



Fontana

# THE 9TH FONTANA BOOK OF GREAT GHOST STORIES

Tales from 'beyond the veil' by Edith Wharton, Rudyard Kipling,  
Judith Merrill and others - selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes



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

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*and many others*

The Ninth Fontana Book of Great

# Ghost Stories

*Selected by R. Chetwynd-Hayes*



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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	6
<i>Introduction</i>	7
Death Cannot Wither <i>Judith Merrill with Algis Budrys</i>	11
The Lady's Maid's Bell <i>Edith Wharton</i>	32
Keeping His Promise <i>Algernon Blackwood</i>	52
The Coat <i>A. E. D. Smith</i>	66
The Four-Fifteen Express <i>Amelia B. Edwards</i>	73
Sally <i>Patrick Davis</i>	98
The Song in the House <i>Ann Bridge</i>	116
The Sweeper <i>'Ex-Private X'</i>	134
The Glove <i>Roger Hicks</i>	150
The Return of Imray <i>Rudyard Kipling</i>	161
The Liberated Tiger <i>R. Chetwynd-Hayes</i>	172

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## INTRODUCTION

I wish I could say truthfully that I had seen a ghost.

I have read about reputedly haunted houses, listened to friends who knew someone who had experienced some kind of psychic phenomena, but as a professional horror-monger I really am ashamed to say that the dim world of the here-after has, to date, given me the go-by.

This, I feel, is nothing short of a tragedy, because I would dearly like proof that some form of life exists beyond the grave. After all is said and done, one is dead longer than one is alive. Not that a ghost proves anything, one way or another. 'Time image', 'extension of personality', 'atmosphere', and 'fear-flamed imagination' – all can be responsible for the phenomena known as ghosts; and I have yet to meet anyone who has held an intelligent conversation with an apparition.

Of course, there may be people who think they have, and to those fortunate few doubt can no longer exist. The opinions of down-to-earth sceptics are of no importance; they, the lucky few, know, and knowledge is an asset which rises above belief, replaces mere faith and slaughters doubt.

That is why I have opened this anthology with *Death Cannot Wither* by Judith Merrill. Edna Colby not only saw her dead husband, she talked to him, touched him, and apparently even made love with him. The reader may have some doubts as to whether the entire business takes place in her mind, but to Edna he was as real as Monday morning.

*The Lady's Maid's Bell* by Edith Wharton has, on the other hand, a genuine old-fashioned ghost. She – the former lady's maid – is seen by more than one person and haunts for a good reason. Not for her the aimless wandering of dark corridors, plus the odd shriek, which appears to be the usual practice of her kind. This really is a blood-curdler and I recommend it for your attention.

*Keeping His Promise*, by that true master of the macabre, Algernon Blackwood, is another sleep murderer – with a difference. The ghost is seen by only one man, but its snores

are heard by two. Is this a shared delusion, or is Field really keeping his promise?

*The Coat* by A. E. D. Smith is reputed to be based on an actual dream, and a fine old nightmare it must have been. This is the story of a fear-ghost and none the less real for that. If you must go on cycling holidays, I can only advise you to keep away from empty houses and discarded coats.

*The Four-Fifteen Express* by Amelia B. Edwards undoubtedly deals with a time-ghost. Here we have an apparently flesh-and-blood man, entering a train carriage and conducting a conversation about events which belong to the past. There would be nothing unusual about this, were it not for the fact . . . But I have no intention of spoiling your fun. Read the story.

*Sally* by Patrick Davis is a beautiful piece of work. The artist is one of those fortunate people I mentioned earlier; he knows he can see his lovely ghost, even though everyone else is blind. The author has portrayed the wild Devonshire coast brilliantly and I am very pleased to include *Sally* in this collection.

*The Song in the House* by Ann Bridge has a conventional ghost: a wraith who has been stranded on the beach of time. I believe many occupants of old country houses must have had similar experiences to the one depicted in this story, and perhaps one day there will be an explanation for them. In the meantime, a ghost from the distant past is still a chilling prospect.

*The Sweeper* by Ex-Private X is a marvellous piece of macabre. I can think of nothing more terrifying than a ghost who periodically sweeps the garden path, and on each visit comes a little nearer the house . . .

*The Glove* by Roger Hicks takes place in the frozen wastes of Antarctica, and hence is a chilling tale in more senses than one. It has a neat little twist at the end.

*The Return of Imray* by Rudyard Kipling is a must for any collection of ghost stories and I can only wonder that it has never been used before in this type of anthology. What with the ghost that tramps around the bungalow at night, the dog that just will not come indoors after sunset (wise animal) and snakes over the ceiling, I can only conclude that those gentlemen in the India Service were men of iron.

My own contribution, *The Liberated Tiger*, was, as indeed

are all my stories, written blind. In other words, I took up my ballpoint pen and began to write. I had no idea how it would end until the last page but one. I hope you like it.

A last word. If anyone has a resident ghost: a real, dyed-in-the-wool apparition that can be guaranteed to put in an appearance, please let me know. As I have said, I'd dearly like to meet one.

*R. Chetwynd-Hayes*



## DEATH CANNOT WITHER

JUDITH MERRIL WITH ALGIS BUDRYS

Edna coldly awoke an hour after dawn, and after no more than three hours' fitful sleep. In peignoir and mules she groped to the window, and looked out at her Dutchess County farm – hers and Jack's, she reminded herself dutifully – at orchard and field touched by a winter morning's first light. Just barely winter by the calendar, but winter . . . and Jack's bed beside her own was still as smooth, as empty, as when she'd made it up the day before.

Separated by an authentic hand-tied rag rug and an Early American maple night-table, the two beds were grey in the light. She stared out of the window at the apple trees, at the twisted barren-bare trunks, and whispered, 'Like my own heart.' She repeated the phrase, tasting each syllable, listening to the sound of a woman bereft. Then she went downstairs, a pink ribbon adding a wistful note to her handsomely cut hair.

She stood before the gleaming stove in the kitchen, making coffee, her eyes unseeing on the golden knotty-pine panelling of the walls. She was thinking over how to phrase her excuses to the farm help when they came to get Jack's instructions for the day. The coffee boiled over before she could decide on the proper wording. She pinched her lips and wiped the stove.

'He might at least have called,' she whispered sharply. 'The other times, he's at least tried to cover up.' She realised suddenly that each of those only suspected other times had this morning become a certainty too long ignored. 'I'm losing him,' she thought with great intensity; then, in jealous anger: 'I've lost him!' And then, finally, in purest rage, she cried out: 'No!'

The kitchen door slammed loudly. 'Coffee!' Jack's hearty voice cried out on a wave of cold sharp air. 'Baby, that smells good.'

Before she could react, Jack had crossed the room, embraced her warmly from one side – avoiding the coffee pot in her other hand – and murmured fondly: 'Happy anniversary, sweetheart!'

It was, indeed, eight years to the day since the cocktail party at which Edna Arkwright, Assistant Buyer in Ladies' Wear, had met Jack Colby, who was something-or-other on Madison Avenue. She at the age of thirty-five, chic if not specially pretty, trim-figured with the aid of a remarkable new bra, and he of roughly the same age (actually a trifle younger), amiable, friendly, personable in a downy sort of way, and pretty much at loose ends.

Pretty much at loose ends, and perfectly willing to have someone gather them up for him, if that someone showed the slightest tact in the gathering. He seemed to be completely unaware of what perfect raw material he was; content to drift, to meander pleasantly along – in short, to waste himself instead of assuming a settled, solid role in life of the sort for which his background obviously fitted him.

He had left his father's apple-country-squiredom at the usual time of youth to become an officer in either the Army or the Air Force – perhaps they had been one and the same thing at the time; Edna could not get it quite straight – and, after the war, had simply accepted a position in a distant relative's firm.

That was the thing – the thing about him that both attracted and angered Edna Arkwright, with her sense of greater things to be done with one's life, with her code of aspirations that had kept her firmly undistracted, steadfast in pursuit of her destiny. She conveyed to Jack, gradually but unflaggingly, that there was more in him than could ever be realised by a life of effortless progressions towards old age. What was he *doing* with his life, with himself? To this, of course, Jack had no ready answer.

It was plain to Edna that Jack Colby was not truly at home in the city; however much he might think he liked it, he was growing soft underneath and certainly drinking more than he should. In her complete sincerity of purpose, she saw in his eyes a hint of something that was, if not lost, then misplaced; she taught him to understand that she, of all people, could best remind him where he'd left it.

They were married five months and a few days after the cocktail party and, Jack's father having died and left him everything, went straight home to the ancestral manse in Dutchess County. There they lived comfortably and suitably, once Edna had wiped out the frowsty traces of Mr Colby,

Senior's, last years of bachelor living. There was, of course, a great deal of continuing work for Edna to do, a gradual transformation of both the house and the remainder of the property into a condition appropriate to genteel country living, as distinct from the functional but often starkly unpainted working farm she had found. For Jack, as a sort of gradually diminishing concession to his old habits, there were infrequent trips into the city to tend to the Colby investments and the business requirements of modern fructiculture. Except that, though all of Edna's other concerns prospered as if to prove the rightness of her planning, Jack's trips into town *did* not diminish as they ought to have. Despite her best efforts, some elusively stubborn streak in him would not relinquish its old ways, even after the passage of eight years.

And now, still circled by his mackinaw-sleeved arm, her neck prickled by the short brown beard he had at her behest grown since their marriage, she realised she had completely forgotten what day it was. Eight years – not long enough, it seemed, and yet perhaps already too long – and Jack had been out since dawn, it developed, doing something special for the occasion. He wanted her to come out with him after breakfast. Something to show her. A surprise . . .

But he didn't immediately say where he'd been till dawn. As if he hadn't even seen the necessity to make up a good story beforehand, and needed time to extemporise one now.

Over breakfast, he told her at last about the late poker game in the city, and losing track of time . . . deciding not to phone and wake her up . . . the slow milk train . . . getting home late, knowing he'd have to be up early . . . napping downstairs on the living-room couch so as not to bother her . . . up early, and out . . .

She listened to him with careful gravity, then touched her lips to his forehead and went upstairs to dress.

She dressed in a cold fury, putting on walking shoes and a bright red jacket – it was hunting season – and realised only then that she had forgotten even to order anything special for today's dinner. Well, the woods were full of rabbits. She knew a delightful recipe for rabbit, and it would add something if they shot a couple for themselves.

It was inexcusable to have forgotten, she thought in a sort of additional annoyance; she had always managed things so perfectly. The restoring and remodelling of the old house; the

garden club and prize flower growing; urging Jack to write little pieces for the *Farm Journal*; arranging for Jack to become an advisor on farming and animal husbandry for the local 4-H club; having the house eventually selected for photographing by a national magazine – these gradual shapings of a hundred details towards an enduring whole of gracious living, firmly rooted in all the most admirable attitudes and ideals.

But: the bottle in the toolshed, though they'd agreed with utmost reason that alcohol, for some people, was a disease.

But: the late homecomings, and the excuses, the glib and at first believable phone calls from the city . . . and now not even a phone call.

She hadn't allowed for this continuing goatishness in him. Could it be that her careful management of things was going to be overcome by the very person who was intended to crown them all? Was the intended ideal husband suddenly going to destroy the intended perfection of her life's work as the ideal wife?

Edna Colby saw herself on the brink of disaster, all because Jack, for all his excellent potential, simply did not realise what a difficult thing she was trying to do – how few women had the singleness of purpose successfully to take a man and mould him into everything he should be, and to provide the proper mode of life to set him off, like a perfect work of art in a perfect frame.

There had been a lingering scent of alien perfume in Jack Colby's beard. Edna Colby clenched her fists. 'Oh, no,' she whispered. 'Oh, no, you're not going to lose me now, Jack Colby.' And then she turned and brightly went downstairs to look at Jack's surprise.

She found him waiting for her in the yard, gunning the motor of the jeep, a look of arch anticipation on his face. Obviously, he thought he'd gotten away with it again. Obviously, he expected that even if she were somehow suspicious, a little extra devotion on his part would smooth everything over.

She smiled, the perfect picture of the country matron, and got in beside him, sweeping her hands under the backs of her thighs to straighten her skirt. She pushed his hand away impatiently, her irritation breaking through long enough to snap: 'Act your age, Jack!'

The little-boy playfulness flickered in his eyes, and for a moment she saw something else there.

'Really, Jack, didn't you get enough of that in the Air Corps?'

'It was the Army Air Force,' Jack said, and put the jeep in gear. After a moment, he forced a rueful smile. By the time they were out of the neatly tended yard, in the centre of the trim, freshly painted outbuildings, she was a country gentlewoman again, and Jack was to all intents and outward purposes her devoted husband.

A two-mile jeep ride through the woods, and another half-mile's walking brought them in sight of a stand of fine young hemlocks. For three years, Jack had been promising her a hedge to shut off the pig-pens from the new sundeck view. Now he wanted only her approval of the trees before he started digging them out to transplant.

A pitchfork and spade, a pile of burlap, and a small hand-truck to take the young trees out to the road were already on the spot. Jack had his lunch – and a hidden pocket flask – along. He figured it would take him till mid-afternoon. Young Harold, the grown son of the farm foreman, already had instructions to get the trenches dug at the new location and come after Jack with the jeep when he was done.

The trees were perfect. Edna said as much with delight even while she smelled again that musky trace of foreign scent in his beard. Later, when he bent over to pick up the rabbits he'd shot for the anniversary stew, she saw a smudge of lipstick on his neck. She had worn none herself that morning. The spot was covered by his jacket collar when she looked for it again. She smiled when he turned to wave goodbye. Her smile, she thought idly as she drove the jeep homewards to cook the special dinner, had been exactly right. He could never have guessed she was lost in contemplation of ways to make him behave from now on.

At four that afternoon, Edna took a spicy-smelling deep-dish pie out of the oven, checked the setting of the small table in front of the fireplace, and started upstairs to bathe and dress. That was when Young Harold came to tell her he'd been looking in the woods for an hour or more, and found no sign of Mr Colby – nor any trace of work done on the trees. He had brought back with him the spade and pitchfork, the stack of burlap, and – though he did not

tell her that at the time – Mr Colby's red hunting cap.

'He must have walked down into town for some reason,' Edna said as casually as she could, remembering the pocket flask. 'I guess he'll phone if . . . maybe you'd better go down to the village and look around. He might have *tried* to phone . . .'

Harold went out, and Edna went upstairs. By the time she was bathed and dressed, and Harold had returned again alone, she was furious. Jack had never done anything quite *this* gauche before.

A half-hour later she was getting worried. By six o'clock she was sick with fear, and at six-fifteen, she phoned for the police. By seven o'clock, in spite of heavily falling snow, the woods were swarming with volunteer firemen, state troopers, and as many of the older teenage boys as could get loose to join the hunt. Edna answered the troopers' questions with as much presence of mind as she could summon. She told them what he had worn, and that she had brought the gun back herself. Young Harold, she said, had brought back the other equipment. She had gone out with Mr Colby about half-past eight. It might have taken half an hour to reach the site . . . probably less. They had selected the trees to move, had shot two rabbits, and walked up to a ridge with a favourite view before she left. She wasn't sure just what time she got back home; it was before noon. Mr Colby had expected Young Harold to show up by mid-afternoon. And that was all she could think of that might help. Perhaps Young Harold could add something.

They had already talked with him. At midnight, they gave up searching until dawn. Next day, descriptions went out on police wires through the state, and across the country. By the end of the second day, the obvious assumption was already accepted, though the search continued: one more unfortunate hunting accident, with the body somehow hastily disposed of.

There was talk of dragging the old quarry pool, but the township selectmen frowned, pointing out the considerable distance between the hemlock stand and the quarry. They nodded their heads towards the over-night snow thick on the ground, and said: 'Likely it'll turn up, somewheres, come spring thaw.'

For Edna, on the week before Christmas, there was shock, and grief shading into sincere loneliness. But it was on the day before Christmas that she broke down, alone in the old house

where she had planned the old-fashioned Christmas Eve dinner . . . the roast goose, the pudding, the log in the fireplace.

She fled to New York, to spend Christmas at a hotel. Right after New Year she returned just long enough to engage a caretaking couple, and to promote Big Harold, Mr Vanderhardt, Sr., to farm manager. Then she packed the few things from the old house she had to have – she could hardly bear to take even necessities with her – and went back to the city. It seemed to her that her own life was as good as finished. How could she ever hope to start, all over again, towards that at best difficult goal of complete happiness?

Still, she had to do something to keep occupied.

Ladies' Wear had no charms for her. She could still remember, quite clearly now that she had to think of it, the tearful interview with Selden's supervisor of personnel when she had, for the second time, been passed over when there had been an opening for a full-fledged buyer.

'Look, honey,' the no-nonsense, severely tailored executive had said, impregnable behind her desk. 'You're not going to stay with us forever.'

'Oh, but I *am*, I *am*!' Edna had insisted.

'No, you're not. You're not the type. You got all your ideas of what you want out of life in the wrong places, for us. You think Paradise is going to have its floor plan reproduced in *Better Homes and Gardens* any day now. One of these days you're going to run across some poor defenceless guy whose main attraction is he can give you that kind of life. When that happens, you'll be *phfft*, out of here so fast you'll break the door down. We've got to promote the people who're going to stay with us.'

The memory of that interview was sharp enough so that Edna's first thought of going back was her last.

She settled, finally, on a specialty florist's shop. Somehow, it seemed a logical compromise between her status as a business-woman and the all-too-brief years of her recent past.

Like everything else to which she applied her diligent concern, Edna's shop flourished. She purchased the brownstone building in which it stood, and, allowing for business expansion to the second floor, began remodelling the upper stories as a town house. After the farm, she found a hotel apartment confining.

In the little spare time that remained, she betook herself

dutifully, on the advice of friends and doctors, to parties and concerts and dinner engagements; she was introduced to a wide assortment of suitably eligible gentlemen, and was cynically pleased to discover that as a wealthy widow of forty-two she was patently more attractive to the male species than she had been as a bachelor girl of ten years less. It all confirmed her suspicion that there were two main classes of men; those who were after her money, and those who were after Something Else.

Edna Arkwright had been seduced, once, under a lying promise of marriage, by a plausible gentleman with the wit to see that she could be seduced in no other way. The widowed Edna Colby remembered too well the anguish, the hideous, weeks-long fear afterwards that she might be That Way. She had no compensating memory of pleasure – the gentleman had been plausible, but he had done nothing to dispel the virgin impression that the girls who did It over-rated It in a spiteful effort to make their more strong-minded sisters feel jealous. And as for the rewards of motherhood, didn't she have her own mother's reiterated testimony, day after day through the years? Was the honour of living in the stink of diapers supposed to compensate for the horror of giving birth . . . for the hours on the agonising rack, for the whole dirty, humiliating mess that was, in fact, a blind animal response to the indiscriminate need of the brute organism indiscriminately to reproduce itself?

'Jack,' she had said firmly, and more than once, 'that sort of thing may be all right for some people. But you and I are presumably *civilised*.'

There had been times, of course, when some of the bounds of civilisation had had to give way. But Edna had always seen to it that even in those moments, it was clearly understood that a certain gentility must be preserved, as it was in everything else. Civilised people could hardly be blamed for the environment of their childhood – there was, indeed, a certain degree of merit in having risen from, for example, a two-room cold water flat on the Lower West Side to a charmingly restored farmhouse in Dutchess County – but it was certainly unthinkable to slip back into those discarded ways once they had been overcome.

So Edna spared very little time on gentlemen who did not remain impersonally friendly. She devoted herself to her shop

and her new house with such energy that the one was a going concern and the other a completed work of the decorators' art in very short order. It was only then, with her social habits fixed and her workload diminishing, that Edna Colby had time on her hands.

She was not sure she liked that state of affairs. There were mysterious stirrings somewhere deep within her, and these speedily became a gnawing restlessness that no amount of late reading, exercise, or careful avoidance of afternoon coffee could keep from turning into a chronic insomnia.

There was something missing . . . something . . .

She turned and tossed on her bed at night until dawn came into the windows of her pink bedroom, and when it came it reminded her of Jack. Eventually, she found herself ridden with the notion that Jack was, somewhere, somehow, roisteringly alive.

It was a ridiculous obsession, she knew. But she could not allay it. She understood it to be a symptom of some private turmoil that was shut off from her conscious mind, and it frightened her.

Then spring came. The shop showed a disconcerting tendency to run itself. Daffodils and the first forsythia reminded her of tulip bulbs she wanted to get from the farm. She could have them sent down, of course. . . .

But she wondered if anyone had trimmed the lilac. And the next thought – of apple blossoms – convinced her that she *did* want some of the dining-room pieces from the big house for the duplex. So it came about that on a warm weekend in the middle of May, Edna packed slacks and a nightgown in a hatbox, took the little-used car out of the garage, and drove up along the river to the old farm, unannounced.

She arrived to find the driveway rutted and ungravelled, the lawn ragged, flower borders untended, and the house itself smelling of dust and must. She did not stay overnight, but gave the caretakers two weeks' notice, and drove straight back to town to make arrangements for an indefinitely prolonged absence.

When she returned a week later, she was expected. She had written ahead asking a friend in the Garden Club to engage some help for the work inside the house. She arrived to find the club ladies had already started work on her flower borders. The man and two women she'd asked for arrived at

ten-thirty on the dot. One of the women carried a basket ('Miz Barron said from the Garden Club ladies, welcome home') with fresh farm milk and butter, salad vegetables, a still-warm home-baked loaf of bread, and a foil-wrapped roast chicken.

All day, the four of them scrubbed and rubbed and scoured. By evening, the house was clean, and Edna was gloriously tired. She soaked in a hot tub, went to bed, and was asleep before she had time even to think about the sleeplessness of the past four months.

'What a *fool* I've been!'

She thought it again as she awakened in the morning, with the sun pouring in through the sheer ivory curtains. And then it came to her, unaccountably, that she had once again failed to remember a date. For tomorrow, she realised with a pang, was her wedding anniversary. Was that, she wondered in surprise, *could* that have been what had brought her back here?

That day she was busy with visits and errands and arrangements. She had dinner out, with the Barrons; when she drove home it was nearly eleven. She went through the big empty house, checking doors and windows, then found herself oddly reluctant to go to bed. It was almost as if she were afraid last night's exhausted peace might not come again.

She went back downstairs in her negligee, made some cocoa, tried to read, and couldn't concentrate. In the end she turned on the television and watched it without interest. At the stroke of midnight, she turned her head and saw Jack sitting in his own favourite chair.

'Jack . . .' Edna whispered. 'Oh, Jack, *no*!'

He sat there, as ruddy and bearded as ever, wearing the clothes he had worn that day five months ago, except for the cap, and his smile was a curious mixture of the tender and the flippant, as though he felt some need to make his first words cheerful. 'Happy anniversary, sweetheart,' he said, the cheerfulness not quite successful.

'But, Jack - '

'Oh, I'm dead, Edna. We'd better make sure you understand that. Do you?'

She nodded, carefully. 'How - have you been, Jack?'

He shrugged. 'All right.' He seemed listless. That was very little like him. Edna had learned to mistrust him when he acted out of character.

A host of thoughts went through Edna's mind. Suddenly, she was back to her mood of that earlier anniversary. Jack was here – in what way, made no immediate difference – he was here, and she could talk to him, see him, possibly even touch him. It was as if the intervening five months had never been. She wondered if that lipstick smudge might not be still faintly visible on his neck.

All this because of one unguarded tone of voice. But she knew him too well to let it escape her. Knew him too well not to understand what it meant.

'Jack – what *happened* to you?' The question popped out almost of its own will. She was teeming with things she urgently wanted to know, and she was still too numb to worry about the possibility of bad manners.

With the same forced lightness he had shown before, Jack confirmed her surmises of last December in a few halting sentences. A careless hunter had, indeed, shot the wrong game. Then, finding Jack dead with the bullet through his heart, the killer had chosen discretion before valour or honour. Wrapping the fresh corpse in some of the burlap, he had roped the whole bundle to the hand-truck, carted it cross-country for a quarter of a mile, and dumped the whole thing into the quarry pool, while the beginnings of the snow-fall hid his tracks behind him. From there the hunter had vanished, presumably to his car and back to the city. Jack, in his typically careless way, seemed to bear him no particular ill will.

'The hand-truck!' Edna exclaimed. 'My goodness, I forgot all about it and I suppose Young Harold didn't think to mention it, either. No wonder no one could see how your – that is, how he reached the quarry!' Another thought struck her. 'But, that's terrible! Now your – That is,' she corrected fumblingly, 'they won't find you.'

It was unthinkable – it was ghastly to *know* where Jack was, now, and to think that there had been no funeral and no proper interment. Jack . . . at the bottom of the quarry . . . roped to the hand-truck, in the black, frigid water.

'I'll have to tell them immediately. In the morning.'

'Darling,' Jack said in discomfort, 'why should they believe you? How are you going to explain how you can be sure?'

'Why, I'll just . . . ' Edna suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth. 'Oh, darling, I haven't been *thinking*!' She flew

across the room into Jack's lap, to throw her arms around his neck and hug herself to his chest. Only later did she stop to think it was only luck that Jack did, indeed, have the substance to receive her. At the moment, she was too occupied with holding and kissing him, having at last, and so abruptly, fully realised what a remarkable and wonderful thing had happened. 'Oh, I'm *so glad* to see you! You don't *know* how lonely I've been!'

It was only gradually that she realised Jack was returning her embrace with perfect politeness but with an unmistakable desire to bring it to an end as soon as possible. 'I *do* know, darling,' he said uncomfortably. 'You see, you're the one who's keeping me here.'

She leaned back. 'I'm the one who's . . . ?'

'It's - ' Jack was plainly embarrassed. 'Well, it's hard to explain about how things are. In some ways, it's a great deal like it was before I . . . well, you know. The countryside looks the same - but it's wild . . . there aren't any buildings, or roads, though it's certainly pleasant. There's something very odd about the horizon, too. Sometimes I'm almost sure it's flat; I think I can see a lot farther than I ought to be able to. But it's hard to tell.'

'Are there any other people?' Edna asked artlessly. Even in her most distracted moments, she had found long ago, she was able to keep her head about certain things - and the suspicion lurking in the back of her mind had to be satisfied.

'People? Oh, yes, there're quite a few. I can see them, off in the distance.' There was a wistful note in his voice. 'I'd like to go and talk to them . . . see what they're doing.'

'And you can't? Go over to these men . . . and women?' She traced one fingernail through the beard at the base of his jaw, studying his face.

'No, no, I can't. It's because you . . . well, it's because I can't leave the boundaries of the farm - except as far as the quarry, of course.' He was fidgeting nervously, she saw; the fingernail was distracting him. Substantial or something a shade less, Jack had kept his old reflexes. She wondered who was keeping them sharp for him, if anyone was.

'And can't these people come to you?'

Jack shook his head. 'I think it's part of the rules. Or maybe they just haven't noticed me, yet. Maybe I'm not really one of them - maybe they can't see me. I wonder if you

might not be the only person anywhere who knows I exist.'

'What about those rules, Jack? Hasn't . . . well, *Anyone* . . . explained them to you? Didn't *Anyone meet* you?' Edna settled into a more comfortable position on Jack's lap.

'Oh, no!' Jack said as if repeating the most obvious thing in the world. 'The only people who can meet you are people who care for you. They sort of welcome you, I think. I don't know - I'm not sure I know - you seem to just *feel* the way things are supposed to be - but I think the amount of good that does you depends on how much you can trust your feelings.' He shook his head again, and Edna saw that there was much about his new life that troubled him. She considered that carefully.

'But, my dear, you have a number of relatives . . . *there* . . . It seems to me your father, at least, or your mother . . .'

'Well, no, sweetheart,' Jack said. 'You see, they had no warning I was coming. It happened too fast. Unless they were right there on the spot - and, of course, they weren't . . . And now I'm over there without anyone knowing about it, and I don't think they *can* find out about it, now. You see - ' He patted her shoulder clumsily. 'I don't think I'm really all the way over there. And that's because if no one knew I needed welcoming there, then it's necessary for someone over here, who loved me, to have said goodbye to me.'

'*Said goodbye!*' Edna recoiled to arm's length, barely retaining her grip around Jack's neck. 'I was so lonely I couldn't even stand to live here any longer!'

'Well, yes, sweetheart,' Jack said tortuously, gathering her up in his own arms and holding her close. 'Yes, of course you were. But couldn't you . . . well . . . let go of me? I *am* down in that quarry you know.'

His choice of words was unfortunate. Edna had a sudden graphic image of Jack, and the burlap wrapping, and the hand-truck, and the water, cold and black even this close to summer, and the weeds, and the fish - were there fish in the quarry? Someone might have put minnows in it, mightn't they? She prayed no one had.

She clung to the warm, substantial husband she had here, in the house with her, now.

'And let you wander away? To do I can imagine what?'

Jack winced. 'But that's what it's *for*.'

'*What?*'

'Not – not that – not what you're thinking,' he said quickly. 'I meant the wandering; the meeting people, talking to them, seeing what they do.'

'Jack Colby, I've got you back and I'm not going to let you go.'

Jack sighed. 'Now, look, Edna,' he said, 'you can't keep me here against my will.'

'You just said I could.'

'Oh, you can keep me here around the farm. But you can't make me actually be here in the room with you, and talk to you, unless I help.' And as if to prove his point, Jack suddenly seemed a shade less warm, a shade less substantial. His skin took on a curious transparency, and his chest did not seem to move with breath at all. His voice was distant, if rebellious. 'If you feel that way about it, I can just make sure you never see me again, even while I'm looking over your shoulder.'

'Jack!' Edna wailed. And at this point she was desperate. Her voice changed. 'Jack?' Her negligee loosened a little at the shoulders.

'Edna, what in Heaven's name . . . ?' It was there, in Jack's suddenly wide and quite substantial eyes; the roguish gleam, that had twisted her heart bitterly only five short months ago but was her ally now. 'Edna?'

'Don't leave me, Jack. Not tonight.'

'Well, I'll be –'

Damned?

One night passed after another, and Jack never failed to come to her. Edna Colby blossomed again, and the house and farm had never seemed so prosperously trim, so efficiently run. The Garden Club ladies remarked on the amazing way she had taken hold of herself again. Edna had never been happier. She knew some of them considered it hardly proper for her to be so content so soon, if ever. But she was proper. Not even the most vicious gossips could find anything with which to reproach her. Some of them, she suspected, were keeping close watch on the doors at night, to see if perhaps somebody might not be . . .

But nobody was . . . Nobody who needed doors.

Edna blossomed. She found, now that there was No Danger, that there was a certain element of . . .

Well, she said to herself occasionally with a certain kind of

smile, Jack had never again made his ridiculous threat to leave her, had he? As a matter of fact, he seemed rather more . . . satisfied . . . than he had ever been, before.

There was, in fact, only one problem. It was small at first, but it could not remain so. The future cannot be disregarded forever . . .

Edna Colby sat in her living-room, and looked around her at the polished wood of the authentic Dutch Colonial furniture, the multi-paned casement windows opening to the rose garden in summer-time, the creamy-yellow walls and deep-napped carpet. She looked at the dying embers in the great stone fireplace.

Last of all she looked into the shining mirror opposite her on the wall.

Edna was now forty-three years old. Jack had been thirty-eight when he . . . *died*. He had of course not aged visibly in the short time between then and the time when he began appearing to her. From what he said, his body did age somewhat when he materialised – but at nothing like the metabolic rate of her own.

Jack was from long-lived country stock – the kind who looks young at fifty, and feels it still at sixty-five. Edna had once been trim and tiny; during her widowhood, she had begun to think of herself as skinny. The past months had put weight on her for the first time. She looked herself over carefully: *beginning to show her age* was one way to put it; *umpy* was another.

And the end of summer brought another nagging worry.  
...

It was September before Edna became seriously concerned. Up till then she could still remind herself that she was, after all, of a certain age.

It was ridiculous. Suddenly peevish, she stood alone before the big mirror and slowly turned from side to side, examining a figure that showed signs of a specialised sort of dumpiness.

It was absolutely ridiculous. Who would have thought of taking Certain Precautions in these circumstances?

She stirred as if waking from a dream and moved slowly towards the sunlit library, where she took the big medical encyclopedia from the shelf, opened it to *Sterility, psycho-*

*somatic*, and began reading carefully. When she had finished, she went back and examined her newly-rounded figure in the mirror again.

'Receptive, relaxed attitude.' If Jack had seen fit to speak to her about such matters, instead of simply busying himself with what she now saw was desperate enthusiasm, he might have used those words to her. 'Banishment of fear-tensions . . .' If she had found the words to tell him how *she* felt – not *now*, of course, not now that this awful thing had happened – but last week, last month, yesterday . . . those would have been the words.

For one brief moment, Edna had the feeling of something lost; something that might have been, with just a little more time.

Now her mouth was a hard, narrow line, and the crows' feet stood sharply outlined at the corners of her clenched eyes.

When Jack appeared from behind the turn in the upstairs hall that night, he found Edna waiting in the middle of the bedroom, a carefully packed bag at her feet.

'You brute!' she cried out in a high-pitched voice. 'You nasty *animal*! Get out of my sight!'

Jack stared at her. Then, gradually, the surprise was erased by an expression of dawning relief.

Edna finished: 'You just *wait* till I get back!'

The relief disappeared from Jack Colby's face.

Edna had already informed Big Harold that she had been called to the city suddenly for a few days. She left in the car and drove not to New York, but to Boston, where she knew no one and no one knew her. She checked into a hotel and, first thing in the morning, phoned for an appointment with a nationally famous obstetrician.

Doctor Martin's receptionist was quite firm, at first, about there being *no* time available for the next two weeks. But in this sort of jousting, Edna was in her element. She emerged triumphant from the Battle of the Telephone with an appointment for that afternoon. She spent an edifying morning inspecting the Common, and a few of the more prominent historic landmarks. She made mental notes about other places to see later in the day: she would be interested in attending a talk on Winter Protection, at the Boston Botanical Gardens . . .

She never did get there. The doctor, a cheerful, chubby type, told her exactly what she had been trying to pretend he would not.

His examination was both thorough and expert despite its speed. Smilingly, he assured her that her symptoms were indeed those of an increased, rather than a diminishing, fertility.

About four months, he thought . . . hard to tell without a definite date . . . and now, if 'Mrs Hartley' was planning to remain in Boston, he could recommend several excellent physicians. Unfortunately, his own time was full right now. . . .

In a dutiful daze, Edna copied down names and addresses. She accepted the little booklet of information he gave her, and murmured what she hoped were appropriate responses at proper intervals. She was half-way out of the consulting-room before she thought to ask, 'Isn't there some sort of a *test*, Doctor . . . ?'

'Rabbit test.' He smiled, if possible even more heartily than before. 'Yes, but hardly necessary at *this* stage.'

'Oh?'

'Of course you can have it if you *want* it,' he said patiently. 'Any doctor you decide on will be able to do it for you. . . .'

At Dr Elliott's, 'Mrs Grahame,' having taken thought, insisted on a test. She filled a small sterilised bottle for the nurse, and departed. When she phoned the following day – she had not been able to leave a telephone number, since she was registered at the hotel under her own name – the results were, as she had expected, negative. In the intervening time, instead of visiting Boston's historical or horticultural wonders, she had procured several books of a specialised nature in a small shop on Huntington Avenue, and had perused them thoroughly. By the time she checked out of the hotel that afternoon, Edna Colby, who had looked up psychosomatic sterility in the encyclopedia at home, was now also something of an expert on psychosomatic pregnancy. Enough of an expert, and possessed of enough additional personal knowledge, to wonder a little about how much psychosomasis there might be to some of the case histories detailed in the books.

For four hours she drove carefully and attentively south-bound through moderate traffic; it was not until she found

herself approaching the end of the Wilbur Cross Parkway and the beginning of the Merritt, that she realised she had taken the turnoff for New York, rather than staying on Route Six for Dutchess County. *That* wouldn't help. She was no more prepared for chance meetings with friends and acquaintances than for any immediate steps with Jack.

Accordingly, she left the highway, and headed due south for the Connecticut shore. At some small town whose name she never knew, she found a motel with clean white-painted cabins, and a chintz-curtained dining-room. After a quiet dinner, she walked down to the shore, and sat for a long while in the shelter of a rocky ledge, ignoring the cold and the damp, doing her planning to the rhythm of the white-foam sea.

If she could not hold Jack, without paying this price, then she knew what her choice must be. As the daylight waned, she began to think in cold, carefully thought-out steps without reference to or remembrance of the very longing that had brought her to this situation.

Edna stood up and walked to the edge of the pounding surf, seeing in her mind's eye, instead, the still surface of the old quarry pool. The way was clear to her now: the one and only way.

She shivered abruptly on the cold empty beach.

In the morning she continued towards New York. She would have liked to go home and close the house properly, collect her belongings, and provide suitable explanations for the neighbours; but she could not risk letting Jack learn her plans. True, he could not leave the farm till she released him – but still, he might think of some way to upset her programme. So she wrote letters instead, and arranged things by phone, telling everyone that urgent business required her to leave immediately. Three days later she embarked on a prolonged tour of South America, where she thought she would be reasonably safe from chance encounter with anyone she knew.

When she returned to Dutchess County, it was four months, almost to the day, from the time she had left. She did not go to the farm, but took a room at an exceedingly middle-class resort hotel where she knew there was no possibility of meeting someone who knew her as the mistress of Colby Farm. In all probability, anyhow, none of her former friends

would have recognised the fat-and-fortyish woman in the ill-fitting clothes, with the brooding face and the too-bright eyes.

She had tried to time her arrival so as not to have too much waiting, but she had not dared stay away too long. As it turned out, she spent almost two weeks in the dingy hotel room, waiting.

When the pains came at last, late one frozen afternoon, Edna bundled up, left the hotel without a word to anyone, and walked the full four miles to her destination, rather than hire a driver who would almost surely remember taking her out to the quarry. She walked haltingly, stopping to rest against trees and rocks for brief moments, then pressing on.

Fear and iron determination drove her. She was in a panic at the coming ordeal; the possibility of death, of some terrible crippling that would leave her alive, but helpless, freezing – with each fresh pain, her heart leaped so that she could hardly breathe.

But she would not give up. Jack had done this. He had returned all her devotion, all her dedication, in this monstrous way, and he would suffer for it.

Sobbing with effort and hysteria, she dragged the burden of her body up through the woods to the quarry's edge. And there, at last, she could stop, fighting for breath between waves of pain.

She swayed on the windrowed stone-chips near the quarry's rim, looking down at the ice below.

Jack was in there, she thought with wooden concentration. Down there, under the ice, wrapped in a rotting shroud.

'Jack,' she croaked hoarsely. 'Jack, I've got something for you.'

As she said the words, the picture of the sodden bundle under the ice returned compellingly to her mind. For a moment, her resolution wavered. For a moment, it seemed easier to give in, to admit that it was her fault much more than Jack's. But she had come this far with immense determination and the courage of a martyr – if she gave in now, she would have wasted it all.

With a moan, she sank to the ground, struggling to arrange her clothes, flayed by the bitter cold. The contractions were nearly continual now. She raised her wristwatch to time them,

in automatic accordance with the manuals she had pored over, but her eyes were misted with tears.

The pains were like nothing she had imagined – like nothing her mother had ever succeeded in describing. They were *directional*; great automatic spasms of her lower body that knotted her shoulders and thighs in sympathy, that surged like the sea turned to molten oil, that seemed to be trying to take control of her body away from her brain and relocate it somewhere in the depths of her spinal column.

She reached out frantically for comfort – she clutched the folds of her soft coat; she dug at the unyielding ground. She no longer thought of the danger in childbirth to even a hospitalised woman of her age.

‘Jack,’ she moaned. ‘*Jack.*’

From somewhere, strong hands were closed on her. ‘Bear down, sweetheart,’ the urging voice said; ‘push, baby, *push!* Don’t let it break you up. *Push!*’

The knowledge of someone near – she barely recognised the voice as Jack’s; the words were only sounds – was enough. One fraction of her panic ebbed away, and her body did the rest of its own accord. She was possessed by a sudden understanding of herself as a function, as a force; as an elemental, marvellously instinctive engine triumphantly meeting a resistance that was all the massive closure of extinction. Meeting it and, with a series of quick surges, suddenly relaxing so that her burden almost seemed to go forth and overcome it of its own volition.

‘Take him – take him, Jack, quickly,’ she moaned. ‘Take him where he’ll be warm, and safe.’

She fumbled at her coat to cover herself. She was terribly cold. There was nothing on the ground – nothing that she could see; there was no sound, no cry.

‘Jack? Jack – can you still hear me?’ She had planned it all so well. Planned it on the basis that she would hate what came out of her torture. Planned it on the basis that it would be torture, planned on the assumption that it would be the best revenge of all to saddle Jack with the brat forever. ‘Jack – is it a boy? Please . . .’

She raised her arms. Silhouetted against the trees, she dimly made out a patch of russet colour from Jack’s beard, and the faint vertical tinge of his trousers. Sole shoes scraped very faintly on the stones beside her. And then she heard it –

the faraway whimper of life – and she looked at the level of Jack's chest. There was something there . . . something . . . As the cry grew momentarily louder, swelled to a full-throated yell, she saw the boy, wrapped in his father's arms.

'Take *good* care of him, Jack,' she whispered. She pitched herself up to her knees, somehow got to her feet. 'I have to go. I'll freeze if I don't.' She looked down into the quarry. 'Goodbye, Jack. Goodbye – I'll miss you.'

'Goodbye, honey,' Jack said softly, 'I'm sorry about the other girls,' he added hurriedly, already gone from sight.

'It was my fault,' Edna whispered. There were tears in her eyes as she thought of Jack and the boy, free to roam their world over now, free to see what lay beyond the wide horizons. She turned sharply on the loose stones.

For one moment, she tried to balance herself. One thought passed through her mind, in a familiar female voice, a voice out of her childhood: 'By God, if that little snip puts on any more airs about being too good for me, she's going to hear a thing or two about what it took to bring her here.' But it was only a fragment of something – perhaps her first conscious memory, rounding out her days into an ellipse of beginning and of end.

There was a shock.

Edna Colby never knew if her body broke all the way through the ice to sink into company with that other abandoned shell. . . . She and Jack and the boy had gone to where the world was warm and green.

# THE LADY'S MAID'S BELL

EDITH WHARTON

## I

It was the autumn after I had the typhoid. I'd been three months in hospital, and when I came out I looked so weak and tottery that the two or three ladies I applied to were afraid to engage me. Most of my money was gone, and after I'd boarded for two months, hanging about the employment-agencies, and answering any advertisement that looked any way respectable, I pretty nearly lost heart, for fretting hadn't made me fatter, and I didn't see why my luck should ever turn. It did, though – or I thought so at the time. A Mrs Railton, a friend of the lady that first brought me out to the States, met me one day and stopped to speak to me: she was one that had always a friendly way with her. She asked me what ailed me to look so white, and when I told her, 'Why, Hartley,' says she, 'I believe I've got the very place for you. Come in tomorrow and we'll talk about it.'

The next day, when I called, she told me the lady she'd in mind was a niece of hers, a Mrs Brympton, a youngish lady, but something of an invalid, who lived all the year round at her country place on the Hudson, owing to not being able to stand the fatigue of town life.

'Now, Hartley,' Mrs Railton said, in that cheery way that always made me feel things must be going to take a turn for the better – 'now understand me; it's not a cheerful place I'm sending you to. The house is big and gloomy; my niece is nervous, vapourish; her husband – well, he's generally away; and the two children are dead. A year ago I would as soon have thought of shutting a rosy, active girl like you into a vault; but you're not particularly brisk yourself just now, are you, and a quiet place, with country air and wholesome food and early hours, ought to be the very thing for you. Don't mistake me,' she added, for I suppose I looked a trifle downcast; 'you may find it dull, but you won't be unhappy. My niece is an angel. Her former maid, who died last spring, had been with her twenty years and worshipped the ground she walked on. She's a kind mistress to all, and where the mistress

is kind, as you know, the servants are generally good-humoured, so you'll probably get on well enough with the rest of the household. And you're the very woman I want for my niece: quiet, well-mannered, and educated above your station. You read aloud well, I think? That's a good thing; my niece likes to be read to. She wants a maid that can be something of a companion: her last was, and I can't say how she misses her. It's a lonely life. . . . Well, have you decided?

'Why, ma'am,' I said, 'I'm not afraid of solitude.'

'Well, then, go; my niece will take you on my recommendation. I'll telegraph her at once and you can take the afternoon train. She has no one to wait on her at present, and I don't want you to lose any time.'

I was ready enough to start, yet something in me hung back; and to gain time I asked, 'And the gentleman, ma'am?'

'The gentleman's almost always away, I tell you,' said Mrs Railton, quick-like - 'and when he's there,' says she suddenly, 'you've only to keep out of his way.'

I took the afternoon train and got out at D—— station at about four o'clock. A groom in a dog-cart was waiting, and we drove off at a smart pace. It was a dull October day, with rain hanging close overhead, and by the time we turned into Brympton Place woods the daylight was almost gone. The drive wound through the woods for a mile or two, and came out on a gravel court shut in with thickets of tall, black-looking shrubs. There were no lights in the windows and the house *did* look a bit gloomy.

I had asked no questions of the groom, for I never was one to get my notion of new masters from their other servants: I prefer to wait and see for myself. But I could tell by the look of everything that I had got into the right kind of house, and that things were done handsomely. A pleasant-faced cook met me at the back door and called the housemaid to show me up to my room. 'You'll see madam later,' she said. 'Mrs Brympton has a visitor.'

I hadn't fancied Mrs Brympton was a lady to have many visitors, and somehow the words cheered me. I followed the housemaid upstairs, and saw, through a door on the upper landing, that the main part of the house seemed well furnished, with dark panelling and a number of old portraits. Another flight of stairs led us up to the servants' wing. It was almost dark now, and the housemaid excused herself for not

having brought a light. 'But there's matches in your room,' she said, 'and if you go careful you'll be all right. Mind the step at the end of the passage. Your room is just beyond.'

I looked ahead as she spoke, and half-way down the passage I saw a woman standing. She drew back into a doorway as we passed and the housemaid didn't appear to notice her. She was a thin woman with a white face, and a darkish stuff gown and apron. I took her for the housekeeper and thought it odd that she didn't speak, but just gave me a long look as she went by. My room opened into a square hall at the end of the passage. Facing my door was another which stood open; the housemaid exclaimed when she saw it:

'There - Mrs Blinder's left that door open again!' said she, closing it.

'Is Mrs Blinder the housekeeper?'

'There's no housekeeper: Mrs Blinder's the cook.'

'And is that her room?'

'Laws, no,' said the housemaid, cross-like. 'That's nobody's room. It's empty, I mean, and the door hadn't ought to be open. Mrs Brympton wants it kept locked.'

She opened my door and led me into a neat room, nicely furnished, with a picture or two on the walls; and having lit a candle she took leave, telling me that the servants'-hall tea was at six, and that Mrs Brympton would see me afterwards.

I found them a pleasant-spoken set in the servants' hall, and by what they let fall I gathered that, as Mrs Railton had said, Mrs Brympton was the kindest of ladies; but I didn't take much notice of their talk, for I was watching to see the pale woman in the dark gown come in. She didn't show herself, however, and I wondered if she ate apart; but if she wasn't the housekeeper, why should she? Suddenly it struck me that she might be a trained nurse, and in that case her meals would of course be served in her room. If Mrs Brympton was an invalid it was likely enough she had a nurse. The idea annoyed me, I own, for they're not always the easiest to get on with, and if I'd known I shouldn't have taken the place. But there I was and there was no use pulling a long face over it; and not being one to ask questions I waited to see what would turn up.

When tea was over the housemaid said to the footman: 'Has Mr Ranford gone?' and when he said yes, she told me to come up with her to Mrs Brympton.

Mrs Brympton was lying down in her bedroom. Her lounge stood near the fire and beside it was a shaded lamp. She was a delicate-looking lady, but when she smiled I felt there was nothing I wouldn't do for her. She spoke very pleasantly, in a low voice, asking me my name and age and so on, and if I had everything I wanted, and if I wasn't afraid of feeling lonely in the country.

'Not with you I wouldn't be, madam,' I said, and the words surprised me when I'd spoken them, for I'm not an impulsive person; but it was just as if I'd thought aloud.

She seemed pleased at that, and said she hoped I'd continue in the same mind; then she gave me a few directions about her toilet, and said Agnes the housemaid would show me next morning where things were kept.

'I am tired tonight, and shall dine upstairs,' she said. 'Agnes will bring me my tray, that you may have time to unpack and settle yourself; and later you may come and undress me.'

'Very well, ma'am,' I said. 'You'll ring, I suppose?'

I thought she looked odd.

'No - Agnes will fetch you,' says she quickly, and took up her book again.

Well - that was certainly strange: a lady's maid having to be fetched by the housemaid whenever her lady wanted her! I wondered if there were no bells in the house; but the next day I satisfied myself that there was one in every room, and a special one ringing from my mistress's room to mine; and after that it did strike me as queer that, whenever Mrs Brympton wanted anything, she rang for Agnes, who had to walk the whole length of the servants' wing to call me.

But that wasn't the only queer thing in the house. The very next day I found out that Mrs Brympton had no nurse; and then I asked Agnes about the woman I had seen in the passage the afternoon before. Agnes said she had seen no one, and I saw that she thought I was dreaming. To be sure, it was dusk when we went down the passage, and she had excused herself for not bringing a light; but I had seen the woman plain enough to know her again if we should meet. I decided that she must have been a friend of the cook's, or of one of the other women servants; perhaps she had come down from town for a night's visit, and the servants wanted it kept secret. Some ladies are very stiff about having their

servants' friends in the house overnight. At any rate, I made up my mind to ask no more questions.

In a day or two another odd thing happened. I was chatting one afternoon with Mrs Blinder, who was a friendly-disposed woman, and had been longer in the house than the other servants, and she asked me if I was quite comfortable and had everything I needed. I said I had no fault to find with my place or with my mistress, but I thought it odd that in so large a house there was no sewing-room for the lady's maid.

'Why,' says she, 'there *is* one: the room you're in is the old sewing-room.'

'Oh,' said I, 'and where did the other lady's maid sleep?'

At that she grew confused, and said hurriedly that the servants' rooms had all been changed last year, and she didn't rightly remember.

That struck me as peculiar, but I went on as if I hadn't noticed: 'Well, there's a vacant room opposite mine, and I mean to ask Mrs Brympton if I mayn't use that as a sewing-room.'

To my astonishment, Mrs Blinder went white and gave my hand a kind of squeeze. 'Don't do that, my dear,' said she, trembling-like. 'To tell you the truth, that was Emma Saxon's room, and my mistress has kept it closed ever since her death.'

'And who was Emma Saxon?'

'Mrs Brympton's former maid.'

'The one that was with her so many years?' said I, remembering what Mrs Railton had told me.

Mrs Blinder nodded.

'What sort of woman was she?'

'No better walked the earth,' said Mrs Blinder. 'My mistress loved her like a sister.'

'But I mean – what did she look like?'

Mrs Blinder got up and gave me a kind of angry stare. 'I'm no great hand at describing,' she said; 'and I believe my pastry's rising.' And she walked off into the kitchen and shut the door after her.

## II

I had been near a week at Brympton before I saw my master. Word came that he was arriving one afternoon, and a change passed over the whole household. It was plain that nobody

loved him below stairs. Mrs Blinder took uncommon care with the dinner that night, but she snapped at the kitchen-maid in a way quite unusual with her; and Mr Wace, the butler, a serious slow-spoken man, went about his duties as if he'd been getting ready for a funeral. He was a great Bible-reader, Mr Wace was, and had a beautiful assortment of texts at his command; but that day he used such dreadful language that I was about to leave the table, when he assured me it was all out of Isaiah; and I noticed that whenever the master came Mr Wace took to the prophets.

About seven, Agnes called me to my mistress's room; and there I found Mr Brympton. He was standing on the hearth: a big, fair, bull-necked man, with a red face and little bad-tempered blue eyes: the kind of man a young simpleton might have thought handsome, and would have been like to pay dear for thinking it.

He swung about when I came in, and looked me over in a trice. I knew what the look meant, from having experienced it once or twice in my former places. Then he turned his back on me, and went on talking to his wife; and I knew what *that* meant, too. I was not the kind of morsel he was after. The typhoid had served me well enough in one way: it kept that kind of gentleman at arm's length.

'This is my new maid, Hartley,' says Mrs Brympton in her kind voice; and he nodded and went on with what he was saying.

In a minute or two he went off, and left my mistress to dress for dinner, and I noticed as I waited on her that she was white, and chill to the touch.

Mr Brympton took himself off the next morning, and the whole house drew a long breath when he drove away. As for my mistress, she put on her hat and furs (for it was a fine winter morning) and went out for a walk in the gardens, coming back quite fresh and rosy, so that for a minute, before her colour faded, I could guess what a pretty young lady she must have been, and not so long ago, either.

She had met Mr Ranford in the grounds, and the two came back together, I remember, smiling and talking as they walked along the terrace under my window. That was the first time I saw Mr Ranford, though I had often heard his name mentioned in the hall. He was a neighbour, it appeared, living a mile or two beyond Brympton, at the end of the

village; and as he was in the habit of spending his winters in the country he was almost the only company my mistress had at that season. He was a slight, tall gentleman of about thirty, and I thought him rather melancholy-looking till I saw his smile, which had a kind of surprise in it, like the first warm day in spring. He was a great reader, I heard, like my mistress, and the two were for ever borrowing books off one another, and sometimes (Mr Wace told me) he would read aloud to Mrs Brympton by the hour, in the big dark library where she sat in the winter afternoons. The servants all liked him, and perhaps that's more of a compliment than the masters suspect. He had a friendly word for every one of us, and we were all glad to think that Mrs Brympton had a pleasant companionable gentleman like that to keep her company when the master was away. Mr Ranford seemed on excellent terms with Mr Brympton too; though I couldn't but wonder that two gentlemen so unlike each other should be so friendly. But then I knew how the real quality can keep their feelings to themselves.

As for Mr Brympton, he came and went, never staying more than a day or two, cursing the dullness and the solitude, grumbling at everything, and (as I soon found out) drinking a deal more than was good for him. After Mrs Brympton left the table he would sit half the night over the old Brympton port and madeira, and once, as I was leaving my mistress's room rather later than usual, I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about.

The servants said very little about their master; but from what they let drop I could see it had been an unhappy match from the beginning. Mr Brympton was coarse, loud, and pleasure-loving; my mistress quiet, retiring, and perhaps a trifle cold. Not that she was not always pleasant-spoken to him: I thought her wonderfully forbearing; but to a gentleman as free as Mr Brympton I dare say she seemed a little offish.

Well, things went on quietly for several weeks. My mistress was kind, my duties were light, and I got on well with the other servants. In short, I had nothing to complain of; yet there was always a weight on me. I can't say why it was so, but I know it was not the loneliness that I felt. I soon got used to that; and being still languid from the fever I was thankful

for the quiet and the good country air. Nevertheless, I was never quite easy in my mind. My mistress, knowing I had been ill, insisted that I should take my walk regular, and often invented errands for me – a yard of ribbon to be fetched from the village, a letter posted, or a book returned to Mr Ranford. As soon as I was out of doors my spirits rose, and I looked forward to my walks through the bare moist-smelling woods; but the moment I caught sight of the house again my heart dropped down like a stone in a well. It was not a gloomy house exactly, yet I never entered it but a feeling of gloom came over me.

Mrs Brympton seldom went out in winter; only on the finest days did she walk an hour at noon on the south terrace. Excepting Mr Ranford, we had no visitors but the doctor, who drove over from D—— about once a week. He sent for me once or twice to give me some trifling direction about my mistress, and though he never told me what her illness was, I thought, from a waxy look she had now and then of a morning, that it might be the heart that ailed her. The season was soft and unwholesome, and in January we had a long spell of rain. That was a sore trial to me, I own, for I couldn't go out, and sitting over my sewing all day, listening to the drip, drip of the eaves, I grew so nervous that the least sound made me jump. Somehow, the thought of that locked room across the passage began to weigh on me. Once or twice, in the long rainy nights, I fancied I heard noises there; but that was nonsense, of course, and the daylight drove such notions out of my head. Well, one morning Mrs Brympton gave me quite a start of pleasure by telling me she wished me to go to town for some shopping. I hadn't known till then how low my spirits had fallen. I set off in high glee, and my first sight of the crowded streets and the cheerful-looking shops quite took me out of myself. Towards afternoon, however, the noise and confusion began to tire me, and I was actually looking forward to the quiet of Brympton, and thinking how I should enjoy the drive home through the dark woods, when I ran across an old acquaintance, a maid I had once been in service with. We had lost sight of each other for a number of years, and I had to stop and tell her what had happened to me in the interval. When I mentioned where I was living she rolled up her eyes and pulled a long face.

'What? The Mrs Brympton that lives all the year at her

place on the Hudson? My dear, you won't stay there three months.'

'Oh, but I don't mind the country,' says I, offended somehow at her tone. 'Since the fever I'm glad to be quiet.'

She shook her head. 'It's not the country I'm thinking of. All I know is she's had four maids in the last six months, and the last one, who was a friend of mine, told me nobody could stay in the house.'

'Did she say why?' I asked.

'No - she wouldn't give me her reason. But she says to me, *Mrs Ansey*, she says, *if ever a young woman as you know of thinks of going there, you tell her it's not worth while to unpack her boxes.*'

'Is she young and handsome?' said I, thinking of Mr Brympton.

'Not her! She's the kind that mothers engage when they've gay young gentlemen at college.'

Well, though I knew the woman was an idle gossip, the words stuck in my head, and my heart sank lower than ever as I drove up to Brympton in the dusk. There *was* something about the house - I was sure of it now. . . .

When I went in to tea I heard that Mr Brympton had arrived, and I saw at a glance that there had been a disturbance of some kind. Mrs Blinder's hand shook so that she could hardly pour the tea, and Mr Wace quoted the most dreadful texts full of brimstone. Nobody said a word to me then, but when I went up to my room, Mrs Blinder followed me.

'Oh, my dear,' says she, taking my hand, 'I'm so glad and thankful you've come back to us!'

That struck me, as you may imagine. 'Why,' said I, 'did you think I was leaving for good?'

'No, no, to be sure,' said she, a little confused, 'but I can't a-bear to have madam left alone for a day even.' She pressed my hand hard, and, 'Oh, Miss Hartley,' says she, 'be good to your mistress, as you're a Christian woman.' And with that she hurried away, and left me staring.

A moment later Agnes called me to Mrs Brympton. Hearing Mr Brympton's voice in her room, I went round by the dressing-room, thinking I would lay out her dinner-gown before going in. The dressing-room is a large room with a window over the portico that looks towards the gardens. Mr Brympton's apartments are beyond. When I went in, the

door into the bedroom was ajar, and I heard Mr Brympton saying angrily: 'One would suppose he was the only person fit for you to talk to.'

'I don't have many visitors in winter,' Mrs Brympton answered quietly.

'You have *me*!' he flung at her, sneeringly.

'You are here so seldom,' said she.

'Well - whose fault is that? You make the place about as lively as the family vault -'

With that I rattled the toilet-things, to give my mistress warning, and she rose and called me in.

The two dined alone, as usual, and I knew by Mr Wace's manner at supper that things must be going badly. He quoted the prophets something terrible, and worked on the kitchen-maid so that she declared she wouldn't go down alone to put the cold meat in the ice-box. I felt nervous myself, and after I had put my mistress to bed I was half-tempted to go down again and persuade Mrs Blinder to sit up a while over a game of cards. But I heard her door closing for the night and so I went on to my own room. The rain had begun again, and the drip, drip, drip seemed to be dropping into my brain. I lay awake listening to it, and turning over what my friend in town had said. What puzzled me was that it was always the maids who left. . . .

After a while I slept; but suddenly a loud noise wakened me. My bell had rung. I sat up, terrified by the unusual sound, which seemed to go on jangling through the darkness. My hands shook so that I couldn't find the matches. At length I struck a light and jumped out of bed. I began to think I must have been dreaming; but I looked at the bell against the wall, and there was the little hammer still quivering.

I was just beginning to huddle on my clothes when I heard another sound. This time it was the door of the locked room opposite mine softly opening and closing. I heard the sound distinctly, and it frightened me so that I stood stock-still. Then I heard a footstep hurrying down the passage towards the main house. The floor being carpeted, the sound was very faint, but I was quite sure it was a woman's step. I turned cold with the thought of it, and for a minute or two I durstn't breathe or move. Then I came to my senses.

'Alice Hartley,' says I to myself, 'someone left that room just now and ran down the passage ahead of you. The idea

isn't pleasant, but you may as well face it. Your mistress has rung for you, and to answer her bell you've got to go the way that other woman has gone.'

Well - I did it. I never walked faster in my life, yet I thought I should never get to the end of the passage or reach Mrs Brympton's room. On the way I heard nothing and saw nothing: all was dark and quiet as the grave. When I reached my mistress's door the silence was so deep that I began to think I must be dreaming, and was half-minded to turn back. Then a panic seized me, and I knocked.

There was no answer, and I knocked again, loudly. To my astonishment the door was opened by Mr Brympton. He started back when he saw me, and in the light of my candle his face looked red and savage.

'You?' he said, in a queer voice. '*How many of you are there, in God's name?*'

At that I felt the ground give under me; but I said to myself that he had been drinking, and answered as steadily as I could: 'May I go in, sir? Mrs Brympton has rung for me.'

'You may all go in, for what I care,' says he, and, pushing by me, walked down the hall to his own bedroom. I looked after him as he went, and to my surprise I saw that he walked as straight as a sober man.

I found my mistress lying very weak and still but she forced a smile when she saw me, and signed to me to pour out some drops for her. After that she lay without speaking, her breath coming quick, and her eyes closed. Suddenly she groped out with her hand, and '*Emma,*' says she, faintly.

'It's Hartley, madam,' I said. 'Do you want anything?'

She opened her eyes wide and gave me a startled look.

'I was dreaming,' she said. 'You may go now, Hartley, and thank you kindly. I'm quite well again, you see.' And she turned her face away from me.

### III

There was no more sleep for me that night, and I was thankful when daylight came.

Soon afterwards, Agnes called me to Mrs Brympton. I was afraid she was ill again, for she seldom sent for me before nine, but I found her sitting up in bed, pale and drawn-looking, but quite herself.

'Hartley,' says she quickly, 'will you put on your things at once and go down to the village for me? I want this prescription made up' – here she hesitated a minute and blushed – 'and I should like you to be back again before Mr Brympton is up.'

'Certainly, madam,' I said.

'And – stay a moment' – she called me back as if an idea had just struck her – 'while you're waiting for the mixture, you'll have time to go on to Mr Ranford's with this note.'

It was a two-mile walk to the village, and on my way I had time to turn things over in my mind. It struck me as peculiar that my mistress should wish the prescription made up without Mr Brympton's knowledge; and, putting this together with the scene of the night before, and with much else that I had noticed and suspected, I began to wonder if the poor lady was weary of her life, and had come to the mad resolve of ending it. The idea took such hold on me that I reached the village on a run, and dropped breathless into a chair before the chemist's counter. The good man, who was just taking down his shutters, stared at me so hard that it brought me to myself.

'Mr Limmel,' I says, trying to speak indifferent, 'will you run your eye over this, and tell me if it's quite right?'

He put on his spectacles and studied the prescription.

'Why, it's one of Dr Walton's,' says he. 'What should be wrong with it?'

'Well – is it dangerous to take?'

'Dangerous – how do you mean?'

I could have shaken the man for his stupidity.

'I mean – if a person was to take too much of it – by mistake, of course –' says I, my heart in my throat.

'Lord bless you, no. It's only lime-water. You might feed it to a baby by the bottleful.'

I gave a great sigh of relief and hurried on to Mr Ranford's. But on the way another thought struck me. If there was nothing to conceal about my visit to the chemist's, was it my other errand that Mrs Brympton wished me to keep private? Somehow, that thought frightened me worse than the other. Yet the two gentlemen seemed fast friends, and I would have staked my head on my mistress's goodness. I felt ashamed of my suspicions, and concluded that I was still disturbed by the strange events of the night. I left the note at Mr Ranford's,

and hurrying back to Brympton, slipped in by a side door without being seen, as I thought.

An hour later, however, as I was carrying in my mistress's breakfast, I was stopped in the hall by Mr Brympton.

'What were you doing out so early?' he says, looking hard at me.

'Early - me, sir?' I said, in a tremble.

'Come, come,' he says, an angry red spot coming out on his forehead, 'didn't I see you scuttling home through the shrubbery an hour or more ago?'

I'm a truthful woman by nature, but at that a lie popped out ready-made. 'No, sir, you didn't,' said I, and looked straight back at him.

He shrugged his shoulders and gave a sullen laugh. 'I suppose you think I was drunk last night?' he asked suddenly.

'No, sir, I don't,' I answered, this time truthfully enough.

He turned away with another shrug. 'A pretty notion my servants have of me!' I heard him mutter as he walked off.

Not till I had settled down to my afternoon's sewing did I realise how the events of the night had shaken me. I couldn't pass that locked door without a shiver. I knew I had heard someone come out of it, and walk down the passage ahead of me. I thought of speaking to Mrs Blinder or to Mr Wace, the only two in the house who appeared to have an inkling of what was going on, but I had a feeling that if I questioned them they would deny everything, and that I might learn more by holding my tongue and keeping my eyes open. The idea of spending another night opposite the locked room sickened me, and once I was seized with the notion of packing my trunk and taking the first train to town; but it wasn't in me to throw over a kind mistress in that manner, and I tried to go on with my sewing as if nothing had happened. I hadn't worked ten minutes before the sewing machine broke down. It was one I had found in the house, a good machine but a trifle out of order: Mrs Blinder said it had never been used since Emma Saxon's death. I stopped to see what was wrong, and as I was working at the machine a drawer which I had never been able to open slid forward, and a photograph fell out. I picked it up and sat looking at it in a maze. It was a woman's likeness, and I knew I had seen the face somewhere - the eyes had an asking look that I had felt on me before. And suddenly I remembered the pale woman in the passage.

I stood up, cold all over, and ran out of the room. My heart seemed to be thumping in the top of my head, and I felt as if I should never get away from the look in those eyes. I went straight to Mrs Blinder. She was taking her afternoon nap, and sat up with a jump when I came in.

'Mrs Blinder,' said I, 'who is that?' And I held out the photograph.

She rubbed her eyes and stared.

'Why, Emma Saxon,' says she. 'Where did you find it?'

I looked hard at her for a minute. 'Mrs Blinder,' I said, 'I've seen that face before.'

Mrs Blinder got up and walked over to the looking-glass. 'Dear me! I must have been asleep,' she says. 'My front is all over one ear. And now do run along, Miss Hartley, dear, for I hear the clock striking four, and I must go down this very minute and put on the Virginia ham for Mr Brympton's dinner.'

#### IV

To all appearances, things went on as usual for a week or two. The only difference was that Mr Brympton stayed on, instead of going off as he usually did, and that Mr Ranford never showed himself. I heard Mr Brympton remark on this one afternoon when he was sitting in my mistress's room before dinner.

'Where's Ranford?' says he. 'He hasn't been near the house for a week. Does he keep away because I'm here?'

Mrs Brympton spoke so low that I couldn't catch her answer.

'Well,' he went on, 'two's company and three's trumpery; I'm sorry to be in Ranford's way, and I suppose I shall have to take myself off again in a day or two and give him a show.' And he laughed at his own joke.

The very next day, as it happened, Mr Ranford called. The footman said the three were very merry over their tea in the library, and Mr Brympton strolled down to the gate with Mr Ranford when he left.

I have said that things went on as usual; and so they did with the rest of the household; but as for myself, I had never been the same since the night my bell had rung. Night after night I used to lie awake, listening for it to ring again, and for

the door of the locked room to open stealthily. But the bell never rang, and I heard no sound across the passage. At last the silence began to be more dreadful to me than the most mysterious sounds. I felt that *someone* was cowering there, behind the locked door, watching and listening as I watched and listened, and I could almost have cried out, 'Whoever you are, come out and let me see you face to face, but don't lurk there and spy on me in the darkness!'

Feeling as I did, you may wonder I didn't give warning. Once I very nearly did so; but at the last moment something held me back. Whether it was compassion for my mistress, who had grown more and more dependent on me, or unwillingness to try a new place, or some other feeling that I couldn't put a name to, I lingered on as if spellbound, though every night was dreadful to me, and the days but little better.

For one thing, I didn't like Mrs Brympton's looks. She had never been the same since that night, no more than I had. I thought she would brighten up after Mr Brympton left, but though she seemed easier in her mind, her spirits didn't revive, nor her strength either. She had grown attached to me and seemed to like to have me about; and Agnes told me one day that, since Emma Saxon's death, I was the only maid her mistress had taken to. This gave me a warm feeling for the poor lady, though after all there was little I could do to help her.

After Mr Brympton's departure Mr Ranford took to coming again, though less often than formerly. I met him once or twice in the grounds, or in the village, and I couldn't but think there was a change in him too; but I set it down to my disordered fancy.

The weeks passed, and Mr Brympton had now been a month absent. We heard he was cruising with a friend in the West Indies, and Mr Wace said that was a long way off, but though you had the wings of a dove and went to the uttermost parts of the earth, you couldn't get away from the Almighty. Agnes said that as long as he stayed away from Brympton the Almighty might have him and welcome; and this raised a laugh, though Mrs Blinder tried to look shocked, and Mr Wace said the bears would eat us.

We were all glad to hear that the West Indies were a long way off, and I remember that, in spite of Mr Wace's solemn looks, we had a very merry dinner that day in the hall. I don't know if it was because of my being in better spirits, but I

fancied Mrs Brympton looked better too, and seemed more cheerful in her manner. She had been for a walk in the morning, and after luncheon she lay down in her room, and I read aloud to her. When she dismissed me I went to my own room feeling quite bright and happy, and for the first time in weeks walked past the locked door without thinking of it. As I sat down to my work I looked out and saw a few snowflakes falling. The sight was pleasanter than the eternal rain, and I pictured to myself how pretty the bare gardens would look in their white mantle. It seemed to me as if the snow would cover up all the dreariness, indoors as well as out.

The fancy had hardly crossed my mind when I heard a step at my side. I looked up, thinking it was Agnes.

'Well, Agnes - ' said I, and the words froze on my tongue; for there, in the door, stood Emma Saxon.

I don't know how long she stood there. I only know I couldn't stir or take my eyes from her. Afterwards I was terribly frightened, but at the time it wasn't fear I felt, but something deeper and quieter. She looked at me long and long, and her face was just one dumb prayer to me - but how in the world was I to help her? Suddenly she turned, and I heard her walk down the passage. This time I wasn't afraid to follow - I felt that I must know what she wanted. I sprang up and ran out. She was at the other end of the passage, and I expected her to take the turn towards my mistress's room; but instead of that she pushed open the door that led to the back stairs. I followed her down the stairs, and across the passage-way to the back door. The kitchen and hall were empty at that hour, the servants being off duty, except for the footman, who was in the pantry. At the door she stood still a moment, with another look at me; then she turned the handle, and stepped out. For a minute I hesitated. Where was she leading me to? The door had closed softly after her, and I opened it and looked out, half-expecting to find that she had disappeared. But I saw her a few yards off hurrying across the court-yard to the path through the woods. Her figure looked black and lonely in the snow, and for a second my heart failed me and I thought of turning back. But all the while she was drawing me after her; and catching up an old shawl of Mrs Blinder's I ran out into the open.

Emma Saxon was in the wood-path now. She walked on steadily, and I followed at the same pace till we passed out

of the gates and reached the high road. Then she struck across the open fields to the village. By this time the ground was white, and as she climbed the slope of a bare hill ahead of me I noticed that she left no footprints behind her. At sight of that my heart shrivelled up within me and my knees were water. Somehow it was worse here than indoors. She made the whole countryside seem lonely as the grave, with none but us two in it, and no help in the wide world.

Once I tried to go back; but she turned and looked at me, and it was as if she had dragged me with ropes. After that I followed her like a dog. We came to the village and she led me through it, past the church and the blacksmith's shop, and down the lane to Mr Ranford's. Mr Ranford's house stands close to the road: a plain, old-fashioned building, with a flagged path leading to the door between box-borders. The lane was deserted, and as I turned into it I saw Emma Saxon pause under the old elm by the gate. And now another fear came over me. I saw that we had reached the end of our journey, and that it was my turn to act. All the way from Brympton I had been asking myself what she wanted of me, but I had followed in a trance, as it were, and not till I saw her stop at Mr Ranford's gate did my brain begin to clear itself. I stood a little way off in the snow, my heart beating fit to strangle me, and my feet frozen to the ground; and she stood under the elm and watched me.

I knew well enough that she hadn't led me there for nothing. I felt there was something I ought to say or do – but how was I to guess what it was? I had never thought harm of my mistress and Mr Ranford, but I was sure now that, from one cause or another, some dreadful thing hung over them. *She* knew what it was; she would tell me if she could; perhaps she would answer if I questioned her.

It turned me faint to think of speaking to her; but I plucked up heart and dragged myself across the few yards between us. As I did so, I heard the house door open and saw Mr Ranford approaching. He looked handsome and cheerful, as my mistress had looked that morning, and at sight of him the blood began to flow again in my veins.

'Why, Hartley,' said he, 'what's the matter? I saw you coming down the lane just now, and came out to see if you had taken root in the snow.' He stopped and stared at me. 'What are you looking at?' he says.

I turned towards the elm as he spoke, and his eyes followed me; but there was no one there. The lane was empty as far as the eye could reach.

A sense of helplessness came over me. She was gone, and I had not been able to guess what she wanted. Her last look had pierced me to the marrow; and yet it had not told me! All at once, I felt more desolate than when she had stood there watching me. It seemed as if she had left me all alone to carry the weight of the secret I couldn't guess. The snow went round me in great circles, and the ground fell away from me. . . .

A drop of brandy and the warmth of Mr Ranford's fire soon brought me to, and I insisted on being driven back at once to Brympton. It was nearly dark, and I was afraid my mistress might be wanting me. I explained to Mr Ranford that I had been out for a walk and had been taken with a fit of giddiness as I passed his gate. This was true enough; yet I never felt more like a liar than when I said it.

When I dressed Mrs Brympton for dinner she remarked on my pale looks and asked what ailed me. I told her I had a headache, and she said she would not require me again that evening, and advised me to go to bed.

It was a fact that I could scarcely keep on my feet; yet I had no fancy to spend a solitary evening in my room. I sat downstairs in the hall as long as I could hold my head up; but by nine I crept upstairs, too weary to care what happened if I could but get my head on a pillow. The rest of the household went to bed soon afterwards; they kept early hours when the master was away, and before ten I heard Mrs Blinder's door close, and Mr Wace's soon after.

It was a very still night, earth and air all muffled in snow. Once in bed I felt easier, and lay quiet, listening to the strange noises that come out in a house after dark. Once I thought I heard a door open and close again below: it might have been the glass door that led to the gardens. I got up and peered out of the window; but it was in the dark of the moon, and nothing visible outside but the streaking of snow against the panes.

I went back to bed and must have dozed, for I jumped awake to the furious ringing of my bell. Before my head was clear I had sprung out of bed and was dragging on my clothes. *It is going to happen now*, I heard myself saying; but what I meant I had no notion. My hands seemed to be

covered with glue – I thought I should never get into my clothes. At last I opened my door and peered down the passage. As far as my candle-flame carried, I could see nothing unusual ahead of me. I hurried on, breathless; but as I pushed open the baize door leading to the main hall my heart stood still, for there at the head of the stairs was Emma Saxon, peering dreadfully down into the darkness.

For a second I couldn't stir; but my hand slipped from the door, and as it swung shut the figure vanished. At the same instant there came another sound from below stairs – a stealthy mysterious sound, as of a latch-key turning in the house door. I ran to Mrs Brympton's room and knocked.

There was no answer, and I knocked again. This time I heard someone moving in the room; the bolt slipped back and my mistress stood before me. To my surprise I saw that she had not undressed for the night. She gave me a startled look.

'What is this, Hartley?' she says in a whisper. 'Are you ill? What are you doing here at this hour?'

'I am not ill, madam; but my bell rang.'

At that she turned pale, and seemed about to fall.

'You are mistaken,' she said harshly; 'I didn't ring. You must have been dreaming.' I had never heard her speak in such a tone. 'Go back to bed,' she said, closing the door on me.

But as she spoke I heard sounds again in the hall below; a man's step this time; and the truth leaped out on me.

'Madam,' I said, pushing past her, 'there is someone in the house –'

'Someone – ?'

'Mr Brympton, I think – I hear his step below –'

A dreadful look came over her, and without a word, she dropped flat at my feet. I fell on my knees and tried to lift her: by the way she breathed I saw it was no common faint. But as I raised her head there came quick steps on the stairs and across the hall: the door was flung open, and there stood Mr Brympton, in his travelling-clothes, the snow dripping from him. He drew back with a start as he saw me kneeling by my mistress.

'What the devil is this?' he shouted. He was less high-coloured than usual, and the red spot came out on his forehead.

'Mrs Brympton has fainted, sir,' said I.

He laughed unsteadily and pushed by me. 'It's a pity she

didn't choose a more convenient moment. I'm sorry to disturb her, but - '

I raised myself up, aghast at the man's action.

'Sir,' said I, 'are you mad? What are you doing?'

'Going to meet a friend,' said he, and seemed to make for the dressing-room.

At that my heart turned over. I don't know what I thought or feared; but I sprang up and caught him by the sleeve.

'Sir, sir,' said I, 'for pity's sake look to your wife!'

He shook me off furiously.

'It seems that's done for me,' says he, and caught hold of the dressing-room door.

At that moment I heard a slight noise inside. Slight as it was, he heard it too, and tore the door open; but as he did so he dropped back. On the threshold stood Emma Saxon. All was dark behind her, but I saw her plainly, and so did he. He threw up his hands as if to hide his face from her; and when I looked again she was gone.

He stood motionless, as if the strength had run out of him; and in the stillness my mistress suddenly raised herself, and opening her eyes fixed a look on him. Then she fell back, and I saw the death-flutter pass over her. . . .

We buried her on the third day, in a driving snow-storm. There were few people in the church, for it was bad weather to come from town, and I've a notion my mistress was one that hadn't many near friends. Mr Ranford was among the last to come, just before they carried her up the aisle. He was in black, of course, being such a friend of the family, and I never saw a gentleman so pale. As he passed me I noticed that he leaned a trifle on a stick he carried; and I fancy Mr Brympton noticed it too, for the red spot came out sharp on his forehead, and all through the service he kept staring across the church at Mr Ranford, instead of following the prayers as a mourner should.

When it was over and we went out to the graveyard, Mr Ranford had disappeared, and as soon as my poor mistress's body was underground, Mr Brympton jumped into the carriage nearest the gate and drove off without a word to any of us. I heard him call out, 'To the station,' and we servants went back alone to the house.

## KEEPING HIS PROMISE

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

It was eleven o'clock at night, and young Marriott was locked into his room, cramming as hard as he could cram. He was a 'Fourth Year Man' at Edinburgh University and he had been ploughed for this particular examination so often that his parents had positively declared they could no longer supply the funds to keep him there.

His rooms were cheap and dingy, but it was the lecture fees that took the money. So Marriott pulled himself together at last and definitely made up his mind that he would pass or die in the attempt, and for some weeks now he had been reading as hard as mortal man can read. He was trying to make up for lost time and money in a way that showed conclusively he did not understand the value of either. For no ordinary man – and Marriott was in every sense an ordinary man – can afford to drive the mind as he had lately been driving his, without sooner or later paying the cost.

Among the students he had few friends or acquaintances, and these few had promised not to disturb him at night, knowing he was at last reading in earnest. It was, therefore, with feelings a good deal stronger than mere surprise that he heard his door-bell ring on this particular night and realised that he was to have a visitor. Some men would simply have muffled the bell and gone on quietly with their work. But Marriott was not this sort. He was nervous. It would have bothered and pecked at his mind all night long not to know who the visitor was and what he wanted. The only thing to do, therefore, was to let him in – and out again – as quickly as possible.

The landlady went to bed at ten o'clock punctually, after which hour nothing would induce her to pretend she heard the bell, so Marriott jumped up from his books with an exclamation that augured ill for the reception of his caller, and prepared to let him in with his own hand.

The streets of Edinburgh town were very still at this late hour – it was late for Edinburgh – and in the quiet neighbour-

hood of F—— Street, where Marriott lived on the third floor, scarcely a sound broke the silence. As he crossed the floor, the bell rang a second time, with unnecessary clamour, and he unlocked the door and passed into the little hall-way with considerable wrath and annoyance in his heart at the insolence of the double interruption.

‘The fellows all know I’m reading for this exam. Why in the world do they come to bother me at such an unearthly hour?’

The inhabitants of the building, with himself, were medical students, general students, poor Writers to the Signet, and some others whose vocations were perhaps not so obvious. The stone staircase, dimly lighted at each floor by a gas-jet that would not turn above a certain height, wound down to the level of the street with no pretence at carpet or railing. At some levels it was cleaner than at others. It depended on the landlady of the particular level.

The acoustic properties of a spiral staircase seem to be peculiar. Marriott, standing by the open door, book in hand, thought every moment the owner of the footsteps would come into view. The sound of the boots was so close and so loud that they seemed to travel disproportionately in advance of their cause. Wondering who it could be, he stood ready with all manner of sharp greetings for the man who dared thus to disturb his work. But the man did not appear. The steps sounded almost under his nose, yet no one was visible.

A sudden queer sensation of fear passed over him – a faintness and a shiver down the back. It went, however, almost as soon as it came, and he was just debating whether he would call aloud to his invisible visitor, or slam the door and return to his books, when the cause of the disturbance turned the corner very slowly and came into view.

It was a stranger. He saw a youngish man, short of figure and very broad. His face was the colour of a piece of chalk, and the eyes, which were very bright, had heavy lines underneath them. Though the cheeks and chin were unshaven and the general appearance unkempt, the man was evidently a gentleman, for he was well dressed and bore himself with a certain air. But, strangest of all, he wore no hat, and carried none in his hand, and although rain had been falling steadily all the evening, he appeared to have neither overcoat nor umbrella.

A hundred questions sprang up in Marriott’s mind and

rushed to his lips, chief among which was something like 'Who in the world are you?' and 'What in the name of Heaven do you come to me for?' But none of these questions found time to express themselves in words, for almost at once the caller turned his head a little so that the gaslight in the hall fell upon his features from a new angle. Then in a flash Marriott recognised him.

'Field! Man alive! Is it you?' he gasped.

The Fourth Year Man was not lacking in intuition, and he perceived at once that here was a case for delicate treatment. He divined, without any actual process of thought, that the catastrophe often predicted had come at last, and that this man's father had turned him out of the house. They had been at a private school together years before, and though they had hardly met once since, the news had not failed to reach him from time to time with considerable detail, for the family lived near his own, and between certain of the sisters there was great intimacy. Young Field had gone wild later, he remembered hearing about it all – drink, a woman, opium, or something of the sort – he could not exactly call to mind.

'Come in,' he said at once, his anger vanishing. 'There's been something wrong, I can see. Come in, and tell me all about it and perhaps I can help – ' He hardly knew what to say, and stammered a lot more besides. The dark side of life, and the horror of it, belonged to a world that lay remote from his own select little atmosphere of books and dreamings. But he had a man's heart for all that.

He led the way across the hall, shutting the front door carefully behind him, and noticed as he did so that the other, though certainly sober, was unsteady on his legs, and evidently much exhausted. Marriott might not be able to pass his examinations, but he at least knew the symptoms of starvation – acute starvation, unless he was much mistaken – when they stared him in the face.

'Come along,' he said cheerfully, and with genuine sympathy in his voice. 'I'm glad to see you. I was going to have a bite of something to eat, and you're just in time to join me.'

The other made no audible reply, and shuffled so feebly with his feet that Marriott took his arm by way of support. He noticed for the first time that the clothes hung on him with pitiful looseness. The broad frame was literally hardly more

than a frame. He was as thin as a skeleton. But, as he touched him, the sensation of faintness and dread returned. It only lasted a moment, and then passed off, and he ascribed it not unnaturally to the distress and shock of seeing a former friend in such a pitiful plight.

'Better let me guide you. It's shamefully dark – this hall. I'm always complaining,' he said lightly, recognising by the weight upon his arm that the guidance was sorely needed, 'but the old cat never does anything except promise.' He led him to the sofa, wondering all the time where he had come from and how he had found out the address. It must be at least seven years since those days at the private school when they used to be such close friends.

'Now, if you'll forgive me for a minute,' he said, 'I'll get supper ready – such as it is. And don't bother to talk. Just take it easy on the sofa. I see you're dead tired. You can tell me about it afterwards, and we'll make plans.'

The other sat down on the edge of the sofa and stared in silence, while Marriott got out the brown loaf, scones, and a huge pot of marmalade that Edinburgh students always keep in their cupboards. His eyes shone with a brightness that suggested drugs, Marriott thought, stealing a glance at him from behind the cupboard door. He did not like yet to take a full square look. The fellow was in a bad way, and it would have been so like an examination to stare and wait for explanations. Besides, he was evidently almost too exhausted to speak. So, for reasons of delicacy – and for another reason as well which he could not exactly formulate to himself – he let his visitor rest apparently unnoticed, while he busied himself with the supper. He lit the spirit-lamp to make cocoa, and when the water was boiling he drew up the table with the good things to the sofa, so that Field need not have even the trouble of moving to a chair.

'Now, let's tuck in,' he said, 'and afterwards we'll have a pipe and a chat. I'm reading for an exam, you know, and I always have something about this time. It's jolly to have a companion.'

He looked up and caught his guest's eyes directed straight upon his own. An involuntary shudder ran through him from head to foot. The face opposite him was deadly white and wore a dreadful expression of pain and mental suffering.

'By gad!' he said, jumping up, 'I quite forgot. I've got

some whisky somewhere. What an ass I am. I never touch it myself when I'm working like this.'

He went to the cupboard and poured out a stiff glass which the other swallowed at a single gulp and without any water. Marriott watched him while he drank it, and at the same time noticed something else as well – Field's coat was all over dust, and on one shoulder was a bit of cobweb. It was perfectly dry; Field arrived on a soaking wet night without hat, umbrella, or overcoat, and yet perfectly dry, even dusty. Therefore he had been under cover. What did it all mean? Had he been hiding in the building? . . .

It was very strange. Yet he volunteered nothing; and Marriott had pretty well made up his mind by this time that he would not ask any questions until he had eaten and slept. Food and sleep were obviously what the poor devil needed most and first – he was pleased with his powers of ready diagnosis – and it would not be fair to press him till he had recovered a bit.

They ate their supper together while the host carried on a running one-sided conversation, chiefly about himself and his exams and his 'old cat' of a landlady, so that the guest need not utter a single word unless he really wished to – which he evidently did not! But, while he toyed with his food, feeling no desire to eat, the other ate voraciously. To see a hungry man devour cold scones, stale oatcake, and brown bread laden with marmalade was a revelation to this inexperienced student who had never known what it was to be without at least three meals a day. He watched in spite of himself, wondering why the fellow did not choke in the process.

But Field seemed to be as sleepy as he was hungry. More than once his head dropped and he ceased to masticate the food in his mouth. Marriott had positively to shake him before he would go on with his meal. A stronger emotion will overcome a weaker, but this struggle between the sting of real hunger and the magical opiate of overpowering sleep was a curious sight to the student, who watched it with mingled astonishment and alarm. He had heard of the pleasure it was to feed hungry men, and watch them eat, but he had never actually witnessed it, and he had no idea it was like this. Field ate like an animal – gobbled, stuffed, gorged. Marriott forgot his reading, and began to feel something very much like a lump in his throat.

'Afraid there's been awfully little to offer you, old man,' he managed to blurt out when at length the last scone had disappeared, and the rapid, one-sided meal was at an end. Field still made no reply, for he was almost asleep in his seat. He merely looked up wearily and gratefully.

'Now you must have some sleep, you know,' he continued, 'or you'll go to pieces. I shall be up all night reading for this blessed exam. You're more than welcome to my bed. Tomorrow we'll have a late breakfast and – and see what can be done – and make plans – I'm awfully good at making plans, you know,' he added with an attempt at lightness.

Field maintained his 'dead sleepy' silence, but appeared to acquiesce, and the other led the way into the bedroom, apologising as he did so to this half-starved son of a baronet – whose own home was almost a palace – for the size of the room. The weary guest, however, made no pretence of thanks or politeness. He merely steadied himself on his friend's arm as he staggered across the room, and then, with all his clothes on, dropped his exhausted body on the bed. In less than a minute he was to all appearances sound asleep.

For several minutes Marriott stood in the open door and watched him; praying devoutly that he might never find himself in a like predicament, and then fell to wondering what he would do with his unbidden guest on the morrow. But he did not stop long to think, for the call of his books was imperative, and happen what might, he must see to it that he passed that examination.

Having again locked the door into the hall, he sat down to his books and resumed his notes on *materia medica* where he had left off when the bell rang. But it was difficult for some time to concentrate his mind on the subject. His thoughts kept wandering to the picture of that white-faced, strange-eyed fellow, starved and dirty, lying in his clothes and boots on the bed. He recalled their schooldays together before they had drifted apart, and how they had vowed eternal friendship – and all the rest of it. And now! What horrible straits to be in. How could any man let the love of dissipation take such hold upon him?

But one of their vows together Marriott, it seemed, had completely forgotten. Just now, at any rate, it lay too far in the background of his memory to be recalled.

Through the half-open door – the bedroom led out of the

sitting-room and had no other door – came the sound of deep, long-drawn breathing, the regular steady breathing of a tired man, so tired that even to listen to it made Marriott almost want to go to sleep himself.

‘He needed it,’ reflected the student, ‘and perhaps it came only just in time!’

Perhaps so; for outside the bitter wind from across the Forth howled cruelly and drove the rain in cold streams against the window-panes, and down the deserted streets. Long before Marriott settled down again properly to his reading, he heard distinctly, as it were, through the sentences of the book, the heavy, deep breathing of the sleeper in the next room.

A couple of hours later, when he yawned and changed his books, he still heard the breathing, and went cautiously up to the door to look round.

At first the darkness of the room must have deceived him, or else his eyes were confused and dazzled by the recent glare of the reading-lamp. For a minute or two he could make out nothing at all but dark lumps of furniture, the mass of the chest of drawers by the wall, and the white patch where his bath stood in the centre of the floor.

Then the bed came slowly into view. And on it he saw the outline of the sleeping body gradually take shape before his eyes, growing up strangely into the darkness, till it stood out in marked relief – the long black form against the white counterpane.

He could hardly help smiling. Field had not moved an inch. He watched him a moment or two and then returned to his books. The night was full of the singing voices of the wind and rain. There was no sound of traffic; no hansoms clattered over the cobbles, and it was still too early for the milk-carts. He worked on steadily and conscientiously, only stopping now and again to change a book, or to sip some of the poisonous stuff that kept him awake and made his brain so active, and on these occasions Field’s breathing was always distinctly audible in the room. Outside, the storm continued to howl, but inside the house all was stillness. The shade of the reading-lamp threw all the light upon the littered table, leaving the other end of the room in comparative darkness. The bedroom door was exactly opposite him where he sat. There was nothing to disturb the worker,

nothing but an occasional rush of wind against the windows, and a slight pain in his arm.

This pain, however, which he was unable to account for, grew once or twice very acute. It bothered him; and he tried to remember how, and when, he could have bruised himself so severely, but without success.

At length the page before him turned from yellow to grey, and there were sounds of wheels in the street below. It was four o'clock. Marriott leaned back and yawned prodigiously. Then he drew back the curtains. The storm had subsided and the Castle Rock was shrouded in mist. With another yawn he turned away from the dreary outlook and prepared to sleep the remaining four hours till breakfast on the sofa. Field was still breathing heavily in the next room, and he first tiptoed across the floor to take another look at him.

Peering cautiously round the half-opened door his first glance fell upon the bed now plainly discernible in the grey light of morning. He stared hard. Then he rubbed his eyes. Then he rubbed his eyes again and thrust his head farther round the edge of the door. With fixed eyes, he stared harder still, and harder.

But it made no difference at all. He was staring into an empty room.

The sensation of fear he had felt when Field first appeared upon the scene returned suddenly, but with much greater force. He became conscious, too, that his left arm was throbbing violently and causing him great pain. He stood wondering, and staring, and trying to collect his thoughts. He was trembling from head to foot.

By a great effort of the will he left the support of the door and walked forward boldly into the room.

There, upon the bed, was the impress of a body, where Field had lain and slept. There was the mark of the head on the pillow, and the slight indentation at the foot of the bed where the boots had rested on the counterpane. And there, plainer than ever – for he was closer to it – was *the breathing!*

Marriott tried to pull himself together. With a great effort he found his voice and called his friend aloud by name!

'Field! Is that you? Where are you?'

There was no reply; but the breathing continued without interruption, coming directly from the bed. His voice had such an unfamiliar sound that Marriott did not care to

repeat his questions, but he went down on his knees and examined the bed above and below, pulling the mattress off finally, and taking the coverings away separately one by one. But though the sounds continued there was no visible sign of Field, nor was there any space in which a human being, however small, could have concealed itself. He pulled the bed out from the wall, but the sound *stayed where it was*. It did not move with the bed.

Marriott, finding self-control a little difficult in his weary condition, at once set about a thorough search of the room. He went through the cupboard, the chest of drawers, the little alcove where the clothes hung – everything. But there was no sign of any one. The small window near the ceiling was closed; and, anyhow, was not large enough to let a cat pass. The sitting-room door was locked on the inside; he could not have got out that way. Curious thoughts began to trouble Marriott's mind, bringing in their train unwelcome sensations. He grew more and more excited; he searched the bed again till it resembled the scene of a pillow fight; he searched both rooms, knowing all the time it was useless – and then he searched again. A cold perspiration broke out all over his body; and the sound of heavy breathing, all this time, never ceased to come from the corner where Field had lain down to sleep.

Then he tried something else. He pushed the bed back exactly into its original position – and himself lay down upon it just where his guest had lain. But the same instant he sprang up again in a single bound. The breathing was close beside him, almost on his cheek, and between him and the wall! Not even a child could have squeezed into the space.

He went back into his sitting-room, opened the windows, welcoming all the light and air possible, and tried to think the whole matter over quietly and clearly. Men who read too hard, and slept too little, he knew, were sometimes troubled with very vivid hallucinations. Again he calmly reviewed every incident of the night: his accurate sensations; the vivid details; the emotions stirred in him; the dreadful feast – no single hallucination could ever combine all these and cover so long a period of time. But with less satisfaction he thought of the recurring faintness, and curious sense of horror that had once or twice come over him, and then of the violent pains in his arm. These were quite unaccountable.

Moreover, now that he began to analyse and examine, there was one other thing that fell upon him like a sudden revelation: *During the whole time Field had not actually uttered a single word!* Yet, as though in mockery upon his reflections, there came ever from that inner room the sound of the breathing, long-drawn, deep, and regular. The thing was incredible. It was absurd.

Haunted by visions of brain fever and insanity, Marriott put on his cap and mackintosh and left the house. The morning air on Arthur's Seat would blow the cobwebs from his brain; the scent of the heather, and above all, the sight of the sea. He roamed over the wet slopes above Holyrood for a couple of hours, and did not return until the exercise had shaken some of the horror out of his bones, and given him a ravening appetite into the bargain.

As he entered he saw that there was another man in the room, standing against the window with his back to the light. He recognised his fellow-student, Greene, who was reading for the same examination.

'Read hard all night, Marriott,' he said, 'and thought I'd drop in here to compare notes and have some breakfast. You're out early?' he added, by way of a question. Marriott said he had a headache and a walk had helped it, and Greene nodded and said, 'Ah!' But when the girl had set the steaming porridge on the table and gone out again, he went on with rather a forced tone, 'Didn't know you had any friends who drank, Marriott?'

This was obviously tentative, and Marriott replied dryly that he did not know it either.

'Sounds just as if some chap were "sleeping it off" in there, doesn't it, though?' persisted the other, with a nod in the direction of the bedroom, and looking curiously at his friend. The two men stared steadily at each other for several seconds, and then Marriott said earnestly:

'Then you hear it too, thank God!'

'Of course I hear it. The door's open. Sorry if I wasn't meant to.'

'Oh, I don't mean that,' said Marriott, lowering his voice. 'But I'm awfully relieved. Let me explain. Of course, if you hear it too, then it's all right; but really it frightened me more than I can tell you. I thought I was going to have brain fever, or something, and you know what a lot depends on this

exam. It always begins with sounds, or visions, or some sort of beastly hallucination, and I –'

'Rot!' ejaculated the other impatiently. 'What *are* you talking about?'

'Now, listen to me, Greene,' said Marriott, as calmly as he could, for the breathing was still plainly audible, 'and I'll tell you what I mean, only don't interrupt.' And thereupon he related exactly what had happened during the night, telling everything, even down to the pain in his arm. When it was over he got up from the table and crossed the room.

'You hear the breathing now plainly, don't you?' he said. Greene said he did. 'Well, come with me, and we'll search the room together.' The other, however, did not move from his chair.

'I've been in already,' he said sheepishly; 'I heard the sounds and thought it was you. The door was ajar – so I went in.'

Marriott made no comment, but pushed the door open as wide as it would go. As it opened, the sound of breathing grew more and more distinct.

'*Someone* must be in there,' said Greene under his breath.

'*Someone* is in there, but *where*?' said Marriott. Again he urged his friend to go in with him. But Greene refused point-blank; said he had been in once and had searched the room and there was nothing there. He would not go in again for a good deal.

They shut the door and retired into the other room to talk it all over with many pipes. Greene questioned his friend very closely, but without illuminating result, since questions cannot alter facts.

'The only thing that ought to have a proper, a logical explanation is the pain in my arm,' said Marriott, rubbing that member with an attempt at a smile. 'It hurts so infernally and aches all the way up. I can't remember bruising it, though.'

'Let me examine it for you,' said Greene. 'I'm awfully good at bones in spite of the examiners' opinion to the contrary.' It was a relief to play the fool a bit and Marriott took his coat off and rolled up his sleeve.

'By George, though, I'm bleeding!' he exclaimed. 'Look here! What on earth's this?'

On the forearm, quite close to the wrist, was a thin red line.

There was a tiny drop of apparently fresh blood on it. Greene came over and looked closely at it for some minutes. Then he sat back in his chair, looking curiously at his friend's face.

'You've scratched yourself without knowing it,' he said presently.

'There's no sign of a bruise. It must be something else that made the arm ache.'

Marriott sat very still, staring silently at his arm as though the solution of the whole mystery lay there actually written upon the skin.

'What's the matter? I see nothing very strange about a scratch,' said Greene, in an unconvincing sort of voice. 'It was your cuff-links probably. Last night in your excitement -'

But Marriott, white to the very lips, was trying to speak. The sweat stood in great beads on his forehead. At last he leaned forward close to his friend's face.

'Look,' he said, in a low voice that shook a little. 'Do you see that red mark? I mean *underneath* what you call the scratch?'

Greene admitted he saw something or other, and Marriott wiped the place clean with his handkerchief and told him to look again more closely.

'Yes, I see,' returned the other lifting his head after a moment's careful inspection. 'It looks like an old scar.'

'It is an old scar,' whispered Marriott, his lips trembling. 'Now it all comes back to me.'

'All what?' Greene fidgeted on his chair. He tried to laugh, but without success. His friend seemed bordering on collapse.

'Hush! Be quiet, and - I'll tell you,' he said. '*Field made that scar.*'

For a whole minute the two men looked each other full in the face without speaking.

'Field made that scar!' repeated Marriott at length in a louder voice.

'Field! You mean - last night?'

'No, not last night. Years ago - at school, with his knife. And I made a scar in his arm with mine.' Marriott was talking rapidly now.

'We exchanged drops of blood in each other's cuts. He put a drop into my arm and I put one into his -'

'In the name of Heaven, what for?'

'It was a boys' compact. We made a sacred pledge, a

bargain. I remember it all perfectly now. We had been reading some dreadful book and we swore to appear to one another – I mean, whoever died first swore to show himself to the other. And we sealed the compact with each other's blood. I remember it all so well – the hot summer afternoon in the playground, seven years ago – and one of the masters caught us and confiscated the knives – and I have never thought of it again to this day –'

'And you mean –' stammered Greene.

But Marriott made no answer. He got up and crossed the room and lay down wearily upon the sofa, hiding his face in his hands.

Greene himself was a bit nonplussed. He left his friend alone for a little while, thinking it all over again. Suddenly an idea seemed to strike him. He went over to where Marriott still lay motionless on the sofa and roused him. In any case it was better to face the matter, whether there was an explanation or not. Giving in was always the silly exit.

'I say, Marriott,' he began, as the other turned his white face up to him. 'There's no good being so upset about it. I mean – if it's all a hallucination we know what to do. And if it isn't – well, we know what to think, don't we?'

'I suppose so. But it frightens me horribly for some reason,' returned his friend in a hushed voice. 'And that poor devil –'

'But, after all, if the worst is true and – and that chap *has* kept his promise – well, he has, that's all, isn't it?'

Marriott nodded.

'There's only one thing that occurs to me,' Greene went on, 'and that is, are you quite sure that – that he really ate like that – I mean that he actually *ate anything at all*?' he finished, blurting out all his thought.

Marriott stared at him for a moment and then said he could easily make certain. He spoke quietly. After the main shock no lesser surprise could affect him.

'I put the things away myself,' he said, 'after we had finished. They are on the third shelf in that cupboard. No one's touched 'em since.'

He pointed without getting up, and Greene took the hint and went over to look.

'Exactly,' he said, after a brief examination; 'just as I thought. It was partly hallucination, at any rate. The things

haven't been touched. Come and see for yourself.'

Together they examined the shelf. There was the brown loaf, the plate of stale scones, the oatcake, all untouched. Even the glass of whisky Marriott had poured out stood there with the whisky still in it.

'You were feeding – no one,' said Greene. 'Field ate and drank nothing. He was not there at all!'

'But the breathing?' urged the other in a low voice, staring with a dazed expression on his face.

Greene did not answer. He walked over to the bedroom, while Marriott followed him with his eyes. He opened the door, and listened. There was no need for words. The sound of deep, regular breathing came floating through the air. There was no hallucination about that, at any rate. Marriott could hear it where he stood on the other side of the room.

Greene closed the door and came back. 'There's only one thing to do,' he declared with decision. 'Write home and find out about him, and meanwhile come and finish your reading in my rooms. I've got an extra bed.'

'Agreed,' returned the Fourth Year Man; 'there's no hallucination about that exam; I must pass that whatever happens.'

And this was what they did.

It was about a week later when Marriott got the answer from his sister. Part of it he read out to Greene:

'It is curious,' she wrote, 'that in your letter you should have inquired after Field. It seems a terrible thing, but you know only a short while ago Sir John's patience became exhausted, and he turned him out of the house, they say without a penny. Well, what do you think? He has killed himself. At least, it looks like suicide. Instead of leaving the house, he went down into the cellar and simply starved himself to death. . . . They're trying to suppress it, of course, but I heard it all from my maid, who got it from their footman. . . . They found the body on the 14th, and the doctor said he had died about twelve hours before. . . . He was dreadfully thin. . . .'

'Then he died on the 13th,' said Greene.

Marriott nodded.

'That's the very night he came to see you.'

Marriott nodded again.

## THE COAT

A. E. D. SMITH

I am quite aware that the other fellows in the office regard me as something of an oddity – as being rather a ‘queer bird’, in fact. Well, of course, a man who happens to be of a studious disposition, who dislikes noise and prefers his own company to that of empty-headed companions, and who, moreover, is compelled by defective vision to wear thick glasses, is always liable to be thus misjudged by inferior minds; and ordinarily, I treat the opinion of my colleagues with the contempt it deserves. But at this particular moment I was beginning to think that perhaps, after all, there might be something to be said for their view. For, though I might still repudiate the ‘queer bird’ part of the business, undoubtedly I was an ass – a first-class chump; otherwise I should have been spending my holidays in a nice comfortable way with the rest of the normal world, listening to the Pierrots or winking at the girls on the promenade of some seaside resort at home, instead of having elected to set out alone on this idiotic push-bike tour of a little-known part of France. Drenched, hungry and lost; a stranger in a strange land; dispiritedly pushing before me a heavily-laden bicycle with a gashed tyre – such was the present result of my asinine choice.

The storm had overtaken me miles from anywhere, on a wild road over a spur of the Vosges, and for nearly two hours I had trudged through the pelting rain without encountering a living soul or the least sign of human habitation.

And then, at long last, rounding a bend, I glimpsed just ahead of me the chimney-pots and gables of a fair-sized house. It was a lonely, desolate-looking place standing amid a clump of trees a little way back from the road, and somehow, even at a distance, did not convey a very inviting impression. Nevertheless, in that wilderness, it was a welcome enough sight, and in the hope of finding temporary shelter and possibly a little badly-needed refreshment, I quickened my pace towards it. Two hundred yards brought me to the entrance gates, and here I suffered a grievous disappointment;

for the roofless porter's lodge, the dilapidated old gates hanging askew on their hinges, and the over-grown drive beyond, plainly indicated that the place was no longer inhabited.

I speedily comforted myself, however, with the reflection that in the circumstances even a deserted house was not to be despised as a refuge. Once under cover of some kind, I might make shift to wring out my drenched clothing and repair my damaged mount; and without further ado I pushed my bicycle up the long-neglected drive and reached the terrace in front of the house itself. It proved to be an old château, half smothered in creepers and vines that had long gone wild, and, judging by the carved stone coat-of-arms over the main entrance, had once been occupied by a person of some quality. Mounted on a pedestal on either side of the iron-studded front door stood a rusty carronade – trophies, probably, of some long-forgotten war in which the former occupier had played a part. Most of the windows had been boarded up, and it was evident that the place had stood empty for many years.

I tried the front door. To my surprise it was unfastened, and a thrust of my shoulder sent it creaking grudgingly back on its hinges. My nostrils, as I stepped into the dim, wide hall, were at once assailed by the stale, disagreeable odour of rotting woodwork and mouldy hangings and carpets. For a moment or two I stood peering uncertainly about me, with the slight feeling of eeriness that one usually experiences when entering an old, empty house. Facing me was a broad staircase, with a long, stained-glass window, almost opaque with dirt and cobwebs, at its head. I mounted the stairs, and throwing open the first door at hand, found myself looking into a spacious, handsomely furnished room that had evidently once been the chief apartment of the house, though long neglect and disuse had now reduced it to a sorry state. The ornate cornice hung here and there in strips, and in one corner the plaster of the ceiling had come down altogether. Green mould covered the eighteenth-century furniture; curtains and draperies hung in tatters; and one half of the beautiful old Persian carpet, from a point near the door right across to the fireplace, was overspread by an evil-smelling, bright orange fungus.

The fireplace gave me an idea. Could I but find fuel I might light a fire, make myself a hot drink, and get my clothes properly dried.

A little searching in the outbuildings discovered a sufficient quantity of old sticks to serve my purpose, and with a bundle of them under my coat I re-entered the house and briskly made my way upstairs again. But on the threshold of the big room, without quite knowing why, I suddenly checked. It was as though my legs, of their own volition, had all at once become reluctant to carry me farther into the apartment – as if something quite outside of me were urging me to turn about and retreat. I laid the sticks down at my feet, and for a moment or two stood there uncertainly in the doorway. I was beginning to sense some subtle suggestion of danger in the atmosphere of the place. Everything was apparently just as I had left it; yet I had an uneasy sort of feeling that during my brief absence something evil had entered that room and left it again.

I am neither a nervous nor a superstitious person; yet I found myself, a moment later, rather shamefacedly picking up my sticks and moving back towards the head of the stairs. Actually, it was not so much fear as a vague, precautionary sense of uneasiness that prompted me. It had occurred to me that perhaps I might feel more comfortable if I remained nearer to the front door, and made my fire in one of the rooms on the ground floor. If – it was an idiotic fancy, I know – but . . . well, if anything – er – queer DID happen, and I had to make a sudden bolt for it, I could get out quicker that way.

It was on this second descent of the stairs, as I faced the light from the open front door, that I suddenly noticed something that pulled me up with a decided start. Running up the centre of the staircase, and quite fresh in the thick dust, was a broad, broken sort of track, exactly as though someone had recently trailed up an empty sack or something of that nature.

From the foot of the staircase I traced this track across the hall to a spot immediately below an old, moth-eaten coat that hung from one of a row of coat-pegs on the opposite wall. And then I saw that similar tracks traversed the hall in various directions, some terminating before the doors on either side, others leading past the foot of the stairs to the rear regions of the house, but all seeming to radiate from the same point below the coat-pegs. And the queerest thing about it all was that of footprints, other than my own, there was not a sign.

Uneasiness once more assailed me. The house appeared to

be uninhabited, and yet, plainly someone, or something, had recently been in the place. Who, or what, was the restless, questing creature that had made those strange tracks to and from the old coat? Was it some half-witted vagrant – a woman possibly – whose trailing draperies obliterated her own footprints?

I had a closer look at the old garment. It was a military greatcoat of ancient pattern with one or two tarnished silver buttons still attached to it, and had evidently seen much service. Turning it round on its peg with a gingerly finger and thumb, I discovered that just below the left shoulder there was a round hole as big as a penny, surrounded by an area of scorched and stained cloth, as though a heavy pistol had been fired into it at point-blank range. If a pistol bullet had indeed made that hole, then obviously, the old coat at one period of its existence had clothed a dead man.

A sudden repugnance for the thing overcame me, and with a slight shudder I let go of it. It may have been fancy or not, but all at once it seemed to me that there was more than an odour of mould and rotting cloth emanating from the thing – that there was a taint of putrefying flesh and bone. . . .

A taint of animal corruption – faint but unmistakable – I could sniff it in the air; and with it, something less definable but no less real – a sort of sixth-sense feeling that the whole atmosphere of the place was slowly becoming charged with evil emanations from a black and shameful past.

With an effort I pulled myself together. After all, what was there to be scared about? I had no need to fear human marauders, for in my hip pocket I carried a small but serviceable automatic; and as for ghosts, well, if such existed, they didn't usually 'walk' in the daytime. The place certainly felt creepy, and I shouldn't have cared to spend the night there; but it would be ridiculous to allow mere idle fancies to drive me out again into that beastly rain before I'd made myself that badly needed hot drink and mended my bicycle.

I therefore opened the door nearest to me, and entered a smallish room that apparently had once been used as a study. The fireplace was on the side opposite to the door, and the wide, ancient grate was still choked with the ashes of the last log consumed there. I picked up the poker – a cumbersome old thing with a knob as big as an orange – raked out the ashes, and laid my sticks in approved Boy Scout fashion. But

the wood was damp, and after I had used up half my matches, refused to do more than smoulder, whilst a back-draught from the chimney filled the room with smoke. In desperation I went down on my hands and knees and tried to rouse the embers into flame by blowing on them. And in the middle of this irksome operation I was startled by a sound of movement in the hall – a single soft ‘flop’, as though some one had flung down a garment.

I was on my feet in a flash, listening with every nerve a-taut. No further sound came, and, automatic in hand, I tiptoed to the door. There was nothing in the hall; nothing to be heard at all save the steady swish of the rain outside. But from a spot on the floor directly below the old coat the dust was rising in a little eddying cloud, as though it had just been disturbed.

‘Pah! A rat,’ I told myself, and went back to my task.

More vigorous blowing on the embers, more raking and poking, more striking of matches – and, in the midst of it, again came that curious noise – not very loud, but plain and unmistakable.

Once more I went into the hall, and once more, except for another little cloud of dust rising from precisely the same spot as before, there was nothing to be seen. But that sixth-sense warning of imminent danger was becoming more insistent. I had the feeling now that I was no longer alone in the old, empty hall – that some unclean, invisible presence was lurking there, tainting the very air with its foulness.

‘It’s no use,’ I said to myself. ‘I may be a nervous fool, but I can’t stand any more of this. I’ll collect my traps and clear out whilst the going’s good.’

With this, I went back into the room, and keeping a nervous eye cocked on the door, began with rather panicky haste to re-pack my haversack. And just as I was in the act of tightening the last strap there came from the hall a low, evil chuckle, followed by the sound of stealthy movement. I whipped out my weapon and stood where I was in the middle of the floor, facing the door, with my blood turning to ice. Through the chink between the door hinges I saw a shadow pass; then the door creaked a little, slowly began to open, and round it there came – the COAT.

It stood there upright in the doorway, as God is above me – swaying a little as though uncertain of its balance – collar

and shoulders extended as though by an invisible wearer – the old, musty coat I had seen hanging in the hall.

For a space that seemed an eternity I stood like a man of stone, facing the Thing as it seemed to pause on the threshold. A dreadful sort of hypnotism held me rooted to the spot on which I stood – a hypnotism that completely paralysed my body, and caused the pistol to slip from my nerveless fingers, and yet left my brain clear. Mingled with my frozen terror was a feeling of deadly nausea. I knew that I was in the presence of ultimate Evil – that the very aura of the Hell-engendered Thing reared there in the doorway was contamination – that its actual touch would mean not only the instant destruction of my body, but the everlasting damnation of my soul.

And now It was coming into the room – with an indescribable bobbing sort of motion, the empty sleeves jerking grotesquely at its sides, the skirts flopping and trailing in the dust, was slowly coming towards me; and step by step, with my bulging eyes riveted in awful fascination on the Thing, I was recoiling before it. Step by step, with the rigid, unconscious movement of an automaton, I drew back until I was brought up with my back pressed into the fireplace and could retreat no farther. And still, with deadly malevolent purpose, the Thing crept towards me. The empty sleeves were rising and shakily reaching out towards my throat. In another moment they would touch me, and then I knew with the most dreadful certainty that my reason would snap. A coherent thought somehow came into my burning brain – something that I had read or heard of long ago . . . the power . . . of the . . . holy sign . . . against . . . the forces of evil. With a last desperate effort of will I stretched out a palsied finger and made the sign of the Cross. . . . And in that instant, my other hand, scrabbling frenziedly at the wall behind me, came into contact with something cold and hard and round. It was the knob of the old, heavy poker.

The touch of the cold iron seemed to give me instant re-possession of my faculties. With lightning swiftness I swung up the heavy poker and struck with all my force at the nightmare Horror before me. And lo! on the instant, the Thing collapsed, and became an old coat – nothing more – lying there in a heap at my feet. Yet, on my oath, as I cleared the hellish thing in a flying leap, and fled from the room, I

saw it, out of the tail of my eye, gathering itself together and making shape, as it were, to scramble after me.

Once outside that accursed house I ran as never man ran before, and I remember nothing more until I found myself, half fainting, before the door of a little inn.

'Bring wine, in the name of God!' I cried, staggering inside.

Wine was brought, and a little wondering group stood round me while I drank.

I tried to explain to them in my bad French. They continued to regard me with puzzled looks. At length a look of understanding came into the landlord's face.

'Mon dieu!' he gasped. 'Is it possible that Monsieur has been in *that place*! Quick, Juliette! Monsieur will need another bottle of wine.'

Later, I got something of the story from the landlord, though he was by no means eager to tell it. The deserted house had once been occupied by a retired officer of the first Napoleon's army – a semi-madman with a strain of African blood in him. Judging from the landlord's story, he must have been one of the worst men that God ever allowed to walk the earth. 'Most certainly, monsieur, he was a bad man – that one,' concluded my host. 'He killed his wife and tortured every living thing he could lay hands on – even, it is said, his own daughters. In the end, one of them shot him in the back. The old château has an evil name. If you offered a million francs, you would not get one of our country-folks to go near the place.'

As I said at the beginning, I know that the other fellows in the office are inclined, as it is, to regard me as being a bit queer; so I haven't told any of them this story. Nevertheless, it's perfectly true.

My brand-new bicycle and touring traps are probably still lying where I left them in the hall of that devil-ridden château. Anybody who cares to collect them may keep them.

## THE FOUR-FIFTEEN EXPRESS

AMELIA B. EDWARDS

The events which I am about to relate took place between nine and ten years ago. Sebastopol had fallen in the early spring, the peace of Paris had been concluded since March, our commercial relations with the Russian empire were but recently renewed; and I, returning home after my first northward journey since the war, was well pleased with the prospect of spending the month of December under the hospitable and thoroughly English roof of my excellent friend, Jonathan Jelf, Esq., of Dumbleton Manor, Clayborough, East Anglia. Travelling in the interests of the well-known firm in which it is my lot to be a junior partner, I had been called upon to visit not only the capitals of Russia and Poland, but had found it also necessary to pass some weeks among the trading ports of the Baltic; whence it came that the year was already far spent before I again set foot on English soil, and that, instead of shooting pheasants with him, as I had hoped, in October, I came to be my friend's guest during the more genial Christmas-tide.

My voyage over, and a few days given up to business in Liverpool and London, I hastened down to Clayborough with all the delight of a school-boy whose holidays are at hand. My way lay by the Great East Anglian line as far as Clayborough station, where I was to be met by one of the Dumbleton carriages and conveyed across the remaining nine miles of country. It was a foggy afternoon, singularly warm for the 4th of December, and I had arranged to leave London by the 4.15 express. The early darkness of winter had already closed in; the lamps were lighted in the carriages; a clinging damp dimmed the windows, adhered to the door-handles, and pervaded all the atmosphere; while the gas-jets at the neighbouring book-stand diffused a luminous haze that only served to make the gloom of the terminus more visible. Having arrived some seven minutes before the starting of the train, and, by the connivance of the guard, taken sole possession of an empty compartment, I lighted my travelling-lamp,

made myself particularly snug, and settled down to the undisturbed enjoyment of a book and a cigar. Great, therefore, was my disappointment when, at the last moment, a gentleman came hurrying along the platform, glanced into my carriage, opened the locked door with a private key, and stepped in.

It struck me at the first glance that I had seen him before – a tall, spare man, thin-lipped, light-eyed, with an ungraceful stoop in the shoulders, and scant grey hair worn somewhat long upon the collar. He carried a light waterproof coat, an umbrella, and a large brown japanned deed-box, which last he placed under the seat. This done, he felt carefully in his breast-pocket, as if to make certain of the safety of his purse or pocket-book, laid his umbrella in the netting overhead, spread the waterproof across his knees, and exchanged his hat for a travelling-cap of some Scotch material. By this time the train was moving out of the station and into the faint grey of the wintry twilight beyond.

I now recognised my companion. I recognised him from the moment when he removed his hat and uncovered the lofty, furrowed, and somewhat narrow brow beneath. I had met him, as I distinctly remembered, some three years before, at the very house for which, in all probability, he was now bound, like myself. His name was Dwerrihouse, he was a lawyer by profession, and, if I was not greatly mistaken, was first cousin to the wife of my host. I knew also that he was a man eminently 'well-to-do', both as regarded his professional and private means. The Jelfs entertained him with that sort of observant courtesy which falls to the lot of the rich relation, the children made much of him, and the old butler, albeit somewhat surly 'to the general', treated him with deference. I thought, observing him by the vague mixture of lamplight and twilight, that Mrs Jelf's cousin looked all the worse for the three years' wear and tear which had gone over his head since our last meeting. He was very pale, and had a restless light in his eye that I did not remember to have observed before. The anxious lines, too, about his mouth were deepened, and there was a cavernous, hollow look about his cheeks and temples which seemed to speak of sickness or sorrow. He had glanced at me as he came in, but without any gleam of recognition in his face. Now he glanced again, as I fancied, somewhat doubtfully. When he did so for the third or fourth time I ventured to address him.

'Mr John Dwerrihouse, I think?'

'That is my name,' he replied.

'I had the pleasure of meeting you at Dumbleton about three years ago.'

'I thought I knew your face,' he said; 'but your name, I regret to say -'

'Langford - William Langford. I have known Jonathan Jelf since we were boys together at Merchant Taylors', and I generally spend a few weeks at Dumbleton in the shooting season. I suppose we are bound for the same destination.'

'Not if you are on your way to the manor,' he replied. 'I am travelling upon business - rather troublesome business, too - while you, doubtless, have only pleasure in view.'

'Just so. I am in the habit of looking forward to this visit as to the brightest three weeks in all the year.'

'It is a pleasant house,' said Mr Dwerrihouse.

'The pleasantest I know.'

'And Jelf is thoroughly hospitable.'

'The best and kindest fellow in the world!'

'They have invited me to spend Christmas week with them,' pursued Mr Dwerrihouse, after a moment's pause.

'And you are coming?'

'I cannot tell. It must depend on the issue of this business which I have in hand. You have heard perhaps that we are about to construct a branch line from Blackwater to Stockbridge.'

I explained that I had been for some months away from England, and had therefore heard nothing of the contemplated improvement.

Mr Dwerrihouse smiled complacently.

'It *will* be an improvement,' he said, 'a great improvement. Stockbridge is a flourishing town, and needs but a more direct railway communication with the metropolis to become an important centre of commerce. This branch was my own idea. I brought the project before the board, and have myself superintended the execution of it up to the present time.'

'You are an East Anglian director, I presume?'

'My interest in the company,' replied Mr Dwerrihouse, 'is threefold. I am a director, I am a considerable shareholder, and, as head of the firm of Dwerrihouse, Dwerrihouse and Craik, I am the company's principal solicitor.'

Loquacious, self-important, full of his pet project, and

apparently unable to talk on any other subject, Mr Dwerrihouse then went on to tell of the opposition he had encountered and the obstacles he had overcome in the cause of the Stockbridge branch. I was entertained with a multitude of local details and local grievances. The rapacity of one squire, the impracticability of another, the indignation of the rector whose glebe was threatened, the culpable indifference of the Stockbridge townspeople, who could *not* be brought to see that their most vital interests hinged upon a junction with the Great East Anglian line; the spite of the local newspaper, and the unheard-of difficulties attending the Common question, were each and all laid before me with a circumstantiality that possessed the deepest interest for my excellent fellow-traveller, but none whatever for myself. From these, to my despair, he went on to more intricate matters: to the approximate expenses of construction per mile; to the estimates sent in by different contractors; to the probable traffic returns of the new line; to the provisional clauses of the new act as enumerated in Schedule D of the company's last half-yearly report; and so on and on and on, till my head ached and my attention flagged and my eyes kept closing in spite of every effort that I made to keep them open. At length I was roused by these words:

'Seventy-five thousand pounds, cash down.'

'Seventy-five thousand pounds, cash down,' I repeated, in the liveliest tone I could assume. 'That is a heavy sum.'

'A heavy sum to carry here,' replied Mr Dwerrihouse, pointing significantly to his breast-pocket, 'but a mere fraction of what we shall ultimately have to pay.'

'You do not mean to say that you have seventy-five thousand pounds at this moment upon your person?' I exclaimed.

'My good sir, have I not been telling you so for the last half-hour?' said Mr Dwerrihouse, testily. 'That money has to be paid over at half-past eight o'clock this evening, at the office of Sir Thomas's solicitors, on completion of the deed of sale.'

'But how will you get across by night from Blackwater to Stockbridge with seventy-five thousand pounds in your pocket?'

'To Stockbridge!' echoed the lawyer. 'I find I have made myself very imperfectly understood. I thought I had explained

how this sum only carries us as far as Mallingford – the first stage, as it were, of our journey – and how our route from Blackwater to Mallingford lies entirely through Sir Thomas Liddell's property.'

'I beg your pardon,' I stammered. 'I fear my thoughts were wandering. So you only go as far as Mallingford tonight?'

'Precisely. I shall get a conveyance from the Blackwater Arms. And you?'

'Oh, Jelf sends a trap to meet me at Clayborough! Can I be the bearer of any message from you?'

'You may say, if you please, Mr Langford, that I wished I could have been your companion all the way, and that I will come over, if possible, before Christmas.'

'Nothing more?'

Mr Dwerrihouse smiled grimly. 'Well,' he said, 'you may tell my cousin that she need not burn the hall down in my honour *this* time, and that I shall be obliged if she will order the blue-room chimney to be swept before I arrive.'

'That sounds tragic. Had you a conflagration on the occasion of your last visit to Dumbleton?'

'Something like it. There had been no fire lighted in my bedroom since the spring, the flue was foul, and the rooks had built in it; so when I went up to dress for dinner I found the room full of smoke and the chimney on fire. Are we already at Blackwater?'

The train had gradually come to a pause while Mr Dwerrihouse was speaking, and, on putting my head out of the window, I could see the station some few hundred yards ahead. There was another train before us blocking the way, and the guard was making use of the delay to collect the Blackwater tickets. I had scarcely ascertained our position when the ruddy-faced official appeared at our carriage door.

'Tickets, sir!' said he.

'I am for Clayborough,' I replied, holding out the tiny pink card.

He took it, glanced at it by the light of his little lantern, gave it back, looked, as I fancied, somewhat sharply at my fellow-traveller, and disappeared.

'He did not ask for yours,' I said, with some surprise.

'They never do,' replied Mr Dwerrihouse; 'they all know me, and of course I travel free.'

'Blackwater! Blackwater!' cried the porter, running along

the platform beside us as we glided into the station.

Mr Dwerrihouse pulled out his deed-box, put his travelling-cap in his pocket, resumed his hat, took down his umbrella, and prepared to be gone.

'Many thanks, Mr Langford, for your society,' he said, with old-fashioned courtesy. 'I wish you a good-evening.'

'Good-evening,' I replied, putting out my hand.

But he either did not see it or did not choose to see it, and, slightly lifting his hat, stepped out upon the platform. Having done this, he moved slowly away and mingled with the departing crowd.

Leaning forward to watch him out of sight, I trod upon something which proved to be a cigar-case. It had fallen, no doubt, from the pocket of his waterproof coat, and was made of dark morocco leather, with a silver monogram upon the side. I sprang out of the carriage just as the guard came up to lock me in.

'Is there one minute to spare?' I asked, eagerly. 'The gentleman who travelled down with me from town has dropped his cigar-case; he is not yet out of the station.'

'Just a minute and a half, sir,' replied the guard. 'You must be quick.'

I dashed along the platform as fast as my feet could carry me. It was a large station, and Mr Dwerrihouse had by this time got more than half-way to the farther end.

I, however, saw him distinctly, moving slowly with the stream. Then, as I drew nearer, I saw that he had met some friend, that they were talking as they walked, that they presently fell back somewhat from the crowd and stood aside in earnest conversation. I made straight for the spot where they were waiting. There was a vivid gas-jet just above their heads, and the light fell full upon their faces. I saw both distinctly – the face of Mr Dwerrihouse and the face of his companion. Running, breathless, eager as I was, getting in the way of porters and passengers, and fearful every instant lest I should see the train going on without me, I yet observed that the newcomer was considerably younger and shorter than the director, that he was sandy-haired, moustachioed, small-featured, and dressed in a close-cut suit of Scotch tweed. I was now within a few yards of them. I ran against a stout gentleman, I was nearly knocked down by a luggage-truck, I stumbled over a carpet-bag; I gained

the spot just as the driver's whistle warned me to return.

To my utter stupefaction, they were no longer there. I had seen them but two seconds before – and they were gone! I stood still; I looked to right and left; I saw no sign of them in any direction. It was as if the platform had gaped and swallowed them.

'There were two gentlemen standing here a moment ago,' I said to a porter at my elbow; 'which way can they have gone?'

'I saw no gentlemen, sir,' replied the man.

The whistle shrilled out again. The guard, far up the platform, held up his arm, and shouted to me to 'come on!'

'If you're going on by this train, sir,' said the porter, 'you must run for it.'

I did run for it, just gained the carriage as the train began to move, was shoved in by the guard, and left, breathless and bewildered, with Mr Dwerrihouse's cigar-case still in my hand.

It was the strangest disappearance in the world; it was like a transformation trick in a pantomime. They were there one moment – palpably there, talking, with the gaslight full upon their faces – and the next moment they were gone. There was no door near, no window, no staircase; it was a mere slip of barren platform, tapestried with big advertisements. Could anything be more mysterious?

It was not worth thinking about, and yet, for my life, I could not help pondering upon it – pondering, wondering, conjecturing, turning it over and over in my mind, and beating my brains for a solution of the enigma. I thought of it all the way from Blackwater to Clayborough. I thought of it all the way from Clayborough to Dumbleton, as I rattled along the smooth highway in a trim dog-cart, drawn by a splendid black mare and driven by the silentest and dapperest of East Anglian grooms.

We did the nine miles in something less than an hour, and pulled up before the lodge-gates just as the church clock was striking half-past seven. A couple of minutes more, and the warm glow of the lighted hall was flooding out upon the gravel, a hearty grasp was on my hand, and a clear jovial voice was bidding me 'welcome to Dumbleton.'

'And now, my dear fellow,' said my host, when the first greeting was over, 'you have no time to spare. We dine at

eight, and there are people coming to meet you, so you must just get the dressing business over as quickly as may be. By the way, you will meet some acquaintances; the Biddulphs are coming, and Prendergast (Prendergast of the Skirmishers) is staying in the house. Adieu! Mrs Jelf will be expecting you in the drawing-room.'

I was ushered to my room – not the blue room, of which Mr Dwerrihouse had made disagreeable experience, but a pretty little bachelor's chamber, hung with a delicate chintz and made cheerful by a blazing fire. I unlocked my port-manteau. I tried to be expeditious, but the memory of my railway adventure haunted me. I could not get free of it; I could not shake it off. It impeded me, it worried me, it tripped me up, it caused me to mislay my studs, to mistie my cravat, to wrench the buttons off my gloves. Worst of all, it made me so late that the party had all assembled before I reached the drawing-room. I had scarcely paid my respects to Mrs Jelf when dinner was announced, and we paired off, some eight or ten couples strong, into the dining-room.

I am not going to describe either the guests or the dinner. All provincial parties bear the strictest family resemblance, and I am not aware that an East Anglian banquet offers any exception to the rule. There was the usual country baronet and his wife; there were the usual country parsons and their wives; there was the sempiternal turkey and haunch of venison. *Vanitas vanitatum*. There is nothing new under the sun.

I was placed about midway down the table. I had taken one rector's wife down to dinner, and I had another at my left hand. They talked across me, and their talk was about babies; it was dreadfully dull. At length there came a pause. The entrées had just been removed, and the turkey had come upon the scene. The conversation had all along been of the languidest, but at this moment it happened to have stagnated altogether. Jelf was carving the turkey; Mrs Jelf looked as if she was trying to think of something to say; everybody else was silent. Moved by an unlucky impulse, I thought I would relate my adventure.

'By the way, Jelf,' I began, 'I came down part of the way today with a friend of yours.'

'Indeed!' said the master of the feast, slicing scientifically into the breast of the turkey. 'With whom, pray?'

'With one who bade me tell you that he should, if

possible, pay you a visit before Christmas.'

'I cannot think who that could be,' said my friend, smiling.

'It must be Major Thorp,' suggested Mrs Jelf.

I shook my head.

'It was not Major Thorp,' I replied; 'it was a near relation of your own, Mrs Jelf.'

'Then I am more puzzled than ever,' replied my hostess. 'Pray tell me who it was.'

'It was no less a person than your cousin, Mr John Dwerrihouse.'

Jonathan Jelf laid down his knife and fork. Mrs Jelf looked at me in a strange, startled way, and said never a word.

'And he desired me to tell you, my dear madam, that you need not take the trouble to burn the hall down in his honour this time, but only to have the chimney of the blue room swept before his arrival.'

Before I had reached the end of my sentence I became aware of something ominous in the faces of the guests. I felt I had said something which I had better have left unsaid, and that for some unexplained reason my words had evoked a general consternation. I sat confounded, not daring to utter another syllable, and for at least two whole minutes there was dead silence round the table. Then Captain Prendergast came to the rescue.

'You have been abroad for some months, have you not, Mr Langford?' he said, with the desperation of one who flings himself into the breach. 'I heard you had been to Russia. Surely you have something to tell us of the state and temper of the country after the war?'

I was heartily grateful to the gallant Skirmisher for this diversion in my favour. I answered him, I fear, somewhat lamely; but he kept the conversation up, and presently one or two others joined in, and so the difficulty, whatever it might have been, was bridged over – bridged over, but not repaired. A something, an awkwardness, a visible constraint remained. The guests hitherto had been simply dull, but now they were evidently uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The dessert had scarcely been placed upon the table when the ladies left the room. I seized the opportunity to select a vacant chair next Captain Prendergast.

'In Heaven's name,' I whispered, 'what was the matter just now? What had I said?'

'You mentioned the name of John Dwerrihouse.'

'What of that? I had seen him not two hours before.'

'It is a most astounding circumstance that you should have seen him,' said Captain Prendergast. 'Are you sure it was he?'

'As sure as of my own identity. We were talking all the way between London and Blackwater. But why does that surprise you?'

'*Because,*' replied Captain Prendergast, dropping his voice to the lowest whisper – '*because John Dwerrihouse absconded three months ago with seventy-five thousand pounds of the company's money, and has never been heard of since.*'

John Dwerrihouse had absconded three months ago – and I had seen him only a few hours back! John Dwerrihouse had embezzled seventy-five thousand pounds of the company's money, yet told me that he carried that sum upon his person! Were ever facts so strangely incongruous, so difficult to reconcile? How should he have ventured again into the light of day? How dared he show himself along the line? Above all, what had he been doing throughout those mysterious three months of disappearance?

Perplexing questions these – questions which at once suggested themselves to the minds of all concerned, but which admitted of no easy solution. I could find no reply to them. Captain Prendergast had not even a suggestion to offer. Jonathan Jelf, who seized the first opportunity of drawing me aside and learning all that I had to tell, was more amazed and bewildered than either of us. He came to my room that night, when all the guests were gone, and we talked the thing over from every point of view; without, it must be confessed, arriving at any kind of conclusion.

'I do not ask you,' he said, 'whether you can have mistaken your man. That is impossible.'

'As impossible as that I should mistake some stranger for yourself.'

'It is not a question of looks or voice, but of facts. That he should have alluded to the fire in the blue room is proof enough of John Dwerrihouse's identity. How did he look?'

'Older, I thought; considerably older, paler, and more anxious.'

'He has had enough to make him look anxious, anyhow,' said my friend, gloomily, 'be he innocent or guilty.'

'I am inclined to believe that he is innocent,' I replied. 'He

showed no embarrassment when I addressed him, and no uneasiness when the guard came round. His conversation was open to a fault. I might almost say that he talked too freely of the business which he had in hand.'

'That again is strange, for I know no one more reticent on such subjects. He actually told you that he had the seventy-five thousand pounds in his pocket?'

'He did.'

'Humph! My wife has an idea about it, and she may be right -'

'What idea?'

'Well, she fancies - women are so clever, you know, at putting themselves inside people's motives - she fancies that he was tempted, that he did actually take the money, and that he has been concealing himself these three months in some wild part of the country, struggling possibly with his conscience all the time, and daring neither to abscond with his booty nor to come back and restore it.'

'But now that he has come back?'

'That is the point. She conceives that he has probably thrown himself upon the company's mercy, made restitution of the money, and, being forgiven, is permitted to carry the business through as if nothing whatever had happened.'

'The last,' I replied, 'is an impossible case. Mrs Jelf thinks like a generous and delicate-minded woman, but not in the least like a board of railway directors. They would never carry forgiveness so far.'

'I fear not; and yet it is the only conjecture that bears a semblance of likelihood. However, we can run over to Clayborough tomorrow and see if anything is to be learned. By the way, Prendergast tells me you picked up his cigar-case.'

'I did so, and here it is.'

Jelf took the cigar-case, examined it by the light of the lamp, and said at once that it was beyond doubt Mr Dwerrihouse's property, and that he remembered to have seen him use it.

'Here, too, is his monogram on the side,' he added - 'a big J transfixing a capital D. He used to carry the same on his note-paper.'

'It offers, at all events, a proof that I was not dreaming.'

'Ay, but it is time you were asleep and dreaming now. I am ashamed to have kept you up so long. Good-night.'

'Good-night, and remember that I am more than ready to go with you to Clayborough or Blackwater or London or anywhere, if I can be of the least service.'

'Thanks! I know you mean it, old friend, and it may be that I shall put you to the test. Once more, good-night.'

So we parted for that night, and met again in the breakfast-room at half-past eight next morning. It was a hurried, silent, uncomfortable meal; none of us had slept well, and all were thinking of the same subject. Mrs Jelf had evidently been crying, Jelf was impatient to be off, and both Captain Prendergast and myself felt ourselves to be in the painful position of outsiders who are involuntarily brought into a domestic trouble. Within twenty minutes after we had left the breakfast-table the dog-cart was brought round, and my friend and I were on the road to Clayborough.

'Tell you what it is, Langford,' he said, as we sped along between the wintry hedges, 'I do not much fancy to bring up Dwerrihouse's name at Clayborough. All the officials know that he is my wife's relation, and the subject just now is hardly a pleasant one. If you don't much mind, we will take the 11.10 to Blackwater. It's an important station, and we shall stand a far better chance of picking up information there than at Clayborough.'

So we took the 11.10, which happened to be an express, and, arriving at Blackwater about a quarter before twelve, proceeded at once to prosecute our inquiry.

We began by asking for the station-master, a big, blunt, businesslike person, who at once averred that he knew Mr John Dwerrihouse perfectly well, and that there was no director on the line whom he had seen and spoken to so frequently.

'He used to be down here two or three times a week about three months ago,' said he, 'when the new line was first set afoot; but since then, you know, gentlemen -'

He paused significantly.

Jelf flushed scarlet.

'Yes, yes,' he said, hurriedly; 'we know all about that. The point now to be ascertained is whether anything has been seen or heard of him lately.'

'Not to my knowledge,' replied the station-master.

'He is not known to have been down the line any time yesterday, for instance?'

The station-master shook his head.

'The East Anglian, sir,' said he, 'is about the last place where he would dare to show himself. Why, there isn't a station-master, there isn't a guard, there isn't a porter, who doesn't know Mr Dwerrihouse by sight as well as he knows his own face in the looking-glass, or who wouldn't telegraph for the police as soon as he had set eyes on him at any point along the line. Bless you, sir! there's been a standing order out against him ever since the 25th of September last.'

'And yet,' pursued my friend, 'a gentleman who travelled down yesterday from London to Clayborough by the afternoon express testifies that he saw Mr Dwerrihouse in the train, and that Mr Dwerrihouse alighted at Blackwater station.'

'Quite impossible, sir,' replied the station-master, promptly.

'Why impossible?'

'Because there is no station along the line where he is so well known or where he would run so great a risk. It would be just running his head into the lion's mouth; he would have been mad to come nigh Blackwater station; and if he had come he would have been arrested before he left the platform.'

'Can you tell me who took the Blackwater tickets of that train?'

'I can, sir. It was the guard, Benjamin Somers.'

'And where can I find him?'

'You can find him, sir, by staying here, if you please, till one o'clock. He will be coming through with the up express from Crampton, which stays at Blackwater for ten minutes.'

We waited for the up express, beguiling the time as best we could by strolling along the Blackwater road till we came almost to the outskirts of the town, from which the station was distant nearly a couple of miles. By one o'clock we were back again upon the platform and waiting for the train. It came punctually, and I at once recognised the ruddy-faced guard who had gone down with my train the evening before.

'The gentlemen want to ask you something about Mr Dwerrihouse, Somers,' said the station-master, by way of introduction.

The guard flashed a keen glance from my face to Jelf's and back again to mine.

'Mr John Dwerrihouse, the late director?' said he, interrogatively.

'The same,' replied my friend. 'Should you know him if you saw him?'

'Anywhere, sir.'

'Do you know if he was in the 4.15 express yesterday afternoon?'

'He was not, sir.'

'How can you answer so positively?'

'Because I looked into every carriage and saw every face in that train, and I could take my oath that Mr Dwerrihouse was not in it. This gentleman was,' he added, turning sharply upon me. 'I don't know that I ever saw him before in my life, but I remember *his* face perfectly. You nearly missed taking your seat in time at this station, sir, and you got out at Clayborough.'

'Quite true, guard,' I replied; 'but do you not also remember the face of the gentleman who travelled down in the same carriage with me as far as here?'

'It was my impression, sir, that you travelled down alone,' said Somers, with a look of some surprise.

'By no means. I had a fellow-traveller as far as Blackwater, and it was in trying to restore him the cigar-case which he had dropped in the carriage that I so nearly let you go on without me.'

'I remember your saying something about a cigar-case, certainly,' replied the guard; 'but -'

'You asked for my ticket just before we entered the station.'

'I did, sir.'

'Then you must have seen him. He sat in the corner next the very door to which you came.'

'No, indeed; I saw no one.'

I looked at Jelf. I began to think the guard was in the ex-director's confidence, and paid for his silence.

'If I had seen another traveller I should have asked for his ticket,' added Somers. 'Did you see me ask for his ticket, sir?'

'I observed that you did not ask for it, but he explained that by saying -' I hesitated. I feared I might be telling too much, and so broke off abruptly.

The guard and the station-master exchanged glances. The former looked impatiently at his watch.

'I am obliged to go on in four minutes more, sir,' he said.

'One last question, then,' interposed Jelf, with a sort of desperation. 'If this gentleman's fellow-traveller had been

Mr John Dwerrihouse, and he had been sitting in the corner next the door by which you took the tickets, could you have failed to see and recognise him?

'No, sir; it would have been quite impossible.'

'And you are certain you did *not* see him?'

'As I said before, sir, I could take my oath I did not see him. And if it wasn't that I don't like to contradict a gentleman, I would say I could also take my oath that this gentleman was quite alone in the carriage the whole way from London to Clayborough. Why, sir,' he added, dropping his voice so as to be inaudible to the station-master, who had been called away to speak to some person close by, 'you expressly asked me to give you a compartment to yourself, and I did so. I locked you in, and you were so good as to give me something for myself.'

'Yes; but Mr Dwerrihouse had a key of his own.'

'I never saw him, sir; I saw no one in that compartment but yourself. Beg pardon, sir; my time's up.'

And with this the ruddy guard touched his cap and was gone. In another minute the heavy panting of the engine began afresh, and the train glided slowly out of the station.

We looked at each other for some moments in silence. I was the first to speak.

'Mr Benjamin Somers knows more than he chooses to tell,' I said.

'Humph! do you think so?'

'It must be. He could not have come to the door without seeing him; it's impossible.'

'There is one thing not impossible, my dear fellow.'

'What is that?'

'That you may have fallen asleep and dreamed the whole thing.'

'Could I dream of a branch line that I had never heard of? Could I dream of a hundred and one business details that had no kind of interest for me? Could I dream of the seventy-five thousand pounds?'

'Perhaps you might have seen or heard some vague account of the affair while you were abroad. It might have made no impression upon you at the time, and might have come back to you in your dreams, recalled perhaps by the mere names of the stations on the line.'

'What about the fire in the chimney of the blue room -

should I have heard of that during my journey?"

'Well, no; I admit there is a difficulty about that point.'

'And what about the cigar-case?'

'Ay, by Jove! there is the cigar-case. That *is* a stubborn fact. Well, it's a mysterious affair, and it will need a better detective than myself, I fancy, to clear it up. I suppose we may as well go home.'

A week had not gone by when I received a letter from the secretary of the East Anglian Railway Company, requesting the favour of my attendance at a special board meeting not then many days distant. No reasons were alleged and no apologies offered for this demand upon my time, but they had heard, it was clear, of my inquiries anent the missing director, and had a mind to put me through some sort of official examination upon the subject. Being still a guest at Dumbleton Hall, I had to go up to London for the purpose, and Jonathan Jelf accompanied me. I found the direction of the Great East Anglian line represented by a party of some twelve or fourteen gentlemen seated in solemn conclave round a huge green baize table, in a gloomy boardroom adjoining the London terminus.

Being courteously received by the chairman (who at once began by saying that certain statements of mine respecting Mr John Dwerrihouse had come to the knowledge of the direction, and that they in consequence desired to confer with me on those points), we were placed at the table, and the inquiry proceeded in due form.

I was first asked if I knew Mr John Dwerrihouse, how long I had been acquainted with him, and whether I could identify him at sight. I was then asked when I had seen him last. To which I replied, 'On the 4th of this present month, December, 1856.' Then came the inquiry of where I had seen him on that fourth day of December; to which I replied that I met him in a first-class compartment of the 4.15 down express, that he got in just as the train was leaving the London terminus, and that he alighted at Blackwater station. The chairman then inquired whether I had held any communication with my fellow-traveller; whereupon I related, as nearly as I could remember it, the whole bulk and substance of Mr John Dwerrihouse's diffuse information respecting the new branch line.

To all this the board listened with profound attention, while

the chairman presided and the secretary took notes. I then produced the cigar-case. It was passed from hand to hand, and recognised by all. There was not a man present who did not remember that plain cigar-case with its silver monogram, or to whom it seemed anything less than entirely corroborative of my evidence. When at length I had told all that I had to tell, the chairman whispered something to the secretary; the secretary touched a silver hand-bell, and the guard, Benjamin Somers, was ushered into the room. He was then examined as carefully as myself. He declared that he knew Mr John Dwerrihouse perfectly well, that he could not be mistaken in him, that he remembered going down with the 4.15 express on the afternoon in question, that he remembered me, and that, there being one or two empty first-class compartments on that especial afternoon, he had, in compliance with my request, placed me in a carriage by myself. He was positive that I remained alone in that compartment all the way from London to Clayborough. He was ready to take his oath that Mr Dwerrihouse was neither in that carriage with me, nor in any compartment of that train. He remembered distinctly to have examined my ticket at Blackwater; was certain that there was no one else at that time in the carriage; could not have failed to observe a second person, if there had been one; had that second person been Mr John Dwerrihouse, should have quietly double-locked the door of the carriage and have at once given information to the Blackwater station-master. So clear, so decisive, so ready, was Somers with this testimony, that the board looked fairly puzzled.

'You hear this person's statement, Mr Langford,' said the chairman. 'It contradicts yours in every particular. What have you to say in reply?'

'I can only repeat what I said before. I am quite as positive of the truth of my own assertions as Mr Somers can be of the truth of his.'

'You say that Mr Dwerrihouse alighted at Blackwater, and that he was in possession of a private key. Are you sure that he had not alighted by means of that key before the guard came round for the tickets?'

'I am quite positive that he did not leave the carriage till the train had fairly entered the station, and the other Blackwater passengers alighted. I even saw that he was met there by a friend.'

'Indeed! Did you see that person distinctly?'

'Quite distinctly.'

'Can you describe his appearance?'

'I think so. He was short and very slight, sandy-haired, with a bushy moustache and beard, and he wore a closely fitting suit of grey tweed. His age I should take to be about thirty-eight or forty.'

'Did Mr Dwerrihouse leave the station in this person's company?'

'I cannot tell. I saw them walking together down the platform, and then I saw them standing aside under a gas-jet, talking earnestly. After that I lost sight of them quite suddenly, and just then my train went on, and I with it.'

The chairman and secretary conferred together in an undertone. The directors whispered to one another. One or two looked suspiciously at the guard. I could see that my evidence remained unshaken, and that, like myself, they suspected some complicity between the guard and the defaulter.

'How far did you conduct that 4.15 express on the day in question, Somers?' asked the chairman.

'All through, sir,' replied the guard, 'from London to Crampton.'

'How was it that you were not relieved at Clayborough? I thought there was always a change of guards at Clayborough.'

'There used to be, sir, till the new regulations came in force last midsummer, since when the guards in charge of express trains go the whole way through.'

The chairman turned to the secretary.

'I think it would be as well,' he said, 'if we had the day-book to refer to upon this point.'

Again the secretary touched the silver hand-bell, and desired the porter in attendance to summon Mr Raikes. From a word or two dropped by another of the directors I gathered that Mr Raikes was one of the under-secretaries.

He came, a small, slight, sandy-haired, keen-eyed man, with an eager, nervous manner, and a forest of light beard and moustache. He just showed himself at the door of the board room, and, being requested to bring a certain day-book from a certain shelf in a certain room, bowed and vanished.

He was there such a moment, and the surprise of seeing

him was so great and sudden, that it was not till the door had closed upon him that I found voice to speak. He was no sooner gone, however, than I sprang to my feet.

'That person,' I said, 'is the same who met Mr Dwerrihouse upon the platform at Blackwater!'

There was a general movement of surprise. The chairman looked grave and somewhat agitated.

'Take care, Mr Langford,' he said; 'take care what you say.'

'I am as positive of his identity as of my own.'

'Do you consider the consequences of your words? Do you consider that you are bringing a charge of the gravest character against one of the company's servants?'

'I am willing to be put upon my oath, if necessary. The man who came to that door a minute since is the same whom I saw talking with Mr Dwerrihouse on the Blackwater platform. Were he twenty times the company's servant, I could say neither more nor less.'

The chairman turned again to the guard.

'Did you see Mr Raikes in the train or on the platform?' he asked.

Somers shook his head.

'I am confident Mr Raikes was not in the train,' he said, 'and I certainly did not see him on the platform.'

The chairman turned next to the secretary.

'Mr Raikes is in your office, Mr Hunter,' he said. 'Can you remember if he was absent on the 4th instant?'

'I do not think he was,' replied the secretary, 'but I am not prepared to speak positively. I have been away most afternoons myself lately, and Mr Raikes might easily have absented himself if he had been disposed.'

At this moment the under-secretary returned with the day-book under his arm.

'Be pleased to refer, Mr Raikes,' said the chairman, 'to the entries of the 4th instant, and see what Benjamin Somers's duties were on that day.'

Mr Raikes threw open the cumbrous volume, and ran a practised eye and finger down some three or four successive columns of entries. Stopping suddenly at the foot of a page, he then read aloud that Benjamin Somers had on that day conducted the 4.15 express from London to Crampton.

The chairman leaned forward in his seat, looked the under-secretary full in the face, and said, quite sharply and suddenly:

'Where were *you*, Mr Raikes, on the same afternoon?'

'I, sir?'

'You, Mr Raikes. Where were you on the afternoon and evening of the 4th of the present month?'

'Here, sir, in Mr Hunter's office. Where else should I be?'

There was a dash of trepidation in the under-secretary's voice as he said this, but his look of surprise was natural enough.

'We have some reason for believing, Mr Raikes, that you were absent that afternoon without leave. Was this the case?'

'Certainly not, sir. I have not had a day's holiday since September. Mr Hunter will bear me out in this.'

Mr Hunter repeated what he had previously said on the subject, but added that the clerks in the adjoining office would be certain to know. Whereupon the senior clerk, a grave, middle-aged person in green glasses, was summoned and interrogated.

His testimony cleared the under-secretary at once. He declared that Mr Raikes had in no instance, to his knowledge, been absent during office hours since his return from his annual holiday in September.

I was confounded. The chairman turned to me with a smile, in which a shade of covert annoyance was scarcely apparent.

'You hear, Mr Langford?' he said.

'I hear, sir; but my conviction remains unshaken.'

'I fear, Mr Langford, that your convictions are very insufficiently based,' replied the chairman, with a doubtful cough. 'I fear that you "dream dreams", and mistake them for actual occurrences. It is a dangerous habit of mind, and might lead to dangerous results. Mr Raikes here would have found himself in an unpleasant position had he not proved so satisfactory an alibi.'

I was about to reply, but he gave me no time.

'I think, gentlemen,' he went on to say, addressing the board, 'that we should be wasting time to push this inquiry further. Mr Langford's evidence would seem to be of an equal value throughout. The testimony of Benjamin Somers disproves his first statement, and the testimony of the last witness disproves his second. I think we may conclude that Mr

Langford fell asleep in the train on the occasion of his journey to Clayborough, and dreamed an unusually vivid and circumstantial dream, of which, however, we have now heard quite enough.'

There are few things more annoying than to find one's positive convictions met with incredulity. I could not help feeling impatience at the turn that affairs had taken. I was not proof against the civil sarcasm of the chairman's manner. Most intolerable of all, however, was the quiet smile lurking about the corners of Benjamin Somers's mouth, and the half-triumphant, half-malicious gleam in the eyes of the under-secretary. The man was evidently puzzled and somewhat alarmed. His looks seemed furtively to interrogate me. Who was I? What did I want? Why had I come here to do him an ill turn with his employers? What was it to me whether or not he was absent without leave?

Seeing all this, and perhaps more irritated by it than the thing deserved, I begged leave to detain the attention of the board for a moment longer. Jelf plucked me impatiently by the sleeve.

'Better let the thing drop,' he whispered. 'The chairman's right enough; you dreamed it, and the less said now the better.'

I was not to be silenced, however, in this fashion. I had yet something to say, and I would say it. It was to this effect: that dreams were not usually productive of tangible results, and that I requested to know in what way the chairman conceived I had evolved from my dream so substantial and well-made a delusion as the cigar-case which I had had the honour to place before him at the commencement of our interview.

'The cigar-case, I admit, Mr Langford,' the chairman replied, 'is a very strong point in your evidence. It is your *only* strong point, however, and there is just a possibility that we may all be misled by a mere accidental resemblance. Will you permit me to see the case again?'

'It is unlikely,' I said, as I handed it to him, 'that any other should bear precisely this monogram, and yet be in all other particulars exactly similar.'

The chairman examined it for a moment in silence, and then passed it to Mr Hunter. Mr Hunter turned it over and over, and shook his head.

'This is no mere resemblance,' he said. 'It is John Dwerrhouse's cigar-case to a certainty. I remember it perfectly; I have seen it a hundred times.'

'I believe I may say the same,' added the chairman; 'yet how account for the way in which Mr Langford asserts that it came into his possession?'

'I can only repeat,' I replied, 'that I found it on the floor of the carriage after Mr Dwerrhouse had alighted. It was in leaning out to look after him that I trod upon it, and it was in running after him for the purpose of restoring it that I saw, or believed I saw, Mr Raikes standing aside with him in earnest conversation.'

Again I felt Jonathan Jelf plucking at my sleeve.

'Look at Raikes,' he whispered; 'look at Raikes!'

I turned to where the under-secretary had been standing a moment before, and saw him, white as death, with lips trembling and livid, stealing towards the door.

To conceive a sudden, strange, and indefinite suspicion, to fling myself in his way, to take him by the shoulders as if he were a child, and turn his craven face, perforce, towards the board, were with me the work of an instant.

'Look at him!' I exclaimed. 'Look at his face! I ask no better witness to the truth of my words.'

The chairman's brow darkened.

'Mr Raikes,' he said, sternly, 'if you know anything you had better speak.'

Vainly trying to wrench himself from my grasp, the under-secretary stammered out an incoherent denial.

'Let me go,' he said. 'I know nothing - you have no right to detain me - let me go!'

'Did you, or did you not, meet Mr John Dwerrhouse at Blackwater station? The charge brought against you is either true or false. If true, you will do well to throw yourself upon the mercy of the board and make full confession of all that you know.'

The under-secretary wrung his hands in an agony of helpless terror.

'I was away!' he cried. 'I was two hundred miles away at the time! I know nothing about it - I have nothing to confess - I am innocent - I call God to witness I am innocent!'

'Two hundred miles away!' echoed the chairman. 'What do you mean?'

'I was in Devonshire. I had three weeks' leave of absence – I appeal to Mr Hunter – Mr Hunter knows I had three weeks' leave of absence! I was in Devonshire all the time; I can prove I was in Devonshire!'

Seeing him so abject, so incoherent, so wild with apprehension, the directors began to whisper gravely among themselves, while one got quietly up and called the porter to guard the door.

'What has your being in Devonshire to do with the matter?' said the chairman. 'When were you in Devonshire?'

'Mr Raikes took his leave in September,' said the secretary, 'about the time when Mr Dwerrihouse disappeared.'

'I never even heard that he had disappeared till I came back!'

'That must remain to be proved,' said the chairman. 'I shall at once put this matter in the hands of the police. In the meanwhile, Mr Raikes, being myself a magistrate and used to deal with these cases, I advise you to offer no resistance, but to confess while confession may yet do you service. As for your accomplice –'

The frightened wretch fell upon his knees.

'I had no accomplice!' he cried. 'Only have mercy upon me – only spare my life, and I will confess all! I didn't mean to harm him! I didn't mean to hurt a hair of his head! Only have mercy upon me, and let me go!'

The chairman rose in his place, pale and agitated. 'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'what horrible mystery is this? What does it mean?'

'As sure as there is a God in heaven,' said Jonathan Jelf, 'it means that murder has been done.'

'No! no! no!' shrieked Raikes, still upon his knees, and cowering like a beaten hound. 'Not murder! No jury that ever sat could bring it in murder. I thought I had only stunned him – I never meant to do more than stun him! Manslaughter – manslaughter – not murder!'

Overcome by the horror of this unexpected revelation, the chairman covered his face with his hand and for a moment or two remained silent.

'Miserable man,' he said at length, 'you have betrayed yourself.'

'You made me confess! You urged me to throw myself upon the mercy of the board!'

'You have confessed to a crime which no one suspected you of having committed,' replied the chairman, 'and which this board has no power either to punish or forgive. All that I can do for you is to advise you to submit to the law, to plead guilty, and to conceal nothing. When did you do this deed?'

The guilty man rose to his feet, and leaned heavily against the table. His answer came reluctantly, like the speech of one dreaming.

'On the 22nd of September!'

On the 22nd of September! I looked in Jonathan Jelf's face, and he in mine. I felt my own paling with a strange sense of wonder and dread. I saw his blanch suddenly, even to the lips.

'Merciful heaven!' he whispered. *'What was it, then, that you saw in the train?'*

What was it that I saw in the train? That question remains unanswered to this day. I have never been able to reply to it. I only know that it bore the living likeness of the murdered man, whose body had then been lying some ten weeks under a rough pile of branches and brambles and rotting leaves, at the bottom of a deserted chalk-pit about half-way between Blackwater and Mallingsford. I know that it spoke and moved and looked as that man spoke and moved and looked in life; that I heard, or seemed to hear, things related which I could never otherwise have learned; that I was guided, as it were, by that vision on the platform to the identification of the murderer; and that, a passive instrument myself, I was destined, by means of these mysterious teachings, to bring about the ends of justice. For these things I have never been able to account.

As for that matter of the cigar-case, it proved, on inquiry, that the carriage in which I travelled down that afternoon to Clayborough had not been in use for several weeks, and was, in point of fact, the same in which poor John Dwerrihouse had performed his last journey. The case had doubtless been dropped by him, and had lain unnoticed till I found it.

Upon the details of the murder I have no need to dwell. Those who desire more ample particulars may find them, and the written confession of Augustus Raikes, in the files of *The Times* for 1856. Enough that the under-secretary, knowing the history of the new line, and following the negotiation step by

step through all its stages, determined to waylay Mr Dwerrihouse, rob him of the seventy-five thousand pounds, and escape to America with his booty.

In order to effect these ends he obtained leave of absence a few days before the time appointed for the payment of the money, secured his passage across the Atlantic in a steamer advertised to start on the 23rd, provided himself with a heavily loaded 'life-preserver', and went down to Blackwater to await the arrival of his victim. How he met him on the platform with a pretended message from the board, how he offered to conduct him by a short cut across the fields to Mallingford, how, having brought him to a lonely place, he struck him down with the life-preserver, and so killed him, and how, finding what he had done, he dragged the body to the verge of an out-of-the-way chalk-pit, and there flung it in and piled it over with branches and brambles, are facts still fresh in the memories of those who, like the connoisseurs in De Quincey's famous essay, regard murder as a fine art. Strangely enough, the murderer, having done his work, was afraid to leave the country. He declared that he had not intended to take the director's life, but only to stun and rob him; and that, finding the blow had killed, he dared not fly for fear of drawing down suspicion upon his own head. As a mere robber he would have been safe in the States, but as a murderer he would inevitably have been pursued and given up to justice. So he forfeited his passage, returned to the office as usual at the end of his leave, and locked up his ill-gotten thousands till a more convenient opportunity. In the meanwhile he had the satisfaction of finding that Mr Dwerrihouse was universally believed to have absconded with the money, no one knew how or whither.

Whether he meant murder or not, however, Mr Augustus Raikes paid the full penalty of his crime, and was hanged at the Old Bailey in the second week in January, 1857. Those who desire to make his further acquaintance may see him any day (admirably done in wax) in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's exhibition, in Baker Street. He is there to be found in the midst of a select society of ladies and gentlemen of atrocious memory, dressed in the close-cut tweed suit which he wore on the evening of the murder, and holding in his hand the identical life-preserver with which he committed it.

## SALLY

PATRICK DAVIS

*'I am departing this world sound of mind and body whatever the coroner, bless him, may feel compelled to say. I simply wish to hasten the moment, which faces us all, when I enter the next world. No other living person is in any way responsible or remotely involved.'*

Last November there was an item in the national press reporting the death under somewhat unusual circumstances of David Pitt, a fine commercial artist who had been working, until a few weeks previously, for Willow, Martin and Chalmers, the advertising agency. Mr Pitt, it was written, had thrown up his job in October for no reason that made sense to his employers (or to most of his friends), despite the offer of a partnership, and had gone to live in a remote hamlet on the north coast of Devon. John Chalmers was reported as saying: yes, he believed Mr Pitt had been in love at the turn of the year, he had been disappointed, but had quite recovered. The firm had been prepared to waive the customary three months' notice because they expected Mr Pitt to return. They had told him that he could have his job back at any time, that they regarded his retreat to Devon as a temporary absence, a recharging of batteries, a sabbatical. The firm did not, of course, concern itself with the private affairs of its employees. No, there were no complaints about the work.

On several counts this part of the report was not true. John was a friend of David's and at one time had been closely involved with his private affairs. He had been saddened by Victoria's decision to marry a Frenchman, an industrialist. And David's work certainly had given them cause for worry during that last month. He had scarcely done any. But John was never one for presenting unearned increments to the Press.

The newspapers reported that David had committed suicide by drowning. This was the verdict of the coroner. There was no cause to doubt the note left in the cottage, the

note with which I started this account. David had been seen the previous evening, and was heard in his cottage talking to himself as usual. The coroner made much of this, questioning the witnesses closely. There had been a storm that night. Next morning he did not collect his milk from the shop and in the evening his body was found in the far corner of the cove, wedged between two rocks.

But, except for me, his friends did not believe the disclaimer in the last sentence of the note. They discussed motives. Artistic temperament, love sickness, schizophrenia, manic depression, other fashionable ailments were diagnosed. Of these only the second came near to the truth, for reasons which the others could not have suspected.

There was one clue: the portrait. This was among the paintings, few of them completed, found in the cottage. All but the portrait were local landscapes, suffused with a fierce impressionism that was new for David, and most impressive. I bought two of them and have them with me now. The portrait was of Sally. I have that, too. David left it to me. Had any of the older inhabitants of the village seen it, their identification of the sitter must have posed enough riddles to keep a dozen reporters in business for weeks. But they did not see it; and since the law was satisfied and the Press given no reason for curiosity, Sally's name was not uncovered.

The portrait is a fine painting in my opinion. David has Sally sitting in an armchair that is placed sideways to the viewer. She is wearing a blue dress with a high collar that fits closely round the neck. There is a glow of firelight reflected in her eyes and on her face, but you cannot see the fire, and the background and the brown armchair are painted in sombre colours. It is the face which rivets the attention, half turned towards the painter, smiling, loving, youthful, fragile, with a hint of humour in the hazel eyes; an innocent face but also one that belongs to a being who possesses worlds of knowledge. David has managed to capture in paint the quality of the flesh, ivory pale yet warmed by the fire and by an inner potency of spirit. Sally must have been, indeed was, perhaps is, a most unusual girl.

I have known David since childhood and had always hoped that he would paint something good. This is good. Yet, knowing him well, and reading between the lines of his last letter, I do not believe he thought of the painting as an

end in itself. This work, which I value so highly and which the world will value one day, was for him a by-product of a larger act of creation, his union with Sally. It was, I think, a celebration of that act, and a testament of love.

There is a proper time for everything and a decent way to do things. At the inquest I said nothing of David's last letter to me, and of the narrative that was enclosed with it. I made no comment on the painting. That he had died of his own wish by his own hand was public fact and my information did not change that. I wanted time to think. I was not ready for the questions.

The account that follows is based closely on David's narrative. I have added a word or a phrase only where it seemed that the reader might not understand. David was a painter chiefly, but would sometimes write a story or an article. His narrative was written in the third person, just as it is here. No doubt he found that this device helped him to see things objectively, to look at himself and the events from outside.

I was tempted to call the piece 'David's Testament'. But in the end I have kept to his own title, for it is Sally who dominates.



Mrs Brown blocked the doorway of the cottage, staring up the steep coombe-side at the evening sky.

'There's a storm coming, Mr Pitt. Ted always reckons on a storm with clouds like that. There's spite in them clouds. You'd better take your raincoat.'

David fetched the coat from the line of pegs in the kitchen. She was probably right. She knew about the weather.

'I'll not be long then.' He squeezed past her into the street, looked up at the sky for himself. 'Does look dark.'

'I know you likes your walk,' she said. 'But they can blow hard, terrible hard.'

He stepped out between the dozen cottages of the hamlet, and by the last of them stopped, and looked back. She was still by the door. This evening she looked frail, her full seventy-three years. On impulse David blew her a kiss. She waved a hand. Then he was round the corner and climbing up the zig-zag path through the woods.

This corner of Devon had never failed to cure him of the

urban malaise. He came back year after year. London is an exciting city; his job paid well and interested him; but the greater reality was here, by the sea, a mile from the nearest road, where he could be at peace. That urge to inspect the rest of the world that seemed to possess every one of his friends had passed him by. And there was nothing here to remind him of Vicky, lost to him in body but not so easily lost from his mind. He had felt the need to keep the place inviolate, even from her, and had never brought her down. Here he could forget her for whole days. Almost this was his home, and the rest of the world a temporary residence.

He came to the end of the wood, where the path broke out on to the open cliffside, about half-way up. A dozen times he had tried to paint this view: the great cliffs falling sheer to the sea in jutting headlands, and between them the little coves filled with the sea at high tide, and the heather and the gorse blazing in a fine discord up on the grasslands. He could never capture the magic, especially the sea, mile upon mile of sea, blue or grey or green, smooth as velvet, or white-capped, tossed and furrowed by the Atlantic winds.

Oddly enough, Mrs Brown was quite a critic. 'Don't you waste no more paint on that one,' she'd say. Or 'Nearly got it there you have, Mr Pitt. But I don't take to that tree, I don't think Ted would like it. Too brown, he'd say.' Her eyesight had been failing this last year, and she would peer closely at the canvas, moving round it like a dog worrying a bone, sometimes smelling it. And she was often right. She treated him as a son, not bothering with other visitors now.

David walked quickly to his favourite promontory two miles on, where a huge block of stone rested on a ledge beyond the path, and the sea swept round on either side far below. On this September evening, overcast and prematurely moving into dusk, the sea had a peculiar oily calm unlike anything he had seen before. He lay on the rock to watch.

The seagulls floating on the water looked very small. They were a long way down. The waves broke strongly enough against the cliffs, spray and foam boiling white, but ten yards out there was no movement. The clouds were closing in and down, black and swollen. The world grew suddenly smaller. He shivered.

He thought of Sally again, who had died in the same storm that had killed her fisherman father, and whom Mrs Brown

never mentioned. In ten years the subject had not come between them, though Ted, her husband, was so often the invisible partner in her conversation. This teased at him as much as the mystery of Sally's death. Yet he himself had not raised the subject. Once or twice he had been about to do so when some breath of a feeling had stopped him: not tact, not quite fear, perhaps awe, and an instinct that somehow their relationship would be changed, and for the worse, if the silence was broken from his side.

There was nothing in the cottage to recall Sally: no photographs, no books, no collections of postcards or stamps, none of the remnants that usually lie in cupboards and drawers long after the children have left. Mrs Brown had cleaned away all trace of her daughter's existence. David had learned of her from a neighbour. Twenty-two, pretty, and liked everywhere, her body had been washed ashore in the cove below the village, along with large sections of her father's boat, his body, and other sad jetsam. She had been devoted to him in death as in life.

But she had not been on his boat that day, or anywhere near it. Ted had been fishing. She had gone to Barnstaple for a dance, and until the body was found they had supposed her to have accepted the offer of a bed in town, since to return through the fury of the storm would have been uncomfortable, perhaps dangerous.

How had the sea caught her? No one knew. She had left the last bus at the top of the coombe around eleven o'clock and was never seen alive again.

David had wondered at this tragic and romantic story, a true mystery. The solitary girl walking down through the black and storm-tossed woods to the village: had she panicked and run blindly past the houses and over some precipitous section of cliff? There were plenty of those. But the girl had lived among them all her life, probably knew them blindfold, had no reason to approach them if going directly to her home. And storms were common. She had shown no signs of fear on leaving the bus, though the driver remembered that she had expressed anxiety for her father. What had happened?

The story tugged and nagged at him now, staring down at the distant sea. In some sense it was more real to him than many of the events from his own past. And thinking on Sally he forgot the storm approaching him, so that its beginning

was quite unexpected. A few swift exploratory gusts, and then the whirlwind. At once the sea below was a fury of white, the crests of the waves torn out by the wind to fly across the surface in sheets of spray.

He flattened to the rock and clung to it. His raincoat, a heap beside him, trembled, hesitated, then shot into the void to fall like a wounded bird far out among the waves. He was frightened, giddy. The wind was tugging, heaving, pulling, beating at him, howling demoniacally.

Then came the rain, above the wind a new and louder roar. He was hit by a Niagara of water, so dense that it was difficult to breathe, impossible to think. He was an insect pinned to a wall, racked on this vertiginous rock above a boiling sea, bombarded by a deluge that flew horizontally through space. For a brief fantastic moment he thought the wind had lifted the sea bodily four hundred feet.

For perhaps half an hour he lay there, stunned, unthinking, pressed against the comforting stone. He was aroused by his own shivering, a mixture of cold and fear. The wind had eased. He could relax that convulsive grip on the rock's crevices. But it had grown dark, opaquely and positively dark. Must get off the rock, he thought and forced himself to slide backwards to where the rock jutted from the path and was tolerably wide. There he turned, still on his stomach, and moved along the path until the full shelter of the slopes above broke the force of the wind. A hundred yards in there was a small cliff, and with his back to this, and one hand gripping the stem of a large bush of heather, David sat up, and began to live.

The rain here was falling, not beating sideways. The cliff itself was pouring water. He wondered what was happening to the streams in the valleys. A vivid flash followed at once by an eardrum-splitting crash of thunder pressed him back against the rock-face. The cliffs below fell into a void of driving rain.

He might have stayed anchored to this corner of comparative safety until the storm passed three or four hours later, if a new element of danger had not driven him out. Stones and rocks began to fall from the slopes above, loosened from the earth by the weight of rain. One large rock must have hit the top of his cliff, for he felt a shock run through it, and he was showered with slivers and fragments.

Larger pieces bounced on the slopes near him and shot into the night.

Without clear thought he was running along the path. It was scarcely visible, and he fell. Then he moved at a sort of crouching walk within the shelter of the inlets, and at a crawl round the two headlands.

He reached the wood. Here it was blind dark, and the gale blowing through the trees, and the rain beating on them, made a continuous deafening thunder. He needed to rest. A lightning flash revealed that he was below one of the many stout though stunted oaks that gave the wood its peculiar character. He climbed and sat with a leg on either side of the trunk, and his chest against it, conscious now of a steady shower of leaves, twigs and small branches. The trunk trembled to the wind's power but gave a most comforting assurance of solidity.

And then through this Stygian world came another human. A figure with a torch hurried past below him, a girl of twenty or so in a flowing cloak who seemed quite able to withstand the wind. A stranger. She was not of the village.

He slithered down and ran after the beam of light before it should be lost. He did this instinctively, and never thought to look for reasons. Perhaps it was the sight of another human being, any human being; perhaps it was from the glimpse of her shadowy face, a beautiful face marked not with fear, but with deep anxiety.

She was well beyond the wood before he caught up with her. He managed to stay a few yards behind on the way back to the first of the headlands, where she stopped. He sat down, her unseen guardian. He was reluctant to make himself known yet could not let her from his sight. Although the wind had lost that first violence, still he did not care to stand on the exposed point. The fiercer gusts plucked at him, as though irritated by the obstruction to their path. The girl seemed unconcerned. Her cloak flapped and billowed wildly, dangerously, but she kept her feet.

She was peering at the invisible sea, looking from left to right and back again. She remained like this for three or four minutes, motionless except for the turning head, the flapping cloak, and her hair streaming out horizontally like seaweed in a tidal race.

Suddenly she turned and ran past him back towards the wood. Had he been sitting on the path instead of squatting

against the slope of the cliff, she must have fallen over him.

Again he glimpsed her face, closer this time. It was white, drawn tight with fear and anguish, a face that haunted, a face that he had to follow. It did not seem unnatural to follow. No other course was possible. But what had she expected to find out there in the blackness of the night-wrapped storm?

The girl kept running. It was a narrow twisting path, rock-rough in places, and was now along its entire length a kind of ford through the waters that rushed down the hillside. David slipped and stumbled but never left the path. He did not consider the danger. With all his faculties he was intent upon tracking that wavering insubstantial beam of light. Sometimes he lost it as driving rain blinded him, or bushes came between them. And it was the girl who fell at last, rolling several feet, the torch beam gyrating wildly. She came to rest in a clump of gorse, and was up and on the path before David could reach her. No cries, no curses, just silently up and on. It was almost inhuman.

After this she slowed and eased his task and there were no more than ten yards between them when, at the entrance to the wood, she paused, wiped her face with a large white handkerchief, and looked back straight at him. He, too, had stopped. He felt as though he was gazing straight into her heart, a heart that was bursting with despair. Then she was off again. In trying to stuff the handkerchief into the pocket of her cloak she dropped it. David snatched it up as he hurried past, for in the wood he had to keep close if the light from her torch was to help him escape the overhanging branches and other hazards. The noise there was still deafening, with the old trees swaying, creaking and groaning, the wind howling through them, and the rain battering down, stripping off the sodden leaves.

When three sheep, maddened by fear, perhaps by the sheer volume of noise, dashed down the hillside and across the path in front of the girl, he heard nothing. Briefly the solid white bodies appeared in the torchlight, eyes glaring, and then were gone towards the precipice below, an apocalyptic vision.

The swift and startling passage of these sheep did not check the girl. Her glance did not follow them. On she went, driven as fiercely by her fears as they by theirs. And on behind her he followed, downward through the last of the wood and out on to the main path from the road above. He

was scarcely conscious of their position. All that mattered was the light, always the light, and whether it was near or far from him.

There were lights on in the village, but windows and doors were shut tight. Although he knew every yard of the short street, tonight the scene was so distorted by the storm, or perhaps by his weary half-blind eyes, that nothing was familiar.

The girl seemed to have picked up a lantern, a mariner's storm lantern. Its more generous light swayed out of the village and among the trees on the other side, then dropped down the steep zig-zag path towards the cove. He hurried after, slowed by the twistings of the path that hid the light and left him in darkness. But there was only the one path, and only the cove at its foot. He knew that he would catch up with her.

As he descended, the great hungry roar of the breakers rose over the noise of wind and rain. By lightning flashes he glimpsed through the foliage furious seas bursting against the rocks. He paused, repelled. Something of the reality of his position came through to him and he began to be afraid. What in Heaven's name was he doing here? Nothing, nothing would make him go close to those waves.

Then the lantern gleamed briefly below, and on he went. Soon he came out on to the wide level shelf of rock and earth that stretched for the length of a cricket pitch fifty feet above and beside the cove. At the far end the path continued down to the shore. At this end, and at right angles, a kind of causeway of natural rock, widened and made regular with stone outworks, sloped gently seawards beside a vertical pitch of cliff. Formerly there had been a lower and longer section, a breakwater jutting beyond the cliffs. On a clear day the foundations could be seen beneath the sea, a dark rectangular shadow. But a storm had removed it, and the light at its sea-tip. Now the causeway ended where the cliffs curved round to make a headland, and a low wall edged it.

David saw the lantern shining near the far end of the causeway, illuminating sheets of spray that swept by. He was glad that she had not gone down to the shore. He moved carefully towards her. The darkness was intense. The cliff gave some shelter, but on the other side the sea foamed and roared below. The tide was up. No one could have survived a fall.

The girl was standing on the extreme edge of the causeway, holding her lantern before her and swinging it from side to side, as if signalling out to sea. He peered into the storm, disbelieving that any small boat could live out there, or could expect shelter in the rough and unprotected cove. Yet why else should she wave her lantern?

When he was but a few yards from her, she moved forward, paused, and disappeared slowly over the edge. He stumbled to the wall and straining forward, peered down. Gouts of stinging spray beat against him, filling his eyes with salt water so that he was practically blinded. But he knew what she was doing. And it was madness.

Down this vertical outer face of the causeway were the remains of the old steps, some missing, others dangerously reduced, that once led to the breakwater. Now they led to the raging sea.

David felt sick from the taste of fear. Perhaps he should have followed, tried to draw her back, but he did not have the courage. He gripped the low wall, clung to it as though his whole world might disappear and this his sole support. The light still shed its wavering beams down there, irradiating a patch of sea and spray. That she had survived so far was a miracle.

Then he saw something that killed all power of movement, fused him to the wall with a total paralysis of fear.

The light was out on the water, moving out on the water, the girl holding it high above her head. No, she was not on the water. She was above the water, ten or fifteen feet above the water.

The girl was swinging the lantern in wide arcs. The spray swept over her, the wind tore at her cloak and hair. She was thirty, forty yards away now, a lonely circle of light above the wastes of storm-tossed sea, waving her lantern regularly, desperately, though her arms must have been breaking. And below her – nothing, space, sea spray, wind.

Then there was a terrifying rumbling, roaring, very loud and near, quite distinct from thunder, as if masonry or rock was sliding and falling in huge quantities. David felt, or thought he felt, the ground shake beneath his feet. And above this, above all the multitudinous noises of the gale, he heard quite distinctly a thin distant cry, her cry.

For a brief moment he stood there, still locked by fear. He

could see nothing, think nothing. Then he was running like a madman back up the causeway. His senses, stretched by fear, led him safely to the path, and he stopped. He looked back.

The causeway was still there. The occasional and now distant lightning revealed the great blunt silhouette, the black cliffs on the left, the sea beyond. Nothing moved. No light shone out. He was alone. Some instinct told him that he was quite alone.

He sat down. He was unnerved, exhausted, still trembling with a residue of fear, far from the hope of connected rational thought. He sat there for a long time.

The storm was dying perceptibly, the wind less strong, the thunder distant, the rain a steady drizzle. Only the sea raged with undiminished fury.

At some point he forced himself to rise and go slowly back down the causeway. Afterwards he used to think this the most courageous thing he had done. He reached the edge, the low salt-sprayed wall. There was only the sea. She had gone.

When he entered the cottage the expression on his face must have told her. For Mrs Brown said at once, wearily, with resignation, almost pity in her voice, and yet with a hint of triumph: 'You've seen Sally.'

And only then, not until then, did he connect that old mystery with his present experience. He sat down very suddenly on the floor by the fire. When the clock on the mantel-shelf struck eight he was amazed; he felt that he had been out for hours, days, half a lifetime. 'Sally, Sally, Sally.' The name ran through his mind nearly to the exclusion of any other thought.

Mrs Brown treated him like a child. She helped him off with his sodden clothing, put him into his pyjamas and a dressing-gown, made him drink the brandy she kept for emergencies. He could not eat much, but did begin to recover. He was able to tell her what had happened.

When he had finished she said: 'And the handkerchief? You have the handkerchief?'

They looked at each other. 'It should be in the pocket of my trousers.'

Mrs Brown went into the kitchen where she had piled the wet clothes. She came back, a white handkerchief in her

hand. She was turning it over, looking at the corners. She held it out to him, a strange expression on her face. In one corner were embroidered the initials 'S.B.', and beneath them a pattern of three interlocking hearts.

She went out again, leaving him to digest this new fact: for here was a fact, incontrovertible, unassailable. He heard her climb the stairs and walk across the floor of her bedroom overhead. A drawer was opened and closed, all slowly and deliberately, and she was on her way back. She came in holding two more handkerchiefs, unfolded, and marked like the one he had recovered, except that the initials were different.

'She made three of them, one for me, one for her father, and one for herself. She was fifteen. Our hearts were joined like this, she said, and must never be parted. I kept mine in a drawer. Ted always took his to sea with him, and it was on his body when they found it, tied round his arm under his jersey. Hers I never found.'

She looked quickly at him, then away at the fire. They were silent for a long time. When she spoke she startled him. He had dozed off. 'And there's something else on it. My Ted and Sally went in 1934. That breakwater went in the great storm of 1872. Many a time I heard my father tell of it, and other folks. It was never rebuilt.'

In silence again they digested that piece of information. For David, things did not quite fit. He did not understand what had happened but was too exhausted to puzzle. He gave in, dragged himself to bed. He slept until ten the next morning and still felt beaten, flattened, sucked dry of energy.

Mrs Brown brought him the daily paper and some breakfast. She said nothing in particular, only recounting some of the damage done to the village by the storm: chimneys down, tiles gone, flooded rooms, fallen trees, the one telephone out of action.

The paper told the same story on a wider scale. Flooding down the narrow coombes had caused the worst damage. Several lives had been lost. The storm, at least, David had not imagined. What had he imagined? Nothing, he told himself over and over again. He had not imagined a thing. What he had seen had been there, and anyone with him would have seen it too. And yet, and yet . . .

Next day he went into Barnstaple to look up the files of the local newspaper. He wanted to confirm about the breakwater,

which he did; and he wanted to see if the death of Sally and her father had been reported. Mrs Brown still kept her silence, and he thought there might be more than the neighbour had recalled.

There was. No one had seen Sally after she left the bus. They had not been able to account for her surrender by the sea. But at the inquest one small and curious fact had emerged unbidden and apparently irrelevant. The court reporter had given it the light touch.

An old woman from the village, now dead, had placed a lantern on a hook outside her house: always she did this in dirty weather at night, always had, always would. During the storm her lantern had gone. She had come to complain to the Coroner, having found no satisfaction with the police. She wanted a replacement. The Coroner tried to soothe her. She had persisted. Finally he had paid for a new lantern himself. He was a busy man.

David found nothing else new in the report. The questions still circled round, whirlpools in the mind.

That evening, the second after the storm, he went for his customary walk. He was nervous but determined to be normal. He did not get far. Half-way through the wood, at about the spot where the sheep had burst across the path, he came suddenly to the lip of a chasm, earth-streaked and rubble-strewn. The path had vanished with the fallen cliff. There was a gap of fifty yards. Trees hung over the edge at drunken angles. He drew back, frightened. He had glimpsed the sea at his feet far below, the sea which had swallowed the millions of tons that must have hit it two nights past, which had swallowed Sally, which could swallow him.

So he had heard a real fall, which might well have shaken the causeway by its impact. But the cry! What of the cry!

Mrs Brown did not seem too well over the next few days. He began to worry about her. On the morning when he had to leave she looked more than ever withdrawn. Her frame was shrinking, as though the life spirit was draining out. He thought she ought to see a doctor and said so.

'Doctors can't cure me, my dear. I'll be joining my Ted soon.'

'Oh, stuff and nonsense. You've many a summer yet.' But David did not believe his own words. For the first time in his memory she had not referred to Ted as someone who was

near by, about to come in, or unexpectedly engaged elsewhere.

'Are you sure you will be all right? Send a telegram if you need my help. I'll come at once.'

She smiled. 'You be off then, Mr Pitt. You'll be back soon enough.' She waved him out of sight.

In London again he began to feel distaste for his work and for the city. It was a feeling stronger and longer-lasting than the usual post-holiday disenchantment. He was unable to rid his mind of Sally and the storm and the village and Mrs Brown, and could not concentrate on work. He turned the problems over and over, even jotted down on paper a short account of the events. He was out of his depth, deeply disturbed yet at times excited, as though he might be on the edge of an important discovery. Once, walking across Waterloo Bridge during a lunch-hour, he felt a close-to-irresistible urge to shout, to throw his briefcase and the hats of his fellow pedestrians into the river, so powerfully was he overtaken by the sensation that great events were pending.

In October, five weeks after his return, it was not a telegram that came from Mrs Brown but a letter, with a covering note from the doctor. She had died quietly and easily three days earlier. She had lost the will to live, he wrote, though none in the village could say why.

David opened the letter, fumbling, anxious. 'It is time for me to go,' he read. 'Now that Sally has chosen you and has company, I have no worries.' Her writing was surprisingly firm; it did not wander over the page. 'I have told them that you are to have the cottage. They will write to you about it when I am gone, which won't be long now, praise God. I've missed him all these years.

'Sally is a good girl. Look after her and she'll be no trouble. Here is her handkerchief. She gave it to you and will want you to be having it. The other two they'll bury with me. Goodbye, dear friend, and God keep you.'

Nothing else. Whatever she had known of Sally, living or dead, had gone with her. It was left to him to find out more if he would.

He unfolded the handkerchief, with its carefully embroidered initials and its three hearts. For a long time he stared at it as it lay on his knee. He felt sad that he would not again see the old lady. But he felt happy about the cottage, con-

tented, almost as if he had been expecting this for a long time, which was not the case. Sally had long hair and a lovely face. He did not think of her as anguished now, haunted, despairing. She was smiling.

He refolded the handkerchief and placed it carefully into the inner breast-pocket of his coat. Was the old lady right? Had he Sally now as well as the cottage? He would have to go down there to find out. He would have to, wouldn't he?

\*

David's narrative finished with the words exactly as reproduced above. On the 12th October he left his London flat and moved to the cottage. Two weeks later he instructed his solicitor to sell the flat and all the furniture. On the 16th November he was drowned. His will, dated 14th November I understand, left everything to his sister. But he left me the portrait. What happened down at the cottage? The letter that David wrote to me when enclosing the narrative provides the only evidence. It is dated 5th November, was postmarked 16th November, but was obviously begun much earlier and added to on several occasions, almost like a journal. I have separated the successive entries, which are obvious enough in the original because of the spacing, or a change of pens, and in one case from the use of pencil. The writing throughout is controlled. The handkerchief, by the way, was not found on his body. I made discreet inquiries.

*Dear Patrick,*

*The enclosed story is as true as I can make it, and you are the only person I care to entrust it to. If you find it a queer tale, I can only plead that it happened, which I think gives to it a kind of power that might be missing from fiction, though of course fiction also 'happens'. But you know what I mean. If there is a sequel, I will write it down and you shall see it.*

Sally came to me last night. She's a very beautiful girl. She has luminous brown eyes, and when I gaze into them I feel that I have come home. Looking at her gives me the feeling I sometimes get when a bit of painting goes especially well, a feeling of exact propriety, of rightness, of inevitability. Her face has an ethereal quality, which is perhaps only natural. The skin has but the faintest tinge of pink and looks even

paler because framed by that long black hair. Her body . . . well, I am not sure that I want to relate even to you the detail of everything, though Sally says she does not mind. After all, this is our honeymoon. She has proved to me that I am her first lover.

*I am not accustomed to instant autobiography, have never kept a diary. You will ask questions and I shall not have answered them. But you can write to me.*

*Sally took me down to the causeway last evening. The leaves are nearly all fallen now, even in this sheltered corner, so that the views from the path into and across the cove are more extensive. There was, I thought, a hint of frost in the air. I confess that I had been reluctant to go that way since the evening of the storm, but Sally says that the best way to conquer fear is to face it, and of course she is right. It is obvious that the villagers cannot see her as I do. I have to be careful when we go out together or they will think me mad. I do the shopping, of course, and most of the eating. Sally says that she must watch her figure, which I thought rather funny. But she was serious. She drinks milk, nibbles at water biscuits, and sometimes eats a boiled egg. I never used to bother much with milk, so have had to invent a story for Mrs Duncannon, who sells the stuff. I've told her that my London doctor has ordered me to swallow as much of it every day as I can manage.*

I have begun to paint Sally. I have to do it in the cottage, where the light is never too good, for I could not explain to the inevitable viewer outside how I am able to paint the portrait of a young lady while gazing at a grass bank or a patch of sea. Besides, the older villagers might recognise her likeness, and how should I get out of that one? She is a good sitter, content to stay reasonably still for thirty or forty minutes at a stretch.

*November 3rd. The evenings draw in. I get an odd feeling now, almost a certainty, that my present way of life will not last. This makes me both nervous and excited. Sally won't say anything directly. But she looks at me sometimes with a question in her eye, as though she was assessing me, judging my fitness for some plan that she has yet to disclose.*

*I have found that she likes red wine, which she had never*

*drunk, and which I have to get from Barnstaple. If my money is to last, I ought not to be buying wine, not regularly. Yet I am unable to worry about money or security now that I am with Sally. There's a turn-up for the book, you will say, remembering how for years I prostituted my talent for commerce (your phrase). Most evenings we sit drinking before a wood and coal fire in the living-room. It is then that I catch her staring at me. She smiles and I try to hide my disquiet. But she knows. I realised this afternoon, with a shock, that she would be fifty-eight if she had lived. As things are, she's been preserved for me. And if things are to continue as they are, I'll have to preserve myself for her.*

Here's an odd fact. My neighbour's dog, with whom I used to be great friends, will not now come near me. But the tabby cat from Mrs Gladower's cottage across the street visits us more than ever.

*Down to the causeway again tonight. It's always at night now, or at any rate after dark. I think I begin to know what Sally has in mind and I am afraid. Yet I trust her. I could not live without her.*

*The painting is going well. At work on it I feel fulfilled yet relaxed, and each problem as I reach it seems to solve itself. Of course I have never been so in love with the subject of my work.*

Birth must be terrifying, and I dare say most of us would refuse the experience had we the choice. So with death. Sally does not talk of death. I suppose she takes it for granted. But she has made it clear that from her point of view our present life is not a satisfactory compromise. For one thing, I grow older and she does not. I'm no believer in the standard religions, so I lack received knowledge of the next stage. That does not worry me. It is the moments of transit that I fear. As soon as I am ready Sally wants me to move on. It may be that her own time is limited. I must reverse the old custom and follow my wife wherever she leads.

*I wish it was summer. The sea will be so cold. I shall post this to you tomorrow morning. I do not wish strange eyes to read it, not until you've seen it, old friend, and it has acquired, as it*

were, the shell and patina of history. And you are to have the painting, which will be, I suppose, the only 'proof' of our marriage. I think I have got her pretty well. It's odd, isn't it? As I write these words, with Sally in the other armchair staring at the flames of the fire that flicker and shadow the black beams and white walls of her mother's living-room, a room I know far better than I know myself; as I write, everything about me is real and vivid. Yet when you read what I have written, for you this will be history, already to a large degree unreal. We cannot truly share experience, can we? Though I wish that I could convey to you the quality of my sharing with Sally. We hardly need words (which is just as well, for the villagers are beginning to fall quiet at my approach!). To be together is a sufficient excellence. Nothing else is important. But I cannot paint quicksilver thought, nor can clumsy words wrapped in an envelope carry to you the spirit of things. Never mind. Lie back, close your eyes, add a thousand per cent to what I write, and perhaps you will understand why you and I cannot meet again. The causeway will be my launching pad to felicity. Tomorrow night, for a storm is forecast. I suppose my departure will cause the tongues to wag. How could one explain?

Sally has just looked up and says to write you her love. She is laughing and looks happier than she has done for some days. She has been rather solemn. She can be very funny when she is happy.

Farewell, and be good.

David

## THE SONG IN THE HOUSE

ANN BRIDGE

When the Buddicombs took Netherfield Greys, that ancient house, and settled down there, they did so with an unspoken sense of usurpation and intrusion that was not wholly warranted by the facts. It was true that Mr Buddicomb had spent most of his life in the City, like his father before him, adding by respected and steady industry to the already considerable fortune left to him; always in London, he had never been a squire. But his mother had been a Hamilton, a distant cousin of the family who had lived at Netherfield Greys ever since a de Grey built the Manor House in Henry VII's time, and it was the impoverished Hamilton-Greys themselves, stressing the relationship, who first suggested that their rich kinsman might care to buy the house when the discovery of death-watch beetles in the timbers of the roof made an immediate outlay imperative.

Seven thousand pounds, the architect said, must be spent, and spent at once, if the whole richly tinted mass of gables, dormers, chimneys, and carved leaden gutter tops was not to come crashing down, involving the house in its fall.

This was the last straw. Up till and through the war, the family had held on somehow, living in fewer and fewer rooms, with smaller and smaller fires, and ever fewer and more incompetent servants – putting away more and more silver, and themselves polishing the glorious furniture, bought as it was made by ten generations of good taste, which glowed richly against the panelling in the low rooms. They drank cider instead of wine, and then water instead of cider; with their own hands they dug and weeded in the long terraced borders overlooking the river, and clipped the living green arches and battlements of the great yew hedges that were the glory of the sundial garden; while, instead of the four or five respectful gardeners of earlier days, an ancient man, an ancient pony, and a callow, whistling boy mowed away through the hot summer days, trying to preserve the shaven turf which stretched down in sunshine to the river, and led

the feet so softly into the deep shadow of the yew walks.

Early and late, harder than any wage earners, they worked – in a voluntary servitude, a proud and anxious devotion to that lovely entity, the house, at once the shelter and symbol of themselves as they most realised themselves – a family in a place where they belonged. Townsmen and dwellers in new countries can hardly understand the depth and spontaneity of this feeling: not that a place belongs to you, but that you belong – how profoundly and lovingly! – to it. But it was a losing fight, and the architect's report merely precipitated the inevitable end. Seven thousand pounds were simply not there. Faced with the alternatives of seeing the beloved house crumble over their heads or of parting with it to those who could preserve its beauty, they chose the latter course, and approached Mr Buddicomb.

It was characteristic of this gentleman that he refused to buy the house. He never explained fully to anyone the reasons which moved him, not even to his daughter Monica, who enjoyed more of his diffident and difficult confidence than anyone else. He was retiring from business, and, like all retiring Englishmen, he sought the land. We cannot help it – it is in our blood. Why is it that, his work over, the Englishman turns for his rest to the quiet fields, the gentle muddy simplicity of his green countryside? I cannot say – but he does; and generally, if he can afford it, he buys.

But when Netherfield Greys was offered to Mr Buddicomb he would not buy it. He took a long lease; he agreed to restore the roof, and voluntarily undertook to leave the rest much as it was; rather shyly he suggested taking the house more or less furnished. The disposition of that vast accumulation of period pieces, so at home in the quiet rooms where they had shone for generations, had been a source of much anxiety to the family. Sadly, but with relief, they accepted the offer; gratefully they took the extra rent which a furnished house implies. Then, sighing, they moved out; and the Buddicombs, presently, moved in. To his wife, who had wished to live in a house she owned, and was disappointed, Mr Buddicomb, jingling his keys, said, 'Oh, well, my dear . . .' To Monica, as they stood gazing from the churchyard gate at the warm pink brickwork of the south front, he observed suddenly: 'Pretty place – pretty place. I'm glad I didn't buy it. You – well, you never know.'

Monica was pretty sure from the outset that she knew what it was that you never know. More even than her father, unable, as she guessed him to be, to take a step which would part the place irrevocably from its real owners, she felt that she was there on sufferance. She, too, was in a way glad that the house had not been bought; and yet, if it *had* been theirs, their very own, it would, she felt, have done something rather important for her. It would have given a focus to her capacity for devotedness, supplied an anchor for those unexpressed emotions which, in her life, were something of a surplus. The unmarried daughter at home is generally left with a good deal of surplus of one sort or another – often time, frequently interest, nearly always emotion. For ten years now Monica had been filling up her life with things – the flowers, the dogs, calls, notes for her mother, new novels. All the spaces left vacant by her music and her feeling for her father she had diligently filled with occupations extraneous to herself – as one stuffs a doll with all sorts of rags, she thought sometimes, impatiently.

It was her own fault, more or less. When she was nineteen, and prettier than she would ever be again, she had refused Robert. Just then it didn't seem possible to marry. Her elder sister was newly married and gone, her mother ill; the idea of leaving her father to cope with an invalid and endure a solitary table and the house-keeping of servants was impossible. Or it had seemed so. She hadn't meant it, in her heart, to be a permanent refusal. She had always expected that Robert's regiment, and Robert with it, would return from India some day, and then . . . On empty foggy afternoons, in Lancaster Gate, she used to imagine the heavy door of the drawing-room opening and Bridgeman saying, 'Captain Shadforth, miss.' It seemed to fill those afternoons, bring them alive, to imagine that – especially when her mother recovered, and became again her active and not too contented self.

But when, four years later, the regiment did return, Robert did not come to Lancaster Gate; she read in the papers of his engagement, and then of his marriage, to a lovely creature. Monica had never been a lovely creature, and she knew in her heart that no one would come now in Robert's place. He had been her one golden chance – a gift, a bright jewel which life in a moment of caprice had held out to

her. She had not taken the gift, and that was that.

All the same, she found it impossible not to love the house, even if she had not the right to serve it as did those others, on whom it laid a claim stronger than its beauty and its grace. With something of a sense of stewardship, Monica and her father delighted together in bringing the place back, slowly and carefully, to the perfection which they felt to be its due. The roof mended, they set to work on the interior. With infinite confabulation and care they chose fresh rugs for the great parlour, with its wide open hearth, and carved chimney-piece, and appropriate curtains for the many deep-set windows. Five gardeners returned to clip, sweep, trim, and shave, while the Buddicombs pored over garden catalogues to bring colour into the long borders and the terrace walk.

All this Monica enjoyed. The process of filling up was, quite definitely, easier and nicer in the country than in London. The dogs' exercise took place not in crowded streets but in elm-shaded lanes and paths across open pasture and ploughland; and bit by bit she discovered, in consultation with the vicar, quite a number of village good works lying ready to her hand. Any contact with the villagers embarrassed her dreadfully at first – she felt that they must regard her with hatred as an intruder. But if they did, they were very polite about it; and the vicar, so long as *someone* would deliver his parish magazines, lead out his Cubs on a Saturday, and provide flowers for the altar in church, did not, apparently, care a hoot *who* did these things.

Most of all, Monica liked doing things in and about the church. It lay close to the house, enfolded in the same loop of river, only a low wall of soft rose-red brick separating the churchyard, with its cypresses and tombstones, from the garden; and by a little private gate she could enter it at any time unobserved. The church was full of Grey monuments.

There was a Crusader earlier than the house; the ruffed builder of it and his wife knelt face to face, with their minute ruffed offspring tailing off behind them – five sons and three daughters. There were later Hamilton-Greys, extravagantly mourned by the flamboyant marble angels of the eighteenth century; and there was the pitifully recent tablet to Guy and Nigel, one killed in 1914 and the other in 1918. But the memorial which most caught Monica's fancy was a small, graceful white urn, in low relief on a grey marble tablet, with

a simple inscription, 'Sabina Grey. A Deare Daughter' – and then the dates. Sabina died in 1601, aged thirty. Monica, as she emptied the altar vases, rinsed them, and put in fresh flowers, stepping to and fro in the empty echoing church, wondered whether Sabina had sometimes done the same, rustling there in her stiff dress. 'A deare daughter'! Would the Elizabethans have called *her* that too? Sabina had not married – had she too had a Robert, and put him aside to tend her parents' needs, and then filled empty afternoons for ten years?

Monica found the thought soothing; in some curious way it gave her a sense of companionship. Her own second name was Sabina. Sabina had been her grandmother's name – that Hamilton kinswoman who was their one real link with the place. Had Sabina gone to Court, or lived always in the old pink-red house – not so old then, but relatively new and modern? She must have been there when the Queen came to stay, the year after the Armada, and slept in the great south bedroom, in the huge four-poster which still had the crowned 'E' carved in the central panel. The frail hangings of that bed, with their clear faded colours, had been in position then – it was all got for the occasion, so the Hamilton-Greys said. Essex had come in the Queen's train, and a crowd of others. Was it then that life had held out to that other Sabina a jewel she did not take? Because everyone married in those days, Monica thought, sighing a little.

While Monica and her father devoted themselves to the house and garden, Mrs Buddicomb turned her attention to the neighbourhood. Called upon, she returned the calls promptly and imposingly. Such hospitality as she received she returned in double measure, giving lunches for teas, and dinners, as far as possible, for lunches. Mrs Buddicomb had a great belief in what she called 'bringing people together'; she delighted in a throng; she liked to see her staircase a mass of people, struggling to get up. But she was rather clever with her entertaining; she would not attempt a throng without a lure. To her annoyance the house was not ready (owing to Monica and Mr Buddicomb's intolerable fussiness over fabrics) for either a strawberry party or a raspberry party – that summer was wasted. It was autumn before her first large entertainment took place.

Actually she owed the lure for this particular gathering to

one of those musical friends of Monica's of whom she so much disapproved, because they had no style and were, as she said, 'no use'. This young man was of less use than anyone imaginable, being barely twenty-four, shabby, and extremely poor. But, like so many of the very young nowadays, he knew an immense amount about his subject – it was really intolerable, Mrs Buddicomb thought, how learned the very young now were. When Monica had mentioned his name in Lord Dreadmouth's hearing – a thing Mrs Buddicomb would never have done – the old gentleman spoke of him positively with reverence, as *the* authority in his own line.

His line was harpsichords; and on one of his visits he had pounced upon an ancient harpsichord which stood in a little-used room along the great upper corridor, crying out that it was an early – something, Mrs Buddicomb couldn't remember the tiresome name – a treasure and a wonder. But when he went on to say that Olivia Pettigrew ought to – indeed simply must – come and sing contemporary Elizabethan songs to it, in costume, accompanying herself as she alone could, Mrs Buddicomb at once saw possibilities in the idea. A rare harpsichord in the great parlour, a rare singer in Elizabethan dress, in that marvellous contemporary setting – here was just the lure she required for her first party at Netherfield Greys. With unusual cordiality she inquired of the young man how one could get hold of Miss Pettigrew, whereupon he said carelessly that he could bring her; when she further inquired if he knew what her fee was, he thought, even more carelessly, that it was thirty guineas. The sum seemed reassuringly large to Mrs Buddicomb, for one afternoon; and with the help of the styleless young man the matter was put in train.

Monica accepted the party with her usual resignation. She wanted to hear Olivia Pettigrew sing with the harpsichord, but this singing in costume, to a crowd of people, seemed to her bound to combine the maximum of tiresomeness with the minimum of pleasure. Nevertheless, she and the young man arranged the harpsichord down by the great fireplace, and ransacked the house until they found the appropriate seat – a low-backed thing, contemporary, with faint traces of gilding, to place in front of the old instrument.

When Miss Pettigrew actually arrived, Monica had something of a shock. She was a smallish, smart, bouncing woman, very much made up, with a slight but unmistakable Cockney

accent. Monica led her to the small boudoir which had been turned into an improvised green-room, where the singer unpacked her clothes, talking volubly all the time. She complained sharply of the bad light at the toilet table, and asked for innumerable things, including a glass of port, until Monica was reduced to feeling it an absolute profanation that such a person should sing in the house at all. When at last she left her and slid quietly into the great parlour, it was already full of the solid befurred and silken shapes of the neighbourhood in its best winter clothes. During the pause which ensued, while the audience chattered and rustled their programmes, she sat wishing it were all over. And then the door opened, and the young man ushered Olivia Pettigrew to the harpsichord.

Monica almost gasped – and a little breathing sound of wonder and pleasure passed through the room. A golden figure in Elizabethan dress – jewelled cap, puffed looped sleeves, wide lace collar, and square-toed shoes – stood for a moment outlined against the dark panelling before moving with slow stateliness to the instrument. In that marvellous dress Miss Pettigrew had gained height and dignity; Monica was swiftly aware that her appearance was no longer a profanation, but exquisitely in harmony with the great room. She sat with bent head, in an attitude of composed grace, while the young man spoke, introducing her; as he finished, she began to play. Her beautiful hands – Monica had noticed their beauty in the boudoir – ran over the keys, making the harpsichord send out its faint, rather touching, tinkling in a small accompaniment; and then she sang.

Before the first verse came to an end, Monica realised that the party was justified. The voice was lovely, a true mezzo-soprano, with just that touch of burr in the lower register, and boyishness in the upper, that was perfectly suited to the curious masculinity of sixteenth-century English music. But even more, as the song proceeded, she felt herself to be in the presence of a real artist. The 'attack' was perfect: with exquisite rightness the singer just emphasised the curious difficult beat of the words against the accompaniment, and yet allowed the emotion of the song to breathe through, lightly, lightly – like a little flutter of heart-beats through the graceful artificiality of some formal minuet. And she brought out, too, as she proceeded through the first group, the peculiar

quality of Elizabethan songs – the sense of youth, of a generation young as no generation ever was before or since, held in a formal convention; of ardours and ecstasies under the stiff and stately dress of some prodigious masquerade.

A singer herself, Monica knew how desperately difficult it is, for this very reason, to sing those songs as they should be sung; her sense of this quality about them had increased of late. Curious about the Elizabethan Sabina, she had gone to the contemporary song writers – Campion, Dowland, and the rest – for illumination, and had found herself hearing their words with quite a new sense of what lay behind them, the background and the life. And here was Olivia Pettigrew, the irritable person with a Cockney accent, pouring out their songs in an interpretation so right and true and sure that it seemed suddenly to Monica as if the room itself sang.

Yes, it was that – the fancy, having once slipped into her head, stuck there: it was as if the great room were somehow repeating its own past, in the notes of that golden figure before the ancient instrument. Had Sabina sat and listened, as she now did, to some renowned singer of her day?

How silly she was, Monica said to herself. Lost in her fancies, she had practically missed the end of the first group. Now, after an interval, in which she felt sure Olivia was drinking more port, the songs began again. But the moment they did, she had once more that curious sense of the past opening before her, of the room giving up something which it held. Really absurd! Oh, but she must listen to this – she loved this! She knew the opening accompaniment – it was from Campion's *Third Book of Ayres*; and glancing at her programme she read the words again, which she so loved for their curious haunted quality, the half-bitter invocation of magic summoned to the aid of the deserted heart:

Thrice tosse these oaken ashes in the air,  
Thrice sit thou mute, in this enchanted chair;  
And thrice three times tye up this true-love's knot,  
And murmur soft, 'She will, or she will not.'

Go burn these poisonous weeds in yon blue fire,  
These screech-owl's feathers and this prickling briar;  
This cypress gathered at a dead man's grave;  
That all thy fears and cares an end may have.

Then come, you fairies, dance with me a round!  
 Melt her hard heart with your melodious sound!  
 In vain are all the charms I can devise:  
 She hath an art to break them with her eyes.

Now Olivia was singing it – faultlessly! The passion, the suspense, the sort of horror of the amateur magician, rose in the room as her voice filled it. Monica shut her eyes. But at the close of the first verse she opened them again with a start. The singer had altered the words – she sang, ‘*He* will, or he will not.’ Now why had she done that? Monica listened again, with closer attention; she might have been mistaken. No – definite and clear, in the final verse, the voice sang:

‘Melt *his* hard heart with your melodious sound!’

And then, with the slower cadence of melancholy:

‘In vain are all the charms I can devise:  
*He* hath an art to break them with *his* eyes.’

The last words were sung quite low, the very breathing of reminiscent joy and present sadness – precisely, oh, precisely so had she herself felt when Robert’s face, Robert’s eyes, had become a lost sweetness, edged with an intolerable regret. Her own memories invaded her, evoked by the music. But gradually her curiosity revived. Why should Miss Pettigrew have changed the words of that song? With a curious urgency Monica felt that she must find out, and when the music was over, and the company was moving – as slowly and congestedly as even Mrs Buddicombe could have wished – down the broad staircase towards tea, she went into the boudoir. The singer was three-parts changed. Her costume and music lay scattered about; she was touching up her eyes and lips before the dim mirror. Monica praised the singing warmly and sincerely, and Miss Pettigrew thawed at her evident knowledge and appreciation. Then she praised the rendering of that particular song, and at last, ‘But why,’ she said, touching the verses on the programme, ‘did you change the words?’

‘What do you mean – change the words? I never do such a thing,’ said Miss Pettigrew, whipping round briskly from the toilet table. ‘Here – let me see.’

Monica held out the paper. 'Here – and here. You sang, "*He* hath an art to break them with *his* eyes", and all of it as if it were a woman singing.'

Miss Pettigrew, scanning the page, said: 'Sorry to contradict, but really, I did no such thing. You can't have heard properly. I sang the words as they are written there. Really, Miss Buddicombe –'

Monica, soothing Olivia's rising wrath, leading her down to tea, talking civilly to the guests, carried about within her an exciting puzzle, which she would examine later. She was quite sure she had *not* been mistaken. She had heard distinctly the words Miss Pettigrew sang; she was equally convinced that the singer, in spite of her temper, was honestly not aware of having deviated from the text. Then what? Turning it over in her mind afterwards, she remembered her strange fancy during the recital – that the room itself was, in the music, uttering some secret of its own past. The idea was fantastic, but in spite of its absurdity she was left with a curious feeling that something had happened.

They left the harpsichord in the great parlour after the party. Mrs Buddicombe liked to tell people about it, and Monica was learning to play on it. They left the curious gilt chair, too, though Monica actually used a music-stool when she was practising. She was sitting there one day, a week or so after the recital, working at the accompaniment of that song of *Campion's* and humming the words softly as she played. It was a gusty afternoon, and presently a great puff of wind came down the chimney, blowing out a cloud of smoke and scattering fine ashes into the room from the open hearth. Coughing a little, Monica played on. But when another and another puff came, she got up and went over to the hearth, and with the tongs rearranged the great oak logs which were smouldering there, to see if that would improve matters.

As she stood up again, a little dizzy from stooping, she saw a woman sitting in the gilded chair, between the harpsichord and the window. The first thing Monica noticed was the face. It was a girl's face, staring with a most strange tenseness of expression, half longing and half horrified – indeed, the whole figure had a curious strained rigidity about it, as of a person waiting for something. And now she saw that the girl was dressed in some dark red stuff, full below and slender above, so that the body sprang like a flower-stalk from the spreading

skirts. On the narrow bosom a jewel gleamed – Monica saw it clearly against the dark dress – a circle of moonstones, with a heart-shaped moonstone drop below it. The circle enclosed a faint tracery of some sort, like a monogram, but what it was she could not see.

Too astonished for fear, Monica stood by the hearth, staring. As her senses came back to her she was aware of two feelings – an intense curiosity, which told her that she must notice and remember *everything*, and a great compassion for the strained longing in the girl's face. What was she waiting for, sitting so still in that chair?

Another puff of wind came down the chimney; it caught Monica full as she stood on the hearth, smothering her with ashes, choking her with the sharp smoke. She sneezed violently. Wiping her stinging eyes, she looked again towards the chair. The figure had gone.

Monica sat down on the music-stool, and, gazing at the empty chair, tried to collect herself. She *must* remember – everything! But she found she could not remember much. The red dress, the jewel, the slenderness; the face – dark haired, only rather pretty. But when she recalled the face, though she thought she remembered a cap of some sort, she could really only see the half-horrified longing of the expression. So strange, this; even more than wondering who the girl was, she wondered why she looked like that. Presently she closed the harpsichord and put away her music; folding the sheets together, she hummed absently the words of the song she had been singing when the fire puffed out. And suddenly, with the sharp, clear impact of a knock on the door, the thought struck her: Had *she*, the girl in the red dress, been using some such incantation? Had she sat there so still, waiting for the evocation of some image, some reality even?

Monica presently became very firm with herself. She did not doubt what she had seen, but she determined not to let her fancies run away with her – to be sternly scientific. Of course, she wanted the girl with the jewel to be Sabina, but just for that reason she must be on the watch with herself. She thought of hunting up the family history – the vicar was an antiquarian, and knew all about the place. But some instinct restrained her. The proper way was to wait and see more, if possible, first.

She waited nearly a month – long enough for the impression

to have lost its first clearness, so that she almost began to doubt its reality. One afternoon she was down at the church, doing the flowers for All Saints' next day. The old sexton was at work, making a huge bonfire outside the churchyard wall; he had been trimming the brambles which sprawled over it, and clearing up the debris of a cypress bough which had come down in a gale the week before. He chattered to Monica, taking the dead flowers from her to add to his fire. A general clear-up he was having, he said, afore All Saints'. 'Tis then the dead should have their garden tidy,' he said with an aged grin, and Monica marvelled at the way the Shakespearean tradition still lingers in the English countryside. Down in that corner the deadly nightshade grew 'something terrible', he told her, but he had 'grubbed 'en all out today'; and he showed her with pride an owl's nest that he had pulled out of the belfry – a vast, untidy agglomeration of rubbish, full of feathers, which now awaited its turn on the bonfire. Monica was sorry for the owls; she loved their desolate voices on still nights, and the wheezy breathing sound they made when they sat in the belfry. Her task finished, she bade old Jenkins good afternoon, and started back to the house, her basket on her arm.

She decided to go round through the yew walks, to enjoy the last splendour of the chrysanthemums, and to see if she could find a late blossom or two in the rose garden. She turned into the broad walk, where the turf spread right up to the walls of yew. The smoke from Jenkins's bonfire was drifting across the garden, and she knew that he must have put on the owl's nest, for she could smell the salt, acrid odour of burning feathers. Suddenly, to her surprise, she saw a woman come into the walk from under the arch which led to the sundial garden, and move towards her with a rapid masculine stride. It was a stranger. Monica had never seen that long, pale face before, and never before had she seen a woman so angry – she was clenching her white hands as she walked, her thin lips moved, and her eyes were terrifying. Half frightened, Monica stepped aside as the woman strode past; she almost expected a blow from those clenched fists, on which she noticed a blaze of rings. Then, wondering who it could be, she turned to look after the receding figure. Was the hair really that strange chestnut-red? But, though she could see the woman striding away, she could not see the

hair, for an odd erection of lace rising from the shoulders, like a screen, eclipsed the head. And now, no longer concentrated on that furious face, she noticed the stiff rich skirts, square at the hips, and the narrow bodice, before the figure turned out of the walk and disappeared.

When it had gone, Monica walked slowly forward. Most strange! It was not the girl in the red dress, though obviously someone of the same period. In fact, Elizabethan! And with the word a conjecture almost too wild to be believed darted into her mind. No – impossible! That was surely a living woman, a living anger! Half puzzled, she turned through another arch into the walk where the chrysanthemums were.

The smoke was thicker here, making a blue haze among the brilliant reds and bronzes of the flowers which stood in groups in front of the dark yew hedges, leaving only a strip of turf between. But there was something else among the flowers too. Slowly, moving to and fro, up and down the borders as though they also were a path, were innumerable people, men and women, all dressed in clothes like those Olivia Pettigrew had worn at the party – as various, as brilliant, as the flowers they so incredibly ignored. And suddenly that one circumstance brought Monica to a realisation of what she was seeing. For them, the borders were not there. They trod a turf coeval with themselves, which stretched from hedge to hedge; for them, the chrysanthemums were only phantasms of the future, as insubstantial as the phantasms of the past. Only for her was the curtain of space and time incredibly rolled up, so that past and present were visible together.

Suddenly she could not bear it – suddenly it was frightening. She felt that she could not endure this smiling, unconscious, bejewelled company among the flowers. Forgetting her determination to be scientific, Monica ran. Her scissors dropped from her basket, but she never heeded them. She turned through the farther arch into the sundial garden and came to a dead stop. For there, standing in one of the rose beds, among the late blooms she had meant to pick, was the girl in the red dress, a young man with her. Oh, and life was holding out a jewel to her! The thought came involuntarily. For the young man had an arm about the girl's shoulders, protectingly, and though there were tears on her face, she was looking up into his with that security and rapture about

which there is no mistake. A rush of sympathy took away Monica's fear.

Now with a white hand he was stroking the girl's head like a child's. Oh, but she had no right to see, to spy on them! Softly, as if her step on the soft turf could have disturbed them, Monica tiptoed to the next opening in the square of clipped hedge. From it she looked back, just to be sure she was not mistaken. There among the roses which for them did not exist the pair stood; and now, in spite of a protesting movement of her hand, the young man slipped something over the girl's head, with a reassuring gesture. Monica saw the gleam of moonstones on the girl's breast, before he enfolded her in an embrace. Monica turned quickly away, and crossed the open lawn. She looked back, when she reached the house, at the dark shapes of the yew hedges, with a sort of awe for what they concealed. The smoke from the churchyard bonfire was still drifting over and through them, bluer still as the late afternoon light deepened; sniffing, she could still smell burning feathers. She went slowly into the house.

It was a day or two before Monica recovered sufficiently from the strangeness of this experience to begin to take stock of it. A whole gardenful of ghosts *was* rather overwhelming, she told herself, determined again now to be scientific. She had been rather ashamed when she went the next morning to recover her flower scissors and found them, rust-stained with dew, on the walk between the chrysanthemums. By daylight she went and studied the print of a famous contemporary portrait of Queen Elizabeth which hung in the dining-room. Oh, well, those old prints told you very little – certainly the dress was the same, with that immense lace collar as high as the top of the head; and the long face with thin lips was not unlike the angry face of the woman she had met in the grass walk. The next time she was in London she went to the National Portrait Gallery and studied the picture there. Well, that *was* very like, certainly. Thinking it over, she was pretty sure about Elizabeth. But mostly Monica's curiosity centred on the identity of the girl in the red dress.

Now she tackled the vicar, on the grounds that it was time she knew more about the history of the place. He gave her books, told her what he knew from one source and another, and showed her his notes on the family. The de Grey of Elizabeth's time had two sons, one of whom succeeded him,

and one daughter – that Sabina whose urn was in the church. The son who succeeded had only married in 1594, five years after the date of Elizabeth's visit; the other son died, unmarried, on the Spanish Main.

Still, Monica felt, she was not much farther on. There was no certainty that the girl in the red dress was Sabina; she might have been the eldest son's wife, come in Elizabeth's train. And yet she had a curious instinct that it *was* Sabina. This gave a certain personal, almost tender, interest to her researches. She felt that she knew, from sympathy, from instinct, more about Sabina than books and records could tell.

And more and more, as time went on, and autumn deepened into winter, she became convinced that the red girl was not a mere visitor to the house but had been there a long time. She was there so much still! One day when Monica came in from a ride, her father was out on the lawn with his spud, and she rode her horse right across the broad gravel sweep to speak to him, so that from where they stood she could see the south front of the house. Some chance made her look up, and there, leaning from a window, was the girl, craning out expectantly; one hand held the stone mullion, so that the looped red sleeve was clear against the grey stone. Monica said nothing to her father; but afterwards, by counting the windows, she identified the room – a small spare room, never used, because it had no fireplace.

And presently she found that the sound of horses' hoofs would almost always bring the girl to that window. One day in January, hounds met at Netherfield Greys – greatly to Mrs Buddicom's joy; but Monica slipped round to the south front to glance up, and there, sure enough, she was. Poor child, poor child! Oh yes, she had been there a long time – filling empty afternoons, running to the window at the sound of a horse's hoofs, waiting for someone who never came; using, Monica felt secretly convinced, some piteous incantation like that in the song to bring him back.

At last Monica decided, so little did her inquiries yield, to apply to the Hamilton-Greys for information. She wrote, asking to be allowed to see them; was bidden to lunch, and went. It was a pleasant flat in London. Old Mrs Hamilton-Grey and a widowed daughter entertained her. Monica, in a renewal of her embarrassment, spoke about indifferent matters until lunch was done; then, over coffee, she broached the

subject. Had they, she asked rather timidly, ever *seen* anything in the grass walks, in the great parlour?

The old lady laughed out. 'Ghosts, do you mean? My dear Miss Buddicombe, someone is hoaxing you. Our great sorrow at Netherfield was always that it had no ghost! So incomplete, for a house of that age.'

'Then who,' said Monica nervously, 'is the girl in the red dress?'

They had no idea. They asked her to describe the girl – politely, but a little derisively Monica felt. She had meant to tell them of the song, of the angry woman in the broad walk, and the jewelled company among the chrysanthemums; but now, feeling snubbed, she merely described the girl and her dress rather minutely. 'And,' she added, 'she wears an odd jewel – a circle of moonstones, with a heart-shaped drop below it, and something in the middle.'

She saw their faces change, startlingly, at that. The old lady got up and went to a small glass case, unlocked it, and took something out. Then she put into Monica's hands the very jewel she had seen on the breast of the girl in red. Monica looked eagerly at the cipher. An 'R' and an 'E' were intertwined within the circle of moonstones. The very same! Eagerly she begged them to tell her whose it was, and its history.

In a very different manner now they told her. It was always called the Queen's Jewel, and was supposed to have been a gift either from Essex to Elizabeth or Elizabeth to Essex. 'You know his name was Robert.' But, oddly enough, they never had known exactly how it came into the family. 'Of course they stayed at Netherfield some time before his marriage, which made her so angry when she found it out; and it has always been supposed that then, or later, she gave this to some member of the family.' Was it known, Monica asked, if Sabina were at home then? Oh yes, Sabina had been at home. The Queen gave her a pair of gloves the day she arrived, and here they were, also in the glass case. And the daughter-in-law – was she there then? Oh no, they were clear about that; she was a Wiltshire girl, and Guy de Grey only met her when he went to stay at Wilton a few months before his marriage.

Now, in their turn, they questioned her – with interest, almost with respect. Monica felt herself under a sort of

obligation to tell them what she had seen, and did so. After all, they were *their* ghosts! They listened thoughtfully. 'Of course, that would explain Guy's losing his place at Court that year,' said the widow, 'if there was some trouble over Essex.' 'Exactly,' said the old lady. Monica was amused at their tone, which was that of those who discuss current family affairs. When she left, the old lady bade her goodbye with a certain warmth. 'You have added a footnote to our history, my dear,' she said.

On her way home Monica decided that this was something she must share with her father. He might think her fanciful, but she must risk that. The Queen's Jewel was good evidence, and he loved the house so much it would certainly interest him. There were people at dinner that night, but the next day she spoke to him. They were sitting together in the great parlour, between lunch and tea. It was a dark, rainy February afternoon. Monica found herself curiously at a loss how to begin. At last, 'Father, I've seen a ghost here,' she blurted out.

'D'you mean that poor girl in red?' said Mr Buddicombe, tapping out his pipe on the logs of the hearth. 'I often see her. Is that what you went to see the Greys about?'

Wonderful Dad! How much he saw, how little he said! Now, contentedly, they compared notes. He had never seen Sabina – they called her Sabina fearlessly after a time – except in the parlour and at the window; but in those places he had seen her repeatedly. 'Poor thing, she doesn't give a rap for motors,' said Mr Buddicombe. 'I've been to see, several times.' He heard Monica's story, and such confirmation as the Greys had been able to give, with the deepest interest. She even ventured to tell him about the song, and the ingredients of Jenkins's bonfire. Happily, they pieced it all out together. At length Mr Buddicombe said whimsically, 'Well, people would say it was fanciful, but then, ghosts are fanciful things! It's funny, though, that *they* never saw anything.' Monica knew that 'they' meant the Hamilton-Greys. 'In a way, you know, it makes one feel – oh well . . .'

Monica also knew what it made one feel – she felt it herself. They were not intruders any more; to them the old house had yielded a secret withheld from its real owners. Sitting there, in the dusk and firelight, they felt at last very much at home.

But at the last her father gave Monica perhaps the greatest

surprise of her life. 'It's *all* funny, you know,' Mr Buddicomb said ruminatively. 'Robert too.' He paused. 'Give me a kiss, my dear – you're a great comfort to me.' Trembling all over, Monica rose and kissed her father. He put his arm round her. 'You're my dear daughter,' said Mr Buddicomb.

## THE SWEEPER

'EX-PRIVATE X'

It seemed to Tessa Winyard that Miss Ludgate's strangest characteristic was her kindness to beggars. This was something more than a little peculiar in a nature which, to be sure, presented a surface like a mountain range of unexpected peaks and valleys; for there was a thin streak of meanness in her. One caught glimpses of it here and there, to be traced a little way and lost, like a thin elusive vein in a block of marble. One week she would pay the household bills without a murmur; the next she would simmer over them in a mild rage, questioning the smallest item, and suggesting the most absurd little economies which she would have been the first to condemn later if Mrs Finch the housekeeper had ever taken her at her word. She was rich enough to be indifferent, but old enough to be crotchety.

Miss Ludgate gave very sparsely to local charities, and those good busybodies who went forth at different times with subscription lists and tales of good causes often visited her and came empty away. She had plausible, transparent excuses for keeping her purse-strings tight. Hospitals should be State-aided; schemes for assisting the local poor destroyed thrift; we had heathen of our own to convert, and needed to send no missionaries abroad. Yet she was sometimes overwhelmingly generous in her spasmodic charities to individuals, and her kindness to itinerant beggars was proverbial among their fraternity. Her neighbours were not grateful to her for this, for it was said that she encouraged every doubtful character who came that way.

When she first agreed to come on a month's trial Tessa Winyard had known that she would find Miss Ludgate difficult, doubting whether she would be able to retain the post of companion, and, still more, if she would want to retain it. The thing was not arranged through the reading and answering of an advertisement. Tessa knew a married niece of the old lady who, while recommending the young girl to her ancient kinswoman, was able to give Tessa hints as to the

nature and treatment of the old lady's crotchets. So she came to the house well instructed and not quite as a stranger.

Tessa came under the spell of the house from the moment when she entered it for the first time. She had an ingrained romantic love of old country mansions, and Billington Abbots, although nothing was left of the original priory after which it was named, was old enough to be worshipped. It was mainly Jacobean, but some eighteenth-century owner, a devotee of the then fashionable cult of Italian architecture, had covered the façade with stucco and added a pillared portico. It was probably the same owner who had erected a summer-house to the design of a Greek temple at the end of a walk between nut bushes, and who was responsible for the imitation ruin – to which Time had since added the authentic touch – beside the reedy fishpond at the rear of the house. Likely enough, thought Tessa, who knew the period, that same romantic squire was wont to engage an imitation 'hermit' to meditate beside the spurious ruin on moonlight nights.

The gardens around the house were well wooded, and thus lent the house itself an air of melancholy and the inevitable slight atmosphere of damp and darkness. And here and there, in the most unexpected places, were garden gods, mostly broken and all in need of scouring. Tessa soon discovered these stone ghosts quite unexpectedly, and nearly always with a leap and tingle of surprise. A noseless Hermes confronted one at the turn of a shady walk; Demeter, minus a hand, stood half hidden by laurels, still keeping vigil for Persephone; a dancing faun stood poised and caught in a frozen caper by the gate of the walled-in kitchen garden; beside a small stone pond a satyr leered from his pedestal, as if waiting for a naiad to break the surface.

The interior of the house was at first a little awe-inspiring to Tessa. She loved pretty things, but she was inclined to be afraid of furniture and pictures which seemed to her to be coldly beautiful and conscious of their own intrinsic values. Everything was highly polished, spotless and speckless, and the reception rooms had an air of state apartments thrown open for the inspection of the public.

The hall was square and galleried, and one could look straight up to the top story and see the slanting balustrades of three staircases. Two suits of armour faced one across a parquet floor, and on the walls were three or four portraits by

Lely and Kneller, those once fashionable painters of Court beauties whose works have lost favour with the collectors of today. The dining-room was long, rectangular, and severe, furnished only with a Cromwellian table and chairs and a great plain sideboard gleaming with silver candelabra. Two large seventeenth-century portraits by unknown members of the Dutch School were the only decorations bestowed on the panelled walls, and the window curtains were brown to match the one strip of carpet which the long table almost exactly covered.

Less monastic, but almost as severe and dignified, was the drawing-room in which Tessa spent most of her time with Miss Ludgate. The boudoir was a homelier room, containing such human things as photographs of living people, work-baskets, friendly armchairs, and a cosy, feminine atmosphere; but Miss Ludgate preferred more often to sit in state in her great drawing-room with the 'Portrait of Miss Olivia Ludgate', by Gainsborough, the Chippendale furniture, and the cabinet of priceless china. It was as if she realised that she was but the guardian of her treasures, and wanted to have them within sight now that her term of guardianship was drawing to a close.

She must have been well over eighty, Tessa thought; for she was very small and withered and frail, with that almost porcelain delicacy peculiar to certain very old ladies. Winter and summer, she wore a white woollen shawl inside the house, thick or thin according to the season, which matched in colour and to some extent in texture her soft and still plentiful hair. Her face and hands were yellow-brown with the veneer of old age, but her hands were blue-veined, light and delicate, so that her fingers seemed overweighted by the simplest rings. Her eyes were blue and still piercing, and her mouth, once beautiful, was caught up at the corners by puckerings of the upper lip, and looked grim in repose. Her voice had not shrilled and always she spoke very slowly with an unaffected precision, as one who knew that she had only to be understood to be obeyed and therefore took care always to be understood.

Tessa spent her first week with Miss Ludgate without knowing whether or no she liked the old lady, or whether or no she was afraid of her. Nor was she any wiser with regard to Miss Ludgate's sentiments towards herself. Their relations were much as they might have been had Tessa been a child and

Miss Ludgate a new governess suspected of severity. Tessa was on her best behaviour, doing as she was told and thinking before she spoke, as children should and generally do not. At times it occurred to her to wonder that Miss Ludgate had not sought to engage an older woman, for in the cold formality of that first week's intercourse she wondered what gap in the household she was supposed to fill, and what return she was making for her wage and board.

Truth to tell, Miss Ludgate wanted to see somebody young about the house, even if she could share with her companion no more than the common factors of their sex and their humanity. The servants were all old retainers kept faithful to her by rumours of legacies. Her relatives were few and immersed in their own affairs. The house and the bulk of the property from which she derived her income were held in trust for an heir appointed by the same will which had given her a life interest in the estate. It saved her from the transparent attentions of any fortune-hunting nephew or niece, but it kept her lonely and starved for young companionship.

It happened that Tessa was able to play the piano quite reasonably well and that she had an educated taste in music. So had Miss Ludgate, who had been a performer of much the same quality until the time came when her rebel fingers stiffened with rheumatism. So the heavy grand piano, which had been scrupulously kept in tune, was silent no longer, and Miss Ludgate regained an old lost pleasure. It should be added that Tessa was twenty-two and, with no pretensions to technical beauty, was rich in commonplace good looks which were enhanced by perfect health and the freshness of her youth. She looked her best in candlelight, with her slim hands – they at least would have pleased an artist – hovering like white moths over the keyboard of the piano.

When she had been with Miss Ludgate a week, the old lady addressed her for the first time as 'Tessa'. She added: 'I hope you intend to stay with me, my dear. It will be dull for you, and I fear you will often find me a bother. But I shan't take up all your time, and I dare say you will be able to find friends and amusements.'

So Tessa stayed on, and beyond the probationary month. She was a soft-hearted girl who gave her friendship easily but always sincerely. She tried to like everybody who liked her, and generally succeeded. It would be hard to analyse the quality of

the friendship between the two women, but certainly it existed and at times they were able to touch hands over the barrier between youth and age. Miss Ludgate inspired in Tessa a queer tenderness. With all her wealth and despite her domineering manner, she was a pathetic and lonely figure. She reminded Tessa of some poor actress playing the part of queen, wearing the tawdry crown jewels, uttering commands which the other mummers obeyed like automata; while all the while there awaited her the realities of life at the fall of the curtain – the wet streets, the poor meal, and the cold and comfortless lodging.

It filled Tessa with pity to think that here, close beside her, was a living, breathing creature, still clinging to life, who must, in the course of nature, so soon let go her hold. Tessa could think: 'Fifty years hence I shall be seventy-two, and there's no reason why I shouldn't live till then.' She wondered painfully how it must feel to be unable to look a month hence with average confidence, and to regard every nightfall as the threshold of a precarious tomorrow.

Tessa would have found life very dull but for the complete change in her surroundings. She had been brought up in a country vicarage, one of seven brothers and sisters who had worn one another's clothes, tramped the carpets threadbare, mishandled the cheap furniture, broken everything frangible except their parents' hearts, and had somehow tumbled into adolescence. The unwonted 'grandeur' of living with Miss Ludgate flavoured the monotony.

We have her writing home to her 'Darling Mother' as follows:

*I expect when I get back home again our dear old rooms will look absurdly small. I thought at first that the house was huge, and every room as big as a barrack-room – not that I've ever been in a barrack-room! But I'm getting used to it now, and really it isn't so enormous as I thought. Huge compared with ours, of course, but not so big as Lord Branbourne's house, or even Colonel Exted's.*

*Really, though, it's a darling old place and might have come out of one of those books in which there's a Mystery, and a Sliding Panel, and the heroine's a nursery governess who marries the Young Baronet. But there's no mystery that I've heard of, although I like to pretend there is, and even*

*if I were the nursery governess there's no young baronet within a radius of miles. But at least it ought to have a traditional ghost, although, since I haven't heard of one, it's probably deficient in that respect! I don't like to ask Miss Ludgate, because, although she's a dear, there are questions I couldn't ask her. She might believe in ghosts and it might scare her to talk about them; or she mightn't, and then she'd be furious with me for talking rubbish. Of course, I know it's all rubbish, but it would be very nice to know that we were supposed to be haunted by a nice Grey Lady – of, say, about the period of Queen Anne. But if we're haunted by nothing else, we're certainly haunted by tramps.*

Her letter went on to describe the numerous daily visits of those nomads of the English countryside, who beg and steal on their way from workhouse to workhouse; those queer, illogical, feckless beings who prefer the most intense miseries and hardships to the comparative comforts attendant on honest work. Three or four was a day's average of such callers, and not one went empty away. Mrs Finch had very definite orders, and she carried them out with the impassive face of a perfect subject of discipline. When there was no spare food there was the pleasanter alternative of money which could be transformed into liquor at the nearest inn.

Tessa was for ever meeting these vagrants in the drive. Male and female, they differed in a hundred ways; some still trying to cling to the last rags of self-respect, others obscene, leering, furtive, potential criminals who lacked the courage to rise above petty theft. Most faces were either evil or carried the rolling eyes and lewd, loose mouth of the semi-idiot, but they were all alike in their personal uncleanness and in the insolence of their bearing.

Tessa grew used to receiving from them direct and insolent challenges of the eyes, familiar nods, blatant grins. In their several ways they told her that she was nobody and that, if she hated to see them, so much the better. They knew she was an underling, subject to dismissal, whereas they, for some occult reason, were always the welcome guests. Tessa resented their presence and their dumb insolence, and secretly raged against Miss Ludgate for encouraging them. They were the sewer-rats of society, foul, predatory, and carrying disease from village to village and from town to town.

The girl knew something of the struggles of the decent poor. Her upbringing in a country vicarage had given her intimate knowledge of farm-hands and builders' labourers, the tragic poverty of their homes, their independence and their gallant struggles for existence. On Miss Ludgate's estate there was more than one family living on bread and potatoes and getting not too much of either. Yet the old lady had no sympathy for them, and gave unlimited largess to the undeserving. In the ditches outside the park it was always possible to find a loaf or two of bread flung there by some vagrant who had feasted more delicately on the proceeds of a visit to the tradesmen's door.

It was not for Tessa to speak to Miss Ludgate on the subject. Indeed, she knew that – in the phraseology of the servants' hall – it was as much as her place was worth. But she did mention it to Mrs Finch, whose duty was to provide food and drink, or, failing those, money.

Mrs Finch, taciturn through her environment but still with an undercurrent of warmth, replied at first with the one pregnant word, 'Orders!' After a moment she added: 'The mistress has her own good reasons for doing it – or thinks she has.'

It was late summer when Tessa first took up her abode at Billington Abbots, and sweet lavender, that first herald of the approach of autumn, was already blooming in the gardens. September came and the first warning gleams of yellow showed among the trees. Spiked chestnut husks opened and dropped their polished brown fruit. At evenings the ponds and the trout stream exhaled pale, low-hanging mists. There was a cold snap in the air.

By looking from her window every morning Tessa marked on the trees the inexorable progress of the year. Day by day the green tints lessened as the yellow increased. Then yellow began to give place to gold and brown and red. Only the hollies and the laurels stood fast against the advancing tide.

There came an evening when Miss Ludgate appeared for the first time in her winter shawl. She seemed depressed and said little during dinner, and afterwards in the drawing-room, when she had taken out and arranged a pack of patience cards preparatory to beginning her evening game, she suddenly leaned her elbows on the table and rested her face between her hands.

'Aren't you well, Miss Ludgate?' Tessa asked anxiously.

She removed her hands and showed her withered old face. Her eyes were piteous, fear-haunted, and full of shadows.

'I am very much as usual, my dear,' she said. 'You must bear with me. My bad time of the year is just approaching. If I can live until the end of November I shall last another year. But I don't know yet - I don't know.'

'Of course you're not going to die this year,' said Tessa, with a robust note of optimism which she had found useful in soothing frightened children.

'If I don't die this autumn it will be the next, or some other autumn,' quavered the old voice. 'It will be in the autumn that I shall die. I know that. I know that.'

'But how can you know?' Tessa asked, with just the right note of gentle incredulity.

'I know it. What does it matter how I know? . . . Have many leaves fallen yet?'

'Hardly any as yet,' said Tessa. 'There has been very little wind.'

'They will fall presently,' said Miss Ludgate. 'Very soon now . . .'

Her voice trailed away, but presently she rallied, picked up the miniature playing cards, and began her game.

Two days later it rained heavily all the morning and throughout the earlier part of the afternoon. Just as the light was beginning to wane, half a gale of wind sprang up, and showers of yellow leaves, circling and eddying at the wind's will, began to find their way to earth through the level slant of the rain. Miss Ludgate sat watching them, her eyes dull with the suffering of despair, until the lights were turned on and the blinds were drawn.

During dinner the wind dropped again and the rain ceased. Tessa afterwards peeped between the blinds to see still silhouettes of trees against the sky, and a few stars sparkling palely. It promised after all to be a fine night.

As before, Miss Ludgate got out her patience cards, and Tessa picked up a book and waited to be bidden to go to the piano. There was silence in the room save for intermittent sounds of cards being laid with a snap upon the polished surface of the table, and occasional dry rustlings as Tessa turned the pages of her book.

. . . When she first heard it Tessa could not truthfully have

said. It seemed to her that she had gradually become conscious of the sounds in the garden outside, and when at last they had so forced themselves upon her attention as to set her wondering what caused them it was impossible for her to guess how long they had actually been going on.

Tessa closed the book over her fingers and listened. The sounds were crisp, dry, long-drawn-out, and rhythmic. There was an equal pause after each one. It was rather like listening to the leisurely brushing of a woman's long hair. What was it? An uneven surface being scratched by something crisp and pliant? Then Tessa knew. On the long path behind the house which travelled the whole length of the building somebody was sweeping up the fallen leaves with a stable broom. But what a time to sweep up leaves!

She continued to listen. Now that she had identified the sounds they were quite unmistakable. She would not have had to guess twice had it not been dark outside, and the thought of a gardener showing such devotion to duty as to work at that hour had at first been rejected by her subconscious mind. She looked up, with the intention of making some remark to Miss Ludgate – and she said nothing.

Miss Ludgate sat listening intently, her face half turned towards the windows and slightly raised, her eyes upturned. Her whole attitude was one of strained rigidity, expressive of a tension rather dreadful to see in one so old. Tessa not only listened, she now watched.

There was a movement in the unnaturally silent room. Miss Ludgate had turned her head, and now showed her companion a white face of woe and doom-ridden eyes. Then, in a flash, her expression changed. Tessa knew that Miss Ludgate had caught her listening to the sounds from the path outside, and that for some reason the old lady was annoyed with her for having heard them. But why? And why that look of terror on the poor, white old face?

'Won't you play something, Tessa?'

Despite the note of interrogation, the words were an abrupt command, and Tessa knew it. She was to drown the noise of sweeping from outside, because, for some queer reason, Miss Ludgate did not want her to hear it. So, tactfully, she played pieces which allowed her to make liberal use of the loud pedal.

After half an hour Miss Ludgate rose, gathered her shawl

tighter about her shoulders, and hobbled to the door, pausing on the way to say good night to Tessa.

Tessa lingered in the room alone and re-seated herself before the piano. A minute or two elapsed before she began to strum softly and absent-mindedly. Why did Miss Ludgate object to her hearing that sound of sweeping from the path outside? It had ceased now, or she would have peeped out to see who actually was at work. Had Miss Ludgate some queer distaste for seeing fallen leaves lying about, and was she ashamed because she was keeping a gardener at work at that hour? But it was unlike Miss Ludgate to mind what people thought of her; besides, she rose late in the morning, and there would be plenty of time to brush away the leaves before the mistress of the house could set eyes on them. And then, why was Miss Ludgate so terrified? Had it anything to do with her queer belief that she would die in the autumn?

On her way to bed Tessa smiled gently to herself for having tried to penetrate to the secret places of a warped mind which was over eighty years old. She had just seen another queer phase of Miss Ludgate, and all of such seemed inexplicable.

The night was still calm and promised so to remain.

'There won't be many more leaves down tonight,' Tessa reflected as she undressed.

But when next morning she sauntered out into the garden before breakfast the long path which skirted the rear of the house was still thickly littered with them, and Toy, the second gardener, was busy among them with a barrow and one of those birch stable brooms which, in medieval imaginations, provided steeds for witches.

'Hallo!' exclaimed Tessa. 'What a lot of leaves must have come down last night!'

Toy ceased sweeping and shook his head.

'No, miss. This 'ere little lot come down with the wind early part o' the evenin'.'

'But surely they were all swept up. I heard somebody at work here after nine o'clock. Wasn't it you?'

The man grinned.

'You catch any of us at work arter nine o'clock, miss!' he said. 'No, miss, nobody's touched 'em till now. 'Tis thankless work, too. So soon as you've swept up one lot there's another waitin'. Not a hundred men could keep this 'ere garden tidy this time o' the year.'

Tessa said nothing more and went thoughtfully into the house. The sweeping was continued off and on all day, for more leaves descended, and a bonfire built up on the waste ground beyond the kitchen garden wafted its fragrance over to the house.

That evening Miss Ludgate had a fire made up in the boudoir and announced to Tessa that they would sit there before and after dinner. But it happened that the chimney smoked, and, after coughing and grumbling, and rating Mrs Finch on the dilatoriness and inefficiency of sweeps, the old lady went early to bed.

It was still too early for Tessa to retire. Having been left to herself she remembered a book which she had left in the drawing-room, and with which she purposed sitting over the dining-room fire. Hardly had she taken two steps past the threshold of the drawing-room when she came abruptly to a halt and stood listening. She could not doubt the evidence of her ears. In spite of what Toy had told her, and that it was now after half-past nine, somebody was sweeping the path outside.

She tiptoed to the window and peeped out between the blinds. Bright moonlight silvered the garden, but she could see nothing. Now, however, that she was near the window, she could locate the sounds more accurately, and they seemed to proceed from a spot farther down the path which was hidden from her by the angle of the window setting. There was a door just outside the room giving access to the garden, but for no reason that she could name she felt strangely unwilling to go out and look at the mysterious worker. With the strangest little cold thrill she was aware of a distinct preference for seeing him – for the first time, at least – from a distance.

Then Tessa remembered a landing window, and after a little hesitation she went silently and on tiptoe upstairs to the first floor, and down a passage on the left of the stairhead. Here moonlight penetrated a window and threw a pale blue screen upon the opposite wall. Tessa fumbled with the window fastenings, raised the sash softly and silently, and leaned out.

On the path below her, but some yards to her left and close to the angle of the house, a man was slowly and rhythmically sweeping with a stable broom. The broom swung and struck the path time after time with a soft, crisp *swish*, and the strokes

were as regular as those of the pendulum of some slow old clock.

From her angle of observation she was unable to see most of the characteristics of the figure underneath. It was that of a working-man, for there was something in the silhouette subtly suggestive of old and baggy clothes. But apart from all else there was something queer, something odd and unnatural, in the scene on which she gazed. She knew that there was something lacking, something that she should have found missing at the first glance, yet for her life she could not have said what it was.

From below some gross omission blazed up at her, and though she was acutely aware that the scene lacked something which she had every right to expect to see, her senses groped for it in vain; although the lack of something which should have been there, and was not, was as obvious as a burning pyre at midnight. She knew that she was watching the gross defiance of some natural law, but what law she did not know. Suddenly sick and dizzy, she withdrew her head.

All the cowardice in Tessa's nature urged her to go to bed, to forget what she had seen and to refrain from trying to remember what she had *not* seen. But the other Tessa, the Tessa who despised cowards, and was herself capable under pressure of rising to great heights of courage, stayed and urged. Under her breath she talked to herself, as she always did when any crisis found her in a state of indecision.

'Tessa, you coward! How dare you be afraid! Go down at once and see who it is and what's queer about him. He can't eat you!'

So the two Tessas imprisoned in the one body stole downstairs again, and the braver Tessa was angry with their common heart for thumping so hard and trying to weaken her. But she unfastened the door and stepped out into the moonlight.

The Sweeper was still at work close to the angle of the house, near by where the path ended and a green door gave entrance to the stable yard. The path was thick with leaves, and the girl, advancing uncertainly with her hands to her breasts, saw that he was making little progress with his work. The broom rose and fell and audibly swept the path, but the dead leaves lay fast and still beneath it. Yet it was not this that she had noticed from above. There was still that unseizable Something missing.

Her footfalls made little noise on the leaf-strewn path, but they became audible to the Sweeper while she was still half a dozen yards from him. He paused in his work and turned and looked at her.

He was a tall, lean man with a white cadaverous face and eyes that bulged like huge rising bubbles as they regarded her. It was a foul, suffering face which he showed to Tessa, a face whose misery could – and did – inspire loathing and a hitherto unimagined horror, but never pity. He was clad in the meanest rags, which seemed to have been cast at random over his emaciated body. The hands grasping the broom seemed no more than bones and skin. He was so thin, thought Tessa, that he was almost – and here she paused in thought, because she found herself hating the word which tried to force itself into her mind. But it had its way, and blew in on a cold wind of terror. Yes, he was almost transparent, she thought, and sickened at the word, which had come to have a new and vile meaning for her.

They faced each other through a fraction of eternity not to be measured by seconds; and then Tessa heard herself scream. It flashed upon her now, the strange, abominable detail of the figure which confronted her – the Something missing which she had noticed, without actually seeing, from above. The path was flooded with moonlight, but the visitant had no shadow. And fast upon this vile discovery she saw dimly *through* it the ivy stirring upon the wall. Then, as unbidden thoughts rushed to tell her that the Thing was not of this world, and that it was not holy, and the sudden knowledge wrung that scream from her, so she was left suddenly and dreadfully alone. The spot where the Thing had stood was empty save for the moonlight and the shallow litter of leaves.

Tessa had no memory of returning to the house. Her next recollection was of finding herself in the hall, faint and gasping and sobbing. Even as she approached the stairs she saw a light dancing on the wall above and wondered what fresh horror was to confront her. But it was only Mrs Finch coming downstairs in a dressing-gown, candle in hand, an incongruous but a very comforting sight.

'Oh, it's you, Miss Tessa,' said Mrs Finch, reassured. She held the candle lower and peered down at the sobbing girl. 'Why, whatever is the matter? Oh, Miss Tessa,

Miss Tessa! You haven't never been outside, have you?"

Tessa sobbed and choked and tried to speak.

'I've seen - I've seen . . .'

Mrs Finch swiftly descended the remaining stairs, and put an arm around the shuddering girl.

'Hush, my dear, my dear! I know what you've seen. You didn't ought never to have gone out. I've seen it too, once - but only once, thank God.'

'What is it?' Tessa faltered.

'Never you mind, my dear. Now don't be frightened. It's all over now. He doesn't come here for you. It's the mistress he wants. You've nothing to fear, Miss Tessa. Where was he when you saw him?'

'Close to the end of the path, near the stable gate.'

Mrs Finch threw up her hands.

'Oh, the poor mistress - the poor mistress! Her time's shortening! The end's nigh now!'

'I can't bear any more,' Tessa sobbed; and then she contradicted herself, clinging to Mrs Finch. 'I must know. I can't rest until I know. Tell me everything.'

'Come into my parlour, my dear, and I'll make a cup of tea. We can both do with it, I think. But you'd best not know. At least not tonight, Miss Tessa - not tonight.'

'I must,' whispered Tessa, 'if I'm ever to have any peace.'

The fire was still burning behind a guard in the housekeeper's parlour, for Mrs Finch had only gone up to bed a few minutes since. There was water still warm in the brass kettle, and in a few minutes the tea was ready. Tessa sipped and felt the first vibrations of her returning courage, and presently looked inquiringly at Mrs Finch.

'I'll tell you, Miss Tessa,' said the old housekeeper, 'if it'll make you any easier. But don't let the mistress know as I've ever told you.'

Tessa inclined her head and gave the required promise.

'You don't know why,' Mrs Finch began in a low voice, 'the mistress gives to every beggar, deserving or otherwise. The reason comes into what I'm going to tell you. Miss Ludgate wasn't always like that - not until up to about fifteen years ago.

'She was old then, but active for her age, and very fond of gardenin'. Late one afternoon in the autumn, while she was cutting some late roses, a beggar came to the tradesmen's

door. Sick and ill and starved, he looked – but there, you've seen him. He was a bad lot, we found out afterwards, but I was sorry for him, and I was just going to risk givin' him some food without orders, when up comes Miss Ludgate. "What's this?" she says.

'He whined something about not being able to get work.

"Work!" says the mistress. "You don't want work – you want charity. If you want to eat," she says, "you shall, but you shall work first. There's a broom," she says, "and there's a path littered with leaves. Start sweeping up at the top, and when you come to the end you can come and see me."

'Well, he took the broom, and a few minutes later I heard a shout from Miss Ludgate and come hurryin' out. There was the man lyin' at the top of the path where he'd commenced sweeping, and he'd collapsed and fallen down. I didn't know then as he was dying, but he did, and he gave Miss Ludgate a look as I shall never forget.

"When I've swept to the end of the path," he says, "I'll come for you, my lady, and we'll feast together. Only see as you're ready to be fetched when I come." Those were his last words. He was buried by the parish, and it gave Miss Ludgate such a turn that she ordered something to be given to every beggar who came, and not one of 'em to be asked to do a stroke of work.

'But next autumn, when the leaves began to fall, he came back and started sweeping, right at the top of the path, round about where he died. We've all heard him and most of us have seen him. Year after year he's come back and swept with his broom, which just makes a brushing noise and hardly stirs a leaf. But each year he's been getting nearer and nearer to the end of the path, and when he gets right to the end – well, I wouldn't like to be the mistress, with all her money.'

It was three evenings later, just before the hour fixed for dinner, that the Sweeper completed his task. That is to say, if one reposes literal belief in Mrs Finch's story.

The servants heard somebody burst open the tradesmen's door, and, having rushed out into the passage, two of them saw that the door was open but found no one there. Miss Ludgate was already in the drawing-room, but Tessa was still upstairs, dressing for dinner. Presently Mrs Finch had occasion to enter the drawing-room to speak to her mistress;

and her screams warned the household of what had happened. Tessa heard them just as she was ready to go downstairs, and she rushed into the drawing-room a few moments later.

Miss Ludgate was sitting upright in her favourite chair. Her eyes were open, but she was quite dead; and in her eyes there was something that Tessa could not bear to see.

Withdrawing her own gaze from that fixed stare of terror and recognition she saw something on the carpet and presently stooped to pick it up.

It was a little yellow leaf, damp and pinched and frayed, and but for her own experience and Mrs Finch's tale she might have wondered how it had come to be there. She dropped it, shuddering, for it looked as if it had been picked up by, and had afterwards fallen from, the birch twigs of a stable broom.

## THE GLOVE

ROGER HICKS

In the last days of that golden autumn, Morgan came down from Head Office and gave me the sack.

I had had a week's warning of his visit – time enough to read between the few short lines of typescript under the Company's impressive letter-head, so I thought I knew exactly what he had been sent to say.

It had been seven months since my accident – seven months since they flew me out of the ice – first to New Zealand, where they cut off my left leg – and then half-way across the world to this quiet sanatorium in Hampshire, where they are clever with artificial limbs and things like that. And all the time of my long drag back to health and sanity the Western Drilling and Survey Company had been footing the bill. I could not help reflecting that my worth to them in the field could hardly have compensated for what they were now paying out for me as I lay here useless and disabled. If I had been reasonable I would have realised, too, that a commercial company is not a benevolent society – that one day it would close its doors to John Farrant, a one-legged geological surveyor, who lay in a hospital bed drawing a fat pay packet for doing nothing.

But I was not being reasonable. I had lost a limb, and my job. And also, as salt for the wound, I had the knowledge that my friends of that past had written me off as a man who could not be trusted when the chips were down – a man who had lost his head in a short summer storm in that frozen wilderness at the bottom of the world.

In fact, I felt that my life had really come to an end in the fissure in the ice on the Ross Barrier, on the 15th March, 1962. And neither Morgan nor his company, for all their kindness, could erase the feeling. Somewhere, some time, I would have to rebuild that life, with the disadvantage of a tin leg, and doing office work, which I hated. But not now. Now I was drunk with the bittersweet gall of self-pity, and I was not going to let Morgan deprive me of that pleasure.

He did though. 'Hi,' he said. 'My name's Chris Morgan.'

He watched with amusement as I fought to control the astonishment in my face. I had imagined some sort of embryo director, balding and paunchy, offering the Company's condolences in pompous, impersonal phrases. Morgan wore a tweed sports-jacket, with leather at the elbows, and his hair was blown over his face any-old-how from driving fast in an open car. I noticed also that, when he looked at my leg standing there in the corner, with the two metal crutches, bright as sledge runners, beside it, his eyes did not slide away in embarrassment, as had those of so many other visitors. It was 'call me Chris' from the start, and he was so friendly that I was glad to do just that. After a moment I was glad that he had bothered to come at all.

He had brought two envelopes with him. The first was large and brown, slightly shapeless and bulging, as though it contained a shirt that one had carelessly left behind after a week-end with friends. The other – a white one – bore the Company's official crest, and I hoped – and hated myself for doing so – that it might contain a final cheque.

When Morgan rose to put the two envelopes on the table beside my bed, I thought at first that he was going. Instead, he walked to the window and glanced at the October sunlight as it drew fire from the thinning leaves of the elm trees at the bottom of the sanatorium lawn. Still looking out of the window, he lighted a cigarette.

He turned, and watched me through the smoke. 'John,' he said; 'this man you saw in the blizzard. Do you still think you saw him, even after all these months lying here?'

In the first few weeks in New Zealand, when the pain from my leg was driving me mad, I had shouted, and begged, and even wept for people to listen to my story: first, eagerly, to the Company agent in Auckland and to members of the expedition who had come to see me, and then, despairingly, to anyone who would listen – to welfare visitors and nurses, and even to the doctors on their rounds.

And all of them had the same knowing, shuttered look on their faces, as if they were saying to themselves: 'This poor chap got grangrene in the Antarctic. He doesn't know what he's saying. . . .'

Still, they were fair – and that, if anything, made it harder. They searched – in the beginning. They even radioed to the

Russian survey party, and to everyone else who was on the ice that summer. But nobody had a man missing, and nobody knew of any unreported expeditions.

So, quickly and quietly, the fuss died away, and the ramblings of a sick man were forgotten. And slowly, over the months, I had tried to forget too. And now, when I had steeled myself to put the memory of that frost-bitten face and staring eyes forever into a dark corner of my mind, here was a complete stranger asking me to bring it out into the daylight again.

It was too late. I could not fight the facts any more, and my voice was quiet and dispirited.

'I've been proved wrong too many times, Chris. I accept that proof – or try to. I thought I saw a man in that storm. I thought it was him who dragged me to safety. Once I would have sworn that I saw him, but now' – and I shrugged – 'I just don't know.'

It was a hopelessly inadequate answer, but it was also the truth; I really did not know any more.

I thought for a second time that Morgan was going, but he merely came over to sit in the chair.

'If you can bear it, I'd like to hear it again, John. Right from the beginning . . .'

Most of the early part he must have known already: how I had met Tillotson by chance, had been persuaded by him to offer my services to the Company, and how I had eventually sailed for the southern continent in October, 1961. We were a party of twenty, including three hangers-on from the Royal Society.

We were put ashore on the 7th November beyond Butter Point, about as near the head of McMurdo Sound as you can get so early in the summer. It was a grand site for a camp – or so I thought – with the plume of cloud from Mount Erebus, forty miles away across the Sound, blowing away into the astonishing blue of the sky like the tail of an Olympian racehorse.

But we did not stay. 'In mid-summer the sea ice will break away into the open ocean to the north.' And since Helmut Jansen had been chosen to lead the party, because of his exceptional experience of Norwegian expeditions to the Antarctic, we did not argue. By the end of that month we had moved – generators, radio transmitters, survey equipment and

all – a hundred miles south to Moore Bay, in the lee of Mount Morning. We were on the Great Barrier and ready to go.

Long ago, before the war, old Sir James Morgan – Chris's father – had had this dream of the vast mineral wealth to be wrung from this frozen land. Over the years he had piloted his beloved company successfully through the uncharted waters of big business intrigues and take-over bids in order to finance that dream. Now, three years after his death, Chris and his elder brothers had cast the old boy's private fortune on the waters, to bring the vision to life.

Our orders had been to find some evidence to justify the extravagance: oil-bearing shale, mineral ore – anything.

As the shadows lengthened across the lawn, a nurse came in, bringing tea. Chris Morgan did the honours.

'You must have some idea now of what's down there, John. What do you think?'

I wondered what answer he wanted. I also thought of the enormous sums of money the Company had already spent – including the two huge, yellow Sno-Cats; mail once a fortnight by courtesy of the U.S. Air Force (who had been supporting a mission of their own in the seaward end of McMurdo), and our own ski-fitted Beaver plane. And all I could say was: 'Not much.'

He did not seem to be worried, but I thought he needed an explanation.

'There are granite outcroppings in the upper reaches of the Beardmore Glacier – Jansen reported them. There might be tin there, or even copper, but it's too inaccessible, Chris. You'd never get it out.'

He nodded. 'But you reported oil in the Mulock Inlet, didn't you?'

I corrected him. 'Hell, you read my report, Chris. I reported sedimentary rock. There's fossil-bearing sandstone, and limestone as well – even some coal. But that doesn't mean anything except that oil *could* be there.' I tried to convince him. 'The big boys have floated fortunes on far more promise than that, and still found nothing. Besides, Chris, I saw this stuff 'way up in the icefloes coming off the Worcester Range. You can't move Sno-Cats or any sort of equipment in places like that.'

He had read my report all right, and I supposed that he just wanted to hear me talk – to judge what sort of person I was.

To judge also whether the rest of my story could be believed. . . .

And so, as the tea grew cold on the table, I tried to bring to life for him a place that he had never seen – a vast, silent continent which – excepting only for beauty – the Almighty, when he dealt out the cards, had quite forgotten.

I tried to tell him, hunting for words, about the Ross Ice Barrier – a sheet of ice four hundred miles wide and a thousand miles long; always the same, and yet never the same. Sometimes that great snow plain was flat, and sometimes blown into fantastic wave shapes by who-knows-what primeval wind. Sometimes you could glide over its surface effortlessly all day, and at other times, for no apparent reason, you would sink and flounder until you were exhausted.

I told him also how the temperatures he knew meant nothing down there. How, on a windless day, we used to sunbathe during the lunch break in fifteen degrees of frost. And how, in the same temperature, when the wind blew the snow clouds off the bastions of South Victoria Land, a man could die from frost-bite and exposure.

I do not know if he understood, but he nodded often, and asked few questions.

And so we came to the things that Chris *did* know. How we had organised ourselves into two parties – Jansen and his group going south to the Beardmore and working their way back; while Tillotson and I moved down from the base camp to meet them.

From time to time the Beaver used to fly groups of us back to base to rest up and get the mail. But the news we brought – and the news we received from the other party – was always the same. Slate and diorite here; limestone and sandstone there. Coal, yes, but not oil. Always the possibility of something, but never anything definite.

And so the weeks went by. We were due to leave for home in the latter half of February, but in the second week of that month a telegram had come from London – probably Chris had had some hand in composing it – asking us to stay on as long as the weather held. The final decision was left with Jansen.

I remembered Tillotson flying down to Cape Parr, just south of the eighty-first parallel, to confer with Jansen, and I told Chris about it.

‘We were talking of staying until the light started to go in

April. The weather was so good.' And I thought back to those endless, sunlit days.

'What stopped you?' asked Chris, somewhat belligerently it seemed to me, and I began to think of him again as 'Morgan'.

'The temperatures, Chris. Sure, it was fine, but it was starting to fall into the minus tens and below at night. That's getting dangerously low for equipment and vehicles. Dangerously low period, come to that.' After all, it was his money – more or less – and he had a right to know if we had wasted it.

Morgan finished the story for me, lighting another cigarette – his eighth.

'So you decided to go on for another month, and be back at base by the end of the third week in March.'

'Yes,' I said. 'That was about the size of it.'

Morgan began playing with the small white envelope, tapping it edgewise on his knee. 'What did you think of that decision?' he asked.

'I think we were all relieved, really.' And I stopped thinking of myself for long enough to feel sorry for him. 'It was no good, Chris. Jansen wanted to look more closely at the area round Cape Selbourne, and I claimed to be on the verge of a breakthrough in the Mulock Inlet. But neither of us believed either ourselves or each other. We had just got to the stage of refusing to give up.' And I really wanted him to believe that.

Morgan said nothing. He walked over to the window again, still tapping the envelope against the side of his leg. I could sense that something was brewing.

'When did your party pack up the Mulock Inlet survey and head for base?'

'The twelfth or thirteenth of March,' I replied. I wondered what he was driving at. I was not left in doubt for very long.

'Moore Bay and the base were about seventy miles north-east from you then. And yet you were found a hundred miles out on the Barrier, 'way off course, on the fifteenth . . .'

He left the sentence hanging, as though he were thinking aloud. But I knew now which way his mind was working. He was wondering what madness had made us steer at right angles to our proper course for base – especially after I had told him that we were relieved to be winding up the expedition.

'Blewett, the glaciologist, wanted to test the thickness of the Barrier Ice. Jansen was at least three days behind us, so we

had plenty of time.' I did not in fact have to defend our actions to him. We had agreed to take the Royal Society boys along, so it was only fair that we should have given them an opportunity to carry out some of their planned tasks. I was fighting a rearguard action all the same, though.

'So you went due east then?' Morgan asked.

'As far as you go due anything in those latitudes,' I told him. 'We just went out at right angles to the land. Blewett was firing seismic charges every ten miles or so.'

I had reassured him on that point, but I knew that there were two questions he still had to ask. And, however friendly Chris Morgan was, the answers to those questions would have to be convincing if he was to believe me further.

He shot the first one from the hip. 'Why were you by yourself that afternoon? Surely an elementary lesson in those environments is that you don't go anywhere alone?'

My mind went back to the end-of-term feeling that had pervaded our whole party that afternoon, and I tried to put this across. Tillotson, Blewett and the rest of the group had gone on ahead to fire Blewett's last charge. They'd left me, at my own request, to walk on behind them.

'Chris, it was a place where we'd spent the last four months together. It was somewhere I wasn't going to see again. I just wanted to be alone for an hour or two. That's all.'

'So you were just wandering about, savouring the atmosphere, a beer-mug's throw from the Pole?' He sounded more than sceptical.

'Not *wandering*, Chris. I was marching up the tracks of the Sno-Cat. Besides,' I added, 'I could see the smoke of its exhaust about five miles away. That's a lot different from aimless wandering.'

I do not know if he was convinced, but he gave me no time to try any further. He let go the second barrel while I was still staggering.

'How in God's name, John, does a blizzard come up in the middle of a Sunday afternoon walk without your noticing it?'

We had been careless there. It was no use denying it. For twenty-four hours the temperature had been high – too high when it was so late in the season – but we had been lulled into a false sense of security by weeks of fine weather. And none of us in the northern party was sufficiently experienced to interpret all the subtle shifts of the ice-field weather. True, the sky

had been overcast at lunch, with a few small flakes of snow drifting idly down, and Tillotson had talked of the possibility of a storm. But, in the windless midday, we did not expect anything for at least twelve hours, by which time we would be well on our way to the base camp.

Out there on the Barrier, a hundred miles from land, and therefore with no physical object to break up the skyline, it was difficult to assess visibility with any accuracy. The first thing I had noticed was that I could no longer see the plume of diesel smoke going up from the distant Sno-Cat. At the same time a knife-like wind had sprung up from the table-land at my back, trundling the ice crystals along the surface of the Barrier like tumble-weed.

Whatever the failings in my story so far, Morgan had forgotten them. I could feel him tensing.

'Were you frightened?' he said.

'No,' I answered emphatically. And I was speaking the truth. 'There was a standard procedure for that sort of occasion.'

I had taken advantage of the surface of the snow plain, which had been frozen into petrified waves, with about two feet vertical distance between trough and crest. On the top of one of these crests I had scooped together the loose snow to form a wall, and had squatted down in this improvised lee to wait for the Sno-Cat to find me. And all around me the wind had risen in earnest, blowing the snow horizontally before it.

I wanted to point out to Morgan that this was hardly consistent with the actions of a man in panic, but I hoped that he would realise anyhow.

'Why were you so confident that Tillotson would find you?' I could see that Morgan was still probing for signs of loss of nerve, but again I could answer him without hesitation.

'We noticed pretty soon after we got on to the Barrier that, in the early stages of a storm, it didn't matter whether it was snowing or not. The wind blew the loose stuff away from the packed snow where the Sno-Cat had passed, making its tracks stand out like railway lines.

'They only had to retrace their steps,' I added.

Outside the window the sun had left the tops of the trees. When Morgan turned to me his face was in shadow, so that I could only see its outline against the deepening blue of the sky.

'And this man, John - he just came at you out of the storm?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I was looking down the tracks of the Sno-Cat. I never saw him until he was as close to me as you are now.'

And I looked at him standing there by the window. But all I saw was a wall of whiteness, and a man staggering down the troughs against the force of the blizzard. A man with hideous, bloodshot eyes, unprotected by goggles, which stared sightlessly into the stinging snow crystals. And a face that was the dirty grey of terrible frostbite.

Not talking to Morgan, but just thinking aloud, I said: 'I never saw a dead man before, but that man was dying, Chris. And the way he staggered, he looked as though he'd been walking all his life.' And ten thousand miles and seven months away I could still feel the hand of nameless horror plucking at the hairs on the nape of my neck.

'So he walked right past you?' And Morgan's voice was as quiet as my own had been.

'Only until I noticed his glove lying in the snow.' I knew that Morgan was about to ask what use one glove could have been to a dying man, but I cut him short. 'I just felt that it was terribly important to give him back his glove. He was so cold, Chris - so very cold.'

I had panicked all right then. Storms can come from nowhere, but not dying men. I had run after him, calling and stumbling into the blizzard. But already the storm had swallowed him up, and my only companions were the roar of the wind and the flying snowflakes, which stung like needles on my face.

Then I did see him again. I had somehow got ahead and to the right of him, and I could just see his head and shoulders behind the crest on my left. I had run towards him, shouting, but, as I came down the snow slope into the trough, the ground fell away underneath me - I had fallen through a small snow bridge. Not a big drop, but enough to break my leg at the joint. I heard the bone snap as the blackness closed over me.

When I came to there were hands under my armpits, dragging me out of the fissure. I thought at first that it was Tillotson, but the voice that said 'take it easy' wasn't Tillotson's. I knew whose it was.

God alone knows where that poor wandering man found his reserves of strength, but find them he did. For fully a

hundred yards he half dragged, half carried me to a place that shielded me from at least the worst of the wind.

Before I fainted again, I remembered him putting his face close to mine, and saying, through cracked and blackening lips: 'You'll be all right.'

And there, hours later, Tillotson had found me, and had taken me back to base. But it was too late then: I already had frostbite. . . .

So that was my story. Chris Morgan could believe it, or scorn it like everybody else. Maybe I *had* lost my senses and imagined the whole thing. It really didn't matter any more, but I knew that, for the rest of my days, I would never forget the compassion that had shone through the chill of death in the eyes of my rescuer.

Into the silence Morgan said, trying to keep his voice matter-of-fact: 'You were clutching a glove when they found you, you know. It's in that envelope. . . .'

I think I nearly passed out then. I gazed at him for a full minute in utter disbelief. Then I tore frantically at the stiff brown envelope.

It was a glove all right: a great, coarse, blue canvas one, with the fibres faded away on the palm, so that its colour there was grey-white, like the colour of its owner's face. And it was very old.

As a schoolboy I had once gone on a sponsored skiing holiday to Austria. To kit me out, my father had opened a trunk in the attic, and had brought downstairs – heavy with bags of mothballs – the clothes that he himself had worn for a similar holiday thirty years earlier. That was where I had seen a glove like this one before.

Morgan had opened the other envelope, too. There wasn't a cheque inside, but a snapshot: a close-up picture of a brass plaque, like those you see on the walls of churches or regimental chapels.

Morgan was talking. 'I believe you saw a man, John. Some trick of time and place – I don't know how – but you saw him. But I had to come down and hear your story to be sure. . . .'

And in that instant I knew too. And whatever Morgan said afterwards was lost in the roaring of the blood in my ears. For the plaque in the picture said: 'Greater Love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

Underneath it gave a name that was written, in faded indian ink, on the inside of the glove – ‘Captain Oates, 15th March 1912’.

Outside, the rooks flew into the elm trees in the last of the day, and a nurse came in to turn on the lights.

# THE RETURN OF IMRAY

RUDYARD KIPLING

The doors were wide, the story saith,  
Out of the night came the patient wraith,  
He might not speak, and he could not stir  
A hair of the Baron's miniver –  
Speechless and strengthless, a shadow thin,  
He roved the castle to seek his kin.  
And oh, 'twas a piteous thing to see  
The dumb ghost follow his enemy!

The Baron.

Imray achieved the impossible. Without warning, for no conceivable motive, in his youth, at the threshold of his career, he chose to disappear from the world – which is to say, the little Indian station where he lived.

Upon a day he was alive, well, happy, and in great evidence among the billiard tables at his Club. Upon a morning he was not, and no manner of search could make sure where he might be. He had stepped out of his place; he had not appeared at his office at the proper time, and his dog-cart was not upon the public roads. For these reasons, and because he was hampering, in a microscopical degree, the administration of the Indian Empire, that Empire paused for one microscopical moment to make inquiry into the fate of Imray. Ponds were dragged, wells were plumbed, telegrams were dispatched down the lines of railways and to the nearest seaport town – twelve hundred miles away; but Imray was not at the end of the drag-ropes nor the telegraph wires. He was gone, and his place knew him no more. Then the work of the great Indian Empire swept forward, because it could not be delayed, and Imray from being a man became a mystery – such a thing as men talk over at their tables in the Club for a month, and then forget utterly. His guns, horses, and carts were sold to the highest bidder. His superior officer wrote an altogether absurd letter to his mother, saying that Imray had unaccountably disappeared, and his bungalow stood empty.

After three or four months of the scorching hot weather had gone by, my friend Strickland, of the Police, saw fit to rent the bungalow from the native landlord. This was before he was engaged to Miss Youghal – an affair which has been described in another place – and while he was pursuing his investigations into native life. His own life was sufficiently peculiar, and men complained of his manners and customs. There was always food in his house, but there were no regular times for meals. He ate, standing up and walking about, whatever he might find at the sideboard, and this is not good for human beings. His domestic equipment was limited to six rifles, three shot-guns, five saddles, and a collection of stiff-jointed mahseer-rods, bigger and stronger than the largest salmon-rods. These occupied one half of his bungalow, and the other half was given up to Strickland and his dog Tietjens – an enormous Rampur slut who devoured daily the rations of two men. She spoke to Strickland in a language of her own; and whenever, walking abroad, she saw things calculated to destroy the peace of Her Majesty the Queen-Empress, she returned to her master and laid information. Strickland would take steps at once, and the end of his labours was trouble and fine and imprisonment for other people. The natives believed that Tietjens was a familiar spirit, and treated her with the great reverence that is born of hate and fear. One room in the bungalow was set apart for her special use. She owned a bedstead, a blanket, and a drinking-trough, and if anyone came into Strickland's room at night her custom was to knock down the invader and give tongue till someone came with a light. Strickland owed his life to her when he was on the Frontier in search of a local murderer, who came in the grey dawn to send Strickland much farther than the Andaman Islands. Tietjens caught the man as he was crawling into Strickland's tent with a dagger between his teeth; and after his record of iniquity was established in the eyes of the law he was hanged. From that date Tietjens wore a collar of rough silver, and employed a monogram on her night blanket; and the blanket was of double woven Kashmir cloth, for she was a delicate dog.

Under no circumstances would she be separated from Strickland; and once, when he was ill with fever, made great trouble for the doctors, because she did not know how to help her master and would not allow another creature to attempt

aid. Macarnaght, of the Indian Medical Service, beat her over her head with a gun-butt before she could understand that she must give room for those who could give quinine.

A short time after Strickland had taken Imray's bungalow, my business took me through that Station, and naturally, the Club quarters being full, I quartered myself upon Strickland. It was a desirable bungalow, eight-roomed and heavily thatched against any chance of leakage from rain. Under the pitch of the roof ran a ceiling-cloth which looked just as neat as a white-washed ceiling. The landlord had repainted it when Strickland took the bungalow. Unless you knew how Indian bungalows were built you would never have suspected that above the cloth lay the dark three-cornered cavern of the roof, where the beams and the underside of the thatch harboured all manner of rats, bats, ants, and foul things.

Tietjens met me in the verandah with a bay like the boom of the bell of St Paul's, putting her paws on my shoulder to show she was glad to see me. Strickland had contrived to claw together a sort of meal which he called lunch, and immediately after it was finished went out about his business. I was left alone with Tietjens and my own affairs. The heat of the summer had broken up and turned to the warm damp of the rains. There was no motion in the heated air, but the rain fell like ramrods on the earth, and flung up a blue mist when it splashed back. The bamboo, and the custard apples, the poinsettias, and the mango trees in the garden stood still while the warm water lashed through them, and the frogs began to sing among the aloe hedges. A little before the light failed, and when the rain was at its worst, I sat in the back verandah and heard the water roar from the eaves, and scratched myself because I was covered with the thing called prickly heat. Tietjens came out with me and put her head in my lap and was very sorrowful; so I gave her biscuits when tea was ready, and I took tea in the back verandah on account of the little coolness found there. The rooms of the house were dark behind me. I could smell Strickland's saddlery and the oil on his guns, and I had no desire to sit among these things. My own servant came to me in the twilight, the muslin of his clothes clinging tightly to his drenched body, and told me that a gentleman had called and wished to see someone. Very much against my will, but only because of the darkness of the rooms, I went into the naked drawing-room, telling my

man to bring the lights. There might or might not have been a caller waiting – it seemed to me that I saw a figure by one of the windows – but when the lights came there was nothing save the spikes of the rain without, and the smell of the drinking earth in my nostrils. I explained to my servant that he was no wiser than he ought to be, and went back to the verandah to talk to Tietjens. She had gone out into the wet, and I could hardly coax her back to me, even with biscuits with sugar tops. Strickland came home, dripping wet, just before dinner, and the first thing he said was:

‘Has anyone called?’

I explained, with apologies, that my servant had summoned me into the drawing-room on a false alarm; or that some loafer had tried to call on Strickland, and thinking better of it, had fled after giving his name. Strickland ordered dinner, without comment, and since it was a real dinner with a white tablecloth attached, we sat down.

At nine o’clock Strickland wanted to go to bed, and I was tired too. Tietjens, who had been lying underneath the table, rose up, and swung into the least exposed verandah as soon as her master moved to his own room, which was next to the stately chamber set apart for Tietjens. If a mere wife had wished to sleep out of doors in that pelting rain it would not have mattered; but Tietjens was a dog, and therefore the better animal. I looked at Strickland, expecting to see him flay her with a whip. He smiled queerly, as a man would smile after telling some unpleasant domestic tragedy. ‘She has done this ever since I moved in here,’ said he. ‘Let her go.’

The dog was Strickland’s dog, so I said nothing, but I felt all that Strickland felt in being thus made light of. Tietjens encamped outside my bedroom window, and storm after storm came up, thundered on the thatch, and died away. The lightning spattered the sky as a thrown egg spatters a barn door, but the light was pale blue, not yellow; and, looking through my split bamboo blinds, I could see the great dog standing, not sleeping, in the verandah, the hackles alift on her back and her feet anchored as tensely as the drawn wire-rope of a suspension bridge. In the very short pauses of the thunder I tried to sleep, but it seemed that someone wanted me very urgently. He, whoever he was, was trying to call me by name, but his voice was no more than a husky whisper. The thunder ceased, and Tietjens went into the

garden and howled at the low moon. Somebody tried to open my door, walked about and about through the house, and stood breathing heavily in the verandahs, and just when I was falling asleep I fancied that I heard a wild hammering and clamouring above my head or on the door.

I ran into Strickland's room and asked him whether he was ill, and had been calling me. He was lying on his bed half dressed, a pipe in his mouth. 'I thought you'd come,' he said. 'Have I been walking round the house recently?'

I explained that he had been tramping in the dining-room and the smoking-room and two or three other places, and he laughed and told me to go back to bed. I went back to bed and slept till the morning, but through all my mixed dreams I was sure I was doing someone an injustice in not attending to his wants. What those wants were I could not tell; but a fluttering, whispering, bolt-fumbling, lurking, loitering Someone was reproaching me for my slackness, and, half awake, I heard the howling of Tietjens in the garden and the threshing of the rain.

I lived in that house for two days. Strickland went to his office daily, leaving me alone for eight or ten hours with Tietjens for my only companion. As long as the full light lasted I was comfortable, and so was Tietjens; but in the twilight she and I moved into the back verandah and cuddled each other for company. We were alone in the house, but none the less it was much too fully occupied by a tenant with whom I did not wish to interfere. I never saw him, but I could see the curtains between the rooms quivering where he had just passed through; I could hear the chairs creaking as the bamboos sprung under a weight that had just quitted them; and I could feel when I went to get a book from the dining-room that somebody was waiting in the shadows of the front verandah till I should have gone away. Tietjens made the twilight more interesting by glaring into the darkened rooms with every hair erect, and following the motions of something that I could not see. She never entered the rooms, but her eyes moved interestedly: that was quite sufficient. Only when my servant came to trim the lamps and make all light and habitable she would come in with me and spend her time sitting on her haunches, watching an invisible extra man as he moved about behind my shoulder. Dogs are cheerful companions.

I explained to Strickland, gently as might be, that I would go over to the Club and find for myself quarters there. I admired his hospitality, was pleased with his guns and rods, but I did not much care for his house and its atmosphere. He heard me out to the end, and then smiled very wearily, but without contempt, for he is a man who understands things. 'Stay on,' he said, 'and see what this thing means. All you have talked about I have known since I took the bungalow. Stay on and wait. Tietjens has left me. Are you going too?'

I had seen him through one little affair, connected with a heathen idol, that had brought me to the doors of a lunatic asylum, and I had no desire to help him through further experiences. He was a man to whom unpleasantness arrived as do dinners to ordinary people.

Therefore I explained more clearly than ever that I liked him immensely, and would be happy to see him in the daytime; but that I did not care to sleep under his roof. This was after dinner, when Tietjens had gone out to lie in the verandah.

'Pon my soul, I don't wonder,' said Strickland, with his eyes on the ceiling-cloth. 'Look at that!'

The tails of two brown snakes were hanging between the cloth and the cornice of the wall. They threw long shadows in the lamplight.

'If you are afraid of snakes, of course -' said Strickland.

I hate and fear snakes, because if you look into the eyes of any snake you will see that it knows all and more of the mystery of man's fall, and that it feels all the contempt that the Devil felt when Adam was evicted from Eden. Besides which its bite is generally fatal, and it twists up trouser legs.

'You ought to get your thatch overhauled,' I said. 'Give me a mahseer-rod, and we'll poke 'em down.'

'They'll hide among the roof-beams,' said Strickland. 'I can't stand snakes overhead. I'm going up into the roof. If I shake 'em down, stand by with a cleaning-rod and break their backs.'

I was not anxious to assist Strickland in his work, but I took the cleaning-rod and waited in the dining-room, while Strickland brought a gardener's ladder from the verandah, and set it against the side of the room. The snake-tails drew themselves up and disappeared. We could hear the dry rushing scuttle of long bodies running over the baggy ceiling-cloth.

Strickland took a lamp with him, while I tried to make clear to him the danger of hunting roof-snakes between a ceiling-cloth and a thatch, apart from the deterioration of property caused by ripping out ceiling-cloths.

'Nonsense!' said Strickland. 'They're sure to hide near the walls by the cloth. The bricks are too cold for 'em, and the heat of the room is just what they like.' He put his hand to the corner of the stuff and ripped it from the cornice. It gave with a great sound of tearing, and Strickland put his head through the opening into the dark of the angle of the roof-beams. I set my teeth and lifted the rod, for I had not the least knowledge of what might descend.

'H'm!' said Strickland, and his voice rolled and rumbled in the roof. 'There's room for another set of rooms up here, and, by Jove, someone is occupying 'em!'

'Snakes?' I said from below.

'No. It's a buffalo. Hand me up the two last joints of a mahseer-rod, and I'll prod it. It's lying on the main roof-beam.'

I handed up the rod.

'What a nest for owls and serpents! No wonder the snakes live here,' said Strickland, climbing farther into the roof. I could see his elbow thrusting with the rod. 'Come out of that, whoever you are! Heads below there! It's falling.'

I saw the ceiling-cloth nearly in the centre of the room sag with a shape that was pressing it downwards and downwards towards the lighted lamp on the table. I snatched the lamp out of danger and stood back. Then the cloth ripped out from the walls, tore, split, swayed, and shot down upon the table something that I dared not look at, till Strickland had slid down the ladder and was standing by my side.

He did not say much, being a man of few words; but he picked up the loose end of the tablecloth and threw it over the remnants on the table.

'It strikes me,' said he, putting down the lamp, 'our friend Imray has come back. Oh! you would, would you?'

There was a movement under the cloth, and a little snake wriggled out, to be back-broken by the butt of the mahseer-rod. I was sufficiently sick to make no remarks worth recording.

Strickland meditated, and helped himself to drinks. The arrangement under the cloth made no more signs of life.

'Is it Imray?' I said.

Strickland turned back the cloth for a moment, and looked.

'It is Imray,' he said; 'and his throat is cut from ear to ear.'

Then we spoke, both together and to ourselves: 'That's why he whispered about the house.'

Tietjens, in the garden, began to bay furiously. A little later her great nose heaved open the dining-room door.

She sniffed and was still. The tattered ceiling-cloth hung down almost to the level of the table, and there was hardly room to move away from the discovery.

Tietjens came in and sat down; her teeth bared under her lip and her forepaws planted. She looked at Strickland.

'It's a bad business, old lady,' said he. 'Men don't climb up into the roofs of their bungalows to die, and they don't fasten up the ceiling-cloth behind 'em. Let's think it out.'

'Let's think it out somewhere else,' I said.

'Excellent idea! Turn the lamps out. We'll get into my room.'

I did not turn the lamps out. I went into Strickland's room first, and allowed him to make the darkness. Then he followed me, and we lit tobacco and thought. Strickland thought. I smoked furiously, because I was afraid.

'Imray is back,' said Strickland. 'The question is - who killed Imray? Don't talk, I've a notion of my own. When I took this bungalow I took over most of Imray's servants. Imray was guileless and inoffensive, wasn't he?'

I agreed; though the heap under the cloth had looked neither one thing nor the other.

'If I call in all the servants they will stand fast in a crowd and lie like Aryans. What do you suggest?'

'Call 'em in one by one,' I said.

'They'll run away and give the news to all their fellows,' said Strickland. 'We must segregate 'em. Do you suppose your servant knows anything about it?'

'He may, for aught I know; but I don't think it's likely. He has only been here two or three days,' I answered. 'What's your notion?'

'I can't quite tell. How the dickens did the man get the wrong side of the ceiling-cloth?'

There was a heavy coughing outside Strickland's bedroom

door. This showed that Bahadur Khan, his body servant, had waked from sleep and wished to put Strickland to bed.

'Come in,' said Strickland. 'It's a very warm night, isn't it?'

Bahadur Khan, a great, green-turbaned, six-foot Moham-medan, said that it was a very warm night; but that there was more rain pending, which, by his Honour's favour, would bring relief to the country.

'It will be so, if God pleases,' said Strickland, tugging off his boots. 'It is in my mind, Bahadur Khan, that I have worked thee remorselessly for many days – ever since that time when thou first camest into my service. What time was that?'

'Has the Heaven-born forgotten? It was when Imray Sahib went secretly to Europe without warning given; and I – even I – came into the honoured service of the protector of the poor.'

'And Imray Sahib went to Europe?'

'It is so said among those who were his servants.'

'And thou wilt take service with him when he returns?'

'Assuredly, Sahib. He was a good master, and cherished his dependants.'

'That is true. I am very tired, but I go buck-shooting to-morrow. Give me the little sharp rifle that I use for black-buck; it is in the case yonder.'

The man stooped over the case; handed barrels, stock, and fore-end to Strickland, who fitted all together, yawning dolefully. Then he reached down to the gun-case, took a solid-drawn cartridge, and slipped it into the breech of the '360 Express.

'And Imray Sahib has gone to Europe secretly! That is very strange, Bahadur Khan, is it not?'

'What do I know of the ways of the white man, Heaven-born?'

'Very little, truly. But thou shalt know more anon. It has reached me that Imray Sahib has returned from his so long journeyings, and that even now he lies in the next room, waiting his servant.'

'Sahib!'

The lamplight slid along the barrels of the rifle as they levelled themselves at Bahadur Khan's broad breast.

'Go and look!' said Strickland. 'Take a lamp. Thy master is tired, and he waits thee. Go!'

The man picked up a lamp, and went into the dining-room, Strickland following, and almost pushing him with the muzzle of the rifle. He looked for a moment at the black depths behind the ceiling-cloth; at the writhing snake under foot; and last, a grey glaze settling on his face, at the thing under the tablecloth.

'Hast thou seen?' said Strickland after a pause.

'I have seen. I am clay in the white man's hands. What does the Presence do?'

'Hang thee within the month. What else?'

'For killing him? Nay, Sahib, consider. Walking among us, his servants, he cast his eyes upon my child, who was four years old. Him he bewitched, and in ten days he died of the fever - my child!'

'What said Imray Sahib?'

'He said he was a handsome child, and patted him on the head; wherefore my child died. Wherefore I killed Imray Sahib in the twilight, when he had come back from office, and was sleeping. Wherefore I dragged him up into the roof-beams and made all fast behind him. The Heaven-born knows all things. I am the servant of the Heaven-born.'

Strickland looked at me above the rifle, and said, in the vernacular, 'Thou art witness to this saying? He has killed.'

Bahadur Khan stood ashen grey in the light of the one lamp. The need for justification came upon him very swiftly. 'I am trapped,' he said, 'but the offence was that man's. He cast an evil eye upon my child, and I killed and hid him. Only such as are served by devils,' he glared at Tietjens, couched stolidly before him, 'only such could know what I did.'

'It was clever. But thou shouldst have lashed him to the beam with a rope. Now, thou thyself wilt hang by a rope. Orderly!'

A drowsy policeman answered Strickland's call. He was followed by another, and Tietjens sat wondrous still.

'Take him to the police station,' said Strickland. 'There is a case toward.'

'Do I hang, then?' said Bahadur Khan, making no attempt to escape, and keeping his eyes on the ground.

'If the sun shines or the water runs - yes!' said Strickland.

Bahadur Khan stepped back one long pace, quivered, and stood still. The two policemen waited further orders.

'Go!' said Strickland.

'Nay; but I go very swiftly,' said Bahadur Khan. 'Look! I am even now a dead man.'

He lifted his foot, and to the little toe there clung the head of the half-killed snake, firm fixed in the agony of death.

'I come of land-holding stock,' said Bahadur Khan, rocking where he stood. 'It were a disgrace to me to go to the public scaffold: therefore I take this way. Be it remembered that the Sahib's shirts are correctly enumerated, and that there is an extra piece of soap in his wash-basin. My child was bewitched, and I slew the wizard. Why should you seek to slay me with the rope? My honour is saved, and – and – I die.'

At the end of an hour he died, as they die who are bitten by the little brown *karait*, and the policeman bore him and the thing under the tablecloth to their appointed places. All were needed to make clear the disappearance of Imray.

'This,' said Strickland, very calmly, as he climbed into bed, 'is called the nineteenth century. Did you hear what that man said?'

'I heard,' I answered. 'Imray made a mistake.'

'Simply and solely through not knowing the nature of the Oriental, and the coincidence of a little seasonal fever. Bahadur Khan had been with him for four years.'

I shuddered. My own servant had been with me for exactly that length of time. When I went over to my own room I found my man waiting, impassive as the copper head on a penny, to pull off my boots.

'What has befallen Bahadur Khan?' said I.

'He was bitten by a snake and died. The rest the Sahib knows,' was the answer.

'And how much of this matter hast thou known?'

'As much as might be gathered from One coming in in the twilight to seek satisfaction. Gently, Sahib. Let me pull off those boots.'

I had just settled to the sleep of exhaustion when I heard Strickland shouting from his side of the house –

'Tietjens has come back to her place!'

And so she had. The great deerhound was couched stately on her own bedstead on her own blanket, while, in the next room, the idle, empty ceiling-cloth wagged as it trailed on the table.

## THE LIBERATED TIGER

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

Mary knew Roland was dying and accepted the fact with a sad, rather detached resignation. He was old, though not all that old – sixty-eight last birthday – but he seemed to have burnt up his life force faster than most men of his age, and he had, at the best, a few days left.

She straightened his pillows and looked down at the lined, tired face with pitying affection.

‘How do you feel, dear?’

‘Fine.’ He repeated the word he had always used when asked a similar question, and Mary tried to stifle the familiar twinge of irritation. ‘Fine. I feel fine.’

‘Anything I can get you?’

‘I would – I would like a cup of weak tea, if it’s not too much trouble.’

Again came that twinge of irritation. The light was going out, but the diminishing flame still burnt steadily; feeble now.

‘No trouble at all, dear. You have only to ask.’

He did not answer, only stared up at the ceiling with a kind of pathetic expectancy. He was looking forward to his weak tea.

In the kitchen Mary wondered how she would manage once he had gone. Money would be no problem, but there would be a void, not easy to fill at her age. No one to care for, to guide, instruct, even – she sighed – to nag. Her very frustration would die, when the reason for its existence was no more. She poured hot water over a teabag, allowed it to steep for half a minute, then removed the bag. She added a liberal dose of milk, three spoonfuls of sugar, then carried the end result up the stairs and into the bedroom. Roland’s eyes lit up like those of a sparrow that has spotted a succulent worm.

‘The cup that cheers.’

She sighed. She would even miss the maddening clichés.

She sat by his bedside and listened to the rain beating on the window panes, feeling, despite her genuine grief, extremely

bored. She would have liked to have gone for a long walk and rejoiced in a sense of well being as the rain lashed her face and trickled down her nose. But that could not be, for Roland, the companion who had accompanied her along the road of time for almost fifty years, was dying. Dying. Waiting to pass over; to pass away – to kick the bucket.

‘Shouldn’t be long now,’ Roland observed suddenly.

‘What?’ Mary blinked, aware she had almost dozed off.

‘Shouldn’t be long now. I wouldn’t be surprised if I go tomorrow.’

‘Really!’ Mary sat upright, shocked, even horrified. ‘I will be very cross if you talk like that.’

‘Or,’ Roland ignored her, ‘the day after. I might last till Wednesday.’

‘I’m not going to tell you again. You’re not to talk like that. Go, indeed. You’re good for years yet. Years and years.’

‘It’s funny how we pretend,’ Roland sighed gently. ‘You know I’m dying, I know I’m dying, yet I’m not supposed to know. Why? Dying is a perfectly natural function – everyone does it once. It’s like awfully polite people who pretend they never go to the lavatory. Everyone knows they do, but they mustn’t say so. I’m rather looking forward to it. Dying, I mean.’

‘Roland, how can you? You might have some consideration for my feelings.’

‘What?’ He was instantly contrite. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. Only I thought we ought to talk about it. Sort of clear the air.’

‘Clear the air?’

‘Yes. I mean to say, it’s so silly you sitting there trying to make small talk, and me racking my brains for something cheerful to say. I rather wanted to ask your advice.’

‘Advice?’ Mary spat out the word as though it were a lump of something nasty that threatened to choke her.

‘Yes, advice. You’re much brighter than me, and being a churchgoer I thought you might give me – well – one or two tips on how to behave when I get there.’

‘Get there? Where?’

‘To wherever it is I’m going. That’s another point. Where *am* I going? Honestly, Mary, I can’t see myself in a flannel nightgown playing a harp. I mean to say, I’m not that sort of chap.’

'You're being blasphemous,' Mary objected, her grief suddenly smothered under a blanket of shocked horror. 'Remember, you may soon have to face your Maker.'

'But will I?' Roland was drawing on his meagre strength in one last effort to make himself understood. 'There's an awful lot of people in my predicament and He can't meet us all. I keep thinking and thinking, and all I come up with is a long list of questions, and not a single answer. What sort of person will I be?'

'What sort of person will you be?' Mary did not try to fight the rising wave of irritation. 'You'll be yourself. The person you've always been.'

'I'm not so sure.' Roland shook his head. 'The "me" you know is the result of glands, environment, memories, heredity, lots of things. But once out of this body, I might be another kettle of fish entirely.'

'Nonsense!' Mary ejaculated. 'Utter rubbish!'

'You remember that tiger we saw in Chessington Zoo?' Roland inquired. 'Looked peaceful, well fed. Just a big pussy-cat. Think what he would have been like if we had let him out of his cage. What are our bodies, but cages? Who can tell what we become once the door has been opened.'

'I'm not going to listen to another word.' Mary got up. 'I'll make a nice cup of tea.'

'Ah, the cup that cheers.' Roland sank down among the pillows and closed his eyes, looking like an ancient baby waiting for its feed. 'Plenty of sugar. Lots and lots of sugar.'

Mary almost smiled.

The clock struck two and Roland slept. He looked peaceful; his narrow chest rose and fell gently, his lower lip quivered when he breathed out, and it seemed ridiculous to Mary that she was in fact looking down on a dying man. Where was he now? Was he making a reconnaissance of that unknown land, in which he must shortly take up residence. She had read somewhere that the soul travels far and wide when the body sleeps; only the memory of that surely remarkable journey was lost once physical consciousness returned. She whispered: 'Bosh,' then rose and walked to the window. Pushing back the curtains she looked down on the lamplit street.

Night lay across the city like a black blanket and she was isolated in a brick box with a dying man. And all around

were other brick boxes, each one housing atoms of flickering consciousness that sooner or later would be extinguished, or perhaps – and this was surely the great question – transferred to another plane of existence. She allowed the curtain to fall back into place and returned to the bedside. Roland was still sleeping peacefully, and she gazed down upon the lined face for a long time.

‘Who are you?’ she asked at length. ‘Who are you?’

The sleeping face was a mask.

The gas-ring roared, the kettle sang, and Mary warmed the teapot under the hot water tap. How many gallons of tea had she made in her lifetime? It must be thousands: a great lake of steaming, amber fluid, on which floated an armada of forgotten dreams. Tea had always been the panacea for all ills, the comforter, the suburban drug.

She turned, began to walk towards the gas stove, then stopped. Slowly, a wave of horror flooded her being. Roland was standing just within the kitchen doorway.

The shock was so breathtaking it was some time before she spoke; then the words slid out from her constricted throat as a hoarse whisper.

‘Roland . . . what are you doing out of bed?’

Then she stopped. Roland could not get out of bed; he scarcely had the strength to raise his head; neither did he possess a black gown. But the Roland – or someone very like him – who stood in the doorway was clad in a long black robe that encased his body from neck to feet, and he had an unlined, horribly young face. It was linen-white – Mary reluctantly accepted the simile – corpse-like, but the eyes were alive. They glittered in the lamplight and watched the terrified woman when she moved, backing towards the stove, trying to retreat from the impossible. She made a sound that came midway between a scream and a croak, thrust her balled fist into her mouth, shook her head.

Then it was gone. It vanished like a shadow wiped out by a sudden beam of sunlight; it became as a dream blasted by the clamour of an alarm clock. At that moment the whistling kettle shrieked, and Mary, like a sleep walker, automatically performing an often-repeated action, turned off the gas, carried the kettle over to the kitchen table, and poured boiling water into the teapot. She then walked back to the

stove and replaced the kettle on the gas-ring, before turning and staring with blank, uncomprehending eyes at the open doorway.

Then she screamed.

Roland was still sleeping, but the noise Mary made when she sank on to the bedside chair must have disturbed him, for he opened his eyes and smiled. A weak, tired little smile.

'Had a nice sleep. Feel fine now. Fine.'

Mary made no comment; just sat watching him, trying to understand.

He yawned. He opened his mouth, making a little sucking sound, and really it was difficult to realise he had perhaps little more than a day of life left. He looked clean, fresh, but the eyes had a strange, faraway look.

'You look worn out, dear.' He spoke softly. 'There's no need for you to sit up all night. If you're worried, why not get someone in?'

'No, no.' She shook her head. 'I'm all right.'

'It won't be much longer now.' As always, he tried to comfort her. 'When it's all over, you can sleep.'

'Please don't talk like that. Please . . .'

She began to cry: fear and grief united and crashed through the weakened walls of her self control, and the tears rolled down her cheeks, while her shoulders shook. Roland would have touched her had he the strength, but he could only murmur: 'Forgive me . . . I never intended . . .'

'I don't want you to die . . .'

The words came up out of a sea of torment and she really meant them. Sad but calm resignation had been shattered beyond repair, and she desperately wanted him to live, although, as yet, she refused even to consider the monstrous reason for this change of heart. Mary clutched the bedclothes with both hands and for the last time tried to browbeat him into submission.

'You're not to die. Do you hear me? You are not to die.' He managed to smile.

'I fear on this one occasion, I must disobey. This is not just a matter of a change of career, although I suppose it does come under that heading.'

'What do you mean?' Mary wiped her eyes and tried to concentrate.

'Nothing.' The dying man seemed to have used up his meagre reserve of strength and there was a film of moisture on his forehead. Mary gave him a drink from a feeding cup, while that remark about a change of career became an irritating itch. Then she remembered.

'I was only thinking of your own good. To throw up a steady, well-paid job, for a pie in the sky, would have been madness. Surely you realise that now.'

'But it might have worked.' He whispered the words, staring up at the ceiling, as though gazing into a misty past where stillborn dreams lie in unmarked graves. 'Carstairs had faith in me, until you . . .'

'The man was an adventurer,' Mary protested. 'You would have lost everything.'

'I expect you're right.' Roland sighed. 'You always were. But I would have liked to try . . . try . . .'

He was asleep again, and had Mary dared, she would have woken him. As it was, she leant over him and spoke in a low tone.

'Have you held that against me, all these years? Have you?'

Roland did not answer, but there was a suggestion of a bitter smile parting his lips.

The doctor came at eleven o'clock.

'He could last another day,' he said gently, 'or even possibly two. There again, he might go tonight. You must be prepared.'

Mary nodded and there was a great dread in her heart; a taste of fear in her mouth, and the stench of terror filled the entire house.

'You should get someone in,' the doctor advised. 'Sitting up all night is too much for you. Let me send a nurse round.'

'Not a nurse.' Mary shook her head. 'Roland wouldn't like a nurse in the house. Remind him of hospitals, and he hated them. I wouldn't mind a woman who could help around the house, and do . . . do whatever has to be done when the time comes.'

'Good, I know the very person.' The doctor took up his bag and prepared to depart. 'I'll try to get her round after lunch. Now you take things easy. We don't want you laid up.'

Roland slept for the remainder of the morning and Mary decided to put the house to rights; no Hoovering, for the noise might have disturbed him, but a flick round with a duster,

washing up, and a few other jobs that did not require too much effort. Then she crept into the bedroom, saw he was still asleep, and wondered if she dare take a bath. He looked no worse than yesterday, his breathing was normal, but the faintest suggestion of a bitter smile still parted his lips. No, she would never forgive herself if anything happened while she was in a bath, besides . . . Perhaps when the woman the doctor promised arrived she might consider it. In the meantime there would be no harm in washing her face and hands, so long as she was quick.

She bathed her face in cold water, and the icy shock cleared her head, made her feel more alive. Then, after she had done her hair and applied a thin coat of lipstick, she opened the bathroom door and stepped out on to the landing.

A blast of terror rose up and struck her heart with a fist of ice. Roland – the other Roland, stood by the bedroom door. A thought flashed across her mind while she gasped for breath, that this apparition was not real, but the manifestation of long-buried shafts of conscience, and, if she only knew how, a mere effort of will would disperse it. But the other Roland looked as solid as a brick wall. The face was more corpse-like; white, expressionless, but the eyes glittered with unmistakable – hate. He – It – began to move, gliding very slowly over the almost-new, floral-pattern carpet, and Mary whimpered like a terrified puppy. The gap narrowed: four feet, three; then it was barely eighteen inches from her. Mary could see a small scar on the chin, the result of a fall years ago, and this atom of proof that this was at least a horrible reflection of Roland put a sharp edge on her terror, which rose to a higher pitch and made her brain scream.

The thin lips parted, very, very slowly, and a hoarse whisper echoed along the empty caverns in her head.

'I . . . would . . . have . . . liked . . . to . . . try.'

Then it turned about with the now terrible slow, floating motion and glided towards the open bedroom door. There it paused for an eternity of a second before moving into the bedroom, leaving Mary bound with chains of terror that did not permit her limbs to move, or her throat to scream, or her mind to think. Her back pressed hard against the wall and she was as a fly on gummed paper, a flower encased in a block of ice; time had ceased to move, the world was an atom of corruption lost in limitless space, and she was – nothing.

Down below, the doorbell chimed, and the sound came across the immensity of space, rippled over the stagnant pool that was her brain, and was ignored. After an interval, the sound was repeated. The house seemed to resent the disturbance. The hall clock struck one; a floorboard creaked, a window rattled in obedience to the dictates of a rising wind. Then the front door opened, and after a while, a woman's voice called out: 'Is there anyone there?'

A bluebottle buzzed belligerently as it flew across the landing; it settled on the sweat-filmed forehead and began to make its way down towards the nose. The voice called out again.

'I've come to oblige Doctor Firkin. The front door was not locked. Is everything all right?'

Heavy footsteps were ascending the stairs; hesitant, ponderous treads; hands slithered along the banisters, and there came the sound of heavy breathing.

A fat, middle-aged woman, dressed in a rusty black coat and a grey felt hat, emerged on to the landing. She stood still for a full minute, staring at the motionless figure propped up against the bathroom wall. Then she gasped: 'Oh, my Gawd.'

The sound of the shocked voice, plus the sight of a matter-of-fact, solid figure, broke the ice-chains, set the wheels of time in motion again, and Mary, with a loud cry, sank unconscious to the floor.

She was propped up against the wall in the spare bedroom; a wet towel was round her head, and a plump, anxious face was peering down at her.

'Feel better, dearie? Eh? Feel better, do you? Fair gave me a turn, you did, standing there like a statue. Couldn't lift you on to the bed. Not strong, I'm not. Only comes out on these jobs to oblige Doctor. Do you think you can get up?'

Mary climbed unsteadily to her feet and struggled to a chair. She collapsed on to the padded seat and fought to dispel the black clouds that still enveloped her brain.

'I'm Mrs Parkins,' the round face informed her, 'and thank goodness I 'ad the gumption to open the front door and come upstairs.'

'Thank goodness, indeed,' Mary nodded. 'I - I must have fainted.'

'That you did.' Mrs Parkins removed her hat and patted a mass of untidy grey hair. 'Went down like a stone, you did. Been overdoing, you have. Getting no sleep and precious little to eat, I'll be bound. Tell you what, you lie down on that bed, while I pop in on the poor gentleman and see 'ow he's doing.'

'Oh . . . him.' Mary put a clenched fist to her mouth and began to moan softly. Mrs Parkins instantly put an arm round the heaving shoulders and propelled her towards the bed, all the while pouring out a torrent of comforting words.

'Now, now, you mustn't carry on so. You've done all you can for him, and more. Do all you can, I say, and you can let them go with an easy conscience. The poor gentleman will bless you, I knows that, and time will 'eal. Now, on the bed with you and so soon as I've seen 'e's all nice and snug, I'll cook you something nice, and you'll feel as right as rain.'

Mary allowed herself to be helped on to the bed, then covered with an eiderdown. Mrs Parkins gathered up her hat, brushed it on her sleeve and prepared to depart.

'Now, don't you dare move. I'll see to all that's to be seen to. Have a little snooze.'

'My husband . . .' Mary raised her head and stared fearfully at the dividing wall. 'Will you . . . ?'

'I'll look in right away and let you know how he is.'

She went, leaving the door open, and Mary waited while a silent prayer shuddered across her mind.

'Please may he be alive - and awake.'

She heard the rumble of Mrs Parkins's voice, then, after an anxiety-racked period, heavy footsteps came tramping along the landing and the round, kindly face peered in through the doorway.

'E's awake and chirpy as you please. He says you're to 'ave a nice rest and not to worry.'

'Oh, thank God.' Mary slumped back on to the pillow. 'Please may he keep awake. Don't let him sleep, don't let him die.'

'That's not in our 'ands, dear,' Mrs Parkins admonished. 'We must resign ourselves to what must be and 'ope for the best. I'll get away down to the kitchen.'

There was a streak of iron in Mary's soul, and this helped her to come to terms with the bizarre situation during the next quarter of an hour. Normally she had no time for women who fainted and surrendered to fear, when calm deliberation

was demanded. But any soldier can be brave when he has never been under fire, and the memory of that dreadful figure on the landing still made Mary tremble. But as she became quieter, questions began to bubble in her mind. Had she seen an illusional-phantom born from Roland's sick ramblings and her own guilt-tinted memories, or had it in fact been – a ghost? If so, could a man's ghost walk while he still lived?

She lay still and worried the problem. Some time, somewhere, she had read, or heard, a relevant story. What was it? Something to do with the Tudors. She raked among her scanty knowledge of history, mostly gleaned from historical novels and films. Henry VIII . . . Mary I . . . Edward VI . . . Elizabeth I . . . ? That was it. The death of Elizabeth. Roland had brought home a second-hand book, and she had read it – years ago . . . It must be downstairs in that bookcase in the lounge. Mary, without hesitation, flung back the eiderdown, slipped into her shoes and made for the door.

Once down in the lounge she found the book on the bottom shelf of the bookcase and, grabbing it with trembling fingers, she carried it over to the window. Agnes Strickland's *Life of Elizabeth I*. She turned to the last pages. *Declining strength . . . last illness . . .* her eyes scanned the printed page and at last found food to feed her fear. She read.

*Lady Guildford, then in waiting on the Queen, and leaving her in an almost breathless sleep, went out to take a little air, and met her Majesty, as she thought, three or four chambers off. Alarmed at the thought of being discovered in the act of leaving the royal patient alone, she hurried forward in some trepidation, in order to excuse herself, when the apparition vanished away. Lady Guildford returned terrified, to the chamber, but there lay Queen Elizabeth in the same lethargic, motionless slumber in which she had left her.*

Mary closed the book and carefully replaced it in the bookcase. So, if the story was to be believed, and it rang true – my God, how true – her experience was not unique. But, and she began to tremble again, the Roland who walked, the – the thing in black, was so different to the kindly, shy, even obedient husband she knew. Or was he? She remembered Roland's own words: *'Once out of this body, I may be a different kettle of fish entirely.'* Perhaps all these years she had been living with a cage of flesh, in which stalked a ravenous tiger, waiting with terrible patience for its hour of

release. And for almost fifty years she had fed it; made it strong on the meat of resentment, goaded it with the whip of ridicule. Now . . .

'What are you doing down 'ere?'

Mrs Parkins was standing in the doorway, her face a mask of concern and simulated anger.

'Didn't I tell you to rest? Creeping down 'ere the minute me back's turned. If you get laid up, it won't do the poor gentleman upstairs no manner of good.'

'There was something I had to find,' Mary said plaintively. 'I just had to.'

'I'm sure it was nothing that couldn't wait.' Mrs Parkins assumed a grim, determined expression. 'Now you come into the kitchen and get yourself wrapped round a nice chop and fried potatoes I've cooked. No nonsense, now.'

Mary allowed herself to be led into the kitchen and was soon looking down upon a plate which contained a sizzling pork chop and fried potatoes. To her surprise she found she was hungry.

'What about yourself, Mrs Parkins?' she inquired.

'Don't worry about me, dear. I'll have something when me old man has his. I'll sup a cup of tea and nibble a biscuit, just to keep you company.'

A few mouthfuls were sufficient to dispel Mary's hunger, but she forced herself to eat, so as not to offend Mrs Parkins, whose watchful eye followed her every action. Then the import of the woman's last remark flared up into fearful understanding.

'Did you say . . . ? You are going home?'

'Not yet, dear. But there's me old man's dinner to get, and he'll expect it on the table the minute 'e puts foot inside the door. You know men. All they think about is their stomachs.'

'But I will be alone.'

Mrs Parkins narrowed her eyes and took a sip from her cup of tea, then she crumbled a biscuit and munched a tiny fragment.

'I've only come to oblige, dear. I mean, I'm not a regular nurse. Can't you get someone in? No relative? A friend?'

'No.' Mary shook her head. 'There's no one.'

'Never 'ad no children, then?' Mrs Parkins inquired.

'No. My health. I couldn't, you see. Roland - my husband understood.'

'Ah, well.' Mrs Parkins sighed expansively. 'Can't say you missed much. I 'ad seven of the little perishers. Don't want to know me now they've grown up. Still, that's the way of the world. Well, I'm real sorry, but I must be off at five sharp. Tell you what, though. I'll be 'ere bright and early tomorrow. Rise with the lark, I do. Always 'ave. I'll see the old man off and try to get 'ere about seven-thirty. How does that suit you?'

'The night.' Mary moaned, dropped her knife and fork and wrung her hands. 'I can't bear it. I can't face the night alone.'

Mrs Parkins leant forward and laid a large, work-roughened hand on Mary's slim fingers.

'Look, dear, what can't be avoided must be endured. It won't be forever, and – well – 'e is your husband. 'Taint like it was a stranger. Why don't you lie down, and I'll rouse you just before I go.'

Pride came to Mary's rescue and she gently withdrew her hand from Mrs Parkins's light grasp.

'Yes, I'll do that. I'm sorry, Mrs Parkins, I shouldn't have tried to impose on your kindness. I'll be all right.'

'That's the ticket.' The woman rose, large, solid, a rock of sanity in a sea of madness. 'You go and lie down, and so soon as I've cleared up, I'll go and sit with the poor gentleman. Have I to give 'im anything?'

'Yes.' Mary pushed back her hair with a now steady hand. 'His medicine. It's on the bedside table. One spoonful in a glass of water, every four hours. The next is due at two o'clock. But the doctor said he's not to be disturbed if he's asleep.' She moved slowly towards the door, then stopped. 'Oh, yes, if he's thirsty, there's some cordial . . .'

'Righto, dear, leave it all to me. Now, you have a nice sleep.'

'Yes,' Mary nodded, 'I'll sleep.'

She was walking across a field with cloud-crowned hills in the far distance, and two children walked in front of her. She could not see their faces, because they would not turn their blond heads, but the youngest was a girl, for she was attired in a candy-striped dress, and her bright hair was secured by a blue ribbon; and the boy, who was a few inches taller than his sister, wore grey trousers and a green shirt. She heard their laughter; it came to her like the peal of bells across an expanse of calm water, and sometimes they called out:

'Mother . . . mother,' and she wanted to run, to catch up with them, but her feet were heavy with the weight of years, and the mists of unshed tears blurred her vision.

'Mother . . . mother . . . Mam . . .'

' . . . Mam . . . MAM . . . wake up . . .'

Mrs Parkins was shaking her gently, and the round, kindly face was puckered into an expression of deep concern.

'I'm sorry, dear, but I must be off. I let you sleep to the very last moment.'

'Thank you, Mrs Parkins.' Mary sat up and shook her head in an effort to dispel the fog of sleep. 'I'll be all right now. You run along.'

It took great courage to say those last words, without unmasking the great fear; and she even managed to smile. Mrs Parkins seemed relieved.

'That's fine, dear. I expect a good sleep put you to rights. Now, I've made the poor gentleman nice and comfy. Washed his face and given him his medicine. And I found a vacuum flask in the kitchen, so I took the liberty of making you some nice milky cocoa and a few 'am sandwiches. You'll find 'em on the bedside table.'

'You are very kind.' Mary was near tears, for this thoughtful act accentuated the prospect of the terrible night that lay before her. 'I don't know what I will do without you.'

'Won't be for long, love. A little over twelve hours and I'll be back, and if - well - anything happens, all you have to do is ring Doctor Firkin.'

Mary shuffled into her slippers and did not reply. Mrs Parkins moved with brisk determination towards the door.

'Right, I'll be off then. I'll let meself out of the front door.'

Her heavy footsteps descending the stairs was the departure of normality; the slam of the front door, the death of hope. Mary let the silence settle about her and tried to draw strength from the familiarity of her surroundings. This was her house; she knew the ways and turnings of its brick-fleshed body; it held nothing that could frighten or surprise her. In the next room was a double bed; on this lay her husband. She knew his habits, both good and bad: the number of minutes he liked his eggs boiled, the amount of sugar to put into his tea, the way to hurt him if he displeased her, and the means of pleasing him when she required a special service.

She was monarch of her domain. Fear must be quelled, fought or ignored.

She came out on to the landing. It was neat, well-groomed and empty. The master bedroom door was open, the room beyond waited for her to enter; it would not welcome, neither would it repel. It would just remind her she had a duty to perform.

Roland smiled wanly when she switched on the overhead light and closed the curtains. She sat down on the bedside chair and watched him with wonderful calmness. He had changed since she had seen him last; his face had slackened, giving him a strange and terribly familiar, youthful appearance. When he spoke his voice was weaker.

'Days . . . are drawing in.'

A typical remark. Another cliché from a well-stocked cupboard. How could super-horror grow from such an ultra-ordinary man?

'How do you feel?' she asked and closed her eyes.

'Fine . . . fine . . .'

It was impossible. She had been the victim of a recurring wide-awake dream, brought on by lack of sleep and strain. Or perhaps a brainstorm. When . . . when all was over, she must see a doctor. She opened her eyes.

'Roland, have you been happy? I mean, have I made you happy?'

He seemed to find something very interesting to watch on the ceiling; his eyes moved slowly, moving from left to right, and it seemed to the watching woman that he sighed.

'We should have painted it pink,' he said.

'Roland, were you unhappy?'

He turned his head and stared at her. The words were merely articulated breathing.

'The number of times a man is really happy can be counted on the fingers of one hand.'

It was as though she had been slapped across the face. Such a statement could only have been made by a man who has thought long and deeply, or brooded on some real or imaginary wrong.

'Roland, I've done what I thought was the best for both of us.'

'While there is breath in my body, I will never reproach you.'

The room grew suddenly cold; she stood on the edge of a precipice, then dared to take the fatal leap.

'And . . . when you no longer breathe?'

He turned his face away, then his lips moved and she had to bend over him to hear the whispered words.

'Who can tell into what red hell my sightless soul will roam.'

He fell asleep.

His by now familiar drop into the pit of unconsciousness caught Mary unprepared, but when the full realisation lit up the screen of her awareness, she gasped and glanced round the room with instant apprehension. The pink striped wallpaper was a demure veil that hid cold plaster and rough brickwork; the wardrobe mirror faithfully reflected that much of the room which came within its vision. Familiar objects: dressing-table, pictures, curtains, all dared Mary to see the extraordinary in the commonplace, and she flashed a wordless prayer across the cosmos, that the unbelievable would not appear, then felt strangely disappointed when it did not.

Minutes crept out of eternity and became hours; and still the dying man slept. Motionless, save for the gentle rise and fall of his chest, he was drifting slowly into the unknown on the calm lake of sleep. Then, a little after two o'clock, he stirred, jerked his head from side to side and began to moan softly. Occasionally, the plaintive sound crumpled into a brief torrent of words. Mary bent her head to listen and it seemed she was peering through a doorway that led into the dark corridors of his brain.

'Want to . . . want . . . want . . . children . . . no children . . . why . . . Mary . . . why . . . why . . . ?'

The words disintegrated into the original low moan, then his eyes suddenly flashed open and stared straight into Mary's own. She gasped, jerked back, then asked in a low whisper: 'Roland, what is it?'

The moaning ceased and he continued to stare at her with unseeing eyes. For a moment she thought he was dead, but he still breathed, his chest rose and fell with unbroken rhythm, and she knew this was not the end but some terrible interlude.

Downstairs, a door opened.

The sound was unmistakable; the turning of a handle, the faint squeak of hinges, the sudden loud click when the handle

was released. Then heavy footsteps crossed the hall – a man's solid tread; another door, the lounge this time, was flung back. It crashed against the wall. Then the footsteps receded and for a while there was an awful silence. Mary's head jerked from side to side, trying to watch both her sleeping husband, whose unblinking eyes still watched her, and the bedroom door, which was a frail barrier standing between her and the unexplainable.

A crash brought her up from her chair. This was followed almost immediately by the sound of breaking china; then the footsteps came back into the hall, moved with heavy deliberation towards the stairs – and stopped. Mary could feel the presence standing there, staring up at the bedroom door.

The first creak of a stairboard was so slight, she barely noticed it. The second was like the crack of a whip. For a while, nothing, then a slithering sound as though a hand was being drawn along the banister. Then another creak, then another; finally, a horrible little pattering run, which terminated in a light thud against the bedroom door. Mary backed towards the window as a loud whisper came from two directions. From her sleeping husband, whose staring eyes seemed to watch her terror-inspired retreat, and from behind the closed door.

'Where . . . are . . . they . . . where . . . are . . . the . . . children?'

The door handle was turning when Mary ran forward, seized Roland's thin shoulders and shook him.

'Wake up . . . oh, my God, wake up!'

The eyes blinked; he turned his head away, then spluttered weakly into protesting wakefulness.

'What . . . is . . . it?'

Mary sank down upon the bedside chair and sat crying; her shoulders shook while she clawed at the chair arms like a terrified animal and, in the midst of this terrible fear-storm, a strange thought passed across the tumultuous clouds that obscured her brain. 'How long can I stand this?'

Presently she became aware of a small voice trying to attract her attention; a slight, wheezy whisper, that twenty-four hours ago would have stung her to instant solicitous activity.

'Mary . . . you must not . . . grieve for me.'

She looked at the small, lined, anxious face and giggled. Roland . . . her Roland, was keeping true to form, but now his ordinariness, his apparent simplicity, seemed to have sinister undertones. The thing that walked while he slept was as much part of him as the mild, complaisant husband she had known for years.

'Roland . . . ' She wiped her eyes and managed to conjure up a measure of self-control. 'Roland, do you hate me very much?'

His expression suggested astonishment, but she thought there was a momentarily uneasy, even shifty, gleam in his eyes, and she repeated the question.

'Roland, do you hate me?'

When he replied, the answer was as she should have expected.

'Why should I?'

'Roland . . . Roland . . . ' She leaned forward and spoke close to his ear. ' . . . You must listen. You must try to understand. When you sleep, you walk. Your ghost haunts the house . . . '

He did not appear to have heard her. Either he was being deliberately obtuse, or his dying mind had wandered from the narrow path that borders the dark lands. The whispering voice spoke very slowly, rasping her mind.

'I want to go away . . . away . . . out through the great star lanes, into the comforting darkness that lies beyond . . . A million suns light my path . . . but something pulls me back . . . back . . . '

There followed a jumble of words, and Mary got the impression he was back in his childhood, for there was the occasional 'School . . . ice cream . . . prep . . . ' and a string of schoolboy slang. Then: 'My roots are in yesterday. They are . . . deep . . . deep and they are feeding on my goodness . . . and the growth is twisted . . . bad . . . bad . . . Mary . . . why . . . why . . . '

Suddenly his head swung round and Mary was again facing that blank, open-eyed stare, and at once, like a re-started film, the stamp of heavy feet came from the landing; the door trembled, the handle turned, and he - the other Roland - came in.

The intruder was so natural, the black-clad figure so life-like, that Mary could hardly believe it was not a flesh and

blood man that faced her. He – It – walked over to the fireplace and stood there, silent, motionless, as though waiting. Only the eyes were expressive. Mary whimpered, for there was no manner of doubt, they were filled with black, undying hate.

Roland – Mary's Roland, closed his eyes, moved his head, and instantly the figure vanished. The plaintive whisper said: 'A cup of weak tea . . . my mouth is parched.'

She could not move, only shake her head and cling desperately to her chair, as though it were an anchor that stopped her floating away on a black stream of horror.

'Tea,' the whisper went on, 'the cup . . . that cheers . . . cheers . . . plenty of . . . milk . . . lots . . . lots . . . of . . . sugar.'

The words flickered out, were lost; the eyes stared at Mary and the black figure was back in front of the fireplace, watching the woman with a glare of black hate. The lips parted and Mary saw the same chipped tooth that Roland would never have repaired; then the hoarse whisper came from two mouths.

'Not . . . much . . . longer . . .'

'Tea,' said the dying man, 'a cup . . . of . . . weak . . . tea . . .'

The figure vanished.

'Mary . . . can't you hear . . . a . . . cup of tea for my parched . . . tongue . . .'

Again silence – the figure was back, only this time Roland was not asleep. He was staring at his other self with dilated eyes; struggling weakly in an effort to sit up. The other Roland grinned, then nodded, before moving very slowly towards the bed. The dying man gave a strangled scream, then turned his head to face Mary. She saw the dreadful white face, the bulging eyes, the constricted throat that was vainly trying to form words. For a moment Mary saw both faces: one grinning, evil, hate-ridden, the other terrified, white, fighting for the power of speech. Then Roland shrieked.

'I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . .'

He fell back and lay with open mouth and bulging eyes, staring up at the ceiling. The other Roland walked slowly round the bed, a look of terrible triumph in the blazing eyes. Mary did not move or even turn her head. She was beyond

fear, without hope. In those fleeting minutes she knew what must happen, and did not care. It was not important. Nothing was of the slightest importance.

Mrs Parkins let herself in the front door, having taken the key the night before. She called out softly:

'It's only me.'

She put her bag down on the kitchen table, took off her hat and coat and hung them on the hall stand. After lighting the gas and placing a filled kettle on the ring, she ascended the stairs. She tapped on the bedroom door.

'All right for me to come in, dear?'

There was no answer, so she gently opened the door and moved slowly into the room. The scene which greeted her brought an involuntary 'Oh, my Gawd!' from her gaping mouth, and only vast experience of death chambers and generally tidying-up the dead saved her from a fit of hysterics.

Roland was lying half out of the bed, his head lolling over the edge, and on his face was an expression of indescribable terror. Mary was still seated on the bedside chair and her lips were parted in a grin of malicious joy. When Mrs Parkins entered she laughed, a terrible rasping sound that made the large woman flinch and almost sent her running from the room, but a sense of duty, plus a certain fearful pity, drove her forward.

'You poor dear. I shouldn't 'ave left you. Oh, my Gawd, I didn't ought to 'ave left you.'

Mary's grin broadened; she opened and shut her hands, then laughed again, and now there was a triumphant gleam in her eyes. Her teeth parted and a hoarse, croaking whisper seeped out.

'The selfish bitch. Wouldn't have children . . . done me out of my big chance . . . nag . . . nag . . . nag . . .'

Mrs Parkins made a strange sound as Mary reached out to clutch her, but she shrank back in time. The hoarse whisper went on . . . and on . . .

'She won't nag any more . . . no, she won't . . . I'm the boss now . . . screaming she is . . . inside the head . . . she's screaming . . . won't nag . . .'

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plainly some one, or something, had recently  
been in the place. Who, or what, was the restless,  
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I had a closer look at the old garment . . . all  
at once it seemed to me that there was more  
than an odour of mould and rotting cloth  
emanating from the thing – that there was a  
taint of putrefying flesh and bone . . .

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