



THE 10TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

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by O. Henry, Sheridan Le Fanu, Ambrose Bierce
and others

—selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



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

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The Tenth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



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INTRODUCTION

Experience has taught me that people like three ingredients in a collection of ghost stories. Fear, to make them shudder, pathos to make them shed the occasional tear, and humour to dilute the other two. But of course the greatest of these must be fear.

The ghosts that walk the pages of John Hastings Turner's *The House in the Wood* are not of the usual variety, for they have wandered from the land of What-Should-Have-Been, instead of What-Has-Been. All of us have walked beneath the evergreen trees in that nostalgic country and sought vainly for our still-born ghosts in the melancholy twilight. Mr Turner's conducted tour is well worth your attendance.

Fear, by P. C. Wren, would seem a strange departure for the author of *Beau Geste*, but in fact this gifted writer wrote many ghost stories, of which, in my opinion, this is one of the best. From the moment we enter that lonely bungalow the atmosphere is heavy with menace.

'It was the atmosphere, aura, the spirit of the house that was anti-pathetic, inimical. Even outside it, one had the feeling of an emanated antagonism. Inside, the feeling deepened, and one seemed conscious almost of warning; and then of danger; and finally, of threat.'

Read on.

It is my long-held contention that every room that has been used by a lot of people over a long number of years must be haunted. It would seem that O. Henry, that superb master of the short story, agreed with me. For in *The Furnished Room* we sense the presence of numerous ghosts, but only one can make itself felt. Think about this story when you are next in a hotel bedroom.

Master Ghost and I by Barbara Softly is a ghost story with a difference. What that difference is I do not propose to tell you, but it is exciting and extremely readable. In particular I like the historical background.

Apart from writing many excellent novels, Rosemary Timperley has turned out an impressive number of ghost stories,

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including *To Keep Him Company*, which I have included in this collection. Here we have fear and pathos, plus another visit to the land of What-Should-Have-Been.

In The Mist, by Elizabeth Walter, is a story set in the days of the last war – at least the ghostly part is – and to my mind it is made even more chilling by the matter-of-fact appearance of the ghost. I am of the opinion that ghosts should advertise their calling by a few warning groans and at least a hint of transparency – not accept a lift from a perfect stranger and chat away ten to the dozen, even if this particular one has a voice that is rich and pleasing. It is rather like taking advantage of good nature.

The ghost in *On The Brighton Road*, by Richard Middleton, has the same unconventional code of behaviour and deserves to be continuously bumped off, whenever a suitable occasion occurs.

I have often warned people that party games played in the dark can lead to trouble of one kind or another, but I was not thinking of the trouble which crops up in *Smee* (It's me) by 'Ex-Private X', which really is too much of a bad thing. Should you be trapped into taking part in this extremely dubious pastime, take my advice and shut yourself in a narrow cupboard. By the way, I have still to learn who 'Ex-Private X' was – or is.

I suppose Ambrose Bierce's most famous story is *Incident At Owl Creek*, which has had the distinction of being made into two films and a radio play. I have not included it here, because it has been reprinted so many times, and in any case it is not a ghost story. But *The Moonlit Road* is, and a very gripping one into the bargain. It has a terrifying depth and intensity and I think comes a good second to its more famous predecessor.

Two Trifles, by Oliver Onions, are very funny and act as comic relief after the grim feast that has gone before. I love the second trifle, *The Mortal*, where the ghost of Sir Egbert has to spend the night in a Human Chamber. As another ghost so aptly remarks: 'Oh, it's playing with flesh.'

Any ghost story by Sheridan Le Fanu is bound to be blood-curdling, and *Wicked Captain Walshawe* is no exception. I was particularly drawn to the mode of materialization favoured by the ghost of Captain Walshawe.

'He saw the extinguisher lifted by a tiny hand from beneath,

and a small human face, no bigger than a thumb-nail, with nicely proportioned features peep from beneath it. In this Lilliputian countenance was such a ghastly consternation as horrified my uncle unspeakably.'

Me too.

Next comes an offering from the author of *The Go-Between*, L. P. Hartley. *Monkshood Manor* has a ghost which keeps well in the background, but has a penchant for arson that is most disconcerting.

A. E. Ellis was at one time master at two public schools, and during that period wrote a number of ghost stories which afforded pleasurable thrills to his young pupils. Now that pleasure is extended to a wider audience with the first appearance of *The Chapel Men*, written by an author whose father was a Wesleyan minister, living in West Cornwall at the period of this story. This is a marvellous piece of macabre and the description of the fishing village community is masterly.

The Birthright by Hilda Hughes is, quite frankly, hair-raising. The twist at the end is one of the most original and horrifying that it has been my privilege to read for some time. Read the story carefully – don't skip a word – and see if you don't agree with me.

Lastly – my own contribution: *Non-paying Passengers*. What can I say? It's true – every word of it. Honestly. If you don't believe me, stand on Platform 16 at Waterloo Station during the evening rush hour and look out for the – more than one – odd passenger that climbs aboard the five-forty-five train for Shepperton. You'll be surprised – to say the least.

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

THE HOUSE IN THE WOOD

John Hastings Turner

I've got to put this thing on paper. I've told the story again and again, and I find, at the finish of it, that even my best friends are trying not to look slantwise at me. I don't blame them. It is, as one of them said to me, 'a hell of a proposition'. But the way I feel is that if once I can get the thing down in black and white it won't, so to speak, be on my mind so much. It was after I had told Bill Whiteman the story and asked him the question I always ask that I got the answer which I have written.

A hell of a proposition it may be . . . and perhaps I, too, ought to be where poor Robbie McClaren is – and he's been in an asylum these two years . . .

I'd known Robbie since the days when we knocked cricket balls through his father's cucumber frames, and then told lies about it, for Robbie's father was about sixty years out of date, and Robbie feared him more than he feared Hell. I think if his mother had lived, or if his father had been another kind of man, Robbie might have been every bit as sane as the rest of us. But he was hunted – literally hunted – through his boyhood . . .

But that has nothing to do with the story. He became an architect. He never did much at it. I believe his ideas were a bit impracticable, and, anyway, he wasn't long enough at the job to make his mark. He was twenty-eight when the thing happened, and I was two years his senior. Of course, I knew that Robbie was what people call 'peculiar'. That is to say, he didn't fall in line with everybody else. He didn't play games, or shoot, or dance – in fact, the only thing he did do was to play the piano. His own stuff, and for all I know abominable – but I liked to hear him play for all that.

I had a little flat in Charing Cross Road, and one evening in the early summer Robbie blew in. I hadn't seen him for months, and I thought he looked rather used up.

'Look here, Roger,' he said, 'I want some air.'

'You won't get it in Charing Cross Road,' I answered.

'I want to go for a week – walking – anywhere,' he went on.

'Will you come?'

It was an attractive idea. The weather seemed set fair. The country would be at its best. I said I might.

'When I say anywhere,' he continued, 'I mean the Savernake Forest.'

'Why?' I asked.

'I'm not going at all if I don't go there,' he replied.

Well, I ought to have thought that a bit queer, I dare say, but I didn't. Robbie had always been a creature of whims, and if he'd set his heart on the Savernake Forest, why not? It's a lovely spot.

I said I didn't care where we went, and after a bit of a talk and planning things out, we agreed to make a start the following Saturday.

For a miracle the weather held, and as we walked out of Wantage, our faces set towards the downs, I think we both felt about eighteen. I can answer for myself at least, and Robbie's high spirits were almost embarrassing. He chucked his hat away over a hedge and sang lewd songs at the top of his voice. But Robbie had always hated towns, and became a different creature in the country. We tramped along for a couple of days, taking things easily, and I must confess I never remember such a grand time. The air was intoxicating, the turf like walking on a springboard, and a subtle, satisfying appeal was coming to us from the very earth, the appeal of being English in England. (Robbie was Scotch, but he swore he felt it, too!) Those first two days were pure joy . . .

On the third we were in the Forest itself, surprising squirrels and rabbits, and once, in the evening, an old badger. We deviated that night, and slept at the smallest inn we have ever seen in a village of which we didn't even ask the name. And, in the charming, contemptuous English way, the name not being written up for us anywhere, I do not know it to this day.

On the following morning we struck back into the Forest. And then I noticed that Robbie was beginning to hurry. He set about twice the pace we had been travelling. When I taxed him with it he slowed down, and made some silly joke about my getting an old man. But I noticed that he seemed curiously embarrassed.

A strange eagerness seemed to have got hold of him. It was as if—yes, almost as if he was pointing, like a dog. But

at the time, though I noticed his mood, I gave it no serious thought. Why should I? It was so like Robbie to have some unaccountable enthusiasm.

We lunched under a beech tree, and I remember a green woodpecker (shyest of birds) came and looked at us gravely from across the riding, and deciding that we were harmless, if unusual, continued his tap-tapping without taking any further notice.

When we had religiously buried our empty beer bottles and were watching the smoke from our pipes go spiralling up into the leaves, I said casually:

'Where do we turn in tonight, Robbie?'

'Oh, I know a place,' he answered, and I noticed – or thought I noticed – a queer constraint in his voice, as if he was facing a crisis of some sort, a crisis which he knew would come. But I was sleepy, and paid no heed to it.

'Well, anyway,' I murmured, 'don't let's overshoot the mark again and have an extra two miles to the village at the end of the day.'

For that was what we had done before, and two unexpected miles just when you're wanting your supper seem a day's journey. Robbie's voice became suddenly quite surly.

'It isn't a village,' he said abruptly.

'Oh, look here, Robbie,' I protested. 'If you think I'm going to doss down in some broken-down woodman's shack and go without my dinner, you're on the wrong horse.'

He struck a match to relight his pipe, and his hand trembled ever so little. 'It's not a shack,' he said. 'It's anything but a shack.' He seemed to be trying to control some intense excitement. He gave me the impression that he was angry with me for asking questions. But I wasn't going to stand that. It isn't good for a chap, even if he does have moods and whims, to be given in to all the time.

I said: 'Well, you needn't be so mysterious about it.'

He didn't answer for a moment or two, and when he did he had his back turned to me.

'It's a house,' he muttered.

'A house?' I echoed. 'What? Here in the middle of the Forest, miles from anywhere?'

'Yes,' he said. He seemed to hate to talk about it.

'But it's impossible!' I cried.

He turned then, and I saw that he was furiously angry.

'It isn't impossible,' he retorted. 'I tell you, I know the house and I know the people who live there. I know the house well,' he added in a gentler tone. As if he was remembering tenderly something happy about the place.

'Oh, all right,' I answered, 'but you never said anything about it before.'

'Why should I?' he snapped, and I had no reply to that.

'I can't think how they carry on,' I said, 'marooned like that. Why, they'd never get a servant to stay in the place!'

He seemed to turn that over in his mind for a few seconds. Then he said, with a sort of gentle, reminiscent smile, 'They're old family servants; they've been there for years.'

'All the same,' I protested, 'they may not be exactly pleased at two fellows blowing in without notice, both as hungry as hell.'

'They'll be delighted,' he said earnestly, 'delighted! Didn't I tell you I'd known them for years?'

'Oh, well,' I answered, 'it's up to you.' After which we took the road again, or rather the path, for the riding had narrowed down to a bridle-track and the woods were thick all round us. I couldn't help wondering what strange sort of birds elected to live in the middle of a forest, and, with my practical, everyday sort of mind, speculating on how they ran the place. And from that I got to wondering how on earth the house came to be built, for you can't, as far as I know, buy a plot in the middle of Savernake Forest. I even came to the point where I was considering the possibility of Robbie trying to play a practical joke on me, and, by this time feeling a bit 'leggy', I thought what a rotten sort of joke it would be, and promised myself a real row with Robbie when he exploded it.

Meanwhile, Robbie himself was going faster and faster. Hang it, he was racing along as if he were on the Stock Exchange Walk! And his face! It was purple with excitement and his eyes were glittering like . . . like a panther on the trail. I thought: 'Damn! - he's been sitting on wet grass, and he's got a chill and he's feverish.' And I wondered what on earth I'd do about it, for Robbie was not strong, and if he was going to be ill he'd have complications quicker than anybody on earth.

But just as I was speculating on these lines we turned a corner abruptly and came upon the house. I must confess I

was relieved to see that house. If Robbie had taken a chill we could at least get a hot-water bottle and a whisky and lemon for him. And I took another sidelong look at the man. I was astonished at the change in him. The mere sight of the house seemed to have returned him to the normal. He stood quite still, looking at it with a sort of appreciative smile.

'Well, here we are,' I said at last, 'and damn it, Robbie, you've almost walked me off my feet.'

'Sorry,' he replied. 'You see, I got in a funk that I shouldn't be able to find it.'

So that was it. But fancy working oneself up into such a state! Thank God, I had an ordinary workaday temperament that refused to fatigue itself!

Then, for the first time, I took a real look at the house itself. It was a new house – and that gave me a bit of a shock, because, for some absurd reason or other, I had expected an old one.

But this was quite new – so new, indeed, that the polygonum they meant to train up its walls was merely a row of spindly branches, and in the freshly laid lawn one could still see the gaps between the turves. As for the house itself, it was pleasing enough to look upon – built on two floors, with green shutters to the windows, which somehow or other gave it a foreign appearance. And yet, though it was an ordinary enough kind of house at first sight, there was something about it . . . some oddity which struck one, as such things will, even before one had time to see exactly what it was. But in another second, as we were approaching the front door, I saw what made the place look unusual. The roof. From each end of the long, low house it rose with a gentle slope to a point in the centre. I'd never seen a roof built like that, and now that I did I couldn't help feeling that, with a long, low house like that, the effect of that slight slope and the centre angle where it met was rather pleasing.

I said as much to Robbie.

'Curious kind of roof,' I commented, 'but, in a way, rather effective, don't you think?'

'Do you?' he said, with a curious eagerness. 'Yes, I agree. I like it immensely . . . immensely!'

I thought his sudden enthusiasm rather odd, until I remembered that he was an architect, and that these things meant a great deal more to him than they did to me.

He rang the bell, and, in the interval before the door was opened, I noticed that it was as much as he could do to keep still.

A maid opened the door and recognized him immediately. 'Mr McClaren,' she said, and smiled at us; then she added: 'I'll go and tell the master at once.'

But Robbie stopped her.

'And Miss Dorothy?' he said. 'She's at home, isn't she?'

'Oh yes, sir,' answered the maid. 'Miss Dorothy is at home.' I thought then that I understood everything. Robbie's excitement, his embarrassment (for that, of course, was the explanation of his bad temper), everything. But why on earth couldn't he have told me about Dorothy? After all, we had been friends for years.

I was congratulating myself on such a simple explanation of what I had foolishly thought to be a feverish attack when I saw an old gentleman coming down the stairs to meet us. When I say old, I mean that he was what men of our age call old. I dare say he was round about sixty; and one of the most charming-looking men I've ever seen. His expression of welcome to us both, not only in his words but his face, made one feel in an instant that in that house one could never be a stranger again.

His arm went round Robbie's shoulder, but he smiled at both of us as he said: 'Now, what would you two boys like? A drink right away—or a wash first, and join Dorothy and myself for cocktails in a quarter of an hour?'

We chose the latter, and were shown to our rooms. Our host insisted on coming with us himself. I remember when he left us, feeling what a pity Robbie's father hadn't been that kind of man. He radiated everything that was generous, everything that was lovable. And evidently he was used to entertaining. My room looked as if I had been expected at this very moment. Robbie came in to me, after a wash and brush-up, and I commented on the readiness of things. I remember he walked to the window and sighed, a deep, contented sort of sigh. And then he turned and said quite simply:

'But you are Roger—I've always been expected here.'

We went downstairs, and Dorothy gave us cocktails. She was a lovely girl, with a sly sense of fun that made one feel

there was no barrier between the sexes after all.

I'd begun to look on myself as a confirmed bachelor, because I believed that, in the really intimate concerns of life, it is impossible to get on terms with a woman. But if you could . . . I mean, if her mind really marches with your own . . . Well, I must admit that after my second glass of port I regarded Robbie as an undeserving young devil. Then those two disappeared somewhere or other, and Dorothy's father smiled at me and produced some old brandy, and said it was good to look at them, wasn't it? And I said it was. And I felt it, too. For there was something about that house and its occupants that somehow made you see life properly.

And then Dorothy's father asked if I would like to see over the place, and, of course, I said 'Yes,' and he showed me every hole and corner in a way that made me know he loved it. And later Robbie and Dorothy joined us; and Robbie enthused over the place as if it were his own, which, I reflected, it might well be, one day. And—I may as well confess the thing—I was a little jealous of Robbie.

I remember thinking, just before I dropped off to sleep that night, that it was rather a rotten sort of feeling to have had.

And the next day, off we went again. I tried to rag Robbie, in the silly way men do, about Dorothy, but he got savage about it, and I shut up. We walked in silence for some time, and I had leisure in which to think that is isn't really such a grand joke—people falling in love, I mean. Nobody sees anything tremendously funny about Primavera or Héloïse and Abélard. What blasted cads we make of ourselves—following silly conventions! I remember I tried to apologize to Robbie, and he said, 'That's all right,' and said it, too, as if it didn't matter a damn what I'd said—because, I suppose, I was too small to count in the world he was living in just then. And I thought how right he was, and I felt a bit humble, and, as a sort of punishment, I put up with the long silent walk that followed. I asked no more questions, and I certainly made no more silly jokes. We found our way to another country inn, and had the simple dinner they provided.

And it was there that it happened. Suddenly—straight out of the blue—in that shabby little coffee-room, Robbie gave a queer cry and burst into tears.

I got him up to his room somehow or other (I can still see the shocked and deprecating eye of a local farmer who had dined there too). In the bedroom Robbie went mad. What I mean is, I believe that it was there his brain actually snapped. He did incredible things, he said incredible things. I'm not going to set them down here. I locked the door, found the landlord and got him to send someone for the local doctor. By the grace of God he was a man who knew more than he had need of, in that little place. When I took him into Robbie's room Robbie was stretched full-length on his bed, naked, with the tears streaming down his face. I can't remember very much about what happened in that room. The doctor asked Robbie a question or two, and I remember him turning up his eyelids. Then he drew the coverlet over Robbie's stark, twitching body, and he and I went outside.

'I'm going to ring up for an ambulance,' he said, 'and your friend will be taken to London.'

'What's happened to him?' I asked.

'I can't tell you that,' answered the doctor; 'I wish I could. If I could I'd be one of the world's greatest men. But I'm afraid I can tell you his condition. He's insane, poor chap. I may be wrong, but I think he's been insane for a considerable time. Something has brought it to a head, that's all.'

So they took Robbie to London, where certain formalities were gone through, and Robbie disappeared to the place where now he is.

But I, being his friend, though I felt helpless, yet imagined it was at least my duty to tell the old man in the house with the strange roof, and to ask him, as gently as he could, to tell his daughter Dorothy.

Perhaps you can guess what happened?

There was no house in the wood; there was no charming old gentleman; there was no Dorothy. They told me that at the inn, but I wasn't satisfied, and I went back myself to the very spot.

There were trees, and a little winding path, through little bushes struggling towards the sun. There was no place where a house could ever have been.

And yet . . . I've got to confess it.

I can still see that charming host, I can still see Dorothy, disappearing with Robbie into the newly-made garden. I can

still tell you every hole and corner of the house which the old man so lovingly showed me. I can even see the old court-cupboard, out of which he brought the decanter of liqueur brandy . . .

Yet I'm allowed to go about my business while poor Robbie . . .

Still, they tell me he's perfectly happy. They say he spends most of his time drawing plans for grandiose and impossible palaces.

Well, I've written the thing down now, and although it's probably not particularly interesting, it has given me a certain amount of comfort in the doing. And if I am going mad . . . somebody will know why. I shall just put this MS. in my desk, and it will be found . . . afterwards.

I wrote this yesterday, with an idea in my head that I wouldn't cumber the earth with my presence much longer. Yes. I'd even taken the old Service revolver out of the drawer and had a look at it . . .

But thank God . . . thank God . . . I'm sane!

They found a note at Robbie's office, saying that if anything happened to him, I was the only friend he had, and he would like me to go through his papers. I spent an afternoon carrying out Robbie's wish.

And all of a sudden I came across a careful and minute plan of the house in Savernake Forest; the queer roof . . . everything. I recognized every room, every corner. And just underneath it, on a sheet of notepaper, I found a poem. It was written 'To Dorothy', and, though no power on earth would make me write it down here, I can say that it described the Dorothy I knew beautifully and completely.

And then, suddenly, I knew.

This was Robbie's ideal house, Robbie's ideal father, Robbie's ideal girl. He had created them all for himself. He had lived with them, dreamt with them, and then, alone with me in the forest, his brain, so much more vivid than my own, had made the thing real to me too.

That's all. But perhaps you'd like to know the question I always put when I tell this story.

'Do you think,' I ask, 'that it is possible for an hallucination which is a real and vivid thing to a lunatic, to be so impressed

upon the mind of another chap that it materializes at least for the time being?'

When I asked Bill Whiteman that he just said: 'It's a hell of a proposition.'

I suppose it is. But I've no doubts whatever myself.

FEAR

P. C. Wren

I

From the first moment I disliked the bungalow intensely. Nor had this feeling anything to do with the fact that it was dirty, derelict and tumble-down; nor, again, that it was lonely, isolated and obviously long-uninhabited.

It was the atmosphere, aura, the spirit of the house that was anti-pathetic, inimical. Even outside it, one had this feeling of an emanated antagonism. Inside the feeling deepened, and one seemed conscious almost of warning; and then of danger; and, finally, of threat.

I was reminded of that remarkable and haunting line which, once he has read it, occasionally returns to the mind of the traveller in little-visited and out-of-the-way corners of the earth:

'The place was silent and – aware.'

Certainly this place was silent, and undoubtedly one had an uneasy feeling of its awareness, of being watched, of being expected – and unwelcome. Not watched by human eyes, but by the place itself.

It was an old – and old-fashioned – rest-house, built on *teangs*, strong square pillars, some twelve feet in height, of *meribau* wood, that hard red wood which is proof against the attack of insects, including even the white ant.

Mounting the flight of steps that led up to the platform on which the house was built, and entering the big central room, the thought immediately entered my mind that 'rest-house' was a misnomer. I felt quite certain that whatever else I got here, I should get little rest.

One had frequently been in places which gave the impression that the *genius loci* was inimical. One had been conscious of the feeling, both in buildings made by hands and in places but rarely trodden by human foot; in certain swamps, cañons, dark forests, caves, and sun-blasted or wind-harried desert places.

I have had this feeling strongly when spending a dark and

lonely night in Angkor Wat; and again in the brilliant sunlight of a beautiful morning on top of the hill called Doi Wieng Lek, a hill situated near Lampoun, some thirty miles from Chiangmai in the direction of Lampang, in Siam. 'Doi Wieng Lek' means 'the hill which is the place of evil spirits', a fact of which I was unaware, or at any rate, did not realize, until I had left it.

But standing on top of the hill, which I had climbed in order to admire a view of the Lampang plain and the distant hills, I was suddenly conscious of an uneasiness, which was but little removed from fear. What caused the uneasiness, and of what I should be afraid, when mental discomfort and apprehensiveness deepened into fear, I had not the slightest idea. It had nothing to do with the fact that practically every tree looked as though it had been struck by lightning, which certainly was not the case. It was not that I heard any of those sounds which, in certain places, are perturbing, if not startling; it was not because the trees seemed to have been deserted by both birds and gibbons, in spite of the fact that all the surrounding jungle was alive with the gibbons, little spidery long-armed long-legged monkeys whose bewhiskered faces are so friendly and amusing, and whose call is musical, yet so mournful . . .

But the house.

I am not psychic. I am not a nervous person nor sensitive. I am not fanciful, superstitious nor suggestible; but, like everybody else, who is not an absolute clod, I have a sense of atmosphere, whether it be social or local. And never in my life have I been so quickly or so strongly aware of an eerie and minatory atmosphere as in this abandoned rest-house. Had it been possible, I would have marched on, and left it to its loneliness and gloom. For I felt it was haunted, tragic and evil. However, I had no choice. Here I was, and here, for a period, I must remain. For, however unpleasant the place might be, to flee from it and return, the object of my journey unaccomplished, would have been more so. I should have felt ashamed of myself. Also ridiculous. For how could I possibly explain that I had found the place, according to directions given me by kindly hosts in Mualongse, had not entered into possession, but had simply fled, frightened away?

It seemed to me that my coolies disliked the place almost as much as I did, for with unwonted rapidity they unpacked

the *hahps*, the big baskets made of woven bamboo, which hang at either end of a pole balanced over the shoulder, and in which one's food, clothes and other chattels are transported in that part of the world.

Nor did my jungle 'boy' appear disposed to linger, when once he had set up my camp-bed and served my dinner, a remarkably well cooked and satisfying meal, consisting principally of a stew of tinned meat, rice, alleged mushrooms, bamboo shoots, dough-dumplings, chillies and unidentifiable odds and ends.

In view of the fact that my cook had, so far as I knew, neither materials nor apparatus for cooking, the effort was beyond praise.

Having dined, I carried my collapsible chair out on to the veranda, lit a cigarette and—told myself not to be a fool. For I felt more uncomfortable, more lonely, more apprehensive than ever before in all my life.

From where I sat, the moonlit jungle looked beautiful—but unfriendly, threatening; and the danger implicit in the threat was not from the leopard or the tiger.

Generally speaking, this was one of the best hours of the day, the march completed, dinner eaten, and a pleasant tiredness enhancing the flavour of tobacco and the enjoyment of a book. A good hour for the review of the events of the day, the making of plans for the morrow, and appreciation of one's good fortune in being far from the madding crowd and the din of an increasingly clamorous civilization.

The ocean, the desert and the jungle are the last strongholds and resorts of peace.

But here there was no peace. Silence, so far as the jungle is ever silent; utter stillness; but no peace—of mind.

Decidedly this was a bad place, or else I was going to be ill. It must be that . . . Fever . . . Liver . . . And yet, until I came within sight of this derelict house, I had been in perfect health.

I had better go to bed.

Re-entering the big central room, on either side of which were two bedrooms, I turned up the wick of the lamp that hung from a roof-beam, and took stock of the place. What immediately caught my attention and gave me a slight shock of surprise, was the fact that, across one corner of the room, was a piano.

Now, I have had a perhaps unusually wide experience of

rest-houses, *dak* bungalows, *pahngs* and such buildings, provided for the shelter of the casual traveller in India, Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Malaya, Annam, Cambodia, and certain parts of Africa and China; but never yet have I discovered one provided with a piano. I have known them to be well-fitted, well-kept houses, with one or more resident servants; and I have known them to be dirty derelict huts, with one or more resident reptiles, poisonous, domiciled and waiting – but never a piano.

And as my eye roamed round the ill-lit room, I discovered that it differed, in other respects, from the usual central hall common to the use of travellers occupying the different bedrooms – should more than one traveller be occupying the rest-house at the same time.

Such a room generally contains a dining-table and four chairs.

This room was furnished; and old, neglected, tattered, dust-covered and derelict as the furniture might be, it had once been drawing-room furniture. There was what had been a handsome screen at each door; there were a sofa and arm-chairs; pictures had once adorned the walls, and the cracked, dirty and insect-riddled remains still hung in their places. In a teak-wood bookcase were the remains of books, now the home of the fish-insect, the ant, the cockroach and the rat. In a corner was a standard lamp, about whose glass chimney and globe still hung the tattered remnants of a silk shade. And beneath my feet was a matting of a very different quality from that of the usual plaited palm-leaf to be found in the ordinary travellers' rest-house. This was of fine Chinese reed-work and had cost money.

And incongruous, in this ghost of a long-dead drawing-room, stood a bed. Beside it, my jungle 'boy' had set up my own folding camp-bed, which looked neat, clean and positively attractive beside the much bigger one, once comparatively sumptuous, now a dubious-looking mass of discoloured, dust-covered silk and grimy linen.

Here and there a gleam of colour showed through dust which lay so thickly as to amount almost to a covering of earth or ash. Part of this, of course, would be the settling dust of years, part a precipitate of fine bamboo and other wood 'saw-dust' that had rained down upon it from the roof and rafters above, as the boring insects proceeded with their

uninterrupted labours of destruction.

A truly dreadful room, suggesting to my mind an aged crone dressed in finery that she had worn for fifty years; a hag, evil and malignant, foul and filthy, yet not only alive, but retaining, beneath the dirt of ages, faint rare glimpses of a former finery.

But why sleep in this drawing-room of a nightmare, when there were apparently four bedrooms opening from this central room?

On a bedside table—who last had used that bedside table, and had it been a man or a woman?—I saw that my boy had placed my Hitchcock lamp, one of those invaluable pieces of camp-furniture which, needing neither chimney nor globe, gives an excellent if fierce light, and whose loud and insistent ticking is something that soothes or maddens the nerves of the lonely listener, according to the state of his mind, or more probably of his liver.

Picking it up, I lit it, and opened the nearest door.

In this room were two beds, a leg-rest chair, and a dressing-table with mirror. The room was in some disorder, and was evidently exactly as it had been left by its last occupants when, hurriedly, they departed.

Returning to the drawing-room and closing the door behind me, I entered the other room on the same side, and discovered similar conditions. This also was a double bedroom, or at any rate a room last occupied by two people, the almost mouldering remains of tumbled bedding, and suggestions of hurried departure, if not sudden flight.

And similarly in the case of the two other bedrooms.

Eight guests—and a ninth person, the host, who had slept in the drawing-room that fatal night—had fled in haste, leaving everything as it stood.

Having made my tour of inspection I sat down in a spacious arm-chair—and almost went through it to the floor. For one hideous moment of imprisonment I struggled in a position of great indignity and extreme discomfort, until I contrived to extricate myself from what was really a very neat trap.

'Good heavens!' thought I, as at length, breathless, I got to my feet and surveyed the now bottomless chair, 'I might have stuck there till I died,' the idiotic thought being in keeping with my frame of mind and my environment. For I should hardly have died before morning, when my boy and the coolies would have come. On the other hand, in that horrible

position, with my knees firmly pressed against my chest, I might very well have died of suffocation, heart failure, or of a broken blood-vessel.

And once again, what rubbish, when my heart was as strong as that of a horse, and my arteries as soft as indiarubber. And yet, fear, horror and despair are not ridiculous; and, for a few seconds, while firmly wedged into that malevolent-seeming chair, endowed with devilish intention, I had been frightened, horrified, and despairing of ever escaping from the trap.

However, fear had its usual reaction, anger, and I felt thoroughly and savagely annoyed—a much healthier mental state.

I would undress and go to bed; and the devil and all his imps could play any game they fancied, in, around, above, and below the bungalow; and I would not so much as open an eye and cast a glance at them.

So I thought, or at any rate, so I told myself, and raising the mosquito curtain, got into bed, tucked the edge of the curtain in, turned the light down very low, closed my eyes and composed myself for sleep.

Suddenly something creaked very loudly. I opened my eyes and sat up; and sleep fled farther from me than ever.

This wouldn't do. If I were going to jump up like that every time there was a creak, I should spend a restless night. But this had been no ordinary creak; and, lest it should seem strange and unreasonable that one should differentiate between one creak and another, I will mention that the sound was precisely that which I myself had made in walking across the wooden floor.

As I have said, the bungalow was supported upon *teangs*, great posts which raised it some twelve feet above the ground; and the floor was of boards, one or two of which, probably owing to shrinkage in dry weather after being swollen during the rains, creaked quite audibly when trodden on, somewhat as do the stairs in all old houses.

I was perfectly certain that someone, probably a bare-footed native, had crossed the room.

Hastily pulling out the linen border of the mosquito-curtain from under the thin mattress of the camp-bed, I turned up the lamp.

The room was empty, of course, and as I perfectly well knew.

Neither my jungle 'boy' nor any coolie would come into the room before dawn, and no dacoit would wander about in that fashion, within a minute of my getting into bed. What a dacoit would do would be to creep up the steps, glide like a ghost—damn that word ghost!—across the veranda and with a rush and a leap, drive his *kris* through my throat.

Or so I argued.

Anyway, there was nobody in the room. Nobody visible, that is to say.

And again I turned down the lamp, tucked in the mosquito curtain, turned on to my right side, firmly closed my eyes, and prayed the old English prayer:

*From bogles and bugaboos, warlocks and wurricoes,
Ghaisties and ghoulies, long-leggity beasties,
And things that go wump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us.*

I closed my eyes but unfortunately I could not close my ears, and the loud creak which was obviously made by someone stepping upon one of those loose boards again sounded through the room, sudden and sharp as the crack of a pistol. That was a gross exaggeration, of course. It was more like the snapping of a twig beneath the unpractised foot in the dry jungle, the tiny resounding snap that warns the stalked prey of the approach of heavy-footed clumsy death—of murder most foul but self-defeated.

For some reason, or for no reason, I suddenly remembered my Irish batman and his favourite formula for use on all occasions.

'Ah, to Hell wit' it then!'

That was the proper attitude of mind and the suitable incantation.

Again the sound of stealthy footsteps . . .

Bosh! That was an absolute boys'-magazine *cliché*. There was no sound of footsteps, stealthy or otherwise—only the noise of someone treading on loose boards.

But surely a ghost, a spirit, a *bhut*, *afrit*, *peh*, was imponderable, without substance, and quite incapable of depressing a warped board.

It wasn't incapable of depressing me, though, and my possibly warped mind.

A loud creak, as someone or something – or nothing – trod on another place where a board under the matting responded beneath the pressure.

'Ah, to Hell wit' it!'

And then, almost with a shriek, I again sprang bolt upright, for a pair of giant hands, with fingers spread from end to end of the keyboard, crashed down upon the keys of the piano, bringing forth a terrific and hideous cacophony, a horrible jangling discord, discernible through which were the sounds of breaking wires.

Good God! Angels and ministers of grace defend us!

I admit that it was with a hand decidedly inclined to tremble that I again turned up the light, and saw that there was no one at the piano, or in the room.

But really, this would not do. This was not only beyond a joke, it was beyond all reason. Clearly and definitely it was beyond reason that invisible hands should strike a crashing chord upon a piano.

I'm sure there are brave men who would have said 'Tut! tut!' Possibly have walked to the piano, played a hymn-tune – *Eternal Father, strong to save*, perhaps – and returned to bed the better for the performance.

Personally, I was much more inclined to get well down under the clothes, pull them over my head, and stay there till a cold or bony hand removed them.

What I did do was to sit and stare, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, while I burst into a cold sweat and tried to find rational explanation for this astonishing – and indeed in that place, at that hour, appalling – phenomenon.

The creaking of the loose boards I could explain away, more or less – in point of fact, very much less – satisfactorily, by remembering how furniture creaks, and indeed bangs, occasionally, in old houses, in the middle of the night. (Though why the devil it should always choose the middle of the night for that exercise is something of a mystery.)

The boards might creak and groan without having been trodden upon by human or non-human foot; it might be their playful habit and old-established custom to wait till midnight and then make precisely the noise they made when a heavy man stepped on them.

But what about the piano? I could not remember ever previously having slept in the same room as a piano, but I was prepared to wager a very large sum that though the wood-work of an aged and neglected piano might conceivably utter a creak or, through the sudden breaking of a wire, emit a doleful jangling *ping*, it could not possibly produce a hellish uproar in which a score of keys and strings were concerned.

I was prepared to admit that in the lonely stillness of the most ordinary drawing-room in the most commonplace bungalow, a piano, through the slipping of a wire, might make one unmusical sound; but it was inconceivable that it should make a hundred hideous jangling noises.

Cursing my cowardice, I turned the light right out.

Staring into the darkness, I could see nothing; and this is not so much a statement of the obvious as it sounds, for the darkness was not complete, not that darkness as of black velvet. The night without was lit by a gibbous moon and the brilliant tropic stars.

No, I could see nothing. But again someone at the piano played a rough and violent discord.

Raising my mosquito-curtain, I struck a match and lit the table-lamp. As I did so, I heard a heavy thud, followed by minor movements.

Lifting the lamp above my head with a hand undoubtedly beginning to tremble, I looked round the room. There was nothing whatsoever to be seen, save the decrepit furniture.

'Another little smoke wouldn't do us any harm,' said I aloud, to show myself how bold a fellow of yet-unshaken nerve was I.

Something rustled in reply.

'Rats!' said I. 'Rats. And this can be taken as a reference to rodents or as a derisive ejaculation.' Which statement, made solemnly and aloud, showed me that, whatever I might pretend, I was nervous. I would get up, light the hanging lamp, turn the small one up, and read until daylight.

No—damned if I would. For the rest of my life I should be ashamed to look myself in the face.

I finished my cigarette, turned out my lamp again, and, as a concession to human frailty and cowardice, took the matches into bed with me, tucked in the mosquito-curtain, and composed myself to slumber.

Never yet have I found any of the devices advocated for

sleep-inducement of the slightest effect or value. Speaking for myself, the only thing is to relax, mind and body, beginning with the muscles of the toes and working up to those of the scalp, consciously relaxing and letting go all holds, one after the other, and finally making the mind a blank – or blanker than usual.

I had worked my way up to the arms, and had just made my hands and forearms utterly inert, when there was what might be called – and indeed must be called, for there is no other description – ‘a ghastly cry’. And the ghastly cry was uttered within the room.

It was something between a moan, a wail, and a scream. I struck a match. It broke, fell on to the bedclothes, and went out. And in the brief half-second of light, I saw what again might be called – indeed must be called, for there is no other description – ‘something white’, a ghostly figure that crossed the room.

I struck another match, pulled up the mosquito-curtain with a great air of resolution and determination to look into the matter and do something, only to discover that there was no matter into which to look, and nothing to be done. There was no sound in the room, and certainly there was no ‘something white’.

‘And this is where another little drink wouldn’t do us any harm,’ said I.

In point of fact, it had no opportunity to do any harm or any good, for I had nothing to drink save a little soda-water in the bottle left by my jungle ‘boy’. There was not even the *nam tohn* of porous clay with a tin cup inverted over its neck, usually to be found in *dak* bungalows; and, had there been one, I should have hesitated to drink from it. Why, it is difficult to say. What is the difference between germ-infested water brought straight from the nearest *huey* or pond to the bungalow, and water of the native-owned soda-water shop? Of the two, perhaps the soda-water is the more dangerous, as its inhabitant microbes must be in a higher state of stimulation and activity – not to mention the mud and other filth encrusted in the neck of the soda-water bottle.

Having decided, I drank the soda-water and lay down, after noting that, according to my watch, the night was still young, the hour being but two o’clock. Well, plenty of time for plenty of doings . . .

Soon I fell asleep—even as do men who await the dawn firing-party or the gaol officials who come to lead them to the scaffold. In that cheery frame of mind.

Anyhow, I must have slept, because undoubtedly I was awakened. How much of what I experienced in the act of awakening was dream, how much imagination, and how much an utterly unreal reality, I don't know, but I do know that from a dream or from dreamless sleep I awoke to the knowledge that there was a party in progress in the room. I must have been in the act of opening my eyes as I saw lights, the forms of men, heard speech and laughter; and what is more, noticed that it was slurred speech and over-noisy laughter.

So certain was I of this, that, in the moment of sitting up and going to raise my mosquito-curtain once more, the feeling uppermost in my mind was one of indignation. What right had these fellows to come carousing and bingeing in my room at three or four o'clock in the morning? A most disgusting exhibition of caddish ill-manners, and I threw up the curtain, prepared to speak my mind to that effect.

Of course there were no bright lights; there was no sound of revelry by night.

But there was . . .

They were trooping down the steps from the veranda to the garden. And as for a second I listened, now terrified rather than indignant, I knew that the merry party, instead of spreading itself over the garden with joyous whoops, drunken shouts and alcoholic song, turned in under the bungalow among the *teangs*, the great pillars of *meribau* wood that supported the house.

Distinctly I heard them. Distinctly I heard a crash, as of something heavy overturned. Distinctly I heard shouts and cries which were not merry nor amusing; and, finally, a sound such as I hope never to hear again. Those who have heard the scream of a wounded horse will have some idea of the blood-curdling horror of that dreadful cry, a clear-cut shocking shriek that seemed to freeze the marrow in my bones and cause the hair of my head to stand on end.

I had had enough.

Getting out of bed and pulling on my boots, I lit the Hitchcock lamp, turned it up until its flame was as high as it would go, and was thankful for its steady brilliance, and the fact that

it needed neither globe nor chimney which might have blackened and broken and obscured the light.

And holding high my lamp, I crossed the veranda, descended the steps and boldly – yes, boldly! – plunged into the midst of whatever might be happening in the pillared gloom of the dreadful place beneath the bungalow.

For it was dreadful.

Not because of anything that was there, but because there was nothing there. No sign or sound of human being, animal, ghost or spirit briefly incarnate.

Save for the fact that it had no outer walls, the place was like a crypt, the big baulks of timber that supported the house suggesting Norman pillars of stone. Several feet above my head were the boards of the floor of the room from which I had just come. Beneath my feet was what had been hard-beaten earth, now in parts thinly covered by sickly weeds. No sign whatsoever of human visitation or occupation was there, save the collapsed timbers of what had been a big packing-case.

I was defeated: and promptly and willingly admitting defeat, fled from the place, mounted the steps and re-entered my bed-drawing-room.

Compared with the cellar-like place beneath the house, this horrible and haunted room seemed almost attractive; for inimical as was its atmosphere, it was not as fear-compelling as the other.

Here above, I felt fear. There below, I felt a horror and a terror fearful beyond fear.

A return to bed, somnolence, and an attitude of defenceless acquiescence were out of the question, and I began to dress, involuntarily glancing over my shoulder, swiftly turning about to see what was behind me, as I did so.

And on this occasion, as not infrequently before, I was glad that I was an extremely temperate person, and that for me, alcohol had no attraction. (Incidentally I really do not make this idiosyncrasy a cause for any self-approval. If I liked alcohol I should drink it.) I was glad because all that I had heard and the little I had seen, really *had* been heard and seen. There was no question of it. It was no alcohol-induced or drug-begotten fantasy. I had heard sounds when wide awake, as widely awake as I was now, doing up my buttons.

True, I had awakened suddenly to see lights and hear sounds that might have been part of a dream; but I felt absolutely

convinced that they had also been part of waking experience.

Well, '*There are more things in Heaven and earth . . .*'

And whether I had been imagining things, dreaming dreams and seeing visions, or not, one thing was certain: nothing on earth, absolutely nothing, would induce me to spend another night in this place; nay, nor another hour more than was necessary for my getting away from it.

II

Next night I camped in the jungle, a most unpleasant night of wind and rain and conditions that defeated even my accomplished Lao cook and jungle 'boy'. A night that should have been memorable for its acute and complicated discomfort, but which, in point of fact, is memorable for its sweet peacefulness, a sweetness unsoured by cold driving rain and devilish plucking wind, a peace unbroken by the heaviest crashes of violent thunder-storms. Sweetness and peace, because this was the jungle, and not that fear-stricken, horror-infested bungalow.

What were tigers, leopards, king cobras, scorpions, leeches – and the greatest of these is leeches – compared with one sound, one sight, in that house of dread?

The following night I slept in a *Wat*.

We reached it at sundown, and it had an air of solid comfort very reassuring to me after what I had been through. It was but a small *Wat* situated at the end of a green path which led to it from the road, a distance of about two hundred yards. Its outer court or hall of stone was clean and had a well-cared-for air about it. This outer hall had no walls and its stone roof was supported on four heavy stone pillars. Near the entrance was an ancient sacred *Boh*-tree whose branches were so heavy that each one had to be supported by a pole resting on the earth.

The *Wat* was empty save for one *poogni* in a yellow robe, who was chanting before the stone image of Buddha, and he took no notice of me, until, presently departing, he gave me the usual greeting of '*Sabai-ga*?'* to which I answered the usual '*Sabai*!'†

In front of the enormous effigy of the Buddha were arranged the heterogeneous collection of offerings which are usually to

* 'Are you well?' † 'Quite well.'

be found in these *Wats* and which never cease to astonish one, by reason of their strange variety.

There were stone jam-jars containing dead flowers, cheap alarm-clocks, such as are found in the village-shops in England, bunches of dried flowers, brightly coloured feathers, celluloid or glass balls, bits of coloured china, tin and enamel mugs. There were also numerous candles stuck in the melted wax of others long-since burnt-out. These candles are only lit at festival times, when the villagers come to make their offerings.

Here in this place was Peace, for over it brooded the spirit of the Buddha, beneficent, well-wishing; and the pious founder of the temple had been one who fain would acquire merit.

In it I slept peacefully.

On the next day my 'boy', leading our little party, suddenly turned aside and took a path even narrower and fainter than that on which we were. Some little distance down this path was a bamboo *pahng* or *sala*, built in a clearing in the jungle. It is not unusual to find these shelters in various parts of the dense forests. They are quite unfurnished and empty, and may be used by any passing traveller who happens to know where they are situated. The walls and floor are made of split bamboo. While perfectly strong and adequate, the bamboo floor is apt to be rather disconcerting when one walks on one of them for the first time, for it springs up and down with every movement, and it is difficult to keep one's balance until one becomes accustomed to the feeling of walking on springs.

This particular *pahng* was very charmingly situated. Behind it rose a steep hillside covered with small teak-trees which were in flower. There were also many shrubs, with leaves of various shades of red and gold. In front of the *pahng* was the clearing, beyond which were the tall trees of the forest, and growing up one side of the shelter itself was a thick bush of the pale pink Honolulu creeper which someone had, at some time or other, planted there . . .

Here again I slept in peace, and on the following night reached the house of an American medical missionary.

The Reverend Dr Gates proved to be a most interesting man, the soul of hospitality, as unlike the missionary of nitwit fiction as a man could be; and most definitely a doctor, an ethnologist, botanist, zoologist and general scientist long before he was a parson. When, purely for the sake of making conver-

sation, a thing that at first has to be made when one meets a man who has not spoken his own language for months or years, I somewhat fatuously asked him if he had made many converts, he somewhat disconcertingly replied:

'Converts to what?' and later admitted modestly that he had possibly converted a few Wild Was to tameness, a few Karens and possibly one or two arboreal Mois, to elementary ideas of hygiene and handicraft.

Anyhow, shy jungle-folk came to him with their wives and other troubles, realizing that his methods of *accouchement* were better than those of their own witch-doctors, who did not invariably get the best results from their method of roasting the expectant mother before a large fire in the jungle . . .

After an excellent dinner that night, we settled down to talk, and, having lived long enough to know when the most successful conversationalist is he who uses his ears far more than his mouth, I got the doctor to tell me of his life work.

And when the good doctor at length fell silent, after apologizing for having talked so much, and I had told him it was the best talk I had had for years, I introduced the subject that, even so, was uppermost in my mind.

'Do you believe in ghosts, Doctor?' I asked as he stuffed his pipe.

'Ghosts?' he laughed. 'Depends entirely on what you mean by ghosts. I haven't an unshakable belief in the chain-rattling figure of the wicked Sir Giles who crosses the moonlit hall at midnight; nor much in the Grey Lady who is discovered sitting in costume in the music room at sunset on St John's Eve. Why? Do you believe in ghosts?'

'Depends entirely on what you mean by ghosts,' I smiled. 'I didn't believe in any sort or kind of ghost until last Monday night. Now I have to do so.'

'Last Monday night. Let's see. Four marches back. Ah! That means the abandoned bungalow just over the Border, the one they tried to turn into a rest-house. Stayed a night there, did you? What happened?'

'Oh, a lot of funny things. First of all, a ghost walked up and down the room in the silence and the darkness - breaking the stillness of the night by causing the boards to creak beneath his weight.'

'The weight of a ghost!' smiled the doctor.

'Weight of something,' I said.

'Well, deal with that first. Suppose a leopard came in and padded to the end of the room and back, looking for your dog, as they do.'

'I should have smelt it.'

'Probably.'

'I should have heard its claws on the boards.'

'One doesn't, in point of fact,' said the doctor. And from the way in which he spoke, he had evidently been in the same room with a leopard and darkness by night.

'Anyway, we needn't go as far as that. The boards creaked and groaned as the temperature fell. Or, more likely still, as they imperceptibly moved back into place after your weight had rested on them.'

I nodded. 'Pass up.'

'Next thing?'

'Something – probably not a leopard – came and played the piano.'

'Recognize the tune?'

'No. There was no tune. In point of fact, it was a God Almighty (excuse me!) crash, as though some giant had suddenly struck every key in three octaves simultaneously. And so hard that some of the wires broke.'

'Yes. Very disturbing in the middle of the night, and admittedly not a leopard. I'll tell you what happened.'

'Thank you,' said I, perhaps a shade sceptically.

'An iguana fell from a horizontal roof-beam. Full length on to, and as it happened, exactly parallel to, the keyboard.'

'Yes . . .' I admitted. 'That would serve.'

'Do iguanas get up in the roof?' I asked.

'Not that I know of,' admitted Dr Gates frankly. 'But there's a mighty big lizard – they call it the *goh* – up here . . .'

'What, the Siamese *toctaw*?' I asked.

'A bit bigger,' said Gates. 'Though I don't know that I've ever seen one that would cover three octaves on the piano.'

'A snake could, of course,' he added.

'Yes,' I mused. 'But it would be funny if a snake fell rigid in a straight line, like that, wouldn't it?'

'Extremely funny, except for the person who was there listening to it,' admitted Gates. 'But if a big snake fell ten or fifteen feet on to a keyboard of a piano, there would be some noise.'

'Or I'll tell you what it might have been,' he continued.

'Not an iguana, but an ichneumon.'

'Civet-cat,' said I, proud of my worldly knowledge.

'Yes, same sort of thing. Now, they do inhabit roofs, and they are apt to drop most suddenly and somewhat alarmingly from the roof to the floor. It might have been an ichneumon. I had a nice little chap here, tame as a cat. Used to worry my dog frightfully, although I had taught him to accept the hitherto-wild jungle beast as a house companion. 'Tricks' was a big Airedale. Stood about a foot and a half high, and the civet-cat, Jo, used to stalk him. As Tricks walked past its hiding-place Jo would run out, climb on to Tricks's hind leg, run up and along the dog's back and perch on his head just above his nose. I'm afraid it was the bane of poor Tricks's life, but he put up with it very patiently.'

'Well, iguana, *goh*, *toctaw*, or ichneumon for the piano playing. Pass up. But by the way, the piano was played twice!'

'Yes, that was the iguana or *goh* scrambling off the piano, after resting, a bit winded from his fall, of course.'

'H'm. Well, the next thing was an eerie shudder-making cry in the room, and an indisputable glimpse of the "something white" of ghostly fiction. This was fact.'

'Let's see,' pondered the doctor. 'Yes, I think we can dispose of that. There's a very large white owl in these parts, whose nocturnal habits are not blameless. He's quite equal to a sudden swoop right through your bungalow, in at the back and out at the front, uttering a shriek to curdle your blood as he does so.'

'Is he intentionally offensive?'

'No - it's a - you know - "*This is the house that Jack Built*" sort of sequence. Tiny insects such as mosquitoes and moths fly about; bats come in and catch the flying insects, and the huge white owl comes in to catch the bats. That was your ghost.'

I nodded. 'Pass up.'

'He's rather an interesting chap, that bird. Biggest owl in the world, and the natives always attribute its cry to a *peh*, and compare the owl to the *peh-nawk*. When they hear it, they hurry inside their huts and, if possible, shut themselves in. And curiously enough, the cicadas seem to share their fear or dislike, for they always cease their shrilling, and the jungle becomes comparatively silent for some time after the cry has been heard. Some people think the cicadas shut up because

they know that the owl eats them, and they realize that their natural enemy is near at hand. Anything else?’

‘Anything!’ I smiled. These were only *hors d'oeuvres variés*. Yes, there was something else . . . I fell asleep, a fact that I frankly admit, and I awoke from a dream, another fact that I frankly admit, and the dream continued for a few seconds, so to speak, as I awoke—and a rowdy party that was in my dream was continued in my room . . . I am sure that, for a few seconds, or perhaps for part of one second, I was literally wide awake to the fact that this party was going on.’

‘And then?’ inquired Gates.

‘I found that the room was in darkness, and that the party was trooping down the steps and going in under the bungalow.’

Dr Gates eyed me steadily.

‘Explanations please?’ I smiled.

‘Ah! Now you’re asking for something,’ was the quiet reply. ‘But haven’t you . . . Haven’t you . . . something else to tell me?’

‘Well, only that I lit my lamp, got up, pulled on my boots, and went down to investigate.’

‘Good for you,’ said Gates. ‘I know exactly how you felt, but what I meant was, haven’t you something else to tell me about the—er—party?’

‘No . . . No . . . Oh, yes. Of course! Above the laughter and voices, I distinctly heard a crash.’

‘Sort of noise made by an *almirah** falling down on its face?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Yes . . . Yes . . . ?’

‘And then a most appalling scream. The most utterly dreadful sound I had ever heard in my life.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Dr Gates. And I say ‘agreed’ advisedly. For obviously he had been expecting me to say just what I had said.

‘I might of course produce the *peh-nawk* to account for the scream, but I won’t.’

‘What is it? And why not?’ I asked.

‘What is it? The *peh-nawk* is probably the bird I mentioned just now. It must be a bird. Nobody has seen it, but all

* Big cupboard or wardrobe.

jungle-dwellers have heard it. I rank myself as a jungle-dweller, and I have heard it. Like the natives themselves, I would pay down quite a perceptible little sum in hard cash rather than hear it again. And I'd travel a mighty long way round a place where it was likely to be heard. And the reason why I won't blame the noise you heard on to the *peh-nawk* is because it wasn't made by one.'

'By what was it made then?'

'Now, my friend, you are asking another question. I will reply with a story. A story that I think will answer that question. Also answer the first one of the series, and that was, "*Do you believe in ghosts?*"'

'Geoffrey Walsh-Kurnock built that bungalow and laid out that plantation in that particular spot because, amongst other considerations – climate, soil, water, labour and so on – it was in what he considered the Unadministered Territory. This Mission is, of course, undeniably in Unadministered Territory, and at the moment you are neither in China nor Burma; neither in Siam nor Cambodia. You are nowhere, in fact. Not on any map, at least.

'And Geoffrey had the idea that if he made his plantation and built his bungalow where he did, he'd be free. No one would have any right to interfere with him.

'He was a curious chap and that was one of his idiosyncrasies – freedom . . . As if anyone is free – anywhere.

'However, I was glad enough when he came up this way, for it made my nearest neighbour only sixty miles away. What one might call quite near. One could have a monthly chat with a fellow white man. We got along famously, with our dozen talks a year; and, though we didn't see eye to eye on many things, we had a mutual respect and the bond of total dissimilarity.

'He did me a lot of good, broadened my outlook, and made me more tolerant; and I tried to do him a bit of good so far as that was possible without being offensive – though I must admit it ended in my insisting on his coming and seeing me here instead of my going there, for I really am an awfully poor hand at orgy-making. I don't play cards, I don't drink and – I don't like being a wet blanket. And whenever Geoffrey sent a messenger over, inviting me to his place for the first Saturday

in the month, I knew what it meant. It meant, among other things, a wild party. For his monthly feasts became famous; and forest-officers and young teak men; wandering prospectors who had an idea that anybody who went off the beaten track was likely to stumble over large rubies, ingots of silver or lumps of jade; elephant hunters; and occasionally some of those wonderful people who catch large free wild beasts alive, and put them in little iron cages; were apt to be among his guests.

'Anyhow, a party, large or small, there always was, on the first Saturday in the month, at Walsh-Kurnock's place. Of course, it was famous, apart from its hospitality, by reason of its being unique, positively the only plantation in this part of the world, the only place for hundreds of miles where a white man, or any other man, tried to grow kapok, tea and rubber.

'Naturally it has all gone back to jungle now, and I doubt whether any of it would have done much good, unless, possibly, it was the kapok, though I have an idea that 'there was more in, and behind, Walsh-Kurnock than met the eye.'

The doctor fell silent as he eased the tobacco in his pipe and looked extremely thoughtful.

'In what way?' I asked.

'I don't know. It was no more than wild theory on my own part, but it was such an unlikely place for such an unlikely man, that there must have been more to it than met the eye. I don't know. Oil . . . rubies . . . jade . . . silver . . . a Consular official watching Chinese encroachment from the North? And then again, it might have been just agoraphobia, just his idiosyncratic love of solitude, his yearning to escape from his fellow-man. And yet there were the wild parties . . . I don't know.

'Well, one Friday afternoon, the day before one of the monthly gatherings of half a score of people who came from all over half a score thousand square miles, Geoffrey Walsh-Kurnock was sitting on the veranda of that bungalow having tea, when there came along the track leading to the bungalow a party of Kamoo jungle-men, personally conducting a gigantic python. They do, you know, in the most extraordinary manner, something like a couple of agricultural labourers leading a bull, at Home. When he thinks he'll charge to the right, the man on the left pulls him back, and when he thinks he'll charge

to the left, the man on the right pulls him back, and if he thinks he'll bolt straight ahead, they both pull him back.

'Same with a python. These folk tie a rattan rope round his neck, and a band of them gets at each end of it, and they lead him along. If he won't go straight ahead, they drag him. If he goes too fast, they put the brake on. If he wants to go left or right, they do exactly as the bull-leaders do.

'Perhaps you are wondering why they took the trouble to bring this great brute – over twenty-five feet long and as thick as a man's thigh – to call on Walsh-Kurnock. It was because he was assembling specimens of the fauna of this part of the world, to give, or possibly to sell, to a man who was making a collection for the New York Museum of Natural History.

'So he extended a cordial welcome to what was the very finest specimen of a snake he had ever seen.

'The next problem was how to house it worthily and safely until Brooke came for it. Suddenly he remembered a packing-case in which his piano had arrived. Incidentally, just fancy a man going to the expense and trouble of getting a piano up here.'

'How on earth did he do it?' I asked.

'Well, I should imagine every form of known transport was used between the warehouse in Bangkok and that bungalow; train, sampan, elephant, bullock-cart, and mostly human beast-of-burden. That piano must have come on men's heads through swamp and jungle, over hill-track and forest-path, like a stag-beetle carried by ants.

'Well, into the piano packing-case, without apology or ceremony, went the huge python, a big stone was placed on the lid, the Kamoo coolies then being handsomely rewarded with a five-satang piece – about a penny – each.

'Geoffrey returned to his tea. Nor, we may imagine, did he give the snake another thought until, at the height of the party next night, when, the champagne dinner finished – it was always champagne for the guests at Geoffrey's monthly party – and the brandy-and-soda flowing; the Devil put it into somebody's mouth to say:

"If you drink much more, Geoff, you'll be seeing snakes."

They had been amusing themselves by trying to snuff a burning candle standing on the veranda rail, at twenty paces, with revolvers fired from the back of the room, when Walsh-

Kurnock, who had been very successful, asked if anyone would let him shoot the candle off the top of his head – like William Tell and the apple.

There was an Austrian there, a queer chap with a highly polished bald head – he was a man who was trying to grow cotton a hundred miles east of Walsh-Kurnock's place – and Geoffrey particularly wanted to drop some hot wax on his bald cranium, stick the candle in it, light it, and snuff the flame at twenty paces.

'But the Austrian, though otherwise a sensible man, objected.

"No, you're drunk, Geoff," said he. "If you drink much more, you'll be seeing snakes in a minute."

'And that was what reminded him.

"Snakes!" he cried. "Adam and Eve! I'll show you a snake! I've got the very one that escaped from the Garden of Eden, downstairs. Come and have a look."

'And picking up the candle and telling someone else to bring the lamp, he led the way down those steps and they all trooped in under the bungalow.

"Here, catch hold of this," he said to somebody, gave him the candle, went to pull the big stone off the top of the packing-case, and overturned the whole thing.

There was a crash, as it went over and the stone and lid fell away, releasing the enormous python. Before that lot of drunken and half-drunken and wine-excited young men knew it, that twenty-five feet of immeasurable deadly strength was among them. The man holding the lamp, backing away, fell over the stone, dropping the lamp as he did so. The lamp went out. The man who held the candle fled for his life, and as the rest turned, shouting, scrambling, stumbling in the pitch darkness, bumping into the *teangs*, they heard a scream that curdled their blood.

'It was one of them who told me all this, and I shall never forget the phrase he used:

"It was a shrieking scream of agony and fear that seemed to rend the very fabric of the night with a gigantic tearing sound that pierced one's ear-drums."

'He wasn't an Englishman, as you may imagine.

The first man who returned with a light held above his head saw Geoffrey Walsh-Kurnock bound to one of the twelve-foot *teangs* by a gigantic rope, a living rope, the python – whose open mouth and coldly glaring eyes hovered a few

inches from those of its victim, its crushed and mangled victim, in whose body every single bone was broken a dozen times.'

'Yes, I heard every detail of the whole affair from an eye-witness, the man who saw him in the serpent's coils. He came straight here, just as quickly as he could travel, and I had to nurse him for quite a while, before he was fit to take up life again.'

We sat a while in silence.

'Before I leave this place, if I ever do,' said Dr Gates, 'I shall come to believe that I too was an eye-witness – instead of only an ear-witness – of what happened that night.'

'A what?'

'An ear-witness. Like yourself. The night I slept there, I heard – exactly what you did. I don't mean the creakings of the dry floor-boards nor the falling of the lizard on to the piano and the hooting of the owl; but the laughter, the descent to the place beneath, the brief hubbub, and then the cry.'

'Do we believe in ghosts, you and I, Doctor?' I asked.

'No, no, of course not. Aren't we rational, sensible men? We each dreamed a dream, a nightmare, rather; and were wakened by the scream of the *peh-nawk*.'

'Quite so,' I agreed. 'Obviously . . . But, tell me. What was your chief essential fundamental sensation, your real mental reaction, to that bungalow?'

'Fear. Soul-shaking, mind-enfeebling, body-devitalizing *fear*,' he replied.

'Mine too,' I admitted. 'There I really knew fear.'

THE FURNISHED ROOM

O. Henry

Restless, shifting, fugacious as time itself is a certain vast bulk of the population of the red brick district of the lower West Side. Homeless, they have a hundred homes. They flit from furnished room to furnished room, transients forever—transients in abode, transients in heart and mind. They sing 'Home, Sweet Home' in ragtime; they carry their *lares et penates* in a bandbox; their vine is entwined about a picture hat; a rubber plant is their fig tree.

Hence the houses of this district, having had a thousand dwellers, should have a thousand tales to tell, mostly dull ones, no doubt; but it would be strange if there could not be found a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant guests.

One evening after dark a young man prowled among these crumbling red mansions, ringing their bells. At the twelfth he rested his lean hand-baggage upon the step and wiped the dust from his hat-band and forehead. The bell sounded faint and far away in some remote, hollow depths.

To the door of this, the twelfth house whose bell he had rung, came a housekeeper who made him think of an unwholesome, surfeited worm that had eaten its nut to a hollow shell and now sought to fill the vacancy with edible lodgers.

He asked if there was a room to let.

'Come in,' said the housekeeper. Her voice came from her throat; her throat seemed lined with fur. 'I have the third-floor back, vacant since a week back. Should you wish to look at it?'

The young man followed her up the stairs. A faint light from no particular source mitigated the shadows of the halls. They trod noiselessly upon a stair carpet that its own loom would have forsworn. It seemed to have become vegetable; to have degenerated in that rank, sunless air to lush lichen or spreading moss that grew in patches to the staircase and was viscid under the foot like organic matter. At each turn of the stairs were vacant niches in the wall. Perhaps plants had once been set within them. If so they had died in that foul and tainted air. It may be that statues of the saints had stood there, but it was not difficult to conceive that imps and devils had

dragged them forth in the darkness and down to the unholy depths of some furnished pit below.

'This is the room,' said the housekeeper, from her furry throat. 'It's a nice room. It ain't often vacant. I had some most elegant people in it last summer—no trouble at all, and paid in advance to the minute. The water's at the end of the hall. Sprowls and Mooney kept it three months. They done a vaudeville sketch. Miss B'retta Sprowls—you may have heard of her—Oh, that was just the stage names—right there over the dresser is where the marriage certificate hung, framed. The gas is here, and you see there is plenty of closet room. It's a room everybody likes. It never stays idle long.'

'Do you have many theatrical people rooming here?' asked the young man.

'They comes and goes. A good proportion of my lodgers is connected with the theatres. Yes, sir, this is the theatrical district. Actor people never stays long anywhere. I get my share. Yes, they comes and they goes.'

He engaged the room, paying for a week in advance. He was tired, he said, and would take possession at once. He counted out the money. The room had been made ready, she said, even to towels and water. As the housekeeper moved away he put, for the thousandth time, the question that he carried at the end of his tongue.

'A young girl—Miss Vashner—Miss Eloise Vashner—do you remember such a one among your lodgers? She would be singing on the stage, most likely. A fair girl, of medium height, and slender, with reddish, gold hair and a dark mole near her left eyebrow.'

'No, I don't remember the name. Them stage people has names they change as often as their rooms. They comes and they goes. No, I don't call that one to mind.'

No. Always no. Five months of ceaseless interrogation and the inevitable negative. So much time spent by day in questioning managers, agents, schools and choruses; by night among the audiences of theatres from all-star casts down to music halls so low that he dreaded to find what he most hoped for. He who had loved her best had tried to find her. He was sure that since her disappearance from home this great, water-girt city held her somewhere, but it was like a monstrous quicksand, shifting its particles constantly, with no foundation, its upper granules of today buried tomorrow in ooze and slime.

The furnished room received its latest guest with a first glow of pseudo-hospitality, a hectic, haggard, perfunctory welcome like the specious smile of a demirep. The sophisticated comfort came in reflected gleams from the decayed furniture, the ragged brocade upholstery of a couch and two chairs, a foot-wide cheap pier glass between the two windows, from one or two gilt picture frames and a brass bedstead in a corner.

The guest reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel, tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry.

A polychromatic rug like some brilliant-flowered rectangular, tropical islet lay surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay-papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless one from house to house—*The Huguenot Lovers*, *The First Quarrel*, *The Wedding Breakfast*, *Psyche at the Fountain*. The mantel's chastely severe outline was ingloriously veiled behind some pert drapery drawn rakishly askew like the sashes of the Amazonian ballet. Upon it was some desolate flotsam cast aside by the room's marooned when a lucky sail had borne them to a fresh port—a trifling vase or two, pictures of actresses, a medicine bottle, some stray cards out of a deck.

One by one, as the characters of a cryptograph become explicit, the little signs left by the furnished room's procession of guests developed a significance. The threadbare space in the rug in front of the dresser told that lovely women had marched in the throng. Tiny finger prints on the wall spoke of little prisoners trying to feel their way to sun and air. A splattered stain, raying like a shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurled glass or bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall. Across the pier glass had been scrawled with a diamond in staggering letters the name 'Marie'. It seemed that the succession of dwellers in the furnished room had turned in fury—perhaps tempted beyond forbearance by its garish coldness—and wreaked upon it their passions. The furniture was chipped and bruised; the couch, distorted by bursting springs, seemed a horrible monster that had been slain during the stress of some grotesque convulsion. Some more potent upheaval had cloven a great slice from the marble mantel. Each plank in the floor owned its particular cant and shriek as from a separate and individual agony. It seemed incredible that all this malice and injury had been wrought

upon the room by those who had called it for a time their home; and yet it may have been the cheated home instinct surviving blindly, the resentful rage at false household gods that had kindled their wrath. A hut that is our own we can sweep and adorn and cherish.

The young tenant in the chair allowed these thoughts to file, soft-shod, through his mind, while there drifted into the room furnished sounds and furnished scents. He heard in one room a tittering and incontinent, slack laughter; in others the monologue of a scold, the rattling of dice, a lullaby, and one crying dully; above him a banjo tinkled with spirit. Doors banged somewhere, the elevated trains roared intermittently; a cat yowled miserably upon a back fence. And he breathed the breath of the house—a dank savour rather than a smell—a cold, musty effluvium as from underground vaults mingled with the reeking exhalations of linoleum and mildewed and rotten woodwork.

Then, suddenly, as he rested there, the room was filled with the strong, sweet odour of mignonette. It came as upon a single buffet of wind with such sureness and fragrance and emphasis that it almost seemed a living visitant. And the man cried aloud: 'What, dear?' as if he had been called, and sprang up and faced about. The rich odour clung to him and wrapped him around. He reached out his arms for it, all his senses for the time confused and commingled. How could one be peremptorily called by an odour? Surely it must have been a sound. But, was it not the sound that had touched, that had caressed him?

'She has been in this room,' he cried, and he sprang to wrest from it a token, for he knew he would recognize the smallest thing that had belonged to her or that she had touched. This enveloping scent of mignonette, the odour that she had loved and made her own—whence came it?

The room had been but carelessly set in order. Scattered upon the flimsy dresser scarf were half a dozen hairpins—those discreet, indistinguishable friends of womankind, feminine of gender, infinite of mood and uncommunicative of tense. These he ignored, conscious of their triumphant lack of identity. Ransacking the drawers of the dresser he came upon a discarded, tiny, ragged handkerchief. He pressed it to his face. It was racy and insolent with heliotrope; he hurled it to the floor. In another drawer he found odd buttons, a theatre

programme, a pawnbroker's card, two lost marshmallows, a book on the divination of dreams. In the last was a woman's black satin hair-bow, which halted him, poised between ice and fire. But the black satin hair-bow also is femininity's demure, impersonal, common ornament, and tells no tales.

And then he traversed the room like a hound on the scent, skimming the walls, considering the corners of the bulging matting on his hands and knees, rummaging mantel and tables, the curtains and hangings, the drunken cabinet in the corner, for a visible sign, unable to perceive that she was there beside, around, against, within, above him, clinging to him, wooing him, calling him so poignantly through the finer senses that even his grosser ones became cognisant of the call. Once again he answered loudly: 'Yes dear!' and turned, wild-eyed, to gaze on vacancy, for he could not yet discern form and colour and love and outstretched arms in the odour of mignonette. Oh, God! whence that odour, and since when have odours had a voice to call? Thus he groped.

He burrowed in crevices and corners, and found corks and cigarettes. These he passed in passive contempt. But once he found in a fold of the matting a half-smoked cigar, and this he ground beneath his heel with a green and trenchant oath. He sifted the room from end to end. He found dreary and ignoble small records of many a peripatetic tenant; but of her whom he sought, and who may have lodged there, and whose spirit seemed to hover there, he found no trace.

And then he thought of the housekeeper.

He ran from the haunted room downstairs and to a door that showed a crack of light. She came out to his knock. He smothered his excitement as best he could.

'Will you tell me, madam,' he besought her, 'who occupied the room I have before I came?'

'Yes, sir. I can tell you again. 'Twas Sprowls and Mooney, as I said. Miss B'retta Sprowls it was in the theatres, but Missis Mooney she was. My house is well known for respectability. The marriage certificate hung, framed, on a nail over -'

'What kind of a lady was Miss Sprowls - in looks, I mean?'

'Why, black-haired, sir, short, and stout, with a comical face. They left a week ago Tuesday.'

'And before they occupied it?'

'Why, there was a single gentleman connected with the draying business. He left owing me a week. Before him was

Missis Crowder and her two children, they stayed four months; and back of them was old Mr Doyle, whose sons paid for him. He kept the room six months. That goes back a year, sir, and further I do not remember.'

He thanked her and crept back to his room. The room was dead. The essence that had vivified it was gone. The perfume of mignonette had departed. In its place was the old, stale odour of mouldy house furniture, of atmosphere in storage.

The ebbing of his hope drained his faith. He sat staring at the yellow, singing gaslight. Soon he walked to the bed and began to tear the sheets into strips. With the blade of his knife he drove them tightly into every crevice around windows and door. When all was snug and taut he turned out the light, turned the gas full on again and laid himself gratefully upon the bed.

It was Mrs McCool's night to go with the can for beer. So she fetched it and sat with Mrs Purdy in one of those subterranean retreats where housekeepers forgather and the worm dieth seldom.

'I rented out my third floor, back, this evening,' said Mrs Purdy, across a fine circle of foam. 'A young man took it. He went up to bed two hours ago.'

'Now, did ye, Missis Purdy, ma'am?' said Mrs McCool, with intense admiration. 'You do be a wonder for rentin' rooms of that kind. And did ye tell him, then?' she concluded in a husky whisper, laden with mystery.

'Rooms,' said Mrs Purdy, in her furriest tones, 'are furnished for to rent. I did not tell him, Mrs McCool.'

'Tis right ye are, ma'am; 'tis by renting rooms we kape alive. Ye have the rale sense for business, ma'am. There be many people will rayjict the rentin' of a room if they be tould a suicide has been after dyin' in the bed of it.'

'As you say, we has our living to be making,' remarked Mrs Purdy.

'Yis, ma'am, 'tis true. 'Tis just one wake ago this day I helped ye lay out the third floor, back. A pretty slip of a colleen she was to be killin' herself wid the gas – a swate little face she had, Mrs Purdy, ma'am.'

'She'd a-been called handsome, as you say,' said Mrs Purdy, assenting but critical, 'but for that mole she had a-growin' by her left eyebrow. Do fill up your glass again, Missis McCool.'

TO KEEP HIM COMPANY

Rosemary Timperley

They came to him only when he was by himself, as when he went into the garden to play or was sent up to bed in his little room. There were three of them, two boys and one girl. He accepted their presence naturally, almost as if they were part of him. Yet they did tend to boss him a little sometimes, and when he asked: 'Why should I do what you say?' they would reply: 'Because we're older than you are.' Yet they didn't look any older.

'I'm the oldest,' the dark boy told him, 'he's next,' pointing to the fair boy, 'she's next,' indicating the girl, 'and you're the baby.'

'But I'm not a baby,' Tim protested with the dignity of five years behind him.

'You'll always be the baby to us,' said the girl, 'cos you're the youngest.'

But it wasn't often that they argued. Usually he just enjoyed the pleasure of their company. He was an only child, therefore a lonely child, and their presence blurred the edge of that loneliness. When he sat in the sun on the grass in the garden, he liked to see them hovering around, and when he was sent to bed early on summer nights it was good to have a chat with them before going to sleep.

He never mentioned them to his parents. He didn't really know why but some deep awareness prevented him.

When first he went to school, they came with him. For although he could hardly be called 'alone' at school with all the other children around, it was aloneness compared with being at home. He sat at a small desk and was aware of them lingering round him when all the other desks were occupied. Once he said to the teacher: 'Can't they sit down?'

'Who, Tim?' she asked. 'Everyone is sitting down.'

How queer that she couldn't see them. Perhaps she had bad sight . . .

In the playground he didn't at first join in with the other children's games. He stayed with his special three.

The teacher asked: 'Tim, why do you always play by yourself?'

'I don't,' said Tim.

'You funny little boy – of course you do.'

He almost said: 'No, I don't,' but refrained. It was wiser not to argue with a teacher however stupid she was.

But as time passed he did begin to fit in better with his classmates, and when that happened his three would leave him, returning only at bedtime to keep him wistful company.

Once he whispered to them: 'Don't ever leave me. Don't go away.'

The girl said: 'We're always here when you want us.'

'But I always want you!' Tim protested.

'No you don't,' said the dark boy. 'You're growing away from us.'

'Am I getting older than you now?' Tim asked hopefully.

The girl laughed. 'Silly. You'll always be the baby, even though you do behave sometimes as if we didn't exist.'

'I'm sorry,' murmured Tim. For he knew what they meant. Sometimes the business of everyday living took up so much thought and concentration that he did forget about them.

It was on the evening of that conversation that he raised his voice when talking with them and his mother heard him. She came in and switched on the light.

'Did you call out, Tim?'

'No, Mum.'

'I thought I heard you.' She looked round the room.

His three had drawn away from him and stood against the curtains of the window, but she made no comment.

'Oh, well, maybe you cried out in a dream,' she said.

'Maybe,' said Tim, keeping his fingers crossed under the bedclothes.

'Good night then, darling, my only darling.' She kissed him, turned out the light and departed.

'That was a close shave,' said Tim.

They were still by the curtains in the dark. The girl was crying.

'What's the matter?' Tim whispered.

'She's forgotten us,' sighed the girl.

'Cry-baby,' said the dark boy, and 'Soppy,' said the fair one.

Tim said: 'How can she forget you when she never knew you?'

But they didn't answer and soon he slept.

Secondary school followed primary school and Tim's life immediately became harder and busier. Sometimes he could barely keep up. The demands were such that time to be himself was almost squeezed out – turmoil, teachers, traffic, telly and the torture of piles and piles of homework. The three companions of his childhood rarely visited him now and he began to think that perhaps they never had existed, that they'd been some sort of babyish imagining. Babyish. When they did come they still teased him about being 'the baby'.

'Baby my foot! I'm fifteen!' he protested to them one sleepless night. 'You're the babies now.'

They laughed and said: 'We're still older than you are.'

He looked at them. They had indeed grown up along with him, but they didn't look *older*. In fact, they looked rather like reflections of himself in different mirrors. Tim was dark like the dark boy, but his eyes were blue, as with the fair boy, and he had full lips and a small turned-up nose, like the girl.

Next morning he remembered their return but thought it must have been a dream in which he had only *thought* he was awake. After all, in dreams, one did usually *think* one was awake.

And he had no time to bother about dreams now, with 'O' Levels just round the corner, like a black animal lying in wait. If he made the smallest sign of slacking, his parents began to nag. So imaginary companions were definitely out!

Yet they came to him on the night before the 'O' Level exams began. He was tossing and turning, feeling ill with fear – and there they were.

'Poor old boy,' said the girl.

'Sooner you than us,' said the dark boy.

'We'll keep our fingers crossed,' said the fair boy.

'It'll take more than that to get me through those bloody exams,' moaned Tim. 'I could be sick every time I think of it.'

'We know,' they murmured. 'We know.'

They soothed him to sleep. In the morning, he thought: That dream again! and dismissed it from his mind.

Later, however, he brooded over his three companions, and he felt uneasy. He had read enough now to know that people who see and hear what others do not see and hear have got

something very odd about them. They are having what doctors call 'hallucinations'. As when Macbeth saw Banquo's ghost and no one else did. He had been 'doing' *Macbeth* for his exams and the teacher had talked about hallucinations and schizophrenia. She had gone on to say that whereas Macbeth had gone mad because of his sense of guilt, some people were thus afflicted through taking drugs, including alcohol; some were suffering from a diminished supply of blood to the brain, as occurred usually in cases of senility; and some became schizophrenic for no apparent reason at all – maybe they were born that way. Tim had been frightened by this information and was glad that he had never told anyone about his visitors. He understood the phrase 'cunning of the lunatic'. For if he was a lunatic, at least he had the sense to keep quiet about it. He recalled too that when his three had come, he'd always been glad to see them – so perhaps his very desire to see them had caused their coming. That being so, he must put them right out of his mind and try to get sane again. He must occupy his life so completely that there would be no room for fantasy.

Despite his anxiety, he did well in his 'O' Levels. His parents were delighted. The headmaster suggested he stay at school for two more years, take 'A' Levels and go on to University. Tim agreed because his parents were so keen, although his heart sank at the thought of all that study ahead. He turned himself into a working-machine, cramming facts into his weary head, and feeling lonely. Once he even turned on his mother in bitterness and said:

'You don't really care about me at all. You and Dad just regard me as something for *you* to get credit by – a sort of status symbol – "our boy on his way to University"!'

'What a cruel thing to say!' she protested, her eyes full of tears. 'It's not true, Timmy. We only want what's best for you. You're all we have.'

You're all we have. Ridiculous! They had the house, the car, the telly and each other. He'd been right in what he said. Yet he was sorry that he'd almost made his mother cry and felt ashamed. He wept in bed after the quarrel – and then his three came to him, not speaking, just hovering around in silent sympathy. But he couldn't accept them now. He tried to shut them out of his thoughts, and succeeded.

Next day he thought: That crazy hallucination again.

Visitations from his three became rarer and rarer as time went on. Practical living took him over: 'A' Levels, University, leaving home to live in digs, intensive study for his degree, a love affair. Lonely people, when they fall in love, do so with a torturing intensity, and so it was with Tim. The girl was a student like himself but had all the openness, warmth and vivacity which he lacked. She was reckless where he was conscientious, extravagant where he was careful, lazy where he was industrious, bold where he was nervous and, sometimes, cruel where he was kind. She was surrounded by would-be lovers and would pick and choose her favourites according to her whim. He adored her and she made him suffer. But she also gave him a motive for living which he'd never had before. She gave him hope on each day's waking, for at least he would see her that day, even if he was out of favour. He still worked hard from a sense of duty towards his parents, but some cold part of his mind did that chore. It was no longer important. His heart was possessed by the lovely, uncaring girl.

They took their degree exams at the same time, then came the long vacation and she went abroad on holiday. Two months later, she sent him a postcard from Italy saying that she hoped he was well and that she had just got married.

Something within him died then. But he showed nothing and told no one. He burned the postcard and hardened his heart. Even his exam results—he'd got a Second Class Degree when he'd feared he might manage only a Third—gave him little pleasure, except that he was glad that his parents were glad.

He took up teaching. With a Second Class Arts Degree, there wasn't much else he was fitted for—and he soon found that he wasn't fitted for that. Tim's trouble in the classroom was not that he didn't know his stuff and prepare his lessons carefully, but that he couldn't keep the kids in order. He lacked that quality of energy, enthusiasm, power, and ability to be unkind which makes even a young teacher able to control a class. He was 'soft'. Sometimes his classes were little less than riots.

After one particularly dreadful day, he went back to his digs near the school and felt that he simply couldn't go on. Even the anguish over his love affair had faded so that his heart was a stone. And the daily torture from schoolchildren made him feel physically as well as mentally ill.

Escape was necessary, and the only real escape was death. How could he set about dying?

He went to his GP and asked for sleeping pills. The doctor wanted to know *why* he wasn't sleeping and asked all sorts of questions. Tim behaved calmly and sanely so was given a prescription for a dozen pills and told to 'come back next week and say how he was getting on'. He thought twelve might not be enough so went to another doctor. This one, frantically overworked, gave him the prescription without the questions. Tim took his hoard back to his room.

Up till then he had thought it would take a lot of courage to kill himself, that he might even funk it at the last minute. But when he had the pills set out before him, with a jug of water and a glass, he found himself unafraid. It would be so wonderful not to have to go to school tomorrow. Fear of life was stronger than fear of death. He filled the glass with water.

It was then that they came. They weren't children any more. They were grown-up, like him, like different aspects of him, himself in different mirrors.

'Don't do it,' said the dark young man.

'Why not?' said Tim.

'It's not right—such a waste,' said the fair young man.

'How do you know?' asked Tim.

'We know because we're older than you are,' said the girl, reminding him of childhood, that foreign country from which he had been exiled so long ago.

'But I have nothing to live for,' he told her.

'You've got life,' she said. 'Lots of people would be glad of it.'

'Like "eat your rice pudding and be grateful as children in India are starving,"' Tim sneered. For his self-contempt had driven him to a feeling of contempt for others, too. 'I know I'm mad,' he went on, 'or I wouldn't be seeing you. I don't even know who you are.'

'But we know who you are,' they said.

'Go away and leave me alone.'

'We can only come to you when you're alone,' said the girl.

'Well you can't any more. I don't want you.'

They retreated and turned into shadows, shadow of the wardrobe against the wall, shadow of the bed across the shabby carpet, shadow of table and chair against the skirting.

He hesitated, almost willed them back, stopped himself, held firm to his determination, froze his heart, put handfuls of tablets into his mouth and washed them down his gullet with glass after glass of water.

Then he lay on the bed and waited to die.

When he woke, he was in a different room. He had never seen it before. At first he wondered where he was. Then he remembered what he had done. And he was horrified. If this was death, he might as well have stayed alive. For he still existed. Was there then no escape at all? Had even the final refuge turned out to be a cheat?

His three were there, standing around the bed where he lay.

'Right muck-up you made of that,' said the dark young man.

'You silly idiot,' said the fair one.

'We tried to stop you,' said the girl.

'Oh, shut up,' he said, trying to close his eyes and ears against them, but he still saw them against the dark of his closed eyelids, and heard the girl say: 'I almost wish he'd made it. It would have been nice for us.'

Then another voice said: 'Feeling better?'

He opened his eyes again and found himself staring up at a woman in nurse's uniform.

'Am I dead?' he asked her.

'Far from it,' she said. 'Why did you want to be?'

'I was tired of life.'

'And who isn't sometimes? But thanks to God and the stomach-pump you're going to be okay. Like to sit up?'

'Thank you,' he said politely, knowing now that he was back in the prison of life, that his attempted escape had failed. It was quite a relief in a way. Better to find himself back in prosaic life, in an ordinary hospital bed, than to think that death was no more than a continuation of that life . . . that had been nightmare indeed. The escape hatch was still there. It was just that he hadn't given it a hard enough shove. Maybe those doctors had cheated him by giving him very mild pills. What a rotten trick!

But he didn't feel very vigorously about that or anything else. He felt limp as an old cabbage leaf. He thought vaguely of the lovely girl, the magnificent butterfly which he had pursued with such a tiny, grotty net. How foolish! He thought of his tormentors in the classroom. They belonged to some past

hell. What would happen now? He didn't care. He was tired. A day drifted by like a petal on the wind.

His parents, white-faced and tragic-eyed, came to his bedside.

'Hallo, Timmy,' said his mother, bending down to kiss him.

'Hallo, Tim,' said his father, shyly.

'Sorry,' Tim muttered.

'No, Timmy,' said his mother. 'We're sorry. We didn't realize. You should have told us.'

'There was nothing to tell.'

'But there must have been!'

'Nothing I could tell you.'

When he said that, they both drew back, as if he were an insect which had stung them or a gun which had shot them. He didn't know what to say or do. And then suddenly his three came back. They grouped themselves round him and his parents.

'Don't let them down,' said the dark young man. And the fair young man and the girl said almost together: 'Look after them.'

Look after them. Them? Did that mean his parents? But they were the ones who had been supposed to look after him – and look what a mess they'd made of it. Why should *he* be expected . . .

Yet, how much older they looked, sad and worn. They did look as if they needed looking after . . .

'Don't worry, Mum,' said Tim. 'I'm feeling fine now. I'll be home soon.'

'That's what your father and I hoped,' she said. 'You must come home for a long holiday. Will you?'

Tim nodded. Their faces lightened. Then the bell rang for the end of visiting-hour and they went away. But his three companions remained, silently haunting the shadows, to keep him company.

A week later he left hospital and went home to his parents. They were gentle, considerate, unquestioning. He guessed that the hospital doctor had told them to be. Even so, they could have taken it out on him for the hurt he'd done them – but they didn't.

Weeks passed and Tim occupied himself by looking after the garden. In the past, with his father at the factory every

day, the garden had been his mother's job. But now she had a pain in her back so was glad for him to do the work for her. He started on it merely because he had to do something. Then he found himself enjoying it.

He planted, weeded, pruned, mowed, watered. The more he did the more there was to do. Sometimes as he worked he thought of the past, saw that terrible postcard again before his eyes, saw those terrible classes of children again before his eyes – but they were no more to him now than pictures on a screen. Why had he cared about such pictures? They meant no more to him now than pictures in a magazine or on television. Remote. Nothing to do with him. The garden was to do with him, his hands tending it, his heart going into it. The stone heart was beating again.

Roses became his speciality. With their many different names and qualities, he tended to them as if they were his many different children. And often his three companions were with him, not doing any work, but drifting around among the shadows of the roses.

Sometimes he thought: This is all a dream. It can't go on for ever. One day –

One day his mother came to him when he was working in the garden and said: 'Timmy, don't you think it's time now that you decided what you want to do?'

He looked round the small garden which he had turned into a thing of beauty, and said: 'I like doing this.'

'I know,' she said, 'but –'

'But what?'

'Your father and I won't live for ever. You should be earning.'

She stood there, white-faced in the sunshine, her hand behind her back where the pain was.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'd better go and garden somewhere else – for cash.'

Her cheeks flushed. 'Oh, Timmy, that's what we thought. We've been making inquiries. There's a market gardener near here and your father and I thought –' She went on explaining.

So, three weeks later, he was employed by a market gardener whose establishment produced flowers, fruit and vegetables. The work lacked the intimacy and possessiveness one feels about one's own small patch of beauty, but Tim still found that he enjoyed it. Plants and flowers, unlike unloving lovers and

tormenting classroom children, needed no commands or demands; only attentiveness, conscientiousness, knowledge, care, kindness.

And Tim could give all those things. Especially to the roses. And especially when his three companions joined him at his work, not doing any, just being there. And he no longer worried about being mad when he saw and heard them. They were there, and that was that.

Years passed thus. Tim was over thirty now. His employer at the market garden had retired and handed over management to him. At first he had been scared by the responsibility, but soon found that he enjoyed it, because he really knew what he was doing and therefore could tell other people what to do, with knowledge and without bossiness—so different from teaching. His father had retired on a pension now, his mother still had that pain, up and down, and he lived with them and looked after them as if they were plants in his garden.

He was happy—except for the black fear at the back of every happy person's mind—the knowledge that it can't last, because happiness never does.

And, of course, he was right.

One day, when he came home from work, he found his mother waiting alertly for him. 'Timmy—quickly—' she said.

'Yes? What is it?'

'I've sent your father down to the shops to get him out of the way. I must tell you.'

'What?' He chilled through and through.

'You know those X-rays I had at the hospital?'

'Yes.' The chill chilled to freezing.

'I haven't got much longer, Timmy. There's nothing anyone can do. I've known it for a long time really and now they've told me straight. It's your father who'll feel it most. So you'll look after him, won't you?'

'I will,' he promised.

And suddenly his three companions came and stood by him. His mother, not seeing them, continued:

'There's something I ought to tell you. Maybe your father and I should have told you before. I realize now that secrecy is bad for anyone—and we may have harmed you by it. Maybe the way we hid things from you may have been at the

root of your – your –'

'What is it?' asked Tim.

'You know we always told you that you were an only child?'

'Yes.'

'Well – you weren't. Timmy, there were four of you. I had quadruplets. Four babies. Three boys and one girl. They all died except you, the youngest boy, the baby. So maybe that was why your father and I were always too ambitious for you – driving you on when we shouldn't have done. It was because the other three died, so you were extra precious.'

'So that's who they are,' said Tim.

His three, smiling a little, nodded towards him.

'It's all right, Mum,' he said. 'We'll look after you, the four of us, and we'll take care of Dad, too.'

And his brothers and sister caressed his mother's brow with their shadowy fingers and murmured: 'We'll look after you. And we'll take care of Dad, too.'¹

IN THE MIST

Elizabeth Walter

Mary Hesketh always said that the mist was responsible. How else explain what happened to her and Ralph? Especially since they were the last people in the world such a thing should happen to: solid, down to earth, prosperous, and recently grandparents for the first time.

It was the arrival of this first grandchild that had delayed their holiday, for naturally Mary could not think of leaving until Jane and the baby were safely settled in at home and had been supplied with every warning and comfort a grandmother could offer, notwithstanding Jane's barely concealed preference for Dr Spock. Then of course there had been a crisis in Ralph's office—a firm of civil engineers in Queen Anne's Gate—and before they could draw breath their son Peter returned from a student holiday in Spain with food poisoning. It was not surprising their own holiday was late.

Still, as Mary said, the great thing was that they were going. A contented, middle-aged couple with a good car, no worries and a fortnight's freedom, even in October—it was almost like a second honeymoon. She said so in her artless way to several friends and neighbours, whose degree of cynicism varied, but fortunately not their tact. Besides, it was generally agreed that the Heskeths were an asset to their community—a Surrey village which had been taken over almost exclusively by people like themselves, and in which each detached house acted as a buffer for those adjacent against whatever was unacceptable in the world outside.

The Heskeths had driven north because, from London, there are only two directions the long-distance driver can take and Scotland in autumn struck them as a more desirable goal than Devon or Cornwall, which they already knew rather well. They had excused themselves for not going abroad, which in their circle was more or less expected, by pleading a lack of time to plan. In reality, they were ill at ease with food and languages that weren't English, and believed that there were other things in life besides sun-tan.

It had been Ralph's idea to spend a few days in Yorkshire,

a county which he knew well although his wife did not. During the war he had served in the RAF and had been stationed at various bases up and down England's eastern shires. He had never gone back (except once, to attend a civil engineering conference in Sheffield): there were too many memories he would rather leave interred. But twenty years had blunted his emotions and whetted his curiosity. He had a longing to revisit the old haunts.

Mary contentedly acquiesced, as she acquiesced in everything. She was a comfortable rather than a demanding wife. Her view of woman's rôle was based on yesterday's conventions, by which indeed she regulated her whole life. These taught her that there were things in a man's life which it was not for a woman, even the most loyal and devoted woman, to share. So she withdrew to a distance when Ralph went into the RAF chapel in Lincoln Cathedral, or stood lost in reverie before the astronomical clock in York.

How handsome he looked, standing rather self-consciously to attention. And how thankful she was that he had been spared, when so many from these bases had not been. She smiled at him complicitly as he emerged. Until now she had not realized how much these moorlands and fenlands were dedicated to the RAF, having spent the war years in the secluded West of England, where both the children had been born. Ralph had not shared his Service life with her even in conversation, and she had not inquired into it, warned by some self-preserving instinct which told her that ignorance might well be bliss. Like every other woman with a serving husband, she had lived in ever-present expectation of widowhood, and had been both thankful and surprised when that fate failed to overtake her; she had always been premonitorily convinced that it would.

As though to emphasize that all such horrors were now behind them, the October weather was perfect—so much so that Mary, for whom this venture into Ralph's past had the attraction of great danger viewed from great safety, was eager for them to stay another day.

'We haven't seen the Yorkshire coast,' she urged, 'and I should so like to; and it's not as if we're due in Scotland at any particular time.'

So they spent a day of uninterrupted sunshine and turquoise sky and tranquil, sparkling sea, and left later than they

intended, as dusk was falling, to drive from Whitby to their hotel near Pickering.

The bracken on the moorland plateau still gleamed redly, though whether in its own right or in the reflection of the setting sun it was impossible to say. It was a world of greyness and redness. The grey road lying like a folded ribbon across the red, flat, featureless moor; the red sun a disc against the soft yet solid greyness of distance and the western horizon. It was this greyness that caused Ralph to step on the accelerator and mutter about fog coming up.

The mist enveloped them suddenly in a slight hollow. In an instant it became impossible to see ahead, impossible to see behind or sideways, impossible—or very nearly—to see the grass verges of the road. Ralph slammed on the brakes and the car's crawl added to the eeriness. The unfamiliar whine of the engine was the only sound. It was only eight miles to Pickering and their hotel lay just beyond it, but in fog so dense it seemed unlikely they would even get that far. An unfamiliar bumping warned them that they had left the metalled roadway. Ralph swore and pulled on the wheel. And then, as suddenly, they were in the clear and the fog patch lay like a solid wall behind them, and Ralph swore with the even greater violence of relief.

Mary patted him. 'It's all right, darling. It's over.'

'Yes, but God knows when we're going to hit the next.'

The moorland seemed all at once to have lost its colour. Grey grass and bracken blended with a much nearer sky. All the horizons had contracted. Whichever way they looked it was a blank—a blank with soft, sinister, shifting edges, which without warning closed about them once again.

It was as they came out of this second fog patch that they saw the young man on the road. They saw him first in the yellow glare of the fog lamp, which seemed absurd in what was now relatively fog-free air.

Ralph switched it off and glanced inquiringly at Mary. 'Shall we offer this laddie a lift?'

'Yes,' Mary said, influenced as much by the fact that he was the height and build of Peter as by considerations of weather and the loneliness of the road.

The young man turned round as he heard the car approaching, but he made no hitch-hiker's sign. They had a glimpse of a white, strained face above the turned-up collar of a

sheepskin flying-jacket. Then the RAF-blue legs marched stolidly yet clumsily on. His step had a martial rhythm. They could hear the left-right, left-right as Ralph slowed the car and wound down the window on his side.

'Want a lift?'

A pair of startled eyes regarded him as though a lift were something unheard of. Then suddenly the young man smiled.

He had a dazzling smile. It lit up a face that was unmistakably good-looking, despite being tired and drawn.

'Jolly decent of you, sir.'

The voice was rich and pleasing – a good accent, Mary noted as she leaned back to open the door.

The young man climbed in and she took a closer look at him: dark eyes and hair, and lean, slightly aquiline face. Under the flying-jacket he was wearing a zipped-up RAF battle-blouse. There were heavy flying-boots on his feet. This of course explained the clumsiness of his marching. It seemed an extraordinary garb to choose for walking over the North York moors. Mary was curious; but Ralph was already asking the young man where he wanted to go.

'Back home – to the camp if you're going anywhere near it, sir. It's about five miles from here. We shall pass the entrance on the left.'

It was touching that he thought of the camp as 'home', Mary decided. She asked politely, 'Did you miss the bus?'

'You could put it that way.' The young man clenched his hands till the knuckles whitened.

'Will you get into trouble for being late?'

'I shouldn't think so. Not in the circumstances. They're more likely to give me a gong.'

Ralph laughed. 'You mustn't pull my wife's leg – she won't understand you. Try mine instead; I'm ex-RAF, so that's fair.'

'Are you really, sir?' The boy looked doubtful. 'But I assure you, I wasn't pulling anyone's leg.'

'All right, all right,' Ralph said hastily. 'I see from the outfit that you're air-crew. What's your line?'

'Pilot.'

'We ought to get together – I was a navigator. What kind of crate do you fly?'

'All sorts. It's a Wellington at the moment.'

'Don't tell me the RAF still use those! They were obsolete when I came out, and that's some time ago, I can tell you.'

'On our field we use them a lot.'

'Hear that, Mary? All these millions on defence and these boys have to make do with old equipment. Still, I like your loyalty – not letting the RAF down.'

'I've let 'em down all right tonight.'

'Checking in late isn't all that serious, is it?'

'I ought to have made it. *I ought.*'

Surprised by the intensity in the boy's voice, Mary turned. He was leaning forward, and his clenched fists beat on his knees.

'I'm sure they'll understand,' she said soothingly.

'Oh yes.' His voice was bitter. 'But the boys who trusted me won't. They can't. They were so sure I could make it. I was sure too. I almost did. And then, just at the end . . .' A tear glistened on his cheek.

Mary leaned back and placed a hand over the clenched fist, which was cold and rigid. 'Don't torture yourself. I'm sure they know you did the best you could.'

'I wonder. It would make it easier to think so.'

'Weren't you expecting a gong for it?' Ralph asked.

'I just said that because it shows the stupidity of medals. I get it and they've earned it. Is that fair?'

'I used to ask the same sort of questions. Now I know that even to ask them isn't fair, since it puts the burden of replying on one person rather than another.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I wasn't meaning myself. I've nothing to complain of. Life's been pretty good to me. But why me, for Christ's sake? What have I done to deserve a whole skin, a good job, a wife and kids and now a grandchild?'

'I envy you the wife and kids.'

'Plenty of time. You don't want to settle down too early; at least, that's what I tell my son.'

Mary turned back to him. 'And how old were you when you married? Fifty?'

'You heard me say I was a lucky man.'

'And I'm a lucky woman. That makes two of us. And this young man is lucky we gave him a lift.'

He was indeed, Mary reflected, for the fog was closing in. There had been no further solid patches on the road, but visibility had decreased sharply. The headlights cut a path like machetes through jungle. The young man eyed them with

appreciation. 'Wizard car,' he observed.

She was a Humber Hawk, and the Heskeths had had her less than a year and were still proud of her. Even so, they were so used to blasé remarks from Peter that the comment caused them surprise.

'She's not bad,' Ralph admitted.

'Had her long?'

'Eight months.'

'I suppose they had her in stock.' The young man sighed enviously. 'She's got everything, hasn't she? A reminder of what motoring's all about.'

Suspecting flattery, perhaps mockery, Ralph said shortly, 'She's not a blueprint, you know.'

Mary felt it was time to intervene. 'Do you have a car?' she asked their new acquaintance, who smiled and shook his head.

'Not now. I did when I was up at Oxford.'

'Oh!' Mary exclaimed. 'Were you there?'

'I did a year.'

Mary faltered. The boy had evidently been sent down. She had heard Peter mention such tragedies, accepting them phlegmatically in the way of the very young. Whereas she never lost an opportunity to enlarge upon them: the waste the shame of it, the disappointment to all concerned. And indeed she meant every word of these monitory expostulations, so vividly could she imagine her own feelings if Peter should bring disgrace upon her.

Now she was in the same car with one of these unfortunates, and she did not know what to say. She could imagine so easily what had happened: the wildness carried too far, the bitter consequences, the parental upbraidings, the enlisting in penance or defiance, or both.

She asked with all the tact she could muster: 'Are you making the Royal Air Force your career?'

The young man grinned, but without humour. 'I dare say it will be,' he said.

'And what were you reading at Oxford?'

'History.'

'Fancy! Our son is up there now doing that. Ralph, did you hear? This young man read history at Oxford.'

'Really? Which college?' Ralph inquired.

Upon being told the name, Mary exclaimed afresh. 'Why,

that's Peter's college! Tell me, do you know our son? Our name is Hesketh.'

The young man pronounced it, considering. 'No, but then it's four years since I left.'

'Still, you must know some of the same people. Peter's tutor is Bernard Williams. Who was yours?'

'Bernard Williams? Must be a new man. I suppose most of the younger chaps have gone. Mine won't have done because he's got shocking eyesight. His name's Appleby.'

The name registered with both the Heskeths.

'Not Sir David?' Ralph asked, awed.

'I don't know about the "Sir". His name's David. Don't tell me they've made him a KBE!'

'Yes. I'd no idea it was so recent. I thought he'd been Sir David for years.'

'Not in my day he wasn't.'

That just goes to show that time is deceptive. Which reminds me—where's this camp of yours?'

'We're not there yet. You'll see an arrow pointing to the turning.'

'You don't think we've missed it in this fog?'

'I'm certain we haven't. I know every inch of this moorland.'

'Yet you're not a native of these parts.'

No, but I've a friend who lives locally. We go out walking. She's taught me to know my way around.' He stopped, blushing to have betrayed the friend's sex so quickly, then went on: 'It's thanks to her I knew which road to take tonight. And it's thanks to you I'm going to make it. I should never have done it alone.'

'Oh, surely. We've come no distance. Although I suppose the fog makes it seem farther than it is.'

'No, by the time you found me, I'd bought it.'

'Had you been wandering for hours?'

'I don't know. My watch packed it in when the kite pranged.'

'Good God!' Ralph came sharply to attention. 'You don't mean you were forced down in this?' He indicated the grey trails of vapour that moved against the windscreen.

The young man looked at them also. 'I couldn't quite make it,' he said.

'I suppose you radioed your field?'

'The radio was out of action.'

'You mean they don't know where you are?'

'I was over the North Sea when the radio packed it in. They'll probably conclude I'm in the drink.'

'Good God!' Ralph said again. 'No wonder you're anxious to make it. But you know, this damn fog's getting worse. And I haven't a clue where I am except that I must still be on the road to Pickering because there hasn't been another road to turn off.'

'There's one now,' Mary said. Through the murk it was dimly apparent that the edges of the road diverged. Ralph stopped abruptly and stalled the engine. The silence was absolute. It did not seem possible they were within a few miles of human habitation, of lights, streets, houses, shops – a town.

'Isn't it deserted!' Mary had said that morning as they drove in sunlight. They knew the meaning of deserted now. On these moors there was nothing, not even sheep, only thin soil and bracken, a road that looped from one horizon to the other, and in the distance the clifflike scars of former subsidence. This morning there had been larks and puffy cloudlets. Now the sky had fallen, enfolding the earth. There were drops of moisture on the bracken fronds and on the windscreen wipers. Everything was static, immobile, as under an enchanter's spell.

'You take the left-hand fork,' the young pilot said quietly.

There was so much confidence in his tone that Ralph started the engine and edged the car over without any further ado, although normally his navigator's training led him to query anyone else's directions and some degree of argument ensued.

Mary, impressed by the young man's quiet confidence, turned round again to talk. 'I'm sure you're a good pilot. I can sense it. How many medals have you got?'

'They don't give medals to good pilots. They might as well issue them with your kit.'

'No, but seriously – you have got a medal, haven't you?'

'I'd rather not discuss it, if you don't mind.'

'It's pretty difficult to get gonged, except in wartime,' Ralph put in warningly.

Mary switched her line of attack. 'Tell me about your girlfriend,' she commanded.

'What is there to say about her?'

'What does she look like? Is she tall or short, fat or thin, dark or fair?'

'Something in between all three.'

'Are you engaged?'

'Not officially. Her father thinks she's too young. And he doesn't consider an RAF pilot a very secure means of support. You know—here today and gone tomorrow. I must say I see his point of view. I said we'd wait, but I guess I stuck my neck out too far in saying it. I'm not sure if we'll be able to.' He added, without changing his tone, 'The camp entrance is on the left here, sir. That's it. Well navigated. Bang on.'

Ralph pulled up. 'I don't see any entrance.'

The young man pointed to where a narrow road turned off in the darkness, with the familiar metal Air Force directing arrow: RAF Hillingdale.

'That's not the entrance to an RAF camp,' Ralph objected.

'Not the main entrance, no. But it's the nearest and will get me home soonest. It's only a quarter of a mile down the road.'

'Then let us drive you there. You're in no fit state to walk it. You look all in.'

'The lane's too narrow to turn and you'd have to back. Don't risk it. I'll manage all right from here.'

As he spoke, the young man opened the car door. He climbed out and stood, already shadowy, beside Ralph's window. The mist swirled into the car, and the young man's figure seemed to sway with it. Unless he were swaying on his feet.

'Thanks for the lift.' He bent down and they had a last glimpse of the handsome, aquiline face, grey in the greyness, and the flash of white teeth in the familiar dazzling smile. Then he was gone and they heard his awkward marching, left-right, left-right, fading away along the narrow road to the left.

The hotel where the Heskeths were staying was private, small and good. By the time they reached it—in clear weather, for the mist had not descended from the moors—dinner was officially over. However, the proprietor himself served them in the dining-room and apologized for the absence of his wife, who was not feeling well and had retired early.

Mary told him of their encounter with the RAF pilot. He smiled and shook his head.

'He was having you on. There's been no plane down. We should have heard about it if there had been. News travels

faster in country districts than ever it does in a town.'

'It was very convincing,' Ralph put in in defence of Mary's story. 'Except for one trivial thing. He mentioned he was flying a Wellington. Surely they're not still in use?'

The proprietor snorted. 'Might as well have said an Avro-Anson while he was about it. There's not a Wellington left in service. The lad must have been lacking in imagination to come up with a tale like that.'

'He was a nice-looking boy,' Mary said regretfully.

'Most likely been in some scrape—a lass, perhaps—and overstayed his pass, so he was trying to get back quick.'

'Yes, he mentioned a girl—someone local.'

'There you are. It's happening all the time.'

'He was wearing flying-kit.'

'I don't blame him if he had it. These autumn mists on the moors are bitter cold.'

'Yes, but flying-kit . . .'

'Hold on a minute. Do you mean a sheepskin jacket?'

'Yes, and boots . . .'

'You can buy 'em locally. There's a Government store. What's to stop his girl-friend's father or brother owning one and fitting him out when the fog came down? Specially if he'd got to walk back to camp in it because he'd missed the bus.'

'You asked him if he'd missed the bus,' Ralph reminded Mary.

'So I did. Now what did he say in reply?'

'“You could put it that way,”' Ralph prompted. 'Meaning, I suppose, that he hadn't even tried for the bus. No doubt he was otherwise occupied. Didn't he say the wedding couldn't wait?'

'He said he wasn't sure if they could wait for the wedding.'

'Comes to the same, I dare say.'

The proprietor laughed. 'It wouldn't be the first shot-gun wedding round here with an RAF bridegroom. Folks don't even raise their eyebrows at 'em by now.'

Mary pursed her lips, thinking of Peter.

'I think he'd been in trouble before. It sounded as though he'd been sent down from Oxford. He was at the same college as our son. I must ask Peter if he knows anything about him.'

'How will you do that when you don't even know his name?'

'We don't, do we? We told him our name, but he didn't give his in exchange.'

'If he was hoping to sneak into camp unnoticed, he wouldn't,' the proprietor said firmly.

Ralph laughed. 'He was certainly hoping to do that. You never saw such a god-forsaken back way as he selected. You wouldn't have known there was a camp within miles.'

'Where was it?' the proprietor asked.

'Hillingdon - no, that's Middlesex. RAF Hillingdale.'

'He was certainly having you on.' The proprietor chuckled. 'Hillingdale hasn't been operational since the war. It's just a supply dump for some of the other establishments, staffed mainly by civilian clerks. I shouldn't have thought they were strict enough on passes for the lad to worry. Perhaps that was one more of his tales.'

'But why should he lie so?'

'A taste for glamour.'

Ralph slowly nodded his head.

'Some of the wartime atmosphere still hangs around these bases,' the proprietor continued. 'The lad wouldn't be the first to feel that.'

'My husband feels it,' Mary informed him. 'He was in the RAF during the war.'

'Ah, then you'll understand what I mean, sir. These youngsters, they don't know what it was like. They see the glamour, but not what went with it. Some of 'em like to play at how they think it was. And if this boy was educated and imaginative . . .'

'He certainly carried it pretty far - slipping in by the back gate.' Ralph's voice held the truculence of the deceived. 'He went up a narrow lane that turned off a few miles before we got to Pickering. Serve him right if he gets ten days' CB.'

'Quite a study in deception,' the proprietor said thoughtfully. 'He must have mugged it all up and no mistake. Twenty-five years ago there was an entrance to Hillingdale up that lane, but it's been closed for God knows how long. Well, let's hope he'd taken the trouble to find that out. There's a brick wall across the old entrance and a few thicknesses of barbed wire on top.'

'You don't say!'

'Ask my wife about it in the morning. She used to live up that lane. Some of the lads did try to use it as a back

entrance – she helped one or two of 'em, I believe. From her dad's garden it was possible to climb the camp fence without being spotted – if you were lucky, and if Nora's dad would lend you the steps.'

He paused to chuckle reminiscently. 'Some rare tales Nora's got. You'll have to ask her about them – only, as I say, she's not too well at present. I'd appreciate it if you'd let it wait another day.'

'You don't look too well, either, Mary,' Ralph said concernedly. 'Are you sure you're feeling all right?'

'There's nothing wrong with me, darling. It was just – something I thought of.'

'But you've gone as white as a ghost.'

'That's what I thought of.' Mary sounded tearful. 'Ralph, I think that RAF boy was a ghost.'

'Nonsense, darling. There aren't any ghosts.'

'Oh, I know we don't believe in them. But that doesn't mean they're not there.'

'Mary! I've never heard you talk like this since I've known you. You must have caught a chill on the moors.'

'No, Ralph. I'm all right. It's nothing physical. Only – don't you see? – it's all so frighteningly odd.'

'You're telling me it's odd! What's the matter with you?'

'Well –' Mary glanced at the proprietor who had also gone rather white – 'you said the wartime atmosphere still lingers. Why shouldn't it crystallize in the form of one of the young pilots?'

'But that boy wasn't a ghost.' Ralph had a distinct impression as he spoke of the way the car springs had sagged as the boy had entered it. He had been at least ten stone of flesh and blood. No transparent, luminous nonsense about that one. His footsteps, too, had sounded on the road.

'What are you getting at?' His voice was gentler. Mary, poor girl, was looking decidedly ill. 'Do you think he's one of the ones who didn't come back? Is that it?'

'He told us he didn't make it,' Mary said. 'And he'd let the others down – it was his crew he was thinking of.'

'Yes, a Wellington carried five.' Ralph hardly realized he had spoken aloud, but Mary seized on it.

'It explains why he said a Wellington, I expect they flew them from Hillingdale during the war.'

'They did,' the proprietor said warily.

'And it explains why he thought our car was so super. It would be to someone who died in 1945. And if he was at Oxford during the war years, it would have been before Sir David Appleby was knighted. And he only did a year because he was called up – not sent down. Oh, Ralph, I'm *certain* that poor boy was a ghost.'

She turned to the proprietor. Her face was flushed now. 'Did many planes – Wellingtons – crash on the moors?'

'Ay, one or two.'

'Then that proves it. It explains why he wore flying-kit, too. Because that wasn't Government surplus, it was old-fashioned. I realize now why it seemed odd and yet familiar. That was wartime issue. Whether you believe it or not, Ralph, you and I saw a ghost.'

Ralph said carefully, 'It is – unusual – that all these points seem to add up.'

'Not "seem". They do. You believe in ghosts, don't you?' She looked at the proprietor.

'I believe it's possible they may exist, though I've not seen one. I believe it's possible it was a ghost that you saw. But I believe also that no good comes of speculating about the world after this one. You'd best put it out of your minds. Now I must go and see how my wife is, if you'll excuse me. Good night to you, and I hope you sleep sound. As for the RAF lad, he'll do you no harm, flesh or spirit.'

As he turned away, they heard him mutter, 'Whichever it is, may he rest easy too.'

At a quarter to ten next morning the 'ghost' walked into the dining-room.

The Heskeths, who had slept late and were the last of the breakfasters, gazed at him open-mouthed. There was no mistaking him: the same height and build, the same dark, aquiline features, although he looked a good deal ruddier by the light of day. He was also dressed in civilian clothes of a contemporary cut and fashion, and walked into the dining-room as if he owned the place.

He passed the Heskeths' table without even an acknowledgment. It was this discourtesy which restored Mary to herself.

'Did you get back to camp safely?' she inquired.

'I beg your pardon?'

The young man looked at her in puzzlement.

'I asked if you got back to camp last night without being caught,' Mary repeated.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand you. What camp?'

'Whichever RAF camp you're stationed at. Hillingdale, you said.'

'But I'm not in the RAF.'

'You were wearing RAF uniform when we gave you a lift about half past six last night.'

'I think there's some mistake,' the young man said equably. 'At half past six last night I was in a hotel in Goole.'

'But we saw you. We talked to you. You admired our car. You were at Oxford.'

'Not me, madam, I'm afraid.'

'Wait a bit.' Ralph leaned forward. 'Have you a younger brother, perhaps?'

'Mum's kept it very dark if I have.'

'Or a young cousin?'

'Not that I know of. Why this sudden interest in my relations?'

'It's not nosiness,' Ralph explained quickly. 'Only my wife and I gave a lift last night to an RAF boy who wanted to get to Hillingdale camp. You're so like him that it doesn't seem possible there's no connection. In fact, we thought you were the boy himself.'

'They say everyone's got a double,' the young man said, 'and you make it sound as if it's true. It couldn't have been me you saw, because although I ought to have arrived for the weekend last night I was caught in the fog and had to give up trying to get here. That's how I came to spend the night in Goole. You can check the hotel register if you don't believe me. I stayed at the Neville Arms.'

Ralph looked at Mary. 'That seems conclusive. And I must say that, though the resemblance is astounding, the voice isn't quite what I recall.'

Ralph did not like to say that the young man before them spoke with a Yorkshire accent, whereas last night's guest had not, but Mary took his point.

'We must have been mistaken,' she conceded. 'Though I must say it's very odd. I shall keep an eye open for this double of yours, Mr - er - ?'

'Thorpe, Michael Thorpe.'

'Any relation to our proprietor?'

The young man grinned. 'Sure. I'm the son of the house.' As though to prove it, he crossed the dining-room and disappeared through the service door.

The Heskeths looked at each other. 'What price your ghost now?' Ralph said.

'I still feel I'm right,' Mary answered with feminine logic. Ralph abruptly rose to his feet.

'Where are you going?'

'To look out of the window. I want to see what sort of car young Thorpe has.'

A moment later Ralph whistled in admiration. 'Come here, Mary. Take a look at this.'

Outside was the latest MG sports model, such as Ralph had admired at the Motor Show earlier that year.

'That clinches it,' Ralph said. 'The owner of that beauty wouldn't have wasted a second glance on our old bus.'

'Unless he was pulling our legs.'

'But he wasn't, was he?'

'No,' Mary said. 'It certainly didn't sound like that.'

The Heskeths were thoughtful for the rest of the morning. They did not go far afield, contenting themselves with the short drive back to Hillingdale and an investigation of the alleged back way in. As the proprietor had told them, a brick wall closed off the roadway; it was some seven feet high with rusty barbed wire on top. The surrounding vegetation was undisturbed; no one had attempted to scale it. The Heskeths returned even more thoughtful than they had set out.

A hundred yards down the road were two deserted, derelict cottages. Mary drew Ralph's attention to them.

'Didn't Mr Thorpe say that his wife used to live there?'

'I believe he did. What of that?'

'Let's tell her the story.'

'What on earth for?'

'I don't know. She might know something.'

'I don't see why she should. Anyway, she's not well.'

'She's all right today. I saw her. Walking in the garden with her son.'

'We may not see her. She keeps pretty much in the background.'

'No matter. We'll tell the story in the first place to her husband, and see what he has to say.'

'Michael Thorpe may have told them already.'

'I doubt it. He obviously thinks we're off our heads.'

'All the more reason for warning his father,' Ralph suggested.

'He's not that interested,' Mary said.

She was right, as usual. Mr Thorpe knew nothing when the Heskeths buttonholed him after lunch. To their surprise, he showed signs of such visible agitation that they felt constrained to reassure him at once.

'Of course it wasn't your son,' Mary said soothingly. 'It's just that they were so very much alike. Except for the voice, they could have been brothers.'

'What sort of voice had t'other lad got?'

'Not a Yorkshire voice,' Ralph said firmly. 'It was rather standard, a good accent. Probably came from the south.'

'And otherwise he was like our Michael?'

'As alike as two peas in a pod.'

'I don't like it,' the proprietor murmured. 'If this tale gets round Nora'll be mightily upset.'

'We wondered if your wife could throw any light on it,' Mary suggested. 'You said she used to live near Hillingdale.'

'I'd rather my wife didn't hear of it, and I'll thank you to keep mum about this ghost. There's no sense in re-opening an old wound.'

'What makes you suddenly sure it was a ghost?'

'Because – although I'd not meant to tell you – I know the man you gave a lift to. And he's dead.'

'How do you know he's dead?'

'I was the one who found him.'

Ralph laid a reassuring hand on Mary's arm. 'When was this?'

'Twenty-five years ago.'

'You mean – in wartime?'

'Twenty-five years ago last night.'

Mary moaned softly. 'I was right, Ralph. I knew I was right when he talked about the car.'

'I'm not so sure,' Ralph said sharply to the proprietor. 'Aren't you perhaps covering up for your son?'

The lad had nowt to do with it. He wasn't even born in those days. I should know, for his birth cost his mother so dear that there've been no more children. You can leave him out of this.'

'Then who was the – the person we gave a lift to?'

'A young pilot stationed at Hillingdale. It was a bomber

station in wartime—mostly Wellingtons. On the way back from one of his missions, he crashed. God knows how he got that kite across the North Sea. No one ever knew, for the radio packed up half-way. But she was losing height all the time and he had to try a forced landing in fog. Unluckily she dived at the last moment, killing the surviving crew. He was thrown out—alive. He was in pretty bad shape when he recovered consciousness, but he could walk, so he set out to walk across the moors, which he knew—'

'So he told us. His girl-friend—'

'That's right. He'd walked them with a local girl. The irony of it was, in his concussed state he didn't realize his crew had had it. He thought he was bringing help to them. And his determination was such that he damn near made it. He was within a hundred yards of Hillingdale when he collapsed.'

'Is that where you found him?'

'Ay. On the road to Nora's cottage and the back way into the camp. There was nothing I could do, but he was a brave man and deserved better. He got a bar to his DFC for that.'

'And your son?'

'Nora accepted me soon after, though she'd turned me down twice before. Mike was born the following year, and there's not a better son living, as Nora would tell you if she were here.'

'But you don't want us to mention this ghost in your wife's hearing?'

'I've told you, I'd be obliged to you if you'd keep mum. She was very fond of that young pilot. And of course, Mike's his son.'

ON THE BRIGHTON ROAD

Richard Middleton

Slowly the sun had climbed up the hard white downs, till it broke with little of the mysterious ritual of dawn upon a sparkling world of snow. There had been a hard frost during the night, and the birds, who hopped about here and there with scant tolerance of life, left no trace of their passage on the silver pavements. In places the sheltered caverns of the hedges broke the monotony of the whiteness that had fallen upon the coloured earth, and overhead the sky melted from orange to deep blue, from deep blue to a blue so pale that it suggested a thin paper screen rather than illimitable space. Across the level fields there came a cold, silent wind which blew a fine dust of snow from the trees, but hardly stirred the crested hedges. Once above the skyline, the sun seemed to climb more quickly, and as it rose higher it began to give out a heat that blended with the keenness of the wind.

It may have been this strange alternation of heat and cold that disturbed the tramp in his dreams, for he struggled for a moment with the snow that covered him, like a man who finds himself twisted uncomfortably in the bed-clothes, and then sat up with staring, questioning eyes. 'Lord! I thought I was in bed,' he said to himself as he took in the vacant landscape, 'and all the while I was out here.' He stretched his limbs, and, rising carefully to his feet, shook the snow off his body. As he did so the wind set him shivering, and he knew that his bed had been warm.

'Come, I feel pretty fit,' he thought. 'I suppose I am lucky to wake at all in this. Or unlucky - it isn't much of a business to come back to.' He looked up and saw the downs shining against the blue like the Alps on a picture-postcard. 'That means another forty miles or so, I suppose,' he continued grimly. 'Lord knows what I did yesterday. Walked till I was done, and now I'm only about twelve miles from Brighton. Damn the snow, damn Brighton, damn everything!' The sun crept higher and higher, and he started walking patiently along the road with his back turned to the hills.

'Am I glad or sorry that it was only sleep that took me,

glad or sorry, glad or sorry?' His thoughts seemed to arrange themselves in a metrical accompaniment to the steady thud of his footsteps, and he hardly sought an answer to his question. It was good enough to walk to.

Presently, when three milestones had loitered past, he overtook a boy who was stooping to light a cigarette. He wore no overcoat, and looked unspeakably fragile against the snow. 'Are you on the road, guv'nor?' asked the boy huskily as he passed.

'I think I am,' the tramp said.

'Oh! then I'll come a bit of the way with you if you don't walk too fast. It's a bit lonesome walking this time of day.' The tramp nodded his head, and the boy started limping along by his side.

'I'm eighteen,' he said casually. 'I bet you thought I was younger.'

'Fifteen, I'd have said.'

'You'd have backed a loser. Eighteen last August, and I've been on the road six years. I ran away from home five times when I was a little 'un, and the police took me back each time. Very good to me, the police was. Now I haven't got a home to run away from.'

'Nor have I,' the tramp said calmly.

'Oh, I can see what you are,' the boy panted; 'you're a gentleman come down. It's harder for you than for me.' The tramp glanced at the limping, feeble figure and lessened his pace.

'I haven't been at it as long as you have,' he admitted.

'No, I could tell that by the way you walk. You haven't got tired yet. Perhaps you expect something the other end?'

The tramp reflected for a moment. 'I don't know,' he said bitterly, 'I'm always expecting things.'

'You'll grow out of that,' the boy commented. 'It's warmer in London, but it's harder to come by grub. There isn't much in it really.'

'Still, there's the chance of meeting somebody there who will understand -'

'Country people are better,' the boy interrupted. 'Last night I took a lease of a barn for nothing and slept with the cows, and this morning the farmer routed me out and gave me tea and toke because I was so little. Of course, I score there; but in London, soup on the Embankment at night, and all the rest

of the time coppers moving you on.¹

'I dropped by the roadside last night and slept where I fell. It's a wonder I didn't die,' the tramp said. The boy looked at him sharply.

'How do you know you didn't?' he said.

'I don't see it,' the tramp said, after a pause.

'I tell you,' the boy said hoarsely, 'people like us can't get away from this sort of thing if we want to. Always hungry and thirsty and dog-tired and walking all the time. And yet if anyone offers me a nice home and work my stomach feels sick. Do I look strong? I know I'm little for my age, but I've been knocking about like this for six years, and do you think I'm not dead? I was drowned bathing at Margate, and I was killed by a gypsy with a spike; he knocked my head right in, and twice I was froze like you last night, and a motor cut me down on this very road, and yet I'm walking along here now, walking to London to walk away from it again, because I can't help it. Dead! I tell you we can't get away if we want to.'

The boy broke off in a fit of coughing, and the tramp paused while he recovered.

'You'd better borrow my coat for a bit, Tommy,' he said, 'your cough's pretty bad.'

'You go to hell!' the boy said fiercely, puffing at his cigarette; 'I'm all right. I was telling you about the road. You haven't got down to it yet, but you'll find out presently. We're all dead, all of us who're on it, and we're all tired, yet somehow we can't leave it. There's nice smells in the summer, dust and hay and the wind smack in your face on a hot day; and it's nice waking up in the wet grass on a fine morning. I don't know, I don't know—' he lurched forward suddenly, and the tramp caught him in his arms.

'I'm sick,' the boy whispered—'sick.'

The tramp looked up and down the road, but he could see no houses or any sign of help. Yet even as he supported the boy doubtfully in the middle of the road a motor car suddenly flashed in the middle distance, and came smoothly through the snow.

'What's the trouble?' said the driver quietly as he pulled up. 'I'm a doctor.' He looked at the boy keenly and listened to his strained breathing.

'Pneumonia,' he commented. 'I'll give him a lift to the infirmary, and you, too, if you like.'

The tramp thought of the workhouse and shook his head 'I'd rather walk,' he said.

The boy winked faintly as they lifted him into the car.

'I'll meet you beyond Reigate,' he murmured to the tramp. 'You'll see.' And the car vanished along the white road.

All the morning the tramp splashed through the thawing snow, but at midday he begged some bread at a cottage door and crept into a lonely barn to eat it. It was warm in there, and after his meal he fell asleep among the hay. It was dark when he woke, and started trudging once more through the slushy roads.

Two miles beyond Reigate a figure, a fragile figure, slipped out of the darkness to meet him.

'On the road, guv'nor?' said a husky voice. 'Then I'll come a bit of the way with you if you don't walk too fast. It's a bit lonesome walking this time of day.'

'But the pneumonia!' cried the tramp, aghast.

'I died at Crawley this morning,' said the boy.

SMEE

'Ex-Private X'

'No,' said Jackson, with a deprecatory smile, 'I'm sorry. I don't want to upset your game. I shan't be doing that because you'll have plenty without me. But I'm not playing any games of hide-and-seek.'

It was Christmas Eve, and we were a party of fourteen with just the proper leavening of youth. We had dined well; it was the season for childish games; and we were all in the mood for playing them—all, that is, except Jackson. When somebody suggested hide-and-seek there was rapturous and almost unanimous approval. His was the one dissentient voice.

It was not like Jackson to spoil sport or refuse to do as others wanted. Somebody asked him if he were feeling seedy.

'No,' he answered, 'I feel perfectly fit, thanks. But,' he added with a smile which softened without retracting the flat refusal, 'I'm not playing hide-and-seek.'

One of us asked him why not. He hesitated for some seconds before replying.

'I sometimes go and stay at a house where a girl was killed through playing hide-and-seek in the dark. She didn't know the house very well. There was a servants' staircase with a door to it. When she was pursued she opened the door and jumped into what she must have thought was one of the bedrooms—and she broke her neck at the bottom of the stairs.'

We all looked concerned, and Mrs Fernley said:

'How awful! And you were there when it happened?'

Jackson shook his head very gravely.

'No,' he said, 'but I was there when something else happened. Something worse.'

'I shouldn't have thought anything could be worse.'

'This was,' said Jackson, and shuddered visibly. 'Or so it seemed to me.'

I think he wanted to tell the story and was angling for encouragement. A few requests, which may have seemed to him to lack urgency, he affected to ignore and went off at a tangent.

'I wonder if any of you have played a game called "Smee"?

It's a great improvement on the ordinary game of hide-and-seek. The name derives from the ungrammatical colloquialism, "It's me." You might care to play if you're going to play a game of that sort. Let me tell you the rules.

'Every player is presented with a sheet of paper. All the sheets are blank except one, on which is written "Smee." Nobody knows who is "Smee" except "Smee" himself—or herself, as the case may be. The lights are then turned out and "Smee" slips from the room and goes off to hide, and after an interval the other players go off in search, without knowing whom they are actually in search of. One player meeting another challenges with the word "Smee," and the other player, if not the one concerned, answers "Smee."

The real "Smee" makes no answer when challenged, and the second player remains quietly by him. Presently they will be discovered by a third player who, having challenged and received no answer, will link up with the first two. This goes on until all the players have formed a chain, and the last to join is marked down for a forfeit. It's a good noisy, romping game, and in a big house it often takes a long time to complete the chain. You might care to try it; and I'll pay my forfeit and smoke one of Tim's excellent cigars here by the fire, until you get tired of it.'

I remarked that it sounded a good game and asked Jackson if he had played it himself.

'Yes,' he answered; 'I played it in the house I was telling you about.'

'And *she* was there? The girl who broke—'

'No, no,' Mrs Fernley interrupted. 'He told us he wasn't there when it happened.'

Jackson considered.

'I don't know if she were there or not. I'm afraid she was. I know that there were thirteen of us and there ought only to have been twelve. And I'll swear that I don't know her name, or I think I should have gone clean off my head when I heard that whisper in the dark. No, you don't catch me playing that game, or any other like it, any more. It spoils my nerve quite a while, and I can't afford to take long holidays. Besides, it saves a lot of trouble and inconvenience to own up at once to being a coward.'

Tim Vouce, the best of hosts, smiled around at us, and in that smile there was a meaning which is sometimes vulgarly

expressed by the slow closing of an eye.

'There's a story coming,' he announced.

'There's certainly a story of sorts,' said Jackson, 'but whether it's coming or not—'

He paused and shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, you're going to pay a forfeit instead of playing?'

'Please. But have a heart and let me down lightly. It's not just a sheer cussedness on my part.'

'Payment in advance,' said Tim, 'ensures honesty and promotes good feeling. You are therefore sentenced to tell the story here and now.'

And here follows Jackson's story, unrevised by me and passed on without comment to a wider public:

Some of you, I know, have run across the Sangstons. Christopher Sangston and his wife, I mean. They're distant connections of mine—at least, Violet Sangston is. About eight years ago they bought a house between the North and South Downs on the Surrey and Sussex border, and five years ago they invited me to come and spend Christmas with them.

It was a fairly old house—I couldn't say exactly of what period—and it certainly deserved the epithet 'rambling'. It wasn't a particularly big house, but the original architect, whoever he may have been, had not concerned himself with economizing in space, and at first you could get lost in it quite easily.

Well, I went down for that Christmas, assured by Violet's letter that I knew most of my fellow-guests and that the two or three who might be strangers to me were all 'lambs'. Unfortunately, I'm one of the world's workers, and I couldn't get away until Christmas Eve, although the other members of the party had assembled on the preceding day. Even then I had to cut it rather fine to be there for dinner on my first night. They were all dressing when I arrived and I had to go straight to my room and waste no time. I may even have kept dinner waiting for a bit, for I was last down, and it was announced within a minute of my entering the drawing-room. There was just time to say 'hallo' to everybody I knew, to be briefly introduced to the two or three I didn't know, and then I had to give my arm to Mrs Gorman.

I mention this as the reason why I didn't catch the name of a tall, dark, handsome girl I hadn't met before. Everything

was rather hurried and I am always bad at catching people's names. She looked cold and clever and rather forbidding, the sort of girl who gives the impression of knowing all about men and the more she knows of them the less she likes them. I felt that I wasn't going to hit it off with this particular 'lamb' of Violet's, but she looked interesting all the same, and I wondered who she was. I didn't ask, because I was pretty sure of hearing somebody address her by name before very long.

Unluckily, though, I was a long way off her at table, and as Mrs Gorman was at the top of her form that night I soon forgot to worry about who she might be. Mrs Gorman is one of the most amusing women I know, an outrageous but quite innocent flirt, with a very sprightly wit which isn't always unkind. She can think half a dozen moves ahead in conversation just as an expert can in a game of chess. We were soon sparring, or, rather, I was 'covering' against the ropes, and I quite forgot to ask her in an undertone the name of the cold, proud beauty. The lady on the other side of me was a stranger, or had been until a few minutes since, and I didn't think of seeking information in that quarter.

There was a round dozen of us, including the Sangstons themselves, and we were all young or trying to be. The Sangstons themselves were the oldest members of the party, and their son Reggie, in his last year at Marlborough, must have been the youngest. When there was talk of playing games after dinner it was he who suggested 'Smee'. He told us how to play it just as I've described it to you.

His father chipped in as soon as we all understood what was going to be required of us.

'If there are any games of that sort going on in the house,' he said, 'for goodness' sake be careful of the back stairs on the first-floor landing. There's a door to them and I've often meant to take it down. In the dark anybody who doesn't know the house very well might think they were walking into a room. A girl actually did break her neck on those stairs about ten years ago when the Ainsties lived here.'

I asked how it happened.

'Oh,' said Sangston, 'there was a party here one Christmas time and they were playing hide-and-seek as you propose doing. This girl was one of the hidiers. She heard somebody coming, ran along the passage to get away, and opened the

door of what she thought was a bedroom, evidently with the intention of hiding behind it while her pursuer went past. Unfortunately it was the door leading to the back stairs, and that staircase is as straight and almost as steep as the shaft of a pit. She was dead when they picked her up.'

We all promised for our own sakes to be careful. Mrs Gorman said that she was sure nothing could happen to her, since she was insured by three different newspapers, and her next-of-kin was a brother whose consistent ill-luck was a byword in the family. You see, none of us had known the unfortunate girl, and as the tragedy was ten years old there was no need to pull long faces about it.

Well, we started the game almost immediately after dinner. The men allowed themselves only five minutes before joining the ladies, and then young Reggie Sangston went round and assured himself that the lights were out all over the house except in the servants' quarters and in the drawing-room where we were assembled. We then got busy with twelve sheets of paper which he twisted into pellets and shook up between his hands before passing them round. Eleven of them were blank, and 'Smee' was written on the twelfth. The person drawing the latter was the one who had to hide. I looked and saw that mine was a blank. A moment later out went the electric lights, and in the darkness I heard somebody get up and creep to the door.

After a minute or so somebody gave a signal and we made a rush for the door. I for one hadn't the least idea which of the party was 'Smee'. For five or ten minutes we were all rushing up and down passages and in and out rooms challenging one another and answering, 'Smee? - Smee!'

After a bit the alarms and excursions died down, and I guessed the 'Smee' was found. Eventually I found a chain of people all sitting still and holding their breath on some narrow stairs leading up to a row of attics. I hastily joined it, having challenged and been answered with silence, and presently two more stragglers arrived, each racing the other to avoid being last. Sangston was one of them, indeed it was he who was marked down for a forfeit, and after a little while he remarked in an undertone, 'I think we're all here now, aren't we?'

He struck a match, looked up the shaft of the staircase, and began to count. It wasn't hard, although we just about filled

the staircase, for we were sitting each a step or two one above the next, and all our heads were visible.

'... nine, ten, eleven, twelve—*thirteen*,' he concluded, and then laughed. 'Dash it all, that's one too many!'

The match had burnt out and he struck another and began to count. He got as far as twelve, and then uttered an exclamation.

'There *are* thirteen people here!' he exclaimed. 'I haven't counted myself yet.'

'Oh, nonsense!' I laughed. 'You probably began with yourself, and now you want to count yourself twice.'

Out came his son's electric torch, giving a brighter and steadier light and we all began to count. Of course we numbered twelve. Sangston laughed.

'Well,' he said, 'I could have sworn I counted thirteen twice.'

From half-way up the stairs came Violet Sangston's voice with a little nervous trill in it.

'I thought there was somebody sitting two steps above me. Have you moved up, Captain Ransome?'

Ransome said that he hadn't. He also said that he thought there was somebody sitting between Violet and himself. Just for a moment there was an uncomfortable Something in the air, a little cold ripple which touched us all. For that little moment it seemed to all of us, I think, that something odd and unpleasant had happened and was liable to happen again. Then we laughed at ourselves and at one another and were comfortable once more. There *were* only twelve of us, and there *could* only have been twelve of us, and there was no argument about it. Still laughing we trooped back to the drawing-room to begin again.

This time I was 'Smee', and Violet Sangston ran me to earth while I was still looking for a hiding-place. That round didn't last long, and we were a chain of twelve within two or three minutes. Afterwards there was a short interval. Violet wanted a wrap fetched for her, and her husband went up to get it from her room. He was no sooner gone than Reggie pulled me by the sleeve. I saw that he was looking pale and sick.

'Quick!' he whispered, 'while father's out of the way. Take me into the smoke-room and give me a brandy or a whisky or something. You know the sort of dose a fellow ought to have.'

Outside the room I asked him what was the matter, but he didn't answer at first, and I thought it better to dose him first and question him afterwards. So I mixed him a pretty dark-complexioned brandy and soda which he drank at a gulp and then began to puff as if he had been running.

'I've had rather a turn,' he said to me with a sheepish grin.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know. You were "Smee" just now, weren't you? Well, of course I didn't know who "Smee" was, and while mother and the others ran into the west wing and found you, I turned east. There's a deep clothes cupboard in my bedroom - I'd marked it down as a good place to hide when it was my turn, and I had an idea that "Smee" might be there. I opened the door in the dark, felt round, and touched somebody's hand. "Smee?" I whispered, and not getting any answer I thought I had found "Smee".

'Well, I don't know how it was, but an odd creepy feeling came over me. I can't describe it, but I felt that something was wrong. So I turned on my electric torch and there was nobody there. Now I swear I touched a hand, and I was filling up the doorway of the cupboard at the time, so nobody could get out and past me.' He puffed again. 'What do you make of it?' he asked.

'You imagined that you touched a hand,' I answered, naturally enough.

He uttered a short laugh.

'Of course I knew you were going to say that,' he said. 'I must have imagined it, musn't I?' He paused and swallowed. 'I mean, it couldn't have been anything else *but* imagination, could it?'

I assured him that it couldn't, meaning what I said, and he accepted this, but rather with the philosophy of one who knows he is right but doesn't expect to be believed. We returned together to the drawing-room where, by that time, they were all waiting for us and ready to start again.

It may have been my imagination - although I'm almost sure it wasn't - but it seemed to me that all enthusiasm for the game had suddenly melted like a white frost in strong sunlight. If anybody had suggested another game I'm sure we should all have been grateful and abandoned 'Smee'. Only nobody did. Nobody seemed to like to. I for one, and I can

speak for some of the others, too, was oppressed with the feeling that there was something wrong. I couldn't have said what I thought was wrong, indeed I didn't think about it at all, but somehow all the sparkle had gone out of the fun, and hovering over my mind like a shadow was the warning of some sixth sense which told me that there was an influence in the house which was neither sane, sound nor healthy. Why did I feel like that? Because Sangston had counted thirteen of us instead of twelve, and his son had thought he had touched somebody in an empty cupboard? No, there was more in it than just that. One would have laughed at such things in the ordinary way, and it was just that feeling of something being wrong which stopped me from laughing.

Well, we started again, and when we went in pursuit of the unknown 'Smee' we were as noisy as ever, but it seemed to me that most of us were acting. Frankly, for no reason other than the one I've given you, we'd stopped enjoying the game. I had an instinct to hunt with the main pack, but after a few minutes, during which no 'Smee' had been found, my instinct to play winning games and be first if possible, set me searching on my own account. And on the first floor of the west wing, following the wall which was actually the shell of the house, I blundered against a pair of human knees.

I put out my hand and touched a soft, heavy curtain. Then I knew where I was. There were tall, deeply-recessed windows with seats along the landing, and curtains over the recesses to the ground. Somebody was sitting in a corner of this window-seat behind the curtain. Aha, I had caught 'Smee'! So I drew the curtain aside, stepped in, and touched the bare arm of a woman.

It was a dark night outside, and, moreover, the window was not only curtained but a blind hung down to where the bottom panes joined up with the frame. Between the curtain and the window it was as dark as the plague of Egypt. I could not have seen my hand held six inches before my face, much less the woman sitting in the corner.

'Smee?' I whispered.

I had no answer. 'Smee' when challenged does not answer. So I sat down beside her, first in the field, to await the others. Then, having settled myself, I leaned over to her and whispered:

'Who is it? What's your name, "Smee"?'

And out of the darkness beside me the whisper came back: 'Brenda Ford.'

I didn't know the name, but because I didn't know it I guessed at once who she was. The tall, pale, dark girl was the only person in the house I didn't know by name. *Ergo* my companion was the tall, pale, dark girl. It seemed rather intriguing to be there with her, shut in between a heavy curtain and a window, and I rather wondered whether she was enjoying the game we were all playing. Somehow she hadn't seemed to me to be one of the romping sort. I muttered one or two commonplace questions to her and had no answer.

'Smee' is a game of silence. 'Smee' and the person or persons who have found 'Smee' are supposed to keep quiet to make it hard for the others. But there was nobody else about, and it occurred to me that she was playing the game a little too much to the letter. I spoke again and got no answer, and then I began to be annoyed. She was of that cold, 'superior' type which affects to despise men; she didn't like me; and she was sheltering behind the rules of a game for children to be discourteous. Well, if she didn't like sitting there with me, I certainly didn't want to be sitting there with her! I half turned from her and began to hope that we should both be discovered without much more delay.

Having discovered that I didn't like being there alone with her, it was queer how soon I found myself hating it, and that for a reason very different from the one which had at first whetted my annoyance. The girl I had met for the first time before dinner, and seen diagonally across the table, had a sort of cold charm about her which had attracted while it had half angered me. For the girl who was with me, imprisoned in the opaque darkness between the curtain and the window, I felt no attraction at all. It was so very much the reverse that I should have wondered at myself if, after the first shock of the discovery that she had suddenly become repellent to me, I had no room in my mind for anything besides the consciousness that her close presence was an increasing horror to me.

It came upon me just as quickly as I've uttered the words. My flesh suddenly shrank from her as you see a strip of gelatine shrink and wither before the heat of a fire. That feeling of something being wrong had come back to me, but multiplied to an extent which turned foreboding into actual

terror. I firmly believe that I should have got up and run if I had not felt that at my first movement she would have divined my intention and compelled me to stay, by some means of which I could not bear to think. The memory of having touched her bare arm made me wince and draw in my lips. I prayed that somebody else would come along soon.

My prayer was answered. Light footfalls sounded on the landing. Somebody on the other side of the curtain brushed against my knees. The curtain was drawn aside and a woman's hand, fumbling in the darkness, presently rested on my shoulder. 'Smee?' whispered a voice which I instantly recognized as Mrs Gorman's.

Of course she received no answer. She came and settled down beside me with a rustle, and I can't describe the sense of relief she brought me.

'It's Tony, isn't it?' she whispered.

'Yes,' I whispered back.

'You're not "Smee" are you.'

'No, she's on my other side.'

She reached a hand across me, and I heard one of her nails scratch the surface of a woman's silk gown.

'Hallo, "Smee"! How are you? Who are you? Oh, is it against the rules to talk? Never mind, Tony, we'll break the rules. Do you know, Tony, this game is beginning to irk me a little. I hope they're not going to run it to death by playing it all the evening. I'd like to play some game where we can all be together in the same room with a nice bright fire.'

'Same here,' I agreed fervently.

'Can't you suggest something when we go down? There's something rather uncanny in this particular amusement. I can't quite shed the delusion that there's somebody in this game who oughtn't to be in at all.'

That was just how I had been feeling, but I didn't say so. But for my part the worst of my qualms were now gone; the arrival of Mrs Gorman had dissipated them. We sat on talking, wondering from time to time when the rest of the party would arrive.

I don't know how long elapsed before we heard a clatter of feet on the landing and young Reggie's voice shouting, 'Hallo! Hallo, there! Anybody there?'

'Yes,' I answered.

'Mrs Gorman with you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you're a nice pair! You're both forfeited. We've all been waiting for you for hours.'

'Why, you haven't found "Smee" yet,' I objected.

'You haven't, you mean. I happened to have been "Smee" myself.'

'But "Smee's" here with us,' I cried.

'Yes,' agreed Mrs Gorman.

The curtain was stripped aside and in a moment we were blinking into the eye of Reggie's electric torch. I looked at Mrs Gorman and then on my other side. Between me and the wall there was an empty space on the window seat. I stood up at once and wished I hadn't, for I found myself sick and dizzy.

'There was somebody there,' I maintained, 'because I touched her.'

'So did I,' said Mrs Gorman in a voice which had lost its steadiness. 'And I don't see how she could have got up and gone without our knowing it.'

Reggie uttered a queer, shaken laugh. He, too, had had an unpleasant experience that evening.

'Somebody's been playing the goat,' he remarked. 'Coming down?'

We were not very popular when we arrived in the drawing-room. Reggie rather tactlessly gave it out that he had found us sitting on a window-seat behind a curtain. I taxed the tall, dark girl with having pretended to be 'Smee' and afterwards slipping away. She denied it. After which we settled down and played other games. 'Smee' was done with for the evening, and I for one was glad of it.

Some long while later, during an interval, Sangston told me, if I wanted a drink, to go into the smoke-room and help myself. I went, and he presently followed me. I could see that he was rather peeved with me, and the reason came out during the following minute or two. It seemed that, in his opinion, if I must sit out and flirt with Mrs Gorman—in circumstances which would have been considered highly compromising in his young days—I needn't do it during a round game and keep everybody else waiting for us.

'But there was somebody else there,' I protested, 'somebody pretending to be "Smee". I believe it was that tall, dark girl,

Miss Ford, although she denied it. She even whispered her name to me.'

Sangston stared at me and nearly dropped his glass.

'Miss *Who*?' he shouted.

'Brenda Ford – she told me her name was.'

Sangston put down his glass and laid a hand on my shoulder.

'Look here, old man,' he said, 'I don't mind a joke, but don't let it go too far. We don't want all the women in the house getting hysterical. Brenda Ford is the name of the girl who broke her neck on the stairs playing hide-and-seek here ten years ago.'

MASTER GHOST AND I

Barbara Softly

Nathaniel Dodd, the steward who had served our family for as long as I could remember and who had not seen me for close on five years, stared disapprovingly over the roll of parchment in his hand. His eyes, squinting in the sunlight that danced through the window to make a mockery of the sullen atmosphere, became mere pinpricks that tried to pierce my thoughts. His stare moved from my tanned features to the buff coat of my officer's uniform, travelled down the sleeve and paused on the edge of plain linen at my wrist. Involuntarily; and immediately ashamed of the action, I curved my fingers under my gloves so that he would not notice the nails I had split that morning while mending a broken bridle. From my hands the stare glided to my sword, slid from hilt to tip and came to rest on the spurs of my muddied riding-boots.

'I left as soon as I received your message,' I began in weak apology for my unkempt looks, and feeling momentarily like the refractory schoolboy he still considered me to be.

The squinting eyes swung from my boots to my face again.

'You may sit down,' he said.

Four cold words; not 'Good day' or any remark on the change in my appearance which the half decade of soldiering with the Parliamentary Army must have made. I checked the rising comment, for I had no wish to make a greater enemy of the man who was the sole link with my family who had disowned me.

What had I done? Rebelled. The only one of my parents' four children who had dared to disobey their wishes. My two brothers had, not willingly, directed their lives into the ways chosen for them and my sister, at an early age, had been given in marriage to an elderly landowner of wealth in order to provide him with much-wanted heirs. But I, at fifteen as I then was, had seen little glamour or excitement in the life of a priest when I learned that I was destined for the Church. Glamour, life, excitement were to my mind to be found in my youthful pleasures, my sword, my horse, and the prospect of fighting; but not fighting for King Charles, who had just

raised his standard at Nottingham, and who was head of that very Church from which I wished to escape.

A few months after I had run away from home I was tracked down by Nathaniel Dodd. That was the first time I was summoned to receive his disapproving stare and the four cold words – ‘You may sit down.’ On that occasion I had remained standing, a silent but defiant fifteen-year-old, my hair cropped as short as the most fanatical Roundhead’s, determined to retain my freedom. It was not my freedom that Master Dodd wanted. It was to tell me that I could go the way I had chosen and live on the meagre pay of a common soldier because my family had disowned me, and there would never be any forgiveness for me.

‘Callous young puppy,’ Nathaniel Dodd had hissed at my apparent composure.

‘What do you expect me to say?’ I had asked, goaded into speech by his contempt. ‘If I show sorrow now for the distress I have caused my parents for not entering the Church, you will be the first to tell me my repentance is too late. The Church is not for me. Why should a boy’s life be stunted to suit his parents’ whim? If they prefer to exile me and make me homeless, they are to blame for their own unhappiness now, not I.’

They were hard words, and they came from a heart that was steeling itself to do without kindred and home for the bitter years of civil war.

Now, five years later, Nathaniel Dodd had sent for me again saying that he had important family matters to divulge. By this time there was a lull in the fighting and I, no longer a common soldier but a captain of a troop of horse in the New Model Army, was able to leave my quarters without a moment’s delay. Believing that my father or both my parents were dying, if not dead, I covered the many miles to Master Dodd in two hot summer days, to arrive tired and travel-stained on a well-nigh lamed horse in the mid-afternoon.

‘You may sit down.’ The words were repeated.

‘Thank you,’ I replied, and obeyed, flinging my hat and gloves on the floor beside me.

For an instant the pinprick eyes wavered, then dropped to the parchment and began to read. I was conscious that, at the end of every line, Master Dodd’s attention wandered from the black script to my relaxed figure, noting my hair, now

long like an ordinary officer's, not shorn like a fanatic's, and the air of maturity and experience.

'Are my parents well?' I asked.

He started as if he had not expected me to have the temerity to address him first.

'In exceptional health, I believe,' he said, and there was a hint of acidity in his voice showing that neither I nor what he read on the parchment was to his liking.

'This is your uncle's will,' he continued in the same sour tone. 'Your father's only brother Edward Knapton, who, until within a few months of his death, fought loyally at the King's side.' He glared at me over the parchment again and I wondered why he was at pains to tell me this. 'He has left his fortune, which was considerable, not to your father, your brothers or your sister—but—to a rebellious, ill-favoured, traitorous—' and here his list of adjectives failed him—'ne'er-do-well—to yourself.' He tossed the document in contempt on to the table in front of him.

I hid my amazement at his news and replied with as little sarcasm as possible that my uncle must have known the others were well provided for. If Master Dodd had been a common soldier he would have spat out his disgust.

'The man was mad,' he exploded, 'mad! He destroyed his previous will and made that—that travesty—only a short while ago.' His fingers quivering with fury, he pulled some keys from a drawer and went to a small coffer under the window. 'If you need money now I can let you have some, and the rest can be sent when and where you want it later. The house can be sold and then I—'

'What house?' I interrupted.

'Your uncle's,' he barked. 'Now yours. A new house—' And he named a village deep in a part of the West Country which had been torn by the campaigns during the early years of the war. 'He finished building it this spring and planned to live in it at once, but—' He hesitated, lifting the lid of the chest and burying his hand in its contents. 'It's no place for anyone and you'll not be needing a house when you are on the march all the time—you chose to give up one Royalist home and this will only be another. It will fetch a good price and—'

'I do not wish to sell it,' I replied firmly. His ready acceptance of the fact that I neither needed nor wanted the house roused my obstinate nature, although I was not really inclined

to be saddled with the property. 'You can give me the keys and I will go down there.'

He straightened up, his eyes blinking nervously.

'You'll not like it. Your uncle could not abide it in the end.'

'No doubt that was why he left it to me,' I said. 'If he had been fond of it he would have given it to a more worthy recipient. In any case, I should like to see the servants. They might not be willing to serve a rebel master after a Royalist one.'

'There are no servants.' He spoke slowly in order to convey some deeper meaning. 'The place is empty, no one will stay there. Your uncle was driven from it—by some power, some evil—he believed the place was haunted.'

'Haunted?' I laughed. 'What—a house not a year old with a ghost? Who is it? One of the bricklayers fallen from the scaffolding or did they wall up the master carpenter in the chimney because of his prying ways?'

Nathaniel Dodd eyed me with awe and a strange fascination.

'Heaven be praised you never entered the Church,' he muttered. 'The supernatural is to be feared not mocked.'

He passed a bag of money and some keys from the coffer to my outstretched hand. Then smoothed his glistening forehead with a damp palm.

'I shall be ready to sell the property when you have changed your mind,' he said.

I slipped the bag and keys into my pouch, swung my hat and gloves from the floor, and bowed my thanks.

'Maybe I won't change my mind,' I smiled, and I was conscious of the shaft of sunlight dancing joyously across the sombre room. 'For perhaps Master Ghost and I will become well acquainted.'

Forty-eight hours later, on a day that had turned from high summer to the cloud and steady wind which had prevailed for most of the season, I sat surveying my inheritance—or what I could see of its chimneys showing above a high, uncut hawthorn hedge and an iron-studded gateway. Dismounting, I glanced all round, back along the grassy track which had led from the road a mile away; to the right where the deep hills were folded in peace, and to the left where, from a distant, tree-lined hollow, the smoke from hidden cottage fires was being swept like pennants across the countryside.

I hitched my horse to a stake in the hedge and, leaving him there to graze, fitted one of Master Dodd's keys to the lock on the gate. The key grated, the lock was stiff and the gate had to be pushed over uneven ground where I had thought there would be a smooth drive. There was no drive and I stood staring in bewilderment. There was nothing, nothing but grass, rough and knee-deep or in hummocky tufts and the whole vast hayfield, in which the house and outbuildings seemed to have been dropped, was scattered with mature trees. Only under the nearest line of windows was there a terrace of freshly laid flag-stones, and even they were edged with weeds, littered with wisps of straw and flutterings of dead leaves.

What is it that is so uncanny about an empty house? As I moved softly on the carpet of turf every window seemed to be watching, every stone to be listening and the air of desolation was so heavy and still that my ears were oppressed with it. Yet there was no stillness; the silence was full of the wind of that dull, clouded summer day, a wind that swept the dry leaves on the flags, that bent the branches of the limes into brooms and brushed them in never-ending motion; a wind full of unseen voices.

The clattering of my spurs striking the terrace steps was enough to unsteady my nerves; my hand flew to my sword while my heart pounded as it had never done in battle.

'Coward,' I muttered, remembering Master Dodd's words. 'But it seems a day of ghosts; the air could be full of them, crying like lost souls.'

'Will you be wanting anything, sir?'

I spun round, back to the wall, sword half drawn, ready to defend myself against the supernatural if need be.

A most unghostlike face, balanced on the haft of a scythe, was glaring at me through the overgrown bushes.

'I be here to cut the grass,' it said.

'A pity you did not come sooner,' I retorted, angry with myself. 'It has not been cut for months.'

'I come once a year—the Master only wanted me once a year.' The shrubs quivered and a man wriggled on to the stones in front of me. He stood up slowly, stroking the blade of the scythe and eyeing my buff coat with the same look as Master Dodd's—disapproval verging on hatred. 'I'm Mallett,' he said, 'Ned Mallett—and you're a soldier, bain't you.' It was

a statement not a question. 'We don't hold with soldiers in these parts; you'd best be off before anyone else sees you.' The scythe tilted in the manner of a battle-axe.

'This is my house,' I told him. 'The master of whom you speak was my uncle and he has left this property to me.'

'That's as maybe,' he growled. 'Master or no master, you're a soldier, and we've had enough of soldiery in these parts whether they be King's men or Parliament's. You leave peaceful folks be.'

'The previous owner, Edward Knapton, was a soldier, too,' I replied.

'Maybe he was.' The man's attitude became more threatening. 'But we don't want no more of you, trampling our crops, eating our food, burning our barns, taking all, and paying nothing. We fought you once with pitchforks and clubs and we'll fight you again whether you be the Master, the King, or the Parliament.'

I knew what he meant. Villagers all over that locality, driven to desperation by the plunder of war, had banded together to fight the common enemy, Royalist and Roundhead. Both sides had tried to woo their friendship with promises of better-disciplined troops and gifts of muskets and carbines. The Clubmen, we had called them, because of their primitive weapons.

'You'd best be going,' he said again before I could speak. 'Master Knapton wouldn't stay here. Worried well-nigh out of his wits, he was, though it wasn't us what drove him away. It might have been,' he added menacingly, 'if the devil hadn't done it for us. "I'll not come again," that's what he told me. "Ned Mallet," he said, "the place is evil and I'll not—"'

'Never mind what he told you,' I interrupted, my temper rising. 'You and your Clubmen, the devil and all his demons, I am staying here the night at least. So you "had best be off" down to those cottages and find someone who can come up and cook my supper for me. My horse needs stabling, too, and you can do that on your way back.'

He wavered under the decisive tones, but, as his eyes shifted swiftly over my shoulder, something more like cunning crept into his voice.

'My missus'll come up like she did for Master Edward,' he muttered. 'She'll do the fires and air the linen—though she'll not—'

'I am not asking anyone to sleep here,' I forestalled him, and immediately thought that I should feel safer in my bed with my hostile neighbours on the other side of a barred door. 'I am not afraid of being alone.'

Without another word, he jerked the scythe into his hands and went towards the outbuildings on a path that was evidently the shortest route to the cottages in the hollow. I moved to recross the terrace to the main porch, intending to explore the house, for I was anxious to examine it thoroughly before the man and his wife returned or darkness fell.

With an exclamation of annoyance, I saw another prying villager standing behind me, a boy of about fifteen years of age.

'Who are you?' I snapped.

'Ro-Roger,' he stammered.

'And you live here, too, I suppose?'

'S-sort of.'

We looked each other up and down.

'You—you're a soldier,' he said. 'A soldier in the New Model Army, an officer.'

'A captain of a troop of horse, and before that I served under Waller in most of his campaigns here in the West; and I have been a soldier for the past five years.'

I rolled the words out in fury, waiting for the inevitable disapproval, but it did not come. The boy was staring at me with an odd mixture of incredulity, wonderment, and admiration. His hair was cropped shorter than mine had ever been and he was wearing a shabby doublet and breeches of a faded blue-grey colour. On second thoughts, as I continued to study him, I decided that his clothes were not shabby with the wear of work as Ned Mallett's had been. They were faded with disuse, the lace of his shirt yellowed, dust lines in the creases of folding, and it seemed probable that he was dressed in a discarded suit of my uncle's.

'You knew Master Knapton?' I asked. 'Master Edward Knapton who lived here?'

'He only came once, a short while ago. I met him then,' was the quick reply.

'And he gave you those clothes.'

A momentary glimmer of astonishment showed in the boy's eyes and he glanced down at his doublet.

'They came from the chest at the foot of his bed,' he explained, and then more eagerly, 'Why are you here? - you're a soldier, and there's no fighting now -'

'Because the house is mine.' Soon these villagers will be aware of that fact, I thought. 'Edward Knapton was my uncle, and I am John Knapton, his nephew, who -'

'John Knapton?' he broke in. 'You are John Knapton? But - but you're a soldier - a captain in the Army -' His astonishment was not hidden now. 'But no one would ever have dreamed you were a Roundhead soldier as well.'

'As well as what?' I asked.

He flushed, hesitated, and shrugged his shoulders.

'As well as - being - being -'

'As well as being the nephew of a loyal subject of the King,' I finished for him.

He smiled and the flush deepened.

'That's as good a reason as any.'

He laughed, and I could not help liking the boy; his disarming friendliness and his quaint, clipped way of speaking, which was quite different from Mallett's broad dialect or my slight country drawl.

Taking out another of Master Dodd's keys, I went towards the door at the front of the house, and as I reached the porch I heard Roger padding softly after me.

'This is tansy, isn't it?' he asked.

I turned and saw him running his hand up a feathery-leaved yellow flower which was growing in a straggling clump at the edge of the steps. He buried his nose in his palm.

'What a scent!' he exclaimed. 'It reminds me of blazing borders and summer gardens.'

'It reminds me of fleas,' I said, 'and doses of bitter physic when I was a child.'

His guffaw of laughter warmed me. It was good to hear such a sound in the atmosphere of cheerlessness which had so far been my greeting. When I opened the door, wrinkling my nose at the musty smell, Roger was close at my elbow.

He wriggled past my arm. 'Look,' he whispered in excitement. 'It's new - so new. Look at that panelling and this floor.' He darted across the hall to smooth his fingers down the freshly carved woodwork on the walls.

'Of course it's new, boy,' I replied. 'It was only finished this year. Didn't you see it when my uncle was here?'

He shook his head. 'I - I didn't come in,' he murmured, and with an effort seemed to check his eagerness.

After that, with firmly compressed lips, he followed me like a dog, through the living-rooms and kitchens, stopping when I stopped, and pausing to look out of a window whenever I opened one. Upstairs, in one of the bedrooms which was more fully furnished than the rest of the house and had obviously been intended for my uncle's use, the sour staleness was overpowering. As I strode to the window, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Roger drop on his knees in front of the linen chest at the foot of the four-poster bed. With a sigh of pleasure, he let his fingers caress the dull wood as they had caressed the panelling and the yellow herb.

'It's the same,' I heard him hiss. 'It's unbelievable that it's still the same only so much darker.'

'If it's the one Master Knapton took your suit from I'm not surprised it's the same,' I said, glancing round at him. 'But as you did not come indoors when he was here, I don't see how you can recognize it.'

He dropped back on his heels as if caught in some guilty thought or action.

'The date is on it here,' I said quietly, for he did not reply, and I seemed to have damped his enthusiasm. 'On the lid - 1620. I've no doubt it was made for my uncle when he was a young man. It's old by his standards now, over twenty-five years.'

'Twenty-five years! That's not old,' Roger protested. 'It won't look like that in over three hundred years, that I know.'

'Neither will you,' I retorted.

He stared at me. There was silence, a second's silence while the wind of that dull, clouded summer day blew in the narrow window and sent only its voices sweeping through my uncle's room.

'"*Tempus edax rerum*,"' I commented.

'What?' asked Roger sharply. 'What does that mean? It's Latin, isn't it?'

'Latin, boy!' I exclaimed. 'Of course it's Latin, and at your age you should know what it means.'

'I don't,' he confessed. 'I don't take Latin at my school. I take other subjects.'

I refrained from another exclamation. For all I knew he might be some ignorant local lad that my uncle had befriended

and he was trying to cover his lack of knowledge by blaming it on to his schoolmaster.

'“Time, the devourer of all things,” is a fair enough translation,’ I explained.

Roger’s eyes met mine, and again I was conscious of the wind, the rustle of the dead lime flowers on the flags. Then he chuckled – and the sound of hoofs clapping on the terrace beneath us told me that Ned Mallett had returned to stable my horse. I hurried to the head of the stairs to see if the man’s wife was with him, too. Before I called down I glanced back at Roger. He had not moved but he was watching me, that strange look of wonder, near affection on his face. Although I pretended not to have noticed, it was with growing feelings of uneasiness and foreboding that I made my way to the kitchen.

Who was he, this boy? He seemed familiar with my uncle’s possessions, and yet he said he had only met him once. Was his friendliness genuine or was it a cloak for something deeper? Ned Mallett’s antagonism had unsettled me. I recollected his hasty glance to where the boy must have been standing behind me and I began to wonder if, ever since Edward Knapton’s death, the villagers had set a spy to wait for the new unwanted soldier-owner of the property; a spy who would gain his confidence, as this boy was gaining mine, and, then at the chosen moment – My fingers sought the hilt of my sword. With that alone, for I now realized my foolishness in leaving my pistols on my saddle, I reckoned I could withstand any treachery.

In the kitchen Mistress Mallett had already lighted the fire and blown it into a blaze. There were clean sheets, which she told me she had brought herself, draped across a bench; but her sullen greeting added to the wave of depression that had come over me at the top of the stairs.

Strong hands smoothed the folds of her petticoats down her broad hips as she regarded me with the eyes of Nathaniel Dodd and Ned Mallett.

‘So – you’re a soldier,’ she sniffed. ‘We’ve seen more than enough of the likes of you.’

‘So I understand,’ was my quick rejoinder and, leaving her at the oven, I went into the living-room.

‘There’s bread and cheese and ale for your supper,’ she called out. ‘I’ll make up the beds and then you must shift for

yourself. I'll not stay after dusk in this God-forsaken place.'

I did not trouble to reply, but dropped my hat and gloves on the settle as I passed and dragged a high-backed chair up to the table in the window. Sitting there, gazing out over the windswept terrace and the unending grass of that vast field, my depression deepened. Master Dodd had been right; I should have to sell 'the God-forsaken place'. The villagers, even if they intended me no real harm, would never accept me without a struggle, and no doubt, one night spent alone in the house would be enough to drive me away. It would not be difficult to decide which had the most power, the supernatural or the ill-wishes of Master Mallett.

And what of Roger? Was I to be completely alone? It was unlikely after Mistress Mallett's use of the word 'beds'. As far as I could see the boy had no intentions of leaving me, which seemed further confirmation of my suspicions. He had followed me to the kitchen, through to the living-room and now, without turning my head, I was able to watch his form, grey-blue in the growing shadows, where he was crouching on the settle. My hat and gloves were in his lap and he was engrossed, examining both in minute detail, furtively fingering the felt, the leather, even the lines of stitching.

'It's getting dark in here,' I said abruptly.

He started in alarm.

'D-dark?' he stammered. 'I'll switch the light on.'

He sprang across the room to the door and put his hand to the wall. Then he stood still, his hand slipping to his side.

'What's the matter?' I asked, shaken by his words and attitude.

'Candles - I'll fetch the candles,' he murmured.

I stood up to follow him, but hesitated at the strident tones of Mistress Mallett's voice.

'There's candles and tinder in the dresser in the living-room, I'll be bound. Don't you be bothering me, now. The supper's out here and I'll be gone in less than a minute.'

Roger returned. He walked past the dresser, straight to the table, and sat down.

'She doesn't want me in the kitchen at the moment,' he explained. 'There are plenty of candles out there and I'll light them from the fire when she has gone.'

It was a barefaced lie.

'One candle will be sufficient,' I remarked coldly, and sat down opposite.

'I don't mind being in the dark,' he said.

No, I thought in agreement, I do not suppose you do. So much can be accomplished in the dark with an unwary opponent, but I am as watchful as you, my lad.

Suddenly he leaned across and looked searchingly up into my face.

'You know what you said just now, about time,' he began. "'Time the devourer of all things" – "*tempus*", something or other?'

"*Tempus edax rerum*," I repeated, wedging my knee under the table so that it could not be tipped unexpectedly and send me off my balance.

'Do you believe that?'

'That time devours everything?' I asked, and I heard the click of the latch as Mistress Mallett left the kitchen. 'It is obvious it does. Look at the grass out there and the hedge. A few months and the place is a wilderness, a few years more of neglect and the whole house will be a tangle of briars, the woodwork rotten and the plaster fallen in. That's time; time devours and –'

'I know,' he interrupted impatiently. 'That's one sort of time – but I'm trying to talk about something else – a – a time that is only a cover, that we have to live by in hours and days, but which doesn't really exist.'

If you are spinning out the time, I thought, you are going about it in a very odd way.

'I'm so hopeless at expressing myself,' he went on with a hint of desperation. 'Something like it comes in a piece of poetry, though I'm not much good at the stuff and I can never remember it properly –'

*"In every land thy feet may tread
Time like a veil is round thy head.
Only the land thou seek'st with me
Never hath been nor yet shall be –"*

An uneasy cold crept over my whole body as I listened, held against my will by his glowing eyes and the tense face so white in the half light. If he had wanted to put me off my

guard, he had succeeded.

'Don't you believe that time is only a veil, and if you lift it you can be anywhere at any period of existence?' he whispered.

Uncertainty, vague fear, and a presentiment of some unknown power gripped me.

"Time like a veil is round thy head." The slow words he repeated dropped into the hollow stillness of the empty house.

My question hovered on the air.

'Who wrote that?' I breathed.

'Henry Newbolt,' he said, and even before he spoke I sensed it would be a poet of whom I had never heard.

A sudden flicker of light beyond the hedge in the darkening garden jerked me from my stupor. One hand flew to my sword, the other instinctively closed over Roger's slim wrists on the table.

'Don't move,' I hissed as I pressed him to the chair.

'I can't,' he growled. 'And there's no need to hold me down. I'm not frightened of them.'

The injured tone was reassuring. The boy was no accomplice, of that I was sure, though what he was I had not the courage to admit. I was only concerned at that moment with the need for speedy action.

'I'll wager it's Ned Mallett with his scythe and half the village too, come to drive the soldier from his stronghold,' I muttered in rising anger. 'And this soldier will not be driven. I'll go of my own free will, and neither man nor devil shall frighten me out of my own house.'

I released Roger who was writhing under the strength of my arm.

'Get down to that gate opposite the terrace steps. See that it's locked and bolted,' I commanded. 'They'll not venture over this hawthorn hedge without ladders yet.'

'Can't we barricade the house?' he asked eagerly. 'We could block all the doors and shutter the windows and pour buckets of blazing tar on their heads. That's what they do in sieges -'

'This isn't a siege,' I snapped, ignoring his flippancy although he appeared to be in earnest. 'And it is not going to be one. Attack first, defence afterwards is the order in my troop of horse. There must be another gate behind the stables and I'll wait for you there.'

He darted away and sent the chair flying in his impetuous dash.

'Don't be foolhardy,' I called. 'If they are armed they'll fire.'

'What?' He paused in the doorway. 'With one of those old carbines? Those things wouldn't hit a cow at five yards.'

'They've been known to kill a man at twenty,' I retorted.

'Oh for a Winchester, and I'd pick 'em off like flies,' he cried.

'I want no bloodshed,' I ordered. Again his remark was incomprehensible, but time enough to ask him what he meant later, I thought. 'If they want to live in peace, far be it from me to start a fight, but they must learn to leave me in peace, too.'

If I could retrieve my pistols – if Master Mallett had not had the wits to remove them from the holsters in anticipation of this attack – and could fire over their heads to frighten them into parleying, we might be able to come to amicable terms after all.

As the outer door banged behind Roger, I groped through the dim kitchen to make my way to the stables and barns – but I never reached either. The moment my foot stepped into the sullen darkness of that clouded evening, a bullet shattered the window at my side. I ducked, slid beneath the covering bushes, and flattened myself against the wall waiting for the next shot. None came; no sound, no movement but the trees in the wind and my own shallow breathing. So much for the prospects of peace without bloodshed, I thought, and this was a form of fighting I despised. With my pistols or sword, even my bare hands, I would tackle any numbers if they refused to listen to words of reason, but this game of hide-and-seek, with an enemy who had already spotted me, was not to my liking.

Cautiously I edged sideways, aware that my disadvantage lay in the fact that I was not familiar with the courtyard, and that the stables might be any of the shapes that rose up in the gloom. If my enemy meant to kill, once I was in the open I was an easy target, and so until I could catch a glimpse of him, it was wiser to hug the wall. My fingers, spreading along the bricks, touched first climbing tendrils, a snail – then, something warm and rough – a hand! I froze. My fingers crept upwards to touch a sleeve. With an exclamation of alarm the

owner of the sleeve jerked backwards, and before another hand could drop on mine I sprang at the hidden figure. Nose to nose, knee to knee, we struggled under the bushes betraying our whereabouts to the unseen marksman. His second shot speeding through the branches over my head so startled my antagonist that, in his momentary hesitation, I wrenched myself free, swung my fist and gave him a crushing blow on the jaw. As his sagging body toppled another shape leapt for my throat, received the toe of my jackboot in his stomach and fell winded and writhing to the ground.

Two, I thought quickly, and how many more? Off balance and reeling from my shelter I nearly slipped beneath the double onslaught of a burly figure in front and little, leech-like arms which clasped my wrists behind me. With a vicious kick to the rear, I felt my spurs gouge deeply into a stockinged shin—there was a scream of pain and the third assailant dropped from the fight. But the fourth was taking all my strength; he tripped my feet and sent me sprawling to the dust, bruised and entangled by my own sword, and there we rolled, locked in each other's arms until I became conscious of a light wavering towards us from the darkness of the hedge. It was Master Mallett, a flaming torch held high, and at his side was the marksman with his carbine.

'This is your doing,' I bellowed in a brief moment when I was uppermost. 'I came in peace and if any of these men are dead, may it lie on your conscience for ever.'

I saw the light glinting along the raised barrel and I saw Roger leaping into the circle of yellow flame.

'Get down—he'll fire!' I gasped.

For a moment he stood there poised, a pace from the carbine's mouth—a shot—silence—a feather of smoke—a quiver from the torch as Ned Mallett turned, too late, and struck the gun from the man's hands. The fellow gripping my shoulders loosed them, sat back and eased his bruised muscles; other shapes rose and shambled towards the gate. I lurched to my feet and stumbled forward.

Roger had not moved; upright and as firm as a rock, he watched me coming, a faint smile on his lips. His eyes, as he glanced up into my face, wore an odd, distant look.

'That must be like the silver bullet in the fairy stories that's supposed to kill the devil,' he said quietly. 'It doesn't really kill him, it just gets rid of him for a while.'

'You're hurt,' I said.

I slipped my arm round his shoulders and he did not resist. Slowly I led him to the long grass at the edge of the terrace, where I pulled off my coat and spread it on the ground. He sank down and let his head droop on to the improvised pillow. Kneeling by his side I fumbled with the worn cloth of his doublet, feeling through his shirt to his chest. There was not a mark on him nor a speck of blood.

'There's no wound,' I whispered.

'There won't be,' he murmured. 'I'm not going to die yet. I shall be alive long after you are dead—more than three hundred years.'

I gazed into that still face which glimmered among the grasses like a white moth at rest.

He raised one hand; his fingers touched my hair, my cheek, my linen shirt, the hilt of my unused sword.

'John Knapton—Captain John Knapton,' and I sensed that he was smiling. 'I have always wanted to know what you were really like—and now I know you were a Roundhead soldier as well, while everyone else just believes you to be the man who laid out the gardens.'

'What gardens?' I asked, a great fear gripping me.

'The gardens here,' he replied. 'Gardens that everyone comes to see—the sundial on the terrace where you carved your name and put those strange words along its rim, in English, too. I wonder why you did that; most people of your time would have put them in Latin. It's so short, so short a time,' he whispered desperately. 'There was so much I wanted to see, to know, to ask—and I never guessed how it could end—I—I thought I could be here for ever, if I wanted. The suit was in the chest; I found it there, all folded and old just as he had put it away and then, I hoped I might meet you.' He chuckled. 'I frightened him, the old man, your uncle, though the villagers thought I was some boy of his. It was too soon and I pestered the life out of him asking what he was doing in your house—everyone knew it was yours—they hadn't a clue it belonged to him first—they even thought you built it.'

His fingers slipped from my sword and lay, a featherweight on my own.

'He was afraid of me,' he murmured. 'I was something out of this world to him, I suppose.'

I heard the wind bending the lime branches, the leaves tapping the flagstones, but there were no voices, only peace in that clouded night.

'The supernatural is to be feared not mocked,' Master Dodd had said – and 'I was not afraid.

I watched him, how long I watched him, I cannot tell. His slight form lay, a shadow in the flattened grass, his face fading, until, as the moonless hours crept by, he drifted like a moth into the darkness.

My coat was warm when I took it up and stumbled into the house. I lit a candle with the tinder that I believed Roger had not known how to use and mounted the stairs to my uncle's room. There I opened the chest and there I found the blue-grey doublet and breeches, the fine lace shirt, fresh-folded in lavender, just as my uncle had laid them away a few months ago; the dust and creases, the yellowing of age and faded colours that Roger had put on would form with the years, three hundred years of time.

I knelt there, my head bowed in my arms while the candle burned low in its socket. I, who had never allowed myself to feel the need for a home, now wanted this, my inheritance, though willed to me in fear; and wanted to create out of its wilderness something living to take the place of the destruction which had been five years of my life.

Was it possible, I asked myself, to raise a memorial to a ghost from the future, to a boy not yet born, a memorial that would endure until he came?

'A wall would last longer than that hawthorn hedge,' I thought. 'And oaks are slower growing than limes or elms; flagged paths and stone seats would weather the centuries; shrubs of rosemary and lavender – they spring from slips quick enough although the mother plant may not thrive more than a decade and –' I laughed aloud – 'he shall have his tansy and as many herbs as he wants, descendants of the ones already here; and his blazing borders, banked by yew – that's almost everlasting.'

I stubbed the flaring candle in its pool of grease and, fired with enthusiasm, strode to the open window. The limes were still, only an early thrush was rustling the limp leaves.

'A dial on the terrace,' I mused, 'where it will catch the sun most of the day; and my name on it with some Latin maxim carved along its rim, *Tempus Fugit* or –' A chuckle of

merriment burst from me. 'But the boy doesn't know any Latin!' I exclaimed. 'Roger, Roger, what an ignorant lad you are—but, for your sake, I'll put the words in English.'

I gazed out across that vast field of rampant grass, already seeing in my mind the beauty it was to become. And Roger? I should look for him in vain, for he would not come in my lifetime any more; but come, at last, he would, and love that garden as I was beginning to love it.

"'Long looked for—come at last.'" I breathed into that first dawn the words which were to be inscribed in stone.

The sun's gold touched the latticed panes.

'I have lived three centuries in half a day,' I thought, and then a mischievous smile curved my lips because I knew I should have to write to Nathaniel Dodd.

The house would not be sold for—Master Ghost and I had become well acquainted.

THE MOONLIT ROAD

Ambrose Bierce

I. STATEMENT OF JOEL HETMAN, JR.

I am the most unfortunate of men. Rich, respected, fairly well educated and of sound health—with many other advantages usually valued by those having them and coveted by those who have them not—I sometimes think that I should be less unhappy if they had been denied me, for then the contrast between my outer and my inner life would not be continually demanding a painful attention. In the stress of privation and the need of effort I might sometimes forget the sombre secret ever baffling the conjecture that it compels.

I am the only child of Joel and Julia Hetman. The one was a well-to-do country gentleman, the other a beautiful and accomplished woman to whom he was passionately attached with what I now know to have been a jealous and exacting devotion. The family home was a few miles from Nashville, Tennessee, a large, irregularly built dwelling of no particular order of architecture, a little way off the road, in a park of trees and shrubbery.

At the time of which I write I was nineteen years old, a student at Yale. One day I received a telegram from my father of such urgency that in compliance with its unexplained demand I left at once for home. At the railway station in Nashville a distant relative awaited me to apprise me of the reason for my recall: my mother had been barbarously murdered—why and by whom none could conjecture, but the circumstances were these:

My father had gone to Nashville, intending to return the next afternoon. Something prevented his accomplishing the business in hand, so he returned on the same night, arriving just before the dawn. In his testimony before the coroner he explained that having no latch-key and not caring to disturb the sleeping servants, he had, with no clearly defined intention, gone round to the rear of the house. As he turned an angle of the building, he heard a sound as of a door gently closed, and saw in the darkness, indistinctly, the figure of a man,

which instantly disappeared among the trees of the lawn. A hasty pursuit and brief search of the grounds in the belief that the trespasser was someone secretly visiting a servant proving fruitless, he entered at the unlocked door and mounted the stairs to my mother's chamber. Its door was open, and stepping into black darkness he fell headlong over some heavy object on the floor. I may spare myself the details; it was my poor mother, dead of strangulation by human hands!

Nothing had been taken from the house, the servants had heard no sound, and excepting those terrible fingermarks upon the dead woman's throat—dear God! that I might forget them!—no trace of the assassin was ever found.

I gave up my studies and remained with my father, who, naturally, was greatly changed. Always of a sedate, taciturn disposition, he now fell into a so deep dejection that nothing could hold his attention, yet anything—a footfall, the sudden closing of a door—aroused in him a fitful interest; one might have called it an apprehension. At any small surprise of the senses he would start visibly and sometimes turn pale, then relapse into a melancholy apathy deeper than before. I suppose he was what is called a 'nervous wreck'. As to me, I was younger then than now—there is much in that. Youth is Gilead, in which is balm for every wound. Ah, that I might again dwell in that enchanted land! Unacquainted with grief, I knew not how to appraise my bereavement; I could not rightly estimate the strength of the stroke.

One night, a few months after the dreadful event, my father and I walked home from the city. The full moon was about three hours above the eastern horizon; the entire countryside had the solemn stillness of a summer night; our footfalls and the ceaseless song of the katydids were the only sound, aloof. Black shadows of bordering trees lay athwart the road, which, in the short reaches between, gleamed a ghostly white. As we approached the gate to our dwelling, whose front was in shadow, and in which no light shone, my father suddenly stopped and clutched my arm, saying, hardly above his breath:

'God! God! what is that?'

'I hear nothing,' I replied.

'But see—see!' he said, pointing along the road, directly ahead.

I said: 'Nothing is there, Come, Father, let us go in—you are ill.'

He had released my arm and was standing rigid and motionless in the centre of the illuminated roadway, staring like one bereft of sense. His face in the moonlight showed a pallor and fixity inexpressibly distressing. I pulled gently at his sleeve, but he had forgotten my existence. Presently he began to retire backward, step by step, never for an instant removing his eyes from what he saw, or thought he saw. I turned half round to follow, but stood irresolute. I do not recall any feeling of fear, unless a sudden chill was its physical manifestation. It seemed as if an icy wind had touched my face and enfolded my body from head to foot; I could feel the stir of it in my hair.

At that moment my attention was drawn to a light that suddenly streamed from an upper window of the house: one of the servants, awakened by what mysterious premonition of evil who can say, and in obedience to an impulse that she was never able to name, had lit a lamp. When I turned to look for my father he was gone, and in all the years that have passed no whisper of his fate has come across the borderland of conjecture from the realm of the unknown.

II. STATEMENT OF CASPAR GRATTAN

Today I am said to live; tomorrow, here in this room, will lie a senseless shape of clay that all too long was I. If any one lift the cloth from the face of that unpleasant thing it will be in gratification of a mere morbid curiosity. Some, doubtless, will go further and inquire, 'Who was he?' In this writing I supply the only answer that I am able to make—Caspar Grattan. Surely, that should be enough. The name has served my small need for more than twenty years of a life of unknown length. True, I gave it to myself, but lacking another, I had the right. In this world one must have a name; it prevents confusion, even when it does not establish identity. Some, though, are known by numbers, which also seem inadequate distinctions.

One day, for illustration, I was passing along a street of a city, far from here, when I met two men in uniform, one of whom, half pausing and looking curiously into my face, said to his companion, 'That man looks like 767.' Something in the number seemed familiar and horrible. Moved by an

uncontrollable impulse, I sprang into a side street and ran until I fell exhausted in a country lane.

I have never forgotten that number, and always it comes to memory attended by gibbering obscenity, peals of joyless laughter, the clang of iron doors. So I say a name, even if self-bestowed, is better than a number. In the register of the potter's field I shall soon have both. What wealth!

Of him who shall find this paper I must beg a little consideration. It is not the history of my life; the knowledge to write that is denied me. This is only a record of broken and apparently unrelated memories, some of them as distinct and sequent as brilliant beads upon a thread, others remote and strange, having the character of crimson dreams with interspaces blank and black – witch-fires glowing still and red in a great desolation.

Standing upon the shore of eternity, I turn for a last look landward over the course by which I came. There are twenty years of footprints fairly distinct, the impressions of bleeding feet. They lead through poverty and pain, devious and unsure, of one staggering beneath a burden –

'Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow.'

Ah, the poet's prophecy of Me – how admirable, how dreadfully admirable!

Backward beyond the beginning of this *via dolorosa* – this epic of suffering with episodes of sin – I see nothing clearly; it comes out of a cloud. I know that it spans only twenty years, yet I am an old man.

One does not remember one's birth – one has to be told. But with me it was different; life came to me full-handed and dowered me with all my faculties and powers. Of a previous existence I know no more than others, for all have stammering intuitions that may be memories and may be dreams. I know only that my first consciousness was of maturity in body and mind – a consciousness accepted without surprise or conjecture. I merely found myself walking in a forest, half-clad, footsore, unutterably weary and hungry. Seeing a farmhouse, I approached and asked for food, which was given me by one who inquired my name. I did not know, yet knew that all had names. Greatly embarrassed, I retreated, and night coming on, lay down in the forest and slept.

The next day I entered a large town which I shall not name. Nor shall I recount further incidents of the life that is now to end—a life of wandering, always and everywhere haunted by an overmastering sense of crime in punishment of wrong and of terror in punishment of crime. Let me see if I can reduce it to narrative.

I seem once to have lived near a great city, a prosperous planter, married to a woman whom I loved and distrusted. We had, it sometimes seems, one child, a youth of brilliant parts and promise. He is at all times a vague figure, never clearly drawn, frequently altogether out of the picture.

One luckless evening it occurred to me to test my wife's fidelity in a vulgar, commonplace way familiar to every one who has acquaintance with the literature of fact and fiction. I went to the city, telling my wife that I should be absent until the following afternoon. But I returned before daybreak and went to the rear of the house, purposing to enter by a door with which I had secretly so tampered that it would seem to lock, yet not actually fasten. As I approached it, I heard it gently open and close, and saw a man steal away into the darkness. With murder in my heart, I sprang after him, but he had vanished without even the bad luck of identification. Sometimes now I cannot even persuade myself that it was a human being.

Crazed with jealousy and rage, blind and bestial with all the elemental passions of insulted manhood, I entered the house and sprang up the stairs to the door of my wife's chamber. It was closed, but having tampered with its lock also, I easily entered, and despite the black darkness soon stood by the side of her bed. My groping hands told me that although disarranged it was unoccupied.

'She is below,' I thought, 'and terrified by my entrance has evaded me in the darkness of the hall.'

With the purpose of seeking her I turned to leave the room, but took a wrong direction—the right one! My foot struck her, cowering in a corner of the room. Instantly my hands were at her throat, stifling a shriek, my knees were upon her struggling body; and there in the darkness, without a word of accusation or reproach, I strangled her till she died!

There ends the dream. I have related it in the past tense, but the present would be the fitter form, for again and again the sombre tragedy re-enacts itself in my consciousness—over

and over I lay the plan, I suffer the confirmation, I redress the wrong. Then all is blank; and afterward the rains beat against the grimy window-panes, or the snows fall upon my scant attire, the wheels rattle in the squalid streets where my life lies in poverty and mean employment. If there is ever sunshine I do not recall it; if there are birds they do not sing.

There is another dream, another vision of the night. I stand among the shadows in a moonlit road. I am aware of another presence, but whose I cannot rightly determine. In the shadows of a great dwelling I catch the gleam of white garments; then the figure of a woman confronts me in the road – my murdered wife! There is death in the face; there are marks upon the throat. The eyes are fixed on mine with an infinite gravity which is not reproach, nor hate, nor menace, nor anything less terrible than recognition. Before this awful apparition I retreat in terror – a terror that is upon me as I write. I can no longer rightly shape the words. See! they –

Now I am calm, but truly there is no more to tell: the incident ends where it began – in darkness and in doubt.

Yes, I am again in control of myself: 'the captain of my soul'. But that is not respite; it is another stage and phase of expiation. My penance, constant in degree, is mutable in kind: one of its variants is tranquillity. After all, it is only a life-sentence. 'To Hell for life' – that is a foolish penalty: the culprit chooses the duration of his punishment. Today my term expires.

To each and all, the peace that was not mine.

III. STATEMENT OF THE LATE JULIA HETMAN, THROUGH THE MEDIUM BAYROLLES

I had retired early and fallen almost immediately into a peaceful sleep, from which I awoke with that indefinable sense of peril which is, I think, a common experience in that other, earlier life. Of its unmeaning character, too, I was entirely persuaded, yet that did not banish it. My husband, Joel Hetman, was away from home; the servants slept in another part of the house. But these were familiar conditions; they had never before distressed me. Nevertheless, the strange terror grew so insupportable that conquering my reluctance to move I sat up and lit the lamp at my bedside. Contrary to my expectation

this gave me no relief; the light seemed rather an added danger, for I reflected that it would shine out under the door, disclosing my presence to whatever evil thing might lurk outside. You that are still in the flesh, subject to horrors of the imagination, think what a monstrous fear that must be which seeks in darkness security from malevolent existences of the night. That is to spring to close quarters with an unseen enemy – the strategy of despair!

Extinguishing the lamp I pulled the bedclothing about my head and lay trembling and silent, unable to shriek, forgetful to pray. In this pitiable state I must have lain for what you call hours – with us there are no hours, there is no time.

At last it came – a soft, irregular sound of footfalls on the stairs! They were slow, hesitant, uncertain, as of something that did not see its way; to my disordered reason all the more terrifying for that, as the approach of some blind and mindless malevolence to which there is no appeal. I even thought that I must have left the hall lamp burning and the groping of this creature proved it a monster of the night. This was foolish and inconsistent with my previous dread of the light, but what would you have? Fear has no brains; it is an idiot. The dismal witness that it bears and the cowardly counsel that it whispers are unrelated. We know this well, we who have passed into the Realm of Terror, who skulk in eternal dusk among the scenes of our former lives, invisible even to ourselves, and one another, yet hiding forlorn in lonely places; yearning for speech with our loved ones, yet dumb, and as fearful of them as they of us. Sometimes the disability is removed, the law suspended: by the deathless power of love or hate we break the spell – we are seen by those whom we would warn, console, or punish. What form we seem to them to bear we know not; we know only that we terrify even those whom we most wish to comfort, and from whom we most crave tenderness and sympathy.

Forgive, I pray you, this inconsequent digression by what was once a woman. You who consult us in this imperfect way – you do not understand. You ask foolish questions about things unknown and things forbidden. Much that we know and could impart in our speech is meaningless in yours. We must communicate with you through a stammering intelligence in that small fraction of our language that you yourselves can speak. You think that we are of another world.

No, we have knowledge of no world but yours, though for us it holds no sunlight, no warmth, no music, no laughter, no song of birds, nor any companionship. O God! what a thing it is to be a ghost, cowering and shivering in an altered world, a prey to apprehension and despair!

No, I did not die of fright: the Thing turned and went away. I heard it go down the stairs, hurriedly, I thought, as if itself in sudden fear. Then I rose to call for help. Hardly had my shaking hand found the door-knob when—merciful heaven!—I heard it returning. Its footfalls as it remounted the stairs were rapid, heavy and loud; they shook the house. I fled to an angle of the wall and crouched upon the floor. I tried to pray. I tried to call the name of my dear husband. Then I heard the door thrown open. There was an interval of unconsciousness, and when I revived I felt a strangling clutch upon my throat—felt my arms feebly beating against something that bore me backward—felt my tongue thrusting itself from between my teeth! And then I passed into this life.

No, I have no knowledge of what it was. The sum of what we knew at death is the measure of what we know afterward of all that went before. Of this existence we know many things, but no new light falls upon any page of that; in memory is written all of it that we can read. Here are no heights of truth overlooking the confused landscape of that dubitable domain. We still dwell in the Valley of the Shadow, lurk in its desolate places, peering from brambles and thickets at its mad, malignant inhabitants. How should we have new knowledge of that fading past?

What I am about to relate happened on a night. We know when it is night, for then you retire to your houses and we can venture from our places of concealment to move unafraid about our old homes, to look in at the windows, even to enter and gaze upon your faces as you sleep. I had lingered long near the dwelling where I had been so cruelly changed to what I am, as we do while any that we love or hate remain. Vainly I had sought some method of manifestation, some way to make my continued existence and my great love and poignant pity understood by my husband and son. Always if they slept they would wake, or if in my desperation I dared approach them when they were awake, would turn toward me the terrible eyes of the living, frightening me by the glances that I sought from the purpose that I held.

On this night I had searched for them without success, fearing to find them; they were nowhere in the house, nor about the moonlit lawn. For, although the sun is lost to us for ever, the moon, full-orbed or slender, remains to us. Sometimes it shines by night, sometimes by day, but always it rises and sets, as in that other life.

I left the lawn and moved in the white light and silence along the road, aimless and sorrowing. Suddenly I heard the voice of my poor husband in exclamations of astonishment, with that of my son in reassurance and dissuasion; and there by the shadow of a group of trees they stood – near, so near! Their faces were toward me, the eyes of the elder man fixed upon mine. He saw me – at last, at last, he saw me! In the consciousness of that, my terror fled as a cruel dream. The death-spell was broken: Love had conquered Law! Mad with exultation I shouted – I *must* have shouted, 'He sees, he sees: he will understand!' Then, controlling myself, I moved forward, smiling and consciously beautiful, to offer myself to his arms, to comfort him with endearments, and, with my son's hand in mine, to speak words that should restore the broken bonds between the living and the dead.

Alas! alas! his face went white with fear, his eyes were as those of a hunted animal. He backed away from me, as I advanced, and at last turned and fled into the wood – whither it is not given to me to know.

To my poor boy, left doubly desolate, I have never been able to impart a sense of my presence. Soon he, too, must pass to this Life Invisible and be lost to me for ever.

TWO TRIFLES

Oliver Onions

THE ETHER-HOGS

I

With one foot thrust into an angle to brace himself against the motion of the ship, the twin telephone-receivers about his head, and one hand on the transmitting key, while the other hovered over screws and armatures, the young wireless operator was trying to get into tune. He had had the pitch, but had either lost it again or else something had gone wrong on the ship from which that single urgent call had come. The pear-shaped incandescent light made cavernous shadows under his anxiously drawn brows; it shone harshly on dials and switchboards, on bells and coils, and milled screws and tubes; and the whole white-painted room now heeled slowly over this way, and then steved as violently back the other, as the liner rolled to the storm.

The operator seemed to be able to get any ship except the one he wanted. As a keyed-up violin-string answers to tension after tension, or as if a shell held to the ear should sing, not one Song of the Sea, but a multitude, so he fluctuated through level after level of the diapason of messages that the installation successively picked up. They were comically various, had the young operator's face not been so ghastly anxious and set. 'Merry Christmas . . . the *Doric* . . . buy Erie Railroads . . . Merry Christmas . . . overland from Marseilles . . . closing price copper . . . good night . . . Merry Christmas'—the night hummed with messages as a telephone exchange hums; and many decks overhead, and many scores of feet above that again, his own antennæ described vast loops and arcs in the wintry sky, and from time to time spoke with a roar that gashed the night.

But of all the confusion of intercourse about him, what follows is a Conference that the young wireless operator did not hear.

The spirits of the Special Committee on Ethereal Traffic and

Right of Way were holding an Extraordinary General Meeting. They were holding it because the nuisance had finally become intolerable. Mortal messages tore great rents through space with such a reckless disregard of the Ethereal Regulations that not a ghost among them was safe. A spectre would be going peacefully about his haunting; there would come one of these radio-telegraphic blasts; and lo, his essence would be shattered into fragments, which could only be reassembled after the hideous racket had passed away.

And by haunting they meant, not merely the old-fashioned terrorizing by means of white sheets and clanking fetters, nor yet only the more modern forms of intimidation that are independent of the stroke of midnight and the crowing of the first cock, but also benigner suggestions—their gentle promptings to the poets of the world, their whispered inspirations to its painters, their care for the integrity of letters, their impulses to kindness, their spurs to bravery, and, in short, any other noble urging that earth-dwellers know, who give their strength and labour for the unprofitable things they believe without ever having seen them.

A venerable spirit with a faint aura of silver beard still clinging about him spoke.

'I think we are agreed something must be done,' he said. 'Even now, one of the most amiable junior ghosts of my acquaintance, on his way with a *motif* to a poor, tired musician, was radio'd into flinders, and though his own essence is not permanently harmed, his inspiration was shocked quite out of him, and may never be recovered again.'

'That is so,' another bore witness. 'I happened to be projecting myself not far from the spot, and saw the whole occurrence—poor fellow, he had no chance whatever to escape. It was one of these "directive" messages, as they call them, and no ghost of his grade could have stood up for a moment against it.'

'But it is the universal messages, sent out equally in all directions, that are the most serious menace to our state,' another urged.

'Quite so. We have a chance of getting out of the way of the directive ones, but the others leave us no escape.'

'Look—there goes one now,' said another, suddenly pointing; 'luckily it's far enough away.'

There was an indignant clamour.

'Vandals!' 'Huns!' 'Hooligans!' 'Shame!'

Then a female spirit spoke. It was known that she owed her condition to a motor accident on earth.

'I remember a name the grosser ones used to have for those who exceeded the speed limit in their motor-cars. They were called road-hogs. In the same way the creators of these disturbances ought to be called ether-hogs.'

There was applause at this, which the young wireless operator, still seeking his pitch, mistook for the general radio-commotion about him.

'Yes,' the female spirit went on (she had always been a little garrulous under encouragement), 'I was afflicted with deafness, and in that horrible instrument they call an Insurance Policy I had to pay an extra premium on that account; dear, dear, the number of times my heart jumped into my mouth as their cars whizzed by!'

But at this point two attendant spirits, whose office it was, gently but firmly 'damped' her, that is, merged into her and rarefied her astral coherence; they had heard her story many, many times before. The deliberations continued.

Punitive measures were resolved on. With that the question arose, of whom were they to make an example?

'Take a survey,' said the spirit with the aura of silver beard; and a messenger was gone, and immediately back again, with the tidings that at that very moment a young operator, in an admirably susceptible condition of nerves, was seeking to compass a further outrage.

'Good!' said the venerable one, dismissing his minion again. 'We have now to decide who shall haunt him. The Chair invites suggestions.'

Now the selection of a haunter is always a matter for careful thought. Not every ghost can haunt everybody. Indeed, the superior attenuations have often difficulty in manifesting themselves at all, so that in practice a duller spirit becomes their deputy. Thus it is only the less ghostly ghosts we of earth know, those barely yet weaned from the breast of the world, and that is the weakness of haunting from the ghostly point of view. The perfect message must go through the imperfect channel. The great ghosts may plan, but the coarser ones execute.

But as this is not unknown on earth also, we need hardly dwell on it.

Now the Committee had no more redoubtable haunter in certain respects than it had in the spirit of an old Scottish engineer, who had suffered translation in the middle days of steam. True, they had to watch him rather carefully, for he had more than once been suspected of having earthly hankerings and regrets; but that, a demerit in one sense, meant added haunting-efficacy in another, and no less a spirit than Vanderdecken himself had recommended him for a certain class of seafaring commission. He was bidden to appear, and his errand was explained to him.

'You understand,' they said a little severely when all had been made clear. 'Your instructions are definite, remember, and you are not to exceed them.'

'Ay, ay, sir,' said that blunt ghost. 'I kenned sail, and I kenned steam, and I ha' sairved on a cable-ship. Ye canna dae better than leave a' tae me.'

There was the ring, at any rate, of sincere intention in his tone, and they were satisfied.

'Very well,' said the presiding spirit. 'You know where to find him. Be off.'

'Ay, ay, sir—dinna fash yersel'—I'll gi'e the laddie a twisting!'

But at that moment a terrific blast from the Cape Cod Station scattered the meeting as if it had been blown from the muzzle of a gun.

And you are to understand that the foregoing took no time at all, as earthly time is reckoned.

II

'Oh, get out of my way, you fool! I want the ship that called me five minutes ago—the *Bainbridge*. Has she called you? . . . O Lord, here's another lunatic—wants to know who's won the prizefight! Are you the *Bainbridge*? Then buzz off! . . . You there—have you had a call from the *Bainbridge*? Yes, five minutes ago; I think she said she was on fire, but I'm not sure, and I can't get her note again! You try—shove that Merry Christmas fool out—B-a-i-n . . . No, but I think—I say I think—she said so—perhaps she can't transmit any more . . .'

Dot, dash—dot, dash—dot, dash—

Again he was running up and down the gamut, seeking the

ship that had given him that flickering, uncertain message, and then – silence.

A ship on fire – somewhere –

He was almost certain she had said she was on fire –

And perhaps she could no longer transmit –

Anyway, half a dozen ships were trying for her now.

It was at this moment, when the whole stormy night throbbed with calls for the *Bainbridge*, that the ghost came to make an example of the young wireless operator for the warning of Ethereal Trespassers at large.

Indeed, the ships were making an abominable racket. The Morse tore from the antennæ through the void, and if a homeless spectre missed one annihilating wavelength he encountered another. They raged. What was the good of their being the Great Majority if they were to be bullied by a mortal minority with these devastating devices at its command?

Even as that ghostly avenger, in a state of imminent precipitation, hung about the rocking operating-room, he felt himself racked by disintegrating thrills. The young operator's fingers were on the transmitting key again.

'Can't you get the *Bainbridge*? Oh, try, for God's sake! . . . Are you there? Nothing come through yet? . . . *Doric*. Can't you couple? . . .'

Lurch, heave; crest, trough; a cant to port, an angle of forty-five degrees to starboard; on the vessel drove, with the antennæ high overhead describing those dizzy loops and circles and rending the night with the spluttering Morse.

Dot, dash – dot, dash – dot, dash . . .

But already that old ghost, who in his day had known sail and steam and had served on a cable-ship, had hesitated even on the brink of manifestation. He knew that he was only a low-grade ghost, charged rather than trusted with an errand, and their own evident mistrust of him was not a thing greatly to strengthen his allegiance to them. He began to remember his bones and blood, and his past earthly passion for his job. He had been a fine engineer, abreast of all the knowledge of his day, and what he now saw puzzled him exceedingly. By virtue of his instantaneousness and ubiquity, he had already taken a complete conspectus of the ship. Much that he had seen was new, more not. The engines were more powerful, yet essentially the same. In the stokeholds, down the interminable escalades, all was much as it had formerly been. Of elec-

tric lighting he had seen more than the beginnings, so that the staring incandescents were no wonder to him, and on the liner's fripperies of painted and gilded saloons and gymnasium and staterooms and swimming-baths he had wasted little attention. And yet even in gathering himself for visibility he had hesitated. He tried to tell himself why he did so. He told himself that, formidable haunter as he was, it is no easy matter to haunt a deeply preoccupied man. He told himself that he would be able to haunt him all the more soundly did he hold off for awhile and find the hauntee's weak spot. He told himself that his superiors (a little condescending and sniffy always) had after all left a good deal to his discretion. He told himself that, did he return with his errand unaccomplished, they would at all events be no worse off than they had been before.

In a word, he told himself all the things that we mere mortals tell ourselves when we want to persuade ourselves that our inclinations and our consciences are one and the same thing.

And in the meantime he was peering and prying about a little moving band of wires that passed round two wooden pulleys geared to a sort of clock, with certain coils of wire and a couple of horseshoe magnets, the whole attached to the telephone clasped about the young ether-hog's head. He was tingling to know what the thing was for.

It was, of course, the Detector, the instrument's vital ear.

Then the young man's finger began to tap on the transmitter key again.

'Doric . . . Anything yet? . . . You're the *Imperator*? . . . Are you calling the *Bainbridge*?'

Now the ghost, who could not make head or tail of the Detector, nevertheless knew Morse; and though it had not yet occurred to him to squeeze himself in between the operator's ears and the telephone receiver, he read the transmitted message. Also he saw the young man's strained and sweating face. He wanted some ship – the *Bainbridge*; from the corrugations of his brows, a grid in the glare of the incandescent, and the glassy set of his eyes, he wanted her badly; and so apparently did those other ships whose mysterious apparatus harrowed the fields of ether with long and short . . .

Moreover, on board a ship again that wistful old ghost felt himself at home – or would do so could he but grasp the

operations of that tapping key, of that air-wire that barked and oscillated overhead, and of that slowly moving endless band that passed over the magnets and was attached to the receivers about the young ether-hog's ears.

Whatever they thought of him who had sent him, he *had* been a person of no small account on earth, and a highly skilled mechanic into the bargain.

Suddenly he found himself in temptation's grip. He didn't want to haunt this young man. If he did, something might go wrong with that unknown instrument, and then they might not get this ship they were hunting through the night.

And if he could only ascertain *why* they wanted her so badly, it would be the simplest thing in space for a ghost to find her.

Then, as he nosed about the Detector, it occurred to him to insinuate a portion of his imponderable fabric between the receiver and the young man's ear.

The next moment he had started resiliently back again, as like pole repels like pole of the swinging needle. He was trembling as no radio-message had ever set him trembling yet.

Fire! A ship on fire! . . .

That was why these friendly young engineers and operators were blowing a lot of silly ghosts to smithereens! . . .

The *Bainbridge*—on fire! . . .

What did all the ghosts of the universe matter if a ship was on fire?

That faithless emissary did not hesitate for an instant. The ghostly Council might cast him out if they liked; he didn't care; they should be hogged till Doomsday if, on all the seas of the world, a single ship were on fire! A ship on fire? He had once seen a ship on fire, and didn't want, even as a ghost, to see another.

Even while you have been reading this he was off to find the *Bainbridge*.

Of course he hadn't really to go anywhere to find her at all. Low-class and ill-conditioned ghost as he was, he still had that property of ubiquity. An instantaneous double change in his own tension and he was there and back again, with the *Bainbridge's* bearings, her course, and the knowledge that it was still not too late. The operator was listening in an agony into the twin receivers; a thrill of thankfulness passed through the ghost that he had not forgotten the Morse he had learned

on the cable-ship. Swiftly he precipitated himself into a point of action on the transmitter key.

Long, short – long, short – long, short . . .

The operator heard. He started up as if he had been hogged himself. His eyes were staring, his mouth horribly open. What was the matter with his instrument?

Long, short – long, short – long, short . . .

It was not in the telephone. The young man's eyes fell on his own transmitter key. It was clicking up and down. He read out '*Bainbridge*', and a bearing, and of course his instrument was spelling it out to the others.

Feverishly he grabbed the telephone.

Already the *Doric* was acknowledging. So was the *Imperator*. He had sent no message . . .

Yet, though it made him a little sick to think of it, he would let it stand. If one ship were fooled, all would be fooled. At any rate, he did not think he had dreamed that first call, that first horrifying call of '*Bainbridge – fire!*'

He sprang to the tube and called up the bridge.

They picked them up from the *Bainbridge's* boats towards the middle of Christmas morning; but that unrepentant, old seafaring spectre, returning whence he had come, gave little satisfaction to his superiors. Against all their bullying he was proof; he merely repeated doggedly over and over again, 'The laddie's nairves o' steel! Ower and ower again I manifested mysel' tae him, but it made na mair impression on him than if I'd tried to ha'nt Saturn oot o' his Rings! It's my opeenion that being a ghaistie isna what it was. They hae ower mony new-fangled improvements in these days.'

But his spectral heart was secretly sad because he had not been able to make head or tail of the Detector.

THE MORTAL

I

'Oh, Egbert,' the White Lady implored, 'let me beg of you to abandon this mad, wicked idea!'

Sir Egbert the Dauntless was in the act of passing himself through the wainscot of the North Gallery; he turned, half on this side of the panel, half already in the Priest's Hole in

the thickness of the wall.

'No, Rowena,' he replied firmly. 'You saw fit to cast doubts upon my courage before all the Family Ancestors, and now I intend to do it. If anything happens to me my essence will be upon your head.'

The Lady Rowena wailed. In her agitation she clasped her hands awry, so that they interpenetrated.

'Nay, Egbert, I did but jest! On earth you were known as the Dauntless; our descendants are proud of you; cannot you forget my foolish words?'

'No,' replied Sir Egbert sternly. 'Though it cost me my Non-existence I will spend the night in a Human Chamber!'

'Egbert - Egbert - stay - not *that* one - not the Parson's! Think - should he exorcise you - !'

'Too late; I have spoken!' said Sir Egbert, with an abrupt wave of his hand. He vanished into the Fifth Dimension. No sooner had he done so than the general lamentation broke out.

'Oh, he'll Be, he'll Be, I know he'll Be!' the White Lady sobbed.

To be re-confined in Matter, so that there is no speech save with a tongue and no motion save with limbs - to be once more subject to the Three Dimensions of the grosser life - is the final menace to the spectral Condition.

'Poor chap - I fancied I detected a trace of Visibility about him already,' grim Sir Hugo muttered.

'Oh, it's playing with Flesh!' another cried, with a shiver
'Almost Human folly!'

'Already his glide isn't what it was,' said the melancholy Lady Annice, who on Earth had been a famous attender at funerals.

'I shall never behold his dear Aura again,' moaned the White Lady, already half opaque herself. 'It will be the Existence of me!'

'If only it had not been a Parson's Chamber,' said the Lady Annice, with mournful relish.

'Here - catch her quick - she's solidifying!' half a dozen of them cried at once.

It was with difficulty that they brought the White Lady even to a state of semi-evaporation again.

II

It was midnight, and the Parson snored. He turned uneasily in his sleep. Perhaps already he was conscious of Sir Egbert's presence.

Sir Egbert himself dared approach no nearer to the Mortal Bed than the lattice. Fear had given him the pink gossamer look that is the perilous symptom of veins and blood, and he knew that he received faintly the criss-crossed shadow of the lattice. To save his Nonentity he could not have glided up the shaft of moonlight that streamed in at the window.

Suddenly a violent Hertzian Wave passed through Sir Egbert's ether. He jumped almost clear out of his Dimension. The Parson had opened his eyes. To Be or not to Be? Had he seen him?

He had. His horrible embodied eyes were on the poor harmless Spectre. The two looked at one another, the one quailing in the moonlight, the other sitting in all the horror of Solidity bolt upright in bed.

Then the Mortal began to practise his fearsome devices.

First he gave the hoarse cry that all ghosts dread, and Sir Egbert felt himself suddenly heavier by a pound. But he remembered his name—the Dauntless. He would not yield.

Then the Parson's teeth began to chatter. He gibbered, and Sir Egbert wondered whether this was the beginning of the Exorcism. If it was, he would never see the happy old Ancestral Gallery again, never hold his dear Rowena in perfect interpermeation again—never pass himself through a Solid again—never know again the jolly old lark of being nowhere and everywhere at once.

'Mercy, mercy!' he tried to cry; and indeed his voice all but stirred the palpable air.

But there was no mercy in that grisly Parson. His only reply was to shoot the hair up on his head, straight on end.

Then he protruded his eyes.

Then he grinned.

And then he began to talk, as it were, the deaf and dumb alphabet on his fingers.

Sir Egbert's semi-Substance was like reddish ground glass; it was the beginning of the agony. How near to the Mortal

Precipitation he was he knew when suddenly he found himself thinking, almost with fright, of his own dear White Lady. *She was a Ghost.*

Then the Mortal began to gabble words. It was the Exorcism.

Oh, why, why, why had Sir Egbert not chosen a Layman?

The gabbling continued. Colour – warmth – weight – these settled down on Sir Egbert the Dauntless. He half Was. And as he continued steadily to Become, the words increased in speed. Sir Egbert's feet felt the floor; he cried; a faint windy moan came. The Parson bounded a foot up on the bed and tossed his pillow into the air.

Could nothing save Sir Egbert?

Ah yes. They that lead a meek and blameless Non-existence shall not be cast down; they shall not be given over at last to the terrors of the Solid and Known. From somewhere outside in the moonlight there came a shrill sound.

It was the crowing of a Cock.

The Parson had had the pillow over his face. It fell, and he looked again.

Nothing was there.

Sir Egbert, back in his comfortable Fourth Dimension, was of the loved indivisible texture of his dear White Lady again.

WICKED CAPTAIN WALSHAWE

Sheridan Le Fanu

A very odd thing happened to my uncle, Mr Watson, of Haddlestone; and to enable you to understand it, I must begin at the beginning.

In the year 1822, Mr James Walshawe, more commonly known as Captain Walshawe, died at the age of eighty-one years. The Captain in his early days, and so long as health and strength permitted, was a scamp of the active, intriguing sort; and spent his days and nights in sowing his wild oats, of which he seemed to have an inexhaustible stock.

Captain Walshawe was very well known in the neighbourhood of Wauling, and very generally avoided there. He had quitted the service in 1766, at the age of twenty-five, immediately previous to which period his debts had grown so troublesome that he was induced to extricate himself by running away with and marrying an heiress. He was quartered in Ireland, at Clonmel, where was a nunnery, in which, as pensioner, resided Miss O'Neill, or as she was called in the country, Peg O'Neill, the heiress.

Her situation was the only ingredient of romance in the affair, for the young lady was decidedly plain, though good-humoured looking, with that style of features which is termed potato; and in figure she was a little too plump, and rather short. But she was impressible; and the handsome young English lieutenant was too much for her monastic tendencies, and she eloped. They took up their abode at Wauling, in Lancashire.

Here the Captain amused himself after his fashion, sometimes running up, of course, on business to London. He spent her income, frightened her out of her wits, with oath and threats, and broke her heart.

Latterly she shut herself up pretty nearly altogether in her room. She had an old, rather grim, Irish servant-woman in attendance upon her. This domestic was tall, lean, and religious, and the Captain knew instinctively she hated him; and he hated her in return, and often threatened to put her

out of the house, and sometimes even to kick her out of the window.

Years passed away, and old Molly Doyle remained still in her original position. Perhaps he thought that there must be somebody there, and that he was not, after all, very likely to change for the better.

He tolerated another intrusion, too, and thought himself a paragon of patience and easy good-nature for so doing. A Roman Catholic clergyman, in a long black frock, with a low standing collar, and a little white muslin fillet round his neck — tall, sallow, with blue chin, and dark steady eyes — used to glide up and down the stairs, and through the passages; and the Captain sometimes met him in one place and sometimes in another. But by a caprice incident to such tempers he treated this cleric exceptionally, and even with a surly sort of courtesy, though he grumbled about his visits behind his back.

Well, the time came at last, when poor Peg O'Neill — in an evil hour Mrs James Walshawe — must cry, and quake, and pray her last. The doctor came from Penlynden, and was just as vague as usual, but more gloomy, and for about a week came and went oftener. The cleric in the long black frock was also daily there. And at last came that last sacrament in the gates of death, when the sinner is traversing those dread steps that never can be retraced.

The Captain drank a great deal of brandy and water that night, and called in Farmer Dobbs, for want of better company, to drink with him; and told him all his grievances, and how happy he and 'the poor lady upstairs' might have been had it not been for liars, and pick-thanks, and tale-bearers, and the like, who came between them — meaning Molly Doyle — whom, as he waxed eloquent over his liquor, he came to curse and rail at by name, with more than his accustomed freedom. And he described his own natural character and amiability in such moving terms that he wept maudlin tears of sensibility over his theme; and when Dobbs was gone, drank some more grog, and took to railing and cursing again by himself; and then mounted the stairs unsteadily to see 'what the devil Doyle and the other — old witches were about in poor Peg's room.'

When he pushed open the door, he found some half-dozen crones, chiefly Irish, from the neighbouring town of Hackle-

ton, sitting over tea and snuff, etc., with candles lighted round the corpse, which was arrayed in a strangely cut robe of brown serge. She had secretly belonged to some order – I think the Carmelite, but I am not certain – and wore the habit in her coffin.

‘What the d – are you doing with my wife?’ cried the Captain, rather thickly. ‘How dare you dress her up in this – trumpery, you – you cheating old witch; and what’s that candle doing in her hand?’

I think he was a little startled, for the spectacle was grisly enough. The dead lady was arrayed in this strange brown robe, and in her rigid fingers, as in a socket, with the large wooden beads and cross wound round it, burned a wax candle, shedding its white light over the sharp features of the corpse. Molly Doyle was not to be put down by the Captain, whom she hated, and accordingly, in her phrase, ‘he got as good as he gave.’ And the Captain’s wrath waxed fiercer, and he plucked the wax taper from the dead hand, and was on the point of flinging it at the old serving-woman’s head.

‘The holy candle, you sinner!’ cried she.

‘I’ve a mind to make you eat it, you beast,’ cried the Captain.

But I think he had not known before what it was, for he subsided a little sulkily, and he stuffed his hand with the candle (quite extinct by this time) into his pocket, and said he:

‘You know devilish well you had no business going on with y-y-your d – witchcraft about my poor wife, without my leave – you do – and you’ll please to take off that d – brown pinafore, and get her decently into her coffin, and I’ll pitch your devil’s waxlight into the sink.’

And the Captain stalked out of the room.

‘An’ now her poor sowl’s in prison, you wretch, be the mains o’ ye; an’ may yer own be shut into the wick o’ that same candle, till it’s burned out, ye savage.’

‘I’d have you ducked for a witch, for twopence,’ roared the Captain up the staircase, with his hand on the banisters, standing on the lobby. But the door of the chamber of death clapped angrily, and he went down to the parlour, where he examined the holy candle for a while, with a tipsy gravity, and then with something of that reverential feeling for the symbolic, which is not uncommon in rakes and scamps, he

thoughtfully locked it up in a press, where were accumulated all sorts of obsolete rubbish—soiled packs of cards, disused tobacco-pipes, broken powder-flasks, his military sword, and a dusky bundle of the *Flash Songster* and other questionable literature.

Captain Walshawe reigned alone for many years at Wauling. He was too shrewd and too experienced by this time to run violently down the steep hill that leads to ruin. Forty years acted forcibly upon the gay Captain Walshawe. Gout supervened, and was no more conducive to temper than to enjoyment, and made his elegant hands lumpy at all the small joints, and turned them slowly into crippled claws. He grew stout when his exercise was interfered with, and ultimately almost corpulent. He suffered from what Mr Holloway calls 'bad legs', and was wheeled about in a great leathern-back chair, and his infirmities went on accumulating with his years.

I am sorry to say, I never heard that he repented, or turned his thoughts seriously to the future. On the contrary, his talk grew fouler, and his fun ran upon his favourite sins, and his temper waxed more truculent. But he did not sink into dotage. Considering his bodily infirmities, his energies and his malignities, which were many and active, were marvellously little abated by time.

It was a peculiarity of Captain Walshawe, that he, by this time, hated nearly everybody. My uncle, Mr Watson, of Haddlestone, was cousin to the Captain, and his heir at law. But my uncle had lent him money on mortgage of his estates and there had been a treaty to sell, and terms and a price were agreed upon, in 'articles' which the lawyers said were still in force.

I think the ill-conditioned Captain bore him a grudge for being richer than he, and would have liked to do him an ill turn. But it did not lie in his way; at least while he was living.

My Uncle Watson was a Methodist, and what they call a 'class leader'; and, on the whole, a very good man. He was now near fifty—grave, as be seemed his profession—somewhat dry—and a little severe, perhaps—but a just man.

A letter from the Penlynden doctor reached him at Haddlestone, announcing the death of the wicked old Captain; and suggesting his attendance at the funeral, and the expediency of his being on the spot to look after things at Wauling. The

reasonableness of this striking my good uncle, he made his journey to the old house in Lancashire incontinently, and reached it in time for the funeral.

The day turning out awfully rainy and tempestuous, my uncle persuaded the doctor and the attorney to remain for the night at Wauling.

There was no will – the attorney was sure of that; for the Captain's enmities were perpetually shifting, and he could never quite make up his mind as to how best to give effect to a malignity whose direction was being constantly modified.

Search being made, no will was found. The papers, indeed, were all right, with one important exception: the leases were nowhere to be seen. My uncle searched strenuously. The attorney was at his elbow, and the doctor helped with a suggestion now and then. The old serving-man seemed an honest, deaf creature, and really knew nothing.

My Uncle Watson was very much perturbed. He fancied – but this possibly was only fancy – that he had detected for a moment a queer look in the attorney's face, and from that instant it became fixed in his mind that he knew all about the leases. Mr Watson expounded that evening in the parlour to the doctor, the attorney and the deaf servant.

Ananias and Sapphira figured in the foreground, and the awful nature of fraud and theft, or tampering in any wise with the plain rule of honesty in matters pertaining to estates, etc., were pointedly dwelt upon; and then came a long and strenuous prayer, in which he entreated with fervour and aplomb that the hard heart of the sinner who had abstracted the leases might be softened or broken in such a way as to lead to their restitution; or that, if he continued reserved and contumacious, it might at least be the will of Heaven to bring him to public justice and the documents to light. The fact is, that he was praying all this time at the attorney.

When these religious exercises were over, the visitors retired to their rooms, and my Uncle Watson wrote two or three pressing letters by the fire. When his task was done, it had grown late; the candles were flaring in their sockets, and all in bed, and, I suppose, asleep, but he.

The fire was nearly out, he chilly, and the flame of the candles throbbing strangely in their sockets shed alternate glare and shadow round the old wainscoted room and its quaint furniture. Outside were the wild thunder and piping

of the storm, and the rattling of distant windows sounded through the passages, and down the stairs, like angry people astir in the house.

My Uncle Watson belonged to a sect who by no means reject the supernatural, and whose founder, on the contrary, has sanctioned ghosts in the most emphatic way. He was glad, therefore, to remember, that in prosecuting his search that day, he had seen some six inches of wax candle in the press in the parlour, for he had no fancy to be overtaken by darkness in his present situation.

He had no time to lose; and taking the bunch of keys—of which he was now master—he soon fitted the lock and secured the candle—a treasure in his circumstances; and, lighting it, he stuffed it into the socket of one of the expiring candles, and extinguishing the other, he looked round the room in the steady light, reassured. At the same moment an unusually violent gust of the storm blew a handful of gravel against the parlour window, with a sharp rattle that startled him in the midst of the roar and hubbub; and the flame of the candle itself was agitated by the air.

My uncle walked up to bed, guarding his candle with his hand, for the lobby windows were rattling furiously, and he disliked the idea of being left in the dark more than ever.

His bedroom was comfortable, though old-fashioned. He shut and bolted the door. There was a tall looking-glass opposite the foot of his four-poster, on the dressing-table between the windows. He tried to make the curtains meet, but they would not draw.

He turned the face of the mirror away, therefore, so that its back was presented to the bed, pulled the curtains together, and placed a chair against them, to prevent their falling open again. There was a good fire, and a reinforcement of round coal and wood inside the fender. So he piled it up to ensure a cheerful blaze through the night, and placing a little black mahogany table, with the legs of a Satyr, beside the bed, and his candle upon it, he got between the sheets, and laid his red night-capped head upon his pillow, and disposed himself to sleep.

The first thing that made him uncomfortable was a sound at the foot of his bed, quite distinct in a momentary lull of the storm. It was only the gentle rustle and rush of the curtains which fell open again; and as his eyes opened, he

saw them resuming their perpendicular dependence, and sat up in his bed almost expecting to see something uncanny in the aperture.

There was nothing, however, but the dressing-table and other dark furniture, and the window-curtains faintly undulating in the violence of the storm. He did not care to get up, therefore—the fire being bright and cheery—to replace the curtains by a chair, in the position in which he had left them, anticipating possibly a new recurrence of the relapse which had startled him from his incipient doze.

So he got to sleep in a little while again, but he was disturbed by a sound, as he fancied, at the table on which stood the candle. He could not say what it was, only that he awakened with a start, and lying so in some amaze, he did distinctly hear a sound which startled him a good deal, though there was nothing necessarily supernatural in it.

He described it as resembling what would occur if you fancied a thinnish table-leaf, with a convex warp in it, depressed the reverse way, and suddenly with a spring recovering its natural convexity. It was a loud, sudden thump, which made the heavy candlestick jump, and there was an end, except that my uncle did not get again into a doze for ten minutes at least.

The next time he awoke it was in that odd, serene way that sometimes occurs. We open our eyes, we know not why, quite placidly, and are on the instant wide awake. He had had a nap of some duration this time, for his candle-flame was fluttering and flaring, *in articulo*, in the silver socket. But the fire was still bright and cheery, so he popped the extinguisher on the socket, and almost at the same time there came a tap at his door, and a sort of crescendo 'hush-sh-sh!' Once more my uncle was sitting up, scared and perturbed, in his bed.

He recollected, however, that he had bolted his door; and such inveterate materialists are we in the midst of our spiritualism, that this reassured him, and he breathed a deep sigh, and began to grow tranquil. But after a rest of a minute or two, there came a louder and sharper knock at his door; so that instinctively he called out, 'Who's there?' in a loud, stern key. There was no sort of response, however.

The nervous effect of the start subsided; and after a while he lay down with his back turned towards that side of the

bed at which was the door, and his face towards the table on which stood the massive old candlestick, capped with its extinguisher, and in that position he closed his eyes. But sleep would not revisit them. All kinds of queer fancies began to trouble him—some of them I remember.

He felt the point of a finger, he averred, pressed most distinctly on the tip of his great toe, as if a living hand were between his sheets, and making a sort of signal of attention or silence. Then again he felt something as large as a rat make a sudden bounce in the middle of his bolster, just under his head.

Then a voice said: 'Oh!' very gently, close at the back of his head. All these things he felt certain of, and yet investigation led to nothing. He felt odd little cramps stealing now and then about him, and then, on a sudden, the middle finger of his right hand was plucked backwards, with a light playful jerk that frightened him awfully.

Meanwhile the storm kept singing, and howling and ha-ha-hooing hoarsely among the limbs of the old trees and the chimney-pots; and my Uncle Watson, although he prayed and meditated as was his wont when he lay awake, felt his heart throb excitedly, and sometimes thought he was beset with evil spirits, and at others that he was in the early stages of a fever.

He resolutely kept his eyes closed, however, and, like St Paul's shipwrecked companions, wished for the day. At last another little doze seems to have stolen upon his senses, for he awoke quietly and completely as before—opening his eyes all at once, and seeing everything as if he had not slept for a moment.

The fire was still blazing redly—nothing uncertain in the light—the massive silver candlestick, topped with its tall extinguisher, stood on the centre of the black mahogany table as before; and, looking by what seemed a sort of accident to the apex of this, he beheld something which made him quite misdoubt the evidence of his eyes.

He saw the extinguisher lifted by a tiny hand from beneath, and a small human face, no bigger than a thumb-nail, with nicely proportioned features peep from beneath it. In this Lilliputian countenance was such a ghastly consternation as horrified my uncle unspeakably.

Out came a little foot then and there, and a pair of wee

legs, in short silk stockings and buckled shoes, then the rest of the figure; and, with the arms holding about the socket, the little legs stretched and stretched, hanging about the stem of the candlestick till the feet reached the base, and so down the Satyr-like leg of the table, till they reached the floor, extending elastically, and strangely enlarging in all proportions as they approached the ground, where the feet and buckles were those of a well-shaped, full-grown man, and the figure tapering upwards until it dwindled to its original fairy dimensions at the top, like an object seen in some strangely curved mirror.

Standing upon the floor he expanded, my amazed uncle could not tell how, into his proper proportions; and stood pretty nearly in profile at the bedside, a handsome and elegantly shaped young man, in a bygone military costume, with a small laced, three-cocked hat and plume on his head, but looking like a man going to be hanged—in unspeakable despair.

He stepped lightly to the hearth, and turned for a few seconds very dejectedly with his back towards the bed and the mantelpiece, and he saw the hilt of his rapier glittering in the firelight; and then walking across the room, he placed himself at the dressing-table, visible through the divided curtains at the foot of the bed. The fire was still blazing so brightly that my uncle saw him as distinctly as if half a dozen candles were burning.

The looking-glass was an old-fashioned piece of furniture, and had a drawer beneath it. My uncle had searched it carefully for the papers in the day-time; but the silent figure pulled the drawer quite out, pressed a spring at the side, disclosing a false receptacle behind it, and from this he drew a parcel of papers tied together with pink tape.

All this time my uncle was staring at him in a horrified state, neither winking nor breathing, and the apparition had not once given the smallest intimation of consciousness that a living person was in the same room. But now, for the first time, it turned its livid stare full upon my uncle with a hateful smile of significance, lifting up the little parcel of papers between his slender finger and thumb.

Then he made a long, cunning wink at him, and seemed to blow out one of his cheeks in a burlesque grimace, which, but for the horrific circumstances, would have been ludicrous.

My uncle could not tell whether this was really an intentional distortion or only one of those horrid ripples and deflections which were constantly disturbing the proportions of the figure, as if it were seen through some unequal and perverting medium.

The figure now approached the bed, seeming to grow exhausted and malignant as it did so. My uncle's terror nearly culminated at this point, for he believed it was drawing near him with an evil purpose. But it was not so; for the soldier, over whom twenty years seemed to have passed in his brief transit to the dressing-table and back again, threw himself into a great high-backed arm-chair of stuffed leather at the far side of the fire, and placed his heels on the fender.

His feet and legs seemed indistinctly to swell, and swathings showed themselves round them, and they grew into something enormous, and the upper figure swayed and shaped itself into corresponding proportions, a great mass of corpulence, with a cadaverous and malignant face, and the furrows of a great old age, and colourless glassy eyes; and with these changes, which came indefinitely but rapidly as those of a sunset cloud, the fine regimentals faded away, and a loose, grey, woollen drapery, somehow, was there in its stead; and all seemed to be stained and rotten, for swarms of worms seemed creeping in and out, while the figure grew paler and paler, till my uncle, who liked his pipe, and employed the simile naturally, said the whole effigy grew to the colour of tobacco ashes, and the clusters of worms into little wriggling knots of sparks such as we see running over the residuum of a burnt sheet of paper.

And so with the strong draught caused by the fire, and the current of air from the window, which was rattling in the storm, the feet seemed to be drawn into the fireplace, and the whole figure, light as ashes, floated away with them and disappeared with a whisk up the capacious old chimney.

It seemed to my uncle that the fire suddenly darkened and the air grew icy cold, and there came an awful roar and riot of tempest, which shook the old house from top to base, and sounded like the yelling of a bloodthirsty mob on receiving a new and long-expected victim.

Good Uncle Watson used to say: 'I have been in many situations of fear and danger in the course of my life, but never did I pray with so much agony before or since; for

then, as now, it was clear beyond a cavil that I had actually beheld the phantom of an evil spirit.'

Now there are two curious circumstances to be observed on this relation of my uncle's, who was, as I have said, a perfectly veracious man.

First: The wax candle which he took from the press in the parlour and burnt at his bedside on that horrible night was unquestionably, according to the testimony of the old deaf servant, who had been fifty years at Wauling, that identical piece of 'holy candle' which had stood in the fingers of the poor lady's corpse, and concerning which the old Irish crone, long since dead, had delivered the curious curse I have mentioned against the Captain.

Secondly: Behind the drawer under the looking-glass, he did actually discover a second but secret drawer, in which were concealed the identical papers which he had suspected the attorney of having made away with. There were circumstances, too, afterwards disclosed, which convinced my uncle that the old man had deposited them there preparatory to burning them, which he had nearly made up his mind to do.

Now, a very remarkable ingredient in this tale of my Uncle Watson was this, that so far as my father, who had never seen Captain Walshawe in the course of his life, could gather, the phantom had exhibited a horrible and grotesque, but unmistakable resemblance to that defunct scamp in the various stages of his long life.

Wauling was sold in the year 1837, and the old house shortly after pulled down, and a new one built nearer to the river. I often wonder whether it was rumoured to be haunted, and, if so, what stories were current about it. It was a commodious and staunch old house, and withal rather handsome; and its demolition was certainly suspicious.

MONKSHOOD MANOR

L. P. Hartley

'He's a strange man,' said Nesta.

'Strange in what way?' I asked.

'Oh, just neurotic. He has a fire-complex or something of the kind. He lies awake at night thinking that a spark may have jumped through the fireguard and set the carpet alight. Then he has to get up and go down to look. Sometimes he does this several times a night, even after the fire has gone out.'

'Does he keep an open fire in his own house?' I asked.

'Yes, he does, because it's healthier, and other people like it, and he doesn't want to give way to himself about it.'

'He sounds a man of principle,' I observed.

'He is,' my hostess said. 'I think that's half the trouble with Victor. If he would let himself go more he wouldn't have these fancies. They are his sub-conscious mind punishing him, he says, by making him do what he doesn't want to. But somebody has told him that if he could embrace his neurosis and really enjoy it—'

I laughed.

'I don't mean in that way,' said Nesta severely. 'What a mind you have, Hugo! And he conscientiously tries to. As if anyone could enjoy leaving a nice warm bed and creeping down cold passages to look after a fire that you pretty well know is out!'

'Are you sure that it is a fire he looks at?' I asked. 'I can think of another reason for creeping down a cold passage and embracing what lies at the end of it.'

Nesta ignored this.

'It's not only fires,' she said, 'it's gas taps, electric light switches, anything that he thinks might start a blaze.'

'But seriously, Nesta,' I said, 'there might be some method in his madness. It gives him an alibi for all sorts of things besides love-making: theft, for instance, or murder.'

'You say that because you don't know Victor,' Nesta said. 'He's almost a Buddhist—he wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'Does he want people to know about his peculiarity?' I

asked. 'I know he's told you -'

'He does and he doesn't,' Nesta answered.

'It's obvious why he doesn't. It isn't so obvious why he does,' I observed.

'It's rather complicated,' Nesta said. 'I doubt if your *terre-à-terre* mind would understand it. The whole thing is mixed up in his mind with guilt -'

'There you are!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, but not real guilt. And he thinks that if someone caught him prowling about at night they might -'

'I should jolly well think they would!'

'And besides, he doesn't want to keep it a secret, festering. He would rather people laughed at him.'

'Laugh!' I repeated. 'I can't see that it's a laughing matter.'

'No, it isn't really. It all goes back to old *Oedipus*, I expect. Most men suffer from that, more or less. I expect you do, Hugo.'

'Me?' I protested. 'My father died before I was born. How could I have killed him?'

'You don't understand,' said Nesta, pityingly. 'But what I wanted to say was, if you should hear an unusual noise at night -'

'Yes?'

'Or happen to see somebody walking about -'

'Yes?'

'You'll know it's nothing to be alarmed at. It's just Victor, taking what he calls his safety precautions.'

'I'll count three before I fire,' I said.

Nesta and I had been taking a walk before the other weekend guests arrived.

The house came into sight, long and low with mullioned windows, crouching beyond the lawn. This was my first visit to Nesta's comparatively new home. She was always changing houses. Leaving the subject of Victor we talked of the other guests, of their matrimonial intentions, prospects or entanglements. Our conversation had the pre-war air which Nesta could always command.

'Is Walter here?' I asked. Walter was her husband.

'No, he's away shooting. He doesn't come here very much, as you know. He never cared for Monkshood, I don't know why. Oh, by the way, Hugo,' she went on, 'I've an apology to

make to you. I never put any books in your room. I know you're a great reader, but -'

'I'm not,' I said. 'I go to bed to sleep.'

She smiled. 'Then that's all right. Would you like to see the room?'

I said I would.

'It's called the Blue Bachelor's room, and it's on the ground floor.

We joked a bit about the name.

'Bachelors are always in a slight funk,' I said, 'because of the designing females stalking them. But why didn't you give the room to Victor? It might have saved him several journeys up and down stairs.'

'It's rather isolated,' she said. 'I know you don't mind that, but he does.'

'Was that the real reason?' I asked, but she refused to answer.

I didn't meet Victor Chisholm until we assembled for drinks before dinner. He was a nondescript looking man, neither dark nor fair, tall nor short, fat nor thin, young nor old. I didn't have much conversation with him, but he seemed to slide off any subject one brought up - he didn't drop it like a hot coal, but after a little blowing on it, for politeness' sake, he quietly extinguished it. At least that was the impression I got. He smiled quite a lot, as though to prove he was not unsociable, and then retired into himself. He seemed to be saving himself up for something - a struggle with his neurosis, perhaps. After dinner we played bridge, and Victor followed us into the library, half meaning to play, I think; but when he found there was a four without him he went back into the drawing-room to join the three non-bridge-playing members of the party. We sat up late trying to finish the last rubber, and I didn't see him again before we went to bed. The library had a large open fireplace in which a few logs were smouldering over a heap of wood-ash. The room had a shut-in feeling, largely because the door was lined with book-bindings to make it look like shelves, so that when it was closed you couldn't tell where it was. Towards midnight I asked Nesta if I should put another log on and she said carelessly, 'No. I shouldn't bother - we're bound to get finished sometime, if you'll promise not to overbid, Hugo,' which reminded me of Victor and his complex. So when at last we did retire I said meaningly,

'Would you like me to take a look at the drawing-room fire, Nesta?'

'Well, you might, but it'll be out by this time,' she said.

'And the dining-room?' I pursued, glancing at the others, to see if there was any reaction, which there was not. She frowned slightly and said, 'The dining-room's electric. We only run to two real fires,' and then we separated.

In spite of my boasting, for some reason I couldn't get to sleep. I tossed to and fro, every now and then turning the light on to see what time it was. My bedroom walls were painted dark blue, but by artificial light they looked almost black. They were so shiny and translucent that when I sat up in bed I could see my reflection in them, or at any rate my shadow. I grew tired of this and then it occurred to me that if I had a book I might read myself to sleep—it was one of the recognized remedies for insomnia. But I hadn't: there were two book-ends—soap-stone elephants, I remember, facing each other across an empty space. I gave myself till half-past two, then I got up, put on my dressing-gown and opened my bedroom door. All was in darkness. The library lay at the other end of the long house and to reach it I had to cross the hall. I had no torch and didn't know where the switches were, so my progress was slow. I tried to make as little noise as possible, then I remembered that if Nesta heard me she would think I was Victor Chisholm going his nightly rounds. After this I grew bolder and almost at once found the central switch panel at the foot of the staircase. This lit up the passage to the library. The library door was open and in I went, automatically fumbling for the switch. But no sooner had my hand touched the wall than it fell to my side, for I had a feeling that I was not alone in the room. I don't know what it was based on, but something was already implicit in my vision before it became physically clear to me: a figure at the far end of the room, in the deep alcove of the fireplace, bending, almost crouching over the fire. The figure had its back to me and was so near to the fire as to be almost in it. Whether it made a movement or not I couldn't tell, but a spurt of flame started up against which the figure showed darker than before. I knew it must be Victor Chisholm and I stifled an impulse to say 'Hallo!'—from a confused feeling that like a sleep-walker he ought not to be disturbed; it would startle and humiliate

him. But I wanted a book, and my groping fingers found one. I withdrew it from the shelf, but not quite noiselessly, for with the tail of my eye I saw the figure move.

Back in my room I wondered if I ought to have left the hall lights on for Victor's return journey, but at once concluded that as he hadn't turned them on himself, he knew his way well enough not to need them. A sense of achievement possessed me: I had caught my fellow-guest out, and I had got my book. It turned out to be the fourth volume of John Evelyn's Diary; but I hadn't read more than a few sentences before I fell asleep.

When I met Victor Chisholm at breakfast I meant to ask him how he had slept. It was an innocent, conventional inquiry, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to put it. Instead, we congratulated each other on the bright, frosty, late October morning, almost as if we had been responsible for it. Presently the two other men joined us, but none of the ladies of the party, and lacking their conversational stimulus we relapsed into silence over our newspapers.

But I didn't want to keep my adventure to myself, and later in the morning, when I judged that Nesta would not be preoccupied with household management, I waylaid her.

'Your friend Victor Chisholm has been on the tiles again,' I began, and before she could get a word in I told her the story of last night's encounter. Half-way through I was afraid it might fall flat, for, after all, her guest's peculiarities were no news to her; but it didn't. She looked surprised and faintly worried.

'I oughtn't to have told you,' I said with assumed contrition, 'but I thought it would amuse you.'

She made an effort to smile.

'Oh well, it does,' she said, and then her serious look came back. 'But there's one thing that puzzles me.'

'What's that?'

'He told me he had had a very good night.'

'Oh well, he would say that. It's only civil if you're staying in someone's house. I should have said the same if you had asked me, only I thought you would want to hear about Victor.'

Nesta didn't take this up.

'But we know each other much too well,' she said, arguing

with herself. 'Victor comes down here – well, he comes pretty often, and he *always* tells me if he's been taking his security measures. I can't understand it.'

Why does she seem so upset? I asked myself. Does she care more for Victor than she admits? Is she distressed by the thought that he should lie to her? Does she suspect him of infidelity?

'Oh, I expect he thought that for once he wouldn't bother you,' I said.

'You're quite sure it was Victor?' she asked, with an effort. I opened my eyes.

'Who else could it have been?'

'Well, somebody else looking for a book.'

I said I thought this most unlikely. 'Besides, he wasn't looking for a book. He was looking at the fire – I think he stirred it with his foot.'

'Stirred it with his foot?'

'Well, something made a flame jump up.'

Nesta said nothing, but looked more anxious than before.

Hoping to make her say something that would enlighten me, I observed jokingly:

'But he's come to the right place. I saw a row of buckets in the hall and one of those patent fire-extinguishers –'

'Oh, Walter insisted on having them,' said Nesta, hurriedly. 'This is a very old house, you know, and we have to take reasonable precautions. Having a fire-complex doesn't mean there isn't such a thing as having a fire, any more than having persecution mania means there isn't such a thing as persecution.'

Then I remembered something.

'If he doesn't want to be taken for a burglar,' I said, 'why doesn't he turn on the lights?'

'But he does turn them on,' said Nesta, 'just for that reason.' I shook my head.

'He didn't turn them on last night.'

The problem of Victor's nocturnal ramblings exercised me and made me unsociable. I never enjoy desultory conversation, and our pre-luncheon chit-chat seemed to me unusually insipid. So when the meal was over I excused myself from playing golf, though I had brought my clubs with me, and announced that I was going to have a siesta as I had slept badly. There

was a murmur of sympathy, but Nesta made no comment and no one, least of all Victor, betrayed uneasiness.

In the middle of the afternoon I woke up and had an idea. I strode down to the village to search out the oldest inhabitant. To my surprise I found him, or his equivalent, digging in his front garden. Leaning over the wall I engaged him in conversation; and very soon he told me what I had somehow expected to hear, though, like so many pieces of knowledge that one picks up, it was difficult to act upon, and I rather wished I had never heard it. What chiefly intrigued me was the question: Did Victor know what I knew? It was clear, I thought, that Nesta did. But had she told him?

I did not think that I could ask her, it would seem too like prying; besides if she had wanted to tell me, she would have told me. What I had heard could be held to explain a good many things.

My secret gnawed at me and made the social contacts of the party seem unreal, as though I were a Communist in a Government office, my only accomplice being the head of the Department.

Suddenly, after tea I think it was, the conversation turned my way.

'Is the house haunted, Nesta?' asked one of the visitors, a woman, who like myself was a stranger to the house. 'It ought to be—it wouldn't be complete without a ghost!'

I watched Nesta as she answered carefully, 'No, I'm afraid I must disappoint you—it isn't.' And I watched Victor Chisholm, but he kept what might have been called his poker face—if it had been sinister, which it was not. The speaker wasn't to be satisfied; she returned to the charge more than once, suggesting various phantoms suitable to Monkshood Manor; but Nesta disowned them all, finally suppressing them with a yawn. One by one, on various pretexts, the company disbanded, and Victor Chisholm and I were left alone.

'I once stayed in a country house that was said to be haunted,' I remarked chattily.

'Oh, did you?' he said, with his air of being politely pleased to listen, while he was saving himself up for something in which one had no concern; 'was it fun?'

'Well, not exactly fun,' I said. 'I'll tell you about it if you can bear to hear. The house was an old one, like this, and the land on which it stood had belonged to the Church. Well, after

the Dissolution of the Monasteries they pulled the Abbey, or whatever it was, down, and used some of the stones for building this house I'm telling you about. Nobody could stop them. But one of the old monks who had fallen into poverty, as a result of being dissolved, and who remembered the bygone days when they feasted and sang and wassailed and got fat and clapped each other on the back in the way you see in the pictures – he felt sore about it, and on his deathbed he laid a curse on the place and swore that four hundred years later he would come back from wherever he was and set fire to it.'

I watched Victor Chisholm for some sign of uneasiness but he showed none and all he said was:

'Do you think a ghost could do that? I've always understood that it wasn't very easy to set a house on fire. It isn't very easy to light a fire, is it, when it's been laid for the purpose, with paper and sticks and so on.'

This, I thought – and I congratulated myself upon my subtlety – is the voice of reassurance speaking: this is what well-meaning people tell him, and what he tells himself, hoping to calm his fears.

'I'm not up in the subject of ghosts,' I said, 'but they can clank chains and presumably some of them come from a hot place and wouldn't mind handling a burning brand or two. Or kicking one. That fire in the library, for instance –'

'Oh, but surely,' he said – and I saw that I had scared him – 'the library fire is absolutely safe? I – I'm sometimes nervous about fires myself, but I should never bother about that one. There's so much stone flagging around it. Do you really think –'

'I've no idea,' I said, feeling I had the answer to one of my questions. 'But my hostess at the time was certainly apprehensive. I had to worm the story out of her. It's a very usual one, of course, almost the regulation legend, very boring, really.'

'And was the house ever burnt down?' asked Victor.

'I never heard,' I said.

Of course Victor might have been dissembling. He might have known the legend of Monkshood Manor, he might have been afraid of the library fire: neurotic people are notoriously given to lying. But I didn't think so. Yet the alternative was too fantastic. I couldn't believe in it either, and gradually (for logic can sometimes be bluffed) I succeeded in disbelieving both

alternatives at once.

Before nightfall I took the precaution of furnishing my blue room with books more interesting than Evelyn's Diary. But I didn't need them. I slept excellently, and so, to judge from discreet inquiries I made in the morning, did the rest of the party.

I couldn't get much out of Nesta. She rather avoided me, and for the first time in my life I felt like a policeman who must be treated with reserve in case he finds out too much. I still persuaded myself that Victor Chisholm had been and had not been in the library in the early hours of Saturday morning: if pressed, I should have said he had been. The third possibility, put forward by Nesta, that another guest had been searching for a book, I dismissed. My theory was that Nesta had a superstitious dread of a fire breaking out at Monkshood Manor and was keeping Victor in ignorance while she availed herself of his services as a night-watchman without warning him of the risk he ran.

Risk? There was no risk: yet I vaguely felt that I ought to do something about it, so I tried to make my social prevail over my private conscience and throw myself into the collective life of a week-end party. I thought about the form my coming Collins would take, and wondered if I ought to apologize for being a dull guest. In the meantime I could search Nesta out and make amends for something that I felt had been slightly critical in my attitude towards her.

My quest took me to the library. Nesta was not there but someone was – a housemaid on her hands and knees working vigorously at the carpet with a dust-pan and brush.

'Good heavens!' I exclaimed, surprised into speech by the sight of such antiquated cleaning methods; 'haven't you got a vacuum-cleaner?'

The maid, who was pretty, looked up and said:

'Yes, but it won't bring these marks out.'

'Really?' I said. 'What sort of marks are they?'

'I don't know,' said the maid. 'But they look like footmarks.'

I bent down: they did look like footmarks, but they had another peculiarity which for some reason I refrained from commenting on. Instead I said, glancing at the fireplace:

'It looks as though someone had been paddling in the ashes.'

'That's what I think,' she said, leaning back to study the

marks on the carpet.

'Well, it's clean dirt,' I observed, 'and should come off all right.'

'Yes, it should,' she agreed. 'But it doesn't. It's my belief that it's been *burnt* in.'

'Oh no!' I assured her, but curiosity overcame me, and I, too, got down on my hands and knees, and buried my nose in the carpet.

'Hugo, what are you doing?' said Nesta's voice behind me. I jumped up guiltily.

'What were you doing?' she repeated almost sternly.

I had an inspiration.

'To tell you the truth,' I said, 'I wanted to know whether this lovely Persian carpet had been dyed with an aniline dye. There's only one way to tell, you know - by licking it. Aniline tastes sour.'

'And does it?' asked Nesta.

'Not in the least.'

'I'm glad of that,' said Nesta, and leading me from the room she began to tell me the history of the carpet. This gave me an opportunity to praise the house and all its appointments.

'What treasures you have, Nesta,' I wound up. 'I hope they are fully insured.'

'Yes, they are,' she answered, rather dryly. 'But I didn't know you were an expert on carpets, Hugo.'

As soon as I could I returned to the library. The maid had done her work well: hardly a trace of the footmarks remained, and the smell of burning, which I thought I had detected, clinging to them, had quite worn off. You could still see the track they made, away from the fireplace towards the door: but they didn't reach the door or go in a direct line for it; they stopped at a point halfway between, against the inner wall, which was sheathed in books. There was nothing surprising in that: after a few steps the ashes would have been all rubbed off.

And there was another thing I couldn't see, and almost wondered if I had seen it - the mark of the big toe, which showed that the feet had been bare. Victor might have come down in his bare feet, to avoid making a noise; but it was odd, all the same, if not as odd as I had first thought it.

In the afternoon we went a long motor drive in two cars

to have tea with a neighbour. As soon as Monkshood Manor was out of sight its problems began to fade, and in the confusion of the two parties joining forces round the tea-table they seemed quite unreal. And even when the house came into view again, stretched cat-like beyond the lawn, I only felt a twinge of my former uneasiness. By Sunday evening a week-end visit seems almost over; the threads with one's temporary residence are snapping; mentally one is already in next week. Before I got into bed I took out my diary and checked up my engagements. They were quite ordinary engagements for luncheon and dinner and so on, but suddenly they seemed extraordinarily desirable. I fixed my mind on them and went to sleep thinking about them.

I even dreamed about them, or one of them. It started as an ordinary dinner party but one of the guests was late and we had to wait for him. 'Who is he?' someone asked, and our host answered, 'I don't know, he will tell us when he comes.' Everyone seemed to accept this answer as reasonable and satisfactory, and we hung about talking and sipping cocktails until our host said, 'I don't think he can be coming after all. We won't wait any longer.' But just as we were sitting down to dinner there was a knock at the door and a voice said, 'May I come in?' And then I saw that we weren't at my friend's house in London, but back again at Monkshood, and the door that was opening was the library door, which was lined with bindings to make it look like bookshelves. For some reason it wasn't at the end of the wall but in the middle; and I said, 'Why is he coming in by that door?' 'Because it's the door he used to use,' somebody answered. The door was a long time opening, and it seemed to be opening by itself with nobody behind it; then came a hand and a sleeve – and a figure wearing a monk's cowl.

I woke with a start and was at once aware of a strong smell. For a moment I thought it was the smell of cooking, and wondered if it could be breakfast-time. If so, the cook had burnt something, for there was a smell of burning too. But it couldn't be breakfast time for not a glimmer of light showed round the window curtains. Actually, as I discovered when I turned on my bedside lamp, it was half-past two – the same hour that I had chosen for my sortie two nights before.

The smell seemed to be growing fainter, and I wondered if it could be an illusion, an effect of auto-suggestion. I opened

the door and put my head into the passage and as quickly withdrew it. Not only because the smell was stronger there, but for another reason. The passage was not in darkness, as it had been the other night, for the hall lights had been turned on.

Well, let Victor see to it, I thought, whatever it is; no doubt he's on the prowl: let his be the glory. But curiosity overcame me and I changed my mind.

In the hall the smell was stronger. It seemed to come in waves, but where did it come from? My steps took me to the library. The door was open. A flickering light came through, and a smell strong enough to make my throat smart and my eyes water. I lingered, putting off the moment of going in: then I remembered the fire buckets in the hall and ran back for one. The water had a thick film of dust over it and I had an irrational feeling that it would be less effective so, and that I ought to change it. I did not do so, however, but hurried back and somehow forced myself to go into the room.

There were shadows, of course, and there was smoke, drifting about as smoke does. The two together make a shape that is almost opaque. And the shape was opaque that I saw before I saw anything else, a shape that seemed to rise from its knees beside the fireplace and glide slantwise across my vision towards the inner wall of the library. I might not have noticed it so particularly had it not recalled to me the shape of the latecomer in my dream. Before I could ask myself what it was, or meant, it had disappeared, chased perhaps from my attention by the obligation to act. I had the bucket: where should I begin? The dark mass of the big round library table was between me and the fireplace; beyond it should have been the card-table, but that I could not see. Except on the hearth no flames were visible.

Relief struggling with misgiving, I turned the light on and advanced towards the fireplace, but I stopped half-way, for lying in front of it, beside the overturned card-table, lay a body—Victor's. He was lying face downwards, curiously humped like a snail, under his brown Jaeger dressing-gown, which covered him and the floor around him. And it was from his dressing-gown, which was smouldering in patches, and stuck all over with playing cards, some of which were also alight, that the smell of burning came. Yes, and from Victor himself; for when I tried to lift him up I found beneath him

a half-charred log, a couple of feet long, which the pressure of his body had almost extinguished, but not quite, and from which I could not at once release him, so deeply had it burnt into his flesh.

But the Persian carpet, being on the unburnt, underside of the log, was hardly scorched.

Afterwards, the explanation given was that the log had toppled off the fireplace and rolled on to the carpet; and Victor, coming down on a tour of inspection, had tripped over it and died of shock before being burnt. The evidence of shock was very strong, the doctor said. I don't know whether Nesta believed this: shortly afterwards she sold the house. I have since come to believe it, but I didn't at the time. At the time I believed that Victor had met his death defending the house against a fire-raising intruder, who, though defeated in his main object, had got the better of Victor in some peculiarly horrible way; for though one of Victor's felt slippers had caught fire, and was nearly burnt through, the other was intact, while the footprints leading to the wall—though they were fainter than they had been the other time—both showed the mark of a great toe. I pointed this out to the police who shrugged their shoulders. He might have taken his slippers off and put them on again, they said. One thing was certain: Victor had literally embraced his neurosis, and by doing so had rid himself of it for ever.

THE CHAPEL MEN

A. E. Ellis

The west coast of Cornwall is celebrated for the rugged grandeur of its scenery, rudely hewn into bold buttresses, reverberating caverns and boulder-strewn coves by that tireless sculptor, the Atlantic Ocean. At intervals along this granite rampart are breaks in the formidable coastline where beaches of smooth, firm sand, spangled with delicate shells and backed by marram-bound dunes, form a grateful contrast to the stern cliffs on either hand. In a comparatively sheltered corner at the southern end of one of these bays huddles the hamlet and harbour of Tribbens Cove, the inhabitants of which eke out an existence by fishing for pilchard, pollack and mackerel, by maintaining unkempt fowls of uncertain pedigree, and, in the summer months, by providing visitors with teas, plain or cream, and crab or lobster salads.

From the cluster of cottages clinging limpet-like to the steep hillside, two or three footpaths and a road lead up to the 'church town', over three hundred feet higher than the Cove. The church town consists of rows of granite-built houses along each side of the main street, a general store and post office, an inn, a square-towered church which is a landmark for many miles across the moors, and the inevitable non-conformist chapel.

In one of the more pretentious of the houses, distinguished by bow windows which command a view along the street in both directions, there lived Miss Harriet Hendra, known as Aunt Harry to her numerous nephews and nieces, who was regarded as rather superior in social status by reason of her father having been a well-to-do mining 'captain'. As the local lady bountiful and convener of the ladies' sewing meeting, the old lady was held in affectionate regard.

Although the churches may dominate the landscape, in Cornwall it is the chapels that dominate the hearts of the people. The social life of the fisherfolk and farmers centres in the chapel, and the various official posts in the chapel society are as eagerly coveted by the ambitious as political advancement or ecclesiastical preferment in more exalted

spheres. This too often leads to jealous rivalry and heart-burning ill calculated to further the spiritual welfare of the contestants. In petty personal aspirations, the cardinal precepts which it is the object of a religious organization to inculcate tend to be forgotten, so the chapel may deteriorate into a hotbed of rancour and bitterness ill becoming those who call themselves Christians.

The smallness of the chapel community at Tribbens tended to intensify and bring to a focus any jealous animosities. In the years immediately following the first world war, the two most prominent men in the chapel were John Trevithal, a married fisherman who lived down at the Cove, and William Thomas Polhigey, a bachelor of some forty summers, the owner of Penavern Farm, some two miles away across the moor. The rivalry between these two was of almost lifelong standing. The fatal spark had been kindled when, at the age of five, Johnny Trevithal was given a bigger book than Willy Polhigey, aged six, for a Sunday school prize, and was fanned into a flame destined to consume them both when seven-year-old Willy was selected to recite in preference to Johnny at the Sunday school anniversary celebrations.

Throughout youth and early manhood their mutual antipathy grew as their religious activities increased. Polhigey became a Sunday school teacher before Trevithal, but the latter was the first to be honoured as a sidesman. Polhigey was a fully-accredited local preacher while Trevithal was still 'on trial', but the latter anticipated him in being promoted class-leader. So on through the gamut of chapel offices: the glory of each fresh eminence attained by Polhigey—poor steward, chapel steward, society steward—would be tarnished by the advancement of his rival along the heavenly path—his success as a speaker in the society class, his eloquence at prayer meetings, or his popularity as a preacher. The soul of each man became shrivelled to a cinder by the scorching flame of their jealous ambition, and in their hearts there lurked a bitter hatred which would have sorely astounded the weaker brethren, accustomed to look up to these twin pillars of the faith. Outwardly, however, all was harmony. Only Mrs Trevithal suspected the existence of this mordant canker of the soul.

The most responsible office normally tenable by a layman is that of circuit steward, a position of dignity and importance second only to that of the minister. In the Tribbens circuit

this office chanced to fall vacant in the early summer of the year 19—, and so a new officer had to be appointed at the June quarterly meeting. The nomination of circuit steward lies with the superintendent minister, whose nominee is usually accepted without question by those entitled to vote at the quarterly meeting. It so happened that the minister in charge of the circuit at this time was on particularly friendly terms with John Trevithal, whom he regarded, largely on his exceptional ability as a preacher, as being a most capable and worthy man, eminently fitted for high office. There can be no question that the minister was quite justified in his selection so far as his knowledge of the man went, though had he been gifted with the power of insight into the mind, his choice must have been different. The nomination was duly put forward and acclaimed, whereupon Trevithal entered upon his duties and dignity as circuit steward.

This appointment came as the breaking point for Polhigey, who had long aspired to the honour of this office. As the meeting adjourned, placing a hand on Trevithal's shoulder, he warmly congratulated him on his preferment. 'John, the minister could not have made a better choice, we all hoped and expected it would be you, and your old friend must be the first to wish you well.'

'Thank you kindly, William. I value nobody's opinion more highly than yours,' replied the new circuit steward, 'and I know I can safely rely on your wise guidance and support if any problems arise.' But there was no warmth in either man's regard as they bade each other goodnight.

As he drove back to his lonely farm on that peaceful June evening, between flowery hedges and across the sunlit moor, the demon of murder entered into the heart of William Thomas Polhigey.

In August the pilchard shoals migrate northwards from the Mediterranean, where they have passed their youth as sardines, and travel to the coasts of Cornwall. Then comes a period of intense activity on the part of the fishermen, for the season for reaping this harvest of the sea is short, though the fish are abundant for a few weeks. The boats are constantly at sea, with brief intervals ashore for rest and disposing of the catch, and rough indeed must be the weather to render the pilchard fishers idle. But however plentiful the fish, no fisherman will stay out later than midnight on Saturday. The boats

might be surrounded by fish begging to be caught, but on Saturday evening nets are hauled in and the boats make for port. Were the Sabbath to be broken, there is no telling what dire misfortune might overtake the ungodly fisherman. So Sunday is a day of rest for men and fish, and the boats ride idle in the little harbour until the early hours of Monday morning.

Shortly before midnight on the second Sunday in the month of August following the quarterly meeting at which Trevithal had received his appointment, a watcher by the harbour, had there been one, would have observed a stealthy figure making his way cautiously down the steep path to the Cove, past the sleeping cottages, and on to the sands, left bare at ebb tide. Very circumspectly this nocturnal prowler approaches, peering circumspectly around, and clutching some article concealed beneath his coat. He makes his way to one of the boats left stranded by the quayside and clambers inside. His work is skilfully and swiftly accomplished. A faint sound of sawing may reach the slumbering herring gulls on the seawall, but no other noise betrays the fell handiwork in Trevithal's boat. His design executed, the carpenter of darkness emerges and makes his way back up the hillside. His footprints are soon obliterated by the flowing tide. So well has his evil task been done that in calm weather no trace of his workmanship will be detected – but in the stress of a rough sea, woe betide him who trusts his life to that once staunch craft that has rendered such true and faithful service!

The watchdog at Penavern challenged as someone entered the farmyard at about one o'clock that morning, but crept quietly back into his kennel on recognizing his master's footstep. Not for him to wonder what business took his lord abroad at that unholy hour.

Throughout the following week little or no wind disturbed the unruffled ocean, seldom so still even in the calmest weather. Using their auxiliary engines, the boats ventured much farther out than usual, and Trevithal and his two partners made long trips for such small craft and returned heavily laden.

On Saturday evening the weather broke, sooner than the forecasts had predicted. A strong north-westerly breeze sprang up, rising rapidly to near gale force, and some of the boats had difficulty in making harbour. Considerable anxiety was felt when two of the boats, one of which was Trevithal's,

failed to return as usual before midnight, and apprehension increased when no sign of them had been reported up to Sunday evening, the storm still raging with unabated violence.

That evening, Trevithal was supposed to preach in Tribbens chapel, but as he failed to return, Polhigey took his place. One or two odd events occurred during the service, which were related to me later by Miss Hendra, whose veracity is unimpeachable.

A social call on Miss Hendra is a 'must' whenever one is in West Cornwall, and she was entertaining me to tea one summer afternoon a year after the period of this narrative. From her parlour window there was a view of the wrinkled sea, glittering in the sunshine, the Lighthouse Rocks off the headland, and a smudge on the horizon which was the Isles of Scilly. The parlour was a Victorian museum piece, unchanged since Miss Hendra's parents' time. On one wall hung a portrait of the late 'Captain' Hendra, in the bay window flourished a luxuriant maidenhair fern, and a stuffed raven of sinister aspect stood on the sideboard. On the table were displayed a plate of Cornish splits, another of saffron buns, and an imposing Dundee cake as a centre piece. It was made quite clear, however, that this cake was to be admired but on no account to be cut, as it had been made for a sewing meeting tea.

'You know I always go to chapel twice every Sunday,' said Miss Hendra, 'and sit in the same pew, the third from the back on the south side. Well, it was shortly after seven o'clock, towards the end of his sermon, that I noticed the preacher hesitate, become confused and turn pale. His eyes were fixed on the Trevithals' pew, which is just behind my own, near the door. As the fisherman's family were down at the Cove awaiting his return, the pew was unoccupied. Mr Polhigey gazed at the pew for some seconds with a scared expression, then lamely concluded his address and gave out the closing hymn:

*Eternal Father! strong to save
Whose arm doth bind the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to Thee
For those in peril on the sea!*

'As the verses of this great mariners' hymn were sung with

more than usual fervour, the man in the pulpit grew more and more agitated and stared continuously, with a distraught expression, at the Trevithals' pew. At the same time there seemed to be a strong smell of seawater or seaweed, and as I left my pew at the end of the service I was surprised to see damp patches on the seat and floor of the Trevithals' pew, as though someone in soaking wet clothes had just been sitting there. By the close of the hymn Mr Polhigey was so overcome that he could with difficulty pronounce the blessing. He straightway hurried from the chapel, speaking to no one, and set off alone across the moor to Penavern.'

Another odd incident was related by Mr Penrose, who kept the village shop-cum-post office, which thus was a natural clearing-house for local gossip. 'A courting couple,' so he told me, 'returning arm-in-arm the same evening along a fieldpath which passes Penavern, met Polhigey together with another man, who both were certain was Trevithal, walking swiftly from the direction of Tribbens. Their greeting was not returned, and they thought Polhigey looked far from well, while the girl added that there was something wrong about Trevithal too. However, they were forced to the conclusion that they must have made a mistake in identity so far as the latter was concerned, when they heard the tidings brought back from sea next day.'

On Monday morning the wind dropped, and soon after dawn the coastguard espied a fishing-boat passing the Light-house Rocks, making heavy weather of it. He phoned down to the Cove, and the entire village was on the quay to greet the returning fishermen. It was not Trevithal's boat, but the other missing one. Besides her own crew, there disembarked Trevithal's two partners. It was at once apparent that a tragedy had occurred out on those stormy wastes, and there was a poignant scene, as Trevithal's family had assembled on the quay. When the men from the boat, who were exhausted with fatigue and exposure, were in a fit state to give an account of themselves, they related how the sea had claimed its victim.

When the wind rose on Saturday evening both boats were fishing close together some ten miles south of the Runnel Stone. On the first signs of a change in the weather they hauled in their nets and made for home. The sea quickly became rough and choppy, and as the freshening breeze was dead

against them they made slow progress. When the petrol for the auxiliary engines began to run short their plight became serious. Throughout that night and next day they struggled grimly on, and by seven o'clock on Sunday evening were rounding Landmark Head. All of a sudden there were shouts and cries for help from Trevithal's boat, which seemed to be in difficulties. In a remarkably short time it sank and two of its occupants were struggling in the sea. Trevithal himself became entangled in the rigging and was dragged under as the craft foundered. His two companions were with great difficulty rescued by the other boat.

The men were quite unable to account for the disaster. It is true the sea was uncomfortably rough, but there was no sign of undue strain. The tight little ship had weathered worse gales in her time. Without warning, a rending crack had been heard under the forward locker and, before they had realized that there was anything amiss, water poured in. Within what seemed like a few seconds they were swimming for their lives. The only suggestion they could offer to explain this baffling mystery was that there must have been an unsuspected weakness in the planks somewhere.

For what follows I again rely on the testimony of the estimable Miss Hendra, whose word no one who has had the privilege of acquaintanceship with that lady would ever dream of doubting.

'On the Sunday evening after the tragic death of John Trevithal,' Miss Hendra told me, 'as I was entering the chapel, I chanced to meet Mr Polhigey in the vestibule. He seemed much changed since I saw him a week before and had a haggard, careworn look. I inquired if he was quite well, as he had appeared out of sorts in the pulpit last Sunday. He started at this and asked brusquely what I meant. What had I seen? This struck me as an odd sort of question, but as the man was clearly upset about something, I replied evasively that perhaps the heat had been too much for him - forgetting for the moment that the previous Sunday had been cool and stormy. Mr Polhigey affirmed emphatically that there was nothing whatever the matter with him, and we entered the chapel together.

Throughout the service I kept a watchful eye on Mr Polhigey, who sat some pews in front on the other side of the

aisle. He was evidently ill at ease, and kept turning round to glance at the Trevithal pew, where sat the mourning widow and her children, possibly finding some consolation for their grief in the publicity it brought them. The minister, he on whose recommendation John Trevithal had been appointed circuit steward, preached an eloquent and emotional obituary sermon, extolling the virtues of the deceased, which reduced most of the feminine part of the congregation to tears.

'Seven o'clock passed, and a thoroughly miserable time was being enjoyed by all, when the door of Mr Polhigey's pew opened for no apparent reason. Immediately an alarming change came over the farmer. He turned abruptly half round, his face assumed an expression of startled horror, and he slid along to the other end of the seat. For the remainder of the sermon he sat crouched in the far corner in a state bordering on collapse, his face buried in his hands. When the closing hymn was announced,

*Rejoice for a brother deceased,
Our loss is his infinite gain,*

he rose hurriedly, left his pew as though he were pushing past somebody sitting there, and almost ran out of the chapel. The pew door, slammed behind him, swung open again. That was the last occasion but one that William Thomas Polhigey was seen in Tribbens chapel.'

The following Thursday, John Trevithal's body was washed ashore at Gazells Cove, and was brought back to Tribbens in Carrallack's van, passing Penavern on the way. The carrier told me how he drew rein on seeing Mr Polhigey, whom he knew well, leaning on the farmyard gate, and prepared to enter in anticipation of refreshment, but such an alarming change came over the farmer when he learnt of the grim burden in the vehicle, that he was glad to betake himself and his solitary passenger off at top speed.

The funeral took place in the chapel cemetery at Tribbens on Saturday afternoon. As it was not customary in those days for women to attend funerals, my source for what took place is the chapel-keeper, Ned Chirgwin. The entire chapel community, including Polhigey, who seemed to have grown into an old man in the past fortnight, was gathered in the grave-

yard. The farmer's face was drawn and careworn, and there was a furtive, hunted expression in his normally bold and fearless eyes. The committal service proceeded with all its sad solemnity, and the coffin was lowered gently into the grave.

As Tom Skewjack, the sexton, threw the ritual handful of soil on top of the lid, Polhigey uttered a strangled cry and pointed wildly across the open grave. 'Look, look, he's calling me! He's beckoning me in with him! Oh, my God!' and pushing his way frantically through the throng of mourners, he fled as one demented from the cemetery and tore headlong down the road.

That evening, shortly after seven o'clock, as old Tom was giving the finishing pats to the mound over Trevithal's grave, he saw two men approaching at a brisk walk. They entered through the gate which gave access to both the graveyard and the chapel. The sexton dropped his spade and fled from that consecrated ground as though from the gates of hell, for one of those men was Polhigey, while the other was John Trevithal.

When Ned Chirgwin entered the chapel early on Sunday to get ready for the morning service, he was astounded to find Polhigey kneeling with bowed head at the communion rail. He received no reply when he addressed the crouching figure, which was scarcely remarkable – for the farmer was cold and rigid in death. When Ned had summoned assistance from neighbours, the body was removed. It was then seen that a saw was grasped tightly in the right hand, and where the dead man had knelt there lay a square of board, such as might have been cut out of the bottom of a boat.

As I thanked Miss Hendra for her hospitality and bade farewell on that summer evening, she remarked, 'Perhaps the oddest thing of all is that Mr Polhigey, in a will dated a week before he died, left all he possessed to John Trevithal's widow.'

THE BIRTHRIGHT

Hilda Hughes

Martin Drake was considered to be clairvoyant from a little child. At the age of ten he had dreamed of a drowning fatality in the brook on his uncle's farm, and the very next morning they had found his grandfather lying face downwards in the ditch. His clothes were sodden with water, and he was dead, as Martin had seen him in his dream.

Two years later Martin, in the cold grey dawn in his waking hours, had seen, as clearly as if it had happened before him, the horse on which Lord Karney was riding stumble and fall, with its rider thrown under it. And when they picked him up Lord Karney's neck was found to be broken.

Martin's mother, susceptible to her boy's gifts, which were looked upon with disfavour by his father, who gave all his affection to his firstborn Michael, took the vision as an evil omen. She had not been through the tragedy of her father's suicide for nothing. She rushed down to the Manor, asked to see Lord Karney himself, and begged him not to ride to hounds that morning. He scoffed at the superstition of his steward's wife who listened to the precocious prattling of her younger boy, and rode to the meet in the market-place. Three hours later his horse fell clumsily and rolled over upon its master. They carried Lord Karney home upon a hurdle—Karney with his broken neck and his mouth gaping. And Martin had felt a strange thrill of pleasure when he had been told. It was as he had predicted.

He became a person of some importance in the village after that. The schoolmaster, who dabbled in Spiritualism, suggested that Martin was mediumistic. The vision was, in his opinion, not due to the boy's clairvoyance, but to some spirit control. The child should be watched. Eminent research students who were investigating psychic phenomena should have an opportunity of talking with him. Mr Drake, however, was indignant, and refused to consider 'such an infamous piece of humbug'. His wife's pleading left him adamant. The boy was a prig, and should be thrashed until he dropped his posing. And, when old women from the village tried to encourage Martin to have

premonitions about themselves and their own concerns, Mr Drake let it be understood that there was to be no more nonsensical talk of the kind. Perhaps his anger merely veiled his fear. Nothing Martin ever did could please his father, but any suggestion of the boy's supernatural powers merely infuriated him.

And so during the next few years Martin's clairvoyance – call it what you will – was discouraged, although his mother, convinced of her boy's uncanny powers, secretly regaled the ladies' sewing meeting with talk that brought a gleam to the eyes of the least susceptible and made the superstitious experience a curdling of the blood.

When he was twenty-four Martin's father died. Mrs Drake, a sensitive woman who had experienced a good deal of sorrow, lived on in the old house, because Michael had followed in his father's footsteps and been made steward of the present Lord Karney's estate.

A will, made several years before his death, left the entire estate to the elder son, since the widow had money of her own. In due course the will was proved, and Mrs Drake grieved secretly because the bitterness of her husband for her younger son had lived on in his heart throughout his life, had outlived his body. It was as if the father's evil, bitter spirit towards her boy – their boy – brooded about the house, even stronger in death than it had been in life. Once she spoke to Martin about it.

'I couldn't understand your father as he got older,' she said. 'When I married him I saw only the gentle side of his nature. He was loving and kind. But he faced all kinds of trouble, and he couldn't weather the storms. He was a bitter man – a cruel man. He did you a grievous wrong, my boy. He hated you in his lifetime, and his hate lives on. If he has any consciousness in that place where the dead go he may come to be sorry. Perhaps it will trouble him. I can't rest at night in the room where we used to sleep. Perhaps you wouldn't mind changing bedrooms with me, my boy. It's silly, I know.'

'Your nerves are going to pieces, Mother,' he said. 'I'll change rooms with you.'

He did as she bade him, and he too had many sleepless nights.

He gave them the shock of their lives at breakfast-time on the anniversary of his father's death.

'I couldn't sleep last night,' he told them. 'I knew there was something strange about the place. I knew, too, what I should see. It was that old power working in me. I dreaded to see my father.'

His mother shuddered, her lips trembling, a strange sound whistling through her teeth. It was what she, too, had feared. But she dreaded still more that anyone should ever learn her secret, should know that her love for her man had slowly turned to hate and dread. She had trembled before him in his lifetime. She feared him still in death. It was terrible that, having hated him so much, she had been forced to give him her body. The horror of it had seared her mind. But what was her boy saying now?

She looked at him, drawing his hand through his long, straight brown hair. His face looked distorted, as she watched him through narrowing eyes.

'I dreaded seeing him,' Martin said in strange, thick tones. 'He hated me so. I could feel his hate wrapping round me. The air seemed to be full of it. I couldn't breathe. I thought I should choke where I lay.'

'You must have had a nightmare,' his brother interjected, but his mother hung upon every word, and then she turned her face aside and put her hand over her eyes so that they should not look into her soul.

'It was awful,' he went on. 'It was like a poisoned gas in the air, physical as well as spiritual, if you see what I mean. I tried to sit up and then fell back exhausted. I was sick to the heart and horribly afraid. And I can remember those trivial things which do stand out on days like this. I heard the cuckoo-clock in the hall, just as I heard it a few minutes before he died. I can remember noticing the awful ticking of my own watch, which lay on the dressing-table beside me and ticked with a terrifying insistence, seeming to get louder and louder.'

'I could hear the leaves tapping on the window, and the head of Abraham Lincoln on the table looked strange in the moonlight. Even the knobs on the bedstead, with my dressing-gown thrown over the rail, were unnerving. I shall never forget it—the insistence upon my consciousness of all these things; and yet I knew that something terrifying was going to happen, that I was a prisoner, numb with cold, yet suffocating slowly.'

'Go on!' his mother screamed, and they were both shocked

by her voice, hollow and toneless. But Martin's voice was deep, and what he said seemed inevitable. People might cry, batter themselves against Fate; these things were true, unalterable.

'I noticed the Thing near the window at first. Then it moved sickeningly towards the cupboard as though it could not see, but must feel its way. And then it swung round and faced me. And I saw my father's face with hollows where the eyes used to be—like a skull.'

'A skull! Oh, my God!'

'The face was white as he never was even in death. I can't remember what clothes he had, or if he had any, but he wrung his hands, and a terrible dry sobbing came from his lips. I tried to scream out, but I couldn't make a sound. I sat up in bed and clutched the sheets. And slowly I could understand what he meant. It was a voice all right, but the words were strange—like someone trying to speak who has been dumb for years.'

'Oh, God!'

'And he shot out one hand towards me, and although it didn't touch me I had the sensation of something icy-cold. "I've done you a wrong, my boy," he said. "Look in my old coat . . . open the family Bible. You'll find it in Genesis." And then he turned aside and wailed and wrung his hands.'

'I watched him as he went; he seemed to merge into the dusk. He was like light—thin, white, transparent—but he seemed to fade away into the darkness, or else became lost in the moonbeam. I got out of bed when I could. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find him. I got back into bed, and cold sweat poured off me.'

'I don't wonder,' said Michael, shocked to the depths but trying to make a pretence of calm.

'What do you think he meant?' cried the mother.

Martin's long fingers played nervously with his lips.

'How should I know?'

'You say he mentioned his old coat?'

He nodded.

'I wanted to give it to Johnson two days before he died,' said the widow. 'It was so shabby, but he would cling to it. There was a scene.'

'Where is it now?' asked Michael. 'Couldn't you, with your powers, tell us that, Martin, old boy?'

Mrs Drake spoke quickly before her elder son could notice that his brother was not prepared to reply.

'In the cupboard with all his other old clothes. I left them untouched after he died.'

'He went towards the cupboard first,' said Martin.

They looked at each other significantly, as people do when they think they have found a clue.

'We must go up at once,' said Mrs Drake.

Michael took her arm. Martin followed them.

They entered the bedroom where she had known so many unhappy nights. She knocked against the dressing-table and bruised one hip in her hurry. Then she crossed to the built-in cupboard beside the fireplace and flung open the doors. Some old clothes of her own, three or four pairs of shoes, an old hat or two met her gaze. She took them out, threw them upon the floor, took down her husband's frock-coat which had done duty at funerals, and, though very old, was not to be despised even now. Then she produced a dressing-gown, and lastly, from among a number of old garments, the coat in question. The outside pockets gave no clue. Then as Michael, sitting on the floor, ran his fingers over it, he heard a crackling, and felt something in a breast-pocket. He took out a thin sheet of notepaper.

Kneeling on the floor together among the debris of the wardrobe, they read it.

I was unjust. I want to make amends before I die, and I have a premonition of death. For my last will and testament look in the family Bible – Genesis.

'Just as he said,' put in Martin.

'You didn't say anything about a will,' said his brother.

'He didn't exactly mention the word. But I remember him saying look in Genesis.'

'Where is it, Mother?'

'It's such a heavy book,' said Mrs Drake. 'We never use it now. It's got all your ages written upon the flyleaf. I remember your father's Cousin Jane would do it.'

'Silly old girl!' said Michael.

'What does it matter?' sighed Martin.

Mrs Drake went carefully through a pile of books in the cupboard, but could find no trace of the family Bible. They found it at last in the bottom drawer of the chiffonier in the dining-room. And between the pages of Genesis they found the

will. It had been drawn up three years before and witnessed by Cousin Jane and Henry Deane. The premonition of death had evidently come to the strong man not a few days before he actually died, as they had at first supposed, but during a severe attack of influenza three years earlier.

'I remember now he was very nervous about himself,' said the widow.

'Strong men always are when they're ill,' said Martin.

In the will the property was to be divided equally between the two brothers.

'I'm glad your father didn't forget you, after all,' went on Mrs Drake.

'But the will's already been proved,' said Michael.

'The last will must stand,' his mother interposed. 'You'll share and share alike now. It's only just. Your father regretted his bitterness – and to think I never knew!'

Her eyes strayed to the printed page of the Bible.

'And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept.'

It was the poignant story of Jacob and Esau. Her husband must have read that when he was ill. It had brought him to a new state of mind.

The finding of the second will brought calm to Mary Drake's troubled spirit. Her boy – her baby – had not been forgotten. Perhaps her husband's heart had changed before he died. Perhaps he had become more like the man she once had loved passionately – not the fiend she had known in later life.

The proving of the second will took time. The technicalities of the Law always do. But the inheritance of the two brothers was shared equally at last. It was only Martin, benefiting by several thousands, who took it so calmly. His mother sometimes wondered if his father's change of spirit meant much to him. It was nice, of course, to have the money, but surely the justice of the thing must appeal to him. He must be sensitive. Was he not clairvoyant – perhaps a medium?

Martin and his brother talked for a long time about investments one night beside the fire in the old-fashioned dining-room with its horsehair furniture and its copper kettles on the mantelpiece, and its willow-pattern china upon the dresser, and its sporting prints to decorate the walls. They had taken

advice upon the subject that very afternoon, and were viewing themselves and each other as men of property. With the money well invested there was no knowing what they might do in the future. Neither of them had any responsibilities, any ties. Each had himself to consider, and money meant much to both of them, not merely because of the things it would bring them, but because it spelt power.

When Martin went to bed that night in the old four-poster, which his mother and father had once used, he went to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

It was a large room with low beams and only one door. Rain fell outside and leaves rattled against the window-pane, but they had no power to disturb Martin. He had his fortune. He had power. His dreams as the night passed were fantastic. He could see himself as Master of the Hunt, living in the fine old Manor; he could see more money coming from his mother later, and a wife and children sitting beside him at a table spread with silver and crystal. Yet he had never really loved in his life. But the woman in the dream was beautiful, and she was looking across the table with a smile. He could see himself lifting his glass and draining it . . . it was a funny thing to experience the sensation of good old wine in a dream. He could feel it nice to his palate, soothing to his stomach. His legs were tingling. He saw himself stand up and propose a toast. Then the scene changed. They were all at the Hunt Ball, he and his friends, and they were drinking at the bar, and then later dancing madly in a gallop. There seemed to be a fever in his blood. He danced the gallop, which had returned to fashion in order to round off a Hunt Ball programme, as he had never danced it before. A girl was looking up into his eyes – he bent over her – wanted to snatch a kiss – then he awoke.

There was something in the room. He could not see it, but he could feel. It was not the blind either, which was flapping at the open window, nor the curtain which was blown about and then seemed to bulge into the room. And how the wind howled! It was on him before he knew. He could feel something scorching him – was it this fiend's breath, or the heat from the wood fire, crackling in the grate?

He tried to get up, to escape. But small, greenish eyes looked into his. His father stood over him, brooding over him, with intense hate and loathing on his face and in his eyes. There were no hollows, as in a skull. It was the face of a madman

who acted with disconcerting logicity.

The Thing was trying to speak now.

'What was that nonsense you told them . . . the face of a skull?'

The voice made him cower in his bed.

'You lied! You never saw me! I did not come!'

Martin put his hand before his eyes to shut out the sight. The feeling of heat was terrible.

'You lied! You lied!' The voice screamed out the truth in a crescendo.

Sweat poured off Martin's face, his tongue was cloven. He lay trembling, as if in an ague. Words failed. Screams would not come, yet every nerve in his body cried aloud in pain, in horror for the peril that was to come.

And the Thing was drawing nearer . . . leaning over the bed.

'You forged my name—and the witnesses' names—upon that false will. You wrote letters in my handwriting about my premonitions, and I never so much as thought of death in all my life. Would to God I had! You were a forger!'

The voice died away and then rose again in a scream. His father's great red hands with sandy hairs upon them reached out towards his throat.

Martin made a last effort to cry out. And then the Thing was upon him. His blood-curdling scream was his swan-song.

His brother and a fireman forced their way into the room. The smoke was thick, but the fire had not done much damage.

Martin, however, lay white and still upon the bed. They lifted him before they realized.

The doctor came.

'It was not the fire that killed him,' he said; 'it didn't even touch him. But these things are easily explained. Death was undoubtedly due to shock.'

NON-PAYING PASSENGERS

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Walk down any busy street. Sit in a crowded restaurant. Take a seat in a well-filled cinema. In particular, board a packed train. The chances are that somewhere in the immediate vicinity is a ghost. An actual, visible, audible, and – heaven help us – a solid ghost.

This is an unpalatable truth, that would be greeted with derision were it widely broadcast. Certainly, Percy Fortesque would have become gravely embarrassed if such a possibility had been presented to him as an undeniable fact, his assumption being he was either in the presence of a crank or a madman.

He was therefore totally unprepared when he saw the face of his dead wife staring at him from a window of the five-forty-five train which was standing at Platform 16 at Waterloo Station. She was sitting in the corner seat, wearing that blank, long-suffering look he remembered so well, and her steel-rimmed glasses reflected the light from an overhead platform lamp, so that they resembled miniature suns.

Percy's heart gave one violent thump and the shock froze his reasoning powers into icy splinters of fear, so that he could only keep walking and finally seat himself in the compartment next to the driver's cab. Then his brain gradually resumed its natural function and thoughts came tripping over one another in a vain effort to present a rational theory.

'That woman could not possibly have been Doris.' He repeated this comforting assertion over and over again, and was delighted to note a marked improvement in his morale. He then moved on to list a number of excellent reasons why a defunct wife could not possibly be travelling on the five-forty-five from Waterloo. 'One, she's dead. I was with her when she died. She said: "Oh, dear," and died. Two, she was cremated and her ashes sprinkled under a rosebush.' Percy was very pleased now that he had decided on cremation. The fire was so final. Old-fashioned burial meant the component parts were still around. The bones still in existence. The skull intact. And . . . goodness gracious . . . sealed up in a wooden

box, she could still be in one piece. But the cremation oven disintegrated; it was as though she had never been. She did not exist.

Then his nasty, inquiring brain recalled the memory of that face framed in a train window and began to go over the salient points. She had been wearing that awful blue hat that Percy had so detested; and . . . oh, good Lord . . . there had been that little wen on the left side of her chin. The comforting thought of a Doris double began to fade. Surely the arm of coincidence could not be that long? But what was the alternative? Percy shifted uneasily and a dour-faced woman to his left shot him a suspicious glance. A Doris-ghost on a rush-hour train? An apparition on the five-forty-five? Percy giggled and the dour-faced woman tried to edge away.

When he alighted at Richmond he had to have a second look. His heart once again began to beat unnaturally fast and anticipation made icy fingers to trail down his spine—but he had to seek reassurance. Surely a second look would prove beyond doubt that he had been mistaken. Been deceived by a trick of light. Deluded by a quirk of imagination.

He walked slowly along the platform, daring to look into each window, and disinterested faces stared back at him. Newspapers were rustled, one saucy-eyed girl winked at him, but so far there was no sign of *the* face. A whistle blew, a voice shouted: 'Right, Charlie!' and the train began to draw away. Percy stopped and faced the train as the carriages flashed by. Then, just as hope was maturing into blessed relief, he had a glimpse of Doris's face. Blue hat, steel-rimmed glasses, wen and all. He had the impression that just as the carriage tore out of his line of view, she turned her head so as to get a last look at him.

It really was too much. He fainted on the platform and a porter revived him with a cup of tea from the station buffet.

Percy had a good worry all night, and so rose completely unrefreshed next morning. The shaving mirror reflected lines around his mouth and his eyes looked like red-rimmed saucers with blue centres. But nevertheless, the short passage of time had worn the horror down to a nagging uncertainty. Perhaps there was a woman who exactly resembled Doris, right down to an unfortunate taste in hats and a facial disfigurement. It was unlikely, but not impossible. Percy spoke aloud, a not

unusual occurrence since he had been living alone.

'I should have got into the carriage and sat beside her.'

Next time he would, even if there was only standing room, and face this woman, eye to eye. In fact he would open some kind of conversation with her. How about: 'Forgive me, but you have an amazing resemblance to my late wife. I hope you don't mind my mentioning it.' She would have to make some kind of response, even if it was only to tell him to push off, and then the bubble would burst. The illusion would shatter. She could not possibly have Doris's voice. Not that low, precise whisper. He hoped she would have a voice like a fog-horn. That would settle the matter once and for all.

Three weeks passed without so much as a glimpse of anyone who remotely looked like Doris and uncertainty disintegrated into doubt. 'Maybe . . .' dissolved and became, 'Impossible!' The gasp of fear went out as an echo which returned as a laugh of self-ridicule. Peace of mind gave one last look back along the darkened avenues of time, then, like a well-fed cat, settled down before the fire of complacency and purred its contentment. Percy ceased to examine crowded railway carriages.

The expected never happens. The unexpected pounces on the unprepared from the commonplace. Before Percy boarded the District train he had to travel on the Underground, and it was here that his peace of mind was shattered for ever. He was seated in a compartment that was full but not crowded. Every seat was taken, but a few people were standing by the doors, where they either strap-hung or slouched, while wearing that look of painful resignation which is peculiar to their kind. Percy Fortesque was solving the *Evening Standard* crossword puzzle and only looked up when the train roared into Charing Cross station. His eyes photographed the curved walls, the passengers seated opposite, and the extreme side view of the strap-hangers and slouchers by the door. The brain automatically developed the pictures so meticulously captured by the eyes and began to store them away in the dark recess which is the lumber-room of memory. Then it grabbed one back and retained it for the soul's consideration. At first the soul did not want to know. It swiftly thrust the picture into the lumber-room and slammed the door. The brain suggested a retake. The soul vetoed the idea. The brain, being the irritating, curiosity-ridden organ that it was, insisted.

Percy, with great reluctance, lowered his newspaper and looked towards the door. There was no manner of doubt. Doris was hanging on to a strap and staring at him.

Absolutely no shred of comforting, sanity-saving doubt. Blue hat, steel-rimmed glasses, wen, shabby grey coat, slightly wrinkled stockings and sensible shoes. Nothing missing. She had that blank, long-suffering expression, which suggested she was expecting him to do something, but knew very well that he wouldn't. Outside on the platform a voice commanded: 'Mind the doors,' and the doors obediently slid together. Then the voice made a noise that sounded like 'Ye . . . up,' and the train jerked into motion. But Percy continued to stare back at his late wife. This should have been an excellent opportunity for him to try out his theory and stand beside her, but he was too petrified to move, let alone talk.

The train took its time in getting to Waterloo. Just as though wishing to prolong the agony, it stopped twice, and once, to Percy's great horror, the lights flickered as if considering the possibility of going out. It was then that Doris broke the spell. She jerked her head round and stared at an advertisement for Gordon's Gin, and freedom of movement returned. Fear withdrew a little way, and Percy was able to clear his mind of panic-debris.

Suppose – just suppose that someone with a warped, perverted sense of humour were playing a distasteful, but, oh, Lord, soul-saving practical joke. Suppose they had found Doris's double and dressed her up in a replica of Doris's clothes – that would be a rational explanation. But it was not a very convincing one. Belatedly he began to consider his original intention of getting up and speaking to her, but scarcely had he flexed his leg muscles than the train rushed into Waterloo Underground station and a crowd of passengers had risen from their seats. The doors sighed, then slid open and Doris was swept out on to the platform, and Percy, a few yards behind, saw her blue hat bobbing up and down like a rogue buoy in a rough sea.

He kept her in sight when the crowd surged into a side passage and had forced his way within three bodies distance when the queue formed for the lift. It was then that he noticed how still she was. There was not even the slightest suggestion of movement. No shifting of feet, no jerk of the head, no wriggling of shoulders, no – now he came to think of

it—rise and fall that denotes breathing. One might suppose that here was an automaton with its engine switched off.

A roaring of displaced air announced the arrival of the lift; the door crashed open and a ticket collector stood to one side with outstretched hand. He snatched at tickets with all the enthusiasm of a fruit-picker gathering strawberries, but when Doris passed him he gave her a single glance, then instantly turned his attention to the next passenger. Percy was positive that he had seen her, but it was as though his brain had rejected her presence. It was this simple action that finally convinced Percy he was in fact following the ghost of his dead wife. There was something terribly familiar about the man's swift glance, followed by that air of total rejection. He, Percy, must have done it many times. Possibly everyone had at one time or another. You saw and instantly forgot what you had seen. But, once in a million times, someone forgot to forget. Then they were haunted.

The lift gave a great sigh and stopped. The crowd surged out and Percy followed Doris, first up a short flight of steps, then up a slight incline and out into the main station. The blue hat bobbed its way towards Platform 16, and again a ticket collector gave her one swift glance before scowling at a little man who had forgotten to show his season ticket.

Doris walked slowly along the platform until she found a carriage with the door open. She climbed in and sank down into a corner seat and looked dejectedly out of the window. Percy, after vainly trying to curb the brain's damnable lust for knowledge, performed the most courageous act of his life. He bounded into the carriage and sat down beside her.

He was ignored. The still figure was a study in non-movement. Percy's trembling hands opened a newspaper and spread it out, before he dared look sideways. Again he had a close-up view of a scrawny neck, with thin grey hair combed up into an unbecoming bun, which in some small measure supported the blue hat. What would happen if he were to touch her? Nothing on earth could have made him experiment, but speech was a kind of abstract contact. If those waxen-looking ears still functioned she might hear a whispered inquiry, always supposing that he could force his tongue to make one.

Three times his vocal cords contracted, three times his lips parted, and it was not until he had closed his eyes and taken

a very deep breath that he was able to send out one whispered word.

'Doris?'

At that moment the train jerked into violent movement and the figure swayed, so that for an awful, heart-thumping eternity Percy thought it was going to fall back against him. Then the train assumed an even, clack-a-de-clack speed, and the figure once again became a study in still-life. Although Percy could not think this was a good simile. He gathered his courage and breath and expelled the latter in a whispered question.

'Doris – is that you?'

The head came slowly round and the steel-rimmed spectacles gave him one expressionless stare, then the bloodless lips parted and an answering whisper said: 'You're late.'

It was perhaps unfortunate that Percy had not noticed he had boarded the slow train, because, even as he was digesting this piece of disturbing information, it slowed down and stopped at Vauxhall Station. When someone opened the door, Doris, without removing her expressionless stare from his face, climbed down on to the platform with a kind of crab-like movement. She remained stationary while a porter slammed the door, but, as the train pulled away, Percy thought he detected a slight, irritated shaking of the head.

As may be imagined, he was very unhappy and decided to seek expert advice.

Madame Orloff (*Medium Extraordinaire* – Messages from the Beyond a Speciality) no longer touted for business. Gone were the days when she handed out cards at railway stations and accosted perfect strangers. Now a discreet advertisement in the *Apparition*:

MADAME ORLOFF IS PREPARED TO CONSIDER
A FEW RECOMMENDED ADDITIONS TO HER
SELECT CLIENTELE

was all that was needed to keep body and soul together in the manner to which both had grown accustomed. She was not, therefore, at all pleased when she answered an urgent ringing of her doorbell and discovered a distraught Percy on the front step. Neither was she prepared to be gracious.

'Yes?'

Percy made a motion which suggested he was wiping his

feet, prior to making an uninvited entry.

'You are Madame Orloff? The medium?'

'The famous medium. Yes.'

'Could I . . . could I speak to you for a few minutes?'

'About what?'

Percy dry-washed his hands, looked from left to right, inspected his shoes, then re-routed his attention to Madame Orloff's full figure.

'Well . . . it's my wife. She's been dead . . .'

'Passed over,' Madame corrected.

'Yes, passed over for six months. But I keep seeing her on the District train.'

'A distinct possibility. It makes a break for the poor dears after a stint on the Circle Line. So what?'

'Well . . . I'd like to see you about it.'

Madame Orloff withdrew from her doorway with some reluctance.

'Very well. But I can't give you long. I've got a possession coming in half an hour - by appointment. And I usually has a little kip before I does any casting out.'

She led her unexpected and unrecommended client across the hall and ushered him into a room that was situated at the rear of the house. Here Percy was all but pushed into a chair, then the medium seated herself behind an impressive desk.

'Right. Let's get down to it, then. What sort of party was your wife? Strong-minded? Liked to have things just so?'

Percy nodded. 'You could say so. Mind you, she was quiet. Didn't say much. But she had a will of her own.'

Madame Orloff gave him a shrewd glance that took in his neat, well-brushed suit, polished shoes and the way he clutched his hat in both hands.

'And I expect you used to help her? Do a few jobs round the house? Bit of washing-up, maybe?'

Percy's eyes widened with astonishment and his respect for Madame's exceptional psychic powers grew.

'Yes. How did you know?'

The medium shrugged. 'There's not much hid from us that has the gift. Now, how many times have you seen your wife on the train?'

'Twice on the District and once on the Underground.'

Madame Orloff shook her head angrily. 'That Underground! If I had my way I'd have it blown up. What with it being a

cess-pit for elementals, demons, poltergeists and hobgoblins, to say nothing of millions of misguided souls like your passed-over, it's a wonder to me anyone has the nerve to go down there. Talk about possession! What! The number of stories I could tell you of people who came up with something they didn't go down with. Any road, at least your missus has a bit of initiative. She changes over to the District now and again.'

Percy frowned. 'But, what I can't understand - what's she doing on the trains?'

Madame Orloff smiled grimly. 'You may well ask. It's become a sort of habit with 'em. In my young days I doubt if you'd have come across a travelling haunter once in a blue moon. Now - stone the crows - British Railways and London Transport attract 'em like flies to gum paper. I suppose it's because the earth-bounds like to keep moving, and you've got to admit the trains do move sometimes. The rush hours are best, of course. They can get around without giving offence, if you get my meaning.'

Percy tried to absorb all this information, but one question still had to be satisfactorily answered.

'Doris used to go to chapel three times every Sunday and I'm sure she never thought that trains - well, would be the ultimate destination.'

'Ah, she's waiting, ducks, ain't she? Waiting for her little hubby to come and give her a hand. Stands to reason. All of 'em are mostly waiting for someone. Ever spoken to her?'

Percy hesitated for a moment, then he nodded.

'Yes. Once.'

Madame Orloff beamed her approval. 'That's nice. People are sometimes backwards in coming forward when it comes to having a chat with the passed-over. What did she say?'

'She said . . . I was late.'

Had he looked up at that moment he might have detected a hint of embarrassment in Madame's rather protuberant eyes. She began to trace a pattern on the desk top with a pudgy forefinger.

'I'm sure that was very nice, dear. Tell me, have you been rather poorly lately? Been off your grub?'

Percy assumed the expression of a rabbit who is beginning to understand the purpose of a cooking-pot.

'No. I feel fine. Absolutely fine.'

Madame Orloff raised her thick eyebrows as though to denote

surprise. Then she continued to trace an invisible pattern on the desk-top.

'I'm pleased to hear that, dear. Very pleased. But your dear passed-over did say you were late. Didn't she?'

'Yes.' Percy wriggled slightly in his chair. 'I've been trying to understand what she meant.'

'Well, it don't take much gumption to work that out. I mean to say, you don't need a college education. She meant you were late. Overdue. All behind, as the saying goes. Follow me, dear?'

Percy swallowed and turned to an interesting shade of pale green.

'You mean . . . ?'

'Yes, I do. You should have been doing the old Circle Line for some time. Had any near misses lately? You know, almost fell downstairs or something of that nature?'

'I did almost drown in the municipal swimming baths, but an attendant pulled me out just in time. He said I was lucky, as he should have been off duty.'

Madame Orloff nodded her satisfaction. 'That would be it. You should have gone then. I expect your dear passed-over was put out. Never mind, she'll try to put things right, so I wouldn't worry too much.'

'You mean . . . I'm going to have another accident?'

'I'd say you can bet on it. Your good lady sounds like a very determined soul to me and her patience must be wearing a bit thin. Well, it stands to reason. So you go home and leave it all to her. Is there anything wrong?'

There was a good reason for her inquiry because Percy was on his feet and making all haste towards the door. He was also shaking his head in frantic denial and trying to express his total disbelief by shouting: 'I don't believe you. Doris would never do this to me.'

Madame Orloff grinned as she heaved her considerable bulk from the chair. 'Don't kid yourself. She won't half give you gyp when the time comes. No woman likes to be kept waiting.'

Percy was out of the room and running for the front door and was in no condition to heed Madame's cry of rage.

'What about me fee? I don't do this for peanuts.'

The Green Line bus service gained another regular passenger.

Percy derived a kind of grim pleasure imagining Doris look-

ing for him vainly on either the five-forty-five train or in the Underground. It was rather like that time he had dodged chapel and gone to Sunday cinema instead. Then he shuddered as he remembered that Doris had been waiting for him in the foyer. She had an uncanny knack of knowing what he would do next and there was no reason to suppose that a change of location would have dulled her perceptive powers.

For three days and nights he imitated a man sitting on an unexploded bomb. Then on the fourth – a Thursday, which had never been his lucky day – the bus decided to terminate its journey at Hammersmith, and the driver looked round at his passengers with an expression of quiet triumph and ordered: 'All change. 'S'far as we go.'

Percy was faced with a problem. He could either wait for another bus, which would mean arriving at the office half an hour late, or – take to the Underground! There was no reason to suppose that Doris was down there; on the other hand, there was no certainty that she was not. Good heavens, she might be waiting for him on the platform. It was while considering this mind-shattering prospect that Percy happened to look up and see his late wife watching him from the other side of the road.

A stream of cars went by. They were closely followed by two lorries, one hearse and a double-decker bus, then Percy was able to derive the full benefit of Doris's expressionless stare. Suddenly, she raised her arm and beckoned. It was an imperious gesture. The kind of impatient, irritated wave that had on many occasions greeted him from the front gate whenever he arrived home late. He was used to it. It had become an essential part of married life and had created a kind of built-in reflex which meant Percy usually broke into a little trot. It did not fail now. Without further thought he stepped into the road, became aware of the sound of screeching brakes, before a powerful hand pulled him back on to the pavement. Doris made a savage gesture of extreme annoyance before she walked quickly towards the Underground station.

'Tired of life, I dare say,' the burly constable remarked caustically.

'No . . . Oh dear, no.'

'Suicide is not illegal,' the constable went on, 'but it's a bit rough on us blokes if we have to scrape you off the road.'

'I'm so sorry. I wouldn't want to be any trouble.'

'Then use your bloody eyes.'
Eventually Percy hired a taxi.

Next morning Doris was on the Green Line bus.

Percy did not see her at first. In fact, it was not until they were passing Barnes Common that he spotted her reflection in the window. She was seated on the opposite side of the aisle, two rows back, and indulging in her usual practice of looking out of the window. Percy trembled and flirted with the idea of getting out at the next stop, only there did not seem to be much point. She would doubtlessly follow him, and the traffic was moving too fast for comfort.

There comes a point when familiarity blunts the sharp edge of fear. It is then that the unusual assumes the appearance of the commonplace and mental disturbance the aspect of a calm sea. Percy, without being aware of the fact, had been becoming gradually accustomed to seeing his late wife on public transport and might have eventually accepted this state of affairs, had he not been aware of her lamentable intentions. As it was, he found himself considering defensive measures, while not forgetting to keep a wary eye on Doris, who, he fancied, was watching his reflection in the window.

The simple solution, if he were not to meet with the destined accident, was to be constantly alert and make absolutely certain there was always a safe distance between them. For an apparition she looked remarkably solid and might quite well be capable of meting out a good shove, should a suitable occasion arise. He must ignore all gestures that demanded haste, look both ways before he crossed the road, hang on to the black moving rail when he went down an escalator, and mind the step when he got out of a Tube train. In fact the list seemed endless, and his heart sank when he considered the task before him. But surely, if he lasted out long enough, she would give up.

When the bus reached Hyde Park Corner, he made a dash for the door, then tore along the pavement clutching his briefcase in one hand and his umbrella in the other. At the entrance to the underpass he looked back. So far as he could see, Doris had not followed him. It was a small victory, but at least she must now realize that her attentions were not welcome.

From then on life was never dull. Percy found there was safety in speed – just so long as he looked where he was going.

When he found Doris waiting at the bus stop he ran for the railway station. When she presented herself at the top of the escalator, he made all haste for the stairs. The merest glimpse of her on the five-forty-five sent him scurrying for the Underground.

But of course all this activity was very wearing, and Percy lost so much weight he wondered if there was any need to worry unduly about a fatal accident. People acquired the habit of giving him pitying looks and even, on occasion, making unfortunate remarks. An ancient aunt, whom he had not seen for some time, gave him one horrified look and said: 'A thin corpse makes an easy burying,' and fear, which up to then had been content to walk in his footsteps, leapt upon his shoulders.

But the body still did not want to die, so the brain was ordered to devise a plan that would keep death forever locked in tomorrow. Such a burden had not been placed upon that idle, curiosity-ridden organ for many a year, but it did its poor best to explore every avenue of escape and finally came up with a proposed solution that brought a glimmer of hope to the darkness of Percy's despair.

Why not, instead of running, walk beside? In fact, better still – follow. Let the hauntee become the haunter. Give her a dose of her own medicine. Percy actually did a little dance of joy round the kitchen when the full beauty of the scheme became visible. He would beckon to *her* whenever she appeared on the other side of the road, creep up behind her and whisper: 'You're bloody late,' and wait for the reaction. What was it Wellington or Napoleon said? 'Attack is the best means of defence.' Whoever said it was right. Percy sat down and ate a hearty breakfast for the first time in weeks.

It was such a relief to know he was on the attack and not running any more. That morning he caught the eight-thirty to Waterloo and had the satisfaction of spotting his quarry the moment he entered the compartment. Doris was sitting in her usual place by the window. Of course, the sight of his late wife sitting in a train still had the immediate effect of sending icy shivers running down his spine, but, remembering his resolve, he mastered these cowardly emotions and sank down in a seat opposite. Doris treated him to a cold stare in which could be detected a hint of impatience. Percy smiled and felt very

confident. He raised his hat and said: 'Morning, Doris. Sorry if I've kept you waiting.'

It was not perhaps the happiest of remarks, because he was keeping her waiting, and she stressed her disapproval by turning her head and staring out of the window. Percy did not allow this action to deter him. He felt like a boy who has just left school and can now cheek the master.

'You'll never guess what I did last night. Spilt tea all over your best table-cloth. You know, the one your mother gave us.'

Her face betrayed no sign that she had heard him, but he saw one hand tighten up into a fist. His imagination took flight and he leapt from one outrageous lie to another.

'Do you remember how you used to nag me whenever I cracked a plate? There's not much left of the willow-pattern dinner service. Two vegetable dishes and a meat dish, as a matter of fact, and one lid among the lot.'

Her head quivered, a clenched fist moved, but that was all. He went one, earth-shaking step further.

'The cat hasn't half made a mess of the Indian bedspread.'

The head jerked round, and never would he have thought it possible that a face which was so dead, so white and devoid of emotion, could portray such a picture of blazing, impotent rage. He felt like a man who has been tormenting a caged lion – only some kind of invisible bars kept her at bay.

But instead of fear, he experienced a surge of triumphant joy. She was dead, he was alive and intended to remain so, and he could say anything he damn well liked. He stared straight at her and poked his tongue out. Doris unclenched her fists and once again turned her face to the window.

Percy would have liked to have continued his lion-baiting, but it was then he became aware that several people were looking at him in the oddest way. So he unfolded his newspaper and contented himself by watching Doris over it, just in case she tried to do something tricky. When the train rattled into Waterloo, he opened the carriage door and, after making a little ironic bow, said softly: 'After you.'

She climbed down on to the platform with head held high, shoulders stiffly erect, and began to walk swiftly towards the ticket barrier, with Percy close behind. He enlivened their progress by such remarks as: 'Gee-up, there's going to be a flood,' 'Watch it, you've got two left feet,' and, when she quickened her pace, 'Hold it, you've forgotten your saddle.'

Once past the ticket barrier she broke into a run and Percy, after emitting a little cry of joy, galloped after her. They both made the lift just before the doors closed, but unfortunately a fat man squeezed between them, so that Percy was unable to continue his exorcizing treatment. When the crowd swept out into the lower regions, where passage meets passage in the midst of a mind-numbing labyrinth, Percy found he had lost his prey. He looked, stretched his neck, struggled, elbowed and finally shouted. All to no avail. She had vanished. The heat had become too hot in the kitchen and Doris had got out.

Percy, to the profound enjoyment of all those in his immediate vicinity, laughed, danced, swore and finally cried. It was reasonable to suppose that the attack procedure was an unqualified success.

Percy found his day was packed with hours that were reluctant to die. Sometimes he chuckled when he realized how his feelings regarding Doris's post-demise wanderings had been reversed. Now he would be extremely disappointed if she were not on the homeward-bound train. He devised new insults, invented little acts of ridicule, that must surely rouse her to a state of impotent rage. But of course he must never lower his guard: always make certain she was in front and he was in the rear.

When the first shadows of night fell across the city, Percy Fortesque put on his coat and hat, gathered up his briefcase and umbrella, then set forth to renew the hunt. Doris was not on the Piccadilly Line, and he experienced a twinge of disappointment. Neither, so far as he could see, was she on the Bakerloo train, but the crowd was so dense that an entire army of ghosts could be flattened between strap-hanging bodies, or whimpering against doors. With many a look to the rear, Percy hastened to the lift and give a little squeal of alarm when a woman in a blue hat pressed her handbag into his back. But it was not Doris, and he came up into the main station without so much as a glimpse of his quarry.

The five-forty-five was still only half filled, so Percy was able to examine each compartment without difficulty. He found her at the far end of the train, huddled against the off-side window, head averted, shoulders hunched, looking like a badly-wrapped parcel that someone had forgotten. He climbed in, put his umbrella and briefcase up on the luggage rack, then

sat down beside her.

'Evening.' He kept his voice low. 'Thought I'd missed you.' There was no response—he did not expect one.

'Why did you run away this morning? That wasn't a nice thing to do, was it? I've got so much to say, and you never gave me much opportunity to talk when you were alive. For example, I never did mention how much I hated you, although, to be fair, I did not realize it myself at the time. I only knew you were mean, small-minded, sanctimonious, petty and an awful person to live with. Are you listening?'

The back of her neck was more waxlike than ever and he felt a sudden surge of anger. She was treating him with contempt. His words—his feelings—were not worthy of her attention. He raised his voice slightly.

'Why did I marry you? Eh! Didn't you ever ask yourself that question once in all those years? I'll tell you. I thought that anyone so unattractive—I could use the word ugly—would always be grateful. I overlooked the undeniable fact that women only look into rose-tinted mirrors.' He drew a little nearer and turned his voice into a harsh, vibrant whisper. 'Get back to hell, you ugly old cow.'

She still did not move, but her whisper thundered through the dark corridors of his mind.

'My mother is only two carriages back.'

He became aware that the train had already begun its journey towards Richmond and the living people (so far as he knew) had filled every seat and overflowed into the aisles, but he was now more alone than at any time during his life. He wondered what would be the reaction if he were to jump up and shout: 'That thing in the corner—it's my dead wife.' Would they all gape at him, or—and this was a chilling thought—just nod their heads and say: 'Yes, we know'? If his mother-in-law—may she burn forever—was two carriages back, what proof had he that all of them were not dead as a Christmas turkey? Hell below!—all fourteen stone of the old hag had been planted in Brookwood cemetery twenty-five years ago. He shuddered and looked at his nearest neighbours with terrible suspicion. That fat man who was propped up against the far door looked unpleasantly waxy. And that long, lean woman with protruding teeth, she might well have strayed from some far-off damp grave. Then bravado, the dire need to drive fear back behind the frontiers of sanity, made him

turn to Doris again.

'Let the old hag come. I'll settle her hash, too. Dead or alive, it's all the same to me. Let 'em all come.'

Silence. Rigid immobility. Fired by a childish and, by now, terror-tinted fear, Percy would have liked to have punched that motionless figure. But once, when his knee touched hers, there was such a bone-chilling coldness, he slumped back against the same dour-faced woman from whom he had received warning frowns on earlier occasions.

'Kindly desist,' she instructed, pulling her skirt abruptly away as though to avoid contamination.

'It was only my intention . . .'

'I know exactly what your intention was. Kindly desist.'

Every *supposed* living body looked at Percy, but Doris continued to ignore him, although there was something about the way she held her head and shoulders that stated more eloquently than looks or words that this was the kind of reputation that she fully endorsed. When the train reached Richmond, he edged his way from the compartment with lowered head and did not wait to see if Doris's mother was on the look-out for him.

That night he did not sleep much, but spent the small hours feeding his courage. He rehearsed all the cutting remarks he would make to Doris's mother, should she put in an appearance next morning. Then he remembered the formidable bulk, the immense, moonlike face, and hastily turned on the bedside lamp.

'She won't scare me!' he shouted, and the cat, which had been sleeping on the foot of the bed, beat a hasty retreat.

Doris was back in her customary position by the window and Percy, true to his newly-acquired determination, sat down beside her. He asked the all-important question.

'All right. Where is the old hag?'

It is a pity that he had not looked to left and right when he entered the compartment, because Doris's mother was seated opposite. He said: 'Oh, my God,' and stared at her with open mouth and bulging eyes. She really was most awful. A great round face, endowed with three chins, little eyes that glittered from behind horn-rimmed spectacles, shoulders that would not have disgraced a coal-heaver, a bosom that verged on the impossible, and legs like miniature tree-trunks. She wore a

black straw hat, a grey coat with a moth-blitzed fur collar and a pair of buttoned-up boots. To make matters worse she did not look out of the window. The small, unblinking eyes, magnified by the spectacles, stared straight at Percy, the dead-white face wore an expression of frozen disapproval and the overall impression was that of a corpse that had died while in a fit of excessive bad-temper. Percy stared back until his self-control exploded into an eruption of terror-born rage.

'Who do you think you're staring at?'

What with one thing and another, Percy was becoming a source of entertainment for bored commuters. Newspapers rustled, heads were raised, dull eyes brightened and there was a general air of lively excitement. But Percy's mother-in-law did not appear to be impressed. She remained a solid, motionless, larger-than-life wax doll, and her magnified stare never left Percy's face. He might have spoken again, had he not been forestalled by a sudden low whisper. It came from Doris, who was still indulging her passion for looking out of train windows.

'Daddy is in the guard's van.'

Percy sank back and closed his eyes. Despair came strolling down the avenues of time and took up residence in Percy's brain. It banished hope with a hollow laugh, slaughtered confidence with a tiny frown and welcomed horror with a grisly smile.

Percy knew he had lost.

Doris allowed someone to open the door before slowly descending to the platform. There she stood waiting, and Percy, after a fearful glance at his mother-in-law, knew what was expected of him. Presently they were a compact family group, with wife in front, husband behind, mother-in-law to the left and father-in-law moving in.

Doris's father had been a very large man and was in every way a worthy spouse for his formidable partner. Six-foot-four high, by three-foot-six wide, he had a face of granite and fists like bunches of iron grapes. He gave the impression he was looking for someone to hit. He took up a position to Percy's right and the family group moved forward.

Through the ticket barrier, across the station, down the steps and into the lift. Here Percy surrendered his season ticket. He would be travelling free from now on. On the Bakerloo

platform they allowed one train to come and go, but looked grimly at Percy when the second announced its imminent arrival by a fast growing roar. Percy trembled and closed his eyes and from somewhere close behind came a nasty little tittering laugh. The roar exploded into a shriek of triumph as the train was vomited out of the tunnel mouth and Father-in-law's voice rumbled as he spoke the fatal words.

'Over you go and happy landing.'

They all shoved together.

Percy found himself in a corner seat and he was looking miserably out of the window. The train was just drawing into Charing Cross station. It was then that he turned his head and took an interest in his surroundings. Mother-in-law and Father-in-law were seated opposite, Doris was on his left. They were all smirking and resembled three cats preparing to share out one mouse. Percy ventured to ask a question.

'Where are we going?'

'To Leicester Square,' said Doris.

'Then change for King's Cross,' added Father-in-law.

'For a nice trip to Walthamstow Central,' Mother-in-law stated.

'And back to Finsbury Park,' said Doris.

'Then up to Cockfosters.'

'Back to Hyde Park Corner.'

'We'll spend the night in the Victoria Station first-class waiting-room,' promised Father-in-law.

People poured in from the platform, seats were crowded, overhead straps sagged under the weight of hangers-on, aisles were packed solid with homeward-bound (or was it work-bound?) commuters, and demons disguised as porters glared in through the grime-fogged windows.

'It's always the rush hour,' said Doris.

'Eternally,' added Father-in-law.

Mother-in-law had the last word. She always had.

'For ever and ever.'

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