



FONTANA

THE 12TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

Nightmare tales of the unquiet dead by Daphne du
Maurier, Elizabeth Fancett, Sir Walter Scott and
others – selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



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

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The Twelfth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



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INTRODUCTION

I have often thought that there ought to be more ghosts – of one kind or another – on the sea than the land. After all, there is more of it and water could be a perfect conductor for the peculiar vibrations that appear to be necessary for psychic phenomena. Ships are but floating houses, that over a period of time must become saturated with emotional atmosphere which – under certain circumstances – may be able to crystallize as a time-image.

This could be an explanation for the countless stories of so-called phantom-ships; ghosts that float over the water and other like disturbances. In *Escort* by Daphne du Maurier we have a tramp steamer on its way home from a Scandinavian port some time during the last war that manages to avoid the unfriendly attentions of a U-boat by the intervention of a mysterious sailing vessel.

Well – it just might happen.

Returning to dry land, I must confess to a rather morbid curiosity as to what takes place immediately after death. Commonsense, a not very exciting commodity, says most emphatically – nothing. A state of non-existence. But having read *Elaina* by Elizabeth Fancett, commonsense takes a dive for the floor and is most reluctant to get up again. Here is a story of grief which will not allow a personality – a better word than soul, don't you think? – to rest and forces him to walk a familiar path.

Twisted Shadow by Roger F. Dunkley describes a very grim prospect indeed and one that could well take place in this modern age. Someone – could it have been Shakespeare? – said: 'Coming events cast their shadows' – or words to that effect – and it must surely follow that twisted events cast twisted shadows. If you chuckled when reading Mr Dunkley's *The Man Who Sold Ghosts* which was published in the 11th Fontana Ghost Book, be prepared to shudder at this one.

First-Foot by Clodagh Gibson Jarvie is a charming story with a ghost that is not at all frightening – if you don't think about it too deeply. What a pity that the delightful old custom of greeting the 'first foot' to step over your threshold

on New Year's Day, has fallen into disuse.

Sabine Baring-Gould died in 1924 at the age of ninety. Apart from being a well-known novelist and short-story writer, he is also responsible for the hymns *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *Now The Day Is Over*. *The Leaden Ring* proves he knew how to tell a good ghost-story as well. May this serve as a lesson to any spoilt young lady who is thinking of giving her boy-friend the brush-off.

Having read *That Summer* by Barbara Joan Eyre twice, I decided that here again is a situation that is both chilling and intriguing. The hot summer afternoon, the murmur of sun-drugged sea, the sound of youthful laughter and the gentle sigh of a sluggish breeze—all serve as a background for unsated desire that can never die. This surely is what immortality is all about. A tormented soul can never sleep.

In *The Tapestryed Chamber* by Sir Walter Scott, my sympathies were entirely with General Browne who decided that one night spent in Woodville Castle was enough and: 'to seek in some less beautiful country, and with less dignified friend, forgetfulness of the painful night which he had passed . . .'

In other words he put his running shoes on. So would I.

In the 9th Fontana Ghost Book I included a story called *Sally* by Patrick Davis. Now he has written *The Tunnel* for this collection and I have nothing but admiration for the matter-of-fact style with which he handles the chilling plot. Disused railway tunnels must be simply soaked with—what shall I call it?—psychic atmosphere. What is a train but a line of metal boxes, each one crammed with all the emotions that man is heir to? When a fatal crash takes place in such a confined space, raw naked terror must explode like an atomic bomb and become impregnated in the grime-coated walls. At certain times, when the conditions are just right, I would not like to say that a re-enactment of that terrible event could not take place. It is possible some readers have experienced phenomena of this kind, and if so, I would dearly love to hear about it. A serious book dealing with *true* contemporary psychic experiences is long overdue.

In my opinion Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was the greatest of Victorian ghost-story writers. There are three or four close runners-up, but he had the gift of writing good prose without boring the reader. *Ghost Stories of The Tiled House* is an excellent example of what I mean. One feels that if these

stories are not true—they jolly well should be. At the same time I am not certain that old Sally should have been allowed to entertain her young mistress with such gruesome tales while preparing her for bed. Would the young lady have slept soundly after listening to the old woman relate: '... He drew the curtain at the side of the bed, and saw Mrs Prosser lying, as for a few seconds he mortally feared, dead, her face being motionless, white, and covered with cold dew; and on the pillow, close beside her head, and just within the curtains, was the same white, fattish hand, the wrist resting on the pillow, and the fingers extended towards her temple with a slow, wavy motion'?

Ugh!

The Matinée by William Abney shows an actor writing about the theatre, which is as it should be. A nice, quiet little story; all about an unnamed actress who revisits Billington, where the Walter Birch Players are presenting *Love from a Stranger*. Some of you must remember the film, which had Ann Harding and Basil Rathbone playing the starring roles. Well, this actress enters the theatre and . . .

The Travelling Companion by Elizabeth Walter is very nice. Or is it? In a few of my own stories I have tried to warn people about *who* and *what* might be using our public transport. I am pleased to learn that Miss Walter is alive to what is going on. Maybe it is these ghostly bilkers who are responsible for the unending rise in fares. Again I must be fair. My non-paying passengers are not at all nice—whereas Jennifer Mallory's companion does appear to be a well-intentioned person. With a name like Tim, could he be anything else?

Read the story and find out.

Margaret Chilvers Cooper lives in Falmouth, Massachusetts, USA, and in *January Ides* she draws a most remarkable picture of the North American coastline, where: 'Only those great aerialists, the herring gulls, are opportunists to the wind's freezing bluster and ride its currents in screeching triumph to hurl dredged scallop to naked death on the rocks below.' This is a story about a ship stuck fast in the frozen sea, and *that* or *who* which comes across the ice to take revenge on an unfaithful wife. Or—maybe. I particularly like the narrator. She reminds me of Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*.

Dorothy K. Haynes once again takes us north of the border

with her *Barleyriggs*, and I am forced to the conclusion that if all of our trains are haunted, most of Scotland's houses are as well. Not to mention 'wee red vans'. Miss Haynes never lets us down. I hope no one has forgotten *The Head* which I included in *Scottish Tales of Terror*, or Mrs Jones which appeared in *Welsh Tales of Terror*. *Barleyriggs* has a ghost, a mother and child, a strong smell of gas and gas-board men who come in a red van.

Sydney J. Bounds allows his hero to do *A Little Night Fishing* off the coast of Cornwall. As usual Mr Bounds tells a story that has a nasty twist in the tail. The ghost of a wrecker who is still up to his old tricks of luring ships on to the rocks, is not a pleasing prospect, and would put most of us off night – or day – fishing for life.

I must apologize for not commenting on Pamela Vincent's excellent story *The Attic* in my introduction to the 11th Fontana Ghost Book. This was an inexcusable oversight. I have not made the same mistake with *Brooding Dark* which appears here: all about Elizabeth who attends a seance and thinks she knows how and why – then . . . This is a story where it is better to believe than doubt.

From Another World by Rosemary Timperley is a lovely piece of black macabre. It has that chuckle-shudder which is so popular these days and must have some claim to being a little masterpiece. This should teach secretaries to leave the boss's desk alone.

Those of you who enjoyed *Lady Celia's Mirror* which appeared in the 11th Fontana Ghost Book, will not be disappointed with *A Fairly Great Reckoning* by Roger Malisson in this collection. I believe in time-traps. Anyone who has read the account of the adventures of two maiden ladies (school teachers no less) in the gardens of Versailles, can have little doubt about their existence. Mr Malisson tells us about an American who is pulled back to the late sixteenth century, to appease the vanity of a certain well-known poet, who wishes to know if his fame has lived on after him. A very original and intriguing plot – with a surprising ending.

I have included two stories about a haunted room. The first is *Summer and Miss Swanson* by Rick Ferreira, which is concerned with a very nice, if rather sad ghost, that refuses to move out of the attic flat when Mr Fairley moves in. This might – under certain circumstances – be considered an asset,

depending on the lady's intentions. In any case, Mr Ferreira's hero learns to live with the situation, which only goes to prove the maxim – one can get used to anything in time.

The second story is my own *Cold Fingers*, but to be honest there is really no comparison. My ghosts are always nasty. Sometimes in fact really vile, and the thing which materializes in Miss Partridge's third-floor back, is no exception. If Mr Ferreira's Miss Swanson were to meet it, she would think twice before taking up residence in anyone's attic. Which only demonstrates what an awful mind I must have.

Well – I will not wish you happy reading, because that is not my intention. But may I hope you have a chilling, exciting, shuddering page-turning and a few chuckle-haunted nightmares for good measure.

R. Chetwynd-Hayes.

ESCORT

Daphne du Maurier

There is nothing remarkable about the *Ravenswing*, I can promise you that. She is between six and seven thousand tons, was built in 1926, and belongs to the Condor Line, port of register, Hull. You can look her up in Lloyd's, if you have a mind. There is little to distinguish her from hundreds of other tramp steamers of her particular tonnage. She had sailed that same route and travelled those same waters for the three years I had served in her, and she was on the job some time before that. No doubt she will continue to do so for many years more and will eventually end her days peacefully on the mud like her predecessor, the old *Gullswing*, did before her; unless the U-boats get her first.

She has escaped them once, but next time we may not have our escort. Perhaps I had better make it clear, too, that I myself am not a fanciful man. My name is William Blunt, and I have the reputation of living up to it. I never have stood for nonsense of any sort, and have no time for superstition. My father was a Nonconformist minister, and maybe that had something to do with it. I tell you this to prove my reliability, but, for that matter, you can ask anyone in Hull. And now, having introduced myself and the ship, I can get on with my story.

We were homeward bound from a Scandinavian port in the early part of the autumn. I won't give you the name of the port – the censor might stop me – but we had already made the trip there and back three times since the outbreak of war. The convoy system had not started in those first days, and the strain on the captain and myself was severe. I don't want you to infer that we were windy, or the crew either, but the North Sea in wartime is not a bed of roses, and I'll leave it at that.

When we left port that October afternoon, I could not help thinking it seemed a hell of a long way home, and it did not put me in what you would call a rollicking humour when our little Scandinavian pilot told us with a grin that a Grimsby ship, six hours ahead of us, had been sunk without warning. The Nazi government had been giving out on the wireless, he said, that the North Sea could be called the German Ocean,

and the British Fleet could not do anything about it. It was all right for the pilot: he was not coming with us. He waved a cheerful farewell as he climbed over the side, and soon his boat was a black speck bobbing astern of us at the harbour entrance, and we were heading for the open sea, our course laid for home.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, the sea was very still and grey, and I remember thinking to myself that a periscope would not be easy to miss; at least we would have fair warning, unless the glass fell and it began to blow. However, it did the nerves no good to envisage something that was not going to happen, and I was pretty short with the first engineer when he started talking about the submarine danger, and why the hell did not the Admiralty do something about it?

'Your job is to keep the old *Ravenswing* full steam ahead for home and beauty, isn't it?' I said. 'If Winston Churchill wants your advice, no doubt he'll send for you.' He had no answer to that, and I lit my pipe and went on to the bridge to take over from the captain.

I suppose I'm not out-of-the-way observant about my fellow-men, and I certainly did not notice then that there was anything wrong with the captain. He was never much of a talker at any time. The fact that he went to his cabin at once meant little or nothing. I knew he was close at hand if anything should happen.

It turned very cold, after nightfall, and later a thin rain began to fall. The ship rolled slightly as she met the longer seas. The sky was overcast with the rain, and there were no stars. The autumn nights are always black, of course, in northern waters, but this night the darkness seemed intensified. There would be small chance of sighting a periscope, I thought, under these conditions, and it might well be that we should receive no other intimation than the shock of the explosion. Someone said the other day that the U-boats carried a new type of torpedo, supercharged, and that explained why the ships attacked sank so swiftly.

The *Ravenswing* would founder in three or four minutes if she was hit right amidships and it might be that we should never even sight the craft that sank us. The submarine would vanish in the darkness; they would not bother to pick up survivors. They could not see them if they wanted to, not in this darkness. I glanced at the chap at the wheel; he was a

little Welshman from Cardiff, and he had a trick of sucking his false teeth and clicking them back again every few minutes. We stood a pretty equal chance, he and I, standing side by side together on the bridge. It was then I turned suddenly and saw the captain standing in the entrance to his cabin. He was holding on for support, his face was very flushed, and he was breathing heavily.

'Is anything wrong, sir?' I said.

'This damn pain in my side,' he gasped; 'started it yesterday, and thought I'd strained myself. Now I'm doubled up with the bloody thing. Got any aspirin?'

Aspirin my foot, I thought. If he has not got acute appendicitis I'll eat my hat. I'd seen a man attacked like that before; he'd been rushed to a hospital and operated on in less than two hours. They'd taken an appendix out of him swollen as big as a fist.

'Have you a thermometer there?' I asked the captain.

'Yes,' he said. 'What the hell's the use of that? I haven't got a temperature. I've strained myself, I tell you. I want some aspirin.'

I took his temperature. It was a hundred and four. The sweat was pouring down his forehead. I put my hand on his stomach, and it was rigid, like a brick wall. I helped him to his berth and covered him up with blankets. Then I made him drink half a glass of brandy neat. It may be the worst thing you can do for appendicitis, but when you are hundreds of miles from a surgeon and in the middle of the North Sea in wartime you are apt to take chances.

The brandy helped to dull the pain a little, and that was the only thing that mattered. Whatever the result to the captain, it had but one result for me. I was in command of the *Ravenswing* from now on, and mine was the responsibility of bringing her home through those submarine-infested waters. I, William Blunt, had got to see this through.

It was bitter cold. All feeling had long since left my hands and feet. I was conscious of a dull pain in those parts of my body where my hands and feet should have been. But the effect was curiously impersonal. The pain might have belonged to someone else, the sick captain himself even, back there in his cabin, lying moaning and helpless as I had left him last, some forty-eight hours before. He was not my charge; I could do nothing for him. The steward nursed him with brandy

and aspirin, and I remember feeling surprised, in a detached sort of way, that he did not die.

'You ought to get some sleep. You can't carry on like this. Why don't you get some sleep?'

Sleep. That was the trouble. What was I doing at that moment but rocking on my two feet on the borderline of oblivion, with the ship in my charge, and this voice in my left ear the sound that brought me to my senses. It was Carter, the second mate. His face looked pinched and anxious.

'Supposing you get knocked up?' he was saying. 'What am I going to do? Why don't you think of me?'

I told him to go to hell, and stamped down the bridge to bring the life back to my numbed feet, and to disguise the fact from Carter that sleep had nearly been victorious.

'What else do you think has kept me on the bridge for forty-eight hours but the thought of you,' I said, 'and the neat way you let the stern hawser drop adrift, with the second tug alongside, last time we were in Hull? Get me a cup of tea and a sandwich, and shut your bloody mouth,' I said.

My words must have relieved him, for he grinned back at me and shot down the ladder like a Jack-in-the-box. I held on to the bridge and stared ahead, sweeping the horizon for what seemed like the hundred thousandth time, and seeing always the same blank face of the sea, slate grey and still. There were low-banked clouds to westward, whether mist or rain I could not tell, but they gathered slowly without wind and the glass held steady, while there was a certain smell about the air, warning of fog. I swallowed my cup of tea and made short work of a sandwich, and I was feeling in my pocket for my pipe and a box of matches when the thing happened for which, I suppose, I had consciously been training myself since the captain went sick some forty-eight hours before.

'Object to port. Three-quarters of a mile to a mile distant. Looks like a periscope.'

The words came from the lookout on the fo'c'sle head, and so flashed back to the watch on deck. As I snatched my glasses I caught a glimpse of the faces of the men lining the ship's side, curiously uniform they were, half eager, half defiant.

Yes. There she was. No doubt now. A thin grey line, like a needle away there on our port bow, leaving a narrow wake behind her like a jagged ripple. Once again I was aware of Carter beside me, tense, expectant, and I noticed that his hands

trembled slightly as he lifted the glasses in his turn. I gave the necessary alteration of our course, and telegraphed the corresponding change of speed down to the first engineer, and then took up my glasses once more. The change of course had brought the periscope right ahead, and for a few minutes or so the thin line continued on its way as though indifferent to our manoeuvre, and then, as I had feared and foreseen, the submarine altered course, even as we had done, and the periscope bore down upon us, this time to starboard.

'She's seen us,' said Carter.

'Yes,' I said. He looked up at me, his brown eyes troubled like a spaniel puppy's. We altered course again and increased our speed, this time bringing our stern to the thin grey needle, so that for a moment it seemed as though the gap between us would be widened and she would pass away behind us, but, swift and relentless, she bore up again on our quarter, and little Carter began to swear, fluently and passionately, the futility of words a sop to his own fear. I sympathized, seeing in a flash, as the proverbial drowning man is said to do, an episode in my own childhood when my father lectured me for lying, and even as I remembered this picture of a long-forgotten past I spoke down the mouth tube to the engine-room once more and ordered yet another alteration in our speed.

The watch below had now all hurriedly joined the watch on deck. They lined the side of the ship, as though hypnotized by that unwavering grey line that crept closer, ever closer.

'She's breaking surface,' said Carter. 'Watch that line of foam.'

The periscope had come abeam of us and had drawn ahead. It was now a little over a mile distant, on our port bow. Carter was right. She was breaking surface, even as he said. We could see the still water become troubled and disturbed and slowly, inevitably, the squat conning-tower appeared and the long, lean form rose from the depths like a black slug, the water streaming from its decks.

'The bastards,' whispered Carter to himself: 'the filthy, stinking bastards.'

The men clustered together below me on the deck watched the submarine with a strange indifference, like spectators at some show with which they had no concern. I saw one fellow point out some technical detail of the submarine to the man

by his side; and then light a cigarette. His companion laughed, and spat over the side of the ship into the water. I wondered how many of them could swim.

I gave the final order through to the engine-room, and then ordered all hands on deck, to boat stations. My next order would depend on the commander of the submarine.

'They'll shell the boats,' said Carter; 'they won't let us get away, they'll shell the boats.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' I began, the pallor of his face begetting in me a furious senseless anger, when suddenly I caught sight of the wall of fog that was rolling down upon us from astern. I swung Carter round by the shoulders to meet it. 'Look there,' I said, 'look there,' and his jaw dropped, and he grinned stupidly. Already the visibility around us was no more than a cable's length on either side, and the first drifting vapour stung us with its cold, sour smell. Above us the air was thick and clammy. In a moment our after shrouds were lost to sight. I heard one fellow strike up the opening chorus of a comic song in a high falsetto voice, and he was immediately cursed to silence by his companions. Ahead of us lay the submarine, dark and immobile, the water still running from its sides, the decks as yet unmanned, and her long snout caught unexpectedly in a sudden shaft of light. Then the white fog that enveloped us crept forward and beyond, the sky descended and our world was blotted out.

It wanted two minutes to midnight. I crouched low under cover of the bridge and flashed a torch on to my watch. No bell had been sounded since the submarine had first been sighted, some eight hours earlier. We waited. Darkness had travelled with the fog, and night fell early. There was silence everywhere, but for the creaking of the ship as she rolled in the swell and the thud of water slapping her sides as she lay over, first on one side, then on the other. Still we waited. The cold was no longer so intense as it had been. There was a moist, clammy feeling in the air. The men talked in hushed whispers beneath the bridge. We went on waiting. Once I entered the cabin where the captain lay sick, and flashed my torch on to him. His face was flushed and puffy. His breathing was heavy and slow. He was sleeping fitfully, moaning now and again, and once he opened his eyes, but he did not recognize me. I went back to the bridge. The fog had lifted slightly, and I could see our forward shrouds and the fo'c'sle head. I

went down on to the deck and leaned over the ship's side. The tide was running strongly to the south. It had turned three hours before, and for the fourth time that evening I began to calculate our drift. I was turning to the ladder to climb to the bridge once more, when I heard footsteps running along the deck, and a man cannonaded into me.

'Fog's lifting astern,' he said breathlessly, 'and there's something coming up on our starboard quarter.'

I ran back along the deck with him. A group of men were clustered at the ship's side, talking eagerly. 'It's a ship all right, sir,' said one. 'Looks like a Finnish barque. I can see her canvas.'

I peered into the darkness with them. Yes, there she was, about a hundred yards distant, and bearing down upon us. A great three-masted vessel, with a cloud of canvas aloft. It was too late in the year for the grain ships. What the hell was she doing in these waters in wartime? Unless she was carrying timber. Had she seen us, though? That was the point. Here we were, without lights, skulking in the trough of the sea because of that damned submarine, and now risking almost certain collision with some old timber ship.

If only I could be certain that the tide and the fog had put up a number of miles between us and the enemy. She was coming up fast, the old-timer, God knows where she found her wind – there was none on my left cheek that would blow out a candle. If she passed us at this rate there would be fifty yards to spare, no more, and with that hell ship waiting yonder in the darkness somewhere, the Finn would go straight to kingdom come.

'All right,' I said, 'she's seen us; she's bearing away.' I could only make out her outline in the darkness as she travelled past abeam. A great, high-sided vessel she was, in ballast probably, or there would never have been so much of her out of the water. I'd forgotten they had such bulky afterdecks. Her spars were not the clean things I remembered either; these were a mass of rigging, and the yards an extraordinary length, necessary, no doubt, for all that bunch of canvas.

'She's not going to pass us,' said somebody, and I heard the blocks rattle and jump, and the rigging slat, as the great yards swung over. And was that faint high note, curious and immeasurably distant, the pipe of a boatswain's whistle? But the fog vapour was drifting down on us again, and the ship was

hidden. We strained our eyes in the darkness, seeing nothing, and I was about to turn back to the bridge again when a thin call came to us across the water.

'Are you in distress?' came the hail. Whether her nationality was Finnish or not, at least her officer spoke good English, even if his phrasing was a little unusual. I was wary though, and I did not answer. There was a pause, and then the voice travelled across to us once more. 'What ship are you, and where are you bound?'

And then, before I could stop him, one of our fellows bellowed out: 'There's an enemy submarine come to the surface about half a mile ahead of us.' Someone smothered the idiot half a minute too late and, for better or worse, our flag had been admitted.

We waited. None of us moved a finger. All was silent. Presently we heard the splash of oars and the low murmur of voices. They were sending a boat across to us from the barque. There was something furtive and strange about the whole business. I was suspicious. I did not like it. I felt for the hard butt of my revolver, and was reassured. The sound of oars drew nearer. A long, low boat like a West Country gig drew out of the shadows, manned by half a dozen men. There was a fellow with a lantern in the bows. Someone, an officer I presumed, stood up in the stern. It was too dark for me to see his face. The boat pulled up beneath us, and the men rested on their oars.

'Captain's compliments, gentlemen, and do you desire an escort?' enquired the officer.

'What the hell!' began one of the men, but I cursed him to quiet. I leaned over the side, shading my eyes from the light of the boat lantern.

'Who are you?' I said.

'Lieutenant Arthur Mildmay, at your service, sir,' replied the voice.

There was nothing foreign in his intonation. I could swear to that, but again I was struck by his phraseology. No snottie in the Navy ever talked like this. The Admiralty might have bought up a Finnish barque, of course, and armed her, like Von Luckner did in the last war; but the idea seemed unlikely.

'Are you camouflaged?' I asked.

'I beg your pardon?' he replied in some surprise. Then his English was not so fluent as I thought. Once again I felt for

my revolver. 'You're not trying to make a fool of me by any chance, are you?' I said sarcastically.

'Not in the least,' replied the voice. 'I repeat the captain sends his compliments, and as you gave him to understand we are in the immediate vicinity of the enemy, he desires me to offer you his protection. Our orders are to escort any merchant ships we find to a port of safety.'

'And who issued those orders?' I said.

'His Majesty King George, of course,' replied the voice.

It was then, I think, that I felt for the first time a curious chill of fear. I remember swallowing hard. My throat felt dry, and I could not answer at once. I looked at the men around me, and they wore, one and all, a silly, dumb, unbelieving expression on their faces.

'He says the King sent him,' said the fellow beside me, and then his voice trailed away uncertainly, and he fell silent.

I heard Carter tap me on the shoulder. 'Send them away,' he whispered. 'There's something wrong; it's a trap.'

The man kneeling in the bows of the gig flashed his lantern in my face, blinding me. The young lieutenant stepped across the thwarts and took the lantern from him. 'Why not come aboard and speak to the captain yourself, if you are in doubt?' he said.

Still I could not see his face, but he wore some sort of cloak round his shoulders, and the hand that held the lantern was long and slim. The lantern that dazzled me brought a pain across my eyes so severe that for a few moments I could neither speak nor think, and then, to my own surprise, I heard myself answer: 'Very well, make room for me, then, in your boat.'

Carter laid his hand on my arm.

'You're crazy,' he said. 'You can't leave the ship.'

I shook him off, obstinate for no reason, determined on my venture. 'You're in charge, Carter,' I said. 'I shan't be long away. Let me go, you damn' fool.'

I ordered the ladder over the side, and wondered, with a certain irritation, why the stupid fellows gaped at me as they obeyed. I had that funny reckless feeling that comes upon you when you're half drunk, and I wondered if the reason for it was my own lack of sleep for over forty-eight hours.

I landed with a thud in the gig, and stumbled to the stern beside the officer. The men bent to their oars, and the boat

began to creep across the water to the barque. It was bitter cold. The clammy mugginess was gone. I turned up the collar of my coat and tried to catch a closer glimpse of my companion, but it was black as pitch in the boat and his features were completely hidden from me.

I felt the seat under me with my hand. It was like ice, freezing to the touch, and I plunged my hands deep in my pockets. The cold seemed to penetrate my greatcoat, and find my flesh. My teeth chattered, and I could not stop them. The chap in front of me, bending to his oar, was a great burly brute, with shoulders like an ox. His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, his arms were bare. He was whistling softly between his teeth.

'You don't feel the cold, then?' I asked.

He did not answer, and I leant forward and looked into his face. He stared at me, as though I did not exist, and went on whistling between his teeth. His eyes were deep set, sunken in his head. His cheekbones were very prominent and high. He wore a queer stove-pipe of a hat, shiny and black.

'Look here,' I said, tapping him on his knee, 'I'm not here to be fooled, I can tell you that.'

And then the lieutenant, as he styled himself, stood up beside me in the stern. 'Ship ahoy,' he called, his two hands to his mouth, and looking up, I saw we were already beneath the barque, her great sides towering above us. A lantern appeared on the bulwark by the ladder, and again my eyes were dazzled by the sickly yellow light.

The lieutenant swung on to the ladder, and I followed him, hand over fist, breathing hard, for the bitter cold caught at me and seemed to strike right down into my throat. I paused when I reached the deck, with a stitch in my side like a kicking horse, and in that queer half-light that came from the flickering lanterns I saw that this was no Finnish barque with a load of timber, no grain ship in ballast, but a raider bristling with guns. Her decks were cleared for action, and the men were there ready at their stations. There was much activity and shouting, and a voice from for'ard calling out orders in a thin high voice.

There seemed to be a haze of smoke thick in the air, and a heavy sour stench, and with it all the cold dank chill I could not explain.

'What is it?' I called. 'What's the game?' No one answered.

Figures passed me and brushed me, shouting and laughing at one another. A lad of about thirteen ran by me, with a short blue jacket and long white trousers, while close beside me, crouching by his gun, was a great bearded fellow like my oarsman of the gig, with a striped stocking cap upon his head. Once again, above the hum and confusion, I heard the thin, shrill piping of the boatswain's whistle and, turning, I saw a crowd of jostling men running bare-footed to the afterdeck, and I caught the gleam of steel in their hands.

'The captain will see you, if you come aft,' said the lieutenant.

I followed him, angry and bewildered. Carter was right, I had been fooled; and yet as I stumbled in the wake of the lieutenant I heard English voices shouting on the deck, and funny unfamiliar English oaths.

We pushed through the door of the afterdeck, and the musty rank smell became more sour and more intense. It was darker still. Blinking, I found myself at the entrance of a large cabin, lit only by flickering lantern-light, and in the centre of the cabin was a long table, and a man was sitting there in a funny high-backed chair. Three or four other men stood behind him, but the lantern-light shone on his face alone. He was very thin, very pale, and his hair was ashen grey. I saw by the patch he wore that he had lost the sight of one eye, but the other eye looked through me in the cold abstracted way of someone who would get his business done, and has little time to spare.

'Your name, my man?' he said, tapping with his hand upon the table before him.

'William Blunt, sir,' I said, and I found myself standing to attention, with my cap in my hands, my throat as dry as a bone, and that same funny chill of fear in my heart.

'You report there is an enemy vessel close at hand, I understand?'

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'A submarine came to the surface about a mile distant from us, some hours ago. She had been following us for half an hour before she broke surface. Luckily the fog came down and hid us. That was at about half past four in the afternoon. Since then we have not attempted to steam, but have drifted without lights.'

He listened to me in silence. The figures behind him did not move. There was something sinister in their immobility

and his, as though my words meant nothing to them, as though they did not believe me or did not understand.

'I shall be glad to offer you my assistance, Mr Blunt,' he said at last. I stood awkwardly, still turning my cap in my hands. He did not mean to make game of me, I realized that, but what use was his ship to me?

'I don't quite see,' I began, but he held up his hand. 'The enemy will not attack you while you are under my protection,' he said; 'if you care to accept my escort, I shall be very pleased to give you safe-conduct to England. The fog has lifted, and luckily the wind is with us.'

I swallowed hard. I did not know what to say.

'We steam at eleven knots,' I said awkwardly, and when he did not reply I stepped forward to his table, thinking he had not heard.

'Supposing the blighter is still there?' I said. 'He'll get the pair of us. She'll blow up like matchwood, this ship of yours. You stand even less chance than us.'

The man seated by the table leant back in his chair. I saw him smile. 'I've never run from a Frenchman yet,' he said.

Once again I heard the boatswain's whistle, and the patter of bare feet overhead upon the deck. The lanterns swayed, in a current of air from the swinging door. The cabin seemed very musty, very dark. I felt faint and queer, and something like a sob rose in my throat which I could not control.

'I'd like your escort,' I stammered, and even as I spoke he rose in his chair and leant towards me. I saw the faded blue of his coat, and the ribbon across it. I saw his pale face very close, and the one blue eye. I saw him smile, and I felt the strength of the hand that held mine and saved me from falling.

They must have carried me to the boat and down the ladder, for when I opened my eyes again, with a queer dull ache at the back of my head, I was at the foot of my own gangway, and my own chaps were hauling me aboard. I could just hear the splash of oars as the gig pulled away back to the barque.

'Thank God you're back!' said Carter. 'What the devil did they do to you? You're as white as chalk. Were they Finns or Boche?'

'Neither,' I said curtly; 'they're English, like ourselves. I saw the captain. I've accepted his escort home.'

'Have you gone raving mad?' said Carter.

I did not answer, I went up to the bridge and gave orders

for steaming. Yes, the fog was lifting, and above my head I could see the first pale glimmer of a star. I listened, well content, to the familiar noises of the ship as we got under way again. The throb of the screw, the thrash of the propeller. The relief was tremendous. No more silence, no more inactivity. The strain was broken, and the men were themselves again, cheerful, cracking jokes at one another. The cold had vanished, and the curious dead fatigue that had been part of my mind and body for so long. The warmth was coming back to my hands and my feet.

Slowly we began to draw ahead once more, ploughing our way in the swell, while to starboard of us, some hundred yards distant, came our escort, the white foam hissing from her bows, her cloud of canvas billowing to a wind that none of us could feel. I saw the helmsman beside me glance at her out of the tail of his eye, and when he thought I was not looking he wet his finger and held it in the air. Then his eye met mine, and fell again, and he whistled a song to show he did not care. I wondered if he thought me as mad as Carter did. Once I went in to see the captain. The steward was with him, and when I entered he switched on the lamp above the captain's berth.

'His fever's down,' he said. 'He's sleeping naturally at last. I don't think we're going to lose him, after all.'

'No, I guess he'll be all right,' I said.

I went back to the bridge, whistling the song I had heard from the sailor in the gig. It was a jaunty, lilting tune, familiar in a rum sort of way, but I could not put a name to it. The fog had cleared entirely, and the sky was ablaze with stars. We were steaming now at our full rate of knots, but still our escort kept abeam, and sometimes, if anything, she drew just a fraction ahead.

Whether the submarine was on the surface still, or whether she had dived, I neither knew nor cared, for I was full of that confidence that I had lacked before and which, after a while, seemed to possess the helmsman in his turn, so that he grinned at me, jerking his head at our escort, and said, 'There don't seem to be no flies on Nancy, do there?' and fell, as I did, to whistling that nameless jaunty tune. Only Carter remained sullen and aloof. His fear had given way to sulky silence, and at last, sick of the sight of his moody face staring through the chartroom window, I ordered him below, and was aware of a

new sense of freedom and relief when he had gone.

So the night wore on, and we, plunging and rolling in the wake of our escort, saw never a sight of periscope or lean grey hull again. At last the sky lightened to the eastward, and low down on the horizon appeared the streaky pallid dawn. Five bells struck, and away ahead of us, faint as a whisper, came the answering pipe of a boatswain's whistle. I think I was the only one that heard it. Then I heard the weak, tired voice of the captain calling me from his cabin. I went to him at once. He was propped up against his pillows, and I could tell from his face he was as weak as a rat, but his temperature was normal, even as the steward had said.

'Where are we, Blunt?' he said. 'What's happened?'

'We'll be safely berthed before the people ashore have rung for breakfast,' I said. 'The coast's ahead of us now.'

'What's the date, man?' he asked. I told him.

'We've made good time,' he said. I agreed.

'I shan't forget what you've done, Blunt,' he said. 'I'll speak to the owners about you. You'll be getting promotion for this.'

'Promotion my backside,' I said. 'It's not me that needs thanking, but our escort away on the starboard bow.'

'Escort?' he said, staring at me. 'What escort? Are we travelling with a bloody convoy?'

Then I told him the story, starting with the submarine, and the fog, and so on to the coming of the barque herself, and my own visit aboard her, and not missing out an account of my own nerves and jumpiness, either. He listened to me, dazed and bewildered on his pillow.

'What's the name of your barque?' he said slowly, when I had finished.

I smote my hand on my knee. 'It may be Old Harry for all I know; I never asked them,' I said, and I began whistling the tune that the fellow had sung as he bent to his oars in the gig.

'I can't make it out,' said the captain; 'you know as well as I do there aren't any sailing ships left on the British register.'

I shrugged my shoulders. Why the hell couldn't he accept the escort as naturally as I and the men had done?

'Get me a drink, and stop whistling that confounded jig,' said the captain. I laughed, and gave him his glass.

'What's wrong with it?' I said.

'It's "Lilliburlero", centuries old. What makes you whistle

that?" he said. I stared back at him, and I was not laughing any longer.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know.'

He drank thirstily, watching me over the rim of his glass. 'Where's your precious escort now?' he said.

'On the starboard bow,' I repeated, and I went forward to the bridge again and gazed seaward, where I knew her to be.

The sun, like a great red globe, was topping the horizon, and the night clouds were scudding to the west. Far ahead lay the coast of England. But our escort had gone.

I turned to the fellow steering. 'When did she go?' I asked.

'Beg pardon, sir?' he said.

'The sailing ship. What's happened to her?' I repeated.

The man looked puzzled, and cocked his eye at me curiously.

'I've seen no sailing ship,' he said. 'There's a destroyer been abeam of us some time. She must have come up with us under cover of darkness. I've only noticed her since the sun rose.'

I snatched up my glasses and looked to the west. The fellow was not dreaming. There was a destroyer with us, as he said. She plunged into the long seas, churning up the water and chucking it from her like a great white wall of foam. I watched her for a few minutes in silence, and then I lowered my glasses. The fellow steering gazed straight in front of him. Now daylight had come he seemed changed in a queer, indefinable way. He no longer whistled jauntily. He was his usual stolid seaman self.

'We shall be docked by nine-thirty. We've made good time,' I said. 'Yes, sir,' he said.

Already I could see a black dot far ahead, and a wisp of smoke. The tugs were lying off for us. Carter was in my old place on the fo'c'sle head. The men were at their stations. I, on the captain's bridge, would bring his ship to port. He called me to him, five minutes before the tugs took us in tow, when the first gulls were wheeling overhead.

'Blunt,' he said. 'I've been thinking. That captain fellow you spoke to in the night, on board that sailing craft. You say he wore a black patch over one eye. Did he by any chance have an empty sleeve pinned to his breast as well?'

I did not answer. We looked at one another in silence. Then a shrill whistle warned me that the pilot's boat was alongside. Somewhere, faint and far, the echo sounded like a boatswain's pipe.

ELAINA

Elizabeth Fancett

Why do I come home each night, now that she is dead? The house is so cold, so dark, so empty. Once, behind a lighted window, she was cooking the evening meal, happy, waiting for me. But now only emptiness greets me, and a silent house, a dead house. And I wish, too, that I were dead!

I know I must face my loss with courage and that with the help of time the pain grows less . . . or so it is said. But what do they know, who say these things? What do they know of the raw wound of grief that makes of man an emptiness, a vague and lonely shadow of himself? Without her I am nothing and time is an eternal now of pain and emptiness and sorrow.

It is spring now, time of hope, new life, and promise. But for me there is no life, no hope, no promise. The house is no longer dark, but if I look through the window I will still see emptiness, loneliness.

For Elaina, my beloved wife, is not there.

He walks slowly, reluctant to approach the house. He moves with dread and dragging steps until he stands before the kitchen window, unwilling to enter into the silence and the loneliness of the sad and empty place he once called home.

But tonight there is movement! Someone is standing by the stove, someone who looks like . . . No! That is impossible! But someone is there! A relative perhaps . . . come to help me out, to cook for me, to console me . . . ?

Anger enfolds him, an icy passion of rage that fills his being. Why could they not leave him alone, leave him alone! That anyone should have dared to think they could replace his wife, his beloved Elaina! He needed no one's help, no one in her place, moving in her footsteps, doing the things she did . . .

The woman is turning now and he sees her face. His anger changes to bewilderment, to disbelief – then joy surges through him.

Elaina? She is not dead? Was it a nightmare then and I am awake and all is as it used to be? She looks pale, drawn, but it is she, whole, alive!

He cannot bring himself to enter the kitchen, to see, to feel,

to touch her, lest she slip away as in a dream, which he fears it yet might be. But she remains busy about her tasks.

He enters the kitchen. He knows that the room must be warm with the cooking, that the oven must have food in it, but he cannot feel the warmth, nor smell the food. For he is conscious of nothing but the joy in him at the sight of the woman by the stove.

He calls to her, his arms outstretched to embrace her.

Elaina!

The sweetness of her name is on his lips, but his voice sounds only in his mind, in his shocked and startled soul.

Something is wrong! She does not hear or see me. And now that I am close to her, she looks . . . oh, God! is it . . . can it be . . . her GHOST?

He spurns the thought instantly.

No! There are no ghosts! The dead do not return. And she IS dead, my beloved – plunged into the deep waters of the harbour, trapped in the car, whilst I escaped and lived!

Oh Elaina! Would that I had stayed with you, died with you! For there is no life for me without you!

He gazes at the woman moving softly, silently, about the kitchen, her face still turned towards him.

Elaina! Elaina!

She turns from him.

Elaina, turn to me! See me, touch me!

She moves away from him.

She IS a ghost! I speak with her but she does not hear me as she goes about her tasks, doing all the things she did in life. She moves towards the door.

Elaina! My ghostly wife, my wifely ghost! Stay with me awhile! Do not leave me yet!

But she is gone, brushing past him as though he is not there. The kitchen is an emptiness. He follows her, calling to her.

Elaina? Elaina?

She does not answer him. She is not there. For where he is, the living cannot go.

Elaina, find me! Elaina, come to me! For I am lost, Elaina! It is dark here, it is cold, a black void, a pit of silence, a nothingness where no one is . . . where even I am not!

Elaina comes sadly back into the kitchen. She had dreaded these first moments back in the house, alone. His presence was everywhere, everywhere a memory of him. But she could

not stay with friends forever. She knew that she must learn to face her loss with courage. With the help of time the pain would grow less . . . so she was told. But the guilt, the remorse – did *they* grow less?

She knew that they would not. She knew that she would always regret her insistence on driving the car that night – that awful night. She knew that she would always live with the knowledge that his death had been her fault. But she no longer wishes – as she did in those first sad days of grief – that they had left her trapped beside him in the car, that she had died with him. For the pull of life is strong, and she is glad she lived.

She opens the oven door, takes out her evening meal – a lonely meal, for one. She sees it through a sudden mist of tears, for she has not yet done with weeping. Memories haunt her, memories of the love between them, the talk, the laughter, the hopes and dreams they shared . . .

She looks at the clock, tearing at the still fresh wound of grief. He would have been home by now, coming through the kitchen door. In memory she can almost hear his voice, talking, laughing, calling to her, speaking her name . . .

Elaina? Elaina?

She raises her head sharply.

Elaina? Elaina?

'No! No! No!' Her voice is a whisper in her shocked and startled mind, and no sound breaks the silence of the kitchen.

A cold air embraces her, blowing out the gas. Instinctively she puts out a hand to switch off the oven. She feels a touch upon her arm – a familiar touch, restraining . . .

Trembling, she sinks to her knees before the open oven.

The gas tap remains on.

TWISTED SHADOW

Roger F. Dunkley

Mrs Hurse, kneeling uncomfortably at the edge of the top lawn, was weeding.

Then she saw the shadow, black and crooked against the earth of the delphinium bed, and jumped.

'Bernard! Frightening me like that. I nearly made a kebab of that worm.'

She rose, smoothed a wayward curl with her arm and turned.

But the lawns were deserted. Puzzled, she stood, hand on hip, scanning the paddock and the enclosing hills where the famous caverns were just closing for the day. She listened.

'Bernard? . . .'

She shrugged and resumed her offensive against the weeds. Her fork stabbed into the damp soil and she coughed drily, wrinkling her nose. She smelled the odours of earth and decay, and shivered, a momentary prey to ancient fears. A worm squirmed its moist length out of the light down into the dead darkness of the clogging earth. She watched it, half expecting to feel the shadow fall across the ground in front of her again. Or – she shuddered at the thought – to see its twisted outlines rising darkly out of the soil.

'What nonsense,' she told herself and shook her head to dispel the threatening shades of her old depression.

The crunch of tyres on gravel and the plaintive peal of the door-bell pulled her back to immediate reality. Distantly she heard the customary curse as an office key was inserted by customary error in the front door. She winced, automatically, at the scrape of shoes on her newly polished conservatory floor. Climbing unsteadily to her feet, she felt the Saint Bruno flavoured moustache brushing her cheek as her husband's daily greeting was duly delivered.

Bernard had arrived home. He was carrying his latest camera and the new tripod.

'That's funny . . .' Isobel Hurse had gone pale. 'The car. You've just arrived – now, dear.'

'That,' said Bernard Hurse, 'is because I live here.'

'But it's funny . . .'

'It's quite legal. They call it marriage. Now,' he announced,

grimacing doubtfully at the light as he erected the stand and rotated the time exposure to its maximum setting, 'a portrait: the new Deputy Director of the Cavesham Experimental Nuclear Energy Station returns in triumph after a day of gruelling interviews to greet his lady wife! Smile!'

'Bernard!' protested the lady wife. 'My dress. My hair! . . .'

'Other wives say predictable things like "Congratulations".'

Isobel laughed, kissed him and waved the hand fork menacingly under his nose. 'No pictures, dear,' she said. 'You can't.'

'Can,' he said, hastily joining her by the delphiniums and enfolding her in a suitably photogenic embrace. They grinned at the camera. The grins atrophied. The shutter clicked. 'And another,' he said, 'to finish the reel.'

The reel was finished.

'Brute,' said his wife, smoothing the folds of her grubbier gardening smock. 'First you frighten me to death; then you take pictures when I look as though rigor mortis has set in. Hardly action becoming a Deputy Director, dear . . .'

He smiled, shaking his head.

'Frighten you? When?'

'By coming home twice!' she said. 'Someone's playing tricks. I saw your shadow just before you arrived. Here. Across the border. Well, I thought it was yours.'

Her husband chuckled.

'He thinks I'm being neurotic again,' she thought. 'There was a shadow,' she asserted, the uneasiness creeping back, prickling at the base of her skull; 'here. From here to the hedge.'

'Nonsense.'

'I saw it!'

'Imagination,' said Mr Hulse, softening his voice as he noticed for the first time that day the all too familiar strained expression haunting his wife's eyes.

She compressed her lips and remained silent.

'The sun,' he explained. 'Look, Isobel.' He spoke quietly. 'The sun's throwing the shadows *the other way!*'

She looked at their feet, saw their shadows stretched out across the lawn towards the house and knew that he was right. Involuntarily she shivered again. She watched Bernard pick up the spade, heard him planning the new rockery.

'This is where we agreed, isn't it? Just,' he thrust the spade deep into the earth of the delphinium bed, 'here.'

His wife breathed in sharply.

'Blacklock's delivering the stones at the weekend. It'll mean shifting quite a lot of earth.'

He enlarged the hole he'd started with one or two token gestures with the spade and turned to his wife for approval.

'Isobel?' Anxiety unexpectedly sharpened his voice. 'What's the matter?'

Mrs Hurse was trembling. 'That smell.' She coughed. 'No, not a smell exactly . . . It's something in the soil . . .'

Mr Hurse drove the spade home with his right foot.

'No!' said his wife. Apprehension seized her. 'Not there.' She put her hand to her head. The pain was throbbing behind her eyes. Decay. Mortality. An obscure panic dried her throat. An awareness of despair and unbearable suffering welled up, suffocating her senses. With a dry sob she repeated faintly, 'Not there,' and felt the greyness reaching up to her, making her dizzy . . .

'Look.' Her husband stooped over the border. 'Look what's here!'

But Isobel Hurse had fainted.

The decayed object lay before them on an old newspaper, grimy with dirt and age.

'Animal,' said Bernard Hurse. 'Probably a pig.'

'Too big,' objected his wife pithily.

'A horse, then.'

'Too small.'

'Well, it's hardly likely to be human, is it, dear?'

They scrutinized the cracked, yellowing fragment of bone. 'A memento mori,' thought Isobel Hurse. 'Each of us is born to die.'

'No,' she said, without conviction; 'hardly.'

'Cheese, dear,' muttered Bernard wearily on being abruptly awoken by a particularly painful dig in the ribs during the first disturbed night. 'Too much Stilton for supper.'

Mr Hurse had preferred to ignore the implications of his wife's obsessive insistence that the new rockery should remain unexcavated; it was a minor neurotic foible that was to be expected, perhaps, in someone of her age and temperament. The phase would pass.

But it was more difficult to ignore her when she started

having the dreams.

He rubbed his side, winced and turned cautiously over again. Isobel, however, remained stiffly upright beside him, her face drawn and pale.

'Can you – smell anything?' she asked. 'Bernard?'

A gentle snore rose as the bedclothes sank. Instinctively she extended an elbow towards her husband's back – then resisted the temptation. What good would it serve? It wouldn't alter the simple, irrational fact: a smell of loam hung in the room, close, stifling, infecting the air . . .

And what if Bernard couldn't smell it? Angry with herself for such neurotic imaginings, she turned out the light and, with difficulty, finally went back to sleep.

Immediately the nightmare was upon her again.

The setting was indistinct but it felt familiar. A bird calling, song soaring up through shimmering blue skies, up into the sun. Flowers, plump with scents, humming with bees and colour, open to the sun, grass new-mown breathing the sun. She bathed in sensations of relief, of release after pain. Elation.

Then, true to a fatal inevitability, the darkness crept in like a black plague and contaminated: the dream turned sour. Always things followed the same depressing direction. Always things decayed.

The bird song sharpened into stridency, a shrill of fear. A gust of stinging wind and stillness; the sun expanding, white. Then the first of the moans, low, insisting through the bending corn; and a dull pounding along the arteries of the earth promising panic and pain. Pain and panic pounding closer. The air heavy now with sobbing wails, the approach of some unnameable grief. Howls breaking deafeningly about her. A glimpse of stunted trees reaching black arms into a sky heaving with horrors she feared but could not understand. A face – dear heaven, the travesty of a face – lurched into hers, twisted and bubbled into sores and shapelessness. A weight of blistered misery, rotting into meaninglessness. Earth falling. At her feet earth, on her face earth, and between her fingers, writhing, the first of the worms. And everywhere that smell, unbearably familiar, suffocating. Struggling, she opened her mouth to protest, to scream. Why couldn't she scream? Her lungs. Her mouth. Something was clogging her tongue . . .

And abruptly the bedroom walls reassembled themselves around her. There was Bernard bending over her, looking

anxious. Had she actually screamed? He was saying something. Holding out a glass of water.

'Sorry, dear,' she said. 'I seem to have been dreaming again . . .'

Bernard Hurse smiled wanly. After a succession of similarly disrupted nights he began to find even *that* faint encouragement difficult.

His anxieties matured. Reluctantly he realized he would have to make a telephone call.

'You're through.'

Doctor Bill Mark's voice was slightly harassed at first, but he shifted into more friendly gear on identifying his speaker.

'Bernard! How's things? How's the job? Coping with these Anti-pollutionists and their rally? They're all over the village again drumming up support for their annual knees-up next week.'

Bernard sighed. 'Don't I know it! Keep Britain free from Nuclear Contamination. Keep Britain in the Stone Age. Anyone would think we'd planned to bring back the plague!'

'It's all right for you, you old rogue: moving out of the village out of sight of your beastly Reactor domes; cutting your old, less elevated friends. Only bishops and royalty now, By Appointment, eh? How's the Lady of the Manor? Keeping – you know – on top of things?'

Bernard caught sight of his wife – who seemed to have overcome her recent phobia and indulged in some gardening at last – advancing from the potting shed and lowered his voice. 'Bill, it's Isobel . . . Isobel! I can't speak now . . . Yes, it could be the old trouble . . . Heavens no, not a surgery consultation. You know what she's like . . .'

He heard the french windows opening in the next room.

'Look, how about dinner next week? . . . Yes, Laura of course. A delayed house-luke-warming. That sort of thing . . . Wednesday? . . . Fine. Sorry to be so abrupt. Tell Laura tiaras will, of course, be worn. Carry on butchering . . . Yes. 'Bye.'

He replaced the receiver, looked up and saw Isobel in the doorway. He straightened his tie, smiled awkwardly and rose to his feet scattering a sheaf of letters.

'Bill Mark?' she said. Her gaze was penetrating. 'What did he want?'

'Feeding. Good Lord! Where did you get those from?'

His wife subsided into a chair, looking suddenly fragile and exhausted. 'The border. They seem to be everywhere.'

Absently, Bernard brushed the sprinkling of soil into his wastepaper basket. Then he picked up the two earth-crustured fragments of bone and studied them, the creases deepening in his brow.

'Human,' pronounced Doctor Mark; 'not a doubt of it. As human as you or I—give or take a few hundred years of decomposition.'

He put down the bones, brushed the fine powder from his sleeve, nodded and held out his glass for a second offering from the port decanter.

'How exciting,' said Laura Mark, patting Isobel's arm. 'How does it feel, dear, living in a cemetery? Just think of the vibrations! What the old dears at my circle would say! . . .'

'Circle?' asked Isobel.

'A sad case.' The doctor looked at his wife with compassionate resignation. 'She's joined a spectral branch of the W.I.—a sort of Psychic Sewing Circle. They spend their evenings waiting to be possessed by strange men.'

'Spiritualists,' explained his wife with a withering glare. 'They're a bit dotty but great fun. Especially Miss Friend. Like a militant Brown Owl who failed to make it as a witch. You ought to join us, dear. You're the receptive sort. Sensitive.'

'Neurotic,' thought Isobel Hurse. 'That's what she means.'

'Take this house,' said Mrs Mark. 'It must be a mine of rich vibrations!'

'Ah: if walls could talk . . .' murmured Bernard Hurse.

'Perhaps they can,' said Isobel. 'And Laura's old ladies—'

'Quivering with vibrations like superannuated psychic harps,' chuckled Bill.

'—Are picking up memories of vivid emotions, say, embedded in places.'

'Like recordings, you mean,' said Bernard.

'What about your garden, then? All those bones. Your lupins should be positively throbbing with messages,' mocked Doctor Mark. 'You'll have to practise communing with your herbaceous border sometimes, Isobel.'

Mrs Hurse gnawed her lower lip. Her husband glanced at her anxiously. A slight flush betrayed her excitement. She hesitated. 'Haven't you ever come to a place, indoors or out,

and found it immediately, you know, depressing? Over-shadowed. Only certain spots; they seem to draw and repel you, as if there was something terribly important . . .'

Her voice faltered. She became aware that the two men were studying her and Bill suggested rather too vigorously: 'Did you mention slides, Bernard?'

Her husband needed no encouragement. Pictures were duly splashed colourfully across the screen; the noises of admiration, proper on such occasions, were in full progress.

'I say, that is good, Bernard: *another* sunset,' said Bill.

Bernard, pleased, pressed the projector control. 'Oh,' he said. They peered doubtfully at the screen.

'This week's mystery picture,' said Bill. 'Give us a clue.'

'Damn. I thought I'd thrown these away,' said Bernard. 'The exposure went haywire. There were two shots at the end of the reel. The wretched camera had a fit.'

'What's it supposed to be?' asked Laura with more politeness than interest.

'The Deputy Director returning in triumph to greet his lady wife,' quoted Isobel.

'In the middle of a blazing June snowstorm?' murmured Bill.

'The other one's just as bad, only . . . It's strange. This one seems hopelessly over-exposed and the other's quite the reverse—absurdly dark. Yet I didn't alter the setting at all in between.'

'Wait a minute,' said Isobel. Her voice was tremulous. 'You can see *something* . . . Vague outlines. The edge of the border . . .' They craned their necks towards the screen. 'There's a faint sort of figure.'

Bill rose, put on his reading glasses and approached the screen crab-wise, ducking from the beam. 'Good Lord,' he said. 'Who did you say this was supposed to be? God. What a face! It makes *The Night Of The Thousand Vampires* look like something out of Enid Blyton. I wouldn't like to meet that face on a dark night. Can you see? Look.' He pointed. 'All distorted and yelling. And covered in stains: see? Stains or—ugh!—they look like huge, festering blisters.'

He made his way back to his seat. 'What a ghastly sight! No—don't try and look, Isobel. I mean it. It's horrific . . . Change it, Bernard, for heaven's sake.'

But Isobel did not need to look. That face had loomed at

her, howling, out of each of her recent dreams. Every grotesque feature was distressingly familiar. She swallowed back her fright and bewilderment:

'There's something else, too,' she whispered. 'I don't understand. We *both* stood there. Bernard, why is there only one figure in the picture? . . .'

But the next slide had already clicked on to the screen. 'Damn,' said Bernard. 'Disaster slide, number two.'

Shaken but curious, the audience strained to identify the blurred and darkened image before them.

'I thought this was the rejoicing couple,' said Bill. 'Where are they? Hiding behind the hollyhocks?'

'You can see the edge of the lawn clearly enough,' observed his wife encouragingly. 'What's that thing lying across the garden by the hedge? That black stain?'

'A mark on the film,' said Bernard. 'I shall complain.'

'No.' Isobel's voice was hoarse. 'It's a shadow,' she said unsteadily, the sobs rising in her throat. 'I've seen it once before. It's a twisted, black shadow!'

And as much to her own surprise and embarrassment as that of her guests, Mrs Hurse began to cry. They were angry, bewildered tears, releasing the tensions of weeks of fear and repression.

'Oh, Bernard, what's happening to us – to me? Is something haunting us? Is that it?'

Doctor Mark stooped professionally towards her. 'Isobel,' he said. 'Perhaps we could have a chat about it some time . . .'

The sobbing rose helplessly and Isobel Hurse buried her face in the cushions to stifle her misery. 'Not, please not, that clinic again,' she thought.

The doctor and his wife took their leave in the hallway. 'Phone me again – if there are any developments, Bernard.'

The door opened and Doctor Mark tiptoed in. 'Bones,' he said. 'I nearly forgot. I promised Bernard I'd let one of our forensic blokes loose on them.' He picked up the parcel and grimaced. 'The sooner I get them outside the better. They were beginning to smell quite – musty.'

Bernard Hurse slept fitfully that night. When he jerked from the shallows of sleep back into consciousness for the third time, he put on the bedside lamp and squinted at the alarm clock. It was three o'clock. He groaned, thinking of the work-

ing day ahead. He rolled over as cautiously as twenty years of marriage required to see whether his wife was faring any better than himself.

The bed was empty.

His heart fluttered, and settled again as memory returned and reproved his fears. She had, of course, been sleeping in the next room for several weeks now. He stretched, lay back on the pillows and closed his eyes.

The distant sound – an erratic, solitary clatter – which had been nagging at him subliminally, focused in his consciousness. It insisted, teasing his mind. It seemed to be coming from downstairs. Perhaps he'd left a window ajar, and the breeze was rattling it against the frame.

He pulled on his dressing-gown, tiptoed past his wife's open door, retraced a couple of steps, peered inside the room, peered again, switched on the light and saw the crumpled sheets as clearly as the empty bed.

'Isobel,' he called. The bathroom was equally empty. He hurried to the head of the stairs. His voice was louder; it quavered. 'Isobel!' He listened, his teeth pressed together. The clattering noise came again. He hastened downstairs, looked about him, seized a walking stick from the hallstand which he immediately remembered was splintered and particularly fragile, and advanced cautiously through the house, flinging open doors and brandishing his stick into every deserted room.

Warily he prowled across the lounge. The noise clattered suddenly in front of him. He thrashed the air violently in an involuntary response, knocking an ashtray to the floor and further jarring his nerves. He strode forward, found the french windows open and entered the conservatory.

The door which opened on to the garden banged noisily against its frame at the whim of the low wind.

Bernard stood in the doorway, distinctly remembering how he'd locked the door only three hours before. He stepped on to the patio and pulled his dressing-gown more tightly across his chest. His eyes explored the garden, which scraped and rustled with furtive, nocturnal activity.

He started. A low moan alerted his hearing. He moved forward, gasped. A shape, grey in the moonlight, stirred across the lawn. Over by the borders.

'Isobel?'

The figure rose to meet him.

Bernard hurried across the wet grass, his arms open. 'Isobel!' he exclaimed. 'What are you doing here? What – what's the matter with your face? Those – blotches?'

His wife's movements were vague, curiously detached. Had she even heard him? he wondered. She wiped a nervous hand across her face and he realized that the blotches were smears of earth. Her nightdress and hair were matted with damp soil. Her eyes were staring vacantly.

She was pointing to his feet, wet in the glistening grass.

'It's everywhere.'

'It's dew,' he said, comprehension suddenly dawning that she was walking in her sleep. 'You'll catch your death . . .'

She shook her head. 'Blood. The ground is soaked with it. Here. And here. Feel it.' She fell on her knees, stretching out her hands over the border, kneading the soil between her fingers. Bernard tried to pull her away, but she wrenched herself free with a low scream.

'Can you hear them?' she groaned. She laid her head against the ground, eyes dilated, her ear pressed against the soil. 'Bernard, can they talk? Can the dead call to us out of the earth? Listen! Those cries. All that agony. Here. Buried in the soil.'

Bernard crouched and cajoled her into a sitting position. Grief numbed his responses.

His wife's hands clutched at her face. She scratched at the earth on her cheeks and, spluttering, wiped her hand again and again over her lips. 'Something happened here,' she said. 'Something terrible. The bones, the photographs. We must find out what it was. Look!' Her eyes opened wide. Bernard followed her pointing hand.

'Look there. That shadow again. Can't you see it?' She gave a choked scream. 'And there. Another one.' Her head turned in horror. 'Shadows, writhing. Bernard, the black shapes. What are we going to do? They're everywhere!'

She fell back in his arms. 'The phone,' Bernard told himself.

When Isobel Hurse woke up from a heavenly sedated sleep, she was resting in the white, sterilized comfort of the clinic thirty miles away.

Returning, six days later, from an early evening visit to his wife – a rather strained, emotional encounter – Bernard arrived

home to find a motley gathering of people seated round his mahogany table, breathing with rather histrionic deliberation. Presiding over them, her ample bosom heaving impressively, was a colourfully clad female, surmounted by an excessively bushy plumed hat.

'Sorry about this,' said a voice, and Laura Mark materialized at his elbow. 'You sounded so desperate on the phone. I told Miss Friend about your - problem and she insisted on coming round at once.'

Bernard grappled with annoyance and curiosity. 'Frankly I'd rather trust to local history and science than mumbo-jumbo. I say, is she all right? ...'

'She's in trance,' whispered Laura.

Suddenly, emitting a wild grunt, Miss Friend lurched to her feet, announced, 'The garden - she wants to show me the garden,' and headed out, through the conservatory and across the lawn. The Circle straggled untidily after her. She came to rest beside the new rockery, completed by Mr Blacklock the previous day, and already brimming with flowers.

'Ah yes.' Miss Friend gave a deep, withering sigh and lifted up her arms. 'I'm getting a sense of great unhappiness, great pain. Yes, it's someone from the village, she says. She *used* to live in the village once.' The medium began to shake her head. Her voice quickened, came in staccato rushes. 'Death. Many deaths. It must be disease, a rapid one.' She turned, her head on one side, feathers quivering. 'Was there a plague here? A sudden disaster like a plague? She's worrying about a burial. I think perhaps *she* was buried here. It shouldn't happen like that, she says. Being buried with all the others.'

Miss Friend's features tightened into creases of pain. Bernard's concern for her welfare struggled with his disbelief.

'I'm feeling great anguish of spirit. She's concerned about a warning. There's not enough warning, she says. And physical pain - in my throat - I -' Miss Friend swayed on her feet in evident distress, her breathing laboured. Suddenly her hands flew to her throat; her face contorted. She uttered a tortured scream that ripped at the dusk and appalled her listeners.

'Suffocation!' she gasped. There was an agonized pause. 'Yes, I see it now: desolation; earth open to the sky; sudden death.' She heaved a sigh that made Laura whimper. 'Rest now, rest, perturbed spirit. We understand your grief. She tells me, yes, she tells me she is being buried in open ground. Rest; your

agony is over now. No, there's something more.' Miss Friend drew her breath sharply. 'She is being buried – heaven protect her! – *alive!*'

The medium, relieved of her message, subsided rather heavily on to the grass. The Circle closed round her prostrate form.

Bernard felt dazed and confused. From the start he had been unhappy about the easy, instant assumption that the clinic was the best place for his wife – and unhappiness sharpened by his own guilty role in assisting her admission. Now Miss Friend's precise location of the trouble spot in the garden and the similarities between Isobel's breakdown and the medium's faltering, barely intelligible words, distressed him deeply. His uncertainty grew.

He felt someone tugging at his elbow. It was Laura. 'The phone,' she said. 'In the study. It's Ray – Bill's historian friend from the labs. The bone man.' She indicated the dishevelled Circle. 'I'll take care of this lot.'

The earpiece vibrated with Ray's enthusiasm. Bernard listened, his attention riveted.

'Again,' he said. 'Tell me again, please, slowly. How old are the bones?'

'At least five to six hundred years, it seems,' squeaked the excited telephone voice. 'Marvellously preserved. I don't think there's any doubt, Mr Hurse. You've stumbled on something we've been searching for for years. You're living over a medieval burial pit. One of the open mass graves they dug outside the village – 1348 or thereabouts – to fling in the bodies. It was the only way they could deal with so many victims. The population was decimated. Plague victims, you know. Very unpleasant. Swollen sores, speedy agonizing death. It polluted the whole of Europe of course . . . Are you still there? . . . No wonder they called it the Black Death!'

When Bernard Hurse replaced the receiver, his face was white.

'I must go to Isobel,' he said. 'Now. There's been some sort of confusion. I don't understand but it's not just another of her depressions. There's something more. I don't think they can help her there. She must get right away for a bit. A holiday. Capri again, perhaps. As soon as I can take a break.' He tried to explain his doubts to Laura. 'You remember what we suggested that night? About passions being somehow

stamped on places? . . .³

Laura interrupted him. 'Well, you can't go now. At this time? In this state? Don't be ridiculous, Bernard. One night won't make any difference. Go tomorrow.'

Mrs Mark was adamant.

The following morning, Bernard Hurse, Deputy Director of Cavesham Nuclear Energy Plant, was faced with a crisis of conscience. With the Director himself on holiday and his Head of Reactor Control off sick, his sense of responsibility was challenged, his loyalties divided. He reduced the dilemma to its simplest terms – wife or work? – and made his decision.

After her discharge, achieved with maximum bureaucracy and minimum understanding from the authorities, he drove a bewildered and delighted Isobel back home, widely skirting the village to avoid the noisy crowds of protesters assembling in force for the day's Anti-pollution Rally, only to find a police road-block across the lane just round the corner from the house.

'Security. Can't be too careful, sir,' said the policeman who let them through.

'What about the caves?' said Bernard.

'Can't see anyone wanting to visit them today, sir. But there's always the bridle path over the fields, isn't there, if they're really keen!'

Isobel Hurse was home.

'But only for as long as it takes to pack for Capri,' her husband reassured her.

Together they strolled into the garden. The summer air was heavy with the scent of flowers and an occasional admixture from the Westons' cowsheds. A lark rose singing towards the sun. Isobel saw the new rockery, a yellow-blue mist of alyssum and aubretia, with delight. 'Look how they're growing. So fertile already. Like they did at the cottage. D'you remember?' she said. 'And no weeds!'

'Happy, dear?'

Isobel smiled. Of course she was happy now, wasn't she? As Bernard had told her in the car, her fears and dreams had been exposed and explained more or less satisfactorily. The Black Death and its attendant tragedy was played out long ago. Only its shadow had fallen over them from the past.

Her eyes lingered over the garden, basking and humming

in the sun. Relief, that was what she felt. Why, then, did that small, ungrateful voice remind her that shadows could fall before as well as behind? From the future, perhaps, as well as the past. That the bones were possibly a warning as much as a sad reminder of human tragedy, unhappily disturbed. No. She must pull herself together.

So Isobel Hurse smiled and embraced her husband.

'One drink - to the future,' said Bernard, staring absently at the rockery, 'and then I must stop playing truant.'

He disappeared into the house, prepared the drinks and paused at the cassette loaded with his latest slides. Something was pricking at his memory. On impulse he hunted through the transparencies and found the two failures that had caused so much distress. He held them up to the light, scrutinizing them carefully.

The telephone bell jarred against his growing amazement.

He picked up the receiver.

On each of the slides, hazy but distinctly detectable, was a detail they hadn't consciously noticed before. It didn't make any sense, but it was there, a simple visual fact: there, complete with a suggestion of tumbling flowers, was the dim outline of the new rockery. Photographed before it had been constructed . . .

He had no time to contemplate the significance.

'Yes, sorry, Hurse speaking,' he said.

He listened. His eyes widened.

When he rushed out to Isobel on the lawn, she too was tense. She plucked at his arm. 'Listen!'

A low, wailing moan rose in the distance, familiar as nightmare.

'I know,' said Bernard. 'Police cars. It's nothing. I've just had young Collingwood on the phone. Responsibility's gone to his head. It's probably only a minor emergency, some routine malfunction, but the fool's gone and alerted the police. Today of all days!' He pecked her on the cheek. 'Back soon,' he said.

Isobel watched his retreating back. 'He's leaving me,' she thought. She felt the black wings of nightmare beating close. 'I've got to face it alone after all.'

A gust of wind brought the cries of people, hundreds of them, raised in a confusion of fear and anger, across the fields.

How well she knew those sounds! Unable to move, she stood where the border rose into the rockery looking out across the bridle path beyond the hedge, and felt a shudder along the earth like the pounding of stampeding cattle. The cries grew louder, wilder, the pulsing of the ground more threatening, and, as the first wave of frightened demonstrators – some still clutching their Anti-pollution placards – stumbled blindly through the corn, she knew that familiar surge of panic in her blood.

She turned, starting to run towards the house. At the conservatory she stopped. From the hubbub of hysterical wails an audible cry detached itself: 'The caves. To the caves!' Loud-hailers added to the chaos. Was that where the police were directing them? Was the only safety deep inside the hills? Confused, she turned again, and advanced uncertainly across the lawn. Her pulse raced. Now people were rioting through their orchard. With a yell, a man with a beard came crashing through the hedge and raced down the lawn. She cowered back. Several more tumbled after, one with blood dripping from his hair, shrieking madly. Their howls rang about her head. She saw a woman, stout, with extravagant plumes in her hat, stumble and fall out of sight while the mob raged on.

She covered her face with her hands. 'Bernard,' she groaned, helplessly. The garden was a nightmare of yelling faces. She felt sick, knowing she had lived through these despairing moments many times before. She looked up towards the house. Bernard? Yes, there was Bernard, hurrying towards her.

A still moment. Sun white, expanding.

Then, a gust of stinging wind. The earth heaved, the sky buckled and burst into blinding flame.

Scene over-exposed.

Isobel caught a glimpse of stunted trees, and of Bernard's face – was that scorched mass of blisters *Bernard's* face? – lurching into hers, before she was knocked to the ground and her peeling face trampled by demented, blackened figures into the polluted earth. It was wet with blood.

She tried to scream, to draw breath, but the soil, reeking with ancient secrets of mortality and unnumbered deaths, filled her mouth – dear God, was she to be buried still conscious? – and took her down, down into itself.

Beyond the hill, where the world's largest nuclear reactors had once stood, a mushroom cloud flowered and climbed the darkening sky.

Then the delayed arrival of the full, nuclear blast reduced the fallen bodies in the Hurses' back garden to instant shadows, twisted where they lay.

FIRST-FOOT

Clodagh Gibson Jarvie

South-west Scotland at the turn of the year. A fine autumn, golden warm October, merged into a gentle damp November. Only at Christmas did winter come, and the first frosts bit into the air and the land, followed by two days of snow, more frost, and then a bitter wind blowing from the north-east, overland, dry and grey, bitter and icy.

In the lee of the Galloway hills, facing west above a small village, apparently hanging upon the slope beneath a forest of ten-foot-high trees, a small square stone house, washed with white, caught all the light of the last of sunset on the last day of December, and in the pale frosty moonlight of Hogmanay stood out as though phosphorescent against the dark hill. 'Old Janet Gray's wee house -' Mrs Gray and her white hillside house were a much-loved part of village life, and on the night of Hogmanay in particular she never wanted for company. Young and old always took in the white house and called on the small white-haired widow in their rounds as first-foots after the old year was tolled out.

Several parties had been calling, and the old dog was worn out from warning, and then welcoming. He had put himself into his basket in the kitchen and had been turning a deaf ear to the world for an hour or so when the party from the big house on the strath below the village came by to first-foot, knowing of course that they would not in fact be the first to cross Janet Gray's threshold by now.

The old dog stirred and rumbled out of the kitchen, shaking his shaggy head and putting on a show of ferocity. 'Funny -' Janet thought, 'he never noticed the last car -' 'He never barked at you, Robbie,' she called back into the sitting-room as she went to the front door.

'I've already had more than my share, I'm sure,' the widow laughed, as she welcomed the four young people. 'And my latest first-foot is in the sitting-room now with a good drink and some of my shortbread - come away in and have your drink with him.'

However, the sitting-room was empty, and the whisky and shortbread untouched.

'Oh – there now! He must have gone out by the back door!' Janet exclaimed. 'What a shame he didn't stay!' She took more glasses from the sideboard.

'Who did you say it was? Did we meet any cars on the road?' one of the young girls asked. 'Of course he might have gone the other way –'

'It was Jean's husband, Robbie – you know, that works for the Forestry.'

'Jean's in hospital tonight,' the other girl said. 'She's just had her new baby.'

'There,' Janet said, satisfied. 'That's it. Robbie was hurrying away back to the other bairn at home.'

The two young couples were looking at her quizzically. One of the men bent down to fondle the old dog.

'No, I'm not a wee bit drunk, or imagining things,' Janet said. 'Robbie was here, in this room. He came to the front door just as you did, to first-foot his father's old friend – came in laughing, and kissed me –' she put a hand to her cheek.

They pursued the subject no further, and drank their whisky and ate some shortbread. Oddly, no one touched the glass that had been poured for Robbie Mack.

When the house was empty and quiet again, Janet Gray took up the glass she had poured for Robbie. She looked at it, blinked, shook her head. 'I may be getting old,' she murmured, 'but he was here. I know.' She felt suddenly very happy, as though something unexpected but exciting were about to happen. 'Robbie Mack,' she murmured – 'he did kiss me, came in laughing, held me in his arms, kissed me – on the cheek like his father Robert used to – because he was married to Jessie by then and had to forget the way he used to kiss me before –' her cheek felt cold, very cold. She shivered.

Janet Gray felt so expectant that she could not bring herself to go to bed. She stacked up the sitting-room fire and sat wrapped in a rug, staring now at the glowing fire which failed to warm her cold cheek, and now at the pale amber-coloured whisky which Robbie Mack had not drunk. She sat through the rest of the night with her old dog and her memories.

New Year's Day, blue-grey and cold: daylight filtered and fingered through the fabric and the cracks between the drawn curtains.

Janet Gray – who once hoped to be Janet Mack and so nearly had been only she had had to go away to look after her mother

and had come back to find that pretty Jessie Love had taken advantage of her absence to charm Robert Mack into marriage – bent and made up the fire again. She felt stiff and old, old and long widowed – for her husband Jack Gray had died only three years after their marriage – forever childless. She felt the excitement of the night drop away from her. The dog shuffled back into the kitchen and slumped into his basket. Janet picked up Robbie's glass and drank the whisky, its strong warmth tingling through her body. Her cheek was still icy cold.

There was the sound of a car – too early for anyone to be about except a lost late first-foot. Who could it be? Footsteps outside. A knock at the front door. The dog did not stir. He had had enough of Hogmanay and comings and goings. Janet Gray went to the hall and opened the front door.

'Why – Doctor Bell?' Her tone was wondering. 'It's early to be calling –' she noticed his evening clothes beneath the sheepskin coat. 'Or were you first-footing?'

He shook his head. 'No – I had a case. There's usually somebody leaves this life at Hogmanay – some born, and some dead. I was passing. I saw your lights on.'

They went into the sitting-room. Janet pulled back the curtains and let New Year's morning into the room. The light was weak yet, but clear and pure and cold. When the sun rose the wind would strengthen.

'I was at the Johnstones' early this morning,' the doctor accepted a small drink. 'They'd been entertaining me, and the old man and I sat talking. The young people came in – oh – about three o'clock. Young Fiona said that they had been here, about one-fifteen, and that they'd just missed Robbie Mack here.'

'That's right,' Janet nodded. 'He came,' she said. 'He or his father always came to first-foot me. He must have hurried away home –' she stopped.

The doctor smiled gently. 'But it's a strange thing, Janet,' he said. 'Robbie was at the hospital, all night, with his wife.'

Janet believed him, but she also believed her own evidence. 'But he was *here* – yes, he becomes more like his dear father every time I see him. He was here, Doctor Bell,' she said with gentle but obstinate conviction.

The doctor wished he had not come. But now *he* was here, and his message had to be given.

'Robbie's father,' he said. 'Robbie's father, Robert John Mack, died of a massive stroke at one o'clock this morning, Janet. He died while his son was at the hospital. You see - ' he broke off.

Janet's face was briefly transfigured by a most marvellous smile, pure happiness, and she looked momentarily as she must have looked as a young girl. Then the face changed again. One cheek, cold from a kiss, drew up and up until it seemed about to push the eye up through the scalp. One hand wavered up to control the cheek. There was one rattling, snoring gasp : one, deep and final.

The doctor caught Janet Gray as she fell. She was surprisingly heavy for such a small old woman. The doctor felt inadequate, confused. He laid the widow gently on the sofa, found the rug to cover her. His hands were shaking. He was trying to remember what Janet's husband had looked like, but could only think of the Macks, of Robert and of young Robbie, neither of whom had come to this house in the night - neither. He went to the kitchen, to the telephone on the shelf by the far door. On the way he looked at the dog-basket. The old dog was in it, one dead eye catching a gleam of wan daylight. There was no sound, no life, not any more.

THE LEADEN RING

S. Baring-Gould

'It is not possible, Julia. I cannot conceive how the idea of attending the county ball can have entered your head after what has happened. Poor young Hattersley's dreadful death suffices to stop that.'

'But, Aunt, Mr Hattersley is no relation of ours.'

'No relation – but you know that the poor fellow would not have shot himself if it had not been for you.'

'Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, how can you say so, when the verdict was that he committed suicide when in an unsound condition of mind? How could I help his blowing out his brains, when those brains were deranged?'

'Julia, do not talk like this. If he did go off his head, it was you who upset him by first drawing him on, leading him to believe that you liked him, and then throwing him over as soon as the Hon. James Lawlor appeared on the *tapis*. Consider: what will people say if you go to the assembly?'

'What will they say if I do not go? They will immediately set it down to my caring deeply for James Hattersley, and they will think that there was some sort of engagement.'

'They are not likely to suppose that. But really, Julia, you were for a while all smiles and encouragement. Tell me, now, did Mr Hattersley propose to you?'

'Well – yes, he did, and I refused him.'

'And then he went and shot himself in despair. Julia, you cannot with any face go to the ball.'

'Nobody knows that he proposed. And precisely because I do go everyone will conclude that he did not propose. I do not wish it to be supposed that he did.'

'His family, of course, must have been aware. They will see your name among those present at the assembly.'

'Aunt, they are in too great trouble to look at the paper to see who were at the dance.'

'His terrible death lies at your door. How you can have the heart, Julia . . .'

'I don't see it. Of course, I feel it. I am awfully sorry, and awfully sorry for his father, the admiral. I cannot bring him

to life again. I wish that when I rejected him he had gone and done as did Joe Pomeroy, marry one of his landlady's daughters.'

'There, Julia, is another of your delinquencies. You lured on young Pomeroy till he proposed, then you refused him, and in a fit of vexation and mortified vanity he married a girl greatly beneath him in social position. If the *ménage* proves a failure you will have it on your conscience that you have wrecked his life and perhaps hers as well.'

'I cannot throw myself away as a charity to save this man or that from doing a foolish thing.'

'What I complain of, Julia, is that you encouraged young Mr Pomeroy till Mr Hattersley appeared, whom you thought more eligible, and then you tossed him aside; and you did precisely the same with James Hattersley as soon as you came to know Mr Lawlor. After all, Julia, I am not so sure that Mr Pomeroy has not chosen the better part. The girl, I dare say, is simple, fresh, and affectionate.'

'Your implication is not complimentary, Aunt Elizabeth.'

'My dear, I have no patience with the young lady of the present day, who is shallow, self-willed, and indifferent to the feelings and happiness of others, who craves excitement and pleasures, and desires nothing that is useful and good. Where now will you see a girl like Viola's sister, who let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, feed on her damask cheek? Nowadays a girl lays herself at the feet of a man if she likes him, turns herself inside out to let him and all the world read her heart.'

'I have no relish to be like Viola's sister, and have my story – a blank. I never grovelled at the feet of Joe Pomeroy or James Hattersley.'

'No, but you led each to consider himself the favoured one till he proposed, and then you refused him. It was like smiling at a man and then stabbing him to the heart.'

'Well – I don't want people to think that James Hattersley cared for me – I certainly never cared for him – nor that he proposed; so I shall go to the ball.'

Julia Demant was an orphan. She had been kept at school till she was eighteen, and then had been removed just at the age when a girl begins to take an interest in her studies, and not to regard them as drudgery. On her removal she had cast away all that she had acquired, and had been plunged into the whirl of Society. Then suddenly her father died – she had lost

her mother some years before – and she went to live with her aunt, Miss Flemming. Julia had inherited a sum of about five hundred pounds a year, and would probably come in for a good estate and funds as well on the death of her aunt. She had been flattered as a girl at home, and at school as a beauty, and she certainly thought no small bones of herself.

Miss Flemming was an elderly lady with a sharp tongue, very outspoken, and very decided in her opinions; but her action was weak, and Julia soon discovered that she could bend the aunt to do anything she willed, though she could not modify or alter her opinions.

In the matter of Joe Pomeroy and James Hattersley, it was as Miss Flemming had said. Julia had encouraged Mr Pomeroy, and had only cast him off because she thought better of the suit of Mr Hattersley, son of an admiral of that name. She had seen a good deal of young Hattersley, had given him every encouragement, had so entangled him, that he was madly in love with her; and then, when she came to know the Hon. James Lawlor, and saw that he was fascinated, she rejected Hattersley with the consequences alluded to in the conversation above given.

Julia was particularly anxious to be present at the county ball, for she had been already booked by Mr Lawlor for several dances, and she was quite resolved to make an attempt to bring him to a declaration.

On the evening of the ball Miss Flemming and Julia entered the carriage. The aunt had given way, as was her wont, but under protest.

For about ten minutes neither spoke, and then Miss Flemming said, 'Well, you know my feelings about this dance. I do not approve. I distinctly disapprove. I do not consider your going to the ball in good taste, or, as you would put it, in good form. Poor young Hattersley . . .'

'Oh, dear Aunt, do let us put young Hattersley aside. He was buried with the regular forms, I suppose?'

'Yes, Julia.'

'Then the rector accepted the verdict of the jury at the inquest. Why should not we? A man who is unsound in his mind is not responsible for his actions.'

'I suppose not.'

'Much less, then, I who live ten miles away.'

'I do not say that you are responsible for his death, but for

the condition of mind that led him to do the dreadful deed. Really, Julia, you are one of those into whose head or heart only by a surgical operation could the thought be introduced that you could be in the wrong. A hypodermic syringe would be too weak an instrument to effect such a radical change in you. Everyone else may be in the wrong, you – never. As for me, I cannot get young Hattersley out of my head.'

'And I,' retorted Julia with asperity, for her aunt's words had stung her – 'I, for my part, do not give him a thought.'

She had hardly spoken the words before a chill wind began to pass round her. She drew the Barege shawl that was over her bare shoulders closer about her, and said, 'Auntie! is the glass down on your side?'

'No, Julia; why do you ask?'

'There is such a draught.'

'Draught! – I do not feel one; perhaps the window on your side hitches.'

'Indeed, that is all right. It is blowing harder and is deadly cold. Can one of the front panes be broken?'

'No. Rogers would have told me had that been the case. Besides, I can see that they are sound.'

The wind of which Julia complained swirled and whistled about her. It increased in force; it plucked at her shawl and slewed it about her throat; it tore at the lace on her dress. It snatched at her hair, it wrenched it away from the pins, the combs that held it in place; one long tress was lashed across the face of Miss Flemming. Then the hair, completely released, eddied up above the girl's head, and the next moment was carried as a drift before her, blinding her. Then – a sudden explosion, as though a gun had been fired into her ear; and with a scream of terror she sank back among the cushions. Miss Flemming, in great alarm, pulled the check-string, and the carriage stopped. The footman descended from the box and came to the side. The old lady drew down the window and said: 'Oh! Phillips, bring the lamp. Something has happened to Miss Demant.'

The man obeyed, and sent a flood of light into the carriage. Julia was lying back, white and senseless. Her hair was scattered over her face, neck, and shoulders; the flowers that had been stuck in it, the pins that had fastened it in place, the pads that had given shape to the convolutions lay strewn, some on her lap, some in the rug at the bottom of the carriage.

'Phillips!' ordered the old lady in great agitation, 'tell Rogers to turn the horses and drive home at once; and do you run as fast as you can for Dr Crate.'

A few minutes after the carriage was again in motion, Julia revived. Her aunt was chafing her hand.

'Oh, Aunt!' she said, 'are all the glasses broken?'

'Broken – what glasses?'

'Those of the carriage – with the explosion.'

'Explosion, my dear!'

'Yes. That gun which was discharged. It stunned me. Were you hurt?'

'I heard no gun – no explosion.'

'But I did. It was as though a bullet had been discharged into my brain. I wonder that I escaped. Who can have fired at us?'

'My dear, no one fired. I heard nothing. I know what it was. I had the same experience many years ago. I slept in a damp bed, and awoke stone deaf in my right ear. I remained so for three weeks. But one night when I was at a ball and was dancing, all at once I heard a report as of a pistol in my right ear, and immediately heard quite clearly again. It was wax.'

'But, Aunt Elizabeth, I have not been deaf.'

'You have not noticed that you were deaf.'

'Oh! but look at my hair; it was that wind that blew it about.'

'You are labouring under a delusion, Julia. There was no wind.'

'But look – feel how my hair is down.'

'That has been done by the motion of the carriage. There are many ruts in the road.'

They reached home, and Julia, feeling sick, frightened, and bewildered, retired to bed. Dr Crate arrived, said that she was hysterical, and ordered something to soothe her nerves. Julia was not convinced. The explanation offered by Miss Flemming did not satisfy her. That she was a victim to hysteria she did not in the least believe. Neither her aunt, nor the coachman, nor Phillips had heard the discharge of a gun. As to the rushing wind, Julia was satisfied that she had experienced it. The lace was ripped, as by a hand, from her dress, and the shawl was twisted about her throat; besides, her hair had not been so slightly arranged that the jolting of the carriage would completely disarrange it. She was vastly perplexed over what she

had undergone. She thought and thought, but could get no nearer to a solution of the mystery.

Next day, as she was almost herself again, she rose and went about as usual.

In the afternoon the Hon. James Lawlor called and asked after Miss Flemming. The butler replied that his mistress was out making calls, but that Miss Demant was at home, and he believed was on the terrace. Mr Lawlor at once asked to see her.

He did not find Julia in the parlour or on the terrace, but in a lower garden to which she had descended to feed the goldfish in the pond.

'Oh! Miss Demant,' said he, 'I was so disappointed not to see you at the ball last night.'

'I was very unwell; I had a fainting fit and could not go.'

'It threw a damp on our spirits – that is to say, on mine. I had you booked for several dances.'

'You were able to give them to others.'

'But that was not the same to me. I did an act of charity and self-denial. I danced instead with the ugly Miss Burgons and with Miss Pounding, and that was like dragging about a sack of potatoes. I believe it would have been a jolly evening, but for that shocking affair of young Hattersley which kept some of the better sort away. I mean those who knew the Hattersleys. Of course, for me that did not matter, we were not acquainted. I never even spoke with the fellow. You knew him, I believe? I heard some people say so, and that you had not come because of him. The supper, for a subscription ball, was not atrociously bad.'

'What did they say of me?'

'Oh! – if you will know – that you did not attend the ball because you liked him very much, and were awfully cut up.'

'I – I! What a shame that people should talk! I never cared a rush for him. He was nice enough in his way, not a bounder, but tolerable as young men go.'

Mr Lawlor laughed. 'I should not relish to have such a qualified estimate made of me.'

'Nor need you. You are interesting. He became so only when he had shot himself. It will be by this alone that he will be remembered.'

'But there is no smoke without fire. Did he like you – much?'

'Dear Mr Lawlor, I am not a clairvoyante, and never was

able to see into the brains or hearts of people—least of all of young men. Perhaps it is fortunate for me that I cannot.'

'One lady told me that he had proposed to you.'

'Who was that? The potato-sack?'

'I will not give her name. Is there any truth in it? Did he?'

'No.'

At the moment she spoke there sounded in her ear a whistle of wind, and she felt a current like a cord of ice creep round her throat, increasing in force and compression; her hat was blown off, and next instant a detonation rang through her head as though a gun had been fired into her ear. She uttered a cry and sank upon the ground.

James Lawlor was bewildered. His first impulse was to run to the house for assistance; then he considered that he could not leave her lying on the wet soil, and he stooped to raise her in his arms and to carry her within. In novels young men perform such a feat without difficulty; but in fact they are not able to do it, especially when the girl is tall and big-boned. Moreover, one in a faint is a dead weight. Lawlor staggered under his burden to the steps. It was as much as he could perform to carry her up to the terrace, and there he placed her on a seat. Panting, and with his muscles quivering after the strain, he hastened to the drawing-room, rang the bell, and when the butler appeared, he gasped: 'Miss Demant has fainted; you and I and the footman must carry her within.'

'She fainted last night in the carriage,' said the butler.

When Julia came to her senses, she was in bed attended by the housekeeper and her maid. A few moments later Miss Flemming arrived.

'Oh, Aunt! I have heard it again.'

'Heard what, dear?'

'The discharge of a gun.'

'It is nothing but wax,' said the old lady. 'I will drop a little sweet-oil into your ear, and then have it syringed with warm water.'

'I want to tell you something—in private.'

Miss Flemming signed to the servants to withdraw.

'Aunt,' said the girl, 'I must say something. This is the second time that this has happened. I am sure it is significant. James Lawlor was with me in the sunken garden, and he began to speak about James Hattersley. You know it was when we were talking about him last night that I heard that

awful noise. It was precisely as if a gun had been discharged into my ear. I felt as if all the nerves and tissues of my head were being torn, and all the bones of my skull shattered – just what Mr Hattersley must have undergone when he pulled the trigger. It was an agony for a moment perhaps, but it felt as if it lasted an hour. Mr Lawlor had asked me point blank if James Hattersley had proposed to me, and I said, "No." I was perfectly justified in so answering, because he had no right to ask me such a question. It was an impertinence on his part, and I answered him shortly and sharply with a negative.

'But actually James Hattersley proposed twice to me. He would not accept a first refusal, but came next day bothering me again, and I was pretty curt with him. He made some remarks that were rude about how I had treated him, and which I will not repeat, and as he left, in a state of great agitation, he said, "Julia, I vow that you shall not forget this, and you shall belong to no one but me, alive or dead." I considered this great nonsense, and did not accord it another thought. But, really, these terrible annoyances, this wind and the bursts of noise, do seem to me to come from him. It is just as though he felt a malignant delight in distressing me, now that he is dead. I should like to defy him, and I will do it if I can, but I cannot bear more of these experiences – they will kill me.'

Several days elapsed.

Mr Lawlor called repeatedly to enquire, but a week passed before Julia was sufficiently recovered to receive him, and then the visit was one of courtesy and of sympathy, and the conversation turned upon her health, and on indifferent themes.

But some few days later it was otherwise. She was in the conservatory alone, pretty much herself again, when Mr Lawlor was announced.

Physically she had recovered, or believed that she had, but her nerves had actually received a severe shock. She had made up her mind that the phenomena of the circling wind and the explosion were in some mysterious manner connected with Hattersley.

She bitterly resented this, but she was in mortal terror of a recurrence; and she felt no compunction for her treatment of the unfortunate young man, but rather a sense of deep resentment against him. If he were dead, why did he not lie quiet and cease from vexing her?

To be a martyr was to her no gratification, for hers was not a martyrdom that provoked sympathy, and which could make her interesting.

She had hitherto supposed that when a man died there was an end of him; his condition was determined for good or for ill. But that a disembodied spirit should hover about and make itself a nuisance to the living, had never entered into her calculations.

'Julia—if I may be allowed so to call you—' began Mr Lawlor, 'I have brought you a bouquet of flowers. Will you accept them?'

'Oh!' she said, as he handed the bunch to her, 'how kind of you. At this time of the year they are so rare, and Aunt's gardener is so miserly that he will spare me none for my room but some miserable bits of geranium. It is too bad of you wasting your money like this upon me.'

'It is no waste, if it affords you pleasure.'

'It is a pleasure. I dearly love flowers.'

'To give you pleasure,' said Mr Lawlor, 'is the great object of my life. If I could assure you happiness—if you would allow me to hope—to seize this opportunity, now that we are alone together . . .'

He drew near and caught her hand. His features were agitated, his lips trembled, there was earnestness in his eyes.

At once a cold blast touched Julia and began to circle about her and to flutter her hair. She trembled and drew back. That paralysing experience was about to be renewed. She turned deadly white, and put her hand to her right ear. 'Oh, James! James!' she gasped. 'Do not, pray do not speak what you want to say, or I shall faint. It is coming on. I am not yet well enough to hear it. Write to me and I will answer. For pity's sake do not speak it.' Then she sank upon a seat—and at that moment her aunt entered the conservatory.

On the following day a note was put into her hand, containing a formal proposal from the Hon. James Lawlor; and by return of post Julia answered with an acceptance.

There was no reason whatever why the engagement should be long; and the only alternative mooted was whether the wedding should take place before or after Easter. Finally, it was settled that it should be celebrated on Shrove Tuesday. This left a short time for the necessary preparations. Miss Flemming would have to go to town with her niece con-

cerning a trousseau, and a trousseau is not turned out rapidly any more than an armed cruiser.

There is usually a certain period allowed to young people who have become engaged to see much of each other, to get better acquainted with one another, to build their castles in the air, and to indulge in little passages of affection, vulgarly called 'spooning'. But in this case the spooning had to be curtailed and postponed.

At the outset, when alone with James, Julia was nervous. She feared a recurrence of those phenomena that so affected her. But, although every now and then the wind curled and soughed about her, it was not violent, nor was it chilling; and she came to regard it as a wail of discomfiture. Moreover, there was no recurrence of the detonation, and she fondly hoped that with her marriage the vexation would completely cease.

In her heart was deep down a sense of exultation. She was defying James Hattersley and setting his prediction at naught. She was not in love with Mr Lawlor; she liked him, in her cold manner, and was not insensible to the social advantage that would be hers when she became the Honourable Mrs Lawlor.

The day of the wedding arrived. Happily it was fine. 'Blessed is the bride the sun shines on,' said the cheery Miss Flemming; 'an omen, I trust, of a bright and unruffled life in your new condition.'

All the neighbourhood was present at the church. Miss Flemming had many friends. Mr Lawlor had fewer present, as he belonged to a distant county. The church path had been laid with red cloth, the church decorated with flowers, and a choir was present to twitter 'The voice that breathed o'er Eden'.

The rector stood by the altar, and two cushions had been laid at the chancel steps. The rector was to be assisted by an uncle of the bridegroom who was in Holy orders; the rector, being old-fashioned, had drawn on pale-grey kid gloves.

First arrived the bridegroom with his best man, and stood in a nervous condition balancing himself first on one foot, then on the other, waiting, observed by all eyes.

Next entered the procession of the bride, attended by her maids, to the 'Wedding March' in *Lohengrin*, on a wheezy organ. Then Julia and her intended took their places at the

chancel step for the performance of the first portion of the ceremony, and the two clergy descended to them from the altar.

'Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?'

'I will.'

'Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband?'

'I will.'

'I, James, take thee, Julia, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold . . .' and so on.

As the words were being spoken, a cold rush of air passed over the clasped hands, numbing them, and began to creep round the bride, and to flutter her veil. She set her lips and knitted her brows. In a few moments she would be beyond the reach of these manifestations.

When it came to her turn to speak, she began firmly: 'I, Julia, take thee, James . . .' but as she proceeded the wind became fierce; it raged about her, it caught her veil on one side and buffeted her cheek, it switched the veil about her throat, as though strangling her with a drift of snow contracting into ice. But she persevered to the end.

Then James Lawlor produced the ring, and was about to place it on her finger with the prescribed words: 'With this ring I thee wed . . .' when a report rang in her ear, followed by a heaving of her skull, as though the bones were being burst asunder, and she sank unconscious on the chancel step.

In the midst of profound commotion, she was raised and conveyed to the vestry, followed by James Lawlor, trembling and pale. He had slipped the ring back into his waistcoat pocket. Dr Crate, who was present, hastened to offer his professional assistance.

In the vestry Julia rested in a Glastonbury chair, white and still, with her hands resting in her lap. And to the amazement of those present, it was seen that on the third finger of her left hand was a leaden ring, rude and solid as though fashioned out of a bullet. Restoratives were applied, but fully a quarter of an hour elapsed before Julia opened her eyes, and a little colour returned to her lips and cheek. But, as she raised her hands to her brow to wipe away the damp that had formed on it, her eye caught sight of the leaden ring, and with a cry of horror she sank again into insensibility.

The congregation slowly left the church, awestruck, whispering, asking questions, receiving no satisfactory answers,

forming surmises all incorrect.

'I am very much afraid, Mr Lawlor,' said the rector, 'that it will be impossible to proceed with the service today; it must be postponed till Miss Demant is in a condition to conclude her part, and to sign the register. I do not see how it can be gone on with today. She is quite unequal to the effort.'

The carriage which was to have conveyed the couple to Miss Flemming's house, and then, later, to have taken them to the station for their honeymoon, the horses decorated with white rosettes, the whip adorned with a white bow, had now to convey Julia, hardly conscious, supported by her aunt, to her home.

No rice could be thrown. The bell-ringers, prepared to give a joyous peal, were constrained to depart.

The reception at Miss Flemming's was postponed. No one thought of attending. The cakes, the ices, were consumed in the kitchen.

The bridegroom, bewildered, almost frantic, ran hither and thither, not knowing what to do, what to say.

Julia lay as a stone for fully two hours; and when she came to herself could not speak. When conscious, she raised her left hand, looked on the leaden ring, and sank back into senselessness.

Not till late in the evening was she sufficiently recovered to speak, and then she begged her aunt, who had remained by her bed without stirring, to dismiss attendants. She desired to speak with her alone. When no one was in the room with her, save Miss Flemming, she said in a whisper: 'Oh, Aunt Elizabeth! Oh, Auntie! Such an awful thing has happened. I can never marry Mr Lawlor, never. I have married James Hattersley; I am a dead man's wife. At the time that James Lawlor was making the responses, I heard a piping voice in my ear, an unearthly voice, saying the same words. When I said: "I, Julia, take you, James, to my wedded husband" — you know Mr Hattersley is James as well as Mr Lawlor — then the words applied to him as much or as well as to the other. And then, when it came to the giving of the ring, there was the explosion in my ear, as before — and the leaden ring was forced on to my finger, and not James Lawlor's golden ring. It is of no use my resisting any more. I am a dead man's wife, and I cannot marry James Lawlor.'

Some years have elapsed since that disastrous day and that

incomplete marriage.

Miss Demant is Miss Demant still, and she has never been able to remove the leaden ring from the third finger of her left hand. Whenever the attempt has been made, either to disengage it by drawing it off or by cutting through it, there has ensued that terrifying discharge as of a gun into her ear, causing insensibility. The prostration that has followed, the terror it has inspired, have so affected her nerves, that she has desisted from every attempt to rid herself of the ring.

She invariably wears a glove on her left hand, and it is bulged over the third finger, where lies the leaden ring.

She is not a happy woman, although her aunt is dead and has left her a handsome estate. She has not got many acquaintances. She has no friends; for her temper is unamiable, and her tongue is bitter. She supposes that the world, as far as she knows it, is in league against her.

Towards the memory of James Hattersley she entertains a deadly hate. If an incantation could lay his spirit, if prayer could give him repose, she would have recourse to none of these expedients, even though they might relieve her, so bitter is her resentment. And she harbours a silent wrath against Providence for allowing the dead to walk and to molest the living.

THAT SUMMER

Barbara Joan Eyre

There were a lot of people on the beach that summer, running in and out of the sparkling sea and burning their bodies as they basked in the hot sun. So hot it hurt your eyes.

I watched them as I lay on the grass-topped cliffs; I watched them as I lingered in the cool caves beneath; and I watched them avidly as I floated in the bright, warm sea that lured them to it with its cruel promises of cool spray on scorched skin. And they squealed and jumped as the waves hit them, and I lay there, tossing in the foam, yearning deep inside me to feel again the tangy spray on my skin, and the wind in my hair, instead of this clinging, heavy wetness that saturated me and lived in me.

They didn't notice me, of course. So that summer, that first awful, empty summer, I just wandered restlessly around, watching them, listening to them. And waited. The sea had never been so warm, the sky never so blue, and the sand never so soft and golden, creeping as it does, between your toes as you walk. Except I couldn't feel it as they did.

There was a red-haired girl swimming in the sea, a girl of about twenty. I knew what it was like to be twenty, so I spoke to her as I floated near her, but she just stared in rather a surprised way. I tried again, but she just frowned, turned over, and flicked water at me with her toes. So, when she ran out of the sea and across the sands, I followed her.

There was a man, too, waiting for her, tall and brown with thick fair hair, and looking so much like Phil it was painful. I wanted to put my arms around him, lay my head on his shoulder—but it wasn't Phil, so I had to be content with looking at him as he kissed the red-haired girl, and rubbed sun oil lovingly into her back. Her name was Stella, and I thought she would do, until I heard her laugh, and I knew I couldn't possibly live with a laugh like that.

So I left Stella, and found Ruth. She was a little older, slim and sun-bronzed, with lots of thick, dark hair. I felt drawn to Ruth; she was having such a good time, laughing a lot and showing her Gordon-Moore's teeth, and the boys loved it, I could tell, when she teased them and pouted at them.

She was so beautiful, was Ruth, far too beautiful, and she knew it, and I dreaded to think what she would be like when her looks had gone. No – reluctantly – Ruth would not do.

There were so many pretty girls that summer, girls I might have been, having the fun I should have had. I longed to join them, but they didn't know, and didn't care, and I suppose I would have been the same, in their place. A flick of sand, a splash of water, a cold wet finger on their sun-warmed skins, that was all they knew of me as I waited for the right one to come along.

Preferably fair, with hazel eyes and freckles, and long, slim legs. As I had been before the sea had taken me to be another of its unwilling brides, and left me to watch my parents' grief, sudden and heart-wrenching, while I was powerless to console them. And Phil, tall, strong Phil who would have been my husband in a few weeks' time. It had been a bitter blow, that I, who had loved life so much, should be taken from it so early. They had all been so sorry at first –

'Did you hear about Mimi Frost?'

'Yes, tragic, wasn't it? And so young.'

'Just twenty-one. An accident with a dinghy, I believe.'

'Yes, on holiday with her fiancé. But he could swim.'

'Pity he couldn't have managed to save her as well.'

Phil had tried, but the current had been too strong. And I had watched him, afterwards, showing his outward signs of grief, and I wanted to touch him, speak to him, comfort him, but it was no use.

Then Belinda had come along, Belinda my best friend, and Mimi was forgotten. Or, at least, transformed to just a memorable episode in his life. And some people had criticized for a while, that he should forget so soon, but the novelty had rapidly worn off, and I was quickly pushed to the backs of their minds in the bustle of holiday packing and traffic jams all the way to the sea.

And they all went to the sea that summer. There were Joy and Patricia, and Dylis and Kay. But there was something wrong with each of them, the way they talked, or walked, or dressed.

And then I saw Felicity, and straight away I could see she was different. And she had fair hair and hazel eyes and freckles, and long slim legs all brown and strong. And her white bikini was just the one I would have chosen. And

when I saw Gene, her boy-friend, with his thatch of corn-coloured hair and strong face, I knew it had to be Felicity or nothing, and I couldn't bear the thought of winter in that heavy, clinging, possessive cold sea.

And it was marvellous. And so easy. And she didn't even seem to be aware of my presence, she was so like I used to be. And we ran along the sands, and laughed at the sun and the rain, and I felt it all. The wind on my face—her face. The sun on my skin—her skin. The sea-spray on my hair—her hair. And the touch of Gene's skin on mine, as I lay in his strong arms; and the softness of his mouth on mine. And I came out of hell and began to know heaven again.

On the last day of our holiday we went on a boat trip to an island barely visible from the coast. And we dangled our fingers over the side, and rocked with the rocking of the waves. And we didn't notice the sudden swell as we closed our eyes in pleasure. So we weren't really prepared when this huge wave washed over us, and sent the boat spinning like a top.

And everyone was screaming and floundering in the sea, and the waves towered over us like giant hands coming to devour us, and I couldn't see Gene anywhere. There had been no life-jackets—it was only a pleasure trip—and just a couple of life-belts, and I didn't see who was lucky enough to get those because I was screaming helplessly with the rest, remembering it all again as we came up for the second time.

And as the cruel waves closed over my head—her head—the only thought I had was, why had I been so careless, so hasty, when I had chosen Felicity? Because Felicity couldn't swim, either.

THE TAPESTRIED CHAMBER

Sir Walter Scott

About the end of the American war, when the officers of Lord Cornwallis's army, which surrendered at Yorktown, and others, who had been made prisoners during the impolitic and ill-fated controversy, were returning to their own country to relate their adventures and repose themselves after their fatigues, there was amongst them a general officer, to whom Miss S. gave the name of Browne, but merely, as I understood, to save the inconvenience of introducing a nameless agent in the narrative. He was an officer of merit, as well as a gentleman of high consideration for family and attainments.

Some business had carried General Browne upon a tour through the western counties, when, in the conclusion of a morning stage, he found himself in the vicinity of a small country town, which presented a scene of uncommon beauty, and of a character peculiarly English.

The little town, with its stately old church, whose tower bore testimony to the devotion of ages long past, lay amidst pastures and cornfields of small extent, but bounded and divided with hedgerow timber of great age and size. There were few marks of modern improvement. The environs of the place intimated neither the solitude of decay nor the bustle of novelty; the houses were old, but in good repair; and the beautiful little river murmured freely on its way to the left of the town, neither restrained by a dam nor bordered by a towing-path.

Upon a gentle eminence, nearly a mile to the southward of the town, were seen, amongst many venerable oaks and tangled thickets, the turrets of a castle as old as the wars of York and Lancaster, but which seemed to have received important alterations during the age of Elizabeth and her successor. It had not been a place of great size; but whatever accommodation it formerly afforded was, it must be supposed, still to be obtained within its walls; at least, such was the inference which General Browne drew from observing the smoke arise merrily from several of the ancient wreathed and carved chimney-stalks. The wall of the park ran alongside of the highway for two or three hundred yards; and through the

different points by which the eye found glimpses into the woodland scenery it seemed to be well stocked. Other points of view opened in succession—now a full one of the front of the old castle, and now a side glimpse at its particular towers, the former rich in all the bizarrerie of the Elizabethan school, while the simple and solid strength of other parts of the building seemed to show that they had been raised more for defence than ostentation.

Delighted with the partial glimpses which he obtained of the castle through the woods and glades by which this ancient feudal fortress was surrounded, our military traveller was determined to enquire whether it might not deserve a nearer view, and whether it contained family pictures or other objects of curiosity worthy of a stranger's visit, when, leaving the vicinity of the park, he rolled through a clean and well-paved street and stopped at the door of a well-frequented inn.

Before ordering horses to proceed on his journey, General Browne made enquiries concerning the proprietor of the chateau which had so attracted his admiration, and was equally surprised and pleased at hearing in reply a nobleman named whom we shall call Lord Woodville. How fortunate! Much of Browne's early recollections, both at school and at college, had been connected with young Woodville, whom, by a few questions, he now ascertained to be the same with the owner of this fair domain. He had been raised to the peerage by the decease of his father a few months before, and, as the General learned from the landlord, the term of mourning being ended, was now taking possession of his paternal estate, in the jovial season of merry autumn, accompanied by a select party of friends, to enjoy the sports of a country famous for game.

This was delightful news to our traveller. Frank Woodville had been Richard Browne's fag at Eton, and his chosen intimate at Christ Church; their pleasures and their tasks had been the same; and the honest soldier's heart warmed to find his early friend in possession of so delightful a residence, and of an estate, as the landlord assured him with a nod and a wink, fully adequate to maintain and add to his dignity. Nothing was more natural than that the traveller should suspend a journey which there was nothing to render hurried to pay a visit to an old friend under such agreeable circumstances.

The fresh horses, therefore, had only the brief task of con-

veying the General's travelling-carriage to Woodville Castle. A porter admitted them at a modern Gothic lodge, built in that style to correspond with the castle itself, and at the same time rang a bell to give warning of the approach of visitors. Apparently the sound of the bell had suspended the separation of the company, bent on the various amusements of the morning, for, on entering the court of the chateau, several young men were lounging about in their sporting-dresses, looking at and criticizing the dogs, which the keepers held in readiness to attend their pastime. As General Browne alighted, the young lord came to the gate of the hall, and for an instant gazed as at a stranger upon the countenance of his friend, on which war, with its fatigues and its wounds, had made a great alteration. But the uncertainty lasted no longer than till the visitor had spoken, and the hearty greeting which followed was such as can only be exchanged betwixt those who have passed together the merry days of careless boyhood or early youth.

'If I could have formed a wish, my dear Browne,' said Lord Woodville, 'it would have been to have you here, of all men, upon this occasion, which my friends are good enough to hold as a sort of holiday. Do not think you have been unwatched during the years you have been absent from us. I have traced you through your dangers, your triumphs, your misfortunes, and was delighted to see that, whether in victory or defeat, the name of my old friend was always distinguished with applause.'

The General made a suitable reply, and congratulated his friend on his new dignities, and the possession of a place and domain so beautiful.

'Nay, you have seen nothing of it as yet,' said Lord Woodville, 'and I trust you do not mean to leave us till you are better acquainted with it. It is true, I confess, that my present party is pretty large, and the old house, like other places of the kind, does not possess so much accommodation as the extent of the outward walls appears to promise. But we can give you a comfortable old-fashioned room, and I venture to suppose that your campaigns have taught you to be glad of worse quarters.'

The General shrugged his shoulders and laughed. 'I presume,' he said, 'the worst apartment in your chateau is considerably superior to the old tobacco-cask in which I was

fain to take up my night's lodging when I was in the bush, as the Virginians call it, with the light corps. There I lay, like Diogenes himself, so delighted with my covering from the elements that I made a vain attempt to have it rolled on to my next quarters; but my commander for the time would give way to no such luxurious provision, and I took farewell of my beloved cask with tears in my eyes.'

'Well, then, since you do not fear your quarters,' said Lord Woodville, 'you will stay with me a week at least. Of guns, dogs, fishing-rods, flies and means of sport by sea and land, we have enough and to spare; you cannot pitch on an amusement, but we will find the means of pursuing it. But if you prefer the gun and pointers, I will go with you myself, and see whether you have mended your shooting since you have been amongst the Indians of the back settlements.'

The General gladly accepted his friendly host's proposal in all its points. After a morning of manly exercise, the company met at dinner, where it was the delight of Lord Woodville to conduce to the display of the high properties of his recovered friend, so as to recommend him to his guests, most of whom were persons of distinction. He led General Browne to speak of the scenes he had witnessed; and as every word marked alike the brave officer and the sensible man, who retained possession of his cool judgement under the most imminent dangers, the company looked upon the soldier with general respect, as on one who had proved himself possessed of an uncommon portion of personal courage—that attribute, of all others, of which everybody desires to be thought possessed.

The day at Woodville Castle ended as usual in such mansions. The hospitality stopped within the limits of good order; music in which the young lord was a proficient, succeeded to the circulation of the bottle; cards and billiards, for those who preferred such amusements, were in readiness; but the exercise of the morning required early hours, and not long after eleven o'clock the guests began to retire to their several apartments.

The young lord himself conducted his friend, General Browne, to the chamber destined for him, which answered the description he had given of it, being comfortable, but old-fashioned. The bed was of the massive form used in the end of the seventeenth century, and the curtains of faded silk, heavily trimmed with tarnished gold. But then the sheets,

pillows and blankets looked delightful to the campaigner, when he thought of his 'mansion, the cask'. There was an air of gloom in the tapestry hangings which, with their worn-out graces, curtained the walls of the little chamber, and gently undulated as the autumnal breeze found its way through the ancient lattice-window, which pattered and whistled as the air gained entrance. The toilet, too, with its mirror, turbaned, after the manner of the beginning of the century, with a coiffure of murrey-coloured silk, and its hundred strange-shaped boxes, providing for arrangements which had been obsolete for more than fifty years, had an antique, and in so far a melancholy aspect. But nothing could blaze more brightly and cheerfully than the two large wax candles; or if aught could rival them, it was the flaming, bickering faggots in the chimney, that sent at once their gleam and their warmth through the snug apartment, which, notwithstanding the general antiquity of its appearance, was not wanting in the least convenience that modern habits rendered either necessary or desirable.

'This is an old-fashioned sleeping-apartment, General,' said the young lord, 'but I hope you find nothing that makes you envy your old tobacco-cask.'

'I am not particular respecting my lodgings,' replied the General; 'yet were I to make any choice, I would prefer this chamber by many degrees to the gayer and more modern rooms of your family mansion. Believe me, that when I unite its modern air of comfort with its venerable antiquity, and recollect that it is your lordship's property, I shall feel in better quarters here than if I were in the best hotel London could afford.'

'I trust—I have no doubt—that you will find yourself as comfortable as I wish you, my dear General,' said the young nobleman; and once more bidding his guest good night, he shook him by the hand and withdrew.

The General once more looked round him, and internally congratulating himself on his return to peaceful life, the comforts of which were endeared by the recollection of the hardships and dangers he had lately sustained, undressed himself, and prepared himself for a luxurious night's rest.

Here, contrary to the custom of this species of tale, we leave the General in possession of his apartment until the next morning.

The company assembled for breakfast at an early hour, but without the appearance of General Browne, who seemed the guest that Lord Woodville was desirous of honouring above all whom his hospitality had assembled around him. He more than once expressed surprise at the General's absence, and at length sent a servant to make enquiry after him. The man brought back information that General Browne had been walking abroad since an early hour of the morning, in defiance of the weather, which was misty and ungenial.

'The custom of a soldier,' said the young nobleman to his friends; 'many of them acquire habitual vigilance, and cannot sleep after the early hour at which their duty usually commands them to be alert.'

Yet the explanation which Lord Woodville thus offered to the company seemed hardly satisfactory to his own mind, and it was in a fit of silence and abstraction that he awaited the return of the General. It took place near an hour after the breakfast bell had rung. He looked fatigued and feverish. His hair, the powdering and arrangement of which was at this time one of the most important occupations of a man's whole day, and marked his fashion as much as, in the present time, the tying of a cravat, or the want of one, was dishevelled, uncurled, void of powder, and dank with dew. His clothes were huddled on with a careless negligence remarkable in a military man, whose real or supposed duties are usually held to include some attention to the toilet; and his looks were haggard and ghastly in a peculiar degree.

'So you have stolen a march upon us this morning, my dear General,' said Lord Woodville; 'or you have not found your bed so much to your mind as I had hoped and you seemed to expect. How did you rest last night?'

'Oh, excellently well—remarkably well—never better in my life!' said General Browne rapidly, and yet with an air of embarrassment which was obvious to his friend. He then hastily swallowed a cup of tea, and, neglecting or refusing whatever else he was offered, seemed to fall into a fit of abstraction.

'You will take the gun today, General?' said his friend and host, but had to repeat the question twice ere he received the abrupt answer, 'No, my lord; I am sorry I cannot have the honour of spending another day with your lordship; my post-horses are ordered, and will be here directly.'

All who were present showed surprise, and Lord Woodville immediately replied, 'Post-horses, my good friend! What can you possibly want with them, when you promised to stay with me quietly for at least a week?'

'I believe,' said the General, obviously much embarrassed, 'that I might, in the pleasure of my first meeting with your lordship, have said something about stopping here a few days; but I have since found it altogether impossible.'

'That is very extraordinary,' answered the young nobleman. 'You seemed quite disengaged yesterday, and you cannot have had a summons today, for our post has not come up from the town, and therefore you cannot have received any letters.'

General Browne, without giving any further explanation, muttered something of indispensable business, and insisted on the absolute necessity of his departure in a manner which silenced all opposition on the part of his host, who saw that his resolution was taken, and forbore all further importunity.

'At least, however,' he said, 'permit me, my dear Browne, since go you will or must, to show you the view from the terrace, which the mist, that is now rising, will soon display.'

He threw open a sash-window and stepped down upon the terrace as he spoke. The General followed him mechanically, but seemed little to attend to what his host was saying, as, looking across an extended and rich prospect, he pointed out the different objects worthy of observation. Thus they moved on till Lord Woodville had attained his purpose of drawing his guest entirely apart from the rest of the company, when, turning round upon him with an air of great solemnity, he addressed him thus:

'Richard Browne, my old and very dear friend, we are now alone. Let me conjure you to answer me upon the word of a friend and the honour of a soldier. How did you in reality rest during last night?'

'Most wretchedly indeed, my lord,' answered the General, in the same tone of solemnity; 'so miserably, that I would not run the risk of such a second night, not only for all the lands belonging to this castle, but for all the country which I see from this elevated point of view.'

'This is most extraordinary,' said the young lord, as if speaking to himself; 'then there must be something in the reports concerning that apartment.' Again turning to the General, he said, 'For God's sake, my dear friend, be candid

with me and let me know the disagreeable particulars which have befallen you under a roof where, with consent of the owner, you should have met nothing save comfort.'

The General seemed distressed by this appeal, and paused a moment before he replied. 'My dear lord,' he at length said, 'what happened to me last night is of a nature so peculiar and so unpleasant, that I could hardly bring myself to detail it even to your lordship, were it not that, independent of my wish to gratify any request of yours, I think that sincerity on my part may lead to some explanation about a circumstance equally painful and mysterious. To others, the communication I am about to make might place me in the light of a weak-minded, superstitious fool, who suffered his own imagination to delude and bewilder him; but you have known me in childhood and youth, and will not suspect me of having adopted in manhood the feelings and frailties from which my early years were free.' Here he paused, and his friend replied:

'Do not doubt my perfect confidence in the truth of your communication, however strange it may be,' replied Lord Woodville; 'I know your firmness of disposition too well to suspect you could be made the object of imposition, and am aware that your honour and your friendship will equally deter you from exaggerating whatever you may have witnessed.'

'Well, then,' said the General, 'I will proceed with my story as well as I can, relying upon your candour, and yet distinctly feeling that I would rather face a battery than recall to my mind the odious recollections of last night.'

He paused a second time, and then perceiving that Lord Woodville remained silent and in an attitude of attention, he commenced, though not without obvious reluctance, the history of his night adventures in the Tapestry Chamber.

'I undressed and went to bed, so soon as your lordship left me yesterday evening; but the wood in the chimney, which nearly fronted my bed, blazed brightly and cheerfully, and, aided by a hundred exciting recollections of my childhood and youth, which had been recalled by the unexpected pleasure of meeting your lordship, prevented me from falling immediately asleep. I ought, however, to say that these reflections were all of a pleasant and agreeable kind, grounded on a sense of having for a time exchanged the labour, fatigues and dangers of my profession for the enjoyments of a peaceful

life, and the reunion of those friendly and affectionate ties which I had torn asunder at the rude summons of war.

'While such pleasing reflections were stealing over my mind, and gradually lulling me to slumber, I was suddenly aroused by a sound like that of the rustling of a silken gown and the tapping of a pair of high-heeled shoes, as if a woman were walking in the apartment. Ere I could draw the curtain to see what the matter was, the figure of a little woman passed between the bed and the fire. The back of this form was turned to me, and I could observe, from the shoulders and neck, it was that of an old woman, whose dress was an old-fashioned gown, which, I think, ladies call a *sacque*—that is, a sort of robe completely loose in the body, but gathered into broad plaits upon the neck and shoulders, which fall down to the ground, and terminate in a species of train.

'I thought the intrusion singular enough, but never harboured for a moment the idea that what I saw was anything more than the mortal form of some old woman about the establishment, who had a fancy to dress like her grandmother, and who, having perhaps, as your lordship mentioned that you were rather straitened for room, been dislodged from her chamber for my accommodation, had forgotten the circumstance and returned by twelve to her old haunt. Under this persuasion I moved myself in bed and coughed a little, to make the intruder sensible of my being in possession of the premises. She turned slowly round, but, gracious Heaven! my lord, what a countenance did she display to me! There was no longer any question what she was, or any thought of her being a living being. Upon a face which wore the fixed features of a corpse were imprinted the traces of the vilest and most hideous passions which had animated her while she lived. The body of some atrocious criminal seemed to have been given up from the grave, and the soul restored from the penal fire, in order to form, for a space, a union with the ancient accomplice of its guilt. I started up in bed, and sat upright, supporting myself on my palms, as I gazed on this horrible spectre. The hag made, as it seemed, a single and swift stride to the bed where I lay, and squatted herself down upon it, in precisely the same attitude which I had assumed in the extremity of horror, advancing her diabolical countenance within a yard of mine, with a grin which seemed to intimate the malice and the derision of an incarnate fiend.'

Here General Browne stopped, and wiped from his brow the cold perspiration with which the recollections of his horrible vision had covered it.

'My lord,' he said, 'I am no coward. I have been in all the mortal dangers incidental to my profession, and I may truly boast that no man ever knew Richard Browne dishonour the sword he wears; but in these horrible circumstances, under the eyes, and, as it seemed, almost in the grasp, of an incarnation of an evil spirit, all firmness forsook me, all manhood melted from me like wax in the furnace, and I felt my hair individually bristle. The current of my life-blood ceased to flow, and I sank back in a swoon, as very a victim to panic terror as ever was a village girl or a child of ten years old. How long I lay in this condition I cannot pretend to guess.

'But I was roused by the castle clock striking one, so loud that it seemed as if it were in the very room. It was some time before I dared open my eyes, lest they should again encounter the horrible spectacle. When, however, I summoned courage to look up, she was no longer visible. My first idea was to pull my bell, wake the servants, and remove to a garret or a hay-loft, to be ensured against a second visitation. Nay, I will confess the truth, that my resolution was altered, not by the shame of exposing myself, but by the fear that, as the bell-cord hung by the chimney, I might, in making my way to it, be again crossed by the fiendish hag, who, I figured to myself, might be still lurking about some corner of the apartment.

'I will not pretend to describe what hot and cold fever-fits tormented me for the rest of the night, through broken sleep, weary vigils, and that dubious state which forms the neutral ground between them. A hundred terrible objects appeared to haunt me; but there was the great difference betwixt the vision which I have described and those which followed, that I knew the last to be deceptions of my own fancy and over-excited nerves.

'Day at least appeared, and I rose from my bed ill in health and humiliated in mind. I was ashamed of myself as a man and a soldier, and still more so at feeling my own extreme desire to escape from the haunted apartment, which, however, conquered all other considerations; so that, huddling on my clothes with the most careless haste, I made my escape from your lordship's mansion, to seek in the open air some relief to my nervous system, shaken as it was by this horrible en-

counter with a visitant, for such I must believe her, from the other world. Your lordship has now heard the cause of my discomposure, and of my sudden desire to leave your hospitable castle. In other places I trust we may often meet; but God protect me from ever spending a second night under that roof!

Strange as the General's tale was, he spoke with such a deep air of conviction, that it cut short all the usual commentaries which are made on such stories. Lord Woodville never once asked him if he was sure he did not dream of the apparition, or suggested any of the possibilities by which it is fashionable to explain supernatural appearances, as wild vagaries of the fancy or deceptions of the optic nerves. On the contrary, he seemed deeply impressed with the truth and reality of what he had heard; and, after a considerable pause, regretted, with much appearance of sincerity, that his early friend should in his house have suffered so severely.

'I am the more sorry for your pain, my dear Browne,' he continued, 'that it is the unhappy, though most unexpected, result of an experiment of my own. You must know that, for my father and grandfather's time, at least, the apartment which was assigned to you last night had been shut on account of reports that it was disturbed by supernatural sights and noises. When I came, a few weeks since, into possession of the estate, I thought the accommodation which the castle afforded for my friends was not extensive enough to permit the inhabitants of the invisible world to retain possession of a comfortable sleeping-apartment. I therefore caused the Tapestry Chamber, as we call it, to be opened, and, without destroying its air of antiquity, I had such new articles of furniture placed in it as became the modern times. Yet, as the opinion that the room was haunted very strongly prevailed among the domestics, and was also known in the neighbourhood and to many of my friends, I feared some prejudice might be entertained by the first occupant of the Tapestry Chamber, which might tend to revive the evil report which it had laboured under, and so disappoint my purpose of rendering it a useful part of the house. I must confess, my dear Browne, that your arrival yesterday, agreeable to me for a thousand reasons besides, seemed the most favourable opportunity of removing the unpleasant rumours which attached to the room, since your courage was indubitable, and your

mind free of any preoccupation on the subject. I could not, therefore, have chosen a more fitting subject for my experiment.'

'Upon my life,' said General Browne, somewhat hastily, 'I am infinitely obliged to your lordship—very particularly indebted indeed. I am likely to remember for some time the consequences of the experiment, as your lordship is pleased to call it.'

'Nay, now you are upset, my dear friend,' said Lord Woodville. 'You have only to reflect for a single moment, in order to be convinced that I could not augur the possibility of the pain to which you have been so unhappily exposed. I was yesterday morning a complete sceptic on the subject of supernatural appearances. Nay, I am sure that, had I told you what was said about the room, those very reports would have induced you, by your own choice, to select it for your accommodation. It was my misfortune, perhaps my error, but really cannot be termed my fault, that you have been afflicted so strangely.'

'Strangely indeed!' said the General, resuming his good temper; 'and I acknowledge that I have no right to be offended with your lordship for treating me like what I used to think myself, a man of some firmness and courage. But I see my post-horses are arrived, and I must not detain your lordship from your amusement.'

'Nay, my old friend,' said Lord Woodville, 'since you cannot stay with us another day, which, indeed, I can no longer urge, give me at least half an hour more. You used to love pictures, and I have a gallery of portraits, some of them by Vandyke, representing ancestry to whom this property and castle formerly belonged. I think that several of them will strike you as possessing merit.'

General Browne accepted the invitation, though somewhat unwillingly. It was evident he was not to breathe freely or at ease till he left Woodville Castle far behind. He could not refuse his friend's invitation, however; and the less so, that he was a little ashamed of the peevishness which he had displayed towards his well-meaning entertainer.

The General, therefore, followed Lord Woodville through several rooms, into a long gallery hung with pictures, which the latter pointed out to his guest, telling the names, and giving some account of the personages whose portraits pre-

sented themselves in progression. General Browne was but little interested in the details which these accounts conveyed to him. They were, indeed, of the kind which are usually found in an old family gallery. Here was a cavalier who had ruined the estate in the royal cause; there a fine lady who had reinstated it by contracting a match with a wealthy Roundhead. There hung a gallant who had been in danger for corresponding with the exiled court at St Germain's; here one who had taken arms for William at the Revolution; and there a third that had thrown his weight alternately into the scale of Whig and Tory.

While Lord Woodville was cramming these words into his guest's ear, 'against the stomach of his sense', they gained the middle of the gallery, when he beheld General Browne suddenly start, and assume an attitude of the utmost surprise, not unmixed with fear, as his eyes were caught and suddenly riveted by a portrait of an old lady in a *sacque*, the fashionable dress of the end of the seventeenth century.

'There she is!' he exclaimed - 'there she is, in form and features, though inferior in *démoniac* expression to the accursed hag who visited me last night.'

'If that be the case,' said the young nobleman, 'there can remain no longer any doubt of the horrible reality of your apparition. That is the picture of a wretched ancestress of mine, of whose crimes a black and fearful catalogue is recorded in a family history in my charter-chest. The recital of them would be too horrible; it is enough to say, that in yon fatal apartment incest and unnatural murder were committed. I will restore it to the solitude to which the better judgement of those who preceded me had consigned it; and never shall anyone, so long as I can prevent it, be exposed to a repetition of the supernatural horrors which could shake such courage as yours.'

Thus the friends, who had met with such glee, parted in a very different mood - Lord Woodville to command the Tapestried Chamber to be unmantled and the door built up; and General Browne to seek in some less beautiful country, and with some less dignified friend, forgetfulness of the painful night which he had passed in Woodville Castle.

THE TUNNEL

Patrick Davis

There were three of them, two boys and a man, sitting on the short spring grass that partly sheathed the slope of a railway cutting. The grass alternated with patches of low thorn bush. A hundred yards to their left the cutting gave way to a tunnel. Round the brick arch of the tunnel, like a fringe of hair, was a dense thicket of blackberry brambles. The sun was shining, warming the air and the three seated figures. The sunlight emphasized the blackness of the tunnel.

The man looked at his watch. 'We must go, boys. Dursen't be late.'

They slid and scrambled down the slope to the bottom of the cutting. The rails of the single line had been removed some years back, but the sleepers were still in place, partly hidden by grass and young bushes. They were rotting a little at the edges. The man and the boys stepped and jumped from sleeper to sleeper until they reached the tunnel. There they paused. To a height of eight feet the entrance was criss-crossed with barbed wire.

The man was dressed in old corduroy trousers, with a grey pullover on top of a shirt. He was perhaps in his early forties. He said: 'I don't mind admitting I be nervous. There bain't anything in the police manuals that covers this.' From a haversack he drew out a pair of wire-cutters. 'If you wants to cop a copper breaking and entering, here's your chance.'

It took him nearly five minutes to make a gap large enough for them to pass through. He replaced the cutters in the haversack and produced three squares of chocolate and a torch. 'You boys got your torches? Right. We'll 'ave a square of chocolate each as we enter the lion's den.'

Chocolate was a rarity in those days. Each body kept to himself the ration allowed by the government. The boys appreciated the man's generosity.

The taller boy spoke. He and his companion were both sixteen, but he looked the older. 'Constable Perkins, nothing may happen, you know. You won't blame us, will you? Thanks for the chocolate.'

'Yes thanks,' said the other boy.

'We've had all that out, mister, your friend John and I. I don't care to see 'im in trouble. Reckon he believes his story if it makes 'im ill, so it's only proper for you and I to believe it. We 'ave to help one another. If nothing 'appens, why, I'll be right sorry for John -' he grinned - 'but mighty relieved for old Perkins. Come, we'd best be moving.'

He led through the wire and into the tunnel. The light from the entrance lasted for a surprisingly long way. And mostly they could rely on the even spacing of the sleepers. But the difference in temperature was startling. They were glad of the pullovers.

It was a long tunnel, built on the curve. After four hundred yards they lost the entrance, already diminished to a point of brightness, and had not yet picked up the far exit. The brick lining, here and there, was damp with moisture. At one spot there was a thin barrier of drips from the roof that splashed on each side of them in turn. An upward sweep of the Constable's torch revealed a steady rivulet of water running down the wall on either side.

'There,' he said, 'that shows as 'ow the chalk do let through the rain. They say it cannot get through the clay. You boys know all about that, I'll be bound.'

The boys did not reply. All three felt uneasy in the silence that followed, which the little water noises seemed to intensify. So they moved on, their feet stepping from sleeper to sleeper to sleeper. Occasionally one of them kicked a stone which bounced and clattered into the gloom. There was in the dank air a faint smell of smoke, or was this imagination? There had been no trains for several years.

They passed a wooden post painted white. 'It's the next refuge,' said the taller boy. 'It's not far on, John said.' By now their feet had so adjusted to the interval between the sleepers that they could move for a distance without light. The tall boy's torch lit the wall of the tunnel to his left and soon revealed a recessed space in the brickwork. 'This must be it.'

He shone his torch on to his watch. 'Ten minutes yet.' The Constable walked some yards further, came back, swept his torch up and round the roof and then over the walls and along the track. 'Can't see t'other end. Must be two hundred foot of chalk and flint above us 'ere. Old Tom's fields, I reckon, or maybe Chauntley Wood. They do say the tunnel goes under the wood. Safe from that Hitler's bombs down 'ere

eh? There's badgers in the wood. Did you young fellers know that? I'll take you to see 'em one evening if you'd fancy that.'

'Wish we were up there now,' said the shorter boy.

'Think of old John,' said his companion.

This ended the conversation. Then there were no sounds except for those they themselves made: the soft rub of cloth on cloth as they shifted an arm, the sharp strike of boot on stone ballast. The smaller boy sneezed and said 'Sorry'.

They heard the sound of the train simultaneously. They had been waiting for it. 'It be coming then,' said Constable Perkins. 'Into that refuge with you now. Look sharp.'

They heard a distant whistle. The drumming of the train wheels on the track increased rapidly. Then there was a sudden storm of air. Constable Perkins said: 'Praise be it's dark, boys. You can't see me shaking.' He had to shout.

The engine came round the curve of the tunnel. In the glow from the cab they could see the smoke streaming back. It was trapped by the tunnel walls and enveloped the carriages behind like cotton-wool packing. Sparks flew from the funnel. Then it was upon them, roaring and racketing by as they pressed back into the refuge. The noise was deafening, overpowering thought. The smaller boy had his hands tight against his ears. Through the smoke they caught glimpses of lit carriage windows and the heads of people. The smoke made them cough and brought tears to their eyes.

As John had said, it happened when the last two carriages were passing them. Without warning the steady deafening clatter changed to a splintering screeching crashing earthquake of a noise. The world was breaking up. Those last carriages slowed abruptly, swaying, rocking; they slewed sideways off the rails, scraped along the tunnel wall for a few yards, sparks showering, then stopped. There were no lights in the carriages now. There was total darkness and a sudden deep silence except for a distant sibilant sound of escaping steam. Perhaps it was only fifteen seconds before the screaming began. It seemed a lifetime.

The man had gripped the two boys by an arm. They had not moved and did not move now. They stared towards the last carriage, smelling smoke and the acrid tang of scorched wood and metal. A faint glow from the wreckage grew stronger. Some part of the train was on fire.

Another lifetime passed. It may have been no more than a minute. Then a dog came towards them from the train. They knew because it was whimpering. The noise of shouting and screaming and steam escaping faded. The whimpering of the dog as it slowly approached them was the only sound to which they could give attention.

The animal lay down between the lines exactly opposite the refuge. For a little while they listened and stared at the spot, unable to distinguish anything. Then the Constable stepped out and shone his torch. They saw it was a terrier. It was badly injured: its stomach had been torn open.

When the Constable stooped to comfort the animal, still shining his torch, it growled and snapped at his fingers. 'Reckon we should put the poor beast out of its misery,' he said, straightening.

The shorter boy stood beside him. 'You distract him, Constable sir. I'll get behind.' This worked well enough, though the dog fastened his teeth into the sleeve of the Constable's jersey. The boy did not need to press on the dog's throat for long.

They relaxed. They became aware that all sounds had ceased. There was no smoke billowing round them. The glow ahead had disappeared. The man shone his torch down the tunnel. The beam lit nothing save curving brick and the ballast and sleepers.

'Then it be over for this year,' he said. 'We can go back.' He shivered.

In silence, moving fast, they returned along the sleepers to the tunnel entrance, climbed through the gap in the wire into full daylight. The Constable rearranged the severed strands as best he could. 'I'll come back Sunday with more wire,' he said, 'and do that properly. If it weren't for Hitler, this would 'a been bricked up.' They scrambled up the side of the cutting. At the top there was the sunlight. The Constable took a deep breath and stretched his arms wide. 'Dunno about you,' he said, 'but the air do smell marvellous.'

'Did John say anything about a dog?' asked the taller boy.

'No,' said the other, 'he never did.'

They found the track over the fields and walked the four miles to the village. The taller boy said: 'We promised John we'd see him as soon as we could.' The Constable nodded.

They turned out of the main street down a side alley and knocked at the front door of a cottage. The door was opened by a boy.

The two boys exclaimed 'John!' almost simultaneously. He was not in bed. And he looked different.

'You did it, didn't you? You put him out of his misery.' They nodded. The shorter boy glanced at his hands. 'I couldn't do it,' said John. 'But I knew you had. I felt it. It was like . . . It was like when mother unscrews the valve from our pressure cooker.'

The Constable was fingering the torn sleeve of his jersey. 'It's a rum business,' he said. 'Will you be all right now, John boy?'

'Yes, I think so.' John smiled. He smiled for the first time for a year. 'I think so.'

GHOST STORIES OF THE TILED HOUSE

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

I

Old Sally always attended her young mistress while she prepared for bed – not that Liliás required help, for she had the spirit of neatness and a joyous, gentle alacrity, and only troubled the good old creature enough to prevent her thinking herself growing old and useless.

Sally, in her quiet way, was garrulous, and she had all sorts of old-world tales of wonder and adventure, to which Liliás often went pleasantly to sleep; for there was no danger while old Sally sat knitting there by the fire, and the sound of the rector's mounting upon his chairs, as was his wont, and taking down and putting up his books in the study beneath, though muffled and faint, gave evidence that that good and loving influence was awake and busy.

Old Sally was telling her young mistress, who sometimes listened with a smile, and sometimes lost a good five minutes together of her gentle prattle, how the young gentleman, Mr Mervyn, had taken that awful old haunted habitation, the Tiled House 'beyant at Ballyfermot', and was going to stay there, and wondered no one had told him of the mysterious dangers of that desolate mansion.

It stood by a lonely bend of the narrow road. Liliás had often looked up the short, straight, grass-grown avenue with an awful curiosity at the old house which she had learned in childhood to fear as the abode of shadowy tenants and unearthly dangers.

'There are people, Sally, nowadays, who call themselves free-thinkers, and don't believe in anything – even in ghosts,' said Liliás.

'A then the place he's stopping in now, Miss Lilly, 'ill soon cure him of free-thinking, if half they say about it's true,' answered Sally.

'But I don't say, mind, *he's* a free-thinker, for I don't know anything of Mr Mervyn; but if he be not, he must be very brave, or very good, indeed. I know, Sally, I should be horribly afraid indeed, to sleep in it myself,' answered Liliás, with a

cosy little shudder, as the ærial image of the old house for a moment stood before her, with its peculiar malign, scared, and skulking aspect, as if it had drawn back in shame and guilt among the melancholy old elms and tall hemlock and nettles.

'And now, Sally, I'm safe in bed. Stir the fire, my old darling.' For although it was the first week in May, the night was frosty. 'And tell me all about the Tiled House again, and frighten me out of my wits.'

So good old Sally, whose faith in such matters was a religion, went off over the well-known ground in a gentle little amble—sometimes subsiding into a walk as she approached some special horror, and pulling up altogether—that is to say, suspending her knitting, and looking with a mysterious nod at her young mistress in the four-poster, or lowering her voice to a sort of whisper when the crisis came.

So she told her how when the neighbours hired the orchard that ran up to the windows at the back of the house, the dogs they kept then used to howl so wildly and wolfishly all night among the trees, and prowl under the walls of the house so dejectedly, that they were fain to open the door and let them in at last; and, indeed, small need there was there for dogs; for no one, young or old, dared go near the orchard after nightfall. No, the golden pippins that peeped so splendid through the leaves in the western rays of evening, and made the mouths of the Ballyfermot schoolboys water, glowed undisturbed in the morning sunbeams, and secure in the mysterious tutelage of the night, smiled coyly on their predatory longings. And this was no fanciful reserve and avoidance. Mick Daly, when he had the orchard, used to sleep in the loft over the kitchen; and he swore that within five or six weeks, while he lodged there, he twice saw the same thing, and that was a lady in a hood and a loose dress, her head drooping, and her finger on her lip, walking in silence among the crooked stems, with a little child by the hand, who ran smiling and skipping beside her. And the Widow Cresswell once met them at nightfall on the path through the orchard to the back door, and she did not know what it was until she saw the men looking at one another as she told it.

'It's often she told it to me,' said old Sally; 'and how she came on them all of a sudden at the turn of the path, just by the thick clump of alder trees; and how she stopped, thinking it

was some lady that had a right to be there; and how they went by as swift as the shadow of a cloud, though she only seemed to be walking slow enough, and the little child pulling by her arm, this way and that way, and took no notice of her, nor even raised her head, though she stopped and curtsied. And old Clinton, don't you remember old Clinton, Miss Lilly?'

'I think I do, the old man who limped, and wore the odd black wig?'

'Yes, indeed, acushla, so he did. See how well she remembers? That was by a kick of one of the earl's horses - he was groom then,' resumed Sally. 'He used to be troubled with hearing the very sounds his master used to make to bring him and old Oliver to the door, when he came back late. It was only on very dark nights when there was no moon. They used to hear, all on a sudden, the whimpering and scraping of dogs at the hall-door, and the sound of the whistle, and the light stroke across the window with the lash of the whip, just like as if the earl himself - may his poor soul find rest - was there. First the wind 'id stop, like you'd be holding your breath, then came these sounds they knew so well, and when they made no sign of stirring or opening the door, the wind 'id begin again with such a hoo-hoo-o-o-high, you'd think it was laughing, and crying, and hooting, all at once.'

Here old Sally resumed her knitting, suspended for a moment, as if she were listening to the wind outside the haunted precincts of the Tiled House, and she took up her parable again.

The very night he met his death in London, old Oliver, the butler, was listening to Clinton - for Clinton was a scholar - reading the letter that came to him through the post that day, telling him to get things ready, for his troubles were nearly over, and he expected to be with them again in a few days, and maybe almost as soon as the letter; and sure enough, while he was reading, there came a frightful rattle to the window, like someone all in a tremble, trying to shake it open, and the earl's voice, as they both conceited, cries from outside, "Let me in, let me in, let me in!" "It's him," says the butler. "'Tis so, bedad," says Clinton, and they both looked at the windy, and at one another - and then back again - overjoyed and frightened all at onst. Old Oliver was bad with the rheumatiz in his knee, and went lame like. So away goes Clinton to the hall-door, and he calls, "who's there?" and no answer. Maybe, says Clinton, to himself, 'tis what he's rid

round to the back-door; so to the back-door with him, and there he shouts again – and no answer, and not a sound outside – and he began to feel quare, and to the hall-door with him back again. “Who’s there? do you hear, who’s there?” he shouts, and receiving no answer still. “I’ll open the door at any rate,” says he, “maybe it’s what he’s made his escape,” for they knew all about his troubles, “and wants to get in without noise,” so praying all the time – for his mind misgave him, it might not be all right – he shifts the bars and unlocks the door; but neither man, woman, nor child, nor horse, nor any living shape, was standing there, only something or another slipt into the house close by his leg; it might be a dog, or something that way, he could not tell, for he only seen it for a moment with the corner of his eye, and it went in just like as if it belonged to the place. He could not see which way it went, up or down, but the house was never a happy one, or a quiet house after; and Clinton bangs the hall-door, and he took a sort of a turn and a thrembling, and back with him to Oliver, the butler, looking as white as the blank leaf of his master’s letter that was fluttering between his finger and thumb. “What is it? *what* is it?” says the butler, catching his crutch like a waypon, fastening his eyes on Clinton’s white face, and growing almost as pale himself. “The master’s dead,” says Clinton – and so he was, signs on it.

‘After the turn she got by what she seen in the orchard, when she came to know the truth of what it was, Jinny Cresswell, you may be sure, did not stay there any longer than she could help; and she began to take notice of things she did not mind before – such as when she went into the big bedroom over the hall that the lord used to sleep in, whenever she went in at one door the other door used to be pulled to very quick, as if someone avoiding her was getting out in haste; but the thing that frightened her most was just this – that sometimes she used to find a long, straight mark from the head to the foot of her bed, as if ’twas made by something heavy lying there, and the place where it was used to feel warm, as if – whoever it was – they only left it as she came into the room.

‘But the worst of all was poor Kitty Halpin, the young woman that died of what she seen. Her mother said it was how she was kept awake all the night with the walking about of someone in the next room, tumbling about boxes and pull-

ing open drawers and talking and sighing to himself, and she, poor thing, wishing to go to sleep and wondering who it could be, when in he comes, a fine man, in a sort of loose silk morning-dress an' no wig, but a velvet cap on, and to the windy with him quiet and aisy, and she makes a turn in the bed to let him know there was someone there, thinking he'd go away, but instead of that, over he comes to the side of the bed, looking very bad, and says something to her—but his speech was thick and queer, like a dummy's that 'id be trying to spake—and she grew very frightened, and says she, "I ask your honour's pardon, sir, but I can't hear you right," and with that he stretches up his neck high out of his cravat, turning his face up towards the ceiling, and—grace between us and harm!—his throat was cut across like another mouth, wide open, laughing at her; she seen no more, but dropped in a dead faint in the bed, and back to her mother with her in the morning, and she never swallied bit or sup more, only she just sat by the fire holding her mother's hand, crying and trembling, and peepin' over her shoulder, and starting with every sound, till she took the fever and died, poor thing, not five weeks after.'

And so on, and on, and on flowed the stream of old Sally's narrative, while Liliass dropped into dreamless sleep, and then the story-teller stole away to her own tidy bedroom and innocent slumbers.

II

I'm sure she believed every word she related, for old Sally was veracious. But all this was worth just so much as such talk commonly is—marvels, fabulæ, what our ancestors call winter's tales—which gathered details from every narrator and dilated in the act of narration. Still it was not quite for nothing that the house was held to be haunted. Under all this smoke there smouldered just a little spark of truth—an authenticated mystery, for the solution of which some of my readers may possibly suggest a theory, though I confess I can't.

Miss Rebecca Chatterworth, in a letter dated late in the autumn of 1753, gives a minute and curious relation of occurrences in the Tiled House, which, it is plain, although at starting she protests against all such fooleries, she has

heard with a peculiar sort of interest, and relates it certainly with an awful sort of particularity.

I was for printing the entire letter, which is really very singular as well as characteristic. But my publisher meets me with his veto; and I believe he is right. The worthy old lady's letter is, perhaps, too long; and I must rest content with a few hungry notes of its tenor.

That year, and somewhere about the 24th October, there broke out a strange dispute between Mr Alderman Harper, of Highstreet, Dublin, and my Lord Castlemallard, who, in virtue of his cousinship to the young heir's mother, had undertaken for him the management of the tiny estate on which the Tiled or Tyled House—for I find it spelt both ways—stood.

This Alderman Harper had agreed for a lease of the house for his daughter, who was married to a gentleman named Prosser. He furnished it and put up hangings, and otherwise went to considerable expense. Mr and Mrs Prosser came there some time in June, and after having parted with a good many servants in the interval, she made up her mind that she could not live in the house, and her father waited on Lord Castlemallard and told him plainly that he would not take out the lease because the house was subjected to annoyances which he could not explain. In plain terms, he said it was haunted, and that no servants would live there more than a few weeks, and that after what his son-in-law's family had suffered there, not only should he be excused from taking a lease of it, but that the house itself ought to be pulled down as a nuisance and the habitual haunt of something worse than human malefactors.

Lord Castlemallard filed a bill in the Equity side of Exchequer to compel Mr Alderman Harper to perform his contract, by taking out the lease. But the alderman drew an answer, supported by no less than seven long affidavits, copies of all which were furnished to his lordship, and with the desired effect; for rather than compel him to place them upon the file of the court, his lordship struck, and consented to release him.

I am sorry the cause did not proceed at least far enough to place upon the records of the court the very authentic and unaccountable story which Miss Rebecca relates.

The annoyances described did not begin till the end of August, when, one evening, Mrs Prosser, quite alone, was

sitting in the twilight at the back parlour window, which was open, looking out into the orchard, and plainly saw a hand stealthily placed upon the stone window-sill outside, as if by someone beneath the window, at her right side, intending to climb up. There was nothing but the hand, which was rather short, but handsomely formed, and white and plump, laid on the edge of the window-sill; and it was not a very young hand, but one aged, somewhere above forty, as she conjectured. It was only a few weeks before that the horrible robbery at Clondalkin had taken place, and the lady fancied that the hand was that of one of the miscreants who was now about to scale the windows of the Tiled House. She uttered a loud scream and an ejaculation of terror, and at the same moment the hand was quietly withdrawn.

Search was made in the orchard, but there was no indications of any person's having been under the window, beneath which, ranged along the wall, stood a great column of flower-pots, which it seemed must have prevented anyone's coming within reach of it.

The same night there came a hasty tapping, every now and then, at the window of the kitchen. The women grew frightened, and the servant-man, taking firearms with him, opened the back-door, but discovered nothing. As he shut it, however, he said 'a thump came on it', and a pressure as of somebody striving to force his way in, which frightened *him*; and though the tapping went on upon the kitchen window-panes, he made no further explorations.

About six o'clock on Saturday evening, the cook, 'an honest, sober woman, now aged nigh sixty years', being alone in the kitchen, saw, on looking up, it is supposed, the same fat but aristocratic-looking hand laid with its palm against the glass, near the side of the window, and this time moving slowly up and down, pressed all the while against the glass, as if feeling carefully for some inequality in its surface. She cried out, and said something like a prayer, on seeing it. But it was not withdrawn for several seconds after.

After this, for a great many nights, there came at first a low, and afterwards an angry rapping, as it seemed with a set of clenched knuckles, at the back-door. And the servant-man would not open it, but called to know who was there; and there came no answer, only a sound as if the palm of the hand was placed against it, and drawn slowly from side to side,

with a sort of soft, groping motion.

All this time, sitting in the back parlour, which, for the time, they used as a drawing-room, Mr and Mrs Prosser were disturbed by rappings at the window, sometimes very low and furtive, like a clandestine signal, and at others sudden and so loud as to threaten the breaking of the pane.

This was all at the back of the house, which looked upon the orchard, as you know. But on a Tuesday night, at about half past nine, there came precisely the same rapping at the hall-door, and went on, to the great annoyance of the master and terror of his wife, at intervals, for nearly two hours.

After this, for several days and nights, they had no annoyance whatsoever, and began to think that the nuisance had expended itself. But on the night of the 13th September, Jane Easterbrook, an English maid, having gone into the pantry for the small silver bowl in which her mistress's posset was served, happening to look up at the little window of only four panes, observed through an auger-hole which was drilled through the window-frame, for the admission of a bolt to secure the shutter, a white pudgy finger—first the tip, and then the two first joints introduced, and turned about this way and that, crooked against the inside, as if in search of a fastening which its owner designed to push aside. When the maid got back into the kitchen, we are told 'she fell into "a swounde"', and was all the next day very weak'.

Mr Prosser being, I've heard, a hard-headed and conceited sort of fellow, scouted the ghost, and sneered at the fears of his family. He was privately of opinion that the whole affair was a practical joke or a fraud, and waited an opportunity of catching the rogue *flagrante delicto*. He did not long keep this theory to himself, but let it out by degrees with no stint of oaths, believing that some domestic traitor held the thread of the conspiracy.

Indeed it was time something were done; for not only his servants, but good Mrs Prosser herself, had grown to look unhappy and anxious, and kept at home from the hour of sunset, and would not venture about the house after night-fall, except in couples.

The knocking had ceased for about a week; and one night, Mrs Prosser being in the nursery, her husband, who was in the parlour, heard it begin very softly at the hall-door. The air was quite still, which favoured his hearing distinctly. This

was the first time there had been any disturbance at that side of the house, and the character of the summons also was changed.

Mr Prosser, leaving the parlour door open, it seems, went quietly into the hall. The sound was that of beating on the outside of the stout door, softly and regularly, 'with the flat of the hand'. He was going to open it suddenly, but changed his mind; and went back very quietly, and on to the head of the kitchen stair, where was 'a strong closet' over the pantry, in which he kept his 'firearms, swords, and canes'.

Here he called his man-servant, whom he believed to be honest; and with a pair of loaded pistols in his own coat-pockets, and giving another pair to him, he went as lightly as he could, followed by the man, and with a stout walking-cane in his hand, forward to the door.

Everything went as Mr Prosser wished. The besieger of his house, so far from taking fright at their approach, grew more impatient; and the sort of patting which had roused his attention at first, assumed the rhythm and emphasis of a series of double-knocks.

Mr Prosser, angry, opened the door with his right arm across, cane in hand. Looking, he saw nothing; but his arm was jerked up oddly, as it might be with the hollow of a hand, and something passed under it, with a kind of gentle squeeze. The servant neither saw nor felt anything, and did not know why his master looked back so hastily, and shut the door with so sudden a slam.

From that time, Mr Prosser discontinued his angry talk and swearing about it, and seemed nearly as averse from the subject as the rest of the family. He grew, in fact, very uncomfortable, feeling an inward persuasion that when, in answer to the summons, he had opened the hall-door, he had actually given admission to the besieger.

He said nothing to Mrs Prosser, but went up earlier to his bedroom, where 'he read a while in his Bible, and said his prayers': I hope the particular relation of this circumstance does not indicate its singularity. He lay awake a good while, it appears; and as he supposed, about a quarter past twelve, he heard the soft palm of a hand patting on the outside of the bedroom door, and then brushed slowly along it.

Up bounced Mr Prosser, very much frightened, and locked the door, crying, 'Who's there?' but receiving no answer but

the same brushing sound of a soft hand drawn over the panels, which he knew only too well.

In the morning the housemaid was terrified by the impression of a hand in the dust of the 'little parlour' table, where they had been unpacking delft and other things the day before. The print of the naked foot in the sea-sand did not frighten Robinson Crusoe half so much. They were by this time all nervous, and some of them half crazed, about the hand.

Mr Prosser went to examine the mark, and made light of it, but, as he swore afterwards, rather to quiet his servants than from any comfortable feeling about it in his own mind; however, he had them all, one by one, into the room, and made each place his or her hand, palm downward, on the same table, thus taking a similar impression from every person in the house, including himself and his wife; and his 'affidavit' deposed that the formation of the hand so impressed differed altogether from those of the living inhabitants of the house, and corresponded exactly with that of the hand seen by Mrs Prosser and by the cook.

Whoever or whatever the owner of that hand might be, they all felt this subtle demonstration to mean that it was declared he was no longer out of doors, but had established himself in the house.

And now Mrs Prosser began to be troubled with strange and horrible dreams, some of which, as set out in detail, in Aunt Rebecca's long letter, are really very appalling nightmares. But one night, as Mr Prosser closed his bedchamber door, he was struck somewhat by the utter silence of the room, there being no sound of breathing, which seemed unaccountable to him, as he knew his wife was in bed, and his ears were particularly sharp.

There was a candle burning on a small table at the foot of the bed, besides the one he held in one hand, a heavy ledger connected with his father-in-law's business being under his arm. He drew the curtain at the side of the bed, and saw Mrs Prosser lying, as for a few seconds he mortally feared, dead, her face being motionless, white, and covered with a cold dew; and on the pillow, close beside her head, and just within the curtains, was the same white, fattish hand, the wrist resting on the pillow, and the fingers extended towards her temple with a slow, wavy motion.

Mr Prosser, with a horrified jerk, pitched the ledger right

at the curtains behind which the owner of the hand might be supposed to stand. The hand was instantaneously and smoothly snatched away, the curtains made a great wave, and Mr Prosser got round the bed in time to see the closet-door, which was at the other side, drawn close by the same white, puffy hand, as he believed.

He drew the door open with a fling, and stared in; but the closet was empty, except for the clothes hanging from the pegs on the wall, and the dressing-table and looking-glass facing the windows. He shut it sharply, and locked it, and felt for a minute, he says, 'as if he were like to lose his wits'; then, ringing at the bell, he brought the servants, and with much ado they recovered Mrs Prosser from a sort of 'trance', in which, he says, from her looks, she seemed to have suffered 'the pains of death'; and Aunt Rebecca adds, 'From what she told me of her visions, with her own lips, he might have added "and of hell also".'

But the occurrence which seems to have determined the crisis was the strange sickness of their eldest child, a little girl aged between two and three years. It lay awake, seemingly in paroxysms of terror, and the doctors who were called in set down the symptoms to incipient water on the brain. Mrs Prosser used to sit up with the nurse, by the nursery fire, much troubled in mind about the condition of her child.

Its bed was placed sideways along the wall, with its head against the door of a press or cupboard, which, however, did not shut quite close. There was a little valance, about a foot deep, round the top of the child's bed, and this descended within some ten or twelve inches of the pillow on which it lay.

They observed that the little creature was quieter whenever they took it up and held it on their laps. They had just replaced it, as it seemed to have grown quite sleepy and tranquil, but it was not five minutes in its bed when it began to scream in one of its frenzies of terror; at the same moment the nurse for the first time detected, and Mrs Prosser equally plainly saw, following the direction of her eyes, the real cause of the child's sufferings.

Protruding through the aperture of the press, and shrouded in the shade of the valance, they plainly saw the white fat hand, palm downwards, presented towards the head of the child. The mother uttered a scream, and snatched the child

from its little bed, and she and the nurse ran down to the lady's sleeping-room, where Mr Prosser was in bed, shutting the door as they entered; and they had hardly done so, when a gentle tap came to it from the outside.

There is a great deal more, but this will suffice. The singularity of the narrative seems to me to be this, that it describes the ghost of a hand, and no more. The person to whom that hand belonged never once appeared; nor was it a hand separated from a body, but only a hand so manifested and introduced, that its owner was always, by some crafty accident, hidden from view.

In the year 1819, at a college breakfast, I met a Mr Prosser – a thin, grave, but rather chatty old gentleman, with very white hair, drawn back into a pigtail – and he told us all, with a concise particularity, a story of his cousin, James Prosser, who, when an infant, had slept for some time in what his mother said was a haunted nursery in an old house near Chapelizod, and who, whenever he was ill, over-fatigued, or in anywise feverish, suffered all through his life, as he had done from a time he could scarcely remember, from a vision of a certain gentleman, fat and pale, every curl of whose wig, every button of whose laced clothes, and every feature and line of whose sensual, malignant, and unwholesome face, was as minutely engraven upon his memory as the dress and lineaments of his father's portrait, which hung before him every day at breakfast, dinner, and supper.

Mr Prosser mentioned this as an instance of a curiously monotonous, individualized, and persistent nightmare, and hinted the extreme horror and anxiety with which his cousin, of whom he spoke in the past tense as 'poor Jemmie', was at any time induced to mention it.

I hope the reader will pardon me for loitering so long in the Tiled House, but this sort of lore has always had a charm for me; and people, you know, especially old people, will talk of what most interests themselves, too often forgetting that others may have had more than enough of it.

THE MATINEE

William Abney

The woman walked at a steady pace between the hedgerows of the quiet lane that leads to Billington. It was a fine afternoon, an afternoon when the kind angle of the autumn sun seemed to have turned everything to gold. She had nearly two miles to go yet, but as the curtain didn't rise until three o'clock, there was plenty of time for her to enjoy the peace and gentleness of her surroundings. 'How odd,' she thought to herself, 'that they should still be in Billington after all this time – The Walter Birch Players; summer season, June till the middle of October. That was longer than most, but Billington has a very mild climate and people like to come there to catch the last of the sun's warm rays.'

Though she had been away for many years, the woman was well acquainted with the road she followed and made little sounds of recognition as she came across each familiar feature on the way. A gate, a tree, the little cemetery, a cottage – that one, for instance. 'Ugh,' she exclaimed, her face sour with disapproval, 'they've painted it blue; now why did they want to do that!' New people, she supposed, probably refugees from suburbia without feeling for the countryside. She reproved herself for being so intolerant and had, at least, to acknowledge their good sense in having chosen to settle here, in her territory; for so she regarded it, although she was really a Londoner and it was only through an endless succession of seasons with the Walter Birch Players that she had come to look upon this as home ground.

Endless succession of seasons? Not altogether so. There had been an end, a rather abrupt end, some years ago now – just how many years she couldn't quite remember. Six? Seven? Maybe even ten – and life had never been quite the same since. She still missed that smell of size which seemed to be a chronic component of the back-stage atmosphere in any weekly 'rep' . . . scenery ever in a state of being prepared for the next show. At first she had found it quite revolting – like the acrid stench of bilious attacks over lavatory bowls as a child – but later, it had come to mean more to her than any whiff of Lanvin or Chanel. And those chaotic rehearsals

with dog-eared scripts, when all the proper moves had to be changed because of their crude and simple sets. And studying lines back at the digs into the small hours. The anguish of opening nights—words forgotten, entrances missed, yet the whole thing somehow accomplished; and greeted when all was done by 'tumultuous applause'.

On all this she reflected with a warm, sad pleasure as she left the peaceful protection of her country lane and approached the outskirts of Billington. It was a small market town two miles from the coast and it offered the best of both worlds as a little centre for seaside and country holidays. The theatre was a ramshackle, gawky Edwardian building with wrought-iron arches supporting a glass shelter over the forecourt. It stood on the fringe of the town and, having stalls, circle and a gallery, reared up tall and narrow, its back—now in view—scarred in a series of diagonals by an ugly metal fire-escape.

She stopped for a moment and gazed at the odd structure with affection but despite the warmth of her feeling she started to shiver. She had forgotten for that moment just how it had all ended—for her, at any rate. 'But that was a long time ago,' she told herself and, shrugging off the chill, felt only the pleasure of seeing the old place again. Would any of her crowd be there, she wondered. The lady at the box office—what was her name? Hetty? Letty? something like that. And dear Jim, the ageing factotum, who never failed to don his well-worn, outsize uniform before taking up his position in the middle of the foyer. He couldn't still be there, surely; he'd be too old by now. There might still be someone in the company, though. One or two perhaps; it had been like a family in a way and people had always come back if they could possibly manage it. Would George be there? Not likely—not after what had happened. Poor George, she'd never realized how involved he was, nor that he could be so jealous. But he was a good actor; made a splendid Darkie Bellingham! That, of course, was the incredible coincidence. That they should be playing, of all things, *Love from a Stranger*, that old chestnut! Her last show there and, if public reaction were anything to go by, *not* such an old chestnut. 'We certainly kept them on the edge of their seats,' she recalled, with some satisfaction.

She looked at her watch and realized that though she had allowed herself plenty of time for the walk, she had spent

far too much of it day-dreaming. It was now after three and the curtain would already be up. Quickening her pace, she cut through the car park, past the old 'Pit' exits, and finally reached the forecourt, where she would have liked to pause and examine the cheaply printed bills and the sepia portraits of the players, all displayed outside the glass and mahogany swing-doors. But there was no time for that. The foyer looked empty; they'd all gone in, she supposed. No sign of Jim; if by any chance he were still with them, he'd probably have slipped off for a quick brew-up. She hurried over to the box office. If Hetty or Letty – whichever it was – were still there, she'd give her a 'comp', of course. Not that it mattered; she was quite prepared to pay for her seat – but it would be nice, that feeling of mild importance. For a few seconds she waited by the window but it seemed there was no one in the office. Mid-week *matinée*, late in the season; yes, things would be pretty quiet, she reasoned, and anyhow, the business side of things had never been exactly a model of efficiency. Well, she wasn't going to waste any more time; if they weren't there to sell her a ticket, she'd just go in without one.

She walked down the five rather threadbare, red-carpeted steps and reached the horse-shoe corridor circumscribing the stalls. Choosing a small door halfway down the side through which she knew she could slip quite unnoticed, she entered the dark auditorium and eased herself quietly into a back stall. It was incredible how familiar everything seemed. She inhaled deeply and detected a hint of size even where she was sitting. Lovely! The 'country cottage' set was there, with its roughly painted, would-be Tudor beams, so like the one she remembered. Not quite as good, really; in her day the standard had been surprisingly high. And the actors, they seemed familiar too. 'Well, of course – it is George!' That was a comfort, to know he was back, that things hadn't gone too badly for him. And the other man, her 'faithful friend' in the play, surely that was Robert Weston – looking older perhaps, but not much.

This was more than she'd hoped for; she'd have to go round afterwards, just for old time's sake. What about the girl playing 'her' part? She knew that she herself had been rather good in it and she still remembered with satisfaction the gasp of the audience when, in an hysterical effort to escape Darkie, she opened the back door and found herself face to face with him. It had frightened her, too – particularly

that last time when George had been so peculiar. She watched the girl carefully, not wanting to be over-critical, but subconsciously hoping she wouldn't be too good. She was good though, surprisingly good and she had to admit it, but at least it was consoling to see that the part was being played in much the same way she would have played it herself – with dignity and breeding. It amused her, when she considered her orphanage background, to think that she'd always been cast to play ladies of breeding; never the cockney maid or the colonial hoyden, but always the Cynthias, the Penelopes, the Angelas.

She followed the action of the play loosely, one half of her mind almost repeating the well-remembered lines with the actors, the other half reflecting on what those lines evoked. The intervals came and the lights went up but she didn't leave her seat; she looked around at the middle-aged patrons in the half-empty stalls to see if, beneath any of those puce and lilac toques, there might be a face she could recognize – one of the 'regulars' – a shopkeeper maybe; Wednesday was early closing day. A few of them were familiar and she smiled in a tentative way when they looked in her direction, in the hope that they might acknowledge her – that would have been nice. But they didn't, and she was too often left with a half-formed smile on her face and nowhere to dispose of it.

After the final curtain had fallen, she waited until the house was empty and furtively made her way to the pass-door. She wanted to surprise them, George and Robert – and Tommy the stage manager too, if he were still there. She opened the door, climbed up the splintered wooden steps and arrived in the prompt corner. The lights had been turned off and she had to grope her way blindly round the braces and weights supporting the scenery before she could get back-stage. At last she reached the light of the stone passageway which led to the stage-door and the dressing-room stairs. She paused for a minute, overwhelmed by a sense of sadness. She hadn't expected to feel sad; all afternoon she had been looking forward to this moment, to the fun of reunion, talking over old times, probably having tea with them between shows at the Tudor Café. Egg and chips and fresh cream cakes.

She walked to the end of the passage and was about to climb the stairs when suddenly there was an urgent call from the direction of the dressing-rooms. 'Tommy! Tommy, come

quickly – it's George!' She recognized the voice of the girl whose performance she had so much admired. The desperate tone of the summons unnerved her and she hovered anxiously, one foot poised on the bottom step, not knowing what to do. Within seconds a burly figure – it was Tommy – emerged noisily from the basement, brushed past her as if she hadn't been there and tore up the stone steps two at a time. Whatever was going on up there, she had no wish to be involved – it reminded her too vividly of what had happened before. In fact, the sooner she could get away from it all the better.

She turned round and headed for the stage-door, pulling it open and scurrying through in one distracted movement. Once outside, she stumbled along the path leading across the empty car park, anxious to put some distance between herself and the feeling of terror that the building now held for her. After what she felt was a safe interval, she stopped and looked round at the ugly rear aspect of the place. On one of the higher platforms of the fire-escape she saw George, standing close beside the door. Slowly the door opened, hiding George from view as it swung back on its hinges. From the rectangular darkness of the open doorway the actress stepped cautiously out on to the platform, looking up and down the flights of metal steps.

From below, the woman watched the silent action as she had watched the play that afternoon, knowing in advance the course that it would take. Sure enough the door began to close again and as it finally swung to with a sharp clang, the girl turned and found herself facing George. Prepared for this, the woman below called out to them both in an effort to shatter the scene – but nothing happened, no sound would pass her lips, and all she heard in the afternoon stillness was a stifled gasp as George closed his hands round the throat of the girl above. Arms flailed about in wild, convulsive gestures that died slowly down until all movement stopped. George released his hold of the now limp figure and, like an outsize puppet, it buckled at the knees, falling backwards over the edge of the platform and down to the asphalt below.

The nightmare was over. Wracked with a terrible pain, the woman turned and walked away from the town, from the once friendly theatre – scene of her former triumphs – from the sad reflection of memories held too long. And as she reached the quiet country lane and felt the warmth of the

trees and hedges about her, the pain dissolved and she ceased to care about what had gone before. But the day had taken its toll and she was tired; as the shadows grew longer she gradually slackened her pace, knowing she would have to rest before very long. At last she came to the cottage painted blue and, tired as she was, she still disapproved of the sight. Then, just a little beyond, the cemetery, where leaves had gathered like soft gold blankets over the earthen beds. 'Here,' she thought, 'why not here; as good a place as any for a rest,' and under a weeping beech she found herself a hollow in the ground. There she lay down and, letting all consciousness quietly slip away, waited for the leaves to cover her.

THE TRAVELLING COMPANION

Elizabeth Walter

Jennifer Mallory was going home. It was the one thing she wanted. As the train pulled out of Paddington Station, she felt herself relax. She smiled at the man sitting opposite in the window corner, but he did not move a muscle in response. She glanced at her companion to see if he had noticed, but he was gazing out of the window with that faraway look in his eyes which she found so disconcerting because there was nothing worth looking at in the immediate environs of Paddington; so what was it this strange man saw?

He had introduced himself as Tim. He had not mentioned a surname, and the omission had struck her as odd. After all, if you are acting as escort to a convalescent making a long train journey, you surely tell her who you are. Jennifer had been expecting a woman, and when this nondescript, pleasant young man had appeared and introduced himself as her travelling companion, she almost said, 'Are you sure?' No doubt the hospital or whoever had made the arrangements knew what they were doing, but they might have warned me, she thought. Of course a man would be useful with the luggage, but there didn't seem much of that. When she asked him, Tim had smiled at her briefly, and said, 'We're travelling light.'

Jennifer did not care much so long as they were travelling, and travelling in the direction of home. There were still clothes hanging in her wardrobe. It did not matter if they were out of date. When I get there, she told herself, I'm going to go to bed and sleep for forty-eight hours, or longer. After that, we'll see. Secretly she hoped this would help her to overcome the terrible lethargy which had invaded her, making it an effort even to turn her head. She remembered reading somewhere that this was a common effect of head injuries. Or perhaps the doctor had told her that? She was unsure; she could remember so little. Had someone, somewhere, said it was just as well?

The train was gathering speed now, running through the suburbs. She leaned back and looked around. Besides herself and Tim, there were two other people in the compartment:

the man opposite who had not smiled and who was now pretending to be deep in a paper—the *Economist*, it looked like—and the girl on the corridor side. She was a striking blonde whom he kept eyeing covertly—a fact of which she was all too well aware.

Jennifer stole another look at Tim, who was still gazing out of the window. At least he was not eyeing the blonde. Then, perversely, she was irritated with him for not doing so. What was he? Some sort of queer? Queers often made good male nurses. Was that why he was doing this job? She recalled his smile: very kind, very gentle, but not the smile she was used to from a man. It held neither approval nor invitation. It was an utterly sexless smile. Not like David's . . . And as though someone had twisted a knife in her heart she gasped and put out her hands in a warding-off movement. Tim turned to her at once.

'It's all right. You're quite safe. Nothing's going to run into you.'

She nodded. The thought of David was inseparable from the crash. He had been driving, not fast, on his proper side of the road, when two great blazing eyes had swept round the bend and bored straight at them. Jennifer had put up her hands to her face . . .

And now there was no David. There was nothing but a great hollowness in which all sounds were magnified and in which she listened vainly for the sound of David's voice, trying at the same time not to think of him, not to remember . . .

Tim said, 'You'll get over it.'

'You think so?'

'Of course. Everyone does.'

Did he mean the crash, or the great gaping ache of loneliness within her? Jennifer said stiffly, 'How can you be so sure?'

'Well, I did, for example.'

'Did the same thing happen to you?'

'Not quite, but it was very similar. Hadn't you guessed that's why I'm here?'

'No, of course not. Why should I? Is this some new sort of therapy? Like Alcoholics Anonymous.'

'You could say so. It's just that—well, when one knows what it's like one wants to make it easier for others. You

may come to feel like that yourself.'

'I doubt it. I can't stand do-gooding.'

Too late Jennifer realized what she had said. The other two in the compartment gave no sign, but they must have heard it. She looked at Tim.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it quite like that. You're very kind.'

Did he get paid for it, she wondered. His clothes gave nothing away. Nor did his voice, which was standard Southern England, educated. Socially he was difficult to place. And he said so little that it was hard to form any idea of him as a person, just as it was hard to form any idea of him as a man. He neither attracted nor repelled her, yet he was entirely concentrated on her.

The man with the *Economist* was entirely concentrated on the blonde in the corner. He had got into conversation with her, and Jennifer listened desultorily to what they were saying. The man was pursuing the acquaintance. The girl, reluctant, irritated, not quite liking to be rude, was unable to resist responding. Already he knew her name and where she lived, where and why she was travelling, that she had parents living, and a regular boy-friend, but was not actually engaged. I suppose Tim knows as much about me, Jennifer reflected, but somehow it's not the same.

The dining-car attendant was coming down the corridor intoning the first call for lunch. The blonde rose. The man with the *Economist*, who had been waiting to see if she would, rose also and stalked after her in pursuit. Tim remained seated. Jennifer turned to him.

'Do go and eat if you want to. I'm not hungry.'

He smiled. 'Neither am I.'

At least he doesn't try to make me eat, she thought gratefully. I hope Mother will be the same. I hope I can stand the fussing. I hope it's not a mistake to go home. Yet when Tim had just appeared and she had asked him where they were going, he had answered, 'Anywhere you like,' and her lips had framed the words unbidden: 'I want to go home. Take me home.' All her life home had been a secure and happy refuge, the place to which she retreated when things went wrong and from which she drew strength for the next step forward. She trusted it would be so now.

So here she was travelling through Oxfordshire in the

charge of an unknown young man, not even certain she was expected, for she could not remember having written or phoned. But then, she could remember so little since those two great blazing eyes of light. Pain. Voices—for the most part incomprehensible. Odd sentences: 'There's nothing you can do.'

'Tim,' she said, 'are my parents expecting me?'

'Your mother never stops expecting you.'

That was true. The bed was always aired and made up ready in case she should decide to come down. She hadn't been so often lately. It meant forgoing David's company, and she hadn't been sure that the time was ripe to invite him. Now he would never come.

It ought to have been David beside her. She looked at Tim with sudden dislike. What right had he to exist when David was — was —

Abruptly she said, 'Tell me about your accident.'

'There's nothing to tell. I was riding a motor-bike when a car jumped the lights and crashed into us.'

'Us?'

'My fiancée was on the back.'

So he does know what it's like, Jennifer thought. And irrelevantly: At least he isn't a queer. Perhaps he was still too numb to respond. As she was. She asked: 'Was it long ago?'

His eyes had that faraway look. 'Does it matter?'

Jennifer felt unaccountably snubbed. She turned to the window and concentrated so intently that she did not hear the ticket-collector. It was of no consequence since Tim had the tickets—all the travelling arrangements had been made by him—yet when she looked up and saw the man in the corridor looking in at them, she naturally expected him to come in. It was only when he had passed on to the next compartment that she realized she had been too lost in her own thoughts to heed.

About this point you could see the hills of home on the skyline. A blue, misty outline, no more; wrongly orientated because the railway in fact curved round them, so that at home you viewed them from the other side. After that first glimpse they disappeared for almost an hour of the journey, but the sight of them always meant a lifting of the heart. Yes, there they were, unchangeable, unchanging. She said to

Tim: 'We're nearly there.'

'What!' The train was slowing down for a station.

'No, not this one. I only mean I can see the hills.'

She pointed them out to him. 'Jennifer's landmark,' he said softly. 'At least you'll always recognize those.'

On the platform a group of people in black had gathered, mourners from a funeral. They surrounded a middle-aged woman whose black-bordered handkerchief was busy at her eyes. Not in here, Jennifer prayed silently, as they moved towards the door. She drew back her legs, made a moue of distaste and leaned towards Tim as the weeping woman got in. She stood at the window while the remaining mourners clutched her hands and called encouragement. She smelt of mothballs and tears, a distillation of all the family funerals which her old-fashioned suit had attended. She was wringing the last ounce out of Death.

The train began to move. 'Bye, Edie.' 'Be brave.' 'God bless you.' 'Keep your pecker up.' 'We'll write,' came the farewells. The woman sat down, blew her nose loudly, and began to rummage in her big black bag. She was still rummaging when the blonde and the man with the *Economist* returned from what was obviously a good lunch. The girl was flushed and had a tendency to giggle. They looked at the mourning woman with dislike. Jennifer noticed that they now sat close together, instead of at opposite ends of the seat.

The woman, who had ignored Tim and Jennifer, looked at them hopefully. She sniffed, blew her nose and said, 'Excuse me.' Forced to notice her, they looked up.

'Just been to a funeral,' she explained unnecessarily. 'My brother. Only forty-nine.'

The couple made noises of commiseration. The woman in black went on: 'Heart, it was. To think he was at my place only last Thursday and had two helpings of apple pie. I never thought then I should be burying him today. You never know, do you? It could be your turn next.'

The man with the *Economist* shifted uneasily. Jennifer noticed for the first time that he was overweight.

He said: 'It's got to happen to all of us sooner or later.'

'Ah, but not at forty-nine.'

The girl, to whom forty-nine was verging on dotage, said politely: 'It must have been a nasty shock.'

'Shock! You could have knocked me down with a feather.'

My neighbour came to tell me 'cause they'd phoned through to her. Ethel's sister it was who rang. Eth was too cut up to speak to anybody. I don't know what'll happen to her and the kids.'

'They'll be all right,' the man with the *Economist* said cheerfully. 'No one's allowed to starve these days.'

'No, but it's all the worry of it. There's the house, and the Friendly Society, and the insurance. I don't think Jack ever made a will.'

Well, I never made a will, Jennifer thought suddenly. If I'd died instead of David, what would become of my things? Not that there's much apart from my clothes and a few Premium Bonds, but there's Aunt Greta's garnets—they might be worth a bit. And there are the pearls Mother and Dad gave me for my twenty-first—they're cultured, but they're good ones. I suppose Mother ought to have them. 'Pearls mean tears,' Mother had said, her eyes glistening, 'but tears can be tears of joy. And you've always been a joy to us. Hasn't she, Daddy?' Jennifer had been embarrassed and turned away.

But where were the pearls? Her fingers went to her throat unthinkingly. Suddenly she remembered putting them on that night. She had been wearing them in the car with David. Were they safe, or had someone stolen them?

'What's the matter?' Tim asked gently.

She looked at him in distress. 'My pearls.'

'Not to worry. They've been sent home ahead of you.'

Jennifer relaxed slightly. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. All your things were sent home.'

It was the obvious, simple explanation. So this was why they were travelling light.

'Jack always said he took after our father,' the woman in black was saying, 'and he was ninety-one when he died. It just doesn't seem possible Jack won't be about as usual to-morrow.' She began to cry again.

The man and the girl sat resentfully silent. They had offered the tribute of sympathy and that was enough. The woman's reddened gaze began to rove about the compartment. Jennifer braced herself and thought grimly: It'll be our turn next.

'In the midst of life we are in death,' the woman announced to no one in particular. 'That's what the parson said. He said dying was a part of the process of living, and was only the

means of reaching a fuller life.'

Yes, Jennifer thought, but not at twenty-seven, like David. Or even forty-nine, like brother Jack. Dying was for the old, the chronically sick, the infirm. Only for them did it represent the chance of a fuller life. For the young it was a blank denial of potential, a cruel turning away from what might have been. No wonder death was an unwelcome subject and she and Tim and the blonde and the man with the *Economist* were loath to listen. In the midst of death we are in life.

At the next station the man and the girl gathered up their things, uttered noisy farewells and condolences, made pretence of getting out and moved farther down the train. Why didn't we have the sense to do that, Jennifer wondered. She glanced at Tim, but he was far away again. Even to the mourner his abstraction must have represented a barrier; she made no further attempt to talk. Instead, she put away her handkerchief, adjusted her hat, and, producing a magazine and a toffee-bar from her big black handbag, settled down to read and munch.

The train now was almost empty. Home was at the end of the line. Two tunnels, and then there would be a glimpse of the cathedral tower on the wrong side as the train went into a curve. After that, a gradual slowing-down, and then, almost imperceptibly, the platforms would glide alongside, doors slam, officials call 'All change!' Then the exodus would begin: up one flight of steps, across the rickety bridge, and down another, to the congestion of the booking hall and the rapturous, welcoming cries. She had done it so often since leaving home for London, yet the ritual had not begun to pall. It was unthinkable to arrive any other way, even unexpectedly with Tim, and with no one to meet her. Nothing else would have signified coming home.

So she went through the familiar routine detached and dreaming, leaving the practicalities to Tim. There were one or two people she knew in the booking hall who were obviously meeting the train, but she was thankful their attention was concentrated on looking out for loved ones and she was able to slip past them unobserved. Once outside, she drew a deep lungful of the fresh keen air from the distant mountains, and lifted her chin and squared her shoulders in relaxation. Nothing could hurt her now. She was home.

Tim at her elbow was an irritation. She did not need him

any more. He had brought her home and he could go, his mission accomplished. Only he did nothing of the sort. She was thankful that at least he did not suggest a taxi. Already her lethargy was leaving her. She felt buoyed up, her feet seeming scarcely to touch the pavement. She had the swiftness of an arrow leaving the bow.

And her mark was clear in her mind as she sped towards it; the tall, brick-built Victorian house with the gabled roof. Lights would be on in the big bay-windowed sitting-room, for already the autumn afternoon was closing in. Or if not in the sitting-room, in the hall, or the morning-room where her mother often sat to do her sewing, or in the kitchen if she was having a baking afternoon. Jennifer could almost smell the spicy scent of fruit cake, the warm wholesome aroma of bread.

But Tim would know none of these things. She glanced at him. He had lengthened his stride and was keeping up with her easily. He looked about him as he walked, mildly interested but not at all curious. He asked no questions about the town. Items which normally drew comment from visitors had no effect upon him. Jennifer bit back her rising irritation. Why was he here, if he was not prepared to be pleased with what he saw?

She wondered what her mother would say when she walked in unannounced and unexpected and called out in the hall, 'I'm home.' Tim would have to be introduced. He would presumably stay overnight, but how much longer? She asked: 'When does your next escort duty begin?'

'When I've finished this one.'

Was he being impertinent? Or was he too thick to take a hint? 'I mean,' she said, 'when will you be leaving us?'

'When you don't need me any more.'

She didn't need him now. It was on the tip of Jennifer's tongue to say so, but—courtesy apart—there was something about Tim that made her hold back. For all his remoteness, he was a point of contact. She was in rapport with him.

Her first twinge of alarm came when they turned the corner and she saw ahead of her the red-brick house, unlit. Her mother was out. Then she reassured herself. It was not so terrible nor so unexpected. After all, she was coming home unheralded.

Suddenly that struck her as odd. She was considered con-

valescent, not fit to travel alone, yet no one had notified her parents of her arrival.

She turned to Tim. 'Aren't they expecting me?'

'No.'

'You didn't get in touch with them?'

Tim said patiently, 'I couldn't get through.'

'Why didn't you tell me? I could have got through to my aunt if my parents were unavailable.'

'There was no reason why you couldn't have tried.'

Jennifer had hurried on ahead of him, through the iron gate and up the five steps to the front door. She rang the bell and heard its hollow echo. Nothing stirred within the house. Foolishly, she had not brought her key. She had not even brought her handbag. She would have to go round to the back. But when she tried the side gate it was to find it fastened. Her parents only did that if they were going away.

Uneasy now, she slipped through the gap in the hedge that made the locked side gate a mockery, though only if you knew where to go. Tim followed suit. He was like a shadow – and as silent. They did not communicate.

The back door also was locked and bolted. Jennifer said, 'I can't make it out,' and pressed her nose against the glass of the kitchen window, looking into the familiar room.

The eight-day clock on the wall was still going. Her parents could not have been gone long. Yet the kitchen had a disorganized, untidy look about it, as though her mother had ceased to bother overmuch. Jennifer noted with dismay that the linoleum needed sweeping, that the roller-towel hung grubby and askew; there were even two dirty dishes on the draining-board; cups on the dresser no longer hung in uniform, all-facing-one-way rows.

'Has Mother been ill?' she asked Tim, the thought suddenly striking her.

'Not physically, no.'

'But mentally? Do you mean a mental breakdown?'

'We must hope it won't come to that.'

'Has it anything to do with me? With my accident?'

'Naturally,' Tim said. 'What do you think?'

'Why wasn't I told?'

'You weren't in any state to hear it.'

It was true enough, Jennifer supposed. Yet it seemed cruel to let her discover it by finding the house deserted.

She said to Tim: 'You should have stopped me coming home.'

'It was your decision. We could have gone anywhere. You insisted on coming here.'

'But there's no point in it. You could have prevented me.'

'No,' Tim said, 'that's something you had to find out for yourself. Where else would you like to go?'

'I'll go round to Auntie Nora's. She'll know where Mother and Dad have gone.'

'I'll come with you,' Tim offered.

Jennifer had been going to tell him not to bother, but she sensed it would be no use. There was a persistence about Tim that matched his patience. All argument with him was lost before it began.

She was turning away from the kitchen window when something glinting caught her eye. Tossed carelessly on the dresser and gleaming milkily in the gathering twilight, Jennifer saw the pearls. So Tim had been right about their being sent home. But what an extraordinary place to leave them. If the pearls had not been sent home in the velvet-lined case in which her parents exhorted her to keep them, they could at least have found another container, not flung them carelessly on the dresser, where they might prove a lure for any passing thief.

She said as much to Tim, who nodded wisely. 'They didn't arrive until today. There wasn't time.'

'Do you mean my parents left only this morning?'

Tim stooped to a milk-bottle and drew forth a note. 'Looks like it, wouldn't you say?'

The note bore that day's date. For a moment Jennifer did not recognize the handwriting, which was spiky and broken-up. It read: 'Please cancel milk until further notice.'

Then Jennifer exclaimed, 'Why, it's Daddy's writing!' But what had happened to make him write like that? His hand was normally rather large and flowing. This, though undoubtedly his, was cramped, disjointed, the letters leaning towards one another at odd angles. Jennifer had only once seen her father write like that, and that was years ago when his younger brother had died after an operation and her father had had to clear up his estate. There was so much paper-work involved it was not surprising his handwriting suffered, though her mother said it was due to grief. Now, seeing the same

signs of emotional stress in the note to the milkman, Jennifer said:

'Daddy must be awfully worried about Mother to have taken her away like that.'

Tim didn't answer, and she wished once again he would go away. He was going to be difficult to explain to Auntie Nora and Uncle George. Her mother's elder sister was exceedingly conventional. She would not approve of her niece being sent home in charge of a male nurse. At the thought of her aunt's face, Jennifer almost giggled, and then realized that she was uncomfortably close to tears. The thought of home had so buoyed her up that the disappointment of her arrival was all the greater. Auntie Nora, however kind, would be very much second best.

As Jennifer came down the path from the front door, two women passed the gate. Jennifer recognized one of them, a Mrs Beaver, but the woman did no more than glance casually at the closed house and did not see her. She heard their voices as they passed on under the wall.

'Gone away, then.' It was the other woman speaking.

'Yes, went this morning. It's probably the best thing.'

'Poor woman. I heard she was all broken up by it. Shouldn't be surprised if they sell the house after this.'

'Oh, I don't know. People sometimes cling on, don't they?'

'Well, I'd sell it if it were me . . .'

The voices died away, leaving Jennifer rigid. Whatever had happened, surely her parents wouldn't sell the house? Why, it had been home ever since she could remember. She had grown up in it, spent all her life there until three years ago. To this house she would bring David; from here she would be married - Then memory transfixed her. From here she would have been married if only David had still been at her side.

She set off almost at a run, as though to leave the thought behind her, Tim still following at her heels. In fact, Jennifer's considerations were purely practical. If she hurried, she could take the short cut through the cemetery. The gates were closed at dusk; even before that it was depressing; but at least she had company, and it would save a good ten minutes in getting to Auntie Nora's and clearing up the mystery.

For mystery there was. If only she could remember! She stood still, trying to concentrate. Her powers of recall had

always been excellent, but it was not so any more. Then, with horrid clarity, realization began to dawn. *My brain has been affected. I'm not normal any longer. This is why I'm not allowed out alone. This is why I can't remember anything. This is why my mother has broken down. This is why people have pretended not to see me. Oh God!—a fresh thought struck her—am I disfigured as well?*

She put her hands up to her face. Everything felt the same. Her features were still there, unmarked. Or at least it felt that way, though she would have been happier with a mirror. She should have known better than to come out without a handbag. Perhaps her mind had really gone.

'What's the matter?' Tim asked gently.

She raised her face to his. 'I'm not normal, am I?'

'What gave you that idea?'

Jennifer told him. He said consideringly, 'Well, of course you're not quite like other people—not after what you've been through—but there's nothing abnormal about that.'

'I don't understand. You're talking in riddles.'

'Your reactions are normal enough.'

'But you don't think I'm safe on my own?'

'Safety doesn't enter into it.'

It occurred to Jennifer that she might be expected to become violent. Was that why they had sent a male nurse?

She asked: 'Does Auntie Nora know about me?'

'Yes,' Tim said. 'Of course.'

'I suppose everyone knows, from the way you say it.'

'That kind of thing gets around.'

Jennifer could imagine the whisperings: 'Yes, dreadful . . .' 'What, hadn't you heard! . . .' 'Such a bright girl . . .' 'Poor Margaret Mallory, this'll finish her . . .' 'If it had been my girl, I'd rather have seen her dead.' Eventually, she supposed, they would get sufficiently used to it to acknowledge her. Simple sentences and kind, embarrassed smiles. Looks exchanged significantly with her parents, like the kind she remembered as a child. And always this gulf, uncomprehended and unbridgeable. When she walked in, how would Auntie Nora react?

As they entered the municipal cemetery, they heard the closing bell begin to ring. The gates would be shut in five minutes. Already the one and only visitor was hurrying out. Jennifer recognized her. It was Mrs Trotman. She must have

been to Eva's grave. Eva, her only child, had died five years before, but Mrs Trotman still went daily to the child's last resting-place. She knelt there for hours, pretending to weed or rearrange the flowers. Sometimes she crooned the songs that Eva liked, a tender smile on her face. Perhaps if Eva had lived, even mentally impaired, it would have been easier for her. She would not have been left with nothing in her arms.

Jennifer turned to Tim impulsively. 'Promise me Mother won't ever get like that.'

He seemed to know what she meant. 'I think she's too sensible.'

'I'm glad. I couldn't bear it.'

Tim looked at her oddly, but did not ask her to explain.

They were in the broad avenue that led to the southern gateway, where an attendant waited to close the gate. Most of the graves here were old and some elaborate: cherubs, resurgent angels, obelisks. To the right, Jennifer's paternal grandparents lay buried. She remembered her grandmother well. It was her first experience of death, and she recalled the strangeness of knowing Gran would not come back, that the knotted hands, the splendid white hair, the lap she had sat in, were all sealed into a flower-covered box. For weeks afterwards she had wakened crying because Gran must want to get out.

'No, no,' Mother said soothingly. 'She's gone to be with Grandpa.'

'But she loves us. She'll want to come back here.'

'It's not like that,' Mother said weakly; and Jennifer had demanded, 'How do you know?'

There had been no answer and when they took flowers to Gran's grave at Christmas, all the funeral wreaths had been cleared away.

'What happened to them?' Jennifer asked.

'They withered. They aren't any good after that.'

And now another heap of mouldering flowers lay near Gran's grave, most with cards still attached. Jennifer hesitated. The attendant would be getting impatient, yet she felt an overriding urge to go and look. With a glance at Tim, who nodded briefly, Jennifer knelt down on the damp grass. 'In deep sympathy', 'Fondest remembrance' in a handwriting she seemed to know. Feverishly Jennifer reached towards a great sheaf of bronze chrysanthemums. In the distance the attendant closed the gate. Chrysanthemums had always been her

favourites. Now, as though caught by the wind, they toppled and landed at her feet. There was a hammering in her ears and a red mist before her eyes, through which she saw only one thing clearly, and that one thing her own name, written in ink now smudged by rain in a hand that looked like David's. She could not speak, could not put out a hand, but the card obligingly rested face upwards. For an instant the mist cleared and she read: 'To my darling Jennifer, with love for ever and ever from David.'

There was no mistaking that handwriting. Nor the special sign at the end which meant 'Three kisses'. There must be some terrible mistake.

And then she felt Tim's hand upon her shoulder.

'You may as well face it, Jennifer. We're dead.'

SUMMER AND MISS SWANSON

Rick Ferreira

It's odd, I always think, just how people associate ghosts with dark mansions, cobwebs, creaking doors, and the graveyard at midnight. No one ever thinks, it seems, that a ghost can be part of summer—as real as strong sun on your face, flowering gardens, or the quiet solidness of a leafy London square. But then, *I* know that the traditional trappings aren't always necessary for a ghost to brush your life, briefly and strangely . . . for it was in summer that it happened.

Summer of '69, to be exact, and on that sweltering July day I found myself toiling up a hilly street that seemed to be heading straight for Hampstead Heath . . . but number 42 turned out to be the last house but one—before a low wooden rail marked the start of endless grass and trees. The house was long and thin, a bit like the woman who opened the door to me and said rather sharply, 'Yes?'

'I've come to see the attic flat,' I said. 'My name is Fairley. The Agency should have phoned—'

She nodded then.

'Oh! I see. Well, come on in . . .' She seemed to have come to a favourable decision for the thin face split into a sudden—but friendly—smile. 'Go on up and have a good look but it's five flights up. You're too young to be bothered by stairs, I'd say. I'll see you when you come down.' She said something odd then—'Not the nervous type, are you? You know . . . *think* that you hear things at night? Attics aren't like other rooms, always a bit funny with creaks and things like that. I dare say you'll find it a bit ladylike, too . . . but I've decided *now* that a young man up there would be best. Well, you just knock on my sitting-room door . . .'

So I started climbing up from the dim dusty hall that smelt of damp even on this blazing summer's day. And she was certainly right about the 'ladylike' feel of the attic flat. The walls of the long low main room were papered in a leafy green pattern and the carpet was a pale blue. Most of the furniture was painted white and the bed looked too small, even for a midget. I climbed two shallow steps and came into the kitchen, tiny as a speedboat's galley. If you didn't eat

much and kept your weight nice and steady, you could just turn around in it. I promptly knocked over the stool which should have been tucked under the breakfast-bar/kitchen table...

Then I saw the narrow door at the end of the kitchen and went over and drew back the bolt, and stepped out on to a little balcony. I found myself looking down on the tops of the trees that lined the street. Directly below, there was the flagstone path to the door of the house and when I looked to my right I saw that I had a marvellously sweeping view of the Heath. I was gazing at all that greenery, baking in the sunlight, when I felt that I wasn't alone on the small balcony. No cold wind on the back of my neck or anything as corny. I just knew, suddenly, that someone else was there. And the next moment that someone knocked the solitary flower-pot off the edge of the balcony wall!

I looked down, rather stupidly, at the broken bits of clay and scattered earth, far below on the path—with my arms still folded across my chest, as they had been since stepping on the balcony. And as I looked down I caught the small twin flashes of spectacles, uplifted. The face of the woman who had opened the door to me was now peering up at the balcony, the lenses of her glasses alight in the bright sun. Then suddenly she moved back into the shade of the porch and the twin flashes went out.

Odd. Very odd. No, I thought, the attic wasn't for me...

Finally, I went back into the main room and it looked more ladylike than ever, so I started down to the hall and found the thin face peering up, anxiously. *As well she might*, I thought. Then the anxious look vanished and the smile came back, but it wavered when I said: 'Very kind of you to let me see the flat. But a girl would be far more right. And as for the bed—'

She pounced on that. 'Well, I never did think that a gentleman your size could sleep on it. No—there'll be a new six-foot-two divan up there tonight. And I'll let you have it for two pounds weekly, electricity included. You won't get anything like that attic under six guineas—whatever that is in the new money. Not in Hampstead, you won't!' She must have seen that she had me for her smile grew more confident. 'And what I don't see—you don't do! Well, Mr Fairley?'

Well, what more was there to say? Except: 'Yes. Yes.

Thank you. If you're quite sure you can arrange about the bed . . . ?' But I felt compelled to add: 'But, look here, surely *two pounds* is far too -'

She cut me short by saying briskly:

'I've no intention of being the richest landlady in the graveyard!' And as briskly she set about giving me keys and filling in the rent-book, all of which she seemed to have had at the ready. 'Yes, a cheque will do, Mr Fairley. Not usual with new tenants, but you look such a nice young man . . .'

The nice young man moved in the following evening, while the sun was slowly dying across the Heath. The new bed was big enough to accommodate all six-foot of me but I knew I'd find it hard to get on living terms with the wallpaper . . . still, after I'd dumped two crates of books on the carpet, opened a few suitcases, and generally chucked a few things around, I could see that the room would, eventually, get that real lived-in look.

Later, sitting on the stool in the tiny kitchen, I wrote out a list of the things I needed to buy to set up housekeeping proper. But even with the balcony door wide open, the kitchen was a small sweat-box, so I finally threw the Biro on the pad and decided that priority No. 1 was to find that friendly neighbourhood pub . . .

I found it at the foot of my winding street and it was called the Heathman - what else? I found the company congenial and the beer just right, so I stayed until closing time. And, miraculously, I made it safely up all those flights of stairs and tumbled headlong into bed. Some time in the night a storm broke and the rain lashed at the attic as if all hell mistook it for a stranded lighthouse. Thunder boomed and lightning flashed, but I was beery and warm . . . and in a moment I was asleep again. I came half awake when it had all died away to a soft drip-drip of rain, for someone, somewhere, was crying! A gentle kind of sobbing that blended with the dying rain . . . but *that* was soothing, too, so again I drifted back to sleep.

I was shaving the next morning - with a not too steady hand - when I happened to look at the pad with my shopping-list, still lying on the bar/table. My scrawled list had only taken up half the page so there was ample room for someone else to add a footnote.

And someone had done just *that*. In a neat clear hand - a

nice 'school-teacher's hand' as my mother would have said – that someone had written: *Oh, why must it be like this? I'm so alone . . .* I peered closer and now I could see the rounded bumps on the paper that could have been dried tears! I finished my shaving rather hurriedly and went down to search out my landlady.

'Good morning. About my attic . . . could you please tell me something about the last tenant? I know it was a *girl*. Well, what made her move?'

She dropped one of the letters she had been sorting and I bent to pick it up but my head protested violently. As I came up, gingerly, I was suddenly swamped by a flood of words – 'and after her,' said my landlady, 'there was a Miss Peters, but she only stayed the one night, too! . . . Bed-sitter types, you know. Always moving –'

'But there was someone who lived up there for quite a while. Who is she?' I asked – '*And where is she now?*'

Suddenly, my landlady took a step closer and her free hand clutched my right arm, tightly. '*Miss Swanson!*' my landlady said. '– That was her name and she was the last person you'd think would do such a thing. What she *did*, I mean. I mean, how was I to know? So quiet and so respectable. In the Civil Service, you know – and she had the attic for over eight years. I even let her pick her own wallpaper and paint things but I didn't know just how she *felt*, you see. How could anyone? The lonely part of it . . . I only knew afterwards, when I read the note. It's a month now and I can't get anyone to stay up there more than a single –' The phone in her sitting-room startled us both by coming alive. 'Oh, I must answer that,' my landlady said. 'Sorry, Mr Fairley, but I must go . . .'

And she went. But I wasn't altogether surprised that my landlady stayed out of sight when I came in that evening. She, very obviously, wasn't prepared to add to her outburst of the morning . . . to add that vital little bit of information that would complete the sad story. Just how had Miss Swanson – well – *done it*? I knew the *why* of it and that, whatever way she had ended her life, she was still brooding on her continuing loneliness. So I came to a decision . . .

Just before bedtime, I wrote on my pad on the bar/table in my kitchen – *I'd like to help you, if I can. There's no need to cry. How can you be lonely when I'm always around?* Somehow I didn't find any of this strange – or even mildly

frightening. Miss Swanson didn't seem that kind of ghost.

Then I fell asleep on top of the bed for it was far too warm to get between the sheets . . . even when I had the balcony door wide open. But that door brought me awake some time after midnight for it was banging away like mad in a sudden cool wind that had sprung up. I got up, practically sleep-walking, and stumbled up to the kitchen, my hand searching for the light-switch. But I stopped . . . for I could see that someone was sitting upright on the stool, clear and distinct, in the soft night-glow from the balcony.

Then the door banged shut for a moment, darkening the small kitchen, and when the wind again banged it open, Miss Swanson had stood up and started moving slowly out to the balcony. And she was exactly as I had pictured her: small, neat, dark-haired, the faint light glowing on her glasses. She went quietly past me, out to the balcony, paused a moment, then, like a diver trying out the high-board for the first time, Miss Swanson threw herself very violently out into the windy darkness. She may have screamed, that first time, but now she made no sound. It was all like a film-clip from an old silent movie and, as when I'd first heard her story, I felt only a deep regret that sheer loneliness could have driven anyone to do *that* . . .

I knew that I would see nothing on the path below if I went out on the balcony, so I bolted the door against the wind then, finally, switched on the light. Right away I could see that there had been a written addition to the pad on the bar/table. I bent close, once again admiring the neat hand of the late Miss Swanson. She had written: *Thank you for your kind offer. It was all I needed. Goodbye.* There were no tear-stains, wet or dry. I knew then that I had seen and heard the last of her . . .

Well, yes – and no.

I stayed on for six years in that attic flat and my landlady and I never spoke again of Miss Swanson. My rent stayed at two pounds (electricity included), and I did exactly as I liked. For the other tenants there were rules – but none for the ghost-haunted Mr Fairley.

But I finally moved last week . . . to a bachelor flat in a new service block. Summer seems to be moving time for me. And for someone else.

On my first night in the new flat, that someone wrote an

addition to my shopping-list in her neat unmistakable hand. Next morning I read what the late Miss Swanson had written –

I think I shall like it here. I'm never lonely now. So lovely to think that I shall never be again!

I think I said something nice and evocative at the very beginning. Remember? '... a ghost can brush your life, briefly and strangely –' Well, strangely, anyway.

I must now learn to live with the fact that the late Miss Swanson will be with me, a bit more than *briefly*. For all the summers left to me, in fact. And, rather odd this, I find the idea, somehow, *comforting*...

JANUARY IDES

Margaret Chilvers Cooper

I don't know why anyone is afraid of a ghost. In the main, they stay earthbound because they must see justice done. I'm sure that I saw a ghost of Roxanna Dillet and that she knocked on our door to be certain that someone living would know that it was.

Deserted by the people who summer here, my husband and I are alone on Marshes Point. For days without count, the wind whispers its complaints down the flues of the chimneys, and like a landlord to unwelcome guests, follows us from room to room with its whine until its grievances grow intolerable, and, with shrieks and imprecations, it rattles the windows and batters the doors with its threats to catapult us into the sea. Only those great aerialists, the herring gulls, are opportunists to the wind's freezing bluster and ride its currents in screeching triumph to hurl dredged scallop or clam to naked death on the rocks below. I thought, last night, that the knocking was the wind, but the raps ran counterpoint to its lament, and I ran to the door and switched on the light. I could see through the glass a young man or woman, I was not sure which, until I noticed the perfection of her rosy cheeks and the rise of her breasts under a red sweater – for she wore no coat – and I gestured to her as I struggled with the door which was sealed by ice which had formed under the sash. Before I could release it, she pointed toward the bay and laughed, her large, dark eyes so bright that it seemed to give her perfect features an expression of triumph.

'Look to the sea,' she cried, 'look to the sea,' and like a sleepwalker moved slowly away.

When the door finally let go, I called after her, 'Are you there? Where are you?' But she had disappeared without leaving even a print on the hard crust of the snow. It came to me then that her feet had been bare: I intended to tell my husband of the strange visit but the wind's voice intruded leaving the thought unfinished and the next day the ship was there. We were in a different world. The wind had stopped, and for the first time in the month of January, the sun shone. In its reassuring light, I half wondered if I had

gone stir crazy and my night visitor had been nothing but a dream-phantom, but that is what a ghost is anyway, isn't it?

Sarah Crosby says that in the year 1918, there was another January like this. 'Even the first whistle caught cold and developed a wheeze.'

We had gone down to the beach to take pictures of the ninety-foot vessel, *Octopad*, stuck to the horizon, waiting for the coast guard to free her from her embarrassment. As far as we could see, Buzzards Bay was frozen, arrested waves standing above lumpy pockets like craters on the moon. She looked a painted ship, a ghost without insides or guts, but she was real enough and carrying a scientific party. Two of her crew had walked across the ice to tell the news that she bore a body waiting burial. Unknown to the crew, a young sailor, Edgar Eldredge, had slipped away from the ship in the night and fallen to his death. We could not resist taking pictures of each other walking on the water, frozen in such bumps and ruts that it was hard to imagine how the messmen had made it across the bay in daylight without accident.

'I remember well January 1918,' Sarah commented. 'The war was on, but that did not mean much to a child, when there was no action here. It was the cold and the wind.' She looked at me sharply. 'Sometimes, I think a person can go crazy from the wind. It was the only time my parents did not speak, or that my father swore. Mother and Father were really romantic. Mother was beautiful with big hazel eyes and taffy-coloured hair.' She laughed. 'It's too bad I didn't get her looks.'

Wisps of her grey hair had blown out from under a red tam o' shanter and her nose was almost the hue of it, but her grin was so warm that I used my last film to pose her against a back drop of *Ooctopad* before we picked our way off the ice.

'But you have charisma,' I said.

Our boots squeaking on the snow covered sand, we worked up to the beach road.

'You see, Father set such store by his dahlias. He liked to show them off. It was part of his routine in taking a guest about the place. He would start with the vegetable garden, and then the regular flower garden. The dahlias were saved for the grand climax.'

'A sense of the dramatic.'

'Yes. He had a right to be proud, though. Some of them had such beautiful names. I think now they were secret love

names he called my mother, like love light, or moon's awakening.' She smiled. 'No one had such dahlias as Father. If you were lucky, he might give you a few. But he had to like you a lot. But he would cut a bouquet for Mother and leave them in the sink and she would arrange them. Mother never went near the garden herself. She had what was called rose fever. Of course, we know now it wasn't from roses at all, but Father concentrated on dahlias because she said they did not make her sneeze.'

She paused on the road to stamp her feet, and I rubbed my face with my scarf for the air was so cold it made it ache, and the sun on the snow after so many grey days forced tears to run down my cheeks.

'The day they had the fight, the day I remember that January, the roads were like glass, and the horses were falling on the ice. Don't forget that they did not have sanding trucks in those days, so people put out anything they could to help. Father was at work when a pedlar came to the door for help to keep his horse from falling. Mother loved all creatures and went down the cellar to look for something. There was this barrel with newspapers and ashes, and she gave it to him. She had no idea that it was the place where Father stored the dahlias. You can imagine how Father felt when the ashes wore off, and he saw his dahlia bulbs growing out of the ice. He would not listen to poor Mother. He just ran down to the saloon. That was something else to make me remember. As a rule, Father did not drink. Mother didn't cry either, but she did then. Then, when he came home drunk, she got mad and locked him out of the bedroom. He slept on the living-room sofa, and she in the four-poster alone. It was so unusual, that I knelt by my bed and prayed to God to bring them together again.' She gave me a smile. 'A child has no sense of humour where his parents are concerned. When I came down to breakfast the next day, Father had gone, and Mother was very quiet. Well, as I said, a child doesn't understand much about marriage. I thought he had gone forever.'

We had reached the farthest point on the beach road, where we could still see the water, and we stopped to look back at the scene, without life or emotion, like the back drop for a stage.

'It's just the way it was that January,' she said again. 'There was a vessel, the *Nancy Belle*, stuck right there where *Octopad*

lies now, and there was a body.'

Sarah is a great raconteur. Her smile had disappeared, and she put on her air of mystery.

'Come on home. I've got some old newspaper clippings to show you, and I'll tell you about Roxanna Dillet.'

'Sarah,' I protested. 'You haven't finished telling me how your mother and father made up.'

'Wait,' she admonished. 'It's all part of the same story, right up to *Octopad*, caught in it in the ice out there.'

Like a cousin related to a first and elegant family, Sarah's Cape Cod house is on a side street off from the more stately colonial houses built around the green in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. She does not share her mother's sensitivity to pollen and has kept up the garden in the back, but there are no dahlias. Perhaps her father lost heart to begin again. The garden is a cheerful place, but the trees and shrubs which keep the house cool in the summer also box in the windows, and black pines grown ungainly have left the entrance hall and parlour, as she calls it, quite dark. However, with Sarah around, its welcome is warm, and I sat with an attitude of expectancy on the uncomfortable sofa, and exchanged condolences with a portrait of her father for his night here alone while she searched through the drawers of the Queen Anne desk, the one fine piece in the room. After a few minutes, she handed me the January 13th edition of the *Crier* with the single admonition, 'Read.'

Intrigued by the format of the old paper which featured ads on the front page so that one had to search for fragments of news tucked here and there, as if the type-setter had used them only to fill in scraps and corners, I was ready to lose myself in it, but Sarah's impatient finger urged me on.

I read, 'According to the men of the coast guard that freed the schooner *Nancy Belle*, Elijah Dillet tired of life aboard the ship and attempted to visit his wife, Roxanna, but was driven back by the wind, suffering from frostbite on his hands and feet.'

'You'll notice that it says he was driven back? The next day, the ship sailed so he did not see her?' She raised enquiring eyebrows, so I nodded. Then she said, 'According to the *Crier*, which was true enough according to the information which leaked from the ship at the time, but was far from the whole story.' She paused and appeared to be thinking. 'Women

found a means of getting their way before women's lib. Like Mother. She wouldn't let Father in the bed, but that did not last long, because they were happy and in love.' She grinned fleetingly. 'Both were smart enough not to use the word "dahlias" for a long time, though. It's when women use sex for punishment over a period of time, or when they cheat, that things go awry.' She lowered her voice. 'Or if they can't be true to one sex or the other.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'With all the talk about a single standard with equal freedom, the fact is many women don't want it. They prefer a single commitment. That there are some women who have a low sex drive, or find normal sex distasteful is forgotten.'

She nodded. 'Roxanna would have fitted in with the present movement of sexual freedom. In fact, she was well ahead of it. She might have been bisexual. A child learns a lot about sex filling in what adults,' she paused, 'don't say. And they all talked about Roxanna. You see there was a woman who used to stay with her when Elijah was at sea. Violet. Nobody knew much about her, not even her last name. Ladies like my mother weren't encouraged to go near Roxanna's way.'

'What did she look like?'

Sarah was thoughtful. 'I don't know as you could call her pretty. Her features were too strong. Handsome would be better. Real dark hair and eyes, and rosy cheeks. She was tall with a straight carriage. Maybe closer to striking than pretty.'

I thought of my visitor of last night and sat forward to speak, but her voice went on, and I waited until she had finished her say.

As if she anticipated my next question, she said, 'Elijah was pure Yankee sailor. Sandy hair and rather nondescript. The kind of looks that could fit just anyone. It was Roxanna's face and the way she walked, as if she skimmed ground, that you would never forget. No one lived out there on Marshes Point then, not even the summer people, but Roxanna made Elijah build right in the path of that north wind. She used to walk the beach in pants, you know, at a time when women did not wear them; I suppose she liked it out there because it was private.' She gave a triumphant cry and handed me another copy of the *Crier*. The date on this was January 15.

'Roxanna Dillet, wife of Elijah Dillet, was found lying on the floor at the foot of the stairs of their house on Marshes

Point frozen to death. The Grand Jury is waiting Mr Dillet's return from sea for questioning.'

'What happened to the house?'

'Well, it was right on the beach. It blew out to sea in the hurricane of 1938.' She gave me a mischievous glance. 'Now, I'll tell you how Mother and Father made up.'

'Sarah! You've left me with a body!'

'I told you, it's all part of the same story.'

'Oh!'

'Now, you wait. The point is that I was with Roxanna and Violet that very day. I told you I was frightened out of all proportion by my parents' disagreement. I just did not want to go home from school, and so when a couple of the big girls, Kathy Blake and Bessie Frankin, started out to Marshes Point, I followed along. None of us was supposed to be out there, I guess because of Roxanna, but they had their sleds and I had mine and I went. We were sliding down the big hill when I hit a tree and broke my sled. When I realized my predicament, Kathy and Bessie had faded. It was getting late - you know how short the days are in January - and I was all alone with a broken sled and not at all sure of the way home. Crying and dragging the sled along the beach, I was just a short distance from the Dillet house when Roxanna found me and took me home with her. The plan of the Dillet house was very much like this one.' She glanced about the room. 'The steps were to the left of the entrance hall, the living-room to the right, and the combination dining-room and kitchen at the back. The place smelled good. There was an apple pie cooling on the table and something simmering on the coal stove. It might have been pot roast. It had a wonderfully comforting smell. Violet was comforting, too. She took one look at me, draped my wet coat to dry before the stove, made me a cup of cocoa, and cut me a big piece of pie. Roxanna was different to me in those navy pants, something women did not wear in those days, but Violet was like anybody's mother fussing around, drying my clothes and feeding me. She had pale blue eyes and light hair and a nice figure. "You poor little thing," she kept saying, and when I told her the big girls had deserted me, she was indignant. "Weren't they mean!" she exclaimed and gave me another cup of cocoa. I liked Violet. She had such sad eyes, green like the sea.'

'You just said they were blue,' I objected.

She was not amused. 'The sea changes, doesn't it? Blue to green to blue again? I think Violet and Roxanna were like that. Going one way when they were together and another when they were apart. The difference was that Violet was troubled, but nothing fazed Roxanna. She was doing just what a man would do. She got out a hammer and nails and banged away until she had fixed my sled as good as new. I was so relieved. I did not want to go home with a broken sled on top of everything else, and I made up my mind then and there that if I could possibly get away with it, I was not going to tell my parents that I had been to Marshes Point, or that I had compounded my sin by going into the Dillet house. Well, I said that Violet's blue-green eyes,' she gave me a look, 'were sad. They were also worried. She kept turning to see out the window where Elijah's ship, *Nancy Belle*, was frozen out into the bay. Finally, she said, "He could come back. The ship's still there."

"What difference does that make?" Roxanna shrugged. "He won't come back. The coast guard will get them out."

'Violet was hesitant. "But they might not sail for a few days. I think I should go home. He could return." She began to wring her hands. "Besides, what is there to last?"

'Roxanna laughed. Like everything about her, her laugh was unrestrained. "Why do you carry on so?" She came over to Violet and held her hands imprisoned. "The coast guard will cut them out. You'll be glad you stayed," she went on, "You know you will."

They exchanged a glance which was of the kind which children know that they have to grow up to understand, and Violet seemed to settle down. She put my dry coat on me to go. If it hadn't been for what happened later, I don't think that I would have remembered much of what they said or did. It was what happened after that impressed it on my mind and a kind of real feeling for Violet. She was like someone who is hooked, but longs not to be. Roxanna pulled me on the sled within a block of home and then walked off leaving me to make up my own story. Mother opened the door and hugged me and hugged me. She didn't ask any questions either. And my father was there and put me on his lap. It was clear enough that all was right with my world.'

I picked up the paper again. 'The clipping says that Roxanna

was found dead. What did happen?’

‘You notice that it says Elijah attempted to cross the ice but did not succeed?’

I nodded.

‘And then it says *Nancy Belle* sailed, and the next edition reports that she is found dead. There was one other news item, but I must have lost it over the years. Too bad, after Mother kept them so well. But I can tell you what it said. When Elijah’s ship came back to port, he was called before the Grand Jury and admitted that he had reached home that night to be with Roxanna. He said that she laughed and taunted him, and refused her marital duty, and in his anguish, he had rushed down the stairs and run out – that Roxanna must have followed down the steps to close the door and fallen.’

‘But the injury to her head.’ I stopped. I thought I had noticed something strange about my visitor’s head.

She eyed me enquiringly, but made no comment, and so I asked, ‘Nothing about Violet?’

‘No. Not that you read in the paper. But the jury knew about her, and they were all men. They ruled it was an accident; that Roxanna had fallen down the stairs and fractured her skull. While she was lying there unconscious, the wind blew through the open door and she froze to death. They said it was the wind.’

‘What happened to Violet?’

She shook her head. ‘She just disappeared. She must have fled when Elijah was having it out with Roxanna. Don’t forget that this was a story which came up in private conversations every once in a while over the years, but no one ever found out anything about Violet.’ She grinned briefly. ‘They never discovered that I was in the Dillet house that day either.’ Her expression again became serious. ‘I like to think that Violet changed. That she lived her life out in the normal way. From her treatment of me, I think she loved children.’

I walked to the window to gaze again at the frozen world. ‘What about the body on *Octopad*, the sailor? What was his name?’

‘Edgar Eldredge. He was jealous of his wife, too, but for a different reason. She’s too pretty to be real. The men were like bees to the flower before she married Edgar. He started across the ice, I suppose to be one last time with her, but he

fell. They said he broke his leg, not far from the ship either, but the wind howling must have covered his cries.'

She joined me at the window which the sun had freed of its geometric frosting into one cleared circle, and pointed to the horizon. 'Do you ever wonder if events are stacked up out there and have to come around again until they are worked out to a just end, until all debts are paid? Like so many things; this January being the same as in 1918. We're not at war, but we do worry about fuel, energy, and the price of food. In lots of ways, we don't have what we used to have or what we want, and there's *Octopad*, like a ghost come back just where the *Nancy Belle* was frozen. And there is Edgar Eldredge starting across the ice to see his wife, maybe because he was jealous because she was so popular, or suspicious like Elijah Dillet was, or just because he wanted to be with her. Whatever the reason, this time he did not make it to shore.'

I thought about it. 'Sarah, you said this time?'

'Yes, if you were thinking in terms of time, Eternal Time, and that the event has to return until it is worked out, then the people would have to be the same, wouldn't they? So,' she reasoned, 'Roxanna was false to her husband and to Violet, playing with the feelings of one against the other, and she paid. But Elijah Dillet got away with murder. His debt was left outstanding.'

I don't know why I did not tell Sarah then and there that I had seen Roxanna's ghost the previous night, but if she were right, the Dillet affair was cancelled from that Book of Records, wiped away as the sun had wiped the glass through which we gazed. New people would build on Marshes Point as we had. It would be a different place. And there was no reason for Roxanna to stay, unless we held on to her in our minds. And so we stood there in silence, our eyes focused on the melted circle in the pane as if watching Elijah Dillet and Edgar Eldredge standing beside the scales which weigh and measure out the years and centuries of death and birth, until the images of the men blended into one and the scales hung in a delicate balance, precisely.

BARLEYRIGGS

Dorothy K. Haynes

May 7th

We've been house hunting all day. Vincent has been given a new area to cover – the boss says he thinks it's time the firm broke new ground – so we're going to settle down in Scotland. I must say I'm quite looking forward to it. We could do with a bigger house anyway. Jean and Roger are still young enough – technically – to share a bedroom, but the way they carry on they'd both be better for a den of their own. Then there's the question of friends and relations. Once we move, they'll all be looking for holidays in Scotland! It's a good time to make a break, before the children get too involved at school, and Vince and I are both enjoying our forays over the Border. Luckily, the firm gave us time off, and a good removal allowance.

May 14th

It isn't so easy as we expected. We've looked everywhere in the area, but there just isn't a decent-sized house for sale; one or two new bungalows, but at the most they run to three tiny bedrooms, and the living-room's crammed with only a TV set and a three-piece suite. Not the thing at all for growing children.

May 17th

Got a note from Rankine the lawyer today. He says there's a house on the market called Barleyriggs. It's going remarkably cheaply. Probably too big for most folk, and a bit remote; but, he says, if we'd like to make an appointment to see it . . .

May 20th

It's *exactly* what we want! It *is* big, it *is* remote, and I've a feeling we'll have to spend quite a lot to make it habitable, but never mind. At the price they're asking, it's a gift; and

with what's left over from the sale of our own house, we'll be able to spend quite a bit. I'm not keen on all the upheaval, mind, but if we start now we can have it done before winter; and I'd rather have Barleyriggs than a staid terrace house with no personality at all.

June 14th

We finished the formalities today. I've a feeling that Rankine looked relieved. I can't say I blame him. Vincent had the house checked from top to bottom, and asked so many questions, even after the report came in, that I was beginning to feel embarrassed. I wanted to butt in and say, 'Oh, look, Vince, can't we just sign and be done with it?' but I have a very careful husband. He feels that if the house is going at what Rankine calls a bargain price there must be something wrong with it. I'm so taken with the place that if there are snags, I don't want to know; but of course, I'm not business-like. Perhaps it's better that one of us should keep both feet on the ground.

Now I can start packing and getting ready. We're not going to rush things. We'll tackle one room at a time, and make up our mind about things as we go along.

July 2nd

It's happened at last! We've moved into Barleyriggs, and I'm writing this letter before I put out the light and call it a day. I'm so tired I'm beginning to twitch. Vincent has been camping here for two days while I organized things at our end. We got the carpets down, in the rooms we've carpets for, and the beds are up, but all we've unpacked are the necessities.

Jean and Roger, thank goodness, just keeled over after tea, and we put them to bed without washing. I didn't hear any complaints! Skidlum, though, is pretty unsettled. He keeps whimpering about and looking for all the familiar things. I thought it was cats who were attached to houses. Still, he's only a pup, and he'll soon grow to like his new home.

July 16th

Things are looking quite reasonable now. We've got a milk-

man, a butcher and a grocer. We didn't have to do anything about it. They just arrived, and introduced themselves very civilly and pleasantly. You'd think that our arrival was an event. They all asked the same questions, whether we wouldn't be nervous with no near neighbours, and so on. I assured them we wouldn't be; but I've a feeling that when I'm not so busy (if I ever get to that stage!), and when Jean and Roger are at school, I'll be pretty glad of vans calling to break up the day.

July 21st

Life is getting positively hectic. As well as the grocer and the milkman, we'd a visit from a man in a small red van. He said he'd called about the gas fire. I told him we didn't have one. That was his chance to make a sale, if he'd been quick enough, but he only looked at his list and muttered something and left. Oh well, maybe that wasn't his job.

August 30th

I know now why they call it Barleyriggs. The fields around us are all a silky cream colour, and they hiss when the wind strikes them. I'll be sorry to see it all cut down. There's a nip in the air now, morning and evening, and we've loaded up the shed with logs. I'm looking forward to having fires all over the house.

October 30th

This is a very intermittent diary! I thought I'd have more time, with Jean away most of the day, but I seem to be busier than ever.

One snag about this house is that it's terribly difficult to keep warm. I take back what I said about having fires all over the house! It's a full-time job keeping them going, and even then they're not all that efficient. Vincent keeps muttering about central heating, but it seems daft to go through all that upset when we've just finished decorating. Still, it would be a lot more comfortable.

November 8th

We've decided on storage heaters; not too difficult to instal, and no stoking. Just the thing.

November 12th

Heard Skidlum barking hysterically at the gate. A red van with GAS on it was parked outside. Before I could call Skidlum in, the van had moved off. Whatever they wanted us for, it couldn't have been all that important.

December 3rd

A real cold snap, and we're delighted, because we can test out our heating. It's super. Skidlum loves it. He lies curled up against the heaters, and I'm sure he thinks they were put in for his special benefit.

A funny thing happened today, though. Another gasman came, a different one this time, with a bag of tools on his shoulder. He said he'd come about a leak. I tried to explain we'd no gas in the house, but he didn't seem to believe me. His mate sat at the gate in the little van, and he shouted out to him something about 'Barleyriggs', and the mate came out and nodded, and hung about and argued. I was going to ask them in, and show them, once and for all, that we didn't need them but Skidlum made such a fuss that we couldn't hear ourselves speak. I know we need a watchdog in a lonely place like this, especially when Vincent's away so much, but he gets too enthusiastic sometimes. I just had to let the men go, waving and grinning at them to show there was no ill feeling.

December 7th

Roger came up to me today when I was making a steak and kidney pudding. 'Mummy,' he said, 'what's that lady doing in front of the fire?'

'What fire, dear?' I said.

'The sitting-room fire.'

'There isn't a lady . . .'

'Yes there is. She's sitting on the sofa. She's all pale and

thin-looking, and I came away because I thought she was going to cry.'

Of course, I didn't believe a word of it. Roger's got a very vivid imagination, and I think he misses Jean since she started school. But - 'Skidlum doesn't like her,' he said seriously. 'He growled and bristled.'

'Oh, Skidlum's a daft wee dog,' I said, but I slipped in a minute or two later, and had a look. There was nobody there. Of course there wasn't. I'll be glad when Roger's old enough to go to school.

December 18th

A week to go to Christmas. I spent all day getting in holly from the woods - I'm pricked to bits! - and at night Vince and I put up the decorations. Nothing elaborate or trendy, just old-fashioned paper chains and cotton wool and balloons and a few pictures Jean did at school.

Great preparations for Santa Claus! I'm glad we've kept the coal fire. It's so much more traditional. I only wish we were nearer the centre of things, so that other kids could drop in on Christmas morning.

December 25th

Phew! So that's over! It was the most marvellous Christmas ever, but I feel completely whacked. The children are sound asleep, and Vince and I won't be long till we go upstairs too.

Thank goodness it went so well! I was beginning to worry on Christmas Eve. Roger started this business about the lady in front of the fire again. We were laying out ginger wine and biscuits for Santa, and Roger said, 'What if the lady eats them?'

'What lady?' I said.

'The lady that sits by the fire.'

'Of course she won't eat them! There isn't any lady anyway.' I was a bit sharp this time, but Roger didn't seem to notice. He looked thoughtful, and then he said, 'No, she's too quiet. And too sad . . .'

Jean heard him, and told him not to be silly, but she was too quick about it, as if she wanted to cut him off before he said more. She looked scared too. I wonder if they've

been talking about things together? You can never tell with kids.

Anyway, I got them off to sleep, and then just as we'd got to bed ourselves Skidlum started, yap, yap, yap, quite hysterical. He wakened the children, and I had to try to keep them in bed while Vince went down to try to quieten the dog. 'No, no,' I kept saying, 'it's not Santa. Santa hasn't been yet, and he won't come so long as you're awake.' And there were the stockings, hanging filled, and the big toys piled up round the Christmas tree . . . I was terrified they'd go down and find out!

'It's all right,' said Vince, coming back. 'He's just being silly. There's an awful smell of gas down there, though.'

'Gas? But there's none, Vince. You know that. You're as bad as those workmen who keep calling . . .'

And of course there was no smell. I checked it myself. He'd imagined it all.

February 12th

I'll be glad when winter's over. It's bleak, black, and very cold, and there's something uneasy about the place, a kind of hostility I never noticed in summer. What do I mean by hostility? I don't know. Something in the air . . . Skidlum is uneasy. They say these highly bred dogs are apt to be nervy. Maybe we'd have been better with a mongrel. And the children spend far too long whispering and pointing. This game about a woman at the fireside is going too far. It gives me the creeps.

The red van called again. Reports of a gas leak . . . more muttering and checking of papers, then they apologized and went away. Till next time, I suppose.

February 29th

An awful thing happened. Shouts and crying, two voices raised in the night, but nobody there. Skidlum was right against the wall when we came down, snarling. And then . . . it went quiet, all except Skidlum's whines and whimpering. We waited and—we both smelt it; gas, hissing . . . and suddenly, vague, at first, but growing clearer, lying on the rug, The Lady . . .

A quiet, thin lady, elegant but untidy, her hair in wisps, her

hands thin . . . no sign of the man with whom she'd quarrelled. He must have gone out, and she had laid herself down, and turned on the gas fire . . .

But there was no gas fire, and no one beside it. Maybe we had imagined . . . but the smell was there, sickening and heady . . .

'Shut the door,' said Vincent. 'Open the windows in the children's room; but don't waken them! I'll ring the gas people. There's an escape somewhere.'

We opened the door and the windows, and the cold damp air blew in. I made a pot of coffee. If a man was to be hauled out of his bed at this hour of the morning, he'd be glad of a hot drink. Fidgeting about, I waited for the familiar red van.

But the van that came was grey, and the man with it was a stranger. I expected him to look annoyed, but he was more puzzled, and something else.

'You're sure you smelled gas?' he asked.

'Oh yes. Not for the first time.'

'But there's no gas in this house.'

'Your lot don't seem to think so,' said Vince. 'They've been turning up regularly with the same bit of paper, telling us we've got a leak. And now we're telling you, and you turn round and tell us we haven't.'

'Nobody came from our lot. I can assure you of that.'

'They did!' I insisted. 'A wee red van . . .'

He licked his lips, and shivered slightly. Relenting a bit, Vince shoved the door shut, and poured out the coffee. The gasman shovelled in sugar, and gulped.

'Our vans aren't red. They're grey. And I know – and all my workers know – there's no gas at Barleyriggs. It was taken out years ago.'

'The pipes under the floor . . . ?'

'No. We took them out too. And . . . ' he put down his mug, and looked from me to Vince and back again. 'Have you – did you . . . when you bought this house, did nobody tell you . . . ?'

Without answering, we waited for him to go on.

'There was a suicide – well, they think it was a suicide, but there might have been more to it than that. The woman disappeared, you see. Then the next people who came in kept complaining about a smell of gas, and we could never find anything – we did have red vans at that time, Missis.' He gave

me a little nod, like a detective praising smart observation. 'Well, the tenants got fed up, and at last they got us to take the pipes out. We lost a customer, you might say; but we found something else . . .

'She – the lady who was missing – she'd been buried under the floor. Gassed; they found that out, the way they investigate these things. And nobody wanted the house after that.'

So that was it. We haven't smelt gas since, and nobody has mentioned the unfortunate woman by the fire; but I don't think we can stay here much longer. I've a feeling that the drama we saw may be enacted again.

There's no particular hurry. This is February 29th, and it was leap year, according to our friend the gasman, when the tragedy took place. That gives us four years . . .

We'll need it. It took long enough to sell the house last time.

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Rosemary Timperley

The letter had an official look about it, with its buff-coloured envelope, typed address, and the formal 'J. Oswald Esq.'. He couldn't remember ever having been 'Esq.' before, wasn't even sure what it meant. When he opened it, he realized it had come from the hospital, and was from *her*. He'd never expected to hear from her again, because she had seemed to hate him so. The letter came like a voice from another world.

He took a long pull of whisky, although it was only eight in the morning, and began to read.

The Bin,
Somewhere.
Date? Can't think.

Dear Dad,

Are you still alive? No matter. If you're not you'll 'see' this letter all the sooner. They said I could write to someone and I can't think of anyone but you. No hard feelings about that old business, I hope. You were so drunk and I was thoroughly cheesed off with you, so I went berserk. Still, that's all whisky under the bridge. I want to tell you now about what's been happening to me, in my own words, without being confused by lawyers and shrinks. They're not bad people but limited.

It started on my very first day in that job. I got on fine in the morning. Mr Barnet seemed decent to work for, didn't make a pass and didn't dictate too fast for my shorthand. I typed the letters in the little office he'd given me and brought them to him before lunch. He signed them, and I noticed then what an untidy man he was. His desk was littered with papers, books, memos, files, pens, ashtrays. I didn't see how he could ever find anything on it.

'Shall I tidy your desk?' I asked him.

'No,' he said. 'Don't you start that. It may look a mess, but I know exactly where to put my hand on anything I want.'

Fair enough. I went out to lunch. When I came back, he sent for me and he was in a rage. 'I told you not to tidy my things,' he said, and I saw that the desk was bare, everything

put away except for some clean paper and a clean ashtray.

'I didn't do it,' I protested.

'No use denying it, Miss Oswald,' he began, but I broke in, 'I am denying it, Mr Barnet. You told me not to tidy your desk so I didn't. Why should I? Be logical. I don't do extra work unless I have to. Anyway, I quite like things lying around. It looks more homey.'

He scowled uneasily, then muttered, 'All right, but don't do it again, there's a good girl.'

I decided not to repeat that I hadn't done it before—it's as well not to argue with one's boss, even when he's in the wrong—but I wished I knew who had been in there and cleared his desk. It had got me into trouble on my very first day. So, before returning to my own office, I went to speak to the girls in the typing pool.

'Did any of you go into Mr Barnet's room in the lunch hour and tidy his desk?' I demanded.

'No fear' . . . 'Not on your nellie' . . . 'Not bloody likely', came a chorus of denials.

'It's as much as our life's worth,' said Emma, the youngest and most spirited. She was a pretty girl with red hair, mad about dancing, always practising new steps when she should have been typing. She went on, 'That was what Miss Lennox used to do.'

'Who's Miss Lennox?' I asked.

'Old Barnet's late secretary.'

'Late?'

'She fell out of his office window, five floors down. Accidental death, Barnet said. We think he pushed her.'

'You shouldn't say things like that, Em. You'll be had up,' one of the others protested.

'Well, we do think it, don't we?' said Emma. 'She drove him frantic, you see. She was obsessively tidy, and though he told her time and time again to leave his desk alone, she wouldn't. She said the neatness of the office was part of her job and she couldn't stand a muddle. They had terrible rows about it. She'd sneak in there in the lunch hour and clear the decks, and he'd come back and fly off the handle. It was after one of those rows had been going on that he came in here, green in the face, and said, "Miss Lennox has fallen out of the window." We all dashed out to look, and there the poor soul was, dead on the pavement.'

'And was there any suggestion that he pushed her?' I asked.

'Not officially. There were no witnesses and the police didn't know about Miss Lennox's tidiness fetish and how it used to upset Mr Barnet. We didn't say anything as we didn't want to lose our jobs.'

'He must have given the police a satisfactory explanation as to how she fell,' I said.

'Oh, he did, and it was in the papers. He said she was standing by the open window, which has rather a low sill, and she leaned out to look at a pigeon, and toppled over. But you don't lean out of a window to look at anything when you're having a row with someone, do you? You concentrate on the enemy. My guess is that she turned her back on him in a fury, and he came up behind and shoved. So if you value your life, Miss Oswald, don't try to keep old Barnet tidy. Right?'

'Right,' I said, 'but if none of you did it today, who did? Who went in there?'

'Nobody,' they said, and Emma chuckled and added, 'Unless it was Miss Lennox from another world,' and she did a spooky little dance which made everyone laugh.

I didn't believe all she said, of course. The girls were bored, especially Emma, who wanted to be a toe-tapper not a key-tapper, and she was egging them all on to believe that their boss was a killer just to liven things up a bit.

All the same, it was peculiar. Who *had* tidied that desk? I half-wondered if old Barnet was schizo and had done it himself, the left hand not knowing what the right was doing, or t'other way about.

Things went smoothly at the office for a week or so. I never touched the chaos on Mr Barnet's desk, nor did anyone else, and he seemed pleased with me. I worked hard and behaved as well as I knew how, because I'd told a little lie to get the job, so I always had to be careful.

Then one day, when he was dictating, he stopped by the open window and looked out. I fixed my gaze on him, as it was quite difficult to hear what he was dictating when he was speaking out into the air, so I didn't actually see the woman come in. But suddenly there she was, this middle-aged woman, gliding across the room, and she gave Mr Barnet a hard push, right in the middle of his back – and out he went.

I screamed and closed my eyes, hoping that if I couldn't see,

nothing would have happened. I often get rid of the world just by closing my eyes, but of course it comes back if you open them.

The door opened noisily. Emma's voice said: 'What's happening? Oh, you're all right. We thought perhaps he was murdering you. Where is he?'

I opened my eyes, letting the world in again, and pointed to the window. Emma looked out. 'Oh, my God,' she said, 'what have you gone and done?'

'I didn't do it,' I said. 'It was that woman!'

'What woman?'

'She's gone now – you must have seen her. She came in here and just – just pushed him. It all happened so quickly I didn't have time to stop her.'

Everyone was crowding in now, and another crowd was gathering round Mr Barnet on the pavement, and then the ambulance came and the police, and I was asked to describe the woman who had done it.

'She was middle-aged,' I said. 'Grey hair, grey suit, little pearl ear-rings, horn-rimmed spectacles, rather large teeth and a big nose. I've no idea who she was and I'd never seen her before.'

The other girls said that no one except me had gone into Mr Barnet's office, and that my description of the woman fitted Miss Lennox, who was dead.

Well, they'd never described her to me, so how was I to know it was her? Even if I had, I'd probably only have thought she'd come to tidy his desk, not push him out of the window. I realized it must have been she who'd cleared his desk that other time, which he'd blamed me for – and I also realized that I must have second sight, that I was the type to see ghosts. It made me wonder if a lot of people I see around aren't ghosts, because she looked as solid as anyone. I had noticed that the streets were getting crowded to stifling point, and that sometimes I collided with people but felt nothing, and this explained it.

The police grilled me and it soon became clear that they thought I'd pushed Mr Barnet out of the window. You see, someone down in the street had looked up at the crucial moment. This witness said Mr Barnet didn't jump, nor did he topple and drop; he sort of shot forward, as if he'd been shoved from behind – as indeed he had. I'd told the police

that myself *and* described Miss Lennox for them, but they wouldn't believe in her existence.

All I could do was tell them the truth, over and over again, and all ~~they~~ they could do was not believe a word of it. They asked me about my 'relationship with Mr Barnett', suggested that he might have been 'making unwelcome overtures' and I'd fought him off – of all the nonsense! Then they got on to my 'past'.

There they had me. They found I'd spent the previous year in that mental hospital, although I'd lied to Mr Barnett and told him I'd been working abroad. He might not have given me the job otherwise. People are like that. They won't employ you if you admit frankly that you've been in a bin, so it's best to lie. Not that it seemed best now, with the police getting more and more suspicious.

They checked my record, found that once I'd made a 'murderous attempt' on you, Dad, which was why I'd been put in that hospital, and it counted against me. A girl who could attack her own father with a poker, they implied, wouldn't think twice about pushing a difficult boss out of his office window. It might have been better for me if I'd never mentioned Miss Lennox in the first place, but when I mentioned her, I didn't know who she was – there was no way of telling.

So now I'm in this place for something I didn't do. It's awfully unjust. At the trial I was brought in 'Guilty but insane'. I expect you read about it in the papers. You were in the nick at the time on a d. and d. charge, if I remember rightly, but the cons manage to see the papers, don't they?

Anyway, my point is that I might be insane, as they say only mad people see ghosts, but I was *not* guilty.

You'll find this hard to believe, Dad, and I wouldn't tell you if I were anywhere but here – I'd be afraid of being 'put away', but as I'm 'put away' already, I don't have to bother about being thought a nut-case – but Miss Lennox visits me. She comes and goes as she pleases, no bother with locks and keys and bars and red tape, and she's very sorry about my being falsely accused. She hadn't meant that to happen. She says Mr Barnett did push her out of the window when they were having that row over his desk, so she came back to do the same to him. Tit for tat, an eye for an eye and so forth. She didn't see why he should get away with murder. She

believes in the death penalty for murder, on principle. She says it's the only tidy way of doing things, so she came back to the office and got it done. She says that out of fairness, she'd given him a warning a while earlier by tidying his desk – I got blamed for that too, remember – but he didn't cotton on. So, as she puts it, she came and 'did a final tidying up, getting rid of the biggest load of rubbish of the lot'. You can't help laughing. Poor old Barnet! She's forgiven him now she's got her own back.

She's nothing like as prim as she looks and she and I get on like a house on fire. We have long talks, which is a bit of a giggle as the gaolers – nurses, I should call them – think I'm talking to myself.

Quite a few of the other inmates 'talk to themselves', according to the staff, but of course they're really talking to people they can see but the staff can't. They're limited, like the lawyers and shrinks.

There's only one thing that irritates me about Miss Lennox and that is, she will keep tidying up my cell, or room, or whatever you call it. I like to leave a few things about. It makes the place more homey. But she just can't resist putting stray articles away or neatening things into little orderly piles. We even had a row about it one day, when she said I was getting as bad as Mr Barnet, but I can't do what he did to ~~her~~ as there are no windows here which anyone is push-out-able-of; and anyway as she's dead already there wouldn't be much point. You can't murder a ghost so it's as well to stay friends

I think there must have been a bit of telepathy going on when she mentioned Mr Barnet like that, because next thing *he* came to see me. 'Now you know what I went through with that woman,' he said. 'Isn't it infuriating the way she has to tidy everything up? You can't stop her even now. It's an addiction.' I had to agree with him.

Then he said he was very sorry I'd taken the blame for pushing him, and as Miss Lennox is sorry about that too, they agree on one point at least.

Mr Barnet is trying to help me now. He says that as I'm here 'during Her Majesty's pleasure', maybe one day when Her Majesty isn't feeling so pleased with life, she'll let me out, and then I'll need to work again, so I'd best keep up my shorthand. He gives me shorthand practice every day, dictating

loads of letters, and I'm getting up a better speed than ever before. So really it's almost the same as if nothing had happened and I'm still the secretary in his office.

Young Emma comes here too. It's lovely to see her. She brightens the place up. She was killed in a car crash, poor kid, on her way home from a dance. Her escort had had a few too many—you'll understand that little weakness, Dad—and he drove into the white side of a house thinking it was just pale air. Emma doesn't mind now, although she was upset at first. She dances all the time, bless her, and will never have to touch a typewriter again.

So here we all are, Dad: Mr Barnet, Miss Lennox, Emma and me, making a little world of our own in my room. 'Stone walls do not a prison make Nor iron bars a cage.' I remember learning that at school and it's true, as long as you have ghosts for company. They're better company than living people too. Not so limited. They know things without knowing how they know. They know about how I tried to do you in that time with a poker when you were mad drunk, and they never had to look up any records the way the police did. They just know things naturally.

As I write this, I don't know whether you're alive or dead. If you're alive, of course I'd like you to come and see me, but not if you can't bear the idea. It will mean a lot of locking and unlocking and being let in and out and doing the polite with officials, so if you can't face it, don't bother. No hard feelings. But if by any chance you're dead, then you could just drop in and meet the 'family'. We never had much family life, you and me, did we? You'd like it here.

All the best,

Your affec. daughter,
Miss Oswald.

Oswald read the letter several times, then found there was a covering note still in the envelope. It was from the hospital superintendent, who wrote: 'You will see from the enclosed letter that your daughter is suffering from hallucinations, but she behaves calmly and causes us no trouble. She sits alone practising her shorthand most of the time. If you would care to visit her, please do so.' He suggested a date and time.

Straight away, Oswald wrote back to say he would come, then downed a half-bottle of whisky to steady his nerves. He

had no 'hard feelings' where his daughter was concerned, even though she had tried to kill him. She'd been driven by desperation, poor girl. She was round the bend, as her mother had been before she died, shortly after the child's birth: and he himself had been a pretty disgraceful father, drinking, thieving, in and out of the nick. He hadn't wanted her put in a bin after her attack on him. It was the authorities who had made such a fuss and said she was dangerous. He suspected that she *had* pushed her boss out of the window – her story of a ghost was a bit thin – but then when you're accused of something, you'll say anything to get out of it. He always denied accusations himself, and was never believed, so he had a lot of fellow feeling for his daughter now.

The day came for his visit to the hospital. He drank enough whisky to enable him to function – alcoholics usually know the correct dosage to get themselves going – and he'd have been all right if he'd stuck to that original alcohol quota. But in his anxiety not to be late, he reached the hospital too early, so went into a pub for a noggin to spin out time. The noggin turned into two or three, and when he rose to leave he was seeing double. This symptom had been getting worse lately and it was not without interest. For example, you'd see two identical people walking towards you, and only when they came really close did they merge into one. Now, which of the two had been the real one and which the 'ghost'? It was like a game, trying to guess, and he played it as he walked in the direction of the hospital. When he had to cross the road, however, and saw two cars swooping towards him, he made a wrong guess as to which was the solid one, and suddenly it was looming over him like a great black monster, too close to be seen as a car at all, just a 'thing', out to get him. He tried to run, but his legs were wobbly. He fell sprawling to the ground. 'Goodbye, world,' he whispered . . .

There was a tremendous noise, like a bomb going off in his head. But by some miracle the car seemed to have missed him after all, for he got up, no longer shaky, and continued on his way. He looked back to see what the car had hit, and saw people converging towards a figure lying in the road. Then he saw a policeman, and instinctively hurried in the opposite direction. No one took any notice of him.

The shock of the accident had cleared his head; or maybe it was that bomb that had gone off in it which had done the

trick, for he didn't feel in the least drunk now. He felt lively, almost young. Bright instead of blurry. He went eagerly on his way to see his unfortunate daughter.

When he reached the hospital, he didn't bother to tell any one official of his arrival. Why trouble them? He knew where her room was and he had no difficulty whatever in simply going there. He didn't know how he knew, or why everything was so simple. He felt so free, almost reborn.

He entered her room, thinking how pleased she'd be to see him not drunk, for a change, and was surprised to find that she was not alone. The place was full of people, and they were quite a cosy little group, as groups go: the portly, well-off-looking man dictating a letter, the middle-aged woman in glasses tidying up, the pretty girl with red hair twirling in a graceful dance, and his daughter sitting quietly there, writing shorthand.

They all looked round and smiled a welcome in the most natural way possible. He had a feeling of belonging. Only his daughter, when he looked at her more closely, seemed somehow different from the others. Something a bit unreal about her. Shadowy. Transparent. Yes, she looked like a ghost who had strayed in, from another world . . .

'Hello, you old b.,' she said. 'Never seen you look so cheerful. I always told you you'd be better off dead'

A LITTLE NIGHT FISHING

Sydney J. Bounds

'Here is a gale warning. Sea areas Sole and Fastnet. Force eight, imminent.'

Robson switched off the wheelhouse radio and stepped on to the deck. The sky was clear and the sea calm. Well, the weathermen had been known to be wrong before, but there was no harm in checking with the locals. Not that it mattered; he had to go out tonight whatever the weather. Big Todd was not a man to accept excuses.

He studied the appearance of the cruiser before he left: everything looked all right, the fishing tackle was prominently displayed. He crossed the gangplank to the jetty and headed towards the Black Swan.

Robson was a heavy man with a perpetual scowl, dressed in roll-neck sweater, jeans and rope-soled shoes. He didn't like the sea or boats, he didn't like being away from the Smoke – but he liked the money.

Tregorrow, on the Cornish coast, was a scattering of grey stone houses, a small harbour and a pub. He crossed the quay in quick strides and went inside.

Four blue-jerseyed fishermen sat at a table with cards and a crib-board. A giant of a man stood watching them. Behind the bar, the publican's wife polished glasses.

'Pint of bitter,' Robson called and, as the giant turned to look at him, added: 'Join me?'

'Aye, I can sink a pint. I'm Fletch.'

'Robbie.'

A big hand surrounded one of the two mugs pushed across the counter. 'Nice little boat you've got there, Robbie. Fast, I'd bet. You do a lot of fishing?'

'Sweet Violet? She's fast enough for what I want. I get my kicks night fishing – just an amateur, for sport, like.'

'You'll need to watch this coastline,' Fletch said in a warning tone.

'Yeah, more rocks than Hatton Garden. What d'you think to the weather just now?'

'Blowing up a storm I'd reckon.'

'What's a little storm?' Robson said, smiling. 'Adds zest to

the job, and *Sweet Violet* can take it.'

Fletch didn't answer, just stared at the visitor, weighing him up.

Robson stared back. Fletch was blond with blue eyes, making him wonder if the Vikings had ever penetrated to this south-west corner of Britain. A big one, but he could take him. Robson was cockney and expert in the ways of back-street fighting.

'We get some bad storms on this coast,' Fletch said. 'In the past, that made a living for the wreckers. They'd use false lights to lure a ship on to the rocks, then plunder it. None o' that now, of course – but we still get the storms.'

He swallowed the rest of his pint and wiped the hairy back of a hand across his mouth. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, gentle almost.

'There's not so many wrecks now, either. Did you know this coast is haunted? 'Tis true as I stand at this bar – ' His voice grew insistent. 'Too many have seen the ghost not to believe. Some say 'tis the phantom of some poor sailor murdered by wreckers. Come a storm, and fishermen see the grey wraith waving a lantern and warning them away from the rocks. Reckon it's saved a few lives.'

'Yeah? A real live ghost?'

'No, this un's been dead a hundred years. And if you happen to see it tonight, you'll do well to take notice, Robbie.'

The sea had an oily swell when Robson put out. The sun was a ball of fire sinking below the horizon and gulls wheeled and screamed beneath scudding cloud. On the jetty, Fletch stood beside drying nets, watching. Robson waved casually but the Cornishman ignored him.

The hell with you, friend, Robson thought and gave all his attention to the cruiser. *Sweet Violet* moved along easily, driven by two one-hundred-horse-power diesels, her bow parting the sea like a knife. No sign of ships on the grey water. Good. The last thing he wanted was a customs cutter nosing around. Robson checked his watch and compass, watching the receding cliffs for landmarks. There'd be a moon on his way back and he didn't want any foul-up, not with Todd waiting in a fast car. He had to know exactly where the shoals and reefs lay.

He motored at a steady speed, timing distance on a set

course for the rendezvous. A huge tanker passed slowly in the distance. The lights of land faded and he seemed alone on a great grey ocean.

The swell increased and a wind began to keen. The moon went behind storm clouds.

Presently, on time and in the right place, a fishing boat showed. As he closed with it, he read the name on the bow: *Tante Marie*. He cruised parallel to the boat and a man in a beret flashed a torch: two short, pause, one long, repeated. Robson completed his half of the recognition signal and the Frenchman tossed a small package on a line to him. Robson caught it, cut the line and held up the packet to show he'd got it.

The two boats veered apart.

Robson placed the packet in a specially constructed compartment behind the chart locker and turned back for the English coast. That little packet was worth a few thou, but he never considered double-crossing Big Todd. Todd was the connection between a Paris mob specializing in jewel robberies and a fence in Hatton Garden. He also had a fancy way with a razor.

The French boat dropped from view as rain came gusting down. *Sweet Violet* began to rise and fall. At the wheel, Robson smiled. He wouldn't even have to pretend to catch fish now; the rising gale was a perfect excuse to run for harbour.

A dark sea merged with a dark sky and rain slanted down, effectively blocking any view he might have had. Mounting waves tossed the cruiser about like a cork; it was all Robson could do to stay on course. The wind howled and rain drummed on the wheelhouse roof.

He peered into the gloom with aching eyes, listening as waves slammed the hull like the blows of a sledge-hammer. He studied his watch and compass, timing himself. By now he was closing the shore, a shore infested with granite crags and shoal water.

Now he heard it, above the wind and the rain, the noise of surf breaking over rocks. There was not a glimmer of light anywhere and he cursed. The black night was a shroud covering him.

He had difficulty keeping the boat headed where he wanted, staring with suspicion at the compass. He felt uneasy; he

wasn't used to relying solely on instruments. If he didn't see the lights of land soon he would be in trouble.

The crash of breakers sounded ominously close and he struggled into a life-jacket. A hell of a time to wish he'd learnt to swim . . .

Water poured across the wheelhouse window, though whether it was rain or sea he couldn't tell. *Sweet Violet* pitched and tossed as wind and waves battered her.

Then, through the darkness, a weak light winked at him. Robson stared in concentration. Had he imagined it? No, there was a light, swinging crazily. It might have been an oil lamp. As he neared the pin-point of yellow light, he saw a faint grey figure holding a lantern in one hand and swinging it to and fro.

The figure appeared to be a sailor in striped jersey, wearing a wool cap and standing atop a rock in the storming sea. It appeared so pale as to be unreal and did not look wet. Robson saw spray break over the figure . . . no, through it.

Paralysis gripped him. Sweat turned to ice. Fletch's ghost! He stared wild-eyed at the apparition with its swinging lantern, and trembled.

A ghostly voice lifted above the wind. 'Rocks . . . rocks ahead!'

Robson broke the grip of fear and wrenched desperately at the wheel, turning the cruiser away from the light. The hull juddered as she struck, throwing him off balance and he hit his head on the wall. He had a brief glimpse of a sharp-edged reef ripping along the hull, then water swirled at his feet.

In a daze, he scrambled through the doorway and clung to the deck-rail. An undertow caught the boat and swept her inshore. Robson clung to the rail, wet and cold, thinking of a fortune in diamonds hidden behind the chart locker. Big Todd would cut his heart out if he lost them – if he survived this.

Sweet Violet crashed against another rock, swung about and struck again. The wind hammered her, turning her over. Robson lost his grip and was washed overboard. He struggled weakly as his mouth filled with salt water. His feet touched bottom and he lurched upright, spluttering and gulping air.

The wind hurled him forward and he fell face-down on wet sand. A wave rolled over him as he lay gasping like a stranded fish. He could make out the dark shape of the cruiser, wedged

between jutting crags, some twenty yards away. Get the diamonds, he thought, get out of here – but his legs were lead weights. It was just too much effort to stand against the gale. Rest a moment, then he'd –

Shadowy figures gathered about him. One, closer than the others, stooped over him. He recognized the blond Viking from the pub.

'Fletch! Thank God, help me . . .'

Fletch stared down, unsmiling. 'Still alive then, Robbie?' The giant selected a slab of rock and lifted it. 'See our ghost, did thee? As I said, it's real enough – but I told one lie. 'Tis not the ghost of a drowned sailor, but of a wrecker. One of the Brethren. Aye, and it still lures boats on to the rocks for us!'

He brought down the rock, cracking Robson's skull as neat as slicing an egg.

A FAIRLY GREAT RECKONING

Roger Malisson

Henry Baynes Neumann, LLB, was a lawyer with a busy practice in Washington, DC, and he was in England on account of his health. At fifty he had chain-smoked his way through a string of successful cases until his doctor had advised him to lay off the booze and get away from work for a while, before his hypertension and heart condition ensured a more lasting kind of vacation.

Reluctantly at first, and then with pleasure, Henry had made his arrangements. Leaving his partners to cope with the business for a couple of months he uprooted his wife Ethel, locked up his handsome suburban house and set out for Europe.

They visited Austria first, and stayed for a week or two at a charming little village near Brannau, where his father had been born. After that they went to southern Italy, where Ethel suffered from heat fatigue and the paparazzi. Then they made for England. The Tourist Board had arranged for them to rent a Tudor cottage in Kent. There, amid the peaceful beauty of the countryside, Henry intended to forget entirely the pressures of the city, to sunbathe, read, eat good food, maybe play a little golf—in a word, to relax as he hadn't relaxed for years.

Ethel was twittering with excitement as the taxi drew up at the cottage door.

'Ooh, Henry, isn't it just gorgeous? All black and white like in the movies and oh, Henry, see the roses by the door there? I feel like I kind of stepped back four centuries just *looking* at it! Quick honey, give me the key so's we can go see inside!'

'Okay, Ethel.' Henry struggled to find the key and Ethel positively skipped down the front path with it as he searched for change to pay the driver and enlisted his help to heave their cases from the cab.

He glanced wryly at the cottage. It was supposed to date back to Henry VIII's time but the house looked Georgian to him, with the façade possibly a Victorian, or even later, addition.

But he smiled as Ethel ran about the house, exclaiming over

the little leaded windows, the low ceilings and the cute thatched roof. She looked ten years younger, and he—well, it was good to be in England again.

He sank thankfully on to an old-fashioned moquette sofa and stretched his legs. The last time they had vacationed here was in 1964, when he'd taken Ethel and the kids to the quatercentenary celebration of Shakespeare's birth in Stratford-on-Avon. Their son Bill had been so impressed with the Exhibition there that he had developed a passion for literature and was now teaching English at a midwestern university.

Echoing his thoughts, Ethel's voice called from the kitchen.

'Wouldn't Bill and Vanessa just love it here, Henry? I'm going to take a million picture slides to show them at home.'

'Sure, honey,' he grinned. Ethel and that camera were inseparable. 'How about some lunch in that pub we passed along the road?'

They ate at the local, arriving just in time for a meal before the place stopped serving. The bars kept such crazy hours over here. Walking back to his house on the quiet country road the air turned cooler, and a light rain began to fall. Ethel shivered in her summer dress and put a tanned arm through her husband's.

'We'll have to get the heating fixed, Henry,' she chattered, her pretty, faded face glowing. 'It's just freezing here after Italy. And I don't know how I'm going to cook you supper on that funny old kitchen range! Why, my grandmother had one just like it back in Illinois.'

'I remember,' laughed Henry. 'I guess they have some kind of a boiler down in the basement for the heat. I'll fix it when we get back.'

Later, Henry realized why the place laid claim to be sixteenth-century. Ancient stone steps, rough-hewn, led from a door in the kitchen to a bare stone cellar, its flags worn with age. Whatever about upstairs, he thought, this place is *really* old. I guess it must be unique.

While Ethel was busy in the kitchen he walked up and down the gloomy basement, gazing at the dank brick walls and absorbing its historic atmosphere. What action this room, the original house, must have seen!

Eventually he located the boiler in a corner. The machine was aged and complicated, and he struck a match to examine it closer.

Suddenly he felt a violent stabbing pain near his heart. He dropped the match with shock, gasping and clutching at his chest. Stricken with fear and pain he saw the match falling as if with retarded motion, dropping endlessly, never reaching the floor.

The world lurched and rocked before his dilated eyes; confused cries, flickering shapes, unintelligible howling, the jarred sensation of turning and turning in sickening torpor while a million rapid retreating shapes and shoutings flitted through his diminishing senses . . .

'Stop it!' Henry screamed dementedly, but though his throat issued the words his ears heard nothing, only the terrible sound of time roaring into silence.

'Oh God, someone help me! - Ethel! Ethel!'

Some rational spark at the back of his panic-paralysed brain wondered if this was what death is like; a spinning into the *primaeval* past or *posthistoric* future, a brutal eradication of mind and senses sent hurtling towards some centreless void. And yet the same living spark knew that he was not dying, that the unendurable noises were gradually fading as he collapsed slowly, slowly on to the cold stone floor. He was not dead, for his heart was loudly measuring the seconds in his throbbing ears and shaken mind. Then there was nothing, only a darkening hush. For what seemed an age Henry crouched petrified on the floor, all his senses sealed, like an embryo in a bell jar.

'Quid tu moraris . . . Per Jehovam et Gehenna . . .'

Abruptly the sound burst back, but it was abnormal, foreign.

' . . . Ipse nunc surgat nobis . . . vota nos . . . nunc surgat . . .'

A high cracked voice was intoning gibberish, or possibly Latin. In one desperate moment of paranoia Henry wondered if his wife had hidden a tape recorder in the room to play some monstrous practical joke on him. But that was impossible, it must be impossible.

His vision was clearing now. He was still in the cellar, but it was all subtly different, bigger somehow, and all the angles were wrong.

' . . . Ut appareat et surgat . . .' the voice quavered on and on, while along the floor and walls deep shadows crawled and flickered to cluster thickly in the corners.

Sick with terror, Henry sank back on to the stone flags. He

saw that he was in the centre of a circle marked in chalk on the floor crossing lines and strange signs. An acrid smell of woodsmoke reached him, and he was aware of being terribly hot. Was this hell, a dream or an hallucination? His trained and logical mind struggled to make sense of it and then subsided before the irrational, helpless as a cornered rabbit.

With cautious dread he raised his eyes, and his hand flew to his mouth to stifle a cry at the horrific sight before him. Floating above a tall shadow was a skeletal face, an unnatural blurred face whose white features and outlines wavered and shimmered as he watched it; with the lunatic touch of nightmare, it wore a large hat. The mouth was open, and it was from this shadow that the hideous drone of Latin issued. Arms raised, the black shape seemed to move towards him.

Henry screamed.

The thing retreated, and there was a hiss of triumph.

'Sessau, have we caught thee, then! See, sir, look on this!'

'Fearful,' murmured another voice from the corner. 'Fearful, by Jesu!'

Henry saw the second figure emerge from the shadows, heard it speak to its companion. He was sweating freely now, and one thing was clear to his terrified mind—he wasn't hallucinating. Whatever kind of weird situation this was, he was here and it was real. The knowledge brought no comfort.

The two ghostly figures were talking quietly together. They used English, but with an accent or dialect so outlandish that he could hardly comprehend it. They were growing clearer to his bemused eyes; the first was old and wore a long cape that hid his clothes, and with a shock he realized that the second was dressed in full Elizabethan costume. Was this, after all, some stupid trick? He stirred feebly and the younger of the two pointed at him.

'Is it Asmodeus, truly?' he asked in an awed whisper.

'Not so, sir,' croaked the old man. 'What I, conjure a demon out of hell and be damned for it? Not I, sir, not for a king's ransom.'

They approached Henry apprehensively. Their forms were still swimming slightly before his eyes, as though through a heat haze. Henry backed away.

'What is it, then?' the young man asked nervously, stopping short as Henry moved.

'A shadow, merely,' mumbled the old man. 'No more than that, sir, for this is the spirit of one yet unborn. Be not afraid. He cannot step beyond the fiery circle that confines him, not for his life he may not.'

The young man looked sceptical. He leaned forward, resting his hands on the hilt of his sword, and examined Henry with the steady curiosity of a biologist studying a scorpion.

Henry gathered his courage.

'Who are you?' he gasped, choking on the invisible smoke. 'Why am I here? - What's going on?' He staggered to his feet.

The two men glanced at each other excitedly, ignoring his questions.

'He is dressed in beggarly fashion.'

'Aye, and most uncouthly spoken.'

'To hell with you,' said Henry shakily. 'I'm getting out of here!'

He stepped away, and yelled in pain at a sudden scorching heat. It was like backing into a furnace. He made towards them and the heat was worse; frantically he ran this way and that, but the perimeter of the chalked circle might have been drawn in flames, which drove him back when he tried to escape it.

The young man gave a guffaw of brutal laughter at his antics, and the old one joined in, cackling.

'Jesus Christ!' Henry exploded in fear and rage. 'What kind of goddamned fool joke are you guys playing here!'

'Hark, how the fiend curses!' cried the young man, checking his laughter.

Henry stared at them numbly, suddenly overcome by the bewildered pain of a disoriented child, and tears pricked his eyes.

'What is this?' he whispered. 'What have you done? It feels like there's a fire all around!'

'There is.' The old man spoke with a hint of sympathy. 'See'st it not, friend? Thou art environed with fire. Stay still, I pray thee.'

Henry did as he was told. Whatever the hell was happening, he had to play this living nightmare by its own terrible rules.

He gazed at the two faces. The old man had sparse grey hair that straggled from beneath his hat. He was bent, his face worn and lined, and what teeth he had looked rotten. The young man was tall, with a thin-featured, handsome face.

Bushy red hair sprang back from his high narrow forehead, and he had a restless, intelligent look, a nervously energetic presence. Henry decided to address him directly.

'Who are you?' he asked earnestly. 'What's going on here, and what do you want with me?'

The young man drew back and scowled at the ancient.

'And this is the spirit that knows all?' he remarked sneeringly. 'This worthless cringing thing that thou hast summoned - to make a jest of me, old man?' His voice had risen to a note of anger, and his hand played threateningly with the hilt of his sword.

'Hush! A little time, good sir,' snivelled his companion. 'Remember, he is torn away from a different world than ours. See, how he shakes! A little while, and when he is rested you shall hear how he will answer.'

'Aye, or he shall shake on the end of my sword,' growled the other. Experimentally he extended his blade across the circle and pricked the back of Henry's wrist. The cut left no mark, but Henry yelled in pain and wrung his stinging hand. The pain was not like the onset of his heart attack, or the scorching fire; it derived more from shock at the man's idle malice.

His tormentor shrugged, and began to pace the room with jerky impatience.

'Whither com'st thou, demon?' he snapped, pausing just short of the circle.

'From here!' said Henry, trembling. 'I'm in the same place - only I . . .' his voice trailed off. How could he explain what he didn't understand?

'What! From hell into hell?' Fortunately his answer had not angered the man further. He stood back, a frown of wondering speculation in his cold intelligent eyes. Then he turned abruptly and resumed his pacing.

The old man approached Henry and whispered to him urgently.

'Come, recollect! Thou see'st his choleric humour. I charge thee to tell him truly all that thou knowest, or it will go the worse for thee.' He began unrolling a scroll of paper.

'First,' he quavered, 'I would have thee answer whether the harvest will be plentiful or no . . .'

The young man quelled him with a single look of scorn. Having spent some minutes deep in thought, he seemed to

have changed his mind about Henry; his attitude towards him was more relaxed and reasonable.

'Away with thee, thou idle meddling fool!' he cried to the old man. 'Didst thou not say he is but a shadow? Dear God, can you or I or any man recall what harvests were years ago, and yet will you be demanding so of him? Of him, that for ought you know was not born within a thousand years of your reaping times?' He turned to Henry, his voice smooth again.

'Friend, we stand here in the year of Our Lord fifteen hundred and ninety-two.'

Henry's mind spun. 1592! And this was real, these men weren't illusions—in fact they called *him* a spirit—so therefore . . . no, it couldn't be. It wasn't possible for him to have travelled back in time. That was science fiction stuff. Nothing material could travel faster than light. But perhaps his spirit could . . . and he had to act on that assumption.

The young man waited till the first look of shock passed from Henry's face, then he resumed quietly.

'Our queen is Elizabeth, and our country England. Now tell me in your turn, what time you are of, and what manner of man you are?'

Henry said the year. It had a dramatic effect on the two men.

'Four centuries, near enough!' cried the old man shrilly. 'Did I not say that my art was beyond all masters of magic whatsoever? Four centuries!'

The young man gazed at Henry in wonderment.

'And thy degree?' he asked breathlessly.

Henry looked at him.

'Thy quality? Art thou gentle, noble or commoner?'

'My name is Henry B. Neumann, and I'm a lawyer,' he said, drawing himself up, and was surprised and annoyed by the outburst of rather churlish hilarity this statement provoked.

'Man new made, indeed,' grinned the young man, wiping his eyes. 'And would thou hadst been a priest! But to our purpose—you know our language well enough, so you are English.'

'I'm an American,' Henry corrected him testily.

'The Americas?' the old man repeated, catching at a name he knew.

'That's right,' said Henry sulkily. 'About a quarter of the

entire world speaks English now.'

That dumfounded the old man completely, and even the other one, who seemed to possess a very agile mind, was staggered for a moment.

'Then - many, many people of your time, will have heard of ours? Of our Queen Elizabeth and the nobles of our day, they have not forgot us quite?'

'Oh no,' said Henry eagerly. 'I may even have heard of you - who are you?'

There was a pregnant silence. The old man opened his mouth as if to speak, but his companion flashed him such a look of angry command that Henry, too, quailed.

'Nay, sir.' The man gave Henry a quiet pleasant smile that covered a world of tension. 'We would have you tell us who we are. For sir, both of us here believe our names will live to posterity. It may be he, or I, or both deceive ourselves in that, but you are our sure test. Now put us to the trial. If our fames endure then you, as an able, lettered man of full four centuries hence, must know of us. Cast your eye upon us and try an you can give our names.'

There was a tense pause. Henry cleared his throat.

'Will you, uh, be mad if I don't guess right?' he asked carefully, eyeing the man's sword.

'I understand thee not - oh, angry?' He grinned, glancing at the old man. 'Why sir, if we are angry we must digest it as we may. For it must be our own fault that you know us not.'

'Well, I think you ought to tell me a little about yourselves,' said Henry cautiously. 'I mean, any pictures I may have seen of you gentlemen could have been painted years from now, when you looked - look - different. Can't you tell me what you do? Are you politicians maybe?'

They looked puzzled and uneasy, then the old man shrugged and sniggered.

'Oh sir, take us with you,' he said. 'Do you think us conspirators, and plotters against our Queen?'

He had obviously used a wrong word. 'Politicians' must have a bad meaning for them - the young man was scowling dangerously. Hastily he blundered on. What other professions brought fame?

'Are you actors?'

This was worse. The old man turned purple and began to shout, and it took all of his companion's considerable authority

to calm him down.

'Not players, sir,' he said at last, obviously controlling his own temper with difficulty, 'though I have had dealings with those men. How comes it that you thought us, first traitors and then vagabond rogues? Is that how our unhappy age is remembered to yours, for its crimes and its counterfeits?'

'Well, yours was a great time for plays, you know,' said Henry decisively. 'Your theatres are very famous.'

'For – for *plays*?' The man was thunderstruck. 'But what of our other arts, as poetry, singing, building of great houses –'

'Oh, poetry,' agreed Henry, nodding violently.

The man stiffened, his eyes bright. My God, thought Henry, that's it. This guy's a poet.

'Sure, very famous for poetry,' he gabbled, playing for time. Who else had written poetry, besides Shakespeare? What a pity neither of these guys was bald. Hell, this was unfair. He hadn't read any Elizabethan stuff since he'd majored in English at High School, more than thirty years ago.

'There was, let me see, Spenser?' They nodded quickly, but obviously the man wasn't Spenser. 'And, uh, of course there was –' He broke off, hit by a brilliant thought. Shakespeare couldn't have been bald his entire life, could he? He must have had hair *some time*, surely? He gave a gasp of inspiration as the memory of the Exhibition flashed into his mind. He took a wild gamble.

'Were you . . . were you born in 1564?'

'Jesu!' breathed the old man, and the other nodded tensely, his eyes glittering.

'And you write poetry for –' A shot in the dark, this, he hoped he'd got the guy's name right – 'For the Earl of Southampton?'

The man was smiling now. 'I have writ some,' he said.

'You write poetry – but – do you write *plays* as well?'

The man laughed aloud. 'Go on, sir. I begin to think you know me.'

But Henry couldn't, because he was confounded with such a mixture of throat-catching emotion. It was him! It was Shakespeare! He was in the presence of the greatest literary genius the world had ever known. Gentle Shakespeare, his contemporaries had called him. Of course he was a bit difficult and moody, but you had to make allowances for the tremendous intellectual pressures on that mighty brain.

Awe and pride drove out the last of Henry's terror. His harrowing ordeals were as nothing compared with the amazing quirks of fate and time that had allowed him to look upon the face of this immortal, all-comprehending master-craftsman! Who now stood, feet tapping with impatience and an exultation he couldn't conceal, small black eyes gleaming from under thin arched brows, waiting to hear what he—he! Henry B. Neumann of Washington, DC!—had to say.

Henry took a deep breath. Who knows, he thought, I might be the God-ordained cause that inspired him to his greatest feats! A little encouragement goes a long way. He placed a hand over his thumping heart and tried to keep the excitement out of his voice.

God, what a moment.

'I can assure you on my life, sir,' he began solemnly, 'as a gentleman, and without a word of a lie—and as incredible as it may sound to you now, sir—that you are destined to become the greatest playwright, I mean poet, the world has ever known.'

He paused, gratified by the look of cupidity which flitted over the poet's narrow features. This guy was certainly hungry for fame. Well, it just went to show that even geniuses are human.

'And I may say to you, sir—' he wasn't a lawyer for nothing, and delivered his eulogy in best judge-impressing style—'that so long as men shall breathe' (a good touch that, he might remember it for a poem), 'your works will be read, admired and cherished. For you, sir, are the finest playwright, I mean poet, that we have ever seen or are ever likely to see, and a genius to boot. I count it an honour and a privilege, sir, to have met and spoken with you.'

He rested his case. The poet turned to the old man in some amazement.

'In faith, this is a spirit indeed,' he said, 'for he is full of air and wind.'

Henry was a little pained to hear that, but forgave him because he could see that the poet was highly excited by his words, which must after all have sounded extravagant beyond his dreams. Wait till he told Ethel all this! And Bill, he'd never believe it . . . No, he probably wouldn't. And just how was he going to stop being a ghost, and get back to his own time? As the poet began his restless pacing, gloom descended

over Henry, reviving his fear and insecurity. He stared at the men, trying to comfort himself. They'd brought him here, hadn't they? They'd send him back in one piece, wouldn't they? Sure they would.

The great man was still walking up and down. Henry watched as elation, worry and then doubt crossed his handsome face. He'd expected the doubt. This guy was no fool.

'But,' cried the poet half to himself, 'am I to take the word of a ghostly messenger, who for ought I know is conjured of hell, and would gull me with his tales of immortality?'

His mood had changed; anger gathered under the dark brows, and once again at the man's cruel whim Henry felt the sharp edge of his sword. He cried out, and a moment of pure helpless fury followed the pain. 'Gentle Shakespeare! In a pig's ear he was gentle, the irritable sonofa -

'Will he not be forsworn, and all of his promises lies? Oh, my fame!' A note of genuine grief had entered the poet's voice, and he sank dejectedly into a chair.

'Courage, sir.' The old man patted his shoulder soothingly. 'Yet he speaks the truth, and I'm damned for it. This is no fiend, but an honest spirit I have summoned ye. I tell thee, I'll answer for it.'

Henry smiled slightly, his confidence restored. Time for him to take control of the situation.

'I believe I can reassure you gentlemen.' He would swear an oath; that would convince them. He paused, radiating good will while two pairs of eyes rested with anxious trust upon his relaxed features. His courtroom techniques were standing him in good stead, and he widened his smile until they were both, almost, smiling back.

Henry B. Neumann then proceeded to blow it more thoroughly than he had ever previously blown anything in all of his long and distinguished career.

'I believe,' he repeated, 'that I can reassure you. By which I mean, gentlemen - and I mean this with all the sincerity in the world - that I can, as God is my Maker and my Judge, put my hand on the holy Bible and swear in all confidence that you, Mr - Mr William Shakespeare - are destined to be the greatest poet in the world, and - and . . .'

He stopped short, aghast, as bewilderment, outrage and then burning fury crossed the poet's face. Reeling under the

dreadful double insult, the man grasped his sword. In an uncontrollable rage he leapt towards the chalk circle and lunged with violent skill at Henry's breast.

The shock was too much for Henry, and he crouched against the cold flags with the weird feeling that they might absorb him entirely. His perception was getting fuzzy, and he was again dimly aware of the old pain in his chest. The forms and voices of the two men before him were becoming gradually less distinct.

'God's wounds, he vanishes! I would I had not done that.' The poet seemed startled into momentary sobriety, while the old man was making an uproar in the corner.

'A pox on thee and thy black rages! Oh, my spirit, my spirit! How must I learn the skill to conjure thee again, or thy fellows? Sure, I am damned!'

Strange that they could no longer see him, thought Henry hazily.

'Hold thy miserable tongue!' screamed the poet, his fury apparently revived by the old man's keening. 'Or I will break thy head for thee!'

He raised his sword, ready to strike again, but thought the better of it. Still trembling with anger he sheathed his blade and drew a thin purse from his pocket.

'Here's for thee, thou misbegotten loon,' he snarled, 'and may Lucifer blast thy foul soul!'

With savage contempt he thrust the purse into the magician's hand, simultaneously aiming a punch that sent the old man sprawling. Then he stamped out of the little room.

Clutching his money, the old man recovered his dazed wits sufficiently to mutter a curse that the poet's death would come soon, and violently. He glanced at the few coins the man had given him and vowed to have no more truck with the atheistic, unstable, miserly rhymsters or theatre-folk, however famous they were.

The last words Henry heard him or indeed anyone speak was a lamentation that he had been foolish enough to trust in particular Master Christopher Marlowe, who was renowned for his filthy temper.

The spirit of Henry B. Neumann, LLB, catapulted faster than

light through the spiralling time-warp of four centuries. He crashed heavily on to the cellar floor, hitting the ground with one agonized thud as his heart slammed to a standstill. He was found by his weeping wife Ethel, and the doctor's verdict of a terminal heart attack was confirmed by the local coroner.

BROODING DARK

Pamela Vincent

Elizabeth wished she hadn't promised to go tonight. Why did friends always ask impossible things and why did she always find it impossible to say no?

'Whatever sort of people go to these affairs?' she asked, fretfully, as Cynthia hurried her along.

'People like us,' replied her friend. 'Open-minded and enquiring, like me; sceptical but interested, like you.'

'I don't know that I am interested,' objected Elizabeth.

'Of course you are, you never like to miss an *experience*.'

'Experience? What sort of an experience is this likely to be?'

'Who knows until we get there?' retorted Cynthia. 'Anyway, think of all the famous people who have believed in it -'

'It won't make *me* famous,' said Elizabeth.

Cynthia sighed and changed the subject.

'Have you ever been to Australia?' she asked.

'You know I haven't,' replied Elizabeth, bewildered.

'So it doesn't exist, does it?' said Cynthia, sweetly.

Elizabeth was spared having to answer that because they reached the address they were making for.

The dainty little doll's house was not at all what they'd expected. Nor was the man who opened the door, his sparse, sandy hair and a pullover too large for his thin frame making him an almost invisible personality.

'Maybe he's one of the spirits,' muttered Elizabeth as, sandals flapping dangerously, he led them from the cheerful little hall up a steep and narrow staircase to a room that must have taken up the entire first floor, although it still seemed overcrowded by the three or four people already seated on chairs which Elizabeth rightly guessed would prove exceedingly uncomfortable within five minutes.

The room was heavily silent, oppressive, every wall covered by curtains that shut out any noise from the street outside. There was nothing to look at, not even a picture, and no sound beyond the breathing of a military-looking man and an occasional snuffle from a woman with a cold who didn't dare blow her nose properly.

Elizabeth's bones cracked like pistol shots as she wriggled on the unfriendly chair, and she yawned hugely.

'You're not going to start that *already*?' whispered Cynthia, who had suffered from her friend's fidgets on past occasions.

'Can't help it,' Elizabeth whispered back. 'Why don't they get on with it?'

'There are still some empty chairs.'

The military-looking man turned to glare at them and they sank into embarrassed silence. Evidently one was supposed to meditate until the remaining seats were taken.

At last the little man who had admitted everybody addressed them.

'Most of you are old friends, I see. One or two new faces -'

Elizabeth and Cynthia blushed as heads turned but his smile passed on from them to include a poker-faced man so at least they were not the only newcomers.

'Just let me remind you, ladies and gentlemen, of the danger to the Baroness if you disturb the séance in any way. Whatever happens, whatever you may see or hear, please do not leave your seats or speak unless you are asked to do so. There is nothing to be afraid of. Our friends on the Other Side don't want to hurt us, you know,' the little man ended, with a smile.

'But *are* they all friends?'

Most of the audience turned to direct shocked and angry stares at the only man amongst the newcomers. His poker face gave nothing away; impossible to tell whether he was a troublemaker or an over-anxious believer.

'Only friends are invited into this room,' said the sandy-haired man, after a pause.

'Isn't it possible *they* might have gate-crashers?'

'Definitely not,' interrupted the Baroness, as she joined them.

'But she's so ordinary-looking,' said Cynthia, under cover of the noise of everyone politely standing up and then sitting down again when the Baroness was seated in her armchair facing them.

Indeed, apart from a rather toadlike face, the Baroness might have been any middle-aged housewife who needed to watch her weight. Her hair was neat, her afternoon-dress in-offensive. Cynthia was plainly disappointed, and Elizabeth was surprised at the lack of mystical trappings. The Baroness must be very confident.

'Someone here does not believe,' said the Baroness mildly.

Completing the resemblance to a toad, her eyes were unexpectedly fine and they flashed around the room, pausing at the man who had asked the inconvenient questions, then settling upon Elizabeth.

'It does not matter,' she continued, her voice quite accentless. Elizabeth wondered if perhaps the foreign-sounding title provided her one exotic touch, the bait to lure the impressionable, for surely no one could have given it to her in marriage: though her plump hands were covered in rings, Elizabeth couldn't see whether a wedding-ring was concealed amongst them. Of course, there were plenty of European women born with titles that no longer brought them lands and riches, and many of them had decided to remain in England after the war ended.

'Please remember, ladies and gentlemen,' she was speaking again, 'I am not trying to convince anyone of anything. I am merely a go-between—something may happen tonight or it may not, it is not in my power to insist, nor can I create anything unless it is there. Perhaps, through me, loved ones will speak together, perhaps danger may be averted or benefits gained through the loving advice of our friends who can see so much more than we can. Let us hope so.'

She paused, then:

'Shall we begin?'

Her assistant, the sandy-haired man, switched off the lights, leaving only a standard lamp near the Baroness—its shade draped with some thin, dark material—to give just enough light to save them from utter blackness. The room became so stiflingly still that Elizabeth found herself rigid, holding her breath, her arm pressed hard against Cynthia's.

Time passed and nothing happened. She began to feel bored, and wondered if they could possibly slip out quietly before they suffocated. It was really too silly to shut them up in a dark room without ventilation.

As if in answer to her thought, a little draught crept around her shoulders. Someone gave a choked-off gasp. Elizabeth turned to see if the door had opened but the darkness remained as intense as before—she couldn't see any change. Her thoughts started to drift. How long was everyone expected to sit here like this? If it were not for the uncomfortable chairs it would be easy to fall asleep, then everyone's pockets could be

picked! She grinned to herself at the irreverent thought.

Could it be that she was a disturbing influence, spoiling it for everyone else by preventing any kind of – what would you call it? Manifestation, maybe? The Baroness had been quick enough to grasp an alien presence amongst the gathering – or did she say that at every séance to disarm suspicion when nothing supernatural occurred? True, she'd looked straight at Elizabeth but she was probably a good judge of facial expression, and she didn't have many new faces to choose from.

Supposing it was telepathy, though? Telepathy was reasonable enough, much more believable than conjuring up spirits of dead people. Electrical impulses, some strong feeling emitted by one brain and picked up by a more-than-usually sensitive receiver-brain. The Baroness might genuinely think she was communicating with the dead when all she was doing was evoking images of memories and desires already in the minds of the emotionally overwrought. She couldn't be blamed for that if she really didn't know, and if it comforted the bereaved who would want to blame her?

Elizabeth was satisfied with her theory but that was not proof. It might be interesting to try testing it, and she cast around for someone to 'project' to the now heavily-breathing medium. Not a dead person, someone very much alive.

The easiest, most agreeable person for Elizabeth to think about was Bob. Dear Bob: if he hadn't been away she would have had a good excuse not to come here tonight.

She would rather have been with him but at least she could think about him; there was certainly nothing else to do. Bob. Not handsome but so good-looking. Black hair, never quite tidy enough, lopsided eyebrows over twinkling blue eyes. Elizabeth dwelt on each beloved feature – the blunted nose, good-humoured mouth and wickedly-cleft chin, his voice and the way he used it . . .

The Baroness was muttering and making little snoring noises. She must have dropped off to sleep. Would that make her more, or less, receptive to Elizabeth's experiment?

The darkness began to press down, Elizabeth could hardly keep herself from tipping forward off the chair – and if she did, it would be like falling into a bale of thick, black velvet. Gripping the seat under her, she tried to concentrate on the image she was putting across to the Baroness. She could

almost see Bob in front of her.

How was everyone else managing to keep so still? She could no longer hear the military man's breathing, or the woman with a cold; there wasn't a sound from any of them, even Cynthia right next to her. Elizabeth might have been alone with the Baroness in the brooding dark.

Bob. Dear, darling Bob – where are you? What are you doing at this moment, instead of being with me?

'Elizabeth.'

The name sighed out of the darkness and there was a gasp from the startled audience. Cynthia gripped her friend's arm.

Elizabeth frowned. Had she really heard her name? It could almost have been wind rustling through trees – if it weren't for those smothering curtains shutting out all noise from outdoors. It might just have been the Baroness sighing in her sleep.

'Elizabeth.'

She jumped. It was much clearer this time. How absurd, though: she wasn't trying to put her own name into the Baroness's mind! But that queer susurrations might have been anything – Stella or Esther or –

'Is there anyone here named Elizabeth?'

The sandy-haired assistant's voice came quietly and Cynthia shook Elizabeth's arm in her excitement, but another voice from the audience quavered 'Yes' and the two girls relaxed. It was nothing to do with them, they were the outsiders here.

'Miss you – sweet. My – own – fault. I'm sorry –'

Elizabeth froze. Bob always called her 'sweet' in preference to any other endearment. He always called her 'Elizabeth', too: most people shortened it to 'Liz'. Was her experiment beginning to work after all? But what was that about being sorry? The other woman in the audience started to sob and Elizabeth felt a twinge of remorse.

'Such a fool – so sorry –' said the voice again.

'No need, my darling, no need,' sobbed the other Elizabeth.

'You warned me – the tyres –'

'What?' The woman sounded surprised. 'I don't understand, dear – what do you mean?'

There was no answer and she started to cry again.

'Please, Harry – please go on – Harry, don't go away.'

'Not Harry – Bob.'

Cynthia uttered a strangled scream and clutched Elizabeth.

'Dear – old – fusspot.'

Elizabeth smiled. The telepathy was working all right. Not only her conscious but her subconscious mind was sending out messages! The last thing she'd said to Bob was a reminder to have his tyres changed before he went away as he was planning a long, fast drive up the motorway. 'Fusspot' he'd called her, but he knew she was right.

'Miss you – sweet. My – own – fault. I'm – sorry –'

Elizabeth suddenly felt sickened. This was unhealthy, sitting in the dark playing tricks with people's minds.

'Stop it,' she said, sharply. 'This is just stupid nonsense!'

'Hush!' exclaimed someone, and somebody else clicked a disapproving tongue.

'Elizabeth – don't – don't shut me out – please –'

This was getting out of hand. Bob's voice was so clear then that he might have been standing there, holding out his hand to gain her attention. But why such a despairing cry?

The lamplight flickered as if there were a breeze in the room. The shadows around the standard lamp seemed to darken, the material draped over the shade moved slightly. Elizabeth screwed up her eyes, aware of a figure standing by the lamp. The sandy-haired man? But anyone could have hidden behind those all-concealing curtains, ready to step out and oblige when required. How could these people be so absolutely gullible? That man who looked like an old colonel, surely *he* was too sensible to be taken in by such rubbish?

Elizabeth shivered, aware that they had cooled off the room in the approved fashion for psychic phenomena.

The figure by the lamp stepped forward and for one instant the light fell full on his face.

But at that moment Elizabeth was knocked out of her chair as, with a scream of pure horror, Cynthia slumped against her, and there was a confusion of noise and pain as they collapsed in a tangle of limbs and chairlegs in the darkness.

The light was on and the Baroness's assistant was leaning over her worriedly. He looked like a toad, too, Elizabeth observed. Must be the Baroness's brother, growing thinner as she grew plumper.

She realized that she was lying on the floor with the others gathered around, none of them looking very sympathetic, and

with some embarrassment she struggled to sit up and breathe some of the air coming from the now-open door. She caught sight of the Baroness sitting in her armchair, eyes open and observant but otherwise immobile, but then Elizabeth's attention was taken by Cynthia on the floor beside her, deathly pale, and their two chairs lying in a heap. Cynthia's eyes were open but blankly staring at the ceiling, or at some nightmare of her own that no one else could see.

'Should be more careful who they let in,' someone was muttering.

'It was Bob,' whispered Cynthia, without lifting her head or changing her position. 'Something's happened to him.'

'No, it hasn't,' said Elizabeth, firmly.

Now that there was light and air she was able to appreciate the absurdity of it all. This ridiculous room and these people and her own experiment that seemed to work too well – and now the pair of them, having upset everything, lying on the floor like this with everyone gazing down at them. She burst out laughing.

'You're a wicked girl,' said the other Elizabeth, identifiable by her voice.

'Aren't you?' retorted Elizabeth. 'All you people, trying to drag back the ones you claim to love, persuading yourselves that you're in touch with them –'

'But we hear them – we see –' stammered the woman with a cold.

'A roomful of curtains,' said Elizabeth. 'We could have heard and seen an army of ghosts who have never been nearer death than eight hours' sleep a night.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, miss!' snapped the military-looking man.

'It was Bob,' insisted Cynthia, weakly. 'He's dead.'

'Bob isn't dead, Cynthia. I was thinking about him and the Baroness picked up my thoughts –' she looked towards the woman still sitting tranquilly, watching them with an unfathomable expression on her toad face.

'It was Bob,' said Cynthia, again. 'I saw his face.'

'You heard his name, and mine, and when that man came out by the lamp you *thought* it was Bob.'

'What man?' exclaimed the poker-faced newcomer.

Elizabeth blinked at him.

'The one who appeared just before my friend fainted.'

The others were staring, puzzled, indignant, even envious.

'You mean you actually saw someone?' asked the other Elizabeth.

'Didn't you?' Elizabeth felt a faint twinge of uneasiness as the others shook their heads.

'Is this some sort of joke on newcomers?' She tried to speak firmly but her voice broke uncertainly.

The Baroness intervened at last.

'I'm sorry we have ended in such disharmony, ladies and gentlemen, and that the sceptical young lady has had an unfortunate experience. I'm afraid, my dear, you have an even more unhappy time to come.'

The fine eyes bored into hers but there was a hint of sympathy in them.

'You will come to see me again,' the older woman finished. Elizabeth wasn't sure whether it was a statement or a command but she didn't intend ever coming back here or to anywhere like it.

'I've had quite enough of this whole business,' she said. 'Cynthia, do you think you can walk? We'll get a taxi at the end of the road -'

'I'll fetch one,' offered the Baroness's assistant, hurrying off down the stairs.

He was lucky and returned almost immediately. Cynthia huddled in the taxi, tears running down her cheeks.

'I wish I'd never gone. It was horrible. Why should you and your Bob be singled out like that?'

'I tried to tell you, I made it happen. I thought about him, and old Toad-face -' Elizabeth paused to see if she could coax a smile but her friend was no longer listening.

When they reached home, the house where they both had flatlets, there was a message from Bob's brother saying that he was on his way to the hospital and would ring later.

Elizabeth's heart missed a beat, then started racing.

'It's true, then,' wailed Cynthia. 'It is true, he's dead! Bob's dead!'

'It doesn't say so in the message.'

'How could it? Oh, Liz, we shouldn't have gone to that awful place, it's all my fault.'

'It wouldn't have made any difference,' said Elizabeth, dully.

She didn't believe her own words. She'd sat there thinking about Bob, calling him to her, to his death: only the dead

were invited into that room once the lights were turned out.

It was very late when Bob's brother telephoned from the hospital. He'd managed to reach there in time to be with Bob at the end.

'They thought he was going to be all right, his injuries weren't too bad,' he explained, brokenly. 'I don't know what happened.'

'What caused the accident?' Elizabeth could hardly bring herself to ask.

'A tyre blew. On the motorway, so he was going pretty fast. He managed to avoid involving any other traffic. I haven't seen the car, of course, but I expect it's a write-off.'

He was talking too much, trying to cover up his feelings, but Elizabeth only picked up one word.

'A tyre.'

'He was calling for you, Liz. He kept saying he was sorry – you hadn't quarrelled, had you?'

'No, Dave, of course not.'

'That's all right, then. But I can't understand it, the way he suddenly sat up in bed and stretched out his hand, and said something about: "Elizabeth, don't shut me out!"'

'Don't!'

'And then – then –' Dave's voice faltered. 'Then he just fell back and – died,' he finished, simply.

COLD FINGERS

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Paul Etherington examined the old house, noted its dilapidated condition and pulled the old-fashioned bell-handle. The advertisement had said: *Ideal accommodation for healthy young man.* He was extremely healthy and in desperate need of accommodation. He had already been interviewed by several landladies who had stressed the impeccable respectability of their establishments, the dire penalties that would result from the presence of female guests, cats, dogs and other air-breathing inmates in his room, the essential need for one month's rent in advance. Now he had come to the old house that stood in the midst of an untidy garden, waiting for a weather-grimed door to open.

Slow footsteps came from a long way off, took on a slip-slop sound as they drew nearer and did not at all reassure the young man standing on the doorstep.

The door slid open a bare six inches, a long nose surmounted by a pair of black eyes appeared round the edge, and an old harsh voice enquired:

'Yes, who is it?'

Paul cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. 'I've come in answer to the advertisement in the *Comet*.'

The eyes took on a deeper gleam. The nose appeared to twitch.

'Are you healthy?'

The word 'healthy' was drawn out as though the speaker was reluctant to part with it.

'Yes - I think so.'

'Have you nerves?'

'Hasn't everyone!'

The door flew back and one of the most extraordinary looking old women that Paul had ever seen stood outlined against a dimly lit hall, examining him with critical interest. She had the shoulders of a long-retired prize-fighter; a narrow skull that was flanked on either side by tufts of white hair tied with black ribbon, a high forehead - not enhanced by a receding hairline - and a thin mouth that was almost lost amidst an intricate network of wrinkles. A long black dress

made from some thick material draped the flat body from neck to ankle, while coils of amber beads dangled down to a little below the waist, like crystallized gobbets of honey. Although the voice was high-pitched, it had a harsh, cultivated quality.

'You look healthy, and more important, strong. Neither do you appear to have nerves. But I am aware that appearances can be deceptive. You may enter.'

As she closed the door behind him, a cloying atmosphere that had something to do with central heating and warm damp closed in on him. The hall was large; a place of faded red wallpaper, green doors and a staircase which meandered up to a landing that surrounded the room on three sides. His attention was abruptly brought back to the old woman who asked:

'What is your name?'

'Eh - Paul Etherington.'

'You may call me Miss Partridge. Now, Mr Etherington, if you will be so kind as to follow me, I will conduct you to your room.'

Despite her ancient appearance, Miss Partridge ran up the stairs, once actually taking two steps at a time. When they reached the landing, she led her prospective paying-guest - the word lodger could not be entertained - round to the left hand wing and opened the third door.

'I think you will find this to be reasonably comfortable.'

Paul moved forward into the room - then stopped. It was large, well - even luxuriously - furnished and very neat. The mahogany wardrobe and dressing-table gleamed with frequent applications of polish; the thick red carpet must have been vacuum-cleaned but an hour since; the blue bedspread was as smooth as a frozen lake. Paul stared with well-nigh speechless astonishment at the two deep armchairs, the electric fire and the old paintings that decorated the walls.

'The door in the left hand corner,' Miss Partridge said, 'leads to a bathroom and other offices.'

Paul sighed. 'It's absolutely marvellous, but I'm sure it will be too expensive for me.'

Miss Partridge frowned. 'I find monetary discussion most distasteful. Shall we say two pounds a week?'

'Two pounds!' Paul gasped.

'Full board of course,' Miss Partridge added. 'My cooking

has never been questioned.'

'But . . .'

'Very well, I never haggle. One-fifty a week – payable when convenient. When can you move in?'

'At . . . at once, I suppose. My case is at the station.'

'A meal will be waiting for you on your return,' Miss Partridge said. 'Well – don't just stand there – the sun sets early at this time of year.'

Paul had collected his case, unpacked it and stored his few possessions, and was now in the dining-room greedily eating braised steak and boiled potatoes. Miss Partridge – who ate very little herself – presided from the far end of the table.

'I like to see a young man with an appetite. That usually denotes an uncomplicated mind and no nerves worth mentioning. I gather you are a student of something?'

'Yes, I have a grant to study archaeology. I am writing a thesis on the Neolithic diggings just outside town.'

'The past is a land populated by the dead,' Miss Partridge announced. 'An explorer should be very careful where his feet wander. For sweet I have prepared an excellent college pudding. I trust you will partake.'

'Yes . . . thank you.'

The college pudding was taken from a heated food-trolley, and Paul had eaten more than his fair share when he asked the question which had been knocking on the door of his mind for some time.

'Are we – are we alone in the house?'

Miss Partridge appeared to give the matter more thought than it merited. 'I think I can safely say,' she said at last, 'that we are the only people living in this house at the present time. Why? Do you imagine I will try to take advantage of you?'

'No. Of course not.'

'For myself,' Miss Partridge went on, 'the prospect of being assaulted by a young man has long since passed into the realms of what-might-have-been. May I tempt you with a cup of coffee?'

'Thank you. Yes, indeed.'

'You surrender to the dictates of temptation very easily. That suggests a lack of moral fibre. White or black?'

'White, please.'

'Now I detect a certain lack of adventurous spirit. A desire to dilute reality with sentiment. Do you drink strong waters?'

'Pardon!'

'Granted. Do you imbibe intoxicating liquor?'

'No. Never.'

Miss Partridge sighed. 'Pity. Alcohol can often serve as a prop for a shattered soul. Never mind, a teetotaler must – if I may be permitted the expression – be totally lacking in imagination, and under the circumstances, that is a definite asset. Now, I should imagine you have academic work which has a paramount claim on your time.'

'I ought to get down to it,' Paul admitted.

'Then be off. Do not work too late. Remember that an hour's sleep before midnight is worth two after. My room is only two doors down and I will hear if you scream.'

'What!'

Miss Partridge managed to blush. A dull-red wave of colour crept up through the network of wrinkles and made Paul think of blood seeping from an open wound. She actually giggled.

'What a stupid mistake. Why on earth should you scream? A strong young man – with no nerves worth mentioning. Cabbages and parsnips! Whatever was I thinking of? I meant of course – should you require anything – a single, not over-loud call – will arouse me in a moment. I am a light sleeper. Are you?'

'No,' Paul confessed. 'My mother says I sleep like the dead.'

'That is indeed fortunate. Not that, in my experience, the dead sleep all that soundly . . . good night, Mr Etherington. All being well, breakfast will be served at eight o'clock.'

A soft thud jerked Paul back from the brink of sleep; made him sit up and look round the room with wide-open eyes. He gasped: 'Wassat?' then sank back against the pillows when he saw a heavy book lying on the bedside rug. It must have slipped from his fingers just as sleep was closing in, and therefore the sudden, unexplainable fear had no foundation in fact. He picked the book up and placed it on the bedside table, then with firm determination turned out the light and slid down between the sheets.

His eyes closed. One sense had been – so to speak – disconnected. As there was no sound, his hearing shrugged

allegorical shoulders and called it a day. His heart and lungs perceptibly slowed down; his nerve-grid relaxed and relayed final orders to the brain's complicated empire. Toes uncurled, fingers went limp, lips parted, muscles sagged. For a while the command post – the brain – remained fully active; created vivid mental pictures, mixed the dream-colours in a bright-red pot – then began to darken its multi-room castle.

Then something happened that sent the alarm bells ringing; brought the body back to nerve-shrieking awareness.

Paul felt cold – cold fingers gently caressing his throat.

For a while he could not move, but lay quite still, savouring an experience that was unique in its enormity. The fingers, apart from being very cold, were solid and most certainly owed nothing to imagination. Four digits were on the left of his windpipe and a thumb was slowly moving up and down on the right. At first the pressure was light as though the fingers were taking pleasure in the smooth skin, exploring the roundness, possibly drawing a modicum of warmth from the healthy flesh. Then there was a gradual tightening; a pressing down by the thumb, a gentle digging of finger-tips. Paul suddenly remembered that a voice had a basic use and screamed.

For a young man who had never screamed before he did a very good job. Had he been in a more rational state of mind, he might have marvelled that his throat was capable of such a long-drawn-out – not to mention loud – sound. He was filling his lungs with air, prior to making a fresh and in some respects, improved effort, when the door opened and the overhead light flashed on to reveal Miss Partridge, attired in a red dressing-gown and a lace-trimmed cap. She advanced towards the bed and smiled.

'Unless I am greatly mistaken, young man, you screamed. In my experience a scream denotes sudden fear. Now why should a healthy young man be afraid?'

Paul was struggling to sit up. 'I . . . I felt cold fingers on my throat.'

Miss Partridge raised her voice and uttered each word with slow precision.

'Cold fingers on the throat! Am I to understand you are afraid of – a few . . . cold . . . fingers . . . on . . . the . . . throat? Why, when I was a young gal a horrible thing dropped on to my shoulders and I did not utter a sound, but waited patiently

for dear Papa to recite a suitable incantation. Young people nowadays lack backbone.'

After some rapid deliberation Paul decided enough was sufficient and retreat the best means of defence. He pushed back the bedclothes and swung his legs over the bed edge. Miss Partridge raised her voice in protest.

'Are you aware, Mr Etherington, you are clad in night attire and I am a maiden lady of advanced years?'

'Then get out,' Paul instructed, 'while I get dressed. I'd rather sleep on the common than spend another minute in this place.'

'Am I to understand you are a coward?'

'Bright yellow.'

Miss Partridge, with surprising strength, grabbed his ankles, pushed his legs back on to the bed, then pulled the sheets and blankets up about his neck. As an added security measure she sat on the bed and placed a restraining hand on his chest.

'Now, listen to me, Mr Etherington. As a strong, healthy young man—with no nerves to speak of—you have little to fear. I will admit there may be something—a trifling disturbance in this room—that may, or may not, have a penchant for placing cold fingers on the odd throat. The dead have their little peculiarities.'

Far from being comforted by this statement, Paul began to struggle and it took some small effort on Miss Partridge's part to restrain him. She sighed gently.

'Really, you are being most tiresome, Mr Etherington. Will you kindly lie still and listen to me?'

'But . . .'

'Are you going to do as I say, or must I use more restrictive measures?'

There was a gleam in the little eyes that quelled any further objections on Paul's part and he relapsed into a sulky silence.

'Now,' Miss Partridge removed her hand and made herself as comfortable as circumstances permitted, 'you must understand that mine is—to say the least—an unusual family. One of my cousins formed an alliance with a known vampire and their issue is best left undescribed. Are you going to be tiresome again?'

Paul discontinued his futile struggles and prayed for the blessed gift of disbelief.

'My dear Papa,' Miss Partridge went on, 'although a most excellent man in every other respect, had a weakness for what I can only describe as low company. On occasion he brought them home – the low company I mean. Little men with white faces and finger-nails that were longer than is conversant with good taste. Then of course there was his unfortunate hobby.'

Paul experienced a certain morbid curiosity.

'Hobby?'

'Raising the dead.'

'Oh!'

'There are occasions when this can be considered a fairly harmless pastime, and no doubt if dear Papa had confined himself to bringing up nice people, all would have been well. But this weakness for low company was his – and alas – our undoing. Are you unwell? You have developed a strange look.'

Paul muttered something that sounded very like: 'Nutty as a cracked walnut', and started a passionate love affair with the open door. Miss Partridge laid ungentle fingers on his arm, then continued her discourse.

'I have never professed to understand the procedure he used, but suffice to say it was very effective. He did not of course bring up their bodies – that would have been the height of bad taste, and so smelly. No, using the ectoplasm provided by Great-Aunt Martha – of which I may add she had an unlimited supply – Papa called up murderers, pick-pockets and ladies of easy virtue – dear Mama was shocked into an early grave – who slithered, slunk and gibbered round this very room and caused all but dear Papa deep distress.'

'I want to go to the bathroom,' Paul said.

'You can't – not until I have finished. Kindly practise self-control. Now, where was I?'

'They were all slithering, slinking and gibbering.'

'Indeed they were. I am pleased to learn you were paying attention. But they all went back to where they came from when dear Papa said: "Scramrushe".'

'Scramrushe,' Paul replied.

'There's a good boy. All but one. An executed murderer who was buried at the crossroads!'

'Crossroads?'

'There's no need to repeat everything I say. On that particular day Great-Aunt Martha was well charged with ecto-

plasm – the result possibly of consuming half a bottle of old port – and the creature became as solid as a seventy-four bus. I am given to understand they are very solid.'

'If you meet one head-on it is,' Paul agreed.

'And he just wouldn't go away. Dear Papa said "Scramrushe" until he was quite hoarse and had to gargle with permanganate of potassium, but to no avail. Then we found out why the low creature was hanged. I suppose you have formed an opinion?'

'Throats?' Paul suggested.

'Precisely. The wretched creature just couldn't wait to get back to its former occupation. Poor, dear Papa, in this very bed, had his throat squeezed – now don't be silly – and passed into a beyond from which he has never returned. There have been other unfortunate incidents over the years, the details of which might cause you distress were I to relate them.' Miss Partridge sighed deeply. 'All so unnecessary. I was a silly goose not to think of it before. All that is required is a strong young man – who can squeeze back.'

'Good God!'

'Don't blaspheme. There is one point you may find to be of interest. The low creature cannot materialize when the lights are on. I will of course turn them off from the mains.'

Paul began to pull at the bedclothes, a course of action which did not meet with Miss Partridge's full approval. She produced a wicked little automatic pistol from her dressing-gown pocket and poked it into the young man's groin. He became as still as a rabbit that has spotted an ill-intentioned stoat.

'I am most reluctant to cause you any discomfort,' Miss Partridge murmured, 'but I shall not hesitate to do so if there is any more nonsense. Now,' she looked enquiringly round the room, 'I think all is as it should be. All windows barred, key on the outside of the door – yes, I really think the time has come – as my dear Papa used to say – to cut the chat and get down to our muttons. Let us hope you do not become the mutton. Just my little joke.'

Paul frantically sought for words that would delay her departure and bring about a change of mind. Miss Partridge had risen from the bed and was backing across the room, the automatic still pointing in the general direction of his groin, when what he considered to be a reasonable topic for con-

version came galloping over his brain.

'But how can I squeeze the throat of a ghost?'

'A solid ghost, dear. I did explain that. The traumatic shock of having his throat firmly squeezed, *should* send him into immediate and permanent dissolution. Such, at any rate, is my dearest desire. A squeeze in time saves nine.'

Having delivered these last words, Miss Partridge spun round with remarkable alacrity, tripped out to the landing and slammed the door before Paul had time to make any further objections. He heard the key being turned, then the sound of footsteps running down the stairs, which suggested that pleasurable excitement had, at least temporarily, loosened the chains of age.

Paul leapt out of bed and ran for the door, where he kicked the panels and pulled the handle; the result of optimism ignoring the dictates of common sense. The door was made from seasoned oak and the lock was clearly a stout mortice that would never surrender to mere muscle-power. Presently he gave up and went back to bed; panic gradually shrinking to shimmering dread. Then the need to find a prosaic explanation for a bizarre situation enabled him to line up *some* morale-boosting conjectures. He listed them.

'A. The old hag is mad.

'B. There is no such thing as a ghost. And if there were it wouldn't be able to squeeze throats.

'C. Therefore, the cold fingers must either have been the old hag herself, trying to frighten the life out of me, or . . .' and now Paul could not entirely suppress a shudder, ' . . . someone else who is hidden in this room.'

A large wardrobe with a long mirror smirked from the facing wall; long blue velvet curtains stirred imperceptibly and thus created an impression they might be hiding any number of cold-fingered madmen. Then the lights went out and terror rushed in from all sides and crashed through the carefully erected barricades of reasonable conjecture.

Paul peered anxiously from left to right. The darkness was complete; an impregnable wall of blackness that was not relieved by so much as a glimmer. He shouted: 'Come on - you don't frighten me,' but there was no comforting reassurance from the sound of his own voice. It was too high-pitched, had a hysterical quality that might well develop into a scream, and completely belied his brave words. An unexpected answer

came from behind the locked door.

'Don't worry, dear, he will come. But you may have to cultivate a little patience.'

Miss Partridge had, as it were, taken her seat in the stalls and was waiting for the performance to begin. Paul sent out a fear-inspired and totally unrealistic demand.

'Open the door, you mad old bitch.'

Miss Partridge was clearly shocked by this ungallant language and expressed her displeasure in no uncertain words.

'That is no way for a gentleman to address a lady. To say I am surprised is a gross understatement. When you are more yourself – always supposing that all goes well – I will expect an apology.'

Paul attempted to appeal to the eternal mother instinct which he had always been given to understand is every woman's birthright.

'Suppose – whoever – whatever – is in here – kills me?'

The old harsh voice was so gentle – so soothing.

'I have a nice little plot prepared in the cellar. You won't be lonely. But I do so hope it won't be necessary. A young man of your size will be most difficult to drag downstairs.'

His conversational powers ran dry; silence became part of the darkness and clogged his ears with dry velvet. Imagination created thought images that danced across the brain and took on the grotesque shapes of long-forgotten childhood fears. Suddenly the silence crumbled as a series of loud raps went hopping – Paul could think of no better definition – around the walls and terminated on the headboard. The eerie sounds appeared to have no connection with a ghost with a penchant for squeezing throats and Paul was at a loss to account for this phenomenon, until the whispering voice of Miss Partridge supplied a possible explanation.

'That must be one of the good spirits trying to warn you that something nasty is about to happen. A nice thought that helps to restore one's faith in those who have gone before us. Now, I would suggest you curve your hands in readiness, because the low creature will be at your throat any time now.'

Paul was not at all comforted by this statement and made a few interesting noises while he strained his ears and peered into the thick darkness and waved his hands wildly, hoping to ward off whatever might have designs on his windpipe.

Then—somewhere between one heartbeat and the next—his right hand was imprisoned in a soft grip and fear took on another dimension. He could feel the cold, smooth palm; the seemingly boneless fingers that gently caressed his, and the large thumb that clamped down over his knuckles.

He felt a ridiculous urge to relax and take careful note of this intimate contact with the unknown. After all, a person—personality—creature—who holds your hand, must have *some* good intentions, no matter how misdirected they may be. But of course he had forgotten the original purpose of a handshake, which, as every well-informed schoolboy knows, was intended to immobilize the sword-arm. When the cold fingers were once again drawn across his throat, his right hand jerked, then struggled like a captive moth, while the left—for a while—was quite unable to leave the counterpane and assist its stronger brother.

The fingers caressed his windpipe, raised a forefinger and gently tickled his chin, then withdrew until only the tips remained to beat out a soft tattoo on the jugular vein. Paul could hear his heart thumping, the rustle of bedclothes when his right foot moved—and the voice of Miss Partridge who was demanding a progress report.

'What is happening? Have you come to grips yet?'

The fingers moved swiftly; became as five little legs racing across a white plain, creating a trail of dry coldness that again stirred slumbering memories that had first erupted into shuddering life long—so very long ago. Then four fingers nestled down on one side of the windpipe, the thumb found a convenient position on the other—and together—working as a well-organized team—they squeezed.

The brain lost control; sent a stream of conflicting commands along the nerve-grid, causing legs to thrash, the trapped hand to jerk, the voice to gurgle—and the free hand to rise up into belated action. It closed over the cold fingers; thick, muscular, half-covered with coarse hair, that were tightly fastened on their chosen objective, and no amount of pulling or prising could move so much as a single digit.

Not that the pressure was more than a gentle pressing of the windpipe, as though it were necessary for the invisible being to build up strength before passing on to the next stage. Paul's left hand slid from the fingers and found a thick, hairy wrist, then progressed up what seemed to be a leather sleeve.

Higher up was a bulky shoulder, then a large, protruding ear, then – finally – a straggling, greasy beard.

It was a hedge protecting another throat. A mass of tangled, tough, almost wirelike hair, that was jerked from side to side, while from above came a series of little pig-squeals. Desperation is the father of ingenuity and Paul grabbed a handful of the hirsute growth – and pulled. The head came down; was an oval patch of deeper darkness some six inches from his face, and there was a suggestion of glaring eyes – white saucers surrounding glowing sparks.

Then his right hand was free and he was able to push it under that matted beard, and a great, fierce joy came to him, when fingers and thumb found a scrawny throat. And it was not important that now there were ten icy clamps gouging his neck; that a mighty roaring filled his brain, a thousand stars danced before his eyes. He was fighting back – pressing, squeezing, carrying out Miss Partridge's instructions – certain that his young, vigorous body must triumph over the foul creature that squealed and danced a mad reel on the bedside rug.

Suddenly it was all over. One last high-pitched scream, a feeling of slimy dampness – and Paul's hands came together as though in supplication – and there was a total absence of sound or substance. No crash of falling body, no thud of retreating footsteps – just the memory of what *might* have been.

Paul lay on his bed of terror and tried to peer through the mists that hide the face of truth, while he waited for his heart to resume its normal beat. Presently he got out of bed and after stumbling from one item of furniture to another, found his jacket hanging over a chairback. The flame of a cigarette-lighter made a tiny hole in the darkness, but two ornamental candles on the mantelpiece sent flickering yellow spears across the room, chased shadows into corners, and reluctantly – or so it seemed – illuminated the crumpled bedside rug.

There was no body – either there or in any part of the room.

Paul walked to the door and whimpered his plaintive plea.

'Please, Miss Partridge – let me out. I did what you asked. I squeezed. I did . . . I did . . . Oh, merciful God . . . I did . . .'

No answer. No welcoming sound of a key being inserted into a lock; just the sound of a window-frame trembling

before the rough wooing of a rising wind. Paul looked back across the candle-lit room and saw the heavy chairs, the mahogany wardrobe and dressing-table, and tried to decide which would make the best battering-ram.

The dressing-table—after the loss of three legs—finally shattered one panel, and then it was a simple matter to reach out and turn the key, which Miss Partridge had thoughtfully left in the lock. Paul raised one candle over his head, opened the door, took two steps out on to the landing—then stopped. For a while he could only stare, make little crying sounds like those of a child who has seen too much and is mourning the passing of ignorance.

Miss Partridge lay upon the floor, her eyes frozen lakes of horror, with ten blue marks on her throat and a smear of blood on her chin. It was reasonable to suppose she had been strangled.

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