The ELEMENTAL

& OTHER STORIES BY R. CHETWYND-HAYES

FONTANA

Heavy footsteps were on the landing, pacing back and forth, making the ceiling lamp shake, breaking now and again into a kind of skipping dance. Susan screamed before she collapsed into merciful oblivion, and at once the sounds ceased, to be replaced by a menacing silence.

Reginald laid Susan down upon the sofa and crept on tip-toe towards the door. When he opened it a wave of foul-smelling cold air made him gasp, then, with courage born of desperation, he went out into the hall and peered up into the gloom-haunted staircase.

It was coming down. A black blob that was roughly human-shaped but the face was real – luminous-green; the eyes, red; a bird's-nest thatch of black hair. It was grinning and the unseen feet were making the stairs tremble.

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and other eerie tales

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

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THE ELEMENTAL

'There's an elemental sitting next to you,' said the fat woman in the horrible flower-patterned dress and amber beads.

Reginald Warren lowered his newspaper, glanced at the empty seats on either side, shot an alarmed look round the carriage in general, then took refuge behind his *Evening Standard* again.

'He's a killer,' the fat woman insisted.

Reginald frowned and tried to think rationally. How did you tackle a nutty fat woman?

'Thank you,' he said over the newspaper, 'I'm obliged.'

Then he tried to immerse himself in the exploits of a company secretary who had swindled his firm out of thirty thousand pounds. He had not progressed further than the first paragraph when the newspaper shook violently, and a little pyramid formed just above an advertisement for Tomkins Hair Restoring Tonic. He jerked the paper downwards and it was at once skewered on the sharp point of an extremely lethal ladies' umbrella.

'Look, madam,' he spluttered, 'this really is too much.'

'And I really do think you should listen to me, ducks,' the fat lady insisted, completely unmoved by his outburst. 'This is a particularly nasty specimen – a real stinker, and he's growing stronger by the minute.'

Reginald stared longingly at the communication cord, but he had been conditioned from birth to regard this interesting facility as something never to be pulled. Apart from which the old dear looked harmless. She was just batty.

'Have you been feeling weak, run down, rather tired lately?' the fat lady enquired solicitously. 'Don't bother to answer that – I can see you have. He's been feeding on you. They do, you know, nasty, vicious things. I must say I haven't seen a homicidal one before. Sex-starved ones, yes, alcoholic ones,

quite often, but killers, they are rare. In a way you are privileged.'

'What . . .' Reginald felt he should display some interest, if only to humour her, 'What exactly is an el . . .?'

'An elemental?' The fat woman settled back and assumed the air of an expert revealing professional mysteries to a layman. 'Generally speaking, it is a spirit of air, fire and water, but the 'orrible thing that's attached itself to you, is something that's trapped between the planes. It sort of lusts after the pleasures of the flesh. It sucks – yes, that's the word – sucks the juices of the soul. You follow me?'

Reginald was incapable of coherent speech; he nodded.

'Good.' She beamed, then fumbled in her handbag and produced a pair of spectacles. 'Let's have a butcher's.' She adjusted the spectacles firmly on her nose and stared intently at a spot immediately to Reginald's left. 'Ah, yes, my word yes. Tut-tut. He's firmly embedded, I fear. His right arm is deep in your left shoulder – ah – he's not happy about my interest . . .' She shook a clenched fist. 'Don't you glare at me, you dirty little basket, I've got your measure, me lad. Yes, I have.'

A shocked expression made her lips pucker and she hurriedly removed the spectacles and replaced them in her bag.

'He spat at me,' she stated.

'Oh dear, I am sorry.' Reginald was completely powerless to subdue the urge to rub his left shoulder, and the fat lady smiled grimly.

'I'm afraid you won't rub 'im off, dear. Not in a lifetime will you rub 'im off.'

The train roared into Hillside Station, and Reginald greeted its appearance much as a Red-Indian-besieged cowboy welcomed the arrival of the U.S. cavalry.

'My station.' He pulled a suitcase from the luggage rack. 'Thank you very much.'

'Wait.'

The fat lady was fumbling in her handbag. 'I've got one somewhere.'

She upturned the bag and its contents tumbled out on to the seat.

'Really, don't bother,' Reginald had the door open, 'Must go . . .'

'Ah!' She produced a scrap of pasteboard. 'My professional card. "Madame Orloff, Clairvoyant Extraordinary. Séances, private sitting, palmistry, full psychic service guaranteed." I can take care of your little problem in no time at all . . .'

Reginald snatched the card from her outstretched hand, slammed the door, and sprinted for the ticket-barrier. Madame Orloff jerked down the carriage window and shouted after his retreating figure:

'Special reduced rates for five sittings, and a bumper free gift of a genuine crystal-ball if you sign up for ten!'

Susan was waiting for him at the station entrance; she was white and gold and wore a backless sun-suit. He instantly forgot the fat lady, banished the last lingering thought of elementals to that dark world which had always lurked at the back of his mind, and drank in her cool beauty. The blood sang through his veins when he kissed her, and he wanted to say beautiful words, but instead: 'It was hot in town.'

'Poor darling.' She slid her hand over his arm and they walked slowly towards the car. 'You look tired. But never mind, seven lazy days in the country is what you need.'

'Seven days of mowing grass, clipping hedges, hoeing, and chopping wood.' He laughed, and the sound was young, carefree. 'What have you been doing today?'

She opened the car door.

'Get in, I'll drive. Doing? Cleaning windows, Hoovering carpets, airing the bed, everything that's needed in a cottage that hasn't been lived in for three months. Did you remember to turn off the gas and lock the flat door before you left?'

He climbed in beside her and settled back with a sigh of content.

'Yes, and I cancelled the milk and papers, turned on the burglar-alarm, and flushed the loo.'

'Good.'

She swung the car out of the station forecourt and they glided smoothly under an archway of trees that linked arms over the narrow road. He closed his eyes and the occasional beam of sunlight flashed across his round, pleasant face.

'I shall sleep tonight. God, I feel tired, drained dry, almost as if . . .'

He stopped, opened his eyes, then frowned.

'As if what?' Susan cast an anxious glance sideways. 'Look, don't you think you ought to see a doctor? I mean it's not like you to be so whacked.'

He forced a laugh.

'Nonsense. It's this hot weather and the stuffy atmosphere in town. No, give me three or four days of this country air, plus three square meals prepared by your fair hand, and I'll be raring to go.'

'I don't cook *square* meals. They're very much *with-it* meals. But honestly, you do look peaky. I'm going to make you put your feet up.'

He grinned. 'I don't need any encouragement.'

The car shot out from under the trees and the sunlight hit them like a blast from a furnace. Reginald opened the glove-compartment and took out two pairs of sunglasses. He handed one to Susan and donned the other himself.

'We must have anti-glare windscreens installed. Bloody dangerous when the light hits you like that.'

Susan changed gear.

'Don't swear, darling. It's not like you.'

'I'm not swearing. Bloody is a perfectly respectable word these days.'

'But it doesn't sound right coming from you. You're not a bloody type.'

'Oh!' He grimaced, then sank back in his seat. Presently Susan's voice came to him again.

'Darling, I don't want to nag, but don't hump your left shoulder. It makes me think of the Hunchback of Notre-Dame.'

He jerked his head sideways and a little cold shiver rang down his spine.

'What?'

She laughed happily; she was gold and ivory in the afternoon sunlight.

'That made you sit up. "Oh, man, your name is vanity." '

They swept round a bend in the road, and there was the cottage nestling like a broody hen behind the neatly-trimmed privet hedge. Susan unlocked the front door and Mr Hawkins barked happily and reared up on his hind legs, begging to have his ears tickled. 'Down, you monster.' She patted his silky head, then went quickly through the little hall and disappeared into the kitchen. Reginald said: 'Hullo, boy, how are you?' and Mr Hawkins began to wag his tail, but after one or two cautious sniffs turned about and ran into the living-room.

'I think Mr Hawkins has gone off me,' Reginald said on entering the kitchen where Susan was examining a roast that was half out of the oven.

'About fifteen minutes more,' she announced. 'What did you say?'

'I said, I think Mr Hawkins has gone off me. Seems I don't smell right or something.'

'Probably thinks you need a bath. Why not have one before dinner? I've laid out a pair of slacks and a white shirt; you'll feel much fresher afterwards.'

'Hey . . .' He crept up behind her. 'Are you suggesting I stink?'

She looked back at him, her eyes laughing.

'If your best friend won't tell you, why should I?'

He was but two feet from her, his hand raised above her gleaming white shoulder, and he bellowed with mock rage.

'Is that the way you speak to your lord and master? I've a good mind to . . .'

She pulled a saucepan on to the gas ring, then reached up to a wall cupboard and took down two dinner-plates which she placed in the slotted plate-rack.

'Be a good boy and go have your bath.'

'Right.' He shrugged as he turned towards the door. 'I'll wallow in soap suds and sprinkle *Eau-de-Cologne* under my armpits.'

'Oh, don't! That hurt!'

He stared back at her in astonishment; she was rubbing her right shoulder, her face screwed up in a grimace of pain.

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't play the innocent. You know darn well – you hit me.'

He laughed, imagining this to be some sort of joke, the point of which would become clear in due course.

'Don't be silly, I haven't touched you.'

She was performing an almost comical convulsion in an effort to rub the afflicted shoulder. 'Look, there's only two of us here, and I certainly didn't hit myself.'

'I tell you, I was nowhere near you.'

She turned back to the stove, adjusted the gas, then switched on an extractor-fan. 'It's not important, so there's no need to lie.'

Reginald took a deep breath, and made an effort to speak calmly.

'For the last time, I did not hit you, I was nowhere near you, and I don't like being called a liar.'

She made a great business of opening and closing doors, her face set in angry lines. 'Go and have your bath. Dinner will soon be ready.'

Reginald stamped out of the kitchen. In the hall he almost trod on Mr Hawkins, who yelped and streaked towards the living-room.

Dinner began in an atmosphere that would have gladdened the heart of an Eskimo; a thaw set in when the sweet was served, and warmth returned with the coffee.

'Darling,' he murmured, 'please believe me, I didn't . . .'

She interrupted with a radiant smile.

'Forget it. If a man can't beat his wife, who can he beat?'

'But . . .'

'Not another word. What are we going to do after dinner? Watch television, read, or go to bed?'

'Let's take Mr Hawkins for a walk, then pop in the *Plough* for a quick one.'

'OK.' She began to collect the empty coffee cups. 'I'll wash up, then we'll be off.'

'Give you a hand?' Reginald half-rose from his chair.

'No, you don't, this lot won't take me more than ten minutes. In any case, you always break something. Sit in the armchair and read the local rag – there's an uplifting article on pig-raising.'

'If you insist.'

He got up from the table, then slumped down in an armchair, where, after a fruitless attempt at interest in local events, he tossed the newspaper to one side and closed his eyes. The muted sounds made by Susan in the kitchen were pleasant; they told him all was well in his safe little world. They reminded him he had an adoring, beautiful young wife, a good job that he tackled with ease, a flat in town, a cottage in the country, money in the bank. He smiled, and this wonderful sense of security drew him gently into the quiet realms of sleep.

He came awake with a start. The rattle of plates still came from the kitchen; far away on the main by-pass a heavy van sent its muted roar across fields that dozed in the hot evening sun; Mr Hawkins sat under the table and glared at his owner. Reginald blinked, then yawned as he spoke.

'What's the matter with you?'

The dog's usually placid, brown velvet eyes were fierce; his body was rigid, and, even as Reginald spoke, he bared his teeth and growled.

'What the hell!'

Reginald sat upright, and instantly Mr Hawkins retreated and took refuge under a chair, where he crouched, growling and watching his master with a terrible intensity.

'Susan!' Reginald called out, 'what the hell's wrong with this dog?'

Susan came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel, her face creased into an expression of amused enquiry.

'So far as I know, nothing. Why?'

'Well, look at him.' Reginald pointed at the snarling dog, who backed farther away under the chair until all that could be seen was a pair of gleaming eyes and bared teeth. 'Anyone would think I was Dracula's mother looking for her feeding bottle. I say, you don't suppose he's got rabies, do you?'

'Good heavens, no.' Susan crouched down and called softly: 'Mr Hawkins, come on boy.'

Mr Hawkins ran to her, his tail wagging feebly, and he whimpered when she patted his head and stroked his soft coat.

'Poor old chap, has the heat got you down? Eh? Do you want nice walkies? Eh? Nice walkies?'

Mr Hawkins displayed all the signs of intense pleasure at this prospect, and performed a little dance of pure joy.

'He's all right,' Susan said, straightening up, 'It must have been your face that put him off.'

'Well, he put the fear of God into me,' Reginald rose. 'He hasn't been normal since I arrived. Perhaps we ought to take him to a vet.'

'Nonsense, he's fine.' Susan went out into the hall and the dog scampered after her. 'It must have been the heat that got him down. Do you think I need a coat?'

'No, go as you are and shock the natives.' Reginald grinned, then frowned when he saw a six-inch-long mark that marred her right shoulder. 'No, come to think of it, perhaps you'd better put on a jacket or something. It may be chilly before we get back.'

She took a thin satin shawl down from the hall stand.

'I'll wear this. There isn't a breath of wind, and I wouldn't be surprised if there's a storm before morning.'

Mr Hawkins was flattened against the front door, and when Reginald opened it, he growled low in his throat before scampering madly along the garden path and out through a hole in the hedge. Reginald smiled grimly as he closed the door and followed Susan towards the gate.

'There's something bothering that damned dog.'

Out in the narrow road Susan took his arm and they walked slowly under a steel-blue sky.

'Don't be so silly. He's frisky. Just heat and sex.'

'Ah!' Reginald nodded. 'I know then how he feels. What a combination.'

They left the roadway, climbed a stile and walked ankle-deep through lush summer grass, as the dying sun painted the

far-away hillsides golden-brown. Mr Hawkins raced happily back and forth, sniffing at rabbit holes, saluting trees, reliving the days when his forebears acknowledged neither man nor beast as master, and Susan sighed.

'Heaven must be eternity spent in walking through an English field at sunset.'

'And hell,' Reginald retorted, 'must be eternity spent in a tube train during the rush hour.'

They walked for a few minutes in silence; Susan adjusted her shawl, and Reginald watched her, a tiny frown lining his forehead.

'Susan, did something really. . . ?'

'Did something really what?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing. Forget it.'

'No, tell me. What were you going to say?'

'It wasn't important.' He patted the hand that lay on his arm. 'Just a passing thought.'

The sun had set when they once again walked up the garden path, and a full moon lit up the cottage and surrounding countryside, painting the red-bricked walls, the neat little garden, with a cold silver hue. Susan was laughing softly, and Reginald was frowning; he looked tired and drawn.

'Honestly, you must admit it was funny.' She inserted the latch-key, then opened the door and led the way into the hall. 'That little girl . . .'

'Yes, yes, you've been through it three times before,' Reginald snapped, but his irritability only provoked further laughter.

'But . . .' She opened the living-room door and switched on the light, 'But in front of a crowd of beer-boozy layabouts this little mite pointed at you and said . . .' For a moment Susan could not continue, then she wiped her eyes . . . and said, "Ugly man making faces at me." '

'All right,' Reginald glared at Mr Hawkins, who was watching him from under the table. 'All right, so it was funny. Let's forget it, shall we?'

'But you should have seen your face. I thought for a

moment you were going to be sick.'

Reginald slumped into a chair and absentmindedly rubbed his left shoulder.

'Say, ugly face, you don't want anything else to drink after all that beer, do you?'

'No, and cut it out.'

'Come on, now.' She sat on the arm of his chair. 'Where's your sense of humour? She was only a little thing, and probably tired out. I mean to say, you weren't really making faces at her, were you?'

'Of course not.'

'Well then, why so grumpy?'

'I don't know,' He spoke softly, 'I honestly don't know.'

'Let's go to bed,' she whispered, 'and dream away the dark-footed hours.'

'Yup.' He rose, then smiled down at her; she slid an arm about his neck and laid a soft cheek against his own.

'You are the most beautiful man in the whole world,' she said.

He nodded.

'I guess you're right at that.'

Their laughter mingled when he carried her up the stairs, and Mr Hawkins stood in the hallway and watched their ascending figures with worried eyes.

The curtains were drawn back, the soft moonlight kept shadows at bay, and they lay side by side and waited for the silence to summon sleep.

'Think of all the bunny-rabbits peacefully asleep in their burrows,' she whispered.

'Or think of them eating Farmer Thing-a-bob's cabbages,' he murmured.

She giggled.

'Are you sleepy?'

'Somewhat.'

'Why do you insist on sleeping on the right hand side of the bed?'

'That's a darn fool question.' He stirred uneasily and wid-

ened the space between them. 'Because it's man's prerogative, I guess.'

There was a full minute of blessed silence.

'Darling, if you must hold my hand, don't press so hard.'

His voice came from the half world where sleep and consciousness hold an even balance.

'I'm not holding your hand.'

'But, darling, you are, and you must cut your nails.'

'Stop blathering and go to sleep.'

Suddenly her body began to thresh wildly, and her cry of protest rose to a terrified scream.

'Reginald, what are you doing? No . . . oh, my God!'

For a second he imagined she must be playing some silly joke, that this was a not very subtle way of informing him she was not prepared to sleep, then the violent threshing of her legs, the choking gasps, made him sit up and fumble frantically for the light switch. As lamplight blasted darkness, hurled it back against the walls, she leapt from the bed and stood facing him, gasping, massaging her throat, staring with fear-crazed eyes. He was dimly aware of a faint smell, sweet, cloying, like dead flowers.

'What's wrong?' He climbed out of bed and she backed to the wall, shaking her head.

'Keep away from me.'

'What the hell . . .?'

He moved round the foot of the bed then stopped when he saw her expression of terror deepen. At that moment, truth reared up in his brain, but he ignored it, crushed it under the weight of his disbelief, and he whispered:

'You know I would do nothing to hurt you.'

Her whisper matched his and it was as though they were in some forbidden place, afraid lest a dreaded guardian heard their voices.

'You tried to choke me. Awful hands with nails like talons, and a foul breath that I can still smell.'

He could scarcely utter the next words.

'Could that have been me?'

The awful fear on her face was dreadful to watch, and truth was uncoiling again, would not be denied.

'Then – who was it?'

'Get back into bed,' he urged, 'Please, I will sit on a chair. I won't come near you, I promise.'

The beautiful eyes still watched him as she moved to obey, but the moment her hand touched the pillow, she recoiled.

'The smell – the stench, it's still here.'

They went downstairs and seated themselves in the living-room, far apart, like strangers who may never meet again, and his voice bridged the great gulf that separated them.

'There was a woman on the train. She said she was a medium.'

She waited for his next words as though they were venomous snakes being offered on a silver tray.

'She said I had an elemental attached to my left shoulder. Apparently it is feeding off me, growing stronger by the minute.'

Susan did not move or betray the slightest sign she had understood or even heard what he said.

'A few hours ago, I guess, we would have laughed at the very idea.' Reginald was staring at the empty fireplace, even giving the impression he was addressing it rather than the silent girl who sat clutching her dressing-gown with white fingers. 'It would have been a great giggle, a funny story to tell our friends over a drink. Now . . .'

They sat opposite each other for the remainder of the dark hours. Once, Mr Hawkins howled from his chosen place in the empty hall. They ignored him.

Reginald found the card in his jacket pocket and read the inscription aloud.

MADAME ORLOFF
Clairvoyant Extraordinary

15 Disraeli Road,
Clapham, London, S.W.4.

He dialled the telephone number at the foot of the card and waited; presently a voice answered.

'Madame Orloff, Clairvoyant Extraordinary, messages from Beyond a speciality, speaking.'

Reginald cleared his throat.

'My name is Reginald Warren. I don't suppose you remember me – we met on a train yesterday . . .'

'Yes, indeed I do.' The voice took on a joyful tone. 'You're the man with the nasty little E. I expect you want me to get cracking on the 'orrible little basket.'

'Well,' Reginald lowered his voice, 'last night it tried to strangle my wife.'

'What's that? Speak up, my dear man. It did what?'

'Tried to strangle my wife,' Reginald repeated.

'Yes, I expect it did. I told you it was a homicidal. Now look, stay put, I'll have to belt down there. It's a bit of a bind because I had two table-tapping sessions and one poltergeist on the books for this afternoon. Still, it can't be helped. Let me have your address.'

Reginald parted with his address with the same reluctance that he would have experienced had he given up his soul.

'The Oak Cottage, Hawthorne Lane, Hillside, Surrey.'

'Right.' The cheerful voice had repeated the address, word by word, 'Be with you about three. I wouldn't eat too hearty if I were you. He seems to be putting on weight if he's been up to his little tricks so soon. You may have a materialization, although I doubt it at this stage. His main objective is to get inside you. Take over. Follow me?'

'Yes,' Reginald swallowed, 'I think so.'

'Good man. See you at three. Can I get a cab at the station?'

'No, but I'll pick you up.'

'Not on your nelly.' The voice assumed a shocked tone. 'He'll most likely try to run you off the road if he knows I'm coming. I'll hire a car – and add the cost to my bill, of course.'

'Of course,' Reginald agreed, 'anything at all.'

Madame Orloff arrived at five minutes past three; she crossed her fingers and waved at Mr Hawkins, who promptly made a bolt for the stairs.

'Poor little dear,' she sighed. 'Animals always spot them

first, you know. Animals and some small children. Now, let's have a butcher's.'

She put on her spectacles and studied Reginald with keen interest.

'My, my, we have grown. Yes indeed, he's sucking up the old spiritual fluids like a baby at its mother's breast.' She bent forward and sniffed, looking rather like a well-fed bulldog who is eagerly anticipating its dinner. 'Pongs too, don't he?'

'How did it become attached to me?' Reginald asked, aware that Susan was watching their visitor with an expression that was divided between horror and amazement, 'I mean, I was all right up to yesterday.'

'Been in a tube train lately?' Madame Orloff asked. He nodded.

'Thought so. That damned Underground is packed with them during the rush hour. I once saw a bank clerk with six of 'em clinging to him like limpets, and he picked up two more between Charing Cross and Leicester Square. Wouldn't listen to me, of course.'

She turned her attention to Susan, who cringed as the heavy figure came towards her.

'You're a pretty dear, and sensitive too, I fear. You must watch yourself, poppet, keep off animal foods – and I should wear a sprig of garlic if I were you. They can't stand garlic or clean thoughts. Think clean and religious thoughts, dear. Try to picture the Archbishop of Canterbury taking a bath. Now . . .' She rolled up her sleeves. 'Let's see if we can get 'im dislodged. Sit yourself down, lad. No, not in an easy-chair, this plain straight-backed one is the ticket, and angel-love, will you draw the curtains? Light is apt to put me off me stroke.'

Reginald was seated on a dining-room chair, the sunlight was diffused through blue nylon curtains, and the room looked cool, peaceful, a place where one might doze away the years. Susan whimpered.

'I'm frightened. Don't let her do it.'

'Hush, dear.' Madame Orloff twisted her head round, 'We must dislodge the basket, or he'll be at your throat again, as sure as a preggers cat has kittens.'

She put a large beringed hand on either side of Reginald's head, and closed her eyes.

'I don't follow the usual formula, so don't be surprised at anything I might say. It's just ways and means of concentrating me powers.'

She began to jerk Reginald's head backwards and forwards while intoning a little rhyming ditty in a high-pitched voice.

'Black, foul thing from down below,
'Get you hence, or I'll bestow
A two-footed kick right up your bum
That'll make your buttocks come through your tum.'

She writhed, jerked, made the amber beads rattle like bones in a box, all the while jerking Reginald's head and pressing down on his temples, then gave vent to a roar of rage.

'No you don't, you black-hearted little basket! Try to bite, would you? Get out, out – out – out . . .

'Get right out or I'll bash your snout,
Go right under, or get your number,
No more kicks, or you'll pass bricks,
No more crying, it's no use trying,
Out-a-daisy, you're driving me crazy.'

Madame Orloff snatched her hands from Reginald's head and flopped down in a chair, where she sat mopping her sweat-drenched face with a large red handkerchief.

'Must have a breather, dear.' Strewth, he's made me sweat like a pig. I've tackled some 'ard ones in me time, but he takes the biscuit.' She clenched her fist and shook it in Reginald's direction. 'You can grin at me like a cat that's nicked the bacon, but I'll get your measure yet.' She turned to Susan. 'Get us a glass of water, there's a dear.'

Susan ran from the room, and Madame Orloff shook her head.

'You'll have to watch that one. She's hot stuff, attracts 'em like flies to cow dung, if you get my meaning. She's soft and pliable, and they'll slide into her as easy as a knife going

into butter. You back already, dear? Mustn't run like that, you'll strain something.'

She drank greedily from the glass that Susan handed her, then rubbed her hands.

'Thirsty work this. Well, as the bishop said to the actress, let's have another go.'

She got up and once again took Reginald's head between her hands. Her face wore an expression of grim determination.

'Now, dear, I want you to help me. Strain. That's the word, dear. Strain. Possession is rather like having constipation. You have to strain. Keep repeating "Old Bill Bailey" to yourself. It'll help no end. Ready?'

Reginald tried to nod but was unable to do so due to Madame's firm hold, so he muttered, 'Yes' instead.

'Right – strain.

'Nasty horsie that's had no oats,
This little bunny ain't afraid of stoats,

(Strain man – Old Bill Bailey)

Coal black pussy, he's no tom,
He's had his op, so get you gone.'

Madame raised her voice to a shout, and a large blue vase on the mantelpiece suddenly crashed onto the tiled hearth.

'Strain – Old Bill Bailey – come on, we've got 'im! Out – out – get yer skates on . . .

'Out of the window, out through the door,
There's no marbles here, he'll keep you poor,
Don't grind your teeth. . . .'

A chair went tumbling across the floor, books came hurling from their shelves, a rug left the floor and wrapped itself round the ceiling lamp, and a cold wind tugged at the window curtains. Madame Orloff lowered her voice, but it was still clear, unexpectedly sad.

'Lonely wanderer of the starless night,
You must not stay, it is not right,
Blood is for flesh, and flesh is for blood,
We live for an hour, then are lost in the flood
That sweeps us away into fathomless gloom,
We spend eternity in a darkened room.'

'Please stop!' Susan's voice was lost amid the howling wind, but Madame Orloff's cry of triumph rang out.

'Strain – strain . . . he's coming out. Aye, he's coming out as smooth as an eye leaving its socket. He's fighting every inch of the way, but old Ma Perkins was one too many for him. Out you go, my beauty, out you go, down to the land where black mountains glow with never-quenched fire, and white worms crawl from the corrupt earth, even as maggots seethe from a carcass on a hot afternoon. Go . . . *go*. . . .'

The cold wind died, hot air seeped back into the room; all around lay wrecked pictures, scattered books, broken furniture. An ugly crack disfigured the polished surface of a table. Susan was crying softly, Reginald was white-faced, looking like a man who has survived a long illness. Madame Orloff rose, pulled open the window curtains, then looked about with an air of satisfaction.

'A bit of a ruddy mess, but then, as someone once said, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. 'Fraid me services come a bit high, dear. I'll want fifty nicker for this little do.'

'Worth every penny,' Reginald rose somewhat unsteadily to his feet. 'I can't thank you enough, Madame, I feel like . . .'

'A feather, eh?' Madame Orloff beamed. 'A great weight lifted off yer shoulders? I know what you mean. I remember an old geezer down in Epsom; he had a nasty attached to him that was as big as a house. Ruddy great thing, had a lust for rice puddings, made the poor old sod eat three at one sitting. When I got shot of it, he leapt about like a two-year-old. Said he felt like floating. Well . . .' She took up her handbag. 'Mustn't keep that car waiting any longer – the fare will cost you a fortune.' She put a hand under Susan's chin and tilted her head; the blue eyes were bright with tears.

'Cheer up, ducks. It's all over now. Nothing to worry your pretty little head about any more.'

'You must stay for dinner,' Susan said softly. 'We can't let you go like this. . . .'

'Thanks all the same, but I've got a sitting laid on for six o'clock, so I'll leave you to clear up the mess. Don't trouble to see me out. I'm quite capable of opening and closing a door.'

From the hallway she looked back.

'I should keep away from the Underground during the rush hour, Mr Warren. The place is a cesspit – everything from a damn nuisance poltergeist to a vampire-elemental. See you.'

The front-door slammed and Reginald gathered Susan up into his arms; he patted her shaking shoulders and murmured: 'There, there, it's all over now. It's all over.'

They sat in the twilight, younger than youth, older than time, and rejoiced in each other.

'You are wonderful,' she said.

'True,' he nodded.

'And awfully conceited.'

'Self-confidence,' he corrected. 'The weak are vain, the strong self-confident.'

'And what am I?'

'White, gold and tinged with pink.'

'I like that.' She snuggled up to him and Mr Hawkins dozed peacefully on the hearthrug.

Presently –

'What's that?'

She sat up. Fear was in waiting, ready to leap into her eyes.

'Nothing.' He pulled her back, 'Just nerves. It's all over now.'

'I thought I heard someone knocking.'

'There's no one to come knocking at our door. No one at all.'

Mr Hawkins whimpered in his sleep, and somewhere above, a floorboard creaked.

'The wood contracting,' he comforted her. 'The temperature is falling, so the wood contracts. We must not let imagination run away with us.'

'Reginald . . .' She was staring up at the ceiling. 'Madame Orloff – she got it loose from you, and I am grateful, but – suppose – '

Another floorboard creaked and a bedroom door slammed. 'Suppose it's – still here?'

He was going to say 'Nonsense', laugh at her fears, but Mr Hawkins was up on his four legs, his coat erect, growling fiercely as he glared at the closed door. Heavy footsteps were on the landing, pacing back and forth, making the ceiling lamp shake, breaking now and again into a kind of skipping dance. Susan screamed before she collapsed into merciful oblivion, and at once the sounds ceased, to be replaced by a menacing silence.

Reginald laid Susan down upon the sofa and crept on tip-toe towards the door. When he opened it a wave of foul-smelling cold air made him gasp, then, with courage born of desperation, he went out to the hall and peered up into the gloom-haunted staircase.

It was coming down. A black blob that was roughly human-shaped, but the face was real – luminous-green; the eyes, red; a bird's-nest thatch of black hair. It was grinning, and the unseen feet were making the stairs tremble. Reginald, aware only that he must fight, picked up a small hall table and flung it straight at the approaching figure. Instantly, something – some invisible force – hurled him against the front door, and he lay on the door-mat powerless to move. The Thing moved slowly down the stairs, and for a hell-bound second the red eyes glared down at the prostrate man before it clumped into the living-room. The door slammed, and Mr Hawkins howled but once.

Minutes passed and Reginald tried to move, but the power had gone from his legs. Also, there was a dull pain in the region of his lower spine, and he wondered if his back were broken. At last, the living-room door slid open, went back on its hinges with a protesting creak as though wishing to disclaim all responsibility for that which was coming out. Susan walked stiff-legged into the hall, white-faced, clothes torn, but her face was lit by a triumphant smile, and Reginald gasped out aloud with pure relief.

'Darling, thank heavens you're safe. Don't be alarmed – it flung me against the door, but I think I've only sprained something. Give me a hand up and we'll get the hell out of here.'

She moved closer, still walking with that grotesque stiff-legged gait. Her head went over to one side, and for the first time he saw her eyes. They were mad – mad – mad. . . . Her mouth opened, and the words came out in a strangled, harsh tone.

'Life . . . life . . . life . . . flesh . . . flesh . . . flesh . . . blood . . .'

'Susan!' Reginald screamed and tried to get up, but collapsed as a blast of pain seared his back; he could only watch with dumb horror as she swung her stiff left leg round and began to hobble towards the broken table that lay on the bottom stair. She had difficulty in bending over to pick up the carved walnut leg, and even more difficulty in straightening up, but she gripped the leg firmly in her right hand, and the grimace on her face could have denoted pleasure.

'You . . . denied . . . me . . . life,' the harsh voice said. 'You . . . denied . . . me . . . life . . .'

She, if the thing standing over Reginald could still be so called, looked down with red-tinted eyes, horror in ivory and gold, and he wanted even then to hold her, kiss away the grotesque lines from around the full-lipped mouth, murmur his great love, close those dreadful eyes with gentle fingers. Then the carved walnut leg came down and smashed deep into his skull, and the world exploded, sent him tumbling over and over into eternity.

Presently the Thing which had been Susan went out into the evening that was golden with the setting sun. It drank deep of the cool air, for storm clouds were pouring in from the west and soon there would be rain.

It went stiff-legged down the garden path, and out into the roadway. There was still much killing to be done.

A TIME TO PLANT – A TIME TO REAP

Arthur Cooper murdered his wife on Tuesday morning and buried her late on Wednesday evening.

...The reason for this undue delay was twofold. Firstly, the confusion that necessarily results from one's first murder, and secondly, the length of time it took him to dig her grave.

He chose the site with great care; it was essential that the grave received the early morning sunlight, was sheltered from the east winds and was reasonably dry. For it was Arthur's intention to plant some geraniums over Agatha, and experience had taught him that these estimable plants are rather particular where they raise their heads.

The trouble began two feet down. Arthur struck chalk and it cost him eight hours' hard digging before he had acquired a grave that was both respectable and safe. In the meantime, the reason for all this unaccustomed, back-breaking work was lying face down on the bed with her mouth open.

Arthur had, of course, a motive for murdering Agatha. He did not like her. In fact, he had never liked her, but he had quite early in their association fallen head over heels in love with her money. It was, alas, an unrequited passion, for under Agatha's guidance the golden stream had avoided Arthur's hot little hands and, instead of reaping, he was expected to sow.

'A wife expects to be kept by her husband.'

This was one of her gravewards remarks, and once she had remarked with heavy humour: 'What's yours is mine, what's mine is me own,' and Arthur had repaired to the garden shed, where he lovingly fingered the sharp edge of a pick-axe.

So it was, cheated out of what he considered to be his rightful dues, that Arthur found himself the sole possessor of eighteen stone of feminine body – with the cool effrontery to

demand its conjugal rights. Gone was the dream of a middle-aged housekeeper who dished out a fat, monthly cheque and slept the sleep of the contented in her own bedroom.

'What about it then? I fancies it tonight.'

Slender thirty looked at overflowing fifty-five and shuddered.

'You ought to be past that kind of thing,' he muttered.

Agatha thought this remark outrageously funny. She roared with laughter; her three chins shook, her enormous breasts heaved and her great legs flailed like monstrous tree trunks as she fought to control her merriment.

'Past it? I'm just getting into me stride. I could break your back any day.'

Arthur thought it quite possible.

"Ere. How'd you like to smack me bottom?'

He felt sick.

'Or play hide and seek between me boobs?'

So, it can quite well be understood, she had to go. She went. Arthur strangled her with a curtain cord and Agatha displayed her unreasonable attitude to the very end. She took fifteen minutes to die and Arthur was as limp as a dishcloth before the body allowed whatever life force Agatha possessed to depart.

He buried her by moonlight.

It was a dreadful task. She was too heavy to lift and had to be dragged which strained his strength to the uttermost. Gravity helped. A push got her off the bed and she flopped on to the floor with a nasty soggy sound. Luckily she landed on the bedside rug and this served as a sledge, so he was able to drag her to the window. Getting her out of the window was another matter. She got wedged and although Arthur put his back against the broad buttocks and heaved until his face assumed an interesting purple shade, there was no budging her. Finally, remembering the army maxim: 'Sweat saves lives – brains saves both', he fetched a spade and by dint of leverage, easing a tiny fraction through at a time, he at last had the satisfaction of seeing Agatha go sliding over the window sill and hearing the squashy thud as she landed on the garden path.

Agatha in life had not been a particularly pleasant sight

– in death her appearance was hair-raising. After her descent from the window, the face had assumed a lopsided expression; the nose was flattened, the tongue stuck out, one eye had parted company with its socket, and one hand – the right – was clenched, as though, even now, Agatha was considering taking vengeful action.

Arthur ordered his stomach to be still and considered the ways and means of conveying his worst half to her – it was to be hoped – last resting place. Dragging her up the garden path was out of the question, carrying her, downright ridiculous; then brainpower came to his rescue again. The wheelbarrow.

This was a galvanized iron contraption, equipped with a very nice red-spoked, inflated tyre wheel. It was large, one might say commodious, and was quite capable of containing Agatha so long as her legs behaved with reasonable decorum. The trouble was: how the hell did he get her into it?

The car-jack helped. The ironing board did serve as a lever and presently she was enthroned in the wheelbarrow, the great legs stretched out in front, her grotesque head lolling down over the back, so that Arthur, when he stood between the handles, was forced to look down upon a nightmare face that poked its tongue out and shifted its loose eye at every step. Now and again the clenched fist would strike the ground and, in passing, even put paid to one of his prize dahlias – an act of vandalism that hardened his heart. He dumped her silently and unceremoniously into her grave, although he had been considering saying a few appropriate words. Not exactly a burial service but something brief, like: 'Tis a far, far better thing I do now,' or: 'Sleep, sleep and ne'er to wake,' for Arthur had a poetical streak and was well read – assets which Agatha had never appreciated.

She tumbled into her grave and lay face uppermost, and Arthur lost no time in covering that disgusting face with its cheeky protruding tongue and wandering eyeball. The chalky soil that had been so hard to dig out went in easily enough, and presently the hole was filled, the earth beaten flat

with a spade, then raked over, so that the six-foot stretch of ground resembled the rest of the neatly-tended garden. He planted the young geraniums with loving care then, tired out, retired to bed.

Now, it is a well-known fact that a murder, like a good dinner, should be well planned. Arthur had not planned, well or otherwise. He had, so to speak, eaten his dinner, then set about composing the menu. When the early morning sun sent its first pale rays through the open window, Arthur woke and became aware of a nagging worry; a knotty problem his sleeping brain had been milling over during the dark hours. It took a few minutes for him to realise what the problem was.

How was he going to explain Agatha's disappearance? Eighteen stone of active woman was going to be missed, particularly as she had always made a point of being either disagreeable, or gushingly familiar. Quiet, well-behaved people are soon forgotten; noisy, rude ones leave a deep track in their wake, a trail of resentment which if it is suddenly terminated, quickly turns into a question mark. But there was an even more terrible problem waiting to be solved. How was he going to lay his hands on all that lovely money?

If only Agatha could have seen her way clear to die in a respectable manner, all would have been well. A will that Arthur had helped draw up diverted the golden stream into his own particular stretch of desert but, without a nice legal death certificate, it was just an interesting document with an unrealistic potential.

After much thinking and the total destruction of a boiled egg, for Arthur did not allow business to interfere with his breakfast, one fact became crystal clear. Agatha should have met with a fatal accident.

'I ought to have thrown her over a cliff.'

He spoke the word aloud, then looked around with some trepidation, for had not someone remarked that walls have ears? He toyed with the idea of digging Agatha up and transporting her to the coast, where she could take a problem-solving leap over a cliff. But the prospect of a twenty-mile journey, with that lopsided and, by now, earth-daubed

face, was more than his nerves or stomach could endure, so he abandoned the plan for something more practical.

Why not drive the car to the summit of a high cliff, leave a few bits and pieces of clothing around, and trust that the authorities would arrive at the right conclusion?

But wait a minute. Would they not expect to find a body? Or, at least, a bit of a body?

'I should have hacked an arm off, or something,' he reflected miserably, being, as always, wise after the event. Again there was a mental picture of him digging, chopping. . . . But the prospect of carting a portion of Agatha to the coast was no more alluring than transporting her entire person. Then the darkness of his despair was lit by a brilliant thought. Why not park the car near a spot where the currents raced out to sea? He seemed to remember this happened at Chalmouth, some ten miles from Beachy Head.

He threw a mixed selection of Agatha's clothes into a suitcase and started his long journey within the hour.

A thirty-miles-per-hour gale tore across the cliff top and Arthur had to lie face downwards so as to see the boiling sea below. The scene was most rewarding. Waves crashed against rocks; they leapt and whirled in a most satisfactory manner, and really, a better body-disposer could not be imagined. Arthur crawled back to the car, took out Agatha's suitcase and prepared to stack the clothes in a neat little pile, thereby hoping to create the impression she had disrobed before diving head first into the seething cauldron below. He vaguely remembered this was the usual procedure for watery suicides. But he had not taken the gale into consideration. With a triumphal scream, the wind seized Agatha's clothes: to wit – three blouses, two floral dresses, six extra large bras, four nylon slips and a pink corset, and, after raising them on high, bore them off in a southerly direction, not relaxing its grip until they were finally dispersed at various points along the French coast. However, Arthur was not left empty-handed. He managed to grab one pair of French frilly knickers – an article of underwear of which Agatha had been inordinately proud. Deciding that one pair of knickers in the hand

was worth more than an entire wardrobe on the wind, he anchored them down with a large rock, then, aware that his master plan had more holes than a sieve, departed.

He walked ten miles, jumped on to a milk train without being seen and, eight hours later, unlocked his front door, stumbled up the stairs and flopped, fully dressed, on to the bed. What with one thing and another, he had had a strenuous thirty-six hours.

'Shouldn't worry, sir,' said the station sergeant. 'Shouldn't worry.'

'But I am worrying,' Arthur stated for the third time. 'She ought to have been back hours ago. Where can she be?'

'Oh . . .' The sergeant shook his head. 'You can never tell with the ladies, sir. My missus disappeared for an entire day once. It appears she got stuck in the Tunnel of Love at Battersea Fun Fair.'

'I'm sure she's not there,' Arthur said with great sincerity.

'Well, sir,' the sergeant was doing his best to comfort – 'don't you be surprised if you find your good lady cooking the dinner when you get home.'

Arthur shuddered.

Two gentlemen exhibiting a tasteful line in raincoats called next morning and, although Arthur had been expecting their visit, he still all but fainted when he saw them walking up the garden path. They were very polite.

'Good morning, sir.' The elder one, the one with tired blue eyes and a grim smile, raised his hat. 'You are Mr Cooper?'

'Yes.' Arthur swallowed. 'What is it?'

'Could we come in, Mr Cooper?'

They were soon seated in the lounge and the elder man placed his hat on the floor. He eyed it several times, as though fearful lest it might run away. The silence was becoming painful, when at last he broke it.

'You reported a missing person?'

'Yes.' Arthur nodded. 'My wife.'

'Quite.' The man cleared his throat. 'I am Inspector Sharp – this is Sergeant Halliday.'

Arthur made a noise that could have been translated as: 'How'd yer do?' and the two men grunted.

'Your car registration number. Would it be VGU 165?'

Arthur decided to say 'Oh', then racked his brains for something more appropriate and only succeeded in producing a strangled 'Oh, dear.'

'We will want you to come to the station.' Sergeant Halliday apparently thought he should display some interest. 'For an identification.'

'Body?' Arthur gasped.

'No, sir. A pair of lady's undergarments. The only remains that were recovered.'

'Swift currents you see, sir,' Inspector Sharp pointed out. 'Should the poor lady have met with – an accident – she'd be well out to sea by now. But we must hope for the best. Was she – depressed or anything?'

Arthur could not imagine a depressed Agatha and, as he was at heart a truthful man, he said 'No', before he realized it. The inspector looked most distressed and scratched his head.

'We have a theory, but I'd rather not disclose it at the present time, if you don't mind, sir. There'll be an inquest of course, and we'd be obliged if you would attend.'

Arthur said, 'Of course' and 'Can I get you a cup of tea?'

Both the inspector and the sergeant said that was most kind, and Arthur made a nice cup of tea, so they were all fortified before he went down to the police station to identify Agatha's frilly knickers.

As no body had been found, Agatha's inquest was brief.

'Inspector,' the coroner said, peering over his spectacles, 'what, in your opinion (based of course on your vast experience of such matters), took place on that cliff top?'

'Well, sir,' the inspector replied squaring his shoulders and assuming the expression of an expert lecturing to a class of laymen, 'in my opinion, the poor lady received an urgent call from nature; so urgent, in fact, that action – craving the court's pardon – was demanded then and there. Having removed the garment which was subsequently recovered, she chose a spot where the wind was blowing out to sea, and was

blown, or fell, to her death.'

The coroner shook his head sadly.

'I am sure this unfortunate, not to say, tragic, affair will serve as a warning to those who might be tempted to adopt a similar course of action. I feel I cannot say more than: better be a little late in this world, than a lot too early in the next.'

He then expressed deep sympathy for the bereaved and sorrowing husband and recorded a verdict of death by misadventure.

When Arthur got home he did a little dance of joy before racing down the garden path to acquaint Agatha with the good news.

'You fat old faggot.' He would have kicked the grave, only the geraniums were coming along nicely. 'Fat, stupid, old cow . . . misery . . . bloody female Scrooge . . . get down to hell . . . and stay there . . . rot . . . rot . . . I'll find someone with class . . . a trim little number . . . you'll see . . .'

The geraniums nodded their red heads and the forget-me-nots stared up at the noonday sun with blue, innocent faces, while a fat earthworm slithered down through the black soil, in its perpetual quest for nourishment. Next day, Arthur began his search for a replacement.

He found it in a seaside café. It had all things needful for a really satisfactory replacement, having some vital measurements which Arthur correctly estimated to be 36-24-36. It was also equipped with a strawberry-and-cream complexion that made his mouth water, and a cascade of golden hair, which caressed white shoulders that she had thoughtfully left bare. Arthur, with the boldness natural to a man who has recently laid hands on a quarter of a million pounds, sat down opposite this vision and smiled. The replacement glared. Arthur tried a direct approach.

'What do you think of it?'

He pointed to the open door. The new, sports-style Mercedes gleamed bright red in the afternoon sun.

'Yours?' asked the replacement in a voice which rang as sweetly as a well-oiled cash register.

'Fresh from the showrooms.'

The replacement said: 'Ah.'

Her name was Clover Bryant and she gave Arthur to understand that her one desire was to live in quiet, comfortable surroundings, where she could develop her spiritual potential. Arthur stated how he, too, had a great regard for his spiritual well-being, and how lucky it was they had met.

She said: 'I expect you are quite well off, having this fine car and all.'

Arthur casually mentioned a figure rather in excess of two hundred and fifty thousand, and Clover agreed one could do a lot of spiritual developing with such a sum.

They were married three weeks later and honeymooned on the Costa Brava, putting up at a hotel where fish and chip dinners were a speciality and tea laced with goats' milk had an exciting foreign flavour.

Presently they arrived back at the detached cottage and Clover wrinkled her delicious little nose.

'Rather on the small size. I mean, there isn't much room to spread one's potential. I should imagine a property developer would pay you a nice price for it. All that garden. Build a block of flats there, with an underground car park.'

Arthur winced.

'With a fairly small place we'll have lots more money to spend. I mean, that necklace you wanted and all those clothes . . .'

Clover, after some reflection, decided a country cottage was perhaps the place to expand her aura, for she was, after all, a simple girl, who could wear a diamond necklace in rustic surroundings.

Life became an erotic dream.

'Would you like to . . .?' she enquired.

Arthur said he would – and did.

She looked at him, then down at her perfect breasts.

'Perhaps . . .' she suggested shyly.

'It would help pass the time,' Arthur agreed, and he blessed the initiative that had enabled him to exchange a life of boredom for one of almost perpetual bliss.

In the meantime, the geraniums on Agatha's grave had matured into fine, upstanding plants. Their red petals gleamed with good health, their rough stems were like solid stalks of green liquorice, and their leaves were wide-spread hands, greedy for sunlight and rain. The forget-me-nots had not been idle either. They now extended far beyond their original starting point. Each little plant had joined forces with its neighbour and had even sent out scouts into the hinterland where the lordly geraniums waved their scarlet heads above the raw earth.

Arthur, when repletion allowed him time for mundane matters, took out his hoe and loosened the soil, uprooted the occasional weed and rejoiced in his never-abating sense of well-being.

Happiness is a form of madness that afflicts very few people, and then only for short periods. Arthur, when he discovered the white shoot nestling coyly among the vanguard of the forget-me-nots, had lived in a state of ecstasy for nigh on two months. He was overdue for a return to sanity.

It was barely detectable. A mere fleck of whiteness; minute, tinged with yellow, shiny on one side – it was soft to the touch and bent easily. Arthur got down on to his knees and examined this phenomena with mounting interest. What could it be? A sprouting potato? Hardly – he never planted vegetables near the flower beds. He loosened the soil, clawed it away, so that an inch or so more of the strange growth was revealed.

A gentle breeze ruffled his hair, an earthworm slid up from the loose soil, and from the house came the voice of Clover, calling.

'Arthur, darling – where are you?'

Somewhere, deep down in the dark recesses of Arthur's brain, a little man was shouting. He kept repeating the same words, over and over again.

'That's not a plant. That's a finger.'

There could be no possible doubt. Agatha was sprouting.

Clover looked particularly fetching in a backless sunsuit when she crept up behind Arthur, some ten minutes later.

'You do look funny,' she said.

Arthur did not bother to answer, only continued to beat the earth with his hoe, oblivious to the fatal effects suffered by his up-to-now prized geraniums. After a while Clover became a little worried and ventured to touch her husband's arm. He instantly dropped the hoe and spun round, his face white and his eyes dilated by terror.

'Keep away – don't touch me.'

'Arthur, what's the matter?'

Her simple mind tasted his fear and sought for a rational explanation.

'Was it something nasty you saw in the garden?'

He could only nod.

'A worm? A nasty, long wriggling worm?'

Arthur shook his head. Words were still beyond the reach of his tongue.

'Not . . . not . . .' Clover gasped. 'Not a snake?'

She took Arthur's silence to mean acquiescence and flung her arms about him, while she pictured some long, hissing reptile slithering between the geraniums, armed with fangs and an unlimited supply of venom.

'Did you kill it?' she whispered.

'I bashed it with me hoe.' Arthur found his voice at last. 'Bashed and bashed it.'

'And you buried it?' Clover asked.

'Yes.' He nodded. 'Buried it deep. It can't come up again. I pulverized it.'

'You are brave,' Clover said admiringly. 'I'd have run.'

'There's no point in running.' Arthur unwound her arms and looked with deep concern at the ruined flower bed. 'What's buried must be lived with.'

He did his best to forget, having sought desperately for an explanation. All phenomena can be explained if one thinks carefully. A finger must have come adrift. He seemed to remember that worms had buried entire cities, and therefore it was not beyond the realms of possibility that they could detach one finger and sort of – uplift it. It was to be hoped that, having performed this prodigious feat, they – the worms – would let well alone and leave the remainder of

Agatha below ground level.

He decided to do something drastic.

He uprooted all the geraniums and planted cabbages in their place. Cabbages were nice and solid, they put down deep roots, grew big green heads and hid the black earth. Only, Arthur was not at all certain he would ever be able to eat one.

The trouble was, of course, that cabbages take a while to grow, and the naked soil, decorated by two rows of infant plants, looked most forbidding. It was inclined to bulge in several places, and although the hoe soon levelled these, nevertheless imagination gave him no rest. Suppose something was still pushing upwards? He steeled himself to push the hoe down below the soil. There was no resistance. He prodded the loose earth, like a housewife testing a boiled potato. So far as could be judged nothing was coming up. He decided to forget and even possibly forgive Agatha for her one lapse. After all, what was a finger more or less? A floating digit. A stray index. A mere fragment. Come to think of it, the damned thing had probably come adrift when he tossed her into the hole. He went back to Clover with a light heart.

Yesterday slid into tomorrow with the speed of an express train entering a tunnel. Sleep – day – Clover – sleep. Days grew into weeks; autumn loomed over the horizon, the summer began to die and the cabbages reached adulthood.

Fortified by the confidence built by time, Arthur decided it was safe to leave the house unattended. They went for an extended motor tour, putting up at seaside hotels, prolonging a honeymoon that seemed set fair to last forever. They visited a certain cliff top.

'Was it here . . .?' Clover did not finish the question and Arthur nodded.

'How awful.' Clover gripped his arm as a seagull made a mournful cry and for a moment it sounded like Agatha screaming for Arthur to come to bed. He shivered and drew his new, beautiful wife away.

'It all belongs to the past,' he said.

But suddenly he felt an urgent urge to go home.

The cottage welcomed them. The setting sun highlighted the red brickwork, painting the uncut lawn silver-gold, while the flowers gaily waved their bright heads and the cabbages, way down at the bottom of the garden, seemed to nod a sedate greeting.

'How nice to be home.' Clover had a mind that was well stocked with clichés. 'I always say, the best part of going away is coming back.'

They opened the windows, unpacked, dusted the furniture, put fresh sheets on the bed, then had tea – two boiled eggs and brown bread and butter. After tea Arthur cleaned the car, while Clover went for a walk in the garden. After a while she came down the garden path hugging a huge cabbage. Arthur looked up, then frowned.

'What are you going to do with that?'

'Cut it up and boil it,' she said with charming simplicity.

'I don't like cabbage.'

'Then why did you plant them?'

There was really no answer to that, at least not one he cared to give, so he shrugged and went on polishing the car bonnet.

'I liked the geraniums best,' Clover remarked after a short silence, 'but I suppose cabbages are more useful. After all, one can't eat geraniums.'

Arthur stated that, so far as he was aware, boiled geraniums were not recommended with roast pork.

'I knew someone who ate daffodils,' Clover said thoughtfully. 'He – she, boiled them in milk and added parsley. I expect they were very nice.'

Arthur grunted and set to work on the windscreen.

Clover sighed and hugged the cabbage to her well-shaped bosom.

'One of them is deformed.'

'One of what is deformed?'

'The cabbages.'

Arthur applied Windowlene to the windscreen, then rubbed vigorously with a yellow duster.

'Probably got blight or something. I'll see to it later on.'

Clover sighed again.

'Yes, it's small and yellow. Beastly-looking thing. Nasty and soft and it pongs rather. Looks like a clenched fist.'

Arthur's head came up, his mouth opened and he made a strange sound. Fortunately, Clover had turned her back and was already walking towards the house. She called back over one shoulder.

'Dinner will be ready in about two hours.'

The yellow duster floated unnoticed to the ground. Arthur felt sick; the blood drained from his face and there was a terrible coldness. He wanted to walk slowly up the garden path and reassure himself all was well, that all he need worry about was a cabbage that had been struck down in childhood. But he ran. He raced towards horror, dimly aware that it had sat on his shoulders for many a month and was now maturing into a hideous bloom. The cabbages were three rows of motionless green heads; glossy, one might say, replete with good living – one had a pinkish tinge. Arthur paused. Now there was a childish urge to turn about and run back: to keep running, to hide in a deep wood and never let anyone see his face again. Then commonsense prevailed and he knew the inevitable must be faced, whatever the consequences.

It was there. Yellow, shrivelled like a rotten orange but, to the eye that knew, undoubtedly a clenched fist. The knuckle bones gleamed like old piano keys through the discoloured skin and the fingers were tight shut in a gesture of terrible menace.

Arthur swore, trapped in a fit of fear-inspired rage.

'Damn the bloody fat cow. Do you hear me down there? Leave me alone. You're dead . . . dead . . . dead . . . I'll settle your hash . . . just wait . . . wait . . .'

The fist waited while Arthur ran to the tool shed and returned with a spade He raised it above his head, took one savage swipe, missed and beheaded a cabbage.

'Cool.' He was speaking aloud. 'Got to keep cool. Now, take aim . . . and . . .'

He swung the spade, hit the fist square on, and it rose

in a graceful curve to land with a sickening thud some twenty feet away. It took some time for Arthur to find it, for the grass had grown during his absence and, to an uninformed observer, he could have been a golfer seeking a lost ball. Eventually he almost trod on it. It was nestling down between two tufts of grass and came up on to his spade like a fried egg on to a slice. Arthur's eyes saw, but for a while his brain refused to believe.

The fist had roots.

Long, thin, pinkish roots that bled slightly, suggesting they had been broken off some longer, more substantial growth.

He took the awful thing to a spot under the old elm tree and buried it deep, flattening the earth afterwards with the blade of his spade. Then he returned to the grave – no, the cabbage patch – and began a careful examination.

He was not disappointed. He 'uprooted' one big toe that was just beginning to put in a coy appearance, one little finger, a thumb, and a few more odds and ends that defied recognition. He buried these under the apple tree, spreading them out well, for he had a terrible vision of them continuing to produce some awful hybrid.

'Dinner's ready,' Clover said some half an hour later. 'What on earth are you doing?'

Arthur did not answer. He was carrying a large piece of rock.

'All those lovely cabbages!' Clover cried. 'You've uprooted all the cabbages.'

'Bugger the cabbages,' Arthur said coarsely.

'But what are you doing with all those stones?'

'Rockery.' Arthur dumped a lump of masonry on top of a mounting pile of bricks, stones and a couple of rusty flat irons he had found in the tool shed.

'But . . .' Clover began, then gasped: 'You mustn't lift that, it's far too heavy.'

Arthur shook his head.

'Can't be too heavy. Nothing can be too heavy.'

'Well, come and have your dinner. It will spoil.'

'Haven't got time.' Arthur emptied a barrow-load of half bricks on to the one-time cabbage patch. 'Must finish before sunset. Must. Got to keep her down.'

'Keep who down?'

'Eh?' Arthur dropped the barrow. 'Keep the soil down. It rises during the night, you know.'

'Does it?' Clover shook her head in bewilderment. 'I didn't know that. You are clever. Wouldn't it be awful if it rose up and made all those stones tumble down. Then all your hard work would be for nothing.'

Arthur groaned.

In fact, he finished the rockery next day, if indeed the untidy pile of assorted bricks and stones could be so designated. He threw earth over the end result and planted forget-me-nots in all the nooks and crannies, so that within a few weeks it began to look quite pretty in a craggy sort of way. Unfortunately, sometimes. usually at sunset, if one stood in a certain part of the garden, the rockery did rather resemble a fat woman in a flowered dress. But Arthur was careful where he stood and decided the garden did not look its best at eventide.

But when he lay beside Clover in the bed he had once shared with Agatha, he found himself listening. Was the rockery heavy enough? Could she not, even now, be worming her way up, dislodging a rock here, a stone there – slithering up like some hideous flower towards the light? Once, during those sleepless hours, he did hear a dull thud and next morning found a solitary stone that had fallen from the rockery. But that was all. No sinister growth. Time began slowly to rebuild the wall of confidence.

Then, one terrible day, Arthur stepped out into the narrow lane and a young man in a bright sports car hit him square on. When he returned to consciousness, he was encased in bandages and plaster of Paris, and a distressed Clover was patting her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

'I thought . . .' She was sobbing gently so as not to disturb her make-up. 'I thought you were dead.'

Arthur wished he was. He was one continuous ache, and

whenever he moved a blast of pain shot up the length of his entire body.

'What's . . .' Talking was also a painful business. 'What's wrong with me?'

Clover blew her nose, then hastily consulted a handbag mirror, in case she had reddened it.

'You have broken two of your darling legs, cracked three sweet ribs, fractured one divine arm and you are bruised all over.'

'Bloody hell,' Arthur exclaimed.

'I could kill that awful young man in the car,' Clover declared, then added wistfully, 'even if he was rather dishy. The doctor – who's rather nice – says you'll be laid up for weeks – even months.'

Arthur groaned.

'Yes, I know, isn't it simply awful? To think you'll be in this terrible hospital for ages and I'll be on my own. No one to take care of me.' She shook her head sadly. 'I hope I'll be able to hold out. I mean to say, I'm rather . . .'

'The garden?' Arthur gasped. 'Who's going to look after the garden?'

'Don't you worry about the garden,' Clover said cheerfully. 'I'll get a man in. There's an awfully nice young chap in the village . . .'

'No.' Arthur tried to sit up, but instantly fell back with a muffled shriek. 'Leave it alone. No one is to touch it. Do you hear me? No one.'

'Well.' Clover permitted her face to assume a tiny frown. 'If that's the way you feel, I'm sorry I said anything. The grass can grow a mile high, so far as I'm concerned.'

'Good.' Arthur tried to nod.

'It can become a jungle. An impenetrable jungle.'

'Splendid.' Arthur felt like clapping. 'I can get myself fit chopping it down, once I'm on my feet again.'

Clover did her best to think.

'You're funny,' she said after a while.

He spent four worrying weeks in hospital and Clover came to see him every Wednesday evening and Sunday afternoon. On the second Sunday she was accompanied by the

young man who was the direct cause of Arthur's predicament. He was tall and red-faced and sported a ridiculous little moustache.

'Sorry, old man. All my dashed fault. Although you did sort of pop out from nowhere.'

'He kindly offered me a lift,' Clover pronounced gravely.

'Thought I couldn't do less,' the young man stated. 'I mean, you laid up here and your lady wife having to take the bally old bus.'

Arthur was concerned about a more important matter.

'How's the garden?'

'Dreadful.' Clover shook her head. 'The grass is all over the place and you can scarcely see the rockery.'

'Oh dear,' Arthur exclaimed with a sigh of relief. The young man cleared his throat.

'Would you like me to run the old lawn mower over it? Bash about with the old spade? Dig up the bits and pieces?'

'No . . .' Arthur tried to raise a fractured arm. 'No . . . you're very kind.'

'No trouble,' the young man insisted. 'Pleasure . . . absolute pleasure.'

'He'll be company for me,' Clover stated, wide-eyed. 'After all, I've only got the goldfish.'

'Leave the bloody garden alone,' Arthur roared and a ward sister gave him an anxious look 'No one is to touch the garden but me.'

'Sorry, I'm sure,' the young man muttered.

'He has a thing about the garden,' Clover said softly. She would have been angry, but someone had once told her that anger makes lines on the face. 'Let everything grow.'

'Not everything,' Arthur whispered.

'But I want to help most frightfully,' the young man exclaimed.

'You can clean the windows,' Clover promised.

The leaves had fallen when Arthur came home. The tall grass in the garden was dying; the trees were dark skeletons standing out against a sullen sky and the rockery was a weed-infested pile waiting for winter.

Arthur, still unable to walk, was forced to sit by the window and gaze out upon his neglected domain. The grass hid so much – or did it? Conscience may make cowards of us all; it can also make a fool out of a clever man. Arthur was not clever, but he began to wonder if he had allowed his sense of guilt to play havoc with his imagination. What the hell did a finger or two, plus the odd fist, amount to anyway? Surely with that lot of bricks on top of her, Agatha was well and truly bedded down by now. Good heavens, six months or more had passed since – that little unpleasantness that had resulted in her body being dumped in a hole in the garden .Come spring, when he was fully active again, he would cut the grass, trim the rockery and laugh at these ridiculous fears.

Winter came. Snow fell. The garden became a vast plain of eye-dazzling whiteness, save for the rockery, which stood out like a fat woman in a white dress. Arthur chuckled and whispered aloud.

'That'll keep you down. Freeze your bones and chill your marrow. Make that bloody tongue curl up. No more yap-yap-yap.'

Come Christmas, and he was able to walk about, assisted by two sticks, while Clover organised what she called a Yuletide Festival. She bought a silver plastic Christmas tree, a string of coloured lights and an assortment of paper chains. She also invited for Christmas the young man with the sports car.

'Gregory,' she explained to Arthur, who was beginning to entertain some nasty suspicions, 'was very helpful when you were in hospital. He's very lonely and I think it's only right we repay him for all his kindness.'

'Sure he hasn't been paid already?' Arthur enquired.

'Now you're being horrid. Absolutely horrid and unkind.'

She cried beautifully without tears and Arthur could do no less than beg her pardon, which she, after a suitable interval, freely gave. Then Christmas Day came and Gregory was there, assisting in the kitchen, full of Arthur's whisky and good cheer.

'Don't you move,' he instructed Arthur. 'The little woman

and I can manage quite nicely.'

Arthur growled and insisted on coming into the kitchen, where he dropped a hot plate and spilt the gravy.

'Go and sit down,' they said, and he knew they were laughing at him, basking in a warm glow of togetherness from which he was forever excluded. He sulked, knowing full well this was not the way to treat the situation.

'Feel a bit down in the mouth?' Gregory enquired and Clover giggled.

'I expect he wants to play in his garden.'

'Bit chilly out there, old man. Won't be able to put any more rocks on your rockery.'

'Or plant any more cabbages.' Clover exploded into a fit of uncontrollable merriment.

'Shut up.'

Arthur heard his voice rise to a high-pitched scream and he knew he looked and sounded ridiculous, but he seemed to have lost control of his brain. It was making him speak and behave like a madman.

'Temper, old boy,' Gregory said softly. 'Must keep the old shirt on, you know. Christmas, season of good will and all that.'

'Sod Christmas.' Arthur was shaking with infantile rage. 'You think I'm blind? Think I'm a half-wit or something?'

'I'm sure you've got all your marbles,' Gregory murmured.

'I know you've been having it off with my wife.' Arthur crashed his fist down on the Welsh dresser. 'I bet she never stood upright all the time I was in hospital.'

'He's so coarse.' Clover shuddered and Gregory frowned.

'I say, old man, that's a bit thick. I mean to say, in front of the lady and so forth. I really think an apology is in order.'

'I'll see you damned first.' Arthur kicked the dresser and looked longingly at an iron saucepan. 'I'll tell you what. I'll repeat it all in court. Divorce court. I'll make both of your names stink. See if I don't. Oh, the Sunday newspapers will love this. Wife commits adultery with man who ran down husband in sports car . . .'

'Can't let you do that, old man,' Gregory said gently, taking

up a large carving knife. 'Wouldn't do at all, you see. Can't have our names linked. 'Sides, the poor girl wouldn't have a bean.'

A cold blast of terror extinguished the fire of Arthur's anger and suddenly he wanted to cry.

'What . . . what do you mean?'

"Fraid you're for the chop-chop, old boy,' Gregory said sadly as he came round the kitchen table. 'Got the lady's good name to think about. Sorry and all that.'

'You're mad.' Arthur began to back away and only succeeded in trapping himself between the dresser and the return wall. 'I mean you can't . . .' His poor, terror-stricken brain fought to discover a valid reason to postpone his approaching demise. 'Damn it all, it's Christmas Day.'

Gregory chuckled.

'Better the day, better the deed.'

He came close to Arthur, then drove the carving knife with careful precision between the second and third ribs. He stood back as though to admire his work.

Arthur made a strange gurgling sound, then, to Clover's horrified astonishment, staggered out from beside the dresser and advanced, stiff-legged, across the kitchen. The carving knife handle stood out from his chest like some hideous growth. His mouth opened and a pinkish froth seeped over his lips. A few words bubbled up from his constricted throat.

'She . . . should . . . have . . . been . . . up . . . by . . . now.'

He swayed like an uprooted tree, then crashed to the floor. For a while there was silence, then Clover gasped:

'What did he mean?'

'Don't know.' Gregory shook his head. 'Must say, he was a hard chap to kill. I was doing all of forty miles an hour when I hit him with the old jalopy and damn me if he isn't up and about within three months. Then I shove a ruddy great carving knife in his heart and he goes belting around the place, chattering like a sex-mad monkey.'

'Gregory.' Clover clutched his arm. 'I think he's still breathing.'

'Is he?' Gregory reached for another knife. 'We'll soon

put paid to that.'

After a while they began to discuss the disposal problem.

'This is not what we planned, darling,' Clover complained.

'I know, old girl, but when he was so dashed rude to you, I blew me top. Sort of did the deed and left the planning bit to afterwards. Bad form, I know. Sorry.'

'But Gregory, my sweet, where are we going to put him?'

Gregory scratched his head.

'Got me there. Always made the others look like accidents. Safer. No problems. The jolly old authorities looked after the bodies for me. All I had to do was collect the doings.'

'But Gregory, darling, we've got to get rid of him. I mean, we can't leave him in the kitchen and I'm afraid the authorities won't help, without asking nasty questions. You must think, darling.'

'All right, if you say so.' Gregory assumed an expression which suggested some form of activity was taking place in his brain. Then he spoke.

'What about dumping him in the road? Accident. Lightening struck twice and so forth.'

'Knife in the heart?' Clover shook her head. 'Those dishy policemen would never understand.'

'Suppose you're right.' Gregory shook his head. 'There's no getting away from it. Work. We'll have to bury him. The point is – where?'

There was a long silence, then Clover bounced with excitement.

'There's one safe place. Under the rockery.'

Gregory slapped his thigh.

'I say, what a jolly good idea. He loved that bally old rockery, and with all those bricks on top of him he'll be as safe as houses.'

'I'm sure he would have wished it,' Clover remarked sententiously.

Gregory helped himself to a drink, then sat in Arthur's chair and crossed his legs. Clover almost frowned.

'Well, hadn't you better get on with it?'

'What? Now?'

'I certainly don't want him left where he is. The dinner is spoiling.'

'But all that snow. And those rocks and things.'

Clover did not answer, and presently, with a deep sigh, Gregory rose and made for the door.

'It's a bit much. 'Specially on Christmas Day.'

It took three hours to dismantle the rockery; another two before a three-feet deep hole had been carved out of the frost-hard ground. Then Gregory rebelled.

'Damned if I'm going down an inch more. Me bally back's aching, I'm frozen and I'm starving.'

'Don't you think . . .?' Clover began.

'No. In he goes, ready or not. I'll shovel the dirt back in, pile the rocks on top of him and call it a day. I bet the selfish blighter wouldn't have done that much for me.'

By five o'clock he was back in Arthur's chair, looking cold and worn out, but wearing the expression of a man who considers he has done a difficult job well.

'Snowing again,' he announced. 'Will cover up me handiwork very nicely.'

'Gregory.' Clover's lovely face was marred by a troubled expression. 'How are we going to explain his absence?'

'Say he went off and left you. Sort of thing he would do. Fellow was a cad.'

'But the money,' she complained. 'How do we get the money? We must prove he's dead.'

'Gad, you're right.' Gregory sat upright. 'Damnation, there's always something. What the hell are we going to do?'

'His first wife's body was never found,' Clover remarked thoughtfully.

'The devil you say!'

'They found the car on top of a cliff near Chalmouth. The car and a pair of her knickers.'

'You don't say?'

'I could always say he never got over the death of the first wife,' Clover suggested. 'Always fretting, despite all I did to make him forget. He actually took me to that cliff top on our honeymoon. I could easily find it again.'

'Gosh, what a perfectly super idea,' Gregory exclaimed.

'An absolute corker.'

'We'll leave the car on top of the cliff,' Clover said, nodded slowly, 'and a pair of his long underpants. . . .'

The coroner poured out his sympathy in a generous stream. His imagery was reminiscent of the hunting field and farmyard.

'Indeed can it be said; there is no love like the old love. Here was a man who tried so hard to recover from the shock of losing – in such tragic circumstances – the corner stone, or, may I so put it, the very foundation of his life. He remarried a young and beautiful woman, hoping, doubtlessly, to take up the reins and ride hard along the road of life – but alas, the roots were too deep; the obstacles too high for his mount to clear; the ditches too wide. His hand could not grasp the scythe, his plough overturned and he fell in to the compost heap of despondency.

'I would like to tender my deep sympathy for the young widow and express my hope that she will find happiness in the not-too-far-distant future.'

Clover took him at his word. She married Gregory at a registry office the following week and took her new husband down to Brighton for a short honeymoon. When they returned to the cottage, the snow had gone and the grass was a yard high.

'Get a bloke in to cut it, as soon as you get the money,' Gregory told Clover. 'Don't feel up to it meself.'

Clover was in a position to sign her own cheques about two months later and they engaged the services of a Mr Jenkins, who came up from the village, armed with a scythe and riphook.

'Fine old job there,' he remarked, staring thoughtfully at the miniature jungle. 'Rare old thirsty work, that's going to be.'

Gregory poured him a pint of beer and, suitably lubricated, Mr Jenkins went forth to reap. He first cut a broad path round the edge of the garden and the warm air was scented with the smell of new-mown hay. Under the old elm tree he paused, laid down his scythe and examined the exposed ground with

intense concentration. Gregory, who had been watching from a safe distance, called out:

'What is it, Mr Jenkins?'

Mr Jenkins took his hat off and, bending down, deposited a number of small objects into it. He then trotted back along the path his scythe had created and approached Gregory with much shaking of head and clucking of tongue.

'Look ye 'ere, sir. I never did see the like of this in all me born days.'

He held his upturned hat out for Gregory's inspection. In it lay a pile of perhaps two dozen or more grey-white objects, bearing more than a passing resemblance to tiny clenched fists. Each one was about the size of a golf ball, the minute fingers shut tight, the little thumb sticking out at an angle; they were most realistic, almost as if a large fist had gone to seed.

'What on earth are they?' Gregory asked, glancing anxiously at the weed-shrouded rockery.

'I reckon,' Mr Jerkins stated, 'they be some kind of mushroom. See, they are all soft and pappy. I 'spects they got all twisted like when they growed. With your permission, sir, I'll take 'em 'ome and get me missus to fry some with butter. I'll give some to me old rooster and if 'e is still standing up in the morning, then darn me if I don't 'ave 'em with a slice of bacon and a fried egg. Unless you fancy 'em yourself, sir.'

'No thanks,' Gregory shook his head. 'You're welcome.'

Mr Jenkins went back to his work and some ten minutes later he arrived at the apple tree. Again he paused. Then:

'Come you over 'ere, sir.'

'What now?' Gregory ambled over the cut grass and came at length to the tree, where he found Mr Jenkins on his knees, examining a crop of yellowish growths that covered an area of some three square feet.

'Darn me if there ain't some more, only these look like little fingers and thumbs. Darn me breeches if there bain't be some that look uncommonly like little big-toes. Well I'm jiggered.'

'You going to fry those?' Gregory asked.

'No. They be too unusual-like to eat. I was thinking they'd look well if I was to plant 'em between my dahlias. Perhaps they'll spread and make a nice border.'

'You're welcome to them. Take all you can find.'

'Thanks kindly, sir.'

Gregory walked back to the house and his dinner. Mr Jenkins took up his riphook and approached the rockery.

'Little fingers . . . thumbs . . . big toes?' Clover enquired. 'How strange. You don't suppose . . .?'

'Keep your hair on, old girl,' Gregory admonished, spearing a boiled potato on his fork. 'Some sort of mushroom. Old Jenkins is talking about eating them.'

'How ghastly.' Clover yawned. 'I'm getting so bored. I think we ought to go away somewhere for a few days.'

'Dash it all, old girl, we've only just got back. I say – what was that?'

'That' was a yell. Such a cry as might have come from a man who has mistaken a venomous snake for a piece of old rope, or met himself coming down stairs. It was repeated, only now it was more high-pitched, shrill; and there came the sound of running footsteps, intermingled with rasping sobs.

'What the hell . . .?'

Gregory rose and ran out into the garden, almost crashing into Mr Jenkins, who was positively galloping towards the front gate. He stopped, pointed a shaking finger at Gregory and poured out a torrent of words.

'Thought it were a bloody cabbage, I did. Bloody yellow cabbage . . . going to cut I were . . . going to tell 'em . . . I will . . . tell 'em . . . bloody mouth open . . . the other . . . oh, my Gawd . . .'

Then he turned and ran, with a speed that should have been impossible for a man of his age, through the open gateway, and Gregory heard his heavy footsteps receding rapidly down the lane.

'Gregory,' Clover was gripping his arm, 'do you suppose . . .?'

'We must find out,' he said simply. 'We must go . . . there.' He nodded in the direction of the rockery. 'We must find out.'

'I don't want to,' Clover wailed.

'We must,' he whispered. 'We must.'

They moved forward slowly, as if weighed down with heavy chains; and it seemed, at least to Gregory, they were walking a grass-strewn path to hell. The rockery was shaved clean of weeds, dock leaves and grass; the rocks and half bricks stood out in the sunlight like mountains on the moon. Then they saw what crowned the ugly pile and Clover gave a muffled scream.

'No.' Gregory shook his head. 'It's not possible.'

The head that poked out of the top of the rockery was yellow, not unlike a cabbage at first glance; the cheeks had fallen in, the eyes had gone, the mouth was gaping, the hair was a matted, earth-caked mop, rather like an uncompleted bird's nest, but it was still recognizable. Arthur had come up from the depths.

Gregory moved slowly round the rockery and found his cup of horror was yet to be filled. Growing out of the far side was another head. More battered, more time-worn; merely a skull, covered with coarse yellow skin. It appeared to be gazing up at Arthur's head, and a soft breeze shook the dangling mass of grey hair, creating the impression of grotesque movement, as if it still begrudged the two feet or so of space that separated them.

Clover's screams were a wild symphony of terror that made the birds rise from the surrounding trees and go teeming up to the cloudless sky, like an army of lost souls endeavouring to escape from Hades.

Gregory, too, thought of flight, but he knew there could be no hiding place, and he suddenly wished he were safely back in childhood, writing his name on a clean sheet of paper. He moved forward and gazed up at Archer's dead face.

'Why?' he asked.

The awful features wore an expression of terror that was a reflection of his own.

BIRTH

Gurney Slade was cutting grass.

The motor-mower hummed with contentment and so proclaimed its newness as did the lovingly applied film of oil which coated the working parts. Decapitated grass-blades leapt into the gleaming green-enamelled box, while a sweet aroma of newly-mown hay evoked an up-to-now forgotten memory of Gurney's childhood.

The sun had always shone in those summer afternoons of long ago.

He remembered lying in the thick grass that had been allowed to reach full maturity beyond the close-shaved lawn, resting snugly in that sense-blurred plane where one is neither asleep nor awake. From behind, came the faint clatter of cups on saucers as his mother laid the table for tea and, away to his front, the distant, muted roar of a haymaker.

The smell of cut grass bridged the years before an iron hand gripped his heart and hurled him back on to the smooth green carpet. The mower became as a body without a brain; it zig-zagged across the grass, the engine spluttering as though with rising fear, then crashed into the garden wall, denting the gleaming box, before lapsing into an abrupt silence.

A soft summer breeze made an old beech tree tremble; a sparrow alighted on the shorn lawn and looked vainly for worms. From far, far away came the sound of a howling dog.

Gurney got up and looked round. He saw the ruined mower, then instinctively glanced downwards.

He thought: 'Oh, my God!' and knew.

The body lay flat on its back, the sightless eyes staring up at the cloudless sky. Its forehead was smooth, the face unlined, the teeth bared in the death grin, and one hand, the left,

was gripping the white shirt front.

'I'm dead.'

There was no brain to form the thought, no tongue to utter the words, only a speck of consciousness that floated some six feet above the ground. But he was aware – existed – knew.

Only one sense remained. Sight. He could not hear, feel, or smell – only see. But emotion still lived. Sadness and fear produced a soundless cry, then merged and gave birth to grief. He mourned the death of his body and all that pertained to it. Eating, drinking, the smell of newly-cut grass, the lash of rain on his face, the smoothness of Caron's white skin. . . .

'Caron!'

She was not due back until ten o'clock: six or seven hours away, but the shock of finding this thing – the face fast turning black – could well nigh kill her, or perhaps worse, drive her insane.

His line of vision was suddenly directed towards the cottage: the yellow walls half-veiled by honeysuckle, the windows masked by white nylon curtain – four rooms, a dividing hall and a built-on kitchen called to him, and in a flash he was there, floating along the hall, drifting across the dining-room; a something without dimension.

'She will look for me.' The wordless thoughts went streaking across the small room as invisible waves. 'At first without alarm. She will open doors, call my name, go outside, look in the outhouse . . . Not the garden, it will be too dark. For some time she will not think of going out into the garden . . . The puzzled smile will die, her eyes widen, her voice take on the first grey tones of worry. Red thoughts will come out from her brain like scarlet poppies unfolding over the graves of the long-dead, and she will be as a beautiful moth trapped in a summer storm.'

Like a newly-born colt he quickly learnt how to move from one place to another. He thought 'bedroom' and was there, poised over the large double bed, peering into the long wardrobe mirror that denied his existence. 'Kitchen' was associated with 'sink', and at once he was deep down in a stainless-steel pit, where the gleaming walls towered up to a white, grease-streaked sky.

'Meant . . . to . . . decorate . . .' The thoughts hurled him into the small outhouse where empty tins of paint, brushes nestling in jars of turpentine, a distemper-smeared pair of steps and a rust-flecked saw glared at him with angry reproach.

'Oven . . . oven . . . Caron . . . told . . . me . . . to . . . turn . . . it . . . down . . .'

He was on the kitchen floor looking up at the grey-white gas stove; little headless snakes of black smoke were creeping shyly out from round the door edges. He mourned the passing of a ruined meal, then spun round in alarm on finding himself in a flame-lit cavern, where a giant casserole bubbled and spat, its surface a blackened face coated with erupting blisters.

'Should . . . have . . . turned . . . it . . . down . . .'

He was in the heart of a blue flame. A glorious, blue bubble of quivering light that streaked out and up to the limitless frontiers of space, and he felt no fear or wonderment, only a serene understanding, that he was now without size or shape. He had reverted to the original spark that had, in the beginning, been thrown out by a mighty cosmic fire.

'She . . . will . . . soon . . . be . . . back . . .'

The thought shot him back into the living-room where he raced round the walls in a frenzy of helpless terror, until at last a kind of tiredness, which had nothing in common with weariness of the body, made him come to rest on the table.

He must accept. Try to understand. He was dead. Dead . . . dead . . . dead. But was he? The essential Gurney Slade was very much alive. He could still think, even move after a fashion. He had not lost the power to reason. Indeed, coming down to basic facts, all he lacked was a body.

He considered this thought for some time, then allowed it to expand. What were the main functions of a physical body? Well, most essential, it must breathe, then it should be able to talk, and, of course – walk.

Walk! What had it been like to walk? Gurney tried to remember. Strange, he had always taken this fundamental action for granted and never actually noted the senses involved. Firstly, there had been a feeling of a hard surface beneath the feet, then the smooth working of leg muscles,

plus possibly an automatic swinging of arms. Prompted by an experimental urge, Gurney rose to a height of approximately six feet and started to move slowly across the floor. He tried to imagine a firm surface on which a pair of well-formed feet – suitably shod in stout shoes – were pacing. At once he found himself deep down in the thick pile of the carpet; a table leg soared up above him, like the trunk of a mighty oak. He shot upwards, fired by a blast of irritation.

He adjusted his height and tried again, but now he concentrated on a shape that walked on two legs. This was surely the answer; he must not think of the floor. After all, one didn't – its existence was taken for granted. Now he was in an oval box – in other words, the head – looking out of two small windows, and lower down was a flesh-covered bone cage, which housed a messy collection of bowels, heart, lungs and liver. This was supported by a pair of hinged, movable pillars, and they in turn were attached to flattish, ten-toed objects called feet.

He concentrated all his mental power (if this was the right definition) on this desired state of being. The legs were swinging . . . No, they weren't, darn it. The legs were lifting the feet and putting them firmly down on an honest-to-goodness Wilton carpet. The head was looking to its front, the eyes were unblinking, the mouth closed; the heart was beating seventy-two beats to the minute, the lungs knew their business and were breathing in and out, and the bowels were unmoved.

Gurney turned when he reached the doorway and tramped steadily back across the room.

Now, to go over it all again. He was looking through two little windows which had a kind of fringed blind on the outside. His mouth – a lipped slit – was tight shut. The heart was beating soundly, the liver was behaving itself, the lungs inflated before deflating and his bowels rumbled.

Then he bumped into the table.

He stamped solid feet on a carpet-covered floor.

He heard no sound, but there was feeling. Or rather emotion. The joy of one who has created.

He went up the stairs one step at a time, looking straight to his front through those little windows, and there was a great

urge to see that which he had made. To take pleasure in his creation.

He came up on to the landing, then turned and entered the bedroom. There was some anxiety because he could not hear, neither could he look to left or right nor, for that matter, up or down. The neck! He had forgotten to hinge the neck. Never mind – the fundamentals must be there, otherwise he would not be able to walk, feel the floor beneath his feet, or see through his little windows.

He stood before the wardrobe mirror and gazed upon his creation. Cold horror rushed in and held the reflected image frozen for an eternity of a second. The face was oval, white, hairless; there was a thin slit that did service for a mouth, but no nose, no ears and no neck. Two little milk-white windows stared blankly at their creator. The head, if it could so be called, sat on a barrel-shaped – something, and he had forgotten to include arms. Further down he realised he had forgotten something else, but under the circumstances it did not seem important.

The legs were a triumph. Long, muscular, hairy, they had all the hallmarks of a perfectly acceptable pair of masculine legs. Gurney would have gladly taken them anywhere. For the rest . . . The image quivered like a blancmange in a furnace, then quickly dissolved and Gurney Slade was once again a speck of consciousness floating some six feet above the floor.

'How?'

How to take on a perfect reproduction of a flesh-and-blood body? He knew it could be done, but how? How . . . how . . . how . . .? Of course his will was, so to speak, the flour that made the cake. But whence came the water, the sugar and spice and all things nice? Once he had solved this mystery, the next build-up should be a success. He floated through the cottage like an invisible moth, entering dark cupboards, taking a childish delight in oozing through keyholes. He went into the little-used front room, was momentarily lost in a vase of flowers, went back to the kitchen and instantly retreated on finding it full of smoke. Finally he flashed back to the bedroom. It was here, if anywhere, the answer lay.

He settled on the bed and thought.

'Why?'

Why the bedroom? One thing was certain, his memory was intact. The loss of his brain had not destroyed his memory pattern; did this also mean the automatic impulses could still be activated? The mental power-unit that had created a thirteen-stone man out of an eight-pound baby? If so . . . He floated upwards, then drifted over to the wardrobe mirror. But there was still the question. Why the bedroom?

Because . . . Thoughts tumbled over each other in their desire for expression. Because it was here he had slept, made love, given out basic, raw passion, that . . . The thoughts collected together, became as a blown-up balloon, then exploded. . . . That could not die. The raw passion, the bits and pieces, the wastage of his soul, did not, could not, die. The walls, the floor, the bed, were saturated with them. The personality of Gurney Slade was spread out everywhere. And all he had to do was to pull it together, suck the life-giving essence, build-up slowly bit by bit, forgetting nothing – use his goddarn will.

Outside, darkness was falling and he knew the congesting shadows would give him strength, help supply that little extra something he needed. He wondered if the rising moon might not be, in some way, responsible, but quickly dismissed the thought as he prepared for the great experiment.

First, his thoughts, like little winged messengers, went out to the walls, floated down to the beds, disturbed the dust-layer of memories.

'. . . Why . . . do you want to eat me? Love is love is love is lust. What is it? The urge to get inside someone and become part of them?'

'This is no time for philosophy.'

'Can't we talk sometimes?'

'Me Great Big Sitting-Bull . . . me no talk . . .'

Then his thoughts became tubes, long tentacles which fastened their suckers on walls, bed, floor, ceiling, and his will was a mighty pump, drawing in the bits, the pieces, the fragments of Gurney Slade.

'You mustn't . . . all right . . . if you want to . . . you've

tied it too tight . . . damn . . . indigestion . . . must take bath . . . money . . . lots of lovely money . . . you're hurting. . . . plant daffodils tomorrow . . . lovely tits . . . I'll be thirty-five next week . . . getting old . . . bills . . . bloody bills . . . flesh . . . white . . . soft . . . legs . . . thighs . . . bum . . . good word . . . better than buttocks . . . behind . . . arse. . . .'

The tubes were fat, pulsating, filled with essence, but he must go carefully. Keep his cool, build up slowly, forget nothing. Lay the foundations.

In the end and the beginning there were bones. The skeleton.

Gurney Slade watched his skeleton come into being. First as a faint, slightly phosphorescent outline, then a solid, hard framework of articulated bones, complete with skull, spinal column, clavicle, scapula, sternum, ribs, humerus, ulna, sacrum, pelvis, femur, patella, fibula, tibia and cartilages.

Now let the empty places be filled.

A mass of grey matter took possession of the skull; then came eardrums, glaring eyeballs, pink tongue, blood vessels, teeth, complete with fillings, windpipe, food tube – Gurney could not remember its right name – delicate pink lungs, dark brown liver, mauve, white-streaked heart, kidneys packed in creamy suet, neatly rolled coils of intestines . . . Soon Gurney's skeleton was packed tighter than a holiday-maker's suitcase, and he prepared himself for the final act.

'Flesh . . . flesh . . . let there be flesh.'

The skeleton was covered by a mist; this quickly merged into a slimy paste that ran in all directions. It bubbled, seethed, sprouted raw ears, a wet gleaming nose, then it solidified and acquired a smooth white skin. The bald skull darkened as a mop of red hair came into being; eyelashes declared their existence, a five-o'clock shadow clouded the chin. Colour tinted the cheeks, the full lips, and a well-built young man gazed upon his body with contentment.

'Life . . . a pint of life in a proper measure.'

The heart took up a steady beat; blood raced through the singing veins; hearing exploding with a sudden roar – and he was complete.

'I've done it.'

His voice sound strange, but it was familiar. His body felt perfect; never had it been so in tune, so free from aches and pains. But somehow it did not seem right. He was like a man who has sold his house and has illegally taken possession of it again.

'I'm alive!'

But was he?

He stood in front of the wardrobe mirror and breathed in deeply, then exhaled. His chest rose, then sank, in a most satisfactory manner. He slapped his left thigh with one of Caron's hairbrushes and was almost surprised when the blow stung and the flesh turned pink.

'I did it . . . but I couldn't have done.'

These conflicting thoughts accompanied him to the bathroom and refused to be dispelled even when he cut himself while shaving, and watched the bright red blood trickle down his chin.

'I know how I did it, but I can't believe I did.'

When he was in the bath a more comforting thought made its presence known.

'Perhaps . . . perhaps I never died at all.'

Relief poured in, flooded his brain, drove anxiety into a dark corner, where it waited for the tumult to subside.

'I was never dead. Of all the crack-brained ideas. Bloody imagination run wild. I'm probably going barmy, but I was never dead. Dear God, I was never dead.'

He had donned his best tweed suit, put on his shoes and was knotting his tie, when yet another thought sent its whispered words shuddering down the dark corridors of his brain.

'If you did not die, then there should be nothing lying out there in the garden.'

He seized the evil snake of a thought and thrust it into the bag of forgetfulness. But somehow it got out, and would not – could not – be confined. It began its obscene whispering all over again.

'If one cannot trust memory, where is reality? Dismiss your memories, erase the past, then you are dead, for you have never lived.'

'It did not happen.' Gurney spoke aloud. 'I am alive. How

can I be dead in the garden, and stand in this room, breathing, seeing and hearing?'

'Then go out and bury your past in a deep hole.'

'No, if I go out it would deny my existence.'

He went down into the kitchen and turned off the gas oven tap, then opened the window and back door. The acrid smoke drifted out with surly reluctance, while the cool evening air came in to caress his hot face with clammy fingers. He pulled the oven door down and took out the ruined casserole – a black, red-pocked face, that seethed weakly, like a bog digesting its latest victim.

The garden called him with silent, irresistible voice. The urge to go out and face the double-faced head of truth was like that which comes to a man perched on the rim of a high building. Jump – it's the quickest way down.

He shook his head and whispered, 'No!' as he took a torch from the kitchen dresser. He shouted: 'I won't go!' as he shuffled along the garden path. The torch cast a round circle of light which darted across the smooth cut lawn, revealing the straight lines which marked the passing of the mower.

'Not there . . . not there . . .'

Wild hope mocked him and he knew he was allowing the torch beam to stray to the garden wall, the isolated flower beds, anywhere but the dark patch, away over just beyond the garden shed.

'Not there . . . dream . . . madness . . .'

He edged slowly to his right, trying to keep the light beam over to the left, but his treacherous wrist would not be denied. At last, that which he did not wish to see was there – highlighted, revealed in its full ugliness.

He came to it as a rabbit is drawn to a snake. Slowly, inch by inch. And had there been the will, the strength, he would have turned and run back into the darkness. But his feet moved forward remorselessly, and soon, too soon, he was looking down on the black-faced thing that stared up at the now cloud-racked sky with bulging eyes. The teeth were bared in the death-grin; one hand – black – black with sudden death, was still clenched over the shirt front, and Gurney Slade's

terror was blended with pity. Pity for the hideous form of his former self.

'She must not see it.'

He went to the garden shed and took out a pick and shovel. Every man should bury his past.

Carron came home at ten-thirty.

Gurney heard the car growl as she changed gear and turned into the drive. Footsteps on the gravel, the garage door groaned, the engine snarled, and the drawn curtains momentarily blazed with light. Then the garage doors slammed, footsteps came round to the front door, a key clicked into the lock, and she was there – in the hall.

'Gurney?'

Her voice was clear, so familiar, yet it seemed to come from a time that had long since passed.

'Gurney, are you there, darling?'

She laid her cool cheek against his and hugged him gently.

'So sorry. I'm late, but mother wasn't well, and I thought I'd better wait until Mildred came home. Did you think I'd never come?'

'Beautiful women are always late,' he said.

'Flatterer.'

She pulled away and went into the living-room, shedding her gloves, her outdoor coat, then adjusted her bright auburn hair in the overmantel mirror.

'Lord, I look a mess. Has the dinner spoiled?'

'Well . . .' he began.

'You did remember to turn the oven down?'

'I sort of . . . forgot . . .'

'You didn't! Great jumping catfish! Honestly, you are the giddy limit. All you had to do was turn a tap. Men! Mother was right, the sooner women learn to lay eggs the better.'

She went into the kitchen and he listened to the little explosive sounds, the bang of a dish on the table, followed almost immediately by a low chuckle.

'Talk about a burnt offering.'

He sank into an armchair, lit a cigarette, took a few puffs,

then hurriedly extinguished it in an ashtray. The smoke tasted strangely bitter.

'Eggs and ham,' Caron's voice called out. 'That's all we've got. Will you have 'em poached or fried?'

Gurney had a sudden vision of eggs floating on a bed of melted fat in a frying pan; two dead man's eyes. He swallowed a pang of rising nausea.

'Poached.'

'Right. Poached eggs and ham coming up. What have you been up to while I've been away?'

'Cut the grass. A bit of digging.'

'Digging.' The rattle of plates, the roar of a gas-ring. 'What on earth have you been digging?'

'Oh,' he shrugged, 'burying some old rubbish.'

Her footsteps were pottering back and forth across the kitchen.

'You don't want to overdo it. I thought you looked rather seedy this morning. Have you had any more of those pains in the chest?'

'No,' he said and smiled. 'No more pains.'

'I expect it was a touch of indigestion. Be an angel and lay the table.'

He covered the table with a blue-edged cloth, carefully placed knives, forks and spoons in their traditional places, then went back to his chair.

He was hungry.

Not a nagging hunger. Not a pleasurable craving for food that makes the mouth water with anticipatory delight, but an urge for immediate nourishment that filled his entire body. Waiting upon this hunger was a growing weakness, that was not a little frightening. How strong, in fact how durable, was this new body which had been manufactured out of the dark wastage of his soul? He got to his feet as Caron entered, pushing a loaded food trolley, and quickly seated himself at the table.

'Is the poor old fellow famished, then?' She placed a plate of ham and poached eggs, with fried potatoes, before him. 'It's your own fault, letting the casserole burn. I can't think what came over you.'

He seized a knife and fork and carved a lump of sizzling ham.

'Got enthralled. Forgot time.'

'Enthralled in cutting grass!' She laughed, a sweet, silvery sound, as Gurney popped a piece of ham into his mouth.

The taste was all wrong. It was as though he were chewing hotted-up long-dead flesh; his stomach heaved and he spat the food out. It lay upon the table cloth as a revolting splodge; the half-chewed meat looked like red worms.

'What the . . .' Caron half rose from her chair and stared at him with astonishment and fear. 'Are you ill? For heaven's sake, what's the matter?'

'The ham.' Gurney gestured with his fork. 'It's rotten. Putrid.'

'Nonsense.' Caron put a small portion into her mouth and chewed it with an expression of pathetic anxiety. 'It's fine. There's nothing wrong with the ham. It's you. I knew something was wrong the moment I set foot inside the front door. You're ill.'

'Damnation!' Gurney flung down his knife and fork and shuddered. 'There's nothing wrong with me. I feel marvellous and I'm hungry. Bloody hungry, but I can't eat that filth.'

'I think you'd better sit quietly for a few minutes, while I fetch a cloth.'

She walked slowly towards the kitchen, stiff-backed, face carefully averted, and he could sense, almost smell her fear. He stabbed a solitary fried potato and raised it towards his mouth. Instantly his stomach revolted and some automatic impulse forced his hand back upon the table. But the all-prevailing hunger was greater than before.

'Can't eat. I'll starve . . . can't eat . . . What's the good of a new body if I can't eat?'

Caron came back with a glass-cloth and, a bare second before she reached the table, he caught a glimpse of his right hand. With one quick movement he buried it between his legs.

Caron rubbed the tablecloth, then glanced down at him, her pale face a picture of acute anxiety.

'You look dreadful. You'd better go to bed. I expect you've been overdoing it, but if you're not better by tomorrow

morning I'll call the doctor.'

'Yes, I expect you're right.'

As he got up he slid his right hand into a trouser pocket.

'I'll be fine after a good night's sleep. Don't worry . . . don't fuss. I'm all right, just tired . . . stomach upset.'

He left her, doing his best to walk erect, but there was a terrible weakness in his legs, and the great hunger had him by the throat – was clamouring for satisfaction. The stairs were a mountain that took him an eternity to climb, the landing a vast desert, and the bedroom door a gateway that led to nowhere.

Gurney Slade sank down upon the bed and slowly withdrew his right hand from its hiding place. He stared at it for a long time, then gradually accepted the unpalatable truth.

The flesh had disappeared from the tip of his right forefinger. A fragment of gleaming white bone projected from a cylinder of wrinkled skin. After a while he rubbed the other fingers, gently bit the palm. There could be no pretence. His right hand was dying. He began to cry; he sat on the edge of the bed and sobbed like a hurt child. He had snatched a bundle of life from the arms of death, but now the grim reaper was taking back his property. Presently, overcome by weakness, which momentarily made him forget the strange hunger, he climbed out of his clothes and got into bed. He saw that his right toe was turning black, but at that moment it did not seem important. The cool sheets received him, and he sank down into a world where a soft, starlit gloom was forever free from the harsh rays of a devouring sun.

He was gliding over a desolate moor, drifting out of mist-banks, floating in lakes of starlight. An occasional leafless tree lifted black skeleton-arms to a windswept sky, and tall grasses whispered the undying thoughts of the unnumbered dead. The great hunger drove him onward towards a distant horizon and he called out: 'What is it? Must I eat grass, gnaw wood, fill my mouth with black earth?'

The wind laughed; the tall grasses waved their tapered heads, and the black trees shook with obscene merriment. Then he

heard the sound of soft footsteps, the opening of a door, and the roar of running water.

He felt better. The hunger was still there, but it had subsided to a dull ache; his new body was relaxed, limp between the sheets, and, for no reason that could be defined, there was a sense of rising excitement.

Caron was taking a bath. The roar of cascading water ceased, to be followed by a soft, splashing sound. She was humming. The tune he did not recognise, but it was irritating, and he felt his heartbeat quicken, while there was a rising warmth in his loins. The humming merged into words, and she began to sing softly as though fearful lest she disturb his sleep. The words and tune were out of keeping with her normal, matter-of-fact self. He could hear every word.

'Oh, wilt thou have my hand, Dear, to lie along in thine?
As a little stone in a running stream, it seems to lie
and pine!
Now drop the poor pale hand, Dear . . . unfit to plight
with thine.'

It was as though he were peering through a small window in her soul. Who was Caron? He had lived and slept with her for seven years, and yet, he now realised, he had never really known her. The soft voice went on.

'Oh, wilt thou have my cheek, Dear, drawn closer to
thine own?
My cheek is white, my cheek is worn, by many a tear
run down.
Now leave a little space, Dear, . . . lest it should wet
thine own.'

A blast of anger flooded his brain. She had cheated him, deceived him, dared to hide the inner chamber of her soul. He sat up and waved a clenched fist . . . Three fingers were now white, gleaming bone. A fragment of the skeleton to come, unless . . . He growled deep down in his throat, and the

growl shattered and became fierce, muttered words.

'Cheat . . . liar . . . you locked a door where I should have entered.'

'Oh, must thou have my soul, Dear, commingled with thy soul? –
Red grows the cheek, and warm the hand, . . . the part is in the whole! . . .
Nor hands nor cheeks keep separate, when soul is joined to soul.'

A splash, the gurgle of water draining away, the rasp of rough towel on smooth skin, then the approaching pad of naked feet.

Caron came in wrapped in a red bath towel; she looked breathtakingly beautiful and strangely, very young. She gave him a quick, searching glance, then sat down before the dressing-table.

'You're awake, then? I hope I didn't disturb you with my cat-yelling.'

He did not answer, only stared at her gleaming shoulders and slim neck with dilated eyes.

'Do you feel better now? You must be more careful. I don't like you doing all that heavy work in the garden. Heavens above knows, we can afford to employ a man.'

The towel was slipping, sliding down to her waist, and the naked flesh was like a white flame, dazzling his eyes, feeding his anger. The great hunger flared up and mingled with the anger.

'Tomorrow we'll get Doctor Waterhouse to give you a thorough examination.'

'What was that you were singing?'

He was surprised at the calmness in his voice, the casual way in which he asked the question.

'Oh, that.' She looked smilingly back over one shoulder. 'It's called "Inclusions" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Norma Shearer sang it in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street.*'

'I never knew.' He had to swallow – his mouth was filled

with anticipatory water. 'I never knew you went in for stuff like that.'

She laughed and he trembled with rage.

'There's a lot of things you don't know about me, my lad.'

He slid his legs out from under the bedclothes and the floor was solid beneath his feet. He rose up to full height, aware of a burning sensation in his gums, while the gleaming bones of his right hand opened and closed, like the claws of a carnivorous spider.

'Come here.'

A growl that rose up from the stomach, tore at the vocal cords and rasped off the tongue. Caron spun round and stared at him in astonishment.

'What!'

'Come here.'

She came towards him slowly, reluctantly, but perhaps with a secret, fearful joy, for was he not magnificent in his rage? And the great hunger peeped out of his glaring, red-tinted eyes.

'What is it? There's no need to look so . . .'

The bones of his right hand crashed across her cheek and she went down to the floor, where she lay face downward, her bare shoulders trembling, while she sobbed with pain and bewilderment.

The waist was slender, the back curved up to the white shoulders; above was the slim, beautiful – oh, so beautiful neck. Three weals seeped blood and marred the soft curve of her cheek. His eyeteeth moved, slid down from their gum-sheaths and dimpled his lower lip. He dribbled as he came down to her; he was as a starving man invited to a banquet when those wonderful teeth – fangs – sank into the soft white neck.

Her screams were music, her flailing body, the death struggle of a rightful prey, and her blood, life-giving nectar. It filled his mouth, cascaded down his throat, flooded his stomach, raced through his veins and was quickly transformed into violent, never-to-be-extinguished life. She was an orange, a beautiful white bottle, a carton of juice with her neck as

the straw, and he drained her to the very last, precious drop. When he finally rose, the body was limp, whiter than white, a skin-bag filled with bones and bloodless meat.

Gurney Slade placed one foot upon the yielding back, clenched his now fully-fleshed hands, opened his mouth, and gave vent to the triumphant roar of a well-fed bull-vampire.

He experienced the remorse of the fully-sated.

'I am alone.'

He pushed the body over on to its back and was revolted by its awesome appearance. The face had shrunk, the eyes protruded, the mouth gaped. He felt sad that it had been necessary to destroy so much beauty, but most of all he missed her.

Presently he rose, took up the limp corpse and carried it out into the garden. He dug his second grave and gave her back to the hungry earth.

He was bored.

He roamed the empty rooms looking for excitement. His stomach rumbled; there was more than a hint of indigestion, for his last meal had been rich, chock-full of vitamins and flesh-building protein, and now that the great hunger was gone, he missed it. He was like a man who is fully sated after the sexual act. All the pleasure had been spent; now there was a faint guilty feeling, a suggestion that he had made a pig of himself. He had eaten his cake, now he wanted it back, complete with white icing.

The hall clock announced three with a silver voice. Gurney knew, with the instinct of his kind, that time was running out. Soon the sun would stretch out golden fingers across the face of night, and long before then his fine new body must disintegrate, become a million invisible atoms that would lie like silver dust in dark corners – waiting for darkness to bring them together again.

A shadow flitted across the floor. A mere streak of darkness that he would not have seen yesterday, but now his eyes had a special keenness, and he knew Caron had come

back. He ran up the stairs two at a time, truly alive with love, lust and cynical amusement. In the bedroom the tiny speck of a shadow flitted across the wardrobe mirror, then hurled itself at his face. He laughed and spoke softly.

'Don't be such a little goose. Build up, it's your death right. Don't waste your energies in prancing around like a sex-mad moth. Do you hear me? Stand still.'

After a few more turns round the room, the speck of a shadow came to rest some five foot six inches above the floor, which meant it was in line with Gurney's nose, and between him and the mirror.

'That's better. Now, concentrate. Think of all things dark. Bathe in the black waters of half-forgotten sins; remember all the deeds you'd rather forget, then let your thoughts become tubes that suck . . . That's it. By gosh, you catch on quick, but then, I suppose women have more dark thoughts in their brains . . .'

Her skeleton formed very nicely; the internal organs slipped into place, the flesh squelched over the bones, and in no time at all, she was complete.

Caron took her first deep breath, then quickly rediscovered her tongue.

'You bastard.'

'Now, now.' He raised protesting hands. 'Don't get all worked up . . .'

Suddenly she burst into tears and he drew the beautiful white body into his arms and kissed her gently.

'There . . . there. It's all over now. I missed you so much, and I was lonely. The terrible loneliness of the damned.'

'Why did you do it?' She rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand. 'Why did you do it?'

'Every man drinks the one he loves,' he misquoted. 'You were there, I needed you. I suppose, at heart, I wanted you to join me.'

'And we will never be parted again?'

He shook his head.

'Never. The night will belong to us for all eternity.'

'No stakes through hearts? No burning?'

He laughed.

'This is a civilised country.'

From the road which bordered their garden came the sound of someone singing. A voice raised as an act of worship to Bacchus. Not a tuneful voice – it was raucous, unkind to the ear – but Caron's eyes glistened with wonderful, beautiful joy.

'Nellie Dean, oh, Nellie Dean.'
'Where the bloody 'ell have you been . . .'

'A traveller, homeward bound on the waves of wine,' said Gurney softly.

'I'm so hungry,' Caron whispered.

'You've just time for a little snack,' Gurney assured her. 'I'd get stuck in, if I were you.'

'Do you think I dare?'

She tip-toed to the door, a lovely woodland nymph, her eyes shining with girlish anticipation. She paused.

'Won't you join me?'

'Thank you, I've dined.'

He waited. The songster drew nearer; his refrain was a tribute to a fertile imagination.

'Oh, Nellie Dean, I'll chase you round,
A bloody great pointed, grassy mound ,
You'll jump right up, I'll push you down,
Then I'll . . .'

Cor, strike a light!'

'Ah!' Gurney nodded. 'He has seen.'

A short silence. Then:

'Blimey! Starkers! You come along over 'ere . . .'

His scream started on a high note, then descended to a rather nasty gurgle. Gurney lay down on the bed and thought happily of the years to come. They would be buried in a churchyard of course, but that wouldn't matter, and someone else would come to live in the cottage. He hoped it would be a decent family, a large family, the sort of people Caron and he could get along with. Who knows, in time they might

be able to build up a thriving community.

Caron came back. Bloody-mouthed, dewy-eyed, her teeth were like red pearls.

'I feel fit to burst,' she confided.

'You look great. Like Aphrodite after she had been chewing red grapes.'

'Oh, am I in a mess? Please don't say I'm in a mess.'

'Go and wash your face,' he instructed. 'But hurry. Soon it will be sunrise, then we will have to go.'

She went into the bathroom and he heard the sound of running water. How wrong the old tales were – as though water could do anything else but clean. Wash away the marks of sin, purify the face with beauty, soften the lips, caress the hands.

There was music in his head – pulsating drums, clashing cymbals, throbbing violins – and he was a god of flesh, supreme master of blood, undisputed king of night. He got to his feet and was on his way to the bathroom when Caron gave one strangled cry, and suddenly they were both atoms of consciousness floating across the room.

The first pale fingers of dawn filtered through the curtains, and outside in the garden the rising sun smiled upon the infant day. The shadows retreated slowly, as though seeking protection from the death-dealing light, while a buttercup spread out its yellow petals and rejoiced that night had died.

Way down at the bottom of the garden, under a laburnum tree, where the shadows still lurked unmolested, a starling snatched a writhing worm from a freshly-filled grave.

THE LABYRINTH

They were lost. Rosemary knew it and said so in forcible language. Brian also was well aware of their predicament but was unwilling to admit it.

'One cannot be lost in England,' he stated. 'We're bound to strike a main road if we walk in a straight line.'

'But suppose we wander in a circle?' Rosemary asked, looking fearfully round at the Dartmoor landscape, 'and finish up in a bog?'

'If we use our eyes there's no reason why bogs should bother us. Come on and stop moaning.'

'We should never have left that truck,' Rosemary insisted. 'Suppose we get caught out here when night falls?'

'Don't be daft,' he snapped, 'it's only mid-day. We'll be in Princetown long before nightfall.'

'You hope.' She refused to be convinced. 'I'm hungry.'

'So am I.' They were walking up a steep incline. 'But I don't keep on about it.'

'I'm not keeping on. I'm hungry and I said so. Do you think we'll find a main road soon?'

'Over the next rise,' he promised. 'There's always a main road over the next rise.'

But he was wrong. When they crested the next rise and looked down, there was only a narrow track which terminated at a tumbledown gate set in a low stone wall. Beyond, like an island girdled by a yellow lake, was a lawn-besieged house. It was built of grey stone and seemed to have been thrown up by the moors; a great, crouching monster that glared out across the countryside with multiple glass eyes. It had a strange look. The chimney stacks might have been jagged splinters of rock that had acquired a rough cylindrical shape after centuries of wind and rain. But the really odd aspect was that the sun appeared to ignore the house. It had baked the lawn to a pale yellow, cracked the paint

on an adjacent summerhouse, but in some inexplicable way, it seemed to disavow the existence of the great, towering mass.

'Tea!' exclaimed Rosemary.

'What?'

'Tea.' She pointed. 'The old lady, she's drinking tea.'

Sure enough, seated by a small table that nestled in the shade of a vast multi-coloured umbrella was a little white-haired old lady taking tea. Brian frowned, for he could not understand why he had not seen her, or at least the umbrella, before, but there she was, a tiny figure in a white dress and a floppy hat, sipping tea and munching sandwiches. He moistened dry lips.

'Do you suppose,' he asked, 'we dare intrude?'

'Watch me,' Rosemary started running down the slope towards the gate. 'I'd intrude on Dracula himself if he had a decent cup of tea handy.'

Their feet moved on to a gravel path and it seemed whatever breeze stirred the sun-warm heather out on the moors did not dare intrude here. There was a strange stillness, a complete absence of sound, save for the crunch of feet on gravel, and this too ceased when they walked on to the parched lawn.

The old lady looked up and a slow smile gradually lit up a benign, wizened little face, while her tiny hands fluttered over the table, setting out two cups and saucers, then felt the teapot as though to make sure the contents were still hot.

'You poor children.' Her voice had that harsh, slightly cracked quality peculiar to some cultured ladies of an advanced age, but the utterance was clear, every word pronounced with precision. 'You look so hot and tired.'

'We're lost,' Rosemary announced cheerfully. 'We've wandered for miles.'

'I must apologise for intruding,' Brian began, but the old lady waved a teaspoon at him as though to stress the impossibility of intrusion.

'My dear young man – please. You are most welcome. I cannot recall when I last entertained a visitor, although I

have always hoped someone might pass this way again. The right kind of someone, of course.'

She appeared to shiver momentarily, or perhaps tremble, for her hands and shoulders shook slightly, then an expression of polite distress puckered her forehead.

'But how thoughtless I am. You are tired having wandered so many miles and there are no chairs.'

She turned her head and called out in a high-pitched, quivering voice. 'Carlo! Carlo!'

A tall, lean man came out of the house and moved slowly towards them. He was dressed in a black satin tunic and matching trousers and, due possibly to some deformity, appeared to bound over the lawn, rather than walk. Brian thought of a wolf, or a large dog that has spotted intruders. He stopped a few feet from the old lady and stood waiting, his slate-coloured eyes watching Rosemary with a strange intensity.

'Carlo, you will fetch chairs,' the old lady ordered, 'then some more hot water.'

Carlo made a guttural sound and departed in the direction of the summerhouse, leaping forward in a kind of loping run. He returned almost immediately carrying two little slatted chairs and presently Brian and Rosemary were seated under the vast umbrella, drinking tea from delicate china cups and listening to the harsh, cultivated voice.

'I must have lived alone here for such a long time. Gracious me, if I were to tell you how long, you would smile. Time is such an inexhaustible commodity, so long as one can tap the fountainhead. The secret is to break it down into small change. An hour does not seem to be long until you remember it has three thousand, six hundred seconds. And a week! My word, did you ever realise you have six hundred and four thousand, eight hundred seconds to spend every seven days? It's an enormous treasure. Do have another strawberry jam sandwich, child.'

Rosemary accepted another triangular, pink-edged sandwich, then stared open-eyed at the house. At close quarters it looked even more grim than from a distance. There was the impression the walls had drawn their shadows above themselves like a

ghostly cloak, and although the house stood stark and forbidding in broad daylight, it still seemed to be divorced from sunshine. Rosemary of course made the obvious statement.

'It must be very old.'

'It has lived,' the old lady said, 'for millions upon millions of seconds. It has drunk deep from the barrel of time.'

Rosemary giggled, then hastily assumed an extravagantly serious expression as Brian glared at her. He sipped his tea and said: 'This is really most kind of you. We were fagged out – and rather scared too. The moors seemed to go on and on and I thought we would have to spend the night out there.'

The old lady nodded, her gaze flickering from one young face to the other.

'It is not pleasant to be lost in a great, empty space. Doubtless, if you had not returned before nightfall, someone would have instigated a search for you.'

'Not on your nelly,' Rosemary stated with charming simplicity. 'No one knows where we are. We're sort of taking a roaming holiday.'

'How adventurous,' the old lady murmured, then called back over one shoulder. 'Carlo, the hot water, man. Do hurry.'

Carlo came bounding out of the house carrying a silver jug in one hand and a plate of sandwiches in the other. When he reached the table his mouth was open and he was breathing heavily. The old lady shot him an anxious glance.

'Poor old boy,' she consoled. 'Does the heat get you down, then? Eh? Does the heat make you puff and pant? Never mind, you can go and lie down somewhere in the shade.' She turned to her guests and smiled a most kindly, benign smile. 'Carlo has mixed blood and he finds the heat most trying. I keep telling him to practise more self-control, but he will insist on running about.' She sighed. 'I suppose it is his nature.'

Rosemary was staring intently at her lap and Brian saw an ominous shake of her shoulders, so he hurriedly exclaimed:

'You really live all alone in that vast house? It looks enormous.'

'Only a small portion, child.' She laughed softly, a little

silvery sound. 'You see the windows on the ground floor which have curtains? That is my little domain. All the rest is closed up. Miles upon miles of empty corridors.'

Brian re-examined the house with renewed interest. Six lower windows looked more wholesome than the others; the frames had, in the not-too-distant past, been painted white and crisp white curtains gave them a lived-in look, but the panes still seemed reluctant to reflect the sunlight and he frowned before raising his eyes to the upper storeys.

Three rows of dirt-grimed glass: so many eyes from behind which life had long since departed, save possibly for rats and mice. Then he started and gripped his knees with hands that were not quite steady. On the topmost storey, at the window third from the left, a face suddenly emerged and pressed its nose flat against the glass. There was no way of telling if the face were young or old, or if it belonged to a man, woman or child. It was just a white blur equipped with a pair of blank eyes and a flattened nose.

'Madam . . .' Brian began.

'My name,' the old lady said gently, 'is Mrs Brown.'

'Mrs Brown. There's a . . .'

'A nice homely name,' Mrs Brown went on. 'Do you not think so? I feel it goes with a blazing fire, a singing kettle and muffins for tea.'

'Madam – Mrs Brown. The window up there . . .'

'What window, child?' Mrs Brown was examining the interior of the teapot with some concern. 'There are so many windows.'

'The third from the left.' Brian was pointing at the face, which appeared to be opening and shutting its mouth. 'There is someone up there and they seem to be in trouble.'

'You are mistaken, my dear,' Mrs Brown shook her head. 'No one lives up there. And without life, there can be no face. That is logic.'

The face disappeared. It was not so much withdrawn as blotted out, as though the window had suddenly clouded over and now it was just another dead man's eye staring out over the sun-drenched moors.

'I could swear there was a face,' Brian insisted, and Mrs Brown smiled.

'A cloud reflection. It is so easy to see faces where none exist. A crack in the ceiling, a damp patch on a wall, a puddle in moonlight – all become faces when the brain is tired. Can I press you to another cup?'

'No, thank you.' Brian rose and nudged Rosemary to do the same. She obeyed with ill grace. 'If you would be so kind as to direct us to the nearest main road, we will be on our way.'

'I could not possibly do that.' Mrs Brown looked most distressed. 'We are really miles from anywhere and you poor children would get hopelessly lost. Really, I must insist you stay here for the night.'

'You are most kind and do not think us ungrateful,' Brian said, 'but there must be a village not too far away.'

'Oh Brian,' Rosemary clutched his arm. 'I couldn't bear to wander about out there for hours. And suppose the sun sets . . .?'

'I've told you before, we'll be home and dry long before then,' he snapped, and Mrs Brown rose, revealing herself as a figure of medium height, whose bowed shoulders made her shorter than she actually was. She shook a playful finger at the young man.

'How could you be so ungallant? Can you not see the poor girl is simply dropping from fatigue?' She took Rosemary's arm and began to propel her towards the house, still talking in her harsh, precise voice. 'These big strong men have no thought for us poor, frail women. Have they, my dear?'

'He's a brute.' Rosemary made a face at Brian over one shoulder. 'We wouldn't have got lost if he hadn't made us leave the main track.'

'It is the restless spirit that haunts the best of them,' Mrs Brown confided. 'They must wander into strange and forbidden places, then come crying home to us when they get hurt.'

They moved in through the open french windows, leaving the hot summer afternoon behind them, for a soft, clinging

coolness leapt to embrace their bodies like a slightly damp sheet. Brian shivered, but Rosemary exclaimed: 'How sweet.'

She was referring to the room. It was full of furniture: chairs, table, sideboard, from which the sheen of newness had long since departed; the patterned carpet had faded, so had the wallpaper; a vase of dried flowers stood on the mantelpiece and from all around – an essential part of the coolness – came a sweet, just perceptible aroma. It was the scent of extreme old age which is timidly approaching death on faltering feet. For a moment, Brian had a mental picture of an open coffin bedecked with dying flowers. Then Mrs Brown spoke.

'There are two sweet little rooms situated at the rear. You will rest well in them.'

Carlo emerged from somewhere; he was standing by the open doorway, his slate-grey eyes watching Mrs Brown as she nodded gravely.

'Go with him, my dears. He will attend to your wants and presently, when you have rested, we will dine.'

They followed their strange guide along a gloom-painted passage and he silently opened two doors, motioned Rosemary into one, then, after staring blankly at Brian, pointed to the other.

'You've been with Mrs Brown a long time?' Brian asked in a loud voice, assuming the man was deaf. 'Must be rather lonely for you here.'

Carlo did not answer, only turned on his heel and went back along the passage with that strange, loping walk. Rosemary giggled.

'Honestly, did you ever see anything like it?'

'Only in a horror film,' Brian admitted. 'Say, do you suppose he's deaf and dumb?'

'Fairly obviously,' Rosemary shrugged. 'Let's have a look at our rooms.'

They were identical. Each held a four-poster bed, a Tudor-style chest of drawers and a bedside cupboard. The same faint odour prevailed here, but Rosemary did not seem to notice it.

'Do you suppose this place runs to a bath?' she asked,

seating herself on Brian's bed.

Before he could answer, Carlo's lean form filled the doorway and he made a guttural sound while beckoning them to follow him. He led the way down the passage and at the very end opened a door and motioned them to enter the room beyond. It was empty save for a very ancient hip-bath and six leather buckets lined up against one wall.

They began to laugh, clinging to each other for support. Their silent guide watched them with an expressionless stare. Brian was the first to regain his powers of speech.

'Ask a silly question,' he gasped, 'and you'll get a ridiculous answer.'

'I rarely eat.'

Mrs Brown was sipping daintily from a glass of mineral water and watching the young people with lively interest as they each consumed a large steak and a generous helping of fresh salad.

'When you are my age,' she went on, 'one's fires need little fuel. A sip of water, an occasional nibble, the odd crumb.'

'But you must eat,' Rosemary looked at the old lady with some concern. 'I mean – you have to.'

'Child – ' Mrs Brown beckoned to Carlo who started to collect the empty plates, ' – food is not necessarily meat and vegetables. Passion will feed the soul and nourish the body. I recommend love as an *hors d'oeuvre*, hate as the *entrée* and fear as a chilly dessert.'

Rosemary looked nervously at Brian, then took a long drink of water to hide her confusion. The young man decided to bring the conversation back to a more mundane plane.

'I am most interested in your house, Mrs Brown. It seems a shame that so little of it is used.'

'I did not say it was not used, dear,' Mrs Brown corrected gently. 'I said no one lived in the region that lies outside this apartment. There is, as I am sure you will agree, a difference.'

Carlo returned, carrying a dish of large, pink blancmange; this he deposited on the table after giving the girl and young man a long, expressionless stare.

'You must forgive Carlo,' Mrs Brown said while she carved the blancmange into thin slices. 'It is some time since we entertained guests and he is apt to stare at that which he is not allowed to touch.'

Brian nudged Rosemary, who was watching the blancmange carving with undisguised astonishment. 'Mrs Brown, you say the rest of the house is used, but not lived in. I'm sorry, but . . .'

'Does anyone live in your stomach?' Mrs Brown asked quietly.

He laughed, but seeing no smile on the wrinkled face opposite quickly assumed a serious expression.

'No, of course not.'

'But it is used?' Mrs Brown persisted.

He nodded. 'Yes indeed. Quite a lot.'

'So with the house.' She handed Rosemary a plate that contained three thin slices of pink blancmange and the girl said 'Thank you' in a strangled voice. 'You see, the house does not require people to live in it, for the simple reason that it is, in itself, a living organism.'

Brian frowned as he accepted his plate of sliced blancnange.

'Why not?' The old lady appeared surprised that her word should be doubted. 'Do you begrudge a house life?'

They both shook their heads violently and Mrs Brown appeared satisfied with their apparent acquiescence.

'After all, in ordinary houses, what are passages? I will tell you. Intestines. Bowels, if you wish. And the boiler which pumps hot water throughout the body of the house? A heart – what else could it be? In the same way, that mass of pipes and cisterns that reside up in the loft, what are they if not a brain?'

'You have a point,' Brian agreed.

'Of course I have,' Mrs Brown deposited another slice of blancmange on Rosemary's plate. 'But of course I was referring to ordinary houses. This is not an ordinary house by any means. It really lives.'

'I would certainly like to meet the builder,' Brian said caustically. 'He must have been a remarkable chap.'

'Builder!' Mrs Brown chuckled. 'When did I mention a builder? My dear young man, the house was not built. It grew.'

'Nutty as a fruit cake.' Rosemary spoke with strong conviction while she sat on Brian's bed.

'True,' Brian nodded, 'but the idea is rather fascinating.'

'Oh, come off it. How can a house grow? And from what? A brick?'

'Wait a minute. In a way a house does grow. It is fathered by an architect and mothered by a builder.'

'That's all very well,' Rosemary complained, 'but that old sausage meant the damned thing grew like a tree. Frankly, she gives me the willies. You know something? I think she's laughing at us. I mean to say, all that business of carving blancmange into thin slices.'

'A house is an extension of a man's personality.' Brian was thinking out loud. 'In its early life it would be innocent, like a new-born baby, but after it had been lived in for a bit . . .' He paused, 'then the house would take on an atmosphere . . . could even be haunted.'

'Oh, shut up.' Rosemary shivered. 'I'm expected to sleep here tonight. In any case, as I keep saying, the old thing maintains the house grew.'

'Even that makes a kind of mad logic.' He grinned, mocking what he assumed to be her pretended fear. 'We must reverse the process. The atmosphere came first, the house second.'

'I'm going to bed.' She got up and sauntered to the door. 'If you hear me scream during the night, come a-running.'

'Why bother to go?' Brian asked slyly. 'If you stay here, I won't have to run anywhere.'

'Ha, ha. Funny man. Not in this morgue.' She smiled impishly from the doorway. 'I'd be imagining all manner of things looking down at me from the ceiling.'

Brian lay in his four-poster bed and listened to the house preparing for sleep. Woodwork contracted as the temperature dropped; floorboards creaked, window frames made little rattling noises, somewhere a door closed. Sleep began to dull

his senses and he became only half-aware of his surroundings; he was poised on the brink of oblivion. Then, as though a bomb had exploded, he was blasted back into full consciousness. A long drawn-out moan had shattered the silence and was coming at him from all directions. He sat up and looked round the room. So far as he could see by the light of the rising moon that filtered through his lace curtains, the room was empty. Suddenly, the groan was repeated. He sprang out of bed, lit his candle, and looked wildly around him. The sound was everywhere – in the walls with their faded pink-rose wallpaper, in the cracked ceiling, the threadbare carpet. He covered his ears with shaking hands, but still the mournful groan continued, invading his brain, seeping down into his very being, until it seemed the entire universe was crying out in anguish. Then, as abruptly as it began, it ceased. A heavy, unnatural silence descended on the house like a great, enveloping blanket. Brian hastily scrambled into his clothes.

'Enough is enough.' He spoke aloud. 'We're getting out – fast.'

Another sound came into being. It began a long way off. A slow, hesitant footstep, married to squeaking floorboards, a laborious picking up and putting down of naked feet, interspersed with a slow slithering which suggested the unseen walker was burdened with the tiredness of centuries. This time there was no doubt as to where the sound was coming from. It was up above. The soft, padding steps passed over the ceiling and once again the house groaned, but now it was a moan of ecstasy, a low cry of fulfilment. Brian opened the bedroom door and crept out into the corridor. The moaning cry and the slithering footsteps merged and became a nightmarish symphony, a two-toned serenade of horror. Then, again, all sound ceased and the silence was like a landmine that might explode at any moment. He found himself waiting for the moan, the slithering overhead footsteps to begin all over again – or perhaps something else, something that defied imagination.

He tapped on Rosemary's door, then turned the handle and

entered, holding his candle high and calling her name.

'Rosemary, wake up. Rosemary, come on, we're getting out of here.'

The flickering candle-flame made great shadows leap across the walls and dance over the ceiling; it cut ragged channels through the darkness until, at last, his questing eye saw the bed. It was empty. The sheets and blankets were twisted up into loose ropes and a pillow lay upon the floor.

'Rosemary!'

He whispered her name and the house chuckled. A low, harsh, gurgling laugh, which made him run from the room, race down the long corridor, until he lurched into the dining-room. An old-fashioned oil lamp stood on the table, illuminating the room with a pale orange light and revealing Mrs Brown, seated in an armchair, calmly darning a sock. She looked up as Brian entered and smiled like a mother whose small son has strayed from his warm bed on a winter's night.

'I would put the candle down, dear,' she said, 'otherwise you will spill grease all over the carpet.'

'Rosemary!' he shouted. 'Where is she?'

'There's really no need for you to shout. Despite my advanced years, I am not deaf.' She broke the wool, then turned the sock and examined her work with a certain pride. 'That's better. Carlo is so hard on his socks.' She looked up with a sly smile. 'It is only to be expected, of course. He has hard feet.'

'Where is she?' Brian set down the candle and moved closer to the old woman, who was now closing her work-basket. 'She's not in her room and there are signs of a struggle. What have you done with her?'

Mrs Brown shook her head sadly.

'Questions, questions. How hungry youth is for knowledge. You demand to know the truth and, should I gratify your desire, how distressed you would become. Ignorance is a gift freely offered by the gods and so often it is spurned by misguided mortals. Even I sometimes wish I knew less, but . . .' Her sigh was one of sad resignation. 'Time reveals all to those who live long enough. I should go back to bed,

dear. The young need their sleep.'

Brian advanced a few steps, then spoke in a carefully controlled voice.

'I am going to ask you for the last time, Mrs Brown, or whatever your name is – what have you done with Rosemary?'

She looked up and shook her head in sad reproof.

'Threats! How unwise. A sparrow should never threaten an eagle. It is so futile and such a waste of time.'

Mrs Brown carefully placed her work-basket on the floor, then snapped in a surprisingly firm voice: 'Carlo!'

There came, from somewhere to Brian's rear, a low, deep growl. Such a menacing sound might have issued from the throat of a large dog whose mistress has been threatened, or a she-wolf protecting her young, but when the young man spun round, he saw Carlo standing a few feet away. The man had his head tilted to one side and his large, yellow teeth were bared as he growled again. His stance was grotesque. He was leaning forward slightly as though preparing to spring and his fingers were curved, so that with their long, pointed nails, they looked uncannily like talons; his cheeks seemed to have shrunk and his black hair lay back over his narrow skull like a sleek, ebony mane.

'Will you believe me?' Mrs Brown said, and her voice was less harsh – much younger. 'I have only to say one word and your windpipe will be hanging down your shirt-front.'

'You are mad.' Brian backed slowly away and Carlo moved forward, matching him step for step. 'You are both mad.'

'You mean,' Mrs Brown came round and joined Carlo, 'we are not normal by your standards. That much I grant you. Sanity is only a form of madness favoured by the majority. But I think the time has come for you to meet truth, since you are so eager to make her acquaintance.'

'I only want to find Rosemary, then get out of here,' Brian said.

'Find your little friend? Perhaps. Leave here? Ah . . .' Mrs Brown looked thoughtful. 'That is another matter. But come, there is much for you to see, and please, no heroics. Carlo is on the turn. He is apt to be a little touchy when the moon is full.'

They filed out into the hall, Mrs Brown leading the way with Brian following and the grim Carlo bringing up the rear. To the right of a great staircase was a black door and this Mrs Brown unlocked, then entered the room beyond, where she proceeded to light a lamp from Brian's candle.

The light crept outwards in ever-increasing circles as she turned up the wick, revealing oak-panelled walls and a cob-web-festooned ceiling. The room was bare, except for the portrait hanging over a dirt-grimed marble fireplace. To this the young man's eyes were drawn like a pin to a magnet.

The background was jet-black and the face corpse-white; the large black eyes glared an intense hatred for all living things and the thin-lipped mouth was shut tight, but so cunningly had the portrait been painted that Brian had the feeling it might open at any moment.

'My late husband,' Mrs Brown stated, 'was a partaker of blood.'

The statement did not invite comment and Brian made none.

'It must be the best part of five hundred years since they came down from the village,' Mrs Brown continued. 'Chanting priests looking like black ravens, mewing peasants huddled together like frightened sheep. I recall it was night and the mists shrouded the moors and swirled about their thrice-accursed cross as though it wished to protect us from the menace it represented.'

She paused and Brian realised that she looked much younger. The face was filling out, the shoulders were no longer bowed.

'They did not consider I was of great importance,' Mrs Brown went on, 'so I was merely tied to a tree and flogged, thereby providing entertainment for the herd of human cattle who liked nothing better than to see a woman writhe under the lash. But him. . . . They dug a hole, and laid him flat, having bound his body in cords that were sealed with the dreaded sign. Then they drove a stake through his heart. . . . Fools.'

She glared at Brian and clenched her small fists.

'They left him for dead. Dead! His brain still lived. The

blood was only symbolic, it was the vital essence we needed – still need: the force that makes the soul reach out for the stars, the hammer that can create beauty out of black depravity.'

She went over to the portrait and stroked the white, cruel face with hands that had become long and slender.

'When they buried his beautiful body they planted a seed, and from that seed grew the house. A projection of himself.'

'I don't believe you.' Brian shook his head. 'I won't – can't believe you.'

'No!' She laughed and Carlo howled. 'Then feel the walls. They are warm, flesh of his flesh. Moist. The body fluids seep out when he is aroused. Look.' She pointed to a great double door set in one wall. 'Look, the mouth. When I open the lips, food pops in. Succulent, living food and we all benefit. I, Carlo, who sprang from the old people – I still let him roam the moors when the moon is full – and, of course, He. The House. He needs all the sweet essence he can get. He sleeps after meat and no longer moans. I do not like to hear him moan.'

'Where is Rosemary?' Brian asked again and knew what must follow.

'She passed through the lips an hour since.' Mrs Brown laughed very softly and Carlo made a whining sound. 'Now, if you would find her, there is not really much alternative. You must follow her through the great intestines, down into the mighty bowels. Wander and cry out, trudge on and on, until at last your will is broken and He can take from you what he needs.'

'You want me to go through those doors?' Brian asked, and there was a glimmer of hope. 'Then go wandering through the corridors of an empty house? When I find Rosemary, we will break out.'

The woman smiled as she motioned to Carlo.

'Part the lips, Carlo.'

The man, if indeed that which crept forward was a man, silently obeyed; the great doors groaned as they swung inwards and Brian saw a murky passage, lined with green tinted walls. A warm, sweet, cloying odour made his stomach heave and

he drew back.

'She's waiting for you,' Mrs Brown said softly, 'and she must be very frightened wandering through the labyrinth, not exactly alone, but I doubt if she will appreciate the company. Most of them will be well digested by now.'

Carlo was waiting, his hand on the handle of one door; his eyes were those of a hungry wolf who sees his prey about to be devoured by a lion. Brian, without a sideways glance, passed through the entrance and the doors slammed to behind him.

There were no stairs. The corridors sometimes sloped upwards, at others they spiralled down; there were stretches when the floor was comparatively level, but the corridors were never straight for long. They twisted, crossed other passages, suddenly split, leaving the wanderer with a choice of three or more openings; occasionally they came to a blank end, forcing him to retrace his footsteps. Light was provided by an eerie greenish glow radiating from the walls and ceiling and sometimes this light pulsated, suggesting it originated from some form of decay.

Brian stumbled onwards, shouting Rosemary's name, and his echo mocked him, went racing on ahead until it became a faraway voice calling back along the avenues of time. Once he stumbled and fell against the wall. Instantly, the moist, green surface contracted under his weight and there was an obscene sucking sound when he pulled himself free. A portion of his shirt sleeve remained stuck to the wall and there was a red mark on his arm.

When he had been walking for some thirty minutes he came upon the window passage. There was no other word to describe it, for one wall was lined with windows, each one set about six feet apart, and he gave a little cry of joy, certain this was the place from which he and Rosemary could make their escape. Then he saw – them. Before each window stood one, occasionally two, forms – hideously thin, scarecrow figures that pawed at the window panes with claw-like fingers and emitted little animal whimpers.

Brian approached the first window and gave a quick glance

through the grimy panes. He was two floors, if that was the right expression, up, and he saw the lawn then, further out, the moors, all bathed in brilliant moonlight. Even as he watched, a great hound went bounding across the lawn. It cleared the low wall in a single leap, then streaked out across the moor. Something touched Brian's arm and he spun round to face one of the creatures that had silently crept along from the next window. He saw at close quarters the skeleton face covered with brown, wrinkled skin, and the vacant blue eyes that stared up at him with mute, suffering appeal. He judged the man to have been a tramp, or possibly a gypsy, for he wore the remnants of a red shirt and brown corduroy trousers. The claw-hands plucked feebly at his arm, the mouth opened, revealing toothless gums, and a hoarse whisper seeped out.

'The old cow said come in.'

'How long have you been here?' Brian asked, uncomfortably aware that a number of other grotesque bundles of rag and bones were leaving their posts by the windows and slithering on naked feet towards him. The whisper came again.

'The old cow said come in.'

'Have you seen a young girl?' Brian shouted. 'Have any of you seen a girl?'

The man tried to grip his arm, but there was no strength left in the wasted frame and he could only repeat the single phrase:

'The old cow said come in.'

They were all clustered round him. Three bore some resemblance to women, although their hair had fallen out, and one, a tall, beanstalk of a creature, kept mumbling: 'Pretty boy,' while she tried unsuccessfully to fasten her gums into his neck.

'Break the windows!' Brian shouted, pushing them away as gently as he could. 'Listen, break the windows, then I'll be able to climb down and fetch help.'

'The old cow said come in.' The man could only repeat over and over the six ominous words, and a wizened, awful thing, no higher than a child, kept muttering: 'Meat,' as it tried to fasten its mouth on Brian's right hand.

Unreasoning terror made him strike the creature full in the face and it went crashing back against the wall. Instantly, the green surface bent inwards and a deep sigh ran through the house, making the ghastly pack go slithering along the corridor, their remaining spark of intelligence having presumably warned them this sound was something to be feared. The small, child-size figure was left, stuck to the wall like a fly on gummed paper, and, as the green light pulsated, the creature jerked in unison.

Brian pulled off one of his shoes and smashed the heel against the nearest window-pane. He might just as well have struck a slab of solid rock for all the impression he made, and at last he gave up and continued his search for Rosemary. After an hour of trudging wearily along green-tinted passages, he had no idea how far he had travelled, or if indeed he was just going round in a perpetual circle. He found himself dragging his feet, making the same hesitant, slithering footsteps that had so alarmed him in his bedroom, centuries ago.

The corridors were never silent, for there were always cries, usually some way off, and a strange thudding sound which came into being when the green light pulsated, but these offstage noises became as a murmur when the scream rang out. It was a cry of despair, a call for help, a fear-born prayer, and at once Brian knew who had screamed. He shouted Rosemary's name as he broke into a run, terrified lest he be unable to reach her, at the same time in dread of what he might find. Had she not screamed again he would doubtlessly have taken the wrong passage, but when the second shriek rang out he ran towards the sound and presently came to a kind of circular hall. They were clinging to her like leeches to a drowning horse. Their skeleton hands were tearing her dress, their toothless mouths fouled her flesh, and all the while they squealed like a herd of hungry pigs. He pulled them away and the soulless bodies went hurtling back against vibrating walls; bones snapped like frost-crisp twigs and despairing whimpers rose to an unholy chorus.

He took Rosemary in his arms and she clung to him as though he were life itself, clutching his shoulders in a terrified grip while she cried like a lost child. He murmured soft, un-

intelligible words, trying to reassure himself as much as her, then screamed at the pack who were again slowly moving in.

'Don't you understand, this is not real. It's the projection of a mad brain. A crazy nightmare. Try to find a way out.'

It is doubtful if they heard, let alone understood what he was saying, and those that could still move were edging their way forward like rats whose hunger is greater than their fear.

'Can you walk?' he asked Rosemary and the girl nodded. 'Good, then we must make our way downwards. The woman's apartment is on the ground floor and our only hope is to batter those doors in and escape across the lawn.'

'It's impossible.' Rosemary was clinging to his arm and they were leaving the creatures behind. 'This place is a labyrinth. We will wander round and round these corridors until we drop.'

'Nonsense.' He spoke sharply. 'The house can't be all that big and we are young and fit. So long as we go down, we're bound to find the doors.'

This was easier said than done. Many corridors sloped down, only to slant up again, but presently they came out into a window passage and found they were somewhere at the rear of the house, but only one floor up.

'Now,' Brian kissed Rosemary. 'Only one more slope to go and we're there.'

'But we're the wrong side of the house,' Rosemary complained, 'and even if we find the doors, how are you going to break through them?'

'One step at a time. Let's find them first, then, maybe, I'll use you as a battering ram.'

It took an hour to find the next downward slope and then only after they had retraced their steps several times, but at last they were moving downwards, Rosemary shivered.

'It's getting colder.'

'Yes, and that damned stink is becoming more pronounced. But never mind, we'll soon be there.'

They went steadily downwards for another five minutes and then Rosemary began to cry.

'Brian, I can't go on much longer. Surely we've passed the ground floor ages ago? And there's something awful down

here. I can feel it.'

'It can't be more awful than what's up above,' he retorted grimly. 'We must go on. There's no turning back unless you want to finish up a zombie.'

'Zombie!' She repeated dully.

'What did you imagine those things were, back there? They died long ago and only keep going because the house gives them a sort of half life. Mrs Brown and Carlo appear to be better provided for, but they died centuries ago.'

'I can't believe all this.' Rosemary shuddered. 'How can a place like this exist in the twentieth century?'

'It doesn't. I should imagine we stumbled across the house at the right, or in our case, the wrong time. I suppose you might call it a time-trap.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' Rosemary said, then added, 'I very rarely do.'

The passage was becoming steeper, spiralling round and sloping down until they had difficulty in remaining upright. Then the floor levelled out and after a space of about six feet came to an end.

'Earth.' Brian felt the termination wall. 'Good, honest earth.'

'Earth,' Rosemary repeated. 'So what?'

Brian raised his eyes ceilingwards and then spoke in a carefully controlled voice. 'So far we have been walking on a floor and between walls that are constructed of something very nasty. Right? Now we are facing a wall built or shovelled into place – I don't care – of plain, down to earth – earth. Got it?'

Rosemary nodded. 'Yes, so we have got down to the house foundations. But I thought we were looking for the doors.'

Brian gripped her shoulders.

'Say that again.'

'Say what again? Look, you're hurting me.'

He shook her gently. 'The first bit.'

She thought for a moment. 'So we have got down to the house foundations. What's so important about that?'

He released her and went up close to the wall, where he stood for a few minutes examining its surface, then he came back

and tilted her chin up so she was looking directly into his eyes.

'Will you try to be very, very brave?'

Fear came rushing back and she shivered.

'Why?'

'Because I am going to break down that wall.' He spoke very slowly. 'And on the other side we may find something very nasty indeed.'

She did not move her head, only continued to gaze up into his eyes.

'Isn't there any other way?' she whispered.

He shook his head.

'None. None whatsoever.'

There was a minute of complete silence, then:

'What are you going to use as a shovel?'

He laughed and went back to the wall which he pounded with his fist.

'I could say you have a point there, but I won't. Let's take an inventory. What have we that is pick- and shovel-worthy? Our hands, of course. Shoes? Maybe.' He felt in his pocket and produced a bunch of keys and a penknife. 'This might start things going, then I can pull the loose stuff out with my hands.'

He sank the penknife blade into the soft, moist earth and traced the rough outline of a door, then he began to deepen the edges, digging out little lumps of earth that fell to the ground like gobbets of chewed meat. Brian then removed his shoes and used the heels to claw out a jagged hole.

'If I can work my way through,' he explained, 'it should be an easy matter to pull the entire thing down.'

He dug steadily for another five minutes, then a glimmer of light appeared and, after a final effort, he was able to look through an opening roughly six inches in diameter.

'What can you see?' Rosemary asked, her tone suggesting she would rather not know.

'It seems to be some kind of large cave and it's lit up with that green light, just like the passages. I can see hunks of rock lying about, but not much else. Well, here goes.'

He thrust his right hand through the aperture, curled his

fingers round the inner wall and pulled. A large chunk came away, then he began to work with both hands, pulling, clawing, and the entire wall came tumbling down. He wiped his hands on already stained trousers, then put on his shoes.

'Now,' he said, 'for the moment of truth.'

They were in a rough, circular cavern; it was perhaps twenty feet in diameter and an equal distance in height. Loose lumps of rock littered the floor, but there was no sign of anyone – alive or dead – and Brian gave a prolonged sigh of relief.

'I don't know what I expected to see, but thank heavens, I don't see it. Now, we must start looking for a way out. I'll go round the walls, you examine the floor. Never know, there might be a hole going down still further.'

He turned his attention to the irregular walls, leaving Rosemary to wander miserably among the large rocks and boulders that formed a kind of fence round the centre of the cavern. He looked upwards and saw, some twenty feet from the ground, a fairly large hole. Deciding it would be worth investigating, he began to ascend the wall and found the task easier than he had supposed, for projecting rocks made excellent footholds. In a few minutes he had reached his objective. The hole was in fact a small cave that was about seven feet high and five across, but alas there was no exit.

He was about to descend and continue his search elsewhere when Rosemary screamed. Never before had he realised a human throat was capable of expressing such abject terror. Shriek after shriek rang out and re-echoed against the walls, until it seemed an army of banshees were forecasting a million deaths. He looked down and saw the girl standing just inside the fence of stones looking down at something he could not see; her eyes were dilated and seemed frozen into an expression of indescribable horror.

Brian scrambled down the wall and ran over to her; when he laid hands on her shoulders she flinched as though his touch were a branding iron, then her final shriek was cut off and she slid silently to the floor.

A few feet away there was a slight indentation, a shallow hole, and he experienced a terrifying urge not to look into it, but he knew he must, if for no other reason than a strange,

compelling curiosity.

He dragged Rosemary well back and left her lying against one wall, then he returned, creeping forward very slowly, walking on tip-toe. At last he was on the brink of hell. He looked down.

Horror ran up his body in cold waves; it left an icy lump in his stomach and he wanted to be sick only he had not the strength. He had to stare down, concentrate all his senses and try to believe.

The head bore a resemblance to the portrait in Mrs Brown's ante-room; it was dead-white, bloated, suggesting an excess of nourishment consumed over a very long period. The hair was at least six feet in length and was spread out over the loose rock like a monstrous shroud. But the torso and arms grew out of the ground. The shoulders and part of the forearms were flesh, but further down the white skin assumed a greyish colour and, lower still, gradually merged into solid rock. Most horrifying of all was the profusion of fat, greenish, tubelike growths that sprouted out from under forearms and neck and, so far as Brian could see, the whole of the back. Obscene roots spreading out in every direction until they disappeared into the black earth, writhing and pulsating, carrying the vital fluid that circulated round the house.

The eyes were closed, but the face moved. The thin lips grimaced, creating temporary furrows in the flabby fat. Brian withdrew from the hole – the grave – and at last his stomach had its way and allowed him to be violently sick. By the time he returned to Rosemary, he felt old and drained of strength. She was just returning to consciousness and he smoothed back her hair.

'Are you fit enough to talk?' he asked.

She gave a little strangled gasp.

'That . . . that thing . . .'

'Yes, I know. Now listen. I am going to take you up there,' He pointed to the cave set high up on the opposite wall. 'You'll be all right there while I do what must be done.'

'I don't understand.' She shook her head. 'What must you do?'

'Mrs Brown told me her husband was a partaker of blood.

In other words, a vampire, and centuries ago the local lads did the traditional things and drove a stake through his heart. She said something else. It wasn't his body they should have destroyed, but his brain. Don't you see? This house, the entire set-up, is a nightmare produced by a monstrous intelligence?'

'I'll believe anything.' Rosemary got to her feet. 'Just get me out of here. I'd rather walk the passages than spend another minute with that . . . thing.'

'No.' He shook his head. 'I must destroy the brain. The only point is, when I do . . .' He looked round the cavern, then over to the entrance of the green-walled passage. '. . . anything may happen.'

'What about you?' she asked.

'So soon as the job is finished, I'll join you.'

He might have added, 'If I can,' but instead guided Rosemary to the wall and assisted her up to the cave.

'Now,' he instructed, 'stay well back and don't, in any circumstances, so much as put your nose outside. Understand?'

'God, I'm petrified,' she said.

'Don't let it get around,' he nodded grimly, 'but so am I.'

He came back to the hole like a released spirit returning to hell. As he drew nearer, the terror grew until it required a desperate effort to raise one foot and put it down before the other. Only the memory of Rosemary up there in the cave kept his spark of courage alive. At last he again gazed down at that horrible growth; it groaned and the sound raced round the cavern and up through the house. The face grimaced and twitched, while the green tubes writhed like a nest of gorged worms. Brian selected a rock which was a little larger than the bloated head and, gripping it in both hands, prepared to hurl it down. He had tensed his muscles, and was turning slightly to one side, when the eyelids flicked back and he was staring into two pools of black hate.

The shock was so intense he automatically slackened his grip and the rock slid from his fingers and went crashing down somewhere behind him. The mouth opened and a vibrant whisper went racing up through the house.

'Elizabeth . . . Carlo . . .'

The words came out slowly, rather like a series of intellig-

ible sighs, but from all around, from the walls, the floor, the high roof – never from the moving lips.

'Would . . . you . . . destroy . . . that . . . which . . . you do . . . not . . . understand?'

Brian was fumbling for the rock, but he paused and the whispering voice went on.

'I . . . must . . . continue . . . to . . . be . . . I . . . must . . . grow . . . fill . . . the . . . universe . . . consume . . . take . . . strength . . .'

A padding of fast-running paws came from the passage entrance and a woman's voice was calling out.

'Petros, drink of his essence . . . will him into walking death.'

There was a hint of fear in the terrible eyes. The whispering voice again ran through the house.

'He . . . is . . . an . . . unbeliever . . . he . . . is . . . the . . . young . . . of . . . a . . . new . . . age . . . why . . . did . . . you . . . let . . . him . . . through . . .?'

The great dog leapt over the loose earth and emerged from the passageway; it was black as midnight, like a solid shadow newly escaped from a wall, and it padded round the cavern before jumping up on to a boulder and preparing to leap. Brian hurled a rock at it and struck the broad, black snout. The beast howled and fell back as Mrs Brown spoke from the entrance.

'You will not keep that up for long. Carlo cannot be killed by the likes of you.'

She had been transformed. The once white hair was now a rich auburn, the face was as young as today, but the glorious eyes reflected the evil of a million yesterdays. She wore a black evening dress that left her arms and back bare and Brian could only stare at her, forgetting that which lay behind him and Rosemary, up in the cave. All he could see was white flesh and inviting eyes.

'Come away,' the low, husky voice said. 'Leave Petros to his dream. He cannot harm you and it would be such a waste if Carlo were to rip your nice body to shreds. Think of what I can offer. An eternity of bliss. A million lifetimes of pleasure. Come.'

He took one step forward, then another, and it seemed he was walking into a forbidden dream; all the secret desires that up to that moment he had not realised existed flared up and became exciting possibilities. Then, just as he was about to surrender, go running to her like a child to a beautiful toy, her voice lashed across his consciousness.

'Carlo . . . now.'

The dog came snarling over the rocks and Brian fell back, suddenly fully aware of the pending danger. He snatched up a piece of jagged rock and threw it at the oncoming beast. He hit it just above the right ear, then began to hurl stones as fast as he could pick them up. The dog leapt from side to side, snarling with pain and rage, but Brian realised it was coming forward more than it retreated and knew a few minutes, at the most, must elapse before he felt those fangs at his throat. By chance his hands closed round the original small boulder – and it was then he understood what must be done.

He raised the rock high above his head, made as though to hurl it at the dog, which momentarily recoiled, then threw it back – straight at the head of Petros.

The house shrieked. One long-drawn-out scream and the dog was no longer there; instead, Carlo ran towards his mistress, making plaintive, guttural cries, before sinking down before her, plucking frantically at the hem of her black dress.

Brian looked back and down into the hole and saw that the head was shattered and what remained of the flesh was turning black. The green tubes were now only streaks of deflated tissue and the life-giving fluid no longer flowed up into the body of the house. From up above came a deep rumbling sound and a great splintering, as though a mountain of rocks were grinding together. Brian ran towards the far wall and, quickly scrambling up into the cave, found Rosemary waiting to welcome him with outstretched arms.

'Keep down,' he warned. 'All hell is going to break loose at any moment.'

They lay face down upon the floor, and Brian had to raise his head to see the final act. The green light was fading, but

before it went he had a last glimpse of the woman staring blankly at the place where Petros had lain. She was patting Carlo's head. Then the ceiling came down and for a while there was only darkness filled with a mighty rumbling and crashing of falling rock. Fantasy tumbling down into the pit of reality. Time passed and the air cleared as the dust settled and presently, like a glimmer of hope in the valley of despair, a beam of light struck the entrance to the cave. Brian looked out, then up. Twenty feet above was a patch of blue sky.

They came up from the pit, bruised, clothes torn, but happy to be alive. They trudged hand-in-hand out across the moors and after a while looked back to see a pile of rocks that, at this distance, could have been mistaken for a ruined house.

'We will never talk about this to anyone,' Brian said. 'One does not talk about one's nightmares. They are so ridiculous in the light of day.'

Rosemary nodded. 'We slept. We dreamed. Now we are awake.'

They walked on. Two figures that distance diminished until they became minute specks on a distant horizon. Then they were gone.

The early morning breeze caressed the summer grass, harebells smiled up at a benign sky and a pair of rabbits played hide and seek among the fallen rocks. To all outward appearances the moors were at peace.

Then a rabbit screamed and a stoat raised blood-dripping jaws.

SOMEONE IS DEAD

He was a tall, lean young man with a pale face and the smile of one who is hiding his natural shyness under a mask of easy self-confidence. The girl by his side was extremely pretty: ash blonde hair, white skin, and wearing an expression of cynical amusement as though her blue eyes had seen more than her years warranted. In contrast to her companion's neat black suit, she wore a colourful costume that bordered on the bizarre. The mauve blouse had a dangerous split down the centre that revealed the valley between her breasts; there was a corresponding parting at the rear which offered the masculine eye a tantalizing glimpse of a white, smooth back. The black miniskirt was the stunted offspring of a broad belt and her splendid, nylon-clad legs riveted every man's attention and raised a storm of feminine envy.

'I,' announced the young man, 'am Francis St Clare, the world's only practising psychic detective.'

He paused, as though to allow time for applause, then nodded in the girl's direction. 'This is my assistant, Frederica Masters. She answers to Fred.'

The silence suggested embarrassment. Six people looked, first questioningly at each other, then back at the ill-matched couple standing just within the open doorway. At last a plump young man with receding hair came forward and held out a soft, moist hand.

'I'm Reggie Smith.'

Francis St Clare briefly touched the offered hand and said: 'Pleased to meet you,' while the girl nodded.

'We are delighted you could come.' Reggie Smith poured out the statement. 'Delighted and relieved. When we read your advertisement in *The Ghost Hunter's Weekly*, I said to my wife . . .'

'That's me,' an equally plump young woman stated. 'I'm Betty.'

Francis murmured that he was charmed and the girl nodded again.

'I said to Betty,' Reggie went on, 'this is the man for us. Didn't I, Betty?'

'You sure did,' his wife nodded violently. 'Your very words.'

'Can we sit down?' Fred spoke for the first time and there was a fusillade of 'Sorry,' 'Of course,' until soon they were seated in a circle, eight voices searching for something to say.

'I expect you'll want to hear all about the – er – phenomenon,' Reggie suggested at length.

'No.' Francis produced a gold cigarette case, fitted a cigarette into a grotesquely long holder and lit it with a lighter that was shaped like a miniature coffin. 'No. Eye-witness accounts are never accurate. They embellish, over-dramatize. If there is a psychic phenomenon here, I prefer to see and hear it with an unbiased mind. Tell me about the set-up.'

'Set-up?' Reggie raised his eyebrows and looked questioningly round the circle with an amused smile. 'We all live here.'

'I didn't imagine you were visiting.' Francis watched a smoke ring drift up to the ceiling. 'But are you all related, or what? This is a large house and, frankly, none of you are my idea of county.'

A large man near the fireplace grunted and a petite little brunette next to him said 'Indeed' in a tone of voice which suggested a knife being drawn across ice.

'We are three separate couples that share,' Reggie Smith explained. 'The housing problem is pretty acute nearer town, so we all got together and bought this place. It is divided into three reasonably large apartments and altogether it works very well.'

'Do you swop?' Fred asked.

'I beg your pardon!' The big man all but exploded and Francis smiled.

'You mustn't mind Fred. She's naturally depraved. Now, I think it might help if I knew all your names.'

'Surely.' Reggie motioned to the large man. 'This is Roland Taylor and next to him is his wife, Nina. Roland is chief clerk at Hackett's Designs.'

'How's the designing business?' Francis enquired.

'Fair,' Roland grunted and Nina smiled sweetly.

'And this,' Reggie said, indicating a red-haired young man who sat beside a cool, serene young creature with the face of a madonna, 'is Jennifer and Leslie Halliday.'

'Your occupation?' Francis asked.

'Chartered accountant,' Leslie Halliday replied, 'and I don't believe in the supernatural.'

'Indeed.' Francis flicked ash on to the carpet and Betty Smith hastened to put an ashtray on the arm of his chair. 'Suppose you were to meet a headless man in the back garden, what would be your reaction?'

'I'd look for an explanation,' Leslie said shortly.

'Very sensible. Now, you er – Reggie, how do you earn the necessary crust?'

'I'm a car salesman.'

'I see.' Francis sat back and stared thoughtfully at the fireplace. 'We have a chief clerk, a chartered accountant and a car salesman all living in a haunted house. One might say the mundane married to the outrageous. What time does the phenomenon occur?'

'Anywhere from nine o'clock to midnight,' Reggie replied in a low voice.

'Good.' Francis consulted a gold wristwatch. 'That gives us time to bath, shave and eat dinner. Tell me, do you eat separately or *en masse*?'

'All together in the original dining-room,' Reggie stated. 'It's more economical and labour saving.'

'Right, if you will kindly show us to our room, we'll prepare for the worst.'

'I've prepared two rooms,' Betty Smith said coyly.

'Fine,' Francis nodded. 'We don't sleep together.'

'Only on alternate Sundays,' Fred added.

The dining-room was oak-panelled and rather gloomy. The long table wore two white starched tablecloths; a collection of neatly-placed plates and stainless-steel cutlery reminded Francis of a well-dressed hardware shop, and two tall wax candles assisted the overhead chandelier in keeping the shadows at

bay. Everyone had 'dressed'. That is to say, the men wore mass-produced dinner jackets and the women long evening gowns. Francis was attired in faultless evening dress, while Fred appeared in a glittering silver creation that approached the frontiers of near nudity by having a strip of material at the front, leaving the back and ribs bare. The other three women greeted this apparition with unmistakable signs of disapproval, which was wasted on the recipient who seated herself at the table and examined the empty plates with greedy expectancy.

'What's all this, then? Fast day at the monastery?'

'Really, Fred.' Francis sighed. 'One can't take you anywhere.' He apologized to the assembly. 'Sorry about this, but she is a genius, and is only trying to let you know. Shall we get on? I'd like to be well fortified before whatever happens – happens.'

There was a slight easing of the tension and Betty Smith rang a small brass cowbell, which was a signal for the door to open and a large, raw-boned girl to enter, pushing a loaded food trolley.

'This is someone I haven't met,' Francis said.

'Gertrude,' Reggie announced. 'She does for us.'

'How-dew,' Gertrude announced, placing a plate of soup in front of Fred. 'I does for them.'

'Has Gertrude experienced the phenomenon?' Francis enquired, wagging an admonishing finger at Fred who had already laid eager hand to spoon.

'She leaves before nine,' Reggie stated.

'Nutting,' Gertrude said, apparently anxious to stress her non-observation, 'nutting would make me stay in this 'orrible 'ouse after dark.'

'Why?' Francis asked.

'It's bleeding 'aunted.' Gertrude presented Reggie with the final plate of soup and departed.

'Not very bright,' Betty informed Francis. 'She's never seen anything, but imagines a lot.'

'But she's rather sweet.' Nina Taylor smiled at Francis and thereby earned herself a glare from Fred.

'What do you know about your house?' The world's only practising psychic detective addressed the entire table. 'For

example, how old is it?'

'Pretty old.' Roland sipped his soup with an expression of distaste. 'Too much salt again. Elizabethan, I'd say.'

'Balls,' said Fred, scraping her plate with fast-moving spoon.

The shocked silence was broken by Francis saying softly: 'Fred does the research. Never go on a job until we've looked into the background.'

'Pseudo-Elizabethan,' Fred went on, examining with a critical eye the plate of roast beef which Gertrude deposited before her. 'Built in 1880.'

'Oh.' Reggie Smith looked depressed, then he brightened. 'I could have sworn the estate agent chap said it was genuine Elizabethan, but he must have meant the original house.'

'Prison,' said Fred, attacking the roast beef.

'Pardon!'

'This house was built on the site of a seventeenth century prison. It was knocked down in 1830. Your place was shoved up fifty years later.'

'That's what made me decide to take the case,' Francis explained. 'You get a lot of interesting phenomena on the sites of old prisons. Do you remember the case of the headless strangler of Marshalsea, Fred?'

'Do I not?' Fred grimaced. 'The bastard kept taking swipes at me with a dirty great rope.'

'How awful for you,' Jennifer Halliday gasped. 'What on earth did you do?'

'Bashed him in the unmentionables with me handbag. Turned out to be some joker dressed up.'

'We come across any number of fakes,' Francis observed airily. 'Surprising the people who get their kicks out of imagining they have a ghost on the premises. Still, I suppose it's better than taking to drink.'

'I can assure you . . .' Reggie began.

'I think our friends will be convinced in a few hours' time,' Nina observed softly. 'It was possibly a good idea not to tell them the details. Surprise is a great educator.'

'I'm convinced already,' Fred said, cleaning her plate with a piece of bread. 'Francis, my love, something has just come

into the room.'

'Indeed?' Francis filled his glass with some inferior red wine. 'Malignant?'

'No, I don't think so.' Fred was peeling a peach. 'Rather sad – frightened. Nothing visual, but I can feel. It's near the fireplace.'

All eyes were drawn in the general direction of the marble fireplace and Francis murmured softly: 'Keep your shirts on – don't stare.'

'But it's too early,' Betty Smith wailed, 'Nothing happens before nightfall.'

'Nothing you can see,' Francis commented dryly. 'Power comes with darkness. Fred, where is it now?'

'Behind me,' said that young lady cheerfully. 'I think it would like to tell me something, but it doesn't know how.'

'Masculine or feminine?'

Fred closed her eyes.

'Don't know. Very weak . . . sad . . . frightened . . . very . . . very frightened. Hold on a sec . . . it's gone.'

'Sure?' Francis watched the girl's face with some anxiety. 'Put out mental feelers.'

Fred remained motionless for a full minute, her eyes closed and her face devoid of expression. The silence was heavy with subdued fear and Betty Smith whimpered.

'Shut up,' Francis snapped. 'This is not the time for an attack of the vapours. Well, Fred?'

'Gone.' She opened her eyes, but the cynical, irresponsible expression was missing; her body was rigid, the face paler than usual. 'It's a strange one, Francis. Rather like the wailing waif of Battersea, but weaker.'

His eyes were like chips of blue granite as his glance flickered from face to face.

'You say nothing happens before nine o'clock or thereabouts, but has anyone experienced a strange coldness? As though a door had been left open?'

'I have,' Nina confessed, 'and once or twice it seemed that someone was staring at me. You know, a feeling of eyes boring into the back of your neck.'

Francis nodded. 'Right. Anyone else? And don't start imag-

ining. I want facts.'

Five heads were shaken and St Clare smiled grimly.

'One latent psychic and the rest gross materialists, which means five of you shouldn't see or hear anything at all. Let's have that girl in again.'

'You mean Gertrude?' Reggie asked.

'I didn't mean the Queen of Sheba. Ring that bell so I can find out what she knows, sees or imagines.'

Betty shook the cowbell violently and presently Gertrude entered, wearing her outdoor coat and seemingly not happy at being summoned.

'Jew want me? Got to be off, me mum don't like me out after dark.'

'Gertrude,' Francis smiled genially, 'you said a while back nothing would make you stay in this house after sunset. If I recall correctly, you stated it was haunted. What makes you think that?'

Gertrude hung her head and swung her left foot back and forth like a tongue-tied schoolgirl.

'Everyone knows it's 'aunted.'

'You mean you have been told it is haunted. You've never seen anything unusual yourself?'

Gertrude did not answer, but continued to swing her foot; her face was a sulky mask.

'Well,' Francis insisted gently, 'have you seen anything?'

Almost reluctantly, Gertrude shook her head.

'So,' Francis said relaxing slightly, 'how can you be certain the house is haunted?'

'Wan't to go 'ome. Me mum said I must be 'ome before dark.'

'When you have answered my question. How can you be sure the house is haunted?'

'Me – me gran.' The words poured out in an unbroken torrent. 'She was passing 'ere one night, the moon was bright it was and a bloody great man was walking the garden a bloody great man in black and his eyes glared so me gran fair split 'er drawers and he were walking on nutting . . .'

'You mean,' Francis interrupted, 'he was walking on air?'

Gertrude nodded violently.

'Yus, walking on air. 'E was three or four feet up but me gran could 'ear his feet treading on summat 'ard and she ran like billy-o.'

'I bet she did.' Francis smiled gently. 'Right, that will be all, Gertrude. You can go now.'

Gertrude escaped. She went through the doorway with great speed as though anxious to demonstrate her grandmother's long-ago retreat, and presently they heard her footsteps running down the garden path.

'So far, so good.' Francis rubbed his hands with boyish glee. 'The pattern is familiar up to a point, but from then on . . . I don't know. By the way, where does the phenomenon take place?'

'Mostly in the hall,' Reggie volunteered, 'but you can only see it from our sitting-room. The sound effects can be heard all over the house.'

'I gather the experience is rather disturbing.'

They all nodded and Reggie added, 'You can say that again.'

'Well, that being the case – forgive the question – why do you stay here?'

'Because we've nowhere else to go.' Reggie raised his voice. 'Damn it, man, we've all sunk our last pennies in this place and we like it. Frankly, you're our last hope.'

'Hope is a white horse galloping towards a limitless horizon,' Francis murmured softly. 'Very well, you lot scamper upstairs when the time comes, and Fred and I will sweat it out in the sitting-room.'

'You sure?' growled Roland Taylor. 'There's a natural explanation of course, but the whole damn business is pretty blood-curdling.'

'Quite sure.' Francis rose. 'You'd only be in the way. Your united fears would build up and feed whatever materializes.'

'I think we really ought to tell you what to expect,' Betty Smith said. 'I know you've had lots of experience with this sort of thing, but . . .'

'No.' Francis shook his head. 'Under no circumstances. It is important I have no preconceived opinions. I do not wish to be told the plot before I read the book. So upstairs with all of you and leave Fred and me to make some necessary pre-

parations. When it is all over, I will call you.'

There were a few half-hearted attempts to discourage him, but finally they trooped upstairs while Francis and Fred retired to the Smith sitting-room. The girl grimaced.

'This is going to be a tough one, Frankie. I can feel the atmosphere building up.'

'Not to worry.' He opened a small suitcase and took out a bottle of water, a roll of tape and five little wooden crosses mounted on silver bases. 'I don't know if it will be of any use, but we might as well set up a pentacle, just in case a nasty gets rough. Let's clear a space.'

They cleared the floor of furniture, rolled back the carpet, then proceeded to pin the white tape into the outline of a five-pointed star. On the apex of each point, Francis stood a cross, then, having opened the bottle, poured some of its contents into five little silver bowls which he placed on the tips of the inner points. He straightened up and rubbed his hands.

'Well, that's done. Let's hope it works. Do you remember the demon of Colchester Road?'

'Do I not?' Fred shuddered. 'He chucked the crosses at us and threw me around the room.'

'We've had a lot more experience since those days. Put a couple of chairs inside, we might as well be comfy.'

They lifted two chairs over the taped lines, then Francis drew the curtains and switched on all the lights.

'Storm coming up,' he announced, 'beginning to rain and the wind is rising. Listen to it.'

A gust of wind buffeted the house and the rain could be heard lashing the garden. Fred shivered.

'I hope it is not going to thunder. I don't mind spooks on the rampage, but I can't stand thunder.'

'Shouldn't think so,' Francis comforted. 'Just a downpour—I do the gardens good. Right, as the actress said to the bishop, all we have to do is wait for something to happen.'

They sat on two spindle-legged chairs in the middle of the white-edged star, like two children playing some bizarre game. Francis whistled and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling; Fred examined her fingernails and once she yawned.

Francis spoke at last. 'I wonder what shape it will take? I can't help thinking the disturbance here has nothing to do with the present house. Probably goes back to the old prison. Listen to that wind. A few chimney pots will go if it keeps up. What do you think of that lot upstairs?'

Fred shrugged her white shoulders.

'Pretty commonplace crowd. That Nina creature is probably psychic, although she doesn't know it.'

Suddenly, as though a switch had been pulled, or a vast curtain had been dropped about the house, the sound of wind and rain ceased. An abrupt, absolute silence rushed in from all sides and Francis gasped.

'This is it, my sweet. Hang on to your seat.'

For the space of two minutes nothing happened, then, from afar-off, they heard a door slam, followed by the sound of bolts being driven home. Then footsteps; loud, heavy treads that seemed to be crashing down on a paved floor. They grew steadily louder and nearer before the sitting-room door crashed open and Francis saw that, instead of the carpeted hall, a long, door-lined passage lay beyond. Coming towards them was a tall man dressed completely in black.

'Quick, Fred!' Francis snapped his fingers, 'What do you feel? What is it?'

'I don't know.' Fred shook her head. 'I can't feel anything. No coldness, no sense of a presence – nothing.'

'What?'

Francis stared at the approaching figure in astonishment. 'But you must, girl. Look, there's a complete reconstruction out there. I'd say yer actual seventeenth-century prison, and that charlie must be governor or something, and a nasty-looking brute he is too.'

The tall man approached as far as the open doorway. There he stopped and appeared to be staring at the wide-eyed couple seated in the pentacle. He was at least six and a half feet tall and had a dark, intelligent, but evil face, framed with long black hair. He was dressed completely in black: black cut-away coat, black shirt and cravat, black buckskin trousers and black, silver-buckled shoes. He carried a long riding crop which he slashed spasmodically against his leg.

'Here goes,' Francis murmured, then raised his voice. 'Who are you?'

The black, sinister figure continued to stare straight at him; there was a gloating expression in the dark eyes.

'What is it you want?' Francis spoke slowly. 'You don't belong here.'

The figure switched the riding crop several times, then, raising his left hand, began to prod with a rigid forefinger the empty space that lay between the doorposts. It was as though he were feeling an invisible wall.

'What the hell . . .?' Francis stood up, an expression of dawning comprehension lighting his eyes. 'No, mate, it's not ready for you to come through yet. I'd push off if I were you and come back another day.'

The black figure dropped its hand and looked at Francis with deepening interest; the thin lips slowly parted and a set of magnificent white teeth were bared in a mirthless grin. After a few moments, he turned slowly and began to walk back down the passage, trailing his riding crop along the right hand wall, so that it made a rattling sound, slithered from brick to wooden door, then back to brick again. Without warning, the sitting-room door slammed, and instantly the sound of pelting rain and howling wind flashed back into being. Francis jumped to his feet and raced for the door. He flung it open, tore out into the hall and shouted:

'Downstairs all of you! Hurry!'

Way up on the first landing a solitary door opened, proving they had all been huddled in a single room for comfort, then they came down the stairs, every face alive with fearful expectancy.

'In here.' Francis led the way back into the sitting-room and the Smiths pretended not to see the rolled-back carpet or the displaced furniture.

'Now,' Francis said closing the door and taking up a position in front of the fireplace, 'we have just witnessed a scene which is without parallel in my experience. The present – the now – was blocked out and we saw a stretch of corridor that rightfully belonged to the past. A tall, dark man walked up to that doorway and seemed to prod an invisible wall. Is this the

phenomenon you have all seen at various times?'

They all nodded and Roland Taylor muttered: 'Time picture.'

'What?'

'I said, a time picture.' The big man raised his voice. 'An image that builds up under certain conditions. Rather like television waves, and we are the receiving sets.'

'I know all about time images,' Francis snapped, 'only they rarely come equipped with sound and the viewer is usually a high-sensitive person who supplies the necessary energy for the build-up. This results in intense coldness. Fred is a high-sensitive and she felt nothing. Why?'

'I don't understand,' Reggie Smith sounded and looked very distressed. 'What's it matter if she felt hot or cold? The place is still haunted.'

'No,' Francis shook his head, 'apart from the unknown presence Fred detected in the dining-room, I have found no trace of psychic phenomona here.'

'But . . .' Betty Smith was near tears. 'The man, that awful passage?'

'Is the result of what I can only describe as a time slip. For a short while, part of this house reverts, for reasons I have yet to determine, to the original prison which stood on this site some two hundred years ago.'

'Rubbish,' Roland Taylor growled. 'Don't listen to him. All we have seen is a picture of how the passage used to look.'

'Ever thought of going through that door and meeting that bloke in the black gear, half way?' Francis enquired.

Roland Taylor shook his head.

'Frankly, no. I was too scared. But if I had done so, the entire picture would have disintegrated.'

'Fancy trying your luck tomorrow night?'

Taylor flushed and growled, 'Certainly not. We're paying you to do the investigating.'

'Exactly.' Francis smiled grimly. 'I'm the expert. The policeman you are paying to catch the criminal, the soldier you have engaged to fight your war. Now, let's go one step further. Think carefully. How long would you say the passage was when you first saw it?'

'Four – six feet,' Betty Smith ventured.

'Oh, no.' Nina shook her head. 'Ten feet I'd say. The man came out of a – kind of mist.'

'Eight to ten feet,' Halliday stated. 'Certainly not longer.'

'This evening,' Francis said softly, 'I'd be willing to bet my braces on it being all of thirty feet long.'

No one spoke for a full minute, then Roland Taylor asked quietly: 'What are we supposed to deduce from that?'

Francis St Clare stared thoughtfully at the speaker, then shook his head. 'I'm honestly not certain. Perhaps when I said the house had slipped back into the past, I should have said "was slipping". Sliding down a time precipice. But why? Some people – special people – have entered the past for brief periods, but purely as spectators. We seem to be on the verge of becoming actors.'

'That's absolute nonsense,' Roland protested. 'There's no way back into the past. Shadows, images of bygone years can manifest if the conditions are right, but the idea of living people being transported back is ludicrous.'

'Suppose,' St Clare said quietly, 'you come to a river. It cannot be forded and only one of you can swim. How can you cross?'

'Build a bridge?' Jennifer Halliday suggested.

'Bright girl. But how? You have plenty of rope, there are trees on both sides, but the tallest cannot span the river. A rope can be thrown across, but there is no way to anchor it. What is the solution?'

'A strong swimmer . . .' Leslie Halliday began.

'Ah!' Francis nodded, then chuckled with boyish glee. 'Go on.'

'Could swim across taking the ends of two ropes with him. These tied to a convenient tree would make a rope bridge.'

'Exactly.' Francis began to walk from one person to another, staring into each frightened or bewildered face, pouring out a torrent of words, clearly in the grip of some intense excitement. 'Two ropes and agile men could cross; the river – the limbo – would be bridged. But the important first step, the essential action, is to get a man over to the other side. Without him, the would-be travellers can only stand and . . .'

He paused, looked back into the empty hall, then swung round to face the seven bewildered people. '. . . stare into the future.'

'What the hell?' Roland exploded.

'One of them came across,' Francis was shouting. 'It's no use shaking your heads. No use mouthing platitudes – impossible, far-fetched, it couldn't happen . . . It *has* happened and one of you bloody well know it's happened.'

The babble of voices rose. Roland Taylor sneered and seemed on the point of striking the tall, elegant young man who appeared to be enjoying their discomfort.

'You're stark, raving mad. I was against you being called in from the start, but I never dreamed you'd come up with such a hare-brained, cracked stunt as this.'

'Shut up!' Francis roared. 'I said, shut up and listen. There's no other explanation. I know it must sound fantastic to people who have only travelled along the narrow road that runs between house and office, but reason it out for yourselves. Someone – some intelligence, has bridged the great gulf that divides the past from the present. It cannot – I repeat – it cannot be a one-way operation. An anchor man was sent over and he's here with us – now.'

They stared at him open-mouthed, half convinced, on the verge of full belief.

'You mean . . .' Jennifer Halliday was the first to speak. 'There's a ghost – here?'

Francis raised a slim eyebrow.

'Yes, indeed, there is a ghost. Fred sensed it in the dining-room. The ghost of someone recently murdered.'

'Murdered!' Roland Taylor looked helplessly round the room. 'No one has been murdered here.'

'But you're wrong.' Francis nodded several times. 'Someone has certainly been murdered. One of you has had the life force – the essential essence – the soul if you will, driven from his or her body, and you are now possessed by an entity from the past. Or, to put it another way, one of you is dead. The question is – which one?'

They went back to their rooms, where doubtlessly they con-

jectured, denied, toyed with their fears, and Fred and Francis were left alone.

'Can you contact the late departed?' Francis asked. 'A simple communication, a materialization, and our problem would be solved.'

'I doubt it,' Fred shook her head. 'You know what the newly-departed are like. Frightened, not sure what has happened. They shy away from psychic contact like a teetotaller from whisky. But I can try.'

'Do that.' Francis guided her to a chair. 'Put out feelers and see if he or she is around. Then we'll take it from there.'

Fred seated herself and closed her eyes. Francis stood behind her and gently stroked the smooth forehead.

'Relax,' he instructed in a low voice, 'but be careful. You never know what might be prowling around. Now, search this room. Is there anything at all?'

'No,' Fred said softly, 'nothing at all.'

'Right. Now the hall. Put out feelers into the hall, but slowly – take it easy – is there anything in the hall?'

Fred did not answer for some time; there was an expression denoting great mental effort on her pale face. Then she whispered: 'I can feel something. Wait a minute . . . Yes . . . fear . . . bewilderment . . . almost total darkness . . .'

'Can you make contact?' Francis asked. 'Try to bring it nearer. Bring it in.'

'Hold your horses, this is bloody hard work. Every time I make contact it shies away like a virgin from a . . .' She sat up and faced the closed doorway with tight-shut eyes. 'All right now . . . don't panic . . . we want to help. Get it? Help . . . friends . . . we're friends . . . don't get your knickers in a twist . . . come nearer . . . that's the ticket . . . nearer . . . keep your cool . . .'

'Keep it up,' Francis rubbed his hands in anticipation. 'Keep going, you're doing fine.'

'Through the door, ducky.' Fred was leaning forward, her eyes still closed. 'Come on . . . wood don't mean a thing to you now. Follow the blue light, all trains go to Waterloo . . . What the hell . . . ?'

'What's wrong, Fred?' The eager smile died and he watched

the girl with growing anxiety. 'Snap out of it. What's the trouble?'

'Interference. Fear . . . terror . . . the bastard is on to us. Oh, my God!'

She began to jerk violently, writhing from side to side, and her voice rose to a scream. 'The pain . . . get it off . . .!'

'Break contact!' Francis shouted. 'Let go, clear your mind, it's only auto-suggestion. Break contact, you silly cow.'

Suddenly the girl went limp and flopped back in her chair; two tears crept from under her closed eyelids and trickled down her pale cheeks. Francis rubbed her hands, then gently shook her.

'O.K. It's all over. Wake up, there's a good girl.'

Fred opened her eyes and for a while she stared up into the lean, anxious face. Francis kissed her, then straightened up.

'All right now?'

'Yes. I made a bit of a fool of myself, didn't I?' She shuddered. 'I was caught off guard. The sudden flash of cold terror – and the pain. It was as though I was being flogged.'

'Possible,' Francis nodded. 'Our tall friend would be accustomed to dealing out such treatment. Go on.'

'Well, that's all. When I broke contact, I passed out. I fear we will never find the newly-departed again. My own discomfort was only a reflection of what he or she must have gone through.'

'Well, one thing is certain,' Francis said, taking out his cigarette case and putting a cigarette between the girl's lips, 'we have to make it the hard way. Watch every one of them, and wait for the anchor man to slip up.'

'Nina has a psychic potential.' Fred puffed at her cigarette. 'She could have been the magnet that attracted them in the first place. There again, Roland Taylor is always protesting, and he seems to have been against you being called in. I think he's a prime suspect.'

'There's no more we can do tonight.' Francis yawned. 'So, to bed. Tomorrow we must wrap the case up or call it a day, for I doubt if we can hold them here for longer than twenty-four hours. When the big fellow comes into this room, they'll

forget their investment and be off.'

Three men and three women sat in a rough half-circle; each face wore a suitably grave expression and returned Francis's searching glance with disarming innocence. The psychic detective took up his favourite position on the hearthrug, with Fred standing to his left. The girl was wearing the bizarre costume in which she had arrived, the white letters E.V. standing out over her right breast.

'I've gathered you together,' Francis began,' to report progress and in military jargon, to put you fully in the picture. Today, I did some research in the local library and was fortunate enough to find this.' He took a fat volume from the mantelpiece. *'Pilbeam's History of Clarence and Surrounding Districts.* There's an entire chapter devoted to Clarence Grange. It seems there was a prison on this site. It was built in 1629 and demolished in 1830. Now I don't have to tell you that a seventeenth century prison was not the best place in the world to land up in, and if the wrong man was in charge, almost anything could happen. This brings me to the year 1742, for it was then, according to contemporary records, that a Mr Royston Wentworth was appointed governor. There's little doubt he bought the post. Let me quote.'

He opened the book and began to read, but occasionally raised his eyes, as though to observe the expressions on the faces of his audience.

' "Royston Wentworth was a man of goodly proportions and was well versed in the arts that pertain to a scholar and a gentleman. But he did not follow the path of the godly, but did pursue the hound of dark knowledge so that righteous men shunned his presence.

' "When in the year of Our Lord 1742 he did take up the appointment of Governor of His Majesty's Prison at Clarence, he did make one Christopher Wyatt his chief officer and certain other men of ill-repute were installed as turnkeys . . . By 1743, all the former staff had been turned away and only Governor Wentworth's men were to be found in authority, and there was much talk of evil deeds performed behind those grim walls . . .

' ". . . At his trial, one prisoner: a forger and coin-clipper by name of Jeremiah Watts, did testify that Governor Wentworth and the aforesaid Christopher Wyatt did cause a wall to disappear and beyond did he see things that made his bowels move with fear . . .

' "He did see a room where lights burned without flame and a glass-fronted box in which tiny images moved . . .

' ". . . Many of the inmates had become lunatics and one was so bewitched, he swore upon Holy Writ he was not of this time, but had been born in a Century yet to come." '

Francis closed the book and carefully replaced it on the mantelpiece. When he spoke his voice was low, like an accomplished preacher preparing to enjoy himself.

'He swore upon Holy Writ that he was not of this time, but had been born in a century yet to come.' Francis paused, then raised his voice. 'Which one of you was – or will be – he or she? Do not dismiss the idea of time transportation lightly. Many people have claimed to have been switched from one age to another, and when they have tried to explain their predicament to the authorities, have been treated as madmen. Remember, ten to fifteen thousand people disappear every year in Great Britain alone, and are never seen again. Who is to say they are not wandering about the streets of medieval London, or rotting in some seventeenth-century madhouse?'

Jennifer Halliday raised her hand, rather like a schoolgirl who wishes to ask Teacher a question.

'Please, if what you say is true and these – people – succeed in making their bridge, what will happen? Will they kidnap us?'

'There is one present who can answer that question better than I,' Francis answered dryly. 'But I'd say the transfer will be one of souls, not bodies. Royston Wentworth was looking – or is looking – for an escape. He must have known his activities would sooner or later lead him to the gallows. By swopping personalities with someone in a far-off age, he would be safe. It would seem he intends to bring his staff with him.'

'It's unbelievable.' Roland Taylor shook his head. 'Too far-fetched.'

'Really!' St Clare raised an eyebrow. 'I would have thought you of all people would have found the situation most plausible.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'It is supposed to mean this.' Francis suddenly pointed a forefinger at the large, red-faced man. 'I believe you are the anchor-man. The one they sent over to take possession of the real Roland Taylor's body. The bridge isn't complete yet, so the ghost of the poor wretch is still trying to make itself felt. Only you scared it off. That's why you did not want me called in. That's why you have poured cold water on the very idea from the start, that's why . . .'

'You're bloody mad.' Taylor got up, his face congested with rage. 'You poor fool, your theory is full of holes. I can sink it with a few words. Firstly, if I, or, for that matter, anyone here, is a refugee from the eighteenth century, how is it we all talk twentieth-century English? Eh? If you wish, I'll take that television set to pieces and put it together again. Want to know who my mother and father were? When they were born and when they died? Shall I give you a rundown on the history of the last thirty years? Care to watch me drive a car? Go and lock yourself up in the nearest loony bin.'

'How about that?' Reggie Smith smiled. 'I can drive a car, name the Prime Minister of England from 1920 upwards. That puts me in the clear.'

'I can type,' Betty Smith said demurely. 'Sixty words a minute.'

'I can ride a bicycle,' Nina Taylor announced, 'type, do shorthand, use a telephone and an adding machine – and I saw *Gone With The Wind* three times.'

'I,' Jennifer Halliday said, ticking off the list of her accomplishments on the fingers of her left hand, 'can type, do shorthand so long as it's not too fast, tell you the entire plot of *Love Story* . . .'

'All right.' Francis raised his hand. 'So, you are all clever boys and girls. Doesn't mean a thing. Messrs Wentworth and Co were brilliant men. Far ahead of their time. They might not be able to type or take a television to pieces, but they knew the human mind. They had to for this little caper to

work. When our unknown anchor-man took over a contemporary body, he also inherited a twentieth-century brain. A fully-active computer, with a first-class memory bank. No doubt he was scared stiff when his new body entered a cat, but so long as he did not interfere, the memory bank would instruct the brain on what must be done. Sorry, Mr Taylor, but you can recite the Encyclopædia Britannica backwards, and I'll still not be convinced you're not an eighteenth-century black magician on the rampage.'

'Come to think of it,' Jennifer Halliday said shyly, 'Mr Taylor was never particularly frightened when the – er – phenomenon took place. I often wondered why. I know, *I* was.'

'Because I didn't run round like a headless chicken, it doesn't mean I wasn't scared.' Taylor glared at the girl, then turned to Francis. 'You've got a lot to answer for, St Clare. Before you came we were scared of ghosts, now we're terrified of each other.'

'True,' Francis nodded, 'and with just cause. One of you is an alien, a forerunner of a diabolical invasion. And don't think Mr Taylor is my only suspect. For example, Mrs Taylor could well be our – forgive me – our man. She has a certain latent psychic power which could well have drawn the alien to her.'

Nina Taylor started as though she had been struck.

'I find that remark to be insulting, Mr St Clare. If you think I would allow the spirit of some strange man to take possession of my body, you must be madder even than my husband believes. Really!'

Just then Gertrude put in an appearance and announced: 'Denner is sarved', and they all trooped into the dining-room, where they sat round the table in complete silence. Once, when Reggie Smith coughed, everyone jumped and stared at the offender as though he had suddenly sprouted horns. The rattle of cutlery on plates, the murmured request that someone pass the salt, the flopping of Gertrude's slippered feet as she moved round the room – all contributed to an atmosphere so sinister, it could almost be tasted. Francis noted that Roland Taylor put down his knife and fork after a few mouthfuls and stared glumly at the opposite wall.

'Francis,' Fred said suddenly, 'you might be interested to know our wandering recently-departed is back.'

'Really?' Francis registered faint surprise. 'Surely you don't mean that the ghost of the newly-dead is in this room?'

Gertrude screamed, dropped a tray of sherry trifle, and ran from the room.

'I didn't mean your grandmother had dropped in for high tea,' Fred retorted indignantly. 'The poor coot is hovering behind our Roland's chair.

'Damnation!' Roland Taylor pushed back his chair and crashed a clenched fist down upon the table. 'What game are you playing, St Clare? You've scared that wretched girl out of the few wits she has, and frightened the rest of us into the bargain.'

'I'd better go and see if she's all right.' Betty Smith rose. 'I don't want to lose her, help is hard to find.'

'You scared, Taylor?' Francis enquired. 'In a tizzy, are you?'

'Of course I'm scared,' Taylor roared, 'I've never pretended to be anything else.'

'Then why don't you go away? I don't mean for ever, just until this matter is cleared up.'

'Why should I?'

'Why shouldn't you?' Francis turned his attention to the others. 'Why not all of you? Get into your cars and drive to a hotel for the night. Tomorrow, I might have some good news for you. Well, how about it?'

Before anyone could answer, Betty Smith returned and resumed her seat at the foot of the table.

'I think Gertrude will come in tomorrow, but she's in a hell of a blue funk at the moment. We really must be careful what we say when she is present.'

'St Clare wants us to move out,' Taylor said, 'pack our bags and spend the night at a hotel.'

'Is that necessary?' Betty asked. 'I mean, up to now we've been perfectly safe upstairs.'

'Up to now, I agree,' Francis nodded, 'but if Charlie-boy succeeds in completing the bridge, I'll not be responsible for your safety.'

Nina shivered. 'I say, let's go. I keep imagining that great

brute lumbering up the stairs.'

'I don't see why we have to leave our house because some blighter from the past sees fit to strut along a non-existent passage,' Roland Taylor grumbled. 'Besides, think of the expense.'

'Your bank account won't be of much use when you've changed places with Royston Wentworth and friends,' Francis retorted grimly. 'But the main point is, with you out of the way, Fred and I will only have ourselves to worry about.'

'I suppose we could ring up the Green Boy,' Betty suggested. 'I mean, they could be full up.'

'They aren't.' Francis grinned. 'I took the liberty of making three reservations.'

'Bloody cheek,' Roland growled.

'Of course,' Francis shrugged, 'I expected one of you to object. I would imagine that Master Wentworth will be livid when he finds his anchor-man is not at his post.'

Half an hour later three cars went roaring down the drive and a heavy silence descended on the house.

'Are you sure it's going to work?' Fred asked for the third time.

'Nothing is certain in this world.' Francis drew the curtains, then opened the sitting-room door. 'But I'd say one of them will find his or her way back. A lot depends on the anchor-man being present between nine and midnight. He might be able to operate from a distance, but I doubt it. It's the atmosphere in this place which is their greatest asset. No, the intruder, the possessed, must come back or the bridge will begin to crumble. What time is it?'

'Eight fifty-five.' Fred consulted her wrist-watch.

'Any minute now. Might as well make ourselves comfy. No need to take precautions – they wouldn't help us anyway.'

Fred sank down into an armchair while Francis helped himself to a stiff drink from the sideboard.

'What about me?'

'No.' He shook his head. 'A sniff from the cork and you're away. I want your precious sixth sense fully alert.'

'You're a pig.'

'Yes, I know. People have remarked on my swinish aspect before. By the way, have you considered what our palsy-walsy from the other side will do when he finds his anchor-man is missing?'

Fred shrugged. 'I don't know. Belt for the nearest church and demand sanctuary?'

'Not on your nelly. A high master of the black art wouldn't find much sanctuary in a church. No, he'll send another man over, who'll make a beeline for the nearest psychic medium to hand.'

'You don't say?' Fred considered this possibility for a few moments, then an expression of alarm widened her eyes. 'Eh, wait a minute. That's me.'

Francis nodded. 'You have keen perception.'

'But . . . if he succeeds . . . then it's the same as if I was killed.'

'I have always observed,' Francis commented dryly, 'that you have a remarkable gift of summing up a situation in a few words.'

'Oh, thank you very much. I'm to be a Judas goat.'

'Really, I wouldn't call you a goat. Let us say, irresistible bait.'

'You unfeeling bastard. I thought you loved me.'

'I do.' Francis nodded violently. 'If the worst should happen, it will be a great sacrifice.'

'Suppose – I'm killed?' Fred demanded. 'What will you do?'

He sighed deeply.

'I'll have to learn to love someone else.'

Somewhere, a little way off, a door slammed.

'Is that our wandering boy returned?' enquired Francis thoughtfully. 'Or can it be Master Wentworth taking his evening stroll?'

They waited, ears strained to catch the merest sound, eyes alert for the unexpected. Then there came the sound of approaching footsteps, pacing a hard surface: a slow vibrating tread that made a table-lamp quiver, a resounding picking-up and putting-down of heavy feet. But the hall remained perfectly normal: the thick carpet, the umbrella stand, the shaded lights – all belonged indisputably to the twentieth century. The

footsteps came up to the open doorway, then stopped. They heard the sound of heavy breathing.

'Sound but no picture,' Francis said softly. 'Come on, Charlie, whoever you are. Master is going to be very cross.'

Suddenly there was a loud crash, as though someone had kicked a wooden partition. After the lapse of a few moments, the sound was repeated, and Francis grinned.

'Temper, temper.'

'Frankie, love.' Fred spoke in a small voice. 'I'm just the teeniest bit frightened.'

'Well don't be,' he growled. 'You're a professional and you know that fear is a key that will open any door. You also know what might come through an open door. I remember . . .'

He was cut short by a tremendous shout – a mighty roar of rage that seemed to echo down a long corridor. And then came the sound of more footsteps, only now they were lighter – running.

'Stand by.' Francis got up. 'Reinforcements.'

'Can they see us?' Fred asked in a voice that was not quite steady.

'I don't know.' He shrugged. 'Maybe. They certainly know we're here.'

'I don't know if I fancy being watched by some weird characters from the seventeenth century.' Fred shuddered, then clutched her head with both hands. 'Someone is trying to get in.'

'What!' Francis spun round, his eyes cold, his face an impassive mask. 'Explain. Quick, girl.'

'Cold fingers probing my brain . . . pain . . . trying to get in . . .'

He reached her in two giant strides and gripped her arm. 'Blank your mind, use your will.'

'I can't . . . they're strong . . .'

'Look into my eyes.' He released her arms and clamped her face between his two hands, then tilted her head until their eyes were only a few inches apart. 'Fight. Think pain – for them. He's burning up, his stomach's on fire . . . there's a bloody great fire in his belly . . . red hot knives are slicing through his head . . . he's drowning in a sea of white hot

cinders . . . He's going . . . he can't hold on . . .'

From behind them, from beyond the open doorway, came the scream of a man in mortal agony, followed by the sound of retreating footsteps. There was another bellow of rage, then silence. Francis slumped down into a chair and wiped his forehead.

'That was a near thing,' Fred gasped.

'Well, they won't try that again.' Francis got up and poured himself another drink. 'Ye gods, I needed that. For a while I thought I'd have to go out girl hunting.'

'What now?' Fred enquired.

'They'll wait for their anchor-man to show. Which reminds me – where the hell is he?'

'It's not going to work.' Fred shook her head. 'Whoever it is, he or she could never get away from the others without raising suspicion.'

'But he's got to.' Francis banged his clenched fist down upon the chair arm. 'Don't you understand? The bridge is being built slowly, night after night; if there is a break, all their work will be wasted.'

'Then why don't we pack it in and leave 'em to it?'

'Because they would start again. If not on this lot, then on someone else. We've been hired for a job of work, and I'll be damned if . . . What's that?'

Again there came the sound of approaching footsteps, only now they came from outside. The crunch of feet on gravel: slow, fugitive treads that were barely perceptible, but conjured up a picture of someone approaching the house with extreme caution.

'Can it be?' Francis took a deep breath and his eyes glittered with intense excitement. 'Yes, I do believe this could be our wandering boy. Fred, my love, may your seed be as the sand on the seashore, in a few minutes from now, the undead will come ambling in through that there door. Any bets?'

'Taylor.' Fred nodded. 'I'll put me best pair of drawers on Roland Taylor.'

'And very fetching he'll look in 'em too. Maybe. But I rather fancy that little Nina number. Quiet, not much to say for herself. Well, here goes.'

The faint, hesitant footsteps were coming up the front steps; a key was inserted in the Yale lock, then after a while the door creaked open, then was closed with elaborate care. A shadow fell across the hall carpet; it elongated, then crept slowly up the right hand wall as its owner advanced towards the sitting-room. A figure gradually emerged into the open doorway.

'Oh, there you are,' said Reggie Smith.

Francis St Clare bowed.

'Good evening, Mr Christopher Wyatt.'

'I tell you I came back because I was worried,' Reggie Smith repeated. 'I was worried out of my mind.'

'I bet you were,' Francis grinned maliciously. 'The master was very angry. Can't say I blame him.'

'But damn it all, I called you in. If I was the – the guilty one, would I send for the one person who could muck up the entire exercise?'

'Yes.' Francis closed his eyes, then opened them again. 'Only I wasn't supposed to do anything. I was just the poor bloody crank who plays at ghost hunting. No, Fred was the ace-in-the-hole. A strong psychic who could produce that little extra something. A mere girl with a highly-developed psychic gift. A push-over for a take-over. One more lad across the river. Perhaps the great man himself.'

'Really, of all the bloody rot,' Reggie Smith protested.

'Only I wasn't the silly crank I was supposed to be,' Francis went on remorselessly. 'I gave her the will to fight back and your man retreated with a bloody nose.'

'Look,' Reggie appeared to be on the verge of tears. 'I felt awful about leaving you two alone to face – whatever is going to happen, so I sneaked back.'

'Why did you creep up the drive? Where's your car?'

'I came by taxi. The hotel garage was locked up for the night. I walked softly because I was scared.'

'You know something, F.S.?' Fred inquired. 'I think he's telling the truth.'

'Maybe.' Francis sighed. 'It's crazy enough to be true – or an elaborate cover story. I'm reserving judgment, Mr Smith, but

should circumstances prove my worst suspicions, look out. Don't forget that.'

Reggie Smith made a gurgling sound and looked fearfully at the open doorway.

'Perhaps I'd better get back,' he suggested.

'Perhaps you'd better not,' Francis countered. 'Since you're here, I'd be obliged if you would answer a few questions. Has anyone in your crowd been behaving at all strangely?'

'No.' Reggie shook his head. 'I can honestly say I've noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Everyone has been on edge lately, of course, but that's only to be expected.'

'It would be strange if they were not. Tell me, what do you usually do between nine and midnight?'

'Eh?'

'When friend Royston takes his evening stroll, what's the usual practice? Do you always go upstairs?'

'Not at first,' Reggie said thoughtfully. 'No, we all went out into the garden. But after a while someone found the disturbance never troubled the upper storeys, so we got into the habit of trooping upstairs.'

'What was the matter with the garden?' Francis asked, his eyes closed.

Reggie shrugged.

'Nothing, only it was damned cold.'

Francis's eyes opened and he stared intently at the empty hall.

'Cold, you say?'

'Yes.' Reggie frowned. 'Well, the wind springs up over the downs at sunset.'

'So it does. Tell me, did you lock all the doors before you all trotted out this evening?'

'Of course we did.'

'Sure?'

'Of course I'm sure.' Reggie frowned again and his voice carried the faintest suggestion of a peevish tone. 'We decided you had enough to contend with, without having burglars breaking in. We've been robbed twice, you know. Betty said . . .'

'You even locked the back door?' Francis insisted, '– and you

doubtless ensured that all the windows were securely fastened?'

Reggie was staring at him in astonishment.

'Yes, it was my turn to be security man. One has to have organization in a set-up like this . . .'

'Fred,' Francis drawled, a smile lighting his face, 'I'm a stupid blockheaded fool.'

'Confession is good for the soul,' that young lady quoted. 'I wondered how long it would be before the penny dropped.'

'A bloody, benighted, blind, deaf, half-witted cretin,' Francis added. 'There was the answer being served to me on a plate and I hadn't the gumption to see it.'

'You can't help it,' Fred comforted, 'it's the way your mother put your hat on.'

'You, of course, spotted the missing link,' Francis suggested.

There was a short pause.

'No,' said Fred.

'But you've cottoned on now?' he asked, glaring at her over one shoulder.

She shook her head.

'I haven't your brains. I'm only the hired help.'

'But damnation, girl, it's as plain as the nose on your face.'

'Speak for your own nose. I haven't a clue of what you are talking about.'

'I'm talking about the anchor-man. You must realise who it is. We've been so concerned with the impossible, we've overlooked the obvious. Think, girl.'

'I am thinking and it hurts.'

'Jumping beanstalks. Reggie, be a good fellow and do something for me.'

'Sure.' Reggie brightened like a Boy Scout about to do a good deed. 'Anything.'

'Good. Open up the old lugholes and listen. Go and unlock the back door. Then walk round the house whistling "Rule Britannia". When you reach the front door, come in, shut the door and turn out all the hall lights. Got that?'

Reggie concentrated.

'Unlock the back door, walk round the house whistling "Rule Britannia", come in front, shut door, turn out lights. Got

it.' He frowned. 'Why?'

'Never ask "why".' Francis shook his head gravely. 'That word has ruined more kingdoms than you wot of. Just trot away and do your little act.'

'All right, if you say so. But for the life of me . . .'

'When you come back I'll give you a big kiss,' Fred promised.

'Oh!' Reggie flushed a bright red and almost ran to carry out his appointed task. Francis glared at his assistant.

'You want him to break a blood vessel? Behave yourself, the balloon will go up in about five minutes.'

From far off came the sound of a door opening, then, after a considerable period a shrill rendering of 'Rule Britannia' that was accompanied by the crunch of approaching footsteps.

'Never make the top ten,' Francis observed.

'But he's lovely,' Fred stated.

The front door opened with an abruptness that suggested Reggie was grateful to leave the night behind, then the hall lights went out and he stood in the doorway, beaming like a schoolboy who has successfully broken bounds.

'Did it!' he exclaimed.

'You're dead clever,' Francis pronounced gravely. 'Now switch off all the lights and go and sit beside Fred. You can have a little slap and tickle before the fireworks begin.'

Reggie tore round the room, switching out lights, and in no time at all they were sitting in total darkness, like three ghosts waiting for midnight. Once, Fred exclaimed, 'Hey, watch it!' and Francis swore.

'Cut it out. Someone is supposed to think the entire bottom floor is empty. If you can't control him, suffer in silence.'

'Really,' Reggie's voice protested plaintively, 'I never . . .'

'Shut up,' Francis growled.

Fifteen minutes passed, then the hall clock struck eleven, and scarcely had the last vibrating chime died away, when they heard the first sound. A tiny bang. Possibly a slight miscalculation when someone carefully closed the back door. Then, for a while, nothing, save a growing tension as they became aware of an approaching presence. Reggie whimpered.

'One more sound out of you,' Francis whispered, 'and I'll knock you for six.'

A chair stirred in the next room and bumped against the dining-table; a voice muttered a curse; then they heard the soft pad of feet muffled by the thick carpet. A dark figure, a shape of deeper darkness, slid obliquely across the room and became silhouetted against the rectangular blur of the open doorway. The voice was harsh: a shouted whisper.

'Master – master, they locked me out.'

Light crashed through the darkness, and the sudden transition caused eyes to blink, so for a few more seconds the identity of the figure in the doorway remained a mystery. Then Francis St Clare spoke.

'So, we meet at last, Master Christopher Wyatt.'

Gertrude sprang round, her face contorted with fear and rage.

The two men bound the long, raw-boned figure to a straight-backed chair while she made raucous cries like a she-bear caught in a trap. Once or twice the cries merged into words – words spoken in an accent which was a mixture of raw Cockney and West Country, the vowels slurred so as to make the speech well nigh unintelligible.

'Master . . . don't leave me alone in this awful place . . . I'm shut off . . .'

'Right,' said Fred, once the binding operation was completed, 'I know you're just itching to show off. When did you realize it was Gertrude?'

'When Reggie said it was only cold in the garden. You may remember Gertrude told us her gran had seen a man walking above the ground, thereby implying the phenomenon manifested itself in the garden. It doesn't. A closed place, steeped in atmosphere, is essential for the bridge building. I should have suspected before, of course. Gertrude was a natural for a take-over. Simple, a limited vocabulary that made the intruder's task easy, she was, if I can use the expression, made for the job.'

'But she was always out of the house well before nine o'clock,' Reggie protested. 'Unless, of course . . .'

'She came back,' Francis finished the sentence. 'I've no doubt the back door was left unlocked until you retired to bed. But

tonight you locked up before departing, hence we were treated to a show without vision. The camera was missing. The question is – what now?'

'You mean . . .?' Reggie stared with evident apprehension at the open doorway.

'All this supplication should get results sooner or later,' Francis observed, watching the erstwhile Gertrude with some satisfaction. 'Our future depends on how well we handle the situation when it occurs.'

Gertrude/Wyatt twisted her head to one side and glared at Francis with dilated eyes.

'Master Wentworth . . .' 'ee know . . . 'ee make you twist . . .'

'He's a bit slow off the mark,' Francis remarked cheerfully. 'I should give him another shout, if I were you.'

'Master . . .' The mouth was open, revealing an assortment of bad teeth. 'Master . . .'

'That's the stuff.' Francis nodded his approval. 'Bellow away.'

'Look here,' Fred protested. 'I'm not all that keen to see old nasty-chops. Can't we get Gertrude – or whoever she is – certified, and leave the house to itself for a bit? You said the bridge would disintegrate once the anchor-man was removed.'

'And what about the real Gertrude? If we can't get her back into her rightful habitation, at least her death should be avenged. Besides, we've been hired to do a job of work and I don't like leaving it half-completed. So here we sit until Charlie-boy puts in another appearance.'

He tapped the writhing figure on the shoulder.

'Come on now, a couple of more good bellows. Let rip with some of the old psychic influence.'

'Anyone fancy a cup of tea?' Reggie asked. 'I can soon put the kettle on.'

'Not a bad idea,' Francis agreed. 'Make sure you warm the pot and none of those bloody teabags.'

'No sugar,' Fred called out after Reggie's retreating figure, 'and not too strong.'

'Master Wentworth . . . oi am 'ere!' Gertude/Wyatt's voice sounded a little hoarse. 'Gongi . . . Deliverenti . . . woti . . .'

'That sounds a bit technical,' Francis said, grinning. 'The devil

alone knows what it means.'

'Mattermass . . . Satanus.' Gertrude/Wyatt was shouting with all his/her might. 'Smackmuckus . . . bumoninus . . . Pondocronous . . . cunmontus . . .'

'Did you ever hear the like?' Francis enquired.

'Sounds a bit indecent to me,' Fred retorted. 'I bet they were a filthy old lot back in seventeen-something. I say, what must it be like for a man to be in a woman's body?'

'It's been done before,' Francis shrugged. 'Now shut up, I think someone is receiving loud and clear.'

There was the sound of many doors opening, followed by the clattering of running footsteps. The hall seemed to dissolve; the walls fell inwards and in the blink of an eyelid, the long, door-lined passage flashed into being. The tall, dark man was hurrying towards the open doorway, his face a mask of terrible rage. The wretched figure in the chair seemed to shrink; speech babbled off the tongue in a cascade of words.

'Locked out, Master, 'ee locked me out . . . found out, powerful 'ee be. Oi tried to contact . . . oi tried, but too far, Master . . . oi were too far off . . .'

Royston Wentworth clenched his fists and hammered them against the invisible wall. The dull thud gradually gave way to a terrible cracking sound, as though a brick or rock wall were splintering, then there was a mighty crash as the tall, black-clad figure stepped into the room. Several other men were creeping along the passage; they stopped at the doorway, seemingly unwilling, or perhaps lacking the courage, to cross the barrier.

Royston Wentworth stood looking down at the bound figure that cringed in the chair.

'An ass has more wisdom in its head than thou,' he stated.

'Yes, he wasn't very bright,' Francis agreed. 'A spare key would have saved you a lot of trouble.'

The arrogant eyes turned slowly in his direction; the thin lips were parted in a mirthless grin.

'I will pluck your soul from your body and toss it down upon the dark plains, where it will be hunted by the hounds of death.'

'There again,' Francis continued, 'you aren't all that smart.'

'Try to talk English,' Fred instructed. 'He hasn't a clue what you're on about.'

'I said,' Francis shouted, 'your head has lost its wisdom. Oh, damn, I can't talk this jargon. The idea was for your souls to come across, not your flipping bodies. You're on alien ground, son. You're in my territory. Get it? Savvy?'

''Course he doesn't,' Fred protested. 'He probably thinks you're taking the mickey.'

It was not clear if Royston Wentworth understood what was being said or not, but his intention was unmistakable. He was moving towards Francis, his arms outstretched, the fingers slightly curved, and he was growling, deep down in his throat. Francis side-stepped, then began to retreat; he slid a small table across the floor so that it bumped against the legs of the approaching giant, causing him to stumble. Wentworth recovered at once, kicked the table to one side, then continued his relentless advance. Fred picked the table up and threw it at the broad back. It struck Wentworth between the shoulder blades and instantly he turned with incredible speed and made for the petrified girl.

'Move!' Francis shouted. 'Run!'

His warning was unheeded. A hand that looked as if it might have been hewn out of granite swung round and slashed across Fred's left cheek. She went hurling backwards, bounced off a chair, then collapsed on to the floor. Francis forgot his cautious tactics and went in like a boxer going all out for a knock down. He slammed a combination of punches into the hard belly, then executed a perfect uppercut to the jutting chin. He repeated the process three times. Finally, he rubbed his raw knuckles and looked up.

Wentworth's face wore a derisive grin.

'Bloody hell!' Francis swore as he tried to back away, but the great hand found his throat and he was being forced down to his knees, while the ridiculous thought flashed across his mind: 'Is this the story where the baddie wins?'

Consciousness was dissolving into a bottomless pit; his soul was preparing to depart for an unknown destination, when a brown object flew across the room and smashed against Wentworth's face. The steel fingers were jerked from Francis's throat

and he sank to the floor, gasping for breath.

Wentworth was screaming; his hands were clasped over the cut, inflamed face. Reggie Smith looked down at Francis and shrugged.

'What else could I do? I threw the teapot at him.'

Francis came gradually back to life and gazed upon the writhing giant with speechless astonishment. Not until he had clambered to his feet was he able to give utterance.

'The cup that cheers,' he said slowly. 'The life-saving brew. Reggie, you're a bloody marvel. Hand me that small table.'

Reggie obeyed and Francis crashed the table down on Wentworth's head, just as the giant was about to take a more active interest in the proceedings.

'Sleep,' he advised, 'and wake up in a more depressing yesterday.'

Wentworth acceded to this request by crashing to the floor, where he lay like a felled oak waiting for the jack-saw. Francis began to straighten the prostrate figure as Fred climbed slowly to her feet and rubbed the ugly red weal that marred her left cheek.

'Rope,' he said, snapping his fingers, 'curtain cords, nylons, your knickers – anything.'

After a hurried scramble, which Reggie watched with an appreciative eye, Fred handed Francis a pair of sheer nylons which he used to secure the giant's ankles and wrists. He then straightened up and surveyed his handiwork with a certain justified pride.

'Number one ungodly laid low. Now to put him back where he belongs. Reggie, do you feel strong?'

'No.'

'Good. Catch hold of his legs, while I take a firm grip of his manly shoulders.'

Reggie displayed a certain reluctance to lay hands on the enemy, particularly as four sinister-looking individuals were watching the operation from the open doorway. They had not moved since Wentworth had invaded the sitting-room, but were now showing signs of disquiet as it became evident their leader was being returned unto them. Reggie looked fearfully back over one shoulder.

'What about – those men?' he whispered.

'Don't worry your little head,' Francis advised, then shouted to Fred: 'Switch the television on.'

'Which channel?' Fred enquired.

'Independent. A few commercials should put the fear of the devil in them. They do me.'

Slowly, with great effort, they dragged Wentworth towards the open doorway. The silent audience retreated a few steps and one shook his head.

'That's interesting,' Francis observed, 'they don't seem keen on having laughing-boy back. That's too bad. Back he goes, whether they like it or not.'

It proved impossible to throw the body through the doorway for the simple reason, it was too long. Wentworth's weight negated any idea of tossing him in head first, and Francis was coming to a reluctant conclusion when signs of extreme agitation among the silent audience made him look round.

The television screen was depicting a monkey dressed in eighteenth-century costume. It was drinking from a teacup.

'There's nothing I like better than a cup of Rosy Lee,' said the monkey.

The four men turned on their heels and raced down the passage. Their flight was followed by the sound of many doors opening and closing. Then silence.

'You know,' Francis said, taking a firmer grip on Wentworth's shoulders, 'I never realised before the true virtue of tea. Right, let's get him in there.'

After much straining, heaving and grunting, they deposited their burden upon the stone floor, then looked around. Reggie was shaking like a jelly in an earthquake.

'We're . . .' He stopped. The situation robbed him of words.

'In the eighteenth century,' Francis nodded. 'In the Clarence old prison, and heaven help us if the bridge disintegrates before we get back. Still, it would be shame if we didn't have a look round.'

Beyond the doorway the sitting-room and the colour television was indisputably twentieth-century, but on either side and behind, the distant past was as real as Monday morning. Francis opened one of the doors and entered a cell which was

bare save for a plank-bed and an iron bucket. He went back into the passage and was greeted by a terrified Reggie, who was gazing longingly at the cosy sitting-room.

'I think we ought to get back. There are those – men, they keep looking round the corner.'

Even then a fearful face was peering at them from round the nearest corner, but when Francis shouted: 'Boo!' quite loudly, it instantly disappeared.

'Perhaps you're right,' he admitted reluctantly, 'but it would have been nice to explore a little longer, particularly if I fetched a camera. Think what the Sunday papers would pay for a photograph of yer actual eighteenth century.'

'Francis,' Fred called, 'come quickly. Gertrude is playing up and I can't do anything with her.'

They tore back into the sitting-room and there was the possessed Gertrude staring at the television screen with obvious terror.

'Hasn't she ever seen a TV before?' Francis asked Reggie. 'The real Gertrude, I mean.'

'She certainly never saw ours, and I don't suppose her old mother owns one.'

'Then there's no memory to draw upon,' Francis remarked thoughtfully. 'Turn over to the other side.'

Fred pushed a button and there was an instant picture of a big man hitting a little man with all his strength. Gertrude/Wyatt screamed.

'We will put you in yon box,' Francis promised, 'and you will be hit by a big man for all eternity.'

The camera moved in to a close-up of the little man's face. It looked like a lump of raw meat.

'Back to the other channel,' Francis ordered.

A man was running towards the camera; suddenly, a shot rang out and a nasty red stain appeared on the man's shirt-front. He made an interesting gurgling sound and crashed to the pavement.

'We will make you small, shrink you smaller than small, then put you in yon box,' Francis informed the speechless Gertrude/Wyatt, 'for that is the gateway to hell . . . Turn over to BBC-2, Fred.'

The screech of brakes, the roar of guns, the thud of fists on bare flesh, followed by an ear-splitting scream. Something grey, a wisp of mist, streaked towards the open doorway and instantly the passage vanished, to be replaced by the familiar hall. Francis wiped his brow.

'Never thought it would work. Lucky they chose a simple mind. Any sign of the real Gertrude, Fred?'

'No need to worry,' Fred was untying the confining cords. 'As soon as she wakes up, the rightful spirit will return. Just as ours does when we wake each morning.'

'Has – has the bridge gone for good?' Reggie asked, looking anxiously at the empty hall.

'Sure thing. The anchor-man has belted back across the river. It might be as well if you did some alterations to the hall. Replaced the floorboards, did a spot of redecoration, so that the vibrations are changed. But I think your house will behave itself from now on. Ah, I see our wanderer has returned. Best turn the television off.'

Gertrude opened her eyes. She looked slowly round, then up at Reggie Smith.

'Mr Smith, sir, I's 'ad a funny dream. I was walking round the 'ouse and nobody took no notice of me.'

'Now you must go home, Gertrude, for night has fallen.'

She rose from the chair, looking fearfully at the overhead lamp, then at the drawn curtains.

'My mum says I'm not to be out after dark. And me asleep in your best armchair, sir.'

'Why mustn't you be out after dark?' Francis asked slyly. 'Afraid of ghosts?'

'No, I doesn't believe in that nonsense. It be the men with evil in their 'earts, that do prowl around in the darkness.'

Francis smiled.

'May wisdom always be with you, Gertrude.'

They crowded round the car expressing gratitude, the women cooing, the men doing their best to be hearty, their minds already forgetting. It was Betty Smith who asked the final, so far unanswered question.

'Miss Masters . . . Fred, I hope you don't mind my asking,

but surely your initials are F.M.?'

'That's right.' Fred climbed into the seat next to Francis.

'Then . . . why the letters E.V. that are so beautifully embroidered on your dress? What do they stand for?'

The car began to glide slowly away; Fred's voice came back to them, clear, untroubled: the voice of Helen calling over the walls of Troy.

'Ex-Virgin.'

THE JUMPITY-JIM

'Keep yourself neat and tidy at all times,' Father said, 'and learn your duties.'

'Read a portion of Holy Scriptures every night before retiring,' Mother instructed, and Father nodded his agreement.

Harriet waved to them from the coach window, more than a little frightened if the truth be told, for this was the first time she had been away from home and she was going into an unknown future. The coachman whipped up his horses, the guard blew a blast on his horn, and they were away, drawing clear of the village, leaving the happy years of childhood behind.

'You look distressed, my dear,' a kindly looking matron on the opposite seat said. 'You are leaving home for the first time?'

Harriet nodded while patting her eyes with a nice clean handkerchief, freshly laundered by Mother that morning.

'Never mind,' the good lady consoled, 'you'll soon get used to your new surroundings. It's good for youngsters to break away from the apron-strings. Going into service, I expect.'

'Yes, Mam,' Harriet nodded again. 'Begging your pardon, but how did you know?'

The lady laughed. 'Can always tell. Fresh young thing like you, all done up in your Sunday best. Service, I said to myself the minute you put foot inside this coach.'

The four other passengers had been listening to this conversation with varying degrees of interest, and one young man, who wore a beautiful waistcoat, smiled a rather supercilious smile.

'And what household is to be honoured by your service? Buckingham Palace?'

'Oh, no!' Harriet gasped. 'But I am going to a nobleman's house. Lord Dunwilliam's.'

'Are you, indeed!'

The young man produced a quizzing-glass and examined Harriet carefully for a few minutes, as though she were some rare specimen he had not encountered before. At length he dropped the glass, which dangled on the end of a gold chain, and pronounced his verdict.

'You should fit into Dunwilliam's establishment very nicely,' he said. 'Very nicely indeed.'

Harriet stood in the courtyard of the Royal George and watched the departing mail-coach rumble its way up a slope and out on to the main highway. The last link with home had been broken and she was now alone, subject to the caprice of total strangers. She sat down on her black box, not daring to enter the inn, for Father had often stressed the evil which lurked in such places, and wondered what she should do. Father had said someone would be waiting to meet her, but so far none of the loungers that were clustered round the inn door advanced to claim her.

Presently, however, a tall, dark man, dressed in a cassock, entered the courtyard. His coming seemed to alarm everyone in sight, for they dispersed, scattering like corn husks before the wind. Harriet saw the priest had a long, harsh face – a visage she knew to be right and proper for a man of his calling – and she got quickly to her feet, performing a little bob, thus displaying a seemly respect for the cloth and a sense of righteous humility.

The reverend gentleman interrupted his journey towards the inn, which, if his expression was any criterion, boded ill for its occupants, and scowled down at the girl.

'And pray, child, what is a girl who displays all the outward signs of a proper upbringing doing in this place of iniquity? And unattended? Eh!'

He barked the 'Eh' with such ferocity that Harriet trembled before bowing her knee into another bob, an action her mother had often stressed was most pleasing to the quality.

'If you please, sir, I am waiting to be picked up.'

'What!'

The roar made Harriet realise she had not perhaps chosen her words well, and she hastened to explain.

'Begging your pardon, sir, but someone is to collect me. I am to be kitchen-maid, if it so please you, at Dunwilliam Grange . . .'

She stopped in mid-sentence, for the dark, awful eyes that glared down at her now held an expression that left no doubt she had again, inadvertently said the wrong thing.

'Repeat,' the priest said, his jaw muscles quivering. 'I say, if you have the brazen effrontery, repeat what you have just said.'

'If you please, sir, I am to be kitchen-maid at . . .'

'Yes, go on. Where, child? Where?'

'Dunwilliam Grange, sir . . .'

One hand seized the front of her dress, the other tilted her chin, and the raucous voice rang out.

'The face is fair. Eh? I grant you the devil has grown cunning and now hides his evil under a pretty – nay – even an innocent mask. But I am not deceived. Eh? The form is shapely, well-calculated to inflame men's senses, but I warrant that somewhere the great beast has left his mark. Eh? Tell me, wench, where is it?'

'I don't know what you mean, sir.'

Harriet dared not struggle, for she saw the reverend gentleman was sore afflicted; saliva was trickling down the corners of his mouth and his eyes were dreadfully bloodshot. She recalled that Gaffer Cheeseman had a similar appearance after he had drunk two gallons of cider on an empty stomach. The priest tightened his grip.

'Not know what I mean, eh? Going to Dunwilliam Grange and pleading the innocence of a lamb that has just seen the light of day? I would as lief believe the sun rose at midnight and the devil bathed in holy water. Now, I ask again, girl. Where is the mark? The secret tit from which the beast takes substance?'

'I have no mark, sir.' Harriet was crying. 'When you have slept, I am certain you will regret abusing me so. My father says cider breeds madness . . .'

The roar of rage was like that of Farmer Giles's bull when it spotted Mistress Jarvie crossing the field in a red cloak. The priest spun her round and, gripping her dress at the neck line, ripped it open to the waist. Harriet felt the cold air on her

back, and she pulled away, only to have her hair grabbed. The now-spluttering voice shouted: 'The flesh is white. Eh? So is the leper that is cast out from the haunts of men. But I will find the mark. Eh, I will find it.'

'Enough!'

A sharp voice cut across the priest's tirade like the blade of a knife, and Harriet was suddenly released, to go sprawling face down on the cobble stones, where she lay sobbing for a few moments then, remembering her half-nude state, scrambled to her feet. A man was just dismounting from his horse, and tossing the reins to a nearby ostler. He sauntered over to the sobbing girl and glaring priest. Harriet, despite her distress, thought she had never seen such a beautiful gentleman before. He was tall, with a lean, bronzed face, and a pair of dark, penetrating eyes. His hair was jet-black, save for a single white streak which ran from the centre of his high forehead to the base of his skull. He was dressed all in black, relieved only by the silver trimmings on his cloak. He smiled, revealing even white teeth.

'I admire your taste, parson. But in public! Whatever would the dear bishop say?'

The clergyman crossed himself, then backed away a few paces.

'Avaunt, Satan.'

The gentleman laughed. 'I will be gone when the mood suits me. I will not ask why you molested this pretty creature, for you are as crazed as a cracked jug and I have not the time for the prattle of a madman. Where were you bound, girl?'

Harriet would have dropped a curtsey, but she suspected such an operation might cause her to release her torn dress, so she meekly bowed her head instead.

'To Dunwilliam Grange, if it so please you, sir.'

'Another of your imported devil spawn?' the priest growled and the gentleman raised his hand in mock horror.

'You malign me. I rarely snatch from the cradle, but I grant you, she is a delicious morsel. What post are you to fill in my house, child?'

'You are – Lord Dunwilliam?' she gasped.

He sighed deeply. 'I fear so.'

'I am to be your kitchen-maid, my lord.'

'Indeed? I was not aware that we needed one. It must be you that rogue Hackett was supposed to collect, but he ran the dog-cart into a ditch. Drunk as a priest at a bishop's convention.'

He made an ironic bow in the parson's direction.

'Your pardon, Mr Dale, I forgot – you prefer stripping girls to opening a bottle.'

'The day of reckoning is coming.' The Reverend Dale shook his fist. 'I know of the obscenities that take place in that proud house, but I tell you the time will come when its stones will be levelled to the ground.'

'You'd best ride before me, girl.' Lord Dunwilliam smiled down at Harriet. ' 'Twould not be wise to leave you here with that poor, mad fool, and heaven above knows when Hackett will be sober enough to drive a cart.'

He beckoned to the ostler: 'Take the girl's box into the inn. Someone will call for it later.'

He mounted the great horse, then, leaning down, pulled Harriet up. She sat side-saddle, trying hard not to lean against him and very mindful of the strong arms that railed her in on either side when he took up the reins. They rode out of the courtyard and the Reverend Dale's voice followed them.

'God is not mocked. He will send forth his legions and they will crush the forces of evil. Cursed be ye that walk by night, for darkness will be your lot for all eternity . . .'

'The home of my fathers,' said Dunwilliam in a low tone. 'See, girl, the nest in which I was hatched.'

The grey-stoned house stood before a screen of trees; turreted, a face with many eyes, it was a structure of rare, if somewhat grim beauty. Harriet wondered if she dare enter such a grand place with a torn dress and a dirty face.

'It's very nice,' she said.

Lord Dunwilliam chuckled.

'I doubt if there are many hereabouts who would agree with that description. How, in the name of sanity, did you ever become engaged as my kitchen-maid?'

'Mother, who was in service before she married, wrote

to an agency in London. For she knows her letters, and writes as good a hand as Parson himself. They sent someone down to see me, and I am to be on a month's trial.'

'Um.' His lordship grunted as they rode down one hill and then up another, finally to pass through the great iron gates of Dunwilliam Grange.

Mrs Browning was a woman of large proportions and such a grim aspect that Harriet almost wished herself back in the inn courtyard facing the Reverend Dale. The housekeeper allowed her cold gaze to travel slowly down from the girl's auburn head to the tips of her laced-up boots.

'How are you called, girl?'

'Harriet, mam.'

'Most unsuitable. From now on you will be known as Jane.' She called abruptly over one shoulder. 'Mary, come here.'

An extremely pretty girl left the kitchen table where she had been slicing potatoes and came quickly over to Mrs Browning, before whom she stood motionless, her head bowed.

'Yes, mam.'

'Mary, you will take Jane upstairs and see that she returns suitably attired. She is to share your room.'

'Yes, mam. Thank you, mam.'

Harriet followed her guide up some very steep and winding stairs and presently came to a small room that overlooked the back garden. It was furnished with two narrow beds, a wash-stand and a large cupboard. Mary was brimful with curiosity and, scarcely had she closed the door, when questions came tripping off her tongue.

'How did your dress get all tore like that? And Jem the gardener says you come here on his lordship's horse. Did he tear your dress?'

'No.' Harriet shook her auburn curls. 'It was a horrible old parson.'

'Ah, the Reverend Dale. He hates this place something cruel and says all of us who live here be limbs of Satan.'

'Why?' Harriet had removed her tattered dress, which she was examining rather ruefully, and Mary opened the cupboard door and produced a black skirt and white blouse.

'Well, they do say all sort of weird goings-on took place in this house back in his lordship's father's time. There's a big room, right up under the roof, and people saw flashes of light and heard terrible cries. Then one morning his old lordship was found dead. 'Twas said he took poison or some such thing.'

'How awful!' Harriet shuddered. 'Aren't you frightened?'

Mary shook her head.

'No. I pay no heed to talk like that, only I wouldn't care to go wandering around the upper storey after nightfall. Besides, the pay's good, and although Mrs Browning is a tartar, the work ain't all that hard.'

While they had been talking, Harriet had dressed, and now she wore a costume corresponding to Mary's; a long, black serge skirt and an off-the-shoulder blouse. She was not happy with this last item, Mother having on more than one occasion stated that the face and hands were the only parts of the body a respectable woman bared for the public gaze.

'It don't seem right,' she began, but Mary laughed.

'You'll soon get used to it. 'Tis only the shoulders. Why, some ladies leave three parts of their boobs bare and aren't thought none the worse. It's a fad of her ladyship's. Indoors, we young 'uns have to wear this get-up. Don't do no harm. But it makes the parson howl.'

She laid Harriet's torn dress out on the bed and sighed.

'Shame. But a needle and thread should soon put it to rights. Now, we best get down, or Mrs Browning will be raising old Cain and her tongue be sharp enough as it is.'

Back in the kitchen Mrs Browning gave Harriet a quick glance, then said: 'There's an overall hanging up behind the door. Put it on, then go into the scullery and start cleaning out the saucepans. We're all behind like a donkey's tail.'

During the days that followed, Harriet began to realise to some degree why the Reverend Dale entertained such pronounced misgivings about the household at Dunwilliam Grange. With the exception of Mrs Browning, all the female staff were young and extremely pretty. Another disquieting piece of information was that few completed their month's probation. The turnover in female staff was alarmingly high. Once, when washing-up in the scullery, she heard Jem the head gardener

and Hackett, a bearded, morose individual, talking as they sat drinking beer at the kitchen table.

'The new 'un be shapely. 'Twould be a good tumble in the 'ay.'

Harriet wondered what this remark might mean, but, realising that she was the 'new 'un' under discussion, wiped her hands dry and stood listening.

'Won't last long,' Hackett stated. 'They never does. After a little chat with 'er ladyship, out they goes.'

'That be a strange thing.' Jem refilled his glass from an earthenware jug. 'Why be that? Right as a trivet, until they 'as a little heart-to-heart with 'er ladyship. The number of boxes and blubbering wenches you've driven down to the Royal George . . . Don't they talk right or summat?'

'Maybe,' Hackett murmured gruffly. 'Maybe.'

There was a full minute's silence and Harriet wondered if the conversation had come to an unsatisfactory conclusion. Then Hackett spoke again, but this in a low, though perfectly audible tone.

'Jem, if I tells you summat confidential like, will you promise to keep it under your 'at?'

'I'll be as silent as the grave,' Jem promised. 'I'm not one to blab, you knows that.'

'Well,' Hackett said and cleared his throat, 'perhaps I shouldn't tell you, as his lordship gave me a gold piece to keep me mouth shut, but it's lain on me conscience and I'd like to unburden, if you knows what I mean.'

'Aye, man. Get on with it.'

'Well, about two year back, do you remember that red-headed piece, Clara? Only her real name was Jenny Binns. Well, she went upstairs for her little chat with 'er ladyship. Excited she was, thought maybe she'd get promotion to above stairs, and I didn't tell 'er no different. It must 'ave been about half-past six when 'is lordship comes over to the coach house; looked a bit down in the mouth 'e did. He sez: "Hackett, Clara has been taken ill. I wants you to take 'er to the good Sister," 'e sez. "I'll ride over and see the Mother Superior." Well, I thought that a bit funny, see? Any road, I went up to 'er ladyship's room, and there was the girl looking as if she's had

a fit. Speechless she was, with 'er face all twisted up, and 'er eyes – strewth! You'd think she'd seen Old Nick 'imself.'

'Do you think, maybe,' Jem asked in a low, quivering voice, 'she 'ad?'

'No, man. I don't 'old with that nonsense. But I tell you summat else. There were three ruddy great scratches down 'er back.'

'No!' Jem gasped. 'You're 'avin' me on.'

'True as I sit 'ere. 'Er blouse was all tore, and scratches, like claw marks, down 'er back. Don't know what they thought of it up at the Convent. Mad dog, mayhap. Anyway, 'er ladyship was furious. Kept muttering about 'er almost being the one.'

'What do you think she meant?' Jem asked.

'Gawd knows. But . . . Not a word mind. 'Ere comes old Ma Browning.'

Harriet went back to her washing-up, trying to understand what the conversation had implied. Above all, what sort of person was Lady Dunwilliam?

'Mary, have you seen Lady Dunwilliam yet?'

'Once or twice.'

Mary was bathing her feet in an earthenware bowl. 'She walks in the small garden sometimes. Why?'

'I just wondered. You haven't been up to see her?'

'Oh, I see what you mean.' Mary wiped her feet on a towel then, opening the window, emptied the contents of the bowl on to the garden below. 'That'll make the cabbages grow. No. Mrs Browning said her ladyship would want a few words with me some time. But nothing's happened yet.'

Mary climbed into bed and blew out the candle before snuggling deep down into the feather-mattress. She grunted with complete satisfaction.

'Never slept on a feather-mattress 'til I came here. Do you proud they do.'

'What's she like?' Harriet asked.

'Who?'

'Lady Dunwilliam.'

'Oh, I've never spoken to her. She's got a lovely face, but she's deformed.'

'Deformed!'

'Yes.' Mary turned over, making her bed creak. 'She's got a hump. Terrible it is. A great bulge that comes up to her shoulders. I never seen anything like it.'

'We had a hunchback in our village,' Harriet said, 'and the boys used to poke fun at him. He was a nasty man who beat his donkey.'

'If you poked fun at Lady Dunwilliam, Mrs Browning would most likely beat you. Now go to sleep, do. We've got to be up early tomorrow.'

The following morning Mrs Browning summoned Harriet from the scullery and handed her a stiff brush and dustpan.

'Nora is down with the flux. You must stand in for her. Get upstairs to the first landing and brush the carpet. Don't make a mess.'

Harriet took the dustpan and brush and not without some trepidation, for she had never been in the upper part of the house before, made her way upstairs. Lord Dunwilliam had been kind when he had rescued her from the clutches of the Reverend Dale, but she instinctively knew it was the kindness he would have bestowed on a tormented dog, had the mood so moved him. Her parents had taught her to fear and respect people of quality, and fear was uppermost as she mounted the grand staircase.

The carpet was thick; her feet sank into the soft pile and she was trying hard to look in all directions at once. Massive, gilt-framed pictures lined the walls; a magnificent chandelier was suspended from a high ceiling that dominated both staircase and hall. A footman, resplendent in a plum-coloured brocade livery and a powdered wig, minced his way across the first landing and stared at her with supercilious scorn.

'What are you doing up here, girl?'

'I am to clean the carpet.' Harriet raised her head, not in the least impressed by brocade or wig, knowing the man's status to be little above her own.

'Then get on with it,' he instructed, 'and don't make any noise. Her ladyship is still asleep.'

She poked her tongue out at his retreating figure, then sank to her knees and began to brush the carpet. In fact, it needed

little attention and she found the work pleasant after weeks of washing-up, scrubbing the kitchen floor and other menial tasks. She had reached the centre of the landing when a quiet voice asked: 'Who are you?'

Harriet was afraid to look up. The voice was low and had that well-bred quality which told her it was one of authority. It spoke again.

'Stand up, girl, when I am speaking to you.'

Harriet laid aside her dustpan and brush, then obeyed, to find herself facing the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

'I am Lady Dunwilliam.'

If she had said she was the Queen of England, Harriet would have felt no surprise, for the lovely fair-skinned face was regal, even arrogant. A mass of waving, ash-blonde hair tumbled down to her shoulders, a glorious cascade that Harriet wanted to touch. Her eyes were possibly the most outstanding feature, for they were dark-brown and contrasted dramatically with her dazzling fairness. But all this beauty was ruined by the grotesque hump that swelled out in a gradual curve from the small of her back to just above her shoulders. The weight, or perhaps the ungainly bulk of this awful deformity, made it impossible for Lady Dunwilliam to stand upright, and she stooped, reminding Harriet of the coalman preparing to empty his sack into Father's cellar. The dark, wonderful eyes were bitter, and lines of suffering were etched round the full mouth.

'It would seem you are deaf,' Lady Dunwilliam said. 'I asked who you were.'

'Harriet – I mean Jane, my lady. The kitchen-maid, if it please you.'

'It does not please me,' the cold voice stated. 'I am at a loss to know what the kitchen-maid is doing up on this landing. Surely you should be scouring pots, or something.'

'Nora, the housemaid, is ill. And Mrs Browning said . . .'

'Never mind.' A long-fingered hand waved aside the explanation as a spasm of pain passed over the lovely face. 'Leave off doing whatever you're supposed to be doing, and come with me.'

She turned quickly and led the way into the bedroom. Harriet followed and found herself in a charming blue room

that was in a state of chaos. Articles of clothing littered the floor, were draped over chairbacks and even the dressing-table. The bed was unmade; the sheets and blankets were twisted up and one pillow was ripped open: a great gaping wound from which feathers seeped like maggots from the belly of a dead horse.

'Clear this lot up,' Lady Dunwilliam ordered, then sank down on to a dressing-stool, from where she watched the girl with sombre eyes. Harriet began to collect the clothes together, piling them on a chair.

'How long have you been here?' Lady Dunwilliam asked.

'A week, my lady.'

'You can drop the ladyship business. Mam will suffice.'

'Yes, my . . . Yes, mam.'

An uncomfortable silence prevailed for some five minutes before Lady Dunwilliam spoke again.

'Do you like working in the kitchen?'

Harriet thought it good policy to express satisfaction with her mode of employment.

'Oh yes, mam.'

'Then you must be either mad or stupid – and you appear to be neither.' Her ladyship spoke sharply, and Harriet shivered. 'Scouring saucepans, scrubbing floors. Being bullied by the excellent Mrs Browning. I am sure you must enjoy that.'

Harriet did not answer, but turned her attention to the bed which she proceeded to strip before kneading the mattress. As she leant forward her eyes caught sight of a book. She quickly read the title. '*Unnatural enmities and their disposal* by Conrad Von Holstein.' She must have gasped or betrayed some sign she was startled, for instantly Lady Dunwilliam asked: 'What is it, child?'

'Nothing, mam.'

'Don't lie. Was it that book? Can you read?'

'Yes, mam.'

'An unusual accomplishment for a kitchen-maid. Who taught you?'

'My mother. She was in service at Sir William Sinclair's house and Lady Sinclair allowed her to study with the children.'

Lady Dunwilliam pointed to a chair.

'Come and sit down and bring that book with you.'

Harriet crept forward, clutching the book with moist hands, not at all sure she should obey. Mother had been most indignant when a milkmaid had once sat down in her presence. Besides, the invitation might be a test to see if she knew her place.

'Thank you, mam, but I'd rather . . .'

'Great balls of fire, girl, sit down.'

Harriet perched on the very edge of the chair and waited.

'Open the book at page two hundred and seventy-two,' her ladyship ordered.

Harriet found the book almost fell open at that page; the paper was well thumbed and had quite obviously been re-read many times.

'Let us see how well you can read,' Lady Dunwilliam invited.

Harriet cleared her throat and began.

' "Chapter Eight. The Jumpity-Jim . . .

' "We are as blind men groping in eternal darkness, not knowing who or what is attendant upon us, or the pitfalls that are waiting for our stumbling feet. Many and diverse are the creatures that can be raised by those who have dipped a spoon in the unlimited sea of knowledge, but having once clothed them with a semblance of life, even the great Solomon would seek in vain for the power to control them.

' "Let it be known to all those who would follow the path of forbidden lore, that there is no creature more gruesome to behold, or more hell-binding in its relationship to the flesh, than the Primate Horrific, or, as it is known among the unlettered peasantry, the Jumpity-Jim.

' "The natural habitat of this creature is the third lower plane, and it can only be raised by a magician of the first order. But once brought into being, then I say woe unto him who has not protected himself with the three circles of light, or cannot speak the words that are written in the blue book.

' "It is of foul aspect, having the face and form of an unborn monkey, yet is there a fearful parody of a human in its lineaments. It can leap to great heights and with mighty speed, and if he who has called it forth has protected himself,

then will it find another . . ." [2]

'That is enough,' Lady Dunwilliam's voice cut short the recital. 'You read well, child, and are a credit to your mother's tuition.'

Harriet gladly closed the book and looked at her employer with certain astonishment.

' 'Tis most fearful reading, my lady, and, begging your pardon, I wonder why . . .'

'Why I interest myself in such things?' Lady Dunwilliam smiled. 'Perhaps a crooked body breeds a crooked mind. 'Tis nonsense anyway. The poor fool who wrote it had but listened to tales babbled by peasants as they huddled round their fires on a dark night. None of them know the truth or can be expected to.'

She rose and made her way towards the door, talking as she went.

'When you have finished here, come into my withdrawing-room. There is another service I require of you.'

It took Harriet some twenty minutes to put the rooms to rights, then she went out on to the landing and, seeing an open door some little way along, went towards it. In the room that lay beyond she found Lady Dunwilliam seated behind a table, with a strange contraption made of polished walnut in front of her. It had a mass of wires and glass tubes rising up from its flat surface and curving down to disappear on either side. Two perpendicular, polished metal rods were fixed to left and right at the front, while a sheet of smoked glass, set in a metal frame, made a kind of screen at the rear.

'Come and sit beside me, girl,' Lady Dunwilliam ordered, 'but first remove that hideous overall, for I would see if you have the appearance for the kind of work I have in mind.'

Harriet unbuttoned the offending garment and draped it carefully over a chair back; Lady Dunwilliam was watching her with a strangely intense look.

'Turn round.'

Harriet did as she was told, turning her back to the lady, who appeared to be in a state of mounting excitement.

'Good, white shoulders,' she muttered, 'and a strong back.' She raised her voice. 'Come and sit beside me. Hurry.'

As soon as Harriet was seated, Lady Dunwilliam pointed to the contraption and said: 'This was invented by Lord Dunwilliam's father, and is meant to test a person's aptitude.'

'Beg pardon, mam?'

'Great balls of fire!' Lady Dunwilliam appeared to grind her teeth, but hastily regained self-control. 'Test your intelligence, girl. Never mind. This is what I want you to do. Grip those metal rods and stare straight at the glass screen. Now, do that.'

Harriet, with some reluctance, gripped the metal rods as she had been bidden, and found they vibrated slightly. Lady Dunwilliam's voice was rather hoarse when she spoke again.

'Now, press them down. Gently . . . press down gently . . .'

Harriet felt the rods sink slowly downwards and as she pressed them, a reddish liquid began to bubble up through the glass tubes, while the machine gave out a faint humming sound.

'Good . . . good . . .' Lady Dunwilliam was whispering. 'Now, listen carefully. Stare at the glass screen and empty your mind of all thoughts. I know it is not easy, but you must be a good girl and try. Empty your mind. There are no thoughts at all. Just emptiness.'

Harriet found it very difficult indeed to think of nothing at all, but Mother had taught her always to obey her elders and betters, so she tried. And as she tried, the glass tubes filled with fast-moving red liquid, the machine hummed like a kettle just on the boil, and my lady was breathing heavily. The smoked-glass screen was getting bigger – or so it seemed – and its surface was most certainly becoming brighter, was developing a pulsating silver sheen that would have alarmed Harriet had she not been so enthralled. Suddenly, the screen cleared and became a three-dimensional picture, protraying a terrible, gloomy valley, illuminated by flickering flames that flared up from the peaks of flanking mountains. The valley and mountainsides were covered with dead trees; twisted shapes that reached out black, skeleton arms towards a red-tinted sky. Something moved on the topmost branch of the nearest tree: a small, long-legged, long-armed something, that dropped to the ground and went bounding down the valley in great, effortless jumps. It looked like a cross between a deformed

monkey and a monstrous spider, but the swift, leaping jumps were its most horrible aspect.

Harriet screamed as she relaxed her grip on the metal rods, and instantly the picture disappeared to be replaced by the original smoked glass. The girl was in hysterics, screaming, then laughing, and Lady Dunwilliam was clawing at her arm, slapping her face, shaking her. 'What did you see, girl? Stop it . . . stop it . . . tell me what you saw . . .'

'. . . It was awful, mam,' Harriet began, then lapsed into another fit of sobbing and my lady's patience snapped like an over-stretched cord.

'Talk, you stupid, hysterical slut . . . What did you see?'

'I saw a dark valley, and . . .'

'Yes . . . yes . . . go on,' Lady Dunwilliam urged.

'There was something dreadful that went jumping . . .'

She was not allowed to continue, for Lady Dunwilliam suddenly hugged her, kissed her on both cheeks, then sat back and watched her as though she were some long-sought-for treasure that had, against all expectations, come to hand.

'You have it.' She giggled like a very young girl, and clapped her hands in a ecstasy of pure joy. 'The true essence . . . you have it. You wonderful, wonderful child.'

Harriet wiped her eyes, gradually coming to understand that she had recently displayed some unknown gift, or virtue, that might be to her advantage.

'Beg pardon, me lady, but what exactly have I . . . got?'

'Good heavens, child,' Lady Dunwilliam was looking from side to side as though searching for a plausible explanation, 'You have intelligence and imagination. The aptitude machine demonstrated that beyond all doubt. Who but an intelligent and imaginative girl could have created a dark valley and a funny little thing that jumped up and down on a piece of ordinary smoked-glass. I am very pleased with you, my dear.'

'Thank you, mam.' Harriet blushed with pleasure.

'I have been looking for a suitable companion with whom I can converse,' Lady Dunwilliam went on, 'for, as you can see, I lead a very lonely life, and really, I see no reason why you should not fill the post. What do you say to that?'

'Oh, my lady . . .' Harriet began, but Lady Dunwilliam cut

short her thanks with an imperious wave of her hand.

'That's settled then. There's a nice little room next to mine and you might as well move in right away.'

'What will my duties be?' Harriet asked.

'Duties?' Lady Dunwilliam appeared to be at a loss for words for a short while, then, as though struck by a sudden thought, said: 'Reading. You may read to me and keep my rooms tidy.'

'I will endeavour to give satisfaction, mam,' said Harriet.

For no apparent reason, Lady Dunwilliam suddenly began to laugh.

Youth is adaptable and Harriet soon got used to doing practically nothing at all. That is not to say her erstwhile companions of servitude either accepted the situation, or failed to show their shocked surprise. Whenever Lady Dunwilliam was out of sight and earshot, Harriet was winked at, sneered at, scowled upon, pinched, kicked and, on one occasion, punched in the ribs by Mary, who seemed to regard her as a deserter. She was also envied – and, by those who said they knew more than they were prepared to reveal, pitied. One morning, while dusting the china in Lady Dunwilliam's withdrawing-room, she looked up to find Mrs Browning staring at her with cold, expressionless eyes.

'Do you know why her ladyship has taken you to her bosom, girl?'

'She required a companion,' Harriet stated boldly, for of late a feeling of self-confidence had moved in with the pretty dresses and her mistress's constant esteem.

'One of ten poor relations would have filled the post,' Mrs Browning retorted with a sound that was as near a snort as was possible to a person of her demeanour. ''Tis no affair of mine, but pride goes before a fall, and I've not walked about with closed eyes and blocked ears these past ten years. Do you say your prayers at night?'

'Of course,' Harriet expressed surprise at the question.

'Good,' Mrs Browning nodded. 'I would say them at twilight, just before the sun sets, for it's said the good Lord is most receptive then. Another thing.' She paused in the doorway. 'I

wouldn't go roaming around on the top landing after nightfall. It was there, in the locked room, up under the roof, his late lordship – may his soul rest in peace – used to conduct his experiments, whatever they were. They still talk in the village about the horrible cries that could be heard a mile away. There's no servants left that was here then, and that's a fact a sensible girl would think about. So watch yourself, wear a crucifix, keep what I've said under your bonnet – and think about it.'

Such revelations were as stones thrown into a placid pool; they caused unpleasant ripples of alarm, but then, warmed by Lady Dunwilliam's affability, well fed, comfortably bedded and with no arduous toil to mar her days, the feeling of well-being soon returned to Harriet. So pleasantly, in fact, did the days pass, she quite forgot there was such a person as Lord Dunwilliam, and therefore it came as a shock when she entered the withdrawing-room one morning, with her arms full of flowers, to find him seated in an armchair, his dusty boots propped up on a small table. He eyed Harriet with some surprise, then raised a slim eyebrow.

'The damsel in distress! You appear to have made yourself at home.'

Harriet curtsied and almost dropped her flowers in the process.

'Her ladyship . . . she said I was to be her companion . . .'

Lord Dunwilliam seemed to uncoil like a handsome snake; he towered over her, his eyes suddenly alight with a gleam of dawning joy.

'She made you . . . her companion! Well, that is marvellous news.'

Harriet had not thought his lordship would greet her elevation with anything but complete indifference, but here he was displaying all the emotion of a man who has been told he has just inherited a large fortune. He seized her roughly by the shoulder, kissed her soundly on both cheeks, then rushed from the room and tore upstairs.

For the first time she experienced a cold wave of apprehension. She remembered the story Hackett had related, Mrs Browning's sinister warning. Why should Lord Dunwilliam ex-

press undisguised joy when he learnt the kitchen-maid had been promoted to lady's companion? What should have been an unthinkable thought struck her. Was she to play Hagar to Lady Dunwilliam's Sarah? The very idea was extremely sinful and she decided not to think about it. Instead she went upstairs to her bedroom, where she sat by the window and looked out over the garden. Jem was pruning roses. A tall, ungainly figure who looked solid and matter-of-fact; a man of the soil, the kind of person Harriet had known all her life. She was about to go down and speak with him when she heard raised voices. They came from behind the closed door which led into Lady Dunwilliam's bedroom. The deep voice of Lord Dunwilliam was quite distinct, that of his wife a blurred murmur, but Harriet felt sure it was of the uttermost importance for her to hear as much of their conversation as possible. She bent down and applied her eye to the keyhole. His lordship was striding up and down, clearly much agitated; Lady Dunwilliam reclined in a chair and was tapping the palm of her hand with an ivory fan as though stressing her impatience.

'Are you absolutely certain?' Lord Dunwilliam was speaking. 'You know what happened last time.'

Harriet could not hear her ladyship's answer, then the man spoke again. 'We must get her accustomed to the idea. God knows how. She seems simple and perhaps money and the promise of a life of ease might reconcile her. We can but try. There must be no talk. That mad fool, Dale, is already shouting "witchcraft" at the top of his voice – if he were to know the truth . . .'

The lady began to cry and Dunwilliam was about to put his arm around her shoulders, but, as though repulsed by the hideous hump, took one of her hands instead.

Harriet stood up, then, walking over to the window, looked down at Jem, still peacefully pruning his roses.

'How long 'ave I been 'ere?' Jem sat on his wheelbarrow and lit an old clay pipe. 'Well now, let me think. Must be nigh on eight year. Just after old Sir 'Ilary Sinclair died, I 'eard 'is lordship was in need of a 'ead gardener, and so 'ere I comes.'

'Was Lord Dunwilliam married eight years ago?' Harriet

asked, tapping her front teeth with a rose-stem.

'That 'e were,' Jem nodded, 'and 'ad been for two years. Poor lady, must be cruel 'ard for 'er, being afflicted the way she is. 'Specially with that pretty face.'

'His lordship must be a very kind man,' Harriet spoke with assumed artlessness. 'I mean it's not every great gentleman who would marry a cripple.'

'I guess 'e be kind enough,' Jem agreed, 'but they do say she weren't a hunchback when he married 'er. Sweet sixteen she were, and as straight as a larch. Some sickness took 'er after they'd been married nigh on a month, and when she was up and about she were as you see 'er now.'

'No!' Harriet gasped. 'Honestly?'

'So they say. Mind you, this was back in the old master's time and there be no servants 'ere now that there was then. But it sounds right. I can't see a up-and-bucko like his lordship marryin' a humpy. Must 'ave been a sickness affected 'er spine. Made it all crooked like.'

Harriet agreed and wondered if the sickness were catching.

They dined together that evening. Lord Dunwilliam sat at one end of the table, his lady at the other and Harriet in the centre, while the pleasantly-shocked footman relayed news of this startling arrangement back to the kitchen.

'She looks very pretty, does she not, Charles?' said Lady Dunwilliam, and the gentleman nodded as he sipped his port wine.

'As a picture that has escaped from its frame.'

'What white shoulders.' Her ladyship laughed so joyfully, and looked so beautiful, one was inclined to forget the awful hump, and Lord Dunwilliam chuckled as though she had said something very witty.

'With a strong back to support them.' He nodded gravely. 'A veritable column of ivory.'

This was too much for her ladyship, who shook with helpless merriment, so that the hump seemed to jump up and down, and her face was a mask with narrowed, gleaming eyes and a gaping mouth. Then, suddenly, the laughter was strangled by a gasp of pain, and the lady was bending forward,

shaking her golden head, while making a series of animal-like cries. Lord Dunwilliam sat back in his chair and closed eyes that were bleak. His voice was scarcely above a whisper.

'Sit still, my darling. It will pass.'

'What is wrong?' Harriet's pity was aroused, as also was her alarm, for her mistress seemed to be in mortal agony, what with the terrible groans that were being forced out from behind her clenched teeth, and the way her long fingers gripped the table edge. 'Is there aught I can do?'

Lord Dunwilliam sat perfectly still, his eyes still closed, but the ghost of a smile creased his mouth.

'Nothing, child. 'Tis but a gripping pain.'

The spasm passed as quickly as it had come and presently Lady Dunwilliam was smiling faintly, apologising for the alarm she had caused.

'Do not be frightened, my dear. I have these attacks if I get excited. I should never become excited.'

'It must be soon,' Lord Dunwilliam said, and his lady nodded.

'Aye, it must be soon. If I am to remain sane, it must be soon.'

A day passed.

'You will wear this.'

Lady Dunwilliam's eyes were bright and her hand shook as she tossed the dress on to the bed. Harriet said: 'Yes, mam. Thank you, mam.'

'And,' Lady Dunwilliam added, 'you will wear nothing underneath.'

'But, my lady,' Harriet gasped out her horror, "twould not be decent.'

'Great balls of fire!' An expression of anger passed over the beautiful face. 'I am not concerned with your opinion of decency. I said, you are to wear nothing – nothing underneath.'

'But, mam . . .' A tinge of colour tinted Harriet's pale cheeks, 'I am a respectable girl . . .'

Lady Dunwilliam gripped the girl by both shoulders and shook her until her head rocked.

'Listen, girl. Listen. I have put up with your simpering face for nigh on four weeks. I have pampered you, listened to your

childish prattle, and now you will do as I say, or by God's wounds I'll have his lordship strip you himself. Do you understand?'

Harriet was crying, sobbing, so that her body trembled like a wind-rocked tree, and so great was her fear she could only gasp: 'Yes, my lady.'

'Very well.' Lady Dunwilliam went to the door. 'We will come for you in ten minutes.'

Left alone, Harriet reluctantly disrobed, then put on the dress, her horror growing when she viewed herself in the wardrobe mirror. The dress was black and completely backless. She turned round and looked back over one shoulder. Her back, save for a tape that held the dress in position, was bare from neck to waist.

She ran to the door, pulled it open and went racing down the stairs, determined to take refuge in the kitchen, trusting that Mrs Browning or some of the servants would protect her from the madness of Lady Dunwilliam.

The kitchen was empty. The fire was out, all the saucepans were piled neatly on their racks, the doors and windows were locked. She called Mrs Browning's name and, receiving no answer, went tearing up the stairs to the servants' quarters. She flung doors open, scampering like a trapped animal from room to room, but there was no one. Terror came racing down the empty corridors and she screamed, shriek after shriek that gave birth to an army of mocking echoes, like cries of the damned when the lid of hell has been raised. She fled back through the echoes, stumbled down one flight of stairs, fell down the next, picked herself up, then tore out into the main hall. The great front doors were locked and she pounded on the unresponsive wood, tugged at the gleaming handle, then sank down to the floor, sobbing like an abandoned child.

Footsteps came over the paved floor. A shadow moved over her and she looked up into the face of Lord Dunwilliam. Never had he appeared more beautiful; a wonderful gleam of compassion softened his sombre eyes, making him the lover-father, the dream-master who would love and chastise, order and protect. He reached down and pulled her up, then held her to him, murmuring softly.

'She should not have been so cruel. There now, don't cry so. She does not mean to hurt you, but it has been such a long time. Think of it – ten long years. She was younger than you when it happened and she was so sweet, soft and gentle, and so very, very beautiful.'

'Please, my lord, let me go.'

Harriet felt sure when she looked up into that beautiful, kindly face, her request would be granted, but he shook his head, while he smoothed back the tumbled hair from her forehead.

'I can't do that, child. You must surely understand that. I love her. Love demands so much. Honour, pity, the common decencies that enable a man to walk upright under the sun; all these must be sacrificed when the one we cherish cries out for help. You do see?'

'I am so frightened,' Harriet said as he began to lead her across the hall and up the grand staircase. 'Please, I'm frightened.'

Lord Dunwilliam had an arm about her waist, and he held her left hand in his. The deep voice went on, carefully manufacturing words that had no meaning.

'One can learn to live with fear, so that after a while it is as natural as the air we breathe. Resignation and acceptance are the two words you must learn, then when you carry your burden through the darkest valley, there will always be a gleam of light ahead.'

They went up two flights of stairs, then began to ascend a third and Harriet started to struggle, but the iron grip tightened around her waist and the deep voice gently protested.

'Do not struggle, my little bird. You will only break your wings against the bars, and you must not waste your strength. See, there's but a short way to go, and my love is waiting for you.'

They came up on to the top landing, and there, like the mouth of a ravenous beast, was an open doorway. He led the now speechless girl into the room beyond, and, after seating her on a straight-backed chair, he went back and locked the door. The room was little more than a vast attic that possibly covered most of the rooms below. Above were cobweb-

festooned rafters supporting the roof. Dormer windows lined the walls on either side. Glass vats, jumbled heaps of wire and glass tubes littered the floor, and there were signs of a long-ago fire, for some of the rafters and floorboards were charred. The only furniture Harriet could see was a large table and a few wooden chairs.

Lady Dunwilliam came slowly forward, her burning stare fixed on the girl's white face. She wore a loose, flower-patterned dressing-gown and her hair was piled up high on her head.

'No delay!' She spat out the words. 'Let's get on with it.'

'No!' Her husband's voice was like a whip-crack. 'No. She must be prepared.'

'Was *I*?' The woman glared at him, hammering her hips with clenched fists. 'When your father trapped me, was I prepared? He but led me under that rafter . . .' She pointed to a charred beam. '. . . tore the dress from my back and . . .'

'Stop!' Lord Dunwilliam thundered. 'She is young and untutored.'

'What was I?' Lady Dunwilliam shrieked back. 'A mature woman of the world? I was sixteen, fresh from the schoolroom, and happy to have suddenly acquired a kind father and a handsome husband. Father!' She laughed, a mad shriek that made Harriet whimper. 'A devil incarnate. A monster.'

'He but sought knowledge,' Lord Dunwilliam murmured. 'He followed the dark path and found it had no end.'

Lady Dunwilliam sank down on to a chair and lowered her head.

'Tell her what you must,' she said in a low tone, 'but in the name of mercy, hurry.'

Lord Dunwilliam took up a small black book from the table and handed it to Harriet. She recognised the title.

Unnatural Enmities and their Disposal by Conrad Von Holstein.

'My wife tells me you can read, Harriet.'

She nodded.

'Now, I want you to turn to page two hundred and seventy-three and read from the top of the page. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Very well. Begin when you are ready.'

She turned over the yellow-edged pages and presently came to the place. The page stared up at her, the words mutely demanding a voice. She began to read.

' "The Primate Horrific or Jumpity-Jim hath little intelligence, being but a form of low existence that doth demand life essence and warm blood. Once it hath been raised it will leap about with much speed and agility, and, if that which it needs be not to hand, will depart with a mighty explosion.

' "But should there be within the radius of twenty feet, a virgin, who hath the right essence, and should the flesh of her back, that which lies between the neck and the upper portion of the loins, be bare, then will it leap thereon, and will become as part of the poor wretch, as doth the legs and other members that did God in his bountiful goodness provide.

' "Once the abomination has mounted the steed, it can in no wise be removed, unless a like virgin, cursed with the same essence, can be induced, or forced, to accept the loathsome burden . . ." '

'That is enough, Harriet.'

Lord Dunwilliam gently took the book from her limp hands and laid it on the table. She raised tear-filled eyes; never had he seemed so handsome, so kind.

'You have the right – essence, my dear. The instrument my father perfected told us that. You are also a virgin, or the glass screen would not have portrayed the dark valley. 'Twas our wedding eve when my father . . . But enough of that. You do understand what is expected of you?'

'No.' She shook her head violently. 'In God's name . . . No.'

'There is no other way,' his gentle voice insisted, 'for we have searched for so long. One girl had a little power and it did move, causing my wife much pain and injuring the girl. But you are the one. For you the transportation will be easy and there will be a life of ease for you and your parents, for as long as any of you live.'

Harriet could not speak. She was watching Lady Dunwilliam who was unfastening her robe, loosening the girdle, all the while smiling like one who has at last seen the gates of heaven through the smoke-clouds of purgatory. The robe fell to the

floor and she was as Venus in her naked glory, a vision of white curves and moulded breasts. Then she turned round and Harriet tried to scream, but her vocal cords refused to function.

A hump? A promontory? A protuberance? Rather a curvature that arched up from the base of her spine, then terminated in a kind of craggy ridge which unnaturally deepened the thickness of the shoulders.

'Come,' Lord Dunwilliam pulled Harriet to her feet. 'You must stand side by side.'

'No!' she screamed and his face grew grim. 'No . . .!'

'Do not force me to tie you down.'

The threat did much to command her obedience, for there was an added terror in the thought of being tied up, helpless, while – something – leapt upon her. She allowed him to lead her, unprotesting, to Lady Dunwilliam's side, flinched as a cold hand gripped hers, then she stood still and waited. Lord Dunwilliam took up a position in front of them and, after closing his eyes, began to chant a jumble of words. From far below there came the sound of splintering wood, but the three occupants of the room ignored it.

'Darkness, shadows that flow in a black stream, hear me. May that which feeds upon one, come forth and take nourishment from another. May that which has come from the nether-world and can never return, having taken on the flesh of the meat-eater, see the light of day and jump upon the waiting vessel.'

'Aye, upon the waiting vessel,' Lady Dunwilliam repeated.

'She is young and hath much strength,' Lord Dunwilliam raised his voice to a higher pitch. 'And she hath the right essence . . .'

Lady Dunwilliam began to writhe and moan; her grip tightened on Harriet's hand, so that the girl automatically turned as the sudden pain shot up her arm. The hump was moving. The skin was heaving, tremors were passing across the taut surface and on the crag-like ridge little eruptions were taking place. Small, ragged holes appeared, accompanied by little popping sounds. The voice of Lord Dunwilliam had a triumphant ring.

'The shoulders are white, aye, and the back is strong; the blood is thick and sweet and she is rich with essence . . .'

The skin split while Lady Dunwilliam screamed and a tiny, wizened head peeped out from its cocoon, like a chick about to emerge from its cracked egg. It was rather like a shrivelled, pink balloon and it jerked round to stare at Harriet with microscopic red eyes. The girl gave a hoarse cry and jerked her hand from Lady Dunwilliam's loosened grip, before tearing wildly across the room in an effort to escape. As she did so the woman was flung on to her face, while something went leaping up to the rafters, then down to the floor again: a black, pink-tinted something that moved so fast it was only a blur that streaked up and down across the room. With her back against the far wall, Harriet saw it zig-zagging towards her, coming forward with high leaps that carried it up to the rafters and down again; then there was a glimpse of that wizened, deflated face, the long pink body and four many-jointed legs, before she seized a nearby chair and hurled it straight at the approaching horror. Chair and thing collided and what appeared to be a pink ball went rolling over the floor to bounce against the nearest wall.

It lay there, a pulsating beach-ball, artistically striped with black where the legs were coiled tightly about its gleaming roundness and it began to rock slightly as though gathering momentum for another leap.

Lord Dunwilliam had laid his wife flat upon her back before dragging her under the table, where she lay moaning softly. He turned to Harriet and shouted his rage and fear.

'You must let it mount, otherwise it will go back to her. There is no door or wall that can hold it–'

His words were cut short by a sudden and violent interruption. The door first quivered, then splintered under a powerful blow; a second crash sent it hurling inwards and the Reverend Dale stood on the threshold, a thick beam of wood in one hand and a crucifix in the other. He was attired in a white surplice and a ferocious smile.

'Dunwilliam, the day of reckoning has come.' He advanced into the room, the crucifix held high. 'Ye have mocked and practised abominations, but hell is hungry for your soul and I have come to make an end. Aye . . .' He tilted his head to one side and glared down at Harriet. '. . . An end to you and the

foulness that has assumed human form.'

Dunwilliam faced him, a thoroughbred stallion squaring-up to a mad bull.

'Get out. This is not the place for a ranting, insane fool. You have not the slightest conception of what . . .'

'I have eyes.' The priest pointed to the naked form of Lady Dunwilliam, then at Harriet. 'They tell me all I wished to know. When you sent your servants packing for the day, where did you suppose they would go? Eh? To the village, where they prattled of the foulness you be practising with yon wench. You are cursed, Dunwilliam, you and your devil-bedded wife.'

Dunwilliam struck the white face, then gripped the not-so-white surplice and punched the priest about the body. All the while shouting obscenities, bellowing out his mad rage. As the Reverend Dale struggled violently there came the sound of ripping cloth and he went hurtling backwards, the surplice split from neck to waist, baring his scrawny back. Dunwilliam retreated a few paces and looked down at his fallen adversary. A look of indescribable horror was dawning on the clergyman's face; a stupefied glare. His mouth fell open and a gurgling, retching sound emerged from his constricted throat. It slowly and painfully dissolved into words.

'What . . . foul . . . thing . . . is . . . on . . . my . . . back?'

He came up from the floor like a boxer at the count of nine; his questing hands went back and gently caressed that which crouched on his shoulders. He quickly withdrew them, then stared at his moist fingers with an uncomprehending glare. When he spoke again his voice was a low, hoarse whisper.

'I say again, Dunwilliam, what foul thing is on my back?'

Dunwilliam began to laugh. He roared, slapped his thighs, shook with uncontrollable merriment, while tears ran down his cheeks. Harriet could only watch the Jumpity-Jim. It was perfectly at home on the reverend's back; the head was nestling sideways, a little below Mr Dale's neck; the legs were folded neatly under the pink, narrow torso and a slimy excrescence, oozing out from every part of the body, was rapidly congealing into a chalk-white skin. Lord Dunwilliam at last gave utterance.

'Your "holiness" has condemned you, Dale. A virgin!

A virgin whose flesh is bare from neck to waist.'

'What in God's name is it?' Dale was trying to shake his dreadful burden off. He twisted, jerked, then gasped when the creature tightened its hold.

'You must not get excited,' Dunwilliam warned. 'It's a Primate Horrific – a Jumpity-Jim.' He grinned. 'I should take it to a monastery. It will find many changes of abode there.'

The Reverend Dale backed away towards the door, then, after vainly trying to speak, turned and went staggering out on to the landing. They heard him stumbling down the stairs. Five minutes passed before Harriet's strength returned and she too was able to creep from that room of horror. She left Lord Dunwilliam holding his wife and rocking her gently. They were both laughing softly.

Down on the lawn they were waiting. Terrified men with blazing torches and they shrank from the Reverend Mr Dale as though he were a leper. One man, braver than his fellows, approached the hump-backed figure and asked in a strangled whisper:

'What is it?'

The clergyman grinned, a terrible baring of teeth, and he beckoned the man nearer.

'Are you a virgin?' he whispered. 'Eh? Are you a virgin? If so, take off your shirt and we'll dance a merry jig.'

The man retreated, muttering, 'Witchcraft . . . they have bewitched him and put the devil on his back.'

'Witchcraft!' The word leapt from mouth to mouth as they moved with uplifted torches towards the house. Harriet they spat at, beat about the face and back, before she managed to escape from the garden and ran out on to the dusty road that led to the village. When she walked over the narrow bridge she did not look down into the dark waters of the river and did not therefore see the figure of Mr Dale floating, face downwards. She did, however, look back and see great scarlet tongues trying to lick the steel-blue sky. Dunwilliam Grange was burning.

She went on down the road, a pathetic, bowed figure, wandering the short but perilous path that separates the cradle

from the grave. Her white back gleamed in the sunlight.

A little way back, something was zig-zagging across a meadow, leaping over hedges, swinging from the lower branches of an occasional tree. It came to a gate that barred the entrance to a dusty road. There it paused, the deflated, wizened head tilted to one side. Tired, hesitant footsteps came shuffling along the road, they passed the gate and went on behind a low hawthorn hedge.

The Jumpity-Jim jumped.

THE WANDERER

The house in the background was old, the man in the deck chair was young, the lawn and surrounding garden were sun-soaked, and the girl on the bench – situated a little beyond the third rose-bed from the left – was a ghost. Peter was not ghost-prone; that is to say, so far as he was aware, he had never seen a phantom before, neither did he believe nor disbelieve in their existence. If questioned, he would have shrugged, smiled and stated quite simply: 'I do not know.' Now he did know. The girl on the bench was a ghost.

The bench was some distance away, perhaps thirty or forty yards, and the sun was full in his eyes, so he had to concentrate. She was young, with a pale face framed by night-black hair, her long white dress draped the slender form like a winding-sheet, the graceful hands were clasped on her lap and she was looking downwards. A study in white, something out of a Raphael painting; the sun ignored her, the light breeze refused to caress her hair, the bench denied her presence; she was phantasy intruding on reality.

'Catherine,' Peter called softly and the golden-haired creature turned over and squinted up at him.

'Yes?'

'Who is the girl over there? The dark girl on the bench?'

Catherine looked back over one shoulder.

'What girl?'

'I told you, the one on the bench by the rose-bed.'

Catherine sat up and shaded her eyes with a well-shaped hand.

'You're having me on, the bench is empty.'

Peter nodded and muttered 'Why me?' as Catherine returned to her prone position, which allowed the sun to roast her back to a rich brown.

'How long will she stay there?'

The question was an important one, for he knew (and he did

not question the source of this knowledge) that her existence, if that was the right word, depended on many unknown and complicated factors. The very fact he could see her at all was little short of a miracle, and he must be careful not to make a wrong move. He rose very slowly, never for an instant removing his eyes from the fascinating apparition, and glided rather than walked across the lawn. He skirted the rose-bed and with a strange sense of intense excitement, approached the bench. She did not move. It was like drawing near to a portrait that had lost its canvas, and there was a noticeable chill in the air, entirely out of keeping with the furnace-like heat of the house and garden. He was now only three feet away and could study the pale, unlined face, the melancholy eyes, the white dress, frayed at the cuffs and bottom hem.

A voice smashed the silence, shattered the still figure into a quivering mass of mist-specks, and the bench was empty: so many pieces of weather-beaten wood hewn from a long-dead tree.

'What the devil are you doing?'

He spun round, his eyes hard with barely supressed anger; Jimmy Sinclair was watching him with an amused smile.

'You looked like a cat moving in for the kill. The prey is back there, old boy.'

Peter jerked his head in the direction of Catherine, who was still enjoying all the pangs of self-torture under the blazing sun. He forced a smile.

'I was admiring your bench. It must be very old.'

Sir James Sinclair looked down at his property with a faintly sardonic expression; he clearly considered it his duty to humour the more eccentric whims of a guest.

'Older than I am, which is saying something. Put up in my grandfather's time. Must say, I never thought it was anything special.'

He waited, clearly expecting an explanation, his eyes faintly mocking, and Peter frowned before shrugging and assuming an unconcerned expression.

'Oh, I'm interested in old things.'

'Then you should meet my aunt.' Sinclair took his arm and gently steered him back round the rose-bed. 'Age is acceptable

only in antiques and port wine. All else should be perpetually young. My dear child,' he said staring down at Catherine with an air of amazement, 'you are beginning to resemble a delicious roast chicken. Why do you do it? I like women to be pink and white.'

Catherine giggled and eyed the handsome baronet with the expression of a hungry lioness.

'I thought you men liked their meat well done.'

Jimmy Sinclair grinned before making his rounds of the other guests who were sprawled about the lawn in various stages of undress.

'Must you be so bloody obvious?'

The girl watched the retreating figure and waved a red-tipped hand in a gesture of impatience.

'Fudge. He's dishy and I like older men. Jealous?'

'You came with me and we're supposed to have a thing going.'

'Oh, hell.' She touched him lightly on the arm. 'You're a sweet kid. I know you're almost thirty, but you're still a sweet kid, who wants to protect a poor little girl from the cruel, nasty world. But, angel, I don't need protection. None of us do, darling. Now, don't sulk.'

'I'm not sulking. But I don't understand you.'

'You should have lived a hundred years ago when girls of my age were kept in wraps and only brought out on high-days and holidays.'

'Maybe,' he nodded grimly, 'but at least women behaved as women should.'

'They went to bed in the dark,' Catherine observed, 'we leave the light on. It's much more fun.'

The Sinclairs dined formally. That is to say the men donned dinner jackets and the women wore backless dresses, thereby creating an atmosphere of culture – which was belied by Jimmy Sinclair becoming slightly tipsy ere the coffee was served. Lady Sinclair, a beautiful, cold blonde of forty, remarked on this fact as she sipped a glass of iced tea.

'You must forgive my husband. He makes a point of getting drunk as the sun goes down.'

'Not drunk, me dear.' Her husband spoke from his end of the table. 'Pickled. I preserve nicely. When I die you must pop me in a glass case and prop it up in the hall.'

After this exchange the conversation became a little hectic, with everyone trying to create a kind of conversational smoke screen. Miss Pilbeam, who ran the local library and had only been invited because the vicar had been laid low with a bad cold at the last minute, announced brightly: 'I think Hemingway is the novelist of tomorrow,' and no one had the decency to insist on an explanation. Then, when the verbal stream had reached an uphill stretch and an uncomfortable silence had settled over the table, Peter asked: 'Is the Grange haunted?'

'There are a few spirits around,' Jimmy Sinclair replied, taking a sip from his glass. 'They have an uplifting quality.'

'Why do you ask?' enquired Lady Sinclair, not because she was interested, but due to a desire to put a member of the working class at ease.

'I just thought an old house like this should be haunted,' Peter stated lamely.

'So far as I am aware,' the lady said, putting down her glass, 'no ghost has had the impertinence to haunt this old ruin. Jimmy, you are up on the family history. Are we haunted?'

'Now you mention it,' Sinclair grunted, 'old Sir Nigel – the one that got himself in a hell of a mess under George One – he's supposed to go clumping about the long gallery on occasion. Can't say I've seen him meself, but, there again, I've never looked for him. Why?'

'Jimmy, you must listen. Mr Wainwright asked if the Grange was haunted.'

'So he did.' He smiled amiably at Peter. 'Now I wonder why he asked a question like that? What kind of ghost had you in mind, young fellow?'

'I thought I heard somewhere that the Grange garden was haunted by a young girl.'

'The devil you say? Pity someone hadn't the decency to tell me about it. Must start haunting the garden meself. Never know your luck . . .'

'Jimmy, I'm quite certain you are about to become revolt-

ing,' Lady Sinclair interrupted. 'We have guests and they haven't your depraved mind.' She turned her head into Peter's direction, and the cold, beautiful eyes looked through him. 'You may take my word for it, Mr Wainwright, the only gals that walk our garden are living, and have been duly invited. Now, shall we change the subject?'

Peter felt so miserable he could not sleep. He was not an ideal guest for a weekend house party; tennis was a mystery, a horse an object of terror, and he did not look good in swimming-trunks. Then there was Catherine a few doors down the corridor who, for all he knew, might at that moment be entertaining anyone from their host to the butler. The night was hot and the full moon so bright that every object in the room stood out in sharp relief; the wardrobe mirror was a pale, luminous face, and a tall chest of drawers crouched against the far wall like some monster waiting to spring. Finally, Peter climbed out of bed and padded across the room to the window. The old, well-kept garden was a silver-tinted world which belonged to bygone centuries.

His eyes, half expecting, but not daring to hope, swept their questing gaze over the close-clipped grass, lingered for a moment on the rose-bed, then came to rest on the bench. His heart began to pound – for she was there. A lone figure in a white dress, staring sadly at the ground, and again there was no fear, only an overwhelming joy.

Swift as a cloud-shadow fleeing before the wind, he flitted along the corridor, down the great staircase, into the hall below. Fortunately the bolts on the front door had recently been oiled so there were no protesting squeaks, and all the while he was praying, 'May she still be there, please make sure she has not gone away.' Then he was out in the moonlight, moving cautiously across the lawn, and, praise be to God and all his angels, she was still there – waiting, a slab of whiteness on a black bench; a relic that had strayed in from yesterday.

He skirted the rose-bed, then crept silently towards the bench, putting one foot down carefully before he raised the other, lest the slightest sound disturb her. The length of the bench separated them, then only a few feet; still the vision re-

mained intact, then he was down on one knee looking up into that young, pale face.

'Do not be frightened,' he whispered. 'Please do not be frightened or go away.'

No movement. No indication that his silly words had been heard, or if indeed he had been addressing a time-image or a creature that still had intelligence and the ability to hear. He tried again, but now, greatly daring, he raised his voice to a slightly higher pitch.

'You look so tired and sad. Like someone who has . . .' He paused as a thought, an incredible idea, fluttered into reluctant life. 'Like someone who has wandered a long way and for a very long time.'

Was it imagination, or had there been some slight movement? A still-born sigh? The faintest suggestion of a nod? Encouraged, Peter went on.

'You've wandered a long way, haven't you? And the garden looked so peaceful, so much like one you once knew, and which has long since disappeared? Is that it?'

Now there could be no mistake. The head moved slightly up and down, then was still again.

'Poor little wandering ghost,' he said very gently. 'I guess . . . I guess I love you.'

Her head came round so swiftly that it took some seconds for him to realise she had moved at all. Then he was staring straight into those sad eyes and there came to him a feeling of complete aloneness, a strange sense of isolation, and a great awful longing. He had a momentary vision of vast, empty roads, then a montage of rooms, each one soaked with an atmosphere tainted with fear – with repulsion. The face, the wonderful sad eyes, vanished, silently exploded, and Peter was left kneeling before an empty bench, aware of a surprising feeling of relief.

The Sinclairs saw their guests off next morning with a well-acted display of reluctance.

'Enjoyed having you.' Sir James tore his gaze from Catherine's face and smiled at Peter. 'Let me have your bill for those cottages some time.'

'It will be in the post tomorrow,' Peter promised, and the baronet's smile died.

'You must come again,' Lady Sinclair remarked in a tone of voice which suggested the word 'not' had for the moment escaped her.

They said their 'thank yous', 'a marvellous time,' then the little Mini cocked its exhaust pipe at two Bentleys and an Aston Martin before it sped down the drive and out into a country lane. Peter sighed heavily.

'Well, if that's a typical weekend with the upper crust, you can keep it.'

Catherine was examining her face in a compact mirror and was apparently not dissatisfied with what she saw.

'You know what you remind me of? A mildewy old flowerpot.'

Peter changed gear and frowned.

'Thanks.'

'Well honestly,' she said, snapping the compact closed and replacing it in her handbag, 'you have the soul of a mid-Victorian grocer. Arranging yourself with proper respect before your betters. You called Jimmy "Sir" three times yesterday. I could have sunk through the floor.'

'Look . . .' Peter glared at the road ahead. 'That randy old sot . . .'

'He's not old,' Catherine interrupted.

'That randy old sot,' Peter repeated, 'had two reasons for inviting us down here. One was to get his hooks into you, and the other was to get my services free for designing those damn workmen's cottages for him.' He raised his voice to an affected drawl. 'Can't press a fellow for payment when you've accepted his bed and board. What!'

'Oh, shut up.'

Five minutes passed in a strained silence, then Catherine enquired in a matter-of-fact tone of voice: 'You've gone off me, haven't you?'

Peter swung the car round on to the main highway.

'Well, I don't see much point in going on. I don't like being one of a crowd.'

'You damn, smug bastard,' the girl said between clenched teeth.

'Bastard, I might be,' he said cheerfully. 'Smug, never.'

The next silence lasted for ten whole minutes, then she said calmly, 'There's someone else, isn't there?'

'Not that you'd notice.'

'Don't lie. You couldn't keep your hands off me up to yesterday. It's almost as if she were sitting in the back seat now.'

'Don't be fanciful,' he murmured.

'I tell you, it's as though she were looking over my shoulder right this minute and trying to sidle in between us. A soft, clinging-thing, begging to be wrapped in cotton-wool.' The girl involuntarily glanced back over one shoulder, then turned a fair, sensual face to the pale young man who refused to remove his gaze from the road ahead. 'You're a pushover for the "please protect me" type. Don't be a clot, Peter. You need protecting yourself.'

'I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about,' he said blandly. 'I suggest you shut up and let me concentrate on driving.'

An hour later they drove up to the main door of the block of flats in which Catherine lived; Peter made no attempt to get out, but sat with his hands on the steering wheel.

'Aren't you going to give me a hand up the stairs with my bags?' she asked.

'You're a big, strong girl,' he said.

She was about to erupt into an outburst of rage, then suddenly frowned and looked at him with some concern. 'What the hell is this all about? I mean, this tough act isn't you.'

'What am I?' He looked at her with a strange expression that could well have denoted indifference, even dislike. 'The sweet kid of thirty? When I look at you I see only a plastic doll with a blonde wig. It's not so much that you've nothing to offer me – I've nothing you want. It's like watching a fire when you've run out of fuel. It goes out.'

She got out of the car and slammed the door.

He picked up six letters from the doormat, opened the win-

dows, then went into the tiny kitchen where he plugged in an electric kettle. There was a kind of sad peace in performing simple, domestic duties, not that he was a very good housekeeper. Coming out into the sitting-room he grimaced when he saw the littered table, the mass of discarded drawings which lay upon the floor around his draughtsman's desk, like so many broken dreams. The room cried out for a woman's hand.

Back in the kitchen, he poured boiling water on top of a teabag and it floated up to the cup's rim like a drowned mouse. There was no milk in the refrigerator, so he opened a tin of evaporated and poured a generous dose into the brown liquid, which soon resembled gravel-water mixed with chalk. He carried the cup and saucer into the sitting-room and over to his desk; there he sat down and reached for his drawing pad. His fingers captured a pencil and he toyed with it for a few minutes, tapping the desk, tracing the wood grain on the badly-scratched surface, then he drew swift, firm lines across the white paper. Peter Wainwright was an architect, not an artist, but the lines grew into a shape and presently the likeness of a sad, young face was depicted on the paper, and he wanted to cry, to lose himself in a morass of grief. Then he screwed up the paper into a tight ball and threw it across the room.

'I'm going mad.' He spoke aloud. 'It was a dream. It must have been a dream.'

Perhaps it was not surprising that he dreamt about her that night. She was walking down a long, moonlit road, and on either side were barren, rolling moors that swept outwards until they terminated at the foot of tall, glowering mountains. A fierce wind tugged at her dress and blew her black hair so that it streamed out behind her like a raven wing; and a terrible feeling of desolation came in on the wind, a soul-freezing chill that made the sleeper shiver in his bed. Then he was running to catch up with her, but he could only take long, floating strides and the lonely distant figure moved slowly onwards, wandering down the never-ending road of time.

Peter was blasted back into consciousness; he came up from his pillow, his body drenched with cold perspiration, shouting: 'What – what did you say?'

The room was dressed in shadows and the silence was

tainted with fear, for it seemed that the cold desolation of that dreadful dream was seeping in through the open door. Then there was a clinking sound. It was so sudden, so unexpected, that for a moment Peter was not certain what could have caused it. Then it was repeated and he knew. A cup rattling in a saucer. He held his breath and waited. A piece of paper rustled, a soft bump suggested a chair had been pushed against his desk. Then, again, the rattle of a cup on a saucer.

He came up from his bed like a sleep-walker and crept on tip-toe to the doorway, his vocal-chords aching with the desire for speech, but this was not the time for words. He must be sure.

The sitting-room was a cube of blackness, but the feeling of desolation struck him like an icy blast from the face of a glacier. Over by his desk a white shape hovered like a slab of snow on a hillside. The wonder, the love, the urge to protect, to comfort, all disappeared under a wave of pure terror, even as light dies when a room is plunged into darkess. He shouted 'No . . . not here!' then stumbled blindly round the room searching frantically for a light switch. A cup and saucer fell to the floor and a book slid from the desk, then the light was on and he was crouching behind a chair, too terrified to look up, too paralysed by fear even to move.

The familiarity of his surroundings gradually took control and he was at last able to stand upright and face the distasteful truth. He was a coward. A dreamer who trembled when his dream became reality.

The room was neat. The loose sheets of paper had been gathered together and were now stacked tidily on his desk. His shoes had been polished and placed before his favourite armchair. Various articles of clothing, which he was apt to leave draped over chairbacks, were folded and laid out on the dining-table; his loose change was piled in even rows on the mantelpiece. The drawing he had screwed up and tossed to one side had been smoothed out and was now decorating the top of his television. Only the broken cup and saucer were out of place. The shattered pieces of china were mute evidence of work uncompleted; of an unexpected interruption.

Peter looked fearfully round the room; he knew she was still

there, hiding from him, as yet too shy to come out.

'Listen to me.' He spoke softly, his eyes darting from one corner to another. 'Listen to me. You must forget last night. It was different then. A country garden in moonlight – you belonged there. Don't you understand? You belonged to the old garden and a wooden bench. But not here. Oh, my God, not here. This is S.W.16, for heaven's sake – the place I live and work in. You won't be happy here.'

The sound of his voice died away and for a few minutes there was a reassuring silence, then from the hall came the merest suggestion of a girlish giggle. He might have been a lover who has made such an absurd, outrageous statement that his beloved can only treat it with joyous levity. He felt like a man who has set fire to a very dry hayrick. He had struck the fatal match; now the blaze was beyond his control.

'Please,' he whispered, 'you must try to understand. When I said I loved you, I meant I felt pity . . .'

Something moved just beyond his line of vision and when he jerked his head round he had a glimpse of a white dress disappearing through the open door of his bedroom. There came the sound of a sheet being shaken, the smack of a pillow and, worst of all, a low, happy humming. He recognised the tune. It was 'Greensleeves'.

He sat in the chair for the remainder of the night, his terrified gaze darting from bedroom door to hallway, then sweeping round towards the kitchen, much as a hungry cat might try to watch three mouseholes all at once. Towards dawn his tired brain rebelled and he fell asleep, only to wake with a scream when an agonizing pain seared his forehead. When he glanced fearfully back over one shoulder he was in time to see a slender white shape go gliding out into the hall. He rose and tore over to the overmantel mirror. There on his forehead was the red imprint of a pair of lips. He had received his first kiss.

'Go to hell,' the telephone receiver barked.

'But, Catherine,' Peter pleaded, 'you must come round. I'm . . . I'm in a hell of a mess.'

Two miles away, Catherine reclined on her bed and waved freshly-lacquered finger-nails.

'I'm a plastic doll with a blonde wig, remember?'

'I'm sorry about that. But you're the only one that can help. If she sees you, perhaps she'll understand there's no hope, and go away.'

'See here–' Catherine sat upright and gripped the telephone receiver more firmly. 'Am I to understand you've got some floosy there and I'm supposed to warn her off?'

'Not exactly.' Peter looked anxiously towards the kitchen. All sounds indicated that his breakfast was being prepared. 'When I said "she", I really meant "it".'

'It!' A verbal bullet exploded in his ear. 'You trying to be funny?'

He shook his head violently.

'Believe you me, there's nothing funny in what's going on here. Please come round and I'll try to explain then.'

Catherine slammed the receiver down and the dialling signal was like the buzzing of an angry wasp, or the death rattle of hope. With a shuddering sigh, Peter looked round the room; already the flat was assuming a well-cared-for atmosphere. Every cushion was puffed out, his desk resembled a well-dressed stationery counter and a solitary rose lay across his blotting pad.

Greatly daring, he crept into the kitchen and gave a sigh of relief when he saw no actual cooking had been attempted. This was apparently beyond her powers, but a tray was laid out with a plate, knife and fork, and cup and saucer, and the electric kettle was sitting hopefully on the gas-stove. There was no sign of an intruder, but something very cold touched his hand and he was away, running towards the bathroom, the one place instinct told him she would never enter. He shaved, then took a leisurely bath, and there came after a little while a soft tapping on the door, such as a loving wife might make when reminding a tardy husband that breakfast is ready and he must hurry lest it spoil. He combed his hair and noted that the red mark of her lips was beginning to fade, but there was still a faint coldness on the back of his left hand and he shuddered again when the gentle tapping was repeated.

'Go away,' he called, then shouted: 'Go away, blast you!' He wrenched the door open and went out into the hall, his

fist clenched, screaming his fear-fed rage. 'Can't you get it into your silly little head, I don't want you. Do you hear? I don't love you. I hate you. I hate . . . hate . . . hate . . .'

A soft, girlish giggle came from the sitting-room. In the grip of a renewed spasm of anger, he rushed through the open doorway and, seizing a book, flung it against the opposite wall. The giggle was repeated, but now it came from the direction of the window. Grabbing a cushion, Peter hurled it at the window. It bounced off the frame before spinning back towards him, followed by a veritable shower of books, slippers, a pair of trousers and, later, a table knife and a fusillade of ornaments from the mantelpiece. It was the action of an irresponsible child who is just learning to play – a child who giggled with suppressed, but delighted laughter. A china dog caught Peter a glancing blow on the forehead and he collapsed into a chair moaning: 'Please go away . . . please, go away.'

A white figure was flitting round him; cold, cold hands caressed his poor forehead, gentle, icy lips brushed his mouth and a soft voice was murmuring comforting, if unintelligible words, while he struggled like a trapped animal, screaming when the burning coldness seared his flesh.

The doorbell cut across his consciousness like a hot knife and instantly she was gone; only the scattered books on the floor and the touches of ice on his face and hands remained as evidence of the mad battle. When he opened the door, Catherine confronted him, her face wearing a sullen expression. She looked Peter up and down, then snapped: 'Well, much against my better judgment, I'm here. Do I come in, or go back home?'

'Sorry.' He stood aside for her to enter and she brushed by him, resentment in every line of her rigid body. In the sitting-room, she surveyed the havoc with raised eyebrows.

'You seem to have had a high old time, and, by the look of your face, she must wear indelible lipstick.'

Peter lowered his voice.

'It's a mad story. You're not going to believe it.'

'No, I don't suppose I will.' She removed the china dog from a chair and sat down. 'But I'm willing to listen.'

'She . . .' His gaze flickered from bedroom door to kitchen. 'She . . .'

'Hasn't she got a name?' Catherine asked, watching him with narrowed eyes.

'I don't know.' He shook his head. 'I guess she did once.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Catherine almost smiled, then quickly frowned. 'What the hell is this battling nympho? A ghost?'

He spun round and stared at her in astonishment. 'Yes! How did you guess?'

'I take it,' she observed quietly, 'that was meant to be one of your not very funny jokes.'

'I would to God it were. She's still here somewhere – in the bedroom, the kitchen, up on the ceiling. I don't know. But she's here.'

'Let me get this straight.' Catherine crossed her knees and studied his ravaged face. 'Are you honestly trying to tell me, a . . . a ghost has set her cap at you?'

He nodded.

'And what made this phantom bedmate fall for you? We all know you have devastating charm, but I would have thought, under the circumstances, the opportunities for passionate wooing were rather limited.'

'She is a wanderer,' Peter began.

'You don't say?' Catherine murmured. 'Well, that makes sense. I've done a bit of wandering myself in my time.'

'Please be serious.' He sat down on a chair opposite, looking rather pathetic in his effort to be understood. 'I first saw her at Clavering Grange. The day before yesterday. She was on a bench . . .'

'I never thought you had it in you,' Catherine observed dryly. 'A wench on a bench. What is the world coming to?'

'Please listen. I felt sorry for her, I guess. I mean she looked so lonely, and so tired and . . .'

'Go on,' Catherine urged, 'this is getting more exciting by the minute.'

'I told her I loved her. It seemed right at the time. She belonged to the garden, to another age, and there was the moonlight. Do you understand?'

Catherine did not answer, but continued to watch with a face that was devoid of expression.

'I never dreamed she would follow me, never realised the cold horror . . .'

He broke off and suddenly looked with dilated eyes at the kitchen doorway. The white, sad-faced figure was coming out; the slight form moved slowly towards him and, after a swift glance at the seated girl, took up a position behind her. The melancholy eyes watched her.

'What now?' enquired Catherine.

'Didn't you see her?' he whispered. 'You must have. She's standing behind you . . . staring at me.' He began to wring his hands, moaning softly. 'She won't go away and she must . . . must . . . must . . .'

'Even when mad you run true to form,' Catherine said quietly.

He began to talk rapidly, never taking his eyes from the still form.

'You must help me. Help me, you understand? She must be made to realise I don't love her. Can't love her . . . out of the question . . . there's only one way. One sure way. Let me make love to you. Now . . . right in front of her. Then she'll realise it's hopeless . . . then she'll go away.'

'You poor, mad bastard,' Catherine said softly.

'For heaven's sake use your eyes.'

He shouted the words, then, springing to his feet, seized the girl and spun her round. Gripping her shoulders, he pushed her forward until her face was only a few inches from that of the apparition.

'Look, blast you! Look! Who's mad? Look at that damned dead face, stare into those bloody moon-struck eyes. See! Eh? You see? Convinced now?'

'Peter.' Catherine spoke calmly, although there was a hint of apprehension in her voice. 'Peter, let go of me.'

His hands dropped away and she at once moved swiftly round the table and stood facing him; she was pale and the hand that patted her disarranged hair trembled.

'Peter, you need help. You must see a doctor. You hear me? See a doctor . . . You are sick.'

'Only you can help me.'

He sank into a chair, aware that the still figure had not

moved, was continuing to watch him with large, sad eyes. Catherine shook her head and backed to the hall doorway.

'No, I can't help you. This kind of thing is out of my league. Do as I say . . . see a doctor.'

She ran from the room and he heard the front door slam, then silence descended on the room. A dreadful, blood-chilling silence.

His shoulders shook, tears ran down his cheeks and the Wanderer moved slowly towards him, the unprotected looking for shelter, despair searching for hope. Peter Wainright looked up, and when he saw the great agony reflected in those dark, sad eyes, he for a while forgot his fear and tried to make her understand.

'I am flesh.' He held out his hands, opened, then closed them. 'I am flesh and blood. You are . . . you are spirit. I have a body, you have . . . nothing. We cannot be together. See? It is like trying to mix fire and water. You must find those like yourself. Understand?'

She slowly raised her hands and presented them to him, palms uppermost; the frayed sleeves slipped back and he stared with rising horror at her wrists. Two gaping gashes grinned up at him with red-lipped mouths. For a while he was incapable of speech, then he managed to ask in a hoarse, choked voice: 'You. . . . you committed suicide?'

There was the faintest suggestion of a nod. Some instinct warned him not to ask the next question, but he could not control his tongue nor ignore the uncoiling snake of suspicion.

'Why did you show me? Why?'

She turned slowly and glided towards the kitchen and, had it been possible, he would have remained riveted to his chair, but some power – perhaps a morbid, insatiable curiosity – drew him up on his feet and drove him in the wake of the white dress and erect dark head into the kitchen.

The kitchen was neat; cups, saucers, plates, all had been stacked away in the dresser, and the Formica-topped table would have been bare were it not for one object. A large and sharp-edged carving knife. It glittered evilly and Peter began to shake his head while muttering 'No . . . No . . .', but the dark eyes were pleading, alive for the first time, speaking with more

eloquence than mere words could have produced; imploring him to perform the one action that would remove the barrier which stood between them. He screamed once, then turned on his heels and ran, out of the front door and down the stairs to the street below.

He walked a long way, determined that nothing on earth or in hell would induce him to return to that, up to now, snug little flat. His brain refused to consider even the immediate future; it drove him onwards, seeking comfort from the feeling of normality that was generated by the sight of people hurrying, shopping, talking, even laughing. He came to a cinema and entered its cool gloom, hoping to forget awful reality in the atmosphere of make-believe. There were plenty of empty seats and he sank into one, staring hopefully at the flickering screen. A Western! Ghosts, may the saints be praised, never drew six-shooters; neither did they rustle cattle, tie beautiful heroines to trees, or be elected sheriff. When an honest cowboy died, he was buried on Boot Hill and under no circumstances did he leave it. Peter was actually beginning to enjoy himself when a so very cold hand gently squeezed his, and a piece of leg-shaped ice touched his knee. His head jerked round and there was the pale face looking up at him, the eyes begging, glowing with a great, all-devouring love. The carving knife lay across her lap. He sent the ice-cream girl sprawling as he raced for the entrance.

Night had fallen and the river was a black ribbon wending its timeless journey towards the sea; Peter was leaning over the railings looking down. He was talking aloud.

'The impossible cannot happen, the dead are dead, the living live. I must remember that. I believe only in that which can be felt, smelt or eaten.'

Suddenly the sweet, girlish figure was beside him; she looked up into his eyes, then stared wistfully at the river. Peter began to run again.

He was so very tired and she was plainly distressed by his futile efforts to avoid her. So long as he kept moving he was alone; the moment he stopped, sat down, or even leaned against a wall, she was there. The young, unlined face, the

beautiful, adoring eyes, they could not for long be banished, and the small hand was always offering the carving knife, as though this alone was the cure for all ills. In the end he had to go back. Like a hunted fox he made for his burrow.

He closed the front door, then turned on all the lights. She flitted round the sitting-room, her hands like two white moths, caressed the window-curtains, then, kneeling down, she laid her pale cheek against his knees and he felt the death-chill seep into his bones.

He fought for a little while longer, lay down on his bed and closed his eyes, but she gave him no peace. A searing kiss on his lips sent him screaming to the bathroom, but there was no longer sanctuary there. She had grown wanton, was already assuming the privileges accorded to a wife, and his father's cut-throat razor was laid out invitingly on the wash-basin.

He came to the kitchen table like a sacrificial lamb to the altar. His tongue babbled to the very end.

'I don't want to die. I want to continue to be – to breathe, lust, cheat, lie, even to suffer.'

The carving knife came to his hand like steel to a magnet.

'Hate burns, love destroys, but fondness mellows, dislike matures. Thoughts enrich, but speech kills. If I could only live, I would never speak again.'

He was standing before the wardrobe mirror, the knife was at his throat; it was cold, almost beautiful, and he found himself longing for its kiss.

'How can I face eternity,' he whispered, 'when I have never lived for a single second?'

The knife moved very slowly and her face, looking into the mirror over his left shoulder, suddenly smiled. It was the most glorious sight he had ever seen.

Catherine came in from the street and walked with apparent reluctance towards the lift. She stood in front of the closed doors for some time, as though trying to decide whether to summons the lift or not. Twice her hand went out to the ivory button, twice it was withdrawn. Then suddenly there came a faint humming sound and she knew the decision was no longer

hers. The lift was coming down.

She waited. With a deep sigh the sliding doors parted and a man and a young girl stepped out into the hall. The man's head was lowered and he was staring sadly at the floor, presumably content to be steered in the right direction by the radiant young girl whose hand rested on his arm.

'Peter!' Catherine gasped. 'Where are you going?'

The couple continued to move towards the street door. A wondrous, happy smile lit up the girl's face and she clung to Peter's arm and rubbed her cheek against his sleeve. She seemed to be laughing out of pure joy, but there was no sound.

'Peter!' Catherine spoke sharply. 'Hear what I have to say. I've arranged for you to see a man. A specialist. I don't know why I bothered, but I was worried. You might have the decency to stop and listen when I am speaking to you.'

Peter's head came up, then turned slowly sideways and, for the first time, Catherine saw his face. The dead, white flesh made her gasp, and the bulging eyes caused her to shake her head from side to side in horrified disbelief, but it was his throat which finally sent her reeling back against the wall, where she lay trying so very hard to scream.

A great gash had parted his throat into a monstrous red grin; the jagged ends of his wind-pipe glittered like sawn ivory in the artificial light. The young girl was tugging playfully at his arm and Peter turned his head away. Together, the at least half-happy couple passed through the street doors, and for a while there was peace.

Then Catherine found the strength and courage to scream. For an exceptionally unemotional girl, she did it very well.

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