FONTANA

THE 17TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

By famous writers including STEPHEN KING, AGATHA CHRISTIE, JEROME K. JEROME – edited by R. CHETWYND-HAYES

THE SEVENTEENTH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

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INTRODUCTION

Having published fourteen books of my own, edited twenty-two collections of short stories, all dealing in some way with the supernatural; read voraciously every publication dealing with the subject that has fallen into my greedy hands; corresponded with, interviewed and visited ghost hunters; those who had reason to believe they were haunted; I must surely now – with all due modesty – be entitled to classify myself as an expert in this genre.

But – I am still not entirely certain what a ghost is.

According to my calculations there are three possibilities to choose from. A disembodied spirit. A personality residue. A time image. I have very grave doubts about the first, as to my knowledge no one has held a conversation with a ghost. I know all about Parson Rudall and *The Botathen Ghost*, having included the story in *Cornish Tales of Terror*, but that momentous event took place some three hundred years ago; the distant past is a foreign country, they speak a different language there. But of course I may be wrong and am quite willing to be convinced.

A personality residue? Maybe. A fragment of the ego that due to some pressure experienced during life, has managed to survive that holocaust we call death and for a while can manifest to certain people at certain times? This phenomenon would have a limited memory recall, brief periods of awareness, governed possibly by a dimly realized single emotion. I should imagine solitary people would be more inclined to leave this particular hair-raising morsel behind them, than those who had lived gregarious lives.

A time image is my favourite. Thought waves which have become impregnated in the woodwork, atmosphere, etc., and can be transformed into the likeness of their dead creator. I have often pondered on the possibility that our

descendants will be able to watch our antics on a kind of super television set. It is a sobering thought.

A mirror fulfils much the same purpose as a television set, in so far as it too can faithfully reproduce any number of actions portrayed by a performer. Which brings me to the first story in this book: *The Reaper's Image* by Stephen King. The world-famous author of *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *Salem's Lot* and other superb masterpieces, assures me that this story has not been published in Great Britain before; which must be regarded as a Fontana Ghost Book scoop. A nicely subtle slice of macabre that opens up more than one line of conjecture and is apt to put one off antique mirrors for life.

Dorothy K. Haynes also had a similar theme in mind when she wrote *Help the Railway Mission*, only this time the past is trapped in a museum built in the likeness of an old Victorian street. Regular readers of my anthologies may remember that Harold Lawlor used a not dissimilar plot in *The Silver Highway*, but his *pièce de résistance* was a Pope-Hartford motor car. Miss Haynes's is . . . never mind. Find out for yourself. But I am certain of one thing – being rich in the last century was fun – being poor was hell.

It is true to say I cut my literary teeth on the works of Jeffery Farnol. I still consider that *Black Bartlemy's Treasure* and its sequel *Martin Conisby's Vengeance* to be two of the finest historical novels in the English language. But of course I was not at that time aware that Mr Farnol had written some excellent ghost stories. *The Cupboard* is most certainly the best and really terrifying. I love Job the porter who has a unique way of expressing himself. For example: '*By goles! Of all the body-snatching raskell rogues yon's the body-snatchingest – burn 'im, inn'ards and out'ards!*'

Mary Elizabeth Counselman has been rightly acclaimed for over forty years for her stories of the supernatural, and one, *The Three Marked Pennies*, is now an acknowledged classic in its field. I have reluctantly not included it here, as it is not a ghost story, but instead chosen *The Shot-Tower Ghost*, a terrifying account of a wager kept from beyond the grave. I feel this is a superb illustration of a personality residue that is on nodding terms with a disembodied spirit.

After Dark by Tony Richards is an original story and as modern as Carnaby Street. From the first word the reader is drawn into the world of jazz bands, where girls wear Bogart tee-shirts and giggle at passers-by. I have no hesitation in saying that this is a brilliant story, told in a crisp, even elegant style. It is nice to know that even a saxophonist can get his own back, when he has been sent to an early grave by a crooked manager. Most certainly a disembodied spirit.

It is some time since I published a story by A. E. Ellis (*The Chapel Men* in the tenth Ghost Book) and I was beginning to wonder if Mr Ellis had become a ghost himself. But it would seem that he is very much alive, but still displaying a touching interest in those who have gone to the undiscovered country, from whose bourne it would appear travellers *do* return. There is no doubt in my mind that *Dead Man's Barn* is a very accurate account of a time image. There really can be no other explanation and I must congratulate the author on his keen perception. I am particularly drawn to the Rector who has the engaging habit of reciting comforting poems to himself.

O let no evil dreams be near,
Nor phantoms of the night appear.

The Passing of Edward by Richard Middleton is a prose poem and in my opinion a very beautiful one. A few weeks after completing this story Middleton committed suicide and if I may coin a phrase, it shows. Purple melancholy tints every word and the reader is drawn into a mind that is preparing to welcome death as a long-sought-after friend.

Daphne Froome has become a more or less permanent member of my small stable of new authors and those readers who enjoyed her *Christmas Entertainment* in the fifteenth Ghost Book will be delighted with *The Last Innings*. Well written, subtle and eerie. The bizarre gently intruding on the commonplace. A cricket match played against the background of a peaceful English summer afternoon, but Kay, seated in her deckchair, knows that something is dreadfully wrong. Surely all of us at some period in our lives, must ask that terrible question: What is reality? Most certainly ears

and eyes – on occasion – cannot be trusted to provide an answer.

I always try to include a humorous ghost story in all of my collections and on this occasion take pleasure in presenting *Christmas Eve in the Blue Chamber* by Jerome K. Jerome. There is an uncle who says: 'I don't want to make you fellows nervous,' in a peculiarly impressive, not to say blood-curdling, tone of voice: a statement that is more optimistic than accurate. He then goes on to say that the blue room is haunted by the ghost of a sinful man who once killed a Christmas carol singer with a lump of coal. He also seems to have disposed of an entire German band, a meritorious act for which he was never thanked. I classify this one as a disembodied spirit with good intentions.

Catherine's Angel by Heather Vineham is a clever little story with a nice twist in the tail. I cannot say much more about it without giving the game away, but it is on a par with *The Rock Garden* which can be found in the sixteenth Ghost Book. Mrs Vineham appears to have a genuine feeling for the past, an essential for the successful ghost story writer.

Agatha Christie is world famous for her murder mysteries, brilliantly worked out puzzles that the reader is invited to solve, while being misled by a multitude of red herrings. Possibly few of her fans are aware that she was capable of turning out a first-class ghost story. Mrs Christie clearly knew her ghostly business and does not miss out on a single trick. '*As the child was crossing the floor, he distinctly heard another pair of footsteps, as of someone following Geoffrey. Dragging footsteps, curiously painful they were.*'

This kind of thing is very disturbing and should not be thought about when one is alone in an empty house. Neither should one consider the implication of: '*The wind was howling in the chimney, but this was a separate sound – distinct, unmistakable: pitiful little heartbroken sobs.*'

A chilly morsel.

Roger Malisson has turned in some excellent stories over the years and I am pleased to learn that he has not lost his touch. *Welcombe Manor* is a television soap opera, or as the script editor is pleased to call it – a social drama. The reader gathers that it has enjoyed much the same popularity as that

accorded to *Coronation Street*, but the powers that be have decided to kill off its best loved character – Joey Siddons. It is then that the trouble starts. The author clearly has an extensive knowledge of actors and the intricacies of making a long-running television series; plus the ability to use that knowledge to full effect. The reader's attention is riveted from the first paragraph and is held until the really terrifying ending. Undoubtedly a rare example of a time image.

The Bed by Terry Tapp is very nasty. In fact this must be one of the most horrifying plots I have ever read – and I can give no greater praise than that. Imagine if you can a haunted bed and then put someone in it who cannot get out. If I tell you any more I will spoil your enjoyment (!), but accept my word – the prospect is very grim. Maybe the television company that featured *Welcombe Manor* might care to consider scripting *The Bed.* An exciting piece of human drama.

An Unsolved Mystery by E. Owens Blackburne is another oldie, written in 1886. Moreover it is purported to be true, a statement that does little to comfort a shivering reader. From the beginning we are left in no doubt as to what is in store for us.

> *Over all there hung a cloud of fear,*
> *A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,*
> *And said, as plain as whisper to the ear,*
> *'The house is haunted.'*

The Victorians were a tough lot. If I had witnessed half the goings-on that beset the Comyers family, there would have been a Hayes-shaped hole in the nearest window. But it was not until Mrs Comyers was struck down by a *serious nervous illness*, that the family decided to move out. Having said that I must admit it would be the experience of a lifetime to spend a night in such an establishment.

Then there is my very own *Which One?* This makes nonsense of everything I have written in the opening paragraphs of this introduction. I ask you to accept there is life after death and that one can hold a very lengthy conversation with a ghost. Where this plot came from I have

not the slightest idea, as I write blind, never knowing what my characters will get up to, and pound happily away on my typewriter, hoping the combination of fingers and brain will come up with something readable. Believe it or not, usually this slap-dash procedure works, although the end result varies considerably. It is possible the excitement of not knowing what is going to happen next keeps me going.

I close with a poem by Emily Brontë, *The Horrors of Sleep*. The author of *Wuthering Heights* was a mystic, one of those rare beings who are fully aware of a world that exists just beyond the frontiers of our lifetimes. *The Horrors of Sleep* could have been nothing less than an account of some intense psychic experience. Like Richard Middleton it would seem that this gifted, highly sensitive woman had a death wish that is stressed by her refusal to be treated by a doctor in her last illness.

So – sixteen chilling stories and one mystic poem, the work of seventeen authors, a few long in their graves, others but recently departed, the rest still with us and eagerly awaiting the reception of their latest efforts. Remember today's modern story is tomorrow's classic.

Happy shuddering.

R. Chetwynd-Hayes.

THE REAPER'S IMAGE

STEPHEN KING

'We moved it last year, and quite an operation it was, too,' Mr Carlin said as they mounted the stairs. 'Had to move it by hand, of course. No other way. We insured it against accident with Lloyd's before we even took it out of the case in the drawing-room. Only firm that would insure for the sum we had in mind.'

Spangler said nothing. The man was a fool. Johnson Spangler had learned a long time ago that the only way to talk to a fool was to ignore him.

'Insured it for a quarter of a million dollars,' Mr Carlin resumed when they reached the second-floor landing. His mouth quirked in a half-bitter, half-humorous line. 'And a pretty penny it cost, too.' He was a little man, not quite fat, with rimless glasses and a bald head that shone like a varnished volleyball. A suit of armour, guarding the mahogany shadows of the second-floor corridor, stared at them impassively.

It was a long corridor, and Spangler eyed the walls and hangings with a cool professional eye. Samuel Claggert had bought in copious quantities, but he had not bought well. Like so many of the self-made industry emperors of the late 1800s, he had been little more than a pawnshop rooter masquerading in collector's clothing, a connoisseur of canvas monstrosities, trashy novels and poetry collections in expensive cowhide bindings, and atrocious pieces of sculpture, all of which he considered Art.

Up here the walls were hung – festooned was perhaps a better word – with imitation Moroccan drapes, numberless (and, no doubt, anonymous) Madonnas holding numberless haloed babes while numberless angels flitted hither and thither in the background, grotesque scrolled candelabra,

and one monstrous and obscenely ornate chandelier surmounted by a salaciously grinning nymphet.

Of course the old pirate had come up with a few interesting items; the law of averages demanded it. And if the Samuel Claggert Memorial Private Museum (Guided Tours on the Hour – Admission $1.00 Adults, $.50 Children – nauseating) was 98 per cent blatant junk, there was always that other two per cent, things like the Coombs long rifle over the hearth in the kitchen, the strange little *camera obscura* in the parlour, and of course the –

'The DeIver looking-glass was removed after a rather unfortunate . . . incident,' Mr Carlin said abruptly, motivated apparently by a ghastly glaring portrait of no one in particular at the base of the next staircase. 'There have been others, harsh words, wild statements, but this was an attempt to actually destroy the mirror. The woman, a Miss Sandra Bates, came in with a rock in her pocket. Fortunately her aim was bad and she only cracked a corner of the case. The mirror was unharmed. The Bates girl had a brother – '

'No need to give me the dollar tour,' Spangler said quietly. 'I'm conversant with the history of the DeIver glass.'

'Fascinating, isn't it?' Carlin cast him an odd, oblique look. 'There was that English duchess in 1709 . . . and the Pennsylvania rug-merchant in 1746 . . . not to mention – '

'I'm conversant with the history,' Spangler repeated quietly. 'It's the workmanship I'm interested in. And then, of course, there's the question of authenticity – '

'Authenticity!' Mr Carlin chuckled, a dry sound, as if bones had stirred in the cupboard below the stairs. 'It's been examined by experts, Mr Spangler.'

'So was the Lemlier Stradivarius.'

'So true,' Mr Carlin said. 'But no Stradivarius ever had quite the . . . the unsettling effect of the DeIver glass.'

'Yes, quite,' Spangler said in his softly contemptuous voice. 'Quite.'

They climbed the third and fourth flights of stairs in silence. As they drew closer to the roof of the rambling structure, it became oppressively hot in the dark upper galleries. With the heat came a creeping stench that Spangler knew well, for he had spent all his adult life working in it –

the smell of long-dead flies in shadowy corners, of wet rot and creeping wood lice behind the plaster. The smell of age. It was a smell common only to museums and mausoleums. He imagined much the same smell might arise from the grave of a virginal young girl, forty years dead.

Up here the relics were piled helter-skelter in true junk-shop profusion; Mr Carlin led Spangler through a maze of statuary, frame-splintered portraits, pompous gold-plated birdcages, the dismembered skeleton of an ancient tandem bicycle. He led him to the far wall where a stepladder had been set up beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling. A dusty padlock hung from the trap.

Off to the left, an imitation Adonis stared at them pitilessly with blank pupil-less eyes. One arm was outstretched, and a yellow sign hung on the wrist which read: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE.

Mr Carlin produced a keyring from his jacket pocket, selected one, and mounted the stepladder. He paused on the third rung, his bald head gleaming faintly in the shadows. 'I don't like that mirror,' he said. 'I never did. I'm afraid to look into it. I'm afraid I might look into it one day and see... what the rest of them saw.'

'They saw nothing but themselves,' Spangler said.

Mr Carlin began to speak, stopped, shook his head, and fumbled above him, craning his neck to fit the key properly into the lock. 'Should be replaced,' he muttered. 'It's – damn!' The lock sprung suddenly and swung out of the hasp. Mr Carlin made a fumbling grab for it, and almost fell off the ladder. Spangler caught it deftly and looked up at him. He was clinging shakily to the top of the stepladder, face white in the brown semi-darkness.

'You *are* nervous about it, aren't you?' Spangler said in a mildly wondering tone.

Mr Carlin said nothing. He seemed paralysed.

'Come down,' Spangler said. 'Please.'

Carlin descended the ladder slowly, clinging to each rung like a man tottering over a bottomless chasm. When his feet touched the floor he began to babble, as if the floor contained some current that had turned him on, like an electric light.

'A quarter of a million,' he said. 'A quarter of a million dollars' worth of insurance to take that . . . *thing* from down there to up here. That goddamn *thing*. They had to rig a special block and tackle to get it into the gable store-room up there. And I was hoping – almost praying – that someone's fingers would be slippery . . . that the rope would be the wrong test . . . that the thing would fall and be shattered into a million pieces – '

'Facts,' Spangler said. 'Facts, Carlin. Number one: John DeIver was an English craftsman of Norman descent who made mirrors in what we call the Elizabethan period of England's history. He lived and died uneventfully. No pentacles scrawled on the floor for the housekeeper to rub out, no sulphur-smelling documents with a splotch of blood on the dotted line. Number two: His mirrors have become collectors' items due principally to fine craftsmanship and to the fact that a form of crystal was used that has a mildly magnifying and distorting effect upon the eye of the beholder – a rather distinctive trademark. Number three: Only five DeIvers remain in existence, to our present knowledge – two of them in America. They are priceless. Number four: This DeIver and one other that was destroyed in the London Blitz have gained a rather spurious reputation due largely to falsehood, exaggeration, and coincidence – '

'Number five,' Mr Carlin said. 'Supercilious bastard, aren't you?'

Spangler looked with mild detestation at the blind-eyed Adonis.

'I was guiding the tour that Sandra Bates's brother was a part of when he got his look into your precious mirror, Spangler. He was perhaps sixteen, part of a high-school group. I was going through the history of the glass and had just got to the part *you* would appreciate – extolling the flawless craftsmanship, the perfection of the glass itself, when the boy raised his hand. "But what about that black splotch in the upper left-hand corner?" he asked. "That looks like a mistake."

'And one of his friends asked him what he meant, so the Bates boy started to tell him, then stopped. He looked at the mirror very closely, pushing right up to the red velvet guard-

rope around the case – *then he looked behind him as if what he had seen had been the reflection of someone – of someone in black – standing at his shoulder.* "It looked like a man," he said. "But I couldn't see the face. It's gone now." And that was all.'

'Go on,' Spangler said. 'You're itching to tell me it was the Reaper – I believe that is the common explanation, isn't it? That occasional chosen people see the Reaper's image in the glass? Get it out of your system, man. Tell me about the horrific consequences and defy me to explain it. Was he later hit by a car? Jump out of a window? What?'

Mr Carlin chuckled a forlorn little chuckle. 'You should know better, Spangler. Haven't you told me twice that you are . . . ah . . . conversant with the history of the DeIver glass? There were no horrific consequences. There never have been. That's why the DeIver glass isn't Sunday supplementized like the Koh-i-Noor Diamond or the curse on King Tut's tomb. It's mundane compared to those. You think I'm a fool, don't you?'

'Yes,' Spangler said. 'Can we go up now?'

'Certainly,' Mr Carlin said passionlessly. He climbed the ladder and pushed the trapdoor. There was a clickety-clickety-bump as it was drawn up into the shadows by a counter-weight, and then Mr Carlin disappeared into the shadows. Spangler followed. The blind Adonis stared unknowingly after them.

The gable-room was explosively hot, lit only by one cobwebby, many-angled window that filtered the hard outside light into a dirty milky glow. The DeIver looking-glass was propped at an angle to the light, catching most of it and reflecting a pearly patch on to the far wall. It had been bolted securely into a wooden frame. Mr Carlin was not looking at it. Quite studiously not looking at it.

'You haven't even put a dust-cloth over it,' Spangler said, visibly angered for the first time.

'I think of it as an eye,' Mr Carlin said. His voice was still drained, perfectly empty. 'If it's left open, always open, perhaps it will go blind.'

Spangler paid no attention. He took off his jacket, folded

the buttons carefully in, and with infinite gentleness he wiped the dust from the convex surface of the glass itself. Then he stood back and looked at it.

It was genuine. There was no doubt about it, never had been, really. It was a perfect example of DeIver's particular genius. The cluttered room behind him, his own reflection, Carlin's half-turned figure – they were all clear, sharp, almost three-dimensional. The faint magnifying effect of the glass gave everything a slightly curved effect that added an almost fourth-dimensional distortion. It was –

His thought broke off, and he felt another wave of anger.

'Carlin.'

Carlin said nothing.

'Carlin, you damned fool, I thought you said that girl didn't harm the mirror.'

No answer.

Spangler stared at him icily in the glass. 'There is a piece of friction tape in the upper left-hand corner. Did she crack it? For God's sake, man, speak up!'

'You're seeing the Reaper,' Carlin said. His voice was deadly and without passion. 'There's no friction tape on the mirror. Put your hand over it . . . dear God . . .'

Spangler wrapped the upper sleeve of his coat carefully around his hand, reached out, and pressed it gently against the mirror. 'You see? Nothing supernatural. It's gone. My hand covers it.'

'Covers it? Can you feel the tape? Why don't you pull it off?'

Spangler took his hand away carefully and looked into the glass. Everything in it seemed a little more distorted; the room's odd angles seemed to yaw crazily as if on the verge of sliding off into some unseen eternity. There was no dark spot in the mirror. It was flawless. He felt a sudden unhealthy dread rise in him and despised himself for feeling it.

'It looked like him, didn't it?' Mr Carlin asked. His face was very pale, and he was looking directly at the floor. A muscle twitched spasmodically in his neck. 'Admit it, Spangler. It looked like a hooded figure standing behind you, didn't it?'

'It looked like friction tape masking a short crack,'

Spangler said very firmly. 'Nothing more, nothing less – '

'The Bates boy was very husky,' Carlin said rapidly. His words seemed to drop into the hot, still atmosphere like stones into a quarry full of sullen dark water. 'Like a football player. He was wearing a letter sweater and dark green chinos. We were halfway to the upper hall exhibits when – '

'The heat is making me feel ill,' Spangler said a little unsteadily. He had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his neck. His eyes searched the convex surface of the mirror in small, jerky movements.

'When he said he wanted a drink of water . . . a drink of water, for God's sake!'

Carlin turned and stared wildly at Spangler. 'How was I to know? How was I to know?'

'Is there a lavatory? I think I'm going to – '

'His sweater . . . I just caught a glimpse of his sweater going down the stairs . . . then . . .'

'– be sick.'

Carlin shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked at the floor again. 'Of course. Third door on your left, second floor, as you go towards the stairs.' He looked up appealingly. 'How was I to *know*?'

But Spangler had already stepped down on to the ladder. It rocked under his weight and for a moment Carlin thought – hoped – that he would fall. He didn't. Through the open square in the floor Carlin watched him descend, holding his mouth lightly with one hand.

'Spangler – ?'

But he was gone.

Carlin listened to his footfalls fade to echoes, then die away. When they were gone, he shivered violently. He tried to move his own feet to the trapdoor, but they were frozen. Just that last, hurried glimpse of the boy's sweater . . . God! . . .

It was as if huge invisible hands were pulling his head, forcing it up. Not wanting to look, Carlin stared into the glimmering depths of the DeIver looking-glass.

There was nothing there.

The room was reflected back to him faithfully in its glimmering confines. A snatch of a half-remembered

Tennyson poem occurred to him, and he muttered it aloud: '"I'm half-sick of shadows," said the Lady of Shallott . . .'

And still he could not look away, and the breathing stillness held him. Behind the mirror a moth-eaten buffalo head peered at him with flat obsidian eyes.

The boy had wanted a drink of water, and the fountain was in the first-floor lobby. He had gone downstairs and –

And had never come back.

Ever.

Anywhere.

Like the duchess who had paused after primping before her glass for a soirée and decided to go into the sitting-room for her pearls. Like the rug-merchant who had gone for a carriage ride and had left behind him only an empty carriage and two close-mouthed horses.

And the DeIver glass had been in New York from 1897 until 1920, had been there when Judge Crater –

Carlin stared as if hypnotized into the shallow depths of the mirror. Below, the blind-eyed Adonis kept watch.

He waited for Spangler much like the Bates family must have waited for their son, much like the duchess's coachman must have waited for his mistress to return from the sitting-room. He stared into the mirror and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

HELP THE RAILWAY MISSION

DOROTHY K. HAYNES

The museum at Tinnock was built in the likeness of an old Victorian street. It was craftily and skilfully done. Old lintels were let into new but artificially aged walls, concrete floors had patterned vinolay cobbles, and the neon lighting simulated daylight, a grey colourless daylight like an eternally suspended afternoon.

But the shops were the thing. When the windows were lit, the street darkened to the mirk of a winter evening, brightened by the comfort of gaslight and lamps. Peer in at the shop doors, and the lights in the glass globes were gas mantles, you could have sworn; but of course they were small electric bulbs; and the low, economical fires in the iron grates – remember the iron grates in wee shops? – were also electric, a red bulb, a flicker rotor, and a piece of crumpled fibreglass. The lighting set the mood, an elusive mood of nostalgia, expectation, sudden recognition . . . and something else, I don't know what it was. Something which gave me a pull at my stomach which was not entirely pleasant.

The first time I visited it was just after it had opened. Lorna and I, newly married, went along on a Saturday afternoon. We went into the strange dead afternoon light, and there were the shop windows, gay and brilliant – dim by modern standards, but the suspension of disbelief was so complete that they shone as brightly as they must have seemed to do at the beginning of the century.

The draper's was a prosperous, up-to-date shop; you could tell that by the large panes of glass, the vivid display of scarlet uniforms, the elegance of nipped-in waists and whorls of beads and embroidery. I looked down at Lorna, in her blue jeans and jacket. She suited tight trousers. Would she have looked any more feminine in a bustle and bow?

We couldn't go in. The shop was a sham, a window only;

nor could we enter the jeweller's, though we could look in and see the interior and almost hear the tick and scurry of clocks and watches, or the whirr and chime of time passing as slow pendulums waved it on. We went into the chemist's, though, with its gilt-labelled drawers, and proprietary labels from old advertisements. A stone jar marked LEECHES stood on a shelf, and there were nasty little powders in dusty packets . . .

The grocer's was more cheerful. Here was a great treacle barrel with a jug beneath it, and black and gold canisters, and brass scales on the counter. Inside, people were moving and exclaiming, lifting up odds and ends as if they were greeting long-lost friends.

'Do you mind Zebo?'

'Oh, *yes*! My mother used to have a tin in the cupboard, with her blacklead brushes and emery paper . . .'

'Here's Monkey Brand!'

'My, I don't know when I last saw . . .'

'I'll bring my mother next time,' I said. 'She'll get more out of this than me.'

'Your granny, more like,' said Lorna. 'Fancy living like that, everything to do by hand. It's a wonder they'd any time to themselves.'

'I think,' said a very smart lady with grey hair, 'we'd more time than you have nowadays. The days seemed longer; time went more slowly. Or maybe it just seems better for being farther away . . .'

That's what struck me about all the elderly people there. They were so eager to get back. They yearned over the old irons in the ironmonger's shop, the packets of pins in the draper's, the magazines on show in the printing shop. I had a look at them, and shuddered; deathbed scenes, chapter-headings with wreathed flowers, moral exhortations . . . Lorna and I walked back along the street, past the Bank where an old couple were enthusing over the linoleum square on the floor, past the doors with their polished knockers and nameplates. 'Skinner and Bone, Notaries', and 'The Misses Annand, Dressmakers'.

'You'd think they were real, wouldn't you?' said Lorna; and then we were outside, dazzled by the sun, and somehow

relieved to be back in the present. There was nothing there that I actually remembered; but I had the peculiar feeling that there was much I had been glad to forget.

Next time I went to Tinnock was in winter. It was my mother's birthday, and, choosing her card and present, I realised that she was getting on. She had married late, and she was over forty when I was born. That would make her . . . well, never mind. She was old enough to look forward to a visit more than to a present. I decided to take her to Tinnock to see the museum.

It was quiet, out of season, but the museum was open, sparsely heated, but with the shops all lit as usual. Mother's eyebrows went up as we went in the door, and she gasped a little. I hadn't told her the kind of place we were visiting, and I think she had expected a suite of polished rooms with ticketed exhibits in sealed glass cases.

If she was surprised at the revelation, an authentic-looking street *inside* a building, I was more than surprised at her reaction. She seemed to fit into the time and the environment with something more than memory. The grocer's sent her into ecstasies, the old enamel signs on the wall, Van Houten's Cocoa, Mazawattee Tea, and the dark varnished wall covering – what was it called – Lyncrusta? There was a sort of wrought-iron screen with a ledger behind it, and she remembered the scrapy pens and pink blotting paper that went along with it. 'I used to think we got groceries for nothing, but it was all written down, and we paid every week. They made up the books in there . . .' There was a hungry, remembering look about her.

'Not *there*, Mother. You didn't live in Tinnock.'

'I know. I'm not daft, son!' She sounded irritated, but she looked confused, just the same. 'It was just that – there must have been wee shops like this all over . . .'

The chemist's shop fascinated her too. 'Fancy. Scott's Emulsion! I hated it. And Steedman's Powders . . . my mother dosed me every Friday to "cool my blood". She gave me jam to take away the taste – eugh!' She shuddered, and I laughed. I didn't know I'd had a hot-blooded mother.

We passed the Solicitor's, and the door with the dress-

makers' nameplate. 'No, you can't go in there,' I said, as she put out her hand. 'It's just a door.'

'No, it isn't.' She lifted the heavy knocker, and hammered out a brisk 'V' signal. Amused, but exasperated, I looked round again. For a woman of her age, my mother got up to some terribly juvenile tricks.

But the door opened. A grey head peeped out, straight grey hair parted in the middle and dragged into a bun. 'Come in,' said a quiet, resigned voice.

My mother went in politely, and just a little patronisingly. As for me, I was the one now to be confused. My first thought was that the museum was really going to town on authenticity. Not only were the exhibits spot on, but the staff were dressed in character. And then it struck me that this was not one of the staff, nor was it a museum room. The two old ladies – there was another sitting by the fire – lived there, and carried on their trade.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I thought – '

But my mother was not put out at all. 'And how are you keeping, Annie?'

'Oh, we can't complain. We cannie complain.' She smoothed her hands over her long apron, and I saw that she had a tape measure round her neck.

'And Mary?'

'Just the same. She manages up, part of the day. Here's Ruth to see you, Mary.'

The other old lady looked up. She was very like her sister, but softer looking, more frail. She seemed to feel the cold, and after she had nodded she leaned forward again to the fire, her feet on the steel fender, her hands stretched out to coals smoking blackly and without heat. Weakly, she reached for a poker and raked between the bars.

'A bit more coal, Annie,' she murmured. *For the visitors*, her tone implied.

'Yes. Well . . .' Reluctantly, Annie lifted a lump or two from the scuttle with enormous iron tongs. I was fascinated. What a bother, what a *mess*, for so little result! No wonder the women in the grocer's shop had gone on so much about blacklead! There were so many surfaces to be polished, doors and bars and trivets, a swee with an iron kettle, and an

assortment of heavy ironmongery cluttered round the fender. Every movement of the coals or the poker brought more dust to dull the polish; and yet the polish was not so bright as I guessed it could have been. Either the sisters hadn't the energy – or the time.

'You'll take a cup of tea . . .?'

'Well . . .'

That was my mother again. I didn't want to stay. There was something about the room that depressed me; but mother sat down on a hard chair, the kettle was swung over the fire, and Miss Annie fiddled about with cups and saucers and lifted the kettle lid – Heavens, she'll let smoke in, I thought – and then muttered something about slipping out to the shops. She took a black cloak from a hook on the door, pinned on an enormous blue tammy, and went teetering out into the dark afternoon.

'She's not needing to get anything for us,' said my mother belatedly.

Mary mumbled something about not having had time to bake.

'You're busy, then?'

'Oh yes. Annie does it all nowadays.' She coughed, and sighed, and poked the fire under the kettle. 'We're very fortunate, taking all things together. Very fortunate.'

I didn't think they were fortunate at all. I had never seen such a depressing room. The gas hissed in its yellow mantle – real gas, this time – and a paraffin lamp stood on the sill, for emergencies, I supposed. Even with the lamplight added, the room would have been dull. There was a rag rug on the floor, navy blue, and in the corner was the sewing machine, with something black under the needle. The brightest corner was where the dresser took up more than its fair share of space, a dresser crammed with so many dishes you could hardly see the shelves. Cups, saucers, teapots, every monstrosity of Victoriana was there; and on the extreme edge, a wooden collecting box with a picture of an engine on it. 'Help the Railway Mission,' it said.

The lid of the kettle lifted, and water poured into the fire and sent up a stoury stream. 'Oops-a-daisy!' said my mother, swinging the swee aside, and in that moment the other Miss

Annand came in with scones and crumpets in a paper bag. She put the odd ha'pence from her purse into the collecting box, and put the teabread on to two plates.

'You shouldn't have bothered,' said my mother.

'Oh, but we're glad to. We like visitors. It makes the days shorter.'

'The days seemed longer.' Who was it had said that . . . ?

With the best will in the world, it was a meagre meal. The two old ladies tried to be hospitable, but you could see it was a strain. Something was dragging them down, Mary's health, or Annie's responsibilities, or merely the general atmosphere of the house. How in the world did Miss Annand find customers, when there were gay and cheap clothes in the chain stores and boutiques? She didn't charge much, of course. There was an account book lying open nearby, and she seemed to work for next to nothing; in old money, too. That was perfectly in keeping. I wondered if she'd ever get round to metrication.

But whatever she charged, her clients must belong to an older generation. Older than my mother. *She* likes bright colours, and she's up to date in her tastes. She seemed quite at home, though, with the Misses Annand. When tea was over she excused herself graciously, and I let my breath out in a loud sigh when the door closed behind us.

'Well!' she said, with a little laugh of appreciation, 'that was a lovely surprise. Come on and I'll treat you to tea at the café. We might as well make a day of it.'

'Tea? But – '

'Don't argue, Jim. It's my birthday, remember.'

I gave in. My mother loves having her tea out – and neither of us had eaten much in that dreary little kitchen.

Over our tea I tried to clear up some of the things that had been puzzling me.

'Mum – I didn't know you knew those two old ladies.'

'What ladies?' She selected a fern cake, and poured herself another cup.

'You know. The Misses Annand. The dressmakers.'

She stared at me.

'*You* know,' I said, exasperated because I was worried in

case she was growing old and forgetful. 'In the museum. Annie and Mary.'

She laid down her cup and frowned, her head on one side. 'You're getting all mixed up, son. You've heard me talk about your Aunt Annie and your Aunt Mary. And you know my own name was Annand.'

'Yes but – those two – they weren't – '

'*What* two?'

Half angry, half worried, I reminded her of what she shouldn't – couldn't – have forgotten, and all the time she kept her eyes on me, her face growing white.

'Son, I don't know what's got into you, this last half-hour, but – what you're saying, all this about the two sisters – it's all true. But not this afternoon. Never this afternoon!'

'We went – '

'You wouldn't remember your two aunties. They were a lot older than me. Your grandpa worked on the railway, and he was killed when we were quite young. When Mother died not long after – she'd never been strong – the two girls were left on their own. Or the three of us, I should say. I was a good bit younger, and I didn't have any responsibility.'

'Do you remember them dying? Your parents?'

'Not really. All I can remember was the room, all cluttered with dishes and dresses, and the black fire that never seemed to warm the place, and the sewing machine going all the time – I hated that machine, and I hated my sisters for never stopping, never playing, never enjoying themselves – '

'That's what it was like,' I said. 'Dreary and miserable . . . and those Victorian dishes on the dresser, and that big tammy on the back of the door – '

She stared, her face grey. 'How did you know?'

'And the collecting box,' I went on. 'The Railway Mission.'

'That's right. I hated it too. If they'd just once spent something on fun, just once enjoyed themselves . . . but every ha'penny they could spare went into that damned mission box. As soon as it was emptied, they filled it up again, all those hard-earned ha'pennies . . .' She stirred her cold tea, shame in her face. 'And then Mary took ill. Consumption. I

hated her for that too. And yet she'd worn herself out, working for me – '

'Well, if you were too young – '

'I cleared out,' she said. 'As soon as I left school, I went away. I just left them on their own. I couldn't *stand* their life.'

'Mum,' I said, afraid she was going to cry, 'those women we visited – they've upset you. You're mixing them up – '

'We didn't visit anybody,' she snapped. 'And stop acting the fool. You've trapped me into saying too much already.'

So we went back again to the museum, to iron it all out.

There was no room. Of *course*, said my mother, there was no room. The door with the brass knocker gave on to an outside wall, and the owner of the museum told us he'd found the nameplate in a junk shop.

We didn't tell him about the Misses Annand; nor did I tell Lorna. After all, the dressmakers were my mother's ghosts, not mine, though I was the one who had to see them.

Which is why I haven't been back since.

THE CUPBOARD

JEFFERY FARNOL

Among all the tenants of Clifford's Inn none was more highly esteemed than Mr John Jarvey, Attorney-at-Law. His clients, as the case might be, confided their woes to him unreservedly, depended with boundless faith upon his astuteness to extricate them from their difficulties, and respected him, each and all, for his eminent and approved worth. As for Mr Jarvey himself, tall and neat of person, kindly and unobtrusive of manner, he seemed to radiate a mild benevolence, from the crisp curls of his precise wig to the broad buckles of his trim shoes; in a word, Mr Jarvey was all that a highly respected Attorney-at-Law could possibly attain unto.

Even Job, the gate porter (whose salutations were in exact ratio to his estimation of the standing and condition of the various residents), would lift knobby fingers to the brim of his hat with gesture slow and unspeakably respectful, while Tom, the bed-maker, a cheery soul, given alternately to whistling and sucking at a noxious clay pipe, checked the one and left the other outside when duty summoned him within the top-floor chambers of Number —, which was Mr Jarvey's abode; and Christopher, the bootblack, who plied his trade within the shadow of Temple Bar, with Mr Jarvey's leg before him and Mr Jarvey's comfortable, kindly voice in his ears, scrubbed and rubbed with a gusto to lend worthy Mr Jarvey's shoes an added sheen.

Such, then, was Mr John Jarvey, Attorney-at-Law, of Number —, Clifford's Inn.

Now it was upon a certain blusterous and rainy December night towards eleven of the clock, that Job, the gate porter, nodding comfortably over the fire within his lodge, was aroused by a loud and imperious rapping on the outer door. Sighing, Job sat up and, having paused awhile to blink at the

cosy fire and murmur a plaintive curse or so upon his disturber, got slowly to his feet as the summons was repeated and, stepping forth of his lodge, proceeded to draw bolt and bar, and open the gate.

A tall figure, in a long, rain-sodden, many-caped riding-coat and wide-eaved hat – this much he saw by aid of the dim lamp that flickered in the fitful wind-gusts.

'Mr John Jarvey?' enquired a hoarse voice, though somewhat indistinct by reason of upturned coat-collar and voluminous muffler.

''Oo?' demanded Job aggressively, and squaring his elbows.

The stranger raised a large hand to loosen the shawl about his mouth and chin, and Job noticed a small, plain gold ring that gleamed upon the little finger of this hand.

'I said Mr John Jarvey. He lives here still?'

'Sure-ly!' nodded Job. 'Five and twenty year to my knowin'! But if you be come on bizness you be over-late! Mr Jarvey never sees nobody arter six o'clock, nohow. Never did – never will, makes it a rule, 'e do.'

'And he lives here – at Number —, I think?'

'Ay, Number —, top floor as ever was, but if you be come on bizness it aren't no manner o' good you – Lord love me!' gasped Job as, swept aside by a long arm, he staggered, and watched the tall figure flit past and vanish in the swirling, gusty darkness of the Inn. For a moment Job meditated pursuit, but, thinking better of it, shook his head and proceeded to bolt and bar the gate.

'By goles!' said he, addressing the gusty dark. 'Of all the body-snatching raskell rogues yon's the body-snatchingest – burn 'im, inn'ards and out'ards!'

With which malediction Job got back to fire and arm-chair and promptly fell a-dozing, like the watchman he was.

Meantime the stranger, with head bowed to the lashing rain, slipped and stumbled over the uneven pavement, blundered into iron railings, fell foul of unsuspected corners and, often pausing to peer about him in the gloom, found his way at last to the dim-lit doorway of Number — and stood to read,

among divers others, the name of John Jarvey, Attorney-at-Law. He seemed to find some subtle fascination in the name, for he stood there with the rain running off him while he read it over and over again, speaking the words to himself in a soft, sibilant whisper, suggestive of clenched teeth: 'John Jarvey, Attorney-at-Law!' while his hands (buried in the deep side-pockets of his coat hitherto) began to fumble with the muffler that swathed throat and chin, to loosen the buttons of his caped coat, and his right hand, gliding into his breast, seemed to touch and caress something that lay hidden there. Thus stood he, peering from the shadow of his hat and whispering to himself so long that the rain, dripping from his garments, formed small, evil-looking pools on the dingy floor.

Suddenly he turned and, with left hand outstretched and groping in the air before him, and right hand hidden in his bosom, began to climb the dark stair.

He mounted slowly and very softly, and so at last reached the topmost landing, where burned a lantern whose feeble light showed a door whereon was painted the name:

MR JOHN JARVEY

Clenching his fist the visitor struck this name three resounding blows, tried the latch, found the door unlocked and, flinging it wide, snatched off his hat and stared upon the man, who, just risen from the elbow-chair beside the blazing fire, stood staring back at him.

And surely, surely neither Job, the porter, nor Tom, the bed-maker, nor any of his many clients, would have recognized the worthy and estimable Mr John Jarvey in this grey-visaged, shaking wretch who wiped the sweat from furrowed brow with nerveless fingers and peered at the intruder in such wide-eyed, speechless terror.

'Aha!' said the stranger, flinging off his sodden coat. 'Aha, John – though twenty years are apt to change a man, I see you remember me. Ay, I've been buried – damn you! Buried for nigh twenty years, John, while you – you that sent me to it, prospered and grew fat – curse you! But the grave has given up the dead, and I'm alive again, John! And a live man

has appetites – I have, many and raging! So here come I, John, freed from the hell you sent me to.'

'I never did, Maurice, no, not I – never – never – '

'So here come I, John, hasting you-wards to supply all I lack – my every need. For I mean to live, John, live on you, by you, with you. I mean to make up for all the wasted years. I have many needs, and every day these needs shall grow.'

Mr Jarvey's deep-set eyes, usually so keen and steady, flickered oddly, his glance wandered, his hands fluttered vaguely.

'I – I am not a rich man – indeed no, Maurice. What would you have of me?'

'All you possess – and then more! Your money, your friends, your honour, your cursed self-complacency, your life, your very soul. My wants are infinite.'

'If,' said Mr Jarvey, in the same strange, hesitant fashion, 'if you will be a little reasonable, Maurice, if you'd be – a little reasonable – if you only would – '

'Bah!' cried the other, seating himself in Mr Jarvey's cosy elbow-chair and stretching his long legs to the blaze. 'Still the same snivelling coward! She called you coward twenty-odd years ago, and so she might again were she here and alive. But she's dead, John, dead and forgot by all save you and me. And, being dead, should her ghost haunt your chambers tonight and behold you with her spirit-eyes, shivering and sweating where you stand, she'd name you "coward" again!'

From ashen white to burning red, from burning red to ashen white, and upon his pallid cheek a line of sweat that glittered in the candlelight, with hands clenched to sudden, quivering fists, and head bowed between his shoulders, Mr Jarvey stood and listened, but under drawn brows his eyes, vague no longer, fixed themselves momentarily on the thin, aquiline face opposite, eyes, these, bright with more than their wonted keenness ere they were hidden beneath sudden, down-drooping lids.

'Her – ghost?' he mumbled indistinctly, his glance wandering again. 'Is – she – dead, indeed?'

'Years ago, John, and with bitter curses on your memory! Here's her ring – you'll remember it, I'm sure,' and the stranger showed a small, battered gold ring upon his little

finger, then reaching out he took up a glass that steamed aromatically on the hob.

'Aha,' said he, 'what's here, John?'

'My night-cap, Maurice,' answered Mr Jarvey, his roving gaze now upon the worn carpet beneath his slippered feet – 'rum – hot water – sugar and a slice of lemon. I – I didn't know she was dead, Maurice!'

'Ay, she's dead – and gone, like your rum and water,' saying which the speaker emptied the glass and set it down with a crash.

'Dead?' murmured Mr Jarvey, blinking down at the empty glass. 'Dead? Poor soul!'

'Damned hypocrite!' cried the intruder, rising so suddenly and with so wild a gesture that his foot struck the iron fender, dislodging the poker; and Mr Jarvey, starting to the clatter of its fall, stood with bowed head, staring down where it lay gleaming in the firelight.

'Pah!' exclaimed the other, viewing his immobile figure in pallid disgust. 'You were always a repulsive thing, Jarvey! How infinitely loathly you'll be when you're dead!'

'Pray,' said Mr Jarvey heavily, and without removing the fixity of his regard, 'pray when – did she – die?'

''Tis no matter for you – enough of it! I'm hungry – feed me, and while I eat I will tell you how I propose to make you the means of life to me henceforth, how you shall make up to me in some small measure for all those years of hell!'

'You will – blackmail me – Maurice?'

'To your last farthing, John, to the uttermost drop of your blood!'

'And if I – seek the shelter – of the law?'

'You dare not! And tonight you shall sign a confession!'

'And if I – refuse, Maurice?'

'This!'

Mr Jarvey slowly raised his eyes to the pistol half-drawn from the breast of the threadbare coat.

'You would murder me then, Maurice?'

'Joyfully, if need be. But now I'm hungry, and you keep a well-filled cupboard yonder, I'll warrant!'

'Cupboard?' murmured Mr Jarvey. 'Cupboard – well-filled? Ay, to be sure!'

And turning, he glanced at the wide cupboard that stood against the opposite wall, a solid and somewhat singular cupboard this, in that, at some dim period, it had been crowned with a deep cornice, the upper moulding of which had been wedged and firm-fixed to the ceiling; and it was upon this upper part, that is to say, between the true top of the cupboard proper and the ceiling, that Mr Jarvey's gaze was turned as he crossed the room obedient to his visitor's command.

Very soon he had set forth such edibles as he possessed, together with a bottle of wine, and, standing beside the hearth again, chin on breast, watched while his guest plied knife and fork.

'And you – tell me – Maurice,' said he at last, speaking in the same hesitant manner and with his gaze now upon the gleaming poker, 'you tell me that – you – would – murder me?'

'Ay, I would, John – like the vermin you are. But you will be infinitely more useful to me alive. By means of you I shall feed full, lie soft, and enjoy such of life as remains for me – the uttermost.'

'And I,' said Mr Jarvey, turning to stare up at the cupboard with a strange, new interest, 'I must slave henceforth for your pleasure, Maurice?'

'Precisely, John!'

'An evil destiny, Maurice!'

And here Mr Jarvey's glance, roving from his guest's lank form to the top of the cupboard, took on a keen and speculative intensity.

'Your sin hath found you out, John, and come home to roost!'

'A youthful indiscretion, Maurice!'

'That killed a woman and sent a man to twenty years of hell! But that is past, John, and the present being now, you shall fill me another glass of your very excellent wine.'

Mr Jarvey, having dutifully refilled the glass, took up his station by the hearth again, while his guest, holding up the wine to the light of the candles, nodded over it, smiling grimly:

'Twenty years of hell and degradation – a woman's life!

Ha, John, I drink to you – here's misery for you in life and damnation in death!'

The speaker nodded again and, sinking back luxuriously in the cushioned chair, raised his glass to his lips.

Then, swift and sudden and very silent, Mr Jarvey stooped, and his twitching fingers closed tight upon that heavy, be-polished, gleaming poker.

II

Job, the night-watchman, opening slumberous eyes, shivered and cursed and, crouching above his fire, stirred it to a blaze, but, conscious of a chill breath, turned to behold the door of his lodge opening softly and slowly, wider and wider, until he might behold a dim figure standing without, a tall figure clad in a rain-sodden, many-caped riding-coat and a shadowy wide-eaved hat.

'Gate – ho – gate!' said a hoarse voice, indistinct by reason of upturned collar and muffling shawl.

Very slowly the unwilling Job arose, scowling, and stepped forth into a night of gusty wind and rain.

'Look 'ee now, my master,' he growled, slowly drawing bolt and bar, 'wi' all respecks doo from one as ain't a genelman, an' don't wanter be, to one as is or oughter be, what I means ter say is – don't 'ee come no more o' them jostlings, pushings, nor yet shovings, lest, as 'twixt man an' man, I should be drawed ter belt ye one for a body-snatchin' thief an' rogue, d'ye see!'

Hereupon the door swung wide and, with never a word or look, the tall figure flitted away into the driving rain and was swallowed in the dark.

III

'Come in!' cried Mr Jarvey, sitting up in bed and straightening his night-cap. 'Come in, Tom – Lord bless me, Tom. What is it then? . . . Come in!'

Obedient to this summons, the door opened to admit a

shock of red hair with two round eyes below that rolled themselves in gruesome manner.

'Lord love 'ee, Mr Jarvey, sir,' quoth Tom. 'Good mornin' to 'ee, I'm sure, but Lord bless 'ee – an' you a-layin' there a-sleepin' so innercent as babes an' lambs, an' it a-moanin an' a-groanin' an' carryin' on as do fair make me flesh creep, sir – ay, creep an' likewise crawl – '

'Tom,' sighed Mr Jarvey gently, 'Tom, I fear you've been drinking!'

'Never a blessed spot, sir. S'elp me, Mr Jarvey, sir, not one, never so much as – O Lord, theer it be at it again – d'ye 'ear it, sir, don't 'ee? 'Ark to it!'

So saying, Tom edged himself suddenly into the bedroom but, with terror-stricken face, turned over his shoulder to peer into the chamber behind him as, dull and soft and low, there came a sound inarticulate and difficult to define, a groaning murmur that seemed to swell upon the air and was gone again. Mr Jarvey's hands were clenched upon the bedclothes, the tassel of his night-cap quivered strangely, but when he spoke his voice was clear and even, and full of benignant reproof:

'Tom, you are drunk, beyond question.'

'Not me, sir – no! Take me Bible oath on't, I will! Sober as a howl I be, sir. But you 'eard it a-groanin' an' moanin' ghastly-like; you 'eard it, Mr Jarvey, sir?'

'Nonsense, Thomas. Heard what? Speak plain!'

'It were a grewgious, gloopy noise, sir – like a stranglin' cat or a dog in a – there! Oh love me, there 'tis again, sir! Listen 'ow it dithers like a phanitom in a churchyard, like a – '

Tom's voice ended in a hoarse gasp, for somewhere in the air about them, there seemed a vague stir and rustle, a scutter of faint movement, lost in a fitful, whining murmur. Tom was upon his knees, cowering against the bed, his head half-buried in the counterpane: thus Mr Jarvey's fingers, chancing to come upon his shock of hair, tweaked it sharply, albeit he spoke in the same benignantly indulgent tone:

'Tom-fool, you are a drunken fool and a fanciful fool. Have done rolling your eyes and go order my breakfast – a rasher of ham, Tom, and two eggs! Tell Mrs Valpy I found

the coffee over-weak yesterday and the ham cindery. Off with you, Tom, and bring my breakfast in half an hour.'

Obediently Tom rose and, heartened by Mr Jarvey's urbane serenity, shook himself together, pulled a wisp of hair, made a leg and hurried off on his comfortably commonplace errand.

Left alone, Mr Jarvey sat up in bed, and, tearing off his night-cap, sat twisting it in restless hands. Then all at once, he was out of bed and, creeping on naked feet, came where he might behold that cupboard; very still he stood there, save for the restless hands of him that wrenched and twisted at his night-cap, while he stared up at a crack that ran along the cornice with eyes of dreadful expectancy. Suddenly, dropping the night-cap and setting both hands upon his ears, he backed away, but with his gaze fixed ever in the one direction until, reaching his bedchamber, he clapped to the door and locked it.

When, in due season, Tom returned with the breakfast he found Mr Jarvey shaved and dressed, as serene and precise as usual, from the crisp curls of his trim wig to the buckles of his shoes.

But as he ate his breakfast the cupboard seemed to obtrude itself on his notice more and more, so that he took to watching it furtively, and seemed almost unwilling to glance otherwhere. Even when he sat giving Tom the usual precise directions for dinner, served always, winter and summer, at six o'clock, his look would go wandering in the one direction, so that it seemed to him at last that the keyholes of the two doors stared back at him like small, malevolent eyes.

'A – steak, Tom – yes, a steak with – ah, yes – mushrooms – and underdone, Thomas. And a pint of claret – nay – burgundy: 'tis richer and more comforting, Tom – burgundy – '

'Very good, sir!' answered Tom; and now, even as the clock of St Clement Danes chimed the hour of nine, he tendered Mr Jarvey his hat and cane, according to immemorial custom. But, to Tom's gasping astonishment, Mr Jarvey waved them aside:

'Not yet, Tom, not yet!' said he. 'I've a letter to write a – ah – yes, a letter to be sure – the office shall wait – and – ah –

Tom – I am thinking – yes, seriously considering – taking up – smoking.'

'What – you, Mr Jarvey, sir – Lord love me!'

'Why not, Thomas? It is a very innocent vice, sure?'

'Why, so it be, sir, and comforts a man astonishin'!'

'To be sure! Now what tobacco do you use, Tom?'

'Negro-'ead, sir.'

'Is it a – good – strong tobacco?'

'Fairish, sir.'

'What is a *very* strong tobacco, Tom?'

'Why, theer's black twist for one, sir. My grandmother smokes it and fair reeks, she do. 'Oly powers, she do so, sir!'

'Black twist, Tom – to be sure. You may go, Thomas – and mind, a steak – underdone, with mushrooms.'

When Tom had departed, Mr Jarvey, taking hat and cane, crossed to the door, but, going thither, whirled suddenly about to look at the cupboard, and, sinking into a chair, remained to stare at it until the two keyholes seemed to blink themselves at him, one after the other, whereupon he stirred and, shifting his gaze with an effort, rose to his feet and, taking hat and cane, glanced once more at the cupboard and began to retreat from it, walking backwards. Reaching the door he leaned there and nodded his head:

'Black twist!' said he, 'burned in the fire-shovel!'

Then, groping behind him, he found and lifted the latch and, backing swiftly out, clapped to the door and hasted down the winding stair.

IV

'It were jest a fortnight agone this here very night, Job!' exclaimed Tom, the bed-maker, spitting thoughtfully into the fire.

'An' tonight be Christmas Heve, Tom.'

'As ever was, Job, an' 'twere jest two weeks agone, an' mark that. An' I know, becos' that very day I 'ad noo-painted the gate into Fetter Lane an' some raskell 'ad clomb over an' smeared all the paint off, consequently I 'ad to paint it over again. Two weeks tonight, Job, an' Mr

Jarvey never the same man since! Changed 'e be, ah – an' changin'.'

''Ow so, Tom, 'ow so?'

'Took to smokin' 'e 'ave, for one thing, Job – place fair reeks of it of a mornin' – ah, reeks be the only word.'

'Smokes, do 'e?' quoth Job, puffing at his own pipe. 'An' werry proper in 'im, too! Terbaccer's good for the inn'ards, Tom – comforts the bowels an' mellers the system.'

'True enough, Job, but 'tis mighty strange in Mr Jarvey – 'im as never could abide the smell of a pipe all these years! An' now to take to smokin' – ah, an' uncommon strong terbaccer, too, judgin' by the smell o' the place of a mornin'!'

'Why, strong terbaccer's the sweetest, Tom! Gimme plenty o' body in me beer an' me baccy, says I.'

'Well, there's body enough in Mr Jarvey's! Lord, fair choked me, it did, 's mornin' when I opened the door – gamey, it were – I never sniffed sech terbaccer in all my days – no, not even my grandmother's – an' she reeks to 'oly 'eavens, she do! An' then, Job, when I opened the door 's mornin' wi' my key there's Mr Jarvey 'unched up i' the arm-cheer over the 'earth an' the fire dead out. "Lord love me, Mr Jarvey," I says, "be ye sick, sir?" "Never better, Tom," says he. "Only a little wakeful by reason o' rats!" "Rats?" says I. "I've never seed none 'ereabouts," I says. "Why then," says 'e, "you didn't 'appen to see one run out o' the cupboard yonder – did ye – there!" 'e shouts, quick an' sharp-like, p'intin' with 'is finger – "down in the corner – don't ye see it, Tom?" "Only this, sir!" says I, an' picked up one of 'is very own slippers. Whereupon, Job, 'e lays back in 'is cheer an' laughs an' laughs till I thought 'e'd choke 'isself – the kind o' laugh as makes yer flesh creep.'

'An' wherefore must your flesh go a-creepin', Tom?'

'Because all the time 'e was laughin' 'is eyes was big an' round an' starin'.'

'Ah!' nodded Job, 'that's rum, that is. Rum took too frequent 'as a way o' makin' any man's eyes stick out – ah, as round as gooseberries, me lad, an' as for seein' things – rats is nothink. It's snakes as is serious, an' pink toads an' big 'airy worms as twists an' wriggles ain't to be sneezed at nor treated disrespectful – but rats – wot's rats? A rat ain't – '

'What's that?' exclaimed Tom, starting and glancing suddenly towards the door.

'Wot's – wot?' demanded Job, starting also and scowling.

'I thought I 'eard something – outside.'

'That's St Clement a-strikin'. Wot yer got ter shake and shiver at St Clement for – '

'I dunno!' muttered Tom. 'I thought I 'eard footsteps outside a-creepin' – '

''Ow could ye, be goles, when theer's six inches o' snow outside, as you werry well know?'

'Lord, Job – look!' whispered Tom, starting up and letting fall his pipe to point with shaking finger. 'Look – there – there!'

Following that shaking finger Job espied a small, furtive shape that, flitting from the shadow of the door, scuttered across the room and was gone.

'A rat!' he snorted. 'An' then wot? Theer's a-plenty 'ereabouts, as you werry well – '

'Look – the door, Job – look at the door!'

As he spoke, very slowly and stealthily the door was opening inch by inch, until suddenly it swung wide and, as if borne upon the buffeting wind and flurry of snow, a tall figure appeared, who, clapping to the door, leaned there and, peering thitherwards, they recognized Mr Jarvey.

'It came this way, I think?' he questioned, in a strange, high-pitched, querulous voice. 'I've followed it a long time and it came in here.'

Suddenly this unknown captious voice gave place to boisterous laughter and, coming forward, Mr Jarvey hailed them in his own kindly, benignant tones.

'God bless us all, what a night! And still snowing – frosty and snowing – but seasonable; yes, very seasonable. A Merry Christmas to you both and a Happy New Year! This old Inn hath seen a-many Christmases and known a-many New Years, and shall know a-many more when we are dead – ay, dead an' gone – eh, Job?'

'Why, sir, to "die an' go" is natur' arter all.'

'And so it is, Job. Death is the most natural thing – a good thing and kindly – the weary mayhap find rest at last and the eyes – ay, the eyes that watch us unseen, that blink upon us if

we do but turn our back – these cruel, unsleeping eyes shall spy upon us no longer. Here is a joyous thought and this should make death welcome. Tom, my good Thomas, have you chanced to notice the keyholes of my cupboard – I cover them up sometimes – but they are always there!'

So saying, Mr Jarvey, having glanced over his shoulder towards the door, nodded and smiled in his kindly benevolent manner as he leaned forward to warm his hands at the fire, while Tom glanced from him to the fragments of his broken pipe on the hearth, and Job puffed thoughtfully. Suddenly upon the silence stole the soft, mellow chime of St Clement telling the hour.

''Ark to Clem,' said Job, stirring uneasily as the last stroke died away – 'ten o'clock a'ready.'

'Ay,' sighed Mr Jarvey, his glance wandering to the door again. 'The hours of a man's life are numbered and quick in passing. I've heard St Clement's bells chiming my life away these many years, Job.'

'Well then, sir, with all respeck doo, axing your pardin', I says dang St Clement's bells wi' all me 'eart.'

'No, Job, no. They are like the voices of old friends. I would wish for none other sounds in my ears when I come to die.'

'Lord, Mr Jarvey, sir,' exclaimed Job, wriggling in his chair, 'why talk o' dyin'? And this Christmas Heve, too!'

'An' I'll be goin'!' quoth Tom, rising suddenly. 'You'll be takin' your breakfast a hour later than usual, 'cordin' to custom, tomorrow bein' Christmas Day, Mr Jarvey, sir?' he enquired.

'Why no, Tom,' answered Mr Jarvey thoughtfully, 'tomorrow being Christmas Day you may take a holiday, Tom.'

'But what about you, sir – your breakfast?'

'I shall be – very well, Tom.'

'Why, thank'ee, Mr Jarvey, sir, I'm sure – goodnight and a Merry Christmas to ye!' exclaimed Tom, touching an eyebrow. Then with the same good wishes to Job, he departed.

For a while there was silence, Job puffing at his pipe and Mr Jarvey leaning forward to warm his hands and stare into the fire; and, watching him as he sat thus, Job presently

became aware of two things – firstly, that Mr Jarvey's lips were moving soundlessly; and secondly, that ever and anon at sudden and frequent intervals he started and turned to glance swiftly towards the door, very much as though someone standing there had spoken in reply to some soundless question. He did this so often that Job began to glance at the door also, and more than once thought he saw a small, dark shape that flitted amid the shadows. At last, his pipe being out, Job rubbed his chin, scratched his head, wriggled in his chair, and finally spoke.

'Hexcuse me, Mr Jarvey, sir, but wot might you be a-watchin' of?'

'Watching?' repeated Mr Jarvey, hitching his chair a little nearer to Job's. 'No, no – it is I who am watched, Job, wherever I go, sleeping and waking, night and day – which becomes a – little distressing, Job.'

'But 'oo's a-goin' to 'ave the imperance to go a-watchin' of you, Mr Jarvey, sir?'

Mr Jarvey leaned nearer to lay a hand upon Job's arm, turning him so that he faced the shadowy corner by the door!

'I'll show you, Job – look – there!'

Following the direction of Mr Jarvey's pointing finger, Job thought once more to espy a small, vague shape crouched in this dark corner, a shape that leapt suddenly and scuttered along the grimy wainscot and was gone.

'By goles!' exclaimed Job, staring. 'It be that theer rat again!'

'Why, yes,' nodded Mr Jarvey, 'it does *look* like a rat, but – '

'And a rat it be, sir – only a rat.'

'And yet,' sighed Mr Jarvey, shaking his head, 'who ever heard of a rat dogging a man through six inches of snow?'

'Rats,' quoth Job sententiously, 'rats is queer hannimiles, sir, and uncommon owdacious at times, but I never 'eard tell of a rat follerin' a man through six inches o' snow afore.'

'Why, you see, Job,' answered Mr Jarvey, gently shaking his head, 'I didn't say this was a rat, I merely remarked that it looked like one. But it grows late, Job, and rat or no, I must be going!' So saying, he rose slowly and donned his greatcoat, but, with his hand outstretched towards the

doorlatch, he shivered and turned back to the fire as if unwilling to face the bleak night.

'The wind's rising, Job,' said he, shivering again and reaching his hands towards the fire, 'Hark to it!' he whispered, as, from somewhere without, rose a shrill piping that sank to a wail, a sobbing moan and was gone.

'A dismal sound, Job, dismal and ominous – yes, a very evil noise!'

'An' the chimbley-pot's loose on Number Five!' said Job gloomily.

For a while they sat listening to the wind that rumbled in the chimney and wailed mournfully, near and far, that filled the world outside with discordant clamour and passing, left behind a bodeful silence. Suddenly Mr Jarvey was on his feet and, crossing to the door, paused there to glance back to the cosy hearth.

'A happy Christmas, Job,' said he. 'A happy Christmas to you and all the world!' And then he strode out into the howling night.

He was met by a buffet of icy wind that stopped his breath, a whirl of driving snowflakes that blinded him, while the vague dimness of the Inn about him echoed with chaotic din, shrieks and cries and shrill, piping laughter that swelled to a bellowing roar as the rioting wind swept by.

Taking advantage of a momentary lull Mr Jarvey crossed the Inn, ploughing through snow ankle-deep, yet paused suddenly more than once to stoop and peer, now this way, now that, as one who watched something small that leapt and wallowed in the snow.

Reaching Number — he stood awhile gazing up the dark stair and listening until the pervading quiet was 'whelmed in the tumult of the wind and the rattle of lattice and casement. Then Mr Jarvey, fumbling in a dark corner, brought thence a candle-end, the which he lighted at the dim lantern, and with this flickering before him began to ascend the winding stair.

And ever, as Mr Jarvey mounted, his glance roved here and there, now searching the dimness before him and now the gloom behind.

He reached his own stair at last, and, pausing at the foot to snuff his candle with unsteady fingers, he went slowly up and

up until, all at once, there broke from him a strangled cry and he stood to stare at the small, grey shape of that which, crouched, glared down at him from the topmost stair.

The candle fell and was extinguished; came a howling wind-gust that roared beneath the eaves, that shook and buffeted at rattling windows, and then in the darkness within rose shriek on shriek that was not of the wind, a rush of feet, a clash of iron, the crash of heavy blows and rending of wooden panels. But outside, the wind, as if wrought to maddened frenzy, roared and shrieked in wild halloo, louder, wilder, till, spent at last, it sank to a doleful whine, a murmur, and was still.

And upon this quiet was the stealthy sound of a closing door, the grind of key in lock and the shooting of heavy bolts.

V

'And you don't 'ave no rec'lection at all o' seein' 'im go out o' the gate, Job?'

'Not me, Tom. Nary a glimp of 'un since Christmas Heve!'

'An' there's 'is door fast-locked an' me knockin' 'eavens 'ard an' no answer – nary a sound. Job – I don't like it.'

'Maybe 'e's out o' town, Tom.'

'Not 'im! An' then there's a curious thing about 'is door.'

'Wot, Tom, wot?'

'Top panel be all cracked across. A noo crack, Job.'

'W'y then you can look through said crack, Job.'

'No, I ain't tall enough, but cracked an' split it be. Come an' see for yourself.'

'Why, Tom, the wind brought down the chimbley pot on Number Five t'other night, but I never 'eard o' wind splittin' a door yet.'

'Well, come an' see, Job.'

With due deliberation Job got into his coat, clapped on his hat and accompanied Tom to the top chambers of Number —. Arrived on Mr Jarvey's landing, he beheld the door fast shut and, sure enough, a great crack in one of the upper panels.

With Tom's assistance Job contrived to get his eye to the split in the panel and thus peer into the room, and, doing so, gasped and shrank away and, slipping from Tom's hold, leaned against the wall as if faint.

'What is it, Job – Lord love us, what – ?'

'We gotter – open – the door, Tom!'

'Aye, but why, Job – why?'

'We gotter – open – the door! Come now – both together!'

Between them they forced the door at last and then, beholding what was beyond, cowered back, clasping each other, as well they might. For there, sure enough, was Mr Jarvey, dangling against the cupboard from a hook deep-driven into the roof-beam, while above his dead face, from the broken panelling above the cupboard, was something black and awful, shaped like the talons of a great bird, but upon one of the talons there still gleamed a small, plain gold ring.

THE SHOT-TOWER GHOST

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Most of us have nostalgic, so-dear-to-my-heart memories tucked into the back of our minds, our subconscious minds, to be coaxed out briefly now and then by some particular sound, some odour, some half-familiar sight . . .

As for me, I cannot hear a whippoorwill crying at night but I go flying back through time and space to our old family 'Homeplace' in Wythe County, Virginia. The ferry is no longer there – replaced by a coldly efficient steel bridge that the state built. Cars and wagons, herds of sheep, and leisurely riders on horseback no longer pause at the brink of New River to call across: '*Hello-o-o!*' for the stocky, smiling ferryman to raft them over to where the road to Wytheville begins again. But on the east bank, the tall square fieldstone shot-tower still broods over the green-velvet countryside – a grim reminder of a day when Virginia was wracked with civil war, and brother turned against brother.

Yes; the shot-tower is still there, a historical landmark which my family at last turned over to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, for the edification of the passing tourist. The spiral staircase that winds up and up inside the tower is new – not rotten and precarious as it was when I was there, one of the scattered cousins who came 'Back Home' every summer for a visit. The sturdy beamed floor of the single room, high up against the ceiling, used to be spattered with little hardened splashes of lead, spilled eighty-five years ago by determined Rebels and loyal sweating Negroes frantically making ammunition for Lee's troops. The leaden souvenirs are probably gone by now; and the square hole in the floor is fenced in by chicken wire, lest the unwary tourist fall through it into that dark matching hole in the tower's dirt floor below. This leads, well-like, into the river. I am not sure about the huge iron cauldron which caught the shot.

(Molten lead formed round rifle balls when it fell, hissing, into cold water.) The pot may yet be hanging down there into the river. Once, on a dare from another visiting cousin, I climbed half-way down the slimy ladder into that chill, murmuring darkness. But something slithered against my arm, and I never finished the adventure . . . especially as it was almost nightfall, and time for the Shot-Tower Ghost to appear.

Let me say here, to your probable disappointment, that there never was a 'shot-tower ghost'. This gruesome family-spectre was nothing more than a product of my Great-uncle Robert's imagination. He is dead now, a white-bearded irascible old bachelor of the 'hoss-racin' and cyard game' school. Dead, too, is Shadrach, his stooped and grey-haired 'body-servant', last of the family slaves who accepted their 'freedom' with a bored sniff as the impractical notion of 'a passel o' po-white Yankees'. To the last day of their lives – about two weeks apart – Uncle Robert and Shadrach, respectively, remained unreconstructed and unfreed. And the fact that one of my aunts married a Northerner, bore him a fine son, got rich, and came back to buy and remodel another old country place adjoining the Homeplace, was a great shock to both of them. I think they were convinced that 'Yankees' are a roving tribe of gypsy marauders, and incapable of fathering offspring.

That son was my Cousin Mark, who had none of the gracious charm of his mother's side of the family and all of the butt-headed stubbornness of his Connecticut father. But in those days just after World War I – 'the war in Europe' as Uncle Robert verbally shrugged off any of our conflicts but the one between the States – I was a very young fluttery miss with a terrible crush on Francis X. Bushman, thence my Cousin Mark because he slightly resembled him.

This particular summer, however, another cousin of mine from the Georgia branch was also visiting the Homeplace, a redheaded minx named Adelia – she is fat and has five children now, may I add with vicious satisfaction. But she was two years older than I, and just entering the Seminary, so Cousin Mark's eyes were all for her, not for a gawky high school sophomore from Birmingham, Alabama.

Adelia was also popular with the younger set of Wytheville. Almost every night a squealing, laughing carful of young people would bear down on the ferryman, who had orders to ferry Miss Adelia's friends across free of charge. Uncle Robert and Shadrach would roll their eyes at each other and moan faintly, but a short while later my uncle would be grinning from ear to ear, seated in his favourite chair on the wide columned veranda with a bouquet of pretty girls clustered around him, begging for 'ghost stories'. Shadrach, his eyeballs and teeth the only white thing about his beaming ebony face, would circulate around, offering syllabub and tiny beaten-biscuits with baked ham between them, or calling 'rounds' for an old-fashioned reel in the big living-room where the Victrola played incessantly.

Cousin Mark was a member of this coterie more often than anyone else, and Uncle Robert always made him welcome in a formally polite manner that Adelia, giggling beside me later in our big featherbed upstairs, would mock outrageously. Mark and Uncle Robert seemed to clash as naturally as a hound and a fox, for Mark had a rather rude way of finding holes in Uncle Robert's tall tales, mostly about the supernatural.

'Did you ever actually *see* a ghost, sir?' Mark demanded once, sitting at ease on the front steps against a backdrop of grey dusk and twinkling fireflies . . . and the distant plaintive crying of whippoorwills.

'I have, suh!' my uncle lashed back at him stiffly. 'With mah own two eyes . . . and if Ah may say so, Ah could pick off a Yankee sniper right now at fifty yards with a good rifle!'

'Unless he picked you off first,' my cousin pointed out blandly. Then, with stubborn insistence that seemed to infuriate my uncle: '*When* did you ever see a ghost, sir, may I ask?' he pursued. 'And where? And how do you know it wasn't just an . . . an optical illusion?'

'Suh . . . !' Uncle Robert drew himself up, sputtering slightly like an old firecracker. 'Suh, the Shot-Tower Ghost is no optical illusion. He is, and Ah give you mah word on it, a true case of psychic phenomena. You understand,' Uncle slipped into his act – a very convincing one, in spite of Adelia's covert giggling, 'you understand that, after some

very dramatic or tragic incident in which a person dies suddenly, there may be what is called a "psychic residue". An emanation, an . . . an ectoplasmic replica of the person involved. This replica is sometimes left behind after death occurs – the death of the body, that is. For, the circumstances under which the person died may have been so . . . so impossible to leave hanging, the ectoplasmic replica of that person lives on, repeating and repeating his last act or trying to finish some task that he strongly wishes to finish . . .'

'Poppycock!' my cousin interrupted flatly. 'I don't believe there's any such thing as an . . . "ectoplasmic replica"! What a term!' he laughed lightly. 'Where'd you dig that one up, sir? At some table-tapping séance – price ten bucks a spook?'

'No, suh, I did not.' Uncle Robert was bristling now; Adelia punched me and giggled. We could all see how very much he wanted to take this young Yankee-born whippersnapper down a peg or two. 'I find the term used often,' Uncle drawled, 'in Madame Blavatsky's four-volume work on the metaphysical. She was considered the foremost authority on the supernatural during the last century, the nineteenth century, when such notables as Arthur Conan Doyle were seriously studying the possibility of life after death . . .'

'Blavatsky . . . Blavatsky,' Mark murmured, then grinned and snapped his fingers. 'Oh yes. I remember reading about her, something in *The Golden Bough*. Sir James Frazer says she's either the greatest authority . . . *or* the biggest fraud in the history of metaphysical study! I read that once in the library at Tech, just browsing around . . .'

Uncle Robert choked. Most young people listened in wide-eyed awe to his erudite-sounding explanations of his 'tower ghost' and certain other spook-yarns that he cooked up for our naïve pleasure. But Mark was tossing his high-sounding phrases right back at him with great relish, and a covert wink at Adelia who was perched on the arm of Uncle's chair. His smug air seemed to annoy her, though, for:

'Oh, the shot-tower ghost isn't any fraud!' Adelia proclaimed tauntingly, with an affectionate pat for Uncle's gnarled old hand – at the moment gripping his cane as if he

intended breaking it over Mark's head. 'I've seen it, myself,' she announced. 'Lib has, too – haven't you, Lib?' she demanded, and I nodded solemnly.

'Now *you've* seen it!' Mark jeered, flipping a coin in the air and watching it glint softly in the mellow glow that slanted through the fanlight over the door. 'Anybody else? Hmm? I've been hearing about this spook of Uncle Robert's ever since we moved here from Connecticut – but I've yet to catch a glimpse of him myself! A Confederate soldier with his legs cut off – how touching! Making shot for his comrades up to the day of Lee's surrender at Appomattox. And when the sad news comes, he throws himself off the tower into the river . . . Haha!' Mark chuckled suddenly, fastening a cold, matter-of-fact young eye on Uncle Robert's face. 'Come on, Unk. Didn't you make that one up out of whole cloth? It sounds like something out of one of those old paperback dime novels I found in the attic. *Capitola, the Madcap*; or, *Love Conquers All . . .*'

'Young man!' Uncle Robert stood up abruptly, quivering. 'Ah must ask you to mend yoah Yankee manners to yo' elders, suh! Are you havin' the . . . the temerity to dispute my word, you young . . . ?'

At that moment Shadrach took over, gently but firmly. Throwing a light shawl around his master's shoulders, he manoeuvred around beside him, preparing to help him to his feet.

'Marse Robert, hit's yo' bedtime,' the old darkey pronounced. 'Come along, now, Marse Robert. Tell de young folks good night, 'cause Ah'm fixin' to help you up to yo' room.'

'Shadrach – damme, Ah'll take a hoss-whip to yo' black hide!' My uncle roared petulantly, shrugging off the shawl and banging on the porch with his cane. 'Quit babyin' me, confound it! Ah'll go to bed when Ah please! Get! Get away from me! Ah'll bend this cane over youah nappy head! Ah'll . . .'

'Yassuh,' said Shadrach imperturbably. 'Hit's leb'm-thirty. Time you was asleep. Come on, now, Marse Robert . . .' He tugged gently at my uncle's arm, finally wielding his heaviest weapon, the mention of my great-grandmother.

'Miss Beth wouldn't like you settin' up so late, catchin' yo' death o'dampness . . .'

'Oh, the devil!' Uncle snapped at him peevishly. 'Ah'm comin', Ah'm comin'! Soon as Ah tell these pretty young ladies good night . . . and take a cane to this young smartalec!' He glared at Cousin Mark, who grinned back at him lazily. 'It's not a wise thing,' Uncle Robert intoned ominously, 'to joke about the supernatural or regard it as a . . . parlour-game! And one of these days, young suh, you're going to find that out in a way you'll never forget!'

With that, and followed by a chorus of subdued giggles, he stamped into the house, leaving Adelia and me to bid our guests farewell. At the gate, after the carful of his friends had rolled away towards the ferry, Cousin Mark lingered, trying to persuade Adelia to kiss him goodnight. I would gladly have obliged, but my redheaded Georgia cousin switched away from him coolly, tossing her long auburn mop of curls.

'No, I won't!' she said shortly. 'The idea, poking fun at Uncle Robert right to his face! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mark . . . and besides, you're such a smartalec, like Uncle said! How do *you* know there's no such thing as a ghost, just because you happen never to have seen one?'

Mark laughed softly, derisively. 'And neither have you and Lib,' he added. 'I saw you wink at each other. Did you really think I'd swallow that silly yarn about the Confederate soldier?'

Adelia nudged me all at once, a signal to stand by and back up whatever mischief she had in mind.

'I've just remembered,' she said quietly, 'what tomorrow is! Lib . . . it was a year ago that . . . that *we* saw the soldier throw himself off that lookout porch at the top of the tower . . . remember? You and I were riding horseback up the hill, just at sundown. And you heard that awful scream, and we glanced up just in time to . . . to see that shadow falling from the tower into the river! On July ninth, the date of Lee's surrender at Appomattox!'

'It was *April* ninth!' I hissed in her ear. 'You'll ruin everything . . . !'

'Sh-h!' Adelia hissed back, giggling. 'A damyankee wouldn't know *what* day it was, hardly the *year*! . . . Oh, I'll

never forget that sight,' she whispered, shuddering. 'Not as long as I live! The look of despair on that man's face, the glimpse I got of it as he fell down, down . . .'

'Bah!' Mark cut her off with a snort. 'You're as big a liar as your Uncle Robert! He and his ridiculous . . . ectoplasmic replica!'

'But it's true!' I chimed in solemnly. 'When we told about it, they dragged the river. But no body was ever found, and none turned up at the Falls downstream. He was wearing a . . . a shabby grey uniform. And . . . and a grey forage cap.' I elaborated, warming to our little hoax. 'And he wasn't more than four feet tall – his legs, you know; they'd been shot off by cannon-fire . . .'

Adelia punched me again sharply. 'Don't overdo it!' she hissed, then, with a grave, frightened look turned on our cousin from Connecticut: 'Oh, Mark, you mustn't scoff at such things! Tomorrow is the date of the surrender. Maybe if . . . if you watch for him on the hill at sundown, you'll . . . you'll see him, too!'

Mark snorted again, and strode towards the tethered horse he had ridden across the fields to Uncle's house earlier. In tan riding pants and sports shirt open at the neck, he was the handsomest thing I had ever seen – barring, of course, Francis X. himself. I sighed faintly as Adelia and I, arms about each other's waist, watched him mount and start to ride away, then wheel his spirited little bay back to face us.

'So tomorrow's the witching hour, huh?' he laughed. 'Okay, I'll be here – with bells on! But let's make this worthwhile, cuz!' he drawled tormentingly. 'How about a little bet of . . . say, five bucks? You pay me if our ghost doesn't show up. If I see him, I'll pay you . . . and gladly!' he jeered.

Adelia stiffened. I saw her pretty chin set and her brown eyes flash, taking up the challenge Mark's cool blue eyes had thrown her.

'All right, Mr Smartalec!' she snapped back. 'It's a bet! Just be mighty sure you bring that five dollars!'

'Just you have yours in your hand!' Mark taunted, 'Want to make a little side bet, huh? A kiss maybe? That kiss you won't give me tonight?'

'That's a bet, too!' Adelia answered briskly. 'That's how *sure* I am that there *is* a tower ghost, and that you'll see him tomorrow!'

'Okay, carrot-top!' our cousin laughed. 'Remember, you're no Southern gentleman if you don't pay up!'

He galloped away with that, and we strolled back towards the house together, Adelia and I, listening to his lusty voice singing, out of sheer perversity, Sherman's 'Marching Through Georgia'. Adelia stamped her foot.

'I *hate* that . . . that . . . !' she burst out, unconvincingly. 'Lib, we've just got to fix his wagon tomorrow!' Her eyes began to twinkle all at once, and she ran up the curving staircase to burst into Uncle's room, where Shadrach was trying to make him drink his hot milk instead of another whisky.

Quickly she related the bet to Uncle Robert, whose mild old eyes lighted up also with mischief. He slapped his knee, chuckling.

'We'll fix him!' he promised. 'Shadrach, get me young Saunders on the phone, Bill Saunders's boy in Wytheville. He's short enough to look . . . Hmm.' He tugged at his white beard, grinning. 'Where's that old ratty Confederate uniform that belonged to your Great-uncle Claud, Lib? In the attic, is it? Well, get it out . . . That Saunders boy won the high-dive contest at VMI last year, didn't he? Yes. Then, jumping off that lookout porch on the tower and landing deep in the river won't be much of a feat for him. Yes, hmm. Then he can swim underwater, and come up inside the shot well. Hide under the cauldron until young Mark stops looking for him to come up . . . !'

'Uncle Robert, you old faker – I *knew* you'd think of something!' Adelia burst out laughing, and hugged him, then went dancing around the high-ceilinged bedroom where four generations of our kin had been born, made love, had babies, and died. 'I can't wait to see that smarty's face!' she exulted. 'I just can't wait!'

Shadrach, with his glass of hot milk, had been fidgeting around in the background, his wide Negro-eyes flitting from one of our faces to the other. Suddenly he blurted:

'Marse Robert . . . s'posin' dey *is* a shot-tower ha'nt up

yonder? Seem lak I reecollect dey *was* a little runty soldier what got one leg shot off at Murfreesboro. Name o' Jackson . . . and he *did* make shot up yonder in de tower. And he *did* jump off and git drownded!'

'Ah know that,' Uncle Robert cut him short irritably. 'Knew him personally; he was in my platoon. But he didn't jump. He . . .'

'Yassuh. Got drunk and *fell* off'n de lookout porch,' the old darkey recalled uncomfortably. 'But dat wouldn't stop his sperrit from comin' back, if'n he took a notion . . .'

'Oh, balderdash!' Uncle Robert roared at him. 'There's no such thing as . . . as a spirit! Ghost, haunt, call it whatever you like! You know very well Ah . . . Ah simply make up these yarns to amuse the young folks.'

'Yassuh.' Shadrach subsided meekly; but his eyes were large and troubled in his wrinkled black face.

Adelia and I giggled and whispered half the night about our practical joke on Cousin Mark. We gobbled our waffles and wild honey as early as Aunt Cornelia would cook them, and spent the rest of the morning on the phone. Everyone in our little crowd had to be told about Uncle Robert's hoax, and since most of them rather disliked Cousin Mark for his abrupt and opinionated manner, all were looking forward to seeing him 'taken down a peg'.

At noon Bill Saunders turned up, a small freckled youth. He made two or three 'practice dives' off the tower porch, disappearing from sight each time mysteriously and re-appearing through the shot well, slime-covered and draped with cobwebs.

'Splendid, splendid!' Uncle Robert applauded, chuckling. 'You're an excellent swimmer, my boy . . . Well, Adelia?' His old eyes twinkled as my cousin stood with her arm about his waist, watching the performance from the point below the tower where she and I were supposed to have seen the ghost a year ago.

'It's perfect!' she laughed. 'Mark doesn't know you can swim underwater and come up inside the shot well. He'll be sceptical, of course, until our spook disappears into the river! Oh, when he goes back to Connecticut to visit his father's

people, he'll certainly have a tale that will curl their hair!'

The day passed slowly under the weight of our young impatience. After dinner our friends began to turn up, by twos and fours, laughing and whispering together, and winking at Uncle Robert, who was enjoying his little jest immensely. As the long Virginia twilight began to fall, Adelia and I, in fluffy organdie, proposed an innocent-looking game of croquet under the big leafy maples on the lawn. Fireflies were beginning to wink and dart among the hedges. The sun had gone down below the distant blue-grey mountains, but a queer flat light lingered in the sky, giving everything the look of a stereopticon picture.

'Don't anybody dare to snicker and give us away,' Adelia ordered. 'I want Mark to think this is just another evening of fun and dancing. Unrehearsed . . . Oh, I can't wait another minute!' she giggled, consulting the tiny wristwatch Uncle Robert had given her as a graduation present. 'He's late! It'll be too dark in another half-hour for him to see Bill. But I've painted him all over with luminous paint . . . You don't suppose Mark's got cold feet and backed out on his bet?'

'Not that hard-headed stubborn Yankee!' I scoffed. 'An earthquake wouldn't keep him from . . . See?' I broke off, triumphant. 'Here he comes now over the north hill!'

A solitary rider in white sports shirt and brown jodhpurs was indeed coming, hell-for-leather, over the far hill that separated our plantation from my aunt's remodelled home. The little bay mare Mark always rode took the hill at a hard gallop and plunged down the other side without slackening speed. A narrow creek with a fence rambling along its farther bank divided the 'bottom land' where the cows and horses grazed. As we watched, holding our breath, my cousin spurred his mount recklessly to take this precarious jump, ignoring the wide-open gate further down.

'Young idiot!' Uncle Robert muttered. 'Rides like a damyankee. No consideration for the hoss . . . Hah! He'll break his fool . . .'

Even as he spoke the words, the little bay, sailing over creek and fence, caught a hoof on the top rail and fell head over heels. Her rider went sprawling, and did not rise, even

after the mare scrambled to her feet and went galloping back home through the open gate.

Adelia and I gasped, and started to run in that direction. But as we reached the orchard gate, we saw Cousin Mark striding towards us along the narrow path past the springhouse. We waved, he waved back, and Adelia sniffed.

'He's okay,' she said, almost resentfully. 'Nothing could make a dent in that rhinoceros hide!'

But as he approached us, I saw that he looked very pale and dazed. There was a great dark gash across his forehead at the temple, and he limped slightly. With a twinge of remorse we beckoned, ready to call off our little joke. But Mark shook his head mockingly, and pointed to the shot-tower, turning his steps in that direction before he reached the orchard. He shouted something, but wind must have blown the sound away from us, for we could hear nothing but the faint quavering cry of a whippoorwill somewhere along the river.

Adelia stamped her foot. 'See?' she exploded. 'He's so smug, so sure of himself! Going to show us up for a bunch of superstitious nitwits! Just you wait . . . !'

We ran back through the orchard to join the others, lined up along the fence to watch Mark. Through the gathering dusk we could see his lone figure toiling up the hill towards the shot-tower, its bleak silhouette etched out sharply against the pale pink-and-gold of the western sky. White sheep dotted the green hillside, but as Mark picked his way among them, they did not start and run, but went on grazing, undisturbed.

We began to laugh and chatter excitedly as my cousin reached the point where the ghost could best be seen. Uncle Robert signalled surreptitiously with a flashlight, and instantly a foreshortened figure, glowing with an eerie green radiance, appeared on the lookout porch. Laughing, we saw Mark stop short, staring up at the apparition.

Uncle Robert signalled again. Promptly a harsh quavering cry broke the evening stillness, heart-rending in its despair. The figure on the lookout porch, in grey Confederate uniform and forage cap, suddenly flung itself out into space. Screaming, it fell down, down, to disappear in the swirling

river far below. We saw Mark standing on the riverbank, watching intently for the swimmer to bob up. When he did not, my cousin turned uncertainly, looking up- and downstream, while we watched, bent double with mirth at his obvious bewilderment. He turned at last and entered the door of the shot-tower, evidently preparing to climb the spiral staircase and examine the lookout porch from which the spectre had jumped. We fell upon one another, rocked with laughter.

But abruptly my cousin's figure reappeared and started limping down the hill. He reached the front gate and stood there, swaying slightly, very pale and dishevelled, but smiling in mocking triumph. As Adelia opened the iron gate for him, questioningly, trying to keep her face straight and solemn, Mark began to laugh silently – and held out his hand, palm up.

At that instant a second dripping figure, in soggy grey uniform and minus the forage cap, was seen slogging down the hill. Bill Saunders reached us and leaned on the fence, grinning disgustedly and coughing a bit as if strangled. Most of the phosphorescent paint had washed off, and he glowed ludicrously only in spots on Uncle Claud's faded uniform.

'Bill!' Adelia wailed, half laughing. 'Oh, shoot! What went wrong? How did Mark find out . . . ?'

'Aw-w!' Saunders ducked his head sheepishly. 'I did it perfectly twice before! But *this* time I had to swim up under the wrong side of the shot cauldron! Got strangled and darn near drowned! Would have, if Mark hadn't heard me splashing around and caught me by the collar . . .'

All eyes turned on my Cousin Mark then, standing there quietly in the gathering dusk, looking oddly weak and pale but smiling with sardonic satisfaction. His hand was still held out mockingly, and Adelia flounced over to him, disgruntled.

'All right, General Grant!' she lashed out peevishly as Mark still did not speak. 'Start rubbing it in, why don't you? You outflanked us! You won the bet . . . and I'm no welcher!' Her brown eyes twinkled suddenly. 'But . . . I didn't say *where* you could kiss me – just on the cheek!' She turned her pretty face up to him, at the same time thrusting a crumpled

bill into his hand; I gasped as I saw it was a worthless piece of 1864 currency we had found in the attic, along with Uncle Claud's uniform. 'And here's your five,' Adelia jeered. 'I didn't promise I wouldn't pay off . . . in Confederate money!'

Mark smiled at her, a one-sided ironic little smile of reluctant admiration. He shrugged and bent to kiss her on the cheek. But abruptly he swayed, an expression of pain and confusion crossing his handsome face, now only a white blur against the darkness. One hand groped for the money Adelia held out, the other went to the dark gash in his forehead. And I saw my pretty cousin's face soften with tenderness.

'Oh, Mark!' she cried out. 'You *were* hurt when your horse threw you! Why didn't you tell us, instead of going on with this silly bet we . . . ?'

Someone screamed – a rasping, high-pitched sound of utter terror. We all whirled towards the sound, startled. Shadrach, coming across the lawn gravely to find Uncle Robert, had halted abruptly. His darkey eyes were distended with horror, one black hand pointing shakily in our direction. We laughed, thinking he had seen Bill Saunders's glowing figure, and followed him into the house as he ran from us, still shrieking. But he locked himself in his room and no amount of coaxing would bring him out. Through the door, I heard muttered prayers.

In the hallway we noticed the phone, off the hook. Uncle Robert picked it up, and was startled by the sound of sobbing coming over the wire.

It was my aunt, a rather hysterical woman. Mark's horse, she said, had returned, riderless, to the stable. She was sure something had happened to him. Was he all right? Was he there with us?

Uncle Robert soothed her, assured her that Mark was with us, quite uninjured, then called him to the phone to convince his mother.

There was no answer, other than the eerie cry of a distant whippoorwill. Mark had vanished, left abruptly – after collecting, Adelia remarked in a covert tone of disappointment, only the money-half of their little bet. We'd phone and tease him about that when he reached home, she laughingly said . . .

But an hour later, my aunt called back. Mark had not arrived. When she called again frantically around midnight, a search was instituted. Towards morning they found his body.

He was lying, all crumpled up, where his little bay mare had thrown him when she fell. A quick examination showed that his right leg had been broken in two places; but mercifully, he had not had to lie there suffering all night. A blow on the temple, when his head struck a rock, had killed him – instantly, the coroner said.

Mark had been dead all that time. The coroner jeered at the fantastic account we told of his saving Bill Saunders's life, then collecting that bet from Adelia. A case of mass-hypnotism, he called it, induced by the fact that we were all so anxious for Mark's presence to complete our little hoax about the shot-tower ghost. He quoted the illusion of the Indian rope-trick as an example; how a group of people in broad daylight can be made to 'see' a small boy climb a rope rising in mid-air, and disappear before their very eyes. 'Psychic residue' and 'ectoplasmic replica' were terms he had never heard . . . nor did anyone ever hear of them again from Uncle Robert's lips. He and Shadrach were thereafter conspicuously silent, exchanging a long look, whenever the supernatural was mentioned. And as for me, the cry of a whippoorwill at dusk still makes me shiver uncontrollably . . .

For, there was one little item that the coroner could not explain. There was a crumpled five-dollar bill in my Cousin Mark's dead hand when they found him – a worthless piece of currency, printed by the Southern Confederacy in 1864.

AFTER DARK

TONY RICHARDS

There was a new J. Baker Klane album on the stands. A solo album, *After Dark*. A brand-new album, freshly cut. And J. Baker Klane had been dead for almost twenty years.

At first, the enclosed jazz world was delighted. They thought the album was a compilation of old classics. After all, wasn't Klane amongst the best saxophonists of all time? Hadn't he, in his day, been rated above immortal Charlie Parker? Didn't his work influence the likes of 'Cannonball' Adderley, Dexter Gordon, John Coltrane – and even radical tearaways like Ornette Coleman? These were not questions, these were facts.

After Dark. It sold out in a week.

The first puzzled expressions came when people read the list of tracks. There were no such themes, or if there were JayBee had never played them. Well, this was probably just a publicity stunt dreamed up by some irreverent idiot at KZR. The record company had changed the titles to attract more interest. As if that were necessary. *Philistines*.

That theory was demolished the moment the disc was played. Anyone who knew the *first thing* about jazz could tell that these were new tracks. The world had never before heard those particular notes played in that particular order, ever. The album was brilliant, and original, and – a hoax. Definitely a hoax. The music journals went berserk. How dare KZR defile the memory of a great man like this! How dare they waste the talents of an obviously brilliant young sax player on an elaborate joke! Who was the artist who had imitated JayBee? And why did his respect for the dead not match up to his talent?

It was a thoughtful editorial in *Jazz International* which dampened down the blaze. The logic was simple. A new album was out, naming JayBee as the artist. The style was

brilliant and complex. Many people had tried to imitate that style and failed. Miserably. It was unique – there was no way to copy it. And yet, on the album, the style was unmistakable. Therefore, this was a genuine new album.

By J. Baker Klane.

Who had been dead for almost twenty years.

Night-time New York was a patchwork quilt of shadows and sharp brightness. Down in Greenwich Village, the sidewalks were still cooling from the angry summer sun. There was the sound of motors on the air, the acid stench of petrol-fume pollution. But more than that, there was the hum of life. The Village had woken from its daylight hibernation. Ten o'clock and the night was just beginning.

There were a lot of young people on Bleeker Street. They were moths, and the new jazz club, the *Rorschach Horn*, was their dark flame. They glided to it, on their own or in small groups, enthusiastically; they queued, coming awake as they stood. There was an air of desperation about them. Rumours passed up and down the line. The place was already full, the rumours went. Not even standing room was left. And no one, but no one, would be leaving until the early hours of the morning. The evening was a waste.

It came as a surprise, then, when the three chic punks at the front stepped back to let two people out. The punks were already debating who should stay outside, so they never looked properly at the two men. Everyone else saw them. Everyone else smiled that patronising, bitter smile reserved by the young and hip for the old and rather square.

Konrad Zoth and Archie Carraway ignored them. They had problems of their own, problems epitomised by the shabby clothes on Zoth's back and the expression on his friend's face.

Zoth was two paces ahead, his stout legs pumping within shiny pants, his scuffed black shoes timekeeping. Carraway, slimmer but much shorter, struggled to keep up with him.

'Konrad, look at the queue, dammit!' He waved his right arm desperately. 'Look at all the kids who want to see these guys!'

'And what do they know?'

Zoth did not stop, or even slow. Not even when a blonde girl in a Bogart tee-shirt giggled at him. Finally, when they were past the queue, Carraway caught him by the arm and brought him up short. Their friendship almost ended right then. They glowered at each other through the gloom. Zoth waited till his outrage had dispersed on the night breeze before he spoke.

'Archie, why keep on at me? For good or bad, KZR is *my* company, and I'll sign on who I want. Not even you can make me change my mind. Not even you.'

Carraway's eyes were liquid glass. 'I know, but – '

'But? What but? You drag me all the way from the West Coast, right in the middle of an important deal, to listen to a bunch of long-haired freaks who make sounds like a power-drill on heat. And then you say *but*.'

'What big deal, Konrad?' Carraway snapped.

'Nice little combo. Lead trumpeter sounds just like –'

'I know. Sounds just like Al Lewis. And no one listens to Lewis any more, except for us old guys. Just like no one says *combo* any more. You're way behind the times. You're old hat.'

'So sue me.'

'You're becoming a *joke*.'

It sounded like a shout, that remark. But Carraway didn't have to shout.

Zoth reeled under the impact of the truth, might have struck back in defence. Instead, he breathed deeply while he calmed down, unwrapped a finger-sized panatella. Funny how the cigars had grown smaller through the years. Still, the size had shrunk by gradual degrees, and so he hardly noticed it. Just as he hardly noticed growing old.

He lit the end, billowed unpleasant smoke.

'I'll have the last laugh, Archie,' he said quietly. 'Sure, one of the big companies will sign on those four freaks. And maybe they'll be fairly big for a couple of years. I don't care. One of these days, I'll find another genius, someone who'll knock progressive music sideways off its seat. I did it once and I'll do it again.'

'That was a long time ago,' Carraway sighed. 'And you

were lucky even then. A sax player like that comes along once in a lifetime.'

Zoth shook his head. 'Check up on your statistics, pal. On average, a true genius is born every twenty years. I reckon I'm about due for the next one.'

He gazed along the streetlamp-mottled street towards Eighth Avenue and the uptown districts.

'Hey, Archie, will you walk with me to the hotel? This city kind of scares me.'

Carraway smiled sadly. 'In those threads,' he said, 'who's going to mug you?'

The queue had grown to almost reach them. They glanced back one last time, then walked away.

The further up the street they got, the quieter it became. Drunks lay snoring in soot-shadowed doorways. Scrawny men in old sneakers and fatigue jackets eyed them as they passed. The Village had changed for the worse. The sense of *avant-garde* excitement remained and the artistic community was almost as tight as ever, but the disease of the city had begun to invade. Slowly, like a creeping sickness. Like rot. Nothing was quite the same, and Konrad Zoth was unable to adapt to the change. He wanted to cross 14th Street and leave the Village for good.

An empty beer can clattered away from his feet, and the noise brought him alert with a start. His surroundings came into sharp focus. He had not been this way on foot for a long time.

Not for almost twenty years.

Not since . . .

'Listen!' said Carraway, stopping.

There was . . . *music* on the air. At first it was hard to identify it as music. More like the sweet voice of the past whispering through the tepid dark. More like the souls of the old Greenwich Village, of Harlem as it used to be, of New Orleans in honey hot July, of all those things and more, creeping along the rooftops of the tall buildings. Songbird trillings and low lamenting notes. Gossamers of sound which trapped the listener like a drowsy, drugged fly. Blurred and mellowed, like a beautiful dream.

At length, the noises coalesced into saxophone sound. The

beauty did not lessen, it increased. It was coming from a narrow, unlit mews.

A gentle smile creased Carraway's features. He did not notice that Zoth looked puzzled.

'Would you believe it?' Carraway said. 'Isn't that where JayBee used to live?'

Zoth nodded slowly.

'Isn't that great?' laughed Carraway. 'Like an echo from the past. Some fan of JayBee's, playing an old record in the same block where the great man lived.'

'That isn't a record,' Zoth mouthed.

'What?'

'JayBee never cut a record like that. I should know. I produced them all.'

Against the darkness Konrad Zoth was sickly white.

It seemed that light had never touched that alley, never filtered through the windows of the old apartment block, for a thousand years. Though it was mid-summer, the smell of dampness lingered in that dark place like a curse. There was garbage underfoot, and rodent chitterings in the crannies of the walls.

Zoth and Carraway found the doorway with difficulty. They stood there, listening. The sounds were coming from inside, and their beauty was now marred by a sense of fear. Zoth flicked on his cheap lighter. The butane flame illuminated entropy.

'Jesus!' Carraway breathed. He gazed at the scarred, mouldy door, the blackened bricks, the fly-specked windows. Where there were windows at all. 'To think this used to be a fashionable block.'

'I don't know what's stopping them from pulling it down,' Zoth agreed. 'Perhaps they're scared it'll fall on them.'

He glanced up as if daring the masonry to move.

'You'd think they'd have a plaque, or something.' Carraway strained to hear the music. 'Hey, has it stopped?'

Zoth was about to confirm that it had when the saxophone started up again. The two men were entranced for a second, running up stairways of ascending notes, careening down spiralling chutes of near impossible chords. Then, they broke

free. They opened the door. It made a soft, splintering noise at the hinges. A gust of coffin air moved for freedom, blowing Zoth's lighter out – it would not re-ignite. Regardless, they went in.

The music was much louder now. Like a snake charmer's tune, it drew them on.

Inch by inch, foot by slow foot, Zoth and Carraway stumbled ahead. They were in a hallway. On either side empty doorways gaped anonymously. Bare, mildewed boards sagged beneath their weight. Their progress should have been noisy, but the saxophone drowned it out. Strangest of all, the music was acoustically perfect. The hallways should have baffled and re-echoed all the notes; instead they came through loud and clear. Impossible.

'It's coming from above,' Zoth whispered.

'Remember where the stairs are?'

'Somewhere here.'

Zoth was still equating his chances of surviving the stairs when his toe hit the bottom riser. The wood gave under the slight impact, rotten.

'We can't – ' he began to say.

And then he looked up.

And saw J. Baker Klane.

There was no ghostly glow. There was no white outline against the black. Somehow, in perfect darkness, he just – *saw* him. A stifled gasp from behind told that Carraway had looked up too.

Zoth wanted to say something, but there simply were not any words. Not even screams or guttural sounds. His breath had frozen in his lungs.

JayBee was standing on the first landing with his back to them. He was blurred and grainy as a well-thumbed photograph and he seemed to be at odds with the plane of the true world. It was hard to tell whether his feet touched the floor or not, even harder to discern where he left off and emptiness started. Three-dimensional or flat? Upright or crooked? Impossible to tell.

One thing was certain. He had not changed since the day he took his own life.

A gaudy Hawaiian shirt and faded jeans still clothed his

black, expansive form. His grey hair was cropped short, revealing the strong muscles in his neck. And as he played, his shoulders heaved, his body gyrated to complement the soulful tune. Even twenty years later there was no mistaking him.

The music stopped abruptly.

JayBee lowered his saxophone. And turned. There was a bullet hole in his right temple. Streamers of blood were clotted round it. Below them, his eyes were pools of fog. They blazed. His face was sculpted hard with hate.

Zoth took one step back, bumped into Carraway. He muttered: '*No!*'

Then Carraway was retreating, and Zoth was too frightened to move, and JayBee came for him.

The saxophonist never moved his legs, nor was there any flight or gliding. He simply *came close*, as if zoomed in by a camera lens. He loomed. His saxophone had disappeared, his hands were free, and in an instant he was all over his former boss. Clawing, kicking, punching. Grabbing for the eyes and throat. Desperate. Maniacal. Murderous. Zoth collapsed, curled up in a foetal ball and gibbered as the attack continued. Until he realised that he was not being hurt. JayBee was less substantial than the finest mist, less definite than light images on a movie screen. His fists, his limbs, were shadow. They passed through Zoth like candlelight through glass.

Still, Zoth stayed down until the attack was over. JayBee finally backed off and glared at him, hatefully, helplessly. Zoth blinked with fright – and JayBee was not there any more.

Carraway groped his way to Zoth's side, helped him up. Together, shaking uncontrollably, they found their way out of the block. They only stopped when they had left the alley. Zoth slumped against the nearest wall. Carraway stood rigid, one hand outstretched but not quite touching his old friend.

'You okay?' he managed to gasp.

Zoth clutched at his heart for a while and grimaced, then he nodded.

'My God!' Carraway's hands were twisting and untwisting like frenetic snakes. 'I don't . . . I can't . . . What happened?'

'You saw what happened.'

'It was so fast. It . . . I . . .' He lapsed into incoherence for a

while. When he had straightened his thoughts out, he glanced directly at Zoth's eyes. 'He really seemed to hate you. Why?'

Zoth closed his eyes. 'I'm an authority on ghosts?'

'You were his friend,' Carraway said. 'And he attacked you. And you kept shouting one thing, over and over again.'

The eyes came sharply open. Zoth's lips went tight.

'What was that?' he asked, quietly.

'I'm sorry,' Carraway repeated. '*I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*'

Back in his hotel room, Zoth poured himself a drink. And another, and another, until the chill left his body and a smile spread across his face. He chuckled to himself gently. In that old block, in the dark, he had been so scared of JayBee and his spectral fists. But now, in the warm light of the bedside lamp . . . there was nothing to be scared of, never had been. JayBee was gone from this world, and his shadow image could do no one any harm. Zoth had not even felt a cold sensation as the blows passed through. Nothing. The saxophonist would never be able to exact his revenge.

Zoth raised his glass to nothing in particular.

'Beaten you again, old pal,' he grinned.

His gaze fell to the dresser. A bottle of after-shave stood there, and a hairbrush, a comb, a crumpled cigar wrapper. No photographs of family or friends, no mementoes. Just the old, leather-bound scrapbook which he took with him everywhere. He picked it up and, sitting down on the edge of the bed, began to flick through the pages.

There was JayBee's first rave review, the one which had helped make him. And there, a photograph of JayBee in his famous ten-night gig at the Bitter End. JayBee with his first gold disc. JayBee guest-starring with Ellington at Carnegie Hall.

The album ended abruptly, twelve pages short of the end. A score of old news cuttings marked the man's demise. Most of them were short, two-column fillers, but the *New York Times* had covered the tragedy in depth. The detective in charge had been interviewed briefly.

You're certain this is suicide, then?

Absolutely definite. We have no reason to suspect anything else. Have you?

But isn't it true that the bullet entered Klane's skull at an unusual angle?

I really think you're making too big a thing of this. The angle was very slightly odd, yes. But it wasn't an impossible angle by any means. You can hardly expect good marksmanship from someone trying to blow his own brains out.

An open and shut case, then?

The gun was found in the man's hand. It only had his fingerprints on it. Besides, these jazz weirdos are bumping themselves off all the time. Don't you read the papers?

And so, a South Manhattan detective with a penchant for the Chandleresque had sealed the matter. Zoth snapped the album shut with swift finality and laid it beside him on the bed. The smile slowly died from his face and when he took another sip of his drink it tasted bitter to him.

Beyond his window, 23rd Street bustled far into the night. Neon lights and cabs and dating couples, they might as well not have been there. Zoth was brooding, and his thoughts took him back to the ruin in that Village mews, to the strange, solitary inhabitant. To the music, especially the music.

'Killed the goose that laid the golden egg,' Zoth murmured to himself.

The bottom of his glass was wet with amber dregs. He raised it to his lips – and stopped quite still.

'Or have I?'

The next day, Zoth waited impatiently. He guessed that JayBee would not appear till after dark, and the moment dusk began to fall across the city he caught a cab downtown. The gloom was thickening as he got out and paid the driver. He waited until the cab drove off, then strode towards the alleyway. A battery cassette recorder swung from his left hand.

A grey, shapeless heap blocked the entrance to the alleyway. As Zoth approached, it resolved itself into a vaguely human form. A tramp, a wino, a Bowery bum. The bum clambered to his feet, clutching an empty brown bottle. There was no getting past him.

'Got a dime, mister?' He eyed the cassette recorder, mentally debating whether to attempt to snatch it. Blurred instinct told him that he had no chance.

Zoth kept his distance from the bum, gazing in distaste. The filthy clothes, the stubbled chin. And worst of all, the scarlet-marbled eyes, dull, lifeless, subhuman. He was revolted. At any other time, he would have replied with a few harsh words and hurried on. But now . . . the man was in the way. A dime would not get rid of him. The bum would pocket it, then hang around the alleyway and watch with dull, malicious curiosity.

Damn him! Zoth fished a five-dollar note from his back pocket, thrust it in the bum's hand. The bum stared at it in bewilderment.

'Take it,' Zoth snapped, 'and get going.'

The bum did not need to be told. He was already shambling towards the nearest liquor store.

'After all,' Zoth added to himself, 'I can afford it now.'

The night was settling about him like a fallen cloud. The alley yawned its darkness. Zoth drew himself up to his full height and stepped inside.

Immediately, the music started up, as skilful and as eloquent as the night before. Zoth walked within range of the building, placed the recorder on a window ledge and pressed the *record* button.

He let it play for two full minutes. Then, he ran the tape back and replayed. The music had been captured on the oxide band. Just as he'd hoped. Just as he'd guessed.

Picking up the recorder, he made his way inside the building. This time he was not frightened. He sauntered easily down the black corridor.

The music was growing near.

'JayBee?' Grinning, Zoth glanced around him. 'I'm here! Your old friend, Konrad!'

The saxophonist was on him before he had time to take another step. The pattern of violence was repeated. JayBee fought and struck and whirled like a spectral tornado, and he did not ruffle one hair of his victim's head. Konrad Zoth stood through it all, laughing. Laughing.

When it was over, JayBee stood back, head still tucked down, fists ready. He was not perspiring or breathing heavily. The natural laws did not apply. *With that kind of unnatural stamina,* Zoth thought, *what kind of music can he play?*

He extended his free hand. JayBee gritted his teeth.

'So it's come to this,' Zoth said. 'After twenty years.'

JayBee mouthed something, but he had no voice.

'It could have all been different,' Zoth continued. 'A little mismanagement of funds, a little skimming off the top, what did it matter between friends? You were still earning plenty. But no, you wanted to report me to the police. I'd have gone to jail. Worse, I'd have lost the company. I couldn't have stood that. Do you understand?'

Viciously, JayBee lashed at his face. Zoth did not even flinch. Again, he laughed.

'No, JayBee, you can't touch me. No more than you can touch anyone else in this world, hurt anything else. You don't belong here. You can't even make yourself heard. Except . . .'

He left the sentence hanging, let the tape speak for him. JayBee became calm and curious as he listened. His head tilted to one side, his eyebrows met. When it was done, he stared at Zoth questioningly.

'That's right,' Zoth nodded. 'Your music is the only thing which really still exists. It's the link between your world and ours. Anyone can hear it, and it can be recorded just like we used to do. *Just like we can do again.*'

JayBee shook his head and backed away. Zoth followed him. It would be hard persuading him to cut a new album, very hard. But then, in the old days, they had said that Konrad Zoth could make a deal with the devil.

Except in this case, he thought wryly, *who was the devil?*

By ten-thirty the following morning, Archie Carraway was beginning to worry. He had not heard from Zoth since the night they met the ghost. Despite Zoth's vehement denials, old age was catching up on him. He might have had a stroke, a heart attack, anything. Carraway pondered and paced until eleven, then went to the phone.

He called Zoth's hotel first. No, Mr Zoth had not been seen since yesterday afternoon. The secretary at Zoth's small Third Avenue office was equally unhelpful.

There was only one place that Zoth could be.

Carraway dashed into the street and flagged down the

nearest Yellow Cab. Within ten minutes, he was standing on the sidewalk in Bleeker Street, staring at the alleyway. It looked so different in the daylight. Just another dirty little lane, strewn with broken bottles and last month's newspapers. The apartment block looked shabby and defenceless once its veil of darkness had been ripped away.

Yet somehow, it still frightened Carraway.

There was no music now, only a pneumatic drill ratcheting further down the street.

He glanced at the broken, dim windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of Zoth. After a few moments, he realised he could not put off the need for action and he went inside.

Grey light criss-crossed the corridor from the open doorways. There was graffiti on the walls where some vandals had broken in, and an old pile of bottles where some tramp had once made his home. Dust adhered to every surface, trapped by a slick, slimy film of condensation. There was evidence of cockroaches and rats.

The smell in the building was predictably musty. But over it there was an odour Carraway could not place.

As he approached the stairs, he noted where the cobwebs had been broken by his previous passage. There were two sets of footprints in the powder on the floor. Overlapping them, if he was not mistaken, was another set. Zoth had been back.

He reached the staircase, saw for the first time that the middle seven steps were missing. No way up there. But the corridor extended several yards further along, ending up in deep shadow.

Carraway went to take a look.

At first, he thought that a dark sack had been propped up against the final wall. When he realised that it was Zoth, his first impulse was to run out and contact the police. The cassette recorder lying by the dead man's side caught his attention first. It had not been switched off; the tape was stretched to its full limit. Carraway ran it back, then played it.

An entire album was there. An entire new album by J. Baker Klane. A cheap cassette recording should have been useless – but somehow, there was no distortion at all. Every

note was clear and impossibly perfect. Any decent studio could use it as the template for a first-class mono record.

If the police got hold of the cassette first, it would be kept as evidence and never be released. And that would be an insult to JayBee and Konrad Zoth. Good men, both of them. Carraway knew where his duty lay.

He bought a pack of brown manila envelopes from the newsagents across the road, discarded all but one and posted the cassette to KZR. Anonymously, so that no one should connect him with the mystery. Then, and only then, did he bring in the authorities.

The police were still scratching their heads over the empty recorder when he shouldered his way through. Zoth's corpse was covered to the neck with a white sheet. A doctor was crouched over him.

Carraway bent down, frowned at Zoth's bulging eyes, his gaping mouth.

'What killed him?' he asked the doctor. 'Stroke? Heart attack?'

The doctor shook his head. 'Hard to be sure, but I'd say it was shock.'

'Oh, I see.'

'No you don't,' the doctor said. 'By shock I mean some kind of *sonic* shock. Look here.'

He tipped Zoth's head to one side, then the other. There was a pool of brown coagulated blood in each ear.

'His eardrums have burst,' the doctor said.

Of course, the experts concurred, it was impossible that *After Dark* was genuine. But say, for one fanciful moment, that it was. In that case, J. Baker Klane had not spent twenty years idly. He had improved his artistry, inventing new techniques which left the modern bands standing.

The best example was two chords at the end of the last track. Firstly, a high pure note which started softly, became louder and louder until the best hi-fi system could never reproduce it.

Second, a chord which no saxophone should have been able to play. It sounded like a human scream.

DEAD MAN'S BARN

A. E. ELLIS

The Reverend Ernest Sebastian Rearstoke, MA (Oxon.), Rector of East Mompting in the county of West Sussex and diocese of Chichester, a bachelor, was walking over the downs one Sunday afternoon in early autumn to conduct evensong in the little church of Toombs, a once flourishing parish now reduced to two or three scattered farmsteads by the silting up of the tidal river that once brought medieval merchantmen to its quays. Toombs, unable to support a parson of its own, had been united to East Mompting, and the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke was proceeding, this nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, to take his first service there. The Rector chose the downland bridleway in preference to the more direct but motor-infested road, and at length reached the crest of the hill at the foot of which lay Toombs church. Here stands one of those isolated barns or bartons so frequent on the South Downs, and the Rector, seating himself on an upturned feeding trough, paused to admire the view.

From the barn the downs slope gently northward, reaching their highest at Chanctonbury Ring, crowned with a clump of beeches which makes it a landmark for many miles, and dip westward to rise steeply at the terraced hill of Cissbury, the Neolithic 'Sheffield'. To the south a glimpse of the sea shows past juniper-clad Steep Down, while across the valley to the east the long ridge of Thunderbarrow stands stark against the sky.

From contemplation of this panorama the Rector turned to exploration of the barn. He was surprised to find that it showed no sign of recent use, although a well-built structure in good repair except for some missing tiles. In front of the barn was a walled yard, overgrown with nettles and docks, with a clump of sycamore trees outside. Built against the

walls on the inside of the yard were lean-to sheds, containing old agricultural implements, scraps of rusty iron, pieces of chain, hurdles and fencing rails. Near the entrance to the yard was a drinking-trough fed from a rainwater cistern built against the wall some six feet above the ground. Both cistern and trough were empty, however, which was not to be wondered at, for a hole had been drilled in the bottom of the feeder tank.

By the time the Rector had finished his aimless survey of the barn and its precincts, a flock of sheep attended by a weather-beaten shepherd and his two dogs, which the Rector had observed descending the slope of Steep Down as he neared the barn, wandered by with tinkling bells. As they passed, the shepherd, himself a member of the Rector's flock, paused to pass the time of day. The Rector, being of an inquisitive turn of mind, asked the shepherd why the barn was apparently no longer in use.

'Well,' answered the shepherd slowly, 'the fact is that sheep used to get some queer complaint through drinking the water in that trough in there.'

'But there is no water in the trough, nor couldn't be,' objected the Rector.

'True, but there used to be before I drilled a hole in the tank.'

'Then whatever was this strange complaint?' asked the Rector.

'That I couldn't rightly tell, but the sheep's wool used to get red in patches, especially around the throat, and they used to get very wild, particularly at night. Some sheep shut in the yard broke out one night and stampeded over the downs, and it was a week before they were all rounded up. Even then many of them had to be slaughtered, they were so wild and the dogs wouldn't go near them.'

'But surely there must be some explanation of this mysterious disease?' pursued the Rector.

'Well, some said one thing and some another, and I don't know what to think,' replied the shepherd cryptically, but the Rector had an idea that he really knew more than he cared to tell. The shepherd seemed anxious to close the discussion and bade the Rector 'good evening'.

'Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds,' quoted the Rector, who seldom bade a parishioner adieu without some apt words of scriptural counsel, and strode on down the hill.

Evensong over, the Rector decided to return home by a more circuitous route via Chanctonbury Ring. The woods were burnished russet, red and gold, and the soul of the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke was at peace as he climbed upwards through the hangers that fringe the escarpment of the downs below the Ring, blithely carolling some joyful psalm. The gnarled and twisted beeches clung to the steep, crumbling slopes more like gigantic barnacles than forest trees, and the path wound up and up among them to the windswept clump at the summit. 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.'

Arrived at the Ring, the Rector paused awhile to gaze on one of the noblest views in all the south country. Away to the distant line of the North Downs stretches the Weald, while as far as eye can reach the bold ridges of the South Downs extend to east and west, like a giant's rampart protecting England from her foes. Truly 'the lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places' soliloquised the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke.

The roseate hues of early dawn,
The brightness of the day,
The crimson of the sunset sky,
How fast they fade away

he sang as he turned towards home. The brightness of the day had faded faster than he realised, however, and before he had gone a mile a dense mist began to rise from the coombes below. All landmarks were soon blotted out 'amid the encircling gloom', and the Rector shortly came to the disquieting conclusion that he had lost his way. Not being familiar with the downland tracks, try as he would he could no longer be sure in which direction he was travelling.

After some aimless wandering, the Rector chose a path at random, in the hope of eventually reaching some habitation where he could receive directions. At length the dim outlines

of a building loomed up, and on closer approach the errant divine found himself back at the disused barn where he had met the shepherd. Although he now knew his whereabouts, the Rector did not feel confident enough of finding his way home in the fog to warrant his rejecting the shelter this building afforded. He accordingly entered the barn and looked round for a nook in which to pass the night. In a corner was a heap of rather musty hay on which the exhausted Rector laid his weary frame. 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep,' murmured the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke as he composed himself for repose.

It is not easy to fall asleep in a bare barn with a truss of hay for a bed, when one has been accustomed to a spring mattress and downy pillows, especially without any supper, but the worn-out clergyman did at last drop off. Hardly had he sunk into oblivion when he was awakened with a start by a blood-curdling screech emanating from within the barn and almost overhead. Sitting up in alarm he beheld a round white face with a pair of large eyes contemplating him from a rafter. The hideous noise was repeated, but this time the reverend gentleman countered with a well-aimed flint, which sent the offending barnowl flapping hastily out into the night with something definite to screech about.

Having thus unceremoniously ejected what he hoped was the only other occupant of the barn, the Rector again lay down to rest, murmuring before dozing off:

> 'O let no evil dreams be near,
> Nor phantoms of the night appear.'

A few hours later the Rector again awoke. This time he was at a loss to know what had aroused him, but that something had he felt certain. Moonlight was now streaming in through a ventilation slit near the roof, so the fog had evidently disappeared. The Rector lay awhile wondering what had caused him to start so suddenly from slumber. Presently he became aware of a steady dripping sound coming from just outside the barn. There was something odd about this, which at first eluded him. Then it flashed upon

him that it was a perfectly fine night and there had been no sign of rain when he retired to rest. Surely there could not have been a shower during the all too brief interval while he slept.

The Rector's insatiable curiosity asserted itself and constrained him to go outside to find out whence came this aggravating drip, drip, drip. The yard was still quite dry and there had indeed been no rain. Listening intently the Rector traced the dripping noise to the hole in the bottom of the rainwater cistern. 'How on earth has that tank come to contain water?' he asked himself, and at once proceeded to find the answer by scaling the wall and peering over the rim of the tank.

The cistern did not contain water, but it was not empty. A man lay huddled at the bottom. The astonished Rector looked more closely and saw that the man appeared to be asleep. He also noticed that he had a curious dark collar around his neck. His curiosity now thoroughly aroused, the clergyman took a box of matches from his pocket and struck a light. Before he dropped the flaming match in horror, he saw that the man's throat was cut from ear to ear – a strange collar indeed – and from this gaping wound a dark, viscous trickle led to the hole in the bottom of the tank.

The horrified Rector fell rather than climbed down from the wall and made for the gateway. As he reached it he perceived a man standing under the trees outside. This gave the Rector pause, and he watched the man with consternation. The probability was that yonder stood the slayer of that thing in the cistern, and such a villain was unlikely to stick at trifles if he saw that he was observed. But the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke was no faintheart, and he knew that it was his duty to do all in his power to apprehend the murderer, or at any rate to see that he did not escape untraced. Looking about for a weapon, he wrenched off a length of piping from the cistern. Greatly comforted by this acquisition, and further fortified by a hasty prayer for strength to his arm, the man of God leapt forth on the trail of the malefactor.

The man had now left the clump of trees and was walking rapidly down the hill. The Rector broke into a run and

approaching noiselessly on the turf called on him to stop. The man took no notice whatever, so the Rector repeated his hail. Still no response. 'Surely he must be deaf,' thought the Rector, so he dashed ahead and stood to confront this uncanny walker of the night.

'Halt, I say!' cried the valiant priest, raising his weapon threateningly. Still the man came on as though sleep-walking. The Rector now observed that he carried a deadly-looking butcher's knife in his right hand. This was decisive. Swinging the piece of piping over his shoulder, the Rector brought it down with a thud on the man's head and felled him to the ground.

Dropping his weapon, the Rector knelt down to discover the extent of the injury he had inflicted, and was alarmed at the lifeless appearance of the figure on the ground. He placed a hand on the forehead of the prostrate form and hastily withdrew it – the brow was icy cold! He felt the chest – the heart was still, there was no sign of breathing, and again that deathly chill! The clergyman, now thoroughly scared, rose to his feet. In his agitation he had evidently struck too hard and killed the man – but surely the body could not have grown cold in the space of a few moments!

'Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me: and an horrible dread hath overwhelmed me,' moaned the Reverend Ernest Rearstoke forlornly. Then he caught sight of a house in the coombe below. Well, he could not run away and leave the corpse lying there, to say nothing of that other in the tank, so he set off down the hill and knocked at the door of the cottage. After some delay, a bedroom window was thrown open, and the voice of his friend the shepherd called out, 'Who's there?' Great was his surprise when he found it was his own rector, and hastily putting on some clothes he opened the door. The Rector rapidly explained the situation, the shepherd meanwhile maintaining a stolid silence. When requested to assist in carrying down the body, however, he shook his head and said, 'That wouldn't be of any use, sir.'

'But surely you would not leave him lying out there like that?' expostulated the Rector. 'If you won't help me, I must look elsewhere.'

'Very well, then,' acquiesced the shepherd reluctantly, 'I'll come with you, though it won't be any manner of use.'

So they ascended the hill together and came to the spot where the body had lain. There on the grass lay the piping so ably wielded by the Rector, but no corpse was anywhere to be seen. The Rector was dumbfounded, but the shepherd did not seem to be even mildly surprised. 'I told you it weren't no use, sir,' was all the comment he made.

'This is most astounding!' exclaimed the Rector. 'As I live and fear God, the dead body of a man, slain alas by mine own hand, lay on this spot but half an hour ago.'

'Not slain by your hand,' muttered the shepherd almost inaudibly, as he turned back towards his cottage.

'Stay!' cried the Rector, 'I'm going back to the barn. Will you accompany me?'

'That won't be any use neither, but I'll come with you,' replied the shepherd without animation.

They came to the barn and entered the yard. The Rector strode across to the tank and climbed on the wall. He nearly fell off it with astonishment, for the cistern was empty.

'My heart also in the midst of my body is even like melting wax; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my gums,' exclaimed the harassed divine, but all the shepherd said was, 'I told you it weren't no use, sir.'

Back again in his cottage, where the Rector passed the remaining hours of darkness, the shepherd became more communicative, and what he told the Rector was as follows:

'When I was a young man, there were two brothers, Nathaniel and Ebenezer Gorsendale, who were shepherds to Farmer Broadacre at Lower Luddington Farm. Now Farmer Broadacre had a daughter, a fine handsome lass, with whom both brothers were in love – not that she ever gave them any encouragement, far from it. Never having been very friendly, being after the same young woman did not make the brothers any fonder of each other. It didn't mend matters their being so much together minding the sheep, and their jealousy grew with their passion for Fanny Broadacre.

'One February night it came on to snow hard, a real blizzard, which is a most uncommon thing in these parts. The sheep were out on the downs, as there were no BBC

weather forecasts in these days and snow was not expected. The Gorsendales had to go out and fetch them into that barn you slept in – Dead Man's Barn they call it now, but its real name is Hill Barn. When morning came the brothers had not returned, so a search was made. It had snowed hard all night and drifts lay deep in the bottoms. The sheep were safely in the barnyard, but there was no sign of the Gorsendales.

'Presently a dog was heard barking down the valley towards Toombs, and the searchers following the sound found it was the Gorsendales' sheepdog. As soon as the dog saw the men coming it started to dig frantically in the snow, all the while keeping up a low whining. Farmer Broadacre and his men scraped away the snow and uncovered Nat Gorsendale's body, frozen stiff. They continued the search the rest of the day and for many days to come, but no trace did they find of Ebenezer. What they did find was a rusty butcher's knife sticking in a gorse bush between the barn and the hollow where Nat's body was found. Farmer Broadacre recognised it as one he had missed shortly before the fatal snowstorm.

'Spring came and it was then the first signs of that trouble with the sheep I was telling you about began to be noticed. I was then shepherd in place of the Gorsendales and I was sorely bewildered to know what could be ailing them. After a time I noticed that it was only after they had been folded in the barnyard that they became queer. So long as they were out on the downs they were all right. It seemed that the only thing that could be the cause of the trouble was the drinking water, so I decided to clean out the cistern. There is no need for me to tell you what I found in there. He was buried beside his brother in Toombs churchyard.'

'So in death they were not divided,' commented the Rector dryly.

'A mysterious part of the whole tragic affair,' went on the shepherd, 'is that sheep drinking at that trough, although both it and the feeder tank were thoroughly scoured out, still used to get those red patches on the throat and went wild just as before. We gave up using the barn in the end and I bored a hole in the bottom of the cistern.'

'How is it you took last night's extraordinary happenings

so much as a matter of course?' asked the Rector, as he parted from the shepherd in the morning.

'Oh, I often see Nat Gorsendale about when I'm out after the sheep at night,' replied the shepherd, 'but he never takes no notice of me.'

'And Miss Broadacre,' enquired the Rector, who always liked to pursue a matter to the end, 'was she greatly upset by the tragedy of which she was the innocent cause?'

'She never said a word about it at the time, nor since, though Fanny and me have been married forty years come Easter.'

THE PASSING OF EDWARD

RICHARD MIDDLETON

I found Dorothy sitting sedately on the beach, with a mass of black seaweed twined in her hands and her bare feet sparkling white in the sun. Even in the first glow of recognition I realised that she was paler than she had been the summer before, and yet I cannot blame myself for the tactlessness of my question.

'Where's Edward?' I said; and I looked about the sands for a sailor suit and a little pair of prancing legs.

While I looked, Dorothy's eyes watched mine enquiringly, as if she wondered what I might see.

'Edward's dead,' she said simply. 'He died last year, after you left.'

For a moment I could only gaze at the child in silence, and ask myself what reason there was in the thing that had hurt her so. Now that I knew that Edward played with her no more, I could see that there was a shadow upon her face too dark for her years, and that she had lost, to some extent, that exquisite carelessness of poise which makes children so young. Her voice was so calm that I might have thought her forgetful had I not seen an instant of patent pain in her wide eyes.

'I'm sorry,' I said at length, 'very, very, sorry indeed. I had brought down my car to take you for a drive, as I promised.'

'Oh! Edward *would* have liked that,' she answered thoughtfully; 'he was so fond of motors.'

She swung round suddenly and looked at the sands behind her with staring eyes.

'I thought I heard – ' She broke off in confusion.

I, too, had believed for an instant that I had heard something that was not the wind or the distant children or the smooth sea hissing along the beach. During that golden summer which linked me with the dead, Edward had been

wont, in moments of elation, to puff up and down the sands, in artistic representation of a nobby, noisy motor-car. But the dead may play no more, and there was nothing there but the sands and the hot sky and Dorothy.

'You had better let me take you for a run, Dorothy,' I said. 'The man will drive, and we can talk as we go along.'

She nodded gravely, and began pulling on her sandy stockings.

'It did not hurt him,' she said inconsequently.

The restraint in her voice pained me like a blow.

'Oh, don't, dear, don't!' I cried. 'There is nothing to do but forget.'

'I have forgotten, quite,' she answered, pulling at her shoelaces with calm fingers. 'It was ten months ago.'

We walked up to the front, where the car was waiting, and Dorothy settled herself among the cushions with a little sigh of contentment, the human quality of which brought me a certain relief. If only she would laugh or cry! I sat down by her side, but the man waited by the open door.

'What is it?' I asked.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he answered, looking about him in confusion, 'I thought I saw a young gentleman with you.'

He shut the door with a bang, and in a minute we were running through the town. I knew that Dorothy was watching my face with her wounded eyes; but I did not look at her until the green fields leapt up on either side of the white road.

'It is only for a little while that we may not see him,' I said; 'all this is nothing.'

'I have forgotten,' she repeated. 'I think this is a very nice motor.'

I had not previously complained of the motor, but I was wishing then that it would cease its poignant imitation of a little dead boy, a boy who would play no more. By the touch of Dorothy's sleeve against mine I knew that she could hear it too. And the miles flew by, green and brown and golden, while I wondered what use I might be in the world, who could not help a child to forget. Possibly there was another way, I thought.

'Tell me how it happened,' I said.

Dorothy looked at me with inscrutable eyes, and spoke in a voice without emotion.

'He caught a cold, and was very ill in bed. I went in to see him, and he was all white and faded. I said to him, "How are you, Edward?" and he said, "I shall get up early in the morning to catch beetles." I didn't see him any more.'

'Poor little chap!' I murmured.

'I went to the funeral,' she continued monotonously. 'It was very rainy, and I threw a little bunch of flowers down into the hole. There was a whole lot of flowers there; but I think Edward liked apples better than flowers.'

'Did you cry?' I said cruelly.

She paused. 'I don't know. I suppose so. It was a long time ago; I think I have forgotten.'

Even while she spoke I heard Edward puffing along the sands: Edward who had been so fond of apples.

'I cannot stand this any longer,' I said aloud. 'Let's get out and walk in the woods for a change.'

She agreed, with a depth of comprehension that terrified me; and the motor pulled up with a jerk at a spot where hardly a post served to mark where the woods commenced and the wayside grass stopped. We took one of the dim paths which the rabbits had made and forced our way through the undergrowth into the peaceful twilight of the trees.

'You haven't got very sunburnt this year,' I said as we walked.

'I don't know why. I've been out on the beach all the days. Sometimes I've played, too.'

I did not ask her what games she had played, or who had been her play-friend. Yet even there in the quiet woods I knew that Edward was holding her back from me. It is true that, in his boy's way, he had been fond of me; but I should not have dared to take her out without him in the days when his live lips had filled the beach with song, and his small brown body had danced among the surf. Now it seemed that I had been disloyal to him.

And presently we came to a clearing where the leaves of forgotten years lay brown and rotten beneath our feet, and the air was full of the dryness of death.

'Let's be going back. What do you think, Dorothy?' I said.

'I think,' she said slowly, 'I think that this would be a very good place to catch beetles.'

A wood is full of secret noises, and that is why, I suppose, we heard a pair of small quick feet come with a dance of triumph through the rustling bracken. For a minute we listened deeply, and then Dorothy broke from my side with a piercing call on her lips.

'Oh, Edward, Edward!' she cried; 'Edward!'

But the dead may play no more, and presently she came back to me with the tears that are the riches of childhood streaming down her face.

'I can hear him, I can hear him,' she sobbed; 'but I cannot see him. Never, never again.'

And so I led her back to the motor. But in her tears I seemed to find a promise of peace that she had not known before.

Now Edward was no very wonderful little boy; it may be that he was jealous and vain and greedy; yet now, it seemed as he lay in his small grave with the memory of Dorothy's flowers about him, he had wrought this kindness for his sister. Yes, even though we heard no more than the birds in the branches and the wind swaying the scented bracken; even though he had passed with another summer, and the dead and the love of the dead may rise no more from the grave.

THE LAST INNINGS

DAPHNE FROOME

The atmosphere was heavy and still; Kay couldn't remember it ever having been so still before, and except for the slight click of her sandals on the pavement there was no sound. The heat from the sun in the dead sky drew an acrid smell from the molten tar on the roadway as she slowly climbed the hill towards the sports ground at the top.

She wished she had been wearing something more suitable than the grey dress. She had chosen it because it was smart and unobtrusive, but the long sleeves clung to her arms and the high neck seemed to be trying to prevent the heavy air from entering her lungs.

The ground was very exposed on its clifftop site. In the distance she could see the golf course, nearer a tennis court, where two people played a desultory game. The well-tended green of the cricket pitch was lush amidst the shrivelled yellow of the surrounding grass. Quite a crowd of spectators had gathered for the match, dressed for the weather, most of them obviously straight out of the sea.

Except for the deep shadow cast by one enormous oak tree, that reared its massive trunk upwards beside the brown wooden walls of the pavilion and spread its branches over the red tiled roof, there was scarcely any shade at all, but there was shade beneath that in plenty. A number of young men had gathered on the balcony, Bill among them, and she made her way over and ran up the steps towards him.

'Kay!' he exclaimed, with obvious pride. 'Why, Kay, how stunning you look in that frothy dress!' There was a momentary silence as the various people glanced at her and smiled with obvious friendliness. 'Look, the match is just about to begin. I've had my Uncle Tony keep you a place. You'll like Uncle Tony, and he's a great cricketing enthusiast; he'll explain all the finer points of the game and

entertain you by shouting loud abuse every time I make a mistake.' Bill escorted her to a deck-chair in the shade of the great tree, guarded by an elderly man in a well-pressed cream suit. Then, when he had introduced her, he patted her short blonde hair rather self-consciously and returned to the pavilion.

Uncle Tony politely lifted his panama hat, removed his spectacles, polished them, and proceeded to regard her through their clean, shining lenses. 'Come to watch the play, have you? You don't look much of an athlete yourself; you'd never make a bowler like Bill, that's for sure, not with narrow shoulders like those. Hot, isn't it?' He fanned himself with a folded newspaper. 'I played a good deal myself for the county when I was my nephew's age. A batsman, I was. It appealed to me, knocking up the runs; it seemed more positive, somehow, than trying to get the other fellow out.' He squinted after the tall, broad figure of Bill making his way on to the field to bowl the first over. 'The technique, of course, is to get the batsman out before he's had time to settle down.'

Kay watched Bill polish the ball carefully on his shirt as he walked steadily away from the wicket. 'Does he always run up that far?'

The old man nodded. 'Here comes the delivery,' he whispered in a hushed, reverent voice.

Bill's feet carried him with easy speed across the grass and he bowled. The diminutive batsman facing him leant forward and caught the ball a crack that sent it sailing over the heads of the fielders to the boundary.

Uncle Tony buried his face in his hands. 'The ball was short,' he groaned. 'Mind you,' he added fiercely, 'that little chap shouldn't have got away with a cheeky shot like that. He'll try it once too often.'

Kay felt quite a traitorous sympathy for the little man out there facing the bullet-like missiles hurled towards him with all the fire and fury Bill could muster. Much to Uncle Tony's disgust she clapped when he scored one more run. She felt relieved that he wouldn't have to face the bowling for a little.

Bill bowled his third ball.

'Howzat. Well caught!' Her companion rose to his feet.

'Oh, he deserved that, he did indeed. He should never have tried a late cut, not with a new ball and a bowler like Bill!'

Kay nodded in agreement, not daring to ask what constituted a 'late cut'. Waiting for the new batsman to arrive she sat gazing around.

Near-by, the corner of the grey stone restaurant was covered with rambling roses, white perhaps, or pale yellow – it was impossible to see with all the blossoms so overblown. Someone should snip them off – they looked withered, the colour of parchment, wrinkled like dead skin, the dead skin of the skeletal face of the batsman leaving the pitch, coming closer, walking towards the pavilion. She watched him, turning her head as he mounted the steps on to the balcony, hypnotised by the sudden terrible shock, her grey eyes staring, almost as if she thought that in the act of blinking she might open them to an even worse apparition.

'You look as if you could do with this.' Uncle Tony was standing over her, proffering an ice-cream. 'You were so taken up with the game you didn't even see the boy come up and sell it to me. My word, you're shaking! Exciting match, isn't it? I'm sure you're glad you came here for your holiday now.' He had sat down beside her again, and taking a mouthful of ice-cream he gesticulated with the spoon towards the wicket. 'Attacking field, that's the spirit,' he muttered indistinctly. 'Our captain knows what he's up to all right. Get the others rattled, keep 'em that way, it's good psychology!'

She began to take a desperate, almost macabre, interest in the game. She stood up and fiddled with her chair, sliding the wooden bar up into the highest slot so that she could get a better view of the field, following Tony's comments with enthralled attention. The batsmen settled down, the game took on a strangely relentless rhythm. 'Bowl, hit, run, field,' she muttered to herself, grinding the remnants of the ice-cream carton savagely beneath her heel in her agitation. Another bowler had taken over, a man with flailing arms who was referred to by her companion scathingly as 'the windmill'. The diminutive batsman snicked at the ball and commenced his run too late.

'Run out!' Bill's uncle was guffawing loudly.

The batsman was walking back straight towards her. She opened her handbag and, looking down into it, shuffled the contents, pretending to be searching for something.

'You're Kay, aren't you?' a strange voice pronounced, forcing her to raise her eyes again. 'Bill has been going on at great lengths about you. He and I are the firmest friends, though we play on opposite sides. I *am* pleased to meet you.' He held out a square, warm hand that encased hers in a strong grasp. 'Tim's the name. Not a very good beginning for us, is it, with the score at twenty-one for two?' His rather full mouth drooped slightly at the corners. 'Still, it's only a game after all.'

'If you can call it that,' Uncle Tony said cuttingly, 'with one fool stroke and a run out almost before the umpires have had time to take their places.'

'Well – yes – see you again some time, then.' Tim, nonplussed, backed away, his body moving with the easy suppleness of someone very much alive and in perfect health.

Kay turned to her companion. 'Do you know anything about mirages?' she asked him suddenly. 'I mean, on a very hot day like this might the light not play strange tricks?'

'Eh?' Uncle Tony regarded her curiously. 'Not on a cricket pitch. Not in *England*.'

She tried to concentrate on the antics of a near-by fielder as he chased after the ball. His stark white silhouette flickered strangely, like a candle flame blown in a breeze, only there wasn't any breeze. The image was flickering more every moment, the shape of the fielder growing fainter; by the time he had reached the ball he had become nothing more than a mass of pale shadows, as insubstantial as the first beginnings of the misty clouds gathering on the horizon above the distant purple of the sea.

'Well fielded! With a good, straight throw in like that you don't give any runs away,' Tony explained patiently, watching the man unconcernedly. The crowd in their gay clothes clapped politely.

She sat on, her mind stupefied, every so often craning her neck to watch the hands of the pavilion clock slowly eroding the morning hours away. 'If you don't mind,' she whispered at last, 'I think I'll go and buy myself a drink.'

Her elderly companion raised his eyebrows. 'At this desperate stage in the game?' He pointed to a bulging plastic carrier-bag beneath his chair. 'My lunch,' he explained, 'and several cans of beer. You're welcome to help yourself to one of them if you like!' He leant forward, intent only on watching his nephew who was bowling again.

She jumped up and ran towards the restaurant.

It was refreshingly cool inside the large, grey building. Except for half a dozen waitresses sitting round a table, eating their lunch before the customers arrived, and a man polishing glasses behind the bar, the large dining-room was empty.

She went over, ordered a double brandy, and carried it to a chair near an open window that gave on to the car park. It was crammed full of family saloons, one or two opulent sporting models, vans, coaches and even a caravan. She sat staring with gratitude at the ordinary, familiar shapes, shining brashly in the clear, intense light.

After a while she took a sip of the brandy, eyeing her fingers anxiously through the bowl of the glass. They looked normal enough, with the little gold ring set with its pale mauve amethyst stone, that Bill had bought her in the gift shop on the promenade, decorating the third finger of her right hand. She gulped down the rest of the drink and closed her eyes.

'Clever you, running on ahead of everyone and grabbing a table near the window.' Bill sat down opposite her. 'What a morning!' He grinned at her empty glass. 'I see you've been celebrating already. With good cause, too. Getting them all out before lunch – not bad, eh? I did all right, didn't you think?' He eyed her expectantly.

'You played splendidly,' she said brightly. 'You should have seen your uncle's reaction when you took the first wicket!'

'Now, what would you like to eat?'

'Let's order the best they have – let's celebrate – I'll buy a bottle of champagne – '

'Steady on. I'm afraid we don't run to anything special here. Prawn cocktail, cold turkey and orange sorbet are

about the highest flights of haute cuisine the chef can manage.' He paused, doubtfully. 'As for champagne, if you don't mind I'd rather leave that until this evening. We do have to start play again at ten past two, you know, and I'm pretty hopeless at defending a wicket even when I'm stone cold sober. Fortunately I'm down to bat last and I sincerely hope we shall have won long before then, but you can never be sure.'

Outside, two middle-aged golfers were unloading their clubs from the boot of a car. One of them took out a pair of golfing shoes and sat on the low brick wall that bordered the car park, tying the laces carefully into bows. She could see the spikes on the bottoms of the shoes quite distinctly. The man sitting on the wall was dressed in brown, the other one wore a blue peaked cap, matching his shirt. She watched their solid, reassuring backs until they had disappeared.

After lunch, turning away from the cricket pitch, she followed the path they had taken.

The golf course was much larger than she had imagined, with a path running round the perimeter along which she walked, stopping every now and then to study one or other of the players making a shot. The two men from the car park had reached the third tee by the time she caught up with them. Surreptitiously she stood watching them progress with total seriousness and determination from thicket to ditch to bunker, suddenly reminded of how trivial her life had been until this morning, when the supernatural had so devastatingly interfered.

'Fore!' People were shouting and waving at her. Inadvertently she had wandered on to the green. She hurried away, stumbling through a bunker, fording a stream, dodging round clumps of bushes, and eventually climbing a stile that led into a field. She crossed the field and, opening a gate, she suddenly found herself entering the cricket ground from the other side.

The first person she noticed was Bill, who was standing at the wicket, and as she hurried round towards the pavilion she caught sight of Uncle Tony on the balcony. He was surrounded by members of the home team and she tried to tell herself that the indistinctness of their outlines had

something to do with the fact that black clouds had gathered overhead, obscuring the sunshine. She advanced, almost recklessly, and eyed the men more closely. They were featureless, blurred, barely distinguishable from the slatted walls and open windows of the building behind them.

The solid figure of Uncle Tony came down the steps and ran to meet her. 'So here you are at last! Wherever have you been?' His sudden sprint across the grass had left him slightly breathless.

'Watching the golf.'

'The golf! The most exciting game we've had for years and you've been watching the golf!' He paused for a moment, speechless. 'There have been some stirring situations here I can tell you. And now the last men are in and we only need one run to win. Thank heavens young Bill's not batting, that's all. At least with the other fellow we stand some chance. Oh, and something else – that little chap, the friend of Bill's, Tim, you remember, the second man out, well he was hit on the shin by the ball when he was fielding at silly mid-off and carried off to hospital.' Overhead a sudden flash of lightning and a crash of thunder seemed to underline his words. He glanced anxiously at the sky. 'All we need is rain now, or an appeal against the light.'

A hush fell over the ground. Someone was bowling to the batsman, who stood, hemmed in by fielders, opposite Bill.

'They've done it, they've done it, they've got a run!'

All the fielders were beginning to dissolve before her eyes. With the rain suddenly pouring down she raced across through the spectral figures towards Bill, flinging her arms around him, screaming.

Bill stood with the water running from his head, his shirt clinging to his back, and tried to tear himself free. 'You're crazy,' he shouted. 'Mad! Unhinged!' He stared desperately round.

The spectators had gathered up their belongings and fled. In fact the thunder shower had cleared the field of everyone except Uncle Tony, who, not very sprightly on his feet, was making his way more slowly towards the rest of the cricketers already crowding into the pavilion.

'Tony!' Bill's voice roared above the sound of the elements.

The old man stopped, looked round, and came limping back through the puddles. His waterlogged hat sagged down over his ears, water oozed from his shoes as his feet touched the ground. 'What in blazes are you doing?'

The last cricketers disappeared from sight beneath the red tiled roof, leaving Bill and Tony struggling with Kay on the field.

The lightning and thunder struck together, sending the great oak tree down to smash through the pavilion in a mass of flame that raced through the wooden slats of the walls sending up a cloud of steam as it came into contact with the rain.

Kay turned her head in bewilderment and saw Nurse Evans hurry across the grass, her face wearing an expression that was midway between anger and frustration. The high, shrill voice could just be heard above the thudding of falling rain.

'Come indoors this instant, Mrs Marshall. Really, an old lady like you, standing out here in this weather – you will catch your death of cold.'

CHRISTMAS EVE IN THE BLUE CHAMBER

JEROME K. JEROME

'I don't want to make you fellows nervous,' began my uncle in a peculiarly impressive, not to say blood-curdling, tone of voice, 'and if you would rather that I did not mention it, I won't; but, as a matter of fact, this very house, in which we are now sitting, is haunted.'

'You don't say that!' exclaimed Mr Coombes.

'What's the use of your saying I don't say it when I have just said it?' retorted my uncle somewhat annoyed. 'You talk so foolishly. I tell you the house is haunted. Regularly on Christmas Eve the Blue Chamber' (they call the room next to the nursery the 'Blue Chamber' at my uncle's) 'is haunted by the ghost of a sinful man – a man who once killed a Christmas carol singer with a lump of coal.'

'How did he do it?' asked Mr Coombes, eagerly. 'Was it difficult?'

'I do not know how he did it,' replied my uncle; 'he did not explain the process. The singer had taken up a position just inside the front gate, and was singing a ballad. It is presumed that, when he opened his mouth for B flat, the lump of coal was thrown by the sinful man from one of the windows, and that it went down the singer's throat and choked him.'

'You want to be a good shot, but it is certainly worth trying,' murmured Mr Coombes thoughtfully.

'But that was not his only crime, alas!' added my uncle. 'Prior to that he had killed a solo cornet player.'

'No! Is that really a fact?' exclaimed Mr Coombes.

'Of course it's a fact,' answered my uncle testily. 'At all events, as much a fact as you can expect to get in a case of this sort.

'The poor fellow, the cornet player, had been in the neighbourhood barely a month. Old Mr Bishop, who kept

the "Jolly Sand Boys" at the time, and from whom I had the story, said he had never known a more hard-working and energetic solo cornet player. He, the cornet player, only knew two tunes, but Mr Bishop said the man could not have played with more vigour, or for more hours a day, if he had known forty. The two tunes he did play were "Annie Laurie" and "Home, Sweet Home"; and as regards his performance of the former melody, Mr Bishop said that a mere child could have told what it was meant for.

'This musician – this poor, friendless artist – used to come regularly and play in this street just opposite for two hours every evening. One evening he was seen, evidently in response to an invitation, going into this very house, *but was never seen coming out of it!*'

'Did the townsfolk try offering any reward for his recovery?' asked Mr Coombes.

'Not a penny,' replied my uncle.

'Another summer,' continued my uncle, 'a German band visited here, intending – so they announced on their arrival – to stay till the autumn.

'On the second day after their arrival, the whole company, as fine and healthy a body of men as one would wish to see, were invited to dinner by this sinful man, and, after spending the whole of the next twenty-four hours in bed, left the town a broken and dyspeptic crew; the parish doctor, who had attended them, giving it as his opinion that it was doubtful if they would, any of them, be fit to play an air again.'

'You – you don't know the recipe, do you?' asked Mr Coombes.

'Unfortunately I do not,' replied my uncle; 'but the chief ingredient was said to have been railway dining-room hash.

'I forget the man's other crimes,' my uncle went on; 'I used to know them all at one time, but my memory is not what it was. I do not, however, believe I am doing his memory an injustice in believing that he was not entirely unconnected with the death, and subsequent burial, of a gentleman who used to play the harp with his toes; and that neither was he altogether unresponsible for the lonely grave of an unknown stranger who had once visited the neighbourhood, an Italian peasant lad, a performer upon the barrel-organ.

'Every Christmas Eve,' said my uncle, cleaving with low impressive tones the strange awed silence that, like a shadow, seemed to have slowly stolen into and settled down upon the room, 'the ghost of this sinful man haunts the Blue Chamber, in this very house. There, from midnight until cock-crow, amid wild muffled shrieks and groans and mocking laughter and the ghostly sound of horrid blows, it does fierce phantom fight with the spirits of the solo cornet player and the murdered carol singer, assisted at intervals by the shades of the German band; while the ghost of the strangled harpist plays mad ghostly melodies with ghostly toes on the ghost of a broken harp.'

Uncle said the Blue Chamber was comparatively useless as a sleeping apartment on Christmas Eve.

'Hark!' said my uncle, raising a warning hand towards the ceiling, while we held our breath, and listened: 'Hark! I believe they are at it now – in the Blue Chamber!'

I rose up and said that *I* would sleep in the Blue Chamber.

'Never!' cried my uncle, springing up. 'You shall not put yourself in this deadly peril. Besides, the bed is not made.'

'Never mind the bed,' I replied. 'I have lived in furnished apartments for gentlemen, and have been accustomed to sleep on beds that have never been made from one year's end to the other. I am young, and have had a clear conscience now for a month. The spirits will not harm me. I may even do them some little good, and induce them to be quiet and go away. Besides, I should like to see the show.'

They tried to dissuade me from what they termed my foolhardy enterprise, but I remained firm and claimed my privilege. I was 'the guest'. 'The guest' always sleeps in the haunted chamber on Christmas Eve; it is his right.

They said that if I put it on that footing they had, of course, no answer, and they lighted a candle for me and followed me upstairs in a body.

Whether elevated by the feeling that I was doing a noble action or animated by a mere general consciousness of rectitude is not for me to say, but I went upstairs that night with remarkable buoyancy. It was as much as I could do to stop at the landing when I came to it; I felt I wanted to go on up to the roof. But, with the help of the banisters, I restrained

my ambition, wished them all good-night and went in and shut the door.

Things began to go wrong with me from the very first. The candle tumbled out of the candlestick before my hand was off the lock. It kept on tumbling out again; I never saw such a slippery candle. I gave up attempting to use the candlestick at last and carried the candle about in my hand, and even then it would not keep upright. So I got wild and threw it out the window, and undressed and went to bed in the dark.

I did not go to sleep; I did not feel sleepy at all; I lay on my back looking up at the ceiling and thinking of things. I wish I could remember some of the ideas that came to me as I lay there, because they were so amusing.

I had been lying like this for half an hour or so, and had forgotten all about the ghost, when, on casually casting my eyes round the room, I noticed for the first time a singularly contented-looking phantom sitting in the easy-chair by the fire smoking the ghost of a long clay pipe.

I fancied for the moment, as most people would under similar circumstances, that I must be dreaming. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. No! It was a ghost, clear enough. I could see the back of the chair through his body. He looked over towards me, took the shadowy pipe from his lips and nodded.

The most surprising part of the whole thing to me was that I did not feel in the least alarmed. If anything I was rather pleased to see him. It was company.

I said: 'Good evening. It's been a cold day!'

He said he had not noticed it himself, but dared say I was right.

We remained silent for a few seconds, and then, wishing to put it pleasantly, I said: 'I believe I have the honour of addressing the ghost of the gentleman who had the accident with the carol singer?'

He smiled and said it was very good of me to remember it. One singer was not much to boast of, but still every little helped.

I was somewhat staggered at his answer. I had expected a groan of remorse. The ghost appeared, on the contrary, to be rather conceited over the business. I thought that as he had

taken my reference to the singer so quietly perhaps he would not be offended if I questioned him about the organ grinder. I felt curious about that poor boy.

'Is it true,' I asked, 'that you had a hand in the death of that Italian peasant lad who came to the town with a barrel-organ that played nothing but Scotch airs?'

He quite fired up. 'Had a hand in it!' he exclaimed indignantly. 'Who has dared to pretend that he assisted me? I murdered the youth myself. Nobody helped me. Alone I did it. Show me the man who says I didn't.'

I calmed him. I assured him that I had never, in my own mind, doubted that he was the real and only assassin, and I went on and asked him what he had done with the body of the cornet player he had killed.

He said: 'To which one may you be alluding?'

'Oh, were there any more then?' I inquired.

He smiled and gave a little cough. He said he did not like to appear to be boasting, but that, counting trombones, there were seven.

'Dear me!' I replied, 'you must have had quite a busy time of it, one way and another.'

He said that perhaps he ought not to be the one to say so; but that really, speaking of ordinary middle-class society, he thought there were few ghosts who could look back upon a life of more sustained usefulness.

He puffed away in silence for a few seconds while I sat watching him. I had never seen a ghost smoking a pipe before, that I could remember, and it interested me.

I asked him what tobacco he used, and he replied: 'The ghost of cut cavendish as a rule.'

He explained that the ghost of all the tobacco that a man smoked in life belong to him when he became dead. He said he himself had smoked a good deal of cut cavendish when he was alive, so that he was well supplied with the ghost of it now.

I thought I would join him in a pipe, and he said, 'Do, old man'; and I reached over and got out the necessary paraphernalia from my coat pocket and lit up.

We grew quite chummy after that, and he told me all his crimes. He said he had lived next door once to a young lady who was learning to play the guitar, while a gentleman who

practised on the bass-viol lived opposite. And he, with fiendish cunning, had introduced these two unsuspecting young people to one another, and had persuaded them to elope with each other against their parents' wishes, and take their musical instruments with them; and they had done so, and before the honeymoon was over, *she* had broken his head with the bass-viol, and *he* had tried to cram the guitar down her throat, and had injured her for life.

My friend said he used to lure muffin-men into the passage and then stuff them with their own wares till they burst. He said he had quieted eighteen that way.

Young men and women who recited long and dreary poems at evening parties, and callow youths who walked about the streets late at night, playing concertinas, he used to get together and poison in batches of ten, so as to save expenses; and park orators and temperance lecturers he used to shut up six in a small room with a glass of water and a collection-box apiece, and let them talk each other to death.

It did one good to listen to him.

I asked him when he expected the other ghosts – the ghosts of the singer and the cornet player, and the German band that Uncle John had mentioned. He smiled, and said they would never come again, any of them.

I said, 'Why, isn't it true, then, that they meet you here every Christmas Eve for a row?'

He replied that it was true. Every Christmas Eve, for twenty-five years, had he and they fought in that room; but they would never trouble him or anybody else again. One by one had he laid them out, spoiled and made them utterly useless for all haunting purposes. He had finished off the last German band ghost that very evening, just before I came upstairs, and had thrown what was left of it out through the slit between the window sashes. He said it would never be worth calling a ghost again.

'I suppose you will still come yourself, as usual?' I said. 'They would be sorry to miss you, I know.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he replied; 'there's nothing much to come for now; unless,' he added kindly, '*you* are going to be here. I'll come if you will sleep here next Christmas Eve.

'I have taken a liking to you,' he continued; 'you don't fly off, screeching, when you see a party, and your hair doesn't stand on end. You've no idea,' he said, 'how sick I am of seeing people's hair standing on end.'

He said it irritated him.

Just then a slight noise reached us from the yard below, and he started and turned deathly black.

'You are ill,' I cried, springing towards him; 'tell me the best thing to do for you. Shall I drink some brandy, and give you the ghost of it?'

He remained silent, listening intently for a moment, and then he gave a sigh of relief, and the shade came back to his cheek.

'It's all right,' he murmured; 'I was afraid it was the cock.'

'Oh, it's too early for that,' I said. 'Why, it's only the middle of the night.'

'Oh, that doesn't make any difference to those cursed chickens,' he replied bitterly. 'They would just as soon crow in the middle of the night as at any other time – sooner, if they thought it would spoil a chap's evening out. I believe they do it on purpose.'

He said a friend of his, the ghost of a man who had killed a tax collector, used to haunt a house in Long Acre, where they kept fowls in the cellar, and every time a policeman went by and flashed his searchlight down the grating, the old cock there could fancy it was the sun, and start crowing like mad, when, of course, the poor ghost had to dissolve, and it would, in consequence, get back home sometimes as early as one o'clock in the morning, furious because it had only been out for an hour.

I agreed that it seemed very unfair.

'Oh, it's an absurd arrangement altogether,' he continued, quite angrily. 'I can't imagine what our chief could have been thinking of when he made it. As I have said to him, over and over again, "Have a fixed time, and let everybody stick to it – say four o'clock in summer, and six in winter. Then, one would know what one was about." '

'How do you manage when there isn't any clock handy?' I enquired.

He was on the point of replying, when again he started and

listened. This time I distinctly heard Mr Bowles's cock, next door, crow twice.

'There you are,' he said, rising and reaching for his hat; 'that's the sort of thing we have to put up with. What *is* the time?'

I looked at my watch, and found it was half-past three.

'I thought as much,' he muttered. 'I'll wring that blessed bird's neck if I get hold of it.' And he prepared to go.

'If you can wait half a minute,' I said, getting out of bed, 'I'll go a bit of the way with you.'

'It's very good of you,' he replied, pausing, 'but it seems unkind to drag you out.'

'Not at all,' I replied, 'I shall like a walk.' And I partially dressed myself, and took my umbrella; and he put his arm through mine, and we went out together, the best of friends.

CATHERINE'S ANGEL

HEATHER VINEHAM

Beyond the french windows, the park was a swirl of darkness. The cedars looked more than ever like guardians of the sinister threshold beyond their spreading branches.

Eileen shuddered, for a moment appalled at the thought of that menacing spot to which she must go.

She started, with a quick intake of breath, as a hand touched her arm.

'Did I frighten you?'

Sheila was smiling kindly. Eileen had seen that smile before, on so many faces. Sheila was sorry for her. Everyone was sorry for her, after what she had been through, and they were being so nice about it. But why should they be? She was a murderess, wasn't she? She turned, flashing on the bright smile that was fooling them so effectively, she hoped.

'You're both so kind,' she said, 'You and Dick. Letting me come here like this.'

Sheila was watching her anxiously. Wondering what Eileen had been staring at through the window, perhaps? She mustn't look too interested in the park.

Eileen turned away casually, and sat on the divan bed. Sheila put an arm round her shoulder.

'Now you mustn't worry about anything,' she told her. Dear, simple Sheila, plump, comfortable, looking not so very different from when they had played together in that same park, a couple of giggling schoolgirls. She was patting the pillow now, making everything comfortable for her guest.

'I hope you won't mind being on the ground floor,' she went on. 'I did explain in my letter about young Bill coming home from school next week. His things are all in his room. We thought it would be simpler this way – '

'It's just perfect,' Eileen told her. How perfect, Sheila could never guess. French windows opening on to the

garden; that broken fence (still not mended, she had noted) where they used to squeeze through into the park all those years ago.

'I wonder you want me around,' Eileen said. 'After all, I am a criminal – criminal negligence – isn't that the word?'

The effect was surprising. Sheila's usually placid face contorted itself into a mask of indignation.

'Don't ever say that!' she almost shouted. 'You're never to talk like that. You're nothing of the sort. It was a tragic accident – '

'Of course, that's what they say. But I was driving, wasn't I? A learner driver – L-plate and all. And he told me to wait – '

Sheila's grip on her arm was almost painful.

'Now Eileen – you promised you wouldn't go over that again. It was the other driver's fault. That was established in court – '

Eileen said nothing. Let Sheila think what she imagined was best.

The grip lessened.

'Now you're going to forget all about the past and start to get well.'

Eileen nodded obligingly. Forget! Such a simple remedy. It was supposed to settle everything. Forget Paul? When he was dead because of her irresponsible action? And she was – what did they keep telling her in hospital? 'Lucky to survive!' Lucky! Why couldn't she have died with him? But the park was there, waiting for her with the only real remedy – that darkly beckoning spot beyond the cedars.

Sheila paused before drawing the curtains across the french windows.

'Those dreadful high-rise flats,' she said, evidently trying to distract her friend's thoughts from taking a dangerous turn. 'They ruin the whole look of the place. That poor old Manor House looks positively dwarfed!'

'You mean the Greystone Museum?'

Eileen had forgotten the history of the place where she had been brought up. So much had happened since then.

Sheila nodded, her hand on the curtain. 'Such a shame. Do you remember how we used to wait around the Temple right

up till the last bell sounded before the park closed, hoping we would see the angel? But we never did.'

Eileen started to undo her housecoat as a hint that she was ready for bed. It was years since she had moved away from the town.

'Oh, the angel. Yes, what was it all about? I forget the details.'

Sheila finished pulling the curtains across, and turned with a look of surprise.

'Oh, you surely haven't forgotten. There's a plaque telling the story, or at least part of it. A girl living at the Manor House saw an angel at the Temple of Vesta one night – at least, that's what she thought it was.'

Eileen remembered dimly. 'Oh, that's right. "Catherine's Angel." It appeared to her one night in 1770 or something.'

Sheila corrected her. 'A summer night in 1742. 1776 is when she wrote the account of it. I wonder what she really saw – '

Her face took on a dreamy look. Sheila was always interested in old legends and folklore.

Eileen climbed into bed. She wished Sheila would go. Her nerves were at breaking point.

'Oh, she probably imagined the whole thing', she said. What did it matter, anyway? It was all so long ago.

But Sheila shook her head. 'I don't think so. She wrote a most concise account of it many years later. She was convinced it was a guardian angel come to deliver her. She was very unhappy.'

She wasn't the only one, Eileen thought.

Sheila looked contrite.

'Oh, I'm keeping you from getting to sleep. Shall we go down to the Museum tomorrow and read it all up again? It's a very interesting story.'

Tomorrow? Strange to realise there never would be a tomorrow. The last sunset had come and gone.

'Yes, if you like,' Eileen answered listlessly. Her mind was already far away. The dark spot beyond the cedars was calling her strongly.

'Well, good night dear, and sleep well.'

Sheila planted a quick kiss on her forehead and left, closing the door behind her.

The rosy glow of the bedside lamp filled the room. These friends of hers were being very kind. Sheila could not bear to think of Eileen being alone in her flat after the tragedy. She had said in her letter that Eileen must come to them as soon as she was released from hospital.

At first it hadn't seemed to matter where she was. Then she remembered the house with its garden leading down to the park; that plank of wood that slid aside so easily. Fate had planned it all for her.

The house belonged to Sheila since her father's death, and now she shared it with a husband and son. It was the perfect stepping-off place for Eileen's journey into eternity.

As soon as her friend's footsteps had receded upstairs, Eileen slipped out of bed and opened the suitcase that stood against the wall. From beneath a pile of undies, she took out a torch and a pair of wire cutters, and laid them on the table by the window. She drew the curtain aside a fraction. A rectangle of light flowed across the lawn from the room above. As long as that light remained, it meant that the others were awake. It would not be safe to venture out. No-one must hinder her now. Her hand trembled as she switched off the bedside lamp.

Frightening thoughts flitted through her mind as she climbed back into bed. She hoped the wire would not be too tough. Drowning was a quick death, she had read, if you took a deep draught of water into your lungs straight away. But supposing her lungs refused? She might panic, call for help. She imagined her voice trailing away uselessly from her throat, drawn into the maelstrom of the churning water, her hands slipping against the smooth sides of the marble drop . . .

Waiting was going to be a time of torment, but she dared not risk disturbing those in the room above. A turmoil of conflicting thoughts raged in her mind. She longed to be away from the world that had become so purposeless to her. Yet the thought of what awaited her was chilling and repellent. Her psychiatrist was assured that she had passed the suicidal stage. She smiled grimly. How wrong he was . . .

Could she have slept for a time in sheer exhaustion? Impossible, surely; yet the illuminated dial of her watch said 2.30.

She ran to the window. The lawn was in darkness now.

Her clothes lay over the back of the chair, but the task of dressing seemed too long a procedure. A misty blur glimmered in the darkness. Her white silk housecoat. The night was mild. She drew the garment about her, tying the girdle loosely round her waist. No one came to the park at night. How long the housecoat was – the hem reached almost to the ground. It would get wet in the dewy grass. What a senseless thought! As though anything mattered now.

She started towards the french windows, then stopped. Another pale glimmer, silvery white with a gleam of starlight. Her scarf. It lay beside the other clothes, and the sight of it brought back a flood of memories.

She had fallen in love with it when she and Paul were returning from their last Continental holiday. Draped invitingly over a stand at Orly Airport – a dainty nylon thing, just a tourist's souvenir, but very chic, with an illustration of a giant airliner spanning the world. Paul had bought it for her, to finish up their remaining francs. She clasped it to her with a pang of nostalgia, and knew that she must take it with her.

She flung it over her head, knotted it under her chin and slipped the torch and wire cutters into the deep pockets of her gown. Then she stepped out into the garden, keeping in the shadows at the side of the lawn.

The plank creaked noisily as she lifted it, and she looked back furtively. There was no stirring behind the black void of her friends' room. They were sleeping, like every normal inhabitant of that row of houses. A sense of isolation filled her, and a stab of guilt as she thought of the shock her action would cause them; but there was no turning back.

She pushed her way through the surrounding hedge, and looked about her. How vast it seemed, this playground of her childhood, now transformed by darkness into a place of hidden threats. The avenue marking the central path loomed dark and unfamiliar. Those tall forms ranged along it like sentinels. Were all of them only trees and shadows of trees?

Or did some move stiffly, swaying between the outlines of their fellows? What had she to fear, anyway? Soon fear would no longer exist for her.

The cedars towered to her left. They were centuries old, she knew. They had stood in that spot when the Greystone Museum was a stately manor, the park and many acres beyond, its spacious grounds. They were the landmark she must approach, and now she was desperately afraid. The place had always awed her, as a child.

It was when you reached the cedars that the sound began – a roar that seemed to start with curious suddenness, as though a great animal had broken loose. She knew what it was, of course. The torrent that flowed into its deep chasm in the Temple of Vesta, that queer old 'folly" built by an eighteenth-century architect to satisfy a rich patron's whim. An ancient spring, harnessed by man's artifice, deflected from its course, cascading from the little hillock against which the temple was built, to fall into marble depths which had always seemed bottomless to her. She knew now that it joined an underground stream that swirled on its course towards the ornamental lake a quarter of a mile away. But it was her chidhood's terror, the 'sacred river' that ran, in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, 'down to a sunless sea'.

The stark melancholy of the words haunted her now, as did that other phrase she had heard so often repeated, 'the valley of the shadow of death'. She was walking into that valley now. Where would it lead her? Down to a sunless sea, or into realms of light? Soon she would know –

The Temple was before her now, at the top of a flight of stone steps, its entrance flanked by white marble pillars, its domed roof crowned by a figure of the Goddess Vesta, cloaked and majestic.

Eileen mounted the worn steps. She felt calmer now, almost as if some alien force was guiding her steps. The place smelt as she always remembered it, of damp and decay. Moss clung to the outer walls, and inside, dead leaves were piled high where the wind had driven them from the surrounding trees.

Feeling suddenly the need for light, she switched on her torch, pausing for a moment in the doorway to read the

inscription at the side of the entrance: 'Here was recorded the miraculous appearance of an Angel to Catherine Townsend, on the twenty-first day of July in the Year of Our Lord 1742.'

The words had never meant much to Eileen. It was more to fall in with Sheila's mood that she had waited round the little temple with her, when dusk closed in. But now she began to wonder. What had Catherine Townsend seen on that night long ago? An angel, she had said. But why should an angel choose this imitation of a pagan temple to make an appearance? Could it have been some more sinister manifestation that Catherine, in her innocence, had failed to comprehend?

She entered the temple, flashing her torch round the walls. Above her head, a small figure stood in its niche, one hand raised, holding a broken metal sconce. Once a flame had burned in it, lighting the interior together with five other flames. For six bronze nymphs decorated the walls, each holding her sacred flame in honour of the Goddess, depicting the six Vestal Virgins that had tended her fires in ancient times.

For a moment the torch beam caught the swordlike gleam of falling water. The chasm was surrounded now by a wire cage – an ugly modern precaution in this place of old conceits. Then the beam of light skimmed across the wall beyond the cascade, and Eileen froze. Something was crouching there – a blackness deeper than the surrounding shadows. It moved, and Eileen stepped back, trembling so violently that the torch dropped from her hand. For a moment darkness engulfed her. Then suddenly the place was filled with flickering light. Flames fluttered against the walls, from torches held aloft by six figurines, all shining and new. This Eileen saw in a brief flash, but her eyes were fixed on that shape beyond the shaft of falling water. It seemed to be doubled up beneath a black cloak, like a cowering animal. As Eileen watched, petrified, something emerged from the folds of the cloak. Scarcely believing her eyes, Eileen breathed a sigh of relief. A small pale face, a child's face, with two large dark eyes, was regarding her fearfully. In that moment her own fears were forgotten, her grim resolve melting in concern for this obviously terrified little being.

She bent down instinctively, holding out her arms.

'Don't be frightened,' she said, keeping her voice calm with an effort. She had seen in that moment that the chasm was no longer encased by wire. She stepped round it cautiously, and the child cowered back further against the wall. For a moment they stared at each other incredulously. Then tears welled up in the little girl's eyes and she ran forward impulsively.

Eileen lifted her in her arms. How light she was. The arms that now encircled her neck were like sticks, and in the dancing light of the torches, she fancied she saw bruises on them.

The child's eyes were fixed on her scarf. That small, grave face was somehow familiar, a dream face, half remembered, but Eileen could not imagine from where. Then the impression faded as quickly as it had come. This child was badly shocked. The scarf – she seemed to be fascinated by it. Perhaps it would help to take her mind off her fears. Tearing it from her head, Eileen placed it in the little girl's hand.

'What's your name?' she asked. 'Where do you come from?'

But she could get no answer. The child's eyes seemed fixed on the silvery nylon scarf.

Eileen carried her carefully down the steps, then paused at the bottom in puzzlement. The cedars were there all right, and there was the Greystone Museum. But what had become of the high-rise flats? Trees clustered close to the sides of the old house – trees whose shapes she did not recognise at all. Bewildered, she looked back the way she had come, and her heart gave an uneasy thump. Sheila's house and its neighbours were nowhere to be seen. Only trees, and blurred white shapes that looked like statues, where the fence should have been.

Behind her the little temple stood, clean and well kept, its flickering torchlight sending a bright flow down the stone steps. Panic seized her. She was in a strange landscape. Only the feel of the small form in her arms reassured her that she was still in some sort of reality.

Suddenly a fierce wind swept across her, and the child seemed to be jerked from her arms.

'Come back!' she called frantically, but her voice was carried into oblivion by the force of the gust. Her hair blew wildly across her face, and she pushed it from her eyes, realising that she was without her scarf. There it was, just at her feet, flattened against a bush, one end fluttering as though struggling to be free.

She stooped and picked it up, and in that moment darkness fell once more around her, and the air became still. She turned towards the temple. The entrance yawned black and empty. The flickering lights were gone. Only the roar of the torrent boomed still from the darkness.

She looked towards the Greystone Museum. Its hideous neighbours were back in place, and she welcomed them as old friends. In the other direction – the familiar silhouettes of a row of houses. Puzzled, uncomprehending, but with a feeling of utmost relief, Eileen started back towards the house she had left. She no longer felt any compulsion to return to the Temple of Vesta. A strange feeling of exhilaration was racing through her.

It was still with her as she walked next day with Sheila towards the Greystone Museum. She wondered if her companion noticed the new lightness in her step. She paused at the entrance to look around her at the sunlit park. How different it looked with the shadows swept away.

'Here she is!'

Sheila's voice from inside the main hall brought the realisation that her friend had hurried in ahead of her. She was standing in front of the picture. It hung in a well-lighted spot, as Eileen remembered it from her childhood days, and it showed a smiling, well-to-do lady with a high-piled hairdo, one curl hanging provocatively over a rounded shoulder. She wore a rose pink dress, satin and billowing, and a nicely matching rose nestled in her ample bosom. She was pictured resting on a garden seat, a small spaniel curled at her feet.

'She certainly looks in the pink,' observed Sheila, and Eileen smiled obligingly at the old pun. She wanted to read the letter. It lay in a case below the portrait, covered by a pane of glass; just as well, for it was old, yellowed, largely illegible.

'Lucky they've got a translation,' observed Sheila. It was.

Eileen bent over the typed transcription that she had glanced at many times, but never bothered to read through.

'My dearest Joanna' she read. (Joanna was Catherine's favourite daughter. Details of the old story were coming back to Eileen now.)

'. . . As you ask me to set down the account of my meeting with the Angel, I do so herewith . . .' Eileen's eyes swept over the following lines, till she came to a passage that filled her with a strange wonder.

'I being in such melancholy state had crept from my bed that night and was determined to end my life straightway.' (Of course. Her parents had been drowned – a shipwreck off the Indian coast. She had been adopted by relatives who resented her; she stood between them and a handsome inheritance. She had been half starved, neglected.) Eileen read on –

'. . . then I perceived a being more radiant than ever I saw – clad in a robe of shining white, and with a veil upon her head that bore the likeness of a great bird circling the cities of the world . . .'

Eileen felt her heart beating quickly, as she read the rest of the letter:

'. . . but as the Angel bore me away, the veil dropped from my hand, and though I returned the next day and made diligent search, I never could come upon it. But in my prayers I give constant thanks to God, Who sent His Holy Angel to me in my hour of despair.'

Eileen felt tears stinging her eyes, and looked up once more at the pictured face. Plumper, rosier, etched with lines of character and experience, but unmistakably that same small, sad face that had looked at her in the torch-lit temple. No wonder it had seemed familiar. She must have seen that portrait a score of times.

She became aware of Sheila's glance, fixed on her with anxiety.

She blinked the tears away, and took her friend's arm affectionately.

'Poor Catherine,' she said, 'No wonder she couldn't find that veil. She looked for it two hundred years too soon.'

Sheila looked puzzled.

'Do you know,' Eileen went on confidentially, 'I believe I was Catherine's Angel.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Just an idea' said Eileen, 'or – ' she hesitated – 'was she mine?'

Sheila shrugged, smiling.

'I don't know what you're on about, but I'm glad to see you're more like your old self. Don't you want to read the rest of the story? It's all in the library here –' as Eileen propelled her towards the exit.

'No, I don't think so. I know the most important part. Didn't she marry a wealthy nobleman and have two lovely daughters and a quite famous son, and – '

'That's right.' Sheila was babbling enthusiastically, but Eileen scarcely heard. Strange thoughts were stirring in her mind.

Away to the right the Temple of Vesta reflected a white radiance as the sun shone on its smooth marble dome. Even the stern goddess had become benign. Across the intervening space, the eyes of the statue seemed to be fixed on Eileen's own, as though imparting a divine revelation. With a strange intuition, Eileen knew what the goddess was trying to say. That she, Paul, Catherine, were not segregated from each other in sealed compartments of time, but threads in a vast tapestry – crossing and recrossing each other through many lives till the pattern was complete, and no thread ever lost. One part of the picture had found its fulfilment. The rest was yet to be.

THE LAMP

AGATHA CHRISTIE

It was undoubtedly an old house. The whole square was old, with that disapproving dignified old age often met with in a cathedral town. But No.19 gave the impression of an elder among elders; it had a veritable patriarchal solemnity; it towered greyest of the grey, haughtiest of the haughty, chillest of the chill. Austere, forbidding, and stamped with that particular desolation attaching to all houses that have been long untenanted, it reigned above the other dwellings.

In any other town it would have been freely labelled 'haunted', but Weyminster was averse from ghosts and considered them hardly respectable except as the appanage of a 'county family'. So No. 19 was never alluded to as a haunted house; but nevertheless it remained, year after year, 'To be Let or Sold'.

Mrs Lancaster looked at the house with approval as she drove up with the talkative house agent, who was in an unusually hilarious mood at the idea of getting No. 19 off his books. He inserted the key in the door without ceasing his appreciative comments.

'How long has the house been empty?' enquired Mrs Lancaster, cutting short his flow of language rather brusquely.

Mr Raddish (of Raddish & Foplow) became slightly confused.

'Er – er – some time,' he remarked blandly.

'So I should think,' said Mrs Lancaster drily.

The dimly lighted hall was chill with a sinister chill. A more imaginative woman might have shivered, but this woman happened to be eminently practical. She was tall with

much dark brown hair just tinged with grey and rather cold blue eyes.

She went over the house from attic to cellar, asking a pertinent question from time to time. The inspection over, she came back into one of the front rooms looking out on the square and faced the agent with a resolute mien.

'What is the matter with the house?'

Mr Raddish was taken by surprise.

'Of course, an unfurnished house is always a little gloomy,' he parried feebly.

'Nonsense,' said Mrs Lancaster. 'The rent is ridiculously low for such a house – purely nominal. There must be some reason for it. I suppose the house is haunted?'

Mr Raddish gave a nervous little start but said nothing.

Mrs Lancaster eyed him keenly. After a few moments she spoke again.

'Of course that is all nonsense. I don't believe in ghosts or anything of that sort, and personally it is no deterrent to my taking the house; but servants, unfortunately, are very credulous and easily frightened. It would be kind of you to tell me exactly what – what thing *is* supposed to haunt this place.'

'I – er – really don't know,' stammered the house agent.

'I am sure you must,' said the lady quietly. 'I cannot take the house without knowing. What was it? A murder?'

'Oh! no,' cried Mr Raddish, shocked by the idea of anything so alien to the respectability of the square. 'It's – it's – only a child.'

'A child?'

'Yes.

'I don't know the story exactly,' he continued reluctantly. 'Of course, there are all kinds of different versions, but I believe that about thirty years ago a man going by the name of Williams took No. 19. Nothing was known of him; he kept no servants; he had no friends; he seldom went out in the daytime. He had one child, a little boy. After he had been there about two months, he went up to London, and had barely set foot in the metropolis before he was recognized as being a man "wanted" by the police on some charge – exactly what, I do not know. But it must have been a grave one,

because, sooner than give himself up, he shot himself. Meanwhile, the child lived on here, alone in the house. He had food for a little time, and he waited day after day for his father's return. Unfortunately, it had been impressed upon him that he was never under any circumstances to go out of the house or to speak to anyone. He was a weak, ailing, little creature, and did not dream of disobeying this command. In the night, the neighbours, not knowing that his father had gone away, often heard him sobbing in the awful loneliness and desolation of the empty house.'

Mr Raddish paused.

'And – er – the child starved to death,' he concluded, in the same tones as he might have announced that it had just begun to rain.

'And it is the child's ghost that is supposed to haunt the place?' asked Mrs Lancaster.

'It is nothing of consequence really,' Mr Raddish hastened to assure her. 'There's nothing *seen*, not *seen*, only people say, ridiculous, of course, but they do say they hear – the child – crying, you know.'

Mrs Lancaster moved towards the front door.

'I like the house very much,' she said. 'I shall get nothing as good for the price. I will think it over and let you know.'

'It really looks very cheerful, doesn't it, Papa?'

Mrs Lancaster surveyed her new domain with approval. Gay rugs, well-polished furniture, and many knick-knacks, had quite transformed the gloomy aspect of No. 19.

She spoke to a thin, bent old man with stooping shoulders and a delicate mystical face. Mr Winburn did not resemble his daughter; indeed no greater contrast could be imagined than that presented by her resolute practicalness and his dreamy abstraction.

'Yes,' he answered with a smile, 'no one would dream the house was haunted.'

'Papa, don't talk nonsense! On our first day too.'

Mr Winburn smiled.

'Very well, my dear, we will agree that there are no such things as ghosts.'

'And please,' continued Mrs Lancaster, 'don't say a word before Geoff. He's so imaginative.'

Geoff was Mrs Lancaster's little boy. The family consisted of Mr Winburn, his widowed daughter, and Geoffrey.

Rain had begun to beat against the window – pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

'Listen,' said Mr Winburn. 'Is it not like little footsteps?

'It's more like rain,' said Mrs Lancaster, with a smile.

'But *that*, *that* is a footstep,' cried her father, bending forward to listen.

Mrs Lancaster laughed outright.

'That's Geoff coming downstairs.'

Mr Winburn was obliged to laugh too. They were having tea in the hall, and he had been sitting with his back to the staircase. He now turned his chair round to face it.

Little Geoffrey was coming down, rather slowly and sedately, with a child's awe of a strange place. The stairs were of polished oak, uncarpeted. He came across and stood by his mother. Mr Winburn gave a slight start. As the child was crossing the floor, he distinctly heard another pair of footsteps, on the stairs, as of someone following Geoffrey. Dragging footsteps, curiously painful they were. Then he shrugged his shoulders incredulously. 'The rain, no doubt,' he thought.

'I'm looking at the spongecakes,' remarked Geoff with the admirably detached air of one who points out an interesting fact.

His mother hastened to comply with the hint.

'Well, Sonny, how do you like your new home?' she asked.

'Lots,' replied Geoffrey with his mouth generously filled. 'Pounds and pounds and pounds.' After this last assertion, which was evidently expressive of the deepest contentment, he relapsed into silence, only anxious to remove the spongecake from the sight of man in the least time possible.

Having bolted the last mouthful, he burst forth into speech.

'Oh! Mummy, there's attics here, Jane says; and can I go at once and *eggz*plore them? And there might be a secret door. Jane says there isn't, but I think there must be, and, anyhow, I know there'll be *pipes*, *water pipes* (with a face full of

ecstasy) and can I play with them, and, oh! can I go and see the boi-i-ler?' He spun out the last word with such evident rapture that his grandfather felt ashamed to reflect that this peerless delight of childhood only conjured up to his imagination the picture of hot water that wasn't hot, and heavy and numerous plumber's bills.

'We'll see about the attics tomorrow, darling,' said Mrs Lancaster. 'Suppose you fetch your bricks and build a nice house, or an engine.'

'Don't want to build an 'ouse.'

'*H*ouse.'

'House, or h'engine h'either.'

'Build a boiler,' suggested his grandfather.

Geoffrey brightened.

'With pipes?'

'Yes, lots of pipes.'

Geoffrey ran away happily to fetch his bricks.

The rain was still falling. Mr Winburn listened. Yes, it must have been the rain he had heard; but it did sound like footsteps.

He had a queer dream that night.

He dreamt that he was walking through a town, a great city it seemed to him. But it was a children's city; there were no grown-up people there, nothing but children, crowds of them. In his dream they all rushed to the stranger crying: 'Have you brought him?' It seemed that he understood what they meant and shook his head sadly. When they saw this, the children turned away and began to cry, sobbing bitterly.

The city and the children faded away and he awoke to find himself in bed, but the sobbing was still in his ears. Though wide awake, he heard it distinctly; and he remembered that Geoffrey slept on the floor below, while this sound of a child's sorrow descended from above. He sat up and struck a match. Instantly the sobbing ceased.

Mr Winburn did not tell his daughter of the dream or its sequel. That it was no trick of his imagination, he was convinced; indeed soon afterwards he heard it again in the daytime. The wind was howling in the chimney, but *this* was a separate sound – distinct, unmistakable: pitiful little heartbroken sobs.

He found out too that he was not the only one to hear them. He overheard the housemaid saying to the parlourmaid that she 'didn't think as that there nurse was kind to Master Geoffrey. She'd 'eard 'im crying 'is little 'eart out only that very morning.' Geoffrey had come down to breakfast and lunch beaming with health and happiness; and Mr Winburn knew that it was not Geoff who had been been crying, but that other child whose dragging footsteps had startled him more than once.

Mrs Lancaster alone never heard anything. Her ears were not perhaps attuned to catch sounds from another world.

Yet one day she also received a shock.

'Mummy,' said Geoffrey plaintively. 'I wish you'd let me play with that little boy.'

Mrs Lancaster looked up from her writing table with a smile.

'What little boy, dear?'

'I don't know his name. He was in an attic, sitting on the floor crying, but he ran away when he saw me. I suppose he was *shy* (with slight contempt), not like a *big* boy, and then, when I was in the nursery building, I saw him standing in the door watching me build, and he looked so awful lonely and as though he wanted to play wiv me. I said: "Come and build a h'engine," but he didn't say nothing, just looked as – as though he saw a lot of chocolates, and his mummy had told him not to touch them.' Geoff sighed, sad personal reminiscences evidently recurring to him. 'But when I asked Jane who he was and told her I wanted to play wiv him, she said there wasn't no little boy in the 'ouse and not to tell naughty stories. I don't love Jane at all.'

Mrs Lancaster got up.

'Jane was right. There was no little boy.'

'But I saw him. Oh! Mummy, do let me play wiv him, he did look so awful lonely and unhappy. I *do* want to do something to "make him better".'

Mrs Lancaster was about to speak again, but her father shook his head.

'Geoff,' he said very gently, 'that poor little boy *is* lonely, and perhaps you may do something to comfort him; but

you must find out how by yourself – like a puzzle – do you see?'

'Is it because I am getting *big* I must do it all my lone?'

'Yes, because you are getting big.'

As the boy left the room, Mrs Lancaster turned to her father impatiently.

'Papa, this is absurd. To encourage the boy to believe the servants' idle tales!'

'No servant has told the child anything,' said the old man gently. 'He's seen – what I *hear*, what I could see perhaps if I were his age.'

'But it's such nonsense! Why don't I see it or hear it?'

Mr Winburn smiled, a curiously tired smile, but did not reply.

'Why?' repeated his daughter. 'And why did you tell him he could help the – the – thing? It's – it's all so impossible.'

The old man looked at her with his thoughtful glance.

'Why not?' he said. 'Do you remember these words:

> What Lamp has Destiny to guide
> Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?
> "A Blind Understanding," Heaven replied.

'Geoffrey has that – a blind understanding. All children possess it. It is only as we grow older that we lose it, that we cast it away from us. Sometimes, when we are quite old, a faint gleam comes back to us, but the Lamp burns brightest in childhood. That is why I think Geoffrey may help.'

'I don't understand,' murmured Mrs Lancaster feebly.

'No more do I. That – that child is in trouble and wants – to be set free. But how? I do not know, but – it's awful to think of it – sobbing its heart out – a *child*.'

A month after this conversation Geoffrey fell very ill. The east wind had been severe, and he was not a strong child. The doctor shook his head and said that it was a grave case. To Mr Winburn he divulged more and confessed that the case was quite hopeless. 'The child would never have lived to grow up, under any circumstances,' he added. 'There has been serious lung trouble for a long time.'

It was when nursing Geoff that Mrs Lancaster became aware of that – other child. At first the sobs were an indistinguishable part of the wind, but gradually they became more distinct, more unmistakable. Finally she heard them in moments of dead calm: a child's sobs – dull, hopeless, heartbroken.

Geoff grew steadily worse and in his delirium he spoke of the 'little boy' again and again. 'I do want to help him get away, I do!' he cried.

Succeeding the delirium there came a state of lethargy. Geoffrey lay very still, hardly breathing, sunk in oblivion. There was nothing to do but wait and watch. Then there came a still night, clear and calm, without one breath of wind.

Suddenly the child stirred. His eyes opened. He looked past his mother towards the open door. He tried to speak and she bent down to catch the half-breathed words.

'All right, I'm comin',' he whispered; then he sank back.

The mother felt suddenly terrified; she crossed the room to her father. Somewhere near them the other child was laughing. Joyful, contented, triumphant, the silvery laughter echoed through the room.

'I'm frightened; I'm frightened,' she moaned.

He put his arm round her protectingly. A sudden gust of wind made them both start, but it passed swiftly and left the air quiet as before.

The laughter had ceased and there crept to them a faint sound, so faint as hardly to be heard, but growing louder till they could distinguish it. Footsteps – light footsteps, swiftly departing.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they ran – those well-known halting little feet. Yet – surely – now *other* footsteps suddenly mingled with them, moving with a quicker and a lighter tread.

With one accord they hastened to the door.

Down, down, down, past the door, close to them, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, went the unseen feet of the little children *together*.

Mrs Lancaster looked up wildly.

'There are *two* of them – *two*!'

Grey with sudden fear, she turned towards the cot in the corner, but her father restrained her gently, and pointed away.

'There,' he said simply.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter – fainter and fainter.

And then – silence.

WELCOMBE MANOR

ROGER MALISSON

'There's nothing else for it,' declared Adam Hadfield, closing the thick file before him. 'Joey Siddons has got to go.'

The four people seated round the conference table greeted his judgement in silence. All of them liked Joe, especially Tim Caine, who'd known him for years.

'Needs must,' sighed Robyn Cardwell.

'An accident?' Audrey Dalton was quick off the mark as usual. 'Car smash, drowning . . . fall from a balcony?'

'Whatever.' Adam could quite understand their fondness for old Joey, with his friendly nature and cockney wit. But conclusive measures were necessary and there was no room for sentiment.

'I don't agree.' Len Middleton, the buck-toothed newcomer who, Adam noticed, took rather too keen an interest in this sort of thing, leaned forward eagerly.

'Straight murder – by person or persons unknown. We can have him battered to death and a couple of quid taken from his wallet. Pensioner-bashing by a few young thugs . . . happens all the time. Nobody notices.'

He licked his wet lips and sat back with an air of triumph. Wonder what *he* does with his evenings, thought Adam. Rising, he said rather grandly:

'Well, I'll leave you to chew it over, but remember what Tony said about too much violence. And talking of the Boss, I've a meeting with him in five minutes.'

Audrey smiled. He'd thrown the considerable weight of his opinion on to her side; an 'accident', then, it would almost certainly be.

'Pity he's got to die, though,' said Tim. 'Couldn't we . . . ?'

Adam shook his head, pausing at the door.

'No, Tim. It's the ratings, as you know.'

Arrogant swine, thought Tim. 'Right, see you later,' he said aloud, and even mustered a smile.

'It's a damn shame.' Robyn voiced their feelings as the door closed behind Adam.

Len nodded.

'Yes, Siddons must be about the most popular character in the series.'

'I didn't mean that,' said Robyn shortly. 'I meant Joe Kendal himself, he's going through a bad spell and it's going to be quite a blow to him, losing his job like this.'

'Oh, quite,' agreed Len vaguely. He hadn't much time for actors; as people he'd usually found them greedy, vain and thick. 'He's getting on too, of course. It's going to be a nasty shock for him when he comes back from his holidays . . .'

They all glanced at Tim, who was staring down at the table and fiddling with a paper clip.

'I'll tell Joe,' he said finally. 'Better me than being patronised by Adam Hadfield.'

Audrey coughed. 'Well, shouldn't we . . .'

'Yes,' said Tim sharply. 'Let's get on with it.'

Adam waited for the lift with that glow of righteousness which only a painful duty painlessly performed can produce. There was a certain subtle pleasure, he reflected, not only in devising the neat twist of a plot but also in the manipulation of characters one had oneself created and reared, even if one rather despised them.

'Hello, Adam, how's it going? My, you're putting on weight.'

Adam twitched and forced a frigid smile. The speaker, a pretty round-faced girl with mocking brown eyes, grinned back.

'Still script-editing the soap opera, are you? Thought you'd have moved on by now. Here's the lift,' she added unnecessarily as a bell pinged and the grey metal doors slid open.

'Good morning, Shirley.' He stood aside to let her enter first. It always hurt when someone referred to 'Welcombe Manor' as a 'soap opera'; he preferred to think of it as a social drama. Most discriminating people praised 'The Manor' for being extremely well written, acted and

produced, though it merely catalogued the trivia of life in high-rise council flats.

'Not like the old days in Accounts when I was your secretary, eh, Adam?' she chattered. 'Though come to think of it that didn't last very long, did it?' Thank God, her tone implied. 'I'm working on the technical side now. It's good fun, lots of laughs, and I might be moving into Planning soon . . .'

'You're a good secretary, Shirley,' said Adam condescendingly. And you talk too much, he thought spitefully as the cheerful monologue continued, typical of your sex, and you run on emotion like a car on petrol but you're shallow, you're a – what do they call it? – a loser most of the time, in fact you're *common*, just like the women in 'Welcombe Manor'.

'Well, *ciao* for now,' Shirley sang out as the lift stopped. 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do, not that it's likely.'

Adam stepped out thankfully, composing himself as he walked along the corridor of the sixth floor where the executives lived. He felt nettled at being reminded that he'd started his working life with Cameo Television as an office boy, plodding his way into middle management and middle age until that liberating day five years ago when he'd had his wonderful idea for the series. He stopped outside the door marked 'Tony Burke, Producer', straightened his tie, knocked discreetly and entered to discuss the forthcoming demise of the best-loved character in 'Welcombe Manor' with the man he respected to the point of reverence.

Three weeks later they filmed the death of Joey Siddons. It was a cold, damp, miserable night and the crew were struggling. All they wanted was a few simple shots of Joey, after leaving the 'Welcombe Inn' pub, being knocked down and killed by joy-riding teenagers in a stolen car. They'd started in the studio car park when it was getting dark. It was now past midnight and they hadn't completed a single take.

Nick Silversmith, the director, stood by thin-lipped while an electrician replaced a blown fuse in the key light. Pete the Floor Manager, who didn't like the director, marshalled two young actors into the car that had failed to start three times in succession. He was swearing inaudibly into his beard; the

air was frosty but he was sweating. The senior cameraman was talking cricket with the sound recordist and Joe Kendal, the elderly Yorkshireman who played Joey Siddons, looked as though he wanted to join in but couldn't. This crew was new to him and he was a shy man at heart. Four shivering extras, or rather supporting artistes, huddled into thin summer coats and calculated their overtime to try and keep warm. Minutes and money ticked by.

Finally they were ready to go. They took a wide-angled shot of the car park, with two of the extras climbing down from a lorry and the rogue car swerving round the area in the skilful hands of a stuntman. On to the blazing glare of the headlamps and then they were ready for Joe. They shot his reaction to the speeding car first, the old man turning, confused, blinded by the headlights, his eyes widening with the shock of a terrible certainty; it was a brilliant close-up.

'Splendid, Joe, thanks,' said Nick tersely, and suddenly a different kind of tension took the air, revitalised and healthy; they were working at last. The car was filmed roaring closer and then they were on to the final shot.

'Are you all right, Joe?' The director put his arm round the old actor, who was looking pale and tired.

'Fine thanks, Nick,' he said. 'We're on the last lap now, aren't we?'

There was a rehearsal for Joe and the extras, the witnesses who were to run up to him after the accident. The make-up girl dabbed at Joey's face. Nick gave his instructions to the floor manager, who had stopped swearing and called animatedly:

'Opening positions everybody, we're going for a take. *Quiet*, please.'

The director nodded. 'Turn over.'

'Turning over.'

'Running.'

'Mark it.'

'Thirty-four, take three.'

'. . . Action!'

The car with the shouting, singing louts inside it careered round the car park towards Joey who turned, his mouth

gaping in a silent scream as he flung up his hands and fell heavily to the ground. The car squealed away and the witnesses ran to the body, clustering round it; one woman was sobbing.

'Cut.'

For the first time that night the director was smiling. Everyone relaxed, waiting for the clear. A murmur of conversation rose. Joe Kendal sat up and rubbed his knee. The more Union-minded of the technicians were consulting their watches, and then came the floor manager's welcome announcement:

'Okay, it's a wrap. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.'

Joe Kendal got stiffly to his feet.

'Join me for a drink afterwards, Joe?' The director was positively breezy.

'That would be nice – ' Suddenly the old man froze, and a violent shudder ran through his frail body.

'What's the matter, Joe?' asked Nick sharply.

Joe glanced round uneasily, then smiled and shrugged.

'It's nothing. As they say . . . someone just walked over my grave.'

'Joey Siddons,' shouted one of the extras, and everybody laughed.

Joe went for his drink. For him it turned into a session and then into a binge which lasted for three weeks, at the end of which he collapsed in an alleyway and was eventually taken to hospital, where the doctors looked grave and talked of exposure, dehydration and cirrhosis. Earlier that evening the death of Joey Siddons had been broadcast, and 'Welcombe Manor' was never quite the same again.

Tony Burke had not become a senior producer by throwing tantrums, even in the face of gross incompetence. Growing up with the name of A. Burke had taught him considerable fortitude. But along with the record eighteen million viewers who had watched Joey Siddons's accident the previous evening, he had been profoundly shocked and angered. For when the car had 'hit' him, Joey had screamed; a long, terrible, nerve-searing scream which had shaken Tony out of his chair and left him frozen and trembling,

staring in disbelief at the screen as the credits rolled, the trite, innocuous theme music taking on a sinister irony as the programme ended. Tony had poured himself a drink with unsteady hands, willing himself to believe he'd been dozing or imagined it, for there had been something fearfully abnormal about that shriek.

Now, having slept on the incident and arrived early at the office, he bemoaned the 'flu that had kept him at home during the editing stage, when the actor's scream could have been safely removed from the film. The telephone lines at Cameo Television were still jammed by outraged viewers whose young children had suffered nightmares, and who had been badly scared themselves; journalists were gathering like sharks scenting blood. He'd make damn sure it wasn't his blood, though.

Tony's gloomy reflections were interrupted by the arrival of Nick Silversmith. The director was not as placid as Tony. Nick was an artist, and he had the temperament to prove it beyond all reasonable doubt. He shouted and waved his arms a lot as he disclaimed responsibility for the disaster, blond hair flopping and thin jean-clad legs dancing with fury. Adam sidled in, looking as always as if he had a nasty smell under his nose, gravely offended that *someone* had taken liberties with his sacrosanct script. The film and audio managers joined in the barney and it was several minutes before Tony could control the row sufficiently to establish that no one had anything constructive to say and to marshal them all to the viewing theatre for a re-run of last night's episode. It was exactly as they had filmed it. At the end of the showing everyone was calmer, secretly thankful that they had not had to endure that unholy cry a second time.

Arguments, recriminations and investigations continued throughout the day, but finally it was concluded that the scream was the result of a 'crossed line' – a fault during transmission that was nobody's fault.

The engineers monitoring the company's programmes submitted a report containing a mild reproof for the sound quality on that episode of 'Welcombe Manor', and Tony went home early with a headache.

In his lonely hospital bed, Joe Kendal moaned and

struggled to rise. Feebly he grasped the night nurse's hand, and she bent to catch his words:

'Tell Adam, tell him he shouldn't have . . . tell him he *made* Joey Siddons, he's got nowhere else to go . . . he won't leave . . . tell Adam . . . be careful . . .'

The nurse shook her head over the dying man's gibberish and wondered that a rubbishy television serial should occupy a man's last thoughts, even if he were an actor. Then she closed his eyes and covered his face.

'It's nearly eleven o'clock, Arnold,' said Maggie. 'Time to open the doors, let the thirsty mob in, eh? . . . Arnold? You're not still brooding, are you, love?'

The landlord shook his head and smiled sadly at his wife.

'I keep thinking, Maggie . . . if I hadn't served him that last couple of drinks . . .'

'Now you mustn't blame yourself, Arnold. Good heavens, you weren't to know what was going to happen, were you?'

'But I knew he'd had enough at ten o'clock, when he ordered the brandies. I should have sent him home then, and the poor old soul – oh hell.'

'Cut.' Nick glanced over to the source of the noise which had caused the interruption and the expletive: a collapsed table, part of the Siddonses' living-room set on the far side of the studio. Several scripts which had been piled upon it were scattered on the floor.

'See to it the table's fixed, would you, Pete?' Nick asked the floor manager, and turned quickly back to the actors.

'Joan, love, could you move a fraction closer to Justin on your line, "You mustn't blame yourself"? Great. Ah, it's tea time, I see.'

They followed the crew who, at a nod from their branch secretary, were making for the canteen. Adam, who had been watching, walked over to the Siddons set with the floor manager.

'Broken clean off,' said Pete, nodding at the table leg. 'No, don't touch it, the Union will have you if you do. It's their job, see.'

'Of course.' Adam stepped back, his mouth puckering in distaste at the mention of unions.

'Joey used to perch on that table all the time, remember?'

Pete remarked, gathering up the scripts. 'It was bound to break some time or other – Props should have seen to it though. Still, Joey won't be sitting on it any more, will he? Pity, really.'

'One wouldn't expect you to see it, of course, but Siddons's death was expedient.' Adam swept out of the studio, smarting at the implied censure of his decision. Personal unpopularity he could stand, but not criticism of his control of 'Welcombe Manor'. Hadn't he guided the series from the first with an infallible instinct for success? Why, the characters he had created, and motivated, punished and rewarded like a Victorian patriarch often seemed more real to him, and certainly more congenial, than the majority of the individuals he met every day.

Pete watched him go with a mixture of wry amusement and contempt for the man's unbending, snobbish touchiness and total lack of humour, which always managed to alienate his every acquaintance and colleague. Having stacked the scripts neatly on a chair, Pete began to walk back down the deserted studio. Unaccountably, its emptiness made him shiver; on either side of him the sets in the semi-darkness, three walls of the flats of 'Welcombe Manor', reminded him of old half-demolished houses pathetically exposed to the weather, with cheap, vivid wallpaper still clinging to the crumbling walls of rooms where people had lived and loved, broken their hearts, quarrelled and laughed, until time had driven them out.

Well, time had certainly had been called Joe Kendal. Who would have thought the old boy had been an alcoholic? Two bottles a day he was on, according to the newspapers, but you'd never have known it. It just went to – good God almighty, what was that?

He stopped dead, gazing up at the darkened glass walls of the gallery, the control room of the studio. Pressed against its tinted glass was a white face, staring, watching him, and fear touched his spine with a finger of ice.

'Nick, is it you?' he shouted hoarsely, though he could not be heard from the studio, and filled with sudden panic he ran the last few yards to the lighted pub set and grabbed his mic. and headphones.

'Who's there? What are you doing?'

Silence, and the face was gone. He knew from more than instinct that something was terribly wrong. With a growing sense of dread he raced up the stairs to the gallery and switched on the lights. Under the neon the glass-walled rooms were cold and deserted. No sign of any disturbance, so what, then, had given him that fright? *Who*, rather. A thief, a vandal? Better call Security and let them check it.

Somewhat relieved, Pete walked to the door and flicked off the light. And then his hand froze on the switch as he heard the mad cackle of laughter behind him. He turned automatically, and what he saw through the obscurity of the gallery sent him staggering, blind with terror, to the stairs; he stumbled and fell, crashing into the concrete darkness below.

By the time Adam reached his office he had also reached two decisions. One was to build up the part of Arnold, landlord of the 'Welcombe Inn', to fill the gap Joey had admittedly left, and the other was to bring back the Siddonses' granddaughter. He winced as he thought of the precocious brat who played Clare Siddons, and again at the thought of her hard, pushy ex-dancer of a mother. Well, it couldn't be helped. Although they had almost milked Joey's death dry as a topic of conversation, little Clare's glycerine tears should increase the viewers' interest in the programme. 'I can't believe Granddad's really gone away from us, Auntie Marie,' she might sob. 'I think he's watching over us all the time.' 'Auntie Marie' would then lift her eyes piously to heaven; '"Out of the mouths of babes . . ."' she could quote. Something along those lines, anyway. Audrey Dalton could write it, women obviously being better at the mawkish bits than men.

The phone rang. Pete, he was told, had fallen down the stairs and been taken to hospital with concussion and broken legs. Judgement on him for being rude earlier, thought Adam half-facetiously as he replaced the receiver. Anyhow, he knew for a fact that the fellow drank at lunchtimes.

In the weeks that followed, 'Welcombe Manor' became a

byword among the Cameo technicians for overruns and late starts. Gremlins infested the equipment, senior cameramen got it all wrong and normally conscientious actors, affected by a nervous lassitude that resulted from low morale, were late.

Joan, who played Arnold's wife, was never late. But one day she walked into the studio and began to shiver uncontrollably, glancing round and hugging herself as if frozen. They were about to shoot one of her scenes and Nick called to her impatiently. She obeyed like a sleepwalker and tripped over one of the stage weights supporting the set of her 'home'. Joan was a big woman, and by reflexively grabbing the brace she managed to bring two flats down and herself with them. The set was ruined and had to be rebuilt, so that, of course, was the end of the day's shooting. Apart from a twisted ankle Joan suffered no injury, and afterwards she could remember nothing of the incident.

People began to talk. Adam began to worry.

He might have worried more about the silly, superstitious rumours abounding if he hadn't been far more anxious about the 'ratings', the viewing figures which were, to him, the measure of the world's approval for his efforts. Apart from Joey's accident and the couple of episodes that followed, the newspapers' publicity for Joe Kendal's death helping there, the number of people watching 'The Manor' every week had dropped alarmingly. Adam was desperately introducing new ideas, though he stopped short of the nineteen-sixties' thinking; 'Welcombe Manor' did not admit to the permissive era. Inside, men continued upright, marriages remained solid, and minds were sensibly closed; conventional morality lay steadily against the wood and canvas sets of Welcombe Manor, and whatever character walked there, walked chaste.

Adam was hardly away from the set on the days they filmed the programme. He hung around, watching intently, as if by just being there he could stave off the faults, breakdowns and petty accidents that marred every day's shooting. On the day they were doing Clare Siddons's scene he arrived early and took a seat behind the cameras. He became aware of an irritating presence and turned to look.

Someone was hovering in the shadows, probably an idiot of a script girl, and testily he waved the figure away. He wanted to concentrate on Clare's scene particularly, because he regarded it as crucial.

Nick called for a rehearsal. The set was the Bailey family's flat. Frank Bailey was just finishing his tea and Marie was doing the ironing as their young niece burst in. After the greetings Clare began sorrowfully:

'Oh, Auntie Marie, wasn't it sad about – about . . .' she dried.

Nick frowned. She'd been word-perfect in the dressing-room.

'Try it again, love. First positions for another rehearsal, everybody.'

'Hello, Auntie Marie, Uncle – I can't! Oh, Mummy, I can't do it with him watching me!'

'It's all right, darling!' bawled her mother, striding on to the set and clasping the weeping child to her intimidating bosom. 'Who's upsetting you? Tell Mummy and we'll send the nasty man away!'

She glared threateningly round the crew.

God grant it isn't one of the cameramen the kid's taken against, thought Nick in exasperation, but Clare, her face rubbery with tears, was pointing over Adam's shoulder.

'Who is it?' Nick asked sharply. 'Who's watching you?'

'Joey,' sobbed the child.

Many working actors, living as they do with their egos on the line, are notoriously superstitious; but given a conflict, professionalism will inevitably triumph. In the same way, despite their neurotic moaning about the health of their throats and chests when they so much as sniffle or cough, if there is a croak or a gesture left in them they will perform. That is what self-exploited egoism and insecurity do for you, never mind an eighty per cent unemployment rate. Therefore Adam, taking a solitary lunch in his office, was confident that all the actors needed would turn up for the afternoon's shooting, in spite of their consternation that morning over the wretched Clare. They'd herded together, frightened, muttering, unwilling to continue; all of them, it seemed, had been aware lately of mischievous presences, odd noises in the

dark. Nick hadn't helped, standing aside with the crew looking isolated and stricken instead of taking control and chivvying the idiots. Adam himself had had to break the unhealthy atmosphere by suggesting a lunch break; it was slack on Nick's part. True, Nick was taking the brunt of all the myriad things which were constantly going wrong, but even so Adam decided that he must have a word with Tony about him.

He was right about the actors. The afternoon started well, except for a complaint from some of the crew that props had been moved by non-Union members, and everyone settled down as if half-ashamed of the fuss they'd made that morning. Tim Caine had written one of his best scripts to develop the role of Arnold into that of reluctant clown, a part at which Joe had excelled. Justin was a fine actor with a brilliant sense of timing, and even had the crew laughing at the scene where Arnold was taken in by the spiv. His one fault was a tendency to camp when he knew he was winning, but Nick, who understood him, controlled the performance admirably. It was a pleasure to watch them work, thought Adam, the master operating the puppet and the strings of his script to perfection; and a relief to watch the lines of strain melt from Nick's face as he practised the skill he knew best.

'Let's go for a take,' said the director jubilantly. 'I think we'll do it in one.'

'You're joking, dear,' squealed Justin, moving back to his first position. He began to assume the cloak of Arnold by a series of mental and physical changes so subtle that the transformation seemed as natural as a chameleon's. The voice deepened, the shoulders squared, the mincing step became a heavy tread; he was Arnold, who loved his wife and fancied the barmaid, who was slow and good-hearted enough to decry an injustice and trust a rogue.

'Action!'

'You mean I can double my five hundred quid in six months by investing with you, Mr Duxbarton? Well, I must say – '

A report like a rifle shot rang out; a ten-kilowatt lamp had blown. When it exploded the metal guard dropped away and

the shattering glass flew out on to the set. A long sliver caught Justin, embedding itself in his face from brow to chin like a grotesque weapon. There was a moment's paralysed silence, then pandemonium.

The actors clustered round Justin, Joan screaming at the sight of his eye. A sound assistant, recovering first, ran to dial Surgery. Nick alone was calm.

He walked over to the chief electrician, smiling slightly.

'What is this, amateur night?'

He'd intended to whisper but his voice, shaky with incipient hysteria, rang savagely through the studio. It was as well the man was too stunned to reply, for Nick was very near breaking point.

He would have to go, of course, for a long holiday at the very least. Tony Burke knew it even before he and Adam arranged a friendly chat with the director and saw the hunted stare in his eyes and the over-controlled behaviour that expressed unbearable strain.

'I couldn't explain to Nick there and then, of course,' the chief electrician had told Tony. 'It was a freakish accident – unheard-of, as you know, for the guard to break when a lamp blows. I've seen Nick jump up and down often enough, God knows, but never on the set. He's too professional for that.

'So what with him going bananas and poor old Justin getting mutilated and all of the hold-ups, the frustrations, stupid things going wrong every time we try to film – well, people are saying the programme's jinxed, and frankly everybody dreads working on it. I'm speaking for the whole crew, Tony, we're all *very worried.* I'm sure you are, too.'

Tony wasn't. He nodded gravely.

'Yes, that's right, Bob. Strictly between you and me we're considering the future of "Welcombe Manor" very carefully.' He indicated a stack of papers on his desk. 'All these are reports of breakdowns and overruns, letters of complaint . . .'

'Here's another,' said Bob apologetically.

The letter said the Union wished to inform Management that in spite of repeated protests concerning the handling of various studio properties by unknown non-Union members

the situation was continuing and would Management kindly note that further breaches of Agreements would result in immediate withdrawal of labour.

Tony glanced from this to the latest report of the 'Welcombe Manor' ratings, and smiled at the chief electrician with unexpected warmth.

'Thanks, Bob,' he said.

Tim Caine entered the writers' office wearily and slumped into a chair.

'What's up, Tim?' asked Len.

'The latest accident on "The Manor" set,' said Tim dispiritedly. 'That young fellow, the new assistant stage manager, was fooling round with some headphones and got his eardrums busted. He says someone was shrieking at him from the gallery.'

His colleagues stared at Tim in silence.

'It isn't possible,' said Audrey finally. 'The power of the amplifiers isn't great enough to – '

'Tell that to the kid.'

'Have a drink, Tim,' said Robyn. 'In fact we'll all have one. It's the beginning of the end, folks. Tony is politicking like mad, actors are ringing their agents . . . ah, it's Adam. Come on in, Adam, we're having a wake.'

Adam smiled stiffly as he joined them. He noticed disapprovingly that the nucleus of the 'Welcombe Manor' team seemed to be settling down to some serious drinking, though it was only eleven o'clock.

'Whose wake?' he enquired coldly; he often found their humour puerile.

' "Welcombe Manor's." '

'What are you talking about?'

'Oh, come off it, Adam,' said Robyn. 'The writing's on the wall.'

'That's nonsense,' said Adam sharply. 'A few things go wrong and – '

'Have you seen the latest ratings?' Tim broke in. 'Do you know the technicians are planning a walk-out? How many people have been injured in that studio, or what it's costing the company in overtime alone to put the bloody thing out

every week? It's more than just "a few things", Adam. Open your eyes.'

But Adam's eyes held a kind of panic, like those of a man in a trap. He turned and walked out of the door without a word.

'He's in a world of his own,' said Audrey. 'Poor old Adam.'

'Oh, he's on salary,' said Robyn. 'Don't worry about him. They'll kick him upstairs to Personnel or somewhere he'll have fun bullying the clerks. I shouldn't think our contracts will be extended, though.'

'It's been an unlucky series,' Audrey said thoughtfully, 'ever since Joey died.'

Len laughed. 'That's just coincidence.'

'It isn't, you know,' she snapped. 'Pete's still in hospital, Nick's a gibbering heap – '

'Go on, say it. The studio's haunted?'

'It's got an ugly atmosphere, Len, you should see it. The crews go in mortal dread of that programme. Even the security staff avoid the studio after dark.'

'And the cleaners only dust in pairs?'

'Now look – '

'Give it over, you two, and have another drink.' Smiling easily, Robyn broke up a promising argument. 'I see the old man's gone very quiet. What do you think, Tim?'

Tim Caine settled back in his chair and raised his glass.

'You want my opinion? Well, here it is: I believe that every "Welcombe Manor" set should be torn down and the ground strewn with salt. That, my friends, is what I think.'

Adam and Tony walked slowly down the deserted 'Welcombe Manor' studio. The final episode of the series had been filmed the previous day and the stagehands had begun to strike the sets. Tony had avoided Adam since the decision to discontinue the programme, but now Adam had had time to accept the decision he'd summoned him for one of his 'chats'. Tony was in an excellent mood, having just had confirmation that he would shortly be producing a series of prestigious social documentaries.

'And there's a nice job lined up for you in Catering Co-

Ordination, Adam,' he said. 'You'll like that, I'm sure.'

'I should never have killed off Joey Siddons,' Adam remarked absently. 'It was a bad error of judgement. He was the soul of the series.'

'We all make mistakes,' replied Tony, slightly vexed at his lack of attention. 'But "The Manor" had a good run and face it, it was rather old hat . . . You can almost believe the superstition about it, though, can't you?'

No bomb site could have looked more desolate. Tony glanced round the gloomy, barn-like studio and shivered, then gave an exclamation of annoyance.

'What's wrong with the lights? I say! You over there, what do you think you're doing?'

Adam walked on alone, remembering the camaraderie which had occasionally touched his life during the making of 'Welcombe Manor'. All the families he'd known were gone, vanished from the half-dismantled homes that crouched in the shadows waiting to be pulled down and carted away.

It seemed a long while since Tony had spoken. Dreamlike nostalgia and the increasing cold drew him towards the Welcombe Inn. It had always been the centre of the Manor residents' social life; Adam lingered by the bar, savouring memories as the gas fire's flames flickered vividly among the fake logs. Someone had forgotten to turn the fire off, that was careless. He could almost see old Joey at his favourite table in his overcoat and muffler, his merry face crinkling into a grin of mischievous delight as he recognised a former friend. Only his face looked seamed and pale, odd shadows playing about his features; they've lit him from beneath, thought Adam, what a stupid mistake to make, he looks almost sinister.

And then he thought the figure moved and spoke.

'It's me old mate Adam! Hey, Adam! Come and have a drink with us!'

A thrill of pure terror galvanised him. He broke out of his trance and ran; but now four walls of the pub enclosed him and a solid oak door resisted his frantic hands. He was aware, suddenly, of background chatter, of sharp fumes of beer and cigarettes, and slowly he turned back to look

through the cheerful, crowded pub to the corner where Joey Siddons was grinning and waving, waiting for him.

'You're not going yet, are you, Adam? It's brass monkeys out there, old son! I just come in to warm meself up, see. Half of bitter, is it? That's right, sit down. It's nice and warm by the fire . . .'

THE BED

TERRY TAPP

He lay there in the bed, listening to the familiar sounds rising up from the warm summer streets, observing the soft breeze stirring the fine, white net curtain at the window. Sounds were important to him now. The soft, swish of the street sweeper's broom; the dull peal of ringing milk bottles. Footsteps. Yes, footsteps were important. Below the hospital window he knew that the streets would soon be crowded with early morning shoppers and eager tourists, laughing, talking, not knowing or caring that he, Paul Furneaux, was crying out for help.

Crying out? He would have smiled, if he were able. Oh, to be able to cry out! To be able to move, if only one finger! To be able to even blink without consciously thinking about it –

How he wished he could be down there, sitting under the umbrella leaves of the dusty chestnut tree, sipping scalding black coffee, talking, laughing, or just watching the people pass by. They were down there now, walking and talking, frittering away precious jewel time.

With great effort Paul willed his eyes to cast down to where his arm lay, lifeless marble, just as the doctor had left it. The half-curled fingers seemed a million miles away at that moment, detached, not belonging to him. He tried to move a finger, summoning all his strength. He could not. Perspiration bubbled out from his parchment skin as he willed, and prayed, and begged that somehow his hand would show a sign of life, no matter how slight. Anything – the merest whisper of movement would be enough.

Dear God, he thought, I can't stay like this all my life. What will become of me? Who is there now who will take care of me?

Who is there now?

His mind went dead; thoughts became paralysed. Don't

think about it, he told himself. Don't allow yourself to think about it. She is gone now and there is nothing you can do to bring her back. She's gone. Don't think about it!

Desperately he concentrated his effort upon that arm, unfelt tears misting his eyes as he attempted to squeeze the fingers together. Nothing.

He looked away, casting his mind outwards so that he could at least feel mental relaxation. To be able to feel, even pain, would be something. Warmth, coldness – anything would do. Perhaps this was a dream – Could that be the answer? Does a dream go on like this? Day after day, night after night. Seeing and hearing were all that he had. No taste, or smell, or sense of hunger; not even the soft air breathing into his lungs. The starched white linen lay over his chest, undisturbed. There was no movement to show that beneath it was a living, breathing man. He was a prisoner inside his own body, buried alive and so very prematurely.

Paul heard the door open, and he knew, judging the weight and frequency of the footsteps, that it was Dr Stewart come to visit. He could see the tall, slim shadow of the older man standing by the bed, yet he was unable to turn his eyes, let alone his head. 'Good morning, Paul,' said the doctor. 'How are we this morning?' He waited, a half-hearted gesture in the hope that Paul would, one day, turn his head and reply. But Paul could not.

'Did you have a pleasant night?' Stewart asked, now moving into Paul's line of vision.

With great difficulty, Paul blinked once.

'A bad night?' Stewart shook his head. 'Oh – I am sorry to hear that. Are you uncomfortable?'

Another blink gave the reply.

'In pain?'

Paul blinked again.

'Then what d'you feel? Eh?' Dr Stewart sat on the edge of the bed and peered into the young man's lifeless blue eyes. 'Listen, Paul,' he said. 'You have to face up to life. There is no reasonable alternative. I have examined you from top to tail and there is nothing at all wrong with you physically – apart from a natural wasting of the muscles due to your enforced lack of exercise. I believe that your condition is

mainly psychological. Do you understand what I am saying to you?'

Two blinks confirmed this.

'Good,' said Stewart. He made an attempt at a smile, running his slender fingers through his long, greying hair. 'I'm going to level with you, Paul,' he said. 'I am under considerable pressure to send you home. The hospital administrator is sending all non-urgent cases from the hospital. People need the beds, especially now that the tourists are here.' The doctor stood up, went over to the window and looked down into the street, still talking to Paul. 'It appears that people on holiday have a great propensity for falling down and breaking limbs. Accidents happen more frequently on holiday than during a normal working year and, for this reason, our casualty department is working at full stretch. Many of the patients have severe fractures and cannot be moved. The whole hospital is under enormous pressure, Paul.' He turned, silhouetted in the window, his face a dark shadow. 'I am afraid we must send you home.'

Paul blinked once, waited, then blinked again, then once more, begging with his eyes, pleading with any expression his face could manage. The image of the doctor distorted, wavering and melting. Paul knew that he was crying, yet he could not feel the warmth of the tears. At once the doctor came to him, seated himself on the edge of the bed and self-consciously mopped at the tears with his handkerchief. 'Don't, Paul,' he said. 'Don't torture yourself like this. I know you don't want to go home – and, to be truthful, no one here wants you to leave. But the decision is not ours to make. If only you would respond somehow, no matter how little, then I could tell the administrator that we had made some progress and that my treatment was having effect.'

Looking at the earnest face of the doctor, Paul felt a rage boil up inside himself. He wanted to do something. He wanted, most desperately, to show Dr Stewart that he was trying his utmost.

'I tell you this,' said the doctor. 'If I am right in my diagnosis of what is wrong with you, then you must face up to what it was that caused this condition. That is the key to the whole problem, Paul. You see, I believe that you have, in

effect, switched off your body. Something has caused your brain to cease to function normally. It happens like that sometimes. During the war I saw many men in conditions similar to yours. They had been through hell and, rather than recall the terror of their experience, the brain simply locks out all feeling, all emotion. Only the patient exposure of the mind to that which caused the shock was a sure cure. You have to face life again, Paul. You can't give up on me now. I won't allow it.'

Paul blinked twice.

'Ah, so you understand,' said Stewart. 'Well that is something. Now, perhaps, we might look at your problem a bit closer. You realise that Claire is dead?'

Two blinks. No tears.

'You *know* that she is dead,' said Stewart. 'But how deeply do you *realise* it?' He held his hand up as if to ward off any possible protest. 'I know I keep telling you this, Paul. "Your wife is dead," I say. Each day I tell you the same thing. And what do you do? Nothing. You do nothing! You just lie there and stare at the ceiling and drown in your own miseries! Don't make me ashamed of you. Is it that you are a coward? Afraid to cry? Afraid even to tell me that the way I am talking to you is wrong? Is that what you are? A coward?'

One blink. Dry and exhausting to perform.

Paul wanted to scream at the doctor – to tell him that he wanted to be able to move his limbs. Yet all he could do was to scream inside, impotent, unable even to feel the rage which was smouldering in his head. When the doctor talked at him like this it brought everything into focus. He knew, of course, that Claire was dead. He knew that. But why? Why was she dead – and why was he here, in this place, unable to communicate with anyone?

'I can see that I am having no effect on you,' said the doctor wearily. 'However, I am prepared to try one last thing, if, of course, it is your wish that I should do so.'

Two blinks, as fast as Paul could manage them.

'It is known popularly as a "truth drug",' said Stewart. 'I don't know what effect it will have upon you, but, with luck it may release enough information from your knotted mind for me to pull a thread or two. Until you face up to whatever

it is which caused this condition, I see no hopes of recovery. The alternative, if you wish, is for you to be returned home with a male nurse who will take care of you. Would you rather do this?'

Paul answered with a single blink, slowly and with great effort.

'Good,' said Stewart. 'At least we have come to an understanding about this. You do realise that I am trying to help you? No need to try to answer. I am sure that you do.' He stood up, taking Paul's hand in his. Paul watched the limb being lifted, feeling nothing. 'Your pulse is barely discernible,' Stewart told him. 'Look at this arm. It is like so much dead meat!' He let it drop. 'I shall give you fifteen minutes to think the matter over,' he said. 'I hope you have not changed your mind when I return with the injection.'

He walked over to the door, hesitated a moment, then, without a backward glance, left the room.

Paul closed his eyes and lay there in the darkness, his only sense being that of hearing. If that should disappear, he thought, there would be nothing left. Nothing worth living for at all. Perhaps that was the answer – the will to live was gone. Now, like superstitious tribesmen sometimes do, he would turn his face to the wall and just die. It could be done. He knew that. Maybe, without consciously realising it, he had the death wish.

Had not Dr Stewart returned some twenty minutes later, Paul would have fallen asleep. He dragged his eyes open and waited for Stewart to come into his line of vision. The doctor was holding a small kidney-shaped dish, over which was laid a square of clean white linen. He placed the dish on a table, out of Paul's line of vision, then stood upright, the bottle inverted over the syringe he was holding. Carefully he withdrew a measure of the liquid into the barrel of the syringe, squirted the needle to make it just the right amount, then bent down, needle poised.

There was no pain, no sensation at all as the needle pierced the skin and pricked into one of the blue-thread veins in Paul's arm. When the doctor stood upright again, Paul knew that the injection was finished. Now all he had to do was wait. He had hoped that the injection would promote some

feeling, some sensation in him; but it did not. Perhaps it wouldn't work? He lay there, waiting, watching Dr Stewart pacing the small, private ward.

Suddenly the doctor turned to him and started firing questions, one after the other. 'Paul? How do you feel now? Drowsy? Is that how you feel?'

Before Paul had time to answer the first salvo of questions, the second was fired at him. 'Do you feel any sensation of pain? Anything at all? Try to answer me, Paul. Try to make some movement. Are you trying? Are you?'

It was too much. Paul wanted to shut those questions out. Somehow, Dr Stewart had changed. Now he looked hard and cruel. 'You'll have to listen to me, Paul,' the voice went on. 'There is no alternative for you, Paul. I am able to say what I like and you must listen. So, what shall I talk to you about? Eh? Shall I talk about your home?'

Paul managed to blink once.

'No? You don't want me to talk about your home? Well, if that is the case, I think the best service I can perform for you is to go against your wishes. I shall talk about your home – and I shall talk about Claire.'

You bastard, thought Paul. You cruel, unfeeling bastard.

'I can see from the look in your eyes that you would rather I avoided the subject of your wife,' Dr Stewart continued. 'Well, I shall ignore your wishes and talk about her all the same. I am afraid you won't think much of me for taking advantage of you in your present situation, Paul, but, as I see it, I have to root out the things you do not wish to discuss and then explore them in depth. This way, with any luck, I may happen upon the event which has caused your paralysis.'

Talk about anything, Paul thought, his mind seething with fury at the doctor's attitude. Talk about anything you damn'-well please – but don't talk about her. Please, please don't talk about her. I can't bear it.

'Unfortunately I did not know you both before you were admitted to this hospital. That is a pity, because, from what I saw of your wife, Claire, I am sure that we could have been good friends. You can tell about people, you know. Even when they are dead, some lingering, tell-tale expression

lights up the face and gives indication of the person. There were laughter lines around her eyes, Paul. She used to laugh a lot, didn't she? That's good. Laughter is about the best medicine people can have. Yes, I think I would have liked Claire – '

She came up out of the darkness, into Paul's consciousness, smiling, running towards him, her hair flowing back over her shoulders, glinting gold in the sunlight. 'Paul!' She was laughing. 'Wait for me! Oh, you fool, Paul. I can't run in these shoes. Wait for me.'

He laughed, fell to the grass and turned on his back so that he could see the blue sky and breathe the fresh, earthen air. It was a good day. Everything about it was good.

When she caught up with him, she sank to her knees at his side, her pale, grey eyes smiling down on him, warmer than the sun. She reached out, her gentle, fine fingers combing through his unruly hair. 'I love you,' she said. Then she kissed him full upon the lips.

'It is a shame that you had no children,' said Dr Stewart, his voice cutting through Paul's thoughts like a scalpel. 'A child would have given you the will to get better, Paul. And that big house you live in – I often pass it on my way through the town – is far to large for just the two of you. One day, when this is all over with, perhaps you will invite me up to look around? I'd like that, very much. There's something about old houses which draws me to them. I expect you both felt that way when you bought it, didn't you? Think about the house, Paul. Think about the lovely gardens which surround it. Then, imagine that you are standing in the hall, facing the stairs, ready to go up to your bedroom. Try it. Just imagine you are walking up the stairs. Try it. Try it – '

The doctor's voice faded into the darkness as Paul conjured up the vision of the hallway of the house. He was standing with his back to the fireplace, looking up the stairs, following them, counting them, eight-nine-ten, until he reached the first landing where the staircase divided into two junctions. Paul knew every step by heart, just as he knew, individually, each carved banister rail and post. When they had first bought Grangewood, Paul had spent hours

scraping away the old layers of varnish, exposing the scallop-shaped carvings. The whole house was filled with carvings, all following the same patterns. These Gothic carvings decorated the doors and wooden wall panels, the picture rails and the skirtings. It must have taken many years to complete.

Thoughts of the wood carvings dragged Paul's mind upstairs into the attic where he had found the first post. At first he had thought it was another banister rail and had laid it on some sacking so that the dust would not soil it. When he found another post, carved in precisely the same manner, Paul had decided to take them downstairs and find a use for them. Surely they must fit somewhere?

Claire had suggested that they could be curtain rails, but changed her mind when she noticed how deeply carved they were. 'A curtain would never slide along that surface,' she said.

Closer examination at one end of the post showed that something had once been pegged into position tightly, for the wood was slightly bruised.

'Same thing up here,' Claire said. 'Whatever this was used for, it had some sort of fixing at the top and bottom.'

And that would have been that, had not Paul found another post in the potting shed. 'Damned things seem to be breeding!' he said. 'I found this under an old table frame.'

'Table frame?' Claire asked. 'Let me have a look at it, Paul.'

When Claire examined the low frame closely, she laughed aloud. 'Oh, Paul! What sort of people do you think would use a table *this* size? It's far too low. Tell you what I think it is.' She pointed to the holes at each corner. 'I believe it's the base for a four-poster bed, and we have found three of the four posts already!'

Now the hunt was on. They searched the house from attic to cellar, from front to rear, but could not find the missing post. Meanwhile, Paul had dragged the heavy wooden frame out into the garden and, after making some pegs, managed to assemble the three posts. 'It's a bit wobbly,' he said. 'I certainly wouldn't trust it.'

The bed was dismantled and stored in the garage for

almost a year before Claire discovered the fourth post. It had been in view all the time, suspended across the ceiling rafters in the old servants' annexe with a mass of wooden planks, curtain rods and rough wood. Paul refused to go to the trouble of turning out the garage to see the bed assembled because he thought that something was still missing from it. 'After all,' he said, 'why would anyone dismantle a perfectly good four-poster if there was nothing wrong with it?'

The final piece of the bed was discovered quite by accident. For some years, when inviting Claire's family for Christmas, they had used a large, flat board as a buffet table on which to place the Christmas tree, nuts and fruit. Rather than drag the heavy board upstairs to the attic when the festivities were over, Claire suggested that they should store it in the garage. It was when they laid the board against the bed base that they noticed that they were of identical size.

'This must be the carved top of the bed!' Claire said. 'I wondered why the edges and base were so ornate, yet the top was unpolished. Let's try to fit it together.'

It took less than ten minutes for Paul to wedge the wooden pegs into the posts, and when he lifted the board aloft, it seemed to glide into place of its own accord. The bed was now locked tightly together. Paul stood back, admiring his handiwork. 'Should fetch a few bob at an auction.'

'Sell it?' Claire cried.

'What else would you do with it?' Paul asked.

'Sleep in it!' she said, her eyes lighting up at the thought. 'I could make a canopy and we have some nice tapestry curtains which we could hang around the outside. You can sell our modern, horrid double bed if you like – but you're not selling this!'

Sleep in it. It was Claire's idea. Her idea.

She had worked hard on the curtains and the canopy, stitching and sewing, tacking on expensive braidings. Yes, it was her idea from the start.

'Paul?' Dr Stewart's voice cut through the dream like a shower of cold water. 'Can you hear me?'

Yes, Paul could hear all right. But he did not bother to blink his eyes in answer. His thoughts were now concentrated and crystal clear, flowing like a torrent, dragging him

relentlessly, helplessly along towards that cliff-edge fall of reality which he knew must soon come. Soon he would remember.

Ignoring the insistent voice of the doctor, Paul conjured up the vision of the bed in his mind. It had been comfortable enough, and Claire had tied back the curtains with a golden cord so that the light from the bedside lamps was not impeded. Paul had discovered, much to his surprise, that he was mildly claustrophobic, and this feeling persisted so much that he could not settle down to sleep. For almost two hours he lay there, slightly resentful that Claire was now deeply asleep.

Downstairs the newly-restored grandfather clock chimed a dull, muffled midnight, and Paul wrestled against his own surging thoughts and the fear that he would never get to sleep.

Finally he could bear his enforced imprisonment in the bed no longer. He needed to stretch his cramped limbs and, perhaps, even have a stiff drink. Some warm milk laced with a generous brandy should do the trick.

Taking great care not to disturb Claire, he slid from between the warm sheets, crept across the room and went out on to the landing, closing the door carefully. Breathing a sigh of relief, he ran lightly down the stairs, into the kitchen and heated the milk. As he went through to the dining-room to fetch the brandy the light bulb flashed brightly, then went out, plunging the room into darkness. Immediately he realised that the electric cooker must have blown a fuse.

Pale grey moonlight silvered the furniture in the room and, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he placed the drink on a glass-topped table. Of course, it could be a power cut and not a fuse. Paul did not relish the idea of stumbling around in the cellar, especially as he could not remember where he had left the torch. There were two candles in the dining-room, but he knew that Claire would not be pleased if he lighted them, for they were expensive, ornamental candles and not the household kind.

Apart from the deep freezer and the refrigerator, there was nothing else in the house which would cause any concern until morning. Paul decided to fumble through the drinks cupboard for the brandy, have his nightcap and then creep

back to bed. Claire would miss her early morning cup of tea, but then, that was not his fault.

As he raised the glass to his lips, Paul heard a noise outside the dining-room door. He sat there, frozen, his head cocked to one side. 'Claire?' His voice the merest whisper.

'Claire? Is that you?'

The lever of the doorhandle lowered slowly.

Perhaps Claire had woken up and slipped from bed, not realising that he was already downstairs. Not wishing to frighten her, Paul said, 'Claire. It's me. I'm in the dining-room. Damned lights have gone.' He wanted to talk, to break the still, unearthly silence which seemed to muffle the house. It was cold now, causing the skin on his arms and shoulders to raise up like that of a plucked chicken.

Noiselessly, the door opened, admitting a low, flickering light.

'Oh, good. You've found a candle,' said Paul.

There was no reply.

Sleep walking? Paul instantly dismissed the notion. Claire would not have lit a candle if she were sleep walking. Yet – was it a candle which cast the lead-grey, wavering shadows? Candlelight is yellow, warm and soft. This light was paler than moonlight – and cold.

Involuntarily, Paul felt himself rising to his feet, his breath held, as the door swung back. There was no one there. Just the light.

A sensation of sweet relief flooded through him as his brain strove to find answers. The door had opened – probably it had not been latched securely. The light – a reflection of moonlight. His heart started to pound and he felt the colour rise in his cheeks. Reaching down to pick up the drink, he was about to take it up with him to the bedroom when he heard a low, distant laugh.

It was Claire.

Was she awake? A joke? Was she playing a joke? He strained his ears so that even the blood seething through his veins could clearly be heard by him. Talking in her sleep? Claire did that sometimes. Was she having a dream?

Now it seemed important that he should be in the bedroom. Claire might wake up and, finding that he was

gone and the lights would not work, become afraid. Leaving the drink, he started off towards the stairs, his brain already making up excuses for the morning as to why he had made a drink, then left it, untouched, in the dining-room. Perhaps, if he told Claire to stay in bed until the fuse was repaired, he would have time to come down and tip it down the kitchen sink. Certainly he would not tell her about the slowly-opening door and his apprehensions.

As he moved forward, Paul noticed that the light also moved. He paused. The light paused also. He wanted to laugh at himself; tell himself that this was an optical illusion. Light reflected from water, or a mirror. It could be one of a thousand things.

Yet, somehow, he knew that this was not so. The ghastly light would, he knew, move when he moved. How he knew he was not at all sure – yet he did, and with a certainty which appalled him. The next step was the most difficult, for the movement of the light would start in him a thrill of fear. There was no alternative. Paul knew that he would have to move – and that the light would travel with him. Guiding him? Did he have to follow it? He was not sure.

This time the laughter *was* Claire's. It was unmistakable, joyful. He could imagine her running towards him, as she had done that day, hair streaming out behind her, golden, illuminated by the sun. Was she dreaming about that day? Paul felt an unreasonable resentment against her swell up in him. She was asleep, dreaming. He was standing there, at the foot of the stairs, too afraid even to take the next pace forward.

That's how he had felt when they first met. Close, yet miles away. Distanced from her, somehow.

With an effort, he tried to move forward naturally, ignoring the light, dismissing it all in disgust. What was he, a grown man, playing at? Such fears belonged to childhood.

The light moved when he did, enveloping him like a thin, watery fog. He averted his eyes, yet it was all around him, attached almost. Moving quickly up the stairs, fear urging his legs to go faster than they were physically capable, he rushed headlong across the landing towards the bedroom

door, blind now to the enveloping light, the one enduring thing keeping him from crying out in sheer terror.

He could hear Claire's low laugh.

Pausing for a brief moment by the bedroom door to catch his breath, Paul reached forward and took the cold, gleaming knob in his hand. He smiled as he heard Claire laugh out loud. For some reason he could not then define, there was security and comfort in that laughter.

The light entered the room with him.

Paul closed the door carefully now, for he could hear Claire stirring behind him. The phantom light was, he reasoned, similar to the retained light one holds in the eyes coming in from the bright sunlight. After all, the lights had fused.

Again she laughed, voluptuously this time, and there was a sinister note of abandonment in her voice as she mumbled, 'Oh, darling!'

Moving slowly around to his side of the four-poster bed, Paul kept his eyes on his pillow, intent on making the least noise possible. As he rounded the edge of the bed, the curtains moved to reveal Claire's face, illuminated by that unearthly light.

Her eyes were half closed, as if in ecstasy, her body arched and moving gently. With her, face averted, was a man. Paul watched, astonished by the realism of what *must* be a dream. Relief that all this was indeed a dream was mingled with hot indignation as he watched Claire's fingers run through the dark, pitch hair. She moved, kissing his face and neck, thrilling to his touch, her hands travelling his long, naked back, embracing, exploring, moving faster and faster in time with the sinuous motions of her lover. Paul watched, tears springing to his eyes, blinding him. Dream or not, this was disgusting for him to behold. He cried out in rage, his fists balled, body lunging to grab the young intruder and hurl him from the bed.

Claire glanced up, her eyes still alight with a joyfulness he had never been able to impart to her; her hands still defiantly caressing that pale, muscular back. She laughed, harsh and low, not caring that he could see what was happening. No expression of shame or fear crossed her features as she gave

herself, even more. The head which had lain across her breasts now turned and Paul, halted by the sight of it, found his gaze locked upon those coal-black eyes.

The face was handsome, yet made hideous by the expression of utter evil and malevolence in the eyes. He smiled, knowingly, derisively, still continuing the rhythmic movements of his passion, his appetite stronger than his fear of Paul.

The movements slowed, taunting him, defying him to move, yet exultant and triumphant. There was all the time in the world to finish this – to enjoy it to the full.

Claire laughed again, her laughter ringing in Paul's ears, accusing him of an impotence, deriding him.

Then the pounding of his heart became as a hammer in his ears as he watched them cling together in a frenzy of unbridled heat.

Convulsed for a few brief seconds, they relaxed, the young man kissing her eyes, her mouth, his own mouth set grimly now. As Claire lay there, eyes closed, the young man turned to Paul, his evil gaze appraising and penetrating. He laughed, a thin dribble of mirth which barely escaped his lips before dying in the cold, dank air of the room. Transfixed by horror and revulsion, Paul stared as the young man pulled back the bedclothes. He was naked, his skin gloss-white from his exertions, his hand outstretched as if to touch. The eyes were aglow with a new light now, the taut, thinned lips wet with anticipation.

'Come to me.' It was an invitation and a command. Paul tried to take a backward pace, yet could not. His body was frozen, refusing to respond.

Remorselessly the young man gazed at him with an expression of tender, animal lusting, his features twisted into a bleak smile. Unable to move, or even cry out, Paul stood there, stripped naked by that hypnotic stare, vulnerable and helpless. The moist lips parted slightly. 'Come to me.'

'No!' Suddenly Paul found his voice, screaming through his lips with all the force of a gale. He took breath again to let out another cry, this time of rage and fury.

But the young man smiled and reached up swiftly, his

cold, electric fingers touching Paul's lips. And the screaming died to a whisper – and was gone forever.

'Paul?' Again Dr Stewart's voice cut through the dream. 'Wake up!' He felt a slap across his face. It did not hurt. 'Open your eyes, Paul. At least do that. Show me that you are awake.' Stewart's voice was insistent now.

The room, when he opened his eyes, was much the same as it had been minutes, or maybe even hours, before. Nothing had changed. The wind still toyed listlessly with the net curtain and the sunlight slanted in, tumbling the airborne dust across the room.

'So you are awake,' said the doctor. 'Thank God for that. I have never seen such a reaction before. Do you feel all right? Did anything happen?'

Paul blinked twice.

'Try to move your fingers, Paul,' said the doctor, his voice now filled with desperation. 'Try, Paul. Try.'

Paul closed his eyes, shutting out the sunlight and the moving, living world, holding back the tears. It was the bed. He knew it. That four-poster bed was saturated with evil. The night Claire had died, he had learned everything about the bed. Those moist, perverted lips had whispered soft; insinuating knowledge into his mind, vile things which caused his brain to reel with disgust. His head, even now, was exploding with the pressure of that evil knowledge. He knew everything; the insatiable, beastly appetite of the rich, loathsome young man and his sadistic desires filled him with nausea. Two other people, before Claire, had died in that bed; countless others had suffered the pleasure of the young man. Paul could hear their cries, feel their disgust and degradation, know their helplessness and despair.

For some, the shock had been too much; for others, the pleasure too great.

'I am sorry about this, Paul,' said Dr Stewart. 'You obviously are unwilling, or unable to respond. I'm afraid we will have to send you home today. A male nurse will call regularly, and you will be well cared for. Perhaps, in the comfort of your own home, sleeping in your own bed, you may start to recover.'

No – no – no – no! Paul blinked his eyes. He willed himself, prayed to God, cursed, and wept inwardly.

'Can't be helped, old chap,' said Stewart. 'You need time to heal.'

Time? How *much* time? How many nights would he have to endure in that bed? How many awful days, lying there, watching the sun go down and knowing that soon, soon he would come out of the darkness. How many times would he endure those lips next to his ear, whispering terrible and thrilling things? Love, lust, desire and animal appetite – these things would fill the long nights.

Dear God, he thought, I can't do anything. I can't stop them taking me home. I can't tell them.

Paul tried so very hard to scream.

He could not . . .

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

E. OWENS BLACKBURNE

About the close of the eighteenth century, the fashionable life of Dublin was at its zenith; the Ranelagh Gardens were the resort of the beaux and belles of the day; the Parliament was held in College Green; and its members had their town residences in Dublin, and lived there for a considerable portion of the year.

One of the members, an illustrious Irish nobleman who had spent some portion of his youth in Italy, was a man of cultivated taste and refinement. Upon his return to Dublin, he conceived the idea of inviting over some Italian artists to decorate the walls and ceilings of his residence after the Florentine manner. He carried out his idea, and the ornamentations of Charlemont House bear witness to the taste and skill of the decorators. Other noblemen employed these artists; the present Royal Irish Academy House, then a noble, private residence, is similarly decorated; also several other city mansions in several of the leading streets and squares.

When Dublin decreased in importance after the Act of Union in 1801, and was no longer the centre of fashion for the Irish nobility, its splendid private residences gradually decayed; and wealthy burghers and Dublin's proverbially professional aristocracy, now inhabit them. Many of the houses yet retain their curious, rare old decorations, and of one of these residences, situated in a leading square, we would more especially speak.

A large, stately, gloomy-looking house, with a ponderous hall-door, studded with iron nails, like the door of a cathedral. High, narrow windows with Italian jalousies. The grass grows in the interstices of the high, steep steps, now fast falling away. The rusty iron railings have become loosened in their stone settings, and seem as though a good push would

hurl them into the mouldering, vault-like areas. Entering the hall, a damp, earthy smell greets the intruder – for, intruder must anyone be considered who ventures into that region of ghostliness. The wide, flagged, echoing hall, the broad, dark, oak-panelled staircase, lead to chambers awful in their oppressive sense of loneliness and utter desolation. Cobwebs festoon the painted walls; queer, crawling creatures hold high holiday on the once polished floors; but not even the squeak of a rat or a mouse breaks the solemn, death-like stillness which pervades this old, deserted mansion.

'Over all there hung a cloud of fear,
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
And said, as plain as whisper to the ear,
"The house is haunted." '

Twenty-five years ago this house was tenanted by Miss Steele, an eccentric old lady, who, dying suddenly at the advanced age of ninety-one, her property – including this house and furniture – came into the possession of a married grand-niece living in Kildare, whom she had never seen. The season in Dublin was just commencing about the time that all preliminary law-matters connected with the property were being settled, and the heiress, Mrs Nugent, acting upon the advice of her lawyer, resolved to let the house furnished. The furniture, although antique, was handsome; especially that of the drawing-room. The walls and ceilings of this apartment were superbly ornamented in the Florentine style. Arabesques on a pale blue ground adorned the ceilings; the panels of the walls were painted with groups of figures or rare pieces of still-life; whilst from the mouldings which separated these panels, sprang figures which, bending downwards, held the candelabra lighting the apartment. The furniture was in keeping with the architecture – of inlaid wood, heavy with gilding and upholstered in amber satin; it was of that stately and old-world type which suggested the days of minuets, apple-blossom sacques, cherry-coloured satin petticoats, and high-heeled shoes. A spindle-legged spinet stood near the fireplace, wherein was no grate, but great brass dogs. The fireplace was tiled with the queer little

Dutch tiles that came over with the tulips in the days of William and Mary. These tiles bore a succession of Adams and Eves, of Cains and Abels, and other scriptural characters, who looked sadly out of place amongst the nymphs, and satyrs, and similar profanities which surrounded the chamber.

The house was no sooner advertised, than it was immediately taken by an officer then quartered in Dublin. Being a man of taste, Colonel Comyers would not allow the house to be remodelled in any way. Mrs Comyers, too, was a woman who liked novelty, and she triumphantly pictured to herself what a delightful sensation her antique-looking drawing-room would create when well lighted up and filled with a fashionable mob. A pretty, piquante little woman, she was enthusiastically charmed, enchanted, with her Irish residence. One day, about the beginning of October, she moved into it, with her two infant children, and two servants that she had brought from England – a cook and a nurse. For the first night she had no other servants in the house.

Upon the first evening of Mrs Comyers's arrival, her husband was obliged to spend the day and night from home. She amused herself by wandering about the old house, prying into musty cabinets and cupboards, looking with wondering and admiring eyes upon the rare old Venetian glass and egg-shell china, which seemed almost too fine and too delicate for use. About half-past six o'clock, as she sat in the drawing-room, the nurse entered, saying that it was necessary for her to go out to buy some things urgently required. The woman respectfully asked her mistress if she would go up to the nursery to the children should she hear them cry.

'Certainly, Nurse, I suppose you will not be very long away?'

'I cannot say, madam. I do not know Dublin.'

'Then I think Cook had better go with you – she has been here before. I dare say no one will call this evening.'

'Thank you, madam,' and the nurse left the room. Presently, Mrs Comyers heard the hall-door closed, and the two women's footsteps echoing down the steps.

A quarter of an hour – twenty minutes passed. The doors

between the drawing-room and the nursery, two flights higher up, were left open, so that Mrs Comyers could hear every sound. The evening was fast closing in, and she experienced a strange feeling of loneliness, and began to regret her foolish impulse in allowing both servants to go out. She laid down the book she had been reading, and presently one of the children gave a cry.

The mother started from the couch where she was reclining, and was about to go up to the nursery, when hurried footsteps on the stairs struck upon her ear.

'Oh! I need not go,' she said to herself; 'I suppose Cook has stayed at home, after all': and, having by this time reached the door, she indeed saw, by the waning light, the figure of an elderly woman turning the landing of the flight upstairs opposite to her. Mrs Comyers returned to her sofa. But the child's crying did not cease; and as she listened, it increased from a whining cry to a wail of terror. In alarm she started up and ran to the nursery. The eldest boy, a child of three years old, was sitting up in bed, shrieking; but the cook was nowhere to be seen.

In vain Mrs Comyers tried to pacify the child. 'Freddy,' she asked, 'did not Cook come up to you?'

But the child only sobbed the more convulsively; so much so, that the mother refrained from asking any further questions. Softly singing to him, he was soon asleep again, and she stole quietly from the room. It was almost dark, yet she distinctly saw, walking a few steps before her, the figure of the woman which she yet believed to be the cook.

'Why, Cook, I thought you had gone out with Nurse.'

The figure had just reached the bottom of the flight of stairs; it turned slowly round, revealing the face of an old woman with a white cap-border closely crimped around her puckered-up, leering face. A gruesome, weird light seemed to surround her, so that Mrs Comyers distinctly saw the shrivelled lips move, the bleared eyes gleam; and the shaky, skinny hand, which was raised and shaken menacingly at her. The figure then turned and ran swiftly down the stairs.

For a moment, Mrs Comyers was frightened; but, girding up her courage, she blamed herself for giving way to

nervousness – persuading herself that it must be some person engaged by the cook. She walked slowly down the stairs, her heart beating violently, and called out, courageously:

'My good woman, who are you; and what is your business here?'

For answer, a chuckling laugh resounded throughout the echoing old house. The clatter of many feet was heard upon the stairs; still, the brave little woman hardly quailed. But what was she to do? She was too terrified to venture after the figure. Just then, there was a knock at the hall-door, and, with a sense of relief, she hastened down to open it. The two women-servants entered.

'Cook,' said Mrs Comyers, 'did you leave anyone in the house during your absence?'

'No, madam.'

'Well, you had better go and look in the kitchen, for some woman went down the stairs just now.'

Lights were speedily procured, and every inch of the basement storey was unavailingly searched. The doors were then secured, and as Mrs Comyers saw the servants were rather frightened, she wisely refrained from entering into any particulars concerning either the manner of the figure, or the strange noises which she had heard.

The next day she related the circumstance to her husband, who laughed at her nervous fancies, and practically suggested that a close eye be kept on the area gate. The weeks flew by, and the affair seemed to be almost forgotten; until one evening, as Colonel and Mrs Comyers sat alone in the dining-room, the sound of many footsteps was heard in the drawing-room overhead, and a plaintive air was played upon the old spinet. They listened, amazed, for a minute, and at length Mrs Comyers said:

'Henry, I am sure it is that – that thing!'

'You little goose!' he exclaimed, laughing. 'Stay where you are, and I'll go and see.'

He bounded up the stairs – there was a hurried shuffling of feet: the music ceased, and he soon returned. The scene he had witnessed he could not relate to his nervous, delicate wife. Therefore, to avoid being questioned, he said, with an assumption of gaiety:

'Mabel, congratulate me! I have at last seen your mythical old woman!'

Mrs Comyers shivered, and nestled into her husband's sheltering arms, as she whispered, faintly: 'Yes, I know you have seen her, for I saw her go before you out of the room.'

They could not account for the phenomenon, and naturally were diffident about mentioning it to anyone. Thus the time passed on until Christmas.

With the Christmas-time, there arrived a nephew of Colonel Comyers. Clever, handsome, merry Val Wycherley: a young doctor who had just taken out his diploma. He had passed a brilliant examination, and before again resuming work, had come to spend a few weeks in Dublin, for the purpose of resting his overtasked brain. It was agreed that he should not be told anything about the mysterious old woman.

On Christmas Day a number of friends were expected to dine. There was also to be an evening party; therefore, in order to save trouble, Mrs Comyers had had the dining-table arranged early in the afternoon, and then locked the door. She was very proud of her daintily-arranged table: she had tastefully disposed the quaint-coloured and gilt Venetian glass, and the rare old china belonging to the house. Groups of shepherds and shepherdesses holding cornucopias filled with glistening holly, interspersed with its own bright red berries and the snowy white ones of those of the mistletoe, were placed at intervals along the table.

About five in the afternoon, as Colonel Comyers and his nephew were sauntering home round the square, a sudden and heavy shower came on. They walked fast, but by the time they arrived at the hall-door they were thoroughly drenched. Colonel Comyers immediately went into his dressing-room on the first landing, inviting his nephew to follow; but that free-and-easy young gentleman preferred taking off his wet boots in the hall.

'Here, Bridget! – Mary! – Whoever you are, take these boots, like a good girl,' said he, addressing a woman standing in the shade at the top of the kitchen-stairs.

An aged woman, habited in an old-fashioned black gown, with a white handkerchief pinned across her bosom,

approached him. He threw the boots to her, and, to his horror, *they went through her!* and then the figure vanished! Val, being a doctor, his practical thought was, 'By Jove! My head must be in a precious queer state! A bad lookout for me, and Christmas fare in prospective. I had better say nothing, however, or these good folk may think I am completely off my head.'

He walked slowly up the stairs, and on the first landing again was the figure. It preceded him step by step, but Val did not feel frightened; as before, ascribing the vision to purely physical causes acting upon a brain which he felt was overtasked. Although a medical man, it did not occur to him to apply the unfailing test of pressing one eye so as to throw it out of the parallel focus with the other. If the object be the result of hallucination, it is seen still and simply; if actual vision, it is seen double. The figure entered the drawing-room. Val mechanically followed it; and there, what a scene met his eye!

On the polished oaken floor near the fireplace lay the body of a young and beautiful foreign-looking woman richly dressed. There were wounds about her neck half-concealed by her long raven-black hair. A tall, dark-complexioned man stood near, holding a long, thin Venetian stiletto, whilst beside him stood the old woman, who laughed a fearful laugh, as she spurned the body with her foot!

As she laughed, the vision faded, and Val Wycherley left the drawing-room, uneasy for his brain. At the door he was met by Mrs Comyers who insisted upon his coming down to see her pretty dinner-table. Colonel Comyers was also one of the privileged, and the proud young housekeeper unlocked the dining-room door, when lo! – all the exquisite old china and glass lay in fragments upon the floor! The tablecloth was pulled away, and all the pretty decorations ruthlessly destroyed! In a recess near the fireplace stood a dark, foreign-looking man and the old woman, both of whom laughed devilishly, and then vanished! The scene was witnessed by the three. Mrs Comyers fainted in her husband's arms. A serious nervous illness followed, and as soon as it was practicable she was removed from the house.

Val Wycherley recounted his experiences in the drawing-

room, and Colonel Comyers admitted that he had witnessed the same scene. Of course they left the house, but refrained from making the reason public, beyond telling the proprietors; who, naturally, did not credit it. But tenant after tenant left, scared away by strange noises and appearances, and the house fell gradually into its present state of decay: not even a caretaker could be induced to remain in it.

The main facts of the preceding story are perfectly true, and were related to the writer by Mrs Nugent's daughter, the present proprietress of the ill-fated house.

WHICH ONE?

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

The fire-watchers' room was situated in the basement and it was here that they rested between raids, which sometimes meant they never left it for the entire night. Three double bunks stood against one wall, while in the centre a table surrounded by metal folding chairs was covered by an assortment of cups, saucers and non-matching plates: a shelf to hold gas-masks and steel helmets, a wall telephone and a row of hooks completed the furnishings. High up under the ceiling was an iron grid and this gave out a low hum as the ventilation system pumped air down to this windowless den.

With one exception the men were elderly. Harold Smithers, sixty-two, tall, black hair just touched by grey, with deep-set dark eyes that were in keeping with the pale, gaunt face and thin-lipped mouth. He was a greengrocer by trade and a lay preacher for as much time as his business would allow. John Hughes was a complete contrast; of medium height, plump and bald, sixty-five years of age; a retired civil servant, who was reputed to more than like an occasional drink and was not averse to female company. Mr Drayton – no one had so far ever dared to omit the prefix – looked as if he might be in his late fifties: a scholar with an imposing array of letters after his name, rather above medium height, grey-haired and cursed with a ridiculous paunch that had nothing in common with the narrow chest, scrawny neck, thin arms and legs. He was considered to be a little mad by the less sophisticated members of the team.

Henry Jackson, sixty-six, white of hair, sallow of complexion, bowed-shouldered, evil tempered: a former invoice clerk, who firmly believed that fate had cheated him out of a more glorious career. The last of what must be called the seniors was a veritable giant. Charles Conway, six feet six inches in his socks, fifty-nine years of age, not a hair on his

well-shaped head, had a healthy kindly face lit by a pair of small, twinkling eyes. He had formerly been a showroom manager for a well-known firm of furniture makers.

The exception was Raymond Clark. He was only seventeen, a tall blond youth, with a fresh complexion, large blue eyes that appeared to be observing the world with profound astonishment, and large soft hands. He was training to be an architect and hoped the war would be over before he was of an age to be called up.

The time was seven thirty-two and the date November the ninth in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and forty.

'Certain the building is empty?' Smithers snapped, his position of section leader demanding he use a brusque tone of voice. 'No one here but ourselves?'

John Hughes grimaced and Raymond Clark demonstrated his desire to be thought mature and contemptuous of authority by imitating him. 'Yes, the building is empty, stirrup pumps are in position, sand buckets filled and we're all fed, watered, fully clad and in our right minds. At least I am. For God's sake don't be an old woman.'

Smithers frowned while a tinge of colour stained his pale face. 'It's my job to make sure everything is as it should be. Mr Drayton, have you signed the duty book?'

Mr Drayton looked up from a book he was reading and blinked owlishly. 'What? Oh, yes. No, I haven't. Anyone got a pen?'

'You should have brought a fountain pen with you,' Smithers protested. 'Together with a notebook. You can get a nice thick one from Woolworths for a penny.'

'For God's sake,' Henry Jackson exploded, 'why must we go through this palaver every night? Damnation, there's only six of us. We all know we're here. The question is – are we all there? Prancing around in tin hats, playing with stirrup pumps. If nothing happens by two o'clock I'm going home.'

Smithers sat upright and raised his voice to a pitch that was just below a shout. 'It is our duty night, Jackson, and here we all stay until daybreak. There's a full moon tonight and that could mean a raid. A heavy raid. If this place goes up in flames, it will be our responsibility.'

'Balls. If incendiaries fall on the roof they'll most likely burn themselves out. If there's a direct hit, there's damn all we can do about it. Apart from sit here and wait for someone to dig us out. Always supposing we aren't flattened.'

'You forget,' Smithers admonished, 'that there's one who watches over us. So long as we put our trust in Him, all will be well.'

Jackson snorted derisively. 'The perpetual optimist. Use your intelligence, man. At this moment people are dying violently all over the world and He isn't doing much about it. And we are flirting with death every time we go up on the roof during an air raid.'

Smithers was about to protest when Mr Drayton said quietly:

'I have formed a philosophy that I would advise you to follow. So long as this war continues, look upon yourselves as already dead. Then every day that finds you still breathing is an unmerited bonus.'

An uncomfortable silence followed this statement that, from a less distinguished source, might have been treated with derision. Finally Conway cleared his throat and said: 'I think that's an unduly pessimistic viewpoint, old man. I mean to say, we all are condemned to death the very moment we are born, but it doesn't do to keep reminding oneself of the fact.'

Mr Drayton shrugged and gave the impression the subject was beginning to bore him. 'I have no wish to question anyone's beliefs, but in these times a wise man must consider the possibility of an abrupt ending. If that does not bother you, forget what I said. But for those who walk with fear grinning over their shoulders, my solution is as good as any.'

Smithers clearly thought that this was an ideal opportunity to deliver a declaration of faith and proceeded to do so.

'A Christian has no fear of death as he knows it is only a doorway to Paradise. A place of eternal bliss . . .'

'Just a moment,' Jackson interrupted, 'if this place is so good, what are you hanging around for? Are we to understand you are looking forward to dying?'

'That's a stupid question. Of course I want to live as long

as possible. It would be a mortal sin to wish otherwise. What I intended to imply was . . .'

His voice died away as the moaning wail of the air raid siren sent its warning out over the city, and every man jerked his head to one side, as though having difficulty in hearing the depressing sound. Smithers at once became a man of action: a general who must now deploy his army to withstand the enemy's onslaught.

'Right, lads,' he spoke with a forced hearty tone, 'you know what to do. Gas-masks and helmets on, then to your posts. Young Raymond, you will man the telephone. Come on now – best foot forward.'

Jackson, of course, had to be contrary and undermine Smithers's far from certain confidence with sneering remarks.

'Don't panic. There can be anything up to ten minutes between the siren sounding and the arrival of the first planes. Then the damned things have got to find us, which in all probability they never will. So calm down and stop prancing around like a fussy old hen.'

'Look here, Jackson, I've had enough of you. You're a damned . . .'

'Naughty! What would the God box meeting say?'

'A damned disturbing influence. I wonder why you take the trouble to come here, if this is the only attitude you can take.'

Jackson began leisurely to slide the gas-mask strap over his head, an example that Raymond imitated.

'That's a question I often ask myself. Probably because watching you getting hot and bothered is better than a tonic. Breaks the bloody monotony.'

'I don't get hot and bothered . . .'

'Please, gentlemen,' Mr Drayton's quiet voice cut him short, 'this continuous bickering is not conducive to peace of mind, which all of us badly need in these trying times. Might I suggest that if you can't address one another in a civilized manner, you declare a non-speaking truce.'

'But he started it,' Smithers protested. 'He always does. Everyone here knows that.'

Mr Drayton sighed deeply. 'Shall we get ready and take up

our positions? Unless I am mistaken enemy planes are already overhead.'

As though to prove the truth of his words, a distant explosion followed by the intermittent roar of ack-ack guns filtered down through the building. The five men began to file out into the dimly lit passage and make their way towards the flight of stone steps that ran up to the ground floor. Raymond Clark watched them from the doorway, being perhaps not too happy about being left on his own. Smithers had reached the top of the steps and was about to open the iron door, when Jackson said:

'Damnation hell! I've left my gloves behind. Have to go back for them.'

'No you don't,' Smithers objected. 'We haven't time to waste.' He raised his voice. 'Raymond, bring Mr Jackson's gloves. As I remember they are lying on the shelf.'

The boy went back into the room and reappeared a few seconds later carrying a pair of wash-leather gloves. He ran towards the steps and had mounted the first three when a faint whistling sound gradually came into being, quickly growing in volume until it seemed as if the entire planet was screaming in unbearable agony.

There was a mad dash to get back down the stairs and they became a struggling mass of arms and legs, as the shrieking whistle suddenly died and was replaced by what sounded like a long drawn-out gusty sigh. When the explosion came every single mind was filled with one irrevocable belief: *whatever happens to the others – I cannot die.*

The left-hand wall caved in covering six squirming bodies with masonry, bricks and a cloud of choking dust. The roaring crash took a lifetime to die: went shuddering across the universe before being swallowed by a dreadful silence.

A hideous mountain of rubble covered the stairs and sloped down on to an irregular carpet of bricks and plaster that hid about three-quarters of the passage floor. Presently a dislodged brick came tumbling downwards, to be shortly followed by a veritable avalanche as Conway reared up from the steps, looking like a mythical giant born from the ruins of Olympus. He began frantically to search among the rubble, throwing aside great lumps of masonry with apparent ease;

pulling up a plaster-covered body that instantly started to cough and splutter before joining in the rescue operation.

Others struggled upright without any assistance and picked their way through the wreckage; drawn back to the room where a light still created an illusion of normality. One by one they came in through the doorway and flopped into chairs, all bedraggled, coated with dust, but apparently unharmed. Conway was the first to speak.

'We're all here, then? All made it? Christ, I thought my time had come.'

Smithers wiped dust from his lips on the back of his torn coat sleeve. 'God saved us. I said a prayer when I heard that one coming and He must have heard me.'

'Pity He didn't turn the bloody thing round and send it back to where it came from,' Jackson retorted. 'The question is where do we go from here?'

Smithers was so far recovered as to reassume his air of authority. 'The bomb must have glanced off the outer wall, but the hole is blocked by a fall from higher up. Sooner or later the ARP boys will dig us out.'

Mr Drayton spoke with his usual quiet voice. 'Gentlemen, we must face facts. The raid is still going on and I think it must be an extremely heavy one. It is quite possible that no rescue bid will be made until daybreak – if not later. In the meanwhile it may have escaped your notice that the ventilation system is no longer working. Air may be coming down to us through the ruins, but I wouldn't count on it.'

Young Clark began to sob and Smithers patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, while trying to appear unconcerned.

'Don't worry, lad, we'll manage somehow. Having been spared from the blast, it is inconceivable that we should suffocate.'

'It might be inconceivable,' John Hughes commented dryly, 'but it's quite possible. Can't you stop that boy snivelling? Things are no worse for him than the rest of us.'

'I can't agree,' Mr Drayton said firmly, 'the situation is far worse for him. Most of us have ten years left at the very best, he might be good for another seventy. He has every right to mourn.'

'Damn that for a tale,' Jackson protested. 'I intend to hang on to whatever time is left to me. Smithers, I propose we start shifting some of that rubble and try to get through the side wall.'

'My very thought,' Smithers said heartily. 'If we get properly organized it might be possible to break through in no time. What do you say, Mr Drayton?'

'It will certainly keep us occupied and may be successful. But we'll have to move with extreme care, or the whole lot will be down on top of us.'

'Right,' Smithers rubbed his hands and simulated enthusiasm. 'Let's get cracking. Come on, Raymond, stir yourself, lad. Take my box of matches and light all of the hurricane lamps. Jackson, you have a shot at trying to raise someone on the telephone.'

'You've got some bloody hopes.'

'You never know. Electricity is still coming through, so the phone could still be working.'

Raymond, still emitting an occasional sob, knelt down and took six hurricane lamps from under the table, then arrayed them on the surface. He raised each glass globe, but due to his shaking hands, made such a job in lighting the first one, Hughes snatched the matches from him.

'Damnation hell, boy, let me take over. If they ever get you in the army, God help England. You must be Hitler's secret weapon.'

'I can't help it, Mr Hughes. I'm shaking all over.'

Mr Drayton came over and placed an arm round the boy's shoulders. 'Lay down, lad. You're suffering from shock. Wrap yourself in blankets and keep warm. There's enough of us here to do what can be done, without your help.'

He assisted the boy to climb into a lower bunk, then piled blankets over and around him, but looked up when Jackson's voice began to speak into the telephone.

'Hallo, this is the fire-watching post at Mansfield and Hedges... Listen will you... We are trapped in the basement ... For God's sake let me get a word in... Hallo... hallo...'

'What's the trouble?' Smithers asked. 'Have you got someone?'

Jackson put his hand over the mouthpiece. 'There's some

girl on the other end who keeps asking if there's anyone there. It seems I can hear her, but she can't hear me.'

Smithers grabbed the receiver from the man's hand and glued it to his ear. 'Hallo, this is the fire-watching post . . . Can you hear me?' He raised his voice to a shout. 'Can you hear me? Can . . .'

He slowly replaced the receiver on its hook and turned to face the room. 'It's no use. The line went dead. Never mind, we'll try again later. Let's get to work.'

They filed out into the passage, four carrying a lamp each, Smithers carrying two. On arriving at a position where the first step might be hidden under the rubble, they all placed their lanterns in a rough half circle and stared helplessly at the rugged pile that sloped up before them.

'Bloody hopeless,' Conway complained. 'Start mucking about with that lot and we'll have it crashing down on top of us.'

'None of that talk,' Smithers admonished. 'We must climb some way up and start clearing the stairs, then work our way outwards.'

'Be careful of live wiring,' Mr Drayton warned. 'And concealed holes.'

They began to clamber upwards, silent now, for the close atmosphere was tainted with the stench of burnt cordite, that reactivated the memory of the dreadful moments before the bomb struck. But everyone worked with a will and they were presently rewarded by seeing six steps cleared and the beginning of a small cavity in the ruined left wall. Jackson wiped sweat from his brow and expressed a pessimistic opinion.

'There's no hope of getting through that lot. The slightest movement will bring the ceiling and whatever is above it down on us.'

'But we must try,' Smithers pleaded. 'We can't give up now.'

Jackson shrugged. 'Please yourself. Don't say I haven't warned you.'

Each stone was removed with elaborate care, everyone jumping back when an ominous rumble announced that the great pile was moving, and made no objection when Mr

Drayton took up a lamp and eased himself into the cavity their work had created. Suddenly he jerked his head round and looked back over one shoulder, his eyes glittering through the film of dust that covered his face.

'There's a body in here.'

This information was received and digested in almost total silence, that was only broken when Smithers whispered: 'A body! Are you sure? I mean – how could there be?'

Mr Drayton backed out of the hole and handed the greengrocer his lantern. 'See for yourself.'

All four men crowded round the entrance and looked down upon that which had been uncovered. Projecting out from an agglomeration of bricks, broken masonry and plaster was a pair of blackened human legs.

'The upper part of the body is probably flattened,' Mr Drayton said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. 'Was crushed when the wall fell inwards.'

'But who the hell is it?' Jackson demanded. 'Someone standing by the wall outside when the bomb fell?'

Mr Drayton shook his head. 'Impossible. Such a person would have been blown to bits. Got the full blast. No – he must have been on the inside – on the stairs.'

Jackson pushed his way forward and stared down at the legs, his face screwed up into an expression of complete horror.

'What the hell are you talking about, man? There was only us on the stairs. There couldn't have been anyone else.'

'I would be extremely grateful if you can supply a more logical answer. The fact cannot be ignored that there is a body lying on our side of the wall and so far as I am concerned no way of explaining how it got there.'

Smithers bent over and after some hesitation touched one leg. He straightened up and creased his face into a wry grimace. 'Still warm. Can't have been dead for more than an hour. Maybe he fell from above.'

'The ceiling is still intact,' Mr Drayton pointed out, 'so he can't have come from that direction. Look, I don't think there's much point of going on with our fruitless task. I suggest we return to the rest room and give this matter our full consideration.'

'I'm all for packing it in,' Jackson said, 'but be damned if I can see what there's to consider. Some poor devil has been given his quitting papers and how he got there is by the way. I'm much more interested in how we're going to get out.'

'Nevertheless I think we must at least discuss the matter, if for no other reason than how a stranger could have got in here without our noticing.'

They went back to the lighted room where Mr Drayton peered down at Raymond and noticed with some relief that the boy was sleeping and was no longer shaking. He walked over to the table and sank down upon a chair, seemingly unaware of his companions' curious stares, but jerking his head round when Jackson said:

'I'm going to try that telephone again. Maybe whatever is wrong with it has been put right.'

Mr Drayton watched him with a strange intensity when he raised the receiver and began to speak into the mouthpiece.

'Hallo . . . hallo. Oh, damn!' He looked fearfully upwards when another explosion seemed to shake the building and a shimmering cloud of plaster fell from the ceiling. He replaced the receiver and raised his shoulders as a helpless gesture.

'Not a dicky bird. Guess the exchange has been hit. My God! They're going at it hammer and tongs out there.'

'Perhaps we're in the best place after all,' Smithers suggested. 'The air does not seem to have got any worse. I wonder if the water is still on in the washroom? I'd feel better if I could remove some of this muck.'

Neither he nor anyone else made a move to investigate and Hughes said dejectedly: 'I don't suppose so. I'm surprised we're still getting electricity.'

When Mr Drayton raised his voice every face took on a look of faint disgust as though he were about to relate an obscene story that no one wanted to hear, but common politeness demand they listen to.

'There's just one point I would like to clear up. Smithers, you were at the top of the stairs. Did you have the door open?'

Smithers shook his head. 'No. I had my hand on the handle, but the moment I heard the whistling shriek I let go and tumbled down the stairs with the rest of you.'

'That's what I thought. I suppose there's no way the door could have been blown open, then closed again before the wall collapsed? I was thinking that if someone had been sheltering in the upper passage they might have been sort of – well – blown in.'

'Most improbable,' Hughes objected. 'I mean if the door was opened by the blast, debris would have kept it open.'

'I have arrived at the stage,' Mr Drayton stated, 'where the possible must be discarded and the improbable considered. Having confirmed that the door could not have been opened, that there was no one on the stairs except ourselves, I am reluctantly – very reluctantly – drawn to only one conclusion.' He paused and switched his gaze from one face to another, then expelled his breath as a deep sigh before continuing. 'Gentlemen, I am going to ask you to consider the possibility that one of us is dead.'

The stunned silence lasted for a full minute, then was shattered by a united chorus of protests that flowed from gaping mouths and threatened to smother the tiny bud that was trying to unfold on the many-branched tree of knowledge. Mr Drayton closed his eyes and waited with weary impatience for the storm to subside. Presently there was only Jackson shouting his disbelief – his fear-tinted anger.

'I always thought you were potty, Drayton. A bloody crank out of touch with reality. But by God you've gone too far this time. Maybe all this has really sent you round the bend, but . . .'

'Then give me another, more sane explanation,' Mr Drayton interrupted. 'You can't – none of you can. Believe me I would have kept this – this diagnosis – to myself, but whoever it is that has left his earthly body back there on the stairs, must be made to realize his position. If we ignore what has happened he could well be trapped here for centuries.'

Smithers leaned over the table and spoke softly, rather as a parent might do to a backward child. 'Look, old man, we're all alive. Bit battered maybe, grimy, shocked and not a little frightened. But alive and breathing. Nothing ghostly about any of us. Now why don't you have a nice lie down? Take a

nap. Come morning a rescue squad will dig us out and we can laugh about this over a few jars.'

Mr Drayton forced himself into an upright position and when he spoke his voice had taken on a commanding tone, suggesting that his usual indifferent mien was only a carefully prepared mask. 'Now you listen to me and let no one interrupt until I have finished. What I believe has happened here is by no means unique. There are many well-authenticated cases of people who were afterwards proved to be dead at the time of their appearance, walking into their homes, places of employment, behaving exactly as they had during life. One man actually ate a three-course dinner, then went out to fetch some coal for the fire. He never returned, but his so-called ghost was often seen walking from the coal shed to the kitchen door.'

'I bet that story has improved with the telling,' Jackson sneered. 'I would want concrete proof before I believed a word of it.'

'There is a distinct possibility that you will have all the proof you need,' Mr Drayton retorted grimly. 'Consider the possible fact that it is you lying out there. That's the horrible part of the entire business – whoever it is doesn't know he's dead.'

Conway spoke with his accustomed slow tone of voice.

'Mr Drayton, just suppose you're right, how can you explain why a dead man should walk around with a normal body, when the one he has been born with is lying under several tons of bricks?'

'I will try to answer that as best I can. It is quite possible that we all have two bodies. One of dense material that we use in this life and the other that – for want of a better description – is comprised of higher vibrating atoms. Normally at death that speck of consciousness we call the soul is gradually eased into the secondary body and can ascend to the next plane of existence with no trouble at all. But when there is a violent death, shock can result in an unnatural phenomenon. The vibrations can be slowed down and, in rare cases, exactly match those of the defunct body.'

Conway shifted his giant form, then scratched his head.

'Hold on a moment. I can quite well see that if that is the case, the poor bleeder doesn't know he's dead. But how long does he carry on like this?'

'Usually for a short while,' Mr Drayton replied, 'but we are in unusual circumstances. Shut away from normal life, all of us in close proximinity with each other; all unconsciously feeding the undead – sorry that's the only word I can think of – with crude materialistic essence. I'd say if we can't settle this problem beforehand, devibrating won't start until someone from the outside enters this room.'

'What happens when – he devibrates!'

'The secondary body will become invisible, but will still be here. Become what is commonly called a ghost that can be seen by certain people when the conditions are favourable.'

Smithers, Hughes and Conway appeared to be toying with the possibility that this bizarre theorizing might have a basis in fact and were eyeing each other with growing suspicion; but Jackson still maintained his façade of angry disbelief and ejected shrill defiance.

'Balls . . . balderdash . . . all of you must be mad just to listen to him. When you're dead, you're dead . . . finished. Do you fully understand what he is saying? One of us is a bloody ghost! I mean honestly – think about that. You, Conway, all sixteen stone of you, according to Mr Drayton, could be a spook. Or you, Smithers. Far cry from your night-gowned, harp-playing, angel-winged Paradise. Eh? And what about young Raymond there? He's snoring like a pig, but I suppose you haven't ruled him out?'

'As a matter of fact,' Mr Drayton said quietly, 'at the moment you are my number one suspect.'

'I'm what!'

'That might be why you could hear the girl on the telephone, but she couldn't hear you. This is a local affair. Figuratively speaking you wouldn't exist outside of this shelter.'

Jackson clamped fingers to his right wrist, then gave vent to a cry of triumph. 'There, my pulse is beating thirteen to the dozen. I'm solid, warm, with blood streaming through my veins. If I was to hit you, you'd feel my fist. How the hell can I be dead?'

Mr Drayton sighed deeply and suddenly looked old and tired.

'I've explained that. Lowered vibrations would make your astral body temporarily an exact duplicate of your dead one. In any case it may not be you. The reason the exchange could not hear your voice might well be due to some technical fault. But until more convincing evidence turns up, you must be suspect.'

Jackson turned to Conway and tried to lay his hand on the big man's arm, but that worthy shrank back and shook his head wildly. 'No, if you don't mind. I mean if you're . . . what Mr Drayton says you might be . . . it might be catching or something.'

Suddenly Jackson was merely a terrified elderly man, his normally arrogant voice transformed into a hoarse, pleading whisper. 'I'm not dead. I'm not. If there's any truth in all this, it must be one of you. Smithers, you were higher up the stairs than the rest of us. I bet it's you. Come to think of it, you've been acting strangely since we came back down here. Admit it, man. You must know.'

Smithers began to tremble, his hands jerking from side to side on the table as though they had suddenly been endowed with some kind of independent life. His eyes dilated as he spoke. 'No . . . no . . . it can't be me. I did not lose consciousness for a single second. And I'm bruised all over. Wait a minute! Conway, you were up first. Full of energy and so far as I can see not a scratch on you. It must be you.'

Conway permitted himself a tiny smile and shook his head gently. 'No. If that's my body out there, then my legs must have shrunk. Mine are like tree trunks. Right, Mr Drayton?'

The calm man seated at the opposite side of the table nodded gravely. 'That point had not escaped me. Yes, you are in the clear. That reduces the number of suspects down to five. Some small progress, gentlemen.'

'With Jackson leading the field,' Conway commented almost cheerfully.

'Hold on!' Jackson waved a shaking forefinger. 'Those legs might be too small to be Conway's, but they are too large for mine.' He turned quickly in his chair and began to

roll up his trouser legs. 'Look, mine are thin and veined. That rules me out.'

'Don't agree,' Hughes said. 'Look about the same size to me. Anyway those out there are as black as hell. I wouldn't like to bet they aren't yours.'

'Mine are fattish,' Smithers said and was about to roll up his trouser legs, but for some reason decided against such an undignified action. 'As I remember those out there were most certainly on the thin side. Sweet Saviour, they can't be mine!'

'We could of course,' Conway who, due possibly to being the only one completely free from suspicion, was now inclined to be facetious, suggested, 'go back up the stairs and have a leg show. See which pair match.'

'Gentlemen,' Mr Drayton's quiet voice made them all turn and regard him with hope born from desperation, 'this kind of behaviour is getting us nowhere. Earlier I advised you to regard yourselves as already dead. Now I am suggesting you do just that – literally. Let us all say – I am the one. Accept that you are a dead man, still functioning among five live ones. Then – whoever it is – will be free.'

'Free to do what?' Hughes asked.

'Free to leave this place.'

'To go where? I mean to say, that's the rub. A jump into the unknown. Speaking for myself I would rather remain here.'

Mr Drayton frowned and appeared to be considering the advisability of answering this question, but a sudden interruption spared him the need to make a decision. Raymond Clark sat up, rubbed his eyes, then slid from the bunk. He walked unsteadily across the room and after seating himself, said in a tremulous voice:

'I feel funny. All whoosy. Any chance of a cup of tea?'

Jackson laughed shortly. 'You've got some hope. Can't think why you should feel funny. You've been sleeping your head off, while the rest of us have been sweating blood.'

'Sleep well, lad?' Mr Drayton asked.

Raymond scratched his head and looked very young and vulnerable. 'I guess so. But I had a strange dream. Somehow I had got out of here and was walking down Canbury Street.

Bombs were falling everywhere, but they didn't seem to bother me. It was as though I knew they couldn't hurt me. Then I came to the ARP post and went down the steps into the basement. There were several men seated round a table, including Mr Sinclair who is in charge of our office. But when I tried to explain what had happened here, he ignored me.'

Mr Drayton was watching the boy through narrowed eyes.

'You are suffering from shock and influenced by what had just taken place. Do you remember anything else?'

Raymond nodded. 'Yes, but it was so – well – mad, I don't know if I want to tell you about it.'

'It might help if you did,' Mr Drayton said softly. 'Sort of get it off your mind. Do you remember leaving the ARP post?'

'No. I suddenly wanted to be back here – with all of you. Then I was just outside looking at a great pile of rubble that completely hides the entrance. There was a man waiting.'

He stopped talking and wiped his dirt-grimed forehead; a strange flickering glitter momentarily turning his eyes into pools of fire, causing Mr Drayton to draw in his breath.

'Can you describe this man?' he asked gently.

'I think so, although he was like no one I have ever seen before. I had the impression he was dressed in black – a kind of long robe – but it was his face that demanded my full attention. So white it almost shone and the eyes were large, very dark and bright with – well – pity, intelligence, knowledge – I don't know. Perhaps all three. Then he said – only I don't think he actually said anything – I just heard the words in my head: "Don't go back in there. You belong in another place!" '

Jackson exclaimed: 'Oh, my God . . . my God!' and they all shrank back, staring at the boy with terror-bright eyes. Only Mr Drayton did not move or in any way display the slightest sign that he was perturbed, surprised or even relieved. He just asked: 'Doubtlessly you have no reason to believe that the experience is anything more than a particularly vivid dream?'

Raymond looked at him with some surprise. 'Of course not. What else could it be?'

'What indeed. I must tell you that there is a body half

buried under the ruins of the outer wall and there is no way its presence can be explained unless – it is one of ours.'

Raymond looked unhappily from one face to another, then for no particular reason began to examine his large hands. Mr Drayton noted that they were surprisingly clean. 'I don't understand – there is no one missing. Is this some kind of joke?'

'Not of our making, lad,' Jackson said harshly. 'But if you're the one, I'll laugh as heartily as the next man.'

Mr Drayton raised his voice and displayed more emotion than might have been thought possible from his normal demeanour.

'There's no need to jump to conclusions. He could merely have experienced a nightmare, the result of our earlier conversation and the ensuing experience. Remember, we were discussing death when the siren sounded. Whoever walks from this place alive, may well have some very vivid dreams.'

Smithers shook his head violently from side to side, while saliva dribbled down over his lower lips and formed two little rivulets on either side of his chin. He thumped the table with clenched fists.

'Either someone is dead or you're mad, Drayton. And who else could it be but sinful youth that neither heaven nor hell will accept?' He raised a shaking forefinger and pointed it at the terrified youth. 'Look at him! He belongs to the dead. If there's any doubt – then put paid to him right here and now.'

Mr Drayton folded his arms and assumed a scornful smile, but the other three men stared uncomprehendingly at Smithers, then switched their gaze to Raymond. John Hughes frowned and said:

'There's no need for any of us to go overboard. I can't believe you mean that. Hell – none of us here are murderers.'

'Murder! Who's talking about murder? You can't murder anyone who is already dead. Only help him on his way.'

'And suppose he's not the one?' Mr Drayton asked. 'It's by no means certain.'

'You heard him. Did you say people have been seen

walking around while their bodies slept? Well, his soul must have been on the loose while his astral body slept. It stands to reason.'

'This damned business is getting madder by the second,' Hughes protested.

Conway got up and flexed his great muscles, an action that made Raymond shrink back and emit a startled cry. 'We'll settle this matter once and for all. Do what should have been done in the first place. Dig that damned body out and try to find out who it belongs to. There must be something that will identify it. Clothing, size, some distinguishing mark. Who'll give me a hand?'

'But . . . but it's flattened from the waist up,' Hughes protested. 'And if anyone starts mucking about with that rubble, the lot will come down.'

'I'd rather be flattened myself than take much more of this. When I hear a holy Moses like Smithers talk about murder, it's about time something positive was done. Damnation hell, we'll all be raving mad before they dig us out if this goes on.'

'Count me in,' Hughes said. 'I don't like it, but I agree, we must know.'

'And I'll come along as well.' Mr Drayton rose slowly to his feet. 'Let me say this – if it turns out to belong to a stranger, no one will be more relieved than me.'

'I'm staying here,' Smithers stated. 'I know who it is and don't intend to risk my neck in proving the obvious.'

'That being the case,' Mr Drayton said softly, 'Raymond had better come along with us. Smithers, take it easy, man. Try to get some sleep.'

Again there was a violent shaking of the head, a pounding of fists on the table, but now the voice had acquired a shrill tone. 'Not sleep! Sleep is a thief that opens locked doors and lets loose the hounds of hell. I'll never sleep again.'

Mr Drayton ignored the outburst and automatically took charge of the operation. 'We'll need something to prop up the hole as we work inwards. I think the table will be useful, also the doors of this room and the latrnes. Conway, you are the strongest here, how about dismantling them? You can use the axe from the fire-fighting apparatus.'

The big man nodded. 'Fine. Come to think of it there's several spare shovels in the store cupboard. Can the rest of you arrange the lamps on the stairs, so we can see what we're doing?'

With the prospect of having something to do, a kind of artificial gaiety sprang into being between the four men and the boy. The table was carried into the passage, where Conway soon reduced it to several stout planks, which in turn were transported up the stairs and piled close to the cavity. But when the lamps had been arranged in such a way as to illuminate the interior, every voice seemed incapable of speaking above a whisper, and a glaze of fear dulled every eye.

'Our first job,' Mr Drayton instructed, 'is to shore up the opening, then we'll set about enlarging it.'

Conway did most of the work and even he was careful not to look downwards, but concentrated his full attention on the upper half of the cavity, maintaining that it was here that the danger lay. Presently table and door planks had transformed the hole into the likeness of a backless cupboard and it was reasonably safe to shift some of the larger stones; even remove the increasing pile of dust that covered two black, unidentified legs, that no one wanted to see.

Mr Drayton pushed Conway gently to one side and taking up a lamp sank to his knees. He crawled forward, trying to ignore the stench of cordite, dust and corruption, his eyes alert for the slightest sign that would solve the enigma. He called back over one shoulder. 'There's a sponge in the washroom and some water in one of the basins. Soak it well and bring it to me here. Yes, and a dry towel if you can find such a thing.'

While waiting for these requirements, Mr Drayton began to brush dust away from the grisly remains, while toying with the grim possibility that they might be his own. When Hughes handed him a sopping sponge and a torn-off length of a roller towel, he washed one leg, only to discover it made little difference to the colour. He could only assume that an instant and violent death had resulted in the blood congealing under the skin. There were also signs of

decomposition: an unpleasant sagging of the flesh, a sheen of moisture that no amount of rubbing could erase, plus the by now stomach-heaving stench.

He sighed and stood up. 'There's no help for it, we'll have to shift some more of that stuff and hope to hell there's some recognizable clothing – or something. But I warn you – it'll be a pretty grim job.'

No one answered or displayed any marked enthusiasm to render assistance, and it was not until Mr Drayton had all but crushed his foot with a mishandled stone that Conway muttered: 'Here, let me,' and squeezed his way into the hole. He backed out with a large lump of masonry clasped to his chest, then having flung this down the steps, set to with a shovel, enlarging the opening with complete disregard for his own safety. He came out for the last time and stood looking down at Mr Drayton.

'I've done all I'm going to do,' he said harshly. 'There's nothing wrong with my muscles, but my stomach's not all that strong.'

John Hughes, with more courage than wisdom, poked his head into the entrance, then quickly withdrew it and gave the impression he would be violently sick if given the slightest encouragement. Jackson permitted himself one quick glance, before ejaculating: 'Oh no . . . no . . . no. That's enough for me. I want nothing to do with this.'

'But it might be you,' Mr Drayton pointed out.

'That's bloody obscene. I refuse to believe that – that mess – has anything to do with me.'

Raymond Clark remained flattened against the far wall and did not say anything.

'But someone has to go in there and sort through the bits and pieces,' Mr Drayton said brutally. 'There's got to be a clue. Flesh and bones can be crushed, clothes soaked with blood, but some personal effects must be still reasonably intact. A ring, wallet, letters. We are standing a few yards away from the solution of a problem that must be unique. Conway, you started this investigation – why not complete it?'

The big man shook his head. 'No way. I've done the donkey work, now let someone else solve the puzzle. You,

Mr Drayton – you're the strongest man here. I'm not talking about muscles, but whatever it is that keeps us going. There's iron in you and fire that's kept well damped down. I doubt if it's you in there, because you'd know if you were dead. You're ready for it, probably eager to be on your way. So get stuck in, Mr Drayton – up to your flaming elbows.'

Mr Drayton nodded slowly as though he had already solved a problem that had been bothering him for some time, then he spoke quietly, pronouncing each word with cold precision.

'Very well, I will do what must be done, trusting I have the strength you so kindly attribute to me. But every one of you must be prepared. Accept my word that the man I will name is the one. Know for an indisputable fact that *you* are dead and have no right to be in this place. Should – contrary to your flattering opinion, Conway – the body be mine, I will not linger. That much I can promise. I will need a shovel and two lanterns.'

He went into the opening, placed a lamp on either side, then began to scrape dust and embedded lumps of plaster from the flattened torso. It was a dreadful sight. Splintered bone protruded from a congealed mass of blood and mangled flesh; only the legs from thigh-top downwards remained intact. Mr Drayton pushed the tip of his shovel up over the faintly recognizable shape of the spinal column, raising tiny shreds of blood-soaked clothing that defied recognition. Then he drove the shovel down into the loose rubble on the left side and levered the corpse up and over on to one side, thereby exposing what lay beneath. A soggy bundle that measured some four inches wide by six long. Mr Drayton took out his pocket handkerchief and after wrapping it round his right hand, reached down and picked up that which had been uncovered. He turned back the stained leather cover and saw the title page, that although blood-soaked on three sides, was all but unmarked in the centre.

He read the bold black letters with ease, then turned his attention to the inscription that had been written by hand with blue ink. He sighed deeply and was about to back out on to the stairs, when a rumbling roar followed by an

avalanche of falling bricks covered the corpse completely and uncovered another portion of the ruined wall.

'You all right?' Conway asked, after he had pulled Mr Drayton out of the dust-filled hole. 'When we heard that crash, we thought you'd had it.'

'I'm all right,' Mr Drayton replied. 'The fall was – way back. I guess the wooden props saved me.'

Jackson shook his head with fearful impatience and asked the vital question. 'What did you find? Do you know who it is?'

'I know whose body lies in there. Under it – I found this.' Mr Drayton held out the small volume that he still gripped in his handkerchief-wrapped hand. 'It is a pocket edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*. On the inside of the front cover is inscribed – To Harold Smithers from his good friend Arthur Brown.'

For a while they all appeared to be locked in a dimension of frozen time, as though no one wanted to advance into the next second where truth was waiting with an unveiled face. Then the voice of Smithers shattered the silence; came roaring up from the room below, echoing along the endless corridors of eternity.

'In the name of God and all of his angels, what have you found? Do you know who it is?'

Jackson spun round and seemed on the point of doing a little dance of joy as he shouted back: 'It's you, Smithers. You're dead, man. DEAD . . . DEAD . . . DEAD. And oh most merciful God, I'm alive!'

The long-drawn-out scream came shuddering across time and space, made those that remained cover their ears, go down on trembling knees and pray for the blessed gift of silence. The scream sank down to a bubbling moan, that gradually emerged into babbled words: 'Oh, may I be forgiven . . . I did not . . . did . . . not . . . did not . . . believe . . .!'

Four men and a boy crept down the steps and advanced very slowly towards the room where the dead pleaded for clemency, while from behind them, high up, came the sound of a wielded pick-axe. The wailing voice died when the first man – Jackson – passed through the open doorway: was

instantly smothered by the mists of oblivion, to exist only in the realms of deceptive memory. Jackson looked in at the bunks, at the scattered chairs, then voiced his horrified astonishment.

'He's not here! Gone!'

'That was to be expected,' Mr Drayton observed quietly. 'He at last knew and accepted. There was no way he could remain after that. Let us hope he went in the right direction.'

Hughes spoke in a hushed tone: 'Maybe as time passes we'll try to believe that none of this happened. Pretend we were all suffering from shock, illusions – and perhaps that will be for the best. Madness is born from knowledge like this. But I for one will treasure life as never before. Every breath I take will be an undeserved bonus, every sunrise a precious revelation. There may be a paradise waiting for us – but let me enjoy this hell for as long as I can.'

'Too high-flown for me,' Jackson said, 'but I agree with the sentiment. Drayton, I'm not sure if I ever want to see your face again. It will probably stop me sleeping at nights.'

Mr Drayton did not answer, but stood perfectly still, staring intently at the floor.

Conway patted Raymond Clark on the shoulder. 'Well, lad, it's all over. Sounds as if they're digging away up there. That means you'll soon be home. Getting yourself wrapped round powdered egg and tinned bacon. How'd you feel about that?'

Raymond wiped his eyes on the back of his hand.

'Fine, I guess. But are you sure it's all over? I still feel funny.'

'Bound to. We all feel funny. Wonder we're not all crawling on all fours. You must forget all about this. Take Mr Hughes's advice – pretend none of it happened.'

The sound of digging was now much louder and was soon intermingling with the crash of falling rubble, while a cloud of dust drifted along the passage and in through the doorway. Jackson expressed his satisfaction.

'Ten minutes or less should find them down here. I bet they'll be surprised to find any of us alive. I suppose there's no point in us giving them a hand?'

Mr Drayton spoke for the second time since entering the

room. He raised his head and switched his sad gaze from face to face. 'I fear there's no point at all.'

'You mean we'll be more hindrance than help?' Hughes suggested.

'No. I do not mean that. Gentlemen, I have to tell you . . .' He stopped and took a deep breath before continuing. 'When I was in the hole, you may remember there was a fall of rubble. It uncovered another section of the wall. It also revealed four more bodies.'

Hughes frowned and repeated: 'Four more bodies!' and Conway drew nearer to the boy as though to protect him from a new danger. Only Jackson moved forward until he was within a few inches of the sad-faced man and stared up into his eyes.

'So, there are four more bodies! There's been a damned great air raid and there must be quite a few bodies lying around.'

'Please,' Mr Drayton pleaded, 'don't make me spell it out. You know . . .'

Jackson clamped hands over his ears and shouted: 'I'm not going to listen. You're stark raving mad. We've humoured you over Smithers, but this is too much.'

Hughes said: 'I don't understand. What in God's name are you talking about?'

'He's suggesting,' Jackson turned and spat the words out, 'that we've been playing the wrong game. Not – Who is the Ghost? But – Who is the Live One? And the answer is himself. Right, Drayton?'

'Never mind me,' Mr Drayton pleaded, 'just believe. Accept your condition and go. Go . . . go before they break through. Don't get trapped down here and be forced to haunt this place for centuries.'

A resounding crash came from the end of the passage and a voice could be heard exclaiming: 'Not much hope of finding anyone alive, Harry. The bloody wall must have crashed down on all of 'em.'

'I was saved by a fluke,' Mr Drayton explained. 'You all fell on top of me, then the blast lifted you off again. Afterwards I wanted to forget.'

Raymond Clark cried out and pointed to the open

doorway. 'That man . . . the one in my dream, he's out there . . . beckoning. Please don't make me go. Please . . .'

Scarcely had he uttered the last word when the overhead light began to flicker, then gradually dimmed down to a dull red glow, before dying completely. Mr Drayton stood in total darkness and tried to detect other sounds than those which came from the top of the stairs, but there was only the wild beating of his heart, the shuffle of his feet when he moved towards the doorway.

A bright circle of light came dancing down the steps and behind it a line of dim figures that descended out of the surrounding darkness. More torches were switched on when Mr Drayton was spotted standing in the doorway and a disembodied voice asked:

'You the only one left alive, mate?'

'I think so,' he replied with a tremulous voice. 'Merciful God – I think so.'

THE HORRORS OF SLEEP

EMILY BRONTË

Sleep brings no joy to me,
  Remembrance never dies,
My soul is given to mystery,
  And lives in sighs.

Sleep brings no rest to me;
  The shadows of the dead
My wakening eyes may never see
  Surround my bed.

Sleep brings no hope to me,
  In soundest sleep they come,
And with their doleful imag'ry
  Deepen the gloom.

Sleep brings no strength to me,
  No power renewed to brave;
I only sail a wilder sea,
  A darker wave.

Sleep brings no friend to me
  To soothe and aid to bear;
They all gaze on, how scornfully,
  And I despair.

Sleep brings no wish to fret
  My harassed heart beneath;
My only wish is to forget
  In endless sleep of death.

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