was all for his work; perhaps it was going badly. Not for the first time I felt ashamed of all this elaborate and juvenile hocus-pocus. I should have to stay the weekend, though I'd found out what we wanted to know, but after that I'd see we called off the joke and left the man in peace.

In fact I stayed only until Sunday. I didn't have to invent a reason for leaving then; I said frankly to Griffiths I didn't know how he stood it. And I like dogs too; but it wasn't only the dogs.

When we went upstairs that first night he was again looking slightly uneasy. He said, "I hope you'll sleep all right. I don't think this place is very well-built, you know—and there's a more or less steady wind—all the open country. The house is rather noisy at night." I said I wouldn't mind that, I was a sound sleeper. I usually am; but I never put in a night like that before. We had gone up about midnight, and I had not got to bed when the dogs started to whine. They slept in Griffiths' room across the hall, and he had shut the door; I heard him speak to them and they quieted down. I switched off the light and went to bed, and then the house started in. It looked solid enough, but perhaps (I thought), it had been green lumber. You notice small sounds at night you'd never hear in the daytime, of course. The change in temperature contracts the boards. Anyway, there was a succession of creaks and cracks and rustlings, interspersed with silences, and just as I was drifting off more cracks and groans—exactly like a restless, fussy sleeper settling down for the night. Then the mice. There must have been a whole colony of them in the walls—of course you get them in the country, and no cat would share a house with two dogs. They pattered and rustled, and noises are deceptive in the dark; it sounded as if they were running about the passage and on the stairs, and perhaps they were bold enough to come out like that at night. But mice—or even rats, they sounded like. Hundreds of them.

Presently the dogs started whimpering, and I heard Griffiths' muffled mutter at them. After a while his door opened and shut quietly. Dogs wanted out, I decided; and turned over for the dozenth time. There were stealthy noises as he crept downstairs, and I heard the front door open. An interval of silence except for the mice, and then it seemed he

had not let the dogs out after all, for they began whining excitedly from his bedroom and scrabbling at the door. This went on for some time—to my exasperated ears it sounded like a dozen dogs—and the floorboards and walls creaked and groaned steadily (a strong wind had got up about the house) and I was just about to get up and let the damned dogs out when I heard Griffiths coming up the stairs again. I must have fallen asleep then, for a very short time. What woke me was an appalling howl from one of the dogs. Of course once I woke it was for good, though the dog stopped. The boards were still creaking and the wind muttered round the corners of the house and the mice (or rats) seemed to be holding a dancing-party on the stairs. I lay awake cursing: the last time I looked at my watch it was past three. I was just beginning to drift off again when I was brought wide awake by the thud of the closing front door downstairs. The dogs were whining and scratching at the door across the passage. Well, perhaps I had slept; for now the house was wrapped in deep heavy silence, so that Griffiths' step on the stair was loud out of proportion. I couldn't make out why the man was prowling about the house all night. It was just faintly getting light; of course some people are early risers. He came up the stair very slowly, and I heard his door open and shut and his voice speaking to the dogs. I did not sleep again, and was down before him; he appeared after the daily woman had come, about half-past eight. He looked tired and preoccupied, and I said I wondered how he could sleep at all, what with the dogs and the house and the mice.

"Yes, it's rather a nuisance," he agreed. "I certainly shan't buy the place."

I could have suggested he leave the dogs out at night, or put down traps for the mice; instead I said I supposed it might be the position of the cottage, it got the wind just wrong or something, and probably was jerry-built as well. He gave me an odd look and said Yes. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all; and there was an awful anxiety in his eyes. He hadn't eaten much breakfast; he sat fondling the dogs, and the hand that held his cigarette was trembling. But I wasn't feeling too rested myself after that night.

I pottered around doing nothing much, and Griffiths excused himself and worked awhile in his study. That doesn't matter, I'm making a long tale of this; I'll get on. We drove into the village for a drink that afternoon, and talked of things irrelevant to this story. And came back, and had din-

ner. The ghost didn't show up; we hadn't wanted to overdo it, you know. That night was as bad as the first—I thought I'd never sleep. First the house, then those damned mice (or rats), and then the dogs, and Griffiths leaving his room to steal downstairs. I finally drifted off, but was wakened again when he came creeping upstairs at dawn. A damned good job he wasn't married, when he kept such hours, I thought savagely.

The whole farce had misfired anyway and I was fed up. He seemed rather relieved when I said I couldn't stay over Sunday. I thought it was no wonder he looked haggard; and perhaps he was having trouble with his work too.

He said again, "It's a nuisance, yes. I should have warned you." He didn't press me to stay. Just as I was leaving something rather queer happened. I put my bag in the car and shook hands with Griffiths, and casually reached to pat the nearest dog—and he pulled the dog out of my way. It was quite unexpected and rude. He recovered himself at once, and we said the right things, and I left.

As far as I was concerned it was a waste of time and energy. I went and told Barlow that, and he was pleased at being right and sorry we hadn't laid a bet. "I told you he wouldn't fall—too downy a bird."

"Well, he certainly suspected a trick right away, but what he said. I felt rather a fool. But at least I've learned why you can't sell that house." And I told him about the noise.

"Green lumber," he said easily. "Newish houses often do that—settling. Well, happy to have been an accomplice, old man. Any time you need a conspirator call on me. Too bad it fizzled out."

I drove over to the place where the others were staying and broke the news to them. "We'd better call it a day," I said. "He was on to it right away, evidently. Didn't turn a hair. At the moment he seems to think it's some of the natives playing a joke, but he isn't much amused and he may set the dogs on the ghost next time."

"Oh, hell," said Bob. "No reaction at all?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I think he may have been startled at first, but he certainly isn't exhibiting panic terror or anything like that. It was a damn fool thing to do anyway—like a bunch of kids."

"But I'll bet we did frighten him a little," said Ruth. "The first time. One of us should have been there to see."

Well, they'd had a nice little holiday and some innocent

fun, and we all—I think—felt foolish and just as relieved to forget the whole thing. It hadn't been a very funny practical joke. We came back to town and told Kenny and Neville how it had gone. We were all suffering from reaction (if Griffiths wasn't)—an unpleasant feeling that we'd made fools of ourselves. The sight of each other emphasized it, and we scattered about our own affairs. I didn't see any of them for a week or so.

Until that next Monday. That was the day I had a wire from Barlow: *Can you come some odd development Griffiths in hospital.*

"Overwork," said Barlow. "That's what the doctor said, anyway. The daily woman found him yesterday morning—in a dead faint at the foot of the stairs, and the front door open, and the dogs going mad shut up in his bedroom. She called the doctor—very sensible woman, didn't lose her head—and they took him off to the hospital."

"But—"

"It couldn't be anything else, could it?" he asked uneasily. "He did rather seem to drive himself. He's all right now, the doctor said he'd be released tomorrow. I went in to see him last night, but he was pretty dead to the world. I just thought somebody who knows him better ought to hear. I expect they'd let you in."

"Yes, I'll go to see him." I had been suffering pangs of conscience all the way from town; what Barlow said only confirmed my suspicion. We had after all played too deep on the nervy little Welshman. He wouldn't admit his fear and it had festered inside until . . . Or was it just overwork as the doctor said? I didn't know; but if our crude tricks had anything to do with Griffiths' illness we had some apologies to make, and would probably lose a friend—as no doubt we richly deserved.

I went to see him at the cottage hospital. He was sitting up in bed, looking thin and ill and bluer-chinned than ever, but in possession of himself; and he didn't look too pleased to see me. I said a few conventional things. He sat there smoking, an odd look in his eyes, and finally interrupted me in his abrupt harsh voice. "Overwork," he said, and laughed. "D'you agree with the doctor then, that's what it was?"

"Well, I don't—"

"Tell me, Alex, it was you, wasn't it?" he asked. "I thought you had some reason for wanting to come here, that time.

The ghost—it was your idea, wasn't it? And all the rest of it. But I don't know why. Why did you want to do a thing like that to me, Alex?" He sounded, damn it, like a bewildered child.

And to gain time I asked. "Why should you think I . . . and what was it, after all, put you here? You didn't—"

"You're not a very good liar," he said. "I don't understand it, Alex. How could you *do* such a thing? I thought it was you —you were so interested in my reactions! But *why?*"

So I told him. I did it badly, because I felt like hell about it then. It had started as a joke, but as a childish joke so often does it turned out cruel, and I was ashamed, and I knew the others would feel that way too, looking at him. I told him how it had all begun, and what fools we felt, and I suppose I made a lame job of apologizing, because a thing like that—to a man like Griffiths—is beyond apology. It was never very funny, and he would not see even the little elementary fun there had been originally.

"Yes, I see," he said. "The eternal savage attacking the rational man. You would never have thought of such a thing if you didn't half-believe all the superstitions yourselves." He put a hand to his head as if it ached. He looked as if he might drop off to sleep at any moment; the doctor had said he seemed starved for sleep. I expect they'd given him something.

"There's nothing I can say except I know it was worse than ridiculous. We never thought—we never meant . . ." And what the hell had it done to him, and why? He was himself; his creeds had not toppled; only there was that awful anxiousness in his eyes still. "It was a very childish kind of ghost," I said desperately, "I know."

"Oh—the ghost. That never deceived me. But I don't understand—I thought we were friends." As if I needed any more to make me feel the way I was feeling. "I couldn't believe you were *capable* of it," and he leaned back and shut his eyes. He said in a thin dreamy voice, "The ghost," and laughed. "That was childish, yes. It was the rest of it—I couldn't bear. Couldn't *bear.* And what was the—the connection, Alex? I don't understand—how any sane man—just for a *joke*—"

"What d'you mean, the rest of—"

"I fastened all the windows, and the doors were locked—how did they get in? Perhaps there's a secret way into the house. Barlow would know. That's how you did it, isn't it? Or

one . . . one of you. It was a compulsion—terrible—after that first time, when I heard and went to see. I had to go out —try . . . Couldn't sleep, knowing what it *was*. I tried to catch some of them—God, I couldn't bear—try to help them, but . . . It was frightful. Must have been loosed somewhere at the back of the house—running all over . . ."

I can't set down the extraordinary sensation I began to have then, but I managed to ask him very quietly—because he seemed to be drifting off to sleep—"What, Griffiths? What was running all over?"

"Why, the animals," he answered in a tired whisper. "You know. How you *could* . . . All the little animals, all so frightened, and all so terribly hurt. Frantic to get away—frantic with pain. The blood . . . I couldn't bear it—tried to get to them, to help them, but I never could. So I'd have to . . . open the door and wait . . . until they all got out." I thought he had gone to sleep but after a silence he said drowsily, "All so frightened—so hurt. Just—for—a—joke. I don't understand . . ."

And then I remembered the old lunatic Graves, and his laboratory.

You see the awful dilemma I am in. How can I tell Griffiths he has seen not one ghost but hundreds of them? For he saw *that*—it was real; and yet if he knows, and cannot find a physical explanation, as the man of reason, he is quite likely to have a real nervous breakdown. How can I believe, myself? I never considered myself materialistic—but *I* didn't see. Would I have, if I had got up and looked? Or was it only for him?

But I cannot have Griffiths thinking me a sadist, only in pursuit of a practical joke. What am I going to do about it?

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