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Sinister tales of the occult by L. P. Hartley, Robert E. Howard, Daniel Defoe and others – selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

THE FOURTEENTH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

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The Fourteenth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

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INTRODUCTION

Another year has passed since I wrote the last introduction to a Fontana Book of ghost stories and tried to make up my mind what to include and – often regretfully – what to reject. Many authors confuse horror with pleasurable fear and I find that some editors are in a like quandary. How many times has *The Monkey's Paw* been served up as a ghost story? It is a wonderful tale – but without sight or sound of a ghost from the first page to the last.

Having said all that I must admit that in *The Man on the Ground* by Robert E. Howard I have only just kept within my own guidelines, but such is the arrogance of editors, I make no apology for so doing. Firstly, I have long sought a worthwhile ghostly western and secondly, I have an unstinting admiration for that tragic young author who committed suicide in 1936. He had a well-disciplined imagination and the description of the gunfight is a masterpiece of restrained writing. Anyway – there is a ghost.

But my opening story, *Fall in at the Double* by L. P. Hartley, has an entire company of ghosts, plus a haunting nostalgia for those far-off days when troops were billeted in large houses on the southern coast, waiting for the invasion which never came. Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander McCreeth appears to have been a martinet of the worst kind, and possibly deserved the homicidal troops under his command. But one can only feel the deepest sympathy for Philip Osgood who – years after the war – is awakened at daybreak by the shouted order: 'Fall in at the double.'

There can be no doubt that Mrs Crowe was a Victorian lady who knew her ghosts and was not afraid to talk about them. In *Round the Fire* we gather that a number of very polite, well-served people scared one another half to death by relating their supernatural experiences. And an exceedingly good job they made of it. One is inclined to wonder if Mrs Crowe relied solely on her imagination, or was recording incidents that were at least purported to be true. Some readers will notice that I have omitted the early part of this story, being of the opinion

that it rather hampered the narrative.

The St Christopher Medallion by James Turner is a nice professional piece of work that rivets the reader's attention from the very beginning and has most convincing undertones. Mr Turner had (I regret to say he is no longer with us) a remarkable sense of the macabre and all of his stories are so good that I had great difficulty in making a choice. The wretched Hildreth is one of the most pathetic fictional characters I have yet encountered.

Mary Williams has of recent years built up quite a respectable reputation as a writer of ghost stories, having just published her sixth collection. I have included *Melody in a Minor Key* in this volume because of the subtle plot and the quite compulsive charm of the narrator. She makes a lovely ghost.

I am delighted to learn that two of A. M. Burrage's books have been reprinted in the United States and can only hope that some enterprising publisher will bring them out over here. Although many stories by Mr Burrage (Ex-Private X) keep turning up in various anthologies, I cannot but help feel that he is a sadly neglected author who fully deserves a place among the immortals. *One Who Saw* is a first-rate – if terrifying – story and surely ranks as one of the best of its kind. When the evening shadows are reaching out across the garden, it is not good for you to think about that lonely figure of a woman, seated with her back to the watcher – and may the good Lord protect those who see her face.

Terry Tapp is making quite a name for himself as a writer of uncanny stories and regular readers of this series will remember his *Into the Mad, Mad World* which appeared in the 13th Fontana Ghost Book. He has also contributed a most convincing monster story for my 4th Armada Monster Book. In *Never, Never Leave Me* he has again produced an eerie tale of a soul in torment. He also appears to have done some extensive homework and describes an emergency operation on a diphtheria victim with masterly detail.

Thirteen at Table by Lord Dunsany is a real, old-fashioned (and none the worse for that) ghost story, which has a hunting-country background and a dilapidated old house, where a mad baronet entertains ghostly company and the odd visitor is expected to keep his cool. Speaking for myself, I would be out

through the nearest window and high-tailing for the local railway station before Sir Richard had introduced his first guest. And most certainly not linger to utter such nonsense as: 'I fear that I have insulted some ladies in your house . . .'

To my knowledge Daniel Defoe wrote only two ghost stories. *The Apparition of Mrs Veal* which has been grossly over-exposed, and *The Ghost of Dorothy Dingley* which I have included here. I must say both stories are told in a most convincing fashion and one is inclined to believe that they might well be true. Dorothy is a very active ghost and able to climb over stiles, terrify well-spoken schoolboys and chat up verbose clergymen. The trouble is the wretched man does not tell us what she said. But it is an entertaining period piece.

Rosemary Timperley, who at this stage in her career needs no comments from me, has set *Masks and Voices* against a South American background and it is most eerily portrayed. We are aware from the beginning that Kate Lethem has murdered her husband, but the way his ghost manifests itself is very original. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay Miss Timperley is to say – I wish I had thought of it first.

I am almost inclined to say the same thing about *The Late Arrivals* by K. B. Hill. Mr Hill is a newcomer to this series, but I hope will come again – if he can turn out another story that is on equal terms with this little gem. The narrator is a computer operator – a shift leader no less – and what he sees while on night duty is best left undescribed. A computer room! No one is safe anywhere these days.

In the 13th Fontana Ghost Book I used F. Marion Crawford's *The Dead Smile* which, I am given to understand, gave at least two people nightmares. *The Doll's Ghost* is not so much terrifying as disturbing – the ghost being small, with a penchant for saying 'Pa-pa', with a break between the syllables. But a useful phantom to have around when little Else gets lost.

The Sutor of Selkirk is another period piece written by an unknown author. A sutor was a shoemaker. Having come to terms with this item of information, I would now advise you to find out what happened when: '. . . a tall figure, enveloped in a large black cloak, and with a broad-brimmed hat drawn over his brows, stalked into the shop.' I will tell you this much – he wanted a new pair of shoes.

The Monkey's Paw taken for granted, I love all of W. W.

Jacobs's stories and consider *The Three Sisters* to be the most terrifying one. The very idea of a dying woman saying: 'Nothing is to be changed . . . this room is to be locked up and never opened . . . How do you know, how do I know that I may not sometimes visit it?' is enough to raise one's hair. To say nothing of the servant screaming: 'There's a strange woman in this house.'

There is, too.

Siren Song by Barbara Joan Eyre has a haunted caravan and a most intriguing game of Consequences. This is yet another idea I wish I had thought of first. Frankly, Consequences and I are not on spelling terms, since I inadvertently formed a four-letter word in polite company. But Miss Eyre has made me realize that this was possibly the result of an ill-intentioned ghost expressing a sincere opinion of my limited vocabulary.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was, for most of his life, a recluse, refusing to see even close friends, and he gradually developed a deep melancholia. Perhaps this was why he was so interested in the supernatural and was able to turn out such soul-shaking ghost stories. Dissatisfaction with this world might engender an increasing curiosity as to the shadow-clad inhabitants of the next. *Madam Crowl's Ghost* is related by an old woman, who is recalling what took place at Applewale House when she first went there at the age of thirteen. She was to wait on Dame Crowl, who from being a great beauty seventy years before, was now:

'. . . I sid before me, stretched out like the painted lady on the tomb-stean in Lexhoe Church, the famous Dame Crowl, of Applewale House . . . A big powdered wig, half as high as herself, was a-top o' her head, and, wow – was there ever such wrinkles? – and her old baggy throat all powdered white, and her cheeks rouged, and mouseskin eyebrows . . .'

Then the old lady died.

Last of all there is my very own *The Sad Ghost* which has been, regardless of time or expense, written especially for this collection. I have to thank Miss Rosemary Timperley for the name Sorel that I lifted from her novel *The Passionate Marriage* and which she kindly gave me permission to use. On re-reading the story, I have formed the opinion that Sorel is sweet, her parents dull, Grandma an interfering old busybody – and the ghost a gormless idiot who only comes to his

senses on the last page.

So, there we are. Seventeen stories, umpteen ghosts and – I hope – a multitude of shudders.

May black demons watch around your bed.

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

FALL IN AT THE DOUBLE

L. P. Hartley

Philip Osgood had bought his house in the West Country soon after the Second World War, in the year 1946 to be exact. It had the great merit, for him, of being on the river – a usually slow-flowing stream, but deep, and liable to sudden sensational rises in height, eight feet in as many hours, which flooded the garden but could not reach the house. The house was fairly large, mainly Regency, with earlier and later additions; it had encountered the floods of many years without being washed away; so when he saw the water invading the garden, submerging the garden wall and even overflowing the lawn (on which swans sometimes floated), he didn't feel unduly worried, for the house stood on a hillock which was outside flood-range.

Philip had always liked the house, chiefly because of its situation, its long view over the meadows, and because it had, in one corner of the garden, a boat-house, and rowing was his favourite pastime. He sometimes asked his visitors, who were not many (for who can entertain guests nowadays?) to go out with him in the boat, a cockly affair, known technically as a 'sculling gig', with a sliding seat. It could take one passenger, but this passenger had to sit absolutely still – not a foot this way or that, hardly a headshake – or the boat would tip over.

Moreover, besides its natural instability, it took in water at an alarming rate, so that the passenger – he or she – found himself ankle-deep in water, though doing his best to look as if he were enjoying it. The landscape through which the river ambled, or flowed, or hastened, was perfectly beautiful, and this was Philip's excuse (besides mere selfishness) for beguiling his friends into the boat.

The day came when this treacherous vessel (happily with no other occupant in it) overturned, and Philip found himself in the water. Being a practised, though not a good swimmer, he was not unduly disturbed. Although it was March and the water was cold – and he was wearing his leather jacket and the rest of his polar outfit – he thought: 'I will get hold of the boat and tow it back to the boat-house.'

Alas, he had reckoned without the current, swollen by

recent rains, and he found that far from his towing the boat back to the boat-house, it was towing him down-river to the weir, where who knew what might not happen?

He at once relinquished the boat to its fate, and after a struggle – for he was too old for this sort of thing – he reached the boat-house, the only possible landing-place, for everywhere else the banks were too high and steep, and he went dripping up to his bedroom.

It so happened that this very day he had engaged a new factotum, who was to cook and drive for him. His job with Philip was his first job of this kind – he had had others – and it was his first night in Philip's house. His room faced Philip's, an arrangement Philip was glad of, for being an elderly hypochondriac, he liked to have someone within call.

Nothing came of the river-episode – no pneumonia, no bronchitis – not at least for the moment – but who could tell? And suddenly he wondered if the house, which had seemed so welcoming and friendly over twenty years, had something against him?

The next morning, when the new factotum called him at eight o'clock, with a pot of tea, he asked, just as a routine enquiry:

'How did you sleep last night, Alfred?'

'Oh,' said Alfred who, like so many gentlemen's gentlemen, when they still exist, had been in the Services, 'I didn't sleep a wink, sir.' He sounded quite cheerful.

Philip, who himself suffered from insomnia, was distressed.

'I hope your bed was comfortable?'

'Oh yes, sir, couldn't have been more comfortable.'

'I'm glad of that. But perhaps you are one of the people – I am one myself – who don't sleep well in a strange bed?'

'Oh no, sir, I sleep like a log. I could sleep anywhere, on a clothes-line with a marlin-spike for a pillow.'

Philip didn't know what a marlin-spike was, but as an aid to rest it didn't sound very helpful.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, baffled. 'Then what was it that kept you awake?'

'It was the noises, sir.'

Philip sat up in bed and automatically began to listen for noises but there were none. One side of the house faced the main road where there was plenty of noise by day, and some by night; the other side, on which his bedroom lay, over-

looked the long broad meadow, skirted, at no great distance, by the main railway line from London. Philip, in his sleepless hours, was used to the passing of nocturnal trains: indeed they soothed him rather than otherwise. There was the one-fifty, the two-twenty, and the three-forty-five; he didn't resent them, he rather welcomed them, as establishing his identity with the outside world.

Alfred was standing by his bed, teapot in hand.

'Shall I pour out for you, sir?'

'Yes, please, Alfred. But what did you mean by noises?'

Alfred began to pour the tea into his cup.

'Oh, just noises, sir, just noises.'

Alfred (Alf to his friends) handed Philip his bed-jacket.

'But what sort of noises?'

'Oh, I couldn't quite describe, sir. First there was a pattering of feet on the staircase, really quite loud, and then I heard a voice say, like a sergeant-major's – very autocratic, if you know what I mean – "Fall in at the double, fall in at the double, fall in at the double." '

'And what happened then?'

'Nothing much happened. The footsteps stopped, and a sort of smell – a weedy sort of smell – came into the room. I didn't pay much attention to it, and then I went to sleep.'

Thinking this over, Philip was puzzled. Could Alfred, or Alf, have possibly known that the house had been occupied by the Army during the war – the Second World War? There were people who could have told him – the gardener and his wife who lived upstairs could have told him, supposing they knew; but would they have had time to tell him, in the few short hours since his arrival?

But there it was – the tramping of footsteps down the uncarpeted staircase (for it would have been uncarpeted during the Army's occupation), the thrice-repeated command, 'Fall in at the double' – what did it mean?

And then this weedy smell?

Philip couldn't sleep the next night, and expected to be told that Alfred couldn't sleep either; but when Alfred called him with a bright morning face, and Philip asked him if he had had a good night or a better night, he answered promptly, and as if surprised: 'Oh yes, sir, I slept like a log.'

Philip was glad to hear this, but something – a suggestion, a muttering from his subconscious mind – still irked him. He knew that certain people – people in the village and outside – had certain reservations about his house. What they were he didn't know, and naturally, they didn't tell him; only a faint accent of doubt – as if referring to some rather shady acquaintance – coloured their voices when they spoke of it. But when he asked a friend of his who owned a much larger and grander house, if he thought his riverside abode might be haunted, his friend replied, 'Oh Philip, but is it *old* enough?'

Philip was slightly offended. It was a vulgar error to think a ghost needed a long pedigree. His house was quite old enough to be haunted; and this recent visitation, if it was one, had nothing to do with the house's age as a resort for ghosts.

He was not unduly superstitious but there was a nerve in him that vibrated to supernatural fears, and though he tried to calm them during the following days, by the reflection that he had lived in the house for over twenty years without any trouble other than the normal troubles – burst pipes, gas escapes, failures of electricity and so on, that are the lot of many old and decaying houses – he didn't feel so comfortable, so at home with his home, with his thoughts as he used to be.

Supposing?

But was there anything, abstract or concrete, spiritual or material, to suppose?

Alfred professed to be psychic, and familiar with poltergeists and other familiars (Philip laughed to himself, rather half-heartedly, at this mental joke), otherwise he wouldn't have taken the manifestations on the staircase so lightly; but that didn't explain why they had such an obvious bearing on the recent history of the house.

Forget about it, forget about it, and Philip had almost forgotten about it when, a few nights later, he was awakened by a thunderous knock on his bedroom door, three times repeated. It was the loudest sound he had ever heard; the footsteps of the Commendatore coming up the staircase in *Don Giovanni*, were nothing like as loud.

'Come in!' he shouted, unaware of the time, and almost unaware, having taken a sleeping pill, where he himself was. 'Come in!' he shouted again, thinking that perhaps it was Alfred with his early morning tea.

But no one came; and it couldn't have been Alfred, for

when he looked at his watch, it was five o'clock in the morning.

Turning over in bed, he tried to go to sleep, but his subconscious mind had taken alarm and wouldn't let him; and he lay awake listening for another summons until three hours later, when a much gentler, hardly audible knock, that didn't even expect an answer, announced Alfred with Philip's early morning tea.

Philip turned a tired, sleep-deprived face towards him.

'Did you have a good night, Alfred?'

'Oh yes, sir, pretty good. A few noises, you know.'

'You didn't hear a terrific hammering on my door' (Alfred's bedroom door was only an arm's length from Philip's) 'about five o'clock this morning?'

'Oh no, sir, nothing like that. A few scurrying noises, could have been rats.'

Philip, with lack-lustre eyes, sipped his tea. Could he have *imagined* the knocking? No, it was much too loud. But could it have been a sound heard in a dream – the tail-end of a dream? Philip hadn't had many dreams of late years. Sleeping pills inhibited them; that was one of their side-effects, and a bad one, for dreams were an outlet for the subconscious mind, and if denied this outlet, it took its revenge in other ways. In madness, perhaps? One *saw* things in dreams of course and one was aware of conversations; but were these conversations conveyed by sound, or by the illusion of the dream? As far as his recollections went, communication in dreams went by sight, and by some telepathic process – and not by sound – certainly not by sounds as the four tremendous thumps which had awakened him.

So convinced was he of their material reality that while he was dressing he opened his bedroom door, and examined its other side, fully expecting to see marks on it which might have been made by a sledgehammer. There were none; the off-white paint was as smooth and undented as it had always been. To make assurance doubly sure, he held the door open, where the light could catch it at different angles; and then he saw something which in all his twenty-odd years of opening the door, he had never seen.

Beneath its coating of thick paint, something was written, printed rather. White over white, very hard to decipher, but at last he made it out:

PRIVATE
LIEUT-COLONEL ALEXANDER MCCREETH

Well, that explained itself. Lieut-Colonel McCreeth had occupied Philip's bedroom.

Some time during the war years he may have used it as an orderly-room, a sitting-room or a bedroom, but when using it he didn't want to be disturbed. Was the repeated rat-tat-tat meant to disturb his privacy, perhaps for military reasons? The previous owners of the house, who had occupied it for a year or two after the Army left, had redecorated it, and tried to wipe out all trace of their military predecessors. They must have spent a lot of money on it, and then gone away, quite ready to go, apparently, for they had sold it to Philip at a reasonable price. No haggling. Why?

It was years since he had seen the vendors and he didn't even know their whereabouts. And if he had, what could he ask them?

He began to entertain absurd fancies, such as that it was he who had been ordered to fall in at the double and the mysterious knocking was meant to awaken him to the urgency of some military exercise, for which he would otherwise be late. Perhaps the safety of the country depended on it. Perhaps an invasion was imminent?

Not now, of course, but then.

Gradually these fancies began to wear off, and only showed themselves in an almost invincible reluctance, on Philip's part, to ask Alfred if he had had any more psychic experience. At last, when all seemed set fair, he put the question.

'Oh yes, sir, often. But I didn't want to tell you, because I thought it might bother you.'

Philip's heart sank.

'What sort of things?'

'Well, nothing that I've heard myself, except those noises I've told you about, and the voice saying, "Fall in at the double!" But anything may happen in an old house like this.'

'But you haven't heard anything else?'

'As a matter of fact I have, sir, but it's only gossip, things they natter about at the local. Places like this, so far from civilization, they haven't much to talk about.'

'Tell me what it was.'

'May I sit down, sir?'

Alfred sat down, bent forward to get his shirt-cuffs into the correct position, leaned back and said:

'Well, it was about this Colonel.'

'You mean Colonel McCreeth?'

'Yes, Colonel McCreeth. They couldn't pronounce his name properly – they're uneducated here. But they said he was unpopular with the other men who were living here, in this house I mean, at the time. He was a dictatorial type, like some of them are, and they had it in for him. He used to get them up from bed when it wasn't a bit necessary, just to look at the moon, so to say, pretending there was an air raid, when there wasn't. And so they got fed up.'

'I don't wonder. And then?'

'Well, he picked on a certain bloke who had said or done something out of turn and gave him CB – this house counted as a barracks, I believe – and this bloke, and three or four others, slept in my room – you may remember how it was in the Army, sir, they didn't always pay much attention to the comfort of the men.'

'Yes, I do remember,' Philip said.

'Well, this fellow was a sort of trouble-maker, and he had it in for the Colonel, who wasn't liked by any of them, and he got their sergeant, who didn't like him either, to make a sort of plot. Very wrong of them, of course, and against discipline, but you can't try people, even soldiers, beyond a certain point.'

'Of course not.'

'So, as I was saying, they put their heads together, and ran downstairs, saying, "Fall in at the double," and the sergeant knocked at the Colonel's door – your door – sir – and he came out in his pyjamas – and said, "What the hell is this?" And the sergeant said, "It's someone down by the river, sir. He's acting very suspicious. We think he may be a German spy." The Colonel cursed, but he got into his coat and trousers – it was a cold night – and went with them – about three dozen of them – down to the river bank. And what happened afterwards no one seemed to know. You know what men are like when they get angry and excited. It spreads from one to another – a dozen men would do what one man wouldn't – and the Colonel was a heavy drinker – but anyhow the upshot was

he fell into the river, and was found drowned at the weir below your house. The river was low, so he wasn't carried over it.

'Dear me,' said Philip, though a stronger expression would have suited his feelings better. 'Do you think any of this is true?'

Alfred smiled and shrugged his shoulders. 'They're that uneducated in these parts.'

A few nights later at the same hour as before, five o'clock, Philip was awakened by a knocking at his door. 'Come in!' he shouted, still fuddled with sleep, and still unaware if he was awake or dreaming, 'Come in!' he repeated, and it was then he heard the thrice-given order, 'Fall in at the double, fall in at the double, fall in at the double,' followed by the clatter of heavy footsteps on the bare boards of the staircase.

So intent was he on listening to this that he didn't see his bedroom door open – it may have opened of itself as it sometimes did when not securely latched – but at any rate it was open, as he could tell from the moonlight from the hall window, above the staircase, struggling into the densely curtained room. Faint as it was, the moonlight showed him that someone had come in when the door opened, for he could dimly descry the head and the back of a tall man, edging his way round Philip's bed, apparently looking for something. It was more like a presence than a person, a movement than a man, the footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet, but it seemed to stop in front of the wardrobe, and fumble there.

A burglar? If it was a burglar, and if all he wanted was a few clothes, well and good; he might be armed, and Philip was in no state to resist an armed man. Some said – the police even said – that in certain cases, in this age of violence, it was safer not to 'have a go' at a man who might be desperate.

The telephone was at his left hand, the switch of the bedside lamp at his right: yet he dared not use either, he dared not even stir, lest the intruder should realize he was awake.

After what seemed an unconscionable time, he heard or thought he heard, sounds of groping in the recesses of the wardrobe. This activity, whatever it was, ceased and a silence followed which Philip took to mean that the burglar (for who else could he be?) had finished his search and was taking himself off. Philip pressed the back of his head against the

pillow and shut his eyes, for the man was now coming towards him, face forwards. But Philip's pretence of sleep hadn't deceived him; he stopped and peered down at him. Philip's eyes opened: they couldn't help themselves, and he saw the stranger's face. Mask-like, the indistinct features kept their own secret, but their colour was the colour of the moonlight on them. Drawing nearer, stooping closer, outside the moonlight's ray, they were invisible; but a voice which must have come through the unseen lips, though the whole body seemed to utter it, said:

'Fall in and follow me. At the double, mind you, at the double,' and a shadow, momentarily blotting out the moonbeams, slid through the doorway.

Seized by an irresistible inner compulsion, Philip jumped out of bed and without waiting to put a coat over his pyjamas, or slippers on his feet, followed the visitant downstairs in a direction he knew as well as if it had been directed to him by a radar beam.

On the wall that separated the garden from the river he saw first of all a line of heads, he couldn't tell how many, wearing Army caps, turning this way and that, bobbing and nudging, and heard an angry buzz of talk, as of bees, whose hive is threatened. At the sign of his precursor, only a few yards ahead of him, silence fell, and they drew apart, leaving a gap between them in the shallow river-wall. But they were still leaning towards each other, some of their faces and silhouettes moonstruck, the rest in darkness.

'Now, boys, what is all this?' asked their Colonel, for he it must have been, in a cheerful, would-be rallying tone. 'Why have you got me up at this time of night? There isn't an air raid.' And his moonlit face, revolving slowly in its lunar circuit, scanned the night sky.

'No, sir, you know what it is,' said a voice, a low, level voice charged with menace. 'We're fed up with you, that's what it is.'

They were beginning to close in on him, their hands were already round his legs, when he called out, 'You've done this before. Take him, he's my double!' And he pointed to Philip, shivering behind him on the lawn.

'Shall we, Jack? Shall we, Bill? He's one of them, we might as well.'

Their strong hands were round him and Philip, hardly

struggling, felt himself being hoisted over the garden wall, to where, a few feet below, he could see his own face mirrored in the water.

'Let's get rid of the bastard!'

The next thing Philip knew was a hand on his shoulder, and he heard another voice, saying:

'Good God, sir, what are you doing here? You might catch your death of cold.'

He couldn't speak while Alfred was helping him over the wall.

'Thank you, thank you,' he gasped, when he had got his breath back. 'I might have been drowned if it hadn't been for you. But where are the others?'

He looked back at the depopulated garden wall, no dark heads bobbing and whispering, neck to neck, no limbs bracing themselves for violence; only the moon shining as innocently as that de-virginated satellite can shine.

'But how did you *know*?'

'I have my ways of finding out,' said Alfred darkly. 'A hot bath, a hot bottle, a whisky perhaps, and then bed for you, sir. And don't pay any attention to that lot, they're up to no good.'

THE MAN ON THE GROUND

Robert E. Howard

Cal Reynolds shifted his tobacco quid to the other side of his mouth as he squinted down the dull blue barrel of his Winchester. His jaws worked methodically, their movement ceasing as he found his bead. He froze into rigid immobility; then his finger hooked on the trigger. The crack of the shot sent the echoes rattling among the hills, and like a louder echo came an answering shot. Reynolds flinched down, flattening his rangy body against the earth, swearing softly. A grey flake jumped from one of the rocks near his head, the ricocheting bullet whining off into space. Reynolds involuntarily shivered. The sound was as deadly as the singing of an unseen rattler.

He raised himself gingerly high enough to peer out between the rocks in front of him. Separated from his refuge by a broad level grown with mesquite-grass and prickly-pear, rose a tangle of boulders similar to that behind which he crouched. From among these boulders floated a thin wisp of whitish smoke. Reynolds's keen eyes, trained to sun-scorched distances, detected a small circle of dully gleaming blue steel among the rocks. That ring was the muzzle of a rifle, and Reynolds well knew who lay behind that muzzle.

The feud between Cal Reynolds and Esau Brill had been long, for a Texas feud. Up in the Kentucky mountains family wars may straggle on for generations, but the geographical conditions and human temperament of the South-west were not conducive to long-drawn-out hostilities. There feuds were generally concluded with appalling suddenness and finality. The stage was a saloon, the streets of a little cow-town, or the open range. Sniping from the laurel was exchanged for the close-range thundering of six-shooters and sawed-off shotguns which decided matters quickly, one way or the other.

The case of Cal Reynolds and Esau Brill was somewhat out of the ordinary. In the first place, the feud concerned only themselves. Neither friends nor relatives were drawn into it. No one, including the participants, knew just how it started. Cal Reynolds merely knew that he had hated Esau Brill most of his life, and that Brill reciprocated. Once as youths they had clashed with the violence and intensity of rival young

catamounts. From that encounter Reynolds carried away a knife scar across the edge of his ribs, and Brill a permanently impaired eye. It had decided nothing. They had fought to a bloody gasping deadlock, and neither had felt any desire to 'shake hands and make up'. That is a hypocrisy developed in civilization, where men have no stomach for fighting to the death. After a man has felt his adversary's knife grate against his bones, his adversary's thumb gouging at his eyes, his adversary's boot-heels stamped into his mouth, he is scarcely inclined to forgive and forget, regardless of the original merits of the argument.

So Reynolds and Brill carried their mutual hatred into manhood, and as cowpunchers riding for rival ranches, it followed that they found opportunities to carry on their private war. Reynolds rustled cattle from Brill's boss, and Brill returned the compliment. Each raged at the other's tactics, and considered himself justified in eliminating his enemy in any way that he could. Brill caught Reynolds without his gun one night in a saloon at Cow Wells, and only an ignominious flight out the back way, with bullets barking at his heels, saved the Reynolds scalp!

Again Reynolds, lying in the chaparral, neatly knocked his enemy out of his saddle at five hundred yards with a ·30-30 slug, and, but for the inopportune appearance of a line-rider, the feud would have ended there, Reynolds deciding, in the face of this witness, to forgo his original intention of leaving his covert and hammering out the wounded man's brains with his rifle butt.

Brill recovered from his wound, having the vitality of a long-horn bull, in common with all his sun-leathered iron-thewed breed, and as soon as he was on his feet, he came gunning for the man who had waylaid him.

Now after these onsets and skirmishes, the enemies faced each other at good rifle range, among the lonely hills where interruption was unlikely.

For more than an hour they had lain among the rocks, shooting at each hint of movement. Neither had scored a hit, though the ·30-30's whistled perilously close.

In each of Reynolds's temples a tiny pulse hammered maddeningly. The sun beat down on him and his shirt was soaked with sweat. Gnats swarmed about his head, getting into his eyes, and he cursed venomously. His wet hair was

plastered to his scalp; his eyes burned with the glare of the sun, and the rifle barrel was hot to his calloused hand. His right leg was growing numb and he shifted it cautiously, cursing at the jingle of the spur, though he knew Brill could not hear. All this discomfort added fuel to the fire of his wrath. Without process of conscious reasoning, he attributed all his suffering to his enemy. The sun beat dazingly on his sombrero, and his thoughts were slightly addled. It was hotter than the hearthstone of hell among those bare rocks. His dry tongue caressed his baked lips.

Through the muddle of his brain burned his hatred of Esau Brill. It had become more than an emotion: it was an obsession, a monstrous incubus. When he flinched from the whip-crack of Brill's rifle, it was not from fear of death, but because the thought of dying at the hands of his foe was an intolerable horror that made his brain rock with red frenzy. He would have thrown his life away recklessly, if by so doing he could have sent Brill into eternity just three seconds ahead of himself.

He did not analyse these feelings. Men who live by their hands have little time for self-analysis. He was no more aware of the quality of his hate for Esau Brill than he was consciously aware of his hands and feet. It was part of him, and more than part: it enveloped him, engulfed him; his mind and body were no more than its material manifestations. He *was* the hate; it was the whole soul and spirit of him. Unhampered by the stagnant and enervating shackles of sophistication and intellectuality, his instincts rose sheer from the naked primitive. And from them crystallized an almost tangible abstraction – a hate too strong for even death to destroy; a hate powerful enough to embody itself in itself, without the aid or the necessity of material substance.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour neither rifle had spoken. Instinct with death as rattlesnakes coiled among the rocks soaking up poison from the sun's rays, the feudists lay each waiting his chance, playing the game of endurance until the taut nerves of one or the other would snap.

It was Esau Brill who broke. Not that his collapse took the form of any wild madness or nervous explosion. The wary instincts of the wild were too strong in him for that. But suddenly, with a screamed curse, he hitched up on his elbow and fired blindly at the tangle of stones which concealed his

enemy. Only the upper part of his arm and the corner of his blue-shirted shoulder were for an instant visible. That was enough. In that flash-second Cal Reynolds jerked the trigger, and a frightful yell told him his bullet had found its mark. And at the animal pain in that yell, reason and life-long instincts were swept away by an insane flood of terrible joy. He did not whoop exultantly and spring to his feet; but his teeth bared in a wolfish grin and he involuntarily raised his head. Waking instinct jerked him down again. It was chance that undid him. Even as he ducked back, Brill's answering shot cracked.

Cal Reynolds did not hear it, because, simultaneously with the sound, something exploded in his skull, plunging him into utter blackness, shot briefly with red sparks.

The blackness was only momentary. Cal Reynolds glared wildly around, realizing with a frenzied shock that he was lying in the open. The impact of the shot had sent him rolling from among the rocks, and in that quick instant he realized that it had not been a direct hit. Chance had sent the bullet glancing from a stone, apparently to flick his scalp in passing. That was not so important. What was important was that he was lying out in full view, where Esau Brill could fill him full of lead. A wild glance showed his rifle lying close by. It had fallen across a stone and lay with the stock against the ground, the barrel slanting upward. Another glance showed his enemy standing upright among the stones that had concealed him.

In that one glance Cal Reynolds took in the details of the tall, rangy figure: the stained trousers sagging with the weight of the holstered six-shooter, the legs tucked into the worn leather boots; the streak of crimson on the shoulder of the blue shirt, which was plastered to the wearer's body with sweat; the tousled black hair, from which perspiration was pouring down the unshaven face. He caught the glint of yellow tobacco-stained teeth shining in a savage grin. Smoke still drifted from the rifle in Brill's hands.

These familiar and hated details stood out in startling clarity during the fleeting instant while Reynolds struggled madly against the unseen chains which seemed to hold him to the earth. Even as he thought of the paralysis a glancing blow on the head might induce, something seemed to snap and he rolled free. Rolled is hardly the word: he seemed almost to

dart to the rifle that lay across the rock, so light his limbs felt.

Dropping behind the stone he seized the weapon. He did not even have to lift it. As it lay it bore directly on the man who was now approaching.

His hand was momentarily halted by Esau Brill's strange behaviour. Instead of firing or leaping back into cover the man came straight on, his rifle in the crook of his arm, that damnable leer still on his unshaven lips. Was he mad? Could he not see that his enemy was up again, raging with life, and with a cocked rifle aimed at his heart? Brill seemed not to be looking at him, but to one side, at the spot where Reynolds had just been lying.

Without seeking further for the explanation of his foe's actions, Cal Reynolds pulled the trigger. With the vicious spang of the report a blue shred leaped from Brill's broad breast. He staggered back, his mouth flying open. And the look on his face froze Reynolds again. Esau Brill came of a breed which fights to its last gasp. Nothing was more certain than that he would go down pulling the trigger blindly until the last red vestige of life left him. Yet the ferocious triumph was wiped from his face with the crack of the shot, to be replaced by an awful expression of dazed surprise. He made no move to lift his rifle, which slipped from his grasp, nor did he clutch at his wound. Throwing out his hands in a strange, stunned, helpless way, he reeled backward on slowly buckling legs, his features frozen into a mask of stupid amazement that made his watcher shiver with its cosmic horror.

Through the opened lips gushed a tide of blood, dyeing the damp shirt. And like a tree that sways and rushes suddenly earthward, Esau Brill crashed down among the mesquite-grass and lay motionless.

Cal Reynolds rose, leaving the rifle where it lay. The rolling grass-grown hills swam misty and indistinct to his gaze. Even the sky and the blazing sun had a hazy unreal aspect. But a savage content was in his soul. The long feud was over at last, and whether he had taken his death-wound or not, he had sent Esau Brill to blaze the trail to hell ahead of him.

Then he started violently as his gaze wandered to the spot where he had rolled after being hit. He glared; were his eyes playing him tricks? Yonder in the grass Esau Brill lay dead – yet only a few feet away stretched another body.

Rigid with surprise, Reynolds glared at the rangy figure, slumped grotesquely beside the rocks. It lay partly on its side, as if flung there by some blind convulsion, the arms outstretched, the fingers crooked as if blindly clutching. The short-cropped sandy hair was splashed with blood, and from a ghastly hole in the temple the brains were oozing. From a corner of the mouth seeped a thin trickle of tobacco juice to stain the dusty neck-cloth.

And as he gazed, an awful familiarity made itself evident. He knew the feel of those shiny leather wrist-bands; he knew with fearful certainty whose hands had buckled that gun-belt; the tang of that tobacco juice was still on his palate.

In one brief destroying instant he knew he was looking down at his own lifeless body. And with the knowledge came true oblivion.

ROUND THE FIRE

Mrs Crowe

'I have travelled a great deal,' said our next speaker, the Chevalier de La C. G., 'and, certainly, I have never been in any country where instances of these spiritual appearances were not adduced on apparently credible authority. I have heard numerous stories of the sort, but the one that most readily occurs to me at present was told to me not long ago, in Paris, by Count P.–the nephew of the celebrated Count P. whose name occurs in the history of the remarkable incidents connected with the death of the Emperor Paul.

'Count P., my authority for the following story, was attached to the Russian embassy; and he told me, one evening, when the conversation turned on the inconveniences of travelling in the East of Europe, that on one occasion, when in Poland, he found himself about seven o'clock in an autumn evening on a forest road, where there was no possibility of finding a house of public entertainment within many miles. There was a frightful storm; the road, not good at the best, was almost impracticable from the weather, and his horses were completely knocked up. On consulting his people what was best to be done, they said that to go back was as impossible as to go forward; but that by turning a little out of the main road, they should soon reach a castle where possibly shelter might be procured for the night. The count gladly consented, and it was not long before they found themselves at the gate of what appeared a building on a very splendid scale. The courier quickly alighted and rang at the bell, and while waiting for admission he enquired who the castle belonged to, and was told that it was Count X's.

'It was some time before the bell was answered, but at length an elderly man appeared at a wicket, with a lantern, and peeped out. On perceiving the equipage, he came forward and stepped up to the carriage, holding the light aloft to discover who was inside. Count P. handed him his card, and explained his distress.

' "There is no one here, my lord," replied the man, "but myself and my family; the castle is not inhabited."

' "That's bad news," said the count, "but nevertheless, you

can give me what I am most in need of and that is – shelter for the night."

'"Willingly," said the man, "if your lordship will put up with such accommodation as we can hastily prepare."

'"So,' said the count, 'I alighted and walked in, and the old man unbarred the great gates to admit my carriages and people. We found ourselves in an immense *cour*, with the castle *en face*, and stables and offices on each side. As we had a *fourgon* with us, with provender for the cattle and provisions for ourselves, we wanted nothing but beds and a good fire; and as the only one lighted was in the old man's apartments, he first took us there. They consisted of a suite of small rooms in the left wing, that had probably been formerly occupied by the upper servants. They were comfortably furnished, and he and his large family appeared to be very well lodged. Besides the wife, there were three sons, with their wives and children, and two nieces; and in a part of the offices, where I saw a light, I was told there were labourers and women servants for it was a valuable estate, with a fine forest, and the sons acted as *gardes chasse*.

'"Is there much game in the forest?" I asked.

'"A great deal of all sorts,' they answered.

'"Then I suppose during the season the family live here?"

'"Never," they replied. "None of the family ever reside here."

'"Indeed!" I said, "how is that? It seems a very fine place."

'"Superb," answered the wife of the custodian; "but the castle is haunted."

'She said this with a simple gravity that made me laugh, upon which they all stared at me with the most edifying amazement.

'"I beg your pardon," I said, "but you know, perhaps, in great cities, such as I usually inhabit, there are no ghosts."

'"Indeed!" said they. "No ghosts!"

'"At least," I said, "I never heard of any; and we don't believe in such things."

'They looked at each other with surprise, but said nothing, not appearing to have any desire to convince me. "But do you mean to say," said I, "that that is the reason the family don't live here, and that the castle is abandoned on that account?"

'"Yes," they replied, "that is the reason nobody has resided

here for many years."

'"But how can you live here then?"

'"We are never troubled in this part of the building," said she. "We hear noises, but we are used to that."

'"Well, if there is a ghost, I hope I shall see it," said I.

'"God forbid!' said the woman, crossing herself. "But we shall guard against that; your seigneurie will sleep not far from this, where you will be quite safe."

'"Oh! but," said I, "I am quite serious: if there is a ghost I should particularly like to see him, and I should be much obliged to you to put me in the apartments he most frequents."

They opposed this proposition earnestly, and begged me not to think of it; besides, they said if anything was to happen to my lord, how should they answer for it; but as I insisted, the women went to call the members of the family who were lighting fires and preparing beds in some rooms on the same floor as they occupied themselves. When they came they were as earnest against the indulgence of my wishes as the women had been. Still I insisted.

'"Are you afraid," I said, "to go yourselves in the haunted chambers?"

'"No," they answered. "We are the custodians of the castle and have to keep the rooms clean and well aired lest the furniture be spoiled – my lord talks always of removing it, but it has never been removed yet – but we would not sleep up there for all the world."

'"Then it is the upper floors that are haunted?"

'"Yes, especially the long room, no one could pass a night there; the last that did is in a lunatic asylum now at Warsaw," said the custodian.

'"What happened to him?"

'"I don't know," said the man; "he was never able to tell."

'"Who was he?" I asked.

'"He was a lawyer. My lord did business with him; and one day he was speaking of this place, and saying that it was a pity he was not at liberty to pull it down and sell the materials; but he cannot, because it is family property and goes with the title; and the lawyer said he wished it was his, and that no ghost should keep him out of it. My lord said that it was easy for anyone to say that who knew nothing about it, and that he must suppose the family had not aban-

doned such a fine place without good reasons. But the lawyer said it was some trick, and that it was coiners, or robbers, who had got a footing in the castle, and contrived to frighten people away that they might keep it to themselves; so my lord said if he could prove that he should be very much obliged to him, and more than that, he would give him a great sum – I don't know how much. So the lawyer said he would; and my lord wrote to me that he was coming to inspect the property, and I was to let him do anything he liked.

'"Well, he came, and with him his son, a fine young man and a soldier. They asked me all sorts of questions, and went over the castle and examined every part of it. From what they said, I could see that they thought the ghost was all nonsense, and that I and my family were in collusion with the robbers or coiners. However, I did not care for that; my lord knew the castle had been haunted before I was born.

'"I had prepared rooms on this floor for them – the same I am preparing for your lordship, and they slept there, keeping the keys of the upper rooms to themselves, so I did not interfere with them. But one morning, very early, we were awakened by someone knocking at our bedroom door, and when we opened it we saw Mr Thaddeus – that was the lawyer's son – standing there half-dressed and as pale as a ghost; and he said his father was very ill and he begged us to go to him; to our surprise he led us upstairs to the haunted chamber, and there we found the poor gentleman speechless, and we thought they had gone up there early and that he had had a stroke. But it was not so; Mr Thaddeus said that after we were all in bed they had gone up there to pass the night. I know they thought that there was no ghost but us, and that's why they would not let us know their intention. They laid down upon some sofas, wrapped up in their fur cloaks, and resolved to keep awake, and they did so for some time, but at last the young man was overcome by drowsiness; he struggled against it, but could not conquer it, and the last thing he recollects was his father shaking him and saying, 'Thaddeus, Thaddeus, for God's sake keep awake!' But he could not, and he knew no more till he woke and saw that day was breaking, and found his father sitting in a corner of the room speechless, and looking like a corpse; and there he was when we went up. The young man thought he'd been taken ill or had a stroke, as we supposed at first; but when

we found they had passed the night in the haunted chambers, we had no doubt what had happened – he had seen some terrible sight and so lost his senses."

'"He lost his senses, I should say, from terror when his son fell asleep," said I, "and he felt himself alone. He could have been a man of no nerve. At all events, what you tell me raises my curiosity. Will you take me upstairs and show me these rooms?"

'"Willingly," said the man, and fetching a bunch of keys and a light, and calling one of his sons to follow him with another, he led the way up the great staircase to a suite of apartments on the first floor. The rooms were lofty and large, and the man said the furniture was very handsome, but old. Being all covered with canvas cases, I could not judge of it.

'"Which is the long room?" I said.

'Upon which he led me into a long narrow room that might rather have been called a gallery. There were sofas along each side, something like a dais at the upper end, and several large pictures hanging on the walls.

'I had with me a bulldog, of a very fine breed, that had been given me in England by Lord F. She had followed me upstairs – indeed, she followed me everywhere – and I watched her narrowly as she went smelling about, but there were no indications of her perceiving anything extraordinary. Beyond this gallery there was only a small octagonal room, with a door that led out upon another staircase. When I had examined it all thoroughly, I returned to the long room and told the man as that was the place especially frequented by the ghost, I should feel much obliged if he would allow me to pass the night there. I could take upon myself to say that Count X would have no objection.

'"It is not that," replied the man, "but the danger to your lordship," and he conjured me not to insist on such a perilous experiment.

'When he found I was resolved, he gave way, but on condition that I signed a paper, stating that in spite of his representations I had determined to sleep in the long room.

'I confess the more anxious these people seemed to prevent my sleeping there, the more curious I was; not that I believed in the ghost the least in the world. I thought that the lawyer had been right in his conjecture, but that he hadn't nerve enough to investigate whatever he saw or heard, and that they

had succeeded in frightening him out of his senses. I saw what an excellent place these people had got, and how much it was their interest to maintain the idea that the castle was uninhabitable. Now, I have pretty good nerves – I have been in situations that have tried them severely – and I did not believe that any ghost, if there was such a thing, or any jugglery by which a semblance of one might be contrived, would shake them. As for any real danger, I did not apprehend it; the people knew who I was, and any mischief happening to me would have led to consequences they well understood. So they lighted fires in both the grates of the gallery, and as they had abundance of dry wood they soon blazed up. I was determined not to leave the room after I was once in it, lest, if my suspicions were correct, they might have time to make their arrangements; so I desired my people to bring up my supper, and I ate it there.

'My courier said he had always heard the castle was haunted, but he dare say there was no ghost but the people below, who had a very comfortable berth of it; and he offered to pass the night with me, but I declined any companion and preferred trusting to myself and my dog. My valet, on the contrary, strongly advised me against the enterprise, assuring me that he had lived with a family in France whose château was haunted, and had left his place in consequence.

'By the time I had finished my supper it was ten o'clock, and everything was prepared for the night. My bed, though an impromptu, was very comfortable, made of amply stuffed cushions and thick coverlets, placed in front of the fire. I was provided with light and plenty of wood; and I had my regimental cutlass, and a case of excellent pistols, which I carefully primed and loaded in presence of the custodian, saying, "You see I am determined to fire at the ghost, so if he cannot stand a bullet he had better not pay me a visit."

'The old man shook his head calmly, but made no answer. Having desired the courier, who said he should not go to bed, to come upstairs immediately if he heard the report of firearms, I dismissed my people and locked the doors, barricading each with a heavy ottoman besides. There was no arras or hangings of any sort behind which a door could be concealed; and I went round the room, the walls of which were panelled with white and gold, knocking every part, but neither the sound, nor Dido, the dog, gave any indications of there being

anything unusual. Then I undressed and lay down with my sword and my pistols beside me; and Dido at the foot of my bed, where she always slept.

'I confess I was in a state of pleasing excitement; my curiosity and my love of adventure were roused; and whether it was ghost, or robber, or coiner, I was to have a visit from, the interview was likely to be equally interesting. It was half-past ten when I lay down; my expectations were too vivid to admit of much sleep; and after an attempt at a French novel, I was obliged to give it up; I could not fix my attention to it. Besides, my chief care was not to be surprised. I could not help thinking the custodian and his family had some secret way of getting into the room, and I hoped to detect them in the act; so I lay with my eyes and ears open in a position that gave me a view of every part of it, till my travelling clock struck twelve, which being pre-eminently the ghostly hour, I thought the critical moment was arrived. But no, no sound, no interruption of any sort to the silence and solitude of the night occurred. When half-past twelve and one struck, I pretty well made up my mind that I should be disappointed in my expectations, and that the ghost, whoever he was, knew better than to encounter Dido and a brace of well-charged pistols; but just as I arrived at this conclusion an unaccountable *frisson* came over me, and I saw Dido, who tired with her day's journey had lain till now quietly curled up asleep, begin to move, and slowly get upon her feet. I thought she was only going to turn, but, instead of lying down, she stood still with her ears erect and her head towards the dais, uttering a low growl.

The dais, I should mention, was but the skeleton of a dais, for the draperies were taken off. There was only remaining a canopy covered with crimson velvet, and an arm-chair covered with velvet too, but cased in canvas like the rest of the furniture. I had examined this part of the room thoroughly, and had moved the chair aside to ascertain that there was nothing under it.

'Well, I sat up in bed and looked steadily in the same direction as the dog, but I could see nothing at first, though it appeared that she did; but as I looked I began to perceive something like a cloud in the chair, while at the same time a chill which seemed to pervade the very marrow in my bones crept through me, yet the fire was good; and it was not

the chill of fear, for I cocked my pistols with perfect self-possession and abstained from giving Dido the signal to advance, because I wished eagerly to see the dénouement of the adventure.

'Gradually this cloud took a form, and assumed the shape of a tall white figure that reached from the ceiling to the floor of the dais, which was raised by two steps. "At him, Dido! At him!" I said, and away she dashed to the steps, but instantly turned and crept back completely cowed. As her courage was undoubted, I own this astonished me, and I should have fired, but that I was perfectly satisfied that what I saw was not a substantial human form, for I had seen it grow into its present shape and height from the undefined cloud that first appeared in the chair. I laid my hand on the dog, who had crept up to my side, and I felt her shaking in her skin. I was about to rise myself and approach the figure, though I confess I was a good deal awestruck, when it stepped majestically from the dais, and seemed to be advancing. "At him!" I said. "At him, Dido!" and I gave the dog every encouragement to go forward; she made a sorry attempt, but returned when she had got half-way and crouched beside me whining with terror. The figure advanced upon me; the cold became icy; the dog crouched and trembled; and I, as it approached, honestly confess,' said Count P., 'that I hid my head under the bedclothes and did not venture to look up till morning. I know not what it was – as it passed over me I felt a sensation of undefinable horror, that no words can describe – and I can only say that nothing on earth would tempt me to pass another night in that room, and I am sure if Dido could speak you'd find her of the same opinion.

'I had desired to be called at seven o'clock, and when the custodian, who accompanied my valet, found me safe and in my perfect senses, I must say the poor man appeared greatly relieved; and when I descended the whole family seemed to look upon me as a hero. I thought it only just to them to admit that something had happened in the night that I felt impossible to account for, and that I should not recommend anybody who was not very sure of their nerves to repeat the experiment.'

When the Chevalier had concluded this extraordinary story, I suggested that the apparition of the castle very much resembled that mentioned by the late Professor Gregory, in

his letters on mesmerism, as having appeared in the Tower of London some years ago, and, from the alarm it created, having occasioned the death of a lady, the wife of an officer quartered there, and one of the sentries. Every one who had read that very interesting publication was struck by the resemblance.

THE ST CHRISTOPHER MEDALLION

James Turner

I suppose they could be called ghosts of the mind, whatever they may be. But I am not sick in mind, only overcome with a sorrow I shall never shake off. It's true, perhaps, that being a writer, I do have a vivid imagination. I do not believe that this makes the slightest difference to the dead boys who are persecuting me. The truth is that they have long ceased to be anything like 'a figment of the imagination'. I know that, in death, they still exist. They are almost more real to me than they were when alive. Now thirty years after I knew them, as schoolboys, I understand the horror of what they wanted, though I did not at the time. Had it been explained to me, then, in 1969, I don't believe I would have understood their wickedness.

You grow older and the events of the day tend to become insignificant compared with events of the past. This is a common enough experience. Indeed, you seem to gather to yourself increasingly the past into which you retreat. In this alone I can be said to be 'sick', if such nostalgia is a form of sickness? I regard it only as a bad habit, like keeping my diary, a habit which, perhaps, fosters the past too much, because it is so easy to turn the pages and go back to it. Not that *my* diary will be of any use to, say, historians of the period, it deals only with everyday matters like the weather, and how Aunt Kitty is getting on in hospital, and whether, if she dies, I shall come into money. In fact, she did die and I did inherit. Not that the money was a great deal of use to me since the one person I loved almost more than my son, Raymond, was my wife Valerie, and she died of cancer shortly after Aunt Kitty.

Naturally the day, in 1969, when I took Raymond to Lancing College for his first term, these two boys appear on the appropriate page of my diary. It was inevitable that with all those other boys about in the quads and houses, the first day of summer term, I should be thinking of them, for they were the most 'dramatic' events of my own days at the same school, back in 1931, when I, too, was thirteen.

The school buildings had not changed much. After I left

Raymond with his housemaster, I crossed the Upper Quad with its War Memorial Cross, went down the stone steps to the long cloister, past the Armoury and into the Chapel. One is always drawn to this colossal building. It would have been impossible for me not to have gone into it, since I had not been back to the school for at least fifteen years. So much of our daily life, at the school, was spent within its walls that, I assume, most boys never forgot the place, with its clear glass windows, its tall arches, its Gothic roof, and the wide, open space before the High Altar.

That night I wrote my diary, *2nd May Friday, 1969*, 'Took R. to L. for his first term. I wonder if he felt as I did when I was a new boy here? I wish his mother could have been with us. I suspect that R. did, too. I don't believe that he has yet given up grieving for her since she died. *My* mother had come with *me* as far as the College Farm, and left me to go on up the narrow path between iron railings on each side of which were fields. I felt alone, lost and deserted. I remember turning and waving to her when I reached the first of the College buildings, and she waved back. I was convinced then that I should never see her again. Of course, I did. I don't think that R. felt like that at all but then, I suppose, boys are different today; parents only an embarrassment. Perhaps I should not have come with him. But I had a terrible desire to see the place again and to recapture my old self.

'Talk about nostalgia! So I went visiting all the old haunts, like the Library (where I had once played the part of an elf in Midsummer Night's dream. Oh, dear!), the Dining Hall (breakfast porridge, I remember, has never tasted so good since) and, of course, the Chapel. And I think I knew that in some part of me the two boys would be waiting for me. At all events, being back in the school, I remembered their names clearly enough, Bryant and Hildreth, and how Hildreth had worn, round his neck, a gold medallion of St Christopher the last time I saw him. The medallion was very clear in my mind today.

'The odd thing was that though I had last seen one of them, Bryant, in his coffin, before the altar of the Lady Chapel, since I was, then, a very junior Sacristan, today they greeted me as they used to be, dressed in the regulation herring-bone school suit. I say greeted, because actually they both raised their hands and waved to me – and then were gone. I felt, at

first, very sad at seeing them, now so long in their graves. In fact Bryant, I seem to remember, is buried beside another boy who was also drowned, years ago, in the crypt below the Chapel floor.'

If ever my diaries are printed I shall, of course, be accused of hallucinations brought on by returning, in an emotional state, to the scenes of my youth. I can hear the experts saying, 'Could have happened to anyone since he knew the two boys when he, too, was a boy and it made a very lasting impression on him.' However that may be I left the Chapel, then, and went to walk on the well-kept lawns in front of the Hall, with the sun shining on Old Shoreham. Since I did not believe in ghosts I wanted to think about the two boys and their sudden 'appearance'. I could see no point in my 'seeing' them. I was not in the least frightened and, at that time, felt no danger. I doubt if anyone could have. I rather laughed the whole thing off.

After this there was no reason to stay. I knew none of the present-day masters or anyone else on the staff who would, anyway, only be interested in Old Boys much younger than myself. I got into my car, drove down the long hill to the Sussex Pad Hotel (where *my* parents had always stayed when they visited me), and along the Coombes road into Steyning where I had friends who were putting me up. I said nothing to them about the 'visions' of the two boys. Indeed, I would have dismissed the experience altogether, as some kind of subjective phenomenon, had it not been for the fact that shortly after I had left Raymond at the school I moved from London to Cornwall to live with my sister. I had long wanted to be near the sea. She being a lonely spinster and I a widower, we got on well together.

I can hardly be believed when I say that those two boys I knew so long ago, in my schooldays, moved as well. I began to be frightened for my sanity; I began to think that I had done them some injury in the past for which I was to make reparation. Yet I could remember nothing. The fact was that, at school, I had hardly known them, my only real contact with them being in their deaths and after, at their funerals or, at least, at the funeral of one of them, Bryant. Hildreth was buried in London.

I suppose the actual point of contact, the spring which set off their arrival in Cornwall at the same time as myself, is the

fact that Truro Cathedral closely resembles Lancing College Chapel. At least, so it seems to me, though I believe (knowing nothing about architecture) that the Chapel is neo-Gothic and the Cathedral a copy of Early English. Nevertheless, they do as buildings, internally, resemble each other very nearly.

And they were there the first time I went in, on 22 June 1969. I went in to get out of the rain, running down Cathedral Lane and straight in at the south door. It was after I had been into the exquisite Lady Chapel (really the old parish church of St Mary's, or what is left of it), that I walked into the north aisle behind the High Altar, and there he was, Hildreth, just as I remembered him.

This time I was really taken aback. More, I was angry that he should so persecute me. And there was no mistaking the boy, dressed in his school suit, his face made-up with powder and lipstick. I will come to this aspect of him later; it was the cause of his suicide and much else which was to affect me sorely.

Nobody but myself was in that part of the Cathedral at the time. I stood absolutely still and looked into his eyes. He was smiling at me, but it was not a smile with any joy in it. Oddly, I was not, then, afraid of him, only angry. If I had not thought that, for some reason I did not know, he wanted something of me, I believe I should have attacked him, even though we were in a sacred place. Of course, it would have made no difference, real as he appeared to be.

Within a minute, perhaps, while I waited (and neither of us approached the other, it was as if a barrier separated us, yet I knew who we were both waiting for), the other boy, Bryant, joined him. This 'appearance' was quite horrible. He emerged, that is the only word, from a low door in the Cathedral wall, probably to a room used by vergers.

I think I cried out something like 'Oh, no, not like that.' He was, for one thing, naked, which seemed to me to be an affront to the 'holiness' of the building. He was covered in mud and green slime, water was falling from his body on to the stone of the floor. He was crying and holding out his hands, not to me, but to Hildreth, pleading with him.

I was convinced, then, that I was being shown a picture of something which was intended to have great meaning for me. I remembered, of course, that Bryant had died of drowning in the River Adur, and must have looked like this when he was

found on the river bank some way from where he entered the water. The very odd thing was that the St Christopher medallion I had once seen round Hildreth's neck was now round Bryant's neck. There really could be no mistaking this fact.

I don't know whether Bryant actually said the words, only that I was conscious of his saying them. I'm sure his lips moved and I recall the whisper, 'Don't let him, don't let him.' Before I could move Hildreth had crossed to him, had taken Bryant in his arms as if he wished to stifle the words. All the time he was smiling at me with that weird and frightening smile.

Then people began shuffling into the aisle, whispering and looking about them as they do. The 'vision', if it were that and not something more sinister, faded. I seemed to hear a faint cry, a pleading from Bryant and they were gone. When I left the Cathedral the rain had stopped. The sun was shining off all the roofs of Truro. I went to a café and had tea. I was confused and not a little alarmed that the boys, so long dead, had followed me to Cornwall.

This time I was sure that my seeing them was no subjective phenomenon. I was not in an emotional state at all, I was very happy. I was not even thinking of them though, as I've said, I was thinking about the resemblance of the Cathedral to Lancing Chapel. That was inevitable.

And now, of course, every time I go into Truro I am drawn to the Cathedral. Every time, when the north aisle is empty, they come. I may grow older but they never do. They never say anything, but I am conscious of Bryant's pleadings and the wickedness of Hildreth's smile. There is something I can do. This is what I perceive to be their 'message'. What? I thought of lighting candles to their 'shades', of having Masses said for their souls, if that were possible, but to no avail. It was eventually perfectly clear to me that they were begging for release, begging me who, as I've said, hardly knew them at all, to release them. But from what? And how?

Finally, in desperation at seeing them so often, I decided the only thing I could do was to write their stories, in so far as I knew them. Was it this, that I was a writer and could make their 'situations' clear, what they needed? Did they want to be justified in some way? I could hardly believe it. Yet it was all I could think of to do for them. If I did write

about them as they were in 1931, if I published their pathetic, almost juvenile, life-stories it might, in some way I could not comprehend, satisfy them. It might do more, it might release me from their attentions. How wrong I was! It shows how little the living can understand the dead that I was so crass as to make myself believe that this was what they, or at least, Hildreth, wanted. I know now, of course, that it was the last thing he wanted, the very last.

The first boy, Hildreth, the one who had not drowned, was not a friend of mine at all but, like everybody else in the school, I knew about him. I saw him only once to speak to, standing in the little courtyard outside my House, Field's. He was small and delicate and obviously waiting for a friend. Since boys from other Houses were not allowed to go into a friend's House without permission, one had to get a 'resident' to go back and find whoever it was one wanted. I knew him, then, only by reputation. A new boy in Sanderson's House, a very odd new boy, so clever that he had gone straight into the Classical Sixth. Such a rare event alone singled him out.

The other rumours were I thought, then, merely malicious jealousy and gossip. Anything might be said about a boy who didn't attach any importance to games. We were so tightly bound into the society of our own Houses that it would have been difficult, in any case, to discover the truth if I had wanted to.

It was said that he put on lipstick, manicured his nails and painted them, and was very careful of his hair before he went to bed. Such a thing was almost worse than saying his prayers. Or, rather in declaring that he believed in what he did when each night, he knelt beside his bed, as we all did, to pray to order. A prefect would enter the dormitories when we were washed and in our pyjamas, and bellow out the ridiculous command 'Say your prayers', exactly as if we were on parade and being told to stand to attention.

So, this Sunday, Hildreth was standing under the arches of the cloister in the Upper Quad, his slight figure in front of the room in which we kept our tuck-boxes. Behind him was the Master's Tower, rising beyond his fair head, and the tunnel leading to the Fives Courts, and the green grass of the quadrangle set about the War Memorial.

The odd thing was that he didn't look afraid or cowed in

any way. I might almost describe his attitude as brazen. I had heard of dreadful things being done to him at night in the dormitories of Sanderson's House, of beatings and other forms of torture. But now, when he asked me to go and tell his friend, Bryant, that he was waiting for him, he did not look afraid, only confident, intelligent and, though he was younger than myself, much older than his age. It struck me that, in fact, he was much older in experience even than the head boy. I did not feel that I was talking to a boy at all.

His face was flushed. I saw that it wasn't a natural flush but something like rouge. Perhaps the rumours were true. His lips, too, were unnaturally red and his hair beautifully waved. He used his hands in an expressive way, his fingers long and tapering and soft. He was no taller than any other boy of his age. Indeed, his round face, the light blue eyes and his painted features, reminded me of a girl. It was, of course, the exact effect he was after.

It was incredible that he had the courage to get himself up so and to be standing there outside Field's House, waiting for his friend Bryant to go for a walk with him across the Downs. It was obvious that whatever suffering he had been made to undergo, he was taking no notice of it. It had not changed any of his habits. I was completely wrong in this. He may have looked happy, arrogant, serene; in fact, he was at the end of his tether.

Perhaps, in some way we other boys did not understand, he welcomed the suffering? He must have known the effect of his femininity on the baboons with whom his crass parents were causing him to live, like a missionary amongst savages. Was it possible that, corrupted himself, he wanted to corrupt others? In the regulation school suit he looked slightly ridiculous, a puppet, a doll who was going to an unmentionable fate cheerfully and inevitably.

I was never to see him alive again. When we all knew that he was dead, his short life in College seemed incomprehensible. It was difficult to believe that he had existed at all. I could have understood it if, when I saw and spoke to him that afternoon, he had been in tears, or had appealed to me for help. But he did not. It is true, of course, that it wasn't me he wanted, that, at that moment, he was about to escape from his torturers for an hour with a friend, walking in Lancing Ring, a landmark of beech trees. But he showed no

sign of what he was planning to do, of what must have been in his mind.

If he had said, 'I can't stand this any longer, I'm going to kill myself,' I suppose I might have believed him since I knew, in a much milder way, the horror of other boys. If he had said, 'Come out with me, I'm lonely and homesick,' I would have gone with him because I would have known exactly what he meant. But he did not. He only stood there smiling his superior smile 'dressed to kill', waiting, his red wet lips and his pink cheeks an affront to the system in which he was being forced to exist.

I remember particularly that he was wearing a thin gold chain about his neck on which hung a medallion, a rather large medallion of St Christopher helping the infant Christ across the river. In fact I could not help noticing it since he was gently waving it about in his fingers, rather as if he were trying to mesmerize me.

Two days later we read in the papers that he had committed suicide. They made quite a feature of the gold medallion he was wearing. There was a picture of it. Apparently it was valuable and very old.

The afternoon I spoke to him was a Sunday. We had to go for walks anyway, since we were forbidden to be inside our Houses during the afternoon if it were fine. Fine, in this context, meant not actually pouring with rain, hail or snow. It was thought good for boys to walk in gentle rain.

So his friend came. I was surprised to see that Bryant, already beginning to be known a little as an athlete, was 'going out' as we used to call it, with Hildreth. I watched them go off together, arm in arm (which was, anyway, against the rules for first-year boys), up the long flight of concrete steps leading to the labs and to the avenue of trees past the San. Was it them, with the smell of chemicals coming from the labs, that Hildreth formed his idea of suicide? No one can tell. What he and Bryant may have done together in such secret places in the trees of Lancing Ring as that in which I smoked my first pipe, I did not dare to think about when, later, his sad fate came upon us all. Perhaps they had quarrelled. Whatever it was had not been enough to turn him from his purpose. He came back to College on that Sunday afternoon, back to the sneers and the tortures.

On Monday he went to the labs and asked the lab assistant,

a Mr Dixon, to mix him up a killing bottle as he wanted to start a moth collection. It was late September, brilliant and fine, and it was a reasonable request. Dixon found nothing odd in it and it meant a few shillings in his pocket. He had done the same for any number of boys with the same ambition. He handed over the bottle with its large flat cork at the top and half an inch of lethal potassium cyanide at the bottom, and thought no more about it.

So the bright boy took it and applied for an Exeat to go on a visit to his mother in Wimbledon. He said that she was very ill. No enquiries, beyond the forged letter he showed his House Master, were made as to whether his mother was really ill or not, though later it was reported in the papers that she was in the South of France. At least, it was clear that she had no idea that her son was in London. He did not bother to call at his home.

The same afternoon as the train took him up from Shoreham-by-Sea to London, he went out to the Common with the killing bottle. He knew exactly what he was going to do. In a few seconds, he thought, he would be released from the nightmare figures of those other boys in Sanderson's House. Openly he went into a clump of bushes, broke the glass jar and, in what fit of madness or despair, he ate the contents.

He was found, the next day, by a keeper or gardener, and it was obviously that he had suffered considerably. He had not died as quickly as he hoped.

So the boy who was so much in advance of us all in intelligence, lay in the rictus of death by poisoning under the blackberry bushes. He who found few difficulties in Homer or Virgil had easily planned his own destruction. He made an electric impression on the school for the few weeks he was there. His death made everyone gasp for five minutes. And then he was forgotten. His sad ending was not allowed to make the slightest dent in school routine.

But for me, for the rest of the term, he was still standing under the cloister arches as the clock in Upper Quad struck three, still wearing the St Christopher medallion and working it about in his fingers. I was glad he had it with him when he died. I could not bear to think of his despair and loneliness beneath the bushes on Wimbledon Common, his slender fingers breaking the glass jar, his painted mouth devouring the pink

cyanide, and his body writhing in that last fearful pain.

And then, for years, I forgot him until the day, in 1969, when I 'met' him again, the day I took Raymond down to Lancing for his first term.

The other boy was Bryant himself. He died of drowning in the same term as Hildreth killed himself, only a few weeks later. No one in the school, as far as I know, connected the two deaths. He died, so it seemed, by his own carelessness. At least that was the Coroner's opinion. But now I am full of doubt; now I think that his death was far from accidental. Be that as it may, his tragedy was my introduction to the experience of death and funerals. It is necessary here to explain how it was that he was at the river at all.

Back in the summer term we had all taken the river swimming test. Once you had swum up and down the indoor bath half a dozen times, you were given permission to take the stiffer test of crossing the River Adur and back. So, one afternoon, we went, with a master, across the playing fields, under the wire into the small wood nicknamed 'Gethsemane', over the Coombes road and through ragwort and hawkweed in full flower, to the river's bank. There, naked, twelve of us, guarded each side by older and stronger boys, entered the cold water and swam across, directly into the swift current, under the shadow of the cement works at Bramber.

We were told to use only the breast stroke and to swim upriver, the current being strong enough to help us to land in the right spot. On no account were we to swim directly to the pole opposite, marking where we were to land, or we should be driven downstream and end up under the wooden toll bridge near Shoreham. So we swam in a batch, reached the slippery bank on the other shore and returned in triumph and safety.

Once the test was over we went back across the Coombes road and the fields, our bodies tingling from the cold river and the rough towelling, shouting with pleasure at the larks singing overhead, at other boys playing cricket, to a feast of college buns for tea in Hall. Later, at supper, a master slipped you a piece of green cardboard with your name on it and the printed information that you were now considered to be a competent swimmer. Both I and Bryant were, therefore, qualified.

After the summer holidays, in the middle of October, as I've said, Bryant went back to the river alone. I can imagine him slipping away to the attraction of the water. Perhaps, in the summer holidays, he had improved his swimming in the sea and wanted to try himself out against the river, alone. For actually, there was no real danger in the test we had taken, swimming in a group, watched over by a master and prefects. Now he had to prove himself.

At least that is how we all saw what happened in 1931. But I believe now that there was a more subtle reason for his being by the river, an irresistible calling making him go into the water, a suggestion that, this way, he could drown his sorrow at the loss of his friend Hildreth.

At the time there was no other explanation, except his desire to prove himself, as to why he went down on such a dangerous adventure without telling anyone, without asking anyone to go with him. No one saw him go. No one saw him crossing the playing fields and ducking under the wire into 'Gethsemane'. No one would have stopped him if they had seen him for he was doing nothing unlawful, and the Coombes road was not out of bounds.

So he came to the river, forgetting the speed of the current and that the water would be much colder than in summer. He pulled off his clothes and went in. He must have been, at once, swept down the deep stream. But he was a strong enough swimmer for one crossing and, no doubt, he did that. Once across, of course, he had to get back. There was no other way but the water. Even with a rest in the reeds, which must have been cold and so reduced his strength still more, he was not strong enough for the return swim. The current overcame him half-way across and swept him down river towards the sea. He was found that evening, much nearer the old wooden toll bridge, naked on the mud banks. He was quite dead, his body blue, stiff and cold.

Two nights later I was required, being a junior sacristan, to receive his body in its coffin to spend the night on trestles before the altar in the Lady Chapel. He was to be buried in the crypt the next day.

The main Chapel doors were not opened. The undertakers brought in the light-wood coffin at a small door near the flight of stairs leading to the organ loft. I stood, with the head sacristan, a boy called Marsh, to receive and accompany the

coffin inwards; to set out the trestles on which the undertakers would lower it and, finally, to drape the coffin with a gold pall.

The lights here, in the side aisle, were lit, but not in the great nave of the Chapel which remained in mysterious darkness, a void of deep shadow beyond us.

The procession of the coffin was done with unseemly haste, its shadow large on the walls under gaslight, vivid, macabre. When the coffin was in place one of the undertakers opened the lid to see that everything was in order inside. I stood there and looked down at the face of Bryant, serene and quiet. I noticed that the St Christopher medallion, which I had last seen round Hildreth's neck the day I called Bryant out to him for their walk on the Downs, now lay in the folded hands of the corpse. It was not possible. It had been round Hildreth's neck still when he was found dead on Wimbledon Common. It had, presumably, been buried with him. The papers, as I've said, published a very clear picture of it and discussed its value. I would certainly have known it anywhere.

At the time, there, in the emotional atmosphere of the Chapel, the coffin and Bryant's corpse, I explained it to myself by saying that Hildreth's parents must have given it to Bryant, knowing of the deep attachment he had for their son. Any other explanation for me, at that time, would have been unthinkable. But now I know why Bryant was swimming in the River Adur, and it is not knowledge that I am proud of possessing. Hildreth, I am convinced, had a power after death much greater than any he had in life. Such power might well explain why he seemed to be indifferent to the bullying he received in those few weeks he spent at the school.

The undertaker's man, smelling of fish and chips and cigarette smoke, said nothing when he closed the coffin and screwed it down. Another laid a wreath of chrysanthemums from the boy's parents on top of the coffin and went away. Marsh was already putting out the gaslights with a long slotted pole. I stood for a moment, touching the coffin with my fingers, trying to solve the puzzle of the medallion.

I wondered suddenly whether his adventure had been worth it, to be lost in the cold weeds of the river sedge? I wondered at the fright which must have numbed his limbs before he succumbed to death, and I wondered still more, and with revulsion, at the thought of his cold, naked body in the mud.

What hands had reached down to lift him up in his loneliness? Today, of course, I know they were Hildreth's hands.

I brushed the tears from my eyes and came down the altar steps and into the ante-chapel. When I reached the door I turned back to look. At the far end of that side aisle, a pinpoint of light was illuminating the gold pall from the sanctuary lamp hanging before the altar and above his coffin.

So I left him there alone. The river with its weeds going down into autumn, the sea birds coming upstream, were they the last things he saw? The muddy taste of the salt, fishy water the last things he tasted? I was not sure.

I closed the Chapel door and went out into the main courtyard before the Hall. Night had fallen. The entire College was twinkling with lights. The shadow of the great Chapel was swinging into Orion and the Plough, and the boy who had tried to conquer the river was now alone for ever. Now, in 1969, I knew what I did not then know, that he was not alone at all.

Was it conceit which made me write out their stories, or only the nostalgia of returning to the College? It is true that I began to understand them a little more, to understand how a boy like Bryant could be attracted to a boy like Hildreth, because we were shut up so closely and for so long each term. Besides, I am myself so much older and can understand certain things better. I think I know now why Bryant drowned, and who it was he went naked into the River Adur to meet. He must have seen Hildreth on the far bank, calling to him, and he had gone to him, even if he knew that Hildreth was dead and was what we call a ghost. And, no doubt, it was then that he received the St Christopher medallion.

I think now, after the tragedy which overcame me, that I should have considered more carefully what the 'visions' in Truro Cathedral actually meant. I should not have been swept away by the idea of writing about the boys. I should have regarded their appearance, in Cornwall, as a warning. I should have seen the evil of Hildreth and warned the Headmaster. Yet I knew of nothing, then, to be warned about, and should have looked a fool if I had written to the Headmaster and explained my fears, and got him to put the river bank out-of-bounds. And, perhaps, not even that would have made any difference to what happened? And it was not until the tele-

phone rang one Thursday evening at the end of June 1969 that I did know where the danger lay. By then it was too late.

It was the Headmaster himself. He told me that Raymond had met with an accident while swimming, and that I must come immediately. I drove all night up the A30. It was still dark when I arrived at the Sussex Pad Hotel. I did not knock them up, for I had no intention of sleeping. I walked along the Coombes road, praying in a naïve way that Raymond was all right. I now had an intense fear of Hildreth and what he could do.

I looked up at the Chapel as dawn opened the sky and struck the long windows. Light began to pour into the Adur valley. I reached 'Gethsemane' before I turned back, crossed the thin wood of elms out of which I had once fallen in my efforts to reach what I thought was a kestrel's nest, and up the hill to the College.

The Headmaster was waiting for me and, in his study, he broke the news to me. I knew it already. Raymond had died in the night. Everything had been done for him but, with the length of exposure after the cold of the river, he never regained consciousness. It was the saddest moment of my life.

'Where is he now?' I asked.

'In Brighton Hospital where he was taken last evening,' the Head said. 'It was best that he be taken there as we do not have the necessary equipment here, in the Sanatorium. I am assured that the doctors did everything they could.'

I went back to the Sussex Pad; I drank black coffee to overcome the exhaustion of the night drive and the appalling news. I was stunned. Later I drove into Brighton. I asked to see Raymond. He was lying very still on a slab in the mortuary. I pulled down the sheet and looked at his young face, at the face I loved so much. He looked extraordinarily like his mother when I had first known and courted her.

Round his neck was the gold chain, and hanging from it was the St Christopher medallion. I had last seen it round the neck of the ghost of Bryant in Truro Cathedral. Now, finally, I knew what had happened to Raymond and who had called him to his death in the river, as the boy Bryant had been called. Once more, thirty years later, Hildreth had got hold of a victim. Or was it Bryant, acting under Hildreth's orders?

After Raymond's death and funeral – he was buried, like Bryant, in the Chapel crypt – I seemed no longer interested in anything. My purpose in living was dead, too. My sister did her best to awaken my spirits but she did not have much success. It must have been late in August when I went into Truro Cathedral again.

They were there, of course. I suppose I expected them, and that was why I went. They were standing, Bryant and Hildreth, in the same spot when I had first seen them. I noticed, at once, that neither of them was wearing the gold medallion. Yet they looked happy, almost ecstatic, as they turned to the low door behind them. I knew quite well what was going to happen when the door opened. Or did it open? I'm not sure.

All I do know is that Raymond was suddenly there between them, and that the three of them were holding out their hands to me. I noticed, as their figures began to fade, that it was Raymond who was now wearing the medallion. But it was only much later that the full horror of Raymond's death struck me. Which schoolboy would be the next to be 'called' by Hildreth and Bryant and by Raymond? To whom would Raymond pass on the St Christopher medallion?

MELODY IN A MINOR KEY

Mary Williams

As I can now no longer use my hands and am therefore unable to write, I shall have to *tell* this story, and hope you will listen and understand. This is important, because there are certain facts concerning the sequence of events in my life which have been unacknowledged until now.

I first heard the tune in childhood – a few bars of haunting melody in a strange minor key, which existed mostly, I knew, in my own mind. It never ended conclusively, although when it happened in sleep I was taken at the same time to a place unknown to me, desolate and lonely, with gaunt rocks overlooking a sucking green pool below. I didn't look into the pool; I knew it was there, though, holding some culminating climax from which I turned with dread.

As I grew up the tune recurred less frequently; no more, perhaps, than once a year, and it generally heralded some minor disaster or tragedy which I tried not to acknowledge.

I had spoken of it once to the aunt who'd brought me up since the death of both parents, and she had shrugged off lightly any occult significance. Being a down-to-earth common-sense woman she had merely said, 'You've imagined something from a childish nightmare. What's in a tune? Anyway you could have heard it somewhere and forgotten.'

But I knew it wasn't that. I had never *physically* listened to this particular melody before. It seemed to come from some other sphere, and had a queer twilight quality suggestive of half-formed memories, or of life lived and long since gone.

Time passed, and when I was twenty I met Rupert Carne. Six months later I married him, despite all my aunt's pleadings not to.

'Charming he may be, but in my opinion he's after your money,' she stated bluntly more than once. 'The trouble is you're so pig-headed, Laura, you just won't admit it. I don't like saying these things, but I have to.'

I had half believed her, because I knew she spoke sense. I was no beauty, small, pale, with indefinite colouring, and no brains to speak of, only a consuming vivid imagination, and a passionate longing for Rupert which was, I suppose, an

obsession. Well, if I could help him financially, I didn't mind. The fact kind of levelled things up. After all he must have had women after him all his life; his job, photography, must have thrown plenty of lovelies in his way during the unknown years between us; he was fifteen years older than me and experienced. *That* didn't bother me. In any case I wasn't aiming to marry a puritan, and I wasn't such an innocent to have any illusions on that score. His very touch – subtle, and insidiously possessive – was well skilled to inflame feminine response. I preferred it that way; even made myself believe, as women so often do, that in *my* case it was different . . . something apart from the rest.

And so I became his wife.

For the first six months everything was fine. We got a nice home together, travelled a bit, got out and about and made a host of new friends – at least they were new to me – trendy, intellectual, exciting people, who thronged round us and filled our home at week-ends frequently, although I had only to say one word to the contrary and Rupert would shoo them away and not have a soul about for weeks if I wanted it like that. 'It's *you*,' he said. '*You're* the one; no one else matters; not a bloody damn, darling. Remember that.' And he'd kiss me and I'd be in heaven.

All that time I never heard the tune at all. Not until we went to Cornwall for 'a breather', as Rupert put it.

It was autumn then, and heady with the kind of magical smell you get in West Penwith at that time of year . . . brine, blackberries, and the drifting nostalgic tang of woodsmoke from the moors somewhere. We put up at a small inn-cum-hotel place not far from Larrissick, yet far enough for us to be on our own. Except for a few ramblers and local farmers in the bar in the evenings, our privacy was complete. We were the only ones staying at the place. It was like a second honeymoon! . . . *except* . . . how can I explain the discomforting intimation that all was not so heavenly, so assured as it seemed? . . . The creeping sense of developing unease which in spite of my happiness gathered force, until, by the end of the fifth day, my nerves were strained and edgy under a veneer of assumed content. Perhaps Rupert noticed something, because he said after our evening meal that night, 'What's the matter, Laura? Anything biting you?'

His voice expressed concern. His eyes, when he looked at

me, were anxious, but veiled.

'Of course not,' I lied, lightly. 'My head aches a bit, that's all. I think I'll go to bed early.'

'Sure,' he agreed. 'Good idea.'

And that night, in my sleep, I heard the tune again. Faintly at first, like violin strings played fitfully against the wind's moan, sad, eerie, filled with a hungry elemental anguish, which rose, faded, then gathered impetus until the air was filled with it, and the scene emerged from shadows bred of moonlight and the same dark cliffs I had dreamed of before, running in black jagged lines to meet the night sky; while below . . . I *knew* the pool was below, but I did not look. I must have screamed at that point, because Rupert's voice suddenly broke through my terror, and I woke to find his arms holding my shaking form, his face against mine, which was drenched with sweat.

'Laura . . .' he was saying, 'what is it? What's the matter? For heaven's sake . .'

I tried to speak, but it was seconds, perhaps more, before I was sufficiently calmed to get the words out. My teeth were still chattering as I told him, explaining only half coherently about my childhood's nightmare.

He laughed quietly, comfortingly. 'We all get them, poppet. I've had one myself . . . a sort of recurring thing . . . about being squashed up inside a melon. Frustration, the psychologist chappies would say – a sort of phallic desire; a symbol, if you like. But who cares? Forget it.' I knew he was trying to be reassuring as he continued after a pause, 'Maybe you were lying on the wrong side, or got the pillow over your nose. Could be. Nothing to it anyway; just an association of ideas probably, combined with some physical discomfort; those French fries you had for supper . . .

I forced myself to accept his theory verbally, telling myself it *could* be true, yet knowing, deep down, it wasn't.

All the next day I felt edgy; inwardly exhausted, yet unable to rest; and when evening came the tension increased. Even in the bar, following our meal, I could hear from time to time above the intermittent local jargon the first faint wailing notes of that eerie melody, whispering in a sly innuendo at first, rising, then dying again, leaving a mental vacuum while my limbs stiffened and became rigid; waiting . . . always waiting . . . for what, I hadn't a clue.

Whether anyone else noticed except Rupert I don't know. But he must have.

'Let's get out of this,' he said suddenly. 'Stifling. And you look all in. A breath of air will do you good.'

Joe Pengale the landlord heard him. I sensed rather than noticed his eyes turned on me when he remarked, 'Yes, it's a nice night. This place gets hot when there's a crowd in like it is now. But I advise the young lady to take a coat. The mist comes up suddenly at this time of the year.'

There was no mist, though, when we went out. Everything was a patterned vista of cloudless moonlight . . . black shadows against the pale clarity of yellow moorland and distant rim of broken coastline over a glassy sea.

'Come on,' Rupert said. 'This way; we haven't been here together before. I wandered around a bit that afternoon when you were taking a siesta. Remember? There's a path to the other side of the headland; wonderful view.'

He slipped his arm through mine, while I realized, with a bit of a shock, for the first time, how easily and glibly the words fell from his lips sometimes. How trite his phraseology could be, and how inadequate. The way he spoke of 'wonderful view', like a guide on a coach trip . . . almost automatically, as though *I* wasn't really there for him as an individual. I hadn't noticed it before; yet a flash of insight told me suddenly it had been like that all along. We had never really spoken about anything that mattered. When I'd tried he'd somehow diverted me by a laugh, a kiss, or touch of the hand. I hadn't minded then; it was all such a short time ago. But now . . . *now*, alone with him on that lonely walk under the clear night sky, I felt alienated and curiously bereft. His profile, clearly definable against the moon's spilled clarity, was set and granite-hard, like a carving without feeling or warmth. Yet Rupert was not hard. Oh no. *No*, I told myself desperately. He had proved it; lain with me in warmth and passion. We *belonged*. My hand lightened on his arm. 'Let's go back,' I said. 'Rupert, let's go back now. I'm tired.'

'Presently,' he murmured, not looking at me. 'It's not far now.'

He took me along with the purpose of a strong tide sweeping all before it. But there was no wind. Only the silence; and then . . . the tune; sighing, whining, starting up in my head again, until, as we reached the cliffs, it was gathering

momentum so that my hands went to my ears before the cry rose from my throat in desperate recognition . . . of pleading for quiet and freedom. But there was no quiet; only the wailing melody against the echo of Rupert's voice saying, 'Don't drag, for Pete's sake. And why the shout? What's the matter, Laura . . . hurt your foot or something?'

I tried to draw back, but he urged me forward.

'There,' he said. 'Grand, isn't it?'

He was standing on the edge of the cliff overlooking a strip of sand bordering the black glitter of sea and rock. My stomach and heart lurched. I would have turned and rushed back blindly, somewhere . . . anywhere . . . away from that particular spot of ground; but Rupert's arm was firmly round my shoulders holding me there, forcing me imperceptibly forward with a 'Don't be scared' remark, while the world seemed to topple through a sickening lurch of giddiness which blotted, for a time, everything into swimming darkness.

Was Rupert's arm still round me when I recovered? I don't remember. I can remember nothing but glancing down automatically on the scene below.

It was just as I had pictured it so often; a desolate yawning place with great jagged fingers of rock stretching to the shore. And for the first time I really saw the pool . . . a waiting well of inky evil overhung by the glittering black cliffs stretching claw-like and greedy for life . . . as lustful as the pool itself which was already lapping the half-submerged body of the girl who lay there: a slight, pale, terribly dead-looking form washed greenish-white from the fitful light of sea and moon. The tune was loud in my head then, screaming, wailing on a minor note to its baleful crescendo.

I wanted to go down. There was a path leading by a gully not far away. Surely, I thought, we should go down. But Rupert wouldn't listen. He didn't appear to hear me, even when I ran after him tugging at his coat wildly, calling his name . . . calling . . . calling . . . until at last I knew it was no use.

Just occasionally now, but not often, I wonder if what he said later at the inquest could possibly be true, that he *did* really try to save me when I fell? Or was the momentary pressure I felt, his hand pushing me over the cliff edge?

I know the answer, of course. I have never really had any

doubts at all. Only sometimes it's pleasanter to pretend, and believe the best.

Naturally everyone concerned was very kind to him. He appeared so very grieved. The fact that in future he would be a very rich man was glossed over, or maybe didn't register in the face of his terrible loss.

But you see, don't you, how I can never leave him now? Why I like to be with him? He married me. It would be unkind, don't you think, for us to be parted just because of a tune and a step over a cliff on a moonlit night?

The only thing that worries me sometimes is that melody. It's still with me at intervals, wherever I may be . . . insidiously faint, then a little louder, in a minor key.

Rupert hears it too, I'm sure; because he'll turn suddenly and look over his shoulder as though listening, with a scared look in his eyes. He has grown stouter and more ruddy-looking with a twitch at the corner of his mouth due probably to his unfortunate habit of drinking more than he should. I have tried to warn him about this, but he still takes no notice; all he hears, I suppose, is the tune. Even the house where I was so happy for those first few months holds its echoes. It lingers in the discotheques and bars he visits too, although of course it is less noticeable there in the general clamour of 'pop' and folk-music.

Rupert seems very keen on 'pop' these days. I can't quite understand it, since at one time he so enjoyed his own company and lonely walks.

Occasionally I return to 'The Place'. It frightens me no more. I can float and relax there in a kind of disembodied peace, listening to the wind's moan and the lap of waves against the black rocks, becoming myself a part of the general melody, the whining elements – of reeds and wind and sucking waves which fill the air in a minor key.

ONE WHO SAW

A. M. Burrage

There are certain people, often well enough liked, genial souls whom one is always glad to meet, who yet have the faculty of disappearing without being missed. Crutchley must have been one of them. It wasn't until his name was casually mentioned that evening at the Storgates' that most of us remembered that we hadn't seen him about for the last year or two. It was Mrs Storgate's effort at remembering, with the help of those nearest her at table, the guests at a certain birthday party of four years since that was the cause of Crutchley's name being mentioned. And no sooner had it been mentioned than we were all laughing, because most of us had asked one another in the same breath what had become of him.

It was Jack Price who was able to supply the information.

'For the last year or two,' he said, 'he's been living very quietly with his people in Norfolk. I heard from him only the other day.'

Mrs Storgate was interested.

'I wonder why he's chosen to efface himself,' she asked of nobody in particular. 'He was rather a lamb in his way. I used to adore that shiny black hair of his which always made me think of patent leather. I believe he owed half his invitations to his hair. I told him once that he dined out on it four nights a week.'

'It's as white as the ceiling now,' Price remarked.

Having spoken, he seemed to regret it, and Mrs Storgate exclaimed:

'Oh, no! We're speaking of *Simon* Crutchley.'

'I mean Simon,' said Price unwillingly.

There was a faint stir of consternation, and then a woman's voice rose above the rustle and murmur.

'Oh, but it seems impossible. That sleek, blue-black hair of his! And he can't be more than thirty-five.'

Somebody said that he'd heard of people's hair going suddenly white like that after an illness. Price was asked if Simon Crutchley had been ill. The answer was Yes. A nervous breakdown? Well, it was something very like that.

A lady who turned night into day all the year round and was suspected of drinking at least as much as was good for her, sighed and remarked that everybody nowadays suffered from nerves. Mrs Storgate said that Simon Crutchley's breakdown and the change in his appearance doubtless accounted for his having dropped out and hidden himself away in Norfolk. And then another conversational hare was started.

Instead of joining in the hunt I found myself in a brown study, playing with breadcrumbs. I had rather liked Crutchley, although he wasn't exactly one of my own kind. He was one of those quiet fellows who are said colloquially to require a lot of knowing. In social life he had always been a detached figure, standing a little aloof from his fellow-men and seeming to study them with an air of faint and inoffensive cynicism. He was a writing man, which may have accounted for his slight mannerisms, but he didn't belong to the precious, superior and rather detestable school. Everybody agreed that he was quite a good fellow, and nobody troubled to read his books, which consisted mainly of historical essays.

I tried to imagine Simon Crutchley with white hair, and then I caught myself speculating on the cause of his illness or 'breakdown'. He was the last sort of fellow whom one would have expected to be knocked to pieces like that. So far from indulging in excesses he had always been something of an aesthete. He had a comfortable private income and he certainly didn't overwork. Indeed I remembered his once telling me that he took a comfortable two years over a book.

It would be hard for me to say now whether it was by accident or design that I left at the same time as Price. Our ways lay in the same direction, and while we were lingering in the hall, waiting for our hats and coats, we agreed to share a taxi. I lived in the Temple, he in John Street, Adelphi. 'I'll tell the man to drive down Villiers Street,' I said, 'and up into the Strand. I can drop you on the way.'

In the taxi we talked about Crutchley. I began it, and I asked leading questions. Price, you see, was the only man who seemed to have heard anything of him lately, and he was now sufficiently evasive to pique my curiosity.

'It's a queer and rather terrible story,' he said at last. 'There's no secret about it, at least I'm not pledged in any way, but I don't think poor old Simon would have liked me to tell it publicly over the dinner-table. For one thing, nobody would

believe it, and, for another, it's rather long. Besides, he didn't tell me quite all. There's one bit he couldn't – or wouldn't – tell. There was just one bit he couldn't bring himself to describe to me, and I don't suppose he'll ever manage to describe it to anybody, so nobody but himself will ever have an idea of the actual *sight* which sent him off his head for six months and turned his hair as white as a tablecloth.'

'Oh,' said I, 'then it was all through something he *saw?*'

Price nodded.

'So he says. I admit it's a pretty incredible sort of story – yet somehow Simon Crutchley isn't the sort to imagine things. And, after all, something obviously did happen to him. I'll tell you his story if you like. The night's young. Come into my place and have a drink, if you will.'

I thanked him and said that I would. He turned towards me and let a hand fall on my knee.

'Mind you,' he said, 'this is Crutchley's own story. If you don't believe it I don't want you to go about thinking that I'm a liar. I'm not responsible for the truth of it; I'm only just passing it on. In a way I hope it isn't true. It isn't comfortable to think that such things may happen – *do* happen.'

Twenty minutes later, when we were sitting in the snug little library in Price's flat he told me his story, or, rather, Crutchley's. This is it.

You know the sort of work Crutchley used to do? If you don't, you at least know Stevenson's 'Memories and Portraits', and Crutchley worked with that sort of material. His study of Margaret of Anjou, by the way, is considered a classic in certain highbrow circles.

You will remember that Joan of Arc was very much in the air two or three years back. It may have been this revival of interest in her which decided Crutchley to make her the subject of one of his historical portraits. He'd already treated Villon and Abelard and Héloïse, and as soon as he'd decided on St Joan he went over to France to work, so to say, on the spot.

Crutchley always did his job conscientiously, using his own deductive faculties only for bridging the gaps in straight history. He went first to Domrémy, where the Maid was born, followed the old trail of that fifteenth-century campaign across France, and of course his journey ended inevitably at Rouen,

where English spite and French cowardice burned her in the market-place.

I don't know if you know Rouen? Tourists don't stay there very much. They visit, but they don't stay. They come and hurry round the cathedral, gape at the statue of Joan of Arc in the Place de la Pucelle, throw a victorious smile at Napoleon Bonaparte galloping his bronze horse on a pedestal in the square, and rush on to Paris or back to one of the Channel ports. Rouen being half-way between Paris and the coast the typical English tourist finds that he can 'do' the place without sleeping in it.

Crutchley liked Rouen. It suited him. It is much more sober and austere than most of the French towns. It goes to bed early, and you don't have sex flaunted before you wherever you look. You find there an atmosphere like that of our own cathedral cities, and there is a great deal more to see than ever the one-day tourist imagines. Crutchley decided to stay on in the town and finish there his paper on Joan of Arc.

He found a hotel practically undiscovered by English and Americans – l'Hotel d'Avignon. It stands half-way down one of those narrow old-world streets, quite near the Gare de la Rue Jeanne d'Arc. A single tramline runs through the narrow street in front of its unpretentious façade, and to enter you must pass a narrow archway, and through a winter garden littered with tables and chairs to a somewhat impressive main entrance with statuary on either side of the great glass-panelled doors.

Crutchley found the place by accident on his first day and took *déjeuner* in the great tapestried *salle à manger*. The food was good, and he found that the chef had a gift for Sole Normand. Out of curiosity he asked to see some of the bedrooms.

It was a hotel where many ate but few slept. At that time of the year many rooms were vacant on the first floor. He followed a chambermaid up the first flight of stairs and looked out through a door which he found open at the top. To his surprise he found that it gave entrance to a garden on the same level. The hotel, parts of which were hundreds of years old, had been built on the face of a steep hill, and the little garden thus stood a storey above the level of the street in front.

This garden was sunk deep in a hollow square, with the

walls of the hotel rising high all around it. Three rows of shuttered windows looked out upon an open space which never saw the sun. For that obvious reason there had been no attempt to grow flowers, but one or two ferns had sprung up and a few small tenacious plants had attached themselves to a rockery. The soil was covered with loose gravel, and in the middle there grew a great plane tree which thrust its crest above the rooftops so that, as seen by the birds, it must have looked as if it were growing in a great lidless box. To imagine the complete quietude of the spot one has only to remember how an enclosed square in one of the Inns of Court shuts out the noise of traffic from some of the busiest streets in the world. It did not occur to Crutchley that there may be something unhealthy about an open space shut out entirely from the sun. Some decrepit garden seats were ranged around the borders, and the plane tree hid most of the sky, sheltering the little enclosure like a great umbrella. Crutchley told me that he mistook silence and deathly stillness for peace, and decided that here was the very spot for him to write his version of the story of Jeanne d'Arc.

He took a bedroom on the same level, whose high, shuttered windows looked out on to the still garden square; and next day he took a writing-pad and a fountain pen to one of the faded green seats and tried to start work.

From what he told me it wasn't a very successful attempt. The unnatural silence of the place bred in him an indefinable restlessness. It seemed to him that he sat more in twilight than in shade. He knew that a fresh wind was blowing, but it won not the least responsive whisper from the garden. The ferns might have been water-plants in an aquarium, so still they were. Sunlight, which burnished the blue sky, struck through the leaves of the plane tree, but it painted only the top of one of the walls high above his head. Crutchley frankly admitted that the place got on his nerves, and that it was a relief to go out and hear the friendly noise of the trams, and see the people drinking outside cafés and the little boys fishing for roach among the barges on the banks of the Seine.

He made several attempts to work in the garden, but they were all fruitless, and he took to working in his bedroom. He confessed to me that, even in the afternoon, he felt that there was something uncanny about the place. There's nothing in that. Many people would have felt the same; and Crutchley,

although he had no definite belief in the supernatural, had had one or two minor experiences in his lifetime – too trifling, he said, to be worth recording – but teasing enough in their way, and of great interest to himself. Yet he had always smiled politely when ardent spiritualists had told him that he was 'susceptible'. He began by feeling vaguely that there was something 'wrong', in the physical sense, with the garden. It was like a faint, unseizable, but disagreeable odour. He told me that he did not let it trouble him greatly. He wanted to work, and when he found that 'it' would not let him work in the garden, he removed himself and his writing materials to his room.

Crutchley had been five days at the hotel when something strange happened. It was his custom to undress in the dark, because his windows were overlooked by a dozen others and, by first turning off the light, he was saved from drawing the great shutters. That night he was smoking while he undressed, and when he was in his pyjamas he went to one of the open windows to throw out the stub of his cigarette. Having done so he lingered, looking out.

The usual unnatural stillness brooded over the garden square, intensified now by the spell of the night. Somewhere in the sky the moon was shining, and a few stray silver beams dappled the top of the north wall. The plane tree stood like a living thing entranced. Not one of its lower branches stirred, and its leaves might have been carved out of jade. Just enough light filtered from the sky to make the features of the garden faintly visible. Crutchley looked where his cigarette had fallen and now lay like a glow-worm, and raised his eyes to one of the long green decrepit seats. With a faint unreasonable thrill and a cold tingling of the nostrils he realized that somebody was sitting there.

As his eyes grew more used to the darkness the huddled form took the shape of a woman. She sat with her head turned away, one arm thrown along the sloping back of the seat, and her face resting against it. He said that her attitude was one of extreme dejection, of abject and complete despair.

Crutchley, you must understand, couldn't see her at all clearly, although she was not a dozen yards distant. Her dress was dark, but he could make out none of its details save that something like a flimsy scarf or thick veil trailed over the shoulder nearest him. He stood watching her, pricked by a

vague sense of pity and conscious that, if she looked up, he would hardly be visible to her beyond the window, and that, in any event, the still glowing stub of cigarette would explain his presence.

But she did not look up, she did not move at all while Crutchley stood watching. So still she was that it was hard for him to realize that she breathed. She seemed to have fallen completely under the spell of the garden in which nothing ever stirred, and the scene before Crutchley's eyes might have been a nocturnal picture painted in oils.

Of course he made a guess or two about her. At the sight of anything unusual one's subconscious mind immediately begins to speculate and to suggest theories. Here, thought Crutchley, was a woman with some great sorrow, who, before retiring to her room had come to sit in this quiet garden, and there, under the stars, had given way to her despair.

I don't know how long Crutchley stood there, but probably it wasn't for many seconds. Thought is swift and time is slow when one stands still watching a motionless scene. He owned that his curiosity was deeply intrigued, and it was intrigued in a somewhat unusual way. He found himself desiring less to know the reason of her despair than to see her face. He had a definite and urgent temptation to go out and look at her, to use force if necessary in turning her face so that he might look into her eyes.

If you know Crutchley at all well you must know that he was something more than ordinarily conventional. He concerned himself not only with what a gentleman ought to do but with what a gentleman ought to think. Thus when he came to realize that he was not only spying upon a strange woman's grief, but actually feeling tempted to force himself upon her and stare into eyes which he guessed were blinded by tears, it was sufficient to tear him away from the window and send him padding across the floor to the high bed at the far end of the room.

But he made no effort to sleep. He lay listening, waiting for a sound from the other side of those windows. In that silence he knew that he must hear the least sound outside. But for ten minutes he listened in vain, picturing to himself the woman still rigid in the same posture of despair.

Presently he could bear it no longer. He jumped out of bed and went once more to the window. He told himself that it

was human pity which drove him there. He walked heavily on his bare feet and he coughed. He made as much noise as he was reasonably able to make, hoping that she would hear and bestir herself. But when he reached the open window and looked out the seat was empty.

Crutchley stared at the empty seat, not quite crediting the evidence of his eyes. You see, according to his account she couldn't have touched that loose gravel with her foot without making a distinct sound and to re-enter the hotel she must have opened a door with creaking hinges and a noisy latch. Yet he had heard nothing, and the garden was empty. Next morning he even tried the experiment of walking on tiptoe across the garden to see if it could be done in utter silence, and he was satisfied that it could not. Even an old grey cat, which he found blinking on a window ledge, made the gravel slink under its pads when he called it to him to be stroked.

Well, he slept indifferently that night, and in the morning, when the chambermaid came in, he asked her who was the sad-looking lady whom he had seen sitting at night in the garden.

The chambermaid turned towards the window, and he saw a rapid movement of her right hand. It was done very quickly and surreptitiously, just the touch of a forefinger on her brow and a rapid fumbling of fingers at her breast, but he knew that she had made the Sign of the Cross.

'There is no lady staying in the house,' she said with her back towards him. 'Monsieur has been mistaken. Will Monsieur take coffee or the English tea?'

Crutchley knew very well what the girl's gesture meant. He had mentioned something which she held to be unholy, and the look on her face when she turned it once more in his direction warned him that it would be useless to question her. He had a pretty restless day, doing little or no work. You mustn't think that he already regarded the experience as a supernatural one, although he was quite well aware of what was in the mind of the chambermaid; but it was macabre, it belonged to the realm of the seemingly inexplicable which was no satisfaction to him to dismiss as merely 'queer'.

Crutchley spoke the French of the average educated Englishman, and the only other person in the house who spoke English was the head waiter, who had spent some years in London. His English was probably at least as good as Crutch-

ley's French, and he enjoyed the opportunity of airing it. He was in appearance a true Norman, tall, dark, and distinguished-looking. One sees his type in certain English families which can truthfully boast of Norman ancestry. It was at *déjeuner* when he approached Crutchley, and, having handed him the wine list, bent over him confidentially.

'Are you quite comfortable in your room, sir?' he ventured.

'Oh, quite, thank you,' Crutchley answered briefly.

'There is a very nice room in the front, sir. Quite so big, and then there is the sun. Perhaps you like it better, sir?'

'No, thanks,' said Crutchley, 'I shouldn't get a wink of sleep. You see, none of your motor-traffic seems to be equipped with silencers, and with trams, motor-horns, and market cars bumping over the cobbles I should never have any peace.'

The waiter said no more, merely bowing, but he looked disappointed. He managed to convey by a look that he had Monsieur's welfare at heart, but that Monsieur doubtless knew best and must please himself.

'I believe I'm on the trail of something queer,' Crutchley thought. 'That chambermaid's been talking to Pierre. I wonder what's wrong or what they think is wrong.'

He re-opened the subject when the waiter returned to him with a half-bottle of white wine.

'Why do you wish me to change my room, Pierre?'

'I do not wish Monsieur to change his room if he is satisfied.'

'When I am not satisfied I say so. Why did you think I might not be?'

'I wish Monsieur to be more comfortable. There is no sun behind the house. It is better to be where the sun comes sometimes. Besides, I think Monsieur is one who sees.'

This seemed cryptic, but Crutchley let it go. Pierre had duties to attend to, and, besides, Crutchley did not feel inclined to discuss with the waiter the lady he had seen in the garden on the preceding night.

During the afternoon and evening he tried to work, but he fought only a series of losing battles against distraction. He was as incapable of concentration as a boy in love. He knew – and he was angry with himself because he knew – that he was eking out his patience until night came, in the hope of seeing once more that still figure of despair in the garden.

Of course, I don't pretend to understand the nature of the

attraction, nor was Crutchley able to explain it to me. But he told me that he couldn't keep his thoughts off the face which had been turned away from him. Imagination drew for him a succession of pictures, all of an unearthly beauty, such pictures as he had never before conceived. His mind, over which he now seemed to have only an imperfect control, exercised its new creative faculty all that afternoon and evening. Long before the hour of dinner he had decided that if she came to the garden he must see her face and thus end this long torment of speculation.

He went to his room that night at eleven o'clock, and he did not undress, but sat and smoked in an arm-chair beside his bed. From that position he could only see through the window the lighted windows of other rooms across the square of garden shining through the leaves of the plane tree. Towards midnight the last lights died out and the last distant murmur of voices died away. Then he got up and went softly across the room.

Before he reached the window he knew instinctively that he would see her sitting in the same place and in the same attitude of woe, and his eagerness was mingled with an indescribable fear. He seemed to hear a cry of warning from the honest workaday world into which he had been born – a world which he now seemed strangely to be leaving. He said that it was like starting on a voyage, feeling no motion from the ship, and then being suddenly aware of a spreading space of water between the vessel and the quay.

That night the invisible moon threw stronger beams upon the top of the north wall, and the stars burned brighter in a clearer sky. There was a little more light in the well of the garden than there had been on the preceding night, and on the seat that figure of tragic desolation was limned more clearly. The pose, the arrangement of the woman's garments, were the same in every detail, from the least fold to the wisp of veil which fell over her right shoulder. For he now saw that it was a veil, and guessed that it covered the face which was still turned from him. He was shaken, dragged in opposite directions by unreasonable dread and still more unreasonable curiosity. And while he stood looking, the palms of his hands grew wet and his mouth grew dry.

He was well nigh helpless. His spirit struggled within him like a caged bird, longing to fly to her. That still figure was

magnetic in some mighty sense, which he had never realized before. It was hypnotic without needing to use its eyes. And presently Crutchley spoke to it for the first time, whispering through the open window across the intervening space of gloom.

'Madame,' he pleaded, 'look at me.'

The figure did not move. It might have been cast in bronze or carved out of stone.

'Oh, Madame,' he whispered, 'let me see your face!'

Still there was no sound nor movement, but in his heart he heard the answer.

'So, then, I must come to you,' he heard himself say softly; and he groped for the door of his room.

Outside, a little way down the corridor, was one of the doors leading into the enclosed garden. Crutchley had taken but a step or two when a figure loomed up before him, his nerves were jerked like a hooked fish, and he uttered an involuntary cry of fear. Then came the click of an electric light switch, a globe overhead sprang alight, and he found himself confronted by Pierre the head waiter. Pierre barred the way and he spoke sternly, almost menacingly.

'Where are you going, sir?'

'What the devil has that got to do with you?' Crutchley demanded fiercely.

'The devil, eh? *Bien*, Monsieur, I think perhaps he have something to do with it. You will have the goodness, please, to return to your room. No, not the room which you have left, sir – that is not a good room – but come with me and I shall show you another.'

The waiter was keeping him from her. Crutchley turned upon him with a gesture of ferocity.

'What do you mean by interfering with me? This is not a prison or an asylum. I am going into the garden for a breath of air before I go to sleep.'

'That, sir, is impossible,' the waiter answered him. 'The air of the garden is not good at night. Besides, the doors are locked and the patron have the keys.'

Crutchley stared at him for a moment in silent fury.

'You are insolent,' he said. 'Tomorrow I shall report you. Do you take me for a thief because I leave my room at midnight? Never mind! I can reach the garden from my window.'

In an instant the waiter had him by the arm, holding him

powerless in a grip known to wrestlers.

'Monsieur,' he said in a voice grown softer and more respectful, 'the *bon Dieu* has sent me to save you. I have wait tonight because I know you must try to enter the garden. Have I your permission to enter your room with you and speak with you a little while?'

Crutchley laughed out in angry impotence.

'This is bedlam,' he said. 'Oh, come, if you must.'

Back in his room, with the waiter treading close upon his heels, Crutchley went straight to the window and looked out. The seat was empty.

'I do not think that she is there,' said the waiter softly, 'because I am here and I do not see. Monsieur is one who sees, as I tell him this morning, but he will not see her when he is with one who does not see.'

Crutchley turned upon the man impatiently.

'What are you talking about?' he demanded. 'Who is she?'

'Who she is, I cannot say,' the waiter blessed himself with quick, nervous fingers. 'But who she *was* I can perhaps tell Monsieur.'

Crutchley understood, almost without surprise, but with a sudden clamouring of fear.

'Do you mean,' he asked, 'that she is what we call a ghost, an apparition – '

'It matters not what one calls her, Monsieur. She is here sometimes for certain who are able to see her. Monsieur wishes very much to see her face. Monsieur must not see it. There was one who look five years ago, and another perhaps seven, eight The first he make die after two, three days; the other, he is still mad. That is why I come to save you, Monsieur.'

Crutchley was now entirely back in his own world. That hidden face had lost its fascination for him, and he felt only the primeval dread which has its roots deep down in every one of us. He sat down on the bed, trying to keep his lips from twitching, and let the waiter talk.

'You asked Yvonne this morning, sir, who is the lady in the garden. And Yvonne guess, and she come and tell me, for all of us know of her. Monsieur, it all happened a long time ago – perhaps fifty, sixty years. There was in this town a notary of the name Lebrun. And in a village half-way from here to Dieppe is a grand château in which there live a lady, *une jeune fille*, with her father and her mother. And the lady was

very beautiful but not very good, Monsieur.

'Well, M. Lebrun, he fall in love with her. I think she love him, too – better as all the others. So he make application for her hand, but she was aristocrat and he was bourgeois, and besides he had not very much money, so the application was refused! And they find her another husband whom she love not, and she find herself someone else, and there is divorce. And she have many lovers, for she was very beautiful, but not good. For ten years – more, perhaps – she use her beauty to make slaves of men. And one, he made kill himself because of her, but she did not mind. And all the time M. Lebrun stayed single, because he could not love another woman.

'But at last this lady, she have a dreadful accident. It is a lamp which blow up and hurt her face. In those days the surgeons did not know how to make new features. It was dreadful, Monsieur. She had been so lovely, and now she have nothing left except just the eyes. And she go about wearing a long thick veil, because she have become terrible to see. And her lovers, they no longer love, and she have no husband because she have been divorce.

'So M. Lebrun, he write to her father, and once more he make offer for her hand. And her father, he is willing, because now she is no longer very young, and she is terrible to see. But her father, he was a man of honour, and he insist that M. Lebrun must see her face before he decide if he still wish her in marriage. So a meeting is arrange and her father and her mother bring her to this hotel, and M. Lebrun he come to see them here.

'The lady come with them wearing her thick veil. She insist to see M. Lebrun alone, so she wait out there in the garden, and when he come they bring him to her.

'Monsieur, I do not know what her face was like, and nobody know what pass between him and her in that garden there. Love is not always what we think it. Perhaps M. Lebrun think all the time that his love go deeper than her beauty, and when he see her dreadful changed face he find out the truth. Perhaps when she put aside the veil she see that he flinch. I only say perhaps, because nobody know. But M. Lebrun he walk out alone, and the lady stay sitting on the seat. And presently her parents come, but she does not speak or move. And they find in her hand a little empty bottle, Monsieur . . .

'All her life she have live for love, for admiration, and M. Lebrun, he is the last of her lovers, and when he no longer love it is for her the end of everything. She have bring the bottle with her in case her last lover love her no more. That is all, Monsieur. It happen many years ago, and if there is more of the story one does not remember it today. And now perhaps Monsieur understands why it would be best for him to sleep tonight in a front room, and change his hotel tomorrow.'

Crutchley sat listening and staring. He felt faint and sick.

'But why does she – come back?' he managed to ask.

The head waiter shrugged his shoulders.

'How should we know, Monsieur? She is a thing of evil. When her face was lovely, while she live, she use it to destroy men. Now she still use it to destroy – but otherwise. She have some great evil power which draw those who can see her. They feel they must not rest until they have looked upon her face. And, Monsieur, that face is not good to look upon.'

I had listened all this while to Price's version of Crutchley's story without making any comment, but now he paused for so long that at last I said:

'Well, that can't be all.'

Price was filling a pipe with an air of preoccupation.

'No,' he said, 'it isn't quite all. I wish it were. Crutchley was scared, and he had the sense to change to a room in the front of the house, and to clear out altogether next day. He paid his bill, and made Pierre a good-sized present in money. Having done that, he found that he hadn't quite enough money to get home with, and he'd used his last letter of credit. So he telegraphed for more, meaning to catch the night boat from Havre.

'Well, you can guess what happened. The wired money order didn't arrive in time, and he was compelled to stay another night in Rouen. He went to another hotel.

'All that day he could think of nothing else but that immobile figure of despair which he had seen on the seat. I imagine that if you or I had seen something which we believed to be a ghost we should find difficulty in concentrating our minds on anything else for some while afterwards.

'The horror of the thing had a fascination for Crutchley and when night fell he began to ask himself if she were still there, hiding her face in that dark and silent garden. And he

began to ask himself: "Why shouldn't I go and see? It could not harm me just to look once, and quickly, and from a distance."

'He didn't realize that she was calling him, drawing him to her through the lighted streets. Well, he walked round to the Hotel d'Avignon. People were still sitting at the little tables under the glass roof, but he did not see Pierre. He walked straight on and through the swing doors, as if he were still staying in the house, and nobody noticed him. He climbed the stairs and went to one of the doors which opened out into the high enclosed garden behind. He found it on the latch, opened it softly and looked out. Then he stood, staring in horror and fascination at that which was on the seat.

'He was lost then, and he knew it. The power was too strong for him. He went to her step by step, as powerless to hold himself back as a needle before a magnet or a moth before a flame. And he bent over her . . .

'And here is the part that Crutchley can't really describe. It was painful to see him straining and groping after words, as if he were trying to speak in some strange language. There aren't really any words, I suppose. But he told me that it wasn't just that – that there weren't any features left. It was something much worse and much more subtle than that. And – oh, something happened, I know, before his senses left him. Poor devil, he couldn't tell me. He's getting better, as I told you, but his nerves are still in shreds and he's got one or two peculiar aversions.'

'What are they?' I asked.

'He can't bear to be touched, or to hear anybody laugh.'

NEVER, NEVER LEAVE ME

Terry Tapp

It had happened so many, many times before and Clara knew that it would happen again that night. She closed her eyes, willing blessed sleep to drown her tumultuous thoughts as she lay in her snug bed. Yet she knew she would not sleep. Soon she would be with David.

'Nurse,' the voice would whisper. 'Nurse Caldwell, you are needed.'

Then she would jump from her bed, heart racing as she fumbled under her pillow for the canvas roll which contained the precious surgical kit. Within seconds she would be ready, stumbling across her darkling room and out into the cold, cold moorland night.

David would be waiting there, foot hard down on the accelerator of the old army ambulance, his face lined with fatigue.

How many times had she been called in the past? How many times would she be called?

Diphtheria had raged through the Yorkshire countryside like a maddened beast, snarling, strangling and murdering without discrimination. Clara had been on constant call at the fever hospital, sleeping with her surgical roll under her pillow so that she would be ready to answer an emergency call immediately.

Suddenly she sat upright in her bed, ears strained to catch the slightest sound. The headlights of a passing car lighted the curtains of her room – then passed into the night. She sank back on the pillow, her heart still beating and fluttering like a wounded bird. 'Dear God,' she breathed. 'When will I sleep? What more do you want from me?'

And from the dark corners of the room she imagined that she heard low, evil laughter.

No use trying to sleep now; soon, she knew, the voice would whisper and she would be dragged back into reality again. Soon she would feel the stinging slap of the bitter night air, smell the fumes from the stove pipe which stuck out of the roof of the old brown ambulance; soon she would be sitting next to David as they hurtled through the still moor-

land towards another heartbreak.

'David,' she whispered. 'Oh, David . . .'

Without him, what would she be? How could she have faced the countless operations? When she was tired and near to tears, it had been David's arms which had comforted her. When she had failed, he had encouraged and when, once in a while, there had been victory, David had laughed with her and kissed her.

Together they had shared the triumphs and the defeats. Nothing would ever take that away. They were a team and David had never let her down.

Clara smiled as she thought of him, her face relaxing into peaceful repose. Perhaps tonight there would be no call . . . perhaps, just for once, there would just be sleep.

She conjured up his face in her mind, exploring every feature as if for the first time. Again she heard him say those precious words, 'I love you, Clara.' How tightly she had held him, tight, tight with desperation. 'Don't leave me, David,' she had whispered. 'Never, ever leave me.'

Suddenly she heard muffled footsteps outside her door and she was out of bed before the voice could call her.

'Nurse,' the voice whispered. 'Nurse Caldwell, you are needed.'

'I know,' she called. 'I'm coming.'

Hand under the pillow to find the canvas surgical kit, boots on, gloves and scarf . . .

Already she could hear the ambulance revving hard outside the window as she threw open the bedroom door and ran lightly down the stairs and out into the inky night. 'I'm coming, David,' she called. 'I'm coming.'

The passenger door was open and Clara swung herself into the seat as the clutch was let out and the ambulance lurched forward belching out hot fumes into the cab.

'Where is it?' she asked, turning to face David.

But it was not David that night.

'Three miles,' the driver replied.

'Where's David?' Clara asked, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice.

No answer.

Then she knew.

Clara knew beyond all doubts whatsoever.

'Hurry,' she begged. 'For God's sake hurry!'

She knew it would be David. It had to be.

The ambulance clattered through the cobbled streets of the village and drew up outside a low-roofed cottage. Clara took her kit and threw the door open, instantly jumping out and knocking on the cottage door.

'Come on!' she said. 'Come on . . . come on . . .'

The door opened allowing the hot, rancid air to fall out into the street and Clara could already sense the presence of diphtheria.

'Thank God,' the woman said. 'Thank God.'

Pushing past the elderly woman, Clara went into the dark room. She did not have to ask where the patient was for she could hear the rasping, rattling of his lungs.

'Light,' she said abruptly. 'I must have more light.'

The woman turned up the wick on the solitary oil lamp and the room turned sickly yellow.

'David?' Clara called softly.

She approached the couch and gazed upon the cringeing man, stifling a cry as she saw the expression on his face.

'You must be Clara,' the woman said as she drew nearer with the oil lamp. 'David never stops talking about you. Never stops . . .' her voice cracked and the lamplight wavered.

'A cloth,' Clara snapped. 'Get me a clean cloth and anything which gives light. I must have more light.'

Keeping her eyes from his tortured face she examined the swelling in his throat. Evil and glistening, the grey membrane had swollen up, filling the throat and writhing into the mouth; choking and cancerous like an evil serpent.

'Clara,' David said

The voice was distorted – a monstrous imitation of his own soft tones, articulated only with the greatest of difficulty. He threw his head back, trying to drop the membrane into his throat to allow air to get to his lungs. 'For Christ's sake, Clara, let me go!'

'No!' she cried. 'I have to try!'

'I . I don't want . .' The effort was too much for him.

'Don't speak.' she said. 'I know what you are trying to say and I know that I promised.'

David nodded his head. 'You promised.'

Now the tears boiled up in her eyes, scalding and scorching in rivulets; blinding tears which singed and stung as they coursed down her face.

'I know I promised,' she sobbed. 'I promised you I'd never ever do this to you. But I have to, David. Dear God . . . I have to.'

'Promised . . .' was all he could reply.

'I managed to get another candle,' the woman said as she came back into the room.

'Is that all?' Clara cried. 'Just one candle?' The woman gave a stifled sob and Clara instantly regretted her harshness. 'I'm sorry,' she said, reaching out to touch the woman's arm.

'You promised!' David cried.

'What? What did you promise?' the woman asked. 'I'm David's mother and I have a right to know.'

'Bring the candle nearer,' Clara said. 'Take care not to spill the grease and hold it steady.'

'She promised,' he repeated in a low moan.

'Tell me,' David's mother said. 'What is he talking about? What did you promise him?'

Taking great care, Clara unrolled the canvas holder to expose the kit. 'I promised him that I would never do this to him – no matter how bad he became. He told me that he would rather die than have this done to him.'

'But why?' the woman cried. 'In the name of God . . . why?'

'Because he watched poor Simon die,' Clara explained. 'I was the nurse who operated on him, you know.'

'I didn't know,' she said 'David wouldn't talk about it.'

Clara checked the kit methodically. Flame-sterilized dish, rubber tubing, two scalpels, ether, morphine and strychnine. It was all there.

'I tried to save young Simon,' Clara cried, the tears still running freely down her face. 'He knows I tried.'

'I'm sure you did,' his mother replied comfortingly.

'And then he made me promise,' Clara said. 'He made me promise that I'd never do the same to him. He knows the chances of survival are slim, yet I have to try. You see that, don't you?'

David's mother nodded dumbly.

The scalpel was of the finest surgical steel and Clara held it lightly like a fine pen. She appeared to be smiling, her upper lip drawn back tight over her teeth to expose her gums, her hand shaking as she watched David's face contort in another effort to speak.

'Clara,' he groaned. 'Remember Simon. You swore you would never do this to me. You promised. If you love me . . . really love me . . . let me go.'

'The light,' Clara sobbed. 'Bring the light nearer.'

'Darling,' he said, 'for God's sake don't . . .'

Gripping the scalpel tightly now, Clara leaned over his convulsing body, pushing the heel of her hand under his jaw to expose the white, white throat. He groaned, twisting his head aside, but he had not the strength to resist her.

Hypnotized by the pulsing vein in his throat, Clara held the scalpel close and prepared to make the incision.

And the voices chanted in her head . . . 'Cut, Clara! Cut! Cut! Cut!'

'Damn you!' she cried as she flicked the perspiration from her face with her hand. 'Damn you!'

And there was laughter as Clara returned her attention to that pulsing, pulsing vein.

David's mother, thinking that she was the reason for the sudden outburst, drew nearer with the candle and oil lamp, turning all their faces yellow like ageing parchment.

Blue-lipped now, David made another effort to speak, his breath rasping harshly against the murderous grey membrane which grew and grew inside his throat, trying to block out the last gasps of air.

'If . . . you . . . love . . . me. Let me go,' he said.

'Love you?' Clara gave a bitter laugh. 'It is *because* I love you, David.'

He shook his head.

'I swear it,' she replied. 'By Christ, I love you more than I can say and I owe it to you to break this promise. It won't hurt, my darling.'

By now the trachea was almost sealed tight by the glutinous swelling membrane which reared up from within him; soon, if she did not operate, he would suffocate. Clara had seen it all before . . . many, many times. She knew all the symptoms and was determined that it would not happen to David. She knew precisely where to make the incision into the trachea to allow the rubber tube to be inserted. Once opened the tube would supply air to his bursting lungs. Clara knew all this.

She knew when to apply ether and when to inject the strychnine to rescue a heart which is near to death from

exhaustion, from pumping airless blood through the body. Morphine for when the pain became too great to bear . . . all these things she knew.

'You're shaking,' Clara snapped at the woman. 'Dammit, hold that light steady so I can see!'

'I'm sorry,' came the frightened reply.

'How the hell can I operate in the dark?'

Again she regretted speaking so harshly, her eyes glancing up at the older woman's apologetic face. 'Forgive me,' Clara said, her eyes returning instantly to the slimy serpent which gorged itself in the throat of the choking man.

How ugly he appears, she thought. How ugly now that Pain has conquered him. Was not Pain an ugly monster?

'He's going!' the woman screamed.

'I can see,' Clara hissed. 'I can see.'

She hesitated, the scalpel just one inch from his heaving throat. Now, she thought. Do it now and be finished.

Blinking the perspiration from her eyes, Clara made up her mind and pushed the scalpel into the white flesh. Surprised almost, she drew it down, down, down in a skin-peeling incision. Working with deft fingers, she pushed the rubber tube into the trachea, recoiling from her handiwork in horror as the dangling, snakelike tube rasped in some air.

'Too late, my darling,' she smiled. 'I couldn't bear to lose you.'

Now the air was sucking in through the tube and the blueness was disappearing from his lips as his lungs filled. Clara smiled, relieved to have made the right decision at last. Now for morphine to relieve the pain and then it would be a matter of intensive nursing and waiting. The odds were always against survival . . . but at least she had tried.

She looked again at him lying helpless as he choked and spluttered, the sheets covered with blood. Squirting the syringe against the candle flame, Clara turned to David's mother and smiled happily. About to say, 'I'm sorry, darling,' as she turned back to the couch, the words froze in her mouth. David was sitting upright, his eyes blazing with anger and hatred. Deliberately, he reached his hand up to the rubber tube and curled his fingers around it, wrenching it from the incision to allow the blood to sputter out.

'No!' Clara screamed. 'You'll kill yourself!'

'You promised,' he said, the words hanging thickly on his

wet lips. 'You promised that you would never do this. You promised that you would let me go peacefully.'

On her knees, sobbing hysterically, Clara begged him to give her the tube. 'I can still put it back,' she screamed. 'Dear God! Let me save you!'

Before she could stop him, he was on his feet, recklessly squandering all energy to purchase death at any price.

'I'll haunt you, Clara!' he screamed. 'You promised me and now I'll haunt you until the day you die!'

'David . . . let me put the tube back. Please, darling.'

He laughed, his throat filled with the malevolent, bloodied serpent; a loud, evil laugh – gurgling and rich with malice.

Disdainfully, he threw the wriggling rubber tube into the ebbing fire and Clara pushed her hands into the scorching flames to retrieve it. She felt the fire lick over her fingers and she smelled the scorching of her own flesh as she frantically struggled to grasp the tube. With a cry she drew it from the flames, her fingers covered with ash and blisters.

But the tube was too far burned to be of any use and she knew, deep down inside, that it was too late anyway.

'By Christ and all the saints,' he cried, 'I'll haunt you until the day you die, Clara!'

'No!' she sobbed. 'I did it for you, David.' Her arms reached up to him and he looked pitilessly down at her. 'I love you,' she said simply.

He laughed.

Death had taken hold of his body and he was no longer in it. Now his body stood there, a shell in which the last sparks flickered.

The body laughed and Clara screamed as she beheld his awful face, twisted up with hatred.

Run!

She found herself running without realizing it. Run, Clara! Run for your life!

His laughter echoed in the lonely streets like a sabre, carried on the wind and shattering the night calm, as Clara ran.

Run, Clara! Run!

The laughter rose up, coiling around her, never retreating as she ran from street to street, her leather boots resounding on the slippery cobbles.

'God forgive me!' she screamed. 'Dear God, forgive me!'

She screamed again finding blessed relief in screaming to

drown out the laughter in her ears. Then strong hands gripped her shoulders, shaking her gently . . .

'Miss Caldwell?'

Another scream . . .

'Miss Caldwell.'

'I . . . I . . ' She could not find the breath to answer.

'Is it you, Miss Caldwell? Come over here into the gaslight where I can get a good look at you.'

She felt herself being led across the road.

'Oh, dear,' the policeman said. 'What are we going to do with you, Miss Caldwell?'

'Do with me?'

'Lor' knows how many times I've found you out like this, wandering the streets miles from home.'

'I know,' she said.

'Then why? Why do you do it?'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don't mean to be troublesome to you. I'm very sorry.'

'God bless you, ma'am,' he said. 'I know you can't help it. But you're not getting younger, Miss Caldwell – none of us are. You'll catch your death out here.'

Clara smiled a wispish smile.

'It isn't funny,' he said sternly. 'You could easily get lost on the moors at night. It would be the death of you.'

He removed his heavy coat and placed it around her shoulders as they walked together.

'It was David,' she said. 'I had to go to him.'

'You always say that, Miss Caldwell,' he replied. 'Always the same excuse.'

'It isn't an excuse,' she said. 'The ambulance took me to the pottery cottages.'

'Pottery cottages were pulled down years ago,' he said. 'You know that as well as I do. Look, I don't mean to be disrespectful, Miss Caldwell, but oughtn't you to see your doctor about this?'

'I do,' she told him. 'But the doctor says that I have to come to terms with it, whatever that means. He tells me not to feel guilty, and that is like telling a child not to feel pain.' At once she conjured up the vision of young Simon threshing about on the floor of his bedroom while David had stood by, helplessly, watching.

'Sometimes it works,' the policeman said.

'What works?'

'Talking to a child that way,' he answered. 'Suggestion, I suppose.'

Clara smiled.

'Nearly home now,' he said. 'You get straight to bed and stay there, mind.'

'I will,' she said. 'Tell me, Officer, do you think we meet our loved ones when we die?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'What a question to ask!'

'I wish *I* knew,' Clara said wistfully.

'I expect we do,' he added, more to comfort her than from conviction. 'But nothing in this life is certain, so how can we be certain of the afterlife?'

'We can't be certain,' Clara said. 'That's the trouble.'

'Here we are,' the policeman said kindly. 'And look what you've done.'

'What have I done?'

'Left your back door wide open,' he said. 'No wonder people get things stolen if they're so careless.'

'I didn't think,' Clara replied. 'All I could think of was getting out of the house to see David.'

'All right,' he said with a sigh. 'You go indoors now and make sure you have a hot drink before you go back to bed.'

'I will,' she smiled. 'And thank you very much for seeing me safely home.'

The policeman watched her until she was safely indoors and then he continued on his way.

Clara went into the kitchen, put the kettle on the gas ring and took a cup from the dresser. As she waited for the water to boil, she stood before the mirror and removed her head-scarf to reveal the white, flowing hair. How many times, she thought, how many times will it happen to me? Indeed, how many times had it happened before?

Taking her drink upstairs, Clara snuggled into her bed and sipped it, luxuriating in the warmth. She did not care how many times, so long as it happened again. The young police-man was right. How did one know for certain that death would reunite loved ones? It was not certain . . . not as certain as the fact that she would continue to be called during the nights ahead as long as she lived. The only thing she really dreaded was the chance that one night it might not happen at all. But that would be too hard to bear.

Clara lay back on the pillow, drowsy with sleep. 'Haunt me, David,' she mumbled. 'Haunt me, darling. Haunt me as you promised until the day I die. Just never leave me. Never, never leave me. I couldn't bear it if you did.'

And somehow she knew that he would never leave her. She knew that he would continue to haunt her until the day she died.

Clara was glad.

THIRTEEN AT TABLE

Lord Dunsany

In front of a spacious fireplace of the old kind, when the logs were well alight, and men with pipes and glasses were gathered before it in great easeful chairs, and the wild weather outside and the comfort that was within, and the season of the year – for it was Christmas – and the hour of the night, all called for the weird or uncanny, then out spoke the ex-master of foxhounds and told this tale.

'I once had an odd experience too. It was when I had the Bromley and Sydenham, the year I gave them up – as a matter of fact it was the last day of the season. It was no use going on because there were no foxes left in the country, and London was sweeping down on us. You could see it from the kennels all along the skyline like a terrible army in grey, and masses of villas every year came skirmishing down our valleys. Our coverts were mostly on the hills, and as the town came down upon the valleys the foxes used to leave them and go right away out of the country, and they never returned. I think they went by night and moved great distances. Well, it was early April and we had drawn blank all day, and at the last draw of all, the very last of the season, we found a fox. He left the covert with his back to London and its railways and villas and wire, and slipped away towards the chalk country and open Kent. I felt as I once felt as a child on one summer's day when I found a door in a garden where I played left luckily ajar, and I pushed it open and the wide lands were before me and waving fields of corn.

'We settled down into a steady gallop and the fields began to drift by under us, and a great wind arose full of fresh breath. We left the clay lands where the bracken grows and came to a valley at the edge of the chalk. As we went down into it we saw the fox go up the other side like a shadow that crosses the evening, and glide into a wood that stood on the top. We saw a flash of primroses in the wood and we were out the other side, hounds hunting perfectly and the fox still going absolutely straight. It began to dawn on me then that we were in for a great hunt; I took a deep breath when I

thought of it; the taste of the air of that perfect spring afternoon as it came to one galloping, and the thought of a great run, were together like some old rare wine. Our faces now were to another valley, large fields led down to it with easy hedges, at the bottom of it a bright blue stream went singing and a rambling village smoked, the sunlight on the opposite slopes danced like a fairy; and all along the top old woods were frowning, but they dreamed of spring. The field had fallen off and were far behind and my only human companion was James, my old first whip, who had a hound's instinct, and a personal animosity against a fox that even embittered his speech.

'Across the valley the fox went as straight as a railway line, and again we went without a check straight through the woods at the top. I remember hearing men sing or shout as they walked home from work, and sometimes children whistled; the sounds came up from the village to the woods at the top of the valley. After that we saw no more villages, but valley after valley arose and fell before us as though we were voyaging some strange and stormy sea; and all the way before us the fox went dead up-wind like the fabulous flying Dutchman. There was no one in sight now but my first whip and me; we had both of us got on to our second horses as we drew the last covert. Two or three times we checked in those great lonely valleys beyond the village, but I began to have inspirations; I felt a strange certainty within me that this fox was going on straight up-wind till he died or until night came and we could hunt no longer, so I reversed ordinary methods and only cast straight ahead, and always we picked up the scent again at once. I believe that this fox was the last one left in the villa-haunted lands and that he was prepared to leave them for remote uplands far from men, that if we had come the following day he would not have been there, and that we just happened to hit off his journey.

'Evening began to descend upon the valleys, still the hounds drifted on, like the lazy but unresting shadows of clouds upon a summer's day; we heard a shepherd calling to his dog, we saw two maidens move towards a hidden farm, one of them singing softly; no other sounds but ours disturbed the leisure and the loneliness of haunts that seemed not yet to have known the inventions of steam and gunpowder.

'And now the day and our horses were wearing out, but

that resolute fox held on. I began to work out the run and to wonder where we were. The last landmark I had ever seen before must have been over five miles back, and from there to the start was at least ten miles more. If only we could kill! Then the sunset. I wondered what chance we had of killing our fox. I looked at James's face as he rode beside me. He did not seem to have lost any confidence, yet his horse was as tired as mine. It was a good clear twilight and the scent was as strong as ever, and the fences were easy enough, but those valleys were terribly trying, and they still rolled on and on. It looked as if the light would outlast all possible endurance both of the fox and the horses, if the scent held good and he did not go to ground, otherwise night would end it. For long we had seen no houses and no roads, only chalk slopes with the twilight on them, and here and there some sheep, and scattered copses darkening in the evening. At some moment I seemed to realize all at once that the light was spent and that darkness was hovering. I looked at James; he was solemnly shaking his head. Suddenly in a little wooded valley we saw climb over the oaks the red-brown gables of a queer old house; at that instant I saw the fox scarcely leading by fifty yards. We blundered through a wood into full sight of the house, but no avenue led up to it or even a path, nor were there any signs of wheelmarks anywhere. Already lights shone here and there in windows. We were in a park, and a fine park, but unkempt beyond credibility; brambles grew everywhere. It was too dark to see the fox any more, but we knew he was dead beat, the hounds were just before us – and a four-foot railing of oak. I shouldn't have tried it on a fresh horse at the beginning of a run, and here was a horse near his last gasp, but what a run! an event standing out in a lifetime, and the hounds, close up on their fox, slipping into the darkness as I hesitated. I decided to try it. My horse rose about eight inches and took it fair with his breast, and the oak log flew into handfuls of wet decay – it was rotten with years. And then we were on a lawn, and at the far end of it the hounds were tumbling over their fox. Fox, horses, and light were all done together at the end of a twenty-mile point. We made some noise then, but nobody came out of the queer old house.

'I felt pretty stiff as I walked round to the hall door with the mask and the brush, while James went with the hounds

and the two horses to look for the stables. I rang a bell marvellously encrusted with rust, and after a long while the door opened a little way, revealing a hall with much old armour in it and the shabbiest butler that I have ever known.

'I asked him who lived there. Sir Richard Arlen. I explained that my horse could go no farther that night, and that I wished to ask Sir Richard Arlen for a bed.

' "Oh, no one ever comes here, sir," said the butler.

'I pointed out that I had come.

' "I don't think it would be possible, sir," he said.

'This annoyed me, and I asked to see Sir Richard, and insisted until he came. Then I apologized and explained the situation. He looked only fifty, but a 'Varsity oar on the wall with the date of the early seventies made him older than that; his face had something of the shy look of the hermit; he regretted that he had not room to put me up. I was sure that this was untrue, also I had to be put up there, there was nowhere else within miles, so I almost insisted. Then, to my astonishment, he turned to the butler and they talked it over in an undertone. At last they seemed to think that they could manage it, though clearly with reluctance. It was by now seven o'clock, and Sir Richard told me he dined at half-past seven. There was no question of clothes for me other than those I stood in, as my host was shorter and broader. He showed me presently to the drawing-room, and then he reappeared before half-past seven in evening dress and a white waistcoat. The drawing-room was large and contained old furniture, but it was rather worn than venerable; an Aubusson carpet flapped about the floor, the wind seemed momently to enter the room, and old draughts haunted corners; stealthy feet of rats that were never at rest indicated the extent of the ruin that time had wrought in the wainscot, somewhere far off a shutter flapped to and fro, the guttering candles were insufficient to light so large a room. The gloom that these things suggested was quite in keeping with Sir Richard's first remark to me after he entered the room.

' "I must tell you, sir, that I have led a wicked life. Oh, a very wicked life."

'Such confidences from a man much older than oneself after one has known him for half an hour are so rare that any possible answer merely does not suggest itself. I said rather slowly, "Oh, really," and chiefly to forestall another such

remark, I said, "What a charming house you have."

'"Yes," he said, "I have not left it for nearly forty years. Since I left the 'Varsity. One is young there, you know, and one has opportunities; but I make no excuses, no excuses." And the door slipping its rusty latch, came drifting on the draught into the room, and the long carpet flapped and the hangings upon the walls, then the draught fell rustling away and the door slammed to again.

'"Ah, Marianne," he said. "We have a guest tonight. Mr Linton. This is Marianne Gib." And everything became clear to me. "Mad," I said to myself, for no one had entered the room.

'The rats ran up the length of the room behind the wainscot ceaselessly, and the wind unlatched the door again and the folds of the carpet fluttered up to our feet and stopped there, for our weight held it down.

'"Let me introduce Mr Linton," said my host. "Lady Mary Errinjer."

'The door slammed back again. I bowed politely. Even had I been invited I should have humoured him, but it was the very least that an uninvited guest could do.

'This kind of thing happened eleven times, the rustling, and the fluttering of the carpet, and the footsteps of the rats, and the restless door, and then the sad voice of my host introducing me to phantoms Then for some while we waited while I struggled with the situation; conversation flowed slowly. And again the draught came trailing up the room, while the flaring candles filled it with hurrying shadows. "Ah, late again, Cicely," said my host in his soft mournful way. "Always late, Cicely." Then I went down to dinner with that man and his mind and the twelve phantoms that haunted it. I found a long table with old silver on it, and places laid for fourteen. The butler was now in evening dress, there were fewer draughts in the dining-room, the scene was less gloomy there. "Will you sit next to Rosalind at the other end?" Sir Richard said to me. "She always takes the head of the table. I wronged her most of all."

'I said, "I shall be delighted."

'I looked at the butler closely; but never did I see by any expression of his face, or by anything that he did, any suggestion that he waited upon less than fourteen people in the complete possession of all their faculties. Perhaps a dish

appeared to be refused more often than taken, but every glass was equally filled with champagne. At first I found little to say, but when Sir Richard, speaking from the far end of the table, said, "You are tired, Mr Linton?" I was reminded that I owed something to a host upon whom I had forced myself. It was excellent champagne, and with the help of a second glass I made the effort to begin a conversation with a Miss Hélen Errold, for whom the place upon one side of me was laid. It came more easy to me very soon; I frequently paused in my monologue, like Mark Antony, for a reply, and sometimes I turned and spoke to Miss Rosalind Smith. Sir Richard at the other end talked sorrowfully on; he spoke as a condemned man might speak to his judge, and yet somewhat as a judge might speak to one that he once condemned wrongly. My own mind began to turn to mournful things. I drank another glass of champagne, but I was still thirsty. I felt as if all the moisture in my body had been blown away over the downs of Kent by the wind up which we had galloped. Still I was not talking enough: my host was looking at me. I made another effort; after all I had something to talk about: a twenty-mile point is not often seen in a lifetime, especially south of the Thames. I began to describe the run to Rosalind Smith. I could see then that my host was pleased, the sad look in his face gave a kind of a flicker, like mist upon the mountains on a miserable day when a faint puff comes from the sea and the mist would lift if it could. And the butler refilled my glass very attentively. I asked her first if she hunted, and paused and began my story. I told her where we found the fox and how fast and straight he had gone, and how I had got through the village by keeping to the road, while the little gardens and wire, and then the river, had stopped the rest of the field. I told her the kind of country that we crossed and how splendid it looked in the spring, and how mysterious the valleys were as soon as the twilight came, and what a glorious horse I had and how wonderfully he went.

'I was so fearfully thirsty after the great hunt that I had to stop for a moment now and then, but I went on with my description of that famous run, for I had warmed to the subject, and after all there was nobody to tell of it but me except my old whipper-in, and "the old fellow's probably drunk by now" I thought. I described to her minutely the exact spot in the run at which it had come to me clearly

that this was going to be the greatest hunt in the whole history of Kent Sometimes I forgot incidents that had happened, as one well may in a run of twenty miles, and then I had to fill in the gaps by inventing. I was pleased to be able to make the party go off well by means of my conversation, and besides that the lady to whom I was speaking was extremely pretty: I do not mean in a flesh-and-blood kind of way, but there were little shadowy lines about the chair beside me that hinted at an unusually graceful figure when Miss Rosalind Smith was alive; and I began to perceive that what I first mistook for the smoke of guttering candles and a tablecloth waving in the draught was in reality an extremely animated company who listened, and not without interest, to my story of by far the greatest hunt that the world had ever known: indeed, I told them that I would confidently go further and predict that never in the history of the world would there be such a run again. Only my throat was terribly dry.

'And then, as it seemed, they wanted to hear more about my horse. I had forgotten that I had come there on a horse, but when they reminded me it all came back; they looked so charming leaning over the table, intent upon what I said, that I told them everything they wanted to know. Everything was going so pleasantly if only Sir Richard would cheer up. I heard his mournful voice every now and then – these were very pleasant people if only he would take them the right way. I could understand that he regretted his past, but the early seventies seemed centuries away, and I felt now that he misunderstood these ladies, they were not revengeful as he seemed to suppose. I wanted to show him how cheerful they really were, and so I made a joke and they all laughed at it, and then I chaffed them a bit, especially Rosalind, and nobody resented it in the very least. And still Sir Richard sat there with that unhappy look, like one that has ended weeping because it is vain and has not the consolation even of tears.

'We had been a long time there, and many of the candles had burned out, but there was light enough. I was glad to have an audience for my exploit, and being happy myself I was determined Sir Richard should be. I made more jokes and they still laughed good-naturedly; some of the jokes were a little broad perhaps, but no harm was meant. And then – I do not wish to excuse myself, but I had had a harder day than I ever

had had before, and without knowing it I must have been completely exhausted; in this state the champagne had found me, and what would have been harmless at any other time must somehow have got the better of me when quite tired out. Anyhow, I went too far, I made some joke – I cannot in the least remember what – that suddenly seemed to offend them. I felt all at once a commotion in the air; I looked up and saw that they had all risen from the table and were sweeping towards the door. I had not time to open it, but it blew open on a wind; I could scarcely see what Sir Richard was doing because only two candles were left; I think the rest blew out when the ladies suddenly rose. I sprang up to apologize, to assure them – and then fatigue overcame me as it had overcome my horse at the last fence; I clutched at the table, but the cloth came away, and then I fell. The fall, and the darkness on the floor, and the pent-up fatigue of the day overcame me all three together.

The sun shone over glittering fields and in at a bedroom window, and thousands of birds were chanting to the spring, and there I was in an old four-poster bed in a quaint old panelled bedroom, fully dressed, and wearing long muddy boots; someone had taken my spurs and that was all. For a moment I failed to realize, and then it all came back – my enormity and the pressing need of an abject apology to Sir Richard. I pulled an embroidered bell-rope until the butler came; he came in perfectly cheerful and indescribably shabby. I asked him if Sir Richard was up, and he said he had just gone down, and told me to my amazement that it was twelve o'clock. I asked to be shown in to Sir Richard at once.

'He was in his smoking-room. "Good morning," he said cheerfully the moment I went in. I went directly to the matter in hand. "I fear that I insulted some ladies in your house . . ." I began.

' "You did indeed," he said. "You did indeed." And then he burts into tears, and took me by the hand. "How can I ever thank you?" he said to me then. "We have been thirteen at table for thirty years, and I never dared to insult them because I had wronged them all, and now you have done it, and I know they will never dine here again." And for a long time he still held my hand, and then he gave it a grip and a kind of a shake which I took to mean "goodbye", and I drew my hand away then and left the house. And I found James in

the disused stables with the hounds and asked him how he had fared, and James, who is a man of very few words, said he could not rightly remember, and I got my spurs from the butler and climbed on to my horse; and slowly we rode away from that queer old house, and slowly we wended home, for the hounds were footsore but happy and the horses were tired still. And when we recalled that the hunting season was ended, we turned our faces to spring and thought of the new things that try to replace the old. And that very year I heard, and have often heard since, of dances and happier dinners at Sir Richard Arlen's house.'

THE GHOST OF DOROTHY DINGLEY

Daniel Defoe

In the beginning of this year, a disease happened in this town of Launceston, and some of my scholars died of it. Among others who fell under the malignity then triumphing, was John Elliot, the eldest son of Edward Elliot of Treherse, Esq., a stripling of about sixteen years of age, but of more than common parts and ingenuity. At his own particular request, I preached at the funeral, which happened on the 20th day of June 1665. In my discourse (*ut mos reique locique postulabat*), I spoke some words in commendation of the young gentleman; such as might endear his memory to those that knew him, and, withal, tended to preserve his example to the fry which went to school with him, and were to continue there after him. An ancient gentleman, who was then in the church, was much affected with the discourse, and was often heard to repeat, the same evening, an expression I then used out of Virgil:

Et puer ipse fuit cantari dignus.

The reason why this grave gentleman was so concerned at the character, was a reflection he made upon a son of his own, who being about the same age, and, but a few months before, not unworthy of the like character I gave of the young Mr Elliot, was now, by a strange accident, quite lost as to his parent's hopes and all expectation of any further comfort by him.

The funeral rites being over, I was no sooner come out of the church, but I found myself most courteously accosted by this old gentleman; and with an unusual importunity almost forced against my humour to see his house that night; nor could I have rescued myself from his kindness, had not Mr Elliot interposed and pleaded title to me for the whole of the day, which, as he said, he would resign to no man.

Hereupon I got loose for that time, but was constrained to leave a promise behind me to wait upon him at his own house the Monday following. This then seemed to satisfy, but before Monday came I had a new message to request me that, if it

were possible, I would be there on the Sunday. The second attempt I resisted. by answering that it was against my convenience, and the duty which mine own people expected from me.

Yet was not the gentleman at rest, for he sent me another letter on the Sunday, by no means to fail on the Monday, and so to order my business as to spend with him two or three days at least. I was indeed startled at so much eagerness, and so many dunnings for a visit, without any business; and began to suspect that there must needs be some design in the bottom of all this excess of courtesy. For I had no familiarity, scarce common acquaintance with the gentleman or his family; nor could I imagine whence should arise such a flush of friendship on the sudden.

On the Monday I went, and paid my promised devoir, and met with entertainment as free and plentiful as the invitation was importunate. There also I found a neighbouring minister who pretended to call in accidentally, but by the sequel I suppose it otherwise. After dinner this brother of the coat undertook to show me the gardens, where, as we were walking, he gave me the first discovery of what was mainly intended in all this treat and compliment.

First he began to tell the infortunity of the family in general, and then gave an instance in the youngest son. He related what a hopeful, sprightly lad he lately was, and how melancholic and sottish he was now grown. Then did he with much passion lament, that this ill-humour should so incredibly subdue his reason; for, says he, the poor boy believes himself to be haunted with ghosts, and is confident that he meets with an evil spirit in a certain field about half a mile from this place, as often as he goes that way to school.

In the midst of our twaddle, the old gentleman and his lady (as observing their cue exactly) came up to us. Upon their approach, and pointing me to the arbour, the parson renews the relation to me; and they (the parents of the youth) confirmed what he said, and added many minute circumstances, in a long narrative of the whole. In fine, they all three desired my thoughts and advice in the affair.

I was not able to collect thoughts enough on the sudden to frame a judgement upon what they had said, only I answered, that the thing which the youth reported to them was strange, yet not incredible, and that I knew not then what to think or

say of it; but if the lad would be free to me in talk, and trust me with his counsels, I had hopes to give them a better account of my opinion the next day.

I had no sooner spoken so much, but I perceived myself in the springe their courtship had laid for me; for the old lady was not able to hide her impatience, but her son must be called immediately. This I was forced to comply with and consent to, so that drawing off from the company to an orchard near by, she went herself and brought him to me, and left him with me.

It was the main drift of all these three to persuade me that either the boy was lazy, and glad of any excuse to keep from the school, or that he was in love with some wench and ashamed to confess it; or that he had a fetch upon his father to get money and new clothes, that he might range to London after a brother he had there; and therefore they begged of me to discover the root of the matter, and accordingly to dissuade, advise, or reprove him, but chiefly, by all means, to undeceive him as to the fancy of ghosts and spirits.

I soon entered into a close conference with the youth, and at first was very cautious not to displease him, but by smooth words to ingratiate myself and get within him, for I doubted he would be too distrustful or too reserved. But we had scarcely passed the first situation, and begun to speak to the business, before I found that there needed no policy to screw myself into his breast; for he most openly and with all obliging candour did aver, that he loved his book, and desired nothing more than to be bred a scholar; that he had not the least respect for any of womankind, as his mother gave out; and that the only request he would make to his parents was, that they would but believe his constant assertions concerning the woman he was disturbed with, in the field called the Higher-Broom Quartils. He told me with all naked freedom, and a flood of tears, that his friends were unkind and unjust to him, neither to believe nor pity him; and that if any man (making a bow to me) would but go with him to the place, he might be convinced that the thing was real, etc.

By this time he found me apt to compassionate his condition, and to be attentive to his relation of it, and therefore he went on in this way:

'This woman which appears to me,' saith he, 'lived a neighbour here to my father, and died about eight years since; her

name, Dorothy Dingley, of such a stature, such age, and such complexion. She never speaks to me, but passeth by hastily, and always leaves the footpath to me, and she commonly meets me twice or three times in the breadth of the field.

'It was about two months before I took any notice of it, and though the shape of the face was in my memory, yet I did not recall the name of the person, but without more thoughtfulness, I did suppose it was some woman who lived thereabout, and had frequent occasion that way. Nor did I imagine anything to the contrary before she began to meet me constantly, morning and evening, and always in the same field, and sometimes twice or thrice in the breadth of it.

'The first time I took notice of her was about a year since, and when I first began to suspect and believe it to be a ghost, I had courage enough not to be afraid, but kept it to myself a good while, and only wondered very much about it. I did often speak to it, but never had a word in answer. Then I changed my way, and went to school the Under Horse Road, and then she always met me in the narrow lane, between the Quarry Park and the Nursery, which was worse.

'At length I began to be terrified at it, and prayed continually that God would either free me from it or let me know the meaning of it. Night and day, sleeping and waking, the shape was ever running in my mind, and I often did repeat these places of Scripture (with that he takes a small Bible out of his pocket), Job vii. 14: "Thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions." And Deuteronomy xxviii. 67: "In the morning, thou shalt say, Would God it were even; and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning; for the fear of thine heart, wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes, which thou shalt see." '

I was very much pleased with the lad's ingenuity in the application of these pertinent Scriptures to his condition, and desired him to proceed.

'When,' says he, 'by degrees, I grew very pensive, inasmuch that it was taken notice of by all our family; whereupon, being urged to it, I told my brother William of it, and he privately acquainted my father and mother, and they kept it to themselves for some time.

'The success of this discovery was only this; they did sometimes laugh at me, sometimes chide me, but still commanded me to keep to my school, and put such fopperies out of my

head. I did accordingly go to school often, but always met the woman in the way.'

This, and much more to the same purpose, yea, as much as held a dialogue of near two hours, was our conference in the orchard, which ended with my proffer to him, that, without making any privy to our intents, I would next morning walk with him to the place, about six o'clock. He was even transported with joy at the mention of it, and replied, 'But will you, sure, sir? Will you, sure, sir? Thank God! Now I hope I shall be relieved.'

From this conclusion we retired into the house.

The gentleman, his wife, and Mr Sam were impatient to know the event, insomuch that they came out of the parlour into the hall to meet us; and seeing the lad look cheerfully, the first compliment from the old man was, 'Come, Mr Ruddle, you have talked with him; I hope now he will have more wit. An idle boy! an idle boy!'

At these words, the lad ran up the stairs to his own chamber, without replying, and I soon stopped the curiosity of the three expectants by telling them I had promised silence, and was resolved to be as good as my word; but when things were riper they might know all. At present, I desired them to rest in my faithful promise, that I would do my utmost in their service, and for the good of their son. With this they were silenced; I cannot say satisfied.

The next morning before five o'clock, the lad was in my chamber, and very brisk. I arose and went with him. The field he led me to I guessed to be twenty acres, in an open country, and about three furlongs from any house. We went into the field, and had not gone about a third part, before the spectrum, in the shape of a woman, with all the circumstances he had described her to me in the orchard the day before (as much as the suddenness of its appearance and evanition would permit me to discover), met us and passed by. I was a little surprised at it, and though I had taken up a firm resolution to speak to it, yet I had not the power, nor indeed durst I look back; yet I took care not to show any fear to my pupil and guide, and therefore only telling him that I was satisfied in the truth of his complaint, we walked to the end of the field and returned, nor did the ghost meet us that time above once. I perceived in the young man a kind of boldness, mixed with astonishment: the first caused by my presence, and the

proof he had given of his own relation, and the other by the sight of his persecutor.

In short, we went home: I somewhat puzzled, he much animated. At our return, the gentlewoman, whose inquisitiveness had missed us, watched to speak with me. I gave her a convenience, and told her that my opinion was that her son's complaint was not to be slighted, nor altogether discredited; yet, that my judgement in his case was not settled. I gave her caution, moreover, that the thing might not take wind, lest the whole country should ring with what we had yet no assurance of.

In this juncture of time I had business which would admit no delay; wherefore I went for Launceston that evening, but promised to see them again next week. Yet I was prevented by an occasion which pleaded a sufficient excuse, for my wife was that week brought home from a neighbour's house very ill. However, my mind was upon the adventure. I studied the case, and about three weeks after went again, resolving, by the help of God, to see the utmost.

The next morning, being the 27th day of July 1665, I went to the haunted field by myself, and walked the breadth of the field without any encounter. I returned and took the other walk, and then the spectrum appeared to me, much about the same place where I saw it before, when the young gentleman was with me. In my thoughts, it moved swifter than the time before, and about ten feet distance from me on my right hand, insomuch that I had not time to speak, as I had determined with myself beforehand.

The evening of this day, the parents, the son, and myself being in the chamber where I lay, I propounded to them our going all together to the place next morning, and after some asseveration that there was no danger in it, we all resolved upon it. The morning being come, lest we should alarm the family of servants, they went under the pretence of seeing a field of wheat, and I took my horse and fetched a compass another way, and so met at the stile we had appointed.

Thence we all four walked leisurely into the Quartils, and had passed above half the field before the ghost made appearance. It then came over the stile just before us, and moved with that swiftness that by the time we had gone six or seven steps it passed by. I immediately turned head and ran after it, with the young man by my side; we saw it pass over the

stile by which we entered, but no farther. I stepped upon the hedge at one place, he at another, but could discern nothing; whereas, I dare aver, that the swiftest horse in England could not have conveyed himself out of sight in that short space of time. Two things I observed in this day's appearance. 1. That a spaniel dog, who followed the company unregarded, did bark and run away as the spectrum passed by; whence it is easy to conclude that it was not our fear or fancy which made the apparition. 2. That the motion of the spectrum was not gradation, or by steps, and moving of the feet, but a kind of gliding, as children upon the ice, or a boat down a swift river, which punctually answers the description that ancients gave of their *Lemures*, which was Κατὰ ῥύμτω ἀέριον καὶ ὁρμὴν ἅπζαποδισον (Heliodorus).

But to proceed. This ocular evidence clearly convinced, but, withal, strangely frightened the old gentleman and his wife, who knew this Dorothy Dingley in her lifetime, were at her burial, and now plainly saw her features in this present apparition. I encouraged them as well as I could, but after this they went no more. However, I was resolved to proceed, and use such lawful means as God hath discovered, and learned men have successfully practised in these irregular cases.

The next morning being Thursday, I went out very early by myself, and walked for about an hour's space in meditation and prayer in the field next adjoining to the Quartils. Soon after five I stepped over the stile into the disturbed field, and had not gone above thirty or forty paces before the ghost appeared at the farther stile. I spoke to it with a loud voice, in some such sentences as the way of these dealings directed me, whereupon it approached, but slowly, and when I came near, it moved not. I spake again, and it answered, in a voice neither very audible nor intelligible. I was not in the least terrified, and therefore persisted until it spake again, and gave me satisfaction. But the work could not be finished at this time; wherefore the same evening, an hour after sunset, it met me again near the same place, and after a few words on each side, it quietly vanished, and neither doth appear since, nor ever will more to any man's disturbance. The discourse in the morning lasted about a quarter of an hour.

These things are true, and I know them to be so, with as much certainty as eyes and ears can give me; and until I can be persuaded that my senses do deceive me about their proper

object, and by that persuasion deprive myself of the strongest inducement to believe the Christian religion, I must and will assert that these things in this paper are true.

As for the manner of my proceeding, I find no reason to be ashamed of it, for I can justify it to men of good principles, discretion, and recondite learning, though in this case I choose to content myself in the assurance of the thing, rather than be at the unprofitable trouble to persuade others to believe it; for I know full well with what difficulty relations of so uncommon a nature and practice obtain relief. He that tells such a story may expect to be dealt withal as a traveller in Poland by the robbers, viz., first murdered and then searched – first condemned for a liar, or superstitious, and then, when it is too late, have his reasons and proofs examined. This incredulity may be attributed:

1. To the infinite abuses of the people, and impositions upon their faith by the cunning monks and friars, etc., in the days of darkness and popery; for they made apparitions as often as they pleased, and got both money and credit by quieting the *terriculamenta vulgi*, which their own artifice had raised.

2. To the prevailing of Somatism and the Hobbean principle in these times, which is a revival of the doctrine of the Sadducees; and as it denies the nature, so it cannot consist with the apparition of spirits; of which, see *Leviathan*, p. 1, c. 12.

3. To the ignorance of men in our age, in this peculiar and mysterious part of philosophy and of religion, namely, the communication between spirits and men. Not one scholar in ten thousand (though otherwise of excellent learning) knows anything of it or the way how to manage it. This ignorance breeds fear and abhorrence of that which otherwise might be of incomparable benefit to mankind.

But I being a clergyman and young, and a stranger in these parts, do apprehend silence and secrecy to be my best security.

In rebus abstrusissimis abundans cautela non nocet.

MASKS AND VOICES

Rosemary Timperley

She drove along the rough road in the burning sunshine. Her long red hair, heavy with sweat, felt as if it were dripping blood. That was almost her only physical sensation: the ominous wetness round her throat and neck. Otherwise she felt unreal, outside herself, as if none of this were actually happening, this mad journey to her name-place. Mad? She supposed she *was* mad. They would say so if They knew – *when* They knew Did They know already? Had the hunt begun, the hunt for the red-haired vixen? Even if it had, this was the last place in the world They'd think of looking for her. The last place in the world. London was the last place in Geoffrey's world. Would Lethem be the last place in hers?

Behind her, before her, and on either side stretched the Rupununi, the savannah or grassland, although the grass was a cheat because when you examined it more closely you saw that it was sedge. The trees were a cheat too. Glimpsed casually, they appeared to be evenly-spaced fruit-trees. They were nothing of the sort. They were sandpaper trees, stunted and gnarled, as if inhabited by evil spirits, and with leaves as harsh and hurtful as the sandpaper after which they were named, abrasive as the tongue of a sadistic husband. Then there were the 'castles' They were cheats. They looked like stone monuments, some of them six feet tall, set among the trees, each one casting its separate cone-shaped shadow. But in fact they were ant-castles made of grey mud. Everything here was false. Everything was a mask to hide a heartless face. Like the mask of her own face. Such a pretty face, at a glance. But if you looked behind the mask to the heart of the face, you found – what? She had not dared yet to lift her own mask and look behind. She was 'outside herself' and thus she must stay. But suppose, while she was 'outside', something else got in. Something else? What?

Wild thoughts during the wild drive. How much longer, this journey across nowhere? She kept thinking that round the next bend a village or a valley would appear, if not the town of Lethem itself, but each time there was just more savannah, more sandpaper trees, more mud castles.

Now came more practical, even cheerful thoughts. How lucky that she'd still had that passport made out in her maiden name, Kate Lethem; how lucky that she'd kept her separate, secret bank account, savings from her years as a secretary, and been able to draw out the lot, leaving the cupboard bare; how lucky that she'd been able to sum up such presence of mind at all, been able, despite galvanic shock, to do ordinary things like packing clothes, booking a flight to Guyana, buying a cheap second-hand car on arrival at Georgetown. She had to hand it to her *alter ego* for the excellent way it had made her seem a respectable British tourist instead of – instead of – no! Don't let your thoughts look back. Keep them facing forward, the way the mask of your face faces forward, as you drive on . . . and on . . . and on . . .

She reached part of the savannah where there had been a fire. The flames had crept over the sedge like an advancing tide, and then stopped suddenly, as if the tide had turned. On one side of the jagged dividing line the land was brownish green, on the other side, black. Burned up. Finished. Dead. Burned alive. Martyred. The way saints were. And witches. And souls in Hell. Dead souls burning. My soul is burning! Save me!

'Pull yourself together,' she said aloud and, lifting one hand from the steering-wheel, swept back her wet red hair. The soft soaking sight of it sickened her.

'Pull yourself together,' she said again. 'Think sensibly.' She thought: The Rupununi. It *is* a real place. It is not a dream. This is the place where in olden times runaway slaves from the sugar-cane fields tried to find freedom and then starved to death among the sedge and were eaten by ants; or they were captured by the Amerindians, who were rewarded for returning them to their 'rightful' owners. And now that the black man had gained social equality in the land, the Amerindians were afraid of them. Quite right too. The sins of the fathers are not so easily forgiven and forgotten.

Sins? Don't think about sins. And don't cast stones, Kate Lethem, you in your glass house.

A line of green-topped palm trees appeared, marking the course of a stream. Should she stop and go down to the stream for a drink and a wash? No. Don't stop. If you stop you may not be able to start again, never get there, and you must get

there. The palm trees and the stream were left behind as if they had been the mirage of an oasis.

At last, at long last, she came to the city. It wasn't really a city, little more than a settlement with concrete houses and red laterite roads, but after travelling through the savannah for hours she saw the place as larger than life. Yes, this was Lethem, the city with her name.

It was as a schoolgirl that she had first seen the name LETHEM on a map of Guyana. She had thought then: it's *my* name. It must be where I belong, I who belong nowhere and to no one. And now she had arrived and would live here alone with her name and no one would know who she really was and They would never find her.

She stopped the car before she drove into the streets where people were. People. How long since she'd seen any? Really seen, as distinct from being aware of the passing of faces during the first part of her journey. People had been masks with voices, nothing more. The sandpaper trees were more like people to her than were human people. 'Pull yourself together!' She combed her hair, rubbed her face with a towel, powdered her nose and put on a dash of lipstick. She studied this mask in the mirror of her powder-compact. She smiled at it. No, better not smile. A smile of the lips when the eyes are unsmiling shows the mask up *as* a mask. You must be pleasant and courteous, but do not ever smile again, Kate Lethem. Do you remember the last time you smiled at someone? Oh, yes – no! Forget that!

Now, are you ready for your performance? Curtain up. On we go, on to the peopled stage in the full glare of the sun's enormous spotlight. Find the hotel.

First she drove past an abattoir. She smelled the blood, and water-brash rose in her throat. She swallowed it as if she were swallowing blood. Swallowing blood. Swallowing blood. Next she passed a cricket ground – but how 'civilized' in this place which reminded her of border towns in Wild West films. Cricket – how too, too frightfully British, doncherknow? Then there was a hospital. People die in hospitals. They are put in a sack and placed on a handwagon and a porter trundles them along to the mortuary. *He* didn't die in hospital but I expect he's been trundled along to the mortuary by now. Cut out these morbid thoughts, Kate Lethem. You have a performance to give. Ah – here's the hotel they told me about

in Georgetown, pretty Georgetown, with its white wooden houses built by the Dutch. At night they had a fragile, romantic air, an illusion of ivory castles. A cheat. A mask . . .

She parked her car outside the hotel, lifted her suitcase from the back and walked into the foyer, putting on her act of poised and experienced traveller: although in fact she had only twice been abroad before. First, Spain with an employer. Second, to Paris with Geoffrey. And the city of his honeymoon embrace had been far more of a foreign city than the city of Paris. His love-making – not that it had anything to do with love – had been sadistic. He *needed* to hurt. His cutting remarks had been equally cruel. Yes, once he had made her his wife, he had dropped the mask of his surface sugar-sweetness and shown his real face – the face of a tormentor who had gained possession of a helpless victim. A kind of slave. She had hated Paris ever since. Hated 'abroad'. So wasn't she the clever one to get this far without making a fool of herself? Come on now, Kate Lethem, the curtain is well and truly up and here is the first character to whom you must speak your lines: the man at the reception desk.

He turned out to be the manager. He was English, middle-aged, white-haired, calm and friendly. He looked at her passport.

'Lethem?' he said, smiling. 'How interesting. Was the former governor a relation of yours?'

'What former governor?'

'Chap called Lethem. Governor of the colony for a while when Guyana was still British Guiana. Our little city is named after him.'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about him,' she said. She didn't know anything about herself either. As the illegitimate child of an unmarried mother, whom she had never met except on the unremembered day of her birth (if that can be called a meeting rather than of a parting), Kate had spent her childhood in an orphanage. She had never had relatives, nothing personal at all, except her name, and she had sacrificed that one piece of personal property on the altar of marriage. But now she had cancelled the sacrifice, had come back to her own name and come for the first time to the town with the same name. It should be a refuge for her – surely!

'This way, Miss Lethem.' The manager took her to her room. 'My name's Craig. Bill Craig. If you want anything or have

any complaints, the buck stops here.'

'Thank you so much. All I want at the moment is a bath and a rest.'

'Oh, dear,' he said. 'You may not get much rest tonight. There's to be a dance in the hotel. A Brazilian band is coming from Boa Vista on the other side of the border and a lot of Brazilians will be coming too, as well as the local Amerindians. I advise you,' he added, 'to use the bathroom pronto before they all arrive and take over.'

She took his advice. His calm friendliness soothed her and so did the blessing of water as she wallowed in the bath. She only just finished in time, for no sooner was she back in her room than a lorry-load of Brazilians, male and female, drove in, and the women came surging up to the bathroom to repair the ravages of their five-hour journey. There was much twittering talk and tinkling laughter, while wafts of exotic scent infiltrated the corridor and crept into Kate's room.

She lay on the bed and listened to life going on around her. She was half-dozing despite the voices and footsteps – and then the band started up. Its rhythm was good, its beat seductive, its noise tremendous. The drummers in particular seemed to be pounding away like some fearful machine on a demolition site. This din was immediately below Kate's room and it rose up with almost tangible force through the floorboards, enveloping her in a cloak of uproar. She stuck it for half an hour, during which time the noise made her room feel even hotter than before; then decided to go and sit on the ground-floor verandah. At least she would be in the open air and on the same level as the band rather than on top of it.

So she changed her dress, put on some make-up and went downstairs. The large bar had been converted into a dance-hall, tables and chairs placed against the walls instead of scattered about. People were drinking in between dances, and even during dances. Most of the dancers so far were Amerindians, while the Brazilian visitors clustered round the edges of the floor. The Amerindian women were dancing with bare feet, stamping in an odd sort of way and watching their own feet with downcast eyes. Kate felt very foreign in this place which she'd hoped would be home. She walked through to the verandah.

One table there was occupied by three Brazilians, two men and one woman. They were talking in Portuguese. She sat in

a chair by the railing and looked out at the falling dark. The distant mountains had turned from blue-grey to sinister black. They crouched like monsters, waiting. She had a feeling of being watched, but when she glanced round, no one was looking in her direction.

Now she looked down. A baby ant-eater was creeping along by the railing. She thought: ant-eaters eat ants, ants eat – A shudder passed through her. She watched the creature moving unsteadily on its stilt-like legs which concealed sharp, curving claws, lethal as a scalpel or a razor –

Fool! Don't think of razors!

A shadow fell across her. She jumped. But it was only one of the Brazilian men from the table alongside. He flashed a smile, did not speak, indicated the dance-floor. Why not? she thought. If you can't beat them, join them. She nodded, unsmiling. They went inside.

The man danced well. So did Kate. The beat of the music entered into their bodies and soon they were 'high' with it. Kate lost sense of place and time. She was way outside herself again. Wild movement possessed the body left behind. Then the spell broke. The man suddenly seized her by the arm and took her out into the temporarily deserted foyer. There, without more ado, he embraced her so tightly that she could hardly breathe and tried to kiss her on the lips. She tossed her head from side to side, giving cries of anger which were drowned by the noise of the band. Her unwillingness seemed to make no impression on the man and that filled her with a red rage, out of all proportion to the event. She managed to free her small, but unusually strong, right hand and, with fingernails sharp as an ant-eater's claws, she tore that hand down the man's cheek.

Her reward was immediate: five stripes of blood gleamed on his face and he let her go, even pushed her away. He lifted his hand to his cheek, withdrew it and stared at his reddened fingers, then at her, not with anger but – surprise. For a second his face, to Kate's eyes, was Geoffrey's face. She felt paralysed. Then the man's expression changed from one of astonishment to almost-fear; he had seen something in Kate Lethem's eyes which sent a coldness through his overheated body. He turned away and strode out into the night. During the whole episode, they had not spoken a word to each other.

Kate stayed still for a second, then ran upstairs to her room

and locked the door, not so much locking someone out as locking some wild animal in. For now she too was frightened by her own action. She looked at her right hand, at the flesh and blood – his flesh and blood – embedded in her fingernails. She washed her hands at the wash-basin, over and over again as if water could wash away the deed. *Why* was I so savage? she asked herself. It wasn't as if he were trying to rape me in some lonely spot. He was only making a pass in a public place where other people were a few yards away. Oh, God, what is happening to me? What has been released in me since – since –

No! Don't think back – don't – think forward –

She lay in invisible chains on the bed in her locked room. Chains of the past. Slave-chains. She listened to the noisy night. The drummers seemed to be going berserk down there. The din went on for a long time and then, shortly before day-break, the band stopped, abruptly, as if chopped off by a guillotine's blade. Then there were voices, footsteps, drunken cries, ribald laughter, sounds of glass breaking. Later came the groan of the lorry revving up and finally driving away into the distance, letting the silence creep back into the corners and crevices now emptied of sound. Space for silence.

The sky lightened. Kate, still fully-dressed, fell into one of those nightmare-ridden sleeps which are more exhausting than staying awake. When she woke it was broad daylight. She staggered off the bed and looked out of the window. The ground below was carpeted with broken bottles and other litter.

An Amerindian girl came trailing past, shoulders bent, eyes cast down, feet dirty and bare, dress torn about the hem and neckline. She looked as if she had been raped by some drunk in the back of beyond and was in a daze beyond despair. By contrast, a small Negro boy came skipping among the fragments of glass, neatly avoiding them, as if they were provided as a game for his pleasure. His white grin, his curly black hair, his merry little shadow which, attached to his feet, danced with him, was a far cry from the cruel slavery-shadow of his ancestors. No chains on that little one anyway.

Aside from these two symbolic figures, the area outside the hotel was deserted. The glass débris glittered. The waste-paper shone and rustled. Very much 'the morning after the night before'.

Kate freshened up and went down to the bar, which Craig had already rearranged for normal use. She bought herself a beer and took it on to the verandah. She still didn't want to eat. When had she last eaten? On the plane? How long ago was that? She couldn't remember.

As she was the only hotel guest still around, Bill Craig came out to join her. 'Did you enjoy the dance, Miss Lethem?'

'Yes, thank you, Mr Craig.' She concealed her right hand, as if the deed it had done might show.

'I saw you dancing,' he said. 'It was a pleasure to watch.'

'Thank you, but I got tired and went upstairs early.'

'I'm afraid you must find Lethem rather dull after the cities you've been accustomed to. I wondered – would you like to see something really interesting this evening?'

'Depends what it is.' He seemed respectable, this man, but you could never tell by appearances. If he wanted to lure her to some dreary blue film show –

'A visit from a shaman, no less,' said Craig. 'There's an Amerindian village a short distance away. A woman there has been ill for some time. Fever, nausea, fits of hysteria. She doesn't get better in spite of the ministrations of their own doctor and a visiting RC priest. So they've sent for the shaman of an Akawaio Indian tribe, one of the many little autonomous settlements on the river bank. He's coming to hold a séance. I've been to these things before and I shall be going to this one, so if you'd care to come with me – ?' He looked at her enquiringly.

She hesitated. 'What exactly is a shaman? A witch-doctor?'

'That's putting it too crudely. He's a magician-cum-GP-cum-priest-cum-psychiatrist. The Akawaios believe that all physical ills have emotional or social causes and that confession is not only good for the soul but cures the body. What the shaman does is induce himself into a trance by chewing tobacco and making rhythmical rustling sounds by dashing bundles of leaves on the ground – like someone beating a drum – '

'I've had enough of drums,' Kate murmured.

Craig went on: 'Once in trance, the shaman's claim is that his spirit or soul becomes very small and light, detaches itself from his body and, by means of a spirit-ladder, flies into the sky. The soul is helped in its flight by the swallow-tailed kite, known colloquially as "clairvoyant woman", and as it travels

over the hills and forests, his deserted body becomes an empty receptacle which fills up with forest spirits. These spirits speak through the shaman's lips. They cross-examine the patient, trying to find what secret emotion or guilt is at the root of the illness. With luck, the patient eventually bursts out with a full confession of his or her sins and is cured. That's what's expected to happen to the patient today. Of course, you wouldn't understand what was being said by the various spirit voices because they're in the shaman's language, but the whole thing is fascinating to watch. Impressive too. How about it?'

'Wouldn't the villagers mind two outsiders turning up to watch their show?'

'They all know me. I'm no outsider. I'm part of Lethem's furniture. You, as my guest, would be welcome too. The chief's quite a nice old boy.'

Kate realized that she had been making feeble excuses not to go to this séance – had enough of drums – afraid of being unwelcome. The truth was that she felt afraid without knowing why. However, she must keep up her performance as a tourist interested in everything, so she straightened her shoulders and said, 'I'd love to come with you. It'll be fun.' In a flash, she'd regretted. Again, without knowing why. But it was too late for regret. She was committed. She wished she didn't still have that watched feeling. Paranoia brought on by lack of food and sleep? Possibly. Oh, to Hell! It might be fun after all.

So in the late afternoon Craig drove her in his Land Rover to the Amerindian village. It was small and shabby. There were thatched huts, a few rough wooden houses, and a little school which had a neglected air. The village chief greeted Craig in a friendly way and took the two of them to his hut. It was dim and dirty. Decaying food lay around, making Kate feel as if she wanted to be sick. She swallowed and tried to behave graciously. Then they went outside again to where the shaman was sitting on a log in front of one of the other huts. He was holding two bundles of leafy branches and beating them evenly and alternately on the ground. This, she recalled, helped to induce his trance.

She was surprised and relieved by the shaman's appearance. She had expected some gruesome figure decked out in feathers

and paint, but this man looked no more glamorous than a workman who'd come to see to the drains. In a way, that was what he was.

He wore a cloth cap with a peak, a scruffy sleeveless vest and dark shorts. His feet were bare. His skin was dark brown. His face was heavy-jowled, the lips folded tightly inwards. A stubbly moustache decorated his long upper lip, his nose was blunt as a pug's, and his eyes were so tiny that they seemed to be no more than pin-pricks. Some magician! thought Kate. But at least the man's ordinariness removed her feeling of unease. Only later was she to realize how rash she had been to think him 'ordinary' and therefore to relax the way she had.

However, she did relax, to the point of limp receptivity.

'He's had his tobacco juice already,' Craig informed her, as they sat a little apart from the crowd of villagers which had been gradually gathering until all the inhabitants were present.

'By now,' Craig went on, 'his spirit will be flying up into the air, on the spirit-ladder, leaving his body empty. Let's hope some jealous shaman of another tribe hasn't got it in for him. One of their little tricks is to go up on their own ladder, steal the rival shaman's ladder – and then the poor soul can't get back.'

'What happens then?'

'Sometimes he dies.'

She giggled weakly. 'Oh, what nonsense it all is!'

'Sh, child. Don't mock what you can't understand.'

The shaman was now in a trance. The patient, a scraggy, sick-looking woman with big, fevered eyes and lips twisting about in frenzy, was led before him. Then a variety of voices began to speak for her, each voice different from the other and all coming from the shaman's lips. Kate could not understand a word, but she soon saw the effect on the patient. The woman began by arguing and protesting, shaking her head as if in denial of something. Then she stopped her denials and, flinging her arms upwards, let out a long, passionate flow of words which sounded like a grand confession. As she spoke, her whole body relaxed, as if indeed her pains were being drained out of her, like some sort of poison. Finally, she flung herself face down at the shaman's feet, lay there perfectly still for a moment, and then got up, bowed to the shaman, and walked away steadily, calmly and with great

dignity. She looked like a different person.

'Did you understand what she said?' Kate whispered to Craig.

'Most of it. She confessed to theft. Apparently she stole another woman's husband as well as being unfaithful to her own, but now that she's come clean, she'll be all right. The séance has been a success. The shaman will come to himself again in a minute.'

But the shaman did not 'come to himself'. He stayed in the trance. The crowd, which had been murmuring, grew silent again, waiting. Was more to come? No other patient had been brought forward, so whom did the spirits wish to address?

A voice came from the shaman's lips, a cold, mocking, masculine, English voice. It said: 'Your hands are covered with blood, are they not, my darling? *All the perfumes of Arabia* – ' The voice stopped. The shaman gave a great shudder, rose to his feet and glared at Kate with his fierce little pin-prick eyes, as if he suspected that *she* had cast some spell on *him*.

Frightened, she clutched Craig's arm. 'Take me away from here.'

'Of course. Come along.' He guided her back to the Land Rover. 'Extraordinary thing,' he said, as they got in. 'An English voice. I've never heard that happen before. I don't wonder it upset you. I hope you didn't think it was aimed at you personally just because he looked our way – '

'Of course not. How could it be? It just gave me the creeps, that's all.'

'*All the perfumes of Arabia*,' Craig murmured as they drove along. 'How does it end? – *will not sweeten this little hand.* Lady Macbeth, sleep-walking after the murder. Now how could a fellow like that have heard any Shakespeare, let alone be able to quote it? You see what I meant when I said you shouldn't mock what you can't understand. Something peculiar came through him tonight all right, and it was no spirit of our local countryside but of an English public school, if the accent was anything to go by.'

He switched on the car radio. A voice came through immediately, an actor's voice: 'Did you really think you could get away from me? You stupid little runaway slave, running straight to runaway slave territory! I followed you. I've been watching you all the time. And now you're mine again.

Here I am, and here you are, and we shall never be parted again.' Then there was a crash of mood music followed by an announcer's voice: 'That was *The Runaway Slave*, a play by –' Craig switched off. 'Good old BBC World Service,' he said. 'We seem to have just missed an interesting bit of drama.' He looked sideways at her as he sat at the wheel. 'Come back, child. You're miles away.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Craig.'

'That's all right, but I hope that old magician hasn't really cast a spell on you.'

'What nonsense!' She laughed without smiling, the mask of her laughter as false as the mask of her face. Then they drove on in silence and Kate closed her eyes . . .

And she was back in that bathroom again, at the flat. Geoffrey had been making 'love' to her all afternoon, at the same time as stinging her with his contemptuous words. At last she could stand it no longer, ran into the bathroom and locked herself in. There was a pause, then he'd come and rattled at the door. He went on doing it and she knew he wouldn't stop. There was no keeping him out. So she let him in. He had come to shave his 'evening shadow'. His electric razor had gone wrong, so he was using an old cut-throat type. She'd watched him, while he ignored her. She'd recalled one of their acquaintances saying: 'The thing about old Geoffrey is that you don't even how he's got it in for you till you feel the blood dripping down your throat.' Throat. Cut-throat. Cut-throat. Cut-throat. The word had repeated itself silently in her head. Then its hyphen had dropped away and it had turned into two words, like a command. Cut throat! Cut throat! Still she'd stood watching, and he behaved as if she wasn't there.

Then he had replaced the razor on the glass shelf above the wash-basin and turned to her, with his malicious little smile, and she had smiled back – sweetly – radiantly – and picked up the razor – and plunged forward – and drawn the blade strongly, firmly and accurately across his naked throat. His expression, she remembered, had been one of – surprise. After that she had washed her blood-stained hands, and the razor, thoroughly, so very calmly and thoroughly, while he had choked to death on the bathroom floor. She had wrapped a scarf round the razor and put it in her handbag. She had packed her suitcase, collected her passport in the name of

Kate Lethem, and left the flat. She had plenty of time. It might be days before anyone found him. She had spent the rest of the night sitting in the booking hall of a main-line railway station, with the air of someone who had missed a last train and was sitting it out till morning. When morning came and the banks and travel agencies were open, she had sallied forth and made arrangements for her journey. Everything had gone smoothly. Luck was with her all the way. She was 'outside herself', of course, but what of it? No one noticed a little thing like that. And now – *all the perfumes of Arabia* – He had found her. He was dead but he had come after her and watched her. That feeling of being watched: not paranoia at all – true!

'Here we are. Home sweet home.' Craig's voice.

'Do you really think of it as your home, Mr Craig?' Nice, safe, conventional remark, to conceal the turmoil of her feelings, that sensation of being on the brink of madness.

'Indeed I do. Home is where the heart is.'

Home is where the heart is. But suppose you have no heart. Suppose your heart was squeezed and beaten and tortured to death by the man you offered it to? And then you killed him and were left heartless – utterly heartless – your body empty as the shaman's body when he was in trance – empty – and now the evil ghost of the murdered man had come into that emptiness.

They were out of the car now and Craig was leading her into the bar. 'I think you need a drink,' he said. A man and a woman were chatting in the bar. The man said: 'You kept the razor as a souvenir, didn't you? Such a useful souvenir!' Craig said: 'This Brazilian beer is pretty good. Or would you prefer a short? I say, my dear girl, you do look cut up.' Cut up. Cut up. It was Geoffrey who had been cut up . . .

'What shall it be then? Beer or a short?'

'Beer will be fine. Thank you.' She sat at the bar counter, perching neatly on a high stool, legs crossed, hands steady.

While Craig was fetching her drink from behind the counter, she heard snatches of talk from other people in the bar, and she knew that Geoffrey was behind that talk – speaking to her through them. 'It was the only unpredictable thing you'd ever done. In an odd sort of way, I respected you for it' . . . 'Bad blood, I suppose. Orphanage bastard. Slave mentality' . . . 'Oh, yes, a doormat type. Masochistic. What a marriage!

Sadist marries masochist. Ideal marriage?' And laughter.

'Here I am again, come to join you.' Craig said that. He'd brought her drink.

'Thank you so much.'

'What an actress!' said someone in the bar. 'But, sweetie, how long will you be able to keep it up?'

'Oh, shut up!' Her voice was sharp. Heads turned.

'What's the matter?' said Craig. 'I was only trying to help, suggesting that you should eat something and rest.'

'I'm sorry,' said Kate. 'I wasn't – ' She'd been going to say: I wasn't speaking to you. She stopped herself in time. Then, to her relief, some people came into the foyer from a plane which had landed at the local airstrip and Craig went to attend to them, leaving her alone.

A man in the bar said to his companion: 'You'll never be alone again. I'll always be with you.' Someone else said, 'You'll have to join me, soon, very soon.'

She drained her drink and went up to her room. She packed her case, returned to the now empty foyer and left money for her bill on the counter. She went out to her car and began to drive back along the road through the savannah.

Darkness fell. A full moon rose. All was quiet. The time had come.

She parked her car at the edge of the road. She sat stiffly and stone-still at the wheel. Her face was starkly ugly in the moonlight, eyes hard with desperation, mouth bitter and twisted as a scrap of crumpled wire. The mask had dropped away.

She picked up her handbag and got out of the car. She moved like a zombie across the sedge of the savannah. One grotesque sandpaper tree beckoned to her with rigid branch-fingers. She walked towards it, her moon-shadow walking tall and thin before her. Her long shadow-hair was black, dripping with black sweat. She stopped and stood still between the beckoning sandpaper tree and an ant-castle. Her shadow had turned into the shadow of a statue, flanked by shadow-tree and shadow-castle. Then the shadow-statue moved. Its left hand opened the shadow-handbag. Its right hand delved inside and extracted the shadow-razor. The shadow of Kate Lethem laid the shadow-handbag on the ground, then went down on its knees. It stayed still again, perfectly still. A kneeling statue. She gazed down at it. She watched its right arm lift itself,

and then its right hand make one strong, sweeping movement across its throat. She watched the shadow-statue sway and topple and then collapse sideways. She heard it gurgling and choking. What a noise for a mere shadow to make! She felt her wet red hair about her throat and shoulders. Then the fallen shadow vanished as the moonlight went out. All the lights were going out, all over the world. The world was dying. A black tide was coming slowly, jaggedly towards her. Black fire. There was no warding off the approaching blackness. Where am I? Where–

For the rest of the night there was no visible movement in the eerie landscape of the savannah, where the sandpaper trees and ant-castles stood as if petrified in the light of the moon, and the distant night-black mountains waited and watched. Then morning came. The sun burned down. And something stirred. Tiny and purposeful, the ants came marching out of their castle. They made straight for that outstretched right hand, still rigidly gripping the cut-throat razor . . .

All the perfumes of Arabia – will not sweeten –

Maybe not. But to the ants, that little hand was as sweet as anything to be found in the sugar-cane fields, down by the Demerara.

THE LATE ARRIVALS

K. B. Hill

Look, I saw them. I know I saw them. All right, so I was tired. I was exhausted. It had been months since I had last operated the wretched thing, but what else can you do when three of your four operators all go on the sick together?

I don't know; since Friday, yesterday, the looks I've been getting from the other staff around there, anyone would think I was going mad. Well, perhaps I am, I don't know.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't be muttering like this. How did it start? You must be the only one around there who doesn't know; the whole place has been buzzing with it ever since they all got in yesterday morning. As for me, at that moment, I was on my way home, and longing for my bed. For sleep, that is; Suzy was on her way in to work by then. No; it was just a cold and empty bed that awaited me. I was worn out, but after a shift like that, my body was certainly ready for sleep, and yet, my mind . . . my mind was too wide awake. I knew I'd seen it, but would anyone else believe me?

It seems now like an age ago, but it's been only forty-eight hours since I placed my identification card in the slot and watched the Computer Room door open on what seemed nothing other than an uneventful Thursday evening's shift. I talked with Sean, the other shift leader, and glanced through the log: about eight and a half hours' work remained for us to do. I recall smiling to myself at the thought of how long it would have taken the old machine to get through that workload. In those days, when I was a shift leader, it would normally have taken us about fifteen hours, but that Thursday evening, there I was, the Chief Operator, standing in for an ill shift leader, and with a young clerk to act as my junior op, and still it would only take us about eight hours. As I said, I smiled.

I didn't smile for long, though; just until Jinky shouted over to me, 'Red lights here, does that mean anything?'

That was the start of it. I tried for about ten minutes to clear them, but to no avail.

'You might as well go and put the kettle on,' I told Jinky, 'and I'll go and call an engineer.'

That was just after four that afternoon. An hour and a half later, Gerry arrived with his box of tricks, and set to work like some electronic physician, probing away in the Central Processing Unit, tutting over his oscilloscope, and checking meters here and there. Then, while he prodded and poked, Jinky and I had our coffee, and then went out, and got the computer stationery levels stocked up.

It seemed much, much later, but it was only just after seven when we got the machine back, and three hours late, we ran the customer and stock file amendments, and then the customer order sheets themselves. Then the printer ribbon jammed, but of course, that night, I didn't notice it until the job had actually finished. So, naturally, the sheets being totally illegible in places, the relevant computer files had to be deleted, and then restored from the previous night's copy tape, before we could rerun the job.

I told Jinky where the tape was, and while I got the jobs set up again, he went into the tape library, stretched up, got the tape, and dropped it on the floor.

Sensitive bloody machine, this is. Well, being so up to date, it would be. So it decides it can't read the tape. Result? We now have to recreate files from not one, but two nights before.

So, eventually, by about ten that evening, we were back to where we should have been at around five that afternoon. Five hours lost, and we'd only just started the work. I made a mental note to dig out the overtime sheets.

It was around that time that I rang up Suzy, and with masterly understatement, told her I might be a bit late that night, and not to wait up for me; it's just as well for Littlewoods that my predictions on a Saturday are nowhere near as accurate as that one, more's the pity.

Then, just after half past midnight, the month-end invoices had just started, and Jinky and I were sitting in my office, drinking coffee and playing cards, quite calm and peaceful at last, when the fire alarm on the wall above Jinky seemed almost literally to burst into life, with a scream that seemed to flatten my eardrums to a pulp. I dashed into the computer room, and glanced feverishly about. Then Jinky yelled through, 'It's the gatehouse for you!'

I ran back into the office, and took the phone from him. The voice coming through the earpiece was fighting a losing battle with the screaming siren, but I could just make out

the instruction to evacuate the building immediately, and to make our way down to the gatehouse. I slammed the phone down, and above the wailing of the siren, I shouted at Jinky to lock up the tape library while I typed the cancellation command through the console. With my heart really pounding, I impatiently waited for the system to acknowledge. After a whole three seconds, it eventually did, and I went into the power down procedure. Then as the last of the console lights flickered and dimmed, we locked the disc packs away, switched out the lights, locked the doors, and dashed down the deserted corridor, our ears really throbbing by then, and four minutes later, we were standing, panting, outside the gatehouse, in the cool quiet of the night, and chatting to a couple of policemen.

About fifteen minutes after that, we were back up in the Computer Room. It was me that was blazing, and not the building. Damned false alarm!

The night dragged on after that. First one thing, and then another. Jobs that up until that night that could have been relied upon to process without any trouble, usually had to be rerun at least once. Until, by about five o'clock – the following morning, that is – yesterday – I was worn out, fed up, run down – anything, in any direction; you name it, I was it.

Well, the local newsagent usually opens up at about five thirty, so I asked Jinky if he'd pop out and get me a paper, and off he trudged, probably as glad to be away from the stale and fragile atmosphere in the room, as to be getting out into the fresh June dawn.

I sat down at the console, wearily folded my arms across the top of it, and, cradling my head there, I gazed absently at the printer.

Then, in my sleepy stupor, I thought I noticed something moving, away over to my left, somewhere behind the magnetic tape units, and I lazily turned my head to look.

My eyes widened quickly, as I came to my senses. Marching along, totally oblivious of the scene around them, there were six of them, just as I later noted in the log. The tape trolley might just as well not have been there, and the printer as well, just thin air. They marched on, through both of them. Effortlessly simply does not describe it. To them, nothing was in their path, and they just marched on accordingly, through the wall, and across the garden outside. I stared through the

window. Then one minute they were there, the next, they weren't. Incredible, isn't it! Or stupid! Nobody else was there, just me. Oh, I had known that that place was supposed to have been built on the site of an old fort, but no one that I know had ever heard of anything like . . . what d'you mean? You hadn't read the log? But the whole department's talking about them!

Why, six Roman soldiers! Yes! In the Computer Room! Of course I'm OK! There's nothing wrong with me! Or my eyes! I tell you, I did see them! You don't believe me? No one does. And I wouldn't blame them, but look at this – I found it on the floor beside the printer, after they'd gone.

Go on, look at it, closely.

Well, what does it look like! It's a Roman coin! Brand new! Nobody's going to tell me I'm imagining this, as well!

THE DOLL'S GHOST

F. Marion Crawford

It was a terrible accident, and for one moment the splendid machinery of Cranston House got out of gear and stood still. The butler emerged from the retirement in which he spent his elegant leisure, two grooms of the chambers appeared simultaneously from opposite directions, there were actually housemaids on the grand staircase, and those who remember the facts most exactly assert that Mrs Pringle herself positively stood upon the landing. Mrs Pringle was the housekeeper. As for the head nurse, the under nurse and the nursery-maid, their feelings cannot be described.

The Lady Gwendolen Lancaster-Douglas-Scroop, youngest daughter of the ninth Duke of Cranston, and aged six years and three months, picked herself up quite alone, and sat down on the third step of the grand staircase in Cranston House.

'Oh!' ejaculated the butler, and he disappeared again.

'Ah!' responded the grooms of the chambers, as they also went away.

'It's only that doll,' Mrs Pringle was distinctly heard to say, in a tone of contempt.

The under nurse heard her say it. Then the three nurses gathered round Lady Gwendolen and patted her, and gave her unhealthy things out of their pockets, and hurried her out of Cranston House as fast as they could, lest it should be found out upstairs that they had allowed the Lady Gwendolen Lancaster-Douglas-Scroop to tumble down the grand staircase with her doll in her arms. And as the doll was badly broken, the nursery-maid carried it, with the pieces, wrapped up in Lady Gwendolen's little cloak. It was not far to Hyde Park, and when they had reached a quiet place they took means to find out that Lady Gwendolen had no bruises. For the carpet was very thick and soft, and there was thick stuff under it to make it softer.

Lady Gwendolen Lancaster-Douglas-Scroop sometimes yelled, but she never cried. It was because she had yelled that the nurse had allowed her to go downstairs alone with Nina, the doll, under one arm, while she steadied herself with her other

hand on the balustrade, and trod upon the polished marble steps beyond the edge of the carpet. So she had fallen, and Nina had come to grief . . .

Mr Bernard Puckler and his little daughter lived in a little house in a little alley, which led out off a quiet little street not very far from Belgrave Square. He was the great doll doctor, and his extensive practice lay in the most aristocratic quarter. He mended dolls of all sizes and ages, boy dolls and girl dolls, baby dolls in long clothes, and grown-up dolls in fashionable gowns, talking dolls and dumb dolls, those that shut their eyes when they lay down, and those whose eyes had to be shut for them by means of a mysterious wire. His daughter Else was only just over twelve years old, but she was already very clever at mending dolls' clothes, and at doing their hair, which is harder than you might think, though the dolls sit quite still while it is being done.

Mr Puckler had originally been a German, but he had dissolved his nationality in the ocean of London many years ago, like a great many foreigners. He still had one or two German friends, however, who came on Saturday evenings and smoked with him and played picquet or 'skat' with him for farthing points, and called him 'Herr Doktor', which seemed to please Mr Puckler very much.

He looked older than he was, for his beard was rather long and ragged, his hair was grizzled and thin, and he wore horn-rimmed spectacles.

As for Else, she was a thin, pale child, very quiet and neat, with dark eyes and brown hair that was plaited down her back and tied with a bit of black ribbon. She mended the dolls' clothes and took the dolls back to their homes when they were quite strong again.

The house was a little one, but too big for the two people who lived in it. There was a small sitting-room on the street, and the workshop was at the back, and there were three rooms upstairs. But the father and daughter lived most of their time in the workshop, because they were generally at work, even in the evenings.

Mr Puckler laid Nina on the table and looked at her a long time, till the tears began to fill his eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles. He was a very susceptible man, and he often fell in love with the dolls he mended, and found it hard to part with them when they had smiled at him for a few

days. They were real little people to him, with characters and thoughts and feelings of their own, and he was very tender with them all. But some attracted him especially from the first, and when they were brought to him maimed and injured, their state seemed so pitiful to him that the tears came easily. You must remember that he had lived among dolls during a great part of his life, and understood them.

'How do you know that they feel nothing?' he went on to say to Else. 'You must be gentle with them. It costs nothing to be kind to the little beings, and perhaps it makes a difference to them.'

And Else understood him, because she was a child, and she knew that she was more to him than all the dolls.

He fell in love with Nina at first sight, perhaps because her beautiful brown glass eyes were something like Else's own, and he loved Else first and best, with all his heart. And, besides, it was a very sorrowful case. Nina had evidently not been long in the world, for her complexion was perfect, her hair was smooth where it should be smooth, and curly where it should be curly, and her silk clothes were perfectly new. But across her face was that frightful gash, like a sabre-cut, deep and shadowy within, but clean and sharp at the edges. When he tenderly pressed her head to close the gaping wound, the edges made a fine, grating sound, that was painful to hear, and the lids of the dark eyes quivered and trembled as though Nina were suffering dreadfully.

'Poor Nina!' he exclaimed sorrowfully. 'But I shall not hurt you much, though you will take a long time to get strong.'

He always asked the names of the broken dolls when they were brought to him, and sometimes the people knew what the children called them, and told him. He liked 'Nina' for a name. Altogether and in every way she pleased him more than any doll he had seen for many years, and he felt drawn to her, and made up his mind to make her perfectly strong and sound, no matter how much labour it might cost him.

Mr Puckler worked patiently a little at a time, and Else watched him. She could do nothing for poor Nina, whose clothes needed no mending. The longer the doll doctor worked the more fond he became of the yellow hair and the beautiful brown glass eyes. He sometimes forgot all the other dolls that were waiting to be mended, lying side by side on a shelf,

and sat for an hour gazing at Nina's face, while he racked his ingenuity for some new invention by which to hide even the smallest trace of the terrible accident.

She was wonderfully mended. Even he was obliged to admit that; but the scar was still visible to his keen eyes, a very fine line right across the face, downwards from right to left. Yet all the conditions had been most favourable for a cure, since the cement had set quite hard at the first attempt and the weather had been fine and dry, which makes a great difference in a dolls' hospital.

At last he knew that he could do no more, and the under nurse had already come twice to see whether the job was finished, as she coarsely expressed it.

'Nina is not quite strong yet,' Mr Puckler had answered each time, for he could not make up his mind to face the parting.

And now he sat before the square deal table at which he worked, and Nina lay before him for the last time with a big brown-paper box beside her. It stood there like her coffin, waiting for her, he thought. He must put her into it, and lay tissue paper over her dear face, and then put on the lid, and at the thought of tying the string his sight was dim with tears again. He was never to look into the glassy depths of the beautiful brown eyes any more, nor to hear the little wooden voice say 'Pa-pa' and 'Ma-ma'. It was a very painful moment.

In the vain hope of gaining time before the separation, he took up the little sticky bottles of cement and glue and gum and colour, looking at each one in turn, and then at Nina's face. And all his small tools lay there, neatly arranged in a row, but he knew that he could not use them again for Nina. She was quite strong at last, and in a country where there should be no cruel children to hurt her she might live a hundred years, with only that almost imperceptible line across her face, to tell of the fearful thing that had befallen her on the marble steps of Cranston House.

Suddenly Mr Puckler's heart was quite full, and he rose abruptly from his seat and turned away.

'Else,' he said unsteadily, 'you must do it for me. I cannot bear to see her go into the box.'

So he went and stood at the window with his back turned, while Else did what he had not the heart to do.

'Is it done?' he asked, not turning round. 'Then take her

away, my dear. Put on your hat, and take her to Cranston House quickly, and when you are gone I will turn round.'

Else was used to her father's queer ways with the dolls, and though she had never seen him so much moved by a parting, she was not much surprised.

'Come back quickly,' he said, when he heard her hand on the latch. 'It is growing late, and I should not send you at this hour. But I cannot bear to look forward to it any more.'

When Else was gone, he left the window and sat down in his place before the table again, to wait for the child to come back. He touched the place where Nina had lain, very gently, and he recalled the softly-tinted pink face, and the glass eyes, and the ringlets of yellow hair, till he could almost see them.

The evenings were long, for it was late in the spring. But it began to grow dark soon, and Mr Puckler wondered why Else did not come back. She had been gone an hour and a half, and that was much longer than he had expected, for it was barely half a mile from Belgrave Square to Cranston House. He reflected that the child might have been kept waiting, but as the twilight deepened he grew anxious, and walked up and down in the dim workshop, no longer thinking of Nina, but of Else, his own living child, whom he loved.

An indefinable, disquieting sensation came upon him by fine degrees, a chilliness and a faint stirring of his thin hair, joined with a wish to be in any company rather than to be alone much longer. It was the beginning of fear.

He told himself in strong German-English that he was a foolish old man, and he began to feel about for the matches in the dusk. He knew just where they should be, for he always kept them in the same place, close to the little tin box that held bits of sealing-wax of various colours, for some kinds of mending. But somehow he could not find the matches in the gloom.

Something had happened to Else, he was sure, and as his fear increased, he felt as though it might be allayed if he could get a light and see what time it was. Then he called himself a foolish old man again, and the sound of his own voice startled him in the dark. He could not find the matches.

The window was grey still; he might see what time it was if he went close to it, and he could go and get matches out of the cupboard afterwards. He stood back from the table,

to get out of the way of the chair, and began to cross the board floor.

Something was following him in the dark. There was a small pattering, as of tiny feet upon the boards. He stopped and listened, and the roots of his hair tingled. It was nothing and he was a foolish old man. He made two steps more, and he was sure that he heard the little pattering again. He turned his back to the window, leaning against the sash so that the panes began to crack, and he faced the dark. Everything was quite still, and it smelt of paste and cement and wood-filings as usual.

'Is that you, Else?' he asked, and he was surprised by the fear in his voice.

There was no answer in the room, and he held up his watch and tried to make out what time it was by the grey dusk that was just not darkness. So far as he could see, it was within two or three minutes of ten o'clock. He had been a long time alone. He was shocked, and frightened for Else, out in London, so late, and he almost ran across the room to the door. As he fumbled for the latch, he distinctly heard the running of the little feet after him.

'Mice!' he exclaimed feebly, just as he got the door open.

He shut it quickly behind him, and felt as though some cold thing had settled on his back and was writhing upon him. The passage was quite dark, but he found his hat and was out in the alley in a moment, breathing more freely, and surprised to find how much light there still was in the open air. He could see the pavement clearly under his feet, and far off in the street to which the alley led he could hear the laughter and calls of children, playing some game out of doors. He wondered how he could have been so nervous, and for an instant he thought of going back into the house to wait quietly for Else. But instantly he felt that nervous fright of something stealing over him again. In any case it was better to walk up to Cranston House and ask the servants about the child. One of the women had perhaps taken a fancy to her, and was even now giving her tea and cake.

He walked quickly to Belgrave Square, and then up the broad streets, listening as he went, whenever there was no other sound, for the tiny footsteps. But he heard nothing, and was laughing at himself when he rang the servants' bell at

the big house. Of course, the child must be there.

The person who opened the door was quite an inferior person – for it was a back door – but affected the manners of the front, and stared at Mr Puckler superciliously.

No little girl had been seen, and he knew 'nothing about no dolls'.

'She is my little girl,' said Mr Puckler tremulously, for all his anxiety was returning tenfold, 'and I am afraid something has happened.'

The inferior person said rudely that 'nothing could have happened to her in that house, because she had not been there, which was a jolly good reason why'; and Mr Puckler was obliged to admit that the man ought to know, as it was his business to keep the door and let people in. He wished to be allowed to speak to the under nurse, who knew him; but the man was ruder than ever, and finally shut the door in his face.

When the doll doctor was alone in the street, he steadied himself by the railing, for he felt as though he were breaking in two, just as some dolls break, in the middle of the back-bone.

Presently he knew that he must be doing something to find Else, and that gave him strength. He began to walk as quickly as he could through the streets, following every highway and byway which his little girl might have taken on her errand. He also asked several policemen in vain if they had seen her, and most of them answered him kindly, for they saw that he was a sober man and in his right senses, and some of them had little girls of their own.

It was one o'clock in the morning when he went up to his own door again, worn out and hopeless and broken-hearted. As he turned the key in the lock, his heart stood still, for he knew that he was awake and not dreaming, and that he really heard those tiny footsteps pattering to meet him inside the house along the passage.

But he was too unhappy to be much frightened any more, and his heart went on again with a dull regular pain, that found its way all through him with every pulse. So he went in, and hung up his hat in the dark, and found the matches in the cupboard and the candlestick in its place in the corner.

Mr Puckler was so much overcome and so completely worn out that he sat down in his chair before the work-table and

almost fainted, as his face dropped forward upon his folded hands. Beside him the solitary candle burned steadily with a low flame in the still warm air.

'Else! Else!' he moaned against his yellow knuckles. And that was all he could say, and it was no relief to him. On the contrary, the very sound of the name was a new and sharp pain that pierced his ears and his head and his very soul. For every time he repeated the name it meant that little Else was dead, somewhere out in the streets of London in the dark.

He was so terribly hurt that he did not even feel something pulling gently at the skirt of his old coat, so gently that it was like the nibbling of a tiny mouse. He might have thought that it was really a mouse if he had noticed it.

'Else! Else!' he groaned, right against his hands.

Then a cool breath stirred his thin hair, and the low flame of the one candle dropped down almost to a mere spark, not flickering, as though a draught were going to blow it out, but just dropping down as if it were tired out. Mr Puckler felt his hands stiffening with fright under his face; and there was a faint rustling sound, like some small silk thing blown in a gentle breeze. He sat up straight, stark and scared, and a small wooden voice spoke in the stillness.

'Pa-pa,' it said, with a break between the syllables.

Mr Puckler stood up in a single jump, and his chair fell over backwards with a smashing noise upon the wooden floor. The candle had almost gone out.

It was Nina's doll-voice that had spoken, and he should have known it among the voices of a hundred other dolls. And yet there was something more in it, a little human ring, with a pitiful cry and a call for help, and the wail of a hurt child. Mr Puckler stood up, stark and stiff, and tried to look round, but at first he could not, for he seemed to be frozen from head to foot.

Then he made a great effort, and he raised one hand to each of his temples, and pressed his own head round as he would have turned a doll's. The candle was burning so low that it might as well have been out altogether, for any light it gave, and the room seemed quite dark at first. Then he saw something. He would not have believed that he could be more frightened than he had been just before that. But he was, and his knees shook, for he saw the doll standing in the middle of the floor, shining with a faint and ghostly radiance,

her beautiful glassy brown eyes fixed on his. And across her face the very thin line of the break he had mended shone as though it were drawn in light with a fine point of white flame.

Yet there was something more in the eyes, too; there was something human, like Else's own, but as if only the doll saw him through them, and not Else. And there was enough of Else to bring back all his pain and to make him forget his fear.

'Else! My little Else!' he cried aloud.

The small ghost moved, and its doll-arm slowly rose and fell with a stiff, mechanical motion.

'Pa-pa,' it said.

It seemed this time that there was even more of Else's tone echoing somewhere between the wooden notes that reached his ears so distinctly and yet so far away. Else was calling him, he was sure.

His face was perfectly white in the gloom, but his knees did not shake any more, and he felt that he was less frightened.

'Yes, child! But where? Where?' he asked. 'Where are you, Else?'

'Pa-pa!'

The syllables died away in the quiet room.

There was a low rustling of silk, the glassy brown eyes turned slowly away, and Mr Puckler heard the pitter-patter of the small feet in the bronze kid slippers as the figure ran straight to the door. Then the candle burned high again, the room was full of light, and he was alone.

Mr Puckler passed his hand over his eyes and looked about him. He could see everything quite clearly, and he felt that he must have been dreaming, though he was standing instead of sitting down, as he should have been if he had just waked up. The candle burned brightly now. There were the dolls to be mended, lying in a row with their toes up. The third one had lost her right shoe, and Else was making one. He knew that, and he was certainly not dreaming now. He had not been dreaming when he had come in from his fruitless search and had heard the doll's footsteps running to the door. He had not fallen asleep in his chair. How could he possibly have fallen asleep when his heart was breaking? He had been awake all the time.

He steadied himself, set the fallen chair upon its legs, and said to himself again very emphatically that he was a foolish

old man. He ought to be out in the streets looking for his child, asking questions, and enquiring at the police stations, where all accidents were reported as soon as they were known, or at the hospitals.

'Pa-pa!'

The longing, wailing, pitiful little wooden cry rang from the passage, outside the door, and Mr Puckler stood for an instant with white face, transfixed and rooted to the spot. A moment later his hand was on the latch. Then he was in the passage, with the light streaming from the open door behind him.

Quite at the other end he saw the little phantom shining clearly in the shadow, and the right hand seemed to beckon to him as the arm rose and fell once more. He knew all at once that it had not come to frighten him but to lead him, and when it disappeared, and he walked boldly towards the door, he knew that it was in the street outside, waiting for him. He forgot that he was tired and had eaten no supper, and had walked many miles, for a sudden hope ran through and through him, like a golden stream of life.

And sure enough, at the corner of the alley, and at the corner of the street, and out in Belgrave Square, he saw the small ghost flitting before him. Sometimes it was only a shadow, where there was other light, but then the glare of the lamps made a pale green sheen on its little Mother Hubbard frock of silk; and sometimes, where the streets were dark and silent, the whole figure shone out brightly with its yellow curls and rosy neck. It seemed to trot along like a tiny child, and Mr Puckler could hear the pattering of the bronze kid slippers on the pavement as it ran. But it went very fast, and he could only just keep up with it, tearing along with his hat on the back of his head and his thin hair blown by the night breeze, and his horn-rimmed spectacles firmly set upon his broad nose.

On and on he went, and he had no idea where he was. He did not even care, for he knew certainly that he was going the right way.

Then at last, in a wide, quiet street, he was standing before a big, sober-looking door that had two lamps on each side of it, and a polished brass bell-handle, which he pulled.

And just inside, when the door was opened, in the bright light, there was the little shadow, and the pale green sheen

of the little silk dress, and once more the small cry came to his ears, less pitiful, more longing.

'Pa-pa!'

The shadow turned suddenly bright, and out of the brightness the beautiful brown glass eyes were turned up happily to his, while the rosy mouth smiled so divinely that the phantom doll looked almost like a little angel just then.

'A little girl was brought in soon after ten o'clock,' said the quiet voice of the hospital doorkeeper. 'I think they thought she was only stunned. She was holding a big brown-paper box against her, and they could not get it out of her arms. She had a long plait of brown hair that hung down as they carried her.'

'She is my little girl,' said Mr Puckler, but he hardly heard his own voice.

He leaned over Else's face in the gentle light of the children's ward, and when he had stood there a minute the beautiful brown eyes opened and looked up to his.

'Pa-pa!' cried Else softly, 'I knew you would come!'

Then Mr Puckler did not know what he did or said for a moment, and what he felt was worth all the fear and terror and despair that had almost killed him that night. But by and by Else was telling her story, and the nurse let her speak, for there were only two other children in the room, who were getting well and were sound asleep.

'They were big boys with bad faces,' said Else, 'and they tried to get Nina away from me, but I held on and fought as well as I could till one of them hit me with something, and I don't remember any more, for I tumbled down and I suppose the boys ran away, and somebody found me there. But I'm afraid Nina is all smashed.'

'Here is the box,' said the nurse. 'We could not take it out of her arms till she came to herself. Would you like to see if the doll is broken?'

And she undid the string cleverly, but Nina was all smashed to pieces. Only the gentle light of the children's ward made a pale green sheen in the folds of the little Mother Hubbard frock.

THE SUTOR OF SELKIRK

Anonymous

Once upon a time there lived in Selkirk a shoemaker, by name Rabbie Heckspeckle, who was celebrated both for dexterity in his trade and for some other qualifications of a less profitable nature.

Rabbie was a thin, meagre-looking personage, with lank black hair, a cadaverous countenance, and a long, flexible secret-smelling nose. In short, he was the Paul Pry of the town. Not an old wife in the parish could buy a new scarlet rokelay without Rabbie knowing within a groat of the cost; the doctor could not dine with the minister but Rabbie could tell whether sheep's-head or haggis formed the staple commodity of the repast; and it was even said that he was acquainted with the grunt of every sow, and the cackle of every individual hen in his neighbourhood; but this wants confirmation.

His wife, Bridget, endeavoured to confine his excursive fancy, and to chain him down to his awl; but her interference met with exactly that degree of attention which husbands usually bestow on the advice tendered by their better halves – that is to say, Rabbie informed her that she knew nothing of the matter, that her understanding required stretching, and finally, that if she presumed to meddle in his affairs, he would be under the disagreeable necessity of giving her a top-dressing.

To secure the necessary leisure for his researches, Rabbie was in the habit of rising to his work long before the dawn; and he was one morning busily engaged putting the finishing stitches to a pair of shoes for the exciseman when the door of his dwelling, which he thought was carefully fastened, was suddenly opened, and a tall figure, enveloped in a large black cloak, and with a broad-rimmed hat drawn over his brows, stalked into the shop. Rabbie stared at his visitor, wondering what could have occasioned this early call, and wondering still more that a stranger should have arrived in the town without his knowledge.

'You're early afoot, sir,' quoth Rabbie. 'Lucky Wakerife's cock will no' craw for a good half-hour yet.'

The stranger vouchsafed no reply; but, taking up one of the shoes Rabbie had just finished, deliberately put it on, and took a turn through the room to ascertain that it did not pinch his extremities. During these operations Rabbie kept a watchful eye on his customer.

'He smells awfully,' muttered Rabbie to himself; 'ane would be ready to swear he had just cam frae the plough-tail.'

The stranger, who appeared to be satisfied with the effect of the experiment, motioned to Rabbie for the other shoe, and pulled out a purse for the purpose of paying for his purchase; but Rabbie's surprise may be conceived when, on looking at the purse, he perceived it to be spotted with a kind of earthy mould.

'Gudesake,' thought Rabbie, 'this queer man maun hae howkit that purse out o' the ground. I wonder where he got it. Some folk say there are bags o' siller buried near this town.'

By this time the stranger had opened the purse, and as he did so a toad and a beetle fell on the ground, and a large worm, crawling out, wound itself round his finger. Rabbie's eyes widened; but the stranger, with an air of nonchalance, tendered him a piece of gold, and made signs for the other shoe.

'It's a thing morally impossible,' responded Rabbie to this mute proposal. 'Mair by token, that I hae as good as sworn to the exciseman to hae them ready by daylight, which will no' be long o' coming' (the stranger here looked anxiously towards the window); 'and better, I tell you, to affront the King himself than the exciseman.'

The stranger gave a loud stamp with his shod foot, but Rabbie stuck to his point, offering, however, to have a pair ready for his new customer in twenty-four hours; and, as the stranger, justly enough perhaps, reasoned that half a pair of shoes was of as little use as half a pair of scissors, he found himself obliged to come to terms, and seating himself on Rabbie's three-legged stool, held out his leg to the Sutor, who, kneeling down, took the foot of his taciturn customer on his knee, and proceeded to measure it.

'Something o' the splay, I think, sir,' said Rabbie, with a knowing air.

No answer.

'Where will I bring the shoon to when they're done?' asked Rabbie, anxious to find out the domicile of his visitor.

'I will call for them myself before cock-crowing,' responded the stranger in a very uncommon and indescribable tone of voice.

'Hout, sir,' quoth Rabbie, 'I canna let you hae the trouble o' coming for them yoursel'; it will just be a pleasure for me to call with them at your house.'

'I have my doubts of that,' replied the stranger, in the same peculiar manner; 'and at all events, my house would not hold us both.'

'It maun be a dooms sma' biggin',' answered Rabbie; 'but noo that I hae ta'en your honour's measure–'

'Take your own!' retorted the stranger, and giving Rabbie a touch with his foot that laid him prostrate, walked coolly out of the house.

This sudden overturn of himself and his plans for a few moments discomfited the Sutor; but quickly gathering up his legs, he rushed to the door, which he reached just as Lucky Wakerife's cock proclaimed the dawn. Rabbie flew down the street, but all was still; then ran up the street, which was terminated by the churchyard, but saw only the moveless tombs looking cold and chill under the grey light of a winter morn. Rabbie hitched his red night-cap off his brow, and scratched his head with an air of perplexity.

'Weel,' he muttered, as he retraced his steps homewards, 'he has warred me this time, but sorrow take me if I'm not up wi' him in the morn.'

All day Rabbie, to the inexpressible surprise of his wife, remained as constantly on his three-legged stool as if he had been 'yirked' there by some brother of the craft, for the space of twenty-four hours his long nose was never seen to throw its shadow across the threshold of the door; and so extraordinary did this event appear that the neighbours, one and all, agreed that it predicted some prodigy: but whether it was to take the shape of a comet, which would deluge them all with its fiery tail, or whether they were to be swallowed up by an earthquake, could by no means be settled to the satisfaction of the parties concerned.

Meanwhile, Rabbie diligently pursued his employment, unheeding the concerns of his neighbours. What mattered it to him that Jenny Thrifty's cow had calved, that the minister's servant, with something in her apron, had been seen to go in twice to Lucky Wakerife's, that the laird's dairy-maid had

been observed stealing up the red loan in the gloaming, that the drum had gone through the town announcing that a sheep was to be killed on Friday?

The stranger alone swam before his eyes; and cow, dairy-maid, and drum kicked the beam. It was late in the night when Rabbie had accomplished his task, and then placing the shoes at his bedside, he lay down in his clothes and fell asleep; but the fear of not being sufficiently alert for his new customer induced him to rise a considerable time before day-break. He opened the door and looked into the street, but it was still so dark he could scarcely see a yard before his nose; he therefore returned into his house, muttering to himself: 'What the sorrow can keep him?' when a voice at his elbow suddenly said:

'Where are my shoes?'

'Here, sir,' said Rabbie, quite transported with joy; 'here they are, right and tight, and mickle joy may ye hae in wearing them, for it's better to wear shoon than sheets, as the auld saying gangs.'

'Perhaps I may wear both,' answered the stranger.

'Gude save us,' quoth Rabbie, 'do ye sleep in your shoon?'

The stranger made no answer; but, laying a piece of gold on the table and taking up the shoes, walked out of the house.

'Now's my time,' thought Rabbie to himself, as he slipped after him.

The stranger paced slowly on, and Rabbie carefully followed him; the stranger turned up the street, and the Sutor kept close to his heels.

''Odsake, where can he be gaun?' thought Rabbie, as he saw the stranger turn into the churchyard; 'he's making to that grave in the corner; now he's standing still; now he's sitting down. Gudesake! what's come o' him?' Rabbie rubbed his eyes, looked round in all directions; but, lo and behold! the stranger had vanished. 'There's something no' canny about this,' thought the Sutor; 'but I'll mark the place at ony rate,' and Rabbie, after thrusting his awl into the grave, hastily returned home.

The news soon spread from house to house, and by the time the red-faced sun stared down on the town the whole of the inhabitants were in commotion; and after having held sundry consultations, it was resolved *nem. con.* to proceed in a body to the churchyard and open the grave which was

suspected of being suspicious.

The whole population of the Kirk Wynd turned out on this service. Sutors, wives, children, all hurried pellmell after Rabbie, who led his myrmidons straight to the grave at which his mysterious customer had disappeared, and where he found his awl still sticking in the place where he had left it.

Immediately all hands went to work; the grave was opened; the lid was forced off the coffin; and a corpse was discovered, dressed in the vestments of the tomb, but with a pair of perfectly new shoes upon its long, bony feet. At this dreadful sight the multitude fled in every direction, Lucky Wakerife leading the van, leaving Rabbie and a few bold brothers of the craft to arrange matters as they pleased with the peripatetic skeleton.

A council was held, and it was agreed that the coffin should be firmly nailed up and committed to the earth. Before doing so, however, Rabbie proposed denuding his customer of his shoes, remarking that he had no more need for them than a cart had for three wheels. No objections were made to this proposal, and Rabbie, therefore, quickly coming to extremities, whipped them off in a trice. They then drove half a hundred tenpenny nails into the lid of the coffin, and, having taken care to cover the grave with pretty thick divots, the party returned to their separate places of abode.

Certain qualms of conscience, however, now arose in Rabbie's mind as to the propriety of depriving the corpse of what had been honestly bought and paid for. He could not help allowing that, if the ghost were troubled with cold feet, a circumstance by no means improbable, he might naturally wish to remedy the evil. But, at the same time, considering that the fact of his having made a pair of shoes for a defunct man would be an everlasting blot on the Heckspeckle escutcheon, and reflecting also that his customer, being dead in law, could not apply to any court for redress, our Sutor manfully resolved to abide by the consequences of his deed.

Next morning, according to custom, he rose long before the day, and fell to his work, shouting the old songs of the 'Sutors of Selkirk' at the very top of his voice. A short time, however, before the dawn his wife, who was in bed in the back room, remarked that in the very middle of his favourite verse his voice fell into a quaver, then broke out into a yell of terror; and then she heard a noise, as of persons struggling;

and then all was quiet as the grave.

The good dame immediately huddled on her clothes and ran into the shop, where she found the three-legged stool broken in pieces, the floor strewed with bristles, the door wide open, and Rabbie away! Bridget rushed to the door, and there she immediately discovered the marks of footsteps deeply imprinted on the ground. Anxiously tracing them, on – and on – what was her horror to find that they terminated in the churchyard at the grave of Rabbie's customer!

The earth round the grave bore traces of having been the scene of some fearful struggle, and several locks of lank black hair were scattered on the grass. Half distracted, she rushed through the town to communicate the dreadful intelligence. A crowd collected, and a cry speedily arose to open the grave. Spades, pickaxes and mattocks were quickly put in requisition; the divots were removed: the lid of the coffin was once more torn off; and there lay its ghastly tenant, with his shoes replaced on his feet, and Rabbie's red night-cap clutched in his right hand!

The people, in consternation, fled from the churchyard; and nothing further has ever transpired to throw any additional light upon the melancholy fate of the Sutor of Selkirk.

THE THREE SISTERS

William Wymark Jacobs

Thirty years ago on a wet autumn evening the household of Mallett's Lodge was gathered round the death-bed of Ursula Mallow, the eldest of the three sisters who inhabited it. The dingy moth-eaten curtains of the old wooden bedstead were drawn apart, the light of a smoking oil-lamp falling upon the hopeless countenance of the dying woman as she turned her dull eyes upon her sisters. The room was in silence except for an occasional sob from the youngest sister, Eunice. Outside the rain fell steadily over the streaming marshes.

'Nothing is to be changed, Tabitha,' gasped Ursula to the other sister, who bore a striking likeness to her, although her expression was harder and colder; 'this room is to be locked up and never opened.'

'Very well,' said Tabitha brusquely; 'though I don't see how it can matter to you then.'

'It does matter,' said her sister with startling energy. 'How do you know, how do I know that I may not sometimes visit it? I have lived in this house so long I am certain that I shall see it again. I *will* come back. Come back to watch over you both and see that no harm befalls you.'

'You are talking wildly,' said Tabitha, by no means moved at her sister's solicitude for her welfare. 'Your mind is wandering; you know that I have no faith in such things.'

Ursula sighed, and beckoning to Eunice, who was weeping silently at the bedside, placed her feeble arms around her neck and kissed her.

'Do not weep, dear,' she said feebly. 'Perhaps it is best so. A lonely woman's life is scarce worth living. We have no hopes, no aspirations; other women have had happy husbands and children, but we in this forgotten place have grown old together. I go first, but you must soon follow.'

Tabitha, comfortably conscious of only forty years and an iron frame, shrugged her shoulders and smiled grimly.

'I go first,' repeated Ursula in a new and strange voice as her heavy eyes slowly closed, 'but I will come for each of you in turn, when your lease of life runs out. At that moment I will be with you to lead your steps whither I now go.'

As she spoke the flickering lamp went out suddenly as though extinguished by a rapid hand, and the room was left in utter darkness. A strange suffocating noise issued from the bed, and when the trembling women had relighted the lamp, all that was left of Ursula Mallow was ready for the grave.

That night the survivors passed together. The dead woman had been a firm believer in the existence of that shadowy borderland which is said to form an unhallowed link between the living and the dead, and even stolid Tabitha, slightly unnerved by the events of the night, was not free from certain apprehensions that she might have been right.

With the bright morning their fears disappeared. The sun stole in at the window, and seeing the poor earthworn face on the pillow so touched it and glorified it that only its goodness and weakness were seen, and the beholders came to wonder how they could ever have felt any dread of aught so calm and peaceful. A day or two passed, and the body was transferred to a massive coffin long regarded as the finest piece of work of its kind ever turned out of the village carpenter's workshop. Then a slow and melancholy cortège headed by four bearers wound its solemn way across the marshes to the family vault in the grey old church, and all that was left of Ursula was placed by the father and mother who had taken that self-same journey some thirty years before.

To Eunice as they toiled slowly home the day seemed strange and Sabbath-like, the flat prospect of marsh wilder and more forlorn than usual, the roar of the sea more depressing. Tabitha had no such fancies. The bulk of the dead woman's property had been left to Eunice, and her avaricious soul was sorely troubled and her proper sisterly feelings of regret for the deceased sadly interfered with in consequence.

'What are you going to do with all that money, Eunice?' she asked as they sat at their quiet tea.

'I shall leave it as it stands,' said Eunice slowly. 'We have both got sufficient to live upon, and I shall devote the income from it to supporting some beds in a children's hospital.'

'If Ursula had wished it to go to a hospital,' said Tabitha in her deep tones, 'she would have left the money to it herself. I wonder you do not respect her wishes more.'

'What else can I do with it then?' enquired Eunice.

'Save it,' said the other with gleaming eyes, 'save it.'

Eunice shook her head.

'No,' said she, 'it shall go to the sick children, but the principal I will not touch, and if I die before you it shall become yours and you can do what you like with it.'

'Very well,' said Tabitha, smothering her anger by a strong effort; 'I don't believe that was what Ursula meant you to do with it, and I don't believe she will rest quietly in the grave while you squander the money she stored so carefully.'

'What do you mean?' asked Eunice with pale lips. 'You are trying to frighten me; I thought that you did not believe in such things.'

Tabitha made no answer, and to avoid the anxious enquiring gaze of her sister, drew her chair to the fire, and folding her gaunt arms, composed herself for a nap.

For some time life went on quietly in the old house. The room of the dead woman, in accordance with her last desire, was kept firmly locked, its dirty windows forming a strange contrast to the prim cleanliness of the others. Tabitha, never very talkative, became more taciturn than ever, and stalked about the house and the neglected garden like an unquiet spirit, her brow roughened into the deep wrinkles suggestive of much thought. As the winter came on, bringing with it the long dark evenings, the old house became more lonely than ever, and an air of mystery and dread seemed to hang over it and brood in its empty rooms and dark corridors. The deep silence of night was broken by strange noises for which neither the wind nor the rats could be held accountable. Old Martha, seated in her distant kitchen, heard strange sounds upon the stairs, and once, upon hurrying to them, fancied she saw a dark figure squatting upon the landing, though a subsequent search with candle and spectacles failed to discover anything. Eunice was disturbed by several vague incidents, and, as she suffered from a complaint of the heart, rendered very ill by them. Even Tabitha admitted a strangeness about the house, but, confident in her piety and virtue, took no heed of it, her mind being fully employed in another direction.

Since the death of her sister all restraint upon her was removed, and she yielded herself up entirely to the stern and hard rules enforced by avarice upon its devotees. Her housekeeping expenses were kept rigidly separate from those of Eunice and her food limited to the coarsest dishes, while in the matter of clothes the old servant was by far the better dressed. Seated alone in her bedroom this uncouth, hard-

featured creature revelled in her possessions, grudging even the expense of the candle-end which enabled her to behold them. So completely did this passion change her that both Eunice and Martha became afraid of her, and lay awake in their beds night after night trembling at the chinking of the coins at her unholy vigils.

One day Eunice ventured to remonstrate. 'Why don't you bank your money, Tabitha?' she said; 'it is surely not safe to keep such large sums in such a lonely house.'

'Large sums!' repeated the exasperated Tabitha, 'large sums; what nonsense is this? You know well that I have barely sufficient to keep me.'

'It's a great temptation to housebreakers,' said her sister, not pressing the point. 'I made sure last night that I heard somebody in the house.'

'Did you?' said Tabitha, grasping her arm, a horrible look on her face. 'So did I. I thought they went to Ursula's room, and I got out of bed and went on the stairs to listen.'

'Well?' said Eunice faintly, fascinated by the look on her sister's face.

'There was *something* there,' said Tabitha slowly. 'I'll swear it, for I stood on the landing by her door and listened; something scuffling on the floor round and round the room. At first I thought it was the cat, but when I went up there this morning the door was still locked, and the cat was in the kitchen.'

'Oh, let us leave this dreadful house,' moaned Eunice.

'What!' said her sister grimly; 'afraid of poor Ursula? Why should you be? Your own sister who nursed you when you were a babe, and who perhaps even now comes and watches over your slumbers.'

'Oh!' said Eunice, pressing her hand to her side, 'if I saw her I should die. I should think that she had come for me as she said she would. O God! have mercy on me, I am dying.'

She reeled as she spoke, and before Tabitha could save her, sank senseless to the floor.

'Get some water,' cried Tabitha, as old Martha came hurrying up the stairs, 'Eunice has fainted.'

The old woman, with a timid glance at her, retired, reappearing shortly afterwards with the water, with which she proceeded to restore her much-loved mistress to her senses. Tabitha, as soon as this was accomplished, stalked off to her

room, leaving her sister and Martha sitting drearily enough in the small parlour, watching the fire and conversing in whispers.

It was clear to the old servant that this state of things could not last much longer, and she repeatedly urged her mistress to leave a house so lonely and mysterious. To her great delight Eunice at length consented, despite the fierce opposition of her sister, and at the mere idea of leaving gained greatly in health and spirits. A small but comfortable house was hired in Morville, and arrangements made for a speedy change.

It was the last night in the old house, and all the wild spirits of the marshes, the wind and the sea seemed to have joined forces for one supreme effort. When the wind dropped, as it did at brief intervals, the sea was heard moaning on the distant beach, strangely mingled with the desolate warning of the bell-buoy as it rocked to the waves. Then the wind rose again, and the noise of the sea was lost in the fierce gusts which, finding no obstacle on the open marshes, swept with their full fury upon the house by the creek. The strange voices of the air shrieked in its chimneys, windows rattled, doors slammed, and even the very curtains seemed to live and move.

Eunice was in bed, awake. A small night-light in a saucer of oil shed a sickly glare upon the worm-eaten old furniture, distorting the most innocent articles into ghastly shapes. A wilder gust than usual almost deprived her of the protection afforded by that poor light, and she lay listening fearfully to the creakings and other noises on the stairs, bitterly regretting that she had not asked Martha to sleep with her. But it was not too late even now. She slipped hastily to the floor, crossed to the huge wardrobe, and was in the very act of taking her dressing-gown from its peg when an unmistakable footfall was heard on the stairs. The robe dropped from her shaking fingers, and with a quickly beating heart she regained her bed.

The sounds ceased and a deep silence followed, which she herself was unable to break although she strove hard to do so. A wild gust of wind shook the windows and nearly extinguished the light, and when its flame had regained its accustomed steadiness she saw that the door was slowly opening, while the huge shadow of a hand blotted the papered

wall. Still her tongue refused its office. The door flew open with a crash, a cloaked figure entered and, throwing aside its coverings, she saw with a horror past all expression the napkin-bound face of the dead Ursula smiling terribly at her. In her last extremity she raised her faded eyes above for succour, and then as the figure noiselessly advanced and laid its cold hand upon her brow, the soul of Eunice Mallow left its body with a wild shriek and made its way to the Eternal.

Martha, roused by the cry, and shivering with dread, rushed to the door and gazed in terror at the figure which stood leaning over the bedside. As she watched, it slowly removed the cowl and the napkin and exposed the fell face of Tabitha, so strangely contorted between fear and triumph that she hardly recognized it.

'Who's there?' cried Tabitha in a terrible voice as she saw the old woman's shadow on the wall.

'I thought I heard a cry,' said Martha, entering. 'Did anybody call?'

'Yes, Eunice,' said the other, regarding her closely. 'I, too, heard the cry, and hurried to her. What makes her so strange? Is she in a trance?'

'Aye,' said the old woman, falling on her knees by the bed and sobbing bitterly, 'the trance of death. Ah, my dear, my poor lonely girl, that this should be the end of it! She has died of fright,' said the old woman, pointing to the eyes, which even yet retained their horror. 'She has seen something *devilish*.'

Tabitha's gaze fell. 'She has always suffered with her heart,' she muttered; 'the night has frightened her; it frightened me.'

She stood upright by the foot of the bed as Martha drew the sheet over the face of the dead woman.

'First Ursula, then Eunice,' said Tabitha, drawing a deep breath. 'I can't stay here. I'll dress and wait for the morning.'

She left the room as she spoke, and with bent head proceeded to her own. Martha remained by the bedside, and gently closing the staring eyes, fell on her knees and prayed long and earnestly for the departed soul. Overcome with grief and fear, she remained with bowed head until a sudden sharp cry from Tabitha brought her to her feet.

'Well,' said the old woman, going to the door.

'Where are you?' cried Tabitha, somewhat reassured by her voice.

'In Miss Eunice's bedroom. Do you want anything?'

'Come down at once. Quick! I am unwell.'

Her voice rose suddenly to a scream. 'Quick! For God's sake! Quick, or I shall go mad. *There is some strange woman in the house.*'

The old woman stumbled hastily down the dark stairs. 'What is the matter?' she cried, entering the room. 'Who is it? What do you mean?'

'I saw it,' said Tabitha, grasping her convulsively by the shoulder. 'I was coming to you when I saw the figure of a woman in front of me going up the stairs. Is it – can it be Ursula come for the soul of Eunice, as she said she would?'

'Or for yours?' said Martha, the words coming from her in some odd fashion, despite herself.

Tabitha, with a ghastly look, fell cowering by her side, clutching tremulously at her clothes. 'Light the lamps,' she cried hysterically. 'Light a fire, make a noise; oh, this dreadful darkness! Will it never be day!'

'Soon, soon,' said Martha, overcoming her repugnance and trying to pacify her. 'When the day comes you will laugh at these fears.'

'I murdered her,' screamed the miserable woman, 'I killed her with fright. Why did she not give me the money? 'Twas no use to her. Ah! *Look there!*'

Martha, with a horrible fear, followed her glance to the door, but saw nothing.

'It's Ursula,' said Tabitha, from between her teeth. 'Keep her off! Keep her off!'

The old woman, who by some unknown sense seemed to feel the presence of a third person in the room, moved a step forward and stood before her. As she did so Tabitha waved her arms as though to free herself from the touch of a detaining hand, half-rose to her feet, and without a word fell dead before her.

At this the old woman's courage forsook her, and with a great cry she rushed from the room, eager to escape from this house of death and mystery. The bolts of the great door were stiff with age, and strange voices seemed to ring in her ears as she strove wildly to unfasten them. Her brain whirled. She thought that the dead in their distant rooms called to her, and that a devil stood on the step outside laughing and holding the door against her. Then with a supreme effort she flung it

open, and heedless of her night-clothes passed into the bitter night. The path across the marshes was lost in the darkness, but she found it; the planks over the ditches slippery and narrow, but she crossed them in safety, until at last, her feet bleeding and her breath coming in great gasps, she entered the village and sank down more dead than alive on a cottage doorstep.

SIREN SONG

Barbara Joan Eyre

Martin was first to catch a glimpse of the sea. He squealed excitedly and jumped up and down on the back seat of the car.

'I saw it,' he shouted. 'I saw it! I was first! I was first!' Helen smiled at his enthusiasm. Her eyes raked the scenery around them, unable to see the glint of blue because of a suddenly high hedge.

'How could you see it through that hedge?' Jeff argued logically.

'I did see it! I did! Before the hedge started. Besides, I could hear it. Sort of swishy noise.'

'Don't be silly,' derided Cathy. 'We're not near enough.'

'Stop arguing, children,' said Helen. 'We're almost there. See?'

A large drive was ahead on the left, and a tall, white board which said: 'White Sands Caravan Park. No tourers or tents. Vacancies. Enquire at office.' The car sped softly along the drive.

'Is it a big caravan, Mummy?' asked Martin.

'I don't really know, dear. I expect it is. All I know is it has six berths and – '

'Will it have bunk beds?' asked Jeff. 'Like that other one we had?'

'I'm not sure. It could have, I suppose. We'd better wait and see.' And, through the trees, she suddenly saw something, glinting in the sun. The sea. Deep blue, inviting.

'Stop the car, Rod,' she said urgently.

'Eh?'

'Stop the car.' He glanced sideways at her.

'But we're nearly there. Why stop now?'

'I want to listen. Please!' Sighing, he slowed down and stopped the engine. And she could just hear it as it lapped the shore, the soft roar of the tide. She felt like a child again. There had been times during the past few months when she'd wondered if she'd ever see and hear the sea again. But those times were past, she'd been out of hospital for a week now, and there was a glorious future to look forward to. A wonder-

ful new future. Her heart contracted inside her.

'All right,' she said. 'You can drive on now.'

'Yes, Your Ladyship,' smiled Rod, and they moved on again.

'Caravan number thirty-nine,' said the man behind the counter in the site office. He was a little, bald man with round spectacles, and he stared curiously at Helen's white face and dark-ringed eyes. She smiled and took the key, a large shiny affair with a white tag bearing the number thirty-nine.

'The caravan's on the left as you leave here,' he called out as they reached the door. Helen turned and smiled again.

'Thank you.' The caravan was green and white with orange-flowered curtains. It stood at the end of a row of perhaps ten or twelve, all identical, all harmonizing with the green of the trees behind them and the rich grass around them.

'There's the sea!' shouted Cathy as they piled out of the car. Helen stood for a moment to take it all in, the beauty of the scene. The caravan park was sited overlooking a small bay, from which the grey cliffs rose majestically. On the horizon lay an island, with tiny, toy-like white houses, and stretches of golden sand. Helen felt she had never seen such a beautiful sight ever before.

She turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

'How about a nice cup of tea?' she suggested, as the children surged inside, and she produced a bottle of milk from a large box of groceries Rod had brought in from the car.

'This is a nice caravan,' remarked Cathy, looking out of a window. 'I think it was waiting for us.' Helen smiled and put the kettle on the gas, and turned to find the tea-bags. Something flitted out of the corner of her eye, and she turned quickly. Must have been Rod bringing in the cases. She found tea-bags and sugar, and finally the cups and saucers after opening various cupboards.

'I've found the bunk beds!' called Jeff. 'And there's a big cupboard here with lots of drawers and things.'

'I want to sleep on the top,' cried Martin.

'Don't be silly,' argued Jeff. 'You're too little. You'll only fall out.'

'No, I won't. I won't, will I, Mummy?'

'You might,' said Helen gently. 'I think the bottom will be safer for you.' She poured the water into the teapot and turned off the gas.

It was quite cosy sitting around the small Formica-topped table drinking tea from strange cups.

'It tastes funny,' Cathy remarked. 'Different, somehow.'

'I expect it's the water,' said Rod. 'It's hard here.'

'Hard? How can water be hard?'

'It's just a word, dear,' said Helen quickly, before Rod could go into lengthy explanations that the child wouldn't understand. 'More lime salts or something. You'll soon get used to it.'

'There's an odd smell coming from somewhere,' mused Rod, sniffing around him. 'It's gas!' He rushed to the cooker.

'Can't be,' said Helen. Rod fiddled with the taps.

'It was. You left a gas tap on a bit.'

'But I distinctly remember–' began Helen.

'Well, it was definitely on. You must be careful of these cookers, they're not like ours at home.' Helen felt anger simmering inside her. She remembered turning the gas tap off. But it was such a small thing, not worth arguing about and spoiling the holiday. She got up from the table.

'Well, do you children want to run down to the beach for a while, while Daddy and I unpack?' There was a mad scramble from the chairs, and they were out of the caravan and down the path to the beach before anyone could say Jack Robinson.

Helen brushed angry tears from her eyes and furiously started pulling clothes from a case.

'About that gas tap–' Rod began.

'I heard you!' she snapped. 'Don't go on so!' And she took a pile of clothes into the end bedroom where she and Rod would sleep. There was a mirror over the small cupboard between the wardrobes, and she stared hard for a brief moment at the pale face which looked back at her, all shadowed eyes and thin cheeks and trembling mouth. She tightened her lips and looked away. She was not going to spoil this holiday, whatever happened.

She could hear Rod in the kitchen, washing the cups, and she yanked at the top drawer. Something rolled across it and landed in the front corner. She picked it up. A ring. A man's ring, black onyx with the letter S in gold. It felt heavy and cold. She was staring at it when she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she thought it was Rod, come to apologize. She lifted her head and smiled.

'Look what–' Her smile froze as she gazed on the closed door. The pressure on her shoulder receded, and the ring fell back into the drawer. And, suddenly, for the first time in weeks, a feeling of incredible sadness came over her. She let her arms dangle between her knees as she sat on the end of the bed. She couldn't tell Rod. She couldn't tell anyone. She was better, cured, she wasn't going back to that hospital. She was on holiday and she was going to enjoy it, come hell or high water. She pushed the clothes into the drawer and forgot about the ring.

After lunch – soup and baked beans on toast, the boys' favourite – Rod and the children changed into swimsuits and trunks. The sun was blazing in a clear sky and Helen tried to forget her earlier misgivings as she washed the dishes.

'Are you coming with us, Mummy?' asked Cathy. 'The sea's lovely and warm.'

'Later, darling. First I must run to the shop for some more milk, and some bacon for tomorrow's breakfast.'

She waved from the window as they ran down the sloping path to the beach, armed with towels and beach ball. And she stood for a moment to look at the sea sparkling between the trees.

It took a few minutes to reach the shop, situated towards the far end of the caravan park. There were beach toys outside, swim rings, buckets and spades, and the usual stand of postcards. She gave them a cursory glance before going inside.

It was small and rather crowded, and she had to push between the people before she could reach the milk. Finally, armed with five pots of yoghurt, a packet of bacon and three cartons of milk, she made her way to the small wooden counter in the corner. The little bald-headed man from the office beamed at her.

'Hello – it's Mrs Cartwright, isn't it?' He rang up the items on the till. Helen knew she looked surprised.

'Yes, I'm surprised you remembered.' He chuckled.

'I try to remember all my customers. It isn't easy. That's one pound forty-seven, please.' Helen counted out the money and handed it over.

'Let me see,' he continued, putting the yoghurt in a bag. 'You're in caravan number – thirty-nine.'

'That's right. What a memory you have.' He leaned closer. 'Settled in all right? No problems?'

'No, no problems.' She couldn't tell him about the peculiar sensation she'd had. He'd think she was mad. And she was suddenly aware that a plump woman in a striped dress was listening eagerly to their conversation.

'Lovely view from thirty-nine, isn't it?' he persisted.

'Yes, beautiful.' She didn't know why but she felt she had to get away. Perhaps she was becoming claustrophobic.

'Thank you,' she smiled, and pushed her way back out of the shop. Half-way down the drive she heard running footsteps behind her, and curiously, she turned to see who it was. The plump woman was puffing and blowing as she tried to catch up with Helen's rapid stride. Helen stopped.

'I couldn't help overhearing,' the woman panted, and put a hand on Helen's arm.

'Yes?' Really, what could she want? thought Helen.

'You're in caravan thirty-nine, aren't you?' Helen nodded. 'My sister had the caravan next door two weeks ago. Number thirty-eight.' Helen frowned.

'But what has that got to do with me?' she asked.

'Don't you read the papers? Didn't you read about that young woman who committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets while she was on holiday?' Helen didn't like to confess she had been in hospital until a week ago, and knew nothing of any suicides, at home or away.

'I vaguely remember,' she lied. 'But I didn't take much notice at the time – '

'She was in your caravan! She did it in your caravan!'

'You mean she – killed herself – '

'In caravan thirty-nine!' said the woman triumphantly. 'My sister spoke to her, and she had to talk to the police afterwards. Oh, ever so nice they were, ever so kind, but it was such a shame. Such a nice girl, my sister said. Quiet, but nice when you got talking to her.' She moved closer to Helen and lowered her voice. 'Between you and me it was a man.'

'A man? But it was suicide.'

'Oh, yes. No, I mean, a man must have caused it. Don't you think?'

'Well, I never met her, I mean, it would be difficult – ' And in her mind's eye she saw a ring, a man's ring with the initial S. A feeling of irritation came over her, irritation with the gossipy little woman.

'I don't really know why you're telling me all this,' she

said, rather more sharply than she'd intended. The woman's eyes widened.

'I thought you'd want to know,' she began.

'But it's nothing to do with me. Just because a poor depressed girl stayed in the same caravan – '

'She killed herself there!'

'All right, she killed herself, but I can't see it's going to make any difference to our holiday.' Helen was forcing herself to keep calm; although the story had unnerved her she wasn't going to let a complete stranger see it.

'Well, I'm sorry you feel like that about it,' said the woman, a bit huffily. 'I was only trying to help. But if you don't want to take any notice – after all, you are the first people to stay there since it happened.'

She turned on her heel and walked away from Helen. Helen felt she had handled it rather badly, and, brooding on it, she went back down the road to the caravans. Suicide, she was thinking. Was that why I felt so unhappy?

She turned the corner and the caravans were in sight. And she found herself counting along the rows – thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine – but why had Cathy come back so soon? And why was she just sitting there, her face pale against the window? It was Cathy, wasn't it? How had she got in?

Helen found herself hurrying. She was positive she'd locked the caravan door before going to the shops. She turned the handle – and the door opened. She'd forgotten. Oh dear, Rod must never know. She'd never hear the end of it. She went up the steps and inside.

'What's wrong, Cathy?' she called out. But there was no one sitting there, face pressed against the glass. The bedroom! Could she be in the bedroom? But why? she was thinking as she pushed open the door. The room was empty.

Suddenly trembling, she sank on to the end of the bed.

'Don't be upset,' said a voice. Cathy? Helen jerked up her head, but her eyes met nothing but an empty caravan.

'Oh, God, no!' she whispered. 'Not hearing things as well!' Suddenly, she couldn't stand being there any longer. She left the groceries on the bed and ran outside. Without stopping to lock the door she hurried down the path to the beach.

At first she couldn't see them. Then she saw Jeff's tawny head and Cathy's orange one, bent together over something in the sand. Helen sank down beside them.

'Oh – Mummy!' wailed Cathy. 'You've sat on it!'

'Sorry.' She leapt up. Jeff dangled a dead starfish between his thumb and forefinger.

'But you haven't changed,' complained Cathy, staring at her. 'You're still in a dress.'

'Oh – I know – I thought I'd come and see what it was like first.' Apprehensively, she glanced back at the grassy cliff in front of the caravan, but there were just children, hopping up and down on the steps, squealing and shouting. She deliberately turned her gaze towards the sea, where Rod was swimming lazily. She could just made out his blond head.

Helen lay on the hot sand and buried her face in the towel.

'Aren't you going to swim, Mummy?' asked Cathy.

'I don't feel like it,' said Helen slowly. 'I'm rather tired. We've got plenty of time. Perhaps tomorrow.' How could she explain her sudden, irrational fear of the caravan? It was that damned woman's fault, telling her that ridiculous story about a suicide. A cold finger shivered up her spine. Hadn't she felt rather strange before she heard the story? What about the ring? And the hand on her shoulder? But that had been her imagination. She'd had sensations like that before. And the ring – well, that could have been lying there all season. It needn't be anything at all to do with the suicide. Poor girl. And she wondered what she'd been like.

Helen was aware she'd never know now, because she had rebuffed the only person who could tell her. Except. But she knew she'd never bring herself to ask the little man with round spectacles. There was something about him.

She lay her head on the towel and closed her eyes. It was hot, too hot to lie here for long, but she felt strangely lethargic, like the time when she'd been – no, she wasn't going to think about that. It was in the past, gone, forgotten.

She listened idly to the laughter and chatter of the children; a dog barked in the distance; herring gulls were crying overhead; and over it all the sibilant sound of the waves on the shore . . .

They let her sleep too long. She knew that by the pounding of her head when she awoke. The tide was coming in and the sky was beginning to look heavy and menacing. A slight chill in the air made her shiver. Her skin was hot, burning hot. But where was everybody? Why had they just left her here, to fry in the sun? Why hadn't they woken her earlier?

Because it had been Cathy, hadn't it, who had put a cool arm across her hot shoulders, and whispered to her, 'Come on, it's time. Come on, it's time.'? Time? Time for what?

The people were collecting their belongings, folding up the chairs and umbrellas, shaking sand from their shoes. Where was Rod? And the children? Helen felt strangely alone and unhappy.

And she fought back the tears as she made her way up the path back to the caravan. But her self-pity gave way to anger and resentment when she opened the door and they were sitting there around the table, drinking tea and laughing at a joke one of them had made.

'Why did you let me sleep so long?' she demanded. They all looked up and stared at her.

'Were you asleep?' countered Rod. 'We thought you were just sunbathing with your eyes closed.'

'Well, of course I was asleep! Do I usually stay so long in the sun – with *my* skin?'

'Then you should know better than to allow yourself to sleep in the sun. You've done it before, so you should know what it does to you,' said Rod, accusingly. Helen bit her lip. He had succeeded yet again in twisting the argument so that now she was at fault. Frustration mounted in her. She turned on Cathy.

'And why didn't you wake me properly?' she demanded, unable to stop herself. 'Instead of whispering like that in my ear. Supposing I'd slept through it? I would still be – '

'I didn't wake you, Mummy. I didn't even know you were asleep.' Helen stared at her. Suddenly, it was all too much. Holding back the angry tears, she rushed into the bedroom and closed the door. Behind her was silence. She could imagine the significant glances being exchanged.

'Poor Mummy, she's not herself again.'

'Poor Mummy, she's not really better, is she?'

'Poor Mummy – ' Helen thumped the bed in frustration. She was well, she was! It was them, with their accusations, their sidelong glances, their meaningful remarks. Her head was throbbing as she lay on the bed, her eyes closed.

'A cup of tea?' asked a soft, young voice.

'That would be lovely,' she murmured, instantly contrite, and waited for the chink of the saucer on the ledge by the bed. Nothing. She opened her eyes. No cup of tea. The door

was still closed. What were they trying to do, creeping in on her like that? She slid off the bed and opened the door. They were bent over the little table, doing something. 'Did I hear someone mention a cup of tea?' she asked, as calmly as she could.

'There's one in the pot if you want one,' Rod replied. 'Shall I pour it for you?'

'No – it's all right. I can do it.' He was watching her, and her hands shook as she lifted the pot.

'Since it looks like rain,' he said, as she drank the tepid liquid gratefully, 'we're going to play my version of Consequences. Want to join in?' Her first reaction was to refuse, then she remembered her earlier promise to herself, and she forced a smile to her lips.

'Yes, all right.' And she sat down next to Jeff, and was handed a sheet of writing paper. 'What do I do?'

'This is strictly my version,' Rod explained. 'Just write down the first word that comes into your head, then fold the paper back so no one can see your word and pass it to Jeff. He will do the same and pass it to Cathy. After two rounds we'll unfold the paper and see what the completed sentence is. Get the idea?'

'But surely it will be complete gibberish.'

'Not necessarily. You'd be surprised. You often finish up with a reasonably coherent line of words that can be quite amusing. Something to do with association of ideas, I suppose. Anyway, give it a try and if it becomes too ridiculous, we'll play something else.'

Helen nodded and decided that at least this kind of nonsense did not require too much concentration. She wrote the first word that came into her mind on the top of the sheet of foolscap paper, then folded back a neat quarter-of-an-inch flap and slid the paper along the table to Jeff. He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, as though trying to read her mind, before completing his word, folding the paper and passing it to Cathy. Suddenly a cold wave of fear passed across Helen's mind.

Why had she written the word Suicide? It was almost as if her fingers had acquired a will of their own and scrawled the letters as an act of defiance. Rod's voice interrupted her line of thought.

'Come on, Martin, don't take all night. You've only to think

of one word, for God's sake.'

'Yes, but it's got to be the right word. There's at least two running around in my brain. Ah, that's the one. Now your turn.'

Without hesitation Rod wrote his contribution, before again pushing the paper across the table to Helen.

'Here beginneth the second round.'

Helen watched the fingers of her right hand write the word Night. At least that had no sinister implications – or had it? Feeling sick, she stood up. 'I need some air,' she said, squeezing past Jeff. 'You carry on without me.'

It was damp and cool outside and growing dusk. The rain was finally starting and she lifted her face to feel the first drops on her hot cheeks. She wasn't the only one to be out in the dark and the rain. Across the grass, on the edge of the cliff, stood a tall figure, perhaps a girl, but Helen couldn't be sure. Just a silhouette, standing perfectly still, her back to the sea. Her back to the sea? Helen wasn't sure what made her think that – it was too dark to tell. It was just the impression she gave. Standing there, waiting – watching?

The seagulls began wheeling overhead, frightening Helen out of her lethargy. Something must have disturbed them. They were calling, crying – What was that? For a moment Helen thought she heard a voice – Si-mon – Si-mon . . . Then it became just the seagulls crying and she knew she'd been imagining things again.

Then Cathy came running across the grass, holding the sheet of creased paper in her hand. 'Mummy, it's a stupid sentence. Just doesn't make sense at all. Here, you read it.'

Indeed the words, one on top of the other, were – had to be – utter nonsense. SUICIDE – LOVE – BECOMES – HATE – WAIT – NIGHT – THEN – REVENGE – ON – ROCKS. Helen giggled hysterically to herself and went back inside. It was time for tea. It was time .

The rain soon cleared, but it was too cool to go into the sea again. Besides, it was too late.

'Did you know there is a television room up by the site office?' asked Cathy, with a calculated casual air.

'It's a colour television,' added Jeff.

'I'd love to go and watch,' said Martin eagerly. Helen smiled, in spite of herself.

'A walk would do you more good,' said Rod. 'There's a nice

breeze on the headland, and it isn't far.' Cathy pulled a face, and Jeff groaned.

'We'd rather go and watch Starsky and Hutch.'

'Put your anoraks on then,' said Helen. 'And don't be long. It's getting rather dark.' But she knew they were quite safe, really; the whole park was very well lit.

Rod obviously didn't like the idea of them going off on their own. 'I'll come and fetch you, if you like,' he offered. 'Then we can go and see the marvellous view from the headland.'

'In the dark?' queried Helen.

'Yes, in the dark. There is such a thing as a moon, you know.' The children zipped up their anoraks and skipped happily up the path to the main drive. Rod muttered something and picked up a book of crossword puzzles, and sat at the little table, pen in hand. Helen felt restless. She didn't feel like reading, or listening to the radio. She didn't know what she wanted to do. She still had a headache. Perhaps she ought to take something, and lie down for a while. Thank goodness she'd brought the aspirins. She took two, and opened the bedroom door. Rod looked up.

'Still got a headache,' she excused herself. 'I'll lie down for a few minutes.'

Once through the door, she felt herself drawn to the top drawer of the chest where she'd put some of her clothes. What was she looking for? She pulled at a pair of tights that had got wedged at the back, and the ring seemed to fall into her hand. The urgency receded, and she lay on the bed, looking at it on her finger. S. S for Simon? Simon's ring. What was he like, this Simon? Big and swarthy with hairy hands and challenging eyes? Narrow and aesthetic, with a girlish mouth and long hair?

She turned the ring round and round on her finger. It was quite large, but then, she had thin fingers herself. It was about Rod's size. Rod. Why had he changed so since she'd been ill? She yawned and closed her eyes. She was so tired – her ears were buzzing with fatigue – In her hazy state she thought she heard the caravan door open and close. Rod going to fetch the children? Was it already so late?

Simon looked rather like Rod. She suddenly knew he did. Tall and muscular, with fair hair and blue eyes. She could see his eyes now, teasing her, mocking her, just as Rod did. She hated him! Hated him! He made her feel so – inferior!

It was no use, there was no future after all, no future for her, Eleanor. Eleanor? Who was Eleanor?

She tried to open her eyes, but they felt like lead. She didn't care any more. This was how it should end, this was the right way. And she drifted slowly into sleep, into deep sleep . . .

Someone was pulling at her, grabbing her arms, calling her name –

'Helen! Helen! Wake up, Helen!' Someone slapping her face. Simon? Rod? Hell, she was so confused. She was being pulled across the floor, she could feel her heels sliding over the lino. The cold, damp air hit her like a sudden slap. She struggled, and opened her eyes. But what was she doing here? Why was she lying on the wet grass? She could get pneumonia! And where was Rod? Typical. He'd yanked her out of a deep sleep, tossed her on to the wet grass, and gone and left her.

'Rod!' she called weakly, struggling to her feet. Her knees were wobbly. Then she smelled the gas as it poured out of the caravan. Good God! What had she done now? She couldn't remember turning it on, and surely Rod – She shook her head slowly and leaned against the open door. Rod wasn't here. He was on the headland with the children. WHO HAD PULLED HER CLEAR OF THE GAS?

Fear gave her strength. Rain was starting again but she didn't care as she ran along the path to the headland. It was steep in places, and she had a stitch in her side, but something drove her on, oblivious of the strange glances from other people hurrying home. The wet grass brushed against her ankles as she lurched on. Then she saw them, silhouetted against the darkening sky and the faint, wispy moon. From up here she could see the lights of the caravans down below, like fairy lights.

'Rod! Rod!' He turned. She reached him and grabbed his arm.

'What on earth – Helen! Where's your coat? You'll catch your death! I – '

'And why should you care?' she said angrily, her breath hurting in her chest. 'Why did you turn on the gas and almost kill me?'

'Turn on the gas? You must be mad!'

'Yes, it's always Helen who's mad, isn't it?' Subconsciously she was turning the onyx ring on her finger. 'You men are

all alike, aren't you? Go on, deny everything, but it makes no difference. I know you did it. I know you want to get rid of me, I see it all now–' Tears almost choked her. She felt a sudden urge to put out her hands and push him from his precarious position on the cliff edge. She even made a movement to do it.

A blow on her shoulder sent her reeling back, away from him. She teetered dangerously on the slippery grass. And suddenly there were three of them, a tall girl with dark hair was facing Rod, and Helen tried to cry out to her, 'Be careful, you're too near the edge,' then Rod lurched, his arms flailing wildly, and she held her breath as he disappeared from view. And there was no dark girl at all. No one.

It seemed like hours before she summoned the energy to look down at the sea breaking over the jagged rocks. The children came running back.

'Come on, Mummy, it's raining hard,' called Cathy.

'Where's Daddy?' asked Jeff. Helen sank slowly down on to the grass. It was all slow-motion film. And she was alone with the children on the cliff. Slowly, she pulled the ring from her finger and threw it over the edge. She never heard the splash.

'Daddy's had an accident,' she said calmly. 'One of you had better go and tell someone.'

MADAM CROWL'S GHOST

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

'I'm an ald woman now, and I was but thirteen, my last birthday, the night I came to Applewale House. My aunt was the housekeeper there, and a sort o' one-horse carriage was down at Lexhoe waitin' to take me and my box up to Applewale.

'I was a bit frightened by the time I got to Lexhoe, and when I saw the carriage and horse, I wished myself back again with my mother at Hazelden. I was crying when I got into the "shay" – that's what we used to call it – and old John Mulbery that drove it, and was a good-natured fellow, brought me a handful of apples at the Golden Lion to cheer me up a bit; and he told me that there was a currant-cake, and tea, and pork chops, waiting for me, all hot, in my aunt's room at the great house. It was a fine moonlight night, and I eat the apples, lookin' out o' the shay winda.

'It's a shame for gentlemen to frighten a poor foolish child like I was. I sometimes think it might be tricks. There was two on 'em on the tap o' the coach beside me. And they began to question me after nightfall, when the moon rose, where I was going to. Well, I told them it was to wait on Dame Arabella Crowl, of Applewale House, near by Lexhoe.

'"Ho, then," says one of them, "you'll not be long there!"

'And I looked at him as much as to say "Why not?" for I had spoken out when I told them where I was goin', as if 'twas something clever I hed to say.

'"Because," says he, "and don't you for your life tell no one, only watch her and see – she's possessed by the devil, and more an half a ghost. Have you got a Bible?"

'"Yes, sir," says I. For my mother put my little Bible in my box, and I knew it was there: and by the same token, though the print's too small for my ald eyes, I have it in my press to this hour.

'As I looked up at him saying "Yes, sir," I thought I saw him winkin' at his friend; but I could not be sure.

'"Well," says he, "be sure you put it under your bolster every night, it will keep the ald girl's claws aff ye."

'And I got such a fright when he said that, you wouldn't fancy! And I'd a liked to ask him a lot about the ald lady,

but I was too shy, and he and his friend began talkin' together about their own consarns, and dowly enough I got down, as I told ye, at Lexhoe. My heart sank as I drove into the dark avenue. The trees stand very thick and big, as ald as the ald house almost, and four people, with their arms out and finger-tips touchin', barely girds round some of them.

'Well, my neck was stretched out o' the winda, looking for the first view o' the great house; and all at once we pulled up in front of it.

'A great white-and-black house it is, wi' great black beams across and right up it, and gables lookin' out, as white as a sheet, to the moon, and the shadows o' the trees, two or three up and down in front, you could count the leaves on them, and all the little diamond-shaped winda-panes, glimmering on the great hall winda, and great shutters, in the old fashion, hinged on the wall outside, boulted across all the rest o' the windas in front, for there was but three or four servants, and the old lady in the house, and most o' t'rooms was locked up.

'My heart was in my mouth when I sid the journey was over, and this the great house afoore me, and I sa near my aunt that I never sid till noo, and Dame Crowl, that I was come to wait upon, and was afeard on already.

'My aunt kissed me in the hall, and brought me to her room. She was tall and thin, wi' a pale face and black eyes, and long thin hands wi' black mittins on. She was past fifty, and her word was short; but her word was law. I hev no complaints to make of her, but she was a hard woman, and I think she would hev bin kinder to me if I had bin her sister's child in place of her brother's. But all that's o' no consequence noo.

'The squire – his name was Mr Chevenix Crowl, he was Dame Crowl's grandson – came down there, by way of seeing that the old lady was well treated, about twice or thrice in the year. I sid him but twice all the time I was at Applewale House.

'I can't say but she was well taken care of, notwithstanding; but that was because my aunt and Meg Wyvern, that was her maid, had a conscience, and did their duty by her.

'Mrs Wyvern – Meg Wyvern my aunt called her to herself, and Mrs Wyvern to me – was a fat, jolly lass of fifty, a good height and a good breadth, always good-humoured and walked slow. She had fine wages, but she was a bit stingy, and kept

all her fine clothes under lock and key, and wore, mostly, a twilled chocolate cotton, wi' red, and yellow, and green sprigs and balls on it, and it lasted wonderful.

'She never gave me nout, not the vally o' a brass thimble, all the time I was there; but she was good-humoured, and always laughin', and she talked no end o' proas over her tea; and, seeing me sa sackless and dowly, she roused me up wi' her laughin' and stories; and I think I liked her better than my aunt – children is so taken wi' a bit o' fun or a story – though my aunt was very good to me, but a hard woman about some things, and silent always.

'My aunt took me into her bed-chamber, that I might rest myself a bit while she was settin' the tea in her room. But first, she patted me on the shouther, and said I was a tall lass o' my years, and had spired up well, and asked me if I could do plain work and stitchin'; and she looked in my face, and said I was like my father, her brother, that was dead and gone, and she hoped I was a better Christian, and wad na du a' that lids.*

'It was a hard sayin' the first time I set foot in her room, I thought.

'When I went into the next room, the housekeeper's room – very comfortable, yak† all round – there was a fine fire blazin' away, wi' coal, and peat, and wood, all in a low together, and tea on the table, and hot cake, and smokin' meat; and there was Mrs Wyvern, fat, jolly, and talkin' away, more in an hour than my aunt would in a year.

'While I was still at my tea my aunt went upstairs to see Madam Crowl.

' "She's agone up to see that old Judith Squailes is awake," says Mrs Wyvern. "Judith sits with Madam Crowl when me and Mrs Shutters" – that was my aunt's name – "is away. She's a troublesome old lady. Ye'll hev to be sharp wi' her, or she'll be into the fire, or out o' t' winda. She goes on wires, she does, old though she be."

' "How old, ma'am?" says I.

' "Ninety-three her last birthday, and that's eight months gone," says she; and she laughed. "And don't be askin' questions about her before your aunt – mind, I tell ye; just take

* Would not do anything of that sort.
† Oak.

her as you find her, and that's all."

'"And what's to be my business about her, please, ma'am?" says I.

'"About the old lady? Well," says she, "your aunt, Mrs Shutters, will tell you that; but I suppose you'll hev to sit in the room with your work, and see she's at no mischief, and let her amuse herself with her things on the table, and get her her food or drink as she calls for it, and keep her out o' mischief, and ring the bell hard if she's troublesome."

'"Is she deaf, ma'am?"

'"No, nor blind," says she; "as sharp as a needle, but she's gone quite aupy, and can't remember nout rightly; and Jack the Giant Killer, and Goody Twoshoes will please her as well as the king's court, or the affairs of the nation."

'"And what did the little girl go away for, ma'am, that went on Friday last? My aunt wrote to my mother she was to go."

'"Yes; she's gone."

'"What for?" says I again.

'"She didn't answer Mrs Shutters, I do suppose," says she. "I don't know. Don't be talkin'; your aunt can't abide a talkin' child."

'"And please, ma'am, is the old lady well in health?" says I.

'"It ain't no harm to ask that," says she. "She's torflin a bit lately, but better this week past, and I dare say she'll last out her hundred years yet. Hish! Here's your aunt coming down the passage."

'In comes my aunt, and begins talkin' to Mrs Wyvern, and I, beginnin' to feel more comfortable and at home like, was walkin' about the room lookin' at this thing and at that. There was pretty old china things on the cupboard, and pictures again the wall; and there was a door open in the wainscot, and I sees a queer old leathern jacket, wi' straps and buckles to it, and sleeves as long as the bed-post hangin' up inside.

'"What's that you're at, child?" says my aunt, sharp enough, turning about when I thought she least minded. "What's that in your hand?"

'"This, ma'am?" says I, turning about with the leathern jacket. "I don't know what it is, ma'am.'

'Pale as she was, the red came up in her cheeks, and her eyes flashed wi' anger, and I think only she had half a dozen steps to take, between her and me, she'd a gev me a sizzup. But she did gie me a shake by the shouther, and she plucked

the thing out o' my hand, and says she, "While ever you stay here, don't ye meddle wi' nout that don't belong to ye," and she hung it up on the pin that was there, and shut the door wi' a bang and locked it fast.

'Mrs Wyvern was liftin' up her hands and laughin' all this time, quietly, in her chair, rolling herself a bit in it, as she used when she was kinkin'.

'The tears was in my eyes, and she winked at my aunt, and says she, dryin' her own eyes that was wet wi' the laughin', "Tut, the child meant no harm – come here to me, child. It's only a pair o' crutches for lame ducks, and ask us no questions mind, and we'll tell ye no lies; and come here and sit down, and drink a mug o' beer before ye go to your bed."

'My room, mind ye, was upstairs, next to the old lady's, and Mrs Wyvern's bed was near hers in her room, and I was to be ready at call, if need should be.

'The old lady was in one of her tantrums that night and part of the day before. She used to take fits o' the sulks. Sometimes she would not let them dress her, and at other times she would not let them take her clothes off. She was a great beauty, they said, in her day. But there was no one about Applewale that remembered her in her prime. And she was dreadful fond o' dress, and had thick silks, and stiff satins, and velvets, and laces, and all sorts, enough to set up seven shops at the least. All her dresses was old-fashioned and queer, but worth a fortune.

'Well, I went to my bed. I lay for a while awake; for a' things was new to me; and I think the tea was in my nerves, too, for I wasn't used to it, except now and then on a holiday, or the like. And I heard Mrs Wyvern talkin', and I listened with my hand to my ear; but I could not hear Mrs Crowl, and I don't think she said a word.

'There was great care took of her. The people at Applewale knew that when she died they would every one get the sack; and their situations was well paid and easy.

'The doctor came twice a week to see the old lady, and you may be sure they all did as he bid them. One thing was the same every time; they were never to cross or frump her, any way, but to humour and please her in everything.

'So she lay in her clothes all that night, and next day, not a word she said, and I was at my needlework all that day, in my own room, except when I went down to my dinner.

'I would a liked to see the ald lady, and even to hear her speak. But she might as well a' bin in Lunnon a' the time for me.

'When I had my dinner my aunt sent me out for a walk for an hour. I was glad when I came back, the trees was so big, and the place so dark and lonesome, and 'twas a cloudy day, and I cried a deal, thinkin' of home, while I was walkin' alone there. That evening, the candles bein' alight, I was sittin' in my room, and the door was open into Madam Crowl's chamber, where my aunt was. It was, then, for the first time I heard what I suppose was the ald lady talking.

'It was a queer noise like, I couldn't well say which, a bird, or a beast, only it had a bleatin' sound in it, and was very small.

'I pricked my ears to hear all I could. But I could not make out one word she said. And my aunt answered:

' "The evil one can't hurt no one, ma'am, bout the Lord permits."

'Then the same queer voice from the bed says something more that I couldn't make head nor tail on.

'And my aunt med answer again: "Let them pull faces, ma'am, and say what they will; if the Lord be for us, who can be against us?"

'I kept listenin' with my ear turned to the door, holdin' my breath, but not another word or sound came in from the room. In about twenty minutes, as I was sittin' by the table, lookin' at the pictures in the old Aesop's Fables, I was aware o' something moving at the door, and lookin' up I sid my aunt's face lookin' in at the door, and her hand raised.

' "Hish!" says she, very soft, and comes over to me on tip-toe, and she says in a whisper: "Thank God, she's asleep at last, and don't ye make no noise till I come back, for I'm goin' down to take my cup o' tea, and I'll be back i' noo – me and Mrs Wyvern, and she'll be sleepin' in the room, and you can run down when we come up, and Judith will gie ye yaur supper in my room."

'And with that she goes.

'I kep' looking at the picture-book, as before, listenin' every noo and then, but there was no sound, not a breath, that I could hear; an' I began whisperin' to the picture and talkin' to myself to keep my heart up, for I was growin' feared in that big room.

'And at last up I got, and began walkin' about the room, lookin' at this and peepin' at that, to amuse my mind, ye'll understand. And at last what sud I do but peeps into Madam Crowl's bedchamber.

'A grand chamber it was, wi' a great four-poster, wi' flowered silk curtains as tall as the ceilin', and foldin' down on the floor, and drawn close all round. There was a lookin'-glass, the biggest I ever sid before, and the room was a blaze o' light. I counted twenty-two wax candles, all alight. Such was her fancy, and no one dared say her nay.

'I listened at the door, and gaped and wondered all round. When I heard there was not a breath, and did not see so much as a stir in the curtains, I took heart, and walked into the room on tiptoe, and looked round again. Then I takes a keek at myself in the big glass; and at last it came in my head, "Why couldn't I ha' a keek at the ald lady herself in the bed?"

'Ye'd think me a fule if ye knew half how I longed to see Dame Crowl, and I thought to myself if I didn't peep now I might wait many a day before I got so gude a chance again.

'Well, my dear, I came to the side o' the bed, the curtains bein' close, and my heart a'most failed me. But I took courage, and I slips my finger in between the thick curtains, and then my hand. So I waits a bit, but all was still as death. So, softly, softly I draws the curtain, and there, sure enough, I sid before me, stretched out like the painted lady on the tomb-stean in Lexhoe Church, the famous Dame Crowl, of Applewale House. There she was, dressed out. You never sid the like in they days. Satin and silk, and scarlet and green, and gold and pint lace; by Jen! 'twas a sight! A big powdered wig, half as high as herself, was a-top o' her head, and, wow! – was ever such wrinkles? – and her old baggy throat all powdered white, and her cheeks rouged, and mouse-skin eyebrows, that Mrs Wyvern used to stick on, and there she lay proud and stark, wi' a pair o' clocked silk hose on, and heels to her shoon as tall as nine-pins. Lawk! But her nose was crooked and thin, and half the whites o' her eyes was open. She used to stand, dressed as she was, gigglin' and dribblin' before the lookin'-glass, wi' a fan in her hand and a big nosegay in her bodice. Her wrinkled little hands was stretched down by her sides, and such long nails, all cut into points, I never sid in my days. Could it even a bin the fashion for grit fowk to wear their fingernails so?

'Well, I think ye'd a-bin frightened yourself if ye'd a sid such a sight. I couldn't let go the curtain, nor move an inch, nor take my eyes off her; my very heart stood still. And in an instant she opens her eyes and up she sits, and spins herself round, and down wi' her, wi' a clack on her two tall heels on the floor, facin' me, ogglin' in my face wi' her two great glassy eyes, and a wicked simper wi' her wrinkled lips, and lang fause teeth.

'Well, a corpse is a natural thing; but this was the dreadfullest sight I ever sid. She had her fingers straight out pointin' at me, and her back was crooked, round again wi' age. Says she:

' "Ye little limb! what for did ye say I killed the boy? I'll tickle ye till ye're stiff!"

'If I'd a thought an instant, I'd a turned about and run. But I couldn't take my eyes off her, and I backed from her as soon as I could; and she came clatterin' after like a thing on wires, with her fingers pointing to my throat, and she makin' all the time a sound with her tongue like zizz-zizz-zizz.

'I kept backin' and backin' as quick as I could, and her fingers was only a few inches away from my throat, and I felt I'd lose my wits if she touched me.

'I went back this way, right into the corner, and I gev a yellock, ye'd think saul and body was partin', and that minute my aunt, from the door, calls out wi' a blare, and the ald lady turns round on her, and I turns about, and ran through my room, and down the stairs, as hard as my legs could carry me.

'I cried hearty, I can tell you, when I got down to the housekeeper's room. Mrs Wyvern laughed a deal when I told her what had happened. But she changed her key when she heard the ald lady's words.

' "Say them again," says she.

'So I told her.

' "Ye little limb! What for did ye say I killed the boy? I'll tickle ye till ye're stiff."

' "And did ye say she killed a boy?" says she.

' "Not I, ma'am," says I.

'Judith was always up with me, after that, when the two elder women was away from her. I would a jumped out at winda, rather than stay alone in the same room wi' her.

'It was about a week after, as well as I can remember, Mrs Wyvern, one day when me and her was alone, told me a thing

about Madam Crowl that I did not know before.

'She being young and a great beauty, full seventy year before, had married Squire Crowl, of Applewale. But he was a widower, and had a son about nine years old.

'There never was tale or tidings of this boy after one mornin'. No one could say where he went to. He was allowed too much liberty, and used to be off in the morning, one day, to the keeper's cottage and breakfast wi' him, and away to the warren, and not home, mayhap, till evening; and another time down to the lake, and bathe there, and spend the day fishin' there, or paddlin' about in the boat. Well, no one could say what was gone wi' him; only this, that his hat was found by the lake, under a haathorn that grows thar to this day, and 'twas thought he was drowned bathin'. And the squire's son, by his second marriage, with this Madam Crowl that lived sa dreadful lang, came in far the estates. It was his son, the ald lady's grandson, Squire Chevenix Crowl, that owned the estates at the time I came to Applewale.

'There was a deal o' talk lang before my aunt's time about it; and 'twas said the step-mother knew more than she was like to let out. And she managed her husband, the ald squire, wi' her white-heft and flatteries. And as the boy was never seen more, in course of time the thing died out of fowks' minds.

'I'm goin' to tell ye noo about what I sid wi' my own een.

'I was not there six months, and it was winter time, when the ald lady took her last sickness.

'The doctor was afeard she might a took a fit o' madness, as she did fifteen years befoore, and was buckled up, many a time, in a strait-waistcoat, which was the very leathern jerkin I sid in the closet, off my aunt's room.

'Well, she didn't. She pined, and windered, and went off, torflin', torflin', quiet enough, till a day or two before her flittin', and then she took to rabblin', and sometimes skirlin' in the bed, ye'd think a robber had a knife to her throat, and she used to work out o' the bed, and not being strong enough, then, to walk or stand, she'd fall on the flure, wi' her ald wizened hands stretched before her face, and skirlin' still for mercy.

'Ye may guess I didn't go into the room, and I used to be shiverin' in my bed wi' fear, at her skirlin' and scrafflin' on

the flure, and blarin' out words that id make your skin turn blue.

'My aunt, and Mrs Wyvern, and Judith Squailes, and a woman from Lexhoe, was always about her. At last she took fits, and they wore her out.

'T' sir was there, and prayed for her; but she was past praying with. I suppose it was right, but none could think there was much good in it, and sa at lang last she made her flittin', an a' was over, and old Dame Crowl was shrouded and coffined, and Squire Chevenix was wrote for. But he was away in France, and the delay was sa lang, that t' sir and doctor both agreed it would not du to keep her langer out o' her place, and no one cared but just them two, and my aunt and the rest o' us, from Applewale, to go to the buryin'. So the old lady of Applewale was laid in the vault under Lexhoe Church; and we lived up at the great house till such time as the squire should come to tell his will about us, and pay off such as he chose to discharge.

'I was put into another room, two doors away from what was Dame Crowl's chamber, after her death, and this thing happened the night before Squire Chevenix came to Applewale.

'The room I was in now was a large square chamber, covered wi' yak panels, but unfurnished except for my bed, which had no curtains to it, and a chair and a table, or so, that looked nothing at all in such a big room. And the big looking-glass, that the old lady used to keek into and admire herself from head to heel, now that there was na mair o' that wark, was put out of the way, and stood against the wall in my room, for there was shiftin' o' many things in her chamber ye may suppose, when she came to be coffined.

'The news had come that day that the squire was to be down next morning at Applewale; and not sorry was I, for I thought I was sure to be sent home again to my mother. And right glad was I, and I was thinkin' of a' at hame, and my sister Janet, and the kitten and the pymag, and Trimmer the tike, and all the rest, and I got sa fidgetty, I couldn't sleep, and the clock struck twelve, and me wide awake, and the room as dark as pick. My back was turned to the door, and my eyes towards the wall opposite.

'Well, it could na be a full quarter past twelve, when I sees

a lightin' on the wall befoore me, as if something took fire behind, and the shadas o' the bed, and the chair, and my gown, that was hangin' from the wall, was dancin' up and down on the ceilin' beams and the yak panels; and I turns my head ower my shouther quick, thinkin' something must a gone a' fire.

'And what sud I see, by Jen! but the likeness o' the ald beldame, bedizened out in her satins and velvets, on her dead body, simperin', wi' her eyes as wide as saucers, and her face like the fiend himself. 'Twas a red light that rose about her in a fuffin low, as if her dress round her feet was blazin'. She was drivin' on right for me, wi' her ald shrivelled hands crooked as if she was goin' to claw me. I could not stir, but she passed me straight by, wi' a blast o' cald air, and I sid her, at the wall, in the alcove as my aunt used to call it, which was a recess where the state bed used to stand in ald times wi' a door open wide, and her hands gropin' in at somethin' was there. I never sid that door befoore. And she turned round to me, like a thing on a pivot, flyrin', and all at once the room was dark, and I standin' at the far side o' the bed; I don't know how I got there, and I found my tongue at last, and if I did na blare a yellock, rennin' down the gallery and almost pulled Mrs Wyvern's door off t' hooks, and frighted her half out o' wits.

'Ye may guess I did na sleep that night; and wi' the first light, down wi' me to my aunt, as fast as my two legs cud carry me.

'Well, my aunt did na frump or flite me, as I thought she would, but she held me by the hand, and looked hard in my face all the time. And she telt me not to be feared; and says she:

'"Hed the appearance a key in its hand?"

'"Yes," says I, bringin' it to mind; "a big key in a queer brass handle."

'"Stop a bit," says she, lettin' go ma hand, and openin' the cupboard-door. "Was it like this?" says she, takin' one out in her fingers, and showing it to me, with a dark look in my face.

'"That was it," says I, quick enough.

'"Are ye sure?" she says, turnin' it round.

'"Sart," says I, and I felt like I was gain' to faint when I sid it.

'"Well that will do, child," says she, saftly thinkin', and

she locked it up again.

'"The squire himself will be here today, before twelve o'clock, and ye must tell him all about it," says she, thinkin', "and I suppose I'll be leavin' soon, and so the best thing for the present is, that ye should go home this afternoon, and I'll look out another place for you when I can."

'Fain was I, ye may guess, at that word.

'My aunt packed up my things for me, and the three pounds that was due to me, to bring home, and Squire Crowl himself came down to Applewale that day, a handsome man, about thirty years ald. It was the second time I sid him. But this was the first time he spoke to me.

'My aunt talked wi' him in the housekeeper's room, and I don't know what they said. I was a bit feared on the squire, he bein' a great gentleman down in Lexhoe, and I darn't go near till I was called. And says he, smilin':

'"What's a' this ye a sen, child? It mun be a dream, for ye know there's na sic a thing as a bo or a freet in a' the world. But whatever it was, ma little maid, sit ye down and tell all about it from first to last."

'Well, so soon as I made an end, he thought a bit, and says he to my aunt:

'"I mind the place well. In old Sir Olivur's time lame Wyndel told me there was a door in that recess, to the left, where the lassie dreamed she saw my grandmother open it. He was past eighty when he told me that, and I but a boy. It's twenty year sen. The plate and jewels used to be kept there, long ago, before the iron closet was made in the arras chamber, and he told me the key had a brass handle, and this ye say was found in the bottom o' the kist where she kept her old fans. Now, would not it be a queer thing if we found some spoons or diamonds forgot there? Ye mun come up wi' us, lassie, and point to the very spot."

'Loth was I, and my heart in my mouth, and fast I held by my aunt's hand as I stept into that awesome room, and showed them both how she came and passed me by, and the spot where she stood, and where the door seemed to open.

'There was an ald empty press against the wall then, and shoving it aside, sure enough there was the tracing of a door in the wainscot, and a keyhole stopped with wood, and planed across as smooth as the rest, and the joining of the door all stopped wi' putty the colour o' yak, and, but for the hinges

that showed a bit when the press was shoved aside, ye would not consayt there was a door there at all.

'"Ha!" says he, wi' a queer smile, "this looks like it."

'It took some minutes wi' a small chisel and hammer to pick the bit o' wood out o' the keyhole. The key fitted, sure enough, and, wi' a strang twist and a lang skreak, the boult went back and he pulled the door open.

'There was another door inside, stranger than the first, but the lacks was gone, and it opened easy. Inside was a narrow floor and walls and vault o' brick; we could not see what was in it, for 'twas dark as pick.

'When my aunt had lighted the candle, the squire held it up and stept in.

'My aunt stood on tiptoe tryin' to look over his shouther, and I did na see nout.

'"Ha! ha!" says the squire, steppin' backward. "What's that? Gi' ma the poker – quick!' says he to my aunt. And as she went to the hearth I peeps beside his arm, and I sid squat down in the far corner a monkey or a flayin' on the chest, or else the maist shrivelled up, wizzened ald wife that ever was sen on yearth.

'"By Jen!" says my aunt, as puttin' the poker in his hand she keeked by his shouther, and sid the ill-favoured thing, "hae a care, sir, what ye're doin'. Back wi' ye, and shut to the door!"

'But in place o' that he steps in saftly, wi' the poker pointed like a swoord, and he gies it a poke, and down it a' tumbles together, head and a', in a heap o' bayans and dust, little meyar an' a hatful.

''Twas the bayans o' a child; a' the rest went to dust at a touch. They said nout for a while, but he turns round the skull, as it lay on the floor.

'Young as I was, I consayted I knew well enough what they was thinkin' on.

'"A dead cat!" says he, pushin' back and blowin' out the can'le, and shuttin' to the door. "We'll come back, you and me, Mrs Shutters, and look on the shelves by-and-bye. I've other matters first to speak to ye about; and this little girl's goin' hame, ye say. She has her wages, and I mun mak' her a present," says he, pattin' my shouther wi' his hand.

'And he did gimma a goud pound and I went aff to Lexhoe about an hour after, and sa hame by the stage-coach, and

fain was I to be at hame again; and I never sid Dame Crowl o' Applewale, God be thanked, either in appearance or in dream, at-efter. But when I was grown to be a woman, my aunt spent a day and night wi' me at Littleham, and she telt me there was no doubt it was the poor little boy that was missing sa lang sen, that was shut up to die thar in the dark by that wicked beldame, whar his skirls, or his prayers, or his thumpin' cud na be heard, and his hat was left by the water's edge, whoever did it, to mak' belief he was drowned. The clothes, at the first touch, a' ran into a snuff o' dust in the cell whar the bayans was found. But there was a handful o' jet buttons, and a knife with a green heft, together wi' a couple o' pennies the poor little fella had in his pocket. I suppose, when he was decoyed in thar, and sid his last o' the light. And there was, amang the squire's papers, a copy o' the notice that was prented after he was lost, when the ald squire thought he might 'a run away, or bin took by gipsies, and it said he had a green-hefted knife wi' him, and that his buttons were o' cut jet. Sa that is a' I hev to say consarnin' ald Dame Crowl, o' Applewale House.'

THE SAD GHOST

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Once they had moved into the house, Grandma had to admit it wasn't half bad, and the garden was an ideal place to have tea on a hot, summer afternoon. In fact, she made her son buy a nice green enamel table and four comfortable folding chairs, then ordered a multi-coloured garden umbrella from a mail-order firm that had had the foresight to insert an advertisement in *The Silver Thread Home Companion.*

John Smith waved his teaspoon in the direction of the house and said complacently: You've got to admit it looks picturesque.'

And indeed it did. With its red-tiled roof, mellow brickwork, five white-framed windows up and four down, a neat green door in the centre and rambling roses making a gallant effort to reach the freshly painted guttering, it looked as every country house should, but rarely does.

Sorel – who had yet to recover from a most unsatisfactory love affair – sighed and said: 'The house has a romantic atmosphere. It's sort of seeped in time.'

John made a disgusting derogatory sound and Ethel laughed.

'Don't get so emotional, dear. You won't sleep tonight.'

Sorel blushed and gave the impression she might burst into tears, if given the slightest encouragement. But Grandma nodded, then adjusted her glasses and examined the house with critical interest.

'The child's right. Old houses have their memories, just like people. Some sad, and a few that don't bear thinking about. And here in the country it's so quiet.'

John Smith – as behoved a practical, get-ahead business man – frowned, laughed (if a trifle uneasily) and said:

'It's not like you to be so fanciful, Mother.'

The old lady glared at him and crumbled a morsel of seed cake between the forefinger and thumb of her right hand.

'Just because I'm pushing seventy and likes me spot of bingo, don't mean I haven't an intelligent thought in my head. Which is more than can be said for some people.'

John Smith smiled indulgently and winked at Ethel, an action which did not pass unnoticed by his mother, who

nodded slowly as though arriving at a reluctant conclusion. She turned her head and examined her son's pudgy face, which was framed by fashionable long hair, then that of her daughter-in-law who, at forty-six, was fighting with the armoury provided by art to retain the remnants of her youthful prettiness. They are so ordinary, she thought. But Sorel was another matter. Her beauty was quite breathtaking, even if she was still a child at eighteen. The sad grey eyes looked into her own and she sighed deeply.

'You poor pretty dear.' The unspoken words slid across her brain. 'Don't fret. This, too, will pass.'

That was the hard-won wisdom that old age carried on its bent shoulders. All life was transient. The peak of ecstasy, the agonizing hell of depression – all would pass and become elusive ghosts of memory that receded along the misty avenue of time. Today's purple tragedy became tomorrow's amusing anecdote.

Having reached this conclusion, Grandma fell asleep. She had not intended to do so, being of the opinion that only lazy people slept during the hours of daylight, but a combination of heat, sound (the rattle of teacups, the hum of an inquisitive bee) and the cumulative effect of three restless nights, was too much for her tired old brain and body.

However, she was dimly aware that Ethel and Sorel were clearing away the tea things and John had wandered off on some mission of his own; even heard her daughter-in-law say: 'Let her sleep. She's looked so tired lately.' Then she was suddenly wide awake, alone under the multi-coloured umbrella, muttering fearfully: 'No . . . it mustn't happen . . .' and staring up at one particular window.

It was the first one on the left. Four well-cleaned panes of glass that now reflected the amber light of the setting sun. Grandma shook her head, ordered her dangerously thudding heart to behave itself and spoke words of self-reproach.

'Maggie, don't be such a silly old fool.'

But she could not dismiss the perfectly ridiculous notion that some time during that perilous period which separates sleep from wakefulness, a face had been looking down at her from that window. The face of someone long dead.

Sorel insisted that she be moved into the end bedroom, maintaining it received an early ration of sunlight in the morning

and commanded a fine view of the distant hills. Ethel and John complained about the extra work such a move entailed, and Grandma said that when she was young, a girl remained in whatever room was offered her – and was properly grateful. But, of course, the child was allowed to have her own way; the collection of records, books, large posters (some of which the old lady thought rather disgusting), to say nothing of two wardrobes, one chest of drawers and one bed, were transferred to the new location.

Grandma inspected the end result.

'It's a bit smaller than the one down the landing,' she commented, 'and so far as I can see the view's no different.'

The girl stood by the fireplace, a wing of auburn hair half hiding her face. 'But I like it better than any other room in the entire house. And – I know this must sound silly – but it's sort of lonely. The very walls seem to be pleading for company.'

The old lady said: 'Ah!' twice and moved over to the window, where she stared down into the garden. She saw the striped umbrella and the empty chairs and shook her head.

'That's plain daft,' she murmured.

'I know.' Sorel's voice came from behind her. 'But that's the way I feel. But don't tell Mum or Dad. They wouldn't understand.'

'But I do?'

'Yes. Because they're middle-aged, but you're not really old. Not deep inside.'

And she kissed Grandma's cheek and in consequence stopped the old lady from asking questions that in all probability would not have received satisfactory answers.

Instead she said: 'Go along with you. The chances are you'll be calling me a silly old coot before the week's out,' then hurried from the room like a young girl who has just been paid her first compliment. Later – in the sleepless hours that precede dawn – she allowed thoughts to form tiny pyramids of conjecture; sent out mental feelers through the silent house and tasted the loneliness, the sadness – and the rising wave of hope. She created a warning from whispered words.

'Be careful. The purring kitten soon forgets.'

She sensed, rather than heard the low laugh.

John Smith was of the opinion that it was about time his

daughter pulled herself together and stopped moping in her room and went out and about, maintaining that this was the correct conduct for persons of her age and sex. Of course Ethel, being a dutiful wife, fully endorsed this statement and expressed the belief that there were more well-endowed, better-looking and constant fish in the sea, than had as yet been taken out. Sorel listened with praiseworthy attention, waited until both parents had exhausted their immediate fund of wisdom, then made utterance.

'I've decided that men are not worth worrying about. They're selfish, sloppy and have only one thought in their tiny minds.'

Ethel cast a quick glance at her husband and appeared to be pondering on this point of view.

'I won't say, dear, there isn't something in what you say, but that's no reason why you shouldn't get out and about. Go to a nice social. Join the local youth club. I'm sure there must be one somewhere.'

'Oh, leave me alone.'

The girl ran from the room as Ethel expelled a deep, exasperated sigh, and John frowned and would doubtlessly have expressed a profound opinion had not Grandma interrupted from her chair by the window.

'The girl's reached an awkward age. At eighteen you don't know which way the wind's blowing. Leave her to me.'

'Be careful what you say,' Ethel warned. 'You can be so tactless sometimes.'

The old woman ignored the remark and watched the living-room door, which at that particular moment was slowly opening of its own accord. No one else appeared to notice this slightly disturbing phenomenon, and there was really no valid reason why she should draw their attention to it. The word 'draught' crept across her mind, although there was not so much as a breeze to disturb the tall grass at the bottom of the garden. But Grandma narrowed her eyes and flirted with the possibility that something which had been only a memory shadow was being reinforced by raw, adolescent energy. Such an idea was complete nonsense, of course, but it seemed to slip out from a dark cavern in her brain and would not be dismissed. And she discovered that, once embarked on this road of conjecture, there was no turning back. If – her limited vocabulary was not adequate to allow

her to translate such a subject into words – two beings shared a common sorrow, then surely they would be drawn together. Each one attempting to comfort the other – only the girl would soon recover.

Grandma creased her face into a deep frown and got up.

'About time I peeled them potatoes,' she announced and trotted into the kitchen, much to the astonishment of Ethel, who had never been given this kind of assistance before. A few minutes later the living-room door slammed, and John was heard to remark that he hoped the house wasn't subsiding.

Three days later, the Smiths, in an effort to further the process of forcing their daughter to get out and about, threw a small party. True, their circle of acquaintances was still somewhat limited, but the vicar, being himself a newcomer to the district, was more than pleased to put in an appearance and pretended to be vastly amused when the local doctor said he had yet to blunt his scalpel on a human soul. Youth was represented by the nephew of Mrs Carrington-Smythe – secretary of the Self Employed People's Party – a receding chinned, not-much-to-say-for-himself young man who stared at Sorel with inarticulate admiration and blushed unbecomingly when she smiled at him.

Having gathered together a number of people who normally would have passed one another in the street without exchanging so much as a nod, John found himself with a well-nigh insurmountable problem as to what to do with them. He assumed a hearty, let's-have-fun expression and took up a position by the sideboard, which bore more than a passing resemblance to a miniature off-licence.

'What will it be?' he enquired. 'Mrs Carrington-Smythe – can I tempt you?'

'I never indulge,' that lady replied. 'If you have a grape-juice I might consider it.' She addressed the entire assembly. 'I always maintain that strong drink is the crutch required by the morally crippled. Do you not agree with me, Vicar?'

The Reverend Waters, who had been casting appreciative glances in the direction of the whisky decanter, could only agree, and even went so far as to suggest that the road to hell was quite possibly flanked by empty bottles. However, Miss Jenkins – a strong-willed lady who ran the village Post Office

– said her morals were in fine shape and she'd like a port and lemon. Thereupon Sorel giggled and nudged Arnold Carrington-Smythe, a course of action which made that young man blush to an even deeper shade of red and stare earnestly at the carpet.

From that time onward, conversation was hard to come by. The doctor did try to drum up some enthusiasm about the exceptionally fine weather, but Miss Jenkins stated emphatically it wouldn't last. Then John started to describe the house improvements he intended to carry out in the near future, but, as he was not gifted with a fertile imagination, this subject failed to excite anyone's interest. Finally it was Mrs Carrington-Smythe who relit the conversational fire.

'I suppose you know this house has a bad reputation?'

There was an immediate favourable reaction. The vicar assumed an air of professional interest, being under the impression the lady was referring to some past history of unsavoury conduct; the doctor smiled indulgently, and Miss Jenkins nodded grimly, as though she knew much but was prepared to allow someone else to unveil the face of truth. Grandma sighed and took a tiny sip from her gin and lime.

'Bad reputation!' Ethel gasped. 'Whatever do you mean?'

Mrs Carrington-Smythe flicked an imaginary speck from her blue serge skirt and gave the impression she was about to perform a painful duty with great reluctance.

'I only know what I've been told, and doubtlessly the story has gained much in the telling. But there is rarely smoke without fire, no matter how small the flames, and it might be as well if you were told by someone who prides herself on having a fund of common sense. One fact is beyond dispute. A young man committed suicide in this house.'

The vicar said: 'Good gracious!' this being the strongest expletive he could use in mixed company; the doctor exclaimed: 'Indeed!' and Miss Jenkins said nothing at all, only nodded again, then drained her glass of port and lemon. Arnold allowed his mouth to drop open, while Sorel looked rather bored. Grandma asked: 'Why?'

Mrs Carrington-Smythe frowned. 'Why what?'

'Why did he do himself in?'

'He was crossed in love.' Miss Jenkins supplied the answer. 'The squire's daughter jilted him, and he drank prussic acid.'

The secretary of the Self Employed People's Party raised her

voice. She did not take kindly to anyone who tried to steal her thunder.

'You have been misinformed. The girl was his second cousin and he hanged himself.'

'Squire's daughter,' Miss Jenkins insisted. 'Prussic acid.'

'Speaking for myself,' the doctor commented, 'I'd favour the rope. Prussic acid would be very nasty. No woman would be worth that.'

Mrs Carrington-Smythe turned her slightly bovine eyes in his direction. Her voice sounded not unlike a knife being drawn across ice.

'You must remember, Doctor, that this event took place at the turn of the century, when young people were not afflicted by the lack of moral fibre that appears to be the curse of the present up-and-coming generation. In those days, when a young man fell in love with a gal, he loved her, and no bones about it. Dare I say that men were men and not prone to flinch from a bottle of prussic acid?'

'Or a length of clothes line,' Miss Jenkins added.

Neither of the ladies appeared to have realized that they had – so to speak – exchanged ends, and they continued to glare one at the other, until Ethel said:

'Well, thank goodness it all happened a long time ago. Let's hope the young man found peace at last – no matter how he ended his life.'

There was a short, pregnant silence before Mrs Carrington-Smythe dropped her well-primed bombshell.

'Yes – well, that's the crux of the matter. According to local tradition he did not find peace. He's still . . .'

'Very restless,' Miss Jenkins interrupted. 'There are those who say he's been seen looking out through one of the windows . . .'

'Standing on the front doorstep,' Mrs Carrington-Smythe corrected. 'Looking out over the fields . . .'

'Over the garden.' Miss Jenkins was doing her best to deal kindly with the misinformed. 'Waiting for his unfaithful loved one to return.'

The doctor expressed an unfortunate opinion.

'I've never heard so much piffle in all me born days. If you ask me, the entire story was invented by a crowd of old women with nothing better to do. Good God!'

There is nothing like an attack from a third party to turn two former enemies into a close alliance. Miss Jenkins and Mrs Carrington-Smythe both rose and moved slowly, but with great dignity, towards the door. Ethel, mindful that her reputation as a hostess demanded she make some conciliatory overtures, all but ran after the departing guests and tried to pour oil on exceedingly troubled waters.

'Please, I'm sure the doctor did not mean to offend you. He spoke without thinking.'

As though to deny any lapse of thought on his part, the doctor's voice bellowed from the drawing-room.

'Both mad, you know. A pair of frustrated old hens.'

Miss Jenkins gasped, and Mrs Carrington-Smythe called out to Arnold, who appeared to be riveted to his seat beside Sorel.

'Arnold, come here this instant. We are leaving.'

The donning of coats, the gathering of handbags and umbrellas, even the opening of the front door – all such mundane action were performed without words, until Miss Jenkins was about to step down into the small drive. Then she turned round and glared at Ethel and John.

'I hope your hair turns white,' she hissed.

The ill-fated party broke up soon afterwards.

In the days which followed, Grandma kept her thoughts to herself, but watched Sorel with anxious eyes. The girl appeared to be more cheerful than before the night of the party and even discussed the possibility of getting a job with the local pharmacist, but the old woman detected an almost indefinable air of detachment, periods of dreamy unawareness, that were followed by a kind of unnatural gaiety.

'It's nice to see her more like her old self,' Ethel remarked, and John lit his pipe and sent out fat smoke rings and watched them rise to the ceiling.

'She'll soon be out and about.'

Then one evening Grandma received confirmation of her suspicion, and anxiety was transformed into fear-tinted pity.

She came out of her bedroom, walked the entire length of the landing, and was about to descend the stairs when she became aware of a figure standing by Sorel's door. For the space of five seconds she did not fully understand who or what it could be, was, in fact, on the verge of ignoring it –

dismissing the imperfect memory of a tall young man from her mind. Then knowledge flared up into a bright flame, and she *knew*.

Slowly, with great reluctance, Grandma turned her head and accepted the evidence presented by her old eyes. The face could have been classified as handsome were it not for the weak chin: the eyes were well shaped, dark, melancholy, the body slender to the point of leanness. He was dressed in a grey cutaway coat, white shirt and what in Grandma's young days had been called drainpipe trousers. The general impression was one of instability; an affection-starved mind married to a frail body.

Then he smiled. A slow baring of white teeth, a flash of joy in the dark eyes, the transformation of despair into the hope of ultimate fulfilment. Grandma shook her head and said: 'No – it won't work,' and found she was alone, facing an unresponsive expanse of white-painted door. Presently she continued her interrupted journey down the stairs.

During dinner, Ethel and John tossed remarks at each other across the roast lamb, and Sorel toyed with her food and seemed totally unaware of Grandma's furtive glances. Then the plates and dishes were cleared away and it was time to watch television, a pastime that the old lady usually enjoyed, only now she had a problem to solve that any self-respecting script editor would have rejected as 'lacks credibility'.

At first she was tempted to share the burden of her knowledge, but after some little consideration decided that neither son nor daughter-in-law were equipped to deal with the unusual. John would more than likely treat the revelation as an outrageous joke, and Ethel would most certainly have a fit of hysterics. As for Sorel – how much did she know at the present time? Youth hugged its secrets and was able to accept the bizarre with surprising equanimity. No, she must wait, watch, be prepared to act when the time was right.

Sleep is a little death, and it is a matter for enthralling conjecture where that atom of consciousness we call the soul goes during the period when the body rests. It is reasonable to suppose that the young visit some pleasure city that is not far removed from the material plane, whereas the old must surely stray across the frontier that separates the quick from the dead. Conversely, they may never wander more than a

few yards from their beds, always prepared to re-enter the house of flesh when the heart misses a beat or danger approaches.

Grandma was suddenly wide awake.

She lay listening, trying to remember what had disturbed her, straining her ears, peering across the room, which was saved from total darkness by moonlight filtered through the drawn curtains. After a while she switched on the bedside lamp, fumbled for her spectacles, then gave a loud sigh of relief when the familiar furniture came into clear focus. Light is a great comforter.

The low, rippling laugh was almost imperceptible, and the old woman might not have heard it had she not attuned her ears to detect the slightest sound. Her body was reluctant to leave the warm bed, and the dressing-gown slipped from her rheumatic-stiff fingers, so that she had to bend down and pick it up, before forcing her arms into the quilted sleeves. Then there was difficulty in finding one slipper, but finally it was located, lurking under the dressing-table stool – and she was ready to perform the most courageous act of her life.

A thin ribbon of light marked the bottom of Sorel's bedroom door, and scarcely had Grandma placed her ear against one panel when the low laugh again disturbed the night silence. Then she heard Sorel say: 'This is ridiculous. Really it is.'

The old woman gripped the brass handle, turned it and flung the door back. Sorel, attired in light blue pyjamas, was on the bed, which was situated to the right of the doorway, and, at the moment when Grandma entered, was lying on her left side and facing the fireplace wall. She turned a startled face and glared back over one shoulder.

'What do you want?'

There was no sign of an intruder, and the old woman did not really expect to see one. She supposed, without giving the matter much thought, that her entrance had disturbed the atmosphere, dispersed whatever energy was necessary to build him up, and brought about a temporary oblivion. Sorel slipped off the bed and, after casting one quick glance in the direction of the fireplace, began to protest with all the ardour of a child who has been indulging in some forbidden pastime.

'You've no right to burst in like this. I've got some right to privacy, haven't I?'

'You mustn't encourage him,' Grandma said quietly. 'You're playing with fire.'

'I don't know what you mean. You're just a silly old woman.'

Grandma closed the door behind her, then seated herself on the bed. She was horrified to find her knees were knocking together.

'Don't play the innocent with me. I know exactly what's going on, and it's got to stop.'

Sorel's eyes widened in astonishment as she sank into a chair.

'You . . . you know!'

'You little fool – I've seen him.'

Two tears seeped out from Sorel's eyes and rolled slowly down her smooth cheeks. Grandma thought she wept beautifully.

'Perhaps,' she said softly, 'you'd better tell me how it all began.'

The young voice clothed the bizarre with matter-of-fact words.

'I liked this room because it suited my mood. You know – I was so unhappy about – you know who. I suppose I knew someone – or something – was here, but never actually thought much about it. Not, that is to say, until those two old biddies told that story about the ghost. Then – I sort of called him up. Is that the right expression?'

'It will do,' Grandma replied grimly. 'But how did you set about it?'

Sorel smoothed her hair with one white hand.

'Well, I thought about him for a bit. Then tried to imagine what he looked like . . . then sort of pictured him standing by the window . . . and what do you know? He was.'

Grandma shuddered and decided she would never understand the young generation.

'Good grief, girl! Didn't you scream? Faint, or something?'

Sorel wiped her eyes and giggled.

''Course not. Honestly, Grandma, you are square. I mean, it was so thrilling and quite took me out of myself. A real ghost and rather dishy, even if he did look so sad. Gosh, I know girls who'd give their eye-teeth for an experience like that.'

'Which only goes to show they haven't been brought up

properly. What happened next?'

'I tried to talk to him, because I read somewhere you're supposed to talk to ghosts. But at first he was so shy.'

Grandma frowned. 'At first! I take it he became more forthcoming later?'

Sorel tilted her head to one side and appeared to give the question some thought. Then she said:

'I suppose you could say so. He never speaks – perhaps he can't. But he stands and looks at me and appears to understand what I'm saying. He's got a lovely smile.'

'And what do you say?' the old lady demanded.

'Oh, this and that. How awful I think that girl was who jilted him, and how, if he feels lonely, I don't mind talking to him. You know.'

'But it's got to stop. Do you hear me, girl? You mustn't encourage him.'

Sorel pouted, and Grandma thought how beautiful, spoilt and wilful she looked.

'Why? I mean it's not as though he was a real person. Well – not a flesh-and-blood person. He can't do me any harm.'

Grandma got up. 'I'm not sure that I'm all that concerned about you. It's the ghost I feel sorry for. Am I to understand he'll materialize – or whatever he does – the moment I turn my back?'

'No. You spoilt everything by bursting in like that. I bet it will be days before he comes back again. He's very sensitive, you know. That row at the party upset him dreadfully.'

Grandma cast an apprehensive glance around the room.

'Well, that's as maybe. But listen to someone who knows what she's talking about. Get rid of him. Tell him to shove off. It will be kinder in the long run. What your mother would say if she knew you were playing footsy with a ghost doesn't bear thinking about.'

'You won't tell her?'

Grandma opened the door and peered out on to the landing. There was always the possibility that the phantom lover had been eavesdropping.

'Don't be daft. I wouldn't tell her the time of day. Now, remember what I said. Send him about his business.'

'Grandma – you're sweet.'

'I know. But don't tell anyone.'

*

The old are ordained to give advice, and the young have a duty to reject it.

Although Grandma heard no sounds from Sorel's room during the dark hours, she knew instinctively the girl was still entertaining her spectral swain. She sighed deeply and not for the first time tried to imagine how the affair would end. Fortunately, Sorel was displaying signs of returning normality; she applied for and obtained a post as typist in the nearby town and went to the cinema twice a week, so that her parents became quite optimistic.

'Next thing you know,' John observed, 'she'll be bringing a young spark home. One that will appreciate her.'

Grandma shuddered.

Of course he was absolutely right. One Sunday evening the rural peace was disturbed by the roar of a particularly ferocious-looking motor-cycle, and Sorel was seen to dismount from the pillion seat and lead a tall young man with a big nose towards the front door. Ethel withdrew her face from the drawn back curtain and exclaimed:

'John, put your jacket on. Sorel has brought a young man home.'

John said it was about time, and Grandma pretended she did not hear a door slam upstairs.

Later she learnt that the young man was burdened with the name of Jason Butterworth, that he was a with-it-and-get-out-and-find-it tearaway, who beat a drum in the local pop group. It was a case of hate at first sight. He had a mass of frizzed blond hair and an unkempt beard, and wore an exotic line in shirts and a big brass medallion. He also – when the introductions were made – addressed Grandma as 'Gran'.

She knew with a dreadful certainty that they would never get on together. But Ethel, who believed in milking all prospective son-in-law material of any relevant information in the shortest possible time, smirked, poured tea into the best green cups and sent out the first, tentative feeler.

'I expect a lovely motor-cycle like that costs a lot of money. I mean to say, you'd have to earn quite a bit to be able to afford it.'

Jason was not weighted down by modesty and supplied the correct answer in no time at all.

'S'right. If I wasn't pulling in a load of bread, I'd never be able to cock a leg over that baby.'

'Goodness gracious! John, ask Jason if he would like a slice of cream sponge.'

John was not all that taken by the newcomer. Such words as: 'Haircut', 'Shave', 'Good wash' and 'Spot of square-bashing' tripped across his mind, but in these hard days, when it has become almost impossible to meet a young man who is prepared to feed and support another man's daughter, no likely candidate can be dismissed out of hand. So he nudged the cake-stand in the direction of his guest and advanced the interrogation one important step.

'What's your occupation, son? Apart from beating a drum?'

Jason emptied his teacup and held it out for a refill before answering.

'Elevation operative.'

'How interesting!' Ethel exclaimed. 'Does that mean you promote people to higher positions?'

Sorel giggled. 'Mum, honestly! Jason drives a crane.'

The door opened suddenly and crashed against the side wall.

Everyone registered shocked surprise, save Grandma, who nodded grimly and tried to command Sorel's attention. John got up, muttering something about shifting bedrock, and Jason, entirely unaware of the dangerous ground on which he was planting his clumsy feet, said: 'Don't tell me this place is haunted?' then laughed in a most disgusting fashion.

John closed the door as the milk jug nose-dived into Jason's lap.

The ensuing silence was broken by Grandma's sardonic voice.

'The ghost don't seem to fancy you.'

Ethel snapped: 'Grandma, that was uncalled for,' and hastened to the kitchen in search of a damp cloth, while Sorel glared her annoyance and gave the impression she would have some sharp words to say to someone, when a suitable occasion arose. Jason's trousers were cleaned – after a fashion – but although he appeared to accept the profuse apologies and even agreed worse things happen at sea, it was easy to see he wasn't all that happy. There was a tendency to watch the refilled milk jug, eye the door with grave suspicion and grin inanely whenever anyone spoke to him.

'The bloody thing jumped,' he said presently.

John frowned and tried to catch his wife's eye. He did not approve of bad language.

'Jumped! What jumped?'

'The flaming milk jug.'

'Rubbish. How can a milk jug jump?'

Jason left shortly afterwards, not forgetting to take Sorel with him. Barely had the front door been closed when Ethel raised her head and took up the position of someone who is listening to a far-off sound.

'What's wrong now?' John demanded.

'Nothing . . . Only, for a moment I thought I heard someone crying.'

The hall clock had struck two when Grandma, quite unable to subdue her curiosity, crept out on to the landing and flattened her ear against Sorel's bedroom door. The one-sided conversation was most enthralling.

'I'm not going to stand for it.' Sorel's voice had acquired a built-in nagging quality and Grandma thought she would make someone an excellent wife. 'Always hanging about looking like a slab of cold mist. And I'll go out with whom I please, and if I choose to bring them home, I don't expect you to slam doors or throw milk jugs. Are you listening to me?'

There was the sound of a muffled sob, the merest suggestion of a strangled word, before Sorel continued her tirade.

'I can understand why that other girl gave you the elbow. Was fed up to the front teeth, I wouldn't wonder. And what did you do? Hanged yourself – or drank something horrid. Silly great twit. When I was given the push-off treatment some time ago, I didn't do myself in. I just moped a bit, chatted you up – then went out and found Jason . . . Don't you grit your teeth at me.'

Grandma chuckled, did a little dance and muttered: 'That's telling him.'

'And now – out. Get out of this house. Go and find yourself a ghost lady or something. Go on.'

He – it – materialized through the door, and Grandma retreated along the landing and took up a position by her own bedroom door, where she watched the apparition with grave concern. The white face was not so much sad as sullen; had much in common with that of a husband who considers he has been grievously wronged. He glided rather than walked down the stairs and disappeared into the darkness-shrouded

hall. A little later a soft thud suggested that the front door – which was securely locked – had been opened and closed.

Grandma went into Sorel's room and found the girl seated on her bed.

'Well,' she said quietly, 'you took my advice at last. He's gone.'

Sorel's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

'Oh, Grandma, if only he had had a little more go. Been just a teeny bit like Jason.'

Grandma tried to imagine a ghost that beat a drum and decided that, if she had to choose, one that sobbed was much preferable.

'Le's hope we've seen the last of him. Now, I'm going back to bed.'

Jason became a fairly regular visitor, and Sorel went out with him most nights of the week and every Saturday. It was understood she was thinking of learning to play the clarinet and had already mastered the basic rules of beating a drum. Ethel decided she would wear blue at the wedding, John was wondering if the bridegroom would share the expense of the reception, and Grandma announced she wanted nothing to do with the entire proceeding.

The sad ghost had apparently taken his dismissal to heart and no longer haunted Sorel's bedroom, a state of affairs that should have been a matter for quiet satisfaction, but Grandma sometimes heard her crying during the small hours. When questioned, the girl said: 'Aren't men stupid? Oh, I don't know what I want,' a statement that received the old lady's complete endorsement.

One Saturday afternoon, Grandma was dozing peacefully under the striped umbrella. John and Ethel had gone to Midminster to do some shopping, Sorel was doubtlessly being transported across the countryside on the back of Jason's motor-cycle, and it was pleasant to know that for a few hours there would be no one to disturb the sultry tranquillity of a summer afternoon. A large bluebottle buzzed round the old lady's head and brought her to the surface of consciousness. She waved an impatient hand and became aware of other sounds: the quarrelsome chatter of sparrows, the restless breeze that sighed through the leaves of the old elm tree – and the muted snarl of an approaching motor-cycle. She

muttered: 'Damnation!' and resolved that she would pretend to be asleep, even, possibly, assume a death-like stillness that would surely frighten her granddaughter, if not the beater-of-drums-cum-elevation operative.

The snarling engine drew nearer, rose to a high-pitched scream – then suddenly ceased. Grandma opened her eyes and tried to understand why Jason should cut off his engine a hundred yards or so from the house. There was such a thing as consideration for elderly ladies who were having a quiet Saturday-afternoon nap, but she doubted if Jason would walk a hundred yards on that account. Of course, the motor-cycle may not have been his, but that of a perfect stranger who had chosen to indulge in some hanky-panky in Farmer Gamlin's field.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Grandma was about to close her eyes when she saw Sorel looking down at her from the extreme left-hand bedroom window. Afterwards, she remembered the expression of surprise, the slight frown, but at the time she was aware only of an irrational feeling of intense anger. It was as though the mere presence of the girl standing at her own open bedroom window was the result of an irresponsible action, that she, Grandma, had helped bring about.

She called out: 'What are you doing there?' and Sorel smiled and appeared to be trying to answer, only Grandma could not hear a word. Then Jason came lurching round a bend in the drive, his gaily coloured shirt stained with blood, his face as white as a slab of snow in moonlight, his mouth gabbling words that created a kind of mad logic.

'The silly bleeder was standing in the road . . . I tried to miss him . . . and went through him . . . through him . . .'

He collapsed at Grandma's feet, but the old woman could only stare up at the now-empty window, her anger replaced by an unexplainable feeling of comfort.

At last the sad ghost had acquired a bit of go. There was no reason to suppose he would ever be sad or lonely again.

Presently a car came purring up the drive and braked to a halt. Ethel and John got out.

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