



THE 16TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT

GHOST

STORIES

Haunting stories by
M. R. James, Marjorie Bowen,
Pamela Hansford Johnson and others —
selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



THE SIXTEENTH FONTANA BOOK OF
GREAT GHOST STORIES

Also in Fontana

The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 2nd Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 3rd Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 4th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 7th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 8th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

Ed. Robert Aickman

The 9th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 10th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 11th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 12th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 13th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories
The 14th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

Ed. R. Cherwynd-Hayes

Welsh Tales of Terror

Ed. R. Cherwynd-Hayes

The Sixteenth Fontana Book of Great

Ghost Stories

Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

Fontana/Collins

First published by Fontana Books 1980

The arrangement of this collection is copyright
© R. Chetwynd-Hayes 1980

Made and printed in Great Britain by
William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, Glasgow

CONDITIONS OF SALE

This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise,
be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed
on the subsequent purchaser

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>page 7</i>
Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book <i>M. R. James</i>	13
Mariners <i>Terry Tapp</i>	26
Beyond the Red Door <i>Kenneth Hill</i>	41
The Story of Medhans Lea <i>E. and H. Heron</i>	47
Just for the Record <i>Patricia Moynehan</i>	62
The Cook's Room <i>Pansy Pakenham</i>	78
Norton Camp <i>William Charlton</i>	84
The Prescription <i>Marjorie Bowen</i>	98
The Rock Garden <i>Heather Vineham</i>	117
Brickett Bottom <i>Amyas Northcote</i>	127
The Swan <i>Pamela Hansford Johnson</i>	139
The Children and the Apple Tree <i>Meg Buxton</i>	146
The Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall <i>John Kendrick Bangs</i>	155
Destination Glen Doll <i>A. Scupham</i>	162
She Walks on Dry Land <i>R. Chetwynd-Hayes</i>	181

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Editor gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint copyright material to the following:

Edward Arnold & Co. Ltd for *Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book* by M. R. James from *The Collected Ghost Stories of M. R. James*.

The Author for *Mariners* by Terry Tapp. © Terry Tapp 1980.

The Author for *Just for the Record* by Patricia Moynehan. © Patricia Moynehan 1980.

The Author for *The Cook's Room* by Pansy Pakenham from *The Evening Standard Second Book of Strange Stories*.

The Author for *Norton Camp* by William Charlton. © William Charlton 1980.

Mrs Stella Jonckheere for *The Prescription* by Marjorie Bowen.

The Author for *The Rock Garden* by Heather Vineham. © Heather Vineham 1980.

Curtis Brown Ltd for *The Swan* by Pamela Hansford Johnson.

William Kimber & Co Ltd for *The Children and the Apple Tree* by Meg Buxton from *No Earthly Reason*.

The Author for *Destination Glen Doll* by A. Scupham. © A. Scupham 1980.

The Author for *She Walks on Dry Land* by R. Chetwynd-Hayes © R. Chetwynd-Hayes 1980.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Every effort has been made to trace the owners of the copyright material in this book. It is the editor's belief that the necessary permissions from publishers, authors and authorized agents have been obtained, but in the case of any question arising as to the use of any material, the editor, while expressing regret for any errors, will be pleased to make the necessary corrections in future editions of the book.

INTRODUCTION

To have a full chilling effect a ghost should be heard and not seen. Possibly this is the reason that the radio is such a perfect medium for the ghost story, because the listener is only permitted to hear approaching footsteps, creaking doors, a disembodied sigh—and his imagination does the rest. To actually meet a ghost face to face must be an anti-climax; merely confronting a man or woman who might be a little transparent round the edges. Captain Marryat clearly thought so, for when he saw the famous Brown Lady of Raynham Hall coming towards him down a long passage; he promptly put a bullet through her. Not that it did much good, for she got herself photographed in 1926 and is in all probability roaming the corridors of Raynham to this day.

But to return to my contention that unseen ghosts are the only ones worth worrying about, the opening story of this collection, *Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book* by M. R. James, illustrates what I am trying to convey very nicely. Or nastily. The most terrifying part of the tale is when Dennistoun hears a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. The dreadful thing that appears in his bedroom is at first dismissed as being nothing more than a penwiper. Of course he soon realizes it is *something* guaranteed to wipe the smile off the most sceptical face.

On the other hand, although Doctor Gareth Vanglor in *Mariners* by Terry Tapp is at first troubled by unexplainable sounds, he eventually sees more than he bargained for. This is a very ingenious story—as one might expect from an author of Mr Tapp's expertise—and makes full use of an idea that excites my full admiration. A house that looks like a ship and is haunted by the past which saturates the wood from which it was built. There is also a hint that that same past is locked in Doctor Vanglor's mind and he—plus the house—are enough to create an explosive situation.

Computers are, by the very nature of their purpose, excellent ghost containers, for in them can be stored the entire contents of a man's brain. This statement may be interpreted by Kenneth Hill as a hint that I would not be averse to receiving a story which deals with a haunted computer. In the meanwhile his excellent, subtle and entertaining *Beyond the Red Door* is quite enough to be going on with. The atmosphere is most eerie and it takes some little while for the reader to sort out the living from the dead.

I have never completed reading a novel by E. and H. Heron, having long ago decided they are much too pedantic. But their occasional ghost story is another matter entirely, particularly when it includes the pompous psychologist Mr Flaxman Low. *The Story of Medhans Lea* is peopled by stout hearty men who say: 'Don't you know! How ripping! It's a cursed creepy affair!' all of which is intended to inform us that here are some no-nonsense chaps who just don't believe in ghosts—or any of that rot. Which means we just can't wait for them to get their come-uppance. Which they do—in no uncertain terms.

Patricia Moynehan is a pretty young lady (I have her photograph) who has turned in a really first rate modern ghost story that delights my horror-mongering soul. It is indeed most convincing and the characters Ailsa Higgins and Lyle Burton extremely well drawn. Here I am forced to concede that meeting a certain type of ghost face to face is by no means an anti-climax—but rather sad.

I found *The Cook's Room* by Pansy Pakenham in *The Evening Standard Second Book of Strange Stories* which was published before the last war; a veritable treasure trove for a horror-monger like myself who is forever on the look out for chilling and unusual material. I can only take ghoulish pleasure in reviving this grim slice of blood-curdling macabre, knowing it will be much appreciated by the readers of this series. As good cooks go she went—and came back in a place where she was least expected.

Norton Camp by William Charlton deserves to be scripted as a television play and I can only hope that some

alive-and-with-it producer will take due note of that fact. Mist shrouded war time aerodrome, now transformed into an army camp, shivering sentries, cursing soldiery—and strange goings-on in the NAAFI. Time can so easily roll back in such places and today wilt under the icy fingers of long dead yesterdays. I can imagine a close-up of Private Debenham gripping his pick-handle and shouting: 'Stand back . . .' Better than *Crossroads* any day.

In *The Prescription* Marjorie Bowen (she also wrote under the names of George R. Preedy and Joseph Shearing) gives us a prescription for the uncanny. In fact most readers will probably need one after staggering through this chilling tale. It's all here—murder most foul, sound of mad laughter, ghosts galore and a final explanation. I love Mrs Mahogany (!) the medium, who having come out of her trance remarks:

'Well, here I am again! I wonder if I said anything that interested you?'

In *The Rock Garden* by Heather Vineham a young lady has inherited Briar Cottage and a dominating servant called Sarah. She has also acquired some weeds where the rock garden should be. There is no need for me to tell you any more. But I will add the shock ending satisfied even my need for the unusual.

Many years ago I read a story, the plot of which haunted my sleeping and waking hours, although I was unable to remember either title or author. I know now it was *Brickett Bottom* by Amyas Northcote. It was first published by John Lane in a book called *In Ghostly Company* in 1922. In more respects than one it is a haunting little story, with a simple plot that leads us gently to a terrifying climax. One is inclined to wonder if Mr Northcote has read Ambrose Bierce's *Mysterious Disappearances* which had been published sometime during the 1890s. Certainly he seems to owe a considerable debt to the episode that Bierce headed *Charles Ashmore's Trial*, but I do not hold that against him. Writers have been feeding off each other since the days of Shakespeare. With one exception of course.

The Swan by Pamela Hansford Johnson has a child as its

central figure and I cannot say more than that without disclosing what should be a surprise ending. This well planned little story is well worth reading more than once.

The Children and the Apple Tree is the second story written by Meg Buxton that I have included in this series, as I am much impressed by the subtle way in which she deals with her unusual plots. In *The Herb Garden* (15th Fontana Ghost Book) she depicted a young clergyman who could see ghostly monks walking in a country garden. Now we have a man who can see children playing under the old apple tree. I like this kind of thing:

The apple tree, for all its age and decrepitude, had dressed its stubby branches with rosettes of leaves, each with a bunch of pink and white blossom at its centre. The children gazed at it solemnly. Even to Martin's jaundiced eye it was a joy to behold in the late May afternoon sunshine which warmed the grey stone behind it and washed each leaf and petal with golden light . . .

A beautiful story that allows the reader to exercise his own imagination.

I have included *The Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall* by John Kendrick Bangs because I like my collections to have at least one humorous story. And this is very funny. What does one do with a ghost who comes up from the sea every Christmas Eve and soaks everything—and everyone—about her? Oglethorpe works out a simply splendid solution that might be worth remembering should you ever find yourself in his predicament.

A. Scupham takes us for a walk through the Scottish Highlands in *Destination Glen Doll* and relates with impressive clarity all that takes place on that momentous journey. It is apparently a hectic drive up from Edinburgh, mostly through heavy rain, although one can stop to enjoy a meal of fish and chips in the car at Blairgowrie.

But on reaching the outskirts of Kirriemuir it would be wise not to give a lift to a weary looking hitch-hiker, even if he is obviously soaking wet and weighed down with gear, which includes a coil of rope.

Nicely written and a thoughtful ending.

Lastly there is my own *She Walks on Dry Land* which for a change I have set in the Regency period. Well—why not? I like to write about arrogant earls that ride into lonely villages and get their deserts after hitting the innkeeper over the head with a riding crop.

It must have been fun being an arrogant earl back in 1812.

So—another fifteen stories all dealing with a variety of ghosts, that should enable you to enjoy an uncomfortable hour or two.

Happy shuddering.

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

CANON ALBERIC'S SCRAP-BOOK

M. R. JAMES

St Bertrand de Comminges is a decayed town on the spurs of the Pyrenees, not very far from Toulouse, and still nearer to Bagnères-de-Luchon. It was the site of a bishopric until the Revolution, and has a cathedral which is visited by a certain number of tourists. In the spring of 1883 an Englishman arrived at this old-world place—I can hardly dignify it with the name of city, for there are not a thousand inhabitants. He was a Cambridge man, who had come specially from Toulouse to see St Bertrand's Church, and had left two friends, who were less keen archaeologists than himself, in their hotel at Toulouse, under promise to join him on the following morning. Half an hour at the church would satisfy *them*, and all three could then pursue their journey in the direction of Auch. But our Englishman had come early on the day in question, and proposed to himself to fill a notebook and to use several dozens of plates in the process of describing and photographing every corner of the wonderful church that dominates the little hill of Comminges. In order to carry out this design satisfactorily, it was necessary to monopolize the verger of the church for the day. The verger or sacristan (I prefer the latter appellation, inaccurate as it may be) was accordingly sent for by the somewhat brusque lady who keeps the inn of the Chapeau Rouge; and when he came, the Englishman found him an unexpectedly interesting object of study. It was not in the personal appearance of the little, dry, wizened old man that the interest lay, for he was precisely like dozens of other church-guardians in France, but in a curious furtive, or rather hunted and oppressed, air which he had. He was perpetually half glancing behind him; the muscles of his back and shoulders seemed to be hunched in a continual nervous contraction, as if he were expecting every moment to find himself in the clutch of an enemy.

The Englishman hardly knew whether to put him down as a man haunted by a fixed delusion, or as one oppressed by a guilty conscience, or as an unbearably henpecked husband. The probabilities, when reckoned up, certainly pointed to the last idea; but, still, the impression conveyed was that of a more formidable persecutor even than a termagant wife.

However, the Englishman (let us call him Dennistoun) was soon too deep in his notebook and too busy with his camera to give more than an occasional glance to the sacristan. Whenever he did look at him, he found him at no great distance, either huddling himself back against the wall or crouching in one of the gorgeous stalls. Dennistoun became rather fidgety after a time. Mingled suspicions that he was keeping the old man from his *déjeuner*, that he was regarded as likely to make away with St Bertrand's ivory crozier, or with the dusty stuffed crocodile that hangs over the font, began to torment him.

'Won't you go home?' he said at last; 'I'm quite well able to finish my notes alone; you can lock me in if you like. I shall want at least two hours more here, and it must be cold for you, isn't it?'

'Good heavens!' said the little man, whom the suggestion seemed to throw into a state of unaccountable terror, 'such a thing cannot be thought of for a moment. Leave monsieur alone in the church? No, no; two hours, three hours, all will be the same to me. I have breakfasted, I am not at all cold, with many thanks to monsieur.'

'Very well, my little man,' quoth Dennistoun to himself: 'you have been warned, and you must take the consequences.'

Before the expiration of the two hours, the stalls, the enormous dilapidated organ, the choir-screen of Bishop John de Mauléon, the remnants of glass and tapestry, and the objects in the treasure-chamber, had been well and truly examined; the sacristan still keeping at Dennistoun's heels, and every now and then whipping round as if he had been stung, when one or other of the strange noises that trouble a large empty building fell on his ear. Curious noises they were sometimes.

'Once,' Dennistoun said to me, 'I could have sworn I heard a thin metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. I darted an inquiring glance at my sacristan. He was white to the lips. "It is he—that is—it is no one; the door is locked," was all he said, and we looked at each other for a full minute.'

Another little incident puzzled Dennistoun a good deal. He was examining a large dark picture that hangs behind the altar, one of a series illustrating the miracles of St Bertrand. The composition of the picture is wellnigh indecipherable, but there is a Latin legend below, which runs thus:

'Qualiter S. Bertrandus liberavit hominem quem diabolus diu volebat strangulare.' (How St Bertrand delivered a man whom the Devil long sought to strangle.)

Dennistoun was turning to the sacristan with a smile and a jocular remark of some sort on his lips, but he was confounded to see the old man on his knees, gazing at the picture with the eye of a suppliant in agony, his hands tightly clasped, and a rain of tears on his cheeks. Dennistoun naturally pretended to have noticed nothing, but the question would not away from him, 'Why should a daub of this kind affect anyone so strongly?' He seemed to himself to be getting some sort of clue to the reason of the strange look that had been puzzling him all the day: the man must be a monomaniac; but what was his monomania?

It was nearly five o'clock; the short day was drawing in, and the church began to fill with shadows, while the curious noises—the muffled footfalls and distant talking voices that had been perceptible all day—seemed, no doubt because of the fading light and the consequently quickened sense of hearing, to become more frequent and insistent.

The sacristan began for the first time to show signs of hurry and impatience. He heaved a sigh of relief when camera and notebook were finally packed up and stowed away, and hurriedly beckoned Dennistoun to the western door of the church, under the tower. It was time to ring the Angelus. A few pulls at the reluctant rope, and the great

bell Bertrande, high in the tower, began to speak, and swung her voice up among the pines and down to the valleys, loud with mountain-streams, calling the dwellers on those lonely hills to remember and repeat the salutation of the angel to her whom he called Blessed among women. With that a profound quiet seemed to fall for the first time that day upon the little town, and Dennistoun and the sacristan went out of the church.

On the doorstep they fell into conversation.

'Monsieur seemed to interest himself in the old choir-books in the sacristy.'

'Undoubtedly. I was going to ask you if there were a library in the town.'

'No, monsieur; perhaps there used to be one belonging to the Chapter, but it is now such a small place——' Here came a strange pause of irresolution, as it seemed; then, with a sort of plunge, he went on: 'But if monsieur is *amateur des vieux livres*, I have at home something that might interest him. It is not a hundred yards.'

At once all Dennistoun's cherished dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France flashed up, to die down again the next moment. It was probably a stupid missal of Plantin's printing, about 1580. Where was the likelihood that a place so near Toulouse would not have been ransacked long ago by collectors? However, it would be foolish not to go; he would reproach himself for ever after if he refused. So they set off. On the way the curious irresolution and sudden determination of the sacristan recurred to Dennistoun, and he wondered in a shamefaced way whether he was being decoyed into some purlieu to be made away with as a supposed rich Englishman. He contrived, therefore, to begin talking with his guide, and to drag in, in a rather clumsy fashion, the fact that he expected two friends to join him early the next morning. To his surprise, the announcement seemed to relieve the sacristan at once of some of the anxiety that oppressed him.

'That is well,' he said quite brightly—'that is very well. Monsieur will travel in company with his friends; they will

be always near him. It is a good thing to travel thus in company—sometimes.'

The last word appeared to be added as an afterthought, and to bring with it a relapse into gloom for the poor little man.

They were soon at the house, which was one rather larger than its neighbours, stone-built, with a shield carved over the door, the shield of Alberic de Mauléon, a collateral descendant, Dennistoun tells me, of Bishop John de Mauléon. This Alberic was a Canon of Comminges from 1680 to 1701. The upper windows of the mansion were boarded up, and the whole place bore, as does the rest of Comminges, the aspect of decaying age.

Arrived on his doorstep, the sacristan paused a moment.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'perhaps, after all, monsieur has not the time?'

'Not at all—lots of time—nothing to do till tomorrow. Let us see what it is you have got.'

The door was opened at this point, and a face looked out, a face far younger than the sacristan's but bearing something of the same distressing look: only here it seemed to be the mark, not so much of fear for personal safety as of acute anxiety on behalf of another. Plainly, the owner of the face was the sacristan's daughter; and, but for the expression I have described, she was a handsome girl enough. She brightened up considerably on seeing her father accompanied by an able-bodied stranger. A few remarks passed between father and daughter, of which Dennistoun only caught these words, said by the sacristan, 'He was laughing in the church,' words which were answered only by a look of terror from the girl.

But in another minute they were in the sitting-room of the house, a small, high chamber with a stone floor, full of moving shadows cast by a wood-fire that flickered on a great hearth. Something of the character of an oratory was imparted to it by a tall crucifix, which reached almost to the ceiling on one side; the figure was painted of the natural colours, the cross was black. Under this stood a chest of some age and solidity, and when a lamp had been brought,

and chairs set, the sacristan went to this chest, and produced therefrom, with growing excitement and nervousness, as Dennistoun thought, a large book, wrapped in a white cloth, on which cloth a cross was rudely embroidered in red thread. Even before the wrapping had been removed, Dennistoun began to be interested by the size and shape of the volume. 'Too large for a missal,' he thought, 'and not the shape of an antiphoner; perhaps it may be something good, after all.' The next moment the book was open, and Dennistoun felt that he had at last lit upon something better than good. Before him lay a large folio, bound, perhaps, late in the seventeenth century, with the arms of Canon Alberic de Mauléon stamped in gold on the sides. There may have been a hundred and fifty leaves of paper in the book, and on almost every one of them was fastened a leaf from an illuminated manuscript. Such a collection Dennistoun had hardly dreamed of in his wildest moments. Here were ten leaves from a copy of Genesis, illustrated with pictures, which could not be later than A.D. 700. Further on was a complete set of pictures from a Psalter, of English execution, of the very finest kind that the thirteenth century could produce; and, perhaps best of all, there were twenty leaves of uncial writing in Latin, which, as a few words seen here and there told him at once, must belong to some very early unknown patristic treatise. Could it possibly be a fragment of the copy of Papias' 'On the Words of Our Lord,' which was known to have existed as late as the twelfth century at Nîmes?¹ In any case, his mind was made up; that book must return to Cambridge with him, even if he had to draw the whole of his balance from the bank and stay at St Bertrand till the money came. He glanced up at the sacristan to see if his face yielded any hint that the book was for sale. The sacristan was pale, and his lips were working.

'If monsieur will turn on to the end,' he said.

So monsieur turned on, meeting new treasures at every rise of a leaf; and at the end of the book he came upon two

¹ We now know that these leaves did contain a considerable fragment of that work, if not of that actual copy of it.

sheets of paper, of much more recent date than anything he had yet seen, which puzzled him considerably. They must be contemporary, he decided, with the unprincipled Canon Alberic, who had doubtless plundered the Chapter library of St Bertrand to form this priceless scrap-book. On the first of the paper sheets was a plan, carefully drawn and instantly recognizable by a person who knew the ground, of the south aisle and cloisters of St Bertrand's. There were curious signs looking like planetary symbols, and a few Hebrew words, in the corners; and in the north-west angle of the cloister was a cross drawn in gold paint. Below the plan were some lines of writing in Latin, which ran thus:

'Responsa 12^{mi} Dec. 1694. Interrogatum est: Inveniamne? Responsum est: Invenies. Fiamne dives? Fies. Vivamne invidendus? Vives. Moriarne in lecto meo? Ita.' (Answers of the 12th of December, 1694. It was asked: Shall I find it? Answer: Thou shalt. Shall I become rich? Thou wilt. Shall I live an object of envy? Thou wilt. Shall I die in my bed? Thou wilt.)

'A good specimen of the treasure-hunter's record—quite reminds one of Mr Minor-Canon Quatremain in "Old St Paul's," was Dennistoun's comment, and he turned the leaf.

What he then saw impressed him, as he has often told me, more than he could have conceived any drawing or picture capable of impressing him. And, though the drawing he saw is no longer in existence, there is a photograph of it (which I possess) which fully bears out that statement. The picture in question was a sepia drawing at the end of the seventeenth century, representing, one would say at first sight, a Biblical scene; for the architecture (the picture represented an interior) and the figures had that semi-classical flavour about them which the artists of two hundred years ago thought appropriate to illustrations of the Bible. On the right was a King on his throne, the throne elevated on twelve steps, a canopy overhead, lions on either side—evidently King Solomon. He was bending

forward with outstretched sceptre, in attitude of command; his face expressed horror and disgust, yet there was in it also the mark of imperious will and confident power. The left half of the picture was the strangest, however. The interest plainly centred there. On the pavement before the throne were grouped four soldiers, surrounding a crouching figure which must be described in a moment. A fifth soldier lay dead on the pavement, his neck distorted, and his eyeballs starting from his head. The four surrounding guards were looking at the King. In their faces the sentiment of horror was intensified; they seemed, in fact, only restrained from flight by their implicit trust in their master. All this terror was plainly excited by the being that crouched in their midst. I entirely despair of conveying by any words the impression which this figure makes upon anyone who looks at it. I recollect once showing the photograph of the drawing to a lecturer on morphology—a person of, I was going to say, abnormally sane and unimaginative habits of mind. He absolutely refused to be alone for the rest of that evening, and he told me afterwards that for many nights he had not dared to put out his light before going to sleep. However, the main traits of the figure I can at least indicate. At first you saw only a mass of coarse, matted black hair; presently it was seen that this covered a body of fearful thinness, almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, like the body, with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned King with a look of beast-like hate. Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by this appalling effigy. One remark is universally made by those to whom I have shown the picture: 'It was drawn from the life.'

As soon as the first shock of his irresistible fright had subsided, Dennistoun stole a look at his hosts. The sacristan's hands were pressed upon his eyes; his daughter,

looking up at the cross on the wall, was telling her beads feverishly.

At last the question was asked, 'Is this book for sale?'

There was the same hesitation, the same plunge of determination that he had noticed before, and then came the welcome answer, 'If monsieur pleases.'

'How much do you ask for it?'

'I will take two hundred and fifty francs.'

This was confounding. Even a collector's conscience is sometimes stirred, and Dennistoun's conscience was tenderer than a collector's.

'My good man!' he said again and again, 'your book is worth far more than two hundred and fifty francs, I assure you—far more.'

But the answer did not vary: 'I will take two hundred and fifty francs, not more.'

There was really no possibility of refusing such a chance. The money was paid, the receipt signed, a glass of wine drunk over the transaction, and then the sacristan seemed to become a new man. He stood upright, he ceased to throw those suspicious glances behind him, he actually laughed or tried to laugh. Dennistoun rose to go.

'I shall have the honour of accompanying monsieur to his hotel?' said the sacristan.

'Oh no, thanks! it isn't a hundred yards. I know the way perfectly, and there is a moon.'

The offer was pressed three or four times, and refused as often.

'Then, monsieur will summon me if—if he finds occasion; he will keep the middle of the road, the sides are so rough.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said Dennistoun, who was impatient to examine his prize by himself; and he stepped out into the passage with his book under his arm.

Here he was met by the daughter; she, it appeared, was anxious to do a little business on her own account; perhaps, like Gehazi, to 'take somewhat' from the foreigner whom her father had spared.

'A silver crucifix and chain for the neck; monsieur would

perhaps be good enough to accept it?’

Well, really, Dennistoun hadn’t much use for these things. What did mademoiselle want for it?

‘Nothing—nothing in the world. Monsieur is more than welcome to it.’

The tone in which this and much more was said was unmistakably genuine, so that Dennistoun was reduced to profuse thanks, and submitted to have the chain put round his neck. It really seemed as if he had rendered the father and daughter some service which they hardly knew how to repay. As he set off with his book they stood at the door looking after him, and they were still looking when he waved them a last good night from the steps of the Chapeau Rouge.

Dinner was over, and Dennistoun was in his bedroom, shut up alone with his acquisition. The landlady had manifested a particular interest in him since he had told her that he had paid a visit to the sacristan and bought an old book from him. He thought, too, that he had heard a hurried dialogue between her and the said sacristan in the passage outside the *salle à manger*; some words to the effect that ‘Pierre and Bertrand would be sleeping in the house’ had closed the conversation.

All this time a growing feeling of discomfort had been creeping over him—nervous reaction, perhaps, after the delight of his discovery. Whatever it was, it resulted in a conviction that there was someone behind him, and that he was far more comfortable with his back to the wall. All this, of course, weighed light in the balance as against the obvious value of the collection he had acquired. And now, as I said, he was alone in his bedroom, taking stock of Canon Alberic’s treasures, in which every moment revealed something more charming.

‘Bless Canon Alberic!’ said Dennistoun, who had an inveterate habit of talking to himself. ‘I wonder where he is now? Dear me! I wish that landlady would learn to laugh in a more cheering manner; it makes one feel as if there was someone dead in the house. Half a pipe more, did you say? I think perhaps you are right. I wonder what that crucifix is

that the young woman insisted on giving me? Last century, I suppose. Yes, probably. It is rather a nuisance of a thing to have round one's neck—just too heavy. Most likely her father has been wearing it for years. I think I might give it a clean up before I put it away.'

He had taken the crucifix off, and laid it on the table, when his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with their own incalculable quickness.

'A penwiper? No, no such thing in the house. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? I trust to goodness not—no. Good God! a hand like the hand in that picture!'

In another infinitesimal flash he had taken it in. Pale, dusky skin, covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength; coarse black hairs, longer than ever grew on a human hand; nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny and wrinkled.

He flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp. There was black and tattered drapery about it; the coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin—what can I call it?—shallow, like a beast's; teeth showed behind the black lips; there was no nose; the eyes, of a fiery yellow, against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there, were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was intelligence of a kind in them—intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man.

The feelings which this horror stirred in Dennistoun were the intensest physical fear and the most profound mental loathing. What did he do? What could he do? He has never been quite certain what words he said, but he knows that he spoke, that he grasped blindly at the silver crucifix, that he was conscious of a movement towards him on the part of the demon, and that he screamed with the

voice of an animal in hideous pain.

Pierre and Bertrand, the two sturdy little serving-men, who rushed in, saw nothing, but felt themselves thrust aside by something that passed out between them, and found Dennistoun in a swoon. They sat up with him that night, and his two friends were at St Bertrand by nine o'clock next morning. He himself, though still shaken and nervous, was almost himself by that time, and his story found credence with them, though not until they had seen the drawing and talked with the sacristan.

Almost at dawn the little man had come to the inn on some pretence, and had listened with the deepest interest to the story retailed by the landlady. He showed no surprise.

'It is he—it is he! I have seen him myself,' was his only comment; and to all questionings but one reply was vouchsafed: 'Deux fois je l'ai vu; mille fois je l'ai senti.' He would tell them nothing of the provenance of the book, nor any details of his experiences. 'I shall soon sleep, and my rest will be sweet. Why should you trouble me?' he said.¹

We shall never know what he or Canon Alberic de Mauléon suffered. At the back of that fateful drawing were some lines of writing which may be supposed to throw light on the situation:

'Contradictio Salomonis cum demonio nocturno.

Albericus de Mauleone delineavit.

V. Deus in adiutorium. Ps. Qui habitat.

Sancte Bertrande, demoniorum effugator, intercede pro me miserrimo.

Primum uidi nocte 12^{mi} Dec. 1694 : uidebo mox ultimum. Peccaui et passus sum, plura adhuc passurus. Dec 29, 1701.'²

¹ He died that summer; his daughter married, and settled at St Papoul. She never understood the circumstances of her father's 'obsession.'

² *I.e.*, The Dispute of Solomon with a demon of the night. Drawn by Alberic de Mauléon. *Versicle*. O Lord, make haste to help me. *Psalm*. Whoso dwelleth (xc.).

I have never quite understood what was Dennistoun's view of the events I have narrated. He quoted to me once a text from Ecclesiasticus: 'Some spirits there be that are created for vengeance, and in their fury lay on sore strokes.' On another occasion he said: 'Isaiah was a very sensible man; doesn't he say something about night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon? These things are rather beyond us at present.'

Another confidence of his impressed me rather, and I sympathized with it. We had been, last year, to Comminges, to see Canon Alberic's tomb. It is a great marble erection with an effigy of the Canon in a large wig and soutane, and an elaborate eulogy of his learning below. I saw Dennistoun talking for some time with the Vicar of St Bertrand's, and as we drove away he said to me: 'I hope it isn't wrong: you know I am a Presbyterian—but I—I believe there will be "saying of Mass and singing of dirges" for Alberic de Mauléon's rest.' Then he added, with a touch of the Northern British in his tone, 'I had no notion they came so dear.'

The book is in the Wentworth Collection at Cambridge. The drawing was photographed and then burnt by Dennistoun on the day when he left Comminges on the occasion of his first visit.

Saint Bertrand, who putteth devils to flight, pray for me most unhappy. I saw it first on the night of Dec. 12, 1694: soon I shall see it for the last time. I have sinned and suffered, and have more to suffer yet. Dec. 29, 1701.

The 'Gallia Christiana' gives the date of the Canon's death as December 31, 1701, 'in bed, of a sudden seizure.' Details of this kind are not common in the great work of the Sammarthani.

MARINERS

TERRY TAPP

New Teignton is, even today, a thriving Devonshire market town possessed of more than a fair share of thatched cottages and so-called 'character' dwellings, and it affords me great pleasure, in this architecturally barren age, to show my clients around some of these more interesting residences. As an estate agent in the town for over fifty years I find it tedious in the extreme to be burdened with the sale of new estates of flimsy, box-like structures which appear to spring up from green fields overnight.

The tale I have to relate is not about a house, for Mariners could never be described as such. For all its whitened walls and thatch, Mariners is a ship—a ship that never ploughed the deep. Constructed of Devonshire granite and, in part, Spanish timber retrieved from the wreckage of the Armada, Mariners was built by a retired officer of the English navy some four hundred years ago and has, for most of that time, been haunted.

Perched high upon the redstone cliffs which face the coast of France, the house (or ship) is a victory monument. The spoils of war afforded the timber, and many of the artefacts, which have created the illusion of an enormous galleon. It is a house which has been built with loving care, a precise facsimile of the defeated Spanish galleon, and one can quite easily imagine the officer standing on the deck of his 'captured' ship, reliving his battles and luxuriating in his victory, in his old age.

It is my opinion that something of the love and care which that officer lavished on Mariners went into the fibre of the building and, in retrospect, I think that Mariners contains something of all the emotions which were experienced by those who lived in her. The highly polished wood reflected more than the loving care of that English officer and, perhaps, the deck timbers which were fashioned by his hands contained the spirits of the men who

manned that fated Spanish galleon.

Locally it is supposed that the ghost of James Gallagher, butcher and grocer in New Teignton, now haunts Mariners. Indeed, it is a fact that Gallagher did, some eighty years ago, brutally murder his wife and daughter with a crude meat cleaver, severing and jointing them with a pretty expertise. Yet the spirits which haunt Mariners were there long before James Gallagher ever came to New Teignton to set up trade.

Over the years there have been countless strange occurrences within the strict vicinity of Mariners; dogs growling and foaming at the lips when passing near, children suddenly dissolving into hysterical and inexplicable sobbing, cars mysteriously veering from the road. But such evidence is, at best, only circumstantial, causing one to wonder if the dogs growled because they sensed their master's fear; perhaps the children sobbed for the same reason and, as for the cars, the sudden interest generated by the unexpected appearance of a ship on dry land may well have served to distract even the most careful of drivers.

My story concerns Doctor Gareth Vanglor, an American widower retired from his practice in the States and searching for a house in Devonshire in need of modernization—a task which would admirably occupy his retirement hours. It was the remarkable shape of Mariners which first attracted him, causing him to burst excitedly into my office, his tanned face now scalded red with jubilation.

'That house up there,' he said, taking me by the sleeve and pointing at it through the window. 'Is it still for sale?'

'Yes, Mariners is still for sale,' I told him.

'But it's built like a ship!' he cried. 'A damned great galleon. Now who in hell could have thought of such a thing?'

Evidently the unusual was always of great interest to him and I could tell that he was already sold on the idea of living there. But what would he make of the inside of Mariners, I wondered. Would he view the rope ladders which served as

access to the upper floors as a disadvantage, or would he be enchanted by them? And the carved wooden balcony of the forecastle with that fantastic view of the creaming sea, from which the whole bizarre structure could be surveyed—what would be his reaction to that? Would he be puzzled, or delighted that the windows all opened inwards? And the forty-eight polished wooden cannon? It would be interesting to observe his reactions.

'Dammit!' he cried as soon as we entered the house. 'I never saw anything like this in my entire life! It's fabulous!' Gareth Vanglor climbed the rope ladders to each deck of the building, cursing superlatives, shouting out like an excited child. 'Say! There's a forecastle and sterncastle!' He pulled open the full-length windows and walked out onto the balcony. It was a perfect September day and the sun still had sufficient heat to warm the house through—ideal viewing conditions.

'Godammit! Masts! There are even masts out here! Have you seen them?'

'Yes, I have,' I replied. 'The masts are made of four different kinds of trees, sawn by craftsmen and hooped together. The topmast is movable and there is a moonraker canvas stored somewhere.'

'It's a galleon,' he cried. 'Imagine living in a galleon! Jesus—I gotta have this place.'

He was everywhere, climbing ladders, poking his head from the windows, caressing the polished wood panels which lined the walls of each room. Unable to keep pace with him, I sat upon a bench in the gun deck and waited for him to finish his frenetic exploration. Some time later he shinned down the ladder. 'God's teeth! Cannon! Say, I know something about these things. That one over there, the largest, is a Cannon Royale. See that one? It's a Cannon Serpentine. This place is a museum!' He stroked the largest cannon which was some twelve feet in length. 'This baby could hurl over half a hundredweight of shot best part of a mile and still be potent. And look at all this! Breeching rope, ring bolts, handspikes—everything!'

He stood there, hands on hips, his eyes wide open in

wonderment. 'I never knew such a thing existed beyond my sleeping dreams.' Then his glance went down to a display case in which there were set out various complicated tools. He opened the case and held the instruments before him, his expression somewhat akin to utter awe. 'A surgical kit! That's what this is. God knows what torture these cruel-looking things have administered.' Gareth Vanglor told me as we walked down the hill to my office that a chirurgeon, (or surgeon as we call them nowadays), was a vital part of the ship's company. His cabin was usually situated below the gun deck, safe from fire during battles.

'How soon can you get things moving?' he asked suddenly.

'Immediately,' I replied. 'However, I feel I ought to warn you that the house is reputedly haunted.'

Vanglor's eyes shone. 'Haunted? Are you kidding?'

I told him as much as I knew of the history of the house and he paid attention to every word, his face assuming a rapt, almost distant look. 'That clinches it! Say, could I spend the night there?'

'I could ask the present owners,' I replied. 'They are living in Sussex at the moment. I don't think they will have any objections.'

'There's a hammock in the forecastle,' he said. 'I could use that.'

Arrangements were made and permission was given for Vanglor to spend the night at Mariners. I did not see him again for three days, but I will continue the narrative chronologically using the facts which he related to me.

That afternoon Vanglor unlocked the door of Mariners and climbed up the rope ladders to the forecastle where he could once more look out on the fine, blue sea. He stood there, legs apart, enjoying the illusion that he was aboard a mighty galleon. Now he was captain of a ship—not merely a houseowner—and he could sail forever, wherever his imagination would carry him. Narrowing his eyes against the lowering sun, Vanglor watched the great sea swell as it sent forth white horses with foam-flecked lips to charge the cliffs below.

It was good.

What more could a man want than to spend his days set out on that balcony breathing in the fresh, salt air? What more could a man desire than to be captain of a full-scale combat vessel equipped with forty-eight cannon?

Later that afternoon, Vanglor examined the sterncastle of his ship-cum-home. Looking down into the tiny garden below he felt that the illusion was marred somewhat and he decided to bolt the shutters of that window tight so that the incongruity of a garden would not again shatter the illusion which he enjoyed so much. He felt strangely detached, but elated at his wonderful luck in discovering such a place. Wait until the folks in West Virginia got to hear about this place! They would be flocking over to see it.

A ship, within easy reach of the bus station and all local amenities. Vanglor chuckled gleefully.

That evening he dined at the hotel and after a few glasses of wine he made his way back up the cliff path. As he was about to unlock the door he noticed something which he had not seen before. It was a full size helm pinned through with steel and set on a hexagonal wooden post. Suddenly he realized what the puzzling hexagonal holes on the forecastle balcony were used for.

It took all his strength to lift the wheel into the house and a further two hours of work using the breeching rope to haul it up, deck after deck, until he managed to drag it across the forecastle and out onto the balcony.

'Now, baby,' he said. 'Let's see you in position!'

The wooden post sank snugly into the hexagonal socket and the wheel was upright and firm to hold. He stood there, gripping the helm, looking out over the moon-silvered sea, his face wet with tears of happiness. Long years of luxury stretched ahead of him; winter and summer. He could cruise through the July sun, battle the October winds and in the winter, dressed in oilskins, he could steer his ship through storm-tossed seas and lashing rain. There would be all the endless oceans of the world to plough, and all from the safety of his home.

That night he lay in the string hammock, covered over

with a travel rug from his car, swinging gently, listening to the sea surging against the cliff face below.

Mariners' walls were lined with aged, creaking wood and this too helped perfect the illusion that he was aboard ship. He lay there, suspended between sleeping and waking, listening to the sea.

Suddenly he was wide awake, alert and listening without knowing the reason why. Something had caused him to surface to full consciousness quite sharply, yet he could not think what it could be. A car backfiring? A jet, perhaps? He was about to turn over when a noise directly below his hammock caused him to freeze. Not daring to move, he lay quite still, listening to the blood seething in his ears. The noise, a dull thump followed by an almost interminable silence, startled him again. Someone was downstairs.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the hammock, Vanglor crept across to the rope ladder and peered down into the darkness. Mariners had been empty for some time, so it was likely that a tramp had made home here. Vanglor cursed inwardly. The last thing he wanted was a scene at this time of night.

He stood by the ladder, uncertain what to do next. Should he leave well alone and make quite sure, in the morning, that the house was made secure?

No—he couldn't do that.

Climbing down the straining ladder was a difficult task in bare feet and Vanglor winced as the rope creaked, betraying his presence to the intruder.

He paused at the bottom of the ladder, his heart beating so loud that he was sure it could be heard by anyone in the house. Now his eyes were accustomed to the darkness and he glanced quickly along the row of polished cannon. Each cannon provided a possible hiding place. Hands trembling, Vanglor crept slowly forward. He wanted a weapon—something to hold—something to hit out with.

A swift movement at the far end of the room caught his eye. There was no sound—just the fleeting shadow. Whoever had broken into the house was now aware of Vanglor's presence and this did nothing to calm his nerves.

The intruder had fled into a small box room. Vanglor did not relish following him into such a confined space.

Slowly he made his way along the row of cannon, checking behind each one just to make sure that there was no one hiding there. Taking up a thick cudgel of wood from beside the last cannon, Vanglor stood before the half-opened door.

'I think you had better come out,' he said in a loud voice.

He waited.

'I know you're in there. I saw you.'

No reply. Gripping the cudgel firmly, Vanglor pushed the door open so that it groaned back on its hinges and crashed against the wall causing him to jump with alarm.

'If you come out, I won't make a fuss,' he said. 'I know this house has been deserted for some time. Just show yourself.'

Nothing. The silence was unbearable.

'If you don't come out, I'll have to come in,' Vanglor called.

He crept forward until he was standing in the doorway, then reached inside the room, his fingers feeling for the wall switch. As soon as he located the light, he would switch it on and rush into the room, straight across to the window, then turn about and face the intruder before he had time to recover from his surprise. That was the plan. Vanglor felt chill fingers of sweat dribble down his face as he found the switch and prepared to press it. For a few moments he was paralysed, unable to gather courage to put his plan into motion, then, almost taking himself by surprise, he pressed the switch and ran into the room.

Instantly he was inside he slammed the door thus barring any possible exit. Face screwed up in the intense light, he swiftly glanced around the room.

It was empty.

There was no furniture to speak of and the room was perfectly square. And empty. Now his eyes were accustomed to the light he could see that his imagination had played tricks on him. He laughed aloud, comforted by the sound. How his friends back home would laugh when

he told them about it! He laughed again, shaking his head ruefully at his cowardice. Given the same chance over again, he would have acted differently. Still, it was a relief to find an empty room instead of some poor, dishevelled tramp or the like. Vanglor opened the door, switched off the light and made his way back to the hammock. He was tired now and would sleep until morning.

Next day he was up early, his head spinning with ideas. He had entirely forgotten that his permission to use the house did not extend to making alterations and I, for my part, was too busy at the estate agency to spare time to call on him.

New Teignton hardware stores provided Doctor Vanglor with everything he required to make his dream home habitable. He purchased several gallons of clear varnish for the woodwork, some glasspaper, a blowlamp; he placed an order for three iron staircases to be made to measure. As an afterthought he bought sixteen window bolts and a good, solid torch. Last night had served the purpose of reminding him about the security of a home and how useful a torch could be, not only to provide light, but as a cudgel.

After filling the boot of his car with foodstuffs and essential cleaning materials, he drove back to Mariners feeling very pleased with himself.

It took the whole morning to drill all the windows and screw the security bolts in place, but when the job was done the doctor felt that his home was now a fortress; impregnable. He thought about that while he made himself a cup of coffee. Now that the horse had bolted, he was locking the windows. But there wasn't a horse. What was he worrying about anyway? He grinned. Last night had evidently upset him more than he would admit. He had been worried.

No—face facts—he had been scared to hell! Why not admit it? Anyway, securing the windows was good sense.

Opening the tin of varnish he decided to start right away. He knew that the house was not yet legally his, but it soon would be and he wanted to waste no time. If he worked hard he could get a lot done by the time the contracts were

ready for signing.

Climbing up to the forecastle, Vanglor opened wide the full-length windows and breathed in the fresh air. It was one of those cut glass crystal days when the sea sparkled and the air was clean. Deciding to start work on the helm, he was pleasantly surprised to see that the existing varnish was in good order. All it required was a light sanding down and a fresh coat of varnish so that it would sparkle like the sea. To think that he had come to England to retire in one of those quaint thatched cottages—now he was in a quaint thatched ship!

Time cheated him that day, passing by so quickly that he was only aware of it when the sun had sunk exhausted into the ocean. With a sigh of regret he packed away his tools and surveyed his handiwork. The helm glistened in the red evening light and the window shutters were shiny as a newly minted coin. It was most satisfactory bringing the place to life again.

Foraging through the foodstuff he had purchased that morning he made himself a cold meat supper with salad and fresh bread, washed down with several glasses of white wine. After a leisurely smoke, he decided to go to bed early so that he could be up and doing in the morning. He knew that he should have called in on the estate agent to make sure that the wheels were in motion for the purchase of the house, but he couldn't spare the time. He wanted, so much, to work on this ship. Ship? He laughed to himself. Yes—why not? Is it a crime to live an illusion? Most people do anyway. Besides, he was enjoying it all immensely.

Taking his torch and half-finished glass of wine, Vanglor hauled himself up the rope ladder to the forecastle, changed into his nightclothes and stretched full length in his hammock.

For years he had attended the sick, listened to other people's tales of misery and, so often, been faced with death. Now he was going to be self-indulgent. And he was going to enjoy every damned minute of it too!

When *Mariners* was fully decorated he would do some research into its past; find out who built it and what part

that man had played in naval history. Somehow he felt that this long-dead mariner was a man he would have liked to have known. What imagination the man must have had to build a house in the shape of a ship! Vanglor wanted to know about such a man.

This time, when the dull thump sounded below his hammock, he was more frightened than he had ever been in his life. He had thought that the security bolts at the windows would put his mind at rest. But they did not. Vanglor did not want to admit, not even to himself, that he was afraid. But he had checked the whole house from top to bottom that day and he *knew* that all the doors and windows were bolted tightly.

Groping for the torch, he reluctantly made his way across the bedroom and down the rope ladder. It was not his imagination—someone *was* in the house. He stood at the foot of the ladder, the torch switched off, listening and waiting. If it took all night he would wait and wait until he heard the next sound, then he would make his way towards it. This time he was determined to catch the intruder and teach him a lesson. No good just allowing things to happen. If he was going to make Mariners his home, he had to be sure that no one else could get in.

Several times the wooden panels in the gun room creaked causing Vanglor to catch his breath before he realized the cause. Thirty minutes later he was still standing there, determined that he would not move until he heard the noise again. And, as he stood there, he argued with himself. It was impossible for anyone to get into Mariners—yet there was someone in the house. He knew it. He could feel it.

Slowly he crept along the gun room to the next rope ladder, his fingers curled around the torch, resisting the impulse to switch it on. He was, he thought, working himself up for no reason.

'Chirurgon.' The voice startled him.

'Who's there?' Vanglor called, his finger pressing the torch switch at the same moment. He flashed the stark beam of light around the gun room, then down the deep,

dark well to the floor below. 'Who's calling?' he cried. Low, mocking laughter rippled through the cold house. Vanglor shivered.

The voice had come from below and, had there been no laughter, Vanglor would have shinned down the ladder at once. But the laughter halted him—and the use of the word 'chirurgeon'. He stood above the well, his courage evaporated, his determination replaced by apprehension. And as he stood there the light in his torch dimmed and went out leaving him alone, in total, suffocating darkness so that he felt as if he were drowning.

One thing was certain—he could not stand there all night. Vanglor started down the second rope ladder, his hands trembling uncontrollably. He even started to pray.

Somehow the laughter had made it sinister; there was a malice in that laugh which thrilled through him like a blade.

'Chirurgeon?'

Vanglor was at the bottom of the ladder now. 'Who is it? Answer me!'

Again that mocking laugh echoed through the house.

'Show yourself!' Vanglor cried. 'I won't hurt you—' He clenched his fist around the torch.

Although the laughter echoed from the walls, Vanglor felt that it came from the direction of the back door. He edged his way along the wall, step by step, his ears attuned to every sound so that it seemed to him that his own breathing was like the rasping of a file on metal. If he was going to stay in Mariners and make his home there, he would have to be sure— He stopped. Sure? What about? Even then he did not want to admit the possibility which lurked in the dark corners of his mind.

Haunted?

The word had now insinuated itself into his active thoughts and he smiled grimly in the darkness, desperately trying to dismiss it. All this talk about Mariners being haunted had played on his subconscious. That was it. He was in a state of heightened suggestibility where the mind would interpret any noise to match that suggestion.

'Come, chirurgeon,' the voice whispered. 'This way. We

have work for you this night.'

Now Vanglor was positive that the voice was directly ahead of him. He walked quickly, determined to get it over with, confident that the reality could not possibly be worse than waiting and not knowing. The door was open and the white moonlight cast its shape on the floor. As Vanglor approached he saw a black shadow move slowly across that moonlit patch. There *was* someone in there.

This time he would not rush into the room and switch on the light; he would stand in the doorway, pushing the door back against the wall. The moonlight would be sufficient to illuminate the room.

Cautiously he stepped into the room just one pace so that he would be in line when he pushed the door back.

The room was empty.

Vanglor was filled with a surge of frustration and relief. Now that he had plucked up courage to face the intruder, there was no one to confront. Yet the voice had been real. He *had* heard that voice.

A thick cloud rode up over the face of the moon, stealing the light from the room. Vanglor was about to turn away when the door slammed shut with such an explosion it caused him to cry out. The room filled with low laughter and when Vanglor looked towards the window his face filled with horror.

Passing before the window was a mighty galleon, so vast in size that it seemed impossible that the ocean could bear its weight. And on the deck stood men armed with knives and guns. When Vanglor saw their faces he was sick with fear, for each face was a travesty. Skin, where there was any, peeled down to expose the white, ivory bone of the skull. There were no eyes—just black, cavernous holes where eyes once had been. A sudden noise above made Vanglor look up and to his amazement he could see through the ceiling into the gun room.

The air was filled with acrid smoke and the cannon were all in disarray. Four men stood around the Royale, pulling against tough ropes, dragging the low-wheeled cannon back.

Vanglor covered his eyes with his hands. This had to be a dream! It had to be—

'Pull, you lazy bastards!' a voice bellowed. Vanglor stood back against the wall, his eyes rooted to the activity above him. Now the gunner was touching a taper to the saltpetre tow so that there was a spitting and venomous spluttering as the tow burned down to the priming powder which, in turn, took the flames down to the charge which lay in the belly of the cannon. Somehow Vanglor knew all this. He cringed as the resulting explosion shook the house, causing the cannon to recoil with such force that it took the gunner completely by surprise. The three-ton cannon rolled over the man's legs, pinning him to the deck.

'Now, watch, chirurgon!' a voice whispered.

Suddenly Vanglor let out a wild, animal cry, screaming at the top of his voice in the vain hope that all this would disappear. How *could* he believe it? All his life he had been a man of science, dealing with facts and ailments which he cold examine minutely. This *must* be psychological—it could not be happening.

He now stood silent, petrified by the screaming of the trapped gunner above him. It was as if the gunners were walking on a sheet of glass and he could see their every movement. His first thought—that this must be an elaborate hoax—soon evaporated when the door opened to reveal the wounded gunner being brought into the room by his shipmates. Hastily they laid the man on the floor. Then a man entered the room, clad in a brown leather apron. The man carried a canvas bag.

'The legs will have to come off,' he said. 'Hold him down.'

'Don't amputate!' Vanglor cried. 'You can save the leg. Stitch it—' He paused. No one was listening. The gunner was stretched out on the floor, a peg of wood gripped in his teeth, men holding his hands and feet. Above them the roar of men continued, another man having taken over the Royale. Now the immense cannon was being wormed out to clear the burnt parchment remains; the cartridge was rammed home and a line of powder sprinkled from the

touch hole to the base ring. Touching the taper to the powder, the gunner leaped nimbly aside as the cannon huffed, then belched, then exploded with an ear-shattering roar.

'Hurry, for Christ's sake!' a man screamed. 'He's losing blood fast!' The canvas bag was now gaping open, the tools of the chirurgeon laid out on the rough planks.

'I'm doing my best,' the surgeon growled.

'He's dying, Mr Vanglor!' someone else shouted.

Vanglor caught his breath. Who was using his name?

'He won't die,' said the surgeon. 'Hold him for me. I don't want to chase him around the bloody ship, man!'

'Sorry, Mr Vanglor.'

There it was again. The surgeon must be called Vanglor! A strange coincidence, thought the doctor as he watched, fascinated, knowing that he could not be seen by the spectres as they set about their grisly task. He realized that he was observing events long past, buried in the pages of history books. He was aboard a Spanish galleon, watching the defeat of the Armada, witness to a surgeon amputating a limb in the height of the battle with the English. Vanglor scrutinized the young surgeon as he knelt by the struggling, screaming man. The surgeon was called Vanglor! Unable to make sense of the paradox, Vanglor shifted his position to get a better view.

It took just thirty-eight seconds—a sawcut each second—for that screaming blade to bite through the flesh and bone; the other leg took ten seconds longer, the chirurgeon sweating into the blood, hacking fiendishly. And when the limbs were parted from the body and taken away a man stepped forward bearing a flaming torch of molten pitch. With it he sealed the legs.

Leaning heavily against the wall, sick with terror, Vanglor heard the surgeon laugh. 'That was quick enough,' he said. 'Bring in the next!'

All night long, until the bloodied sun dragged itself wearily from the ocean to light another day, the work continued. And Vanglor watched it all.

This then was the gruesome story Doctor Vanglor related to me when he visited my office some days later. He apologized for the delay in coming to see me. Naturally I was astonished at his tale, but believed every word he had spoken. 'Obviously you have been through a traumatic experience,' I said. 'Thank goodness you have not yet signed the contract to purchase Mariners.'

'Contract?' He looked sharply across at me, his pebble eyes suddenly hard. 'What's wrong with the contract? Tell me, quickly.'

'Nothing,' I hastened to assure him. 'I just naturally presumed that you would not now be interested in buying Mariners.'

'But you don't understand!' he cried, his voice shrill with agitation. 'I have to buy that house. Something has called me over here all the way from America. I was meant to live here. My great-grandfather was Spanish, you know.'

'Was he?' I failed to see the connection.

'Vanglor—a Spaniard,' he explained. 'Doesn't it seem possible that one of my ancestors was a surgeon on that ship? No, I must have Mariners—at any price.'

'In spite of the dreadful things which you have witnessed there?' I asked.

'*Because* of them,' he said. 'Don't ask me to explain it, because I can't, but I have spent three nights in that place and I can hardly wait for the sun to go down and for those phantom galleons to rise up over the horizon to start another night of war.'

'But what of the horrific operations you witnessed?' I protested. 'Do they not frighten you?'

He smiled, looking away from me as he replied. 'Yes, they frighten me. They scare the hell out of me. But, God help me, I do so love to watch them amputating.'

Doctor Gareth Vanglor did purchase Mariners and is, to the best of my knowledge, still living there, sailing the oceans by day, holding the helm of his ship, waiting for night to fall so that he may, once again, derive some ghastly pleasure in witnessing the ghostly spectres of the past at work.

BEYOND THE RED DOOR

KENNETH HILL

The beam of yellow light cut into the black, and flickered over the equipment in the machine room, bouncing exaggerated shadows up against the dusty walls. For a moment the only sound to be heard was the muffled clink of keys within a pocket, but gradually, as steady as it was quiet, came the sound of rain against a window, the rain of a still and windless summer's night.

'Peaceful, isn't it?' said a voice at the end of the torch.

'Bloody eerie an' all,' said another anonymous voice beside him.

With their dark blue uniforms, the security patrolmen merged into the night.

'Oh, tha gets used to it after a week or two. Well, straight ahead, there,' and he pointed forward with the torch, illuminating a closed door on the far wall of the watchful room. As they strode across the stone floor, the beat of their shoes almost drowned the only other sound—the call of a distant owl, as it swept through the night. The two men stopped at the door, and the older and more confident of them fumbled with his keys again.

'Still, we're not the only daft buggers about at this time, don't forget,' he said, opening the door, 'the computer operators work through the night as well, over at t'other side of t'building. Working! Hah! So they like to tell folks! Aye, round to t'left here.'

He closed the door behind them, locked it, and withdrew the key. The echo of their departing footsteps diminished until the room was silent again.

Some minutes later, at the far side of the factory, a solitary bat swept twittering through the murky rain, unheard and unseen by a shadowy figure that strode purposefully up to a side door in the old office block. He stepped inside, and the heavy iron door clanged shut

behind him. Above his head, on the wall, a dim light cast his vague shadow against the grimy stonework, and revealed in a half-hearted fashion an unpretentious staircase that rose lazily before him. Taking two steps at a time, he was soon swallowed up by the gloom. At the top of the flights of stairs, two floors above, he pushed open another door, and stepped into a darkened corridor. With the familiarity of previous experience, he moved his hand to the bank of switches on the wall beside him. Click. Beneath the glow of fluorescent lighting, both the corridor and the intruder took form.

A young man, bearded, and with thick brown curly hair, he walked with an air of carefree cheerfulness along the grey-carpeted floor, past locked and anonymous wooden doors, all but one painted a uniform orange. In his blue jeans and his black duffel coat his outward appearance gave little indication of his purpose there at that inhospitable time. At the end of the corridor he paused in front of the one red door, smiled, turned the handle, and walked inside. Jeff Evans, computer shift leader, was five minutes late. But then, every Friday night he was five minutes late. Clocks could be set by him. Hanging his coat up in the Operators' Room, he ambled back into the Computer Room itself.

As they always did, the two other operators greeted him, and the work continued. In a slightly garishly illuminated atmosphere of controlled warmth, the computer functioned as it usually did. Address and indication lights continued to flicker; the disc drives occasionally shuddered as their read/write arms jerked in and out; magnetic tapes jerked, too, but round and round, and then rewound smooth and fast; stationery jumped up through the printers; and all was well.

In his chair at the console, Jeff smiled. 'To think I used to loathe Friday night shifts,' he mused, and grinned at Eddie, his senior operator.

A smile wrinkled Eddie's face, a smile that radiated supreme confidence. He nodded, and as a finger of blond hair fell over his forehead, he answered quietly, 'Yes. Yes;

it's different now, though, isn't it?

A message on the console screen caught Jeff's attention. Eddie, his hands in his pockets, peered idly over his shift leader's shoulder at the screen, as Nigel, the junior operator, walked across the room from the far printer towards the card reader, looking expectantly at his shift leader as he went.

'The usual?' he asked. His unshaven face, crowned by his unfashionably short black hair, was devoid of irritation; indeed on the contrary, every muscle seemed as relaxed as it ever could be.

Jeff swivelled round his chair and nodded. 'Could it be anything else?' he asked, beaming, as though at some sort of private joke.

'Won't be a minute, then,' said Nigel, as with accustomed ease he removed the deck from the card reader, and began to walk down the ramp. He turned the handle on the door, opened it, and stepped out into the cool of the corridor. To his right lay the way to the Data Prep area, and as he began to walk towards it, another door opened at the other end of the corridor, the same door through which Jeff had walked an hour before, on his arrival. But it was as though Nigel's senses had detected nothing: he continued into Data Prep regardless.

Chatting, the two security guards stepped into the corridor.

'Ello; somebody's left the light on,' remarked the younger, newer man.

A look of discomfort passed across his colleague's face. Len—the younger man—looked around him. 'This is the Data Processing Section, George, isn't it?' But without waiting for a reply he nodded to the lights, and continued, 'Bit careless of them, that.'

'Er . . . probably . . . probably the cleaners.'

'Oh yeah. Yeah, that's a thought. 'Ere—are you all right, George?' Len regarded the other with some concern.

Pull yourself together, the older man told himself. His recovery seemed immediate. 'Aye, lad; there's nought wrong wi' me. I must have a bit of a headache, that's all.

Anyway, come on, let's check the Data Prep area.'

They started to walk down the corridor. At the end, George turned as the corridor branched to the left, to Data Prep. Len stopped.

'Ang on a mo, George.'

George looked at him. With a dry mouth, he knew what was coming.

Len jerked his head towards the red door, the Computer Room door. 'Ow come we never check in there? I've been 'ere only a week, I know, but I reckon this is the only place in the entire factory that we never check.' He turned the handle, and pushed, but the door resisted. 'Come on, George, we've got time; give us a look in, will you?'

George looked at him, thoughtfully. Slowly, he walked forward, and lifted the ring of keys from his pocket again. He selected one, and pushed it into the lock. Saying nothing, he paused. He turned the key; and then the handle. He pushed the door open.

Intruding into a chill blackness, the light from behind them cascaded over their shoulders and threw their shadows, distorted, onto the debris on the filthy floor before them. As their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, other shadows began to take form, and vague impressions gradually assumed substance. Tattered remnants of fluorescent lighting hung crazily from the jagged ceiling, swaying gently as the warm air from the corridor began to disturb the mausoleum cold of that miserable room. Paint, blackened and blistered, flaked from the charred walls, almost weeping, it seemed, and lay crumpled and unrecognizable among the formless rubbish that sprawled across the dingy floor. The atmosphere was as still as the night itself.

George switched on his torch, and let its beam wander forlornly around the scene of desolation that was spread before them. The light revealed nothing that the gloom might have concealed.

'God! What a pen and ink!' said Len under his breath, as his nostrils twitched.

'Know what it is?' asked George, eventually, impassively. 'Death. That's what you can smell. This place has been left like this ever since the fire. The computer people wanted the machines out after it happened. Insurance assessment, I suppose. But there's none of this firm's lads'll shift this lot, though. That's why they had to put the new computer in that prefabricated thing over in the car park for the time being.' He shivered. Switching off his torch, he turned away. 'Come on,' he said, quietly.

But Len stood, staring. 'Ow did it 'appen?'

George breathed in, and shook his head. 'Three young lads died in there. About six months ago. Middle of winter. Snow was feet deep. Substandard wiring, they reckon. The whole lot went up like an inferno in seconds. They didn't stand a chance. Come on, lad; let's leave them.'

'Them?' Len stepped back, and stared at his colleague, who was locking the door with quiet determination.

'That's what I said, son; some folks reckon they've seen the g—' He broke off. Something had distracted him: he glanced towards Data Prep.

It was Nigel. Pushing a new card into a pack of pink punched cards in his other hand, he was sauntering along the corridor towards the men. In his creased check shirt, unwashed jeans, and open sandals, he was a picture of scruffy nonchalance. He smiled at George, and though the operator's lips never parted, the older man heard the youth's voice from within his own mind.

'Hello, George! Still here?'

'Hello, son. Take care now,' was his quiet, almost reverent reply. He stepped back from the mystified Len, as Nigel walked between the two.

Len was aware only of his pale colleague. 'George? You sure you're OK, mate?' he asked, perplexed.

The words were lost on George. He would never get used to this bit, he realized, as he watched Nigel step silently up to the red door. The lock might have been as formless as the youth, for he effortlessly turned the handle, opened the door, and walked back into the Computer Room, to rejoin

his now eternally contented colleagues.

Through narrowed eyes, George looked hard at the door as it closed. Was that really a chink of light that he glimpsed, just as the door closed? He shook his head. He could never make up his mind about that bit.

THE STORY OF MEDHANS LEA

E. AND H. HERON

The following story has been put together from the account of the affair given by Nare-Jones, sometime house-surgeon at Bart's, of his strange terror and experiences both in Medhans Lea and the pallid avenue between the beeches; of the narrative of Savelsan, of what he saw and heard in the billiard-room and afterwards; of the silent and indisputable witness of big, bullnecked Harland himself; and, lastly, of the conversation which subsequently took place between these three men and Mr Flaxman Low, the noted psychologist.

It was by the merest chance that Harland and his two guests spent that memorable evening of the 18th of January, 1899, in the house of Medhans Lea. The house stands on the slope of a partially-wooded ridge in one of the Midland Counties. It faces south, and overlooks a wide valley bounded by the blue outlines of the Bredon hills. The place is secluded, the nearest dwelling being a small public-house at the cross roads some mile and a half from the lodge gates.

Medhans Lea is famous for its long straight avenue of beeches, and for other things. Harland, when he signed the lease, was thinking of the avenue of beeches; not of the other things, of which he knew nothing till later.

Harland had made his money by running tea plantations in Assam, and he owned all the virtues and faults of a man who has spent most of his life abroad. The first time he visited the house he weighed seventeen stone and ended most of his sentences with 'don't yer know?' His ideas could hardly be said to travel on the higher planes of thought, and his chief aim in life was to keep himself down to the seventeen stone. He had a red neck and a blue eye, and was a muscular, inoffensive, good-natured man, with courage to spare, and an excellent voice for accompanying the banjo.

After signing the lease, he found that Medhans Lea needed an immense amount of putting in order and decorating. While this was being done, he came backwards and forwards to the nearest provincial town, where he stopped at a hotel, driving out almost daily to superintend the arrangements of his new habitation. Thus he had been away for the Christmas and New Year, but about the 15th January he returned to the Red Lion, accompanied by his friends Nare-Jones and Savelsan, who proposed to move with him into his new house during the course of the ensuing week.

The immediate cause of their visit to Medhans Lea on the evening of the 18th inst. was the fact that the billiard table at the Red Lion was not fit, as Harland remarked, to play shinty on, while there was an excellent table just put in at Medhans Lea, where the big billiard-room in the left wing had a wide window with a view down a portion of the beech avenue.

'Hang it!' said Harland, 'I wish they would hurry up with the house. The painters aren't out of it yet, and the people don't come to the Lodge till Monday.'

'It's a pity, too,' remarked Savelsan regretfully, 'when you think of that table.'

Savelsan was an enthusiast in billiards, who spent all the time he could spare from his business, which happened to be teabroking, at the game. He was the more sorry for the delay, since Harland was one of the few men he knew to whom it was not necessary to give points.

'It's a ripping table,' returned Harland. 'Tell you what,' he added, struck by a happy idea, 'I'll send out Thoms to make things straight for us tomorrow, and we'll put a case of syphons and a bottle of whisky under the seat of the trap, and drive over for a game after dinner.'

The other two agreed to this arrangement, but in the morning Nare-Jones found himself obliged to run up to London to see about securing a berth as ship's doctor. It was settled, however, that on his return he was to follow Harland and Savelsan to Medhans Lea.

He got back by the 8.30, entirely delighted, because he

had booked a steamer bound for the Persian Gulf and Karachi, and had gained the cheering intelligence that a virulent type of cholera was lying in wait for the advent of the Mecca pilgrims in at any rate two of the chief ports of call, which would give him precisely the experience he desired.

Having dined, and the night being fine, he ordered a dogcart to take him out to Medhans Lea. The moon had just risen by the time he reached the entrance to the avenue, and as he was beginning to feel cold he pulled up, intending to walk to the house. Then he dismissed the boy and cart, a carriage having been ordered to come for the whole party after midnight. Nare-Jones stopped to light a cigar before entering the avenue, then he walked past the empty lodge. He moved briskly in the best possible temper with himself and all the world. The night was still, and his collar up, his feet fell silently on the dry carriage road, while his mind was away on blue water forecasting his voyage on the S.S. *Sumatra*.

He says he was quite halfway up the avenue before he became conscious of anything unusual. Looking up at the sky, he noticed what a bright, clear night it was, and how sharply defined the outline of the beeches stood out against the vault of heaven. The moon was yet low, and threw netted shadows of bare twigs and branches on the road which ran between black lines of trees in an almost straight vista up to the dead grey face of the house now barely two hundred yards away. Altogether it struck him as forming a pallid picture, etched in like a steel engraving in black, and grey, and white.

He was thinking of this when he was aware of words spoken rapidly in his ear, and he turned half expecting to see someone behind him. No one was visible. He had not caught the words, nor could he define the voice; but a vague conviction of some horrible meaning fixed itself in his consciousness.

The night was very still, ahead of him the house glimmered grey and shuttered in the moonlight. He shook himself, and walked on oppressed by a novel sensation

compounded of disgust and childish fear; and still, from behind his shoulder, came the evil, voiceless murmuring.

He admits that he passed the end of the avenue at an amble, and was abreast of a semi-circle of shrubbery, when a small object was thrust from the shadow of the bushes, and lay in the open light. Though the night was peculiarly still, it fluttered and balanced a moment, as if windblown, then came in skimming flights to his feet. He picked it up and made for the door, which yielded to his hand, and he flung it to and bolted it behind him.

Once in the warmly-lit hall his senses returned, and he waited to recover breath and composure before facing the two men whose voices and laughter came from a room on his right. But the door of the room was thrown open, and the burly figure of Harland in his shirt-sleeves appeared on the threshold.

'Hullo, Jones, that you? Come along!' he said genially.

'Bless me!' exclaimed Nare-Jones irritably, 'there's not a light in any of the windows. It might be a house of the dead!'

Harland stared at him, but all he said was: 'Have a whisky-and-soda?'

Savelsan, who was leaning over the billiard table, trying side-strokes with his back to Nare-Jones, added:

'Did you expect us to illuminate the place for you? There's not a soul in the house but ourselves.'

'Say when,' said Harland, poising the bottle over a glass.

Nare-Jones laid down what he held in his hand on the corner of the billiard table, and took up his glass.

'What in creation's this?' asked Savelsan.

'I don't know; the wind blew it to my feet just outside,' replied Nare-Jones, between two long pulls at the whisky-and-soda.

'*Blown* to your feet?' repeated Savelsan, taking up the thing and weighing it in his hand. 'It must be blowing a hurricane then.'

'It isn't blowing at all,' returned Nare-Jones blankly. 'The night is dead calm.'

For the object that had fluttered and rolled so lightly

across the turf and gravel was a small battered, metal calf, made of some heavy brass amalgam.

Savelsan looked incredulously into Nare-Jones' face, and laughed.

'What's wrong with you? You look queer.'

Nare-Jones laughed too; he was already ashamed of the last ten minutes.

Harland was meantime examining the metal calf.

'It's a Bengali idol,' he said. 'It's been knocked about a good bit, by Jove! You say it blew out of the shrubbery?'

'Like a bit of paper, I give you my word, though there was not a breath of wind going,' admitted Nare-Jones.

'Seems odd, don't yer know?' remarked Harland carelessly. 'Now you two fellows had better begin; I'll mark.'

Nare-Jones happened to be in form that night, and Savelsan became absorbed in the delightful difficulty of giving him a sound thrashing.

Suddenly Savelsan paused in his stroke.

'What the sin's that?' he asked.

They stood listening. A thin, broken crying could be heard.

'Sounds like green plover,' remarked Nare-Jones chalking his cue.

'It's a kitten they've shut up somewhere,' said Harland.

'That's a child, and in the deuce of a fright, too,' said Savelsan. 'You'd better go and tuck it up in its little bed, Harland,' he added, with a laugh.

Harland opened the door. There could no longer be any doubt about the sounds; the stifled shrieks and thin whimpering told of a child in the extremity of pain and fear.

'It's upstairs,' said Harland. 'I'm going to see.'

Nare-Jones picked up a lamp and followed him.

'I stay here,' said Savelsan sitting down by the fire.

In the hall the two men stopped and listened again. It is hard to locate a noise, but this seemed to come from the upper landing.

'Poor little beggar!' exclaimed Harland, as he bounded

up the staircase. The bedroom doors opening on the square central landing above were all locked, the keys being on the outside. But the crying led them into a side passage which ended in a single room.

'It's in here, and the door's locked,' said Nare-Jones. 'Call out and see who's there.'

But Harland was set on business. He flung his weight against the panel, and the door burst open, the lock ricocheting noisily into a corner. As they passed in, the crying ceased abruptly.

Harland stood in the centre of the room, while Nare-Jones held up the light to look round.

'The dickens!' exclaimed Harland exhaustively.

The room was entirely empty.

Not so much as a cupboard broke the smooth surface of the walls, only the two low windows and the door by which they had entered.

'This is the room above the billiard-room, isn't it?' said Nare-Jones at last.

'Yes. This is the only one I have not had furnished yet. I thought I might—'

He stopped short, for behind them burst out a peal of harsh, mocking laughter, that rang and echoed between the bare walls.

Both men swung round simultaneously, and both caught a glimpse of a tall, thin figure in black, rocking with laughter in the doorway, but when they turned it was gone. They dashed out into the passage and landing. No one was to be seen. The doors were locked as before, and the staircase and hall were vacant.

After making a prolonged search through every corner of the house, they went back to Savelsan in the billiard-room.

'What were you laughing about? What is it anyway?' began Savelsan at once.

'It's nothing. And we didn't laugh,' replied Nare-Jones definitely.

'But I heard you,' insisted Savelsan. 'And where's the child?'

'I wish you'd go up and find it,' returned Harland grimly. 'We heard the laughing and saw, or thought we saw, a man in black—'

'Something like a priest in a cassock,' put in Nare-Jones.

'Yes, like a priest,' assented Harland, 'but as we turned he disappeared.'

Savelsan sat down and gazed from one to the other of his companions.

'The house behaves as if it was haunted,' he remarked; 'only there is no such thing as an authenticated ghost outside the experiences of the Psychological Research Society. I'd ask the Society down if I were you, Harland. You never can tell what you may find in these old houses.'

'It's not an old house,' replied Harland. 'It was built somewhere about '40. I certainly saw that man; and, look to it, Savelsan, I'll find out who or what he is. That I swear! The English law makes no allowance for ghosts—nor will I.'

'You'll have your hands full, or I'm mistaken,' exclaimed Savelsan, grinning. 'A ghost that laughs and cries in a breath, and rolls battered idols about your front door, is not to be trifled with. The night is young yet—not much past eleven. I vote for a peg all round and then I'll finish off Jones.'

Harland, sunk in a fit of sullen abstraction, sat on a settee, and watched them. On a sudden he said:

'It's turned beastly cold.'

'There's a beastly smell, you mean,' corrected Savelsan crossly, as he went round the table. He had made a break of forty and did not want to be interrupted. 'The draught is from the window.'

'I've not noticed it before this evening,' said Harland, as he opened the shutters to make sure.

As he did so the night air rushed in heavy with the smell of an old well that has not been uncovered for years, a smell of slime and unwholesome wetness. The lower part of the window was wide open and Harland banged it down.

'It's abominable!' he said, with an angry sniff. 'Enough to give us all typhoid.'

'Only dead leaves,' remarked Nare-Jones. 'There are the rotten leaves of twenty winters under the trees and outside this window. I noticed them when we came over on Tuesday.'

'I'll have them cleared away to-morrow. I wonder how Thoms came to leave this window open,' grumbled Harland, as he closed and bolted the shutter. 'What do you say—forty-five?' and he went over to mark it up.

The game went on for some time, and Nare-Jones was lying across the table with the cue poised, when he heard a slight sound behind him. Looking round he saw Harland, his face flushed and angry, passing softly—wonderfully softly for so big a man, Nare-Jones remembers thinking—along the angle of the wall towards the window.

All three men unite in declaring that they were watching the shutter, which opened inwards as if thrust by some furtive hand from outside. At the moment Nare-Jones and Savelsan were standing directly opposite to it on the further side of the table, while Harland crouched behind the shutter intent on giving the intruder a lesson.

As the shutter unfolded to its utmost the two men opposite saw a face pressed against the glass, a furrowed evil face, with a wide laugh perched upon its sinister features.

There was a second of absolute stillness, and Nare-Jones' eyes met those other eyes with the fascinated horror of a mutual understanding, as all the foul fancies that had pursued him in the avenue poured back into his mind.

With an uncontrollable impulse of resentment, he snatched a billiard ball from the table and flung it with all his strength at the face. The ball crashed through the glass and through the face beyond it! The glass fell shattered, but the face remained for an instant peering and grinning at the aperture, then as Harland sprang forward it was gone.

'The ball went clean through it!' said Savelsan with a gasp.

They crowded to the window, and throwing up the sash, leant out. The dank smell clung about the air, a boat-shaped moon glimmered between the bare branches, and

on the white drive beyond the shrubbery the billiard ball could be seen a shining spot under the moon. Nothing more.

'Whatwasit?' asked Harland.

' "Only a face at the window," ' quoted Savelsan with an awkward attempt at making light of his own scare. 'Devilish queer face too, eh, Jones?'

'I wish I'd got him!' returned Harland frowning. 'I'm not going to put up with any tricks about the place, don't yer know?'

'You'd bottle any tramp loafing around,' said Nare-Jones.

Harland looked down at his immense arms outlined in his shirt-sleeves.

'I could that,' he answered. 'But this chap—did you hit him?'

'Clean through the face! or, at any rate, it looked like it,' replied Savelsan, as Nare-Jones stood silent.

Harland shut the shutter and poked up the fire.

'It's a cursed creepy affair!' he said. 'I hope the servants won't get hold of this nonsense. Ghosts play the very mischief with a house. Though I don't believe in them myself,' he concluded.

Then Savelsan broke out in an unexpected place.

'Nor do I—as a rule,' he said slowly. 'Still, you know it is a sickening idea to think of a spirit condemned to haunt the scene of its crime waiting for the world to die.'

Harland and Nare-Jones looked at him.

'Have a whisky neat,' suggested Harland, soothingly. 'I never knew you taken that way before.'

Nare-Jones laughed out. He says he does not know why he laughed nor why he said what follows.

'It's this way,' he said. 'The moment of foul satisfaction is gone for ever, yet for all time the guilty spirit must perpetuate its sin—the sin that brought no lasting reward, only a momentary reward experienced, it may be, centuries ago, but to which still clings the punishment of eternally rehearsing in loneliness, and cold, and gloom, the sin of other days. No punishment can be conceived more

horrible. Savelsan is right.'

'I think we've had enough about ghosts,' said Harland, cheerfully, 'let's go on. Hurry up, Savelsan.'

'There's the billiard ball,' said Nare-Jones. 'Who'll go fetch?'

'Not I,' replied Savelsan promptly. 'When that—was at the window, I felt sick.'

Nare-Jones nodded. 'And I wanted to bolt!' he said emphatically.

Harland faced about from the fire.

'And I, though I saw nothing but the shutter, I—hang it!—don't yer know—so did I! There was panic in the air for a minute. But I'm shot if I'm afraid now,' he concluded doggedly, 'I'll go.'

His heavy animal face was lit with courage and resolution.

'I've spent close upon five thousand pounds over this blessed house first and last, and I'm not going to be done out of it by any infernal spiritualism!' he added, as he took down his coat and pulled it on.

'It's all in view from the window except those few yards through the shrubbery,' said Savelsan. 'Take a stick and go. Though, on second thoughts, I bet you a fiver you don't.'

'I don't want a stick,' answered Harland. 'I'm not afraid—not now—and I'd meet most men with my hands.'

Nare-Jones opened the shutters again; the sash was low and he pushed the window up, and leant far out.

'It's not much of a drop,' he said, and slung his legs out over the lintel; but the night was full of the smell, and something else. He leapt back into the room. 'Don't go, Harland!'

Harland gave him a look that set his blood burning.

'What is there, after all, to be afraid of in a ghost?' he asked heavily.

Nare-Jones, sick with the sense of his own newly-born cowardice, yet entirely unable to master it, answered feebly:

'I can't say, but don't go.'

The words seemed inevitable, though he could have

kicked himself for hanging back.

There was a forced laugh from Savelsan.

'Give it up and stop at home, little man,' he said.

Harland merely snorted in reply, and laid his great leg over the window ledge. The other two watched his big, tweed-clad figure as it crossed the grass and disappeared into the shrubbery.

'You and I are in a preposterous funk,' said Savelsan, with unpleasant explicitness, as Harland, whistling loudly, passed into the shadow.

But this was a point on which Nare-Jones could not bring himself to speak at the moment. Then they sat on the sill and waited. The moon shone out clearly above the avenue, which now lay white and undimmed between its crowding trees.

'And he's whistling because he's afraid,' continued Savelsan.

'He's not often afraid,' replied Nare-Jones shortly; 'besides, he's doing what neither of us were very keen on.'

The whistling stopped suddenly. Savelsan said afterwards that he fancied he saw Harland's huge, grey-clad shoulders, with uplifted arms, rise for a second above the bushes.

Then out of the silence came peal upon peal of that infernal laughter, and, following it, the thin pitiful crying of the child. That too ceased, and an absolute stillness seemed to fall upon the place.

They leant out and listened intently. The minutes passed slowly. In the middle of the avenue the billiard ball glinted on the gravel, but there was no sign of Harland emerging from the shrubbery path.

'He should be there by now,' said Nare-Jones anxiously.

They listened again; everything was quiet. The ticking of Harland's big watch on the mantelpiece was distinctly audible.

'This is too much,' said Nare-Jones. 'I'm going to see where he is.'

He swung himself out on the grass, and Savelsan called to him to wait, as he was coming also. While Nare-Jones stood

waiting, there was a sound as of a pig grunting and rooting among the dead leaves in the shrubbery.

They ran forward into the darkness, and found the shrubbery path. A minute later they came upon something that tossed and snorted and rolled under the shrubs.

'Great Heavens!' cried Nare-Jones, 'it's Harland!'

'He's breaking somebody's neck,' added Savelsan, peering into the gloom.

Nare-Jones was himself again. The powerful instinct of his profession—the help-giving instinct—possessed him to the exclusion of every other feeling.

'He's in a fit—just a fit,' he said in matter of fact tones, as he bent over the struggling form; 'that's all.'

With the assistance of Savelsan, he managed to carry Harland out into the open drive. Harland's eyes were fearful, and froth hung about his blue puffing lips as they laid him down upon the ground. He rolled over, and lay still, while from the shadows broke another shout of laughter.

'It's apoplexy. We must get him away from here,' said Nare-Jones. 'But, first, I'm going to see what is in those bushes.'

He dashed through the shrubbery, backwards and forwards. He seemed to feel the strength of ten men as he wrenched and tore and trampled the branches, letting in the light of the moon to its darkness. At last he paused, exhausted.

'Of course, there's nothing,' said Savelsan wearily. 'What did you expect after the incident of the billiard ball?'

Together, with awful toil, they bore the big man down the narrow avenue, and at the lodge gates they met the carriage.

Some time later the subject of their common experiences at Medhans Lea was discussed amongst the three men. Indeed, for many weeks Harland had not been in a state to discuss any subject at all, but as soon as he was allowed to do so, he invited Nare-Jones and Savelsan to meet Mr Flaxman Low, the scientist, whose works on psychology

and kindred matters are so well known at the Metropole, to thresh out the matter.

Flaxman Low listened with his usual air of gentle abstraction, from time to time making notes on the back of an envelope. He looked at each narrator in turn as he took up the thread of the story. He understood perfectly that the man who stood furthest from the mystery must inevitably have been the self-centred Savelsan; next in order came Nare-Jones, with sympathetic possibilities, but a crowded brain; closest of all would be big, kindly Harland, with more than one strong animal instinct about him, and whose bulk of matter was evidently permeated by a receptive spirit.

When they had ended, Savelsan turned to Flaxman Low.

'There you have the events, Mr Low. Now, the question is how to deal with them.'

'Classify them,' replied Flaxman Low.

'The crying would seem to indicate a child,' began Savelsan, ticking off the list on his fingers; 'the black figure, the face at the window, and the laughter are naturally connected. So far I can go alone. I conclude that we saw the apparition of a man, possibly a priest, who had during his lifetime illtreated a child, and whose punishment it is to haunt the scene of his crime.'

'Precisely—the punishment being worked out under conditions which admit of human observation,' returned Flaxman Low. 'As for the child the sound of crying was merely part of the *mise-en-scène*. The child was not there.'

'But that explanation stops short of several points. Now about the suggestive thoughts experienced by my friend, Nare-Jones; what brought on the fit in the case of Mr Harland, who assures us that he was not suffering from fright or other violent emotion; and what connection can be traced between all these things and the Bengali idol?' Savelsan ended.

'Let us take the Bengali idol first,' said Low. 'It is just one of those discrepant particulars which, at first sight, seem wholly irreconcilable with the rest of the phenomena, yet these often form a test point, by which our theories are

proved or otherwise.' Flaxman Low took up the metal calf from the table as he spoke. 'I should be inclined to connect this with the child. Observe it. It has not been roughly used; it is rubbed and dented as a plaything usually is. I should say the child may have had Anglo-Indian relations.'

At this, Nare-Jones bent forward, and in his turn examined the idol, while Savelsan smiled his thin, incredulous smile.

'These are ingenious theories,' he said; 'but we are really no nearer to facts, I am afraid.'

'The only proof would be an inquiry into the former history of Medhans Lea; if events had happened there which would go to support this theory, why, then— But I cannot supply that information since I never heard of Medhans Lea or the ghost until I entered this room.'

'I know something of Medhans Lea,' put in Nare-Jones. 'I found out a good deal about it before I left the place. And I must congratulate Mr Low on his methods, for his theory tallies in a wonderful manner with the facts of the case. The house was long known to be haunted. It seems that many years ago a lady, the widow of an Indian officer, lived there with her only child, a boy, for whom she engaged a tutor, a dark-looking man, who wore a long black coat like a cassock, and was called "the Jesuit" by the country people.

'One evening the man took the boy out into the shrubbery. Screams were heard, and when the child was brought in he was found to have lost his reason. He used to cry and shriek incessantly, but was never able to tell what had been done to him as long as he lived. As for this idol, the mother probably brought it with her from India, and the child used it as a toy, perhaps, because he was allowed no others. Hullo!' In handling the calf, Nare-Jones had touched some hidden spring, the head opened, disclosing a small cavity, from which dropped a little ring of blue beads, such as children make. He held it up. 'This affords good proof.'

'Yes,' admitted Savelsan grudgingly. 'But how about your sensations and Harland's seizure? You must know what was done to the child, Harland—what did you see in

the shrubbery?’

Harland’s florid face assumed a queer pallor.

‘I saw something,’ replied he hesitatingly, ‘but I can’t recall what it was. I only remember being possessed by a blind terror, and then nothing more until I recovered consciousness at the hotel next day.’

‘Can you account for this, Mr Low?’ asked Nare-Jones, ‘and there was also my strange notion of the whispering in the avenue.’

‘I think so,’ replied Flaxman Low. ‘I believe that the theory of atmospheric influences, which includes the power of environment to reproduce certain scenes and also thoughts, would throw light upon your sensations as well as Mr Harland’s. Such influences play a far larger part in our everyday experience than we have as yet any idea of.’

There was a silence of a few moments; then Harland spoke:

‘I fancy that we have said all that there is to be said upon the matter. We are much obliged to you, Mr Low. I don’t know how it strikes you other fellows, but, speaking for myself, I have seen enough of ghosts to last me for a very long time.

‘And now,’ ended Harland wearily, ‘if you have no objections, we will pass on to pleasanter subjects.’

JUST FOR THE RECORD

PATRICIA MOYNEHAN

No one wore black, any more. The only old one in their midst wore sombre colours but the others in the group were young and wore light bright April clothes. Only their faces were grey. Grey webs of grief woven by spiders—all sombre kinds of spiders weaving sombre webs on each sombre face.

Ailsa Higgins clicked her camera at a distance, hoping the mourners would not notice. She fought strands of hair from her eyes and from the camera lens as the cold wind whipped across the open fields of graves beyond the little churchyard. Her fingers and face were numbed with cold; numbness, too, was showing in the faces of the six people standing around that boarded, six foot deep scar in the earth. Was there a grandfather, or a mother, or someone less dear in there? It didn't matter to her. The grief, not the cause of it, mattered to her.

The priest kept his balance well against the billowing sails of his cassock. Click—Dracula in white.

Behind a large mossy Angel Gabriel she paused and pressed her hands over her ears, now thumping painfully because of the constant punchings of the turbulent gusts. Bright green fields of bleak grey and black headstones stretched before her, neat and orderly like an architecturally redesigned Stonehenge, broken up, smoothed out, re-distributed so that everyone could have his little piece of history; if not during his lifetime, well . . .

'Nice weather for beans, in' it?'

Blond, curly haired, smiling face, sandy moustache. Casual, but neat. About thirty . . . 'Sorry?'

'Windy,' he explained.

'Oh, God,' she thought, but smiled politely at him.

'Morbid thing to do, innit? You won't see many interesting things going on around here—unless you got an

infra-red lens on that.'

His accent was bastardized Oxford with a shot of cockney, for effect.

'I'm studying grief,' she said, hoping that the bizarre idea would encourage him to go, quickly.

'Why?' His face turned towards the mourners who were beginning to drift away.

The murmurings of the priest became the murmuring of the wind.

'Why are you interested?' she asked.

'I don't think you'll find much of it in that lot. They look like they've just buried a good investment. When I die I'm gonna leave five hundred quid prize money for the person that can come up with the best epitaph. They look pretty miserable, that lot.'

She felt his shiver and watched the curls at the nape of his neck ruffle in the wind.

'Well, that's what grief does to people. Can you just get out of my way, please? I can't take pictures through you.'

He glanced back at her, 'Try moving sideways,' moved deliberately across her field of vision and leaned against the pedestal of a stone chalice. 'I used to work for Cheviot Sound. I did the late night show, best bit of sarcasm on the radio—"Hurt 'em with Burton"—nothing could touch it for style and content. I was the best thing since sliced white bread.'

'Click, click, click.' The oldest mourner, daughter of the grandmother in the grave, perhaps, lingered beside the open hole while the others walked down the path to the carpark.

'Are you working for independent radio? I don't listen to it.'

He sat down on a small square piece of marble. 'You don't look like the morons wot listen to the other side.'

'I don't listen to any side. I'm either too busy or too tired. I work hard all day for the money to pay for the thing I really want to do and, consequently, I can only work at that during the night.'

'You don't look like a whore, either.'

A bubble of annoyance welled up inside her then quickly burst as she wondered aloud, 'Is there a type?'

She folded the camera into its leather case; the last mourner drifted off down the tarmac path following the billowing form of the priest and when she looked around for her young companion he too had gone.

Brown lumps of clay dropped from the gravedigger's spade and thudded into the deep pit. The gravedigger appeared to ignore her; she paused for only a moment to find out who had died. No headstone told her so she had to ask.

'Oh, 'e were famous round 'ere. You don't sound local, love?'

'No,' she said.

'Only twenty-nine, nobbut a lad. Drove around like a bloody maniac, pardon my French, so 'e 'ad it comin', 'e used to say so 'imself. 'E used to say 'e'd go when 'e were good and ready, 'e were a right 'un. I reckon it took 'im by surprise, meself.' He chuckled.

She found his fat, dirty face odious but thanked him politely and hurried down the winding tarmac into the souging wind. It blew the moans of those it disturbed deep down in the earth, insolently into her face.

Life. God, was it worth it? Not enough time, not enough talent, not enough money. She slammed the car door, started the engine and drove slowly under the black arch towards the iron gates.

There he was again, this time sitting on one of the stone shelves where bearers laid the coffins on the way to the churchyard.

'Why are you hanging around this place?' she asked, winding the window down. 'Do you want a lift somewhere?'

'I was going to ask you out to dinner but I rammed my BMW up the back of a Kraut juggernaut on the M 62. Beautiful car, cost me twenty grand, a real bird puller.' He walked round and got into the passenger seat. 'Thanks, town centre.'

He talked incessantly throughout the journey, telling her

how good he was at his job—he didn't ask her about hers—and how he'd been given the option to buy the entire Independent Television Network by Lew Grade but had had to refuse it because poor management made it a bad investment. His work was his life, he went on, totally unconcerned about her activities. He complained about her old, rattling car. She managed an interruption to say that she had very little money and, when her tenancy ran out, nowhere to live. The car was, at that moment, the least of her worries.

'Try Hodgson and Baynes, in Fieldgate, round the corner,' he said, getting out on to the pavement.

'Thanks,' she looked up into the mirror, and by the time she looked back he was lost in the Friday afternoon crowds.

It was odd that he should disappear like that but his suggestion about the estate agent seemed worth trying.

The vacant bungalow squatted beetle-like on a green hill, its square black eyes staring sullenly out at the world from its nest of neat lawns and rockeries. Mr Baynes had explained, 'It's quite lived-in. You may come across one or two bits and bats belonging to the previous occupier but they'll be cleared out in the next two or three weeks.'

Somehow he never got round to telling her who would be collecting them.

She let herself in by the front door. The long hall had white walls with polished copper hangings. A barometer in a copper setting threatened stormy. Beyond the kitchen window at the back of the house the sky hung like a damp, grey blanket over the fields.

The bungalow was well-furnished, it had central heating, two bedrooms, a study, dining kitchen, bathroom and a comfortable lounge. 'This beautiful ready-made home at an impossibly low rent,' said the leaflet. She was lucky, said the Agents, it wasn't officially on their boards yet, but the landlord was a practical person and had agreed to the letting—rent to be reviewed when certain things had been settled.

He didn't explain about the certain things.

But whatever it was that was keeping the rent low was certainly to her advantage. The bungalow was lovely. Perhaps it was the warm glow from the old-fashioned Victorian lamps, or the smell of the old mahogany furniture or the hazy illumination of the place, or all these things combined, but, whatever the reason, the house seemed to want her in it.

A week after she had moved in, Cheviot Sound called her on the phone. She took it outside into the sunshine and sat on the doorstep in her shorts to welcome the first warm day of May.

King, who had already settled in the bungalow, purred past, plodding his large tabby body across the front lawn.

The Receptionist explained that they'd got Ailsa's number from the newspaper where she worked and would she like to be number three in a trio of guests on a phone-in about psychic phenomena, at this time next week? Because of her weekly column about the tricks the human mind could play on itself, she would be ideal as the impartial member of the debate. Hauntings and the like were very popular with the listeners to Five thirty two—

'Five thirty two?'

'Oh, that's the wavelength,' the girl said. 'The phone-in time is between eight and nine. It goes on for an hour. Could you get here for seven forty-five?'

'Okay, I'll be careful not to mix it up with five thirty two.'

Psychic phenomena. What the radio station had in mind had more to do with ghosts than the deception of the human mind. She replaced the receiver and her gaze shifted to the sky beyond the door. The mind was a clear blue sky sometimes clouded with neuroses.

But there wasn't a cloud in sight and the temperature was up to twenty degrees centigrade. Only two weeks ago the wind had howled across the cemetery almost freezing her to its mouldering earth.

She pruned the roses at the front of the bungalow; it was late to prune but they were overgrown and losing the fight against their suckers. On her way to the compost heap a familiar voice turned her about towards the gate.

'I was right about Hodgson and Baynes, I'm usually right. You've got a nice pair of legs. I haven't seen a nice pair of legs for ages,' he said wistfully. King jumped up on the wall beside him and allowed the stranger to tickle his chin.

'Thanks for the tip—for the bungalow.'

'I used to live here,' he said.

'Oh, did you? Well, you might have pruned the roses.'

'I paid someone to do the garden. Cost me fifteen quid a week. It's the best garden round here.'

'It would be.'

'I'd ask you out to dinner but my car's—'

'Still off the road.'

'Don't move the plants around. Like a good woman, every garden should be laid professionally.' He came in. 'I paid for that lot to be laid out.'

Laid out. The other, morbid meaning shivered in the air between them.

'Look, I do appreciate the tip-off, but you don't live here any more. Okay, it's a nice garden—'

His eyes had moved down and were staring at her legs.

'Your left knee bows in a bit, though. Nice face, shame about the legs.' He grinned at her. 'I left something here—'

'Ah! You're the previous occupier.'

'Right.'

'The Agent said someone would come and pick up the bits and bats as he put it. You should have said who you were. There are some records in the lounge—'

'Thanks.' He walked around the side of the house.

'You can go in the front door.'

The gate clicked open; a postman came up the path. 'Morning, love.'

'Morning.' Post. Re-directed. Four letters. She opened them quickly on her way through the hall to the kitchen. Three bills and a letter for Mr Lyle Burton from the magazine *Airtime*.

'Are you called Lyle Burton? I'm sorry, I opened this—'

The kitchen door drifted open, there was nobody there.

No one in the lounge or the bathroom or the back garden

or the front garden. No sign of him from the top of the hill. Creepy.

What had happened to him?

She looked at the letter in her hand and decided to read it.

Dear Mr Burton,

With reference to the British Music Awards, just a quick note to remind you that despite your promise the late show tape still hasn't arrived. Have the postmen boobed again?

Best wishes,
Richard Gaunt,
Competition Organizer.

P.S. (Closing date is still 29th May.)

'Well, I can't do anything about it,' she said, aloud, and left the letter in the lounge for him to collect with the rest of his stuff if he ever came back.

A week passed and he didn't turn up for his things so she gradually forgot about him. The phone-in appointment overtook her and she became absorbed in briefing herself for the listeners' questions on things that go bump et cetera.

The callers rang in continually with all their personal experiences of ghosts but all could be explained away by some reason or other. She was inclined to agree with a journalist from the *Post* who had been called in to give the sceptic's point of view. Most people imagined they saw things.

'What about people who die?' said the next caller, and his voice seemed to smile as it drifted through the 'cans' into her ears and filled her mind, nudging gently at her memory. 'You know, the ones who leave something unfinished and they keep on coming back to enlist the help of the living.'

It was not difficult to hear a caller over the headsets. The equipment reproduced a caller's voice cutting out much of the megaphone effect so that the voice sounded almost as though it wasn't on a telephone at all. And perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps he couldn't use a phone. Perhaps he didn't need one? Perhaps he was playing a trick? It was a rotten

one. She felt the blood rise to her cheeks and she suddenly became aware of Jack Burrows, who was hosting the show, staring uncomfortably at her.

'Sorry,' she said.

The caller was a woman and had been waiting for an answer for almost thirty seconds.

When the show had finished Jack Burrows gave her the cold shoulder and she hurried out but paused at the swing doors and turned back to reception.

'Does Lyle Burton work here?'

'He used to.'

'Could you tell me where he's gone?'

The girl's eyes blinked pityingly. 'He was killed—over a month ago.'

'But . . . '

'You think you've seen him, don't you?' the girl went on. 'You must be about the hundredth girl around here who thinks she's seen him. He was a really nice guy, you know. I don't think his fans can accept that he's dead. You don't look like the sort of girl who'd run after him. You look like the sort of girl he'd run after, actually.'

'Thanks,' She turned away. He had said he was Lyle Burton. She could not have imagined meeting him twice.

'But he was an absolute mess, they said, when they got him out of his car.' The girl was still talking. 'All the front of the car was compressed in like a concertina. I certainly wouldn't like to bump into him now, if he's walking about like that, somewhere.'

Ailsa left quickly and drove her car out of the city towards the countryside. What if he were wandering about, dead? What if he were a ghost? Maybe there was something in the house that he wanted. Her help? She turned the car off to the left and along the moors road. There were still some people on the wild, bleak hills. It was a windy evening and, under the falling dusk, kites were flying high against the mauve clouds. She stopped the car and got out.

The wind was warm, unlike the one which had blustered over the cemetery. She remembered him sitting on the stone bench in the gateway waiting for a lift. He had tipped

her off about the house. It seemed that he did want her help, but why? And could she give it? She was afraid. She was afraid of the possibility that he was dead. But he was harmless, so far. He hadn't tried to hurt her, yet. He could be an imposter; she hadn't seen any pictures of the real Lyle Burton. It was possible that he wanted something which had belonged to Lyle and which he was hoping she could be scared into handing over. If that was his little game, he would undoubtedly be visiting her at the house again. Next time she would be ready for him.

That was Wednesday. It was now the weekend and there had been no sign of him. She decided it was time she got to know the bungalow thoroughly and climbed the loft ladder to investigate the study which the Agent had told her was situated in the roof.

It was hardly a place for intellectual work. She stood still at the room's centre, gazing round in amazement.

The carpet yielded softly to the pressure of her bare toes. Its wool was deep, and dark red like the velvet drapes on the windows behind and before her. Most of the ceiling was fairly high, because of the angle of the roof which was so steep she could stand upright, quite comfortably by the trapdoor in the middle of the floor. A desk stood in one corner where the ceiling lowered and in the opposite one was a large double bed on which were black sheets and a glittering oriental coverlet. The walls were papered with maroon and gold velvet arabesques and the light which filtered faintly through the curtains was absorbed into the darkness and intensified the aura of eroticism which pervaded every part of the room.

The golden dragon embroidered on the bed coverlet shimmered and writhed in the half light, its pale gold outlines might have been woven from threads of his blond hair. She cast her eyes about the room, looking for him but there was nothing, no indication. The desk was untouched, deserted. A glimmer on the curtains behind it caught her eye. As she traced her fingers along the soft velvet folds, her touch revealed that there were patterns in them which were not immediately visible. Spreading the material out

she saw that the patterns were Japanese. They had been embossed on to the material and as she turned it towards the light the figures were illuminated and seemed to move and gyrate.

She dropped the curtains and sat back on the corner of the desk. Above the desk chair, hanging on the wall in an intricately carved gilt frame, was a painting of a dark-haired nude girl, lying in a wooded glade, listening with a faraway look in her eyes to the God Pan as he piped music over her pale body.

'Well,' she said, 'you sure know how to make a girl feel at home.'

'Monday, March 18th, Armond Toys Inc. 10.30 Manchester.' His voice made her leap to her feet. She turned quickly, looking for the source of his voice.

On the desk, set into the metal top, was a small cassette recorder. The tapes were stacked in date order in the drawers; she played parts from two of them and found that he had used the machine as a verbal diary.

The phone rang in the hall and interrupted her listening. She climbed down the ladder and went to it.

'Oh yes?' She opened the front door and let the afternoon sunlight flood into the hall.

Cheviot Sound. They had noticed that her number was the same as Lyle Burton's. They wondered if she was renting his bungalow now? When she said yes they explained about two tapes of a late night show which Lyle had borrowed from the station and not returned. They wondered if she wouldn't mind popping in with them when she was next in town.

'Forget it. They can't 'ave 'em. I made the bloody show. They belong to me.' Lyle, or the man who said he was Lyle, was standing in the doorway frowning at her. As she replaced the receiver, he walked in, past her and through to the lounge.

'Hey, just a moment—' she pursued him but when she got into the lounge, he was not there.

She went back into the hall and climbed the loft ladder up into the exotic bedroom/study, but she had not been

mistaken, he was not up there, either.

In among the tapes on his desk she found the two cassette recordings of the late night show and listened to some parts of them. The voice was the same. 'Are you him, or aren't you?' she wondered, aloud, waiting for an answer, hoping for no reply. There was no reply.

On the way to the radio station, halfway between country and town and in the middle of a deserted dual carriageway, the heating gauge in her car shot into red and steam spouted up through the bonnet. She pulled into the hard shoulder, noticing that about a mile away, at the foot of the grassy bank, was an isolated, forgotten farmhouse.

When she looked under the car bonnet she saw there was no water in the radiator but there had been plenty of water there yesterday, when the garage had filled it, and the radiator wasn't leaking.

'Hello, what brings a nice girl like you to a dump like this?' He sat on the low fence along the hard shoulder, resting a tank of water on his knees.

She slid her hand into her jacket pocket and gripped hold of the cassettes.

'What's that?' She tilted her head at the tank.

'Water,' he said. 'Do you need any?'

'You know I do.'

He taunted her, smiling faintly, but his eyes stared levelly into hers, cold as the grave.

'Why?' She began walking backwards to the car. 'What do you want?'

He stood up and put the tank of water on the grass verge. 'I'll do a deal with you. The water for the tapes.'

'And what if,' she moved towards the fence, he followed her only with his eyes, '—if I don't agree.'

'I'll take them anyway.'

Now, he walked towards her but she nipped over the fence and ran down the bank towards the farmhouse. 'Oh, God, let there be somebody there,' she thought. Her feet pounded over the muddy ground. She had over-estimated the distance; it was only just over half a mile. She reached

the building and fell against the nearest door thumping on it with her fists.

The woman was puzzled to find Ailsa gasping on her doorstep and pointing back up the slope towards the car on the roadside. There was no one in sight.

She walked back to Ailsa's car with her, carrying the water in a bucket; the tank belonging to Lyle was lying beside the front wheel, when they got there.

The woman gave her a queer look. She thought Ailsa was mad, obviously, and didn't waste any time emptying her bucket into the car radiator and returning to the farmhouse.

Ailsa watched her hurrying across the field and looking back once or twice as if she thought this time someone was going to chase her.

'Well, I don't know why you risked being chased across the field,' the woman had said. And she had a tone in her voice that was suspicious if not distrustful.

He had made her look stupid. Why? She got into the car and took the cassettes out of her pocket. Why did he want them? Perhaps the real Lyle Burton had been mixed up in something illegal and the tapes were connected to it, and the imposter wanted them back before Cheviot Sound got their hands on them.

While she waited for the girl at the desk to finish her telephone conversation she cast her gaze around the studio's reception. The girl obligingly pushed a leaflet across the desk at her.

It advertised a series of Cheviot Sound T-shirts bearing photographic transfers of each of the presenters. Presenter number five was a handsome, fair-haired moustachioed Lyle Burton and underneath was the slogan: 'Hurt 'em with Burton'.

The girl finally disengaged herself from the switchboard. 'Oh, that one's not really for sale any more,' she said. 'It's a good picture, though. He was just like that.' He was, indeed.

Ailsa closed the pamphlet and left it on the desk. 'They're all good,' she said. 'I just called in about the tapes

you said you wanted. I couldn't find them. They're not with the others. But I'll keep looking if you like.'

'Oh,' the girl looked troubled. 'It's just that he might have posted them, then.'

'Sorry?'

'Well, they were going to be entered for the Radio Presenter of the Year Award. He really wanted to win it. Well, he said he would, anyway. I think he would have. But he can't now. Thanks for looking, all the same.'

'It's all right,' she said, 'no trouble.'

In the privacy of her car she opened up her bag but the tapes were not inside. What had he said? 'I'll take them anyway.'

She drove back to the bungalow and found them lying on the telephone table in the hall.

At the bottom of the rear garden there was a pile of old grass cuttings and the prunings from the roses she had cut. She got some matches from the kitchen, the rubbish from the kitchen bin and on her way out through the front door, collected the cassettes.

From the overgrown bushes along the back garden fence she broke off a few branches and threw them on to the little bonfire. They crackled and spat at her, viciously. She moved backwards and at arm's length threw the cassettes into the flames.

As they hit, a fierce gust of wind rose up under the fire lifting a stream of embers and burning wood into the air, the branches spun up, alight, and hovered above the fire. Suddenly, they shot forward. She turned and bolted for the back door but it was locked against her and she tugged desperately at the door handle while the flaming branches beat at her arms and shoulders. A singeing, burning smell rose into the air. Her right sleeve was on fire.

She screamed and tried to run but something pushed her on to the ground, he was smothering her, choking—her—with his—his—damned—lumber . . .

The words flew away from her and she blacked out.

When she recovered consciousness she found his jacket wrapped around her shoulders and the charred branches

scattered around her feet, on the path.

Sliding the jacket from her right shoulder she drew her arm out gingerly but it was unscathed, the sleeve was burnt but her skin was unharmed . . . this time.

In the kitchen, she switched on the kettle and threw a couple of teabags into the teapot. As she sat down on a buffet, her hands began to shake violently in a delayed reaction to the fire.

The kettle whistled but as she reached unsteadily for the switch the sound of singing made her hesitate.

His voice was tenor and he was overdoing it—on purpose, it seemed.

‘What is life? Life without thee? What is life now thou art gone?’

The scent of men’s aftershave drifted on the air under her nose.

She ran to the bathroom door and beat on it: ‘Leave me alone! I tried to do what you wanted. Leave me alone!’

The singing stopped. She took hold of the door handle and it turned easily. The door opened slowly.

The bath was filled with steaming clear water, there was the unmistakable smell of Aramis in the air. But he was not in the room.

Behind her, in the main bedroom, someone was walking about, softly, shoeless, rustling the bedclothes, opening drawers.

She forced herself to turn and look through the open doorway as he walked by, wearing a blue and white bathrobe. She heard him stop, but before he could come back she ran for the front door. It was locked.

‘Are you all right?’ He was leaning against the bedroom doorway.

She leant back against the locked front door and stared at him. He looked—real. ‘No,’ she said, very quietly. ‘Who are you?’

He smiled and turned back into the bedroom. She ran after him. ‘Don’t! Don’t do that!’

He was still in the bedroom but now he was sitting on the bed, cutting his toenails. As each sliver of nail parted

company with the whole they seemed to fall into the air and vanish before they reached the floor. Her gaze shifted from his feet to his muscular calves and upwards. She realized he was watching her and looked away, quickly as a blush burned across her cheeks.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'You better get used to seeing that sort of thing from now on. You never know what you'll find when you open the bedroom door or the bathroom door, eh?'

'What?'

'I said you never—'

'I mean what do you mean? You're not going to stay here? Please, don't . . .'

'I don't have a choice. It's up to you.' He put the scissors to one side and got up. Behind her the bedroom door slammed shut. She turned round and tugged at it but it didn't move.

'It's up to you.' She felt his hands on her waist. He turned her back to look at him.

'Oh, look,' she pleaded, desperately, 'I can't help you. You won't let me. Please, let me go.'

He stared at her silently for a minute or so. The bedroom door clicked and drifted open. He released her.

She backed out into the hall. 'You can't live here. You can't live anywhere,' she challenged him. 'You're not—' she was going to say 'alive' but he was no longer there.

'You can go, but you'll always come back.'

His voice was coming from the lounge.

He was sitting on the sofa with his feet on the small table.

'This is my home,' he said, from behind a newspaper. 'I can't go anywhere else, and I can make sure you don't.'

She watched him from the lounge doorway. 'Forever?'

But instead of answering he disappeared again and a cold wind like the one which had blown across the cemetery on the day she had met him souged across the room and blew the Competition Organizer's letter into her face. She read it again.

The sound of another click drew her attention towards the front door. It had opened slightly. On the telephone

table the two cassettes were lying side by side and blackened from the fire. She took them and ran out to her car.

It was not until she had posted them to *Airtime* and was reversing the car into the front drive that she realized she still had his lumberjacket round her shoulders.

He was standing in the hall when she opened the front door.

'Come here,' he said.

She froze.

He walked over to her and gripped her shoulders. 'I said come here. Don't you ever do as you're told, woman?' Then he kissed her warmly. 'I only wanted to say, "thanks".'

The telephone rang and she reached out for it. He had disappeared again.

The caller was one of his old girlfriends.

'Haven't seen him in years,' the voice said. 'I was just staying in the area overnight.'

Ailsa pushed her hair away from her face and realized the lumberjacket had also gone with him.

'Is he there?' the girl asked.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'he doesn't live here any more.'

'Are you sure?'

Oh yes, she was sure, she said. She was definitely sure, now.

THE COOK'S ROOM

PANSY PAKENHAM

It was on New Year's Eve that I drove to the Maxwell-Smiths' for dinner. When I arrived at Terncote Manor my hostess took me to her bedroom and heartily made me free of the scanty amenities of her dressing-table. She is very fond of animals, and there were several in baskets about the room, so she kept the windows open in spite of the great cold. Nevertheless, there was no fire, as the Maxwell-Smiths are poor and hardy.

As we entered a gust blew the curtains violently inwards, entangling them with the ornaments on a small chest, and a photograph fell to the ground with a crash of broken glass. Mrs Maxwell-Smith picked it up and laughed good-naturedly, displaying all her big teeth.

'Poor Uncle James! He's always in the wars. This is the third time his photograph has been blown over and broken. He hated draughts in his life, the old wretch. I don't think a window was opened the whole time he lived here.'

Shivering before the looking-glass in my black chiffon dinner-dress and dabbing uselessly at my mauve face with a powder-puff, I sympathized with Uncle James, and rather wished he were still alive and owner of Terncote Manor. Not that I had ever visited the house in his day, or even seen him, as he was a complete recluse, and during the last years of his life had never been outside the grounds.

Nobody knew how he occupied himself, though there was a general opinion that he wrote, as great cases of books often arrived at the station addressed to him. And if he could read he could probably also write—so the neighbours agreed.

However, when he died five years ago and his nephew inherited the estate, no monumental manuscripts came to light—only dozens of detective stories, which must have been his principal purchases. The mystery of his daily life

remained unsolved.

'I believe he did nothing but eat,' Mrs Maxwell-Smith had once confided to me. 'The food bills I came across were enormous, and full of the wildest luxuries. But then, of course, he had this marvellous French cook.' She had lowered her voice and cautiously looked round the room.

I was full of curiosity about the cook. She was a tall thin woman, and though often to be seen marketing in the town was too morose to be approachable. She had come to Terncote soon after Mr James Maxwell-Smith and had remained there till he died—for twenty-five years, I should think.

At first he had kept a large staff of servants, but gradually they had disappeared till, at the end, the cook remained alone with him in the house. Of course, there were all kinds of scandalous rumours about her in the country-side, but these subsided when it was found that he had left her nothing in his will.

'That was a great relief,' said Mrs Maxwell-Smith, 'as we can hardly make both ends meet as it is. What with food bills and coal bills—and he spent a small fortune on fires—Uncle James left some pretty debts for his heirs to deal with.'

'And what became of the cook?' I had asked.

'Oh! she went back to France, I suppose. To my astonishment she seemed determined to stay on here—absolutely frenzied about it. But I really couldn't face it, you know. The other servants didn't like her—she hardly spoke to them, and always insultingly, so they said—and then her cooking—not at all our style of thing—much too extravagant, and my husband wouldn't have stood it even if we could have afforded it. So I had to give her notice—which I tried to sugar with a bribe, but she treated me with contempt, and left without asking for a reference or anything.

'I suppose she had decided to retire. She probably couldn't bear the idea of a new situation after so many years in the same place, and she is sure to have saved a good sum out of her wages. I think she came from a little town in

Normandy, where she could live on a mere pittance. The French are wonderful managers, you know.'

Nevertheless Mrs Maxwell-Smith's brick-red face had grown perplexed and a note of apology had sounded in her voice. I remembered the grim, raw-boned figure of Elise Martineau, her smooth black hair and thin long mouth, and gathered that the business of dismissal must have been unpleasant, even alarming.

However, that was five years ago and nothing had been heard of her since. The dinner to-night certainly could not be suspected of French influence, and the log fires downstairs were amply protected by glass and wire screens from shedding their heat in the large draughty rooms.

The party were all so hearty and talkative that they provided their own radiation and even tried to draw me into their convivial circle. Somehow I could not thaw, physically or mentally. I knew that my hosts had only invited me from a desire to be kind to a middle-aged spinster, and that everyone who spoke to me was filled with a sense of conscious virtue. Besides, as the evening wore on I found myself thinking more and more of Uncle James and indentifying my sufferings with his.

How he would have hated the loud, meaningless laughter, the watery brussels sprouts at dinner, the fire screens and the open doors and windows. For ten minutes we stood in the stone-flagged hall while carol-singers were welcomed and refreshed and the north-east wind blew from the downs around our naked shoulders. No carol-singers would have dared to come to the house in Uncle James's day.

It almost brought tears to my eyes to think of him sitting by a little table near the fire, a detective story at his elbow while the silent Elise brought him course after course of exquisitely-cooked food. And then he had other things to drink besides whisky and port, I felt sure.

As early as was decent I rose to go, my thoughts concentrated on the hot-water bottle and tea-kettle waiting for me ten miles away. Twenty minutes later it became evident that my car would not start that night. With

apparent gratitude I resigned myself to the Maxwell-Smiths' hospitality.

'The awful thing is,' said my hostess cheerfully, 'that all the visitors' rooms are full, but if you don't mind putting up with the big attic for one night we'll do our best to make it habitable.'

I said I should love to sleep in the big attic, and after an endless-seeming interval she lighted me up the extra flight of stairs that separated this room from the rest of the house. In the guttering candlelight it certainly looked enormous—partly because it was so low and contained so little furniture. There was a wide iron bedstead at one end protected by a battered screen covered with picture-scrap and heavily varnished.

A small yellow washstand and dressing-table combined leant miserably against a wall—otherwise there was nothing to be seen but old tin trunks, a few moth-eaten rolls of felt, and, right in the far corner, a white marble bust on a brown marble pedestal. As far as I could see it represented a young man with drooping moustaches.

'I really must apologize for this awful room,' babbled my hostess. 'We have never used it once since Elise Martineau left. It used to be hers—we still call it the cook's room—but our cook thought it too lonely and refused to sleep in it. So we just keep lumber in it as a rule—such as Uncle James's bust over there.'

'So that is your Uncle James,' I said, taking my candle to examine the sculpture better. 'He looks rather sympathetic.'

'Oh! That was done a long time ago, I believe—soon after he first came here. He must have been about thirty-five, but no beauty even then. We didn't feel fond enough of him to keep him in the hall, so after Elise left we banished him to her room, and there he has stayed ever since.'

When my hostess had finally said good night I went to look at the marble bust once more. Uncle James had possessed a small, narrow head, delicate features, and a receding chin. His mouth was hidden by a long moustache,

and his back was already rounded. I imagined him fair, and that in later life he had worn gold-rimmed spectacles. I rather liked his presence in the cheerless room where the brownish paper was peeling off the walls, and the only signs of comfort were the red baize curtains in front of the dormer windows, and a sheepskin mat beside the bed. Otherwise the floorboards were bare and worn away in several places.

Once between the sheets I could think of nothing but my absent hot-water bottle. Never had I felt anything so icy touch my skin as those sheets, and I began to look forward to a night of sleepless misery. Moreover, the mattress was such a curious shape. It seemed to have sagged into a great hollow on one side about the level of my shoulders, and the spare pillows were unnaturally dented as well. The extra coldness of these hollows was especially odd—they almost felt like basins of water in the bed.

I tried to keep away from them, but was continually slipping down the slope into their frozen depths. As I grew sleepier this became a sort of nightmare. I seemed to be standing on the steep edge of a pond, and after a while my foot would slip and I would awake with a start on the brink of destruction. This must have happened four or five times and then I did not wake on the brink, and the black icy waters closed over my head. After the death agony I found myself again in bed, bathed in sweat, yet with a strange icy pressure on my face and shoulders.

For a while I lay quiet, not daring to explore this mystery; then I timidly put out my hand. It touched something hard, smooth and cold. Like marble, I murmured. An answering murmur came from the thing beside me, something very faint and sad. All at once I no longer felt afraid, but full of pity and curiosity. I ran my hands over the marble, for I was now sure of the material and recognized with the strangest, most melting emotion, the small, narrow head, delicate features and receding chin, then the bowed shoulders and then—nothing. I traced them lightly again and again, and when I knew them by heart lay in a trance of silent expectation.

After a great while the same melancholy murmur reached me, but this time I could distinguish a few words.

‘Elise, Elise—after all these years—so cold, so cold—but now . . .’

The sounds died away, and I was swept into oblivion until I awoke and saw the misshapen mattress in daylight. But all the time I was dressing I never looked towards the marble bust, and, of course, I said nothing of the matter to my hosts.

A week later a headline in the local paper caught my eye:

GRIM DISCOVERY IN FRENCH TOWN CURIOUS LINK WITH TERNCOTE

‘The sordid death of an elderly woman in the small Norman town of Bléfort was reported in the French papers yesterday. She was found alone in a garret among signs of extreme poverty, and had left a written message confessing to accelerating her end with poison taken on New Year’s Eve.

‘She had lived in complete seclusion since the day, five years ago, when she returned to her native town after half a lifetime spent as a cook in England. She possessed no living friends or relations, and had apparently exhausted her small savings.

‘Her name was Elise Martineau, and some Terncote readers will probably recognize the late Mr James Maxwell-Smith’s faithful retainer in the tragic figure of Bléfort.’

NORTON CAMP

WILLIAM CHARLTON

The news that the 19th Regiment was to be posted from Cavesmere to Norton was not well received.

'A bloody awful dump,' said Captain Smith, who was greatly enjoying the proximity of the physiotherapists at Cavesmere Orthopaedic Hospital.

'They say there's not a bloody pub for three miles,' said Private Debenham.

Fair comments. Norton Camp is a lonely establishment in the Ogleby Hills, and the nearest public house is indeed three miles away, at the depressing little village of Cold Norton. Moreover the history of the camp is not a lucky one.

In 1941, when German bombers held the North East of England at their mercy, Sir Richard Humby at the War Ministry conceived the plan of putting an aerodrome on top of the Ogleby Hills. This aerodrome would be equipped with fighters which, as soon as the Observer Corps reported bombers over the east coast, would rise and intercept them on their way to the great industrial concentrations at Lancaster, Duffield, Duddersley and so forth. It is possible that Sir Richard overestimated the vigilance of the Observer Corps, which in that region was largely recruited from hard-drinking retired cod-fishermen. It may be that the Observer Corps overestimated the efficiency of its equipment, which almost anything was capable of putting out of action. At different times communications had been severed by wind, rime, branches of trees, sheep, deer and grouse. Wherever the blame might lie, one winter night the heavy clouds which usually cover the north-eastern sky parted to reveal a large and unheralded bomber-force directly above the camp. The moonlight illuminated every detail of the runways and the hangars. There was no time to man the anti-aircraft guns. The singing in the vainly

blacked-out NAAFI was drowned in the first devastating explosion. In five minutes the camp was wiped out.

Sir Richard Humby gave orders for the craters in the runways to be filled in, and for the skeletons of the hangars to be reclad in corrugated iron, but there was no attempt to position any more fighters in the Ogley Hills. Instead Norton became one of the many dummy aerodromes which at that time were being sprinkled about to confuse the Germans and make them waste their bombs on useless targets. In this role too it was unsuccessful. For the rest of the war, apart from the odd unsolved murder case, the Ogley Hills were undisturbed.

After the war the farmers who had used the Ogley Hills for grazing their sheep hoped that the camp might revert to agriculture. But it is not the Government's way to give up readily what it has once got its hands on. The weed-grown runways and leaky hangars were transferred from the Air Force to the Army. The Army filled in some more craters, put up some new brick huts, turned the best runway into a parade ground, and used the place as a training ground for school cadet corps. Throughout the next few summers busloads of victims arrived at fortnightly intervals to be immolated on the altar of Mars. The wretched boys were marched about through the heather, fired blanks at one another, and inside the barbed wire of the camp itself received a memorable vaccination against concentration camp life.

It was natural that Norton Camp should be hated by the boys. But it was not long in acquiring a doubtful reputation among school authorities too. Perhaps the surrounding heather, in which dangerous equipment could easily get lost, made the area particularly hazardous for training purposes. More boys, at any rate, than could be wished were blown up by unexploded shells. And when a grandson of Sir Richard Humby lost a leg from a badly aimed mortar, though that is the sort of thing which can happen anywhere, visits from school cadet forces were discontinued, and it began to look as if Norton Camp might, after all, be restored to the sheep.

From this ignominy it was saved by a new development. First scruffy men appeared in small vans and started scrambling over the Ogley Hills with theodolites. There followed large official cars containing large American officials. Then the most easterly of the Ogley Hills was surrounded by a lofty fence, aggressively barbed and buzzing with electricity. Finally within the fence arose three gigantic contraptions of girders, which nodded gravely at one another, and two colossal white spheres, featureless and expressionless. The Ogley Hills had become a vital part of the Early Warning System.

The War Office made sure that Norton Camp had its share of this new glory. The Early Warning Installations were of the highest strategic importance, and the white spheres were crammed with secret apparatus. The strength of Norton Camp must be built up to prevent infiltration by spies and sabotage by the Irish Republican Army, which at that time was harassing Army camps a hundred and fifty miles away on the west coast.

This was the state of things when the 19th Regiment was posted to Norton. It arrived in September, and at first the autumn colours made the long lines of the Ogley Hills look almost tolerable. But soon rising mist and low cloud took to blotting out the colours, and morale was unsettled by an unfortunate accident. A member of the guard saw a furtive figure emerging from a disused ammunition store on the edge of the camp, and loosed off his rifle. The result was the death of a popular sergeant, who had been using the ammunition store as a rendezvous with a girl from the NAAFI.

Autumn is brief in the Ogley Hills. As the year darkened into November winter came down on the camp, muffling it for days on end in freezing fog. The buildings of the camp were only moderately well designed for these conditions. Each platoon was billeted in a brick-walled hut. The huts had stoves which, if they worked, could be raised in the earlier part of the evening to white heat, but which went out during the night to allow the temperature to fall to zero by morning. Similar stoves heated the Ablutions, but these

were kept burning all night by a body of men called the Frost Picket. Other buildings accessible to the men were the NAAFI, which was cheerful but shut early, and a Television Room, which was extremely cold and hard to find in the fog.

The stove in Private Debenham's barrack-room was particularly unsatisfactory since the pipe leading up to the roof was liable to collapse. Private Debenham, therefore, after a bottle or two of beer in the NAAFI, was accustomed to spend the evening in the Ablutions, where there was always a large circle gathered round the stove. At these sessions some people read *Reveille* or *The Weekend Mail* and others conversed, sometimes about women, but more often about the camp, its inhabitants, and the various facets of its disagreeableness.

A good deal of its history had become known in the Regiment and made, of course, gloomy matter for discussion.

'There's been a lot of people killed here.'

'How many was it in the raid? Was it five hundred?'

'More than that. Nearer a thousand, they say.'

'Where are they all buried?'

'They say half of them was never found. They'll be just buried in the craters.'

'Cor. They might be under here.'

'Ay, look out when you're in the bog, Derek, there'll be a skeleton hand come up the hole and pinch your arse.'

This witticism raised a general laugh. Derek Naseby, to whom it was addressed, was a very young, country-bred private, who had been in the Army only for a few months, and who was something of a butt. To cover his confusion he wanted to light a cigarette, but found his packet was empty. He asked one of the other privates to lend him one.

'I'm almost out myself. Can you slip over to the NAAFI?'

'I think it'll be shut by now.'

'Not if you look sharp.'

'Could you get me some too, Derek?' asked Private Debenham. 'Here's five bob.'

Private Naseby did not like the idea of leaving the warm Ablutions and groping his way through the fog to the NAAFI. That was partly why he said it would be shut. But he liked the idea of doing something to please Private Debenham, who was a masterful and influential figure. So off he went.

It was indeed a matter of groping. The fog was unusually thick, and though there was a moon it did hardly anything to relieve the blackness. There were paths through the camp, but they wound about and were rough with froze n mud, so the soldiers found them very poor guidance. Private Naseby blundered along, sometimes on a path and sometimes not, in what he took to be the general direction of the NAAFI. After a considerable time he decided it was the wrong direction and made a cast to his right. This brought him among a group of huts which he presumed belonged to 'C' Company—his own was 'A'. The conjecture was confirmed when he bumped into someone and was sworn at in an unfamiliar voice. At this rate he must have left the NAAFI on his left. He turned back and to the left, and sure enough there loomed up just in front of him a large building. But why had it no lights? Was it shut after all? No, he could hear loud voices and laughter inside, and there were lights, but the windows were covered by thick blinds. He had never known that before, and it made him approach the door rather warily. There were certainly a lot of people inside. They were singing, too, and singing very loud. Perhaps it was someone's birthday. If so, perhaps he had better not break in on it. He opened the door a few inches and peeped in.

There was certainly something abnormal going on. The room was badly lit and full of smoke, but he could see that it looked quite different from usual. A lot of completely strange people were there, not even wearing Army uniform, and having drinks served to them by a couple of girls he had never seen before.

'Well, what was it?' he was asked when he got back, badly rattled, to the Ablutions.

'I didn't stay to go in,' said Private Naseby.

'Why ever not?'

'The people didn't look proper. They wasn't wearing B.D. I thought it might be the I.R.A.'

From anyone else this would have been taken as a joke, but Private Naseby's simplicity was too well known for anyone to doubt him.

'Look here, you poor sod,' said Private Debenham kindly, 'the I.R.A. wouldn't have a bloody party in our NAAFI. You say they weren't wearing Army clothes. What *were* they wearing?'

'They was wearing all sorts of heavy coats and such, and some of them looked like RAF.'

'Looked like RAF !' Private Debenham began contemptuously, and suddenly stopped. There was a moment of silence round the Ablutions stove as the same thought flew from mind to mind. The stove seemed to lose a little of its heat. At last Private Field, who was the most facetious member of the group, began a far from facetious muttering.

'He's ing seen a ghost. He's seen the ing ghosts of all the ing ers that was bombed to ing Hell. He's seen !'

'Shut up, Jake,' said Private Debenham. 'Who knows what the poor bastard's seen? I say we ought to go and have a look.'

'*Who's* going to go and look?' came a deep voice from the other side of the circle. 'I'm ed if *I'm* going just because Derek here thinks he's seen a bloody airman.'

'It's full moon tonight,' said one of the camp historians. 'It was a night like this that they was hit. They were in the NAAFI in the fog, and suddenly the fog opened, and the sky was full of bombers. They'd never know what hit them.'

'The fog's opened now,' said Private Debenham, who had gone to the door.

They all looked in his direction and several (of whom Private Naseby was not one) went over to join him. The fog had entirely disappeared, and the camp, white with rime, was bathed in moonlight. The NAAFI was perfectly visible a couple of hundred yards away. As they watched, a

member of the guard passed the door on his round.

The story of this episode reached Private Naseby's Platoon Sergeant. Sergeant Strickland, as he was called, after some consideration put Private Naseby on a charge under the accommodating Section Forty of the Army Act. He was charged with conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline in that he on the night of Tuesday the 18th had seen a ghost in the NAAFI. The Sergeant did not want superstitious fears to get a hold on the men, and hoped by bringing this charge to turn the affair into a joke.

His idea was a good one, and after Private Naseby had been let off with a peppery rebuke by his Company Commander, the atmosphere was, for a time, lighter. The Christmas leave helped also. But as the winter dragged on through January and February, the bad luck again made itself felt. One man shot himself in the foot with a sten-gun. Another, evidently undeterred by the fate of Sergeant Murphy, scratched himself on a piece of corrugated iron in a disused bomb-depot and developed lock-jaw. Like every British soldier Corporal Fenwick had, of course, received a tetanus injection. it was unfortunate for him that a dishonest orderly had sold the serum and replaced it with distilled water.

It was noticed that unpleasant incidents were likeliest when the moon was full. Guard duty at such times was more than usually unpopular, and as the moon began to wax again at the end of February signs of low morale were disturbingly obtrusive. It may therefore have been more by wise management than by the luck of the draw that Private Debenham found himself on guard for the night of the full moon itself, since he was a robust exception. He liked, he said, to see where he was going when on guard, so as not to muck up his best boots. The events of the night, however, were to deprive the 19th Regiment of this valuable pocket of common sense.

The guard was divided into three parties, each of which had two two-hour turns of duty between six p.m. and six a.m. Private Debenham was put in the third party, and began his ten o'clock patrol of the camp by looking in at the

Ablutions. It was a bitter night. The Frost Picket in an excess of zeal had overstocked the boilers, with the result that there was no hot water available for washing but only steam, and the Ablutions were like a Turkish bath. In spite of this, there was a fair gathering round the white-hot stove, and Debenham passed a pleasant five minutes before the risk of being caught by a roving N.C.O. forced him out again into the cold.

He loitered past the door of his hut, but the chimney had fallen down again and the barrack-room was cheerless and empty. The neighbouring huts looked as if they were either deserted or settling down for the night. Fortunately for his boots, it was fairly light. There was no fog on the hilltop where the camp was situated, though fog could be seen filling the narrow, glacial valleys below, and the moon kept showing itself through high, light cloud.

The billets of the men lay at the end of the camp nearest to the guardhouse. Then came the regimental offices and stores, the NAAFI and other buildings with which the men were concerned. Beyond these was the Sergeants' Mess, beyond that the Officers' Mess, and that was the end of the functioning part of Norton Camp. All these buildings, however, occupied only one side of the camp enclosure. The other side contained the remains, rusty, crumbling or rotting as their materials dictated, of the old aerodrome. It was in this desolate region that lay the ammunition dumps in which NAAFI girls gave meetings to their friends, along with ruinous hangars, cracked platforms for anti-aircraft guns, and so forth.

The NAAFI was shut when Debenham passed it, and the Television Room as usual untenanted. A light burning in the Medical Centre showed that the General Duties man, a person of scholarly tastes, was keeping watch with Hermes Trismegistus. All was quiet in the Sergeants' Mess, and in the Officers' Mess those who were not driving sixty miles in search of physiotherapists had apparently retired to rest. In Norton Camp there was not much to keep you up. Debenham exchanged a word with Col. Brown's batman, out for a breath of air and then, having reached the end of

the inhabited part of the camp, turned to pick his way back through the derelict part.

At this time—getting on for eleven o'clock—the moon was riding clear of the clouds. Debenham could therefore see well enough to be pretty sure that there was a man moving along the side of a hangar. He withdrew into the doorway of a nearby ammunition store and considered what he should do.

The figure was most probably a soldier from the camp on his way to a NAAFI girl. If so, good manners would require Debenham to ignore him. But it was just possible that he actually was an unauthorized person. Although the I.R.A. had not as yet attacked any camp to the east of the Pennines, there was no good reason why it should not. And quite apart from the I.R.A., unauthorized people did come sniffing round the Early Warning Installations. Two or three were said to have been detained during the past year, though nobody of importance. In view of these possibilities Debenham decided he ought to find out who the man, who had now entered the hangar, was.

You might think that an easy task: surely he had simply to challenge the man with a crisp 'Who goes there?' But since the shooting of Sergeant Murphy the guard had been disarmed, and Debenham carried nothing more dangerous than a pick-handle. That being so, there were only two realistic courses open to him. One was to run at top speed to the guardhouse and get reinforcements. If he did this, the man would probably be gone when he got back. The other was to steal up to the entrance of the hangar and, if he did not recognize the man when he came out, hit him as hard as possible over the head with his pick-handle. It says something for Debenham's spirit that he chose the second course.

He gained the side of the hangar without much noise, and was hardly there before the man came out. But the entrance to the hangar was fifty feet wide, and the man emerged at the far side. There seemed to be no hope of reaching him before he realized he was being attacked. The man stopped outside the hangar, and Debenham had a

good view of him in the moonlight. Debenham was glad he had proceeded stealthily. The man was certainly not a soldier from the camp. He was wearing dark clothes, and his face was covered with a dark mask. In his arms was what looked like a heavy metal box.

What could it be? A transmitting set? He was squatting down with it now, making some adjustments to it. Debenham wished the moon would cloud over, so that he might have a better chance of rushing the man.

Instead the weather changed in a way that might be still more advantageous. The fog which Debenham had seen earlier in the valleys had rolled up the brow of the hill unnoticed, and now a fat streamer crept over the hangar, turning the moonlight to grey and dimming the outline of the man on the ground. Debenham prepared to close with him as the fog thickened. But as soon as the man noticed it he rose to his feet with the box and moved forward as if in the hope of getting ahead of it.

The hope would have been a slender one. The fog was pouring along the ground rapidly, and Debenham had to detach himself from the hangar and move fast to avoid losing the man altogether.

The man proceeded at a good pace despite some difficulty, as it seemed, with the box. He was crossing level ground which had once been a runway but which was now pretty well covered with moss and weeds. For that reason Debenham's boots did not make much noise. Nevertheless they made some, and he was relieved that the man paid no attention but continued to stride forward.

The line he was taking would bring him, Debenham reckoned, into the functioning part of the camp about at the Sergeants' Mess. If that happened, Debenham could shout and give the alarm. But surely the man would not be so foolish as to make for the inhabited side of the camp when it would be quite easy to elude pursuit and slip through the wire on the other side. Still, however, he held on in the same direction.

'We can't be far now from the Sergeants' Mess,' Debenham muttered to himself. 'It's not much more than

four hundred yards from the hangar. Unless we've changed direction, which I don't think we have. If only you could see something. Before this fog came up, the rest of the camp was in plain view. How thick it is. I nearly lost him. Better get closer. No, he'll see me, the fog's opening out again. What's that? I thought I saw a building.'

Debenham was about twenty feet behind the man, and the fog, though not exactly opening out, was of variable thickness. Now and then a short corridor appeared in it. It was down one of these corridors that he had caught sight of a building. But what building was it? Not, he thought, the Sergeants' Mess. Could it be one of the old, disused Admin. buildings of the aerodrome? But there weren't any this way, unless he'd lost his bearings completely.

The fog was swirling away on every side, and more and more of the camp was coming into view. But was it the camp? It was deserted, and looked as if it had been deserted for years. Everywhere it was the same, windows broken, doors hanging loose, roofs collapsing, and here and there great holes in the ground full of dead weeds. Nowhere a sign of life, except for the dark figure in front, who was now drawing away as Debenham, bewildered and unnerved, slowed to a halt.

'Stop!' called Debenham, before he knew what he was saying.

Instantly the man in front whirled round with a repressed exclamation.

'What are you doing here?' asked Debenham. He was so confused that the question came out at random.

The man uttered something he could not catch, deposited the box with a swift but careful movement, and started to approach Debenham in a manner he found menacing.

'Stand back!' Debenham grasped his pick-handle. 'What have you been doing here? Stand back, I tell you.'

The man was now about six feet away. He was dressed in black trousers and a black sweater, and wore a black beret without a badge. The mask covered the whole of his face, and the eye-holes were just two pits of shadow. His hands

were gloved, but there was something in his right hand which reflected the moonlight.

'Keep your distance,' said Debenham. 'Tell me what's happened here.'

'What has happened here?' repeated the man. His voice sounded puzzled, and although it was low and muffled by the mask, Debenham thought it had a foreign accent. 'Nothing has happened here. I could not sleep, so I came to see the old camp.'

'To see the camp, or to see the Installations?' Debenham jerked his pick-handle to the left, in the direction of the hilltop with the three skeletal monsters and the large spheres.

The man glanced quickly in the direction indicated and then back. His voice was now half angry, half suspicious. 'You are talking nonsense. There is nothing here except this dummy aerodrome, as you call it.'

Debenham in his turn looked to the left. The top of the hill was quite clear of fog. It was bare except for the rime, luminous in the moonlight.

Before he had recovered from this new shock, the other man had sprung at him. He was lunging up with a knife at Debenham's diaphragm. Debenham brought the pick-handle down and across, and knocked the knife aside, but not sufficiently. It laid open his left thigh.

He moved to the right, and as the man's rush took him past, managed to get in a heavy blow with the pick-handle on his head. The man staggered. Debenham could feel the blood streaming from his thigh, but as the man stood trying to recover himself he hit again with all his strength.

The man dropped, and Debenham's left leg now giving way, he fell on top of him. The body was unexpectedly hard and bony. It was like falling on a bundle of sticks. Debenham felt himself losing consciousness, but grasped at the man's throat, determined to hold on in case there was still some life in him. The movement carried away the mask, and Debenham was looking into two black holes, surrounded by white bone.

Debenham came to in the Medical Centre. It was only

midnight, so he could not have been unconscious for long. The Medical Officer being away in pursuit of physiotherapists, the Medical Corps Corporal and the General Duties man had applied a tourniquet and were waiting for a fifteen-hundredweight truck to take him to the not too distant village of Badby-le-Hole, where the civilian doctor had agreed to be available in case of emergency.

'You'll do,' said the Corporal.

'Can we give him a drink?' asked the G.D. man, who had already filled glasses of whisky for the Corporal and himself.

'Ay, it won't hurt him.'

'What happened?' asked Debenham. 'Where is he?'

'Where's who?'

'The man that attacked me.'

'Did anyone attack you?'

'How do you think I hurt my . . . ing leg?' asked Debenham, the whisky doing him good.

'You cut it on some broken glass you fell over in the fog. Sergeant Strickland found it underneath you.'

At that moment the fifteen-hundredweight arrived, and all attention was diverted to getting Debenham safely to Badby.

Before they went to sleep, the Corporal asked the G.D. man whether he thought Debenham had really been attacked.

'Sergeant Strickland heard him fall, and he didn't hear anything else.'

'Perhaps not,' said the G.D. man. 'But it's an odd thing he was found just under Strickland's window.'

'That's where you'd expect to trip over a broken bottle.'

'Still, there's a story about that place that Strickland doesn't like. The Sergeants' Mess, you know, goes back to the time when this was an aerodrome. Well, in the winter of '44-5, when the place was totally run down and abandoned, some sort of German agent came here with a radio-transmitter. They suppose it was to send a message out to sea, though he may have been using the camp as a base. Anyhow, he was found up here one morning with his head

stove in, and they say it was just under that window!

‘Who bashed him?’

‘That’s the sinister part. They never found out. There was no reason to suspect the chap who found him—he’d been dead a couple of days, and the man was a shepherd. No reason to suspect any of the locals. And you know what an unpopulous place this is.’

‘It’s a bloody creepy place, and all,’ said the Corporal. ‘I shouldn’t wonder if the ghosts got him.’

The G.D. man was settling his head into his Army pillow. His drowsy imagination formed a picture of a frightened German on a deserted enemy airfield turning to see advancing out of the fog a figure with a pick-handle. A ghost? ‘That,’ he murmured, ‘or the other way round, or something of the sort.’

As it happened, this was Norton Camp’s last bite at the 19th Regiment. Its unlucky history flowed on, but others were caught in its eddies. A few days later, Col. Brown received an urgent and unexpected movement-order. The news that the Regiment was to go and fight guerrillas in the leech-infested swamps of Malaysia was received with universal rejoicing.

THE PRESCRIPTION

MARJORIE BOWEN

John Cuming collected ghost stories; he always declared that this was the best that he knew, although it was partially secondhand and contained a mystery that had no reasonable solution, while most really good ghost stories allow of a plausible explanation, even if it is one as feeble as a dream, excusing all; or a hallucination or a crude deception. Cuming told the story rather well. The first part of it at least had come under his own observation and been carefully noted by him in the flat green book which he kept for the record of all curious cases of this sort. He was a shrewd and trained observer; he honestly restrained his love of drama from leading him into embellishing facts. Cuming told the story to us all on the most suitable occasion—Christmas Eve—and prefaced it with a little homily.

‘You all know the good old saw—“The more it changes the more it is the same thing”—and I should like you to notice that this extremely up-to-date ultramodern ghost story is really almost exactly the same as one that might have puzzled Babylonian or Assyrian sages. I can give you the first part of the tale in my own words, but the second part will have to be in the words of someone else. They were, however, most carefully and scrupulously taken down. As for the conclusion, I must leave you to draw that for yourselves—each according to your own mood, fancy, and temperament; it may be that you will all think of the same solution, it may be that you will each think of a different one, and it may be that everyone will be left wondering.’

Having thus enjoyed himself by whetting our curiosity, Cuming settled himself down comfortably in his deep armchair and unfolded his tale.

‘It was about five years ago. I don’t wish to be exact with

time, and of course I shall alter names—that's one of the first rules of the game, isn't it? Well, whenever it was, I was the guest of a—Mrs Janey we will call her—who was, to some extent, a friend of mine; an intelligent, lively, rather bustling sort of woman who had the knack of gathering interesting people about her. She had lately taken a new house in Buckinghamshire. It stood in the grounds of one of those large estates which are now so frequently being broken up. She was very pleased with the house, which was quite new and had only been finished a year, and seemed, according to her own rather excited imagination, in every way desirable. I don't want to emphasize anything about the house except that it was new and did stand on the verge, as it were, of this large old estate, which had belonged to one of those notable English families now extinct and completely forgotten. I am no antiquarian or connoisseur in architecture, and the rather blatant modernity of the house did not offend me. I was able to appreciate its comfort and to enjoy what Mrs Janey rather maddeningly called "the old-world gardens," which were really a section of the larger gardens of the vanished mansion which had once commanded this domain. Mrs Janey, I should tell you, knew nothing about the neighbourhood nor anyone who lived there, except that for the first it was very convenient for town, and for the second she believed that they were all "nice" people, not likely to bother one. I was slightly disappointed with the crowd she had gathered together at Christmas. They were all people whom either I knew too well or whom I didn't wish to know at all, and at first the party showed signs of being extremely flat. Mrs Janey seemed to perceive this too, and with rather nervous haste produced, on Christmas Eve, a trump card in the way of amusement—a professional medium, called Mrs Mahogany, because that could not possibly have been her name. Some of us "believed in," as the saying goes, mediums, and some didn't; but we were all willing to be diverted by the experiment. Mrs Janey continually lamented that a certain Dr Dilke would not be present. He was going to be one of the party, but had been detained in

town and would not reach Veſrall, which was the name of the house, until later, and the medium, it seemed, could not stay; for she, being a personage in great demand, must go on to a further engagement. I, of course, like everyone else possessed of an intelligent curiosity and a certain amount of leisure, had been to mediums before. I had been slightly impressed, slightly disgusted, and very much bewildered, and on the whole had decided to let the matter alone, considering that I really preferred the more direct and old-fashioned method of getting in touch with what we used to call "The Unseen." This sitting in the great new house seemed rather banal. I could understand in some haunted old manor that a clairvoyant, or a clairaudent, or a trance-medium might have found something interesting to say, but what was she going to get out of Mrs Janey's bright, brilliant, and comfortable dwelling?

'Mrs Mahogany was a nondescript sort of woman—neither young nor old, neither clever nor stupid, neither dark nor fair, placid, and not in the least self-conscious. After an extremely good luncheon (it was a gloomy, stormy afternoon) we all sat down in a circle in the cheerful drawing room; the curtains were pulled across the dreary prospect of grey sky and grey landscape, and we had merely the light of the fire. We sat quite close together in order to increase "the power," as Mrs Mahogany said, and the medium sat in the middle, with no special precautions against trickery; but we all knew that trickery would have been really impossible, and we were quite prepared to be tremendously impressed and startled if any manifestations took place. I think we all felt rather foolish, as we did not know each other very well, sitting round there, staring at this very ordinary, rather common, stout little woman, who kept nervously pulling a little tippet of grey wool over her shoulders, closing her eyes and muttering, while she twisted her fingers together. When we had sat silent for about ten minutes Mrs Janey announced in a rather raw whisper that the medium had gone into a trance. "Beautifully," she added. I thought that Mrs Mahogany did not look at all beautiful. Her communication began

with a lot of rambling talk which had no point at all, and a good deal of generalization under which I think we all became a little restive. There was too much of various spirits who had all sorts of ordinary names, just regular Toms, Dicks, and Harrys of the spirit world, floating round behind us, their arms full of flowers and their mouths of good will, all rather pointless. And though, occasionally, a Tom, a Dick, or a Harry was identified by some of us, it wasn't very convincing, and, what was worse, not very interesting. We got, however, our surprise and our shock, because Mrs Mahogany began suddenly to writhe into ugly contortions and called out in a loud voice, quite different from the one that she had hitherto used: "Murder!"

'This word gave us all a little thrill, and we leaned forward eagerly to hear what further she had to say. With every sign of distress and horror Mrs Mahogany began to speak:

' "He's murdered her. Oh, how dreadful. Look at him! Can't somebody stop him? It's so near here, too. He tried to save her. He was sorry, you know. Oh, how dreadful! Look at him—he's borne it as long as he can, and now he's murdered her! I see him mixing it in a glass. Oh, isn't it awful that no one could have saved her—and he was so terribly remorseful afterward. Oh, how dreadful! How horrible!"

'She ended in a whimpering of fright and horror, and Mrs Janey, who seemed an adept at this sort of thing, leaned forward and asked eagerly:

' "Can't you get the name—can't you find out who it is? Why do you get that here?"

' "I don't know," muttered the medium, "it's somewhere near here—a house, an old dark house, and there are curtains of mauve velvet—do you call it mauve? a kind of blue red—at the windows. There's a garden outside with a fishpond and you go through a low doorway and down stone steps.'

' "It isn't near here," said Mrs Janey decidedly, "all the houses are new.'

' "The house is near here," persisted the medium. "I am

walking through it now; I can see the room, I can see that poor, poor woman, and a glass of milk—”

“I wish you’d get the name,” insisted Mrs Janey, and she cast a look, as I thought not without suspicion, round the circle. “You can’t be getting this from my house, you know, Mrs Mahogany,” she added decidedly, “it must be given out by someone here—something they’ve read or seen, you know,” she said, to reassure us that our characters were not in dispute.

‘But the medium replied drowsily, “No, it’s somewhere near here. I see a light dress covered with small roses. If he could have got help he would have gone for it, but there was no one; so all his remorse was useless’

‘No further urging would induce the medium to say more; soon afterward she came out of the trance, and all of us, I think, felt that she had made rather a stupid blunder by introducing this vague piece of melodrama, and if it was, as we suspected, a cheap attempt to give a ghostly and mysterious atmosphere to Christmas Eve, it was a failure.

‘When Mrs Mahogany, blinking round her, said brightly, “Well, here I am again! I wonder if I said anything that interested you?” we all replied rather coldly, “Of course it has been most interesting, but there hasn’t been anything definite.” And I think that even Mrs Janey felt that the sitting had been rather a disappointment, and she suggested that if the weather was really too horrible to venture out of doors we should sit round the fire and tell old-fashioned ghost stories. “The kind,” she said brightly, “that are about bones and chairs and shrouds: I really think that is the most thrilling kind after all.” Then, with some embarrassment, and when Mrs Mahogany had left the room, she suggested that not one of us should say anything about what the medium had said in her trance.

‘“It really was rather absurd,” said our hostess, “and it would make me look a little foolish if it got about; you know some people think these mediums are absolute fakes, and anyhow, the whole thing, I am afraid, was quite stupid. She must have got her contacts mixed. There is no old house about here and never has been since the original

Verrall was pulled down, and that's a good fifty years ago, I believe, from what the estate agent told me; and as for a murder, I never heard the shadow of any such story."

'We all agreed not to mention what the medium had said, and did this with the more heartiness as we were, not any one of us, impressed. The feeling was rather that Mrs Mahogany had been obliged to say something and had said that

'Well,' said Cuming comfortably, 'that is the first part of my story, and I dare say you'll think it's dull enough. Now we come to the second part.

'Latish that evening Dr Dilke arrived. He was not in any way a remarkable man, just an ordinary successful physician, and I refuse to say that he was suffering from overwork or nervous strain; you know that is so often put into this kind of story as a sort of excuse for what happens afterward. On the contrary, Dr Dilke seemed to be in the most robust of health and the most cheerful frame of mind, and quite prepared to make the most of his brief holiday. The car that fetched him from the station was taking Mrs Mahogany away, and the doctor and the medium met for just a moment in the hall. Mrs Janey did not trouble to introduce them, but without waiting for this Mrs Mahogany turned to the doctor, and looking at him fixedly, said, "You're very psychic, aren't you?" And upon that Mrs Janey was forced to say hastily: "This is Mrs Mahogany, Dr Dilke, the famous medium."

'The physician was indifferently impressed. "I really don't know," he answered, smiling, "I have never gone in for that sort of thing. I shouldn't think I am what you call 'psychic' really; I have had a hard, scientific training, and that rather knocks the bottom out of fantasies."

"Well, you are, you know," said Mrs Mahogany; "I felt it at once; I shouldn't be at all surprised if you had some strange experience one of these days."

'Mrs Mahogany left the house and was duly driven away to the station. I want to make the point very clear that she and Dr Dilke did not meet again and that they held no communication except those few words in the hall spoken

in the presence of Mrs Janey. Of course Dr Dilke got twitted a good deal about what the medium had said; it made quite a topic of conversation during dinner and after dinner, and we all had queer little ghost stories or incidents of what we considered "psychic" experiences to trot out and discuss. Dr Dilke remained civil, amused, but entirely unconvinced. He had what he called a material, or physical, or medical explanation for almost everything that we said, and, apart from all these explanations he added, with some justice, that human credulity was such that there was always someone who would accept and embellish anything, however wild, unlikely, or grotesque it was.

"I should rather like to hear what you would say if such an experience happened to you," Mrs Janey challenged him; 'whether you use the ancient terms of 'ghost,' 'witches,' 'black magic,' and so on, or whether you speak in modern terms like 'medium', 'clairvoyance,' 'psychic contacts,' and all the rest of it; well, it seems one is in a bit of a tangle anyhow, and if any queer thing ever happens to you—"

Dr Dilke broke in pleasantly: "Well, if it ever does I will let you all know about it, and I dare say I shall have an explanation to add at the end of the tale."

When we all met again the next morning we rather hoped that Dr Dilke *would* have something to tell us—some odd experience that might have befallen him in the night, new as the house was, and banal as was his bedroom. He told us, of course, that he had passed a perfectly good night.

We most of us went to the morning service in the small church that had once been the chapel belonging to the demolished mansion, and which had some rather curious monuments inside and in the churchyard. As I went in I noticed a mortuary chapel with niches for the coffins to be stood upright, now whitewashed and used as a sacristy. The monuments and mural tablets were mostly to the memory of members of the family of Verrall—the Verralls of Verrall Hall, who appeared to have been people of little interest or distinction. Dr Dilke sat beside me, and I, having nothing better to do through the more familiar and

monotonous portions of the service, found myself idly looking at the mural tablet beyond him. This was a large slab of black marble deeply cut with a very worn Latin inscription which I found, unconsciously, I was spelling out. The stone, it seemed, commemorated a woman who had been, of course, the possessor of all the virtues; her name was Philadelphia Carwithen, and I rather pleasantly sampled the flavour of that ancient name—Philadelphia. Then I noticed a smaller inscription at the bottom of the slab, which indicated that the lady's husband also rested in the vault; he had died suddenly about six months after her—of grief at her loss, I thought, scenting out a pretty romance.

'As we walked home across the frost-bitten fields and icy lanes Dr Dilke, who walked beside me, as he had sat beside me in church, began to complain of cold; he said he believed that he had caught a chill. I was rather amused to hear this old-womanish expression on the lips of so distinguished a physician, and I told him that I had been taught in my more enlightened days that there was no such thing as "catching a chill." To my surprise he did not laugh at this, but said:

' "Oh, yes, there is, and I believe I've got it—I keep on shivering: I think it was that slab of black stone I was sitting next. It was as cold as ice, for I touched it, and it seemed to me exuding moisture—some of that old stone does, you know; it's always, as it were, sweating; and I felt exactly as if I were sitting next a slab of ice from which a cold wind was blowing; it was really as if it penetrated my flesh."

'He looked pale, and I thought how disagreeable it would be for us all, and particularly for Mrs Janey, if the good man was to be taken ill in the midst of her already not-too-successful Christmas party. Dr Dilke seemed, too, in that ill-humour which so often presages an illness; he was quite peevish about the church and the service, and the fact that he had been asked to go there.

' "These places are nothing but charnel houses, after all," he said fretfully; "one sits there among all those rotting bones, with that damp marble at one's side"

“It is supposed to give you ‘atmosphere,’ ” I said. “The atmosphere of an old-fashioned Christmas . . . Did you notice who your black stone was erected ‘to the memory of?’ ” I asked, and the doctor replied that he had not.

“It was to a young woman—a young woman, I took it, and her husband: ‘Philadelphia Carwithen,’ I noticed that, and of course there was a long eulogy of her virtues, and then underneath it just said that he had died a few months afterward. As far as I could see it was the only example of that name in the church—all the rest were Verralls. I suppose they were strangers here.”

“What was the date?” asked the doctor, and I replied that really I had not been able to make it out, for where the Roman figures came the stone had been very worn.

The day ambled along somehow, with games, diversions, and plenty of good food and drink, and toward the evening we began to feel a little more satisfied with each other and our hostess. Only Dr Dilke remained a little peevish and apart, and this was remarkable in one who was obviously of a robust temperament and an even temper. He still continued to talk of a “chill,” and I did notice that he shuddered once or twice, and continually sat near the large fire which Mrs Janey had rather laboriously arranged in imitation of what she would call “the good old times.”

That evening, the evening of Christmas Day, there was no talk whatever of ghosts or psychic matters; our discussions were entirely topical and of mundane matters, in which Dr Dilke, who seemed to have recovered his spirits, took his part with ability and agreeableness. When it was time to break up I asked him, half in jest, about his mysterious chill, and he looked at me with some surprise and appeared to have forgotten that he had ever said he had got such a thing; the impression, whatever it was, which he had received in the church, had evidently been effaced from his mind. I wish to make that quite clear.

The next morning Dr Dilke appeared very late at the breakfast table, and when he did so his looks were a matter for hints and comment; he was pale, distracted, troubled, untidy in his dress, absent in his manner, and I, at least,

instantly recalled what he had said yesterday, and feared he was sickening for some illness.

‘On Mrs Janey putting to him some direct question as to his looks and manner, so strange and so troubled, he replied rather sharply, “Well, I don’t know what you can expect from a fellow who’s been up all night. I thought I came down here for a rest.”

‘We all looked at him as he dropped into his place and began to drink his coffee with eager gusto; I noticed that he continually shivered. There was something about this astounding statement and his curious appearance which held us all discreetly silent. We waited for further developments before committing ourselves; even Mrs Janey, whom I had never thought of as tactful, contrived to say casually:

‘ “Up all night, doctor. Couldn’t you sleep, then? I’m so sorry if your bed wasn’t comfortable.”

‘ “The bed was all right,” he answered, “that made me the more sorry to leave it. Haven’t you got a local doctor who can take the local cases?” he added.

‘ “Why, of course we have; there’s Dr Armstrong and Dr Fraser—I made sure about that before I came here.”

‘ “Well, then,” demanded Dr Dilke angrily, “why on earth couldn’t one of them have gone last night?”

‘Mrs Janey looked at me helplessly, and I, obeying her glance, took up the matter.

‘ “What do you mean, doctor? Do you mean that you were called out of your bed last night to attend a case?” I asked deliberately.

‘ “Of course I was—I only got back with the dawn.”

‘Here Mrs Janey could not forbear breaking in.

‘ “But whoever could it have been? I know nobody about here yet, at least, only one or two people by name, and they would not be aware that you were here. And how did you get out of the house? It’s locked every night.”

‘Then the doctor gave his story in rather, I must confess, a confused fashion, and yet with an earnest conviction that he was speaking the simple truth. It was broken up a good deal by ejaculations and comments from the rest of us, but I

give it you here shorn of all that and exactly as I put it down in my notebook afterward.

' "I was awakened by a tap at the door. I was instantly wide-awake and I said, 'Come in.' I thought immediately that probably someone in the house was ill—a doctor, you know, is always ready for these emergencies. The door opened at once, and a man entered holding a small ordinary storm-lantern. I noticed nothing peculiar about the man. He had a dark greatcoat on, and appeared extremely anxious. 'I am sorry to disturb you,' he said at once, 'but there is a young woman dangerously ill. I want you to come and see her.' I, somehow, did not think of arguing or of suggesting that there were other medical men in the neighbourhood, or of asking how it was he knew of my presence at Verrall. I dressed myself quickly and accompanied him out of the house. He opened the front door without any trouble, and it did not occur to me to ask him how it was he had obtained either admission or egress. There was a small carriage outside the door, such a one as you may still see in isolated country places, but such a one as I was certainly surprised to see here. I could not very well make out either the horse or the driver, for, though the moon was high in the heavens, it was frequently obscured by clouds. I got into the carriage and noticed, as I have often noticed before in these ancient vehicles, a most repulsive smell of decay and damp. My companion got in beside me. He did not speak a word during the whole of the journey, which was, I have the impression, extremely long. I had also the sense that he was in the greatest trouble, anguish, and almost despair; I do not know why I did not question him. I should tell you that he had drawn down the blinds of the carriage and we travelled in darkness, yet I was perfectly aware of his presence and seemed to see him in his heavy dark greatcoat turned up round the chin, his black hair low on his forehead, and his anxious, furtive dark eyes. I think I may have gone to sleep in the carriage, I was tired and cold. I was aware, however, when it stopped, and of my companion opening the door and helping me out. We went through a garden, down some steps and past

a fishpond; I could see by the moonlight the silver and gold shapes of fishes slipping in and out of the black water. We entered the house by a side door—I remember that very distinctly—and went up what seemed to be some secret or seldom-used stairs, and into a bedroom. I was, by now, quite alert, as one is when one gets into the presence of the patient, and said to myself, 'What a fool I've been, I've brought nothing with me,' and I tried to remember, but could not quite do so, whether or not I had brought anything with me—my cases and so on—to Verrall. The room was very badly lighted, but a certain illumination—I could not say whether it came from any artificial light within the room or merely from the moonlight through the open window, draped with mauve velvet curtains—fell on the bed, and there I saw my patient. She was a young woman, who, I surmised, would have been, when in health, of considerable though coarse charm. She was now in great suffering, twisted and contorted with agony, and in her struggles of anguish had pulled and torn the bedclothes into a heap. I noticed that she wore a dress of some light material spotted with small roses, and it occurred to me at once that she had been taken ill during the daytime and must have lain thus in great pain for many hours, and I turned with some reproach to the man who had fetched me and demanded why help had not been sought sooner. For answer he wrung his hands—a gesture that I do not remember having noticed in any human being before; one hears a great deal of hands being wrung, but one does not so often see it. This man, I remember distinctly, wrung his hands, and muttered, 'Do what you can for her—do what you can!' I feared that this would be very little. I endeavoured to make an examination of the patient, but owing to her half-delirious struggles this was very difficult; she was, however, I thought, likely to die, and of what malady I could not determine. There was a table near by on which lay some papers—one I took to be a will—and a glass in which there had been milk. I do not remember seeing anything else in the room—the light was so bad. I endeavoured to question the man, whom I took to be the

husband, but without any success. He merely repeated his monotonous appeal for me to save her. Then I was aware of a sound outside the room—of a woman laughing, perpetually and shrilly laughing. ‘Pray stop that,’ I cried to the man; ‘who have you got in the house—a lunatic?’ But he took no notice of my appeal, merely repeating his own hushed lamentations. The sick woman appeared to hear that demoniacal laughter outside, and raising herself on elbow said, ‘You have destroyed me and you may well laugh.’

“I sat down at the table on which were the papers and the glass half full of milk, and wrote a prescription on a sheet torn out of my notebook. The man snatched it eagerly. ‘I don’t know when and where you can get that made up,’ I said, ‘but it’s the only hope.’ At this he seemed wishful for me to depart, as wishful as he had been for me to come. ‘That’s all I want,’ he said. He took me by the arm and led me out of the house by the same back stairs. As I descended I still heard those two dreadful sounds—the thin laughter of the woman I had not seen, and the groans, becoming every moment fainter, of the young woman whom I had seen. The carriage was waiting for me, and I was driven back by the same way I had come. When I reached the house and my room I saw the dawn just breaking. I rested till I heard the breakfast gong. I suppose some time had gone by since I returned to the house, but I wasn’t quite aware of it; all through the night I had rather lost the sense of time.”

‘When Dr Dilke had finished his narrative, which I give here badly—but, I hope, to the point—we all glanced at each other rather uncomfortably, for who was to tell a man like Dr Dilke that he had been suffering from severe hallucination? It was, of course, quite impossible that he could have left the house and gone through the peculiar scenes he had described, and it seemed extraordinary that he could for a moment have believed that he had done so. What was even more remarkable was that so many points of his story agreed with what the medium, Mrs Mahogany, had said in her trance. We recognized the frock with the

roses, the mauve velvet curtains, the glass of milk, the man who had fetched Dr Dilke sounded like the murderer, and the unfortunate woman writhing on the bed sounded like the victim; but how had the doctor got hold of these particulars? We all knew that he had not spoken to Mrs Mahogany, and each suspected the other of having told him what the medium had said, and that his having wrought on his mind he had the dream, vision, or hallucination he had just described to us. I must add that this was found afterward to be wholly false; we were all reliable people and there was not a shadow of doubt we had all kept our counsel about Mrs Mahogany. In fact, none of us had been alone with Dr Dilke the previous day for more than a moment or so save myself, who had walked with him from the church, when we had certainly spoken of nothing except the black stone in the church and the chill which he had said emanated from it . . . Well, to put the matter as briefly as possible, and to leave out a great deal of amazement and wonder, explanation, and so on, we will come to the point when Dr Dilke was finally persuaded that he had not left Verrall all the night. When his story was taken to pieces and put before him, as it were, in the raw, he himself recognized many absurdities: How could the man have come straight to his bedroom? How could he have left the house?—the doors were locked every night, there was no doubt about that. Where did the carriage come from and where was the house to which he had been taken? And who could possibly have known of his presence in the neighbourhood? Had not, too, the scene in the house to which he was taken all the resemblance of a nightmare? Who was it laughing in the other room? What was the mysterious illness that was destroying the young woman? Who was the black-browed man who had fetched him? And, in these days of telephone and motorcars, people didn't go out in the old-fashioned one-horse carriages to fetch doctors from miles away in the case of dangerous illness.

Dr Dilke was finally silenced, uneasy, but not convinced. I could see that he disliked intensely the idea

that he had been the victim of a hallucination and that he equally intensely regretted the impulse which had made him relate his extraordinary adventure of the night. I could only conclude that he must have done so while still, to an extent, under the influence of his delusion, which had been so strong that never for a moment had he questioned the reality of it. Though he was forced at last to allow us to put the whole thing down as a most remarkable dream, I could see that he did not intend to let the matter rest there, and later in the day (out of good manners we had eventually ceased discussing the story) he asked me if I would accompany him on some investigation in the neighbourhood.

‘“I think I should know the house,” he said, “even though I saw it in the dark. I was impressed by the fishpond and the low doorway through which I had to stoop in order to pass without knocking my head.”’

‘I did not tell him that Mrs Mahogany had also mentioned a fishpond and a low door.

‘We made the excuse of some old brasses we wished to discover in a near-by church to take my car and go out that afternoon on an investigation of the neighborhood in the hope of discovering Dr Dilke’s dream house.

‘We covered a good deal of distance and spent a good deal of time without any success at all, and the short day was already darkening when we came upon a row of almshouses in which, for no reason at all that I could discern, Dr Dilke showed an interest and insisted on stopping before them. He pointed out an inscription cut in the centre gable, which said that these had been built by a certain Richard Carwithen in memory of Philadelphia, his wife.

‘“The people whose tablet you sat next in the church,” I remarked.

‘“Yes,” murmured Dr Dilke, “when I felt the chill,” and he added, “when I *first* felt the chill. You see, the date is 1830. that would be about right.”’

‘We stopped in the little village, which was a good many miles from Verrall, and after some tedious delays because

everything was shut up for the holiday, we did discover an old man who was willing to tell us something about the almshouses, though there was nothing much to be said about them. They had been founded by a certain Mr Richard Carwithen with his wife's fortune. He had been a poor man, a kind of adventurer, our informant thought, who had married a wealthy woman; they had not been at all happy. There had been quarrels and disputes, and a separation (at least, so the gossip went, as his father had told it to him); finally, the Carwithens had taken a house here in this village of Sunford—a large house it was and it still stood. The Carwithens weren't buried in this village though, but at Verrall; she had been a Verrall by birth—perhaps that's why they came to this neighbourhood—it was the name of a great family in those days, you know There was another woman in the old story, as it went, and she got hold of Mr Carwithen and was for making him put his wife aside; and so, perhaps, he would have done, but the poor lady died suddenly, and there was some talk about it, having the other woman in the house at the time, and it being so convenient for both of them But he didn't marry the other woman, because he died six months after his wife By his will he left all his wife's money to found these almshouses.

'Dr Dilke asked if he could see the house where the Carwithens had lived.

"It belongs to a London gentleman," the old man said, "who never comes here. It's going to be pulled down and the land sold in building lots; why, it's been locked up these ten years or more. I don't suppose it's been inhabited since—no, not for a hundred years."

"Well, I'm looking for a house round about here. I don't mind spending a little money on repairs if that house is in the market."

The old man didn't know whether it was in the market or not, but kept repeating that the property was to be sold and broken up for building lots.

'I won't bother you with all our delays and arguments, but merely tell you that we did finally discover the

lodgekeeper of the estate, who gave us the key. It was not such a very large estate, nothing to be compared to Verrall, but had been, in its time, of some pretension. Builders' boards had already been raised along the high road frontage. There were some fine old trees, black and bare, in a little park. As we turned in through the rusty gates and motored toward the house it was nearly dark, but we had our electric torches and the powerful head lamps of the car. Dr Dilke made no comment on what we had found, but he reconstructed the story of the Carwithens whose names were on that black stone in Verrall church.

'“They were quarrelling over money, he was trying to get her to sign a will in his favour; she had some little sickness perhaps—brought on probably by rage—he had got the other woman in the house, remember; I expect he was no good. There was some sort of poison about—perhaps for a face wash, perhaps as a drug. He put it in the milk and gave it to her.”

'Here I interrupted: 'How do you know it was in the milk?'

'The doctor did not reply to this. I had now swung the car round to the front of the ancient mansion—a poor, pretentious place, sinister in the half-darkness.

'“And then, when he had done it,” continued Dr Dilke, mounting the steps of the house, “he repented most horribly; he wanted to fly for a doctor to get some antidote for the poison with the idea in his head that if he could have got help he could have saved her himself. The other woman kept on laughing. He couldn't forgive her that—that she could laugh at a moment like that; he couldn't get help! He couldn't find a doctor. His wife died. No one suspected foul play—they seldom did in those days as long as the people were respectable; you must remember the state in which medical knowledge was in 1830. He couldn't marry the other woman, and he couldn't touch the money; he left it all to found the almshouses; then he died himself, six months afterward, leaving instructions that his name should be added to that black stone. I dare say he died by his own hand. Probably he loved her through it all, you know—it

was only the money, that cursed money, a fortune just within his grasp, but which he couldn't take."

"A pretty romance," I suggested, as we entered the house; "I am sure there is a three-volume novel in it of what Mrs Janey would call 'the good old-fashioned' sort."

To this Dr Dilke answered: "Suppose the miserable man can't rest? Supposing he is still searching for a doctor?"

'We passed from one room to another of the dismal, dusty, dismantled house. Dr Dilke opened a damaged shutter which concealed one of the windows at the back, and pointed out in the waning light a decayed garden with stone steps and a fishpond; and a low gateway to pass through which a man of his height would have had to stoop. We could just discern this in the twilight. He made no comment. We went upstairs.'

Here Cuming paused dramatically to give us the full flavour of the final part of his story. He reminded us, rather unnecessarily, for somehow he had convinced us that this was all perfectly true.

'I am not romancing; I won't answer for what Dr Dilke said or did, or his adventure of the night before, or the story of the Carwithens as he constructed it, but *this* is actually what happened . . . We went upstairs by the wide main stairs. Dr Dilke searched about for and found a door which opened on to the back stairs, and then said: "This must be the room." It was entirely devoid of any furniture, and stained with damp, the walls stripped of panelling and cheaply covered with decayed paper, peeling, and in parts fallen.

"What's this?" said Dr Dilke.

He picked up a scrap of paper that showed vivid on the dusty floor and handed it to me. It was a prescription. He took out his notebook and showed me the page where this fitted in.

"This page I tore out last night when I wrote the prescription in this room. The bed was just there, and there was the table on which were the papers and the glass of milk."

‘ “But you couldn’t have been here last night,” I protested feebly, ‘the locked doors—the whole thing! . . .”

‘Dr Dilke said nothing. After a while neither did I. “Let’s get out of this place,” I said. Then another thought struck me. “What is your prescription?” I asked.

‘He said: “A very uncommon kind of prescription, a very desperate sort of prescription, one that I’ve never written before, nor I hope shall again—an antidote for severe arsenical poisoning.”

‘I leave you,’ smiled Cuming, ‘to your various attitudes of incredulity or explanation.’

THE ROCK GARDEN

HEATHER VINEHAM

Melanie was pleased she had inherited Briar Cottage, but there was still that element of fear. Fear of what? She could never be sure. On her visits as a child it had been there, a vague unease, a whispered sadness, an unspoken threat that lurked in its dark corners.

'Why it's a lovely cottage,' her mother had said, 'and it's going to be yours one day, because you're the last of the Carstairs.'

'It's shadowy,' was all Melanie could think of to say.

Well, it was hers now, and she intended to let some light into its dark corners.

She lifted the last garment from her case and flung it on the bed. The journey had been tiring. Max had been right about her not travelling down till she had fully recovered from the severe heart attack that had kept her in a nursing home for some weeks. She should have taken his advice. But her London flat had become almost as restricting as a sick bed, and she had decided to come to Briar Cottage within a week of her discharge.

As usual, she had brought too many clothes, with their accompanying 'baubles, bangles and beads'—a tendency she had yielded to on many previous holidays—and they had all added to the weight of her case.

The low-ceilinged room had become stifling. She opened the small latticed window, and a breath of country air heavy with the scent of wallflowers greeted her pleasantly. But next moment a frown crossed her face. Sarah was crossing the lawn with a sack of rubbish for the bonfire. Aunt Phyllis's will had stipulated that the old servant should remain at the cottage 'for the remainder of her days', which was only fair, of course. But Sarah seemed to have dominated Aunt Phyllis completely. Melanie knew that she had objected to her having a rock garden.

What impertinence!

Melanie glanced at the far end of the garden, where an untidy tangle of foilage spread haphazardly over a patch of stony ground. That was where the rock garden should have been.

'I wonder why she doesn't want that patch cleared,' Melanie thought, and decided to broach the subject when she came down to tea.

'It's a superstition,' was all Aunt Phyllis could tell her. 'Those herbs are supposed to give protection.'

Against what? But her aunt, whose attitude to most things had always been 'laissez faire' had been hazy on that point.

'Bramble, bracken, ivy, rue,

Never shall the dead pass through,'

Sarah had intoned when Melanie, as a child, had asked her why Aunt Phyllis couldn't have some pretty flowers there.

'Is it a cemetery then?' Melanie had asked. She hadn't seen any angels or crosses.

'In a manner of speaking, yes,' was Sarah's reply, 'but not such a one as we'd care to be buried in!'

And with that Melanie had to be content. Sarah had always given her the creeps.

Well, she was a big girl now—twenty-nine to be exact, and Sarah wasn't going to frighten her any more. She intended to make her views clear about that rock garden for a start.

She sat down at the dressing-table and started to comb her hair into shape after the journey. She was reasonably pleased with what she saw in the mirror. Despite the aftermath of illness that showed in the paleness of her cheeks and dark-rimmed eyes, the face that looked back at her was a very attractive one—oval shaped, small featured, and framed by thick copper-brown hair, a heritage from the Newcombe branch of her ancestors, cut in a becoming shoulder-length style.

She knew what her friends were saying: 'What's the matter with the girl—burying herself in the country and engaged to a man old enough to be her father, when she

could have had anybody—'

But Melanie didn't want anybody. She wanted somebody she could never quite visualize—a dream figure, of course, and she was marrying Max because she knew he loved her dearly, and at twenty-nine she felt she should be leading a more settled life. After one or two rather disastrous affairs, she had no illusions about her feelings for Max. He was a 'father figure', a symbol of peace and protection, and she meant to make him as happy as she could. But it was no whirlwind romance.

A voice from the doorway made her jump.

'Your tea's ready, Miss.'

Sarah stood looking into the room, wiping gnarled hands on a not too-clean apron.

'I hope she washes them before she serves it,' thought Melanie, but she only smiled politely.

'Thank you, Sarah, I'll come right down.'

Why did the old woman have to steal about so quietly? Did she have to wear her grey-streaked hair strained back so severely into a bun, and to have such a malevolent expression in her sharp brown eyes? Melanie supposed it was just her natural disposition to appear like a messenger of doom, and it had always been the same. Probably quite a harmless old thing really, but there was something witchlike about her.

A few moments later, settled at the table in the old-fashioned living-room, Melanie decided to take the plunge. 'It's now or never,' she thought. 'Begin as you intend to continue!'

When Sarah appeared with the tea tray, she remarked as casually as she could:

'I'll want you to help me get those weeds cleared at the bottom of the garden, Sarah. They really are unsightly, and I'm looking forward to making a rock garden there!'

She was prepared for some opposition, but not for the extent of the old woman's reaction. Her beady eyes held a look of terror.

'Oh for pity's sake, Miss,' she almost shouted, and Melanie fancied she had turned a shade paler. 'Don't you

be meddling there now. If he was to walk again, I'd never sleep quiet in my bed—'

Melanie looked at her in astonishment.

'He? What on earth are you talking about?

Sarah seemed unsure how to respond. She set the tray down on the table, and Melanie noticed that her hands were not too steady, but she was evidently trying to keep her emotions in check, and she answered in a quieter tone.

'It's things that happened long ago, you see,' she tried to explain. 'Your aunt didn't understand, but she was wise enough to let things be—'

She broke off, and Melanie decided a sympathetic approach was needed.

'Do tell me what this is all about,' she began as gently as she could. 'After all, I am the owner of this place now, so I have a right to know.'

Sarah glanced at the bookshelf behind her.

'You'll find it there,' she said. 'I don't care to speak of it, but it's true you have a right to know. A big green book *History of Hallerton*. But don't go tampering with them herbs, or this house won't be a safe place for Christian souls!'

And with that, she retreated hurriedly to the kitchen.

Melanie soon found the book, a heavy volume with a faded green cover, and brought it back to the table.

Her tea was left to get cold while she turned the yellowed pages, till she came to a chapter heading that made her pause: 'Of the Plague in Little Hallerton.'

She glanced through the account. Not a very savoury story!

' a pit dug on wasteland behind the Briars for the victims of that act of wanton vanity that brought the Black Death to Little Hallerton.'

In a roll of cloth! She had heard something of the kind. But for a wedding dress! No wonder they blamed foolish Alice Newcombe for that irresponsible act. Couldn't she have been content to buy her material from the market town nearby? Evidently not; it had to be from the smart London establishment where the fashionable ladies

purchased theirs. Even with the plague spreading in the city, as everyone knew!

The seamstress had been the first victim, and others soon followed, among them Alice's husband-to-be, a young man named Michael Renshawe. Alice herself never succumbed. Though grief-stricken at the time, she lived on, later marrying Melanie's ancestor, James Carstairs, a man many years older than herself. The cottage had been part of her dowry.

When Sarah came to clear away the tea things, Melanie closed the book and allowed herself a wan smile.

'Well it's a sad story,' she said, 'but I don't see what those weeds—herbs—have to do with it.'

'Don't you, Miss,' Sarah retorted. 'Well there's more to it, you see, that the book doesn't tell. They didn't get no Christian burial, them as was laid there. It was just wasteland then, before the garden was enlarged. But it was what happened to Alice Newcombe, when she was trying on her bridal gown—not the same one, of course, but the one she planned to wear to marry Mr Carstairs. *He* came for her—him she was meant to wed. She seen him standing behind her as she sat at her mirror—in his shroud, with the plague marks upon him. He stretched out his hand to take her, but she ran screaming from the room—'

Sarah paused, exhausted by her own eloquence.

'What a horrible story, Sarah, but surely you don't believe that part of it, do you?'

Sarah's lips tightened.

'I believe them whose word I trust,' she replied. 'Them herbs was planted by one they called Wise Betsy—and I'm of her stock,' she added proudly. 'She was down by that pit till sundown, chantin' and plantin', then she comes back and says: "I've sent him back and the guardian herbs is atop of him. And there he'll stay for eternity, unless someone's foolish enough to go tampering, and then I can't help no more!" And we all know what she meant by that—'

She paused dramatically.

'Ever since then, Wise Betsy's kith and kin has cared for those herbs, and seen they're kept growin' strong, and we

know why. Take away the blest protectors, and the dead will walk again. The Black Death will be back in Little Hallerton!’

‘Really, Sarah,’ Melanie rejoined, controlling her temper with an effort, ‘how can you believe such superstitious nonsense? You’ll just have to see for yourself that there’s not a grain of truth in that old legend. I’m going to start on those weeds tomorrow. It’ll be a big job, and I’ll want you to help me.’

Sarah’s lip curled in a moment of triumph.

‘It’s my day off tomorrow,’ she reminded her employer. ‘I’m off to visit my sister.’

‘Of course,’ Melanie recollected. ‘Then we’ll make it the day after.’

‘Make it when you like,’ retorted Sarah icily, ‘but don’t expect no help from me; and I’m warning you, you’re acting very foolish!’

And with that she picked up the tray and walked majestically to the kitchen.

Melanie was determined not to pander to the old woman’s fancies as she climbed the winding stair to her bedroom later that evening.

The room was like the rest of the cottage, small windowed, with irregular black beams spanning the ceiling and an uneven feel about the floor as though part of it had sunk lower than the rest. The slightly musty odour of old timber seemed to emanate from its walls.

Something of the fear that haunted her childhood returned in spite of herself. Suppose there was some truth in the legend? Why had she always felt that pall of depression—menace even—when she had visited the place before?

She glanced towards the bed, and for a moment it seemed that an old-fashioned four-poster enclosed in curtains stood half-concealed in the corner of the room. But of course, there was only Aunt Phyllis’s nice modern divan with its flowered coverlet standing in its usual place. The shadows must be playing tricks with her nerves. But she quickly switched on the bedside lamp with its

comforting rosy shade.

She was glad to slip between the cool sheets a few minutes later. The country air had made her tired. Then she remembered. She hadn't had time to look through the glossy magazine she'd brought from London. She had always been a little too clothes-conscious, and she firmly intended to try and control this weakness. But there was plenty of time to concentrate on more serious things, with Max's influence to help her. A few glamorous fashion plates might be just the thing to drive out the oppressive atmosphere that was threatening to overwhelm her.

She took the journal from the bedside table and tried to concentrate on the blandly smiling models in their figure-hugging ensembles. But the tragic story in that book hovered constantly in her mind. She felt an overwhelming pity for Alice. What had she been like, Melanie wondered; that poor, silly girl of long ago. Rather like herself, she suspected. After all, she was a distant ancestress. And Michael—

Now her eyelids were closing, and for a moment a face flashed before her eyes—a face framed by dark curls worn in Cavalier style, and dominated by a pair of brown eyes that seemed to be smiling.

The impression was so clear that she was brought back to consciousness with a start. She felt her heart thumping disturbingly, and remembered that she was still supposed to be convalescent.

Back to the glossy pages; there was safety there. But the formula did not work. Once again she felt the heaviness in her lids, and now the sexy trousersuits and evening gowns were dissolving into tatters of rotting cloth, the fixed smiles writhed into skull grins; and she was looking down into an open grave and sobbing uncontrollably. How could she have foreseen that this would happen? She had only wanted to be beautiful for Michael. Yet even as she told herself this, she knew it was only half true. Had she not always wanted finery, a ribbon for her hair, the daintiest shoes with silver buckles, like the fine ladies she saw alighting from their carriages?

Melanie woke with a start. Sweat was pouring from her forehead, and her heart was thumping more fiercely than ever. She lay still for a moment, trying to calm herself. But something of the nightmare image still clung. Something, someone, had stepped out of that dream and was urging her to perform an impossible task. She knew that at all costs those herbs must be removed from the accursed patch, though the thought of it sent chills of foreboding through her.

'There he'll stay for all eternity,' was what Wise Betsy had said, 'unless someone's foolish enough to go tampering—'

Well, she must go tampering, and Melanie knew that she must do it alone.

With a shaking hand, she switched off the lamp, and lay staring into the darkness, finally drifting into an uneasy sleep.

Sarah had already left on her day's excursion when Melanie came down to find her breakfast ready laid. The cottage seemed less menacing with the morning light, and her heartbeat was back to normal. Better not overdo things, she told herself, then remembered that this was exactly what she intended to do. Thank goodness she had the day to herself. Now she could get the job done without protestations. It would probably be dark before Sarah returned, and tomorrow would be time enough to prepare for fireworks.

She put on Sarah's overall and a pair of gardening gloves from the kitchen drawer, and armed with a spade and fork, made her way to the tangled patch of greenery. A coldness seemed to envelop her as she approached it, and she had to fight back a return of the childish terror she had known in past years. There was something queer about those herbs, particularly the one that looked like a blackberry bush. That was what they called 'bramble', she felt sure. Checking up on Sarah's cryptic little verse, she had learned that it was used to prevent the dead from rising as ghosts. Was she mad to be tearing at its roots as she was doing now? What if Sarah had been right after all? But that dream—

there was a command in that dream which she dared not disobey.

The bramble seemed to shudder as she raked out the first of its obstinate roots. She half expected to hear it shriek like the legendary mandrake as it was wrenched from the soil. At last the dreadful tangle of branches fell away, and the rest of the herbs offered little resistance. Like an army bereft of its leader, they seemed to give up the struggle without protest.

Melanie straightened her back and paused for breath. Dusk was already falling and the air seemed chillier than ever as she stepped back to survey the carnage. The sombre plants lay sprawled about her feet in serpentine disorder. She found herself looking uneasily for some twitching or slithering tendrils, but all remained still. They seemed to be already withering.

She made her way a little unsteadily towards the house. She had been mad to undertake such a monstrous task. Her breath came painfully as she dragged herself up the stairs, reflecting that tomorrow would be time enough to sweep away the untidy heap of weeds she had left. She just wanted to sit down and regain her breath. The dressing-table chair was conveniently near, and she sank down on it with a sigh of relief. Brush, comb and hand-mirror were swept aside and a bottle of face cream overturned as she leant forward in exhaustion, resting her head on her arms.

Suddenly her whole system was jerked into alertness by an awareness that something had moved close behind her. She raised her head, catching a glimpse of her face, pale and strained in the mirror—and behind it, something else. She started to tremble violently. A tall form was reflected, swathed mummy-like in a greyish cloth. She swung round, her exhaustion forgotten, panic escape her only thought—

She looked into a face, half familiar, yet horribly, incredibly different; blackened as though polluted blood flowed beneath the skin, and blotched with hideous livid sores. It was holding out a hand towards her—a pitiful skeleton claw to which some mouldering skin still clung. The putrid odour of corruption filled her nostrils. Yet she

knew she must not scream. This had happened before. He had come to her wretched, uncomprehending, wandering in a strange dimension, desperately afraid of losing her forever. And she had fled from him. It must not be so again. She knew with a strange certainty that salvation lay only one way. She must take the terrible hand in hers.

Shuddering, she stretched out her hand, and felt it enveloped in a frozen mist. Then her heart seemed to burst in a crescendo of pain, and she was falling into darkness.

But the hand still held hers, and now it was no longer like frozen mist, but warm, firm and steady, and she was looking into a handsome, smiling face—the face of her dream that had suddenly turned into a nightmare. But this was no nightmare. She saw dark curls falling over a white lace collar—the swirl of a scarlet cloak over a leather jerkin, the pommel of a sword.

Someone, something, lay face downwards at her feet—copper brown curls so like her own flung untidily over what looked to her like a gardener's smock. The form was vaguely familiar, yet somehow unimportant.

Then through the open door of the room, she saw another figure mounting the stairs—an elderly woman with a look of fury on her face that changed suddenly to one of horrified concern as she stared at the recumbent figure on the floor.

Memories stirred faintly in the girl's mind.

'This is the old dame that was afraid to see you, my love,' she said to the man at her side. 'Her fear was groundless, it seems. She does not even see us now!'

It was true. As though she sensed some other presence, the old woman had raised her eyes from the figure in the smock, and was staring curiously, but unseeingly, through them.

They laughed merrily, and the girl lifted a corner of her bronze damask skirt to tread daintily over the still figure on the floor.

Her elegant silver-buckled shoes made no sound as the young couple passed together out of the door and down the shadowed stair.

BRICKETT BOTTOM

AMYAS NORTHCOTE

The Reverend Arthur Maydew was the hard-working incumbent of a large parish in one of our manufacturing towns. He was also a student and a man of no strong physique, so that when an opportunity was presented to him to take an annual holiday by exchanging parsonages with an elderly clergyman, Mr Roberts, the Squarson of the Parish of Overbury, and an acquaintance of his own, he was glad to avail himself of it.

Overbury is a small and very remote village in one of our most lovely and rural counties, and Mr Roberts had long held the living of it.

Without further delay we can transport Mr Maydew and his family, which consisted only of two daughters, to their temporary home. The two young ladies, Alice and Maggie, the heroines of this narrative, were at that time aged twenty-six and twenty-four years respectively. Both of them were attractive girls, fond of such society as they could find in their own parish and, the former especially, always pleased to extend the circle of their acquaintance. Although the elder in years, Alice in many ways yielded place to her sister, who was the more energetic and practical and upon whose shoulders the bulk of the family cares and responsibilities rested. Alice was inclined to be absent-minded and emotional and to devote more of her thoughts and time to speculations of an abstract nature than her sister.

Both of the girls, however, rejoiced at the prospect of a period of quiet and rest in a pleasant country neighbourhood, and both were gratified at knowing that their father would find in Mr Roberts' library much that would entertain his mind, and in Mr Roberts' garden an opportunity to indulge freely in his favourite game of croquet. They would have, no doubt, preferred some

cheerful neighbours, but Mr Roberts was positive in his assurances that there was no one in the neighbourhood whose acquaintance would be of interest to them.

The first few weeks of their new life passed pleasantly for the Maydew family. Mr Maydew quickly gained renewed vigour in his quiet and congenial surroundings, and in the delightful air, while his daughters spent much of their time in long walks about the country and in exploring its beauties.

One evening late in August the two girls were returning from a long walk along one of their favourite paths, which led along the side of the Downs. On their right, as they walked, the ground fell away sharply to a narrow glen, named Brickett Bottom, about three-quarters of a mile in length, along the bottom of which ran a little-used country road leading to a farm, known as Blaise's Farm, and then onward and upward to lose itself as a sheep track on the higher Downs. On their side of the slope some scattered trees and bushes grew, but beyond the lane and running up over the farther slope of the glen was a thick wood, which extended away to Carew Court, the seat of a neighbouring magnate, Lord Carew. On their left the open Down rose above them and beyond its crest lay Overbury.

The girls were walking hastily, as they were later than they had intended to be and were anxious to reach home. At a certain point at which they had now arrived the path forked, the right hand branch leading down into Brickett Bottom and the left hand turning up over the Down to Overbury.

Just as they were about to turn into the left hand path Alice suddenly stopped and pointing downwards exclaimed:

'How very curious, Maggie! Look, there is a house down there in the Bottom, which we have, or at least I have, never noticed before, often as we have walked up the Bottom.'

Maggie followed with her eyes her sister's pointing finger.

'I don't see any house,' she said.

'Why, Maggie,' said her sister, 'can't you see it! A quaint-looking, old-fashioned red brick house, there just where the road bends to the right. It seems to be standing in a nice, well-kept garden too.'

Maggie looked again, but the light was beginning to fade in the glen and she was short-sighted to boot.

'I certainly don't see anything,' she said, 'but then I am so blind and the light is getting bad; yes, perhaps I do see a house,' she added, straining her eyes.

'Well, it is there,' replied her sister, 'and to-morrow we will come and explore it.'

Maggie agreed readily enough, and the sisters went home, still speculating on how they had happened not to notice the house before and resolving firmly on an expedition thither the next day. However, the expedition did not come off as planned, for that evening Maggie slipped on the stairs and fell, spraining her ankle in such a fashion as to preclude walking for some time.

Notwithstanding the accident to her sister, Alice remained possessed by the idea of making further investigations into the house she had looked down upon from the hill the evening before; and the next day, having seen Maggie carefully settled for the afternoon, she started off for Brickett Bottom. She returned in triumph and much intrigued over her discoveries, which she eagerly narrated to her sister.

Yes. There was a nice, old-fashioned red brick house, not very large and set in a charming, old-world garden in the Bottom. It stood on a tongue of land jutting out from the woods, just at the point where the lane, after a fairly straight course from its junction with the main road half a mile away, turned sharply to the right in the direction of Blaise's Farm. More than that, Alice had seen the people of the house, whom she described as an old gentleman and a lady, presumably his wife. She had not clearly made out the gentleman, who was sitting in the porch, but the old lady, who had been in the garden busy with her flowers, had looked up and smiled pleasantly at her as she passed. She was sure, she said, that they were nice people and that it

would be pleasant to make their acquaintance.

Maggie was not quite satisfied with Alice's story. She was of a more prudent and retiring nature than her sister; she had an uneasy feeling that, if the old couple had been desirable or attractive neighbours, Mr Roberts would have mentioned them, and knowing Alice's nature she said what she could to discourage her vague idea of endeavouring to make acquaintance with the owners of the red brick house.

On the following morning, when Alice came to her sister's room to inquire how she did, Maggie noticed that she looked pale and rather absent-minded, and, after a few commonplace remarks had passed, she asked:

'What is the matter, Alice? You don't look yourself this morning.'

Her sister gave a slightly embarrassed laugh.

'Oh, I am all right,' she replied, 'only I did not sleep very well. I kept on dreaming about the house. It was such an odd dream too: the house seemed to be home, and yet to be different.'

'What, that house in Brickett Bottom?' said Maggie. 'Why, what is the matter with you, you seem to be quite crazy about the place?'

'Well, it is curious, isn't it, Maggie, that we should have only just discovered it, and that it looks to be lived in by nice people? I wish we could get to know them.'

Maggie did not care to resume the argument of the night before and the subject dropped, nor did Alice again refer to the house or its inhabitants for some little time. In fact, for some days the weather was wet and Alice was forced to abandon her walks, but when the weather once more became fine she resumed them, and Maggie suspected that Brickett Bottom formed one of her sister's favourite expeditions. Maggie became anxious over her sister, who seemed to grow daily more absent-minded and silent, but she refused to be drawn into any confidential talk, and Maggie was nonplussed.

One day, however, Alice returned from her afternoon walk in an unusually excited state of mind, of which Maggie sought an explanation. It came with a rush. Alice said that,

that afternoon, as she approached the house in Brickett Bottom, the old lady, who as usual was busy in her garden, had walked down to the gate as she passed and had wished her good day.

Alice had replied and, pausing, a short conversation had followed. Alice could not remember the exact tenor of it, but, after she had paid a compliment to the old lady's flowers, the latter had rather diffidently asked her to enter the garden for a closer view. Alice had hesitated, and the old lady had said: 'Don't be afraid of me, my dear, I like to see young ladies about me and my husband finds their society quite necessary to him.' After a pause she went on: 'Of course nobody has told you about us. My husband is Colonel Paxton, late of the Indian Army, and we have been here for many, many years. It's rather lonely, for so few people ever see us. Do come in and meet the Colonel.'

'I hope you didn't go in,' said Maggie rather sharply.

'Why not?' replied Alice.

'Well, I don't like Mrs Paxton asking you in that way,' answered Maggie.

'I don't see what harm there was in the invitation,' said Alice. 'I didn't go in because it was getting late and I was anxious to get home; but——'

'But what?' asked Maggie.

Alice shrugged her shoulders.

'Well,' she said, 'I have accepted Mrs Paxton's invitation to pay her a little visit to-morrow.' And she gazed defiantly at Maggie.

Maggie became distinctly uneasy on hearing of this resolution. She did not like the idea of her impulsive sister visiting people on such slight acquaintance, especially as they had never heard them mentioned before. She endeavoured by all means, short of appealing to Mr Maydew, to dissuade her sister from going, at any rate until there had been time to make some inquiries as to the Paxtons. Alice, however, was obdurate.

What harm could happen to her? she asked. Mrs Paxton was a charming old lady. She was going early in the afternoon for a short visit. She would be back for tea and

croquet with her father and, anyway, now that Maggie was laid up, long solitary walks were unendurable and she was not going to let slip the chance of following up what promised to be a pleasant acquaintance.

Maggie could do nothing more. Her ankle was better and she was able to get down the garden and sit in a long chair near her father, but walking was still quite out of the question, and it was with some misgivings that on the following day she watched Alice depart gaily for her visit, promising to be back by half-past four at the very latest.

The afternoon passed quietly till nearly five, when Mr Maydew, looking up from his book, noticed Maggie's uneasy expression and asked:

'Where is Alice?'

'Out for a walk,' replied Maggie; and then after a short pause she went on: 'And she has also gone to pay a call on some neighbours whom she has recently discovered.'

'Neighbours,' ejaculated Mr Maydew, 'what neighbours? Mr Roberts never spoke of any neighbours to me.'

'Well, I don't know much about them,' answered Maggie. 'Only Alice and I were out walking the day of my accident and saw or at least she saw, for I am so blind I could not quite make it out, a house in Brickett Bottom. The next day she went to look at it closer, and yesterday she told me that she had made the acquaintance of the people living in it. She says that they are a retired Indian officer and his wife, a Colonel and Mrs Paxton, and Alice describes Mrs Paxton as a charming old lady, who pressed her to come and see them. So she has gone this afternoon, but she promised me she would be back long before this.'

Mr Maydew was silent for a moment and then said:

'I am not well pleased about this. Alice should not be so impulsive and scrape acquaintance with absolutely unknown people. Had there been nice neighbours in Brickett Bottom, I am certain Mr Roberts would have told us.'

The conversation dropped; but both father and daughter were disturbed and uneasy and, tea having been finished

and the clock striking half-past five, Mr Maydew asked Maggie:

‘When did you say Alice would be back?’

‘Before half-past four at the latest, father.’

‘Well, what can she be doing? What can have delayed her? You say you did not see the house,’ he went on.

‘No,’ said Maggie, ‘I cannot say I did. It was getting dark and you know how short-sighted I am.’

‘But surely you must have seen it at some other time,’ said her father.

‘That is the strangest part of the whole affair,’ answered Maggie. ‘We have often walked up the Bottom, but I never noticed the house, nor had Alice till that evening. I wonder,’ she went on after a short pause, ‘if it would not be well to ask Smith to harness the pony and drive over to bring her back. I am not happy about her—I am afraid——’

‘Afraid of what?’ said her father in the irritated voice of a man who is growing frightened. ‘What can have gone wrong in this quiet place? Still, I’ll send Smith over for her.’

So saying he rose from his chair and sought out Smith, the rather dull-witted gardener-groom attached to Mr Roberts’ service.

‘Smith,’ he said, ‘I want you to harness the pony at once and go over to Colonel Paxton’s in Brickett Bottom and bring Miss Maydew home.’

The man stared at him.

‘Go where, sir?’ he said.

Mr Maydew repeated the order and the man, still staring stupidly, answered:

‘I never heard of Colonel Paxton, sir. I don’t know what house you mean.’

Mr Maydew was now growing really anxious.

‘Well, harness the pony at once,’ he said; and going back to Maggie he told her of what he called Smith’s stupidity, and asked her if she felt that her ankle would be strong enough to permit her to go with him and Smith to the Bottom to point out the house.

Maggie agreed readily and in a few minutes the party started off. Brickett Bottom, although not more than

three-quarters of a mile away over the Downs, was at least three miles by road; and as it was nearly six o'clock before Mr Maydew left the Vicarage, and the pony was old and slow, it was getting late before the entrance to Brickett Bottom was reached. Turning into the lane the cart proceeded slowly up the Bottom, Mr Maydew and Maggie looking anxiously from side to side, whilst Smith drove stolidly on looking neither to the right nor left.

'Where is the house?' said Mr Maydew presently.

'At the bend of the road,' answered Maggie, her heart sickening as she looked out through the failing light to see the trees stretching their ranks in unbroken formation along it. The cart reached the bend. 'It should be here,' whispered Maggie.

They pulled up. Just in front of them the road bent to the right round a tongue of land, which, unlike the rest of the right hand side of the road, was free from trees and was covered only by rough grass and stray bushes. A closer inspection disclosed evident signs of terraces having once been formed on it, but of a house there was no trace.

'Is this the place?' said Mr Maydew in a low voice.

Maggie nodded.

'But there is no house here,' said her father. 'What does it all mean? Are you sure of yourself, Maggie? Where is Alice?'

Before Maggie could answer a voice was heard calling 'Father! Maggie!' The sound of the voice was thin and high and, paradoxically, it sounded both very near and yet as if it came from some infinite distance. The cry was thrice repeated and then silence fell. Mr Maydew and Maggie stared at each other.

'That was Alice's voice,' said Mr Maydew huskily, 'she is near and in trouble, and is calling us. Which way did you think it came from, Smith?' he added, turning to the gardener.

'I didn't hear anybody calling,' said the man.

'Nonsense!' answered Mr Maydew.

And then he and Maggie both began to call 'Alice. Alice. Where are you?' There was no reply and Mr Maydew

sprang from the cart, at the same time bidding Smith to hand the reins to Maggie and come and search for the missing girl. Smith obeyed him and both men, scrambling up the turfy bit of ground, began to search and call through the neighbouring wood. They heard and saw nothing, however, and after an agonized search Mr Maydew ran down to the cart and begged Maggie to drive to Blaise's Farm for help leaving himself and Smith to continue the search. Maggie followed her father's instructions and was fortunate enough to find Mr Rumbold, the farmer, his two sons and a couple of labourers just returning from the harvest field. She explained what had happened, and the farmer and his men promptly volunteered to form a search party, though Maggie, in spite of her anxiety, noticed a queer expression on Mr Rumbold's face as she told him her tale.

The party, provided with lanterns, now went down the Bottom, joined Mr Maydew and Smith and made an exhaustive but absolutely fruitless search of the woods near the bend of the road. No trace of the missing girl was to be found, and after a long and anxious time the search was abandoned, one of the young Rumbolds volunteering to ride into the nearest town and notify the police.

Maggie, though with little hope in her own heart, endeavoured to cheer her father on their homeward way with the idea that Alice might have returned to Overbury over the Downs whilst they were going by road to the Bottom, and that she had seen them and called to them in jest when they were opposite the tongue of land.

However, when they reached home there was no Alice and, though the next day the search was resumed and full inquiries were instituted by the police, all was to no purpose. No trace of Alice was ever found, the last human being that saw her having been an old woman, who had met her going down the path into the Bottom on the afternoon of her disappearance, and who described her as smiling but looking 'queerlike.'

This is the end of the story, but the following may throw some light upon it.

The history of Alice's mysterious disappearance became widely known through the medium of the Press and Mr Roberts, distressed beyond measure at what had taken place, returned in all haste to Overbury to offer what comfort and help he could give to his afflicted friend and tenant. He called upon the Maydews and, having heard their tale, sat for a short time in silence. Then he said:

'Have you ever heard any local gossip concerning this Colonel and Mrs Paxton?'

'No,' replied Mr Maydew, 'I never heard their names until the day of my poor daughter's fatal visit.'

'Well,' said Mr Roberts, 'I will tell you all I can about them, which is not very much, I fear.' He paused and then went on: 'I am now nearly seventy-five years old, and for nearly seventy years no house has stood in Brickett Bottom. But when I was a child about five there was an old-fashioned, red brick house standing in a garden at the bend of the road, such as you have described. It was owned and lived in by a retired Indian soldier and his wife, a Colonel and Mrs Paxton. At the time I speak of, certain events having taken place at the house and the old couple having died, it was sold by their heirs to Lord Carew, who shortly after pulled it down on the ground that it interfered with his shooting. Colonel and Mrs Paxton were well known to my father, who was the clergyman here before me, and to the neighbourhood in general. They lived quietly and were not unpopular, but the Colonel was supposed to possess a violent and vindictive temper. Their family consisted only of themselves, their daughter and a couple of servants, the Colonel's old Army servant and his Eurasian wife. Well, I cannot tell you details of what happened, I was only a child; my father never liked gossip and in later years, when he talked to me on the subject, he always avoided any appearance of exaggeration or sensationalism. However, it is known that Miss Paxton fell in love with and became engaged to a young man to whom her parents took a strong dislike. They used every possible means to break off the match, and many rumours were set on foot as to their conduct—undue influence, even cruelty

were charged against them. I do not know the truth, all I can say is that Miss Paxton died and a very bitter feeling against her parents sprang up. My father, however, continued to call, but was rarely admitted. In fact, he never saw Colonel Paxton after his daughter's death and only saw Mrs Paxton once or twice. He described her as an utterly broken woman, and was not surprised at her following her daughter to the grave in about three months' time. Colonel Paxton became, if possible, more of a recluse than ever after his wife's death and himself died not more than a month after her under circumstances which pointed to suicide. Again a crop of rumours sprang up, but there was no one in particular to take action, the doctor certified Death from Natural Causes, and Colonel Paxton, like his wife and daughter, was buried in this churchyard. The property passed to a distant relative, who came down to it for one night shortly afterwards; he never came again, having apparently conceived a violent dislike to the place, but arranged to pension off the servants and then sold the house to Lord Carew, who was glad to purchase this little island in the middle of his property. He pulled it down soon after he had bought it, and the garden was left to relapse into a wilderness.'

Mr Roberts paused.

'Those are all the facts,' he added.

'But there is something more,' said Maggie.

Mr Roberts hesitated for a while.

'You have a right to know all,' he said almost to himself; then louder he continued: 'What I am now going to tell you is really rumour, vague and uncertain; I cannot fathom its truth or its meaning. About five years after the house had been pulled down a young maidservant at Carew Court was out walking one afternoon. She was a stranger to the village and a new-comer to the Court. On returning home to tea she told her fellow-servants that as she walked down Brickett Bottom, which place she described clearly, she passed a red brick house at the bend of the road and that a kind-faced old lady had asked her to step in for a while. She did not go in, not because she had any suspicions of there

being anything uncanny, but simply because she feared to be late for tea.

‘I do not think she ever visited the Bottom again and she had no other similar experience, so far as I am aware.

‘Two or three years later, shortly after my father’s death, a travelling tinker with his wife and daughter camped for the night at the foot of the Bottom. The girl strolled away up the glen to gather blackberries and was never seen or heard of again. She was searched for in vain—of course, one does not know the truth—and she may have run away voluntarily from her parents, although there was no known cause for her doing so.

‘That,’ concluded Mr Roberts, ‘is all I can tell you of either facts or rumours; all that I can do is to pray for you and for her.’

THE SWAN

PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON

The moment I saw the child, bony as she was, standing in the round window with her hands about the neck of the white china swan, I knew she would grow up to be beautiful. She had not heard me come into the room, so I stood very quietly in the doorway and had a good look at her. She was, I suppose, between eleven and twelve, more like Gladys than Tom so far as I could judge from the photograph of Tom hanging over the fireplace in the kitchen. Her legs and arms were growing at a great rate, her eyes were too large for her face. She wore one of those old-fashioned pinafores, white, tucked and ruffled, with lace-edged epaulettes. The pinafore was clean, but the brown frock beneath it looked old and grubby. So like Gladys, I thought, always one for show. Powder over a dirty face. The child was moving her fingers so lovingly over the china breast, the moulded comma of wing, that she seemed to be admiring the glaze like an expert. Her hair was scraped back from her little, bulging forehead into a hard white bow, the ends of which had obviously been freaked and pinked not an hour ago.

I suppose I must have made some small noise, have touched against something with my hands perhaps, for the child looked up and at once peace left her. Pushing the swan away behind a curtain, she wiped her hands up and down her stomach, leaving faint, grimy marks on the snow of the pinafore. Her teeth came out over her lip. Her eyes darkened perceptibly and she backed as if she would disappear like Alice through the glass.

Still I could not speak before the promise of such beauty. More like Gladys than Tom, Gladys when first I knew her, not Gladys in later years. The child did not take her eyes from my face, but fumbled stealthily behind her for the wall. She began to move along it, her back stiffened against the green and maroon roses.

'Here,' I said, 'don't go.'

She gave a short, noisy gasp of fright. I stepped forward and caught her wrists, at the same time squatting down so that her face was on a level with mine. 'Don't run away. I'm your Uncle Phil.'

Taught manners, I suppose, by Gladys, she tried to smile; but long after the smile had faded, a muscle twitched like a dimple at the side of her mouth.

'Why are you scared of me?' I asked, more easily now. 'I knew your mother long before you did. I haven't seen her for twenty-nine years. Isn't that a long time? She told me to go and look at you,' I added, to make her feel happy, 'to see what a fine big girl she had.'

The child nodded mutely towards the swan.

'It's lovely,' I said. 'Do you like it?'

She smiled.

'What's your name?'

No answer.

'You're Essie,' I said.

At once she shook her head, furiously, with obvious fright.

I wondered what Gladys had been doing, to make the child so nervous of strangers. Siddle was a small village, certainly, but visitors often stayed there to be near the bays. I saw Gladys through the window. She was standing at the door of the baker's, hurriedly buying cakes for tea. My visit had been a surprise one, and she had had nothing in the house. She had said, 'Can you amuse yourself for ten minutes, Phil? I've got to get in supper for Tom, too. If Essie should come in before me, just tell her who you are.'

'When did you get in?' I said. 'Your mother told me you were down in the cove.'

She smiled, as if pleased to have arrived home unexpectedly. With a sudden movement she grasped the swan and thrust it into my hands. She said, 'Pretty!'

I agreed that it was indeed pretty. I remembered seeing the thing all those twenty-nine years ago in the house of Gladys' mother, up on top of the cliff. It was a beautiful piece of pottery, and very old.

The child put her hands on my shoulder. I knelt, and she

sat down on one knee, smiling right up into my face as if confidence were truly established. I told her how like her mother she was, and what a pretty girl her mother had been. 'You know,' I said, 'your mother and I used to walk out together when we were young. We used to go down to Brandy Cove, take our tea with us and spend the whole day there. I could swim right round the point, you know, where those three rocks stick up in a row, and sometimes I'd pretend to her that one day I'd swim right away and never come back. I'd hide in the cave, you see, the small one right under the cliff, and she'd call for me like' I searched for a pleasing word. 'Like a seagull.'

The child clapped her hands, then clasped them tightly together as if she had just remembered an injunction never to unlock her fingers.

'Then I'd swim back, and she'd scold me and we'd laugh' She waited for me to go on. 'That was a long time ago,' I said.

'Where have you been?' she asked me, gingerly lifting a finger to touch the top of my head.

I supposed she meant 'All this while,' so I answered, 'Abroad.'

She did not seem to understand. I had set the swan down upon the floor beside us. Almost angrily she slid from my knee, picked it up and hid it from view again behind the curtains. Then she came back to sit with me, listening as if she knew I had not told her the half of it.

'I haven't met your daddy yet,' I said, 'though I've seen his picture.'

She frowned.

'But I will to-night, when he comes in.'

I saw Gladys moving away down the street, stacking her basket as she went. It was a grey day and the light made the mean houses look more blank than ever. I wondered how she had managed to live all this time in such a wretched place. Two colliers came along the pavement. I could hear their soft, light voices. Their clothes were black, their faces piebald with coal dust, though the skin seemed red and healthy where it shone through the grime. Tom would be getting back soon. He was manager at the tin works, and as

such had made Gladys a person of some consequence in Siddle; but even so, I could not understand how she had come to marry such a man. I was glad now that I had taken the chance to go abroad, even though it had meant leaving her in the middle of love.

She had always been a careless girl, slack in her clothes, sluttish with her hair, but somehow the carelessness suited her. A young girl need not be so precise about neatness, nor cleanliness even, but in Gladys the years had intensified this slackness and now she was a handsome, dull, untidy woman with no light in her. She seemed fond of Tom and I was glad of it. I wondered how she would feel when she saw what good friends Essie and I had already become. She had not welcomed me with much appearance of pleasure, but rather as though I were someone to whom she must be polite for someone else's sake.

The child put her arm around my neck. I was so charmed by her that I asked her what sort of present she would like to have. Instantly she pointed to the window.

'The swan?' I said.

She smiled.

'I'll buy you one like it in London and send it here, addressed to you and properly registered, with a blue pencil criss-cross over the brown paper and sealing-wax on the string, and it shall be marked "Fragile" and addressed to Miss Essie Owen, 19, King Street, Siddle.'

Violently she shook her head as if she were shy, and buried her face in her hands. 'Darling?' I said, trying to pull her fingers down.

In a few moments, however, she looked up, as calm as ever. Again her promise of beauty troubled and delighted me. I pulled the bow from her hair, and as I did so the hairs released from strain flew upwards into mist as brown as the morning colour on the wet sand of the bays. Her mouth was straight and pure. When she was older it would soften into a more secret loveliness, and she would be as Gladys was the day she lay on the shingle, her eyes closed to tears, her lips saying quite coldly, 'If you must go, you must.'

'Do you like me?' I asked.

The child touched my cheek.

Gladys was in sight once more, talking to a neighbour outside the gate. The child saw her and sprang up from my knee as if shy or afraid. Snatching the ribbon from my hand, she screwed up her hair and tied a clumsy bow upon it. She seemed eager to be off. 'Where are you going?' I asked her.

Gladys made signs to me through the window. Pushing it open, I asked her what was the matter. 'Forgot my key,' she said; 'will you open the door?'

'All right. I won't be a minute.'

When I turned round, the child had gone. I supposed she had run into the kitchen to await her mother's coming in, or upstairs to wash her hands before tea. I had noticed that they were dirty and rather scratched, as after a climb over the scaly rocks surrounding the cove. I looked along the hall for her, called 'Essie!' but she did not answer. I was rather disappointed, as I wanted Gladys to see me with her. She might have spoken to me less awkwardly had she seen how well I and the child got on together.

I opened the front door and Gladys came wearily in with her load of shopping. 'Sorry I've been so long, Phil. That's the worst of knowing everyone in a street; you have to stop and jaw at every corner.'

We went into the kitchen, where I helped her to unpack her bundles. 'Well,' she said, without much interest, 'how did you get on, all by yourself?'

'I wasn't all by myself,' I said, laughing at her. 'Essie's been keeping me company.'

She did not say anything. I looked closely at her and saw, with a shock I cannot describe, that her face had fallen into a flat stupidity.

'What's the matter?'

'You couldn't have seen Essie. I've just met her on her way up from the beach and sent her into Lewis's to have her hair cut. She'll be in to tea.'

For some reason I was horribly frightened, though I knew I could have no cause to be. 'But, Glad, you couldn't have. She was talking to me here. Sitting on my knee.'

'What did she look like?'

Obligingly I described the child, the tight hair, the bow, the brown frock, the ruffled, old-fashioned pinafore. 'She was playing with the white china swan you've got in the window.'

Gladys stood up, her body stiff as a poker, her mouth wide open like an idiot's. Suddenly she screamed. I have never heard a more dreadful sound. It was like the last wail of childbirth, just before peace comes. I caught her as she fell and laid her on the couch. When she opened her eyes she looked craftily around her. 'Close the door. Close the window.'

'Glad, tell me. Tell me,' I said. I was as terrified now as she, conscious of a darkness in the room that had not been there before.

'You saw Margaret,' she said, and sat up, leaning on an elbow to watch the closed door.

I urged her to tell me what she meant and to tell me quickly. I wanted her voice to drown any noise there might be of slow, timid feet on the stairs, of the brush of a small hand against the door, but she would not speak. On an impulse I left her, though she sobbed that I should stay, and went into the front room. I drew back the window curtains. The swan was still there. I noticed something I had not noticed before; there was a rivet in the arching neck, gleaming argent against the gentle whiteness. The room listened to the beating of my heart. I closed my eyes as I went back along the passage to the kitchen, even though it meant feeling my way with my finger-tips, never knowing what I might touch. Gladys was still leaning on her elbow, her eyes black as though a vision filled them.

I said, '*Who is Margaret?*'

'She's yours. Not so long after you went away. She was a pretty child, but very naughty. She lived with mother and me, and no one ever knew. We wouldn't let her go out except in the garden, and that was mostly after dusk. It was hard to keep her quiet as she was always dancing about, playing or singing. She liked to play with the china swan, though her Grannie told her not to, because it was very valuable. One day she dropped it and the head came off. Didn't you notice the rivet in the neck?'

I knew there had been no rivet, not when the child was running her loving fingers over the glaze.

'Mother always had a temper, and it was awful for helping me bring up a child without anyone knowing. She was ashamed, too. No one ever came to the house up on the cliff there, except the milkman and the boy with the papers. When mother saw that the swan was broken, she leaned forward before I could stop her and gave Margaret a great box on the ear. She didn't really mean to hurt, only to teach a lesson. Margaret ran upstairs crying, and I was fearfully upset, because I was so fond of her. Really fond of her. That night Margaret got out of her bedroom window and ran away. I don't know how she got down, because it was a great climb for such a little thing, and the ivy was thin from there down to the porch.

'I nearly went mad. I daren't search for her too openly, because I couldn't have people know that all the time Anyway, I was out all night on the cliffs. In the morning I saw a bit of white stuck on top of one of the three rocks. I climbed down there somehow, though you know how afraid I always was of heights. It was a rag from her pinafore, just caught there between two spikes. I knew what had happened. For weeks we waited, not daring to tell, not sleeping night or day. Then there was the body of a child found on Pebble Beach miles and miles away I don't think you ever went there Nothing was ever discovered about it. There wasn't much left of it when——'

She clutched my wrists. 'Hear it?'

'What?' I could have died with horror.

'Tom. He's coming in. Never let him know. Say I'm ill, say I've had a fainting fit, anything'

I heard his key in the lock. Quickly I said, 'Why did you keep the swan?'

She looked at me as if she could not understand me, or hear me very well. 'It was valuable,' she said, 'my mother always said it was valuable'; and her eyes searched the ceiling, the walls, the corners, as if she did not know from what space in the world something might come back to her that had been lost.

THE CHILDREN AND THE APPLE TREE

MEG BUXTON

The children played on the beach and in the sandhills all through the long, hot summer. They were naked, their slim bodies as brown and smooth as ripe hazel-nuts, sometimes misted over with a film of silver salt crystals when the sea water had dried on their skin, sometimes powdered with golden sand when, still wet, they rolled and tumbled in the dunes. Their dark hair was bleached by sun and sea until it resembled the blonde, dried grass that struggled for existence in the shifting sand.

They were very beautiful. Martin saw them nearly every day; no one else on the crowded beach ever saw them at all.

The girl was about six, Martin judged, the boy probably no more than four. His heart constricted and his breath came painfully the first time he came close to them.

After nearly thirty years, another marriage, more children, more disaster, he thought he had put away forever the anguish of losing Jane and their two children. The anguish had been so great, so totally destructive, that, to save himself, he had rushed into a second marriage, had begotten more children upon the body of a woman he scarcely knew and hardly liked, in a frantic effort to draw more images on the slate so cruelly wiped clean by that second of inattention while driving which had derived those beloved three of their lives.

It had worked. With his heart filled with growing hatred for his wife and horror at the unloveliness of her children, whom he could barely admit to himself were his as well, the grief that seemed to freeze the blood in veins and paralyse his mind in an endless scream of pain and despair could be controlled, could be buried deep in his subconscious in a grave round which he forced himself to creep without ever disturbing that and those which lay within. But these other children brought it all back.

When Martin's second wife divorced him she had taken his all. That she should take herself and their children had been a relief, and the loss of money and material things had mattered little, but she had taken away the dislike, the irritation, the resentment upon which he relied to fill his thoughts; she had taken the need to work at a job he loathed in order to provide for them all. Now he had nothing and no one to use as a hairshirt. No one but himself.

Martin rented a cottage on the bleak and barren North coast of Cornwall. It was utterly primitive, a tiny stone and slate structure in a low-walled enclosure, sheltering a small and ancient crabapple tree from the prevailing wind on its lee side. It was divided into two rooms; in one was a shallow stone sink in which, infrequently, he washed a cup and a plate or two with water drawn from the stream which cut a deep channel through the towering dunes to flow past the door; in the other was a huge fireplace on which he burnt driftwood which came in after every gale of that rough winter.

The cottage took the brunt of those gales as it had for over two hundred years, but it became a refuge from more than high winds and lashing rain for Martin: it enfolded him in its rugged simplicity and within its shelter he gave vent to the hatred and loathing he felt for himself and all the world.

Walking alone he unleashed his misery, yelling obscenities into the wind and the roaring of the waves, and the outbursts gradually seemed to purge the worst of his despair.

He grew to love the lonely dunes and great crescent of golden beach, learnt to recognize the sea-birds, the shell-fish and other small creatures he found in rock pools. The first time he picked a bunch of the golden colt's foot which forced its flowers through the sand in the early spring he smiled wryly to himself, but as other flowers came out it became natural to take them back to the cottage and place them in a mug of water among the jumble of papers, dirty plates and oddments that he found on the beach and which cluttered the rickety table at which he ate. He achieved a

kind of peace, a near-serenity in which he felt little and wanted for nothing.

The long, slow spring warmed into summer and with the strengthening sun came people. Martin had not bargained for the invasion of the acres of desolate dunes, the miles of empty beach which he had come to think of as his own. Holidaymakers came in their hundreds, in their thousands; caravans and tents plastered the fields which sloped gently away to the headland with bright, hard shapes of brash colour; cars parked in rows where a track came down to the beach, flashing the sun off glass and chrome with eye-searing brilliance, and the sand between the oiled bodies, the windbreaks, the picnic paraphernalia, the screaming babies and barking dogs, became littered and churned up, unrecognizable as his beach, except sometimes at dawn and in the evening when the tide was right and the sea would come in to wash it clean and smooth and empty again.

Martin lurked in his cottage and hatred welled up in his heart once more when, fascinated by the low stone building, people climbed over the sea-pink cushioned wall that encircled it and peered through the small windows, hands cupped round their faces in an effort to see inside. He shouted and raved at them, frightening them away, and at first he took the children to be ordinary trespassers like these.

They came out of the sand dunes and, seeming not to notice the low wall, walked straight towards the house. They appeared in no way apprehensive but as confident as though they were accustomed to coming this way. Martin strode to the door and threw it open noisily as the children passed, but they took no notice of him, their eyes fixed on the apple tree.

The apple tree, for all its age and decrepitude, had dressed its stubby branches with rosettes of leaves, each with a bunch of pink and white blossom at its centre. The children gazed at it solemnly. Even to Martin's jaundiced eye it was a joy to behold in the late May afternoon sunshine which warmed the grey stone behind it and

washed each leaf and petal with golden light, but the children's dark eyes registered no wonder, no delight. Instead they looked puzzled.

The girl, a few inches taller than the boy, reached up and shook one of the knobbly branches and a cascade of petals fluttered down onto their heads and onto the grass at their feet, but even this brought no smile to their infant mouths.

Having come out with the intention of chasing them away Martin stopped within feet of the children and his heart, so well-hedged about with hate as to be no trouble to him, lurched suddenly and he felt dizzy, steadying himself against the cottage wall.

The small, naked bodies, so straight of limb, so smooth of skin, so perfect, might have been his own long ago little son and daughter whose memory he had banished to save his sanity. Far from chasing them away he found that he wanted, more than he had wanted anything for years, that they should stay. He spoke gently to them, calling them, but they seemed not to hear him or even to be aware of him in any way and, with one last bewildered look at the apple tree, they walked away from him and round the other side of the cottage.

He ran after them, apple blossom falling on his own head as he brushed past the tree, but by the time he rounded the corner they had gone, vanishing as children do, taken by a sudden whim to run and hide. He looked behind the sea-pinked wall, went further into the dunes in whose hollows young couples lay and clung together and elderly people sat on deck chairs, arms folded over stomachs and faces turned determinedly to the sun. There was no sign of the children: but they came again, nearly every day.

Martin's days revolved round the possibility of seeing the children. They always came the same way and always in the late afternoon; he sat at the small window watching for their approach with his heart racing, his mouth dry, and when they did not come time stretched endless until he could take up his position the next day to watch for them.

He was used to them taking no notice of him, being

content just to see them, and over the weeks in which the apple blossom fell and the leaves on the tree became mature and dark, he learnt something about them.

The were foreigners; he could not understand the language they spoke but he gathered that their names were Luta and Harn. The little boy would sometimes fall a few yards behind his sister when a beetle or a butterfly caught his eye among the coarse dune grass, then he would run, calling to her to wait for him.

'Luta! Luta!'

Sometimes she would become irritated by his dawdling and, holding her hand out to him would call him sharply.

'Harn!'

They never wore clothes or shoes and, unlike other children playing naked on the beach, never carried a ball or a spade, never had an adult with them.

When they had examined the apple tree they would sometimes play, picking the sea-pinks, throwing small stones at a rock, catching grasshoppers to watch them jump from their palms or rolling down from the steep hillocks of sand, but eventually they would amble out of Martin's sight, seeming to melt in the dunes on the other side of the cottage.

As the summer progressed their constant attention to the apple tree was rewarded; tiny green apples formed which, on finding them hard and bitter, they patiently watched as they swelled a little and turned from green to tawny and eventually to bright scarlet. Then the little girl reached up to pick the small, acid fruit for her brother and herself and they would sit under the tree and devour them, savouring each mouthful as a rare treat and only moving on when they had finished, cores and pips and all, the few that Luta frugally allotted them each day.

One afternoon Martin forsook his position at the window and went to hide in the dunes near the path which the children always took. He waited, concealed behind tufts of tall marram grass, until they came along, so close to him that he could smell the heart-breaking scent of clean, warm, sun-burnished skin as they passed.

Giving them a few minutes' start he followed them as they left the undulating mounds of sand and crossed the beach from which people were beginning to hurry towards their parked cars, loaded with picnic baskets and rugs and towels. No one gave the children a glance and they seemed unaware of the noisy transistor radios and the screaming babies as they drifted through the crowds towards the rocks at one end of the wide, crescent-shaped bay.

They sprang lightly and sure footed up the ledges of rock, Martin close behind them, and onto the short, wiry grass of the turf which covered the plateau of a small headland, and then started to run, hand in hand, towards the edge which fell sheer into the sea. Martin was aghast; their headlong flight seemed certain to take them crashing to the tumbled rocks and creaming surf below and, running himself, he shouted to them to stop before it was too late, but they heeded him not at all and as they reached the edge he threw out his arms in an effort to save them, losing his footing and falling into space, the black basalt rocks, veined with marble, seeming to split and fly to pieces before his eyes as a flock of black and white oyster catchers too wing and rose, piping shrilly in fright, as he plummeted past them towards the churning water.

Martin's head ached and blood trickled down his face from a cut on his forehead as he sat up. He seemed, unaccountably, to have fallen face forward on the turf of the headland which stretched long and narrow before him, projecting far into the sea: he must have hit his head on an outcrop of rock. He had no idea where he was.

Looking seaward he saw an earth rampart towards the end of the tongue of land and spanning its width, beyond it were a cluster of low, ruined huts built of stone, some still partially roofed with turf; looking landward he saw a broad valley with a stream meandering through it. On both sides of the stream lynchets of turf marked out what must be tiny rectangular fields. Towards the sea where the stream cascaded over low black rocks a line of windswept, stunted trees grew, not much more than bushes, on the weather

side of which a bank of blown sand had accumulated, so high in places that it had breached the fragile natural barrier and streamed in drifts across the grass, threatening in time to engulf the little fields. It was winter and very cold. There was no sign of life.

Standing up he walked towards the earth rampart on the headland and cautiously went through the gap which formed an entrance, the small tree trunks which had been used to barricade it lying broken just inside.

The low huts were deserted, not merely were no people there, they had a stricken air; empty, but still with an aura, a feeling, of being recently and violently vacated.

Between the huts were piles of shells, limpet, mussel, oyster, small bones, like those of birds, and pieces of broken pottery. A huge round of ash, cold now and damp, showed where a fire had burnt for a long time, the grass withered and black at its edge. None of it meant anything to Martin and, bewildered, pressing his hands to his throbbing temples, he turned his back on the desolate little settlement and walked dazedly inland.

Near the stream in the broad valley rough hurdles enclosed a small space where the ground had been churned up by the hooves of animals, but the marks were not recent. In one place the hurdles had been smashed as though whatever beasts had been enfolded there had been driven, terrified, through them. There was no sign of any living thing there now.

The wind blew cold from the sea, full of the menace of snow. Pulling his thin jacket closer round him Martin made for the line of trees. He was too weak and confused to walk far and he must find shelter in which to rest. The scrubby trees shuddered and rasped their branches together as the wind, sand-laden, blew hissing through them, but their thin protection was better than nothing and he half-fell to the ground.

He must have slept as it was dusk when he opened his eyes. The western sky was a lurid copper colour and from the north ominous black clouds approached, driven on the gale. The wind howled and the sand sifted, stinging his

face, through the trees. Gradually he became aware of another sound, a wailing which was not the wind, and he raised himself on one elbow.

To his left in the grey light was a stubby tree whose short, knobbly branches he vaguely recognized as a crabapple. It immediately meant something to him, some dim memory strove to make itself understood, and he crawled towards it. There were still a few leaves clinging improbably to the tree, dry, brittle, brown leaves resisting the efforts of the wind to tear them off and hurl them away, and beneath it, among the rotten remains of small round fruit, were crouched two children.

At first his clouded vision could barely make out their bodies in the clutter of twigs, dead grass and wet brown leaves which littered the ground, but with an effort he forced his eyes to focus and saw them more clearly, huddled together and sobbing weakly.

They were so thin, so emaciated, that their skin hung on their little bones, giving them the look of extreme old age, their tiny faces wrinkled and distorted into utter and complete despair. They were obviously starving and half-dead with cold.

With what strength he had left Martin lurched towards them, he did not know how to help himself but even so the misery of the children, children he inexplicably loved, cried out to him to help them, if only by his presence. He struggled out of his jacket to wrap it round the little bodies. The larger of the two children lifted her head and gazed across the other child's shoulder, her brown eyes, seeing him at last, wide and filled with terror. Feebly she staggered to her feet, trying to raise the little boy, but he was too weak and pulled her down again and they clung together, half-standing, half-kneeling, their bodies as brown and as withered, as nearly lifeless, as the wind-riven leaves on the apple tree behind them.

Martin held out his arms to her in love, compassion and helpless longing, whether to comfort or to be comforted he no longer knew, but she started to scream, the thin, wild scream of a dying animal, and the little boy threw his head back and joined his wails with hers, turning to face him, his

thin, sticklike arms raised pathetically as if to ward off an attack, and their screams rose higher, searing into Martin's brain. He had heard these dying screams before; other children had screamed like this, thousands of children up and down the centuries, but these were the screams of his children, his children then and now, and they tore and wrenched at the core of his being as his arms closed round the two naked, terrified little bodies.

His fingers clasped, not flesh and bone, however emaciated, but something brittle and crumbling. The wind finally won its battle with the crabapple leaves and, withered and brown, they were torn from the tree as the two children died under his hands and he whirled away into yet another dimension, flying forever in a gale-torn nothingness, borne on the knife-edged, torturing crescendo of the children's age-old dying screams.

THE WATER GHOST OF HARROWBY HALL

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

The trouble with Harrowby Hall was that it was haunted, and, what was worse, the ghost did not merely appear at the bedside of a person, but remained there for one mortal hour before it disappeared.

It never appeared except on Christmas Eve, and then as the clock was striking twelve. The owners of Harrowby Hall had tried their hardest to rid themselves of the damp and dewy lady who rose up out of the best bedroom floor at midnight, but they had failed. They had tried stopping the clock, so that the ghost would not know when it was midnight; but she made her appearance just the same, and there she would stand until everything about her was thoroughly soaked.

Then the owners of Harrowby Hall closed up every crack in the floor with hemp, and over this were placed layers of tar and canvas; the walls were made waterproof, and the doors and windows likewise, in the hope that the lady would find it difficult to leak into the room, but even this did no good.

The following Christmas Eve she appeared as promptly as before, and frightened the guest of the room quite out of his senses by sitting down beside him, and gazing with her cavernous blue eyes into his. In her long, bony fingers bits of dripping seaweed were entwined, the ends hanging down, and these ends she drew across his forehead until he fainted away. He was found unconscious in his bed the next morning, simply saturated with sea-water and fright.

The next year the master of Harrowby Hall decided not to have the best spare bedroom opened at all, but the ghost appeared as usual in the room—that is, it was supposed she did, for the hangings were dripping wet the next morning. Finding no one there, she immediately set out to haunt the owner of Harrowby himself. She found him in his own cosy

room, congratulating himself upon having outwitted her.

All of a sudden the curl went out of his hair, and he was as wet as if he had fallen into a rain barrel. When he saw before him the lady of the cavernous eyes and seaweed fingers he too fainted, but immediately came to, because the vast amount of water in his hair, trickling down over his face, revived him.

Now it so happened that the master of Harrowby was a brave man. He intended to find out a few things he felt he had a right to know. He would have liked to put on a dry suit of clothes first, but the ghost refused to leave him for an instant until her hour was up. In an effort to warm himself up he turned to the fire; it was an unfortunate move, because it brought the ghost directly over the fire, which immediately was extinguished.

At this he turned angrily to her, and said: 'Far be it from me to be impolite to a woman, madam, but I wish you'd stop your visits to this house. Go and sit out on the lake, if you like that sort of thing; soak in the rain barrel, if you wish; but do not come into a gentleman's house and soak him and his possessions in this way, I beg of you!'

'Henry Hartwick Oglethorpe,' said the ghost, in a gurgling voice, 'you don't know what you are talking about. You do not know that I am compelled to haunt this place year after year by my terrible fate. It is no pleasure for me to enter this house, and ruin everything I touch. I never aspired to be a shower bath, but it is my doom. Do you know who I am?'

'No, I don't,' returned the master of Harrowby. 'I should say you were the Lady of the Lake!'

'No, I am the Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall, and I have held this highly unpleasant office for two hundred years tonight.'

'How the deuce did you ever come to get elected?' asked the master.

'Through a mistake,' replied the spectre. 'I am the ghost of that fair maiden whose picture hangs over the mantelpiece in the drawing-room.'

'But what made you get the house into such a spot?'

'I was not to blame, sir,' returned the lady. 'It was my father's fault. He built Harrowby Hall, and the room I haunt was to have been mine. My father had it furnished in pink and yellow, knowing well that blue and grey was the only combination of colours I could bear. He did it to spite me, and I refused to live in the room. Then my father said that I could live there or on the lawn, he didn't care which. That night I ran from the house and jumped over the cliff into the sea.'

'That was foolish,' said the master of Harrowby.

'So I've heard,' returned the ghost, 'but I really never realized what I was doing until after I was drowned. I had been drowned a week when a sea nymph came to me. She informed me that I was to be one of her followers, and that my doom was to haunt Harrowby Hall for one hour every Christmas Eve throughout the rest of eternity. I was to haunt that room on such Christmas Eves as I found it occupied; and if it should turn out not to be occupied I was to spend that hour with the head of the house.'

'I'll sell the place.'

'That you cannot do, for then I must appear to any purchaser, and reveal to him the awful secret of the house.'

'Do you mean to tell me that on every Christmas Eve that I don't happen to have somebody in that guest-chamber, you are going to haunt me wherever I may be, taking all the curl out of my hair, putting out my fire and soaking me through to the skin?' demanded the master.

'Yes, Oglethorpe. And what is more,' said the water ghost, 'it doesn't make the slightest difference where you are. If I find that room empty, wherever you may be I shall douse you with my spectral pres'

Here the clock struck one, and immediately the ghost faded away. It was perhaps more a trickle than a fading, but as a disappearance it was complete.

'By St George and his Dragon!' cried the master of Harrowby, 'I swear that next Christmas there'll be someone in the spare room, or I spend the night in a bathtub.'

But when Christmas Eve came again the master of

Harrowby was in his grave. He never recovered from the cold he caught that awful night. Harrowby Hall was closed, and the heir to the estate was in London. And there to him in his apartment came the water ghost at the appointed hour. Being younger and stronger, however, he survived the shock. Everything in his rooms was ruined—his clocks were rusted; a fine collection of watercolour drawings was entirely washed out. And because the apartments below his were drenched with water soaking through the floors, he was asked by his landlady to leave the apartment immediately.

The story of his family's ghost had gone about; no one would invite him to any party except afternoon teas and receptions, and fathers of daughters refused to allow him to remain in their houses later than eight o'clock at night.

So the heir of Harrowby Hall determined that something must be done.

The thought came to him to have the fireplace in the room enlarged, so that the ghost would evaporate at its first appearance. But he remembered his father's experience with the fire. Then he thought of steampipes. These, he remembered, could lie hundreds of feet deep in water, and still be hot enough to drive the water away in vapour. So the haunted room was heated by steam to a withering degree.

The scheme was only partially successful. The water ghost appeared at the specified time, but hot as the room was, it shortened her visit by no more than five minutes in the hour. And during this time the young master was a nervous wreck, and the room itself was terribly cracked and warped. And worse than this, as the last drop of the water ghost was slowly sizzling itself out on the floor, she whispered that there was still plenty of water where she came from, and that next year would find her as exasperatingly saturating as ever.

It was then that, going from one extreme to the other, the heir of Harrowby hit upon the means by which the water ghost was ultimately conquered, and happiness came once more to the house of Oglethorpe.

The heir provided himself with a warm suit of fur

underclothing. Wearing this with the furry side in, he placed over it a tight-fitting rubber garment like in a jersey. On top of this he drew on another set of woollen underclothing, and over this was a second rubber garment like the first. Upon his head he wore a light and comfortable diving helmet; and so clad, on the following Christmas Eve he awaited the coming of his tormentor.

It was a bitterly cold night that brought to a close this twenty-fourth day of December. The air outside was still, but the temperature was below zero. Within all was quiet; the servants of Harrowby Hall awaited with beating hearts the outcome of their master's campaign against his supernatural visitor.

The master himself was lying on the bed in the haunted room, dressed as he had planned and then . . .

The clock clanged out the hour of twelve.

There was a sudden banging of doors. A blast of cold air swept through the halls. The door leading into the haunted chamber flew open, a splash was heard, and the water ghost was seen standing at the side of the heir of Harrowby. Immediately from his clothing there streamed rivulets of water, but deep down under the various garments he wore he was as dry and warm as he could have wished.

'Ha!' said the young master of Harrowby, 'I'm glad to see you.'

'You are the most original man I've met, if that is true,' returned the ghost. 'May I ask where did you get that hat?'

'Certainly, madam,' returned the master, courteously. 'It is a little portable observatory I had made for just such emergencies as this. But tell me, is it true that you are doomed to follow me about for one mortal hour—to stand where I stand, to sit where I sit?'

'That is my happy fate,' returned the lady.

'We'll go out on the lake,' said the master, starting up.

'You can't get rid of me that way,' returned the ghost. 'The water won't swallow me up; in fact, it will just add to my present bulk.'

'Nevertheless,' said the master, 'we will go out on the lake.'

'But my dear sir,' returned the ghost, 'it is fearfully cold out there. You will be frozen hard before you've been out ten minutes.'

'Oh, no, I'll not,' replied the master. 'I am very warmly dressed. Come!' This last in a tone of command that made the ghost ripple.

And they started.

They had not gone far before the water ghost showed signs of distress.

'You walk too slowly,' she said. 'I am nearly frozen. I beg you, hurry!'

'I should like to oblige a lady,' returned the master courteously, 'but my clothes are rather heavy, and a hundred yards an hour is about my speed. Indeed, I think we had better sit down on this snowdrift, and talk matters over.'

'Do not! Do not do so, I beg!' cried the ghost. 'Let us move on. I feel myself growing rigid as it is. If we stop here, I shall be frozen stiff.'

'That, madam,' said the master slowly, seating himself on an ice cake 'that is why I have brought you here. We have been on this spot just ten minutes; we have fifty more. Take your time about it, madam, but freeze. That is all I ask of you.'

'I cannot move my right leg now,' cried the ghost, in despair, 'and my overskirt is a solid sheet of ice. Oh, good, kind Mr Oglethorpe, light a fire, and let me go free from these icy fetters.'

'Never, madam. It cannot be. I have you at last.'

'Alas!' cried the ghost, a tear trickling down her frozen cheek. 'Help me, I beg, I congeal!'

'Congeal, madam, congeal!' returned Oglethorpe coldly. 'You are drenched and have drenched me for two hundred and three years, madam. Tonight, you have had your last drench.'

'Ah, but I shall thaw out again, and then you'll see. Instead of the comfortably warm, genial ghost I have been in the past, sir, I shall be ice water,' cried the lady, threateningly.

'No, you won't either,' returned Oglethorpe; 'for when you are frozen quite stiff, I shall send you to a cold-storage warehouse, and there shall you remain an icy work of art for evermore.'

'But warehouses burn.'

'So they do, but this warehouse cannot burn. It is made of asbestos and surrounding it are fireproof walls, and within those walls the temperature is now and shall be 416 degrees below the zero point; low enough to make an icicle of any flame in this world—or the next,' the master added, with a chuckle.

'For the last time I beseech you. I would go on my knees to you, Oglethorpe, if they were not already frozen. I beg of you do not do'

Here even the words froze on the water ghost's lips and the clock struck one. There was a momentary tremor throughout the ice-bound form, and the moon, coming out from behind a cloud, shone down on the rigid figure of a beautiful woman sculptured in clear, transparent ice. There stood the ghost of Harrowby Hall, conquered by the cold, a prisoner of all time.

The heir of Harrowby had won at last, and today in a large storage house in London stands the frigid form of one who will never again flood the house of Oglethorpe with woe and sea-water.

DESTINATION GLEN DOLL

A. SCUPHAM

David Porteous and I had been very much taken with the Glen Doll area and so some months later we planned a walk, starting from Braedownie. We would pass the Winter Corrie of Dreish, a botanist's paradise, and enter Glen Doll where the first two or three miles of walking in the open valley is extremely pleasant, with Craig Mellon to the right and Craig Rennet prominently on our left.

Then we would go on up to gain the summit plateau via a curious short glen. From this point the path is none too well marked but the odd cairn indicates the general direction of Glen Callater and ultimately the main road up to Braemar.

The summit plateau just tops three thousand feet.

I parked my old VW beetle beside the Glen Doll youth hostel one wet Friday evening and we stayed the night there. It had been a hectic drive up from Edinburgh, mostly through heavy rain, although we had stopped to enjoy a meal of fish and chips in the car at Blairgowrie.

On reaching the outskirts of Kirriemuir we encountered a weary looking hitch-hiker. I was not in the habit of giving lifts of this kind but the young chap was obviously soaking wet and weighed down with gear, which included a coil of rope.

I had noticed the rock climbers and imposing rock buttresses near Braedownie, so I assumed that he would be heading for this particular climbing theatre. I stopped the car. David made no comment and I had the feeling that he would have done likewise in the circumstances.

The stranger lunged toward the car.

'Where are you making for,' I shouted to him above the noise of the downpour, 'Glen Doll?'

The fellow grinned broadly and nodded.

'Yes—I'd appreciate a lift, if that's where you're going.'

He scrambled into the car, David having hurriedly moved some of our equipment over the rear seat in order to make room for our guest.

It proved a bit of a crush inside the car what with the three bodies and all the extra gear, the windows requiring an occasional wipe to combat clouding condensation with which the car heater could not cope.

Conversation consisted mainly of a three-way exchange of past experiences on various Scottish mountains. Several of these stories turned out to be quite humorous in the re-telling which helped considerably to shorten the remainder of our mud-splattered journey.

At the Braedownie Hotel David and I had a couple of beers with Michael, who said he was very glad that we had chanced to come along the road when we did.

'What'll you have—another two pints of lager?' urged our new acquaintance politely.

'No, no, we've had enough for now, I think, thanks all the same—and we'll have to book into the hostel soon,' said David convincingly.

Pride, or something approaching it prevented us from allowing the lad to buy us a drink. We knew that he, like many of his friends, some of whom would soon be joining him, made a regular practice of thumbing lifts in order to get to rock climbing regions of their choice. Most could not afford to run their own transport and there were no public services to Glen Doll.

The youth hostel was originally built as a hunting lodge. Encircled by a belt of tall trees, the house was erected at about the turn of the century. An early owner, it was said, attempted to have Jock's Road closed to the public, including the Mounth pass through to Ballater, but only succeeded in running up such a high bill over the litigation that it cost him dearly and he was forced to give up his cause and sell out.

From the hostel, a direct route leads to the beginning of Jock's Road.

That night David and I had a whole dormitory to ourselves, there being few hostellers in the vicinity. The

large, bunk-filled room was situated at the far end of a wide corridor on the upper floor of the ramshackle old house. Of all the double-tier bunks which we could have chosen from the large selection we elected to occupy two lower berths near to a corner window. The heavy rain had simmered down to a steady drizzle, but we had little hope of a vast improvement on the morrow. David and I were dead tired and so neither wished to chat on into the small hours. I drifted off to sleep recollecting a happy weekend spent with my wife and daughter.

During the night something wakened me. At first I was puzzled by a persistent scraping sound. Maybe it was mice . . . or a trapped bird, perhaps, in one of the fireplaces, seeking a way out. I thought I heard a low groan coming from somewhere—somewhere within the room.

Glancing across at David's bunk I could tell at once that he was fast asleep. Reminding myself that this was an old building and no doubt subject to all kinds of strange noises, I turned over onto my side and settled into a more comfortable position. Like a magnet, my attention was drawn to the window. A night breeze was chasing thin clouds across the face of the moon and at this I became a little more optimistic concerning a possible change in the weather.

Still uneasy in my mind, I endeavoured to get back to sleep, but my body was soon jerked into stark alertness and muscular high tension when I distinctly heard someone near at hand whisper my name.

'John, where are you?'

It was a low, manly voice. My heart began to pound in fear and apprehension. An acute compulsion made me open my eyes to behold a dirty, dishevelled figure holding onto the end of my bunk in an effort to steady himself. He spoke again.

'Are you there, John—can you help me?'

My bunk framing shook slightly under the pressure of his scratched and bleeding hands. He was a young man, slightly built and with longish hair. I could not move, let

alone answer him.

While he held on grimly to the top bunk his head was bent almost on to his chest. His clothing was badly torn and muddy and smelled strongly of damp moss and heather. One arm was bared and I could see a dark streak of blood which had been running from a long laceration.

At last I managed to find a voice, which to my surprise sounded fairly steady and adequately forceful.

'Who are you—where have you come from?' I wanted to know.

The clouds which had partially obscured the moon began to disperse and its cold silvery light flooded into the dormitory.

The young man slowly and painfully raised his head. I noticed that one side of his face was smeared with dried blood and there was a purple bruise across his forehead, to which a lock of black hair had become matted. He suddenly slumped forward, gripping the side rail of my bunk, his face coming to within a few inches of my own.

Then I realized that I knew him. He was Michael Anderson, the person to whom we had given a lift on the way here. Blood had dried in a trickle from the side of his mouth, making it appear even wider.

He tried very hard to say something, but no words came.

'Michael, you've obviously been in some terrible accident,' I lamented lamely, 'but how did it happen—and how did you manage to get here?'

I thought of awakening David but decided against this for the moment. Michael was in great need of me and I felt I could handle the situation myself. As I hurriedly scrambled out of my bunk Michael slumped onto the floor. I knelt beside him.

'What on earth's happened to you, lad?'

Turning his pale blue eyes to stare fixedly into my face he whispered hoarsely,

'The mist . . . the icy mist . . . I'm going . . .'

His voice faded away to nothing and his eyes glazed over. I whipped a blanket off an empty bunk and quickly covered

the slim form. He lay quiet and still, as though in a deep sleep.

I went into the adjoining washroom for a damp sponge with which to tend his wounds. Moonlight streamed in through the small window so I had little need of the electric light switch overhead and I was thankful that there was enough warm water left in the pipes.

When I re-entered the dormitory there was no sign of Michael. I looked between the empty bunks then crept out into the corridor but he had disappeared. Giving up the search I returned to my still warm bed. Before slumber engulfed my confused brain I recalled negotiating the bumpy twisting road through Glen Clova in torrential rain and trying to place Michael's accent. I had guessed at Dundee, or thereabout. But there was nothing to piece together from these fragments which made sense either from the talk during the car journey, or later in the hotel bar and which might have helped explain the strange visitation.

I awoke in the weak light of an early sun and to the constant twittering of the birds. I saw that David's bunk was empty and as yet not made up. I went into the washroom. As I finished with the towel I heard the dormitory door opening.

'Aye, so you're up at last,' grinned David, showing me that he was only joking, but adding, pointedly,

'I'm going to make my bunk. By the way, I've begun breakfast, downstairs—you wouldn't be long?'

Nodding absentmindedly I replied,

'Uhu—I'll do mine too, then I'll be down to give you a hand.'

In turning to remove my untidy top covers the night's happenings came flooding back to me. I was still sitting on my unmade bunk, thinking about the incident, when David came back into the room. He sounded a little put out as he complained,

'Aw, come on, John, I've got the bacon and eggs nearly ready—and we'll need an early start . . .'

At David's valid reprieve and I struggled to shake off my private thoughts. Emerging from my morbid meditation I assured him,

'Aye, aye, Dave—be with you in a minute or two.'

At the common room breakfast table I asked David if he had slept well during the night. He seemed quite amused by my question.

'Why? Of course I did—didn't you? Anyway, I heard you snoring away to yourself. Must have been shortly before I dropped off.'

I poured the coffee without looking up. So, David was obviously completely unaware of my ordeal. But, just exactly what ordeal had I really been through? A bad dream, that's what it amounted to. Deciding that it would be best to forget all about it, I did not make any mention of my nightmare to David, the relating of which I felt would have largely been a waste of time in any case.

In fine weather we meandered up through Glen Doll for a mile or so, when it began to rain. We passed a couple who had started out earlier and who were now sheltering from the shower under some trees.

They smiled to us as we passed by.

The path became rougher and steeper just prior to gaining the summit plateau and so we stopped for a short rest in a little glen by a rushing stream. To our left as we faced the winding path ahead of us was a series of cliffs, gullies and crevasses which abruptly marked the beginning—or the end—of the sprawling plateau area.

We duly traversed this great stretch of rolling terrain, spattered with rocks and lochans, to enter the steep incline of Glen Callater. From there to Braemar we saw only one other person, in the shape of an old man trying his luck at fishing in Loch Callater.

Leaving the Braemar youth hostel on the following morning, David and I set out on our return walk, taking in Lochnagar and the Spittal of Muick along with its large deer herds and impressive loch. The day after that we were back in Braedownie. This, my second visit to the Eastern

Grampians, was proving no less an enjoyable one than the first, when David and I had climbed a couple of Munros called Dreish and Mayar with a party.

I drove the car the short distance from the hostel to the Braedownie Hotel. For early spring the weather was sunny and warm so we lounged about at some outside rustic benches while we drank our beer.

David was squinting up toward the road from Glen Clova.

'Look—here comes the rock climbing brigade.'

'Aye, they've been away for a morning's climb I expect,' I remarked lazily, '“Red Craig” I think it's called.'

We sat and watched the group of some six or seven as they gradually drew nearer. One of them waved to us. The voices of the weary but happy band of climbers grew stronger as they joked and occasionally pushed each other about as they walked.

Then I realized that it was Michael who had given us a wave. When next I glanced up from my beer glass he had removed his red helmet from a head of long dark hair. He adjusted a coil of rope which he carried over one shoulder then waved to us again. This time we returned his greeting. He looked hot and his face was flushed with healthy colour, in common with most of his companions.

They were now close enough for Michael to shout out a good-natured 'hello'.

The small group milled around our bench as Michael loosely introduced his friends. One wanted to buy us a beer but we politely declined. After further banter the climbers straggled into the hotel bar. Michael shot us both a cheery grin before following his party into the shady doorway of the hotel bar.

That evening the Braedownie Hotel looked as inviting as ever. It was a fairly large building, for these parts. Close by stood an ancient water-wheel, at one time used in conjunction with an adjoining granary which now served as a storehouse for the hotel.

The small hotel pub was crowded with campers and one

or two hotel guests had also drifted in, seeking local atmosphere.

I chatted with Caleb the barman with whom I got on famously. As Caleb struggled to keep pace with a deluge of orders he called to a fair-haired girl who sat with others at a long pinewood table.

I had noticed that the lass had been softly strumming a guitar. Opposite her sat a teenage youth, also with guitar. The girl had been demonstrating to the youth some aspects of her technique, but at Caleb's urgent request she promptly excused herself.

The teenager propped up the girl's guitar between the seat she had just vacated and the wall behind, in order to keep her place and in the hope that she would soon be able to return.

'C'mon, Alison, come and give me a hand here,' cried Caleb impatiently, adding brightly, 'if they won't let you through then they can't get any service.'

'I'm coming—keep your hair on,' she muttered, giggling to her customer cronies as she squeezed her way toward the bar counter flap.

Michael Anderson flashed David and me a dutiful smile of recognition from his party who were engaged in a darts match over by the fireplace.

After a time the bar counter became less busy and Alison was allowed another short break. She returned to her seat and then proceeded to teach the young lad some guitar chords. Eventually they both got it right and started to play a few recognizable Scottish tunes. From there, a sing-song developed and the evening drew to a predictable rowdy close with the usual encores and bawdy arguments ensuing long after the accompaniment had ceased. Alison had quit her musical instrument for the evening, having been obliged to return to her barmaid's duties toward closing time.

Someone touched David on the shoulder as we drifted out of the bar—well after closing time. The action halted our conversation and we both turned our heads in the direction of the interruption.

It was Michael, who wanted a word with us.

'Er—I wondered—you two are walking tomorrow, aren't you?'

David and I said that his assumption was quite correct.

'Why, Michael? D'you mean you want to come with us—what about your mates—and anyway, I thought you'd all be going home—'

Michael interrupted with,

'Well, my pals have to go back home tomorrow—but I don't—'

'You're very welcome to come for a walk in the hills with us,' I assured him, 'I think we'll just manage to put up with your company. What d'you think, Dave?'

'Don't take any notice of John,' said David, 'he has to be joking.'

'Good,' said Michael gratefully, 'where are you planning to go?'

'Oh, maybe just across to Loch Brandy—or up the glen a wee bit,' said I, 'we're looking forward to a more leisurely day tomorrow.'

'That's fine then, see you, John, David—'

'Eh—correction—me Dave,' declared my friend firmly, with a slight alcoholic sway.

'And I'm Mike—OK? Oh—what time in the morning?'

'About nine would be early enough, Mike—you're at the campsite, aren't you? We won't need an early start. By the way, I have a spare hostel guest card, if you'd like to stay over tomorrow night?'

Michael beamed in obvious pleasure.

'That's great! Thanks a lot. See you in the morning then—at the hostel. My pals will have left then anyway. 'Night.'

I jauntily drove the car the four miles along to the hostel, passing the campsite where Michael would be spending his last night with his mates.

The early morning frost had more or less dispersed by the time the three of us set out to stroll up through the glen. Under a blue, almost cloudless sky we followed the path through the partly forested valley and then on up to the

miniature glen. We rested by the brook.

'This is as far as we should bother going today, Dave,' I announced whilst rummaging in my sack for a Thermos flask.

'I'd like to explore the plateau again—just to have a wee bit of a walkabout—you know,' he said with persuasive enthusiasm. Proffering his coffee mug he pointed out, 'After all, John—we've plenty of time.'

Michael said, diplomatically,

'I'd rather have a drink of water from the stream.'

As he made toward the rushing waters he called,

'Whatever you guys decide, I'll go along with.'

I felt guilty of being some kind of spoil-sport.

'All right—but just for a short trek—not that there's all that much to see, as you well know, Dave.'

Michael, grasping the tail end of our conversation upon rejoining us, volunteered,

'I'll go with you Dave, if you don't mind, John—I could do with stretching my legs a bit,' with the wink of an eye in my direction.

I felt much relieved by Michael's suggestion which I acknowledged by way of a return wink and slight nod of my head.

'You're coming with us onto the plateau, at least part of the way, aren't you?' David wanted to know of me.

'Oh aye—there's no show without Punch,' I answered him, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Digging into his anorak pocket Michael produced a packet of cigarettes and an expensive looking gas and electronic cigarette lighter.

David did not smoke but I accepted one of Michael's cigarettes—and a light.

'That's a super lighter,' remarked David, his eyes shining like a magpie as the metal object flashed in the sunlight, 'd'you mind if I have closer look at it?'

Michael lit his own cigarette then handed the lighter over to David.

'Aye, some of these gadgets are very well engineered,' I agreed.

'There's a fancy letter "M" engraved on it I see,' mused David, adding the afterthought, 'you're not married, are you, Mike?'

I smiled smugly and said,

'You and I might have the look of an old married man, but I don't think that Mike has'

David handed Mike back his cigarette lighter, still expecting a reply to his question.

Michael grinned. 'Well, yes—and no, I'd say. You see, my Morag worked at the college library—she's the one who gave me this lighter—'

'That's her initial too, then,' put in David brightly.

'Aye, it is, as it happens,' Michael agreed mechanically, 'but, anyway, I was dating her regularly and so when she became pregnant I didn't really want to know, at least at first. That's partly why I came here this weekend—to think things out, properly.'

'Don't you like the girl well enough to marry her?' I asked.

Twisting his cigarette butt into the ground he explained,

'Morag and I were always having bloody awful rows about my habit of going away climbing and in fact that's how I found out someone else had offered her a wedding ring—a move I couldn't really afford to think about, until recently.'

'I'm beginning to feel cold, sitting here,' announced David, 'I think we should get moving.'

On reaching the fifth cairn, which was too close to some random rocks to be all that useful as a marker, I handed the map and compass over to David.

'I'll take it easy here for a bit then and maybe have a quiet snooze in the sunshine. See you two in about half an hour?'

'Right,' agreed David happily and then they were off.

The air smelt pure, but with a cold nippy tang to it. I yawned and then settled myself down beside a clump of large boulders.

When I came to, the sun had gone and I felt cold and damp. There was no sign of David and Michael who should

surely have arrived back by now, I reckoned. I turned up my parka hood against the chilly air. A hazy drizzle began which effectively reduced visibility. I wished that the men would put in an appearance.

It started to snow and quite soon everything turned to white, including myself. I huddled even closer to the big stone as a fierce wind whipped up swirls of snow into the thin, icy air.

Then I heard voices, getting louder as they seemed to approach in my direction. I called out.

Peering into the driving blizzard, I could make out up to about nine figures some little way from me who were moving slowly through the storm. They had joined hands and were advancing in single file.

I again called out to them but they paid me no heed and seemed to be more intent upon arguing among themselves as they pressed stolidly on. I tried to struggle toward the moving grey line but found that I was too stiff to move. The intense whiteness hurt my eyes and I lost sight of the grey shapes, their voices becoming fainter as the blizzard increased in its ferocity.

Slumping back onto the comparative shelter of the stone, I was beginning not to care about anything, one way or another.

Then I heard other voices and this time my name was being called, the sound coming from somewhere behind me. Cupping my freezing hands around my numbed mouth I shouted as loudly as I could,

'Over here—Dave—Mike.'

From out of a thick bank of swirling snow the tall figures of David Porteous and Michael Anderson staggered into view. I grabbed at their snow-covered clothing and pulled them to the stone.

'Thank goodness you two are safe—did you see anything of the others?'

David shot me an incredulous glance from under a pair of snow-flecked eyelids.

'Others?' he retorted. 'What others?'

I studied Michael's face for a moment but he too seemed

not to know what I was talking about. I might have guessed, I thought, they'd missed them completely. In irritation I said,

'Oh, forget it—I thought I saw some people—anyway, where the hell have you been all this time?'

'What d'you mean, all this time? We've only been away for about forty-five minutes. We had to turn back when—all this started. By the way, John, I'm afraid I've lost your compass. I had it around my neck—and now it's gone. Sorry'

Michael slumped down beside me and out of the path of the wind which whipped powdered snow gusts over the stone's smoother top contours.

'Just one of those unfortunate things I suppose, John, I don't think Dave's to blame, especially in this freak weather.'

I knew that it was useless to be angry toward David, but the lost compass

We knew that the entrance to Glen Doll could not be very far from where we were and decided to try to make for it rather than possibly freeze at the big stone.

On the way I was again to hear the sound of people shouting, at some point ahead of us.

Turning to David I said,

'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?' he grated gruffly.

Michael had taken the lead.

'There it is again!' I cried.

'I didn't hear anything—maybe it's just the wind dying down,' Michael contributed.

'You must be hearing things,' snapped David disgustedly. 'It's getting to be as quiet as—as eternity.'

That much was quite true. The snow storm was abating, being gradually replaced by a misty drizzle, the manner in which it had begun. I did not mention the voices again for I had come to think that David was right and I had been hearing things. There was now no wind at all. The storm had blown itself out.

We trudged on, cautiously. Snow on the ground was

melting and retarding our progress by undermining stones and gravel underfoot. Suddenly Michael raised an arm to point excitedly.

'Look! Over there—I can see the entrance to that little glen we rested in on the way up . . . come on . . .'

'No!' I strongly disagreed. 'I think it should be a lot farther to our left!'

The next moment slush and underlying loosened scree had us all off our feet and sliding bodily toward the spot Michael had pointed out as the entrance to Glen Doll. I was stopped by a piece of jagged but firm rock, but Michael was being carried steadily toward the edge of a cliff. David, by grasping at wiry heather, was able to curtail his travel, managing to come to a scraping halt quite near to my side. In desperation I shouted to Michael,

'Try to dig your heels in!'

I was too late with my advice. Together with a shower of clattering stones Michael was swept over the edge of the precipice. Hastily rubbing a stinging knee-cap which had collided with the jagged rock, I scratched and crawled my way back up the slope, with David a close second behind me. We worked our way around the treacherous scree delta and onto safer ground until we were able to see over the ridge.

Michael was lying face down across a flat ledge immediately below us. His body was quite still.

'Mike—can you hear me?' I gasped, fearing the worst.

'He might be all right,' David whispered to me hopefully.

Michael groaned and raised one shoulder.

'Aye—but I'm too scared to move.' He spoke huskily, but we were very much relieved, for all that.

The flat rocky ledge shifted under him slightly at which Michael gasped with fright. I quickly emptied my rucksack and motioned to David to do likewise.

'Reach up and get hold of our sack straps, Mike—but try to turn your body slowly . . . slowly now . . .'

Locking our boots into widely split rock fissures behind us we somehow found the strength to gradually take Michael's body weight off the unpredictable platform. He

cried out as the shelf groaned and moved once more.

'We'll never manage it,' David hissed in despair. I gritted my teeth.

'We'll just have to, won't we!'

With all the encouragement we could muster we yelled at Michael to hold on tightly to our straps and feel with his feet to find seams and other footholds which he could use as we tried to haul him up, in an attempt at regaining the ridge. Michael's face was quite flushed now, whereas before it had been pallid from a fear which had threatened to paralyse his reflexes. He was running with sweat from his own efforts and I realized his hands would be damp with perspiration as he held on tightly to my nylon sack straps.

David and I dug our boots into the rock fissures a fraction deeper and wedged our knees tightly between heather and bracken roots.

David checked that I was ready, then ordered Michael to put all he had into this next heave, for it was now or never.

'Now!'

It meant a mighty effort from all of us, but with one sideways swing, then one further heave, Michael was up and over the top to lie panting for breath beside us.

No one spoke for a time, then Michael wiped the wetness of the mist from his brow and said,

'That knee you banged onto the rock, John—how is it now?'

David looked over at me with quizzical eyes.

'Did you bang your knee?'

'Er—yes I did, but I didn't realize that Michael had been aware of it at the time—however it's not painful at the moment.'

It seemed to me that David was eyeing Michael with renewed interest.

We suddenly heard a sharp crackling sound and then a heavy bouncing, crashing noise from below as the huge rock-shelf finally dislodged itself from high on the cliff face to canter away down into the depths of Glen Doll.

'My God, that was close. I'll never be able to thank you two for what you did for me today,' said Michael quietly

and unemotionally.

'Well, you're all right now, Mike—and maybe we'll let you buy a round at the Braedownie tonight,' chided David jokingly.

I had been watching Michael's face, which had become very pale. We should really be treating him for shock, I thought, but decided in the circumstances it would be better to simply press on.

'We'll have to see to getting back to the hostel well before dark, so let's go now, and be careful as you make for firmer ground,' I warned.

We found the real entrance without further mishap although the cold grey mist prevailed. David cursed the swirling dampness as we cautiously picked our way down the path off the plateau and into the little glen. Quite suddenly my heart skipped a beat.

'The mist . . . the icy mist . . . ' The words seemed to want to ring a bell deep within me. I let David go on just ahead of me as we approached the narrow, stony path which was leading us into Glen Doll proper, but I was concerned lest we should lose sight of Michael, who now preferred to take up the rear position. Some fifty yards farther on David stopped.

'John, the mist seems to be lifting—I thought it would be worse as we got onto lower ground, but . . . and it's getting warmer, probably because we're back in the valley—hey, where's Mike?'

Michael had dropped back about twenty yards. He walked with a much steadier gait than either David or myself, albeit slower.

The sky had lightened to cloudy-bright. David impulsively gripped my arm.

'Don't you think there's something odd about Mike—since the rescue, I mean? I begin to feel a bit scary when he looks at me directly, as though he's watching my every move. I've noticed him, well, sort of staring at you like that too . . . it's almost as if he couldn't trust us, or something.'

Jabbing David gently in the ribs with my elbow I said,

'Och, that's ridiculous—*now* who's imagining things? Right! Here he comes so watch what you say and do. He might be suffering from delayed shock—but the weather could act up again and we've only got down the valley to go—'

I had to break off my lecture as Michael had come within earshot.

'OK, lads?' he greeted us blandly.

David glanced nervously at me—a move which I was sure did not go unnoticed by Michael.

'How are you feeling, Mike?' I enquired pleasantly, taking in the dark bruise over his left eye which accentuated his drawn, pale features. Apart from a torn anorak and muddy breeches he claimed to be 'just fine'.

The extremely narrow track continued to dictate a single file walking arrangement and Michael again held back to fill the rear position. By the time we reached the treeline and then the sawmill clearing I knew that that section of Jock's Road would become a good deal wider, enabling us to walk three abreast.

On taking my turn to be in the lead, we had only travelled some forty yards when I thought to look round in checking that everything was as it should be. There was David, trudging heavily along in my wake. Behind him, Michael was nowhere in sight.

I stopped short. While David almost bumped into me I demanded of him,

'Where is he—where's he got to—?'

'He was right behind me—I was counting his footsteps then gave it up.' We called out and searched back up the path, taking into account the man's needs regarding natural functions. In retracing our steps we found ourselves back in the miniature glen beneath the summit plateau.

Only our own voices echoed over the eerie emptiness.

Eventually, it was David who spotted the orange coloured anorak.

'John, look! Down there'

It took us an age to scramble down into the depths of the ravine where a body lay crumpled and broken beside a

large rock slab.

'He's moving,' gasped David as we rock-hopped our way across to where the body had finally come to rest.

'No,' I said sadly, 'the ripped anorak just happens to be flapping in a breeze that's springing up. I'm afraid this one's dead.'

We slowly rolled the stiff, ice-cold corpse onto its back.

With the dead man's immediate effects, we arrived back at the hostel. We were exhausted, but at once reported the finding of Michael's body, although making no mention of the rescue, nor of the aftermath.

Later that night an understanding hostel warden poured David and me each a large whisky.

'You know,' he remarked, 'one New Year's Eve, many years ago, a whole hill-walking party perished in the same place where you found that unfortunate young lad today. They didn't recover those bodies until the spring. The snow lay deep for a long time that year.'

'We'll hand over his personal things to the police in the morning I think,' said David, soberly, turning Michael's cigarette lighter over and over absentmindedly as he sat at an old oak, dark-stained kitchen table.

The warden lifted an ancient poker and attended to an already blazing log fire.

I was aware that David was extremely disturbed over Michael's untimely death. But no more than I—and I thought it very doubtful as to whether either of us would ever fully comprehend the happenings of that fateful day's hill-walking.

I moved over to the kitchen door.

'And where are you going now? It's almost time for lights out, you know,' explained the canny warden tentatively.

David was still engaged in sorting aside some of the personal items which we had taken from Michael's pockets.

'Just going out to my car, warden—for our bottle of whisky—be right back,' I promised him.

Re-entering the warden's kitchen quarters I sauntered across to rejoin David. Setting the whisky bottle onto the

table I then turned my attention to the business of extracting a cigarette from a newly opened packet.

'Come and have a drink with us, warden. Leave the fire as it is—I'm sure it'll last all through the night.'

David sat gazing down at the small sleek metal object he held in his hand, contemplating an elegantly engraved letter 'M' which graced a corner on one side.

As I placed a cigarette between my lips he lightly depressed the electronic ignition button.

'A light, John?'

SHE WALKS ON DRY LAND

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

If eccentricity is a sign of greatness, then verily I, Charles Edward Devereux, Fourth Earl of Montcalm, must be among the greatest in the three kingdoms. During the length of a long life I have always been prone to follow that line of conduct that is least amenable to convention and thus brought down upon my unbowed head the unmerited disapproval of my contemporaries. But I have never understood why wealth and position should stop any man doing that which pleased him, so long as his conduct did not result in harm or discomfort to his fellow beings.

In the year of our Lord 1812, early on the morning of October 5th, being tired of the excesses practised at the Regent's Court, I ordered my body servant Patrick to saddle two horses, and after informing my people I would be absent for an unspecified period, departed for an unknown destination.

I travelled east, leaving London by way of the Strand, then proceeded into the county of Essex, determined to follow the coastline until a whim prompted me to do otherwise. Calling myself Charles Beverley (this being my mother's maiden name) I put up at various inns and places of entertainment and on the fifth day after my departure from London arrived at the small fishing village I will call Denham.

This was nothing more than a row of small cottages that seemed to be an extension of the old grey-stone church, plus one inn that bore the sign *The Limping Sailor* on a creaking board over its main doorway. I ordered Patrick to take charge of the horses and entered this establishment, half determined to spend a few days in this retreat, for I was much taken by its brooding atmosphere of isolation, the thudding music of restless waves and the sad dirge of wheeling gulls.

There was one saloon, if the single room furnished only by a long bar and a few crude benches can be so designated, and several men—mainly hard of feature and sombre of mien—greeted my entrance with the undisguised curiosity of their kind. A large, red-faced man who I assumed to be the landlord, knuckled his forehead (for even plainly dressed I could never be mistaken for other than a person of quality) and asked:

‘What be your pleasure, sir?’

I slapped a gold coin down upon the bar and smiled benignly.

‘A tankard of sack. Also let any present who would partake of my hospitality be served with what pleases them best.’

Instantly there was much movement of feet, a mass surge towards the bar and I became the centre of flattering attention, for the way to reach your yokel’s heart is through his gullet. When all were supplied with their needs and I had half-drained my pewter tankard, I broached the matter of accommodation.

‘Could you put me up for a day or so?’ I asked the landlord. ‘Two rooms and simple fare is all that will be required.’

To my surprise the fellow shook his head and an abrupt silence stilled tongues that had been loosened by my largesse.

‘This is a small house, sir, and I have no means of entertaining such a gentleman as yourself. Few travellers pass this way, you understand.’

Although when making my enquiry I was of two minds if I really wanted to stay in this miserable hovel, a direct refusal had the immediate result of arousing my ire. Neither was I appeased when those who had been partaking of my liberality withdrew and began muttering among themselves. I raised my voice and again addressed the landlord.

‘I would remind you that this is a place of public entertainment and you are compelled by law to provide accommodation for any traveller who requests it.’

The fellow rubbed his hands, then spread them wide in a gesture of apparent helplessness, even while I detected a gleam of fear in his small, deep-set eyes.

'I have no vacant room, sir, Ipswich is but a few miles inland'

'I have no mind to ride a few miles inland at this advanced hour. There must be at least two upper rooms. I will settle for one and my fellow can sleep on the floor.'

I watched the heavy face assume a sullen expression and my rage rose to a level that was out of all proportion to the ridiculous situation, but I am not accustomed to having my will thwarted. When he spoke again his voice was no longer respectful.

'There's no room and that's final. Be gone and ride where you will. But you'll no stay here.'

I struck him with my riding crop and he fell back, clutching a mighty gash on his forehead; but before the others could reach me I was covering them with my horse pistol, nigh choking with rage. The door flew open and there was Patrick, a towering figure with a blunderbuss clasped firmly in his great hands—and they slunk back like rats confronted by two savage dogs. My anger is a flame that burns fiercely for a short space of time, but soon fades when opposition to my will is overcome. When next I spoke my voice was gentle.

'Come, my friends, there is no reason for us to quarrel. Some nefarious activity doubtless makes you resent the presence of strangers. Smuggling perhaps. Do not worry on my account, for I can be both blind and deaf when I so wish. But understand this, I am determined to stay in this place for so long as the fancy takes me and it will ill become any man to say otherwise. Now, I care not if I spend the night in this inn or another, more accommodating abode, but some roof will provide shelter. I am prepared to be a generous guest, but a ferocious outcast. So—who is ready to be my host?'

An old man with stooped shoulders ventured to advance a few steps and after saluting me, proceeded to speak.

'Sir, I am Josiah Woodward, the elder of this law-abiding

community and humbly crave your indulgence when I say you do wrong to commit violence when no man's hand was raised against you. Fear for your safety, sir, forces us to be inhospitable, not evil doing. Come nightfall it bodes ill for any stranger found within the confines of this village and I implore you to ride from hence and give thanks to Almighty God that you do so with body and soul intact.'

I laughed softly for now I realized that here was one of those isolated communities where superstition bemused the minds of its inhabitants, although I was impressed by their mien and mode of speech, which would have done justice to many a Whitehall gallant. I lowered my pistol and said gently:

'Now I understand. You are trying to frighten me with some bogie that moans beyond tightly closed windows, or a demon horseman who comes galloping across the moonlit moor. Have no fear for my safety, my good fellow, I am more than a match for any adversary, be he from this world or the next.'

Their voices rose up and created a chorus of horrified rebuke and the landlord, who had by now somewhat recovered from my admonishing blow, crossed himself vigorously. The old man shook his head.

'It ill becomes you, sir, to treat with levity advice given by those who speak from bitter experience. We who live here have nothing to fear and if so inclined could take pleasure from watching your sinful pride crumble before the wind of abject terror. A year or so ago there came one like unto yourself, who refused to heed our well-intentioned warning, and now his bones lie rotting in the churchyard. Ask not why, sir, but get you gone with our blessing.'

I experienced a thrill of excitement, for here was a situation to guarantee some diversion, even though it more than probably had a mundane explanation. An ancient folk tale, embellished by imagination and retelling round winter fires, based perhaps on some actual event, the origins of which were now lost in the mists of time. I chuckled and said:

'But I insist on knowing why, old man. You cannot

expect a person of my standing to flee from a shadow I have yet to see, to say nothing of unsatisfied curiosity that would pester me for the rest of my life. What dreadful fate strikes down the stranger, but leaves the inhabitants unscathed?’

The old fellow positively glared at me.

‘It is doubtful if words of mine will do more than evoke scorn, but if so be your wish, I will tell you what I know, which is little, for there is no man living who can do more than repeat what his father told him, as indeed did his father before him. But you must accept that long ago, perhaps during the reign of him they now call Charles the martyr, there lived in this place a maiden called Elizabeth Coldwell. ’Tis said she was possessed of great beauty, with black hair and white skin and a face to tempt a man to sin.

‘A stranger came to these shores. One of noble birth, in a ship that anchored off Needles Point and he did what no fisherman, be he master of his own vessel or a humble caster of nets, had ever hoped to do. He enslaved her heart with fine promises and fulsome words. No one knew what took place on the sleek white ship. Maybe after satisfying his own lust, he gave her to the crew, or again perhaps she stumbled across some secret that threatened his safety and so was murdered. But one fact is certain. After his ship had sailed, her body was washed up on to the beach yonder, so mutilated, no man could look upon it unmoved.’

The old man paused, whether to regain his breath or reinforce his imagination, I could not determine, but I nodded and said:

‘Very sad. But I wager some variation of that tale is related in every inn along this coast. And now I suppose you will tell me her unhappy shade comes drifting over the rocks on a moonlit night and he who sees it will die within a year and a day.’

The old man shook his head sadly.

‘No, sir. We never see her from one year’s end to the next. But let a stranger spend one night within the boundaries of this village, then, sir—she comes up from the sea and walks on dry land.’

'For what purpose?' I enquired.

'To show him her face, sir. No man can look upon it without going mad—a singular madness, for he'll run screaming down to the sea and drown himself.'

I called back over one shoulder.

'Patrick, are you willing to risk your sanity for a sight of this lady? I'm thinking she'll have her hands full with the two of us.'

Patrick shrugged and spoke with the familiarity that had come into being over the years.

'If you had any sense you'd do what they say and ride out of here. But if stay you must, then so will I. And I can't see how any wraith can steal our sanity, seeing there's not a spoonful between us.'

I straightened up and put away my pistol.

'So, that's settled. Now in which house do I spend the night?'

The landlord growled like a wounded hound and pointed a shaking forefinger in my direction.

'We wash our hands of you and that black-visaged minion and may Elizabeth Coldwell drive you both to her sea-girt grave. But no man here will give you succour. There's an empty cottage at the far end of the street. Take that and hark you—no one will pay heed to your screams, save maybe to pray for your damned souls.'

'And food?' I asked. 'Surely you will not let us go mad on an empty stomach.'

He nodded, albeit reluctantly.

'Aye, there's victuals for the payment.'

The cottage was unfurnished and had clearly not been lived in for some time, thereby confirming my suspicion that the village was dying. In another ten years the entire place would be merely a collection of deserted houses, breeding dens for any number of wailing ghosts. Patrick had managed to acquire four blankets, how I did not enquire, and these he laid out on the floor, so that I at least could enjoy a modicum of comfort. The landlord had supplied two loaves, a slab of strong cheese and two bottles of wine

(at an exorbitant price) and this sparse fare blunted the edge of our appetites while we waited for something to happen.

'Well, Patrick,' I asked, 'do you think we'll pass a peaceful night, or will our inhospitable friends put on a show for our benefit?'

He laid the barrel of his blunderbuss over the sill of the open window and smiled grimly.

'There'll be a few more ghosts around if they try it on. But I'm thinking your lordship's as cracked as an old jug to play a game like this. You were flashing your gold around in there and that's enough reason for us to be quickly dispatched and our bodies thrown to the fishes. And I doubt if your pistol and old Betsy here would do more than account for a few.'

I reflected on his words then shook my head.

'No. They're law-abiding enough, just warped by superstitious fear. And this adventure is one after my own heart, for who can say if there may not be a basis of truth to the old fellow's story. Violent death may leave scars on the road of time.'

'Surely your lordship isn't really expecting a moaning ghost to come up from the sea?'

I pointed to the scene laid out before us.

'From such a setting one must expect anything—or nothing.'

A rough road separated the row of cottages from the beach; from there on there was nothing more than a mass of jutting rocks, over which the incoming tide rolled and retreated, the waves tinted with silver moonlight, while on both sides towering cliffs curved gently inwards to form a vast bay. To our right a long wooden pier had been erected and to this several fishing boats were moored, each one jogging up and down as the waves lapped their black hulls. The scene was bleak, but at the same time not without an element of wild beauty and I pondered on the possibility of building a small retreat on this isolated coast, a place to which I could escape when the mood took me.

Then a black, seething cloud bank came drifting high up

over the east cliff and veiled the face of the moon. I went back to my couch of blankets and yawned.

'Maybe we shall have to content ourselves with hearing the lady, not seeing her.'

Patrick lit a tall tallow candle and cast an uneasy glance at the open window.

'I'd be just as pleased if we did neither. If your lordship cares to sleep, I'll keep watch and maybe take a little walk outside. I'm mindful there's a back entrance to this place and I'd not put it past those spalpeens to send their ghost in through the back door.'

I uncorked a bottle and poured a generous measure into a tankard.

'Do what you please. But call out if you catch a glimpse of the vengeful lady. That's not a sight you must keep to yourself.'

I did not intend to sleep, but we had ridden far that day and the wine, though distasteful to the palate, was strong and not conducive to relentless vigilance. How long I slept I have no idea, but I was abruptly hurled back into complete consciousness by the hoarse scream of a man, surely one of the most terrifying sounds on earth. For a moment I sat perfectly still and stared blankly round the bare room, that now seemed to be filled with grotesque leaping shadows that were trying to put the candle out.

Then my head jerked round and there was the open window, a black square that refused to admit so much as a spark of light and I *knew*—knew with unquestioning certainty—that something—someone—was standing just beyond that darkness, looking in. And all the while that hoarse scream went on and on, gradually receding, accompanied by the crunch-crunch of pounding feet, until both sounds finally merged with the endless murmur of waves surging over rocks.

But I was wrapped in a mantle of fear that drained the last vestige of warmth from my body and I could only stare at the black screen that was the window, sick to my very soul, knowing that the mere sight of whatever was watching me would shatter my sanity and send me, like poor Patrick,

screaming down to the beach to seek oblivion in the restless sea.

The candle flickered and the shadows leapt up the walls, did a mad dance over the ceiling, then froze into terrifying immobility when the wind died and the world seemed to be holding its breath. I caught a suggestion of movement in the window-frame, before I closed my eyes and prayed that I might have the strength of will not to open them again until the danger had passed—if it ever did.

Then—she was there. A few feet to my left; an unseen presence that was as real as the floorboards beneath my trembling legs, the dim candlelight that flickered through my closed eyelids and the fear that held me in its icy grip. But even in the midst of my terror, I realized in some inexplicable way, that that which stood looking down at me was only a part of the being that had perished so long ago—the worse part. A personality fragment that derived some kind of obscene life from undying hate. The arrival of a stranger (or strangers), a disturbing pattern of fresh thought waves, was sufficient to energize something that was neither flesh nor spirit, but possibly formed from the essence of both.

There was a nigh overwhelming urge to open my eyes and satisfy an illogical curiosity. Like a man poised on the top of a high building, who says: 'Let me jump, it's the quickest way down,' so I toyed with the mad notion that to see would put an end to horrific conjecture. Might it not be better to go mad suddenly, than to sit for another eight or nine hours of darkness, knowing that something so dreadful it had sent poor, unimaginative Patrick shrieking down to the sea, was standing a bare two feet to my left, looking down at me.

For let me make one point clear—I knew its exact location, a rough idea of its shape and size and even the manner of its attire. I sensed the likeness of a young woman, some five feet six inches high, with long black hair and dressed in a torn, white gown. Only the face and eyes escaped me, but I realized that here was the crux of the matter. Poor Patrick had seen the face, maybe looked into

the eyes—and in an instant became a screaming madman.

After a while I managed to move an arm and felt strangely disappointed when no cold hand tried to restrain me. I digested a tiny scrap of knowledge. Quite possibly if I got up and walked it would just follow me—or retreat in front of me—but always careful to keep the face turned towards mine. Walk! Walk out of this room, out of the cottage and not stop until I had reached the confines of the village!

Then surely I would be beyond her jurisdiction. Once I had stepped over the village boundary, I might as well be in London or the wilds of Africa. But I would have to walk with closed eyes, knowing that stark horror accompanied me, and that a stumble or a moment's distraction could result in my seeing the indescribable.

I got up—very, very slowly—and for one moment sensed the face was at a level with my own, then lurched across the room, not daring to put my arms out, lest my hands touch something it was best not to think about. I blundered into a wall, edged my way along it until an open space told me I had reached the doorway, then stumbled out into the narrow passage.

Sound returned when I came to the front door. The sighing wind, the menacing murmur of waves breaking on the rock-girt shore, the distant hoot of an owl. I turned right and, determined now to retain full control of my senses, carefully lowered one foot before raising the other. But—oh, merciful God—it knew what I was about, for could I not sense it in front?—the face all but pressed against my own and once—once—there was the faint suggestion of a cold kiss on my lips, and the merest hint of hands being laid on my shoulders.

Then did I Charles Edward Devereux, Earl of Montcalm, who had often boasted that he feared neither man nor devil, scream out my terror and run with all speed that labouring heart and gasping lungs would permit; eyes tight shut, mouth gaping, unmindful of the brambles that tore at my hands and clothes, the rock that tripped, the low wall that had to be surmounted, for I had the ridiculous

notion that my very soul was in peril.

And she—she not it—whimpered like a frustrated child, clutched at my closed eyes with insubstantial hands and finally sent out a long, despairing cry.

Then I collapsed, rolled into a ditch and surrendered to the burning need to open my eyes, at that moment not caring if a dozen sanity-murdering faces were looking down at me, so long as I were permitted one last glimpse of the night sky. My head was below ground level and I could indeed see the sky where clouds were moving away, leaving the moon free to illuminate the surrounding countryside and turn the grey waves to sparkling silver.

After a while I found the courage to stand up and look back towards the row of cottages, and then to the rock-studded beach, and was just in time to see a white figure drift down to the shoreline, before dispersing into a cloud of fast retreating mist.

By luck—or God's mercy—I had stumbled across the village boundary and cheated Elizabeth Coldwell of her second victim.

I returned to the village next morning and was greeted (if that is the right word) by its inhabitants who appeared to view my continued existence as a major miracle. The old man laid a shaking hand on my arm as though to make sure I was still intact, then asked in a tremulous voice:

'How did you escape her, sir? Your man was discovered cold and stiff, but an hour since.'

'I closed my eyes,' I answered briefly. 'That which cannot be seen, can be endured. Just. Where have you put my servant?'

I was taken to an outhouse at the back of the inn and looked down upon all that remained of my friend and servant. His face was a mask of frozen terror. I gave the old man two gold coins.

'See that he gets a Christian burial.'

'That we will, sir. Within the hour, lest tonight he too walks on dry land.'

I collected the two horses and rode away, sadder and

wiser than when I came, and determined never again to venture forth into isolated places.

But it is an indisputable fact that even to this day, I cannot close my eyes without feeling there is something standing a few feet to my left watching me.

PULSING TERROR

INEVITABLE DOOM

**Pestilence and putrefaction,
escaping at last from its dank, earthy
grave in stories like**

THE ROCK GARDEN

**She looked into a face, half familiar,
yet horribly, incredibly different;
blackened as though polluted blood
flowed beneath the skin, and
blotched with hideous livid sores.**

**She knew she must not scream. He
had come to her wretched,
uncomprehending, wandering in a
strange dimension, desperately
afraid of losing her forever.**

**She knew with a strange certainty
that salvation lay only one way. She
must take that terrible hand in
hers . . .**